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Editor

Selfe Citizenship

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Introduction: Whose Selfie Citizenship?

Adi Kuntsman

Abstract In the introductory chapter, Adi Kuntsman presents the concept of ‘selfie citizenship’: claims made by ordinary citizens via their networked self-portraits, created, distributed and consumed at the times of algorithmic visibility, large-scale dataisation, globalised participatory politics and biometric governance. Kuntsman argues that both ‘selfie’ and ‘citizenship’ need to be understood not as a given but as a field of potential violence and contestation. Approaching selfie citizenship as a visual, networked and social phenomenon, the introduction asks: What are the conditions in which a selfie can do political work? Who are the selfies made for? By whom? How are they consumed? Who, when and how has the ability – and the safety – to star in a selfie, and when is such ability impossible?

Keywords Visibility · Intimate citizenship · Dataisation · Biometric governance · Selfie politics

The book opens with a set of selfies, staged and taken by the transgender queer of colour artist, Rajju Rage, at a German exhibition that documents

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the history of 'homosexual men and women'²¹ (the wording of the exhibition, Schwules museum) in the country. The selfies were part of Raju's performative intervention into the whitewashed space of the exhibition where black, brown and transgender bodies were entirely absent. And as the artist notes in their commentary, such selfie '(re)jection' (Rage, this volume) into whiteness and homonormativity neither claims simplistic visibility nor aims to achieve a celebratory inclusion; rather, it instils a haunting presence that simultaneously undoes racist and transphobic erasure and offers a form of presence for queerness of colour that is not about being displayed and objectified. Raju's account of their experience during the intervention ends with a question as to why their process of taking selfies caused no objections from the almost exclusively white audience in the gallery – and in fact, was largely ignored, at a striking difference to the artist's experience of navigating urban spaces, public transport or toilets, in Germany and elsewhere. Was that something to do with space of the gallery, the particular crowd that attended or the act of selfie-taking itself?

Raju's in(ter)jection and reflection foreground and inspire some of the key questions raised in this book. What are the conditions in which a selfie can do political work? What are the regimes of in/visibility in which such work operates? Who are the selfies made for? By whom? How are they consumed? Who has the ability – and the safety – to star in a selfie, how and in what context, and when is such ability impossible?

In the recent years, we have become accustomed to politicised use of selfies: photographs of individuals with handwritten notes or banners, various selfie memes and hashtag actions, spread on social media as actions of protest and various social statements. Such mobilisation of the selfie genre – understood broadly as self-portraits in viral digital circulation – challenges the prevalent popular view of selfies as narcissistic, inherently apolitical and even antisocial. Instead, it invites us to think about what I propose to call 'selfie citizenship': claims made by ordinary citizens via the use of their own networked self-portraits. Such claims, as the contributors to this book demonstrate, often merge the individual and the collective, the deliberate and the spontaneous, the marketised and the grass roots. In that respect, citizenship itself is taken on here not as a given condition but as an entry in the making, whether we think of 'affective citizenship' (Fortier 2010) – a sense of citizen collectivity constituted through the

governance of intimacies and performed feelings, or 'acts of citizenship' (Isin 2009), where citizenship is made, enacted, within and across geographical borders, cultural scripts and communication genres.

Selfie citizenship, as visual scholars would remind us, needs to be analysed as a phenomenon of depicting and seeing (What kind of iconographies does selfie citizenship mobilise? What does a citizen selfie show? How is it seen?). Furthermore, as Farida Vis (2015) and Jill Walker Rettberg (2014) have recently argued, the visibility and visibility of selfies is a networked phenomenon, mediated by algorithms and computer visions (How and where are acts of selfie citizenship circulated? How and when they can become visible, and to whom? Who are their human and non-human audiences?). But perhaps most importantly, selfie citizenship is also a social phenomenon, and understanding it requires a focus on power, context, actions, effects and consequences. For despite citizen selfies' global spread, and somewhat standardised iconography – person + face + sign – their causes and claims vary significantly. Some stand against police brutality or military occupation, while others promote corporate or governmental causes, or incite hatred and war; some act as witnesses against regimes of silence and erasure, while others capitalise on being bystanders to sensational tragedies; some claim humanity, rights and political selfhood – theirs or those they stand in solidarity with – while others proudly show off their own violent deeds as a means of viral self-promotion. And while in many such selfie actions ordinary citizens put their faces into digital circulation freely and willingly, the phenomenon of selfie citizenship cannot be separated from the rise of biometric governance, and in particular the use of facial recognition in surveillance and policing of individuals and communities, in border control or military operations.

This book therefore proposes that the mobilisation of selfies by citizens should be understood as a new techno-social practice that is embedded not only in new forms of agency, but also in new forms of governance and violence. Selfie citizenship, in other words, is about particular forms of spectacular intimacies and performative effects that can create or disrupt the sense of citizen collectivity through illusory proximity, and capitalise on individual visibility, at the time when citizenship itself is increasingly governed through biometric recognition and large-scale dataisation (Bias 2013).

Reading selfie citizenship this way requires a new set of critical questions, beyond and away from the argument about selfies as either a futile

gesture or a vital format of citizen political mobilisation. Contributors in this collection ask, instead: Can we/should we tie today's increasingly digital practices of citizenship – from consumerism to voting to social protect locally and globally – to the 'self', the face and to various forms and regimes of visibility? Or should we, instead, take apart both the currency of the selfie as a globalised networked practice and the notion of citizenship itself?

Asking these questions means that we approach citizenship neither as a positive value nor as a given condition. Instead, the contributors meditate on citizenship, and in particular, selfie-based citizenship actions, as contested, and contextual, practices and processes. These can include media events that tie the political to the familial, the patriotic to the everyday, the grandiose to the quotidian, as Fatima Aziz, Gabriele de Setta, Michelle Proksell and Negar Mottahedeh demonstrate in their discussion of collective citizen marches, captured in selfies and shared on various social networks. They can offer possibilities for global solidarity and witnessing, as Catherine Hartung suggests. And they can include ways of selfie-based gamified entertainment that seem to shape – or sometimes even replace – other forms of civic engagement, as Catherine Bouko shows in her discussion of millennial selfies.

Indeed, current debates around selfie citizenship are increasingly linked to forms of entertainment and celebratisation that both reshape the *face* (pun intended) of politics and obscure its power. Politicians' selfies, for example, is a phenomenon that no longer surprises us. As Crystal Abidin, Matias Ekman and Andreas Widholm demonstrate, the intimate genre of the selfie is adapted by political leaders who take selfies routinely, purposefully and skilfully as part of their election campaigning and self-branding. But behind the move to popularise a politician's persona by using the latest media trend – the selfie and its trafficking in the banal and the everyday – is a broader shift towards the playful myopia that is at the heart of today's adaptation of ruthless digital technologies into the patina of everyday life. Such is the case of 'biometric citizenship', discussed by Jill Walker Rettberg who shows how we complacently adapt to machine visions of ourselves (and of our selfies); and that of Maximilian Jablonowski's notion of 'dronic citizenship', where a drone – perhaps *the* sign of our technomilitarist times – is excitedly welcomed into casual self-photoshoots.

A light-hearted and eager engagement with such technologies, which is at the centre of the digital industry and its accompanying consumer culture, allows and encourages to continuously disregard both these

technologies' violent origins and their current and future dangerous applications. But disregarding the violence of the digital, and embracing instead its promises and pleasures, is also a privilege and a capital – a socially constructed form of entitlement that is highly contested and policed, and unequally distributed while masquerading as universal. This is an entitlement that can be conditionally offered, or violently withdrawn, just as citizenship itself.

Understanding the digital – and in this particular case, the use of selfies shared on social media – as a form of social capital invites us to rewire the often assumed connections between visibility, face/body and politics. Being able to be visible through a selfie can undoubtedly be a way of locating oneself in time and space, or a form of powerful witnessing that counters death, erasure and forgetting, as Mark Nunes, Larissa Hjorth and Jung Moon argue in their analyses of selfie witnessing. Becoming present through a selfie-based action, as Debra Ferreday claims, can also be a means of claiming speakability, agency and survivorhood in the face of violent silencing and stigmatisation. But selfie visibility can also be a form of privilege, frequently mobilised and capitalised on, yet rarely questioned. As Rajni Rager's powerful in(ter)jection reminds us, and as and Silvia Rodriguez Vega and Sanaz Raji poignantly demonstrate in their discussions of selfie activism *without a face*, for many the visibility ingrained in the genre of the selfie is neither always available nor desirable, and claiming it can have dire consequences. The refusal to show one's face or to participate in social media photo-sharing entirely, or the alternatives deployed by some activists – wearing a mask (Vega), or refocusing the photo on the message instead of the face (Rajni) – offers a powerful critique of the currency of visibility in today's digital politics (and beyond). It also reminds us that acts of selfie citizenship are never solely about those starring in selfies, but always also about those looking at them. As JB Brager poignantly notes in the epilogue, looking at the selfie 'one is forced to ask where we are looking from, as well as who we are looking at, within political frameworks of visibility, hyper-visibility, erasure and misrepresentation' (Brager, this volume: 152).

When both selfies and citizenship are understood as a privilege rather than a given, as a capital that can be gained, lost, appropriated or withdrawn, or as a right that needs to be fought for, our concerns about selfie citizenship begin to shift. Rather than claiming what selfie citizenship *is*, or should be, this volume hopes to offer an opening to a much needed conversation on selfies, citizenship and politics, *as a field of potential violence*

and contestation rather than that of playful celebration. By examining the contexts and conditions in which selves do – or fail to do – political work, and by attending to metaphorical, visual and physical erasures within selfe citizenship, the book is an invitation to reflect on the possible meanings and costs of ‘selfe’ and ‘citizenship’ as they intersect today.

NOTE

1. Schwules Museum, Berlin <http://www.schwulesmuseum.de/en/exhibitions/archives/2015/view/homosexuality-ies/>.

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CONVERSATION I

Acts of Selfe Citizenship