

Wait... Wait guys... Let's take a Selfie!

Lee Walton's *We Are Right Here At This Gallery Right Now* at the Practice Gallery

In its micro-history, the selfie already has a number of iconic moments/images: the Ellen Degeneres-at-the-Oscars selfie; the Obama-David Cameron-and-Helle Thorning Schmidt-at-Nelson Mandela's-funeral-selfie; The Pope Francis-with-followers-selfie; Kim Kardashian's-butt-selfie (of course); and the Beyonce-Jay Z-and-Mona Lisa-selfie (which is not really a selfie, but is taken in the "style" of one¹). This last moment puts in perspective the role that art and museums still play in our lives as a place of pilgrimage, prestige and cultural vitality. They are places where we can see famous and favorite works of art and spend time with family and friends and meet people or even just be alone. These moments have always been commemorated through photographs of the artwork (if allowed) or maybe a shot next to a beloved painting or sculpture, taken by someone else, or at times an unsuspecting passerby. Now, like the aforementioned King and Queen of Pop-music, we simply take selfies, and if you want a really good selfie, where you can control the angle and distance of the shot you better use the selfie-stick.

And you know... it didn't happen unless you've got a selfie of it. So do it!

Meanwhile...

In 2002 in his last interview with Charlie Rose, the late historian and curator Kirk Varnadoe, addressed the difficult position that museums were in at that time, having to satisfy institutional values and economic pressures.² Although not unique to Varnadoe, it was a concern that proved to be warranted. Museums would go on to redesign themselves as a kind of Baudrillardian Disneyland³ that would attract the masses to their doors. Today we see the shells of museums razed, discarded or adjoined to minimalist glass quartzes and cubes or undulating titanium whales, with the interior layout of a upscale shopping mall. Accompanying this fashion make over, an "elevated" experience of "high art" is maintained, where the integrity of the museums holdings are still on display even if surrounded by a spectacle of blockbuster exhibits of all the popular artists: How many Matisse and Picasso shows can we have already?

Spectacle is the key word. Contemporary art would feature celebrity artists like Marina Abramovic and Richard Serra who are all too willing to play up their fame; celebrities would be employed also Actor/artist Tilda Swinton sleeping in a vitrine brought all onlookers to MoMA in what Jerry Saltz describes as: "Placing living art in MoMA's airy atrium has become the museum's crystal meth." or Jay Z and Abramovic staging a awkward performance-rap event.⁴ By naming the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art after celebrity editor Anna

¹ Deana Sumanac-Johnson, *Selfies popular in museums, but some see them as trouble, Twitter's Museum Week generates thousands of photos of people posing in front of famous art works*, CBC News, Accessed April 15th 2015, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/arts/selfies-popular-in-museums-but-some-see-them-as-trouble-1.3011102>

² Kirk Varnadoe, Interview with Charlie Rose, 2002, episode...

³ Jean Baudrillard, "- I. The Precession of Simulacra", *Simulacra and Simulations*, translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, (France: Éditions Galilée, 1981; Michigan: University of Michigan, 1894) pg.

⁴ Jillian Steinhauer *Jay-Z Raps at Marina Abramović, or the Day Performance Art Died* Hyperallergic, <http://hyperallergic.com/75293/jay-z-raps-at-marina-abramovic-or-the-day-performance-art-died/>

Wintour⁵, the Darth Vader of fashion and the arbiter of its biggest monetary contributions, rather than figures like Irene Lewisohn, who actually founded it, or Diana Vreeland who is responsible for developing it into an important curatorial department among the museum's collections, the museums priorities are in transparent view, much like Swinton's vitrine.

The collision:

Just as everything is going well, where the hype of the art is at an all time high; the celebrity love is working perfectly; the museum's revenue is piling high; the spectacle is oh so... spectacular, someone pokes an eye out. As if imagining a nightmare scenario akin to Steve Wynn's blunderous elbowing of the painting he owned: Picasso's "Le Reve," tearing a hole through it, the ban on selfie-sticks was sudden and immediately implemented. It seems the public's fervent need to document every moment of their lives and their access to the world's great artworks exposed practical concerns from the institutions' directors, starting in American museums and then traveling to museums Europe. In one instance, Amsterdam's Van Gogh Museum, not wanting to repel their audience but attempting to save the valuable works from possible harm, "enlarged replicas of the most popular paintings in a special room in the gallery where selfie takers can snap away to their heart's content"⁶. Baudrillard is either smiling, thinking: "I told you so," or both.

There is of course another dimension at play here: Narcissism. The famous complaint from older generations about the navel-gazing of adolescents has become exacerbated in the age of the smart phone. But claims of out-and out narcissism are still unfounded, given that the purpose and relation we humans have with technology has changed dramatically⁷. In fact, as it turns out selfies can be a healthy means in developing self-identification and sharing images of one's experiences with friends on facebook, Instagram and Snapchat etc, could be important to creating open communication in social groups⁸. In the context of art however, the selfie has been compared and contrasted to the self portrait, a traditional subject in the visual arts, with some variation⁹. Lee Walton's Selfie Stick however invites group portraiture, which potentially reaches a little deeper in the art historical canon. One thinks of Rembrandt's self portraits in the previous form of the self portrait, but he has also been known to place himself in larger paintings, like his masterpiece commonly known as *The Night Watch* (1642)¹⁰, which has ironically been part of a much discussed photograph of children sitting in the Rijksmuseum, looking only at their phones ignoring the painting that looms over them¹¹. Maybe Rembrandt

⁵ Stephanie Chan, "The Met Renames the Costume Institute After Anna Wintour", *Pret-aReporter*, The Hollywood insider, January 14, 2014, accessed April 15th 2015, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/met-renames-costume-institute-anna-671055>

⁶ Sumanac-Johnson, *Selfies popular in museums*, CBC News, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/arts/selfies-popular-in-museums-but-some-see-them-as-trouble-1.3011102>

⁷ Stephanie Chan, "The Met Renames the Costume Institute After Anna Wintour", *Pret-aReporter*, The Hollywood insider, January 14, 2014, accessed April 15th 2015, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/met-renames-costume-institute-anna-671055>

⁸ Alexandra Sifferlin "Why Selfies Matter", *Social Media*, Time Magazine Sept. 2013

⁹ Annelisa Stephan, *What's the Difference between a Selfie and a Self-Portrait?* The Getty Iris, The online magazine of the Getty January 21, 2015, accessed April 15, 2015, <http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/whats-the-difference-between-a-selfie-and-a-self-portrait/>

¹⁰ Bryony Jones, Nav Garcha and Ines Torre, *Rijksmuseum reborn: Rembrandt's 'Night Watch' explained*, CNN Online, February 5, 2015, Accessed April 15, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/04/11/world/europe/rijksmuseum-rembrandt-nightwatch-interactive/#index>

¹¹ Bill Muehlenberg, *A Generation of Zombie Children*, Culture Watch, accessed April 15, 2015, <http://billmuehlenberg.com/2015/04/15/a-generation-of-zombie-children/>

was looking over their shoulders instead.

The Selfie Stick Project

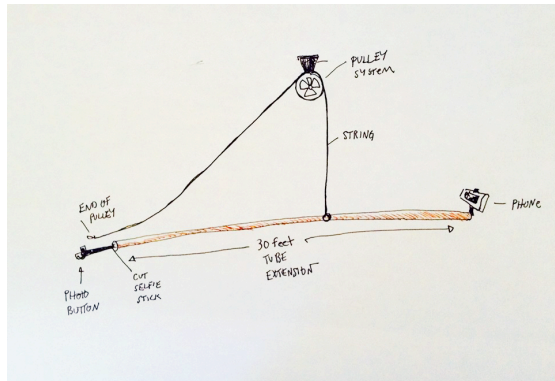
Lee Walton's work *We Are Right Here At This Gallery Right Now* at the Practice Gallery in Philadelphia, focuses on all of these issues and contexts in one work. With the bombast of a Matthew Barney video/performance Walton's selfie stick is a giant Brunelleschian object of engineering, a lever/see-saw that will take up the gallery space and operated by a small team. Groups of gallery goers: families, friends, students and teachers and even strangers (oh my!) will receive assistance in operating the awkward structure and snapping the photo, which will be downloaded to Facebook and Instagram, where selfies usually live.

Because the stick is unwieldy and large it will be seen in each of the selfies. In this, the artist is present without being present, a kind of criticism of the narcissism of performance artists like Abramovic, Swinton and Barney who place themselves at the center of the work. Walton gives over the spotlight to his audience. They are the subject. The art object is the large contraption, used or regarded or both. The experience and the documentation of the experience seamlessly act as one, as the subtext of the work, (a slight nod to the reflexive complexities of Velazquez's 1656 masterwork *Las Meninas*?). The content is, as always in Walton's work are the systems and behaviors of human activities.

Experience is the core of Lee Walton's work, and what we are presented with is a recording of that experience, uncovering the system within. Whether it is his mapped drawings of sporting activities like *The World Series Drawing Installation* or the *Charcoal Chess Tournament*; virtually invisible performances like *Hillary Wiedemann: Living Record from 2007*, a work that we can only experience through the retelling by its only witness, artist Hillary Wiedemann; or *The Dribble Project* and the *The Serial Conversationalist*, where the artist takes it to the Manhattan streets: dribbling a basketball every morning along 36th Street between 7th and 9th Avenue or striking up a conversation with strangers at different NYC parks on specifically planned days.

Walton's *Wappenings #6*, the work with that most resembles the *Selfie Stick Project*, invites anyone willing to pose in a group portrait under the Washington Square Park arch, allowing spontaneous moments to occur between individuals. *We Are Right Here in this Gallery Right Now* or *The Selfie Stick Project* expands on this former work, addressing the notion of "being somewhere," while ironically being engaged in an activity that takes you out of that experience. The generosity of the artist however (or maybe it is the generosity of the internet, really) gives that back to us via posting the images taken here.

We Are Right Here At This Gallery Right Now pauses us not only to take a group selfie, but causes us to think. We think about the inherent systems of our ordinary actions and behaviors, we think about narcissism and the need for self-identification and group interaction, and we think about the nature of experience and how technology takes us out of that experience,



reprocessing it through another format. It also exposes the lust for celebrity, and need for spectacle, criticizing museums for resorting to these vices to boost their economic necessities, and how artists can be all too willing to comply. Perhaps most poignantly, this piece points out that in the midst of creating an economic art carnival, museums have also created a place for meaningful social interaction, and in remembering that they are also the protectors of cultural artifacts they

have turned their backs on this notion. We are reminded that these works of art, whose knowledge value belongs to us, the public, are also investments of monetary value. Lee Walton eliminates the economic-political transgressions found in our institutions and gives back to us the satisfaction of social connectedness.

– Glenn LaVertu,
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