

# CURATING SELFS. DISPLAYED RELATIONS AFTER AUTHENTICITY

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When I pose for a selfie, I act like Kim Kardashian West. Only why does this sound like a provocative claim? I expose myself by choosing to stick to a certain visual vocabulary embedded in a set of popular poses, faces and codes that always relate my own performance to the leading social-media influencers; to the imagery that circulates online. However, I don't want to be seen as Kim Kardashian West – not only because this wouldn't fit into my followers' matrix of what deserves to accumulate symbolic capital by views, likes, comments and shares, but because her persona seems to fail the idea of what should be represented while I inhabit my profiles on various social media accounts: my – online created and authenticated – self.

To speak about authenticity when just this authentic self is shown through filters, systematized with hashtags and evaluated by likes, seems to be a nostalgic, even naive presumption. Authenticity, a culturally constructed concept in itself, means to prove undisputed origin. Paradoxically, it thus leads to an idea of auratic, singular authorship that demonstrates its uniqueness by being performed – and acknowledged by an audience. Especially in online networks, this externalized process of self assurance became a crucial guarantor for 'true' interactions, proving to chat with a human being instead of a bot or fake identity that tries to steal one's money, love or faith. Against the backdrop of scamming and manipulation, authenticity became a precious good even though it works as its own cliché. My authentic self is a staged selection of profile features, and this staged quality creates the effect of authenticity. Within online media and platforms, the model of the display enacts just this effect. It constitutes – so the argument – identity in the moment of a shared scene, which proves authenticity by being seen and acknowledged as a visual order; in short: The display acts itself.

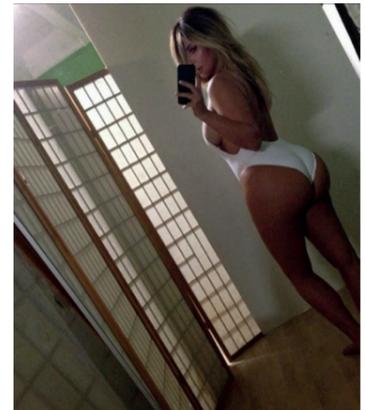
To post a selfie that is perceived as authentic therefore means to gather views that eventually create value through their context and circulation. The aura of uniqueness evolves into an – unique – arrangement of online display. "In place of aura, there is buzz" (Joselit 2013: 16), US art historian David Joselit claims, situating images within digital networks and their inherent ability to be everywhere at the same time. To visually enact a self here means to create surplus value by display – and, as a consequence, by strategies of curation? In fact, to curate means to arrange a set of connections: of objects and activities likewise. Curating includes and excludes people, discourses and accordingly constitutes, legitimizes and disavows identities by strategies of selection and presentation. Even though the meaning of curating is historically and socially interlinked to both the idea of the individual artist and the author curator, it is just this sense of the authentic, unique individual that is contingent on a society among which it can unfold – and be displayed. To display an authentic self in this sense would mean to demonstrate affiliation. Among digital cultures, the tension between society and the individual became more simplified: To show authenticity means to be unique, but sympathetic and never strange (a touch of weirdness might help to appear more unique though). Online display thus reflects on an idea of selfhood that became problematic; it must be arranged, shown and mediated and eventually reduces to a gesture. As an analogy to digital displays, exhibition displays go through a "crisis of representation" (Sternfeld 2017: 176). According to art scholar and curator Nora Sternfeld the seemingly objective White Cube leads into a bourgeois, western, national and patriarchal idea of representation: It constitutes identity by pointing to an exposed 'other'. A self on display thus would be an obsolete hypothesis, referring predominantly to distinction and othering – a self simply cannot represent itself anymore.

At stake here is the strategy of curating as a potential means for an intersectional idea of identity that does not fall into the trap of (self-) representation. Even if my selfies cannot be confused with those by Kim Kardashian West, they follow the same concept of authenticating authorship by variations of a mutually shared visual vocabulary among a self-centered networked public. Referring to the model of the display, a self is embedded in a seemingly neutral hegemonic power structure. However, besides strategies of selection and presentation, it is the invisible relations and conditions of production that enact the display. They can be

seen as performative site where identity is constituted by ephemeral, fluid acts of selfhood instead of a represented self. Extending on Judith Butler's fundamental idea of performativity (Butler 1988), identity here is displayed by repeating the idea of an authentic self through various image-acts of online performance. To understand these performative acts as essential proves of self-identity hides the social categories and hierarchies they imply – just as the (Western) concept of the White Cube disavows anything but the fiction of a free-floating aura of the exhibit. However, it is exactly this concept of performativity that bears the potential to go beyond essentialist claims and labels and take an intersectional perspective that articulates aspects of gender, race, class and ethnicity. Coming back to Kim Kardashian West, I could do what many other users already did: mimic her infamous swimsuit selfie. The picture would clearly refer to her persona, pointing out the invisible role model. It would resemble her image. Nevertheless, it would point out all differences as deviant, but visible intersections to the given persona: another skin color, gender, body, age or social status. This could lead into a broader sense of disorder that understands identity more as a collaborative process of referring, relating and mimicking. In this context, philosopher and sociologist Oliver Marchart considers the function of exhibitions as positioning. To curate an exhibition would mean to organise a specific public under the hegemonic gaze. This gaze can be undermined by the creation of relations that are, within the hegemonic discourse, considered to be impossible (Marchart 2007). Following his argument, the creation of relations and constellations beyond the visible display enacts what eventually produces meaning – and the idea of a self that is rather based on relations than on identities. It must therefore be the always-ephemeral process of relating that could change the viewers' expectations. Understood as on-going performance of mimicry, posing for a selfie – resembling Kim Kardashian West or not – could support this performative understanding of self-display. However, it is not the act of curating that causes this process, but the curatorial. As a "constellation, which is process-oriented, relational, multivocal, performative and self-reflecting" (von Bismarck 2011: 183), and a "multiplicity of relations" (Lind 2010: 63), it leads to an intersectional, fluid understanding of self display; and can, finally, refrain from the idea to represent an authentic self.



Mercedes Javid, Recreation of Kim Kardashian West's swimsuit selfie (2015). Photo: Mercedes Javid. If despite intensive research rights of copyright holders have not been taken into account, please inform the author.



Kim Kardashian West, swimsuit selfie (2015). Photo: Kim Kardashian West, Image courtesy of Rizzoli (Kardashian West, Kim (2015), Selfish), New York.

Agnieszka Roguski is a freelance writer and curator based in Berlin. She uses different practices to approach the exhibition as medium. Her work is articulated in different formats and encompasses both the art – and academic – world, particularly dealing with strategies of representation and staging among shifting technologies. She is writing her PhD thesis *The Self on Display – visual performances in the digital society* at Freie Universität Berlin about the re-/presentation of the creative subject. Mediating her research, she gave lectures and workshops at Frankfurter Kunstverein, Martin Gropius Bau Berlin, Louisiana Museum Copenhagen, and Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe. Her works were recently shown at KV – Kunstverein Leipzig, HKW Berlin, Torrance Shipman Gallery New York; and published by Tectum, Kerber, Peter Lang, Broken Dimanche, Revolver, Spike Art Magazine, Camera Austria, vonhundert, KubaParis and Springerin. Most recently, she reviewed "Left Performance Histories" at ngbk Berlin for Texte zur Kunst.

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