The Visual Representation of Self in the Social Media Era

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Abstract

This thesis questions whether the internet and social media in particular are changing the artistic practice of self-portraiture both artistic and 'folk'.

I look first at the history of self-portraiture, particularly fine art self-portraiture. I move on to examine how people portray themselves online today and how this would be different from their behaviour and self representation in the physical world. I seek commonalities in these areas.

My research includes making art works in which I attempt to bring together the online and physical worlds. A series of experiments resulted in a series of performances by social media users shown as a triptych on mobile devices.

I conclude that the desire to share information about our lives has always existed and that technology now enables us to do this effortlessly and often without consideration. What is relatively new however is the blurring of lines between popular practises and Contemporary fine art.

Preface

I have read with interest how it has always been our nature to want to share information. All of the behaviours attributed to social media users today are rooted in our predecessors dating back to ancient Rome. Our aristocratic ancestors in the Tudor court communicated secretly by way of poetry written in a book that was shared only amongst a few. This book, now known as the Devonshire Manuscript, provided a similar social space for young courtiers as today's teenagers enjoy on their mobile phones (Standage, 2013:66). However, we seem to have evolved into a society of sharers, not simply to find out information or as a means of communication as our ancestors did; we have taken it to another level and assume that the audience is interested in our documentation of every mundane detail of our lives: assumptions which appear to be well founded.

My interest led me to begin with research into the history of self-portraiture, exploring what might have been the intent of the artist and the experience of the viewer. Artists from Michelangelo to Tracey Emin have used self-portraiture to explore their feelings revealing a fragile state of body and mind and Nan Goldin confronts her emotions by documenting those close to her in their suffering.

More recently, artists have examined how details of our lives posted online can easily find their way into the wider public domain. In 2011 artist Liz Sterry recreated the bedroom of a young Canadian girl based on information posted to her blog. Similarly, online dating apps such as Grindr have been raided for the purposes of art by Future Femme and Dries Verhoeven both of whom put up for public display images and text that was previously intended to be shared only with one other user; both producing works that highlight the issues associated with maintaining such an intimate online presence.

Introduction

I started my own work by analysing how I could attach the online identity to the physical existence and begun by exploring the images and statuses posted regularly by those around me. Each one of these fragments of information about their lives gives us, when pieced together, an insight into the character of the individual with the mobile device at their fingertips.

I also wanted to explore my fascination for the impact of the triptych and why it would be appropriate to present my work as such. The definition of a triptych implies religious roots or a set of three works intended to be appreciated together, increasing the impact on the viewer.

The following studies interest me as they combine self-portraiture with the triptych format. Figure 1, Gustav Courbet's *The Artist's Studio* (1855) is composed in triptych as the artist places himself in the centre of the canvas with, to the right of him, his friends, workers and devotees of the art world and to his left, the rest of life that the artist considers trivial (Hall, 2014:202). The format allows the piece to become a narrative.

Figure 1. Gustav Courbet, *The Artist's Studio, a Real Allegory of Seven Years of my Artistic and moral life* (1855) Oil on Canvas, 361x 598cm

This piece captures my attention as it tells us the artist exudes confidence. The way he is seated in the centre framed by the canvas, announces that he is the subject and the main focus of the artwork. There is a naked model that appears to be gazing attentively over him as he works, although he is painting a landscape not the model's portrait. There is a small boy looking up at him in awe. This implies his confidence is bordering on arrogance, as he is clearly showing the viewer that he deserves to be adored. The piece appears to be a summary of how he views himself and his way of life at that current moment. This work followed an invitation to paint a large new commission for the Universal Exhibition of 1855. Courbet turned this offer down after being asked to send a sketch for prior approval and subsequently decided to hold an exhibition of his own self-portraits in a tent opposite which he called the 'Pavilion of Realism'. This show was a

milestone in the history of both self-portraiture and of self-publicity as no artist had ever exhibited so many self-portraits in one place (Hall, 2014:202).
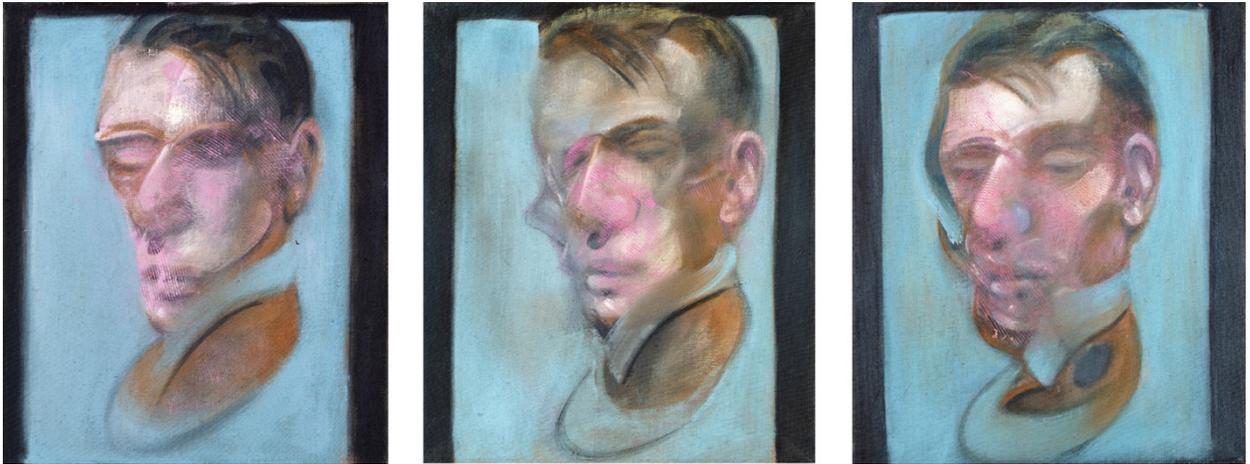
Figure 2. Francis Bacon, *Three studies for a self-portrait* (1980) oil on canvas, each: 35.5 x 30.5cm

Francis Bacon created a series of eleven studies in triptych and was at the time struggling to deal with his own mortality. He was seventy-one at the time of *Three studies for a self-portrait* (1980) (Figure 2) and had experienced several losses of people close to him (francis-bacon.com). I feel that this piece captures his state of mind. There is a sense of movement which creates a powerful feeling of unease and anxiety and the triptych format adds to the impact which I feel isn't as present in Figure 3, the single image portrait, *Self-Portrait* (1975). Here also is a sense of movement and an indication of anxiety, but the portrait in threefold shows varying levels of emotion and adds an extra dimension. Perhaps this is because of the minimal repetition which could be re-affirming the point of the angst experienced.
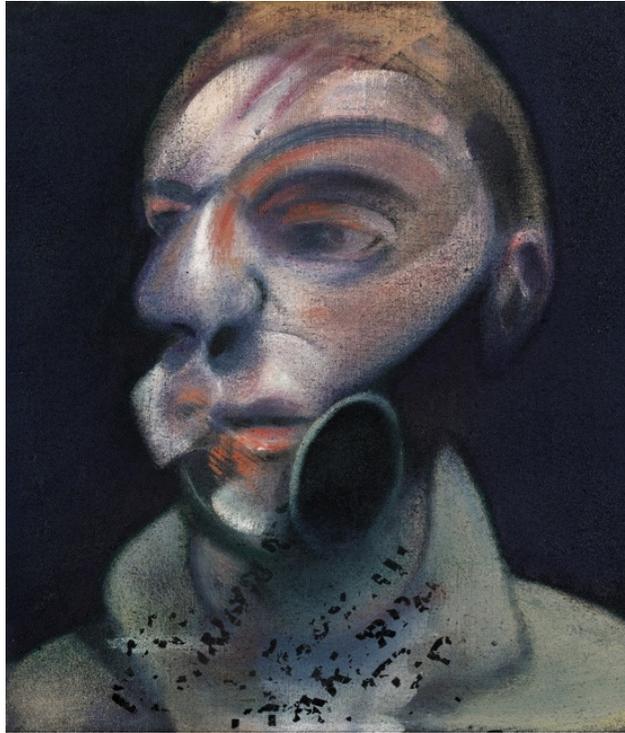
Figure 3. Francis Bacon, *Self-Portrait* (1975) oil on canvas, 35.5 x 30.5cm

The power of the triptych is that it conditions how the audience views a work of art. I believe the content of my own work suits being viewed in threefold as I would suggest it is commenting on the nature of the world today, characterised by the carrying out of multiple tasks at one time and constant summons for our attention. I will argue that the religious origins and connotations of the triptych sit appropriately with the devotional manner in which social media is widely used.

The artwork which I exhibited for my MA show in May 2015 and which forms part of my final research submission addresses the topic of how social networking and our ever growing online presence could be changing the execution of both the traditional idea and modern practice of self-portraiture, for example digital selfies and questioning how we in general construct an identity.

My work consisted of a triptych of self-portraits, not of myself but by social media users: who, in the process of updating their social networking sites, construct a self-portrait for the viewer. The work is shown simultaneously on three mobile devices and also addresses the current climate of feeling the need to be immediately responsive to multiple "friends" at any one time.

I have been inspired by how before we had the technology that we enjoy today, art was used as a way to project a constructed identity to the public in the same way social media is now used. In the time before photography, camera phones and celebrity imagery, leaders would commission sculptures and paintings of themselves as a way to project a powerful image of themselves or rather their 'brand' to the public. It was a false likeness of them but they needed to maintain a strong, authoritative image to instill a sense of public confidence.

Their modern day contemporaries adopt similar methods to promote their identities to their followers, largely by way of social media platforms such as Twitter. We gain insight for instance on what our Prime Minister wishes for us to believe are his current thoughts and activities on @David_Cameron (Figure 4). He tweets about policies and some more "personal" thoughts in order to appear as one of the people and of course, during the 2015 general election Twitter proved to be a useful tool.

Figure 4. Samantha Humphreys, *Screenshots from @samhartist* (2015)

This thesis will explore how in today's world there will soon be no-one left who can remember a time before social media. It has become such an integral part of our being, there will soon be no-one left who recalls being completely alone.

My research has taken me from the history of self-portraiture to the current fondness for selfies in inappropriate places.

Self-Portraiture

To attempt to write a condensed history of self-portraiture here would prove too complex a task, since, rather than a direct path from start to present day, there are countless detours and two way junctions to undertake (Cummings: 2010: 9). I have chosen to take the route of selective and perhaps typical observations about self-portraiture from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries onwards. Although self-portraits undoubtedly existed before, it is since that time that artists have been identified as representing themselves in their art. It was widely assumed once that self-portraits gave privileged access to the soul of the sitter (Hall: 2014:7). This assumption would seem to persist amongst those today, who would not usually consider themselves artists, yet make self-portraits regularly. The common practice of taking selfies, for some on a daily basis, allows us access to the 'souls' of many, thanks to the cameras on the phones we carry with us all the time. The selfie, a self-portrait that has been taken on a smartphone, has become a popular genre of its own in recent years and has become a widely used means of focusing attention on oneself and defining one's own 'brand'.

In Figure 5, Rogier Van Der Weyden's *The Justice of Trajan and Herkinbald* (c1439) a piece destroyed in 1665 and only known today from early tapestry copies and contemporary accounts (Hall, 2014), the artist placed himself in the centre of the entourage of Pope Gregory the Great and indeed in the centre of the whole large scale piece. He is singled out and made more prominent than those surrounding him by the darker tone of his skin and his more ornate hat.

Figure 5. Rogier Van Der Weyden, Self-portrait detail from the Trajan tapestry, copy after Rogier van der Weyden's *Scenes of Justice* painted for the Brussels Town Hall (1435-40 destroyed in 1665). Tapestry

In '*The Self-Portrait A Cultural History* by James Hall it is stated that one of the wonders of self-portraits is their capacity to induce unique levels of uncertainty in the viewer. Is the artist looking with a view to portraying or judging themselves? Is the artist creating a persona to serve specific ends? (Hall, 2014: 9) Artists have long since used self-portraiture to reveal certain fragments of their lives, allowing the viewer to see vulnerabilities. Michelangelo included a self-portrait in *The Last Judgment* (1536-41) (Figure 6). The fresco work he painstakingly created on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel incorporates an image of the artist as the flayed skin of St Bartholomew. The Last Judgment was the last work to be painted on the ceiling by the artist, much later than the

earlier work was completed. This indicates the self-portrait as flayed skin could refer to how drained and weakened he felt at this point in his life and wished to communicate this. He was in his late sixties at the time of completion, quite elderly for that time (Cummings, 2010: 61).
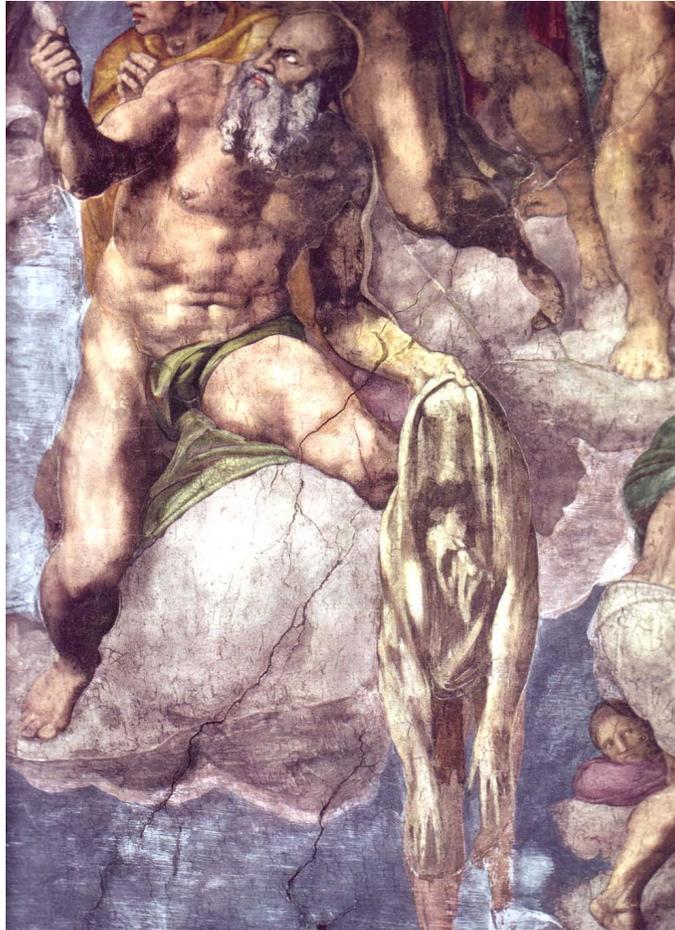
Figure 6. Michelangelo Buanarroti Detail of *The Last Judgement* (c.1538-41) Sistine Chapel, Fresco

There is more to a self-portrait than the sitter, who, although the central focus of the work, it is often the surrounding space that is most telling of the story. The artist's face is not necessarily the most engaging part. In Figure 6, *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez

(1656) the artist has placed the viewer in the place of the monarch who in turn is being painted by Velazquez. Interestingly, although the painting at first seems to be about the painting of a small child who is being prepared by ladies in waiting, the artist has made himself the focus and the true subjects are the King and Queen who are limited to a small cameo appearance in the reflection of the mirror albeit in the centre of the painting. It is a brazen piece that brings to mind the current trend for photo bombing, which indeed is not an entirely new concept (Farago, 2015).

Figure 7. Diego Velázquez *Las Meninas* (1656) Oil on canvas

Artists would often paint themselves into the painting alongside the portrait sitters, creating both portrait and a self-portrait within. It is believed that this was done in order to assert their position within that society.

Many contemporary artists have been known for their prolific self-portraits. For some, they portray themselves as the victim of ordeals or situations and the self-portrait is a part of a process for dealing with their experiences. Edvard Munch was one of the most fecund self-portraitists, most of which were produced after he split from heiress Tulla Larsen in 1902. He refused to marry her, declaring that art was his greatest love. In *Self Portrait in Hell* (1903) (Figure 8)*,* Munch portrays himself in his own personal eternal hell. At the time of the split, Tulla had threatened to kill herself but Munch, not wanting the attention to be diverted to her, shot himself first. He only managed to damage the tip of a finger yet the record he left of this event was to say the least over dramatic. Tulla did not indulge the attention seeking attempt and simply grabbed a cloth to clear the blood from the tiles (Cummings: 2010:211).

Figure 8. Edvard Munch, *Self-Portrait in Hell* (1903) Oil on canvas

This enraged the artist and in subsequent works of self-portraiture, he appeared to never be able to let go of how this event made him feel. The story of Tulla not pandering to the attention seeking behaviour adds to the drama of the painting. It brings to our attention the close relationship the painting has to today's use of selfies and the desire for 'likes.' Munch painted himself largely as androgynous which was seen as a symbolist ideal of self-sufficiency (Hall: 2014:221). This could be a demonstration of his previous declaration of art being his greatest love and denying the need for any close personal relationships. During the first decade of the twentieth century, Edvard Munch took numerous photographic nude self-portraits and was the first artist to take photographs of himself holding the camera at arm's length much in the way demonstrated by smartphone users now, not necessarily for the sake of art.

In Figure 9, a self-portrait titled *Self -Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940) by Frida Kahlo was painted at the time when her husband divorced her and would seem to be commenting on the sense of rejection she was feeling. The words at the top of the piece, written as lyrics with a music score "Look, if I loved you it was for your hair, now that you have no hair I don't love you anymore." illustrates the cruelty of man's rejection of woman. Kahlo is better known for presenting herself in her work in traditional dress and by appearing in a man's suit she is calling the viewer's attention to the state of vulnerability she has been left in after the betrayal of her husband. The only feminine quality of the portrait is the artist's head in an otherwise masculine image which is clearly a statement of the humiliation and rejection experienced with the emphasis on the source of the pain rather than the end result.

Figure 9. Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940) Oil on canvas, 40 x 27.9 cm

A later piece by Frida Kahlo, *The Wounded Deer, Self-Portrait* (1946) (Figure 10)*,* carries symbolism to explore the artist's immense suffering in more ways than one. Frida Kahlo painted herself not only wounded by nine arrows but also as a hunted deer: perhaps to draw attention to her victim status. At eighteen years of age, she had suffered a terrible bus crash that left her with lifelong back pain. This, along with marriage to an unfaithful husband and miscarriage, provided an abundance of fodder for the telling of her tragic tale through art (Cummings: 2010:223).

Figure 10. Frida Kahlo, *The Wounded Deer*, *Self-Portrait* (1946) Oil on Masonite, 22.4 cm × 30 cm

Nan Goldin is a New York artist who has expressed herself in front of her camera throughout her adult life which has been constantly touched with tragedy. The artist makes work about her own reality as witnessed first-hand by documenting the lives of her friends and those in the community around her. Her work has been described as 'social portraiture' (Sussman, 1997:25). In the nineties many of the artist's friends began contracting the AIDS virus so she began documenting them in their lives and also in death (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Nan Goldin, *Gotscho kissing Gilles (deceased)*, (1993) Photograph

What makes her work unique is the fact that the images she takes of her friends become

self-portraits of the artist, as they are so personal to her. They are also more than just a

comment on society as she lives deep within this community and she expresses her own

fears and grief in her photographs. Figure 12 is an example of how Nan Goldin also

includes her own life within that documentation, photographing herself with black eyes

after being beaten by a boyfriend in Berlin (Goldin, 2004). This image interests me

because it is not presented in a self-pitying manner, just as a simple record of an event.

We now live in a society that documents our own lives in the same style as Nan Goldin

although, rather than it being presented as art, it has now become omnipresent, part of

our existence. When this issue was raised in relation to her work during an interview, she clearly saw it as a different concept altogether, saying she can't be held responsible for what has happened since.

"Most of that stuff is so easy and lacking in any kind of emotional depth or context. Nowadays, people forget how radical my work was when it first appeared. Nobody else was doing what I did" – Nan Goldin (O'Hagan, 2014).

This might be true. Most of what is posted to Instagram and many social media sites is done so without thought as it is intended to be used as an instant record to be executed on impulse rather than a carefully considered decision, but does the fact that what we post about ourselves is not intended as a self-portrait mean that it cannot be viewed as such? Self-portraits or 'selfies' taken on mobile phones and words written for public display on social networking sites embrace many qualities of a modern folk art. Anyone can now be a photographer thanks to the fact the majority of people carry a camera on their phone, so technology has facilitated the possibility that everyone is potentially an artist. Selfies and status updates are a form of real time documentation and can be more informative due to the very lack of intent behind them. We now live in an age of social self-portraiture.

Figure 12. Nan Goldin, *Nan after being battered*, (1984) Photograph

If Frida Kahlo's trigger was the bus accident and Nan Goldin's the social issues devastating her inner circle, then the traumatic and painful early life of artist Tracey Emin was what gave rise to her lifelong series of self-portraits. The subject of her work is simply being who she is and she has achieved this as much through her art as through the many newspaper interviews and columns and drunken television appearances (Cummings: 2010:227). *My Bed* (1998) a seminal work by Emin, lays bare the desperation of her life experiences and is at its most powerful when placed in juxtaposition with the artist herself.

Photographic self-portraits have not always been about revealing inner truths however. Cindy Sherman portrays many characters in her images, although she is always featured in the photographs, they are anything but a self-portrait. The artist maintains that her work is set apart from her own version of herself; she constructs identities and proves that despite the old adage, the camera can always lie. "I'm not about revealing myself" -

Cindy Sherman (Hattenstone, 2011). The current trend for selfies over the last few years echoes this concept of manipulating a version of you to present to the viewer. There is a level of controlling the editing of a selfie or indeed the choosing which image of many to upload. Andy Warhol was well known for manipulating his own self-portraits to be rid of imperfections and blemishes. According to Laura Cummings in her book *A Face To The World: On Self Portraits*, (2010) Warhol is the 'patron saint of Photoshop' (Cummings: 2010:260). Both practices are reflective of today's inclination toward representing ourselves online in a way that we want to be true rather than the less interesting reality of regular life. In addition to posting statuses that may have slightly tweaked versions of the boring truth, in recent years there has been a trend for posting images to Instagram using the hashtag #iwokeuplikethis, the idea being to show off natural beauty without the benefit of make-up. Figure 13 demonstrates this with an image posted by Jennifer Lopez on her Instagram account on 15th June 2015 with the hashtags "no makeup day! #realface #trueselfie #iwokeuplikethis" It is often suggested, usually when such posts are created by celebrities, that certainly the faces may be make-up free but the chances of them being filter free are slim (Cahn, 2014). *Time* magazine published an article on the no make-up selfie for cancer research phenomenon in 2014. The idea behind it being that women post images of themselves wearing no make-up and donate to cancer research via their mobile device. There were however, articles giving advice on how to still look your best with the use of filters and lighting, which was perhaps missing the point (Dockterman, 2014). There is an undeniable irony of the use of such a manipulated environment to promote natural looks and unenhanced beauty. The editing tools and filters on our devices are so instant it is seemingly as routine as nature itself, leading to a blurred line between what counts as natural beauty and what does not. The decision making involved in these

images before making the image public is, in my opinion, what makes the difference in sharing personal snapshots and creating an artistic self- portrait.

Figure 13. Jennifer Lopez, *No make up day* (2014) Photograph

The current trend for multiple selfies, aside from the obvious fact that technology has made it possible; echoes the same need of the creator to either explore their own feelings in order to be able to cope with negative life experiences or use self-portraits for attention seeking activity. Reality star Kim Kardashian posts numerous selfies on her Instagram account in an almost obsessive manner (Figure 14). Social media users often post selfies online in order to attract likes, often resulting in the images being taken back down if the number of likes is not great enough. Perhaps more seriously, attention is sought from

audiences by way of posting statuses on Facebook that are designed to encourage

worried responses and messages of support.
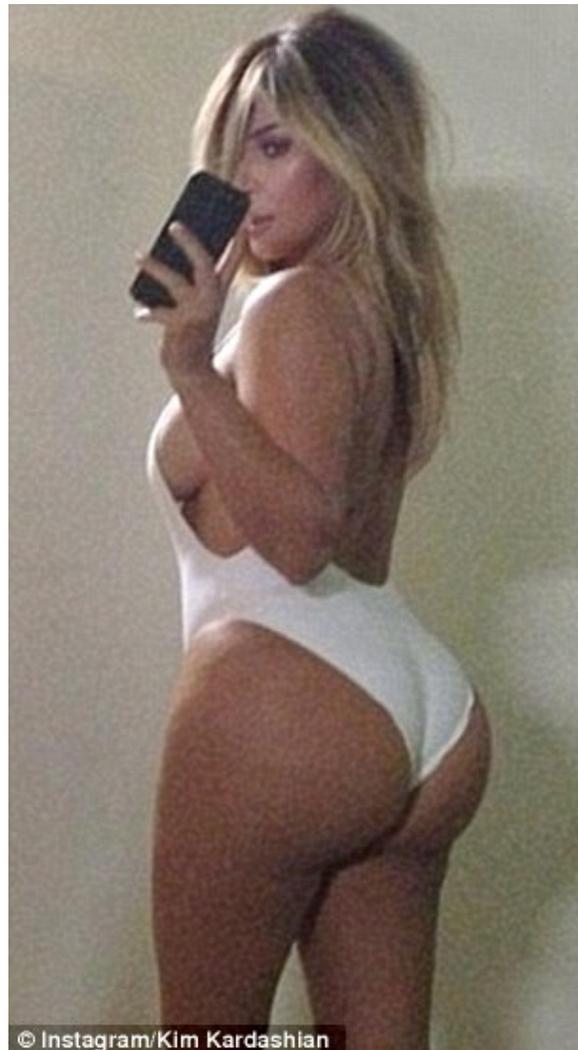
Figure 14. Kim Kardashian from *Top 10 celebrity selfies of 2014* (2014) Photograph

This tendency toward revealing yourself regularly by way of updating online accounts

could be considered to portray the subject in a truer light than any image, as the act of

conducting oneself in that manner exposes fragments of narcissistic character traits. As

previously mentioned, selfies are carefully composed and constructed, Kim Kardashian

has even posted a YouTube tutorial on how to take the perfect selfie so that you can

show yourself at your best, a set of instructions that appears to be followed to the letter by millions of viewers. It could also be said that only certain personality types would post a selfie, or several, so the act itself is a revealing element of a self-portrait. The Greek philosopher Plotinus said that a self-portrait is not produced by looking at a mirror but by withdrawing into the self. "Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the creator of a statue that is yet to be made beautiful: he cuts away here, he smooths there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer, until a lovely face has grown upon his work" (Hall: 2014:18). This is very much how I see our online presence on social media taking shape in the form of a self-portrait, the words being our tools that we use to form a digital online sculpture of ourselves. My interest in society's current fondness for over sharing was nurtured by a book I encountered two years ago, *Alone Together* by Sherry Turkle.

Social Media

In her book *Alone Together* Sherry Turkle traces the roots of device dependency back to the time when children became attached both physically and emotionally to toys such as the Tamagotchi, a small digital creature that required feeding and caring for. This nurtured an early dependence on gadgets. These toys demanded not only attention but also some form of relationship from the child, as though it were a real creature (Turkle, 2011: 18) This generation who grew up with such robot toys, are a generation who do not know how it is to be without a device that connects them all of the time to other people, maybe all of the people they know. They have grown up with the internet, which brings with it many opportunities to show to the world whatever self you wish. There are the social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram with all their simple life sharing buttons: but also sites that allow the user to live an entirely different life alongside the physical being they were dealt.' Second Life' provides virtual space for entirely this purpose, somewhere to explore an identity that may be too daunting to explore in real life (Turkle, 2011: 152), maybe a virtual life that can be lived as an alternative to their current mundane existence. The point is, it is not a game to those who participate in it, it is actually a 'second life', one that mimics all the elements of reality, including love, sex, marriage and money (Turkle, 2011: 158). As there is interaction with other users, a certain level of trust would need to be present to participate. Second Life avatars and social media profiles are not so different. Turkle talks of a sixteen-year-old girl called Audrey who refers to her Facebook profile as 'my internet twin' and 'the avatar of me' (Turkle, 2011: 180). She explains that they have a lot in common with everyday texting and instant messaging. 'The point of it all is to do a performance of you' (Turkle, 2011: 191).

Artists have been working with the idea of multiple identities for some time. In an experimental piece in 2010 *I Am Karen Blissett*, Karen Blissett, a regular contributor to art world debates, posted an invitation on the Netbehaviour email discussion list asking people to 'join her', saying that she wanted "to become more open and free, with a more distributed identity". Karen is not a real person, she is a created identity based on neoist (a satirical 'ism') open-identity artists Luther Blissett and Karen Eliot. People were encouraged to email her to register their interest and if she trusted them, she would share her googlemail password with them. According to the digital arts organisation Furtherfield, many people now write and create as Karen Blissett in online social spaces including video portrait performances of themselves as Karen (furtherfield.org).

We create an infinite self-portrait when we update our online status, forever commenting on our evolving identity. A performance of the self which unfolds before the eyes of many due to both our controlled manipulation of it and the unsuppressed shares and long social media memory.

My Research

I am predominantly looking into self-representation and how artists in the contemporary art world deal with self-identity; how these identities transfer to others and how it determines their perception of us. I have also explored what role popular culture plays in terms of the intent and the effect on the self that the transferred public perception has. In Tracey Emin's show at White Cube the artist explores her acceptance of who she is and reflects on who she has become. *The Last Great Adventure is You* tells the story of her identity, how she has evolved into an acceptance of her existence as an 'I' rather than an 'us'. It is about her acceptance of knowing she will never become a mother or part of a couple and being content with the fact. Although no decision was taken on how her life has unfolded, she is nevertheless content with her life and feels complete (Emin, 2014). The artist has dealt with many issues throughout her life and her work has largely explored this.

Artists such as Edvard Munch and Egon Schiele largely inspire an artist who tells us she has been taking selfies for thirty years; Tracey Emin has frequently 'painted' herself. During an interview on *The South Bank Show* in 2001, she spoke of her realisation that her life was the best inspiration for her art than anything else "I was better than anything I made" (Emin, 2001). The artist's seminal piece *My Bed*, (1998) a self-portrait which communicates to us, arguably in no way a photograph or painting could, her vulnerability at a time when she was suffering severe depression. I have wondered why an artist with such a flair for drawing from her own life experiences to make art, doesn't now seem to be embracing new media to do so, or even have a presence on social media to speak of, except in a professional capacity. During her artist talk at the White Cube I was considering raising my hand to ask such a question when she stated "Art shouldn't be

fast flowing, it should be about a moment in time." I felt this answered my question.

Amongst Emin's vast collection of items she collects for inspiration, are pieces from

Pompeii that still have the physicality of life frozen in time. Life today doesn't permit

those frozen moments she is so fond of, that allow no editing. During her talk, she spoke

of being influenced by time and the shortness of it. I have seen Tracey Emin's short film

Why I never became a dancer (1995) several times now. Each time it gives more of a

sense of raw feeling; it tells us a story of how deeply wounded she was by the cruel

treatment she received by men during her early teenage years. The last time I watched the

film was at the exhibition *Self* at The Turner Contemporary in Margate in May 2015 in

the town where these acts of indecency and sexual assault were committed against her. It

was truly moving and highlighted the differences to me between true suffering and the

modern day anguish played out online by today's social media users.

Many of us today use social media and the internet to document our lives to varying

extents. Artist Liz Sterry explored how we may reveal more of ourselves than intended

when she created *Kay's Blog* (2011) (Figure 15). The installation is a replica of a

bedroom assembled from information gathered from a blog she followed of a young

Canadian girl, Kay, who was otherwise unknown to the artist. Yet she shockingly

revealed intimate details of her life through her blog, unintentionally performing a

particular identity to the world.

Figure 15. Liz Sterry, *Kay's Blog*, (2011). Installation

Walter Sickert was an artist who was most at home in character; he lived his life as though it was a theatrical performance (Graham Dixon, 2014). He liked to wear disguises and had skills in make-up. It was partly these traits, but mainly the very detailed scene of crime paintings that contribute to the author Patricia Cornwell's theory that he was Jack the Ripper (Gibbons, 2001). Sickert's paintings are so powerful that it is believed to be also painting a picture of the man himself and what type of person he was. Cornwell's claims have been discredited but I use this as an example as it demonstrates how art can facilitate how the viewer can read art as a portrayal of the artist and draw certain conclusions in regard to their character.

Figure 16. Walter Sickert *The P.S. Wings in the O.P Mirror* (1889) Oil on canvas

The girl singer in Figure 16*, The P.S. Wings in the O.P Mirror* (1889) shows a disconnection with the audience, who are not facing toward the stage as you might expect. In fact, we see a reflection in the mirror and she is actually engaged with her audience. The painting reminds me of the deceptive levels of engagement that users of online sites seem to have with the rest of society in how social media appears to affect people's behaviours. It is quite possible now to be checking a phone almost continuously, yet still watching a film, listening to a friend or carrying out some other task whilst appearing not to be concentrating, behaviours often met with disdain from generations who were not brought up with this technology - an inference of connection but disconnection and playing out to an audience.

In 2014 Dries Verhoeven set himself up with a Grindr profile for his project *Wanna Play*? (2014) (Figure 17) in which he interacted with potential dates, arranging to meet men and broadcasting the private messages in lights outside of the glass building in which he was both living and conducting the chats. One of the men he was holding a conversation with, Parker Tilghman, arrived to meet Dries and unsurprisingly reacted in anger upon discovering his conversation being projected for all to see. He felt violated. It could be said that Tilghman implicitly gave his permission for his information to be publicised, by simply setting up a Grindr account –Verhoeven argued this himself afterwards on his Facebook page (Cain, 2014). This installation served to highlight something many now are guilty of, which is assuming we can trust those we "meet" online. Grindr is an app that many gay and bisexual men feel safe using and one would have assumed that other users all shared the same need for trust. In today's society, it is necessary to understand that the information we give out to the friends, acquaintances and followers is potentially a self-portrait that we are painting for the world.
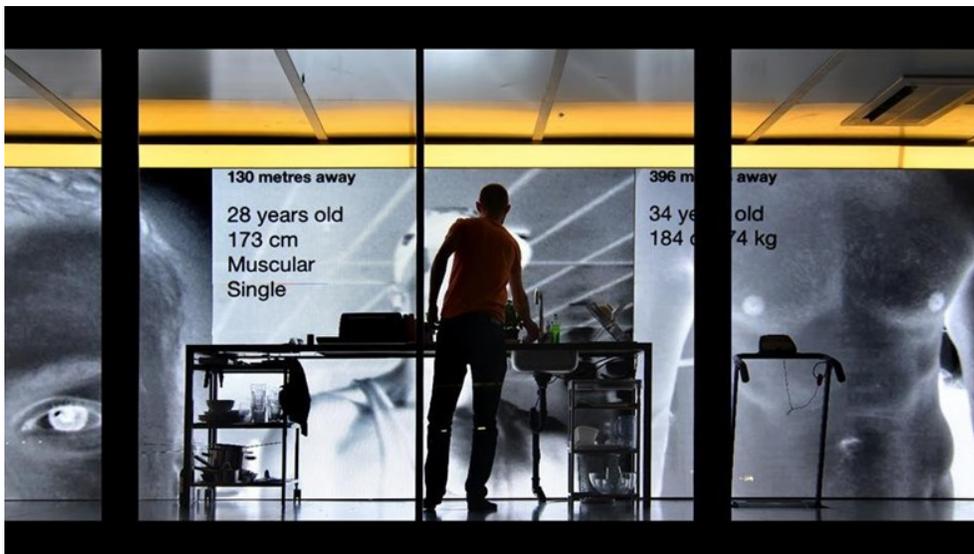

Figure 17. Dries Verhoeven, *Wanna Play?* (2014) Performance

Future Femme are an anonymous feminist art collective also commenting on the privacy issues surrounding so called safe online environments. In *Show Me More* (2013) four women in the collective searched various dating apps asking men to send them photographs of their genitals. The idea was born when one of the women was sent such an image without requesting one. *Show Me More* was a curated exhibition of three hundred images that men had sent on request without knowing that they would be shown in public. It is worth noting that the names of the subjects in the images were not given or associated with the show (Cain, 2014).

What I find intriguing and would like to explore further is how we are evolving, becoming one with our online connections, becoming bolder due to our ability to use a previously unheard voice that is dehumanised by 'status updates' and 'comments' platforms. We are forgetting that these are real life words seen by real people; in many instances, hundreds or maybe thousands of people. We don't consider that we wouldn't have said this or that without an easily available public platform and that once said, it is forever said and can't be unseen by those who have seen it. An emerging negative aspect of the social media age is that voicing opinions through online platforms is making bullies of those who would never consider behaving this way in face to face situations. We type before we think. The term 'keyboard warrior' has become widely used to illustrate this behaviour. This new found voice, however, is no doubt inspiring many a previously lost confidence and encouraging communication between friends. We are now living in a time where, like the emperors and leaders in ancient and simpler times, we are able to totally re-invent ourselves like never before to create an identity that we would like the public to accept. A positive aspect of the existence of social media can be demonstrated at times when gathering public support is necessary. For example,

Facebook is now proving a crucial tool when people or pets are missing. More specifically in such cases as that of war veteran Harold Jellicoe Percival who died aged ninety nine without family in 2013. An appeal was put out to the public on social media and as a result over two hundred members of the public turned out for his funeral (Williams, 2013). The downside is that now we can lose control, not only of the technology which if used without fully understanding its impact can certainly have devastating consequences, but of our own inhibitions. It is easy to give away character traits that we would have rather kept to ourselves. It could also be inspiring a measure of over confidence and bravado where the sharing of personal images is concerned as in the physical sense as demonstrated through the work of Future Femme. An example of this can be found in the current climate of regular everyday people being catapulted into the world of celebrity. Former X factor contestant Rylan Clarke featured in Grayson Perry's recent Channel Four series *Who Are You*? The artist sought to create portraits that gave us an understanding of who the subjects think they are. Although these are portraits rather than self-portraits, I feel that the extensive involvement of the sitters and their lifestyle choices adds elements of self-portraiture. Rylan is troubled by the readily believed fakeness of his public persona and the process of having his portrait realised appeared to help him to be reconciled with his life choices and the fact that his time in the spotlight is likely to be short lived (Perry, 2014). The resulting artwork was a miniature digital painting that represented how the current digital media era can vastly escalate a public profile. The miniature element was a nod to the devices such as the iPhone on which these over-shared images are taken.

 Over recent years we have seen celebrities move between artistic practices. Reality stars accept acting roles in soap operas and therefore need to present themselves to their public

in different ways depending on what the role requires at that time. Does this tell us that the composed 'selfie' has now become integrated into our lives so deeply, that editing our public self is a natural reflex? Sure this may have always been human nature, but it is becoming more prominent because of how life is constantly documented. We cannot however, be the person that everyone wants us to be. The celebrity appears to be able to move freely between practices in spite of there being traditional routes of qualification for various professional artistic practices. Certainly though, all members of these professions are all equally open to the same critical rules. Actor Shia LaBeouf blurs the lines between acting and his true self. In early 2014 he announced that his Twitter account was performance art following a series of appropriated tweets in response to claims of plagiarism. Throughout the remainder of the year followed a series of performances by the actor including appearing at a premiere wearing a paper bag on his head bearing the words "I am not famous anymore" and a six day performance in Los Angeles called *#IAMSORRY*. The latter consisted of the actor wearing a tuxedo and bag over his head and sitting in a room silently crying. Visitors could enter one at a time and could choose from a series of items to take in with them including amongst other things a transformers toy and an Indiana Jones whip. LaBeouf later claimed that during the performance, a woman who had entered the room attempted to rape him, (Jones, 2014) perhaps the most explicit parallel to how vulnerable the act of presenting our whole selves to the public will leave us.

An early pre-internet experiment in social media, *Hole in Space* (1980) was conducted by artists Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz by way of a two way video camera and large screens left in a public place for people to work out for themselves what was happening. It was fascinating for those who discovered they could flirt from miles away

and the installation brought tremendous joy to those who lived apart from their families who could arrange to see each other in real time.

Still at a time before social media and the internet, artist Gillian Wearing worked with the public in ways that encouraged them to publicly declare their inner feelings. In *Signs That Say What You Want Them to Say and Not Signs That Say What Someone Else Wants Them to Say* (1992) participants of the project were passers-by who were asked to write something on a piece of paper. Some of the series left the meaning open to interpretation, others appeared more obvious. The series appears to be an early experiment in the art of sharing personal information socially. It would seem that when sought out, the public appear to want to share information that we would normally expect to be private. Perhaps the arrival of social media has just facilitated this desire. A later piece by Gillian Wearing titled *Confess All On Video. Don't Worry You Will Be in Disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian Version II* (1994) also prefigures elements of today's love of public sharing. The subjects of this video installation were encouraged to confess something on film. Alternatively, they could lie outrageously. Whichever they chose, they would never be caught out, as they would be wearing masks (Hodge, 2015).

Artist Jeroen Van Loon looked back at pre-internet life in a work titled *Analogue Blog* (2010) the artist was unable to use his computer at this point and so decided to write a blog using the old fashioned postal system. He had eighty followers to whom he wrote to personally keeping them updated. I asked him "What was your initial interest in how the digital aspect of life impacts on our reality?" and his response was" I became really interested in digital culture and its influence in 2010 when I had to graduate art school (studied digital media design). During the last part of my education my Repetitive Stress Injury (RSI) became so bad that I didn't want to touch a computer anymore. So I

graduated with a project called From Digital To Analogue (sic) where I didn't use a computer or the internet for two months. During those two months I created a analoge (sic) blog for which I weekly wrote about how my life had changed without internet and a computer. From that point on I started making art about the influence of digital technology. After I graduated I started the *Life Needs Internet* project because I wanted to know how people thought about the internet in places that were the extreme opposite of my western access to internet. So all in all, it's started as a personal quest."

Every week Jeroen van Loon would send a letter, typed in an old-fashioned way, to his blog readers. His offline experiences were shared with over eighty readers. By communicating in this way and not by email or online commenting, people felt more relaxed and wrote very personal thoughts. This gives us a fascinating insight of the influence of the computer on our everyday existence. The communications in the form of the handwritten letters were then exhibited in the *From Digital to Analogue* installation (jeroenvanloon.com).

Today we can, and do, communicate our vulnerabilities far more promptly. We are used to sharing thoughts as they come to our minds, without any consideration or pre-planning. Technology allows us to do so without giving much thought to the process of these public displays. Each time, these thoughts we share form part of the ongoing self-portrait we build. In some, probably most cases, of prolific sharers, each share is a fragment of an elaborate lie. Dr Richard Sherry, clinical psychologist and founding member of the Society for Neuropsychoanalysis believes that social media users are rewriting their future memories when they make posts about how good their lives are on their status updates.

"Our need to document and share our lives is part of our nature and beneficial – but the strengths and drawbacks of social media need to be understood better by society. "Recent studies show that memories are actually modified and less accurate whenever we 'retrieve' them from our minds, to the point of entirely changing their nature over time. Being competitive is normal. However, the dark side of this social conformity is when we negate what authentically feels to be 'us' to the degree that we no longer recognise the experience, our voice, the memory or the view of ourselves" (Calman, 2014).

I have found this to be true in my own life. I have a Facebook profile, set up originally as a family member wanted to share his family photos with several people at once rather than have to email them separately to me. I post very little to it and I share things that I feel will be of interest to my Facebook friends, who incidentally, are also real life physical friends and peers. I find often that friends will post things on there that I know not to be the whole truth, I know because I actually talk physically to them. Not major lies and I would not consider any of these people to be liars in the true sense of the word, but small embellishments to make the story more interesting. The very fact that I myself often write a status then delete it before posting as I consider it too uninteresting to tell many people at once, tells me that this distortion of the truth is a necessity for prolific social media users.

My Practice

My own practice has developed from challenges I have faced since childhood and as a mother. I recall quite vividly the mixture of excitement and deep anxiety I felt during and after the period of our family relocation from Liverpool to Essex, a drastic contrast of culture back in 1984. Those were the days before the internet and social media when keeping in touch required a certain amount of effort. There was no such thing as a free telephone call and as a child, letter writing was the only way. I soon lost contact with my old school friends and as a new girl in Essex with a strange northern accent and parents who insisted I abide by school rules and wear correct uniform and no make-up I made very few new friends and became the target of bullies.

My series I titled *What If?* (2012) was born from both vivid memories of the years preceding the traumatic time of my move down south; and my anxieties I feel as a mother bringing up children in a time that is so very demanding on both our attention and money. I think that because of the internet and easy access to it, young people now are exposed to the idea of 'celebrity perfect' and that this puts the pressure on to conform to this. I began with the theoretical question of "What if we were to teach our children about the harsh realities that face so many in life?"

Figure 18. Samantha Humphreys, *Beaten* (2012) Photograph

Clearly, we wouldn't dream of exposing children to such things and my work is by no means intended to be used as an educational tool, but by using Barbie dolls, an iconic plaything that oozes perfection, (unlike the Sindy dolls of my childhood that portrayed a more credible everyday depiction of a woman), I am demonstrating that life for some is by no means perfect. The series of ten images explores domestic violence, insecurity, loneliness, illness and addiction.

Following their inclusion in *Speaking Out*, an exhibition in Leicester commenting on domestic violence against women, the images received international media attention across the Internet. This proved interesting and invaluable to me as it opened up discussions in comment forums about my work and allowed me to view the work from the outside. There were comments from the public on issues such as sexism. In Beaten (2012) (Figure 18), Why hadn't the artist also portrayed a man being beaten up by a woman? Racism, the female in the image titled *Tender* (2012) (Figure 19), was clearly

being abused by the male doll whose arm was on her shoulder, which was clearly an arm belonging to a non-white male. So is the artist implying that Asian men like to beat white women? This brought home to me exactly why it is important for artists to call attention to current issues. As an artist, I can never predict how someone will view and interpret my work and the work itself only becomes enriched by the viewer's approach.

Figure 19. Samantha Humphreys, *Tender* (2012) Photograph

There was during this period of exposure an element of personal attack, which, as someone who, as previously mentioned, does not post my private life to public social media platforms I found devastating. There were comments implying I must be a terrible person/mother to allow my own children to be exposed to such horrific art as well as that I must have real issues if I consider this to be suitable teaching materials for children. The power of the internet and mass exposure it allows is potentially very damaging as well as a being a positive move forward in terms of being able to be heard.

Recent work of mine has explored social networking and how our online presence is becoming a more prominent identity than our physical one and also how we are becoming more and more dependent on our devices and that the world viewed through these devices is seemingly the world that matters most. Recent work of mine, a collection, *We create. We believe. We Judge.* (Figures 20-22) reflects on the question: Is there no difference any more between our online presence and our physical one, is it all blending into one reality and do we care? Hashtags are often overused now in order to clarify a point in case the reader should miss it. The pieces consist partly of a series of photographs that shows how our online presence impacts our physical being exploring topics such as never experiencing 'alone-ness', self-obsession and the importance of giving others a particular idea of how we are living our lives and how we portray our public identity.

Figure 20. Samantha Humphreys, *How Do I Look?* (2014) Monoprint with Photograph

Figure 21. Samantha Humphreys, *Look How Happy I Am* (2014) Monoprint with Photograph

The collection included a piece containing thirty mobile phone size blocks of wood each containing a printed news item, demonstrating our dependence on our devices on which we count on as a source for all our information. I transferred real news items to the wooden 'devices' not allowing any further searching outside of the boundary of the object. To accompany this piece was a series of wooden iPads that could be handled by the viewer. Interestingly, it felt unnervingly comfortable holding the devices as one would hold a real working piece of equipment. Is our use of devices mainly a habit we have developed rather than a need?

Figure 22. Samantha Humphreys, *We Create. We Believe. We Judge.* (2014) Ink and
Carbon print on wood

A short film portraying how the happenings as viewed through the device are more
prominent than the direct experience of the moment was also part of the series. The film
shows momentary distractions, pressures from "friends" and tender moments from the
physical world.

This led to my current investigations identifying how the frequent use of social media
and maintaining an online presence is altering the concept of the self-portrait, looking at
how we behave toward others and how we perceive their lives and personalities and the
way we react to them. How boundaries are blurred and often real life is distorted by the
life online which has more prominence and appears to be the actual reality. My intention

has not been to focus on negative aspects of social media as I feel that there are so many positive aspects to this relatively new way of life if used responsibly. I simply wish to comment on and explore this new way of conducting life.

It would appear to be true that what we see through our devices has more of an impact than what we view simply through our own eyes. I have experienced this in recent years during the many concerts I have watched while those around me watch the whole show through their mobile phones in order to secure a satisfactory recording of the event rather than enjoy the moment of being there and allowing themselves to become enthralled in the atmosphere.

Figure 23. Samantha Humphreys, *Untitled* (2014) Photograph

This type of behavior echoes Jean Baudrillard's theory that the copy has become more important than the original. According to the French philosopher the world is dictated by simulation and simulacra rather than reality. Baudrillard's theories are based on the idea

of simulacrum meaning a fake or representation of the original (Costello & Vickery, 2007:157). This is ubiquitous more now than ever before thanks to the widespread availability of life editing tools at our fingertips.

I began thinking how I could re-attach the online identity back to the physical one so I started by collecting statuses that had been posted, small snippets of information that were unique to their author. These statuses were just a few seconds worth of information yet they were incredibly demonstrative. Not only was the content telling but also the length of the status and the implied tone. The frequency of the person's updates all build a picture of who they are and what type of person they are. All preconceived ideas of course, but in our judgmental society, this is how we form our opinions, at least as far as the online world is concerned; first impressions are often sole impressions.

I found myself wondering, what is it that keeps us hooked on social media? Looking at the constant updates? For me, it is the chance of reading something of interest. I suspect for many the chance to take a peek into the lives of others is too irresistible to miss.

Artist Terry Perk's installation *Inside Out* (2013) was built on the idea that human nature is to be curious, intrusive even of the privacy of others. Not in a disrespectful way, but in the manner in which we glance into a window that has not been protected by a pulled curtain or closed blind. The installation at the home of the artist, invited passers-by to look directly into the front room via a triangular prism set up outside. What the viewers saw was a beautiful kaleidoscope pattern from the light shade that was placed directly at the indoor end of the prism (terryperk.com). The point is; we are invited to look so we do. However, we are unlikely to see what we expect to see. The outcome of our curiosity doesn't matter.

I wanted to consider how I could use what currently happens on social media in terms of forming and presenting an identity towards a physical piece of work. The concept of the self-portrait being sculpted a little piece at a time and the words used acting as the tools that chip away at a very large piece of stone to reveal tiny elements of what lies beneath excited me and I wanted to bring together online and physical identities. I wanted to demonstrate how online sharing is a performance of the self and that it changes how we behave in public as social media is still 'public' despite the fact we are in what we consider a safe and sometimes private environment.

Conclusion

In June 2015, I was in Hyde Park London at a Taylor Swift concert. This artist has a strong presence online and regularly posts images that appeal to teenage girls such as cute photographs of cats and sleepovers with celebrity friends. Taylor Swift also writes music that could be interpreted as a form of self-portraiture as it largely explores her experiences with ex-boyfriends. During the concert this performer, who has a massive following, chose to talk extensively to the audience. She talked about how past experiences make us who we are today and about having no regrets. What caught my attention though is what she said about our lives being played out on social media, how we only get to see the highlights of the lives of our friends "but every day we go online and we scroll through the highlight reel of other people's awesome lives but we don't get to see the highlight reel of our awesome lives, all we see is the behind the scenes of our lives" - Taylor Swift. I looked around me during this speech and every one of those spectators within my line of vision appeared completely spellbound by these words, it seemed that all could identify with this realisation.

The artworks that I presented for my degree show in May 2015 were a "re-presentation" of how social media users present themselves online (Figure 24). I was looking to explore how I could bring together online presence with physical presence with the intention of highlighting the differences. I invited all of my social media friends to be involved in my explorations into online behaviour which would involve being filmed, physically communicating their social media posts and updates. Most ignored the request, some apologised for not wanting to be filmed and a few enthusiastically agreed. Interestingly though, some friends of friends that had heard of my project in person, not via Facebook, volunteered to contribute. Some users only post photographs to their

accounts, some comment on their images and some post details about their lives and friends. One of my subjects has a Facebook account and has for many years, yet he posts nothing. As this exercise was based on how users behave online, this friend simply sat silently. As the most appropriate method for choosing my subjects was by general invitation, the social media platforms came with the user involved so were not chosen by me.

Figure 24. Samantha Humphreys, *Forever Portrait. Part 1* (2015) Installation

The profiles used were from Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. I wanted to portray a physical version of these posts so I asked the volunteers to talk the status updates as though they were typing them, with no animation or expression in their voice or on their face, as I believe this is how they are executed when originally displayed. The subjects would be sat on a plinth to perform their updates as I felt this would affirm the concept of presenting a self-portrait through the medium of social media. The triptych of films was

to be screened on android tablets as I felt this an appropriate medium as hand held

devices are commonly used for updating statuses. I was aware that smartphones are more

widely used for this sort of documention yet it was immediately clear that mobile phones

would be too small for this to be a satisfactory viewer experience. I discovered that while

I was exploring through experimental pieces using the collected text from the news feeds

the words felt essentially as though they were a receipt, validating the words written by

the poster. I had been talking to sound artist John Hughes who included text from his

sound piece *You are my Burger King* (2006) into a book which presented the work as

poetry. He inspired me to want to see the beauty of the words in printed form cascading

from the top of the wall and pooling on the floor. These scripts were placed in the centre

wall between the film triptych and three acrylic prints of carbon printed statuses that I

felt captured the spirit of the essence of today's social media governed society (Figure

25*).*

Figure 25. Samantha Humphreys, *Forever Portrait. Part 3* (2015) Acrylic prints

Is social networking and our ever growing online presence changing self-portraiture and

how we form an identity?

The reactions of both the subjects and independent audiences of my piece varied. During

filming when faced with the self composed scripts that I had copied and pasted and

which were taken from their social media news feeds, many participants could not believe that they themselves had written it. Saying the words out loud seems to change how we feel and perhaps if we had to vocalise before being allowed to post on social media then some things might remain unsaid. The reception from the audience was a collective ability to identify with the participants whom, on watching themselves perform in the finished piece, reacted in ways that varied from slight embarrassment to disbelief that they use their time in this way, that they would post text that now appears to be nonsensical. It is far from nonsensical since it calls attention to the differences in the way we behave online and how we would behave in person and to how we are evolving into a society of individuals who are becoming able to manage multiple identities that run parallel to each other. Social networking has now become integrated into our society to such an extent that it has become a part of our physical existence. Self-portraiture is cemented firmly into popular culture in the form of selfies and social media updates. What sets this phenomenon apart from the self-portraiture of the contemporary art world is simply that art is premeditated and presented as such. We have evolved into beings who document our lives as second nature, almost as easily as we execute other essential functions such as breathing, sleeping and eating.

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