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Facing the World

THE GLOBAL LANGUAGE OF SELFIES

Wolfgang Ullrich

Teenager in Saudi Arabia in trouble with the law for posting a selfie with his tongue stuck out right by his dead grandfather. Critics dub the selfie stick an 'erection aid for narcissists'. Couples are not advised to take selfies of themselves on their first date. A woman reports taking a selfie in the toilet at a police station. Brewery giving away vouchers for selfies of people with their favourite beer. Selfies will be permitted in future during guided tours of the White House, but selfie sticks will not be allowed. German woman daubed in ketchup faking a brutal attack takes selfie, but when she sends it to her ex-lover as a trick he involves the police. Selfie sticks are prohibited at Disney World. 'A selfie a day keeps the bad mood away'. Does taking selfies turn people into their own stalkers? Woman manages to take a selfie with the photographer Annie Leibovitz. Fathers in India are encouraged to take selfies with their daughters, so that they'll learn to value their sons and daughters equally. There's someone collecting selfies that have been digitally edited in the least professional way. A woman dreams of a selfie with a giraffe.

These are just some of the tweets at #selfie that were posted on Twitter in a matter of minutes. The tweets flood in, just seconds apart, with selfies and telling funny stories, displaying odd attitudes and maybe teaching us something about social norms today.

In 2012, when selfies were suddenly all the rage, it might have seemed that they were just a fad, but today no-one could be in any doubt that the pictures people take of themselves have become a favourite genre. Although there are still people predicting the rapid demise of the selfie, the flood of selfies in social media continues

to grow, by several million a day. New variants on selfies are constantly emerging: belfies (pictures of buttocks), cellfies (taken by prisoners on banned mobile phones), gelfies (taken in gyms), helfies (hairdos), lelfies (legs), nelfies (nude pictures), relfies (people with their partners), velfies (video selfies) and suglies (selfies with deliberately ugly expressions), to name but a few.

Cultural pessimists view these many variants of selfies as worrying evidence of unchecked 'hyperindividualism'.¹ Their fear is that most people today are only interested in themselves and are succumbing to egomania. There has even been a study showing that 'people who frequently post staged self-portraits on social media are more likely to be narcissists than those who show greater restraint'.²

Other theorists prefer to classify the selfie as part of the tradition of pop culture or even to ennoble it as an art form in keeping with our own time. In spring 2015 the influential American art critic Jerry Saltz suggested that Kim Kardashian's book *Selfish* – a collection of selfies from the last decade – casts the reality-TV star as the successor to Andy Warhol, because of the way she and Kanye West were creating a 'new essence' and were doing this with 'grandiosity, sincerity, kitsch, irony, theater, and ideas of spectacle, privacy, fact, and fiction', that provoked scathing criticism but that also made people sit up and take notice.³

While the selfie – be it 'decadent' or 'cool' – has rapidly found itself caught between the usual battle lines of cultural criticism, one aspect of this phenomenon has been strangely neglected. No-one seems to be asking why selfies became so popular just a few years ago, given that the means to produce pictures of oneself have been

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1 Loopydave, *Rembrandt Selfie 3192*, 2014.

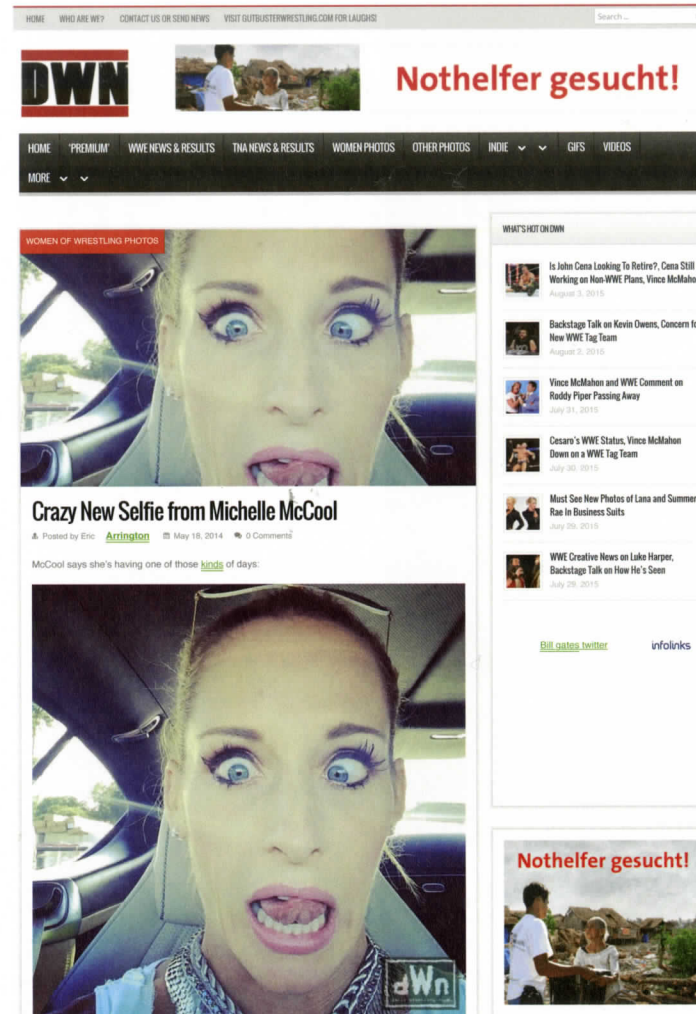
available throughout the entire history of photography. Of course some have presented photographic self-portraits as the forerunners of selfies and many have described famous self-portraits from the past as the precursors of selfies – some have even reworked early paintings (fig.1) – but that only obscures the striking fact that taking selfies has become a mass phenomenon. It is no longer only artists and those with aesthetic ambitions who create pictures of themselves. The speed with which this has come about casts doubt on all the claims that this is a sign of social change and a different mentality. Unless a true catastrophe of some kind occurs, changes of that sort only ever evolve much more slowly, from one generation to the next.

At the same time it is not hard to explain why the selfie boom did not even emerge in the twentieth century, for instance after the introduction of roll-film cameras or during the heyday of Polaroid, and came about only with the arrival of the smartphone. The decisive difference between smartphone photography and earlier technologies is that it is now possible not only to take a picture in no time at all but also to send it just as quickly, either to one person or to a whole community on the web. These images have thus also become a means of communication. They are used by people to tell others where they are at any given moment, how they are and what they are doing. More than that, a picture message can often be faster and wittier, subtler and more dramatic than a verbal message.

In other words, the selfie boom is closely connected with a particular function of images that has only come into being with the smartphone. In the past, images could never have been used in the

same way as words: as a medium for instantly exchanging news and views, opinions and emotions. Although there were pictures in the past that were intended as signals or messages, to convey a mood or to depict something in a heightened form, these certainly could not be used for live communications. The production process was far too time-consuming and, even more importantly, there was no way of instantly sending them to other people. Consequently, people mainly used pictures as permanent records of various kinds. Depending on the genre, the image could serve as a document, a souvenir, or as a focus for reflection. All of that is still possible, but the crucial new task of smartphone images is to convey their messages the moment they are sent.

This also explains the nature of selfies and very much sets them apart from other images that have to fulfil traditional functions. It has frequently been said, usually disapprovingly, that individuals taking selfies tend to distort their facial expressions: grimacing or mimicking exaltation (fig.2). People taking and posting these images are often accused of superficiality, stupidity or of a lack of social skills.⁴ But criticisms of that kind completely fail to take into account the fact that selfies are almost always intended as a means of communication in a particular situation. In that situation the selfie has to be as easy to understand as possible; it should be pithy and has to have an immediate impact that may in turn prompt an instant reaction from the recipient. In that respect they are like other types of images used in social media, most notably emoji (fig.3). These codify not only diverse emotions and feelings but also standard situations in normal communications, making it possible to convey



2 Screenshot from the site <http://dailywrestlingnews.com>.

information much faster than with words. In the same way, dramatic selfie poses can be shorthand for certain feelings, almost as concise as a pictogram. The recipients of selfies instantly understand the wide-open eyes, a tongue stuck out at the camera or a broadly grinning mouth. This expressive exaggeration is often (intended to be) infectious, putting others in the same mood as the person who sent the selfie.

In 2014 the fact that emoticons and emoji fulfil a similar function to selfies led to the development of imojiapp, which allows people to turn selfies into personalised stickers. A set of graphic tools allows users to remove distracting backgrounds and details or to select particular facial features (fig.4). There are now also extremely revealing selfie tableaux on Instagram, where users are seen in sets of four, six, or nine different poses, to which they might add a suitable emoji (fig.5). Emoticons (already becoming somewhat dated) evidently serve as the point of reference here. People try to fit in with the emoji and in effect compete to come up with the most strikingly expressive, most outrageously exaggerated poses.

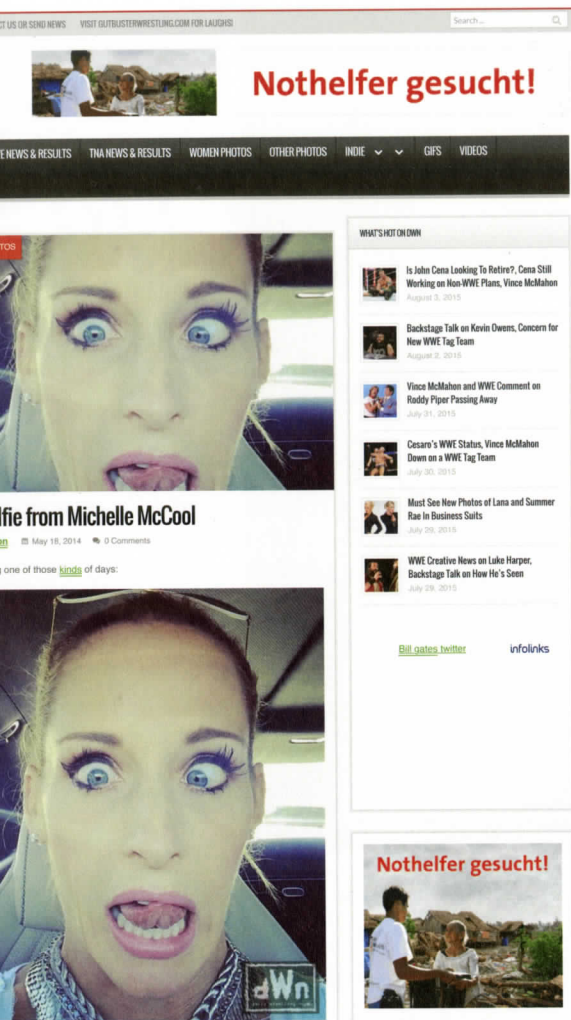
The similar functions of selfies and emoticons highlight the vast distance between selfies and self-portraits by artists past and present. Originally the aim of artists was to inform posterity of their appearance, their social status or their self-image, perhaps even to



3 Screenshot of emoji.

document the development of their psyche, to record a process of growing self-awareness or to picture themselves in a significant situation in order to increase their own mystique and renown. Whatever the aims of the self-portrait, the artist was always consciously motivated by the fact that the finished work would have a certain endurance and would still stand as a record long after the time when it was made. It would have made no sense to make an effort with the form or contents of the work, to have spent days or even weeks working on a self-portrait if the only aim had been to convey some item of information in a short, one-off act of communication. In contrast, no-one taking a selfie today has posterity in mind or thinks of defying the transience of life; their only aim is to appear spontaneous, witty or popular. The idea is to surprise and to entertain others as well as to heighten the intensity of what is already in some way a memorable or emotional moment.

The extent to which images in social media are intended only for the present moment is seen not least in the success of apps such as Snapchat, Periscope and other instant messaging services where the default is not to store sent messages. Like a spoken sentence that immediately disappears and at best only lives on in the memories of those involved in the conversation, many of the images vanish as soon as they have been posted. In the same way, a large proportion



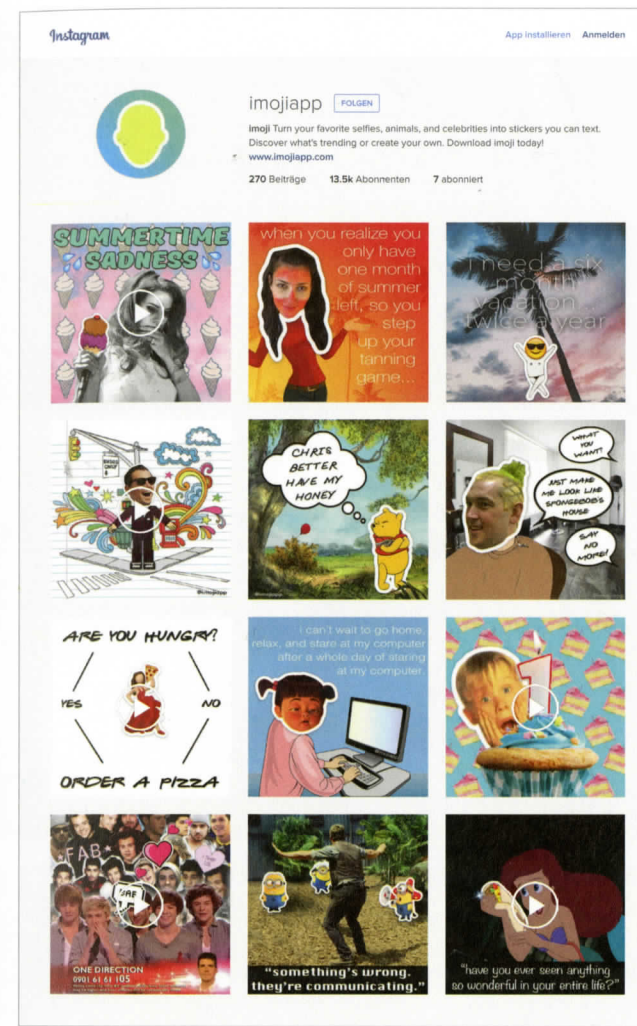
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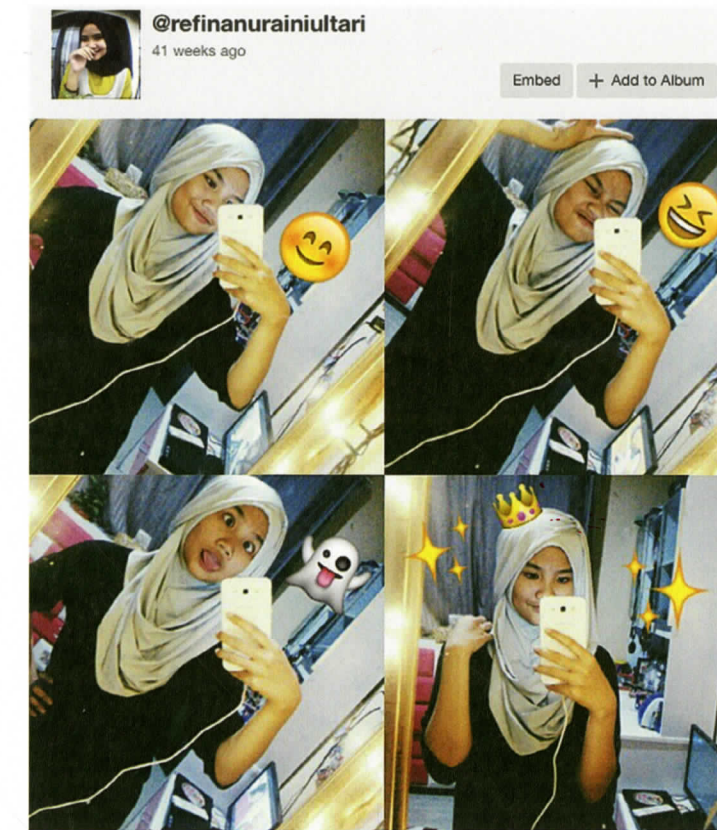
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4 Screenshot of imojiapp's Instagram account.

of what is on social media platforms such as Facebook and Tumblr remains visible but is never looked at again as it gets lost in the depth of pages with infinite-scroll functions. A selfie taken on the spur of the moment very quickly means as little to the subject or the recipient as an old shopping list or an answerphone message once it has been played back. It is only in exceptional cases that a selfie is deemed to be a valuable document and only an artist or a cultural historian would come up with the idea of deliberately assembling collections of old images for some higher purpose. Nevertheless, for those who actively or passively engage with selfies, they are far from inconsequential. On the contrary it is now clear that, with their functional affinity and debt to emoticons, selfies are changing some people's body language and facial expressions. The more individuals use selfies to tell others what they are doing and the more they view the selfies of friends and strangers, the more pronounced certain gestures, angles of the head and grimaces become in their own poses. As highly mimetic creatures with constantly active mirror neurons, human beings copy the strongest, most evocative modes of expression they see in others. Surely nothing today is more significantly modifying and codifying facial expressions and gestures than selfies, because people in selfie-mode are more focused and concentrated on how they are expressing



5 Screenshot of refinanurainiultari's Instagram account.

themselves than in almost any other circumstances. Consequently, people in all sorts of situations can be seen adopting poses that they have practised and perfected in selfies. This is perfectly exemplified in the promotional video *Things Everybody Does But Doesn't Talk About* released by President Barack Obama in February 2015 (fig.6). It shows the President, supposedly thinking he is unobserved, not only preparing for a speech in front of a mirror but also fooling around and pulling faces. Again and again Obama mimics expressions that are typically seen in selfies and that are also clearly modelled on emoticons. He looks into the mirror and re-creates the standard 'face with stuck-out tongue and winking eye'. He even picks up a selfie stick and starts taking selfies. But it makes no difference whether he is shown taking selfies or in the (supposed) moment of privacy: the striking expressions and gestures used in selfies – and emoticons – have infected his entire body language. In 2014 the American artist Jenna E. Garrett (one of those who is interested in studying and working with the ever-growing fund of images on social media) started to collect some of the gestures and facial expressions that are particularly popular in selfies and can now be seen as widely understood communication codes (fig.7).⁵ These include familiar gestures, such as the victory sign, as



6 Screenshot of the video, *Things Everybody Does But Doesn't Talk About*, 2015.

well as others that were not known before selfie-ism, such as a particular pout with wide-open eyes staring straight at the recipient or someone else off-camera. The fact that poses of this kind have become the norm within just a few years attests to the influence of selfies.

This influence is all the more powerful since selfies are a global phenomenon. A trend that emerges in one country or cultural group can almost instantaneously affect behaviours in other parts of the world. Like emoticons, selfies are rapidly becoming a global language that can communicate moods and situations to anyone anywhere. Cultural differences regarding the meaning of certain gestures or facial expressions cease to be an obstacle and for the first time, after many fruitless attempts, it seems that a universally accepted form of communication has come into being.⁶ However rudimentary it may be at the moment – limited to a single set of

emotions – little by little it could perhaps become the basis for more complex forms of transcultural understanding.

While selfies reawaken old utopian ideals of unlimited, cross-border communication, they are also leading to normed facial expressions and gestures. Above all they deploy extreme poses, which in effect stake out the range of potential emotional states, in fact defining them from their margins, where there is the least ambiguity. If one were to continue Garrett's work and to systematically catalogue all the facial expressions ever seen in selfies, the result – again like emoticons – would be a kind of alphabet. By definition the alphabet would consist of the modifications that can be made by different parts of the face – lips, chin, eyes, eyebrows – and that can be variously combined. In one situation there is a wide-open mouth and tightly shut eyes; in another the same mouth could be combined with staring, open eyes or a frowning forehead.





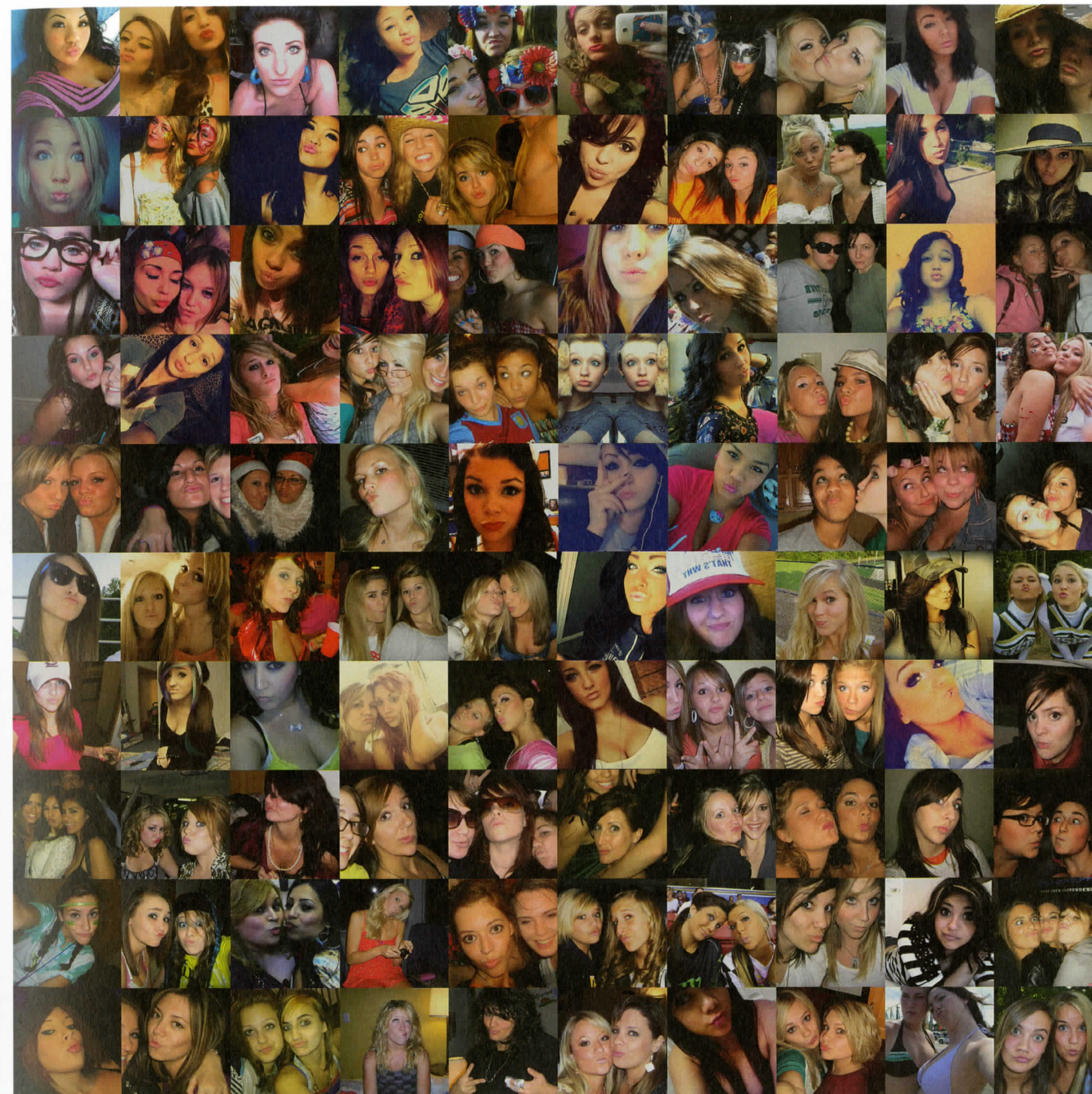
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7 Screenshot of *The Public Profile of an American Girl* by Jenna E. Garrett.



8 Franz Xaver Messerschmidt,
A Know-it-all Quibbling Quipster
(*Character Head no.3*), 1770–83,
plaster cast (twentieth century),
Belvedere, Vienna.

9 (right) Extract from:
Matthias Rudolf Toma, *Messerschmidt's*
Character Heads, 1839, lithograph on
paper, Austrian National Library, Vienna.

As such, selfies could be seen as a – highly successful – variant on the character heads by Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, which were misunderstood and wholly unsuccessful in their day (figs 8 and 9). Starting in 1770 Messerschmidt produced around fifty sculptures based on his own physiognomy, in which he set out to investigate the range of expressions a face can adopt, some of which were more like exaggerated caricatures. In any comparison of selfies and Messerschmidt's images of his heads – with stuck-out tongues, pursed lips, wide-open eyes or wrinkled foreheads – there is an immediately obvious affinity (fig.10). Although Messerschmidt devised combinations for which there are (as yet) no (established) equivalents in selfies, the latter have achieved what would once have seemed outlandish and unlikely: these extreme facial expressions have become a means of global communication.

Anyone who regards selfies as no more than the excesses of unrestrained individual behaviours and who sees them as isolated phenomena (like Messerschmidt's heads in their time), has simply failed to recognise their role in present and no doubt future communications between human beings. These dialogues will increasingly be conducted through the medium of images; soon these will comprise more moving images than static pictures. The images in question often take on the character of signs, with the subject

depicted in the selfie also taking on an emblematic quality. It is thus entirely possible that one day selfies may come to be appreciated as an early form of communication through which human beings were able to give semantic meaning to their faces and bodies.

A girl in Romania dies trying to take the ultimate selfie when her selfie stick touches a live high-voltage wire. Fashion designer Marc Jacobs posts a nude selfie on Instagram by mistake. A woman believes she can see a ghost in the background of a selfie. Internet users share maps showing sites where selfie sticks are banned. 'Forgive my selfie'. A woman says she is glad that when she was a child she didn't have to worry about how many likes she got for her selfies. A man dares his friends to take selfies in the Louvre. A woman reportedly tries to take a selfie with a cigarette in one hand and holding a baby with the other hand. Selfie sticks have been banned in Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare's birthplace. Sony has applied for a patent for software that can read emotions in selfies. A woman is fired for taking a selfie at work. A man in Kuwait is suspected of being a terrorist because of a selfie. Someone wants to know how many people you can have in a selfie. A twenty-one-year-old girl in Moscow taking a selfie on a bridge has fallen off and been killed.



8 Franz Xaver Messerschmidt,
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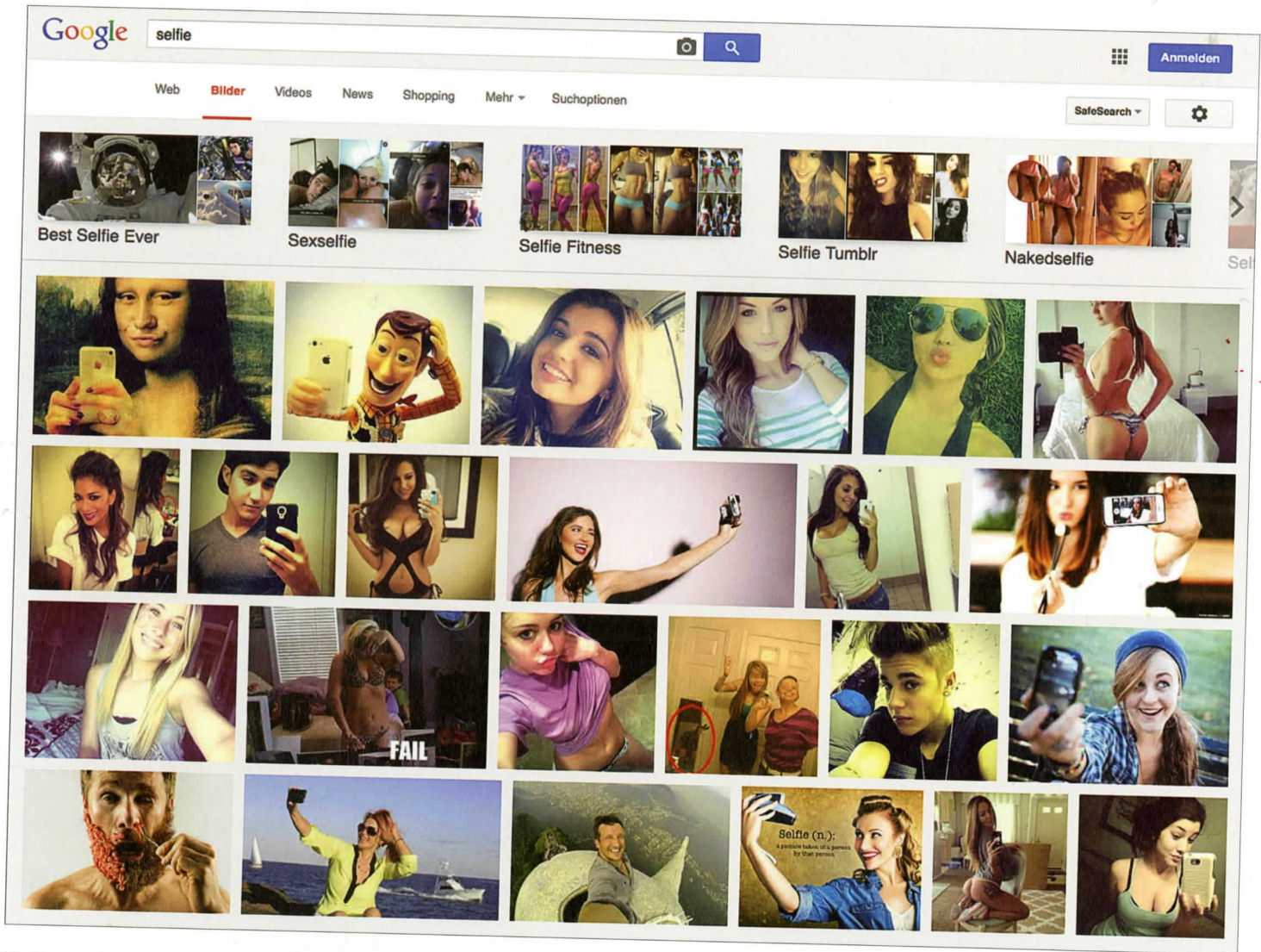


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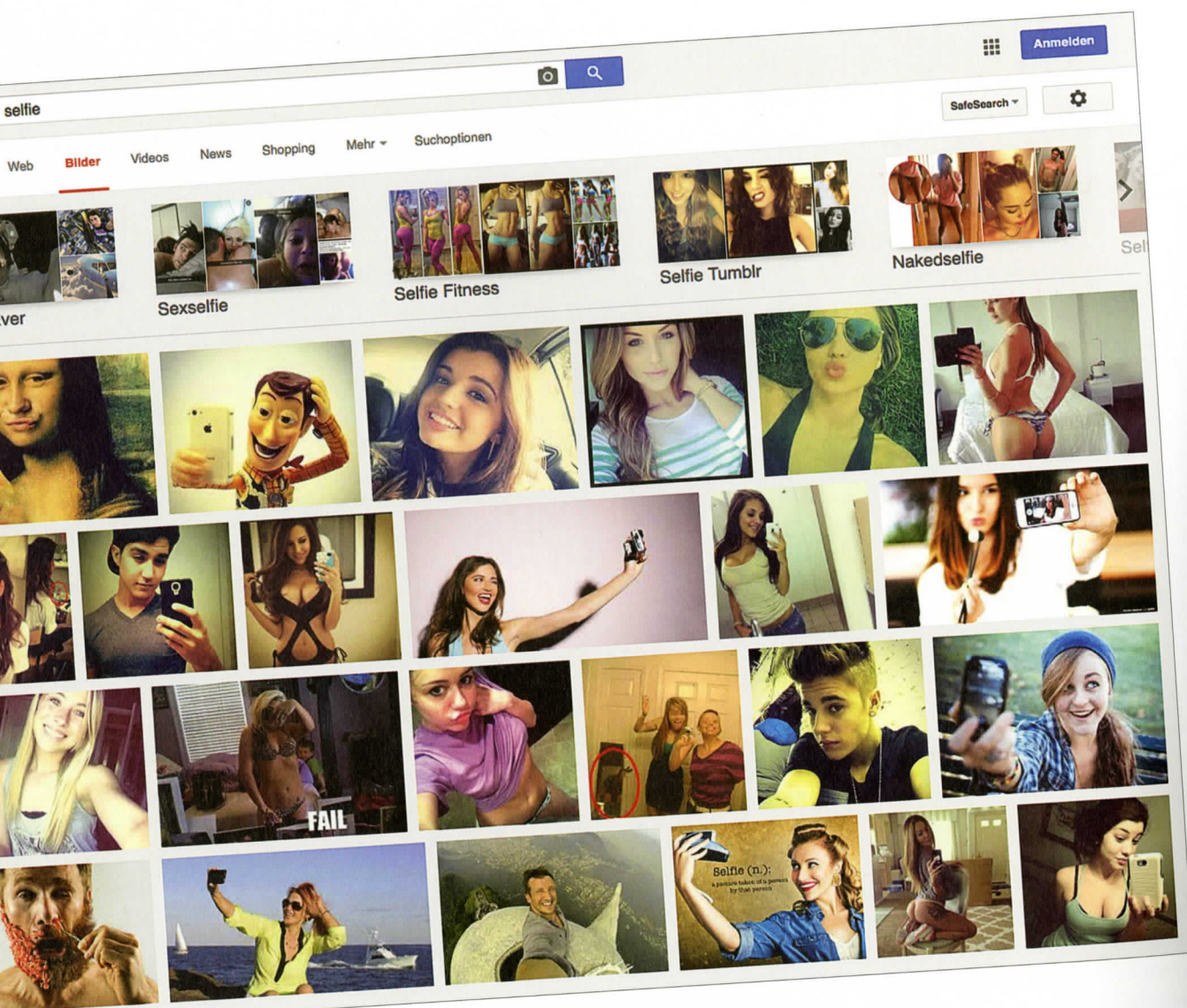
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10 Screenshot of the Google image search for 'selfie'.



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- 1 Joël Luc Cachelin, 'Das Smartphone ermöglicht den Hyperindividualismus', Schattenzeitalter, <http://schattenzeitalter.ch/1-5-2>, accessed 6 July 2015.
- 2 Translated from Frankfurter Allgemeine, 'Selfie-Sucht entlarvt Narzissten' (9 January 2015), <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/gesellschaft/menschen/studie-selfie-sucht-entlarvt-narzisst-13360922.html>, accessed 6 July 2015.
- 3 J. Saltz & D. Wallace-Wells, 'Jerry Saltz: how and why we started taking Kim Kardashian seriously (and what she teaches us about the state of criticism)', *Vulture* (20 May 2015), http://www.vulture.com/2015/05/saltz-how-kim-kardashian-became-important.html?mid=twitter_vulture, accessed 6 July 2015.
- 4 See, for instance, Philipp Tingler in conversation with Thomas Macho, in 'Ich inszeniere mich, also bin ich' [video], SRF, Sternstunde Philosophie (19 October 2014), now at <http://www.srf.ch/sendungen/sternstunde-philosophie/ich-inszeniere-mich-also-bin-ich>, accessed 6 July 2015.
- 5 See *The Public Profile Project*, <http://www.publicprofileproject.com>, accessed 6 July 2015.
- 6 See W. Ullrich, *Bilder auf Weltreise: Eine Globalisierungskritik*, Berlin 2006.