

THE SELFIE-MANIA IN ART: SOCIAL TREND OR COMPULSIVE BEHAVIOUR?

Prof. Dr. Rosella Tomassoni

Ph.D. Candidate Dr. Giuseppe Galetta

Ph.D. Student Dr. Marialaura Gargano

University of Cassino and Southern Latium

Department of Human, Social and Health Sciences, **Italy**

ABSTRACT

Selfie is the most typical expression of the current visual culture, that characterizes the contemporary age, revealing a new form of subjectivity that involves both digital immigrants and digital native. The advent and spreading of new technologies, and the dissemination of a web-mediate culture, particularly through mobile devices (such as smartphone and tablet), has led to the emergence of a new form of self-focused communication and social trend, characterized by the compulsiveness of a mediatic ritual: the Selfie-Mania. Contemporary Art is also acquiring this form of communication, turning that into a new way of creative expression and the selfie-based artistic technique. The unselfconsciousness and frequency through which also art specialists or professionals are making use of Selfie gave rise the question: "is Selfie a social trend or a compulsive behaviour for artists?".

Keywords: Selfie, Contemporary Art, Narcissism, Self-Esteem, Compulsive Behaviour

INTRODUCTION

At the present time digital technology is becoming part of human life in an ever more massive way, by allowing to interact with millions people simultaneously through virtual networks made up of images and words. In this specific context Selfie becomes the most typical expression of visual culture, a stage through which everyone can show the image that he/she want to share with the public (or *followers*), often driven by a need for perfection and control [1]. But what is Selfie? The first use of "selfie" term is traced in an Australian Internet forum in 2002, but only in 2013, in an editorial by Judy Pearsall, "selfie" is declared word of the year, pointing out that in the course of its evolution the word was spelled with a "y" at the end instead of "ie", helping to transform a narcissistic need in a media-engaging term, making this term socially acceptable. In the Oxford Dictionary the word "selfie" has defined a photograph taken to themselves, via smartphone or webcam, uploaded and shared on a social media website [2]. By means of this definition, it is clear that Selfie is a fast self-portrait, made by a smartphone or tablet camera, immediately shared and disseminate online through social networks: Selfie-taking is therefore a photo-sharing action that instantly helps an individual to tell with no words where he/she is now, what is doing, and what looks like at this precise moment. In this scenario, Contemporary Art could not refrain from using Selfie as an expression of the time in which it developed, characterized by the

immediacy imposed through the new technologies and the consumerism culture, but also by the construction of a self-centered generation. Probably the first significant pre-Selfie in the 20th century is *Hand with Reflecting Sphere* (also known as *Self-Portrait in Spherical Mirror*), the famous lithography created by Maurits Cornelis Escher in 1935, in which the strange compositional structure is dominated by the artist's face distorted and reflected in a handheld convex mirror, that seems to echo due to proximity, depth and clipped frame, to current Selfie. According to a traditional point of view, perform a self-portrait is a search for oneself, being aware of who the artist is in a particular historical moment: self-portrait is therefore an artistic form of self-examination that reflects the desire to stop and capture the image of themselves, in order to offer that to posterity in a different time and culture dimension. We have to wait for the Renaissance to see the first self-portrait of an artist by Albrecht Dürer, and afterwards Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, who created a hundred self-portraits (probably the largest number in the art history): the narcissistic obsession with oneself has led artists of the past to spend hours and hours in front of the mirror. Today, everyone may become a self-artist, thanks to the new tools specifically developed for taking self-portraits in everyday life, from webcams to smartphones equipped with frontward-facing cameras, to the selfie stick with a remote shutter, by way of photo-editing software such as Photoshop. Either self-portrait and Selfie originate certainly from the human need to reveal oneself to the world, and to be the creator of their own image, by becoming control means and claim of one's own identity. But what compels contemporary artists in Selfie-making? Are they forced by a compulsive behaviour or conditioned by a social trend, perhaps using its innovative power as a function of artistic creation?

MATERIALS AND METHOD

A qualitative research method was adopted: in fact, through the observational data analysis, based on the psychological interpretation of several Selfie-focused artworks produced by some artists and the evaluation of the creative behaviour detected in their works of art, that were examined during recent exhibitions and performances in various museums, art galleries, and art spaces all around Europe, but also through an in-depth analysis of the scientific literature produced up to now about Selfie topic both in psychological and artistic area, we have tried to understand what of the above two hypotheses prevails in the artists who are making use of Selfie as a new medium of creative expression in the Contemporary Art practice.

RESULTS

The hectic pace imposed by new technologies along with a consumer culture, seems to be reflected in our way of thinking and acting. For “digital natives” time freezes in an eternal present, without past or future, according to the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, we live in a “liquid modernity”, or rather in a world full of conflicting signals, prone to change quickly and unpredictably, in which men are interested in being connected in an ephemeral way, since paradoxically all that associated with a permanent condition generates fear and uncertainty [3]. For this reason, in a consumer culture that promotes products ready for immediate use, without too much emotional investments, Selfie established itself as a medium of communication in an invasive way, becoming increasingly a means of asserting one's individuality, but also an artistic expression tool, capable of representing a plurality of eternal moments in an infinitive present. Digital devices allow to experience the ubiquity, to share every fold of human life with the

global network, through sharing images, words or video from everywhere in the world, by focusing on themselves in order to strengthen their own self-esteem and public image: technological become part of people's lives in an ever more massive, systematic and steady way, so as to cause changes in the sense of human identity, that needs approval and support from the community. Web-mediate interpersonal relationships and the massive use of digital devices cause consequences for the way in which people interact each other: they present themselves not for who they are, but how they want to look like: the password is "I share therefore I am". Selfie has become part of the human life as the bearer of shared meanings that allow social actors to make sense of their world: it enters fully even in Contemporary Art as a new form of expression of a digital life and there are many artists who are using Selfie at the moment with the intention of creating an artwork (giving to Selfie this status), even if many curators sometimes hesitate to consider Selfie as a true work of art, although Selfie has entered into the gallery spaces on the same rules as other artworks (however staying in the context of art spaces in a different way, not yet sufficiently normalized). But what lies behind this social (or perhaps artistic) trend? Although taking a photographic selfie is a shallow practice that doesn't cause the same level of self-examination requested by an artist who spends countless hours painting his/her own self-portrait, through our investigation it was noted that new technologies have brought about a change in the body perception, inducing a need of outward projection of the individual Self and a desire to show the individual body, that may reflect both insecurity and excessive self-esteem, which in some cases could lead to the narcissistic personality disorder that, by the artist's point of view, can be feed by the need for success and acknowledgment for their social role and profession. Through the Selfie-Mania, the possibilities of viralization by the Net, and the "like/share" model (typical of the social networks), artists try to speed up the process of self-assertiveness, exhibitionism and dissemination of their Art through a hyperrealistic self-representation by means of Selfies, that can focus and highlight (enlarging or reducing) some body parts, satisfying at the same time their self-confidence, even if the body is fragmentized and destroyed. In fact, current trend of selfie-based art working is using Selfie as main mode of expression by presenting a photograph of single parts of artist's body that obscures the background, often duplicating endlessly making use of the "copy-paste" procedure, typical of aesthetic photo-editing, in an effort to strive for the ideal perfection, but forgetting the classical language of painting. By staying in selfie's context, artist plays him/herself through a series of images (similar to movie frames) that highlight, in an obsessive way, the process of recreating him/her own three-dimensional self-portrait (often by using the artist's face as an artifact), focusing on specific body parts: this process of auto-creation has always been so crucial for artistic practice, since when subjectivity revelation took place in 18th century, in the era of Enlightenment, when contemporary visual culture was born. This means that the moment of crystallization of artist's image (that is the quintessence of his biography) is substantial for his/her identity as a human being and it goes beyond the current stereotypical cultural habits: artist wants to assert his/her identity in a contradiction with a homologated and standardized art, which has in the classical self-portrait its reference point, running the risk of lowering the artist's status to that of any camera user (or Internet user) and cancelling his/her true human essence. Selfie is a new way to self-telling that shows a strong mediating potential, in which the artistic message is compressed into the photographic sign without the effort of self-contemplation that characterizes the traditional painterly self-portrait: it is a new

narrative tool for the contemporary artist, that involves viewers into the interpretative dynamic by calling them in completing a selfie-based artwork. In fact, as “like/share” model is functional to social media interaction, public’s feedback is necessary to institutionalize the artistic operation mediated by Selfie: artist’s attempt to present him/herself through a selfie-based artwork, based on a self-exhibitory practice, requires necessarily a social interaction to be recognized as an art form. In any case, it was found that Selfie is closely related to the body perception and, specifically in Contemporary Art, it is the projection of a need for self-assertiveness by the same artist: Selfie is more than a temporary and stereotyped social trend, but a new artistic technique that are really changing the artist’s psychology. Through Selfie the distinction between private and public life is abolished in favour of a virtual identity, enclosing what a person wants to be and not what he/she really is: in this light Selfie would be a celebration of the social self by controlling own personal image [4]. Therefore Selfie-Mania in Contemporary Art reflects the artist’s need to be recognized and approved by the other, in order to satisfy the need for recognition and social approval, as well as digital users require compulsively “like” and “share” to increase the confidence and self-esteem in themselves: surely behind Selfie-making in Art there is a strong narcissistic component that pushes artists to create Selfie-based artworks. In fact, one of the strands of the myth of Narcissus is the concept of the mirror, which artists such as Van Gogh, Picasso, and De Chirico used to stop and represent their own image: artists are giving voice to a new form of self-mirroring that is precisely based on Selfie. Furthermore, the increase of narcissistic traits in the artistic personality seems currently increasing rapidly due to a social trend, increased by using new technologies, that places great importance on aesthetics: Internet allows people who have narcissistic traits to fall in love again of themselves, through images that highlight their positive qualities. But at the same time, the contemporary narcissism expressed by artists in their Selfie-focused artworks, seems to imply a total denial of their emotional identity: the narcissist would lacks the ability to feel emotions, because the hyperbolic amplification for his/her own aesthetic image at the expense of the Ego, would cause the removal of past and future, the loss of historical continuity, the disappearance of the sense of belonging to a previous generation, and a freeze about the *hic et nunc*. In the wake of the compulsive tendency to self-portraits making by Selfie, the photographer and American psychologist John Suler, in his book *Psychology of the Digital Age: Humans Become Electric*, argues that Selfie is mostly associated with a lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem [5]. In any case, narcissism levels have increased steadily in recent years, making the millennial generation (the so-called “Generation Me”), more selfish and self-centered than any other previous generation in the past. In fact, narcissism is typically characterized by a tendency to believe themselves superior to others, seeking persistently admiration from others through selfish behaviour: this trend is confirmed by the mode of using social networks by Net users [6]. A study about the relationship between selfies and narcissistic traits conducted in 2015, shows how the self-objectification is a tendency to regard own body as a sex-based object, and it is linked to low self-esteem that people have of themselves [7]. However, in the United States the Selfie-making has spread in a manner so explosive that it is talking about *Selfie-Syndrome* as a disorder that affects people self-absorbed or overly concerned with their own digital image on social networks: selfie-taking is becoming a compulsive behaviour [8]. The possibility to post photos of themselves in a continuous stream allows those people, who is characterized by narcissistic traits, to get reputation and media exposure by collecting positive

comments (i.e. *likes*), that account for such type of user a key source of reassurance and gratification [9]. But in a long term this trend could have serious repercussions on human psyche, by transforming brains and people's personalities, and demonstrating that technology is an autonomous force outside of the human control [10].

CONCLUSION

Artists of the past have long used self-portraits to explore their identity: just think of the 37 self-portraits by Vincent van Gogh, that represent the crisis of identity of the artist in the last three years of his life. In the digital era van Gogh would have probably used a *smartphone* to capture his own image, but it is certain that Art has changed different clothes over time, wearing the one best suited to the context, representing at the same time an impulse to go beyond what is known in "digital natives" era, Selfie becomes a means of expression of a fragmented time, looking for self-esteem and reassurance for a virtual and "liquid" world. Selfies can be therefore described as an emerging art form, a sign of a new form of visual communication, at halfway between social trend and a compulsive behaviour also for artists, who seem making use of this new means of expression in a strategic, utilitarian, and sometimes ironic or funny way. Contemporary artists are so aware of the communicative power of this new medium to ride the wave of the moment by transforming their own Selfies into artworks, although the tendency to make use of this new art form seems to be chosen more frequently from individuals characterized by narcissistic traits, such as positive and inflated sense of self, attention-seeking, importance, power and need for leadership, physical attractiveness, social extraversion with low interest in forming intimate bonds, social acceptance, vanity, admiration demand, self-bragging or exhibitionism: all these personality traits are usually attributed to some typical figures of contemporary artist. In particular, by means of Selfie, digital artists exploit the transitive properties and the viralization of the Internet in order to confirm their social and professional reputation more easily and quickly, but also as an opportunity to achieve public through the virtual global network with no personal involvement, exploiting Selfie as a tool of social self-enhancing under the urge of a narcissistic personality, that often transforming their art practice in a compulsive behaviour, with the aim to hold off the aggressive tendencies that may arise out of fear of being rejected or disapproved by the public, revealing also a self-objectification susceptibility. Selfie becomes an one-image statement, the assertion of their individual personality and an artistic mode to manage expertly (and technologically) the impressions that artists give others, or rather a self-regulation effort aimed at hiding their own flaws (through the technological manipulation capabilities enabled by advanced digital devices), attracting so the public's favour. Underlying the need to paint, represent and share on social media their own image there is always a need to know him/herself, but there is also a deep love for his/her mirrored image, just like Narcissus: the narcissist-artist puts into practice attention-seeking behaviours through selfie-based artworks to obtain the public admiration, by meeting self-esteem issues and realizing so his/her the need to appear and to gain artistic fame, celebrating at the same time what makes him/her unique, but also confirming and validating their self-perception. What changes with respect to the traditional and classic self-portraits of the past is an increased ability to control how artists are portrayed and the immediacy through which Selfie is produced, becoming in itself a true work of art that expresses the hyper-realistic and perfect self-representation of a new kind of artist in the digital age: by means of Selfie the artist's psyche is revealed through Art practice.

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