



I ♥ My Selfie

Essay by Ilan Stavans / Autoportraits by ADÁL

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I  My Selfie



I



My Selfie

Essay by Ilan Stavans / Auto-Portraits by ADÁL

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Penetration of an Object from a Closed
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To **John Berger**,
for teaching me the difference
between
looking and seeing . . .

And to **Miriam Sokoloff**.

—I. S.

This above all: to thine own self be true,
and it must follow, as the night the day,
thou canst not then be false to any man.

—*Hamlet*, Act I, Scene 3

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CHILLIN'

Of the hundreds—nah, thousands!—of *cellfies* I usually store in my smartphone, including pictures of family and friends, as well as consequential places and occasions, a generous percentage is what I call “false starts.” In these the relation between cause and effect is inverted. Rather than my taking a spontaneous picture of a natural moment, I manipulate nature to fit it into a picture. For instance, I have an image of a tombstone in a Jewish cemetery near Havana. There is an uneven pile of pebbles on top of it. When visiting a grave, it is a Jewish custom to leave a stone, not flowers, on it as a memento. The reasons, I believe, are manifold. Flowers perish and stones last, symbolizing the permanence of memory; according to the Talmud, a person’s soul lingers on earth for a while after death, and placing a stone is a way to prolong that stay and even to encourage the soul to return; and then there is a semantic explanation: the Hebrew word for “pebble” is *tz’ror*, which also means “bond.” This verbal link turns the stone placed on the tombstone into a bridge between this world and the next.

During my visit to Havana, the grave I was compelled to photograph—its structure destroyed by vandals—had beer bottles and other garbage piled up on top. I opted to clean it up and even felt righteous about it. In doing so, I added, for aesthetic purposes, several extra pebbles forming an irregular structure. Thus, I doctored

nature to my own needs. Of course, there is nothing either new or special about this. In fact, the strategy is as old as photography itself: we don't use the camera to capture what we see; we invent what we see in order to take a picture. Except that the smartphone camera is, supposedly, a lens through which we capture life as is, unadulterated, in the spur of the moment—life uncontrolled by the eye.

In and of itself, maybe this anecdote is a false start—mind you, I got rid of several others—to a disquisition like this one on the profound role *selfies* play in Western civilization in general (whatever that means!) and in American culture in particular (again, if such a thing exists!), and on the oeuvre of Adál, the groundbreaking Nuyorican artist whose oeuvre, about the search for selfhood, I have admired for decades. After all, I myself don't show up in the photograph, meaning it is a *cellfie* but not a *selfie*, aka a cellphone picture but not a shot of myself. Nor is the image especially memorable, at least not to others. I keep it in my photo app as evidence of an enlightening journey to Cuba. I don't think I have shown it to anyone else. Anyway, I like the idea of starting this narrative attempt, imperfect as it is likely to be, with what is probably a misstep, since my purpose is to explore both authenticity and dishonesty. Or maybe I should say it in another way: I want to talk about truth in selfies, aware as I am that it is a futile proposition.

I find it curious that we condemn dishonesty at all times on ethical grounds, yet everyone engages in it. That is what hypocrisy is: being duplicitous. Think of the famous line Shakespeare gives to Polonius, King Claudius's chief councillor. Polonius, a single father, advises his son Laertes, who is about to depart for France, "This above all: to thine own self be true." No better fatherly instruction might be given. Yet Polonius fails to explain how Laertes should be truthful. Should "true" be taken to mean faithful, realistic, practical? Is it synonymous with moral uprightness? Is "to thine own self be true" the same as "to thy self be authentic"? And how should Laertes go about finding the road of truth, if such a road exists?

At any rate, the imperative is to be direct, honest, and straightforward. *Hamlet* is both a reflective and a reflexive play: it meditates on existence as a whole and also on its own theatricality, on its own existence as a play. The evidence abounds: for example, Hamlet's endless ruminations, his agonizing to-be-and-not-to-be (*that* is the question!), and the insertion of a play within the play in act III, scene 2. It wonders whether we control thoughts or they control us. It

wonders what our role is as witnesses of injustice. And, equally crucial, it investigates the role of art as a tool for change.

In Polonius's statement, an important aspect not yet seized at this point by the audience is that he himself is a conniver, a kind of Lord Chamberlain. His advice to Laertes is thus ironic, to the point of turning the statement upside down. Polonius the schemer might actually be telling his son to be untrue, to behave in ways that are advantageous to him. "This above all: to thine own self be true, and engage in dishonesty if this advances your cause." This advice will prove useful to Laertes. In other words, to be truthful is to satisfy the needs of the self.

Inherently, false starts are dishonest; that is, they are untruthful. Yet this is the kind of dishonesty everyone practices. My tombstone photo reveals by way of hiding; it delivers a message that looks unplanned but was meticulously planned. The image it offers is a disguise, a façade, a front. Were I to circulate *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, no one, I assume, would complain that it was counterfeit. Honestly, I myself am not conflicted about my photo's fakeness. I'm happy because I took the picture I wanted to take. It is false, sure, but so is life as a whole.

A false start isn't a defeat; it is simply another way to engage the world. In his lucid essay "Of Cannibals," Montaigne says that there are defeats more triumphant than victories. I for one see these false starts on my smartphone's cellfie museum as statements of purpose: they are snapshots of reality as I want reality to be.

Late in 2015, I discovered a red spot in my upper left cheek, almost under my eye. I thought it would disappear on its own but it didn't. I consulted a doctor, who told me it was a basal cell carcinoma, a mild case of skin cancer, and it needed to be removed. The surgery was painful: a two-inch incision, sealed with nineteen stitches. The wound took a couple of weeks to heal and several months to integrate itself to the landscape of my face. Early on, whenever I would look at myself in the mirror, I would feel like a pirate: my face was strange, different. The photos I would saw of myself contained something false, an aspect of me I needed to update, to reappraise, to appropriate. Building a new self-image took time and stamina. In retrospect, my situation was small potatoes compared with more invasive, long-lasting cancers. Yet the effort at reassessing my self-image, the face I had known and the face I now had, was nonetheless traumatic. I learned to love the scar. It is true that there are defeats more triumphant than victories.

Now think of the errors called *parapraxis*, commonly known as Freudian slips. These gaffes are more than mere failures of concentration; they are perceived as linguistic faux pas. Psychoanalysts love them (everyone else is horrified!) because they are a window into the unconscious, a way to seize on the self while it is vulnerable and unguarded. Freudian slips are also snippets of the self when it isn't fully in control, a vintage way of understanding that beyond the façade of restraint we project lurk other intangible forces. These bloopers offer a fascinating opportunity to explore the relationship between what is concrete with what is secret in our life, between the lies the self tells itself and others in order to enhance its credibility and the lies it keeps from itself—the part that is beyond the self's reach. The reverse of a Freudian slip might be a lapse in which a person suddenly forgets a word; here it is not that unwelcome information has surfaced but that needed information has been scrapped. A hairdresser friend of mine calls these hiatuses “brain farts.” The difference between a Freudian slip and a brain fart is that one reveals, whereas the other conceals.

What these practices show is that the self is an inefficient, ineffective manager, that certain forces are beyond its domain, and that it likes to parade itself as strong, morally upright, and authentic when in fact its rule depends on deceit. Samuel Beckett, in *Worstward Ho*, says: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

The term *selfie* (occasionally spelled *selfy*) is said to have originated in 2002, in an Australian online forum. Since then the frequency with which it is used worldwide has increased exponentially, in part because other languages (Spanish, French, German, Portuguese, Russian, Hebrew, Arabic . . .) have incorporated it as their own, occasionally as a derisive artifact that satirizes “the American way of life.” There is something of a Hallmark card in the sound of the term: be selfless in a selfie; that is, be free and let others know. Or, paraphrasing Oscar Wilde, be yourself in a selfie because everyone else is already taken.

Selfies, hence, are approximations of the self. They are a business card for an emotionally attuned world. They promise smiles, happiness, and engagement. In delivering these ingredients, they shape mass taste. Selfies can't stay still; they need to be constantly disseminated, navigating the globe, posted all over for others to endorse with a two-thumbs-up. A selfie taken but stored isn't the real thing; a real selfie needs to be distributed through social media. Voyeurs become consumers. The media functions as an educated eye, distinguishing be-

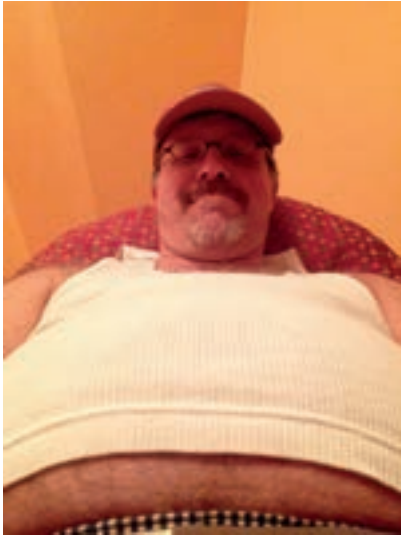
tween average selfies (paraded in Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat, for instance) and high-brow selfies (Tumblr).

This ecosystem allows them to be in a popularity contest. People like irreverence, sarcasm; they dislike snobbism, pedantry, aloofness. Certain topics become taboo. For instance, I have seen a selfie taken next to a corpse and found it nauseating. (It never crossed my mind, in the Havana cemetery, to take a selfie with the gorgeous tombstone in the background. Taking such a photo would probably have been more irreverent than my irreverent act of cleaning up the grave.) Likewise, I don't often come across selfies taken in a state of depression. Or featuring blood, although I once watched a smartphone video, posted by the *New York Times*, of a bunch of Arab terrorists who had captured a large boat. They were doing rounds shooting at escapees swimming away in the ocean. One of the shots hits its target, and blood colors the area where the victim was. The terrorists laugh, then congregate triumphantly to take a selfie near the prow. And I have also seen a selfie with blood whose purpose was to serve as evidence for the police, as proof that a fight between two neighbors had taken place.

The reason violent selfies are uncommon is that these aren't aspects of existence people want to share with others; on the contrary, they would rather keep these facets to themselves. For, in the end, the selfie is a portal through which we share the handsomest, least frightening side of our self. The word "fright" isn't part of the selfie lexicon.

Selfies are about catching ourselves halfway, in the act—and art—of living, moving around casually, being informal, laid-back, blasé, doing nothing but, to use today's slang, "chillin'." Or else, about being a trickster, a fool, maybe even a dissenter. As a selfie I once got stated it, "I'd rather laugh with the sinners." In the selfie, the mandate is to look impeccably cool in our unawareness, to be *in flagrante delicto* without a crime even taking place. "Funny you mention that—I was just thinking I don't care," reads the caption. In selfies I take of myself, for instance, I pretend to be obese. Or my face is divided in the mirror. Or I'm in the Plaza de la Revolución, in Havana, Cuba, with a wall-size drawing of Camilo Cienfuegos, a leader in Fidel Castro's uprising, behind me. This is me and isn't—it's an impostor, a pretender.

Needless to say, this state of blissfulness isn't achieved easily. The photographer—the selfie taker—must work hard at it. Exiling pain isn't enough. Being calm, composed, and level-headed, being normal, isn't enough; one must hide



Ilan Stavans, *Selfie #31 (Lite)*, Amherst, Massachusetts, 2015. Photo by author.



Ilan Stavans, *Selfie #27 (Divided)*, Amherst, Massachusetts, 2015. Photo by author.



Ilan Stavans, *Selfie #18 (with Camilo)*, Havana, Cuba, 2015. Photo by author.

any displacement, any sense of confusion. And, if possible, one must give the impression that the selfie is a product of a disinterested eye. My son Isaiah was once at a Cuban restaurant. A prominent jazz musician (my son called him “the Cuban Gaucho”) was sitting behind him. My son didn’t want to attract the musician’s attention, yet he wanted proof that he had been near him. So he took a photograph of himself in such a way that the musician in the background could be clearly spotted. This was only a selfie out of necessity: he wasn’t intent on getting a photo of himself, but no other social act would have satisfied his need of capturing the jazz musician’s face. This strategy tries to make the selfie blend into the environment. Yet that disinterest is defined by a tunnel vision.

In short, the selfie is performance achieved through overstatement. It is a show-and-tell game in which secrets are supposedly revealed, made public for everyone to savor them. In the selfie, we all become normal, ordinary dwellers in the quandary of self-absorption. Samuel Johnson argued that the narcissist doesn’t hide his faults from himself, but persuades himself that they escape the notice of others. The selfie does the exact same. It isn’t about the person—it’s about the persona, a word derived from the Latin term for mask. The self, apparently, is made of multiple masks, which is the way it projects itself to the world. For our self isn’t a unity but a multiplicity. Thus, as the night follows the day, being true to one’s self means being fundamentally adaptable, contingent, provisional, all of which are attributes of falseness.

The selfie blurs the line between the domestic and the communal, between what is mine and what belongs to others. It goes without saying that photography was always about blurring that line, but the selfie has taken the approach a step further. Mick Jagger was once sitting at a table next to mine at a Manhattan restaurant. This anecdote isn’t like the one of my son Isaiah with “the Cuban Gaucho.” I didn’t recognize Jagger. Or maybe I didn’t care who he was. Frankly, I have never been interested in the rock music scene as much as I am in Latin jazz. Be that as it may, our tables were contiguous. It was a time before smartphones but not before paparazzi. After dinner, the waiter asked Jagger if he could take a picture with him. Jagger demurred. Tonight he wasn’t a rock star, he said. Tonight he was a private citizen. The waiter politely objected, but he ultimately complied. Were the incident to occur now, perhaps the waiter, despite Jagger’s resistance, would have sat next to him at the table and turned the camera on himself next to

the celebrity. Politeness is no longer a requirement. Having the selfie is an end in itself, an expression of love that is worth the effort no matter the expense.

All emotions are volatile, therein their disposition, but love, for some reason, seems more elusive, more ethereal than others. It is often hard to pin down. We depend on love to thrive. Spinoza, in *The Ethics*, argued that love, as an emotion, is simply joy accompanied by the awareness of an external cause. For him, emotion is a change in the state of our physical organism to a greater or lesser degree of vitality, along with an idea, or mental representation, of that change. Selfies seek to make that love concrete, to make it tangible. Since selfies cannot convey spirituality in abstract terms, the images included in them must always be obvious, even clichéd. The more extreme those images—the more unreal—the more effectively they transmit their message. I am awed by that love, the way selfies promote it, the goodwill they disseminate.

It is a dangerous type of love, though. (But isn't love always dangerous?) Although the capacity to produce selfies makes us all equal, creating a made-up community of supposedly happy, interconnected communities, the true tale behind it is about uniformity, homogeneity, and exclusion. Selfies serve as glue for specific groups, ratifying their intrinsic bonds. Those that are in are pictured in it or else receive it through social media, and those that are out are excluded, ignored, and silenced. The turf is quite concrete: either you're my friend or you hate me. Thus, the selfie reaches only a small base of qualified supporters made of people who pledge allegiance to the selfie taker and who are thus ready to believe in the fiction portrayed in the selfie. Caption: "The question isn't 'Can you?,' it's 'Will you?'"

In other words, this is about who is hip and who isn't. The in-crowd uses the selfie to delineate its territory, to specify its confines, and thus to exclude those alien to it. The out-crowd, by definition, is the one left beyond the margins, the one who isn't accepted, the one described as uncool. The in-crowd depends on the selfie to project stability, continuity, and power. Their ultimate, tyrannical message is that normalcy is the right way and anything else is unacceptable. Narcissus is at the center of the orbit, a gravitational force keeping everyone at arm's reach. Self-love mutates into communal love: Narcissus realizes that because he loves himself, others love him as well.

It is rather easy to discredit selfies as manifestations of youthful egotism. They are artifacts of young and old, rich and poor, men and women. They are

like comfort food: easy, fast, and mindless. We are all selfie makers and selfie critics. When you see a group of tourists with selfie sticks making their way through a historic site (say, to invoke “dark tourism,” where the atomic bomb landed in Hiroshima), you are looking at the compulsion not only to frame sight but also to boast about it, to be in place and displaced at the same time. And then, suddenly, you realize yourself are in a selfie.

Fine advice, Polonius: to thine own selfie be true! In homage to the minimalist logo created by Milton Glaser in 1977, pro bono, to promote tourism to New York, let us all sing cheerfully in unison: I ♥ My Selfie. (How do you *sing* an emoticon?)