

Susanne von Falkenhausen
**Self-Identity is
a Bad Visual
System**

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01/04

*Self-identity is a bad visual system.
Theory is passionate fiction.*

These are two statements that, even or just because of their isolation from their original context, are both open enough to let loose our thoughts, and precise enough to become sharp tools of criticism. The first one is from Donna Haraway's seminal essay "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" (1988), and the second one is by Teresa de Lauretis in *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (1994).

These two phrases have accompanied my intellectual life for quite a while now, albeit separated from their specific contexts and metaphorized for my own questions. Haraway uses the visual metaphor to characterize the limits of self-oriented positioning in scientific knowledge. In my reading, "self-identity is a bad visual system" becomes a brilliant comment on narcissism as a cultural practice that also motivates and steers technological inventions that are out to control, sell, and dominate.

"Theory is passionate fiction" is taken from de Lauretis's reading of Freud's theories of desire as passionate fiction – an interpretation first proposed by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit. I read it as a critique of grand thinking with global pretensions, which in my view abounds in the rhetorics of network apologists as much as in the theory of accelerationism.

The link that connects them, in my view, is narcissism – the narcissism of interpretation in the widest sense. Interpretation includes theory; the one who interprets facts, issues, and presumed world conditions is, consciously or not, always also producing theory, grappling with what s/he considers to be a truth about the world. The fact that theory is driven by desire often passes unnoticed – more so if theorists and theory are embattled in the intellectual frontlines of the day. No one wants to be reminded of the fragility and limited value of his/her interpretations – and the fragility of one's own subjectivity.

So in a way I link theory, in the sense of its universal application to global problems, to narcissism, and narcissism to such claims made by producers of theory – that in fact could be *my* passionate fiction involved in, and fed by, a deep distrust of grand narratives and those who propose them. To me it is astounding how the critical negativity of theoretical thinking – and this negativity connects pre-poststructural thought like the Frankfurt School to the poststructuralism of Foucault or Lacan (or, come to think of it, Donna Haraway, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler) – is again being turned into the heroic narcissism of thinking in



Stan van Der Beek, *Movie-Drome*, 1963-1965. Multimedia installation.

totalities, accelerationism being one version of it.

Old stuff? Eighties critical thinking on difference and situated knowledge, with no value in today's acceleration toward global catastrophe? Individualization of critique in the face of the need for a theory or *the* theory to save or at least explain the world?

"Acceleration implies the submission of the unconscious to the globalized machine," Franco Berardi writes. "It generates panic."¹ This too is a quotation taken out of its context. It made me think of a very special panic that transports itself in expressions of drunken happiness: the selfie. These expressions are not unlike those produced by high-spirited young people decades ago in photo booths for ID cards. The selfie seems to me the perfect example for this submission of the unconscious to the globalized machine, more so as it is made with so-called self-expression in mind.

For Sartre, selfies would have been pure horror: his fantasy of the self as voyeur who is himself watched in the act of gazing by an unseen other has become the matrix of theories of the gaze. The gaze of the other, if only imagined, constituted a deep danger for the consistency of the self. Imagine widening this gaze of the other into the endless circulation of the internet.

Selfies, the fastest-growing narcissistic practice of recent years – another case for technology steered by and catering to narcissism – turns Sartre's evil gaze of the other on an endangered and paranoid self into its opposite: the incessant reassurance of the self through the constant re-performance of its presumed integrity before the eyes of countless anonymous others. Still, the anxiety, I imagine, is always just around the corner, in those moments between selfies. This again propels the drive towards circulating countless images of selves staring into the eyes of cameras – the self-image as a mirror for the other in an endless circular economy of narcissistic exchange.

But where has Sartre's paranoia gone in the age of the selfie? Is it the substitution of the body and the face with its image that makes people expose themselves and their images to the gaze of others, forgetting their panic and trafficking their selfies so recklessly? If so, then let's rediscover our panic. It might be the drive needed for practices of critique lost in this naive, jubilatory, infantile mirror-gazing.

Another version of narcissistic cultural practice seems to be curating. The curator has lately become the master of "content," and artists are expected to follow suit. The curator formulates something considered programmatic; the rhetoric of typical curator-speak has the

pretention of being a ponderous comment on the state of the world, assembling all the latest theoretical buzzwords (the documenta 13 *Book of Books* is a prominent example). This is not only bad theory; it also stages the illusion of the writer's control over the interpretation of the world.

Artists as curators, then, will need to be all the more careful to give their peers, the participating artists, room enough to breathe, think, and act.

Resistance is needed against a narcissism that steers the global machine and is steered by it. Narcissism is no longer a welcome addendum in the development of a healthy self, as proposed decades ago by the psychology of the self. Instead, it has turned into a vast and quickly-expanding field of cultural practices sustained, framed, and driven by technology.

Might art have a role in practices of resistance? It has been said that art as a specific practice is dissolving within the circulation of the global image machine. That could indeed be the case, but art as a specific practice might also find forms of resistance within it. Here, Haraway's "self-identity is a bad visual system" becomes helpful. Self-identity does not help with critical positioning. Getting distance from oneself(ie) does.

I know, I know, there is no "outside" from which to change the world, but the inside should offer enough room for movement and resistance – in single, multiple, fragmented, particular moments between selfies.

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Franco Berardi, "Accelerationism Questioned from the Point of View of the Body," *e-flux journal* 46, June 2013.

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