

About the Anti-Figurativeness of #selfie. (Location of #selfie)

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I propose that what I will call “#selfie” is far from being a figurative object as it is generally assumed, since figurativeness is not an accidental consequence. As 'figurative', we mean the quality of the image with iconic reference to objects and subjects belonging to the natural world (beings, phenomena, things). According to Greimas (1984), in order to analyse a work of art you must first determine whether it is of a figurative or abstract kind and, therefore, whether it represents icons that are related to the natural world (beings, phenomena, objects) or those which have no figurative references. Based on a number of examples of #selfies, I shall instead demonstrate that the context in which these self-portraying pictures are taken, as well as the online and social environment in which they are shared, are more important than the self-portrayed subjects themselves. The hashtag “#”, in fact, indicates the centrality of the tag, the gesture of tagging, which is considerably more important than the fact of being self-portrayed through the #selfie. This implies that research on the practice of taking and sharing #selfies should (re)consider the current discussion focus on all those contemporary phenomena that are fostering and developing self-expression through new media. Taking into account the reflections made by Esposito on the impersonal (2007) and the research by Villa on contemporary self-portraits (2012, 2013), I will try to relate the production of #selfies to the practices of conceptual art (eg. *Location of the I* by Martin John Callanan), rather than privileging the idea of artistic (*self*)representation.

KEYWORDS

#selfie, figurativeness, hashtag, conceptual art, impersonal, trace

Introduction

A while ago in Bologna, I was fortunate enough to see some of Diego Marcon's videos and listen to his talk during *Archivio Aperto*¹, the annual opening event of the *Home Movies* association. Marcon collects family videotapes from friends and acquaintances. His collection is not restricted to any particular criterion except from the format. His only criterion is that videos must be analog. After digitizing, watching and micro-sequencing all material, Marcon edits it. He intervenes by underlining the flaws, he builds (or re-builds) a narrative line from scratch, he plays with the soundtrack. On his website, he explains that 'each archive is analysed in its specificity and re-organised as a video'. The result is a series of videos of different length, named after the owner of the images and organised in ascending order (*Tape 01.Lia, Tape 02.Roger, Tape 03.Rita* and so forth). It is rather impressive that, as Marcon explained, his friends and acquaintances handed him their materials with relative ease, and in some cases, did not even ask him to see the final result, nor did they want their material back.

It could be interesting to compare this process of distancing oneself from subjective images, which, once ordered in a sequence, would tell the story of the photographed subject, with the practice of clicking and sharing #selfies online. Over the following paragraphs a series of examples, references and reflections will guide us through the argument towards the final conclusion. This focuses on the consideration that whoever chooses to click and publish a #selfie, is actually making an act of 'impersonality'² about herself/himself, an act of self-questioning their being subjects in the world as a means of *becoming* subjects online instead. But it is precisely in this gesture – so seemingly and obviously desecrating of one's own features – that the awareness of oneself, as well as the online or offline environment in which this happens, comes to life – a process which is so specific to our contemporary times. The purpose of this article in fact is to verify how,

1 <http://www.memoriadelleimmagini.it/homemovies/>

2 In contemporary philosophy, and most notably in the debate on the subject and the person in biopolitical theory, authors often refer to philosophy of the impersonal and of 'impersonality', in order to emphasize the distinction between their work and the theoretical schools that characterized the twentieth century. Roberto Esposito underlined the need to interpret the political in terms of biological lives and bodies, in the neutral and impersonal form of the discourse on the human being. The choice is justified by contemporary circumstances related to ethnic conflicts, irregular migration and asylum seeking, but also more broadly in terms of subjects that are increasingly devoid of a structured political framework, and for which any 'personal' discourse is likely to produce exclusionary paradoxes, depriving them of individual rights and of their status as persons, and thus transforming this notion in exclusionary and negative, in a context of human rights negation (2007). Esposito therefore suggests a philosophy of the impersonal, which would take the neutral form in order to avoid the fragmentation of the biological unity of the human being caused by personalism and its exclusive nature which addresses 'the rational and voluntary core of human existence as the focal point of political thought and political action [...]'. Against the personalistic paradigm is the one of the impersonal, which develops from Bichat's biology and Nietzsche's philosophy. By rejecting the sacredness of the person in Simone Weil, and endorsing Foucault's biopolitics and Deleuze's critique, this paradigm reflects upon the possibility of a political development in third person, where one could merge life with law'. Enciclopedia Treccani, *Lessico del XXI Secolo*, [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/impersonale_\(Lessico-del-XXI-Secolo\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/impersonale_(Lessico-del-XXI-Secolo)/) Cfr. Esposito (2007). For further details, see: Lisciani Petrini (2012). In this essay, Lisciani Petrini offers a historically and theoretically grounded reconstruction of the trajectory that led from personalist theories to the impersonal paradigm, specifying the links between this and the phenomenological philosophy. It is no coincidence that her work develops upon a number of examples of artistic expressions.

by excluding any figurative reference from selfies, this definition could illustrate a conception of contemporary times that culminates in the passage of the individual from modernity to postmodernity: a path marked by theories of self-fragmentation, since modernity.³

In contemporary times, the superabundance of images seems to overpower the role of the sender and recipient, and even that of the message. Everything is reset and coupled with the impersonal. Let's consider the realm of public discourses: the impersonal is typical of those situations in which public, conventional aspects, prevail over an authentic contact with life and its seasons. As part of an objectifying dynamic, discourses are supported by chats, news is supported by gossip ('they say'). The impersonal concerns life with regard to authenticity, offset by habits and ways of doing things that dissolve subjective personality into a series of attitudes and unnatural poses. This is the logic of the chasm between signifiers and meanings, as well as between senders and recipients, and between sign and its referent. Image is nothing more than a pure trace, a legacy, the footprint of a passage. The image becomes the mark that 'I (was) there' – located and to be located – the outcome of which entails in a sense of testament, a 'being' exceeding the 'I am'. In this sense, the practice of taking and sharing #selfies is much closer to those practices of anti-figurative conceptual art⁴ (i.e. the work of Daniel Buren, On Kawara, Hanne

3 In a nutshell, we shall by making reference from two precursors from the late 1700s: Rousseau in *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1754) and Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau ou La Satire seconde* (first written in 1761-1762 and then revised in 1773-1774). According to Rousseau, each individual becomes progressively dependent on the opinion of others, so that his own internal coherence may be put in question, and his self becomes mere exteriority, a copy made on the basis of the requests of the society. The detachment from the definitory power of traditions, and the emergence of the freedom to define oneself, hence, does not happen in the context of a personal, solitary and reasoned research, but rather in the context of an urban, chaotically dynamic and ferociously competitive society. In such a context, the fear to lose competitiveness induces the individual towards prioritizing the safety of socially approved representations, rather than towards making the more risky choice of seeking the real motivations pertaining to his own identity. *Rameau's Nephew* by Diderot inspired, among others, Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* or *The Phenomenology of Mind*), in particular for the presentation of his two models of subjectivity: the 'honest consciousness', typical of the pre-modern world and characterized by sincerity and by the coincidence between what one thinks and what one does in coherence and respect of tradition; and the 'disintegrated consciousness', typical of modernity, for which nothing is what it appears, and morality does not complete all that is worthy of the human person. The vision of the self emerging in the text by Diderot returns in the work of Goffman, according to which the unicity of the actor is divided in a 'simultaneous multiplicity of selves' (Goffman, 1961), displayed according to the circumstances of the interaction. Following this theoretical path, one meets the work of Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), but also Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), *La condition postmoderne* by Lyotard (1979), *L'anti-Œdipe* by Deleuze and Guattari (1972), until cyborg theory (Haraway, 1991), posthumanism (Wolfe, 2010) and gender theory (Benhabib, Butler, Cornell, Fraser, 1995). Ultimately, there is the abovementioned third person by Esposito (2007).

4 Conceptual art is an 1960s artistic school focusing on the intellectual contemplation of artworks. It is based upon the denial of any sign by the artist, as well as any figurative message, since the artwork must convey exclusively the artist's concept, i.e. his intellectual procedure. The conceptual art represented the end result of an artistic path which, having started with impressionism and characterizing most of the evolution of contemporary visual arts, set out to free art from the formal and cultural ties that had characterized its tradition. The choice of giving up the artwork is the last step after art gave away naturalism and mimesis (Post-impressionism and expressionism), perspective (cubism), the past (futurism), the economic value of the artwork (Dadaism), the form (informality), and it undoubtedly

Darboven, Alighiero Boetti, etc.) as much as it is far from the idea of artistic self-representation through self-portraits (Villa, 2012).

1. #selfie is only a Trace, a Clue, a Sign.

I should like to leave out the figurativeness of #selfie. I will try, instead, to discuss it as a substantially un-iconic phenomenon. Through clicking and sharing #selfies, one loses any relationship of similarity with the reality they refer to, which, in this specific case, is represented by physiognomic traits, the features composing the face of that person who snaps and shares his/her own #selfie online. I mean this in the sense that the effect of a #selfie is to subsume the subject's figure to the context the picture is taken in, as well as to the network online system it is published in. This makes the taking and sharing of a #selfie a gesture of self-subtraction from communication, enunciation and the dialectic between the two subjects "I / you" (vs. he/she). In fact, as I will explain better further on by analyzing Eddy (2007), Benveniste (1966) distinguishes between the I and the 2nd and 3rd person. The latter is a non-person because it is not provided with a variable reference. In contrast, you and I references depend on the subject who takes charge of one or the other in the space of a particular enunciation. You and I have a specific reference, indicating the two actors of communication; the third person has instead a determined reference. The practice of #selfies lie in the dimension of the 3rd person – the non-person – and, as it will be explained better later, of the impersonal.

I use the term "selfie" always preceded by a hashtag, with the intention of underlining the practice of tagging the photo, over the selfie itself.

For this reason I use the term 'anti-figurativeness' as opposed to the concept of figuration/ figurative. In the case of a #selfie, which is not – or at least only partially – an artistic phenomenon, but is instead a social one, it is obviously impossible to claim a figurative referencing system. A #selfie is "a photograph that one has taken of oneself," as reported by the Oxford English Dictionary, and of the abstract kind. So, I would use the term 'anti-figurativeness' by means of similarity, as I will attempt to verify whether #selfies stand apart from the natural world's icons they are related to, disjoining themselves as much from their signifying as to the meaning, just like the person signifies herself/himself as non-person. I believe, however, that the prefix anti- is more suitable in this case, because of the dual value it can take. In one sense, from the Latin ante 'in front, before', it indicates anteriority – earlier in time or space. In the second case, from the Greek ἀντί 'against', it assumes, among other meanings, that of 'opposition, dislike, antagonism towards something', or 'ability to avoid or prevent something'. In our case, it indicates the reference to the image of the one who takes the # selfie. The term 'anti-figurativeness' is therefore more suitable to signify the active process and consequential transformation of the #selfie in reference to its own image captured in the placing of a photographic device in front of oneself, as a trace, a signal, a footprint, a footprint that is essentially impersonal.

represented the most important development offered by the twentieth century's vanguards' research for innovation.

On the other hand, it is extremely important to avoid the risk of isolating the #selfie phenomenon and, therefore, its analysis, from the broader research area on contemporary self-portraits and new mediality, so as to (re)center the focal point of the discussion on all those contemporary phenomena which feed and develop *self*-expression and expression of *the self* through new media platforms. So, it is the case of positioning #selfies among other phenomena of a similar kind, such as choosing a profile picture in social networks, creating an avatar⁵, the so-called MySpace Angles⁶, photobombing⁷, Time-Lapse Self Portrait⁸. In fact, in all these cases, and many others, that are typical of contemporary culture connectivity (van Dijck, 2013), the person is brought to invest on content (verbal but also and mainly visual content) to represent herself/himself online, or to control and manage their personal reputation online, a process which also happens through the sharing of #selfies.⁹

The *liquidity* (Bauman, 2000) of our online or offline present time and reality, at different times during the day, is both the effect and the cause of individual and collective recognition, so that the nature of the meaning seems hidden. Today, in fact, an image (photographic or audiovisual) is accompanied by an overabundance of meanings overpowering the role of the sender and recipient, and even the message itself¹⁰. Everything is restructured, attached to the impersonal: it is no longer something but a trace, a legacy, the footprint of a passage and of an having ‘be(en) there’, of the process of being located and to be located, positioned and to be positioned, from which a sense of testament, the ‘I confess that I lived’ (in the words of Neruda, 1974), a sense of ‘being’ that exceeds the ‘I am’, springs out.

In the process of taking and publishing a #selfie, one’s self is restructured as a passage to the impersonal. In other words we see here a shift from the reflexive ‘I take a picture of myself’ to the impersonal ‘one takes a picture of oneself’. It goes as far as trespassing the aforementioned anti-figurativeness. Uploaded to one or more social networks, these self-

5 The avatar is an image chosen to represent users in virtual communities, gathering places, online discussions or online game.

6 MySpace Angles is the practice of photographing oneself at a particular angle for the sake of obscuring one's own facial flaws. (<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/myspace-angles>).

7 Photobombing means the act of introducing oneself within a photograph by ruining the result.

8 ‘A special kind of stylisation of the self on the web that is the temporal compression of an infinite series of self-portraits made daily during a regular period of life and compressed in a few minutes to produce a visual change and that we can find in the projects Jonathan Keller, Ahree Lee and Noah Kalina some of the leading exponents.’ (Villa , 2012)

9 As much as it is almost predictable, it is necessary to point out that this kind of self-representation of the subject is not a feature of web or online reality. Citing Goffman (1959), which explains how the interactions of the participants can be simultaneously actors and the public, that, for example, on Twitter can be both followers and followed.

10 Consider, for example, phenomena that are widespread over the web, such as video mashup, fanvideo, vidding, machinima, coputer-generated imagery, YouTube Poop and the Internet memes. In all of these cases, and in many others, photographic and audiovisual images are extrapolated, displaced and manipulated from an original text or context, and become available to take potentially countless new meanings and effects over the collective imagery. Since there is a wide scholarship on this subject, I shall only quote here the works by Jenkins, 2006, Lessig, 2008, Blackmore, 2000, Shifman, 2013.

portraying fragments destructure their figurative nature and become nothing more than footprints and legacies of a passage.

There is therefore a gap between the #selfie as a representation of the self, fully adhering to oneself's features or to oneself's mood, or all of it together, taken in a specific moment, and the #selfie as an image among others, shareable, downloadable, easy to manipulate¹¹: an image lost in the system, substantially distant from its reference, from its own caption and its own meaning, of which it is possible to carry anything but a distant recollection, a cherished nostalgia, less and less concrete as it runs through the degrees of separation. Tools such as *Chatroulette*, *Facefeed* or *Shots*, but also the ability to hide behind a nickname offered by *Instagram* and *Twitter*, all demonstrate the knowledge retained by the user to take a #selfie, share it in the network without linking it to a specific identity (as much as it is self-managed, online and offline), in order to re-launch it among others. The mechanism is similar to that of those websites and blogs in which one can share most intimate secrets. Alicia Guet-Brohan recalls that, for her research, she had publicly called for posts on Tumblr specifically creating #selfies accompanied by first name along with profession and city of residence. Many found it easy to publish #selfies but were not at ease with signing it with their names. Guet-Brohan then asked: 'En quoi une photo de soi serait-elle moins intime qu'un prénom ?' (2014, 29) My guess is that, more or less consciously, the user of a social network is perfectly aware that a photo of herself/himself published/shared is not intimate at all, and it is this awareness that encourages users to take #selfies and launch their faces onto the web.

Federica Villa has extensively explained that this unstable and precarious state of things in the relationship between people and mediated meanings sets in motion a constant struggle for self-defense:

Mediality develops antibodies to avoid forms of betrayal, estrangement and definitive break. [...] Mediality then becomes mode and attitude, habitus of cohabitation, mentality, experiential tension that holds together what is lived and media, by marking off escape routes from failure, fear and by developing comforting formulas defined not only by the important but simple being friendly (2013, 20).

People take #selfies in order not to surrender to contemporary mediality; to say 'Here I am! I am here too! I am part of it too!'¹²

11 About the 'manipulability' and 'commonality' of the images see an essay by José van Dijck (2008), written well before the explosion of the mass phenomenon of #selfie: 'Digital photography: communication, identity, memory'.

12 'Selfies, when they enter circulation, aren't a matter self-expression (as their defenders sometimes claim) but self-surrender.' (Horning 2014).

2. Examples and Case Studies¹³

Here I offer only a few examples and cases I find useful to show that the context in which #selfies are taken and the online and social environment in which they are shared are more important than the self-portrayed subjects themselves.

Fig. 1. One of the #selfies that are most commonly considered inappropriate are those taken at funerals (collected by *Tumblr*¹⁴) and, as it is well known, even some heads of state could not resist taking some.¹⁵

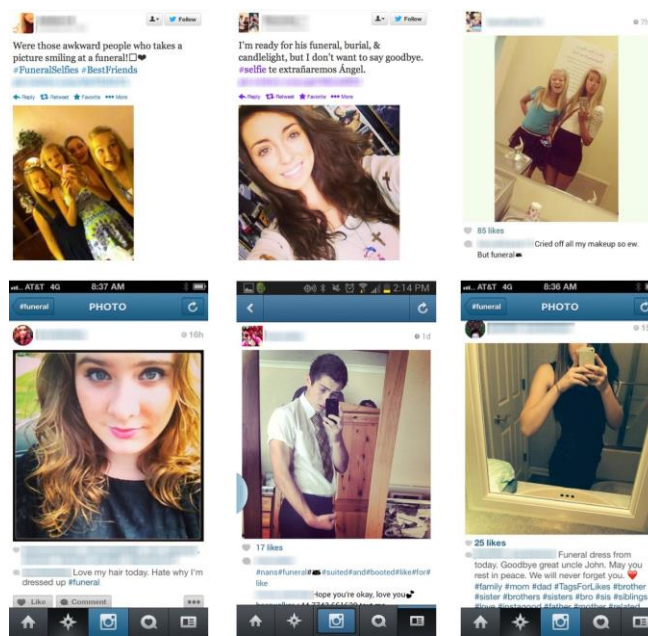


Figure 1

Figs. 2-3. Similarly, the #selfies at Auschwitz are generally considered inappropriate, and have often sparked anger and sharp reactions from all over the world (wide web).¹⁶

13 For a more exhaustive framework and for references on the examples that were mentioned earlier, see: Gunthert, 2015 and Senft, Baym (eds.), 2015.

14 <http://selfiesatfunerals.tumblr.com/>

15 See: Kate M. Miltner, Nancy K. Baym, "The Selfie of the Year of the Selfie: Reflections on a Media Scandal". In Senft, Baym (eds.), 2015

16 See: Ruth Margalit, "Should Auschwitz be a site for selfies?", *The New Yorker*, June 26, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/should-auschwitz-be-a-site-for-selfies>.



Figure 2



Figure 3

Fig. 4. Note also the “Ukraine selfies” of Russian soldier Alexander Sotkin on Instagram¹⁷ which made some people believe that the government of Putin had lied about the location of Russian troops¹⁸.

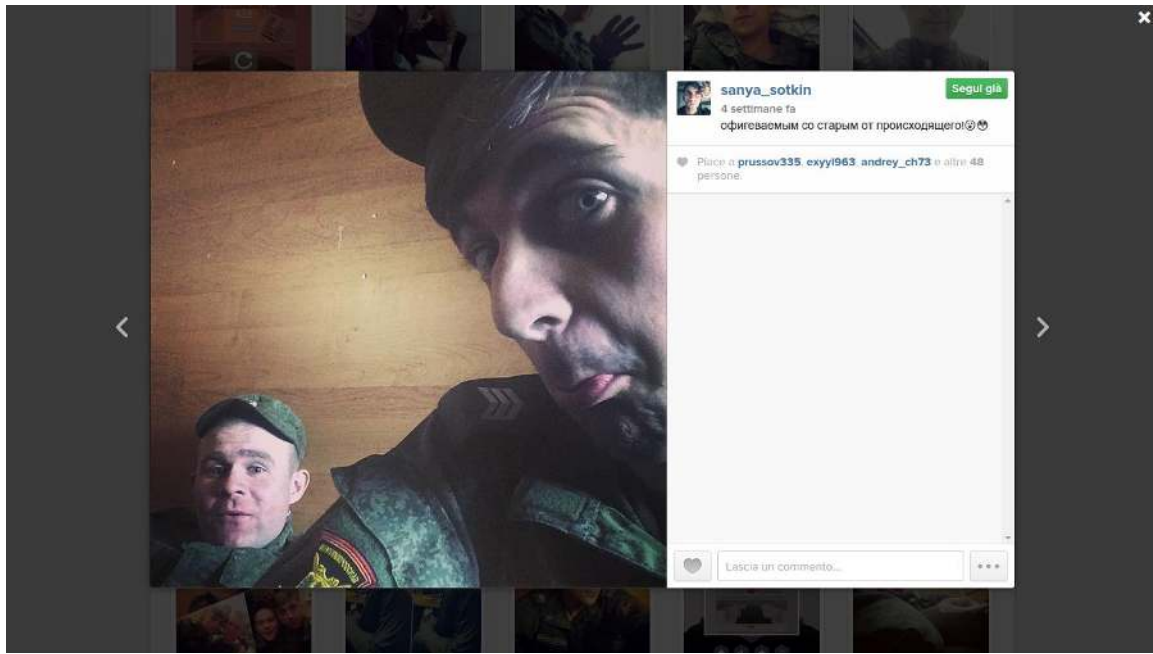


Figure 4

Figs. 5-6. Another case, an artistic one with completely different purposes, is the project #artselfie developed by New York collective *Dismagazine*. Dismagazine asked their audience to photograph themselves in front of a work of art and upload the #selfie on *Instagram* accompanied by hashtag #artselfie.

Figs. 7-8. The last example, among many other possible examples, is the photograph taken by Lucia Rossini and Barbara Montereale in one of Palazzo Grazioli's bathrooms. This picture allowed the public to have a glimpse of Silvio Berlusconi's evenings.

17 https://instagram.com/sanya_sotkin/

18 David K. Li, 'Soldier's selfies might prove Russia's direct role in Ukraine', *New York Post*, July 31, 2014, <http://nypost.com/2014/07/31/soldiers-selfies-might-prove-russias-role-in-ukraine/>

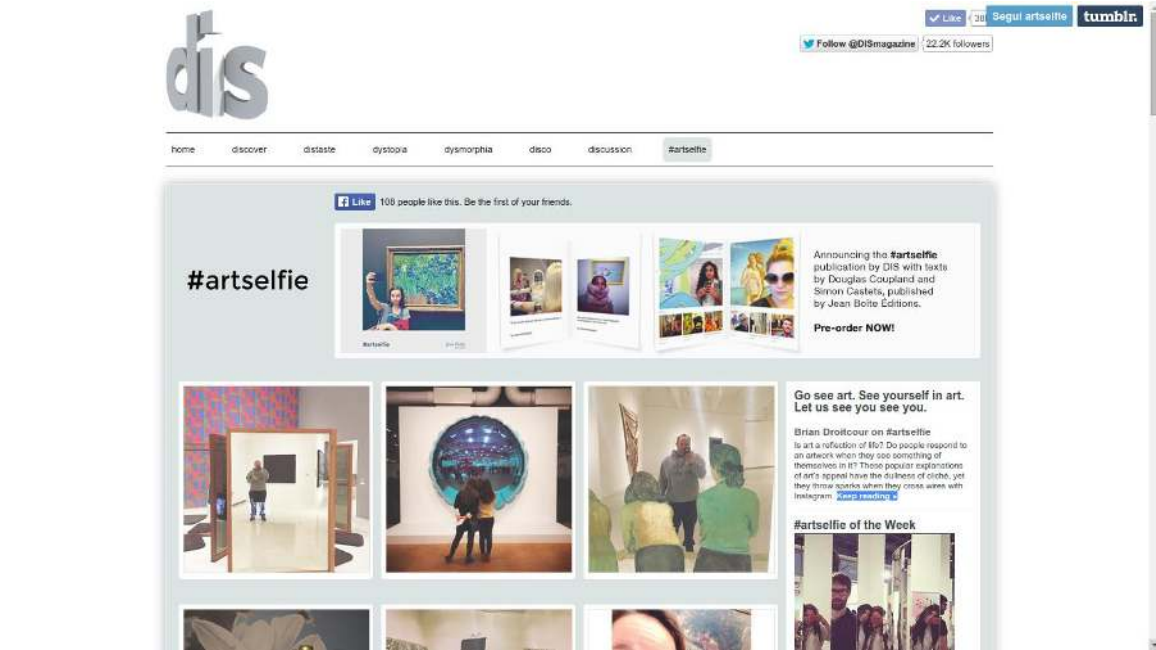


Figure 5

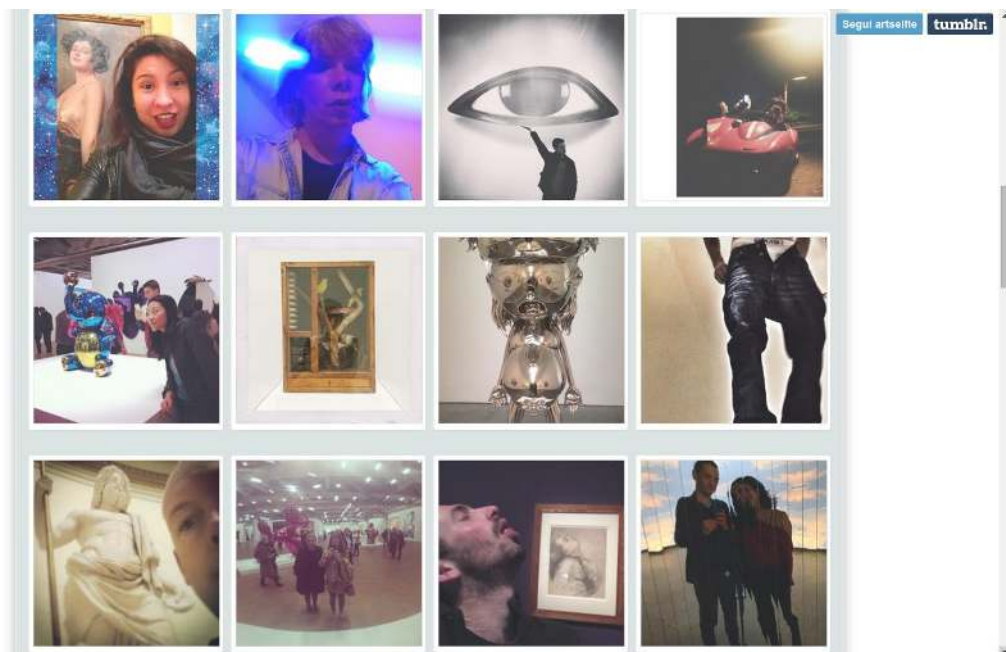


Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

These examples are enough to make me think that the place, in the sense of the context in which the pictures are taken, is much more significant than the self-portrayed subjects themselves. It occurs to me that the features of soldier Sotkin, of the students smiling at Auschwitz or those of Barbara Monreale do not matter much to anyone – including themselves as a figurative representation of the subjects portrayed.

Equally, it seems important to note that the tag going together with these images is, in fact, what guides them and carries them around the web, from one device to another. Moreover, the tag is inserted further to a (more or less) positive act, whilst the geotag that accompanies the image is inserted automatically by the GPS geolocation service. Taking a picture and publishing it as a #selfie, means then to flatten out our own participation and become part of the context. It means not to be individually and subjectively part of the context, but rather be part of it as just another figure – the one in the foreground – within an environment that will retain our image forever, anonymously and digitised, detectable only through algorithms and metadata. The effect of a #selfie is a kind of alienation to the two dimensions, a voluntary destruction of our own individuality and subjectivity, a self-transformation into objects always present, albeit dispersed, in the network. It is not a question of management of our own social capital, or rather to be recognised or appreciated by collecting likes, retweets or hearts. Instead of denying the passage of time, sharing a #selfie means 'existing' in the present time and in the place where the image was captured, foregoing therefore any interaction or dialectics with the co-sharers (or beholders) of the image.

3. The 'Impersonal'

Here I would like to pose one more time the question of the 'impersonal' in contemporary times as theorised by Roberto Esposito (2007). This concept was recognised by Federica Villa as the main cause of, as well as the theoretical background for and an ideal expression of contemporary self-portrait practices.

In 2006, *Time* magazine chose *You* as Person of the Year, thus celebrating the utopia of Web 2.0 as a space of participation and collective and global enrichment.¹⁹ What is left of this utopia a few years since then is just a distant echo. Taking a #selfie has come down to a question of objectification, of processing image physiognomy in a "thing" among others in the network. #Selfies are ways in which individuals objectify themselves and their selves; by putting ourselves in-picture, we mark our passage and – in so doing – we historicise ourselves in the archive of the infinite web. Going through the countless #selfie screens and pages on Google, Instagram, Tinder etc. one never meets fragments of autobiographies, personalities, contexts, in other words, real lives, but one meets instead objects and forms, downloadable files, manipulated and perpetually looking for new meanings, coming from others. Images not of people, but of dispersed particles, self-excluded from the original interaction and inevitably transformed into objects at the

19 'It's a story about community and collaboration [...] about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes' Lev Grossman, *Time* magazine, December 16, 2006.

mercy of everyone and anyone. It's not about representing ourselves then. #Selfie is a concrete example of what Benveniste, as quoted by Esposito, wrote. It shows and proves the process of the withdrawal of the individual from the comparison between “I” and “you”, between subject and non-subject, establishing instead herself/himself as non-person.

The non-person, writes Benveniste (1966), ‘since it does not imply anyone, can take any subject or none, and this subject, expressed or not, is never established as a person’ (in Esposito 2007, 130). Moreover, Esposito, reflecting on Simone Weil (1957), writes that

the impersonal is not simply the opposite of the person – his direct denial – but something that belongs to or exists within that person, which disrupts the immune mechanism inserting the ‘me’ into the circle of ‘us’. A point, or a layer, which prevents the natural passage from re-doubling – what we call self-awareness, self-assertion – to the collective doubling, to social recognition (2007, 125).

This seems to me to be the process that is taking shape in social networks and, more broadly, in new mediality: denying the fact that we are individual people, by denying our image, concealing its meaning, and resurrecting online as pure sign, track, shift, (de)historicising²⁰ ourselves, multiplying, liquefying ourselves among our followers.

This, I would say, is why the friends of Marcon were not interested in the results of his project, nor did they ask to get their family videos back.

4. Anti-Figurative Conceptual Art

The subtitle of my paper, *Location of selfie*, is adapted from the work of the artist Martin John Callanan entitled *Location of I*²¹. For about two years, from March 2007 to July 2009, Callanan published on the Internet his exact physical location by means of ‘locative devices’, ‘every minute of every day’. The series of locations is still available online based on day, month and year, and displayed on a map that gives account of all trips made by Callanan during the day, together with the correct time of the last transmission received on this date. Callanan represents himself disembodied and dehumanised, reduced to signal space and time, or rather, as ‘here and now’²². He does not share a personal experience, but he abstracts from his story in a particular place and moment as though he had no past or a future, nor was involved in a change of place: it is not about “going / staying”, or “being left / being” in one place or another, but it is rather about

20 ‘Even if it refers to another time or other space, the “I” always talk to the “you” in the present tense, it cannot escape from that contemporary time that defines his momentary condition of speaker. Speaking, declaring herself/himself as I, she/he literally “introduces herself/himself” - to herself/himself and another he is speaking to.’ (Esposito, 2007, 128).

21 Here: <http://greyisgood.eu/location/>

22 Giacomo Coggiola states that ‘Here and Now, turned into ordinate and abscissa, give the visitor in absence and abstraction what makes them expressible in Cartesian terms: delivered in the most complete and impersonal disembodiment, abstraction in addition to the deferral that follows the interruption of the series. The deposits of these signs of life, launched two years in “real time” and then interrupted, are not consulted today.’ (in Villa 2013, 190-191).

“being able to be localised” at a given time, on a two-dimensional map online, and leave there an indelible trace of himself.

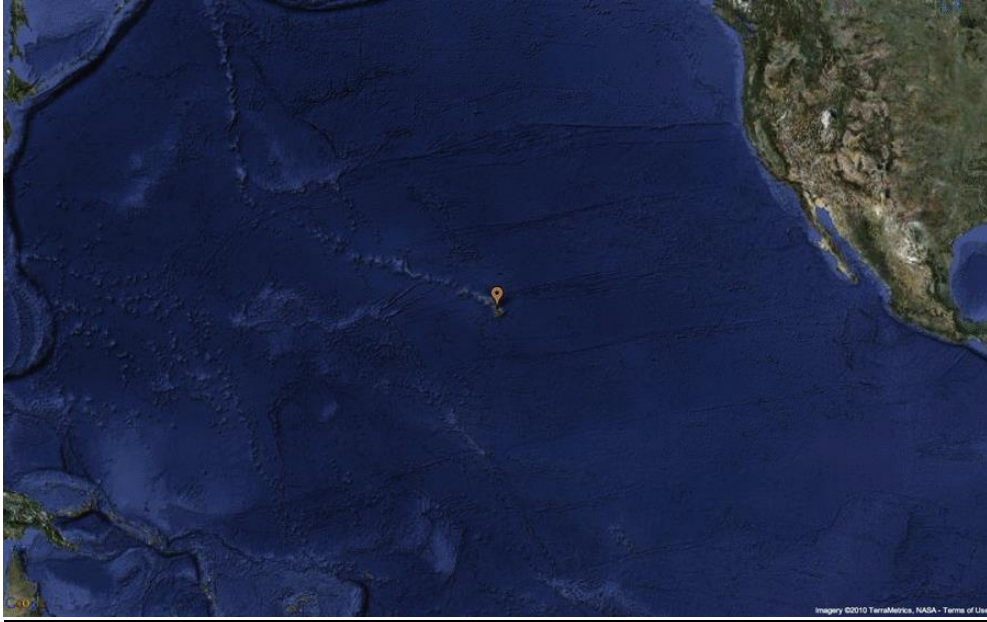


Figure 9

Martin John Callanan, ‘Location of I’. Commissioned by Riga Centre for New Media Culture RIXC, Latvia. Funded by the European Commission Culture 2000 Fund via At Home in Europe with support from ISIS, InterSpace, Bek, and Arts Council England. Additional support from SCEMFA.
(<http://greyisgood.eu/location/>)

It is a process conceptually similar to that enacted by Daniel Buren when fitting his stripes between buildings and cityscapes or rural environments²³. Buren marks his passage and marks the territory with a sign of his passing. Disembodiment happens here in terms that are much less impersonal, since Buren leaves a trace that can only refer directly to him and to his work, and so, even if it is clear here that Another “you” – whom Buren refers to – is called into question, the anti-figurative quality he dissolves himself into is the same.

23 French Minimalist Daniel Buren has been making art with stripes since the 1960s. Vertical stripes to be specific-3.4 inches wide and 3.4 inches apart, over and over. His stripes have temporarily transformed everywhere from the Art Institute of Chicago to the Picasso Museum, in Paris. They have permanently transformed a bridge in Bilbao and the Palais-Royal in Paris, democratizing a former symbol of the French aristocracy.



Figure 10

Daniel Buren, 'Costruire sulle vestigia: impermanenze Opere in situ. Intersezioni', 2012. Museo MARCA, Catanzaro, curated by Alberto Fiz.

The artist On Kawara, author of the famous *Date Paintings*²⁴, is similarly radical. See, for example, the series *Today* consisting entirely of the date, since January 4, 1966, on which the painting was executed in simple white lettering and then set against a solid background. Each *Date* is placed in a cardboard box custom-made for the painting, which is lined with a clipping from a local newspaper from the city in which the artist made the painting. The result is somehow a step behind the story itself. It routine is abstract but at the same time it materialises in the thickness of the paint and the sheets of newspaper that mark, with each date, a particular time and place, also emphasised by the different languages and writings.²⁵ Kawara materialises himself the very moment in which he dematerialises into dates: he stores moments and places and he objectifies them by objectivising himself. He makes an impersonal gesture by establishing himself as a non-person because, as its experience is related to a mere sign which is irreducible to communication, he interrupts the natural flow from self to social recognition (as also stated by Esposito, 2007, 125).

24 On Kawara's *Date Paintings* record nothing more than the date on which they were made. For each work in the series—Kawara produced nearly 3,000 of them over more than four decades—the artist observed a strict set of rules, inscribing the exact date he created the painting in white letters and numbers on a monochromatic ground. (<http://www.guggenheim.org/video/on-kawara-date-paintings>)

25 The date is always documented in the language and grammatical conventions of the country in which the painting is executed, i.e., '26. ÁG. 1995', from Reykjavik or '13 JUIN 2006' from Monte Carlo.



Figure 11
On Kawara, examples from ‘Today series’

One could quote other examples (e.g. *16 dicembre 2040–11 luglio 2023*²⁶ by Alighiero Boetti, the stripping of autobiography through signs and mathematical calculations by Hanne Darboven²⁷, Mail art examples etc.) but perhaps the ones I quoted are enough to signify the similarity entertained by the phenomenon #selfie with practices of anti-figurative conceptual art rather than with the idea of (self)representation through self-portraits.

When uploaded to one or more social networks, #selfies eliminate their figurative nature and become footsteps and legacies of a passage. The context becomes the one they have been taken in and the social environment in which they are shared becomes more important than the (self-)depicted subject.

Conceptual art is the practice that testifies to the expression and the sign witnesses an idea occurred through expression, in other words, a practice. What remains of a conceptual work is nothing else than the trace of what happened, of an experience that “was”, and that trace is able to take on new and multiple senses and meanings (trivially: for example, strips of Buren in a place become objects of urban furniture or become part of a landscape and an environment, coming to coincide with many possible views). Similarly, the #selfie is emancipated from the subject which snapped it and shared it online, it extracts itself from the communicative intention that had produced it in the first place and relates itself to the issues and concepts of impersonal, third person, non-person that “can take any subject or none”²⁸, disembodiment, abstraction, self-concealment in pure sign, trace, passing. In the form of a #selfie, the non-person excludes herself/himself from the dialogue, navigating among everyone and no one. She/he “can take any subject

26 Alighiero Boetti, *December 16, 2040–July 11, 2023*, 1971. Embroidery on fabric. Private collection, Houston.

27 For example: Hanne Darboven, *Quartett >88<*, 1990. Artists book, page: 9 x 6 3/8" (22.8 x 16.2 cm). Publisher: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne. Edition: 1,000. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York.

28 Benveniste, 1966 (in Esposito 2007, 130)

or none”. A trace that will remain, at least for a certain time, detectable by a search engine.

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