SELF i.e.

:: An exploration into the cultural value of selfies

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A thesis submitted to the Victoria University of Wellington in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Design

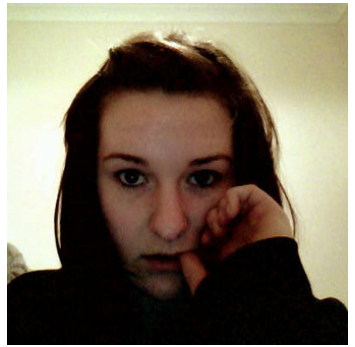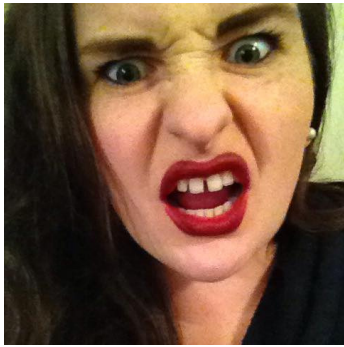**Victoria University of Wellington**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the cultural value of selfies. The selfie is an artifact of self-representation in network culture, and its communication of identity parallels that of historical self-portraiture.
This research analyses the socio-cultural context of both historical self-portraits and selfies in order to show evidence that these two forms of self-representation have similar cultural value.
Through design-led research, a series of experiments explore the relationship between these two forms. Investigations into the creation of identity in the age of social media, the social context of historical self-portraiture, and the effect of the popularisation of celebrity culture on cultural worth, lead to the identification of common elements between the two forms of identity representation.
Finally, this thesis describes the creation of a product that employs these conceptual elements.
The output was produced through crowd-funding, a system of modern patronage in network culture. This final output indicates that, beyond innate social value, selfies have cultural worth through what the scholar David Throsby terms 'aesthetic value' and 'authenticity value', and their economic reflection.
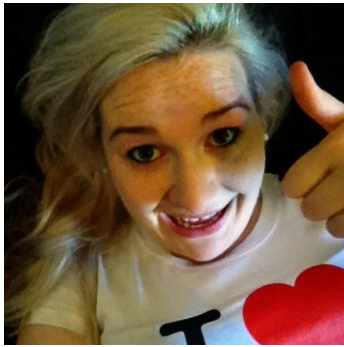
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// Introduction

Introduction

The creation of identity through art and design has been an interest of mine ever since I was introduced to the concept of self-portraiture in primary school. I remember being frustrated in an art lesson, as I could not produce something that matched how I saw myself. When I was introduced to the Old Masters, I studied their self-portraits and wondered how they felt about themselves and the image they were creating. Were these paintings accurate physical portrayals, or had the artists felt as I had felt – that my outer image did not reflect my inner self, and that my image needed to be carefully crafted to include these self-perceived characteristics.

This manifestation of self-perception is interesting to me, as even when a simple drawing is made, the artist makes conscious and unconscious decisions that affect the outcome – as the Tuscan proverb says, "ogni pittore dipinge sè" – "every painter paints himself" (Zöllner, 2006).
Does this make a self-portrait more true to life than a rendering of solely physical attributes, with stylistic elements showing the nature of the individual, or do these elements mask their true self by tampering with a naturalistic image?

I became interested in iconography, and how the use of symbols and stylistic features in a portrait could show the intangible qualities of a subject. How was the duality of identity portrayed, the inner and outer qualities of an artist, when they had an extra layer of coded visual language to incorporate? Were both the tangible and intangible attributes needed to form an identity? This led me to look further into the creation of identity within fine art, and to see the value of the artist's position and concept behind each work.

During my Bachelor's degree at the Victoria University School of Design, I set about reconciling the practice of design with my understanding of fine art. The work I produced was no longer solely based on my own perception; I also had to consider external views, needs, and understanding. Working in media design, my peers and I were instructed that we needed to create a brand for ourselves in order to communicate our worth to potential employers – 'you won't get hired if no-one knows you exist' was a common refrain. We were taught to make a website, to join the online social networks that would connect us to industry names and professionals, and ensure that every output followed the brand rules we had created for ourselves – 'you don't exist if you're not online'. Though these exercises were intended to set us up for the wider world of business, I saw them as far more philosophical. I interpreted these exercises to mean that we need other people for validation; existence and interaction are intimately related, and that identity is a fragile thing. For instance, I could easily say, 'this is what I look like' and 'this is what I enjoy', but 'this is who I am' is far more difficult to express.

In 2012, I completed my undergraduate design degree. This was the year that the word 'selfie' was commonly used in mainstream media, before earning the title of 'Word of the Year' in the Oxford Dictionaries online collection in 2013 (Oxfordwords, 2013). Just as with every other form of self-portraiture, selfies intrigued me. They were quick and often banal snapshots that saturated my social media networks, yet I valued them as a complex form of self-representation.

This thesis explores the value that I perceive in selfies as a contemporary form of identity representation. Although commonly regarded as unnoteworthy artifacts of low culture this thesis advocates a more nuanced consideration of selfies and their cultural value. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan's work plays a central role in this thesis. I apply his theory on the role of the medium in society to the evolution of self-portraiture. In concluding from McLuhan's observations that the medium and social context is a key factor in the perception of a design's content. I use his work to rationalise my perception of the similarity in cultural value that historical self-portraits and selfies possess.
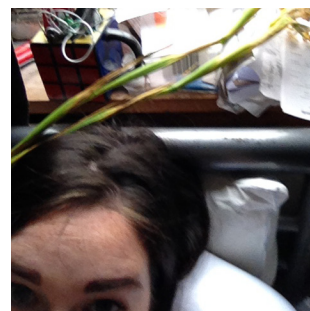
Thesis Structure

This thesis is a combination of comparative historical research, and research through design, divided into two sections respectively. Section 1, parts 1 through 4, establishes selfie culture as part of a broader history of identity representation in art and culture. Section 2, parts 5 through 7 describes my exploration of the cultural value of selfies through design experiments. The main hypothesis of this thesis is that historic self-portraits and selfies, the self-portraits of modern network culture, have similar cultural value - despite their varying social contexts.

Part One of this thesis examines and analyses historical self-portraiture in fine art, with a strong focus on the motivation behind their production. This research covers salient points in the progression of self-portraiture, from antiquity to the Early Modern period. Additionally, this section tracks the transition of artistic motivation from deity worship to the introduction of humanism and its influence on the European Renaissance.

Part Two presents the innovations that have influenced the strong visual language of today's society. Beginning with early photographic technology and its links to fine art, this research moves swiftly to the production of the smartphone, which changed the way self-portraits are produced and dispersed.

Part Three introduces the selfie as self-portraiture in network culture, and includes an initial survey of social media networks and their role in the crafting and dissemination of identity by way of selfies.This is followed by an analysis of contemporary perception to the selfie, in the form of popular music videos. The understanding of how the selfie is perceived acts as a baseline for this study's design experiments.

Part Four presents a study of Andy Warhol and his pivotal work in the period of Pop Art. Warhol was able to raise everyday items to an iconic status through innovative production methods. This constructs a template for the elevation of low art to high art – an important element in my final output. Warhol's focus on consumerism and celebrity culture is reflected in today's society, affecting the ideals of fame and fortune and consequentially, the social value of self-portraits.

Part Five documents and analyses a series of design experiments that further explore the relationship between historical self-portraits and selfies. The initial experiment investigates the creation of identity in network culture, assessing the influence that perceived privacy has on self-representation. The second experiment juxtaposes the selfie against fine art self-portraits of high cultural value. This experiment focuses on the medium of each format, and assess the influence of the social context on resulting reactions. Finally, this section presents a case study of the actor James Franco, and his multi-disciplinary explorations into self-representation and public personas. This leads to an experiment discussing the social value that is placed on celebrity culture, and concludes with the sentiment that self-portraiture is often related to fame and power.

Part Six details the final output of this research. In reflecting on the results of the previous experiments, a product is designed to mimic the qualities and content of a socially-valued selfie. It is produced through a system of modern patronage, relying on the support of network culture to prove its social worth. The success of this product is then analysed against the elements of cultural value, as set out by economist David Throsby (as cited in Belfiore & Firth, 2014).

Part Seven concludes this thesis. In this section I present my findings and observations, and discuss future directions of research.

// Theoretical Grounding

Before beginning the historical overview I will start with the theoretical foundation of my thesis, which is based on Marshall McLuhan's critical theories. McLuhan's oft-cited work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* is a complex text, with the well-known mantra "the medium is the message" at its centre (McLuhan, 1964). McLuhan's theory offers useful observations that support my study.

McLuhan coined the phrase 'the medium is the message', and in the initial chapter of *Understanding Media* he explores its origins. The term 'medium' is used here to describe any "extension of ourselves", i.e. anything we conceive or create, as each extends our ability (McLuhan, 1964). For instance, the cellphone is an extension of speech, and speech is an extension of our internal thoughts. Similarly, the wheel is an extension of our feet, extending our ability to move. The 'message' is not what the content tells us, such as a television programme or signpost, but "the change of scale or pace or pattern" that an invention or product has on "human affairs" – how it affects us (McLuhan, 1964). So to say the the medium is the message is to say that we can understand the things that we create by looking at the effect they have on society.

My study of the selfie looks at content that is both a representation of self and a creation of identity. This content, or rather the theme of this content, has not changed over time. What has changed is the medium in which this content is conveyed. The medium of self-representation has evolved from basic materials such as

stone and wood, to paper, canvas, photography, and to today's manifestation, smartphone photos and digital images. Each medium has affected the social environment into which it was borne, and reciprocally, the social context has changed the perception, or 'message', of the medium. Historically, production of self-portraiture was centralised and rare, depending on the materials available and the patronage of a wealthy figure. Today, it is democratised and disseminated, as the medium of selfies – the smartphone and the internet – is widespread and there is no dependence or need for a patron to assist in production. These two vastly different social contexts were both affected by and had an effect on the media used, yet the self-representation element remained unchanged.

McLuhan's argument is central to my thesis, as it rationalises my perception of the discrepancy of value between historical self-portraits and the selfie. I value the portrayal of identity and self-representation, which is inherent in every self-portrait. The change of social context and medium leads to a change in perception, affecting the perceived value of the self-portrait - a point I did not recognise prior to this research.

To begin to explore the thesis hypothesis it is necessary to first have a grounding in the history of self-portraiture and its techno-cultural evolution. In the following sections I will cover the salient points of self-portraiture and photography that relate to this study.
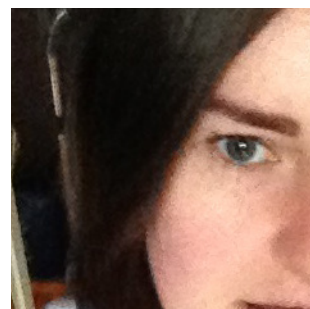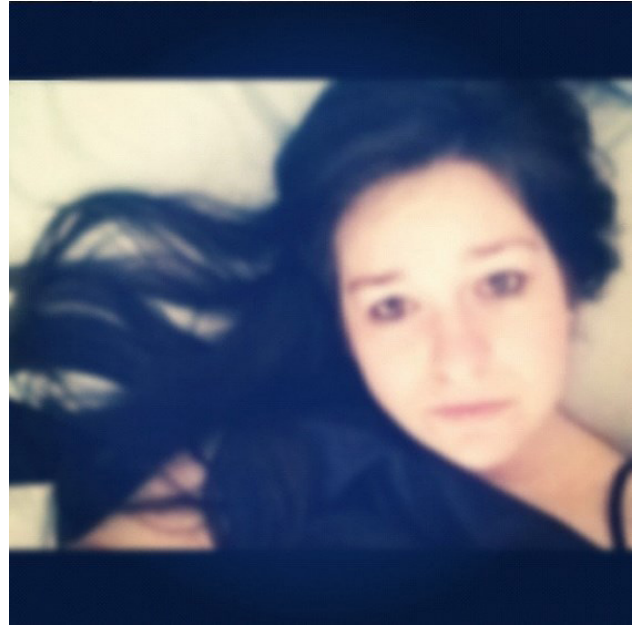
01 // Historical Self-Portraiture

1.1 *The Divine Nature of Self-Portraiture*

The earliest surviving self-portraits do not come from the illustrious Greek or Roman civilisations as one might expect, but from ancient Egypt; a country centered entirely around the worship of gods and their representatives on Earth.

Images were primarily used for communication, and most documented important events and the distinguished people involved in them; detailed portraits were reserved for the gods and pharaohs. Labourers and people of other lower class groups, such as merchants and farmers, were depicted through generic representations of their professions. It was extremely rare for any individual to be showcased, unless they were of supreme importance. Bak, a sculptor to the pharaoh Akhenaten, was one of the first people to create a self-portrait. In carving his own image on a stela he elevated his status from servant to artist; a revered figure in the pharaoh's court. (Hall, 2014).

Akhenaten ruled Egypt from 1353–1336 BC. He dedicated his reign to the glory of Aten, the sun-disc, and overhauled the nation's traditions to match. The art of Ancient Egypt had been rigid and cautious, with figures portrayed in one angular style. Akhenaten ordered a new style of imagery - he wanted to be

Figure 1. Bak (c. 1353-1336 BC). *Bak, Self-portrait with his wife, Taheri.*
From Every Painter Paints Himself. Retrieved from http://www.everypainterpaintshim-
self.com/blog/an_intriguing_self_portrait_c.1345_bc

surrounded by expressive and natural visuals in honour of Aten, who made all life possible (Wilkinson, 2007). This resulted in curvaceous forms and intimate family scenes that were previously unseen (Laboury, 2010). Akhenaten was so invested in the arts that the inscription surrounding another of Bak's self-portraits details that the pharaoh taught him "how to make art", potentially referring to the orders of a new style of imagery, or at the pharaoh as a source of inspiration.

The very existence of the self-portrait stelae suggests that Bak's work was so highly praised that his position was nearly equal to Akhenaten and his family, and the god that they revered. The treatment of self-portraiture in ancient Egypt differs greatly from that of the European Renaissance, which was built upon the ideals of humanism.

1.2 *Humanism and the Rise of the Individual*

The idea of individualism was relatively new in the Renaissance period, as in the Middle Ages it was thought that God was the only creator. Celebration of the creative capabilities of man inspired artists to look to themselves and humanist themes rather than religious subject matter (Atkinson, n.d.).

Humanism refers to the social philosophy and ideas that were current from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century. There was a revival in the popularity of pagan classics, and this both begot and increased interest in concepts of "secularism, the appreciation of worldly pleasures, and above all, intensified the assertion of personal independence and individual expression." (Kreis, 2012).

The devastating effects of the bubonic plague disillusioned the faithful, and a growth in the economy due to trade saw an influx in areas that were governed more by money than the church. This brought instability to the power of religion, and humanism was an attractive alternative.
This placed artists of the Renaissance between two worlds; the established Christian order, and the emerging freedom of humanism. Both would play a large part in the evolution of self-portraiture (Whittemore, n.d.).

1.3 *The Mirror and Self-Reflection*

A critical tool in the creation of self-portraits is the mirror, which allows artists to observe and copy their reflection. Mirrors have been in existence since antiquity, in the form of still water, polished metal and stone (Packwood, 2011). Many theories on the rise of self-portraiture in the Renaissance cite the manufacturing of flat Venetian crystal-glass mirrors as a catalyst, but they were extremely small and expensive until the late seventeenth century. Before then, the majority of artists used convex glass mirrors backed with metal - a method developed in the Middle Ages (Packwood, 2011).

The concept of the mirror was also favoured in religious texts on self-improvement; according to themes in the writings of Saint Augustine, every living creature is a reflection of God and his spirit. How clear that mirror is depends on your level on the 'chain of being'; in I Corinthians 13:12, Saint Paul revealed that on Earth we see "through a glass, darkly", in comparison to the Virgin Mary, who was commonly thought to be a 'spotless mirror' (Packwood, 2011). Gazing into a mirror, whether it be metaphorical or not, was considered an opportunity to identify your vices and virtues, so that you might reform, and thereby move closer to God.

Parallel to this religious message, a theory that arose in the writings of Socrates and Plato regards the mirror as the way to self-awareness. This theory was defined by Lucius Annaeus Seneca, also known as Seneca the Younger, who was a Roman Stoic philosopher of the Silver Age of Latin Literature (18-133AD)

Figure 2. Rubens, P. P. (c. 1600-1626). *Lucius Annaeus Seneca.*
From The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Retrieved with OASC permission from
http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection- online/search/459195

Figure 3. Butteri, G. (1575). *Virgin and Child with St Anne and Members of the Medici
Family as Saints.* From the Web Gallery of Art. Retrieved from http://www.wga.hu/
html_m/b/butteri/virgin_c.html

(Encyclopedia Britannica (n.d.). In his text *Naturales Quaestiones,* Seneca outlined that as one's life progressed, a mirror would help in gauging one's age, and the corresponding appropriate behaviour.

> Mirrors were invented in order that man may know himself, destined to attain many benefits from this: first, knowledge of himself; next, in certain directions, wisdom. The handsome man, to avoid infamy. The homely man, to understand that what he lacks in physical appearance must be compensated for by virtue. The young man, to be reminded by his youth that it is a time of learning and of daring brave deeds. The old man, to set aside actions dishonourable to his grey hair, to think some thoughts about death. This is why nature has given us the opportunity of seeing ourselves. A clear fountain or a polished stone returns to each man his image. (Seneca & Corcoran, 1971)

Seneca insisted that physical knowledge led to moral understanding. With these two theories, mirrors were championed as instruments for examining the Self, but it was not until the rise of humanism that the self-portraiture became common.

1.4 *The Renaissance and the Artist as Creator*

The Italian Renaissance began in Florence in the late 1300s, and was a period of enormous cultural upheaval. At this time, Florence was a republic, rather than an aristocracy as many other European states were, and this allowed for wealthy merchants and other citizens - such as the Medici family - to rise to prominence (see Figure 3). Due to this economic structure, the leading figures of Florence had the money to commission opulent artworks that would stand as a testament to their wealth. This increase in patronage, combined with the growing influence of humanism, created a vibrant and prosperous climate for artists (Teacher's vanity, 2012).

Though the ideals of Italy would not spread North till the late 15th Century, other areas of Europe were experiencing their own cultural rebirth. Artists of the Burgundian Netherlands (Belgium, The Netherlands, and Luxembourg) focused on naturalistic subjects, such as still lifes and landscapes, though there was still a strong religious influence in many of the works. Attention to detail, expressiveness, and the use of impeccable technique and colour made these works highly sought after, especially those of renowned painter Jan van Eyck.

Van Eyck painted many religious commissions, most notably the Ghent Altarpiece, which is regarded as the "defining monument of the "new realism" of Northern Renaissance art" (Rosenthal, n.d.). He is also credited with popularising the use of oil paints, which created a vibrant and tactile media that enhanced material elements such as hair, fur, and fabric in art.

Van Eyck's *Portrait of a Man in a Red Turban* (see Figure 4) is thought to be the first Western self-portrait after antiquity, though there is some debate over whether the subject is van Eyck himself, as there is no inscription to clearly demonstrate this. There is, however, a faux-engraving on the surrounding frame that points to a personal connection. The words "Als Ich Kan" are painted in Greek letters at the top of the frame, and translate to van Eyck's signature phrase, "As I can". This is noted to be a play on words, referring not only to his technical skill - "I do as best I can", but also to his surname in the boastful phrase - "As only Eyck Can" (Khan Academy, n.d.). As one of the masters of Renaissance art, van Eyck's self-portrait supports the growing status of artists in the 15th Century.

German painter Albrecht Durer was also gaining attention as one of his nation's most sought-after artists. Durer had created several self-portraits from a young age, either as physical studies or gifts to companions

Figure 4. Van Eyck, J. *(1433) Portrait of a Man in a Red Turban.*
From The National Gallery UK. Retrieved from http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/
paintings/jan-van-eyck-portrait-of-a-man-self-portrait

Figure 5. Durer, A. (1500). Self-portrait in a fur-collared robe.
From the Web Gallery of Art. Retrieved from http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/d/durer/1/03/1self28.html

(Hall, 2014). In 1494, while travelling to Italy to study their style of art, he was amazed at the high status that was given to artists. In a letter to a friend, Durer wrote "How I shall freeze after this sun! Here I am a gentleman, at home only a parasite." (Springer, 2013). On returning to Germany, his self-portraiture took a new direction. Influenced by the social status of Italian painters, he began to portray himself in elegant, rich clothing and powerful poses. In 1500, Durer completed a self-portrait that broke the boundaries of contemporary art (see Figure 5).

The most confronting element of this work is the way that Durer has positioned himself. Front-facing and engaging the viewer with his gaze, he is presented in a format that was exclusively reserved for images of Jesus Christ (Khan Academy, n.d.). With this brazen statement of power and divinity, Durer includes several references to the tools of an artist. The prominence of his right hand alludes to the working hand of a painter, and the placement of the golden inscriptions at eye-level guides the viewer to his eyes - another invaluable tool (Khan Academy, n.d.).

With this self-portrait, Durer presents himself as the artist-creator; a divine maker of images, just as God made human beings in his image. Beyond an homage to Christ, Durer instead takes his place. As the art historian Joseph Koerner states, "Nothing we see in a Dürer is not Dürer's" (Koerner, 1997).

The self-portraits discussed in this section are linked by a common theme. The creation of each artwork was motivated by a want to portray the artist in a position of high status. Initially this status was linked to a religious hierarchy, but with the advent of humanism it came to be an exploration of self-reassurance and self-worth. During the Renaissance, this expanded to show the masterful creativity and importance of the artist in society.

Through my design experiments I observed that this was an underlying theme for not only historical self-portraiture, but also for selfies. Though the social context has changed, and the production of media has disseminated through network culture, this core motivation of fame and power remains a factor in the self-portraiture of modern society.
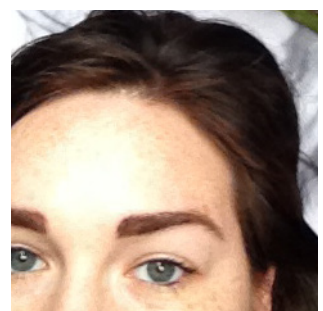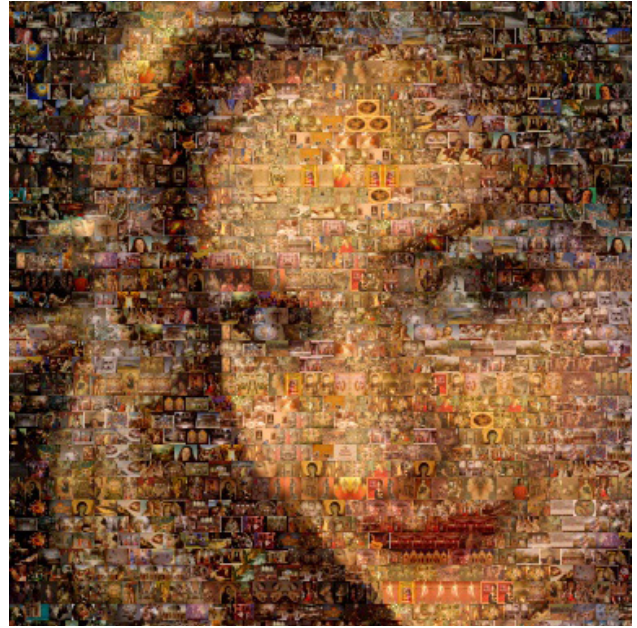
02 // The History of Photography

2.1 *The Evolution of the Camera*

The camera obscura had been used by artists since the 17th century, and after the discovery of photosensitive paper, it was adapted by Nicéphore Niépce to create one of the first permanent photographs (Beloff, 1985). Niepce continued to improve his methods of affixing the image and started working with Louis Daguerre whom, after Niepce's death just four years later, became wildly successful with his own process- the daguerréotype. A daguerreotype was unable to be reproduced unless the original was re-photographed - similar to the production of artworks. Another notable figure in the evolution of photography was William Henry Fox Talbot, who tried to overcome this feature by use of a negative image - he noted that photographic images were 'the pencil of nature' (Beloff, 1985). The reproductions from his process degraded in quality after multiple copies. These early experiments in photography form the base on which our current image capture technology is positioned. Talbot's description of the photograph suggests that initially it was seen "as having a kind of independent reality". Although photography is compact, reliable, and complete - there is always that mixture of "information, accident, aesthetics and motive" - the human agent (Beloff, 1985). This is probably why it fit so well into the visual arts and wasn't solely used as a scientific tool.

In 1839 Robert Cornelius took what is believed to be the first photographic self-portrait (see Figure 6),

Figure 6. Cornelius, R. (c. 1839) *The first photographic self-portrait.*
From PetaPixel. Retrieved from http://petapixel.com/2013/12/05/pioneering-
photographer-robert-cornelius-credited-worlds-first-selfie/

and from the 1840s artists were producing "illegitimate offspring of the camera and the brush" by taking compositions from fine art and replicating them through the lens (Beloff, 1985). Delacroix began using photographs as a basis for his paintings, allowing an intensity of detail previously unseen. It was a natural progression, and now photography is inextricably linked with art (Hammer Museum, n.d.).

Advances in photographic technology continued to revolutionise the way images could be created. The foundation of the Eastman Kodak Company in 1892, and their invention of rolls of celluloid film, played a large part in the evolution of an accessible and portable camera (Kodak, n.d.). In 1975, the company's breakthrough creation of the world's first digital camera heralded a new age for photography - the boundaries of which are still expanding today with the invention of smartphones (Zhang, 2010).

2.2 *The Smartphone as a Camera*

The trend of people turning the camera on themselves was a 'thoughtless act' (Suri & IDEO, 2005) that prompted Sony to make the first cellphone with a front-facing camera in 2003 (Nerdeky, 2003). Samsung followed with a digital camera featuring a front and back lcd screen that eliminated the need for a timer – the fact that cellphones had front-facing screens before cameras suggests that the relationship people had with their phones was evolving. The influx of smartphones with internet access in the early 2000s enabled the uploading of images to the internet straight from the source. Images were not only free, simple and fast, they now had an avenue of instantaneous publicity. The inclusion of the front-facing camera in smartphones coincided with the rise of social media networking websites, most notably MySpace which had 75.9 million users at its peak in 2008 – each obliged to upload a profile picture for their page. Facebook has now eclipsed this figure with a staggering 1.35 billion monthly active users (Day, 2013). Even before the arrival of public-access internet, we were immersing ourselves in a visual culture. The journalist and former White House Press Secretary Bill Moyers stated in 1990 that "we live in a world of the mass producing and consuming of images which shape our lives and the public mind" (Moyers, 1990) . It is then, perhaps, not surprising that photo-based social networks such as Instagram and Tumblr have gradually become more popular than any of the text-oriented platforms, with Facebook seeing a -6% change in active usage, Tumblr +22% and Instagram +25% in late 2014 (Realtime Report, 2014).
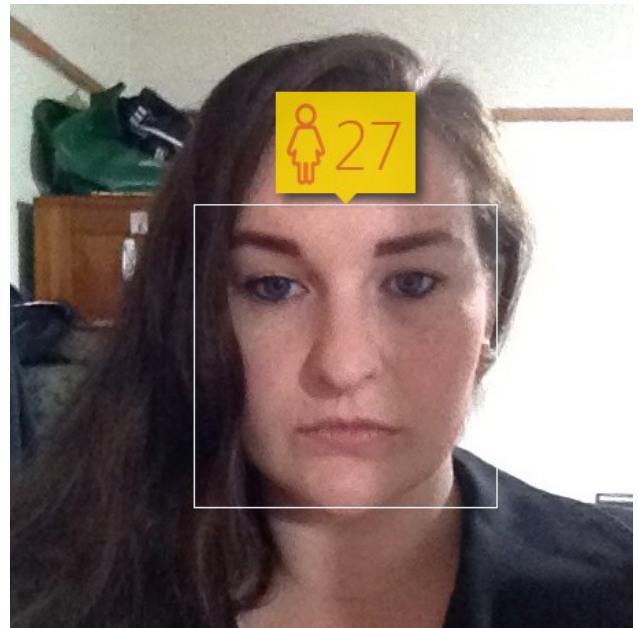
03 // Selfies and Social Media

3.1 *Introducing the selfie*

The term 'selfie' first appeared on an Australian web forum on the 13th of September, 2002. A user named 'Hopey' posted on ABC Online, asking for advice about stitches in his lip (Liddy, 2013) (see Figure 7). To accompany his request, he posted an out-of-focus close up of his swollen lip, stating:

> Um, drunk at a mates 21st, I tripped ofer [sic] and landed lip first (with front teeth coming a very close second) on a set of steps. I had a hole about 1cm long right through my bottom lip. And sorry about the focus, it was a selfie. (Liddy, 2013)

Over the next two years, images started to appear on the photo-sharing site Flickr hash-tagged as 'selfie' and 'selfy'. With the advent of the smartphone, posting a selfie to the internet became distinctly easier and more popular, and this led to the term being officially added to the Oxford Dictionary Online in 2013 (Oxfordwords, 2013).

Selfies are most commonly posted to social networking sites, and conform to a recognised format. The image is uploaded, and a caption may be used to express extra information – usually pertaining to why the

Figure 7. Hopey. (2002) *The first selfie.*
From ABC News. Retrieved from http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-11-19/this-photo-is-worlds-first-selfie/5102568
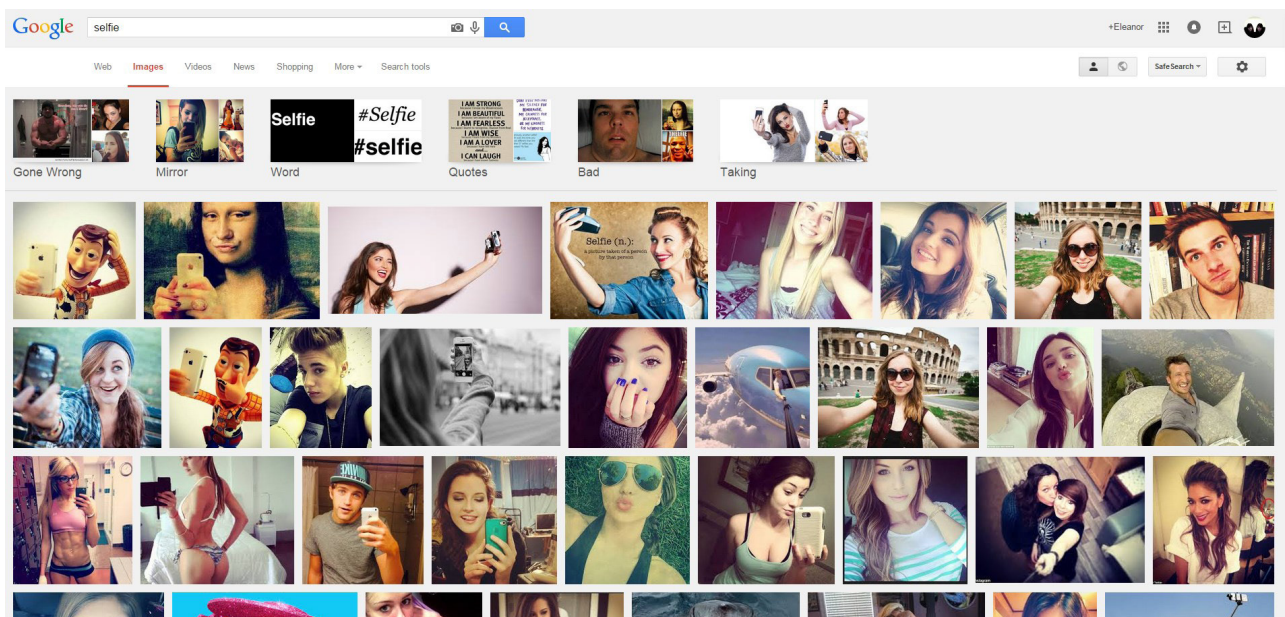
Figure 8 & 9. Google (2015) *Selfies on Google Images.* Retrieved from https://www.google.co.nz/search?q=selfie

selfie was taken and the mood of the subject. In addition to this text, the post is categorised by the use of hashtags that appear underneath the caption; words or phrases that hyperlink to groupings of similarly tagged posts, supposedly helping people find more of the things they're interested in. Though initially used for single words descriptive of the image (#me, #bedroom) as the notion of 'tagging' posts becomes more familiar, users are increasingly creating their own shorthand (#idek - 'I don't even know', #tbt - 'throwback thursday') and even using the hashtag as an extended caption (#iseriouslyjustwokeuplikethisicantevenwalk).

Type 'selfie' into any online image search and you'll be rewarded with numerous amounts of self-portrait snapshots – people at home, work, on holiday, happy, sad, or even bored. It seems that any moment is a good moment for a selfie (see Figure 8). Though many images are as bland and uninteresting as passing strangers on the street, some are very intimate and show insight into people's personal lives. There are often environments and objects around the subject that bring an intriguing or captivating context to the shot. Bedrooms and untidy bathrooms reflected in mirrors, or bystanders accidentally caught in the frame, selfies at funerals, and even after sex; there are no limits to what you can upload.

The enamourment with selfies and photographing our actions is thought to mar the experience that is occurring - people seem to be documenting life and not living it. "As social life becomes more fragmented and anonymous, we express ourselves is a photograph. The more fragile our identity, the more we need to reinforce it. To show that we exist" (Beloff, 1985). Perhaps we are scared that we are going to lose things if they are not captured as a material object, so we turn our image into a material good that people can collect and treasure. We stop being intangible and become a commodity.

Mobile applications have been made to simplify and enable the sharing of photographs online, and these applications hold large collections of selfies that are publicly available to view. Instagram and Tumblr are two of the most popular image-sharing applications, and are discussed below.

3.2 *Instagram*

Instagram is a photo-sharing application created by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, that launched in October 2010 (Tolentino, 2012). The application allows users to take photos on their smartphones, and share the images to social media networks such as Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter. For each image, the user can add tags (key descriptive words), captions, and also apply one of several image filters to enhance the stylistic qualities of their photo. By tagging an image, it can be connected to other uploads with the same tag, allowing users to search through images from around the world. Posts can be 'liked', and third-party applications can be used to re-post images from other users – this is known as 're-gramming'.
In October 2014, Instagram reported that it had approximately 300 million monthly active users, and as of May 2015, more than 271,342,000 photos were tagged 'selfie', and more than 367,805,000 photos were tagged 'me' (Iconosquare, 2015).

3.3 *Tumblr*

Tumblr is a blogging platform founded by David Karp, that launched in February 2007 (Davis, 2008). Unlike other blogging sites, Tumblr is based on the format of a 'tumblelog' – a short format blog with mixed media posts and very little commentary. Users can upload posts in a variety of formats, and like Instagram, these can be tagged, captioned, liked, and reposted. Tumblr does not currently offer statistics about their content, but as of May 2015 it has more than 238 million blogs with over 112 billion posts (Tumblr, 2015).

Figure 10 & 11. The Chainsmokers. (2014) *Still from #Selfie.*
From Youtube. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kdemFfbS5H0

Figure 12 &13. Bonaparte. (2014) *Still from Me So Selfie.*
From Youtube. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUvIjvgUR2

3.4 *Contemporary Attitudes*

The phenomenon of the selfie spread far outside of social networks. Various creative works have been made critiquing the selfie, and the following analysis of music videos from popular culture aims to identify the mainstream media's attitudes and perception of selfies. On the music streaming software Spotify, a search for 'selfie' returns multiple lists of artists, albums, and songs featuring the term.

The Chainsmokers
One of the more well-known selfie-songs is '#SELFIE' by American DJs The Chainsmokers. The club hit spent four weeks at number one on the Billboard Dance/Electronic Song List of 2014 (Billboard, 2014), has over 300,000,000 views on YouTube, and its chorus hook "But first, let me take a selfie" is regularly referenced in news headlines, fan videos, and many websites (The Chainsmokers, 2014). A recent article on The Huffington Post's website describes the song as containing "spoken verses following a vapid, self-obsessed woman's night at the club – highlighted by her stopping everything to snap photos of herself", and calls it an "infectious" success (Del Mar, 2014). Verses include musings on Instagram filters, choosing the best caption and tags to seem cool, and a contemplation of deleting a selfie that has very few 'likes' – the worth of her selfie seems to rely heavily on validation from other people.

Along with enlisting stars such as David Hasselhoff, Steve Aoki, and Snoop Dogg, The Chainsmokers put out a call on their website, asking fans to submit selfies that would appear in the music video (The Chainsmokers, n.d.). The song is now circulating on the smartphone application Vine, where users can record their own six-second video clips and submit them to be liked or re-posted by followers. With The Chainsmokers' hit playing in the background, a string of videos show people pausing in important or serious situations to lip-sync "but first, let me take a selfie", and following this with snapshots of overly-emphasised clichés of posing for a selfie, such as the puckering of the lips, and tilting of the head to one side. This new meme (media that is copied and shared by Internet users (Meme, n.d.) perpetuates the song's perspective of taking selfies as a narcissistic, ignorant, and judgmental act, and also cements the selfie as a passing image; something instantaneous with little substance or merit.

Bonaparte ft. Tim Fite
With its YouTube views sitting at just over 80,000, the music video for 'Me So Selfie' is far less well-known than its dance-club counterpart (Bonaparte, 2014). Performed by Tobias Jundt, the man behind German electronic-rock band Bonaparte, and American musician Tim Fite, 'Me So Selfie' is a confession of selfie-addiction that pokes fun at this obsession (Terry, 2014). The song encompasses the common opinions on selfie-taking; that the subject must be vain, and preoccupied by maintaining an online image. In contrast to The Chainsmokers, Jundt and Fite present these opinions in an overtly humorous way, bringing to light the trivial nature of most content. With lyrics such as "I'm so sweet, I could eat my selfie", along with the song's title, we see that the diminutive 'selfie' is not only short for 'self-portrait', but could also be short for 'self' and 'selfish' (Bonaparte, 2014). A repeated phrase within the song is "me, me, me and my selfie", and with the multiple meanings of the word I was interested in the relationship between the photographer and the photo. Are we our selfie or is our selfie us?

Again, as with '#Selfie', there are suggestions of a selfie being used as a tool for self-validation. The lyrics "Do I look sexy? Look at those abs. Do I look fat? Look at those abs." (Bonaparte, 2014) are questions cast out to the social network, looking for answers and assurances of self-worth and attractiveness. This 'worth' corresponds to the number of likes and comments that the photo receives; which can be seen to be the modern day equivalent of Durer's admirers and patrons.

The accompanying video clip for 'Me So Selfie' is a mix of staged video, fan photos, and documentary footage. Each of the singers constructs a large protruding arm that is then belted to their waist; a modified selfie-stick for constant use. The footage is then shown as videos inside smartphones, as if we are watching their personal live selfie stream (Bonaparte, 2014). Punctuating this video are selfies of fans and friends of the band, which are collaged and cropped into the song's title, which appears as large flashing text at several points in the video (see Figure 12).

Most interesting though, is the footage we are shown from outside the self-selfie bond. Jundt and Fite walking and dancing through streets while poring over their digital image at the end of an extra limb, presents the constant obsession with selfies to viewers in a tangible and public way. In 1964, media theorist Marshall McLuhan wrote that "men at once become fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves", and this sentiment is reinforced as crowds of people join Jundt and Fite as they chant "aw yeah, me so selfie" in Times Square; the focus of their amusement being their own faces on a cellphone, held by an artificial hand (see Figure 13).

The way that selfies are presented in popular culture as vapid and a sign of vanity, and the negative attitudes shown towards them, indicate a discrepancy between their cultural value and that of historical self-portraiture - which is revered and hung in museums. In gaining an understanding of this discrepancy, I was able to construct design experiments that further addressed and explored it.

04 // Fame, Fortune, and Warhol

In the midst of Neo-Dadaist New York, Andy Warhol began an artistic process that would see him become an iconic figure in the Pop Art scene of the 1960s. His elevation of everyday products to icons of high art, and his treatment of celebrities as mass-produced commodities, suggests to me that the same trajectory could be taken by selfies, which are currently perceived as throwaway, inconsequential images.

Based in Switzerland, the Dada movement had formed as a reaction to World War I, and had spread its radical anti-nationalist and irrational notions through Europe in the early 1910s (Art Story, n.d.). It was taken up by refugee artists who were ready to build a new culture in the face of political constraints following the war (Shipe, 2012). Francis Picabia, at the time a primarily Cubist painter, became involved in Dada through his correspondence with founder Tristan Tzara while hospitalized in Zurich. Picabia soon solidified the concept of fortuitous and non-conformist culture on his return to Paris, and he and friends Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp took these themes to New York (Collins, n.d.). Duchamp was already known for his work with 'readymades' – manufactured objects that he presented as art in an effort to divorce aesthetics from expression, so the Dada manifesto seemed a natural fit for his progressive work.

Though there were already many artists experimenting with new styles, and gaining exposure through such exhibitions as the Armory Show of 1913 and the 291 Gallery, New York soon became the hub for a collective

Figure 14. Johns, J. (1954-1955) *Flag.* From The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Retrieved from http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/john/hd_john.htm

Figure 15. Warhol, A. (1962) *210 Coca-Cola Bottles.* From The Tate Modern. Retrieved from http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/warhol

we now tentatively call New York Dada (Art story, n.d.). This new strain of art had many similarities to the Zurich movement; the use of photography within works, found objects, and the aim to redefine art and expression through confrontational and unexpected displays. There were, however, notable differences; New York Dada was driven by irony and criticism of the values of current society, instead of political frustration at them. Dada soon gave way to Surrealism and Abstract-expressionism, which spread through to the 1950s (Art story, n.d.). Art at this time was dominated by emotive and gestural work, such as Jackson Pollock's expressive paint splatters. New York was celebrated as the centre of modern art, and the portrayal of universal themes through abstract expression both soothed and reflected the trauma caused by the Second World War.

With every action there is a reaction, and the height of abstract art was cut by a small but powerful rebellion. Neo-Dada was born to shift focus from the "internal emotions" that popular artists were referencing (Art story, n.d.). The same chaos and irrationality of Dada was fused with new media, and consumer culture became an area to both mock and celebrate. The goal, again, was to "look beyond traditional aesthetic standards", and Neo-Dadaists revelled in creating complex messages through juxtaposition and the viewer's perception (Art story, n.d.). The 'readymades' of Duchamp took centre-stage, as artists adhered to "the premise that works of art are intermediaries in a process that the artist begins and the viewer completes" (Art story, n.d.).

The key figures in this movement were Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Johns is perhaps most well-known for one of his early works, Flag – a collage of newspaper clippings combined and coloured with melted wax to form the USA flag. His works often feature familiar symbols and signs; "things the mind already knows", that carry a variety of connotations (Rosenthal, n.d.). This helps "foster the perceptual ambiguity and semiotic play" that is an integral part of the art (Rosenthal, n.d.).

Likewise, Rauschenberg left the interpretation of his work to the audience. He worked with fortuitous arrangements of everyday objects and street rubbish, creating chaotic compositions labelled as 'Combines' (Art story, n.d.). The idea of bringing an object into a different context, and thereby creating a new form, was important to Rauschenberg's practice. He and Johns were a formidable duo in 1950's New York; friends and lovers, exhibiting a radical and scandalous form of art that took the familiar and opened it up to re-interpretation (Towle, 2013).

At this time, Andy Warhol was working as a designer of window displays for commercial businesses. He had found success in advertising, and was known for his pen-and-ink drawings of shoes. He employed the same method of production in one of his first Pop Art works – a single Coca-Cola bottle, a popular icon which Rauschenberg had used in a Combine just a few years before. Warhol soon followed this with experiments in screen-printing, a novel form of image production, and created works featuring rows of the bottles – identical from afar, but each with their own individual characteristics.

In cultivating his own style, Warhol built upon the idea of a familiar icon by drawing from his work in advertising. Instead of following Johns and Rauschenberg in the re-interpretation of the everyday, Warhol saw the potential for artistic tension when presenting images from pop culture that already had mass appeal (Gompertz, 2012). Was it celebration of the glorified, or criticism of consumer culture? What occurs when we are presented with popular icons in a new and critical context?

Warhol cemented his position and the aesthetics of Pop Art with his work featuring 32 individual Campbell's soup cans, which he found inspiration for whilst eating soup for lunch. There was no need for artistic flourishes; the art was in presenting an image of the can itself as art. In mass-producing a very simple and faithful copy of a product, Warhol challenged the convention of producing unique art. How could identical

*The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available.
The image was sourced at The Tate Modern. Retrieved from http://www.tate.
org.uk/art/artworks/warhol-marilyn-diptych-t03093*

Figure 16. Warhol, A. (1962) *Marilyn Diptych.* From The Tate Modern. Retrieved from
http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/warhol-marilyn-diptych-t03093

paintings be considered individual, authentic artworks? As Will Gompertz of Salon Magazine writes, "Their sameness goes against the traditions of the art market, which places value – financial and artistic – on perceived rarity and uniqueness" (Gompertz, 2012). The repetition of images also pertains to the mass-production used to make consumer goods – the goods that he was now turning into art.

Along with consumerism, Andy Warhol turned to celebrity culture to fuel his practice. In August 1962, the death of Marilyn Monroe incited Warhol to create what is known as the Marilyn Diptych (Gompertz, 2012) (see Figure 16). Featuring 50 repeated headshots of the actress set out in a grid, the piece was created within two weeks of her death. Warhol used his screen-printing method to replicate the series of images, which were taken from a publicity still for the film Niagara that premiered in 1953. The 25 images on the left-hand panel show a smiling Monroe with yellow hair, fuschia skin, and red lips on an orange background. Vibrant and glossy, these perfect prints are reminiscent of the flawless celebrity illusion we are accustomed to. On the right-hand panel the 25 faces appear again, but this time in black and white (Gompertz, 2012). They are inconsistent, faded, and smudged, alluding not only to Monroe's death, but also to the fading of fame and beauty. It was a strategic piece, created at a time where public interest in the actress was at a peak. Warhol capitalised on this, and turned the celebrity into a piece of merchandise that he could mass-produce and sell.

Warhol continued to associate himself with consumerism and celebrity culture for the rest of his career. His studio 'The Factory' was indeed a place of manufacture, and played host to a variety of famous people, all of whom perpetuated the brand of Warhol with their appearances in much of his later work (Gompertz, 2012). Eventually it didn't even matter whether the artist had printed his own art or not – what mattered was the brand, and for a man so obsessed with celebrity and consumerism, perhaps this was his greatest work of all.

Andy Warhol elevated everyday products to icons of high art, and treated celebrities as mass-produced pieces of merchandise – taking advantage of their fame and influence as a way of raising his artistic profile. The transformation of this content through innovative methods of production offers a template for my final design output, and Warhol's focus on consumerism and celebrity culture is reflected in today's society, affecting the ideals of fame and fortune and consequentially, the social value of self-portraits.

Following this overview of the historical perspective of self portraiture and how it has been influenced by technology, I will discuss the design experiments undertaken to further explore the similarities in cultural value between selfies and historical self portraiture.
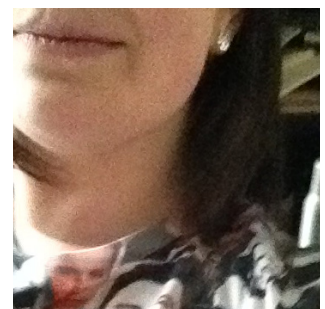
05 // Design Experiments

5.1 *I Want Your Selfie*

Being an active user of social networks, I am constantly exposed to selfies. Selfies of my friends, selfies of strangers, and celebrity selfies on blogs and fan pages.
These selfies are often accompanied by text – comments and hashtags that provide a small glimpse into the creator's motivation behind the image. They capture personal moments, yet as posts on an ever-updating feed, they are treated as inconsequential images which are quickly replaced by more recent shots.

Personal social media profiles on networking sites, such as Tumblr and Instagram, convey a sense of security and privacy, with closed networks and tight circles of friends. It is easy to forget who can view the content we post, and how it might be used by third-parties. I was interested to see how people edited and selected pictures of themselves when they were made aware that the images would be used publicly. In reality, the majority of the internet is public and I could have selected their selfies without their knowledge or permission, but in calling for people to submit their own image, I was receiving photographs that were self-approved as representations of the subject. Images that would not be buried by more recent social media updates, but would stand as the sole identifier of the subject in a forum that was specifically for selfies. I asked 'Who are you?', and they replied 'This is me'.

*The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available.
The image contains material that was sourced at Instagram. Retrieved
from http://www.elle.com.au/news/zeitgeist/2013/11/the-best-selfies-
of-2013/justin/*

Figure 17. (2013) Promotional poster for 'I Want Your Selfie'.
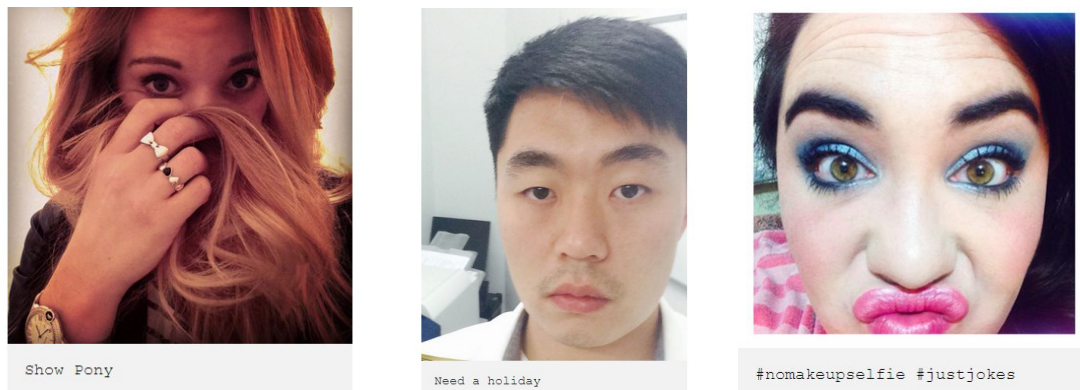

Show Pony

Need a holiday

#nomakeupselfie #justjokes

*Figure 18a. (2014) Examples of submissions from 'I Want Your Selfie'. From Tumblr. Retrieved
from http://iwantyourselfie.tumblr.com/*

I set up a Tumblr blog entitled 'I Want Your Selfie'. I asked friends, family, and classmates to submit a selfie. The site was advertised around my university campus by a poster that read, 'I Want Your Selfie', with the website address '.tumblr.com' beneath. This was accompanied by a large selfie that the singer Justin Bieber had taken in 2013 (see Figure 17).

Shirtless, tattooed, and wide-eyed, Bieber presented himself in a clearly heavily-manicured image, consciously constructed to maximise his sex-appeal. The text was chosen to mimic that of J.M Flagg's US army recruitment poster (1917) (Library of Congress, 2010), adapted from the 'Lord Kitchener Wants You' poster designed by Alfred Leete (1914) (Bryant, 2009). Flagg used the USA nationalist figure of 'Uncle Sam' in the place of Lord Kitchener, and changed the accompanying text to a direct first-person 'I Want You'. With Bieber as my 'Uncle Sam', I called upon not only his celebrity status, but the conflicting interest the media has given him, to act as an audience hook. Initially touted as one of the 'people who mattered' by TIME magazine in 2010, their more recent articles have titles such as 'More Than 70,000 People Have Signed a Petition to Deport Justin Bieber' (2014). Public opinion has been just as varied, with the pop star having extreme fans who call themselves 'belibers' (a play on the term 'believers', reinforcing the god-like status they have attributed to the singer), and also being the subject of a Flash game dedicated to "killing Justin Beaver" that includes audio from the singer's shows (Sims5000, 2011).

I posted the link to 'I Want Your Selfie' on my personal Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr reach a wider audience through online networking, creating a wider sample range. There were no guidelines about what could be posted, except for a notice about the public use of the images submitted. I wanted to leave the site as open as possible so as not to influence the type of selfies that people chose to post.

The selfies that were submitted were very reserved; nothing beyond the happy snapshots you would expect to see. Some submissions were from people I know personally, and had already been posted on other social media sites.They had chosen from a 'back-catalogue' of photos and selected the selfie that they felt best represented them, or how they wished to be perceived, instead of a new spur-of-the-moment, raw image. Many submissions were colour-filtered and edited to provide a more manicured image. Captions, as discussed in Section 3.1, were often self-deprecating or apologetic in nature – providing a layer of security and self-awareness in the face of any possible criticism. They couldn't rely on a new selfie to be as representative of themselves as one that had already been assessed and approved, and potentially edited and corrected. Just as one would for a painted self-portrait, the taker of the selfie each took on the role of artist; directing and carefully composing the subject within the frame.

The results of 'I Want Your Selfie' show that on publicly accessible social media sites, the perceived privacy and freedom to post any content is much greater than on sites where the user is reminded of the public nature of the forum. Although the privacy levels of any Tumblr page (and many other social network profiles) are the same as the 'I Want Your Selfie' page, there was a distinct difference between the selfies I found through a random search and those that were submitted for my cause. As the two collections of selfies were from completely different people, I cannot compare the 'private public' selfies from one individual to the 'public public' selfies of another. I did, however, look at the selfies from people I knew, as having access to their personal social network profiles allowed me to assess whether the submitted photo was created just for my website, or one that had previously been posted online.

I had already seen the majority of the submissions, mainly as profile pictures on social media sites. There are a number of possible reasons for this selection:
      a.   The image was already posted online, or was stored on the computer or phone – it takes less effort to submit an image that is readily accessible.
      b.   The image had been previously uploaded, and had received positive comments or 'likes'
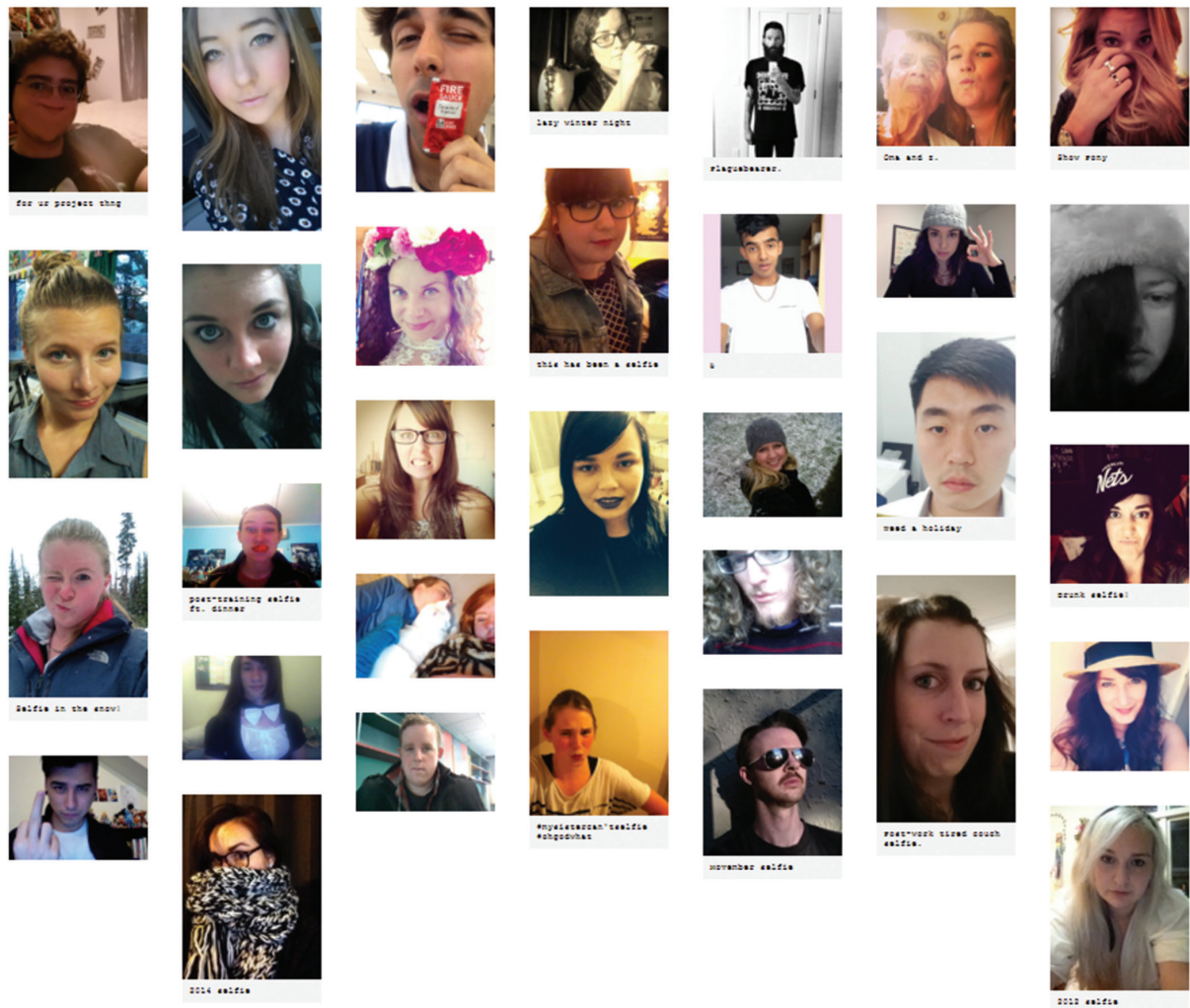
Figure 18b. (2014) *Examples of submissions from 'I Want Your Selfie'.*
From Tumblr. Retrieved from http://iwantyourselfie.tumblr.com/

Figure 19. (2014) Comparison of original and created selfie.

Alexander Matson the self portraits don't seem narcissistic, rather just objective documents (the old ones) or exercises in style (van gogh, picasso). whereas just from the tags I can tell the purpose of the selfies was attention seeking, despite the sometimes self effacing tone. so there's a contrast, and an irony that abstract paintings can somehow be more honest than photography, a seemingly objective document...that's gold jerry!
Unlike · 👍 1 · 9 January at 00:11

Michelle Martin I like Frida's hair. Maybe i can do mine like that...Also i disagree, there is always a social value in art whether this was intended or not by the artist and the social value evolves with whatever is in vogue (selfies for now but famous painting have and will always be tampered with). So i don't think the social value is lowered but simply changed (whether for better or worse is a question for the viewer). I don't imagine the famous artists would have realised their portraits would be used in a humorous manner but it gives them another layer of viewing entertainment. A selfie is not usually humurous but more self indulgent/vain/a 'good' version of oneself
Like · 9 January at 07:55

Figure 20. (2014) Comments on selfie mash-ups.

36

on social media sites. The person submitting their selfie already knew it was a socially accepted image of themselves that would not cause damage to their presented persona.
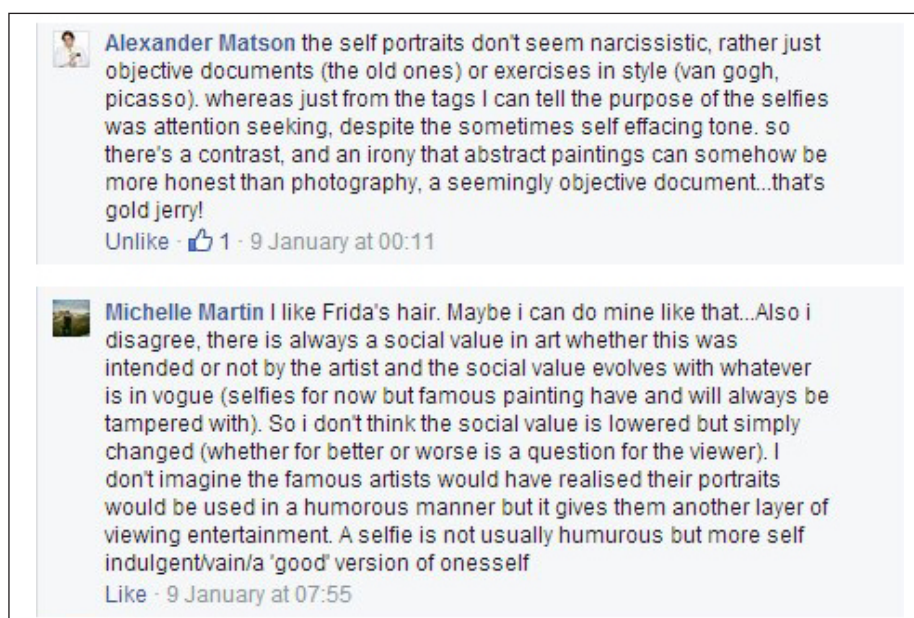
    c.   The image represented a certain aspect of themselves and their lives that they enjoyed. Some were holiday snaps, or photos with family members. These images hold positive memories and show their personal values.

It is possible that a photo was submitted for all of these, and other reasons, combined. I added my own selfies to the site, and they too were photos I had already posted to my social media profiles. My personal reasons for my selected selfies were a combination of the three suggestions above. It takes time and effort for me to take a selfie that I am happy with, and the two that I submitted had received 'likes' and comments from others that supported my own satisfaction with the image. The photos I selected also contained elements that I was particularly proud of – one showed my newly-dyed blonde hair, and the other a new scarf that I was excited about.

The photos that appeared on my site seem to support the assertion that the people who submitted selfies felt the same as I did. I wanted to present myself in a favourable way, and submitting selfies that had been trialled and assessed on other networks already removed the possibility of embarrassment or detriment to my public image. In this way, I treated my personal social media profiles as private spaces where I could post content and determine its social worth based on the amount of attention it received. It was only when an image had been socially favoured that I chose it for a overtly public site.

5.2 *Mash-Ups*

If taking selfies is "the image-making of our time" (Gorman, 2013) then how does the practice compare to more traditional self-portraits? With my research showing a clear historical progression through image-making technology, and as per McLuhan's observations, surely a selfie is just a painting or drawing in another form? My immediate reaction to this question was to follow the postmodernist trend of juxtaposition. By combining elements from past and present self-portraits, any similarities would be enhanced, identifying elements that I could further investigate in my exploration of the cultural value of the selfie. In choosing self-portraits to compare to today's selfies, I looked at what would be most accessible to viewers. As modern media users understand both the context in which a selfie is created and the creation process itself, the comparison self-portraits needed to be just as universally understood in order to garner unbiased responses. It stands to reason that the most accessible and familiar self-portraits are by popular and noted artists; therefore I chose self-portraits from iconic painters such as Vincent van Gogh, Albrecht Durer, Jan van Eyck, and Andy Warhol.

In my initial juxtaposition I transferred the content of the traditional self-portraits to the medium of the selfie. I emulated the graphic layout of the social networking sites Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram so as to replicate the digital environment of selfies, and each self-portrait was placed in a post that retained the original selfie caption and hashtags. Without this context the self-portraits would be unrecognisable as 'selfies', and seem just like a digital copy of an artwork.

Assigning an image to a post was not a random procedure. The famous artworks and their artists were studied so that a caption could be chosen to suit the emotion and context that the original piece held. For instance, the selected self-portrait by Durer is, as previously discussed, acknowledged as a direct reference to imagery of Jesus Christ. Durer thought he was so famous and important in society and art that he held himself at the same level as Christ, and portrayed himself as such. The chosen selfie caption reads "The real question is: would I date myself? Yes", and reflects Durer's hubris and vanity. Each pairing was constructed to offer a semblance of reality: had these artists owned smartphones, is this how they would communicate their
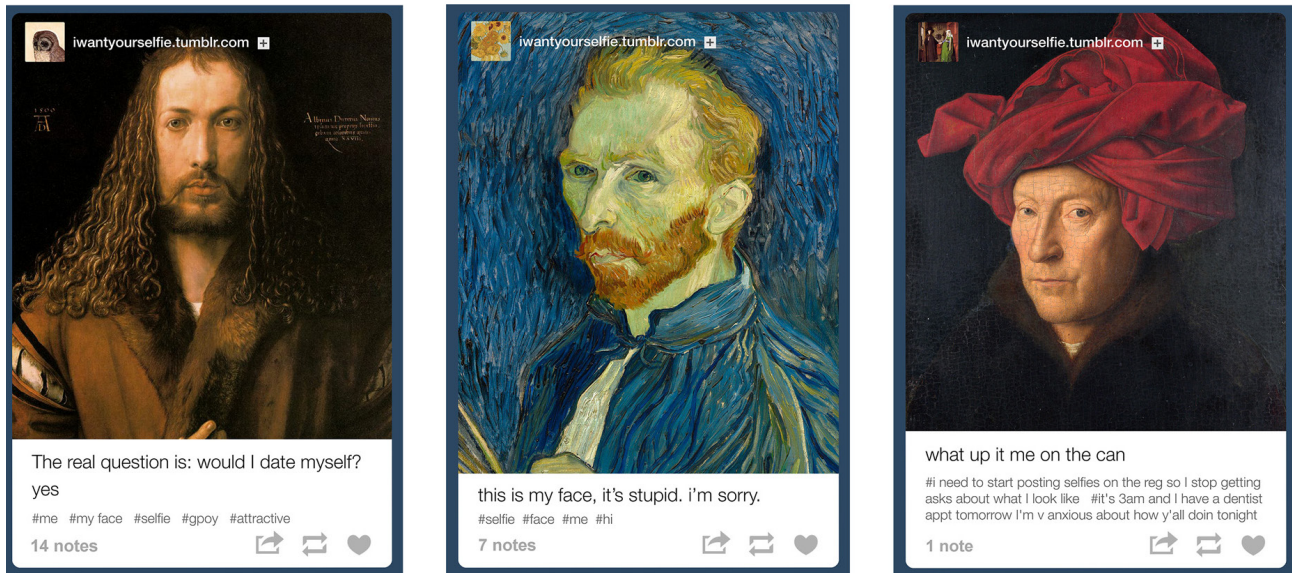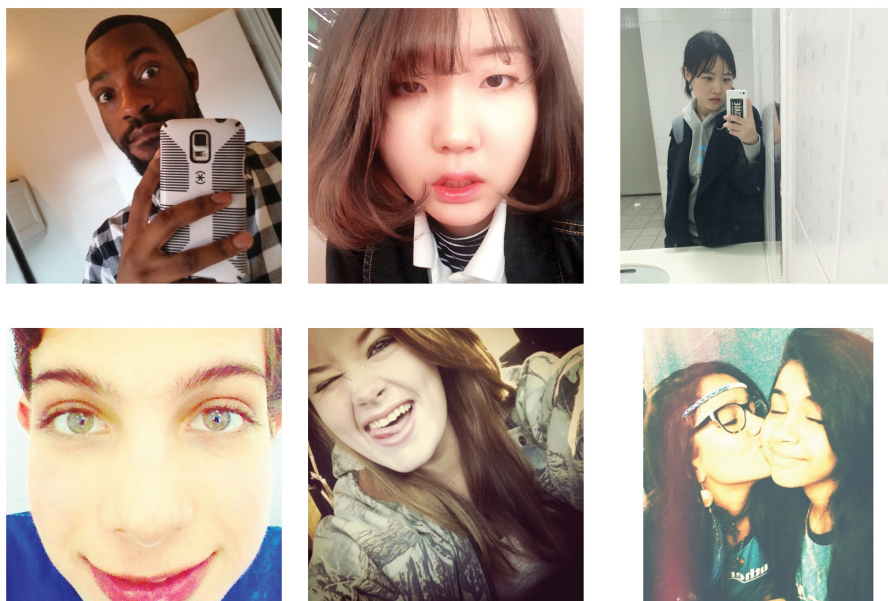
Figure 21. (2014) *Selfie mash-ups.*

Figure 22. (2014) *Selfies offered for oil-painting.* From Tumblr.
Retrieved from https://www.tumblr.com/search/selfie

sense of self?

I posted these images to my profile on Facebook, a social media network, and received comments on them from friends who I had connected to on the site (see Figure 20; for full transcript see Appendix C).
The imagery garnered strong reactions. The selfie text and tags were seen as vapid and narcissistic, and even seemed so unlikely that they were doubted as being from genuine Tumblr posts. Their insipidness also served to reinforce the common belief that selfies are only created due to a want for attention, and those that take on a self-deprecating tone are equally as self-centered.
The people who chose to comment on my experiment agreed that the famous artworks are held in greater respect than selfies, with one commenter choosing to see them as documents with no subjective pretext or ulterior motive - in an online environment many posts are motivated by the prospect of gaining popularity through 'likes', whereas these artworks seemed devoid of that intention. In contrast to the manicured and self-involved selfie text that accompanied them, this created "an irony that abstract paintings can be more honest than photography – a seemingly objective document."

Also suggested was the fact that both areas of self-portraiture had social value, dependent on current trends and the viewer's own opinion. However, the famous historical paintings continue to be held in high regard even when modified, whereas selfies may only be valuable in the "now". If this is the case, what is it that causes such a discrepancy in value between the two forms of self-portraiture?
This juxtaposition was an initial probe into dissolving the perceived differences between traditional self-portraits and selfies. What resulted was a discussion that raised further questions, and led me to reconsider the direction my research was taking. My experiment had fallen short of providing tangible evidence of similarities between the two formats - excluding the obvious, that the images were all self-portraits. The simple exchange of media had not conveyed my intention of showing the cultural value of selfies, it had instead enhanced their insignificance next to great artists through history.

With my second juxtaposition, I was again attempting to showcase selfies as valid works of art. My research on McLuhan had shown that a self-portrait would always be a self-portrait, regardless of the way it was presented (Mcluhan, 1964). However, after the first part of this experiment, I began to wonder whether the medium was affecting people's attitudes towards the subject. This would likely be because of the social context and how that medium was viewed in contemporary culture. Perhaps the digital format of selfies carries a stigma, as it is a rapid, accessible, and easy media to work in, and therefore has less worth. Surely then, the time-consuming, detailed mastery of oil-painting might create the conditions of a valued self-portrait.

I reversed the roles in my initial experiment and transferred the content of Tumblr selfies into the favoured medium of historical artists – oil paint. To ensure the resulting paintings took on similar qualities to the original art, I chose to paint on wood panels. Artists such as Durer used poplar, oak, and other locally available wood as their canvas. I wanted to source wood that was native to New Zealand; a 'local' wood.
After contacting James Henry, a Wellington flooring company, I made a trip to their workshop to find suitable materials. I chose thin lengths of wood from offcuts of rimu, matai, and tawa. These were then cut into small panels of 120x60mm; the approximate dimensions of the iPhone 5 (Apple, 2014).
In constraining the painting to this small size, I replicated the original size of the selfie content in iPhone applications such as Instagram and Tumblr. As the size of a selfie is a very distinct and universal feature due to the similarity of cellphones, changing this element would have competed with the change of medium. It was important to me to concentrate on the oil painting alone so that the cause of any responses would be easy to identify. I sanded and prepared each panel with white primer before handing them to Bonnie Pyper, a local amateur painter who has some experience in oils. She was given a list of URL links to selfies that I had chosen from Tumblr. The images on the list were chosen at random – as random as personal choice can

Figure 23. (2014) *Oil-painted selfies.*

be – and Bonnie then selected three of them to transfer onto the panels. I instructed her to copy the image as closely as she could, and to resist the temptation to correct any colour anomalies or focus issues – the hallmarks of a cell-phone image.

The completed panels changed the sense of the selfies completely. They were no longer throwaway images created at the touch of a button, but small, strangely composed paintings that provided very little emotion – despite the time and effort involved in producing them. It may be that I am conditioned to associating oil-paintings with grand masterpieces, but I felt that the content of these selfies was not worthy of this form. I was tempted to pass on these same images to more experienced artists to see whether my response differed as the technical skills were raised. However, considering my initial thoughts, this experiment seemed successful in terms of the change of medium.

Just like the first part of this experiment, this exchange of media was obvious, and reinforced the initial findings. Again, the content of the selfies was damaging to the perception of the outcome.
Neither of my experiments in juxtaposition provided me with results to support the idea of selfies having cultural value. I decided to change the direction of my research, and instead of aiming to elevate everyday selfies, begin by looking at selfies that already had popularity and social value.

5.3 *James Franco Breakers*

Background

James Franco is a celebrity actor, writer, and teacher. He has five post-graduate degrees, and is set to complete a Doctorate in English Literature at Yale. He is also an artist working in both a physical and digital environment (Graywolf Press, n.d.). Despite his expansive list of creative outputs, I believe his favourite medium is his own persona, and thus appropriate for inclusion in this research. Franco has been a major player in the selfie trend since he created an Instagram account in September 2012. Scrolling through the 3,000+ images he has posted, it is obvious that he has embraced the trend – nearly every second photo is a selfie. Not just a selfie, but a half-naked, grinning selfie (Jamesfrancotv, n. d.). Franco seems to revel in the attention he receives for each risqué shot, using them to draw attention to his latest creative projects. In a discussion with Savannah Guthrie on The Today Show, he discussed his motives:

> I don't wanna post those things. I just look at the number of likes, and like if I put on a book or something I like, I get, I dunno, this number, and if I just put a stupid selfie, it's like 10x, though…When I try and get attention for something else, I'll put a selfie and then something like, 'Go see this movie.' (Dawn, 2013)

Franco understands the influence he has on his followers – in an article for The New York Times he revealed the powerful strategy behind posting selfies:

> A well-stocked collection of selfies seems to get attention. And attention seems to be the name of the game when it comes to social networking. In this age of too much information at a click of a button, the power to attract viewers amid the sea of things to read and watch is power indeed. (Franco, 2013)

His musings centre on an opinion that selfies are admittedly a little vain, but are ultimately "tools of communication". For Franco, the value of a selfie is not just its power as a marketing tool, it is the intimacy shared between the subject and the viewer in a physically disconnected medium: "In our age of social networking, the selfie is the new way to look someone right in the eye and say, 'Hello, this is me.'" (Franco, 2013).

Figure 24. (2015) *James Franco Hamptons Selfie.* From Instagram. Retrieved from https://instagram.com/p/3UM6Ejy9Q1/

Though he cites other celebrities such as Justin Bieber and Ashley Benson as being more prolific in selfie-taking, Franco has increased his notoriety by writing articles about the trend for The New York Times, having a selfie-calendar printed by Paper Magazine (Paper, 2014), and producing his own selfie-shirt (Jamesfrancotv, n. d.). His Instagram feed also includes 'meta-selfies' – selfies of Franco painting selfies that he has previously posted, along with the number of 'likes' each image has gained (Jamesfrancotv, n. d.).

This grab for attention is not the be all and end all for Franco. The constant focus and rumour-mongering of the media and the willing audience of fans provide him with another outlet for his artistic experiments; a playful take on relational art, utilising the media and social interaction as participants.

> There is this weird thing that has been created around me.
> It's me and it's not me, it's my creation and not my creation.
> So I just use it. In the art world I can play and be free. (Ryder, 2013)

His public persona changes from week to week. Franco toys with the public's perception by presenting himself as whatever the media suggests. There is much speculation over his sexuality; Franco often plays up his relationships with male friends by posting intimate photos and videos on his social networks, and if there is any rumour around who he is dating, a post will appear – crudely edited and captioned, confirming the ultimately fake partnership. To add to this cat-and-mouse game, Franco wrote an article for FourTwoNine Magazine entitled 'The Straight James Franco Talks to the Gay James Franco' in which he interviews himself as two personas. On the subject of his identity, the gay James Franco had this to say:

> I like my queer public persona. I like that it's so hard to define me and that people always have to guess about me. They don't know what the hell is up with me, and that's great. Not that I do what I do to confuse people, but as long as they are confused, I get time to play. (429 Magazine, 2015)

It seems that all aspects of celebrity life are a potential game to Franco; areas where he can flex his artistic muscles and experiment with the notions of fame, identity, and perception.

Franco's fascination with self-representation does not stop at selfies. Widely censured by critics as being a "wannabe renaissance-man", Franco dabbles in poetry, painting, and photography amongst many other creative outputs in order to express himself (Lesmoir-Gordon, 2014). In 2011, Franco produced a piece of art for the Museum of Non-Visible Art (MONA), a project from the collective 'Praxis', dedicated to exhibiting invisible artistic concepts and metaphysical constructs (Praxis, n.d.). Fresh Air is a piece described as an endless supply of "delicious, clean-smelling air" which the buyer can carry with them anywhere. New media producer Aimee Davison bought Fresh Air for $10,000, explaining that it was the theory behind the MONA project that drew her to it:

> I felt that the act of purchasing Fresh Air supported my thesis about a concept I term 'you-commerce', which is the marketing and monetization of one's persona, skills, and products via the use of social media and self-broadcasting platforms, like Franco's use of the crowd-funding platform Kickstarter to fund the Museum of Non-Visible Art. (Edelist, 2011).

Self-broadcasting seems to be Franco's specialty. His 2013 recreation of photographer Cindy Sherman's Untitled Film Stills series received negative feedback, with comments that his voice as a male artist demeans Sherman's original feminist undertones . However, Musée Magazine writer John Hutt (2014) suggests a different analysis:

> New Film Stills is either wholly narcissistic self-indulgence, or Franco is further deconstructing the idea of what an actor is by using the entire show, the gallery, expectations, fame, this article, as an absurd, large scale work commenting on the nature of the actor as a product.

Figure 25. Korine, H. (2012) *Alien - Spring Breakers.* Retrieved from Spring Breakers.

Figure 26. Korine, H. (2012) *Publicity Still - Spring Breakers.* Retrieved from http://www.mtv.com/news/1825197/james-franco-says-spring-breakers-sequel-will-be-terrible/

We can only speculate on Franco's intentions, as he is notorious for deliberately posting provocative comments to gain a reaction – especially in regards to his sexuality and relationships with other celebrities. If we consider his comments about attention equalling power, perhaps Franco is in fact a master of his public image.

In 2012, James Franco starred in the film Spring Breakers. Described as 'beach noir' by director Harmony Korine, the film tells the story of four girls in college who rob and lie their way to a festival during spring break. The group get arrested during the festival and are bailed out of jail by rapper-cum-drug dealer 'Alien', who leads them into his chaotic and dangerous world. The themes within Spring Breakers speak strongly of the materialistic culture that also surrounds the selfie. Ty Burr, a reviewer for the Boston Globe, goes so far as to say that the girls' "musings on freedom and happiness – half-baked adolescent poetry – echo on the soundtrack like banal Facebook posts" (2013). Alien, played by James Franco, is a "vainglorious", materialistic character. Surrounded by money, drugs, girls and weapons, Alien is portrayed as the man who has it all. In one stand-out scene he champions his material possessions, preaching from atop his bed surrounded by banknotes and ninja swords; "This is the fuckin' American dream. This is my fuckin' dream, y'all! All this shit! Look at my shit!".

Preoccupied with his belongings, and their effect on his social standing, Alien doesn't live up to his own hype. As Burr (2013) explains; "he's dangerous but he also wants to be dangerous, and it's that puppyish need that weakens him." Franco's portrayal of Alien fascinated me, for it seemed to echo his tendency to create a front for his audience – as if he is constantly acting.

Within the 'American Dream' scene mentioned in my research on the film, Alien uses his belongings to prove his status and his worth as a role model to the girls on spring break. He talks about his possessions as if they are the pinnacle of human achievement. He has "shorts – every fuckin' colour" and "blue kool-aid", to name but a few of his decidedly worthless trophy-items. The more we are shown of Alien's Florida home, the more we understand the world that he lives in. Every shot of the compound is barren, save for the prized possessions. We begin to see the emptiness of Alien's life. His investment in status and appearance seems a pitiful mask for his lack of substance. Burr (2013) commented on Alien's intense act, stating that "the brilliance of the performance is that the character's barely up to his own badass myth".

Just as Alien constructs his grandiose façade through material goods, Franco constructs his own celebrity persona through his Instagram – both blurring the lines between reality and fantasy. Was Harmony Korine aware of the similarities between actor and character? As Burr (2013) expounds, "Alien represents the apotheosis of Franco's hydra-headed career as matinee idol, doctoral candidate, soap star, and gallery artist. It's a full-blown Method performance... that can also be seen as a knowing lampoon of Method acting… Franco and Korine are so suited to collaboration, it's amazing it didn't happen sooner – two prankster artists whose straight-faced self-parody can skirt the sublime."

With Spring Breakers showing the materialistic culture prominent in today's society, it seemed a natural progression to look at the dynamic between James Franco, his crafted public persona, and his character Alien.

Design Experiment
Being a critical point in the establishment of materialistic themes, I chose to edit the 'American Dream' scene from Spring Breakers. Not only does it feature Alien's grand, rambling speech on his most valued objects, but it shows the interior of his extravagant house. This provided me with both audio and visual imagery to manipulate. I analysed and removed the 932 frames within this scene that featured Alien, and replaced them with James Franco's Instagram selfies. One character, replaced by another.
These still images were run together like a non-linear flip-book, creating a somewhat disjointed and absurd

*The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available.
The image was sourced at Hanley, C. (Producer), & Korine, H. (Director).
(2013). Spring Breakers [Motion Picture], 54:05s. USA: A24*

Figure 27. Korine, H. (2012) *The Compound- Spring Breakers.* Retrieved from Spring Breakers.

effect. With the audio from the scene running uninterrupted, the combination of barren scenery and Franco's intimate statuesque selfies formed a surreal digital artwork.

Here in the midst of Korine's neon-lit dream the snapshots appear bland and devoid of true character. Perhaps seeing the photographs in a different context filtered out the personal connection that occurs on social networks. Not only was this connection broken, but Franco's celebrity status seemed non-existent; leaving an insipid and banal image.

Just as in previous experiments, when removed from its native format the selfie was shown to be no more than an artistically-thoughtless digital photograph. It seemed, at its heart, a truly worthless object. Yet the social value of celebrity selfies could not be ignored, for as Franco said, "the power to attract viewers... is power indeed". If the power of the selfie comes from the status and popularity of its subject, is that not a direct parallel to the very nature of culturally valued self-portraiture? Can we not trace status and fame from the self-portraits of Bak, the pharaoh's right-hand man, to Durer, the self-crafted 'painter in Christ's image', to Warhol, a brand personified, to Franco, the celebrity polymath who revels in attention?

It may be that the general public perception of selfies is correct – they are vapid and banal – but this experiment showed that that actually does not matter. What matters is the social context and what we value as a culture. In today's society we idolise celebrity, fortune, and power, and researching just a little into the past has shown that this has nearly always been the case. A self-portrait will always be a representation of identity, but whether it gains cultural value depends on the identity of the subject.

The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available. The image was sourced at Hoshide, A. (2012) Selfie at the ISS. From Instagram. Retrieved from https://instagram.com/p/uGXzPYtPkV/.

Figure 28. Hoshide, A. (2012) S*elfie at the ISS.* From Instagram. Retrieved from https://instagram.com/p/uGXzPYtPkV/.

The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available. The image was sourced at Franco, J. (2015) James Franco Easter Selfie. From Instagram. Retrieved from https://instagram.com/p/1I3mbPS9Q-/

Figure 29. Franco, J. (2015) *James Franco Easter Selfie.* From Instagram. Retrieved from https://instagram.com/p/1I3mbPS9Q-/

06 // Final Output

The ideas of vanity, self-promotion, identity exploration, and communication that are attached to selfies are the same found in traditional self-portraiture. Each artist poses for themselves, and creates an image that presents a crafted identity to the world. This representation of identity is the same today as it has been at any point throughout history. What has changed is the medium of this expression, and the democratisation of its production and distribution.

I learnt from my initial experiments that the content of a selfie has more social worth than the medium or skills used to create it, due to what is valued most in the current social context. Selfies taken by people with little social fame are dismissed as vain and worthless, unless they also capture an entertaining or significant event – such as this photo by Japanese astronaut Aki Hoshide in 2012 (ISS, 2015) (see Figure 28).

Six months after it was posted to the International Space Station (ISS) Instagram account, this photo had gained over 13.7 thousand likes, which is well above the norm – according to the marketing platform Curalate, 65% of all Instagram photos accrue under 10 likes (Rijk, 2013). 13.7 thousand likes might seem a lot, but when compared to this banal selfie of James Franco that gained over 132 thousand likes in just two weeks, it seems extremely insignificant (Jamesfrancotv, n.d.) (see Figure 29).
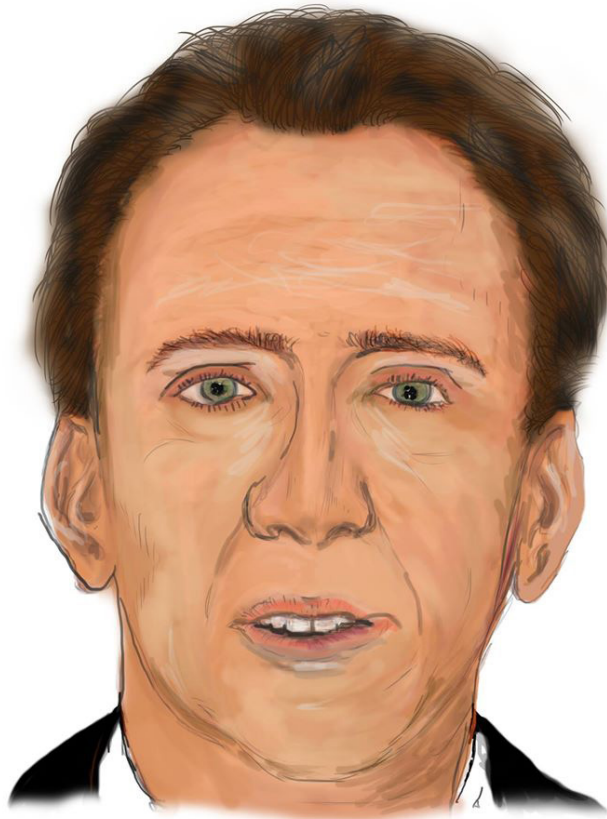
Figure 30. (2014) Nicolas Cage - Digital Drawing.

Figure 31. (2014) Nicolas Cage 'Grin' - Blind-contour Drawing.

If celebrity content can gain so much social worth, can it also gain cultural worth? Franco's Fresh Air was labelled 'social media art' by owner Aimee Davison, who explains the term as:

> The use of new media to create and launch projects, to produce traditional and social media buzz, and to establish cultural and economic value, principally by entertaining the public with a novel idea or narrative. (Edelist, 2011)

Perhaps Social Media Art is the future of the selfie?

For my final output I wanted to look deeper than the selfie in its native digital form. I had already established that the subject of a selfie and their social status play a large part in the social worth of an image, and that the medium of expression is secondary to this. I began this experiment by analysing the medium of a selfie, in the hopes of applying its qualities to celebrity content, in order to produce a new design. I would then take this design and assess it against Throsby's elements of cultural worth (see Appendix A for a detailed explanation of Throsby's elements of cultural worth) (as cited in Belfiore & Firth, 2014).

A selfie is produced quickly, and often numerous versions are created before a final image is selected. The production is of low quality, easily accessible, and simple to undertake. The medium is common, throwaway, and of little monetary value. Having identified these qualities of a selfie, I began translating them into an alternative design. The first stage in this process was to select my celebrity content. I have long been interested in the public's perception of actor Nicolas Cage, as he is the subject of many internet memes and discussions. Due to his charismatic acting style, and a tendency to star in low-quality films, Cage is a "significant figure in Internet culture" (Knowyourmeme, 2012). Though Cage does not have a personal social media presence, I believed that this would benefit my work as it would serve to disconnect my design from socially-valued, intimate, celebrity selfies and lower the content to impersonal imagery with less social value, such as paparazzi shots and movie stills.

The next step was to find a way of creating this content. Using images of Cage straight from the internet would satisfy the conditions of production, but I was interested in bringing this design closer to the realm of fine art self-portraiture. Digital images and photography were too closely linked to the selfie.

I created a few portraits of Cage; the first was a time-consuming digital drawing using a tablet, the rest were pencil sketches (see Figure 30). Creating art on paper seemed simple and accessible enough, but how could I introduce the qualities of a crude and quick production? It was during my work as a design tutor that I came across a solution. I was teaching my students a technique called blind-contour drawing, when I realised it was the style I had been searching for. Blind-contour drawing is a technique where the artist concentrates on the subject and does not look at the canvas. This technique was introduced in Kimon Nicolaïdes' book, The Natural Way to Draw: A Working Plan for Art Study (1941). It helps the artist to improve hand-eye coordination, and to focus on the expression and contouring of the subject rather than the details. The result of the exercise is usually an abstracted gesture that bears only a structural resemblance to the original form. By blind-contour drawing my content, I could produce a raw representation of the original image in a short amount of time (See Figure 31).

With my content and production method in place, I looked for media on which to place my work. In New Zealand souvenir shops, decorative and commemorative tea-towels are extremely common. In my opinion, they are an odd product, as by definition a tea-towel is meant for cleaning purposes – not something to be preserved or coveted. They are not wall-hangings or canvases, but ordinary pieces of cloth destined to be dirtied, dampened, and eventually destroyed. Yet, there are a huge variety of beautifully decorated tea-towels available in souvenir shops as tokens for travellers, and many artistic designs are even available in homeware stores. This banal item has both low and high artistic potential, and therefore was an ideal choice of medium in this experiment. I began blind-contour drawing Nicolas Cage from movie stills, and was

Figure 32. (2014) *Nicolas Cage 'Arizona' - Blind-contour Drawing.*

Figure 32. (2014) *Nicolas Cage Tea-towel Kickstarter.* From Kickstarter.
Retrieved from https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/3lle/nicolas-cage-tea-
towels

researching the production of printed tea-towels within New Zealand. I then realised I would need funding if I was going to produce a large quantity in order to reflect the easily distributable nature of the selfie.

Crowd-funding (raising money by way of small donations from many people) was an obvious choice. I had encountered this funding method in my research on James Franco's Fresh Air artwork, with his use of the website Kickstarter, and the idea that the production of self-portraiture evolved to selfies through the democratisation of production methods made crowd-funding a fitting choice. Kickstarter is a platform for crowd-funding that allows users to present their projects with specific funding amounts and deadlines. Reward tiers are offered to 'backers' who donate money, with the transaction only being completed once the project fundraising goal is fulfilled. Co-founder Perry Chen explained that the site is modelled on historical patronage, where artists often had to turn to a large amount of donors in order to complete a project. Chen cites the 18th-century English poet Alexander Pope, and his translation of The Iliad from Greek to English as a case study; the project had over 700 supporters, and as a reward for their support, Pope wrote their names in the first edition (Garber, 2013). In using this method of funding, I was following a long-established path for artists seeking patrons. I set up a Kickstarter page for my project: Nicolas Cage Tea-Towels. My funding goal was $700, the cost of printing just under 100 single-colour printed tea-towels in Wellington, and I planned to upload my drawings to the Kickstarter site along the course of my 30 day fundraising time-limit.

Realising that printing in New Zealand was extremely expensive, I looked overseas for other options. I found a company in China, the Hengshui Jiahe Textile Company Ltd, who would print a short order of my designs onto tea-towels for a fraction of the price. With no advertising outside of a few personal Facebook posts, I was relying on the celebrity of Nicolas Cage to draw in my patrons and add worth to my decidedly valueless product. I received my first pledge, of $40, within two hours of starting the project. Someone had decided there was value in what I had designed. By the end of the month, I had 34 backers who had pledged an incredible $1,388 to the cause. With the excess funds I was able to offer three styles of tea-towel, the designs of which were chosen by a vote amongst my backers. I received hugely positive comments about my project and was featured twice in Kickstarter's blog and their Staff Picks list (Abebe, 2014; Hockley-Smith, 2014). The cult following of Nicolas Cage had decided my hastily-drawn portraits were "inspired" and brought out the "essence that we all love in Mr. Cage" (See Figure 33).

My tea-towels were printed over the next few months, and when they arrived I packaged and sent the rewards for my donors, which consisted of varying numbers of tea-towels and art prints of the Nicolas Cage designs. I still had over 250 tea-towels left, so I looked for another way to test their cultural, and economic, worth. I set up a few stalls at local markets, and had a surprising amount of success, selling over 100 products. Both in New Zealand and across the world my crude, banal form of art had value. My project also gained coverage in blogs on the internet (See Figure 34) – once under the heading 'Shitty Kickstarter Projects', and once as one of the '9 Outrageous Nic Cage Products You Can't Live Without' (Jay_santos, 2014; Glass, 2015).

My creation of the Nicolas Cage tea-towels was an experiment in cultural worth. An object that was extremely common and of low-value was embellished with a worthless, unrefined drawing. It raised a large amount of money and was received positively around the world. Analysed against Throsby's elements of cultural value (see Appendix A), this project had Aesthetic, Social, and Authenticity value - an aspect of which is price that is paid for an object, as it represents "the economic reflection of the presence (or indeed lack) of this form of value" (Belfiore & Firth, 2014).

The results of this final experiment show that there is evidence of cultural worth in a product that mimics the qualities and content of a socially-valued selfie. Though this was just one exploration into cultural value, the immense success of the product suggests that the selfie is form of media worth investigating further.
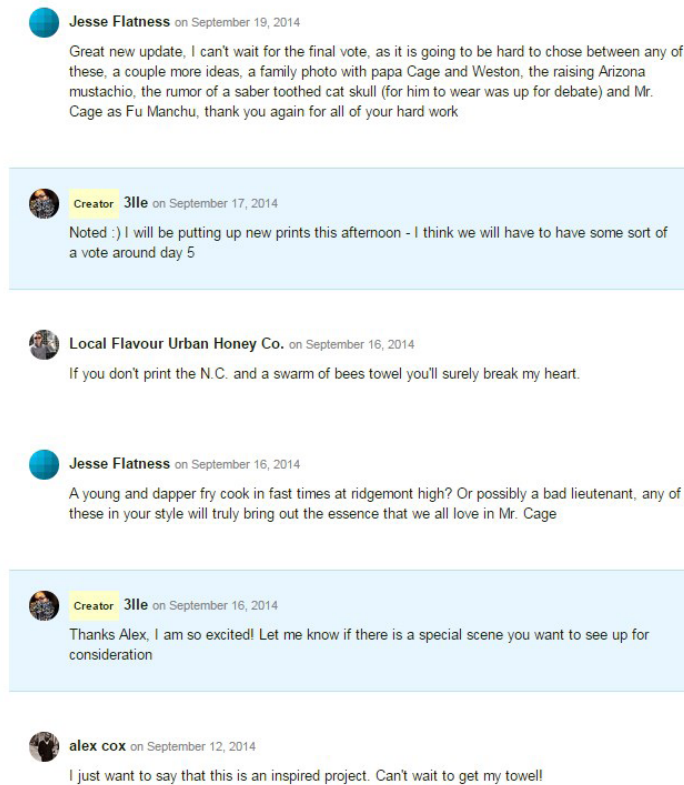
Jesse Flatness on September 19, 2014

Great new update, I can't wait for the final vote, as it is going to be hard to chose between any of these, a couple more ideas, a family photo with papa Cage and Weston, the raising Arizona mustachio, the rumor of a saber toothed cat skull (for him to wear was up for debate) and Mr. Cage as Fu Manchu, thank you again for all of your hard work

Creator 3lle on September 17, 2014

Noted :) I will be putting up new prints this afternoon - I think we will have to have some sort of a vote around day 5

Local Flavour Urban Honey Co. on September 16, 2014

If you don't print the N.C. and a swarm of bees towel you'll surely break my heart.

Jesse Flatness on September 16, 2014

A young and dapper fry cook in fast times at ridgemont high? Or possibly a bad lieutenant, any of these in your style will truly bring out the essence that we all love in Mr. Cage

Creator 3lle on September 16, 2014

Thanks Alex, I am so excited! Let me know if there is a special scene you want to see up for consideration

alex cox on September 12, 2014

I just want to say that this is an inspired project. Can't wait to get my towel!

Figure 33. (2014) *Comments from Kickstarter.* From Kickstarter. Retrieved from https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/3lle/nicolas-cage-tea-towels

Eleanor Beeden

Nicolas Cage Tea Towels

Price: $Varied

By taking a more abstract, almost Ralph Steadman approach to the Cage, artist Eleanor Beeden presents a piece of art as disjointed as the actor himself. These towels can be used for drinking tea or while eating a peach for hours.

Figure 34. Supercompressor (2015) *9 Outrageous Nic Cage Products You Can't Live Without.* From Supercompressor. Retrieved from http://www.supercompressor.com/culture/nicolas-cage-items-for-sale-on-etsy-amazon-society-6-celebrity-clothing-online

07 // Conclusion

As per McLuhan's theory of media, the cultural value of a self-portrait is reliant on the social context into which it is born (McLuhan, 1964). In network culture, the medium of a self-portrait is a smartphone's digital photograph, uploaded and shared across social media networks - the selfie. In a social context where production and dissemination methods are widely accessible, and no longer a rarified act of creative mastery, the creation of a selfie is neither highly praised nor valued. This society, however, places large amounts of social and cultural value on celebrity culture, the rich, and the powerful. In my final design experiment, I explored the combination of this highly-valued content and the inherent qualities of selfies through social media art. I found that my product had elements of cultural value, despite its prominent low-art features. This demonstrated that there is indeed the potential for the selfie to be valued beyond the social sphere of network culture.

As I conclude this research, I find myself still poring over books on self-portraiture; reading about the artists who created them and what motivated them to do so. Identity is still a complex issue, and my thesis has barely scratched the surface of the realm of self-representation. I remain fascinated by it, and I offer this study so that others might pause to think the next time they are presented with a self-portrait - in any form.

In the week prior to submitting this thesis, American artist Richard Prince opened an exhibition of his latest

The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available. The image was sourced at Johnson, P. (2015). Installation view of Richard Prince, "New Portraits," at Gagosian. From ArtNet. Retrieved from https://news.artnet.com/art-world/richard-prince-sucks-136358

Figure 35. Johnson, P. (2015). *Installation view of Richard Prince, "New Portraits," at Gagosian.* From ArtNet. Retrieved from https://news.artnet.com/art-world/richard-prince-sucks-136358

work entitled *New Portraits* (Corderoy, 2015) (see Figure 35). For this series, Prince selected 37 images on Instagram - many of models, celebrities, and other beautiful people. He then proceeded to leave a comment underneath each image, and take a screenshot of the resulting composition. Enlarging each image to 6-foot by 4-foot, he printed them out on an inkjet printer and hung the canvases in Gagosian Gallery, New York. Each canvas is currently selling for over $90,000 (Corderoy, 2015).

The opening of this exhibition was extremely fortuitous for my study, and I was eager to see the reaction that the public had to this transformation of Instagram images into high-art. Interestingly, there has been little to no mention of the fact that these photos were once inconsequential images on a popular photo-sharing application. The critique is centered on image appropriation, and the failure of Prince to gain permission from the photographer or the subject of his selected images. This reaction reinforces my belief that selfies have the potential to rise from a form of low-art to high-art, as the Instagram images have been accepted as an art-form worthy of exhibition without comment or critique. What this exhibition and the continuing commentary suggest is that selfies are a noteworthy visual artefact of network culture, and one that has definite cultural worth. This reflects the position that I have explored in this research. Prince's exhibition, and my own findings, indicate that this will continue to be an active area of contemporary culture for the foreseeable future.

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Tumblr Research

B.1 *Tumblr Privacy Policy*

(Tumblr, 2015)

"User Content: By default, all sharing through the Services is public, and when you provide us with content it is published so that anyone can view it. Although we do provide tools, like password-protected blogs, Asks, and Fan Mail, that let you publish content privately, you should assume that anything you publish is publicly accessible unless you have explicitly selected otherwise. Also, please keep in mind that anything you share privately with another user, particularly through an Ask, Fan Mail, or submitted post, may be posted publicly by that user. Content published and shared publicly is accessible to everyone, including search engines, and you may lose any privacy rights you might have regarding that content. In addition, information shared publicly may be copied and shared throughout the Internet, including through actions or features native to the Services, such as reblogging."

B.2 *Selection of images from Initial Survey*

A selection of collected Tumblr selfies, 2014

(Tumblr, 2014)
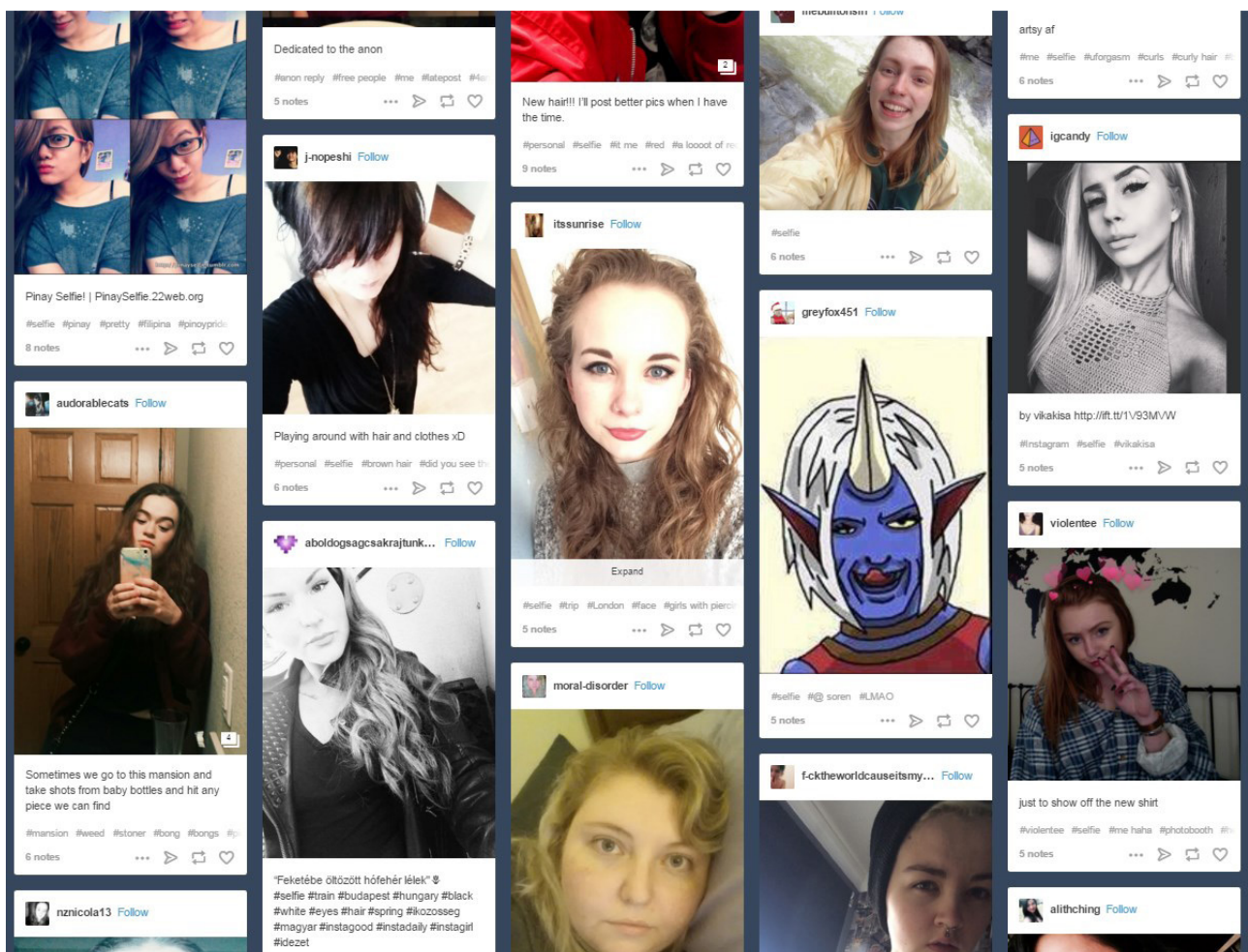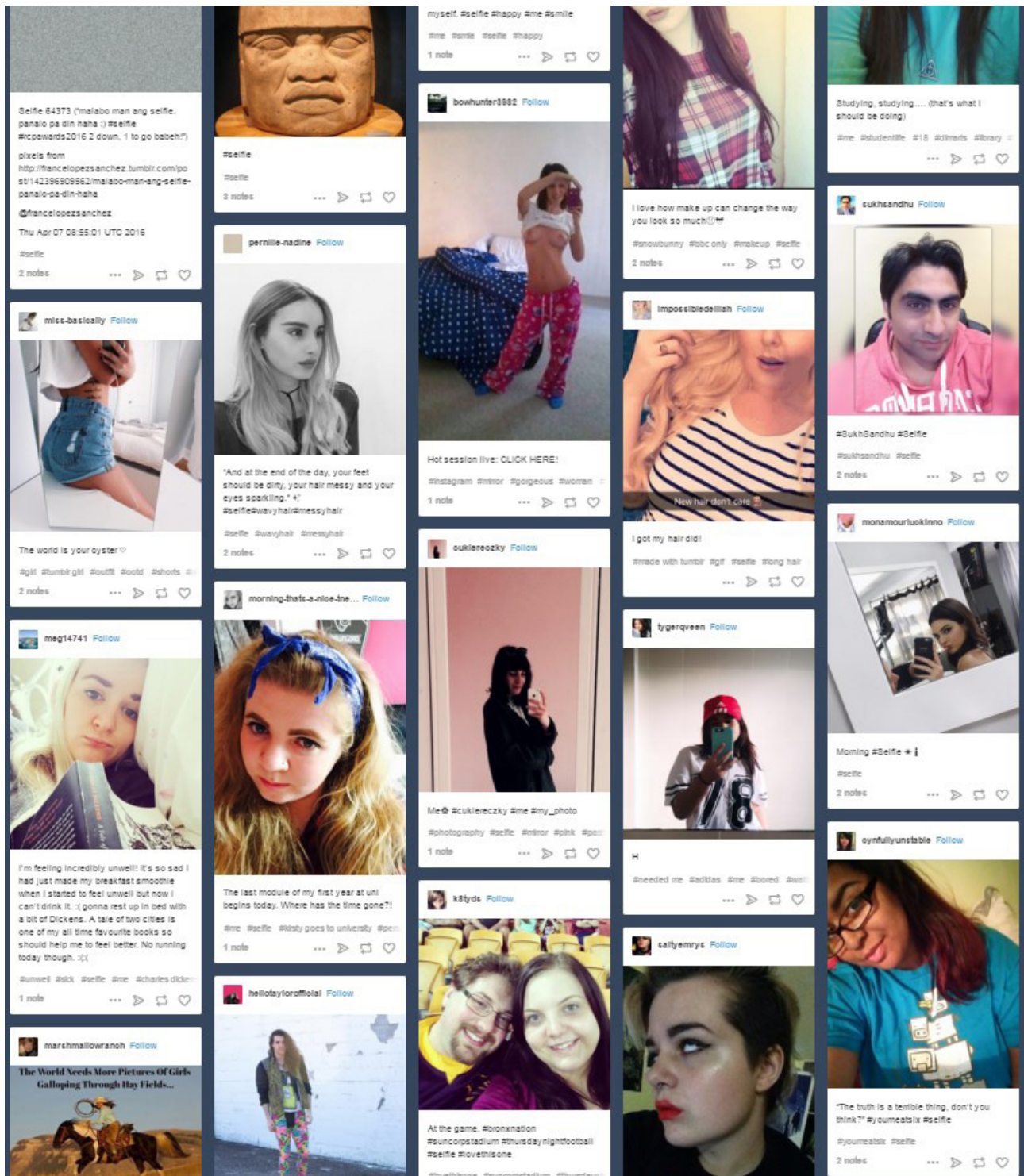
Transcript of Facebook conversation.
Facebook (2014) Comments on selfie mash-ups.
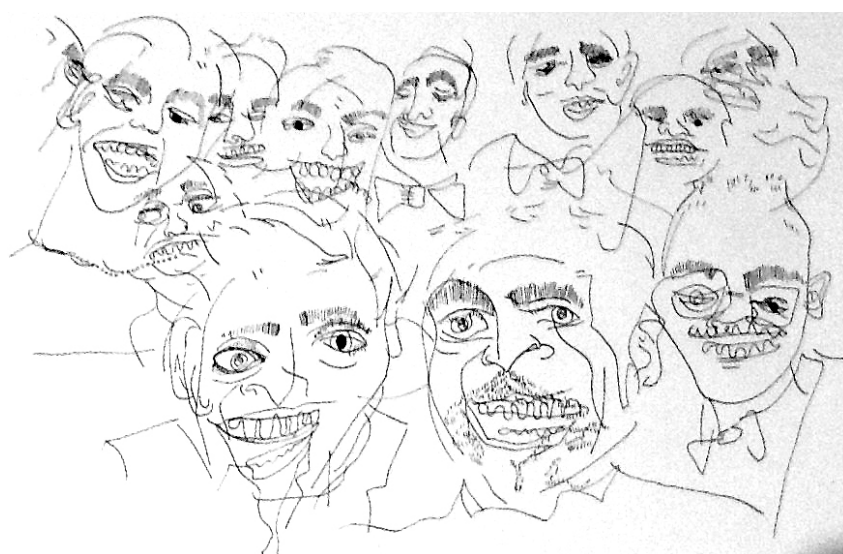
Additional blind-contour drawings for Nicolas Cage tea-towels.

Application of my research to celebrity selfies

After the success of my Nicolas Cage tea-towels I was approached by Enjoy Public Art Gallery's Media and Publications Manager, Meredith Crowe, to contribute a piece of art to the 'Buy Enjoy' fundraising exhibition. The exhibition was to include art and design from the New Zealand arts community, and all work could be bought for a fixed price for the duration of the show.

I took this offer as another chance to present the selfie as an object of cultural worth. Returning to self-portraiture, I decided to reproduce a selfie in the same blind-contour drawing style as my tea-towels, though this time on gallery-quality paper.

I first selected one of the most famous, content-valuable selfies in recent years – the Ellen DeGeneres Oscars selfie. At the 2014 Academy Awards ceremony, talkshow host DeGeneres worked through a scripted comedy piece by taking selfies with famous attendees, including Liza Minelli and Chiwetel Ejiofor (Mogg, 2014). Approaching actress Meryl Streep, she explained how she wanted to take a photo that would break the record for 're-tweets' (i.e. re-posts) of a post on Twitter, and began to organise a selfie with the actress. Julia Roberts, Channing Tatum, and others surrounding them were called to join in, and the group of A-listers crowded round the not-so-subtly promoted Samsung smartphone (Sullivan, 2014). What was to be a constructed gag, with the original subject Streep being asked to take the photo and therefore being excluded from the group, turned into a moment in selfie history when actor Bradley Cooper took the phone and snapped a candid selfie showing all twelve of the Hollywood celebrities. The selfie did indeed break the record on Twitter, gaining over two million re-tweets by the end of the awards ceremony – beating previous record holder Barack Obama's re-election tweet by almost 1.5 million (Sullivan, 2014). This photo is the epitome of celebrity culture, social media communication, intimacy in the public sphere, and self-promotion. Could this image also be appreciated as art? I copied the selfie in my unrefined style on to high-quality A3 cotton paper, and submitted it to the gallery. The resulting drawing was as badly produced as the original photo, with no thought to composition or lighting, and of very poor quality.

The artwork was accepted into the gallery, but did not sell.

Oscar selfie for Enjoy Gallery.