

Is There a Queer Selfie?

by [Alicia Eler](#) on September 30, 2013



(image by the author for Hyperallergic)

CHICAGO — If the act of allowing someone else to photograph you is read as normative, the selfie in and of itself is a queer act of taking back the gaze. So is there such a thing as a queer selfie, or is the selfie inherently a queer(ed) self-portrait? To clarify, in this case I am not using queer to suggest a non-normative sexual or gender identity; rather, I am referencing the idea of a photograph that engages with power dynamics in relation to the socially networked self. The selfie is a self-reflective act, and in this sense implies a power struggle with the self. This all sounds pretty queer to me.

This week, rather than present you with a stream of five selfies like usual, I shall queer my own series a bit, presenting you with three selfies from a single artist coupled with a performative email exchange with an idea about an erotic selfie that never came to fruition. There is triumph in failure, of failed ideas such as the staged erotic selfie, which will in turn lead to better projects and performances alike. Here I present a queer performative selfie gesture that tests the power relations between writer and artist who both partake in internet-induced power play through the medium of email.

First, I present to you the artist: Oli Rodriguez, an assistant professor in the Photography Department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His recent body of work, [The Markings Project](#), considers contemporary fetishism's relationship between pleasure and consumption while concurrently visualizing sadomasochistic culture. As an artist, Rodriguez is always interested in pushing boundaries and pre-defined categories, and his approach to the selfie is no different.

Here are two selfies that he sent me per my original request. Both are performative selfies; this new selfie type positions the selfie as a self-portrait that is directed by the artist, often used on social media sites. "The selfie is a performative action and documentative demand," says Rodriguez of the 'performative selfie.'



Oli Rodriguez with entire apple in his mouth

"I actually use this pic on all social media dating sites," says Rodriguez. "[It is] suggestive of

potential sexual acts. I feel that this was whim, a joke, a delicacy. I can fit an apple in my mouth and more ... Again, as instructed another photographer took the photograph with my instruction. Lower, higher, more straight, get both of my eyes open, less flaring of the nostrils, eyes wider. This selfie was actually taken at least 20 times.”

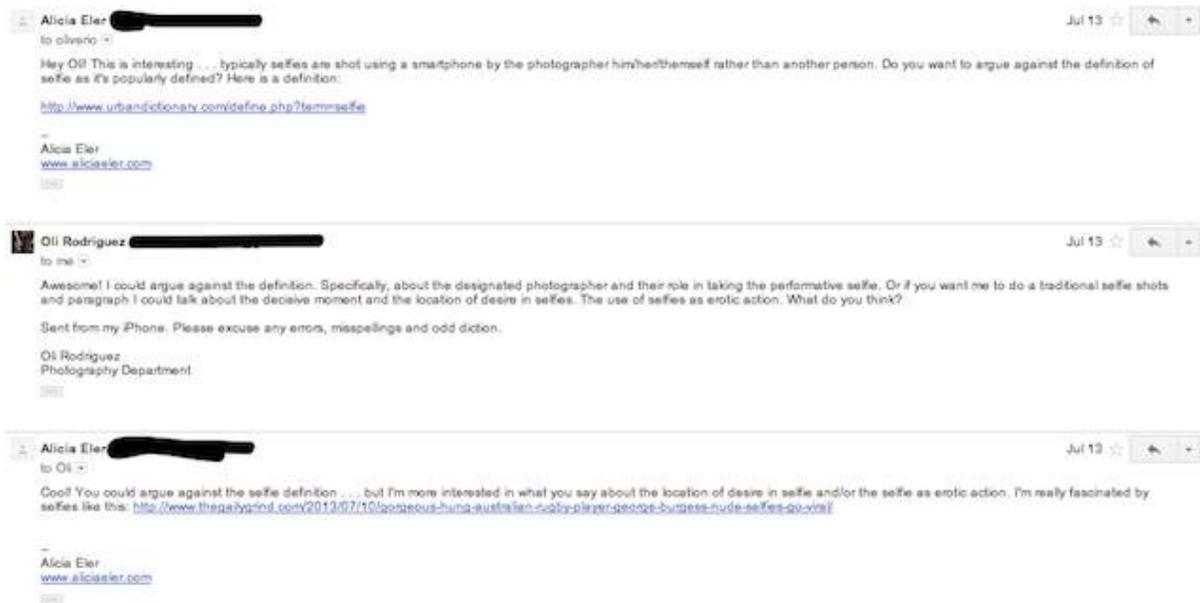


Oli Rodriguez, selfie in a helmet

“I was at [Defibillator Space](#) [a performance art gallery in Chicago] having a meeting with two artists there,” Oli tells me. “One was preparing for their performance the next day. I handed my camera to one of them and instructed to a lo-angle shot as I loomed above him on the pedestal. Given the dramatic, horror film-esque lighting, illuminating from below and the light from behind casting me in silhouette. I contorted my body forward, mimicking a ghoul or monster, grasping my gloves in my hand and using them to mimic a sized extension of fingers from my palm.”

Rodriguez, whose work is in photography and video, had this to say about the performative selfie: “I am inclined in my selfies to designate a photographer to capture the ‘decisive moment,’ as Henri Cartier-Bresson would deem ‘an indistinguishable moment that cannot be found at any other time.’ The selfie is derived in theoretical photographic history. It is completely reliant upon a person situated in the documenter and those that are documented in a partial moment. Cartier-Bresson also states: ‘There is nothing in this world that does not have a decisive moment,’ and ‘to me, photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second.’ This translates well into the momentary realization of the selfie and the moment.”

What ensued after Oli sent me his selfies was a conversation about the making of an erotic queer selfie that would mirror a nude selfie that went viral by Australian rugby player George Burgess. I asked Oli if he would perform this selfie. He responded with thoughts on this performative selfie, inquiring about how desire is located in the selfie, or how the selfie is an erotic action. See our conversation below (reproduced with permission from Oli).



An email exchange with artist Oli Rodriguez about staging the ‘erotic selfie’ based on a nude selfie by rugby player George Burgess that went viral over the summer of 2013.



George Burgess' nude erotic selfies that circulated the web this summer 2013. Sorry, you can't remove the rainbow! (image via TheGailyGrind.com)

Oli never produced the erotic queer selfie, and I didn't follow-up. The act of not producing this erotic selfie is actually more queer — a failure of the selfie and email communication — than a mirrored, queered selfie of the sort Burgess' leaked selfie could have been. Perhaps the queer erotic selfie is one that is not made public, but instead produced for private consumption or for performance in a queer-specific space. After all, Burgess' nude selfie went viral by mistake. How was it leaked? And who was it actually intended for before it ended up on TheGailyGrind.com, among other sites? Try asking Burgess — I doubt he'll tell you.

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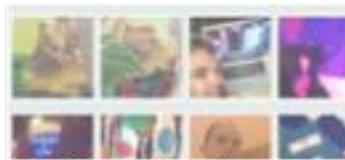
I, Selfie is a series of ongoing conversations around people working in the medium of the selfie. The selfie imagemakers are accepting themselves as objects, and reflecting their images back through the smartphone camera lens. They control the images of themselves that float around these murky virtual waters, but they cannot anticipate how these images will be received or perceived by others who exist in the internet void, a space that we pleasurably and both selfishly and selflessly indulge in.

Email Hyperallergic your selfie at [selfies \[at\] hyperallergic.com](mailto:selfies@hyperallergic.com) along with a very brief word explanation of why you shot it and what it means to you.





What the 60 Minutes Segment on the Art Market Really Said



Our Selfies, Ourselves



The Great Refusal: Videos Taking on New Queer Aesthetics