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## Subverting the Selfie: Analysis of Cindy Sherman's Instagram Photos and Untitled Film Stills

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SUBVERTING THE SELFIE:  
ANALYSIS OF CINDY SHERMAN'S INSTAGRAM PHOTOS AND  
*UNTITLED FILM STILLS*

by  
Katrina M. Russell

A Thesis Submitted in  
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December 2021

## ABSTRACT

### SUBVERTING THE SELFIE: ANALYSIS OF CINDY SHERMAN'S INSTAGRAM PHOTOS AND *UNTITLED FILM STILLS*

by

Katrina M. Russell

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2021  
Under the Supervision of Professor Jennifer Johung

As a prominent artist of self-portraiture, Cindy Sherman has been captivating audiences and scholars for decades. Recently, some media outlets have begun generalizing all of Sherman's work under the selfie concept using her dual role as model and photographer as the defining factor along with her recent activity on Instagram. In this paper, I argue that characterizing all of Sherman's work as selfies is problematic and inaccurate while illustrating similar themes present in her early *Untitled Film Stills* series and more recent Instagram photos. First, I start by outlining the fundamental criteria for characterizing a photo as a selfie using the work of previous scholars of social semiotics. Next, I use prior analysis of Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* to identify parallel themes in her Instagram photos while highlighting the differences in viewer reception and creation methods between both sets. Finally, I use the criteria of a selfie from section one and use the themes from Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* and Instagram photos to show how the photos from both subvert the selfie concept. Ultimately the analysis of both sets of photos provides more understanding about Sherman's Instagram photos and provides a unique case study for illustrating how selfies are a genre of self-portraiture and that not all self-portraits should be considered selfies.

Key Words: Cindy Sherman, Instagram, *Untitled Film Stills*, selfies, self-portraiture, self-portrait, social media, photography.



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## Introduction

Rising to prominence in the 1970s with her series *Untitled Film Stills*, Cindy Sherman's self-portrait photographs have captivated audiences and scholars for decades. More recently, her self-portraits posted on the social media network Instagram have compelled fans of her work to follow her account. However, scholars have paid little attention to Sherman's Instagram photos, while media outlets have not shied away from considering her early and contemporary self-portraits as selfies. For example, before her 2019 retrospective at the National Portrait Gallery in London, *Telegraph Online* and the *BBC Arts* described Sherman as "the original selfie queen" in their article titles introducing the exhibition.<sup>1</sup> These news articles were meant to market the exhibition; however, the generalization of all Sherman's work as selfies is problematic to followers of her work. It is highly troublesome because the concept of the selfie did not exist when she created many of her portraits. The photographs selected from both Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* and Instagram photos for this thesis provide the contrast that will illustrate critical differences between a selfie and an artistic self-portrait.

Generalizing Sherman's work in this way also opens the door for the work of other artists to be mischaracterized as a selfie simply because of the artist's dual role as photographer and subject. Though the photographer's presence as the subject is a significant component to defining a photo as a selfie, how audiences interact with specific photographs is equally significant. Due to the decades between their creation, Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* and her Instagram photos

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<sup>1</sup> "Cindy Sherman, National Portrait Gallery, review: a glossy retrospective for the original Selfie Queen." *Telegraph Online*, June 25, 2019. *Gale In Context: Biography* (accessed November 1, 2020). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A590710267/BIC?u=milwaukee&sid=BIC&xid=f249dd9>, 1.

"The Original Selfie Queen: Cindy Sherman's Candid Camera," *BBC Arts (BBC)*, accessed November 2, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/3vxkMH4J6prkmzd99gJcBk1/the-original-selfie-queen-cindy-shermans-candid-camera>, 1.

provide a prime example for showcasing the differences between the methods of creation and how audiences interact with them.

This distinction is crucial for scholars of self-portraits created in the age of social media as more artists are turning to platforms like Instagram as a medium and a place to showcase their work to reach more audiences. It also is imperative not to mislabel self-portraits produced outside of photography and social media as a selfie simply because the artist is also the subject of the work. An alarming example of this type of mischaracterization is the article written by Jason Bailey for *Artnome* titled "How Rembrandt and Van Gogh Mastered the Art of the Selfie," in which Bailey references the self-portrait work of both Rembrandt and Van Gogh in the context of social media selfie practice.<sup>2</sup> While selfies can be considered a genre of self-portraiture, it is incorrect to label all self-portraits under the contemporary concept of a selfie. As will be explored throughout this thesis, technology and social media play a crucial role in determining if a self-portrait can be considered a selfie based on when the work was created and how viewers interact with the piece.

Sherman's long career using herself as the model in most of her photos provides a unique opportunity to explore how her previous photographic work and current work using social media stand against the concept of a selfie. By using Sherman's work as a case study for defining a selfie, this analysis will provide avenues for future study of contemporary artists who utilize social media as a medium. Additionally, it will provide scholars with examples of why specific self-portraits do or do not fall within a selfie definition.

The first section of this thesis will use previous scholarship about the influence of social media and technology on how viewers receive photos to understand what criteria are needed to

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<sup>2</sup> Jason Bailey, "How Rembrandt and Van Gogh Mastered the Art of the Selfie," *Artnome* (Artnome, October 26, 2020), <https://www.artnome.com/news/2018/11/26/how-rembrandt-and-van-gogh-mastered-the-art-of-the-selfie>.

constitute a selfie. To understand fully how Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* and Instagram photos fit within the definition of a selfie as laid out in section one, section two will trace the historiography of each set of photos using past scholarship. Section two will provide insight into how themes from Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* correlate to those present in her Instagram photos. As a celebrated series, Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* have been subject to a wealth of scholarship analyzing how the images subvert female stereotypes portrayed by white film stars of the 1950s. However, her recent Instagram photos have very sparse scholarly analysis about them. Comparing the themes of her *Untitled Film Stills* with her Instagram photos will provide insight into the similar social and gender constructs in both sets of photos and create more understanding about her photographs. It is also important to note that any reference to stereotypes related to femininity and female aesthetics is based on those projected onto white women in Western societies. Femininity and female stereotypes differ significantly between cultures and races. Therefore, this analysis will focus on those Cindy Sherman would have encountered and understood as a white female artist.

Section three will focus on analyzing photos from both Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* and those posted to her Instagram account in the context of how they subvert the concept of the selfie. Her *Untitled Film Stills* series and the photographs she posts to Instagram contain numerous unique images that could provide ample opportunity for in-depth analysis. As a result, I will focus on only a few from each to illustrate how themes correlate between the two sets of photos and how they subvert the selfie concept. The photos from both Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* and Instagram account chosen for analysis in this thesis were considered based on the lack of formal and thematic attention paid to them in other scholarly analyses. Furthermore, the unique compositions of each photo in relation to each other provide understanding about

Sherman's compositional choices and exploration in both sets of photos. This thesis will provide insight into the themes present in Sherman's Instagram photos and how they relate to her previous *Untitled Film Stills* series while illustrating how each set of photos subverts the selfie concept. Ultimately, providing a basis for understanding selfies as a type of self-portraiture rather than characterizing all self-portraits as selfies.



## 1. Social Semiotics and the Selfie

Analysis of Cindy Sherman's work through the selfie concept requires understanding what a selfie is and what it entails as a practice by examining the work of previous scholars of the selfie. It is essential to recognize that not all self-portraits can or should be considered a selfie because of different compositional and creation techniques that are further complicated by the interactive nature of social media platforms, such as Instagram. Social media provides additional layers to photos by adding captions, providing filters, and allowing textual dialogue between the viewer and the photographer. As a result, social semiotics as a methodology provides a framework for understanding the fundamental characteristics that allow a self-portrait photograph to be characterized as a selfie. The criteria for defining a self-portrait as a selfie are determinable through the context of social media interconnectivity, the photographer's compositional choices, and textual context through captions and comments. Additionally, social semiotics provides an understanding of how artists can use social media as a medium for exploring the interconnectivity between users and as a new way to reach a broader audience for their work.

In their 2018 article, "The Interplay of (Semiotic) Technologies and Genre: the Case of the Selfie," Sumin Zhao and Michele Zappavigna investigate the complexity behind defining a selfie by exploring how the concept of semiotic technologies can define a photograph as a selfie.<sup>3</sup> Mainly, Zhao and Zappavigna use previous scholarship related to PowerPoint to illustrate the communicative capabilities of the software and apply those concepts to the practice of creating selfies.<sup>4</sup> Moving from concepts based on a study about PowerPoint and applying them to the

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<sup>3</sup> Sumin Zhao and Michele Zappavigna, "The Interplay of (Semiotic) Technologies and Genre: the Case of the Selfie," *Social Semiotics* 28, no. 5 (2018): pp. 665-682, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2018.1504724>, 666.

<sup>4</sup> Zhao and Zappavigna, "The Interplay of (Semiotic) Technologies and Genre: the Case of the Selfie," 666.

practice of selfies may seem surprising since one is a computer program and the other a digital photograph created and modified with computer programs. However, selfies are a complicated type of photograph due to the technologies used to create them and how users interact with them through social media, which is very different from people encountering a photograph in a brick-and-mortar museum or gallery space. As noted by Zhao and Zappavigna, this is because there are, "...at least three types of user technologies involved in selfie practice – smartphone cameras (hardware), image editing applications (software), and social media (platform), each contributing to the shaping of the meaning-making potential of selfies."<sup>5</sup> Specifically, they highlight the challenges of defining a selfie solely because the person in the photo is also its photographer due to the methods and technology needed for its creation. Instead, Zhao and Zappavigna suggest that selfies have three simultaneous types of meaning: ideational (the representation of the self), interpersonal (enactment of the relationship between the photographer, represented self and the viewer), and textual (the composition of the created image).<sup>6</sup> These three concepts provide the basis for the analysis Zhao and Zappavigna conduct of various self-portrait photos through smartphones, photo-editing applications, and social media to provide a base definition of a selfie. They then further sub-categorize selfies into four common types: represented, mirrored, implied, and inferred.<sup>7</sup> In this article, Zhao and Zappavigna's primary focus is to lay a foundation for studying selfies within the constructs of semiotic theory through the analysis of compositions, the technological elements involved in the creation of selfies, and how these aspects impact their meaning. Ultimately, Zhao and Zappavigna's work provides a valuable tool for determining what

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<sup>5</sup> Zhao and Zappavigna, "The Interplay of (Semiotic) Technologies and Genre: the Case of the Selfie," 667.

<sup>6</sup> Zhao and Zappavigna, "The Interplay of (Semiotic) Technologies and Genre: the Case of the Selfie," 668.

<sup>7</sup> These four types are not explicitly explored in this article, but the authors instead direct readers to another article covering these concepts in more detail.

See Zhao and Zappavigna, "The Interplay of (Semiotic) Technologies and Genre: the Case of the Selfie," 668.

makes a self-portrait photograph a selfie as a basis for further analysis into Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* and her Instagram photos.

Notably, the interpersonal concept of the relationship between the viewer, photographer, and the photographer's represented self and how the viewer interacts with the image on social media is central to understanding what a selfie is. Social media presents a unique opportunity for the photographer to interact with viewers through written communication unavailable in a typical gallery or museum setting. The photographer of a self-portrait or a selfie has the ultimate decision on how to portray themselves in the resulting image through compositional choices and the choice to use filters or not. However, when the photo is posted to social media, the viewer has control over how to interpret the photo, like it, or decide to comment on it, all of which influence the photo's meaning. Nevertheless, the photographer's decision directly influences the initial meaning of the selfie: they decide how to present themselves in a photo. Then they decide to post to a social media platform where viewers have the opportunity to interpret and comment on the photo and change its contextual meaning through their comments. For example, the user who posts the photo can add a caption to help others understand the image, whether a vacation or a significant life event. The viewer then can see both the photo and the caption and discern the intended meaning behind the photo; however, they also can comment on it and have the potential to modify that original meaning through their comments or actions of liking or disliking the post. Thus, through the social media platform, the original poster and photographer submits control of their image to other social media users who, by adding comments, can dramatically affect the reception of the photo.

Though they do not explicitly define what a selfie is in this article, the concepts explored by authors Richard Kedizor and Douglas E. Allen in their 2016 article, "From liberation to

control: understanding the selfie experience,” provide a foundation for exploring the experiences and relationships between the photographer, viewer, represented self, and how society influences the creation of selfies. Mainly, they provide a framework for analyzing selfies through the paradoxes related to societal influence and self-empowerment.<sup>8</sup> As a photographic practice often associated with presenting the most flattering and attractive image of oneself, selfies have frequently been associated with narcissistic tendencies. However, because selfies are created by the person depicted in the image, they empower the photographer by providing a way to express themselves and form connections with other social media users. The resulting connections also highlight the disempowering aspects of selfies because of societal pressure to post them to social media. These connections also create shifting control over the meaning-making potential of selfies between the photographer and viewer through textual comments and viewer reception.

Understanding the relationships between the photographer, viewer, and the represented self is paramount to understanding Cindy Sherman’s photos and understanding how most of her work does not fit the definition of a selfie. As both model and photographer, Sherman has complete agency over her portrayal in each photo. Until recently, viewers have primarily encountered her photos in a museum, a controlled and sterile environment. However, since selfies are often taken with the intent to be posted online for others to interact with, they have the presence of both individual empowerments over their creation and societal influence with the interconnectivity related to social media platforms. When posted to social media, the control behind the meaning-making of selfies slips between the original poster and the audience of the photo through their interactive comments with one another.

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Kedzior, and Douglas E. Allen. “From Liberation to Control: Understanding the Selfie Experience.” *European Journal of Marketing* 50, no. 9/10 (2016): 1893–1902. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ejm-07-2015-0512>.

As Kedzior and Allen explain, selfies are empowering due to the, "...assumption that digital self-portraiture is an act of self-revelation, which, combined with the possibility of online publication...empowers the posters and gives them control over how they are represented."<sup>9</sup> Because the selfie photographer is also the one photographed and gets to decide what is posted to social media, taking a selfie is empowering based on the photographer's control of every aspect of the photo's creation. While it is highly debatable if Sherman's self-portrait photos should or could be classified as selfies, her work is a prime example of her control as both the photographer and photographed. Acting in both capacities, Sherman has control over both the aesthetic and presentation of herself as different characters like Kedzior and Allen explore concerning selfies as a practice. Societal control comes into play when, as Kedzior and Allen explain, "...the disempowering potential of selfies often results from specific forms of control, be it the male gaze or hegemonic cultural norms. The control can also materialize in the form of peer pressure out of the activity which initially was experienced as emancipating." In effect, where the control lies in creating a selfie determines the initial empowering or disempowering nature of them. While the selfie's creator may be in initial control of its empowering potential upon creation, once the photo is uploaded to a social media platform, the creator loses control of the photo's perception. Instead, it falls into the hands of social media users who can interact with the photo through comments and likes, resulting in the potential for these interactions to either support the creator's intent and empowerment or to undermine it through negative comments or reactions, causing disempowerment.

In Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* series, the empowerment of her photos is apparent in her representation of the female film star of the 1950s through her construction of each character

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<sup>9</sup> Kedzior and Allen, "From Liberation to Control: Understanding the Selfie Experience," 1895.

to challenge stereotypical Western ideas of feminine beauty. Using idealized Western symbols of feminine norms as portrayed by the female film stars of the 1950s, such as makeup, clothing, and expression, Sherman subverts these ideals through her compositional choices and facial expressions in each photo, as will be examined in more detail later. With the recent photos Sherman continually posts to Instagram, she also showcases empowerment through technological filters to enhance features often deemed undesirable or ugly, such as wrinkles or age spots. Instead of hiding these features, she enhances them unapologetically to create portraits that subvert existing Western ideas that the process of aging is ugly and something to be avoided. While both series show the empowering potential of self-portraiture, further understanding of how viewers interact with both sets of photos is vital to understanding how each fits within a social semiotic definition of a selfie. Because Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* were introduced to the public in a museum setting, and her social media portraits are continually posted online where users can comment and interact with the photos, the viewer relationship to each of them is also integral to understanding their potential to be characterized as a selfie.

To understand viewer relationships with Sherman's work, further exploration into the interpersonal aspect of selfies and the social media networks where they are most often shared with the public is necessary. In this case, Instagram is the social media network of primary interest because that is the platform Cindy Sherman uses to post her distorted colorful portraits. In their 2018 article, "Studying Social Media as Semiotic Technology: a Social Semiotic Multimodal Framework," Søren Vigild Poulsen and Gunhild Kvåle explore the concept of the selfie through the social media networks that are used to display them.<sup>10</sup> In particular, they

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<sup>10</sup> Søren Vigild Poulsen and Gunhild Kvåle, "Studying Social Media as Semiotic Technology: A Social Semiotic Multimodal Framework," *Social Semiotics* 28, no. 5 (2018): pp. 700-717, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2018.1505689>, 701.

examine selfies through the study of social media networks as semiotic technologies incorporating software design, the use of the software, and the relationship between the software's design and user.<sup>11</sup> What becomes apparent through Poulsen and Kvåle's analysis of these relationships is that meaning is attributed to the photos posted to social media in different ways depending on how users are viewing them.

These interactions highlight how technology in the form of social media has allowed for the capability to share a gallery of photos instantly rather than sharing from physical photo albums when others are in the physical presence of it.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, this shift from tangible to the digital has impacted how many artists, including Sherman, reach their audience. No longer do they need to wait to be accepted by the art establishment and have their work physically displayed in a gallery or museum; instead, they can instantly share their work digitally and reach a broader audience. Furthermore, due to the instantaneous nature of social media platforms and their accessibility to the public, social media networks have the potential to be used as a medium by artists. Artists can use social media networks as a medium by curating their work in social media galleries, using them as a branding tool, or highlighting how people tend to portray themselves in a flattering or glamorous light, hiding their authentic selves.

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<sup>11</sup> Poulsen and Kvåle, "Studying Social Media as a Semiotic Technology: A Social Semiotic Multimodal Framework," 702.

<sup>12</sup> Of particular interest for this thesis and analysis of Cindy Sherman's work on Instagram are the social and historical dimensions examined. Based on the established relationships between software and user, Poulsen and Kvåle share seven dimensions of understanding to create a comprehensive approach to understanding the ways social media networks provide interconnectivity. The social dimension refers to how people interact with each other's posts to create meaning and how that interaction can create new meaning from what was initially established by the person who created the post or photo. The historical dimension refers to changes in the technology itself, software updates that could create new features or get rid of features. This dimension also refers to technological capabilities and how people use social media as a digital photo gallery of their lives. See Poulsen and Kvåle, "Studying Social Media as a Semiotic Technology: A Social Semiotic Multimodal Framework," 704-709.

So far, it has been shown that photos can be considered selfies using social media networks and the unique interactive relationship between the viewer and the creator of the photo, expanding past the essential criteria of the photographer being the one present in the photo. However, there is more to the concept of selfies than those two elements. Selfies also have compositional aspects that set them apart from other self-portraits in addition to the narrative context created by photos presented before or after them in a digital gallery or the text used alongside them. In one study of the compositional aspects of what constitutes a selfie, “Classifying the narrated #selfie: genre typing human-branding activity,” Toni Eagar and Stephan Dann explore the use of these elements for self-promotion and branding purposes.<sup>13</sup> Eagar and Dann’s study provides understanding into how selfies are used by social media users, particularly how their context based on composition can be interpreted and provide meaning to the individual photo and others present in the digital gallery. In their study, Eagar and Dann examine the compositional and contextual elements of photos posted to Instagram to determine the essential elements that constitute a selfie and utilize the captions provided by users to determine that selfies can be further categorized based on the context of their creation.<sup>14</sup> It is the use of the captions in tandem with the compositional features of the photos that help to categorize selfies into various genres.

Of primary interest for understanding Cindy Sherman’s Instagram photos in the context of selfie culture is the category Eagar and Dann refer to as the parody selfie. They explain that

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<sup>13</sup> Eagar, Toni, and Stephen Dann. “Classifying the Narrated #selfie: Genre Typing Human-Branding Activity.” *European journal of marketing* 50, no. 9/10 (2016): 1835–1857.

<sup>14</sup> Essentially, selfies tend to have similar compositional elements such as the presence of the camera used to take the photo, the presence of the photographer, an outstretched arm, distorting angles, and many more possibilities. With such similar compositional traits, it is difficult to determine the photographer’s intent or purpose for taking the photo and subsequently why they posted it to social media through analysis of its composition. Therefore, Eagar and Dann note the importance of the textual elements in the form of captions or user’s comments in determining the selfie’s purpose and the poster’s intent behind the photo’s creation. See Eagar and Dann, “Classifying the Narrated #selfie: Genre Typing Human-Branding Activity,” 1841.



the parody selfie uses facial expressions, costumes, commentary, and current social media trends to make a humorous commentary about social media practices.<sup>15</sup> Sherman's social media portraits fit this genre of the parody selfie incredibly well. She uses filters to enhance features of herself that Western society has deemed unfavorable for women to possess. The use of filters also illuminates the artificiality behind posting selfies to social media because most people who post selfies strive only to use the best photos of themselves and hide their so-called imperfections. Sherman does the opposite, enhancing and distorting her features in a transparently artificial way. However, the question remains as to whether Sherman's Instagram portraits can be considered an actual selfie even though they fit within this sub-genre Eagar and Dann describe. Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, however, fail to meet the basic criterion of the selfie simply because they are not posted to social media and thus lack the interconnectivity between the viewer and the creator of the photo. The interconnectivity of the selfie is also limited or absent in her early series; in physical gallery and museum spaces, the wall text that helps to provide context for the photos on display is often not written by the creator of the work but by a curator. Direct communication from the viewer to the creator is interrupted by a third party in a museum or gallery setting; it is impossible without the institution's intervention by facilitating audience interactions with the piece or the artist. However, posting photos to social media allows the creator to provide more context in their own words through captions and comments, resulting in more connectivity with the photo's audience.

In addition to the context of the individual images posted to social media based on their composition and textual context, photos that are considered selfies often are posted as part of a longer personal narrative of the user's life, mainly to document important or enjoyable events.

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<sup>15</sup> Eagar and Dann, "Classifying the Narrated #selfie: Genre Typing Human-Branding Activity," 1844.

The individual image provides its narrative, documenting a specific moment in time. When the photos are strung together with the user's previous posts, a narrative of the poster, or the branded identity of the poster, becomes apparent. In their study, "Selfies and Cultural Events: Mixed Methods for the Study of Selfies in Context," Gemma San Cornelio and Antoni Roig examine how selfies have become less an indication of narcissistic behavior and more about the documentation of moments in time and when integrated on platforms like Instagram; as such, a personal narrative of the account holder is discernable.<sup>16</sup> Inevitably, because photos on social media end up in digital photo galleries, narratives will develop even if they were not intended by the original poster. In some cases, the photos may be a series from a trip or specific event like a wedding or party then posted in an album, creating a documented narrative of that person's experience of said event. When these photos are viewed in the full context of all the photos on a person's account, a broader understanding of the person's life comes into view. Social media and particularly Instagram provides an opportunity for people to share and document their lives through sharing photos in context with life events and captions. As a result, selfies gain more meaning when coupled with textual commentary and when viewed in the context of other photos.

Sherman's work on Instagram and her *Untitled Film Stills* series both have the potential to be read in the context of other photos, even though that was not Sherman's intent for either. When viewed in a museum setting, the photos from the *Untitled Film Stills* have the potential for a narrative reading; however, it depends entirely on the placement of each photo in a specific sequence. When on display in a gallery or a printed catalog, *Untitled Film Stills* resist narrative

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<sup>16</sup> Cornelio, Gemma San, and Antoni Roig. "Selfies and Cultural Events: Mixed Methods for the Study of Selfies in Context." *International journal of communication* (Online) (2018): 2773–2792.

coherence because each photo is ambiguous in terms of the specific character represented.<sup>17</sup>

Sherman also often influenced the relational context between each of her photos in the *Untitled Film Stills* because in many cases she was able to choose which photos were displayed or printed together. However, with her Instagram portraits, the placement of the photos in the digital gallery is predetermined by the date the photo is posted. If she chooses to include multiple photos in one post, Sherman has more agency over the relational context of the individual photos within that singular post; however, not how they relate to the other photos posted to her account. As a result, her Instagram portraits are subject to the same relational context that Cornelio and Roig explore in their study, the creation of a personal narrative through the documentation of singular moments strung together under one social media account.

Ultimately, the work of these scholars provides a foundation for understanding how to define a self-portrait as a selfie and how those aspects can be related to Cindy Sherman's work. Based on the above analysis, selfies are complex, multi-faceted photos that require more profound analysis than the simple definition as a portrait created by oneself. As noted above, selfies are defined not only by their unique compositional features of the photographer's presence and the device used to take the photo. Selfies are defined by the context of the photo's captions and the interconnectivity created between social media users and the photographer through social media platforms. In addition, selfies have a complex push and pull between who controls the photo's meaning: the photographer and original poster or the viewers and commenters of the image on the social media network. While the original poster controls the intention, composition, and any captions that accompany the photo, other users on social media can modify the meaning through their commentary, thus taking control from the photographer

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<sup>17</sup> Cindy Sherman, *Cindy Sherman: The COMPLETE Untitled Film Stills*, ed. David Frankel (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 7.

and original poster. The unique interconnectivity between social media users is an essential component of defining self-portraits as a selfie based on the shifting power dynamics related to the context and perception of the photo.

Along with the specific compositional choices of the photographer, such as the angle of the photo and use of filters, the context provided to the photo in the form of captions, and the interconnectivity of social media, selfies have a complex set of defining qualities. Ultimately, this results in the following set of criteria that define a self-portrait photo as a selfie: the presence of the photographer in the resulting photo, compositional choices, textual commentary in the form of captions or comments from other users resulting in constantly shifting power dynamics using social media as the catalyst for these interactions. In subsequent sections, the specifics of how these qualities are applicable to both Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* and Instagram portraits will show that simply labeling a self-portrait photograph as a selfie because the photographer is also the photographed is highly problematic and should be used with caution.

## 2. Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* and Instagram Photos

Understanding how scholars define a photograph as a selfie greatly informs how the work of Cindy Sherman can or cannot fall within that category of self-portrait photography. Before that analysis can take place, however, it is imperative to understand the themes and technology available for the creation of both her *Untitled Film Stills* and her Instagram photos. A celebrated photographic series, Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* has a long history of scholarly critique and examination. Most analyses have focused on the explicit use of Sherman's body in her photos and her portrayal of female aesthetics in relation to film, particularly her use of a similar aesthetic of women used in Alfred Hitchcock films of the 1950s.<sup>18</sup> For example, the photos from the *Untitled Film Stills* are all shot in black and white like many early films, using chiaroscuro lighting, and generally portraying women in an idealized way, always donning makeup in every situation and often dressed to the nines. In contrast, the colorful distorted images of Sherman's Instagram account have received much less attention from scholars due to their more recent creation, and they seem to have few similarities with her much earlier *Untitled Film Stills* series. However, this analysis will show Sherman presents similar themes in both sets of photos, whether consciously or not. To exhibit the connection between them, I will mobilize scholarship on Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* as a means of analyzing the themes presented in her Instagram

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<sup>18</sup> Mulvey refers to Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* as seeming to "...refer to the '50s, to the New Wave, to neo-realism, to Hitchcock, or to Hollywood B-pictures."

Laura Mulvey, "Cosmetics and Abjection: Cindy Sherman 1977-87," in *Cindy Sherman*, ed. Johanna Burton, 6th ed. (Cambridge (Mass.), MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 68.

Rosalind Krauss' analysis of Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* series at the beginning of this essay explores the aesthetic of the photos as they relate to the objectification of the female body because of the male gaze. In her essay, Krauss refers to Hitchcock's films as a specific aesthetic that Sherman emulated with her *Untitled Film Stills*. While not explicitly outlined in this thesis, Krauss uses the work of both Judith Williamson and Laura Mulvey in her analysis of Sherman's work and shares similar observations as the work of those scholars.

See Rosalind Krauss, "Cindy Sherman: Untitled," in *Cindy Sherman*, ed. Johanna Burton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 97-141.

photos. By examining the themes, the technology used, and intention behind the creation of each series will help to clarify how these photos fit within the social semiotic definition of a selfie. As a reminder, this analysis is based on stereotypes and themes that Sherman would have been most familiar with in her experiences; therefore, any reference to female aesthetics, themes related to the female experience, and femininity will be those projected on white women by Western societies.

An early example of analysis of Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* is Judith Williamson's 1986 essay titled, "A Piece of the Action: Images of 'Woman' in the Photography of Cindy Sherman." In this essay, Williamson explores the femininity portrayed in the *Untitled Film Stills* based on Sherman's composition choices compared to stereotypical Western society's views of femininity. Williamson explains that:

Sherman's women with their parted lips and their stories in their eyes...are something to get off on in their very uncertainty. And in linking the erotic and the vulnerable she has hit a raw nerve of 'femininity.' I don't by this mean women (though we do experience it) but the *image* of Woman, an imaginary, fragmentary identity found not only in photos and films but in the social fabric of our thoughts and feelings.<sup>19</sup>

Williamson directly links elements of the *Untitled Film Stills* in this statement to how the stereotypical ideal image of a woman is solidified by various societal avenues such as films, photos, and advertisements. These stereotypes, Williamson suggests, result in the viewer's understanding of sexism and femininity based on cultural perspectives that permeate how they engage with the *Untitled Film Stills*. Because Sherman has disguised her identity behind the characters in these photos, she shows us that the image of woman is multifaceted through her choices as both photographer and the photographed. In essence, Sherman is re-presenting the

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<sup>19</sup> Judith Williamson, "A Piece of the Action: Images of 'Woman' in the Photography of Cindy Sherman," in *Cindy Sherman*, ed. Johanna Burton, 6th ed. (Cambridge (Mass.), MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 46.

“image of woman” as constructed and fragmented through her imagined characters, illuminating that these characters only exist based on Western society’s idea of how a woman should look or act. As Williamson explains, “Obviously the dialectic between Sherman as performer and photographer is important; after all, she *does* choose to present *herself* (in disguise) in her pictures. The identities she acts out may be passive and fearful. But look what she *does* with them, what she *makes*: she is in control.”<sup>20</sup> Sherman’s choices and deliberate use of costume to portray the characters in this series turn Williamson’s explanation of society’s “image of woman” on its head. This subversion takes place through Sherman’s control as both the photographer creating the image and in her portrayal of the character she presents as the subject. Sherman takes society’s “image of woman” as passive and vulnerable and accentuates those aspects of perceived femininity, all while completely controlling that perception in her photos. In addition, the choice to use costume to hide her identity in these photos further illuminates the idea that the “image of woman” as perceived by society can only occur through inauthenticity.

In the selected photos for this thesis, *Untitled #56*, *Untitled #2*, and *Untitled #14* (Figures 1-3), as the model, Sherman depicts three different women in three very different environments. Yet, the ambiguity of her expression in each photo correlates with Williamson’s idea that this uncertainty is part of what highlights the societal view of what a woman is. In *Untitled #56* (Figure 1), Sherman only shows the viewer part of her face as she looks pensively at her reflection in the mirror. The uncertainty and vulnerability present in this photo are evident in her gaze; questions of what this woman is thinking and how she views herself arise from her pensive expression. Society’s symbols of femininity further confront viewers in the dark lipstick she wears, her deliberately shaped eyebrows, and her thick mascara. From her expression to how she

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<sup>20</sup> Williamson, “A Piece of the Action: Images of 'Woman' in the Photography of Cindy Sherman,” 51.

has styled her hair and done her makeup in this photo, Sherman has created a character that encompasses society's construction of white femininity through the images provided by classic films.

Another example of analysis exploring the construction of white femininity through the façade of makeup, costume, and expression in Sherman's work is Laura Mulvey's 1996 essay titled, "Cosmetics and Abjection: Cindy Sherman 1977-87." In this essay, Mulvey explores Sherman's use of makeup, high heels, and clothing as iconographical elements in Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*. Uncertainty caused by using these items coupled with Sherman's choice of expression creates compelling slipping between subject and object in these photos. For example, Mulvey states that the disguising makeup and clothing are "...accoutrements of the feminine struggle to conform to a façade of desirability."<sup>21</sup> Used in this manner, these items represent the stereotype that being feminine is also to be desirable and to be sexualized because of that desire. Sherman's use of makeup and costume to become a character and act out different scenarios perpetuates her status as the subject of each photo. In contrast, the viewer of the resulting photo ensures her role as an object on display, desired through the uncertainty of her expressions and the lacking narrative of each photo. According to Mulvey, Sherman causes uneasiness through her dual role on the part of the viewer, stating "...just as she is artist and model, voyeur and looked at, active and passive, subject and object, the photographs set up a comparable variety of positions and responses for the viewer. There is no stable subject position in her work, no resting point that does not quickly shift into something else."<sup>22</sup> The dual role Sherman has in these

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<sup>21</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Cosmetics and Abjection: Cindy Sherman 1977-87," in *Cindy Sherman*, ed. Johanna Burton, 6th ed. (Cambridge (Mass.), MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 68.

<sup>22</sup> Mulvey, "Cosmetics and Abjection: Cindy Sherman 1977-87," 70.



photos of artist and model presents constant uncertainty of what is fabricated and between what she has controlled in the image and what is a result of the moment.

The concepts explored by Mulvey share many similarities with the “image of woman” that Williamson presented in her 1986 article. This similarity showcases that these scholars have parallel findings about the themes presented in Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills*. Both Mulvey and Williamson observed the iconographical use of makeup as symbolic of society’s view of what a woman should aspire to look like and how her expression is symbolic of how women should be passive and submissive to their environment. Therefore, influenced by society’s view of feminine beauty, Sherman constructs these characters through her choices as both the model and photographer to illuminate the fabrication and fiction of societal female stereotypes and the construction of the self.<sup>23</sup> Both scholars provide direction for analyzing Sherman’s use of disguise in her *Untitled Film Stills* that help set a foundation for interpreting her use of disguising filters in her Instagram photos explored later.

Before that analysis can occur, the matter of intent and technology used to create the photos in the *Untitled Film Stills* needs exploration. In the introduction for the book, *Cindy Sherman: The Complete Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman divulges, importantly, that she wanted to be in complete control of her work, and that is a big part of the reason she is both the model and photographer in the majority her photos from this series.<sup>24</sup> Knowing Sherman wanted to be in

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<sup>23</sup> Though not explored in-depth in this thesis, in his essay “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism,” Douglas Crimp also touches on the constructed aspects of Cindy Sherman’s work and how her work exposes the fiction of photography and the construction of the self, influenced by culture and society.

See Douglas Crimp, “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism,” *October* 15 (1980): pp. 91-101, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778455>.

<sup>24</sup> I mention that she was the photographer of most of the photos in this series because she mentions some of them were taken by her father and later cropped by her on page 14 of the introduction. This does not change that she was in control of the photo’s final aesthetic or her role as the photographer and model for the entire series.

See Cindy Sherman, *Cindy Sherman: The COMPLETE Untitled Film Stills*, ed. David Frankel (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 6.

control of these photos, from the aesthetic created by being the photographer and being in control of the expressions she wanted to portray illuminates how scholars have become fascinated by the fluidity of her roles. Sherman may not have been acutely aware of this fascination when she initially took the photos; however, as previously noted, scholars such as Mulvey and Williamson have used this to examine these photos through a feminist lens. Sherman's control in creating the images and how she portrays herself in disguise in these photos opens them to the interpretation that they are a statement of taking control of society's ideal feminine aesthetic. Likewise, Sherman's view behind her creation of these photos also opens the photos to the interpretation of the presence of feminist undertones. As Sherman explained about the creation of the *Untitled Film Stills*:

I know I was not consciously aware of this thing called the 'male gaze.' It was the way I was shooting, the mimicry of the style of black and white grade-Z motion pictures that produced the self-consciousness of these characters, not my knowledge of feminist theory. I suppose unconsciously, or semiconsciously at best, I was wrestling with some sort of turmoil of my own about understanding women. The characters weren't dummies; they weren't just airhead actresses. They were women struggling with something but I didn't know what.<sup>25</sup>

Even though Sherman was not necessarily fully cognizant of the themes now recognized in the *Untitled Film Stills* series, she was aware of a broader, burgeoning unease with the idealized portrayal of women in film. This unease is present in each photo in the expressions of each character she portrays, coupled with the aesthetics of her disguise.

One example of the unease presented in these photos is *Untitled #2* (Figure 2). This photo shows Sherman as a woman admiring her reflection in a small mirror placed over a bathroom sink while wearing only a towel. This character has been caught in an intimate and private

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<sup>25</sup> Sherman, *Cindy Sherman: The COMPLETE Untitled Film Stills*, 9.

moment, presumably before entering the shower, as her hair appears to be dry. She seems unaware of the camera lens that has frozen her in this moment of reflection. As a photo, viewers do not know the duration of time that Sherman's character was at the mirror and this raises questions about if this moment was just a passing glance, if she was practicing poses, or admiring her beauty. Regardless of why this woman was at the mirror or for how long, her unawareness of the viewer's presence in this very private moment is uncomfortable. It highlights the leering intrusion of the camera's lens and, subsequently, the viewer of the photo. This intrusiveness of the viewer is reminiscent of the unsolicited attention and objectification women encounter in their daily lives. Based on her compositional choices and costume choice, like that in *Untitled #56*, Sherman has provided viewers with images depicting the uncertainty, vulnerability, and objectification present in society's idealized image of women. This objectification is present in the image and the way the image was taken and through Sherman's control as both photographer and model.

Understanding the previous scholarship about Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* allows for a foundation of possible themes present in her later work, particularly the photos she posts on Instagram. Since these photos are posted exclusively on Instagram and Sherman began creating them in 2017, this lack of scholarship is not surprising. While there has not been much in the mode of scholarly analysis, there has been some interest in Sherman's Instagram photos from media outlets. One of the only scholars who has mentioned Sherman's Instagram photos was Paul Moorhouse in the exhibition catalog for the 2019 retrospective at the National Portrait Gallery in London, *Cindy Sherman*. In his essay, "Cindy Sherman's Personae," the Instagram photos are mentioned merely in passing as an avenue Sherman uses to create her persona as an

artist.<sup>26</sup> This mention of Sherman's Instagram photos, while brief, brings awareness to them as part of her oeuvre. Moorhouse does not discuss the style or thematic content of these photos, nor does he provide any comparison between these and Sherman's previous series, leaving their interpretation open for further discussion.

An article published in *New York Magazine*, "Ugly Beauty," written by Parul Sehgal in 2018, provides more insight into the similarities between the themes present in Sherman's previous work and how they relate to her Instagram photos. Sehgal's article is mainly biographical, weaving Sherman's personal life with her work while speculating about similar themes presented through her different series. Particularly at the beginning of the article, Sehgal refers to Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* and contrasts their themes with her Instagram photos. Essentially saying that the characters in the *Untitled Film Stills* portray a narrative through Sherman's compositional choices whereas, "Her new mock self-portraits are of ordinary people, albeit cartoonishly caricatured. They are some of the first pure protagonists in Sherman's work: These women are not metaphors, they are not waiting to be represented, rescued or destroyed. They are gloriously, catastrophically themselves..."<sup>27</sup> This is a very surface-level comparison between the two sets of images, with no references to theory or comparison between specific photos. Moreover, his description fails to attribute any of the themes of her previous series to her Instagram photos, when, as will be explored momentarily, the themes Sherman has presented in the *Untitled Film Stills* are glaringly present. Though the overall aesthetic of her work has changed through the years, Sherman has shifted to reflect the contemporary use of technology and social media to highlight those ever-present themes.

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<sup>26</sup> Paul Moorhouse et al., *Cindy Sherman* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2019), 16.

<sup>27</sup> Parul Sehgal, "Ugly Beauty." *New York Times Magazine*, Oct 07, 2018, 62-69,95,97, <https://ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/magazines/ugly-beauty/docview/2116361166/se-2?accountid=15078>, 64.

One example of scholarship that ties the themes between Sherman's photographs is Pamela Church Gibson's 2018 article, "Cindy Sherman in a New Millennium: Fashion, Feminism, Art and Ageing." Gibson's is one of the only scholarly articles that examine themes that carry through all of Sherman's series, focusing on fashion as the primary indicator of the consistent feminist issues throughout the decades. Her interest was in Sherman's manner of challenging the portrayal of aging women in the fashion industry and the internal conflict Sherman has expressed about her experience with aging. Gibson focuses most of her analysis on Sherman's partnerships with the fashion industry and her work portraying older women wearing couture in her series referred to as *Society Portraits*. She then briefly ties those feminist themes to Sherman's recent Instagram photos at the very end of the article. Utilizing the work of Mulvey and Williamson, Gibson sets a foundation for themes presented in Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* and how they apply to her later work. She does not blatantly state that these themes are reflected in Sherman's Instagram photos; however, Gibson suggests the possibility for further analysis using themes present in Sherman's earlier work to explore how age and her ties to the fashion industry have influenced later series.<sup>28</sup>

For example, the photo on Sherman's Instagram captioned "Smile" (Figure 4) contains Sherman in the foreground altered to look older with elongated fingers and large open eyes looking up out of the image's frame. However, she is not smiling, as the caption would suggest. Sherman is present in the photo's background with a camera in front of her face pointing the lens right at the viewer. While Sherman appears in this photo at least twice, her identity is hidden by the viewer in both cases. Her foreground image is hidden through distortions to enhance the size of her eyes, the shape of her face, and by adding age spots and wrinkles to her skin, while the

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<sup>28</sup> Pamela Church Gibson, "Cindy Sherman in a NEW Millennium: Fashion, Feminism, Art and Ageing," *Australian Feminist Studies* 33, no. 98 (February 2018): pp. 481-497, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2019.1567256>.

camera physically hides her face in the background figure. The distortions accentuate what many would view as flaws women should hide. Here, Sherman does the opposite, contradicting the notion of finding a most flattering pose in favor of accentuating those flaws. By using the filters in this contradictory way, Sherman is subverting the practice of the selfie as being flattering and idealizing. Nevertheless, by posting these portraits to Instagram, Sherman is also mobilizing the practice of selfies and validating a selfie as a type of self-portrait.

In both sets of photos, Sherman uses concealment to showcase the constructed façade of these images where her identity is not available to viewers. In the *Untitled Film Stills*, she dresses up using wigs and cosmetics. However, the masquerade is created in her Instagram photos after the original photo is taken and then manipulated using digital filters and applications. Through these veneers, the photos in both series initiate a dialogue with the viewer. This dialogue results in illuminating constructed female stereotypes, such as those explored above. The most apparent similarity between the *Untitled Film Stills* and Instagram photos is Sherman's use of herself as the model in all the photos, explicitly using herself as the subject while also remaining the object of the resulting image by the viewer. Slipping between subject and object in this way is not unique to Sherman's photos, as artists have been using themselves in their work for centuries. However, the additional layer of using disguise through costume in the *Untitled Film Stills* and image altering filters in the Instagram photos highlights the objectified and constructed nature of the female body by society.

In each set of photos, because Sherman uses herself in the photos, she becomes the object to be viewed, a commodity to the viewer as something to be observed and desired. This desire is based on her choice to dress in character for the photos of the *Untitled Film Stills* and her use of camouflaging filters in her Instagram photos, creating a sense of uncertainty and curiosity on the

part of the viewer. Desire is also active through Sherman's narrative, compositional choices in the *Untitled Film Stills* to draw in viewers to know more about each character. Sherman's Instagram photos question reality and, in turn, cause a desire to understand the truth beneath the disguising filters and distortions while being drawn into the photo by the figure's gaze. This concept of desire is related to the male gaze present in cinema, as explored by Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema":

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Women displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to striptease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, place to and signifies male desire.<sup>29</sup>

Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* activate the male gaze, as Mulvey describes by appealing to male desire, which is amplified by the gaze of each character. Looking off-screen or at herself in each photo creates passivity, causing her character to become an object of the viewer's infiltrating gaze. Sherman's character is also archived at that moment through the photograph and is never attainable in reality to the viewer, resulting in further fantasy, desire, and a relationship of objectification.<sup>30</sup> Sherman's choice of depicting the aesthetic of cinematic film stars of the 1950s

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<sup>29</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Essay. In *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Scott MacKenzie. University of California Press, 2021.  
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uwm/reader.action?docID=1650802&ppg=526>, 533.

<sup>30</sup> Roland Barthes notes this loss of tactility and reality through the archive of one unique instantaneous moment through a photo, "What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially." Similarly, the photos of Sherman in the *Untitled Film Stills* are an archive of the character she is representing in that one moment in time, never to be attainable again. As a result, to those who view the photo, the desire to know more details about that moment or fantasize about her character creates a supply and demand dynamic. The viewer demands more answers and craves that unique moment that the photo can never manifest as an archive of a specific moment in time.

See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010, 4-7.

and placing her characters in intimate scenes like that in *Untitled #2* (Figure 2) where she is dressed in a towel and posing in the mirror, creates intrigue about what she is doing and thinking. This uncertainty creates desire on the viewer's part to make sense of the moment portrayed, and in some cases, to fantasize sexually about this character and what happens after this scene has occurred. Also, the camera angle Sherman chose for *Untitled #2* places the viewer outside of the bathroom looking into the space through a doorway as an intruder to this very intimate moment. As a result, the relationship between the viewer and the woman in the photo is one of intrusion. The viewer playing the role of the voyeuristic uninvited observer and creating an objectified relationship between Sherman as the model and the viewer. By placing the viewer in this role, Sherman has brought attention to the sexual objectification of the female body and depending on the viewer, their interaction with the photo may be uncomfortable, one of curiosity, or one of sexual arousal. In any case, Sherman is the object used to elicit a response by the viewer to accentuate the different ways the female body can be objectified through the viewer's gaze.

Looking at another photo from the *Untitled Film Stills* series, *Untitled #14* (Figure 3), viewers are presented with Sherman dressed in a short, black dress, wearing a dark, short-haired wig again with heavy makeup and a string of pearls around her neck. She is in the middle ground of the photo with her back to the mirror and is looking off to the left of the image at something or someone not pictured. Viewers are presented with a table in the photo's bottom-left corner with a dresser and mirror in the background. It is left up to the viewer to determine who or what has caused the woman to turn and look off the frame. The viewer objectifies Sherman's character in this photo through the uncertainty of what the woman is looking at and her expression. Does it indicate her coyness, or is she embarrassed? Is she a woman, or is she only dressed as one using society's symbols of femininity? The unresolved questions presented in this



photo activate the viewer's imagination to create a storyline and character identity behind this one still moment. Desire is therefore active through the viewer's imagination, and this character is likewise objectified through the viewer's gaze and yearning to figure out her circumstances and characterization.

While desire is created differently in Sherman's Instagram photos than in her *Untitled Film Stills*, the characters are still highly objectified in these photos through viewer engagement. Referring to the image captioned, "Smile" on Sherman's Instagram, viewers are confronted with questions about the character's circumstances and what reality is present in the image. Like in *Untitled #14*, the woman in the foreground of "Smile" is looking outside of the photo's frame, as is the woman depicted on her t-shirt. This compositional choice raises questions about what this character is contemplating, engaging the viewer's imagination. While in *Untitled #14*, Sherman used her expression and masquerade through society's symbols of feminine beauty to draw attention to the objectified nature of her body; in "Smile," she used filters to enhance her eyes, adjust the wrinkling of her skin and add age spots to highlight realistic features of aging women that society deems unsavory. This woman still adorns makeup and tidy hair to fit into society's "image of woman." As a result of these filters, viewers encounter an image that challenges their understanding of beauty, aging and raises questions about any presence of reality. The questions of reality and what beauty means create curiosity on the viewer's part resulting in the same desire between them and the image as is portrayed in *Untitled #14*.

The elements of disguise and compositional choices in both the *Untitled Film Stills* and Instagram photos, though executed differently, exude similarities in the objectification of Sherman's characters. With the knowledge that Sherman is the model in each series and in control of what she wants to portray, she can use makeup and filters as tools to subvert initial

perceptions of the photos and force viewers to take what Rebecca Schneider labels as a ‘second look’ at what they stand for beneath the surface. As Schneider explains in her book *The Explicit Body in Performance*, a ‘second look’ encapsulates the concept of explicitly using the sexualized female body to “...wield the master’s tools against the master’s house, to force a second look at the terms and terrain of that sexualization.”<sup>31</sup> To force a second look at these photos, Sherman uses makeup and costume in her *Untitled Film Stills* and filters in her Instagram photos to subvert Western society’s concept of white female beauty by accentuating the constructed nature of that image through distortions and expressions in both sets of photos. Essentially, she uses the makeup, costumes, and filters as Western society’s tools representing idealized female beauty to challenge the authenticity of this ideal and highlight their use in the objectification of the female body while further exploring them as a visual representation of masking one’s identity. Sherman’s work in both the *Untitled Film Stills* and her Instagram portraits explore the authenticity of how the self is presented to the public through the construct of Western society’s view of how a woman should look or what makes her beautiful.

Though the *Untitled Film Stills* and Instagram photos were created nearly four decades apart, and the method of creation, aesthetic, and audience interaction are vastly different between them, both sets of photos hold strong themes regarding authenticity and what that means regarding idealized images of the self or characters. As will be explored further, the way viewers encounter the photos is a crucial distinction between a photographic self-portrait and a selfie. Understanding these parallel underlying themes presented in both sets of photos will highlight why they should not be considered selfies. As will be explored, this distinction is important because of the differences in the method of displaying the photographs and how each series

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<sup>31</sup> Rebecca Schneider, "The Secret's Eye." In *The Explicit Body in Performance*, 88-125. London: Taylor & Frances Group, 1997. Accessed March 25, 2018, 105.

provides a further context of Sherman's views of Western society's white female stereotypes and selfies as a practice.

### 3. Subverting the Selfie

Defining a photograph as a selfie is not as simple as saying that the photographer and the camera are shown in the resulting image. There are technological considerations in the form of the interactivity of social media platforms in addition to the context provided by captions and other photos, and the compositional choices by the photographer. There is also the consideration of how viewers encounter the photos on social media versus how they approach photos displayed in a physical space. Exploring Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* photos and her portraits on Instagram using the previously mentioned criteria shows that characterizing her work as a selfie simply because she is both the photographer and the photographed is problematic for both. By using Sherman's work as a case study for understanding the complexities related to defining a self-portrait as a selfie, the future mischaracterization of the work created by artists who use social media as a medium is avoidable. As a reminder, the criteria used to determine how Sherman's work subverts the concept of a selfie are as follows: the presence of the photographer in the resulting photo, the photographer's compositional choices and intent, and the unique interactivity of social media that results in shifting power dynamics regarding the context of the photo through textual commentary.

Selfies as a concept are new; they have only been around for a short time, whereas artists have practiced self-portraiture for centuries. One of the first and foremost disqualifiers for Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* not fitting within the selfie concept is the time the photos were created. Created in the 1970s, Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* were around much longer than the concept of selfie, while self-portraiture was a common and prevalent practice amongst artists. The only sure way for artists to reach their audience when Sherman created the *Untitled Film Stills* was through display in a physical gallery or museum space. The physical display options

did not allow for the same level of interactivity or contextual relationships afforded to the portraits Sherman has been posting to Instagram in recent years or to self-portraits that social media users post of themselves. Technology in the form of applications and software have also changed the way photographers can modify the images they take digitally through corrective filters, without the need for hours spent in a dark room with chemicals and manual photo development techniques. These technological tools have created a more instantaneous way self-portraits can be created and shared with the public, creating a unique opportunity for artists to engage with their audience more quickly and interactively. Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* clearly should not be categorized as selfies because their creation occurred long before selfies were a concept. However, her Instagram portraits were and are continuously created after selfies became a social media phenomenon, and Sherman regularly posts these photos exclusively on Instagram. Based on this one criterion regarding the technology available at the time of their creation, Sherman's Instagram portraits could fall within the concept of the selfie. In contrast, her *Untitled Film Stills* would clearly not fall within the definition. However, there are other factors that clarify why photos from both series should not be classified as selfies, including how the audience interacts with the photos and the themes that both sets of photos share.

As explored previously, social media creates a unique interactive experience for both the viewer of the photos and for the photo's creator. The interpersonal relationship created by posting selfies to social media between the viewer, the photographer, and the self creates shifting control over the context and understanding of the photo. As a result, artists have an opportunity to explore this interactivity as part of their work and as another means to make a statement about social media practices. Because Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* were created before social media was a tool for artists to utilize and were predominantly displayed in a gallery or museum setting,

the photos from that series do not have the same level of interpersonal relationships and interactivity that her Instagram portraits do. Even so, Sherman's photos on her Instagram account provide opportunities for others to react to these portraits while also giving users a chance to directly interact with the photos she has created through comments and hitting a like button. By posting to Instagram, Sherman uses social media as a tool to illuminate the inauthenticity and superficiality of selfies and social media by accentuating her features through filters that would otherwise be deemed ugly, unfavorable, or hidden by other social media users who post selfies. Essentially, she is using the common societal practice of posting photos of the self to social media to highlight the constructed nature of those photos on social media. Through highlighting the lack of reality behind using social media by posting distorted portraits of herself, Sherman also showcases the empowering aspects of sharing photos of the self on social media as a mode of expression and commentary.

For example, one of the most telling indications is that Sherman's work on Instagram should not be taken at face value or understood simply through the selfie concept based on her views. In an interview with Derek Blasberg for the *Gagosian Quarterly* in 2020, Sherman disclosed her disdain for the concept of selfies and constant posting to social media by stating:

The thing I hate most about selfies is the way most people are just trying to look a certain way. They often look almost exactly the same in every pose, and it's a pose that's aiming to be the most flattering, which isn't at all the way self-portraiture has traditionally been used—it was never about self-promotion or making one look one's best, it was more about studying a face, using one's own face to learn about portraiture in general when, I suppose, no other face was available. Also, I've always thought that phone cameras

distort the face. The lens is slightly wide angle, which isn't inherently very attractive anyway.<sup>32</sup>

In her conversation with Blasberg, Sherman expressed her feelings about social media practices and specifically that she has negative feelings about the practice of selfies. This statement also speaks directly to her intent in creating the portraits she began posting to Instagram to explore what manipulations can be done to her face using available software. Understanding that Sherman views selfies in the context of self-promotion and attention-seeking behavior showcases how her Instagram portraits are also a way to show the artificiality of what people present to the public on social media platforms. By posting these portraits to social media, Sherman is posting photos of herself as subject and photographer, which would fall within the basic definition of a selfie. However, Sherman's use of software and filters to manipulate her likeness is an exaggeration used to accentuate her views of the inauthenticity of social media and selfies. As a result, Sherman is subverting the base meaning of the selfie by using the filters to disguise her likeness and transform her face into a new character, virtually unrecognizable as herself.

Taking another look at the photo captioned "Smile" (Figure 4), the images of three women are presented in three different ways. Knowing that Sherman uses herself as the model in all her photos, all three women are representations of Sherman in some form or another. The primary figure in the photo has been manipulated with filters and distortions to enhance the size of her eyes, adds wrinkles and age spots, twist her nose, and elongate her fingers. At the same time, she remains in a contemplative pose. Like the characters in her *Untitled Film Stills*, with this portrayal of herself, Sherman hides behind a façade while illuminating desirability through the uncertainty in her expression. Sherman then also appears in the background, holding a

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<sup>32</sup> Cindy Sherman, "In Conversation: Cindy Sherman," interview by Derek Blasberg, *Gagosian Quarterly*, 2020, <https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2020/04/16/cindy-sherman-derek-blasberg-in-conversation/>.

camera to her face, hiding again, but this time with a camera that she points directly at the viewer. The final image of Sherman is on the figure in the foreground's shirt, where her features are reminiscent of the women in her *Untitled Film Stills* series, with a blond wig and heavy makeup. Here her face is also distorted by the folds of the shirt's fabric, again hiding Sherman's face.

Sherman's presence in all three instances fulfills the first criteria for a selfie, the photographer's presence in the resulting photo. Making this photo a stronger candidate to fall within the definition of a selfie is the presence of the camera pointed at the viewer. As previously examined, the device used to take the photo is often in the resulting image referred to as a selfie; however, it is not the only indicator of a selfie. In this case, the camera is pointed directly at the viewer, suggesting that Sherman took that image of herself while looking into a mirror; although, it could not have resulted in the original photo of herself in the foreground. Each photo of herself in this image would have been taken at different points in time then assembled into this specific composition. Even though this photo was shared on Instagram, fulfilling the third criteria of being a selfie through the interactivity and interpersonal relationships present by sharing photos on social media, this resulting photo "Smile" veers away from being defined entirely as a selfie. The separation from the selfie concept occurs because of Sherman's choice to use three images of herself taken at different times and deliberately composed into this one image. So, while the individual photos of Sherman within "Smile" could fall into the definition of a selfie on their own, being composed into this one image changes the contextual meaning of all three images of herself, resulting in an artistic and deliberate artistic composition of self-exploration.

The contextual relationship between the images of Sherman in "Smile," along with her choice to compose them into one image, also encourage viewers to take a second look at each



figure in the photo and the entire composition. Sherman causes a second look in this photo through the three very different images of herself and the specific tools she used to hide her identity for each. For the foreground image of herself, Sherman modified her appearance using filters, as previously explored, as the tools commonly used by selfie producers in order to accentuate the lack of authenticity of the resulting image.

The background image of Sherman is deliberately looking out toward the viewer with the camera blocking her face, again hiding. Instead of the filters and distortions, she uses a physical object in this photo while engaging the viewer through the camera's lens. With this part of the photo, Sherman accentuates the exchange and relationship between the photographer and viewer, representing the interpersonal relationship that occurs with photos of the self shared on social media platforms. Not only that, but this direct gaze with the viewer is representative of subverting the gaze of the viewer and empowering the figures in the photo by reciprocating the viewer's gaze.<sup>33</sup> This reciprocation directly subverts the notion that the figures in the photo are only subjected to the gaze of the viewer. Instead, Sherman has taken control of the gaze and shifted it back onto the viewer, equalizing the power dynamics of the gaze. By equalizing the power dynamics of the gaze through the camera, Sherman has subverted the objectification of the figures in this image by taking control and turning the gaze back onto the viewer. Even though Sherman will not observe the viewer through the image, the connotation of being viewed through the camera's lens creates the illusion of a more tactile relationship between the viewer

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<sup>33</sup> Laura Mulvey's exploration of the male gaze in her article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," builds on the concepts presented in Lacanian psychoanalysis related to the power dynamics of the gaze between the viewer and the viewed. This analysis is done mainly through the concept that the viewer holds the power in the viewer and viewed relationship, where the viewer ends up objectifying the viewed through their gaze. See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema (UK, 1975)," in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Scott MacKenzie, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2014), pp. 526-542, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uwm/reader.action?docID=1650802&ppg=526>.

and the viewed. Through the creation of this illusion, Sherman has taken more control over the viewer's relationship with the image.

The third representation of Sherman in "Smile" on the foreground figure's shirt is reminiscent of the characters she created in her *Untitled Film Stills* series; she has a short, blond curly haircut and is wearing heavy makeup. Presumably, she is smiling; however, it is quite likely that the smile is caused by the folds of the shirt's fabric. As previously explored, the photos in Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* challenged the construction of female beauty using makeup and costume to accentuate the fabrication of the idealized image of what female beauty should be, based on Western society's ideals. An additional layer to the photo of Sherman on the foreground figure's shirt is through disguising her full facial expression and creating uncertainty for the viewer on if this woman is smiling or not. The uncertainty of the woman's expression creates desire on the part of the viewer to understand her authentic expression. This desire to understand the uncertainty of Sherman's expression on the shirt accentuates the mystery of the image. This mystery results in the objectification of Sherman's image on the shirt, first through being placed on an object worn by another figure in the image and second, through the desire to know if her smile is genuine.

Sherman's choice to deliberately combine these three images of herself into one composition accentuates how she has complete control of the resulting image. Not only did Sherman control the creation of each image of herself individually, but she also had additional control over the compilation of all three into the composition. As explored above, each photo of herself within this composition could fall within the definition of a selfie. Individually, each contains multiple exaggerations related to the selfie concept. Composing the individual self-portraits together plays on the relational context influencing their interpretation. Each portrait

individually contains distortions and a character to be interpreted. When collaged together, the individual portraits influence how the others are interpreted based on their location and the direction of their gaze in the resulting composition. Therefore, the relationships between the three images of Sherman in "Smile" also showcase how placing multiple images of the self into a composition together impacts how each is interpreted based on where they are in relation to each other. These contextual relationships mirror those that occur between photos in an Instagram gallery. Selfies are placed in context with other images of someone's life, providing context for viewers to interpret the person. In the case of "Smile," Sherman has intentionally controlled the contextual relationship between each of the photos of herself before sharing it to social media. On social media, the control of the photo's context moves from her to the viewers who comment on or like the whole composition. As an example, the first few comments when viewing the post for this photo on Sherman's Instagram account shows users who have commented with either a single emoji, a string of them to communicate a specific message, or positive text-based comments.<sup>34</sup> These comments provide insight into how viewers perceive the image, how they interact with it, and how they respond to each other's comments. The interactivity viewers have with the image, and each other further shows how this photo can be classified as a selfie. However, this photo ultimately subverts the concept of a selfie by incorporating three photos that can be considered a selfie with aspects that question the authenticity of selfie practice into a single composition.

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<sup>34</sup> To respect the privacy of individuals, I will not be providing a screenshot or including specific comments in this thesis, instead I will provide a general description of what was said about the image and how that affects the perception of Sherman's photo. Also, emojis create another level of complexity to social media interactions and the potential for user interactions to change perceptions about the posted image based on cultural and generational understanding of what each emoji represents. Due to this complexity, I will not be exploring the emojis in user comments on Sherman's Instagram account at this time.

Sherman also explores selfies through filters and composition in photos where she includes one image of herself. In the photo captioned “Happy” (Figure 5), for example, Sherman depicts one image of herself, a filter-laden and distorted character in the center of the photo, directly gazing at the viewer. In this photo, Sherman appears to have been cut out and placed on a background of the outdoors with mostly sky as the backdrop. Her character is not smiling, but their mouth is open, showing off large pearly white teeth that are too big for their mouth. On top of their head is a crown of pink and magenta flowers held by their hand behind her head. The most eye-catching part of this photo is the facial hair Sherman has placed on the character, donning both a large dark mustache and a long, braided goatee. Here again, Sherman deliberately uses the filters to distort and hide her identity. Regardless, the solitary image of herself is more reminiscent of a photo typically referred to as a selfie because of the upward angle and direct gaze with the viewer, and this image was shared to Sherman's Instagram account. Like those in “Smile,” this image subverts the selfie concept through Sherman’s use of filters to accentuate and distort her features into this new persona. Again, the exaggerated features are a way to showcase the idea that a selfie is continually enhanced and not representative of the true self. These exaggerations also highlight the distorting qualities of the camera lens.

“Happy” also is a portrayal of taking control and eliciting a second look from the viewer based on elements in the photo that create uncertainty. Where in her *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman used wigs and heavy makeup to recreate the feminine ideal based on 1950s cinema stars; in this photo, she adds the facial hair and the flowers as another form of disguise. Here she is toying with the socially constructed concept of gender by using an often-accepted symbol of masculinity in the image in the form of facial hair. Without going too much into what that all entails, “Happy” illuminates a shift from exposing the inauthenticity of Western society’s

accepted view of white female beauty to accentuating gender as a fluid construct.<sup>35</sup>

Understanding that Sherman is the model in the photo and the filters including her beard and the flowers on her head are overlayed on her original photo, she encourages a second look by the viewer to try and see aspects of the photo that may reveal her actual appearance.

In this photo, as with the previously explored “Smile,” Sherman is in complete control over how her photo has been taken, the filters used on it, and the placement of herself in relation to the background. Like a selfie, this photo was also deliberately shared to Instagram, where users can comment on and modify the context of the image through their interaction with it. Thereby users displace some of Sherman's original control in its creation. This photo strongly subverts the selfie concept because Sherman uses the filters and distortions again to create a new character, accentuating the construction of the self to share on social media.

Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* and her Instagram photos provide a unique opportunity to explore self-portraiture against the contemporary concept of the selfie, even though they were created decades apart from one another. Based on the first criteria that the photographer must be present in a selfie, both sets of photos would fit this basic definition. However, it is imperative to recognize the technological capabilities at the time of each set of photos creation. Created in the 1970s, long before digital cameras or the internet were invented, Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* never encountered the unique interactivity and interpersonal relationships afforded to her Instagram photos. As a result, it is highly inaccurate to categorize the photos from her *Untitled Film Stills* series within the selfie concept. Viewers of the photos in this series have primarily

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<sup>35</sup> Judith Butler's first chapter in her book, *Gender Trouble*, problematizes gender and feminism based on appearances and what society deems acceptable or not for a particular group of people. Sherman's work encompasses many of these ideas, but within the scope of this thesis, an in-depth analysis of appearances and the construct of gender would not do this topic justice. It is worth noting here that this could be explored in more detail at a future time.

See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 2006), 1-34.

encountered them in a physical museum or gallery setting where no textual dialogue with the creator or the image can occur. Sherman's Instagram photos, however, were initially shared on Instagram enabling dialogue to occur between the photo, Sherman, and the viewer in the form of written text or clicking on a like button. This relationship is a crucial component of what makes a self-portrait photo a selfie because of the shift in contextual control from the photographer to the viewer through the comments on the photo and how the viewer interprets the image. Like the viewer, the photographer can also comment on the viewer's responses to the photo or modify their original caption, resulting in another shift in contextual control. Even though Sherman's Instagram photos fit the technological and photographer as photographed aspects of a selfie, the underlying themes regarding inauthenticity based on her compositional choices and by using digital manipulation to distort her face subvert the concept of a selfie by hiding her identity. Her intent and feelings about posting to social media and selfies as inauthentic and as a way for self-promotion also inform the context behind the creation of these photos and why they subvert rather than support the criteria of a selfie.

In essence, with her Instagram portraits, Sherman uses social media and the creation of selfies as a medium to explore different ways to portray herself while remaining consistent with the themes presented in her past work. For example, in the Blasberg interview with Sherman, when asked about why she began posting to social media, she stated:

I'd been hearing about Instagram all the time but I didn't really know what it was until I went on a trip to Japan with a friend and she insisted on doing it. I thought, "Well, I'll just share photos of my vacation." And then, slowly—it's kind of fascinating how it creeps in—I got interested in discovering all these different sorts of subcultures, like

people who do makeup but aren't really makeup artists as I know them. It's a whole separate art form that I wouldn't have known about if it wasn't for Instagram.<sup>36</sup>

While she did not initially set out to subvert the concept of a selfie, with each new portrait that she posts to her account, Sherman accentuates the constructed reality behind posting to social media by exaggerating her features and creating abstract renderings of herself. Her statement about finding Instagram and different photo manipulating apps exposing her to a new art form shows how Sherman sees the potential for social media and selfies as a practice to use as a medium for her artwork.

To summarize, based on the technology available at their creation, Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* automatically are incapable of being considered selfies. The selfie concept did not exist at the time of their creation; neither did the social media networks that create the interpersonal relationships required to be considered a selfie between the photographer, viewer, and the photos. While the Instagram photos fit two criteria for being considered a selfie, the intention behind their creation and the deliberate compositional choices subvert the concept. They subvert the selfie concept by hiding her identity and accentuating the concept of inauthenticity and a lack of reality behind the practice of selfies and photographic representations of the self.

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<sup>36</sup>Cindy Sherman, "In Conversation: Cindy Sherman," interview by Derek Blasberg, *Gagosian Quarterly*, 2020, <https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2020/04/16/cindy-sherman-derek-blasberg-in-conversation/>.

## Conclusions and Remaining Questions

Social media and technological capabilities have altered how people interact with artists' work. Nonetheless, it is important to remain cautious when applying a contemporary term such as the selfie concept to art created before the technology that brought about the concept existed. By taking a contemporary concept like the selfie and anachronistically applying it to photographic self-portraits before the concept existed opens the door for non-photographic self-portraits to be mischaracterized as a selfie simply because of the artist's dual role as the creator and the subject of the image.

Through establishing criteria that constitute what a selfie is and showing how that can relate to the work of a single artist across many decades, the analysis in this thesis provides a framework for understanding the selfie as a type of self-portraiture unique to social media interactivity. The analysis of Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* and her recent Instagram photos shows that the photos from both can be considered self-portraits of Sherman. However, they cannot all be considered selfies based on the technology available at the time of creation, artistic intent, and how audiences interact with the photos. Though the photos examined in this thesis contain images of Sherman that she has taken, only the two Instagram photos fit the essential criteria of being shared on social media. By sharing them on social media, Sherman created an opportunity for interpersonal relationships between the viewer, artist, and the photo that could not happen with her *Untitled Film Stills* in a physical museum or gallery setting. Even so, the use of filters and deliberate composition choices to enhance the inauthentic nature of selfies subverts the notion of instantaneous documentation of the self while also echoing themes that resonate in her earlier body of work. The photos Sherman posts to Instagram should only loosely be considered selfies for those reasons.



Another aspect to consider about how Sherman views the photos she has posted to Instagram is that she has had many made into tapestries. In a 2021 exhibition at Sprüth Magers in Los Angeles, Sherman explored the medium of tapestries by using the photos she produced originally for Instagram.<sup>37</sup> Analysis into Sherman's shift from solely exhibiting these photos on Instagram to transforming them into tangible art objects to be displayed in a traditional gallery is needed to fully understand how she views the portraits she shares digitally, as worthy of exhibition in a physical space. Also, the shift from digital to tangible of the same image should be explored in relation to the problematization of copies versus the original and the experiences viewers encounter with the tapestries compared to the photos on Instagram. Because Sherman created these tapestries of many of the same photos she posted to Instagram, using the tapestries and original Instagram photos provides an excellent case study for exploring how viewers interact with and respond to the image in different environments. Exploration into how using tapestry as a medium instead of traditional photo paper would also be fascinating to explore based on the past practice of copying modern artworks into tapestry for monetary and preservation goals.<sup>38</sup>

Further research and analysis of specific photos from Sherman's Instagram account is needed to fully understand how these photos relate to one another and how the comments of viewers impact the overall meaning of the individual photos. Exploration into the specific comments in this thesis was limited to respect the privacy of the Instagram users who interacted

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<sup>37</sup> "Exhibition: Cindy Sherman, 'Tapestries' at Sprüth Magers, Los Angeles, USA," Ocula the best in contemporary art icon., accessed November 12, 2021, <https://ocula.com/art-galleries/spruth-magers/exhibitions/tapestries/>.

<sup>38</sup> The chapter "Reproduction" in the book *Weaving Modernism: Postwar Tapestry between Paris and New York* by K.L.H. Wells explores the tradition of modern art being recreated into tapestries for many reasons and explores the problems with considering the tapestries as simply a copy of the original artwork. Similar exploration and conclusions can be made about Sherman's choice to replicate her Instagram photos as tapestries and displayed in a gallery or museum.

See K.L.H. Wells, "Reproduction," in *Weaving Modernism: Postwar Tapestry between Paris and New York* (London: Yale University Press, 2019), pp. 107-155.

with Sherman's photos. Analysis of the commentary was also limited due to the additional complexity that text, and the use of emojis bring into the equation. Emojis are interpreted in various ways as images that convey meaning, and their meaning can vary depending on cultural and generational perceptions. Additional research is also needed to understand the contextual relationships between Sherman's self-portraits and the social justice and lifestyle photos she posts alongside them. Studying those contextual relationships will further determine how she uses Instagram, whether as a medium or simply as a mode of sharing her most recent work with her audience. Analyzing Sherman's work in the context of social media and selfies also provides an avenue to understand and further analyze how other artists are using social media for their work. For example, artist Amelia Ulman recently took to Instagram and created a piece titled, *Excellences & Perfections*, where she deliberately changed her appearance and the types of photos she posted, like Sherman, to accentuate Westernized stereotypes of how white women should appear and act on social media.<sup>39</sup> Ulman did not use filters as a disguise; instead, she used the entire practice of posting photos to social media to create a new fictional narrative about herself. Exploring social media as the medium for interactive art showcases how artists use interactive platforms to make a point and how people who consistently post to social media use it to tell their own stories. An in-depth study into the contextual relationships between photos on social media sites and the dialogue between users will provide more insight into both selfies as a practice and the narratives that users create about themselves.

Social media has created a new avenue for people to explore virtual connections, document them, and display them for others to interact with and view. Selfies as a practice have become a common form of self-portraiture used by people to control how they look to other

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<sup>39</sup> Emma Maguire, "Constructing the 'Instagirl,' Deconstructing the Self-Brand: Amalia Ulman's Instagram Hoax," *European Journal of Life Writing* 8 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.21827/ejlw.8.35546>.

users on social media. While there has been a wide breadth of scholarship on selfies as a concept, there has been very little in differentiating between defining a self-portrait as a selfie and the implications of generalizing all self-portraiture under the umbrella of being considered a selfie. Likewise, Cindy Sherman's early photos within her *Untitled Film Stills* series have been highly analyzed by scholars since their creation. In contrast, her recent Instagram photos have had very little scholarly attention though themes from her earlier series permeate these new portraits. Sherman's work provides a unique opportunity for scholars to understand how self-portraits by artists could fall under the concept of a selfie and how social media can be explored as a medium. Analysis like that in this thesis shows the potential for social media and social practices like the creation of selfies to be used deliberately by artists to make a point about social practices and why generalizing all self-portraiture as falling within the concept of a selfie is inaccurate. Ultimately, through using Sherman's work as a case study and exploring the technological, interpersonal, and reception differences between her *Untitled Film Stills* and Instagram photos, the distinction of what constitutes a selfie can be discerned. This distinction also provides a framework for further scholarly analysis of selfies as a type of self-portraiture brought about by the creation of social media networks and their potential as an artistic medium.

## FIGURES



Figure 1. *Untitled #56* from Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*. (Photograph by Cindy Sherman. Photo courtesy of ARTSTOR.) [https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/asset/ARTSTOR\\_103\\_41822001270030](https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822001270030)



Figure 2. *Untitled #2* from Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*. (Photograph by Cindy Sherman. Photo courtesy of ARTSTOR.) [https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/asset/ARTSTOR\\_103\\_41822001325438](https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822001325438)





Figure 3. *Untitled #14* from Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*. (Photograph by Cindy Sherman. Photo courtesy of ARTSTOR.) [https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/asset/ARTSTOR\\_103\\_41822001048923](https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822001048923)



Figure 4. This photo is captioned “Smile” on Cindy Sherman’s Instagram account. (Photograph by Cindy Sherman. Photo courtesy of Cindy Sherman.)

<https://www.instagram.com/p/BrGDnLCHUCS/>





Figure 5. Captioned “Happy!” on Sherman’s Instagram account. (Photograph by Cindy Sherman. Photo courtesy of Cindy Sherman.) <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2xmyuDpzs9/>



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