INTRODUCTION

I realized that the key to understanding the museum visitor experience was the construct of identity.¹

It was the 4th Annual Museum Selfie Day,² and I was in the Brussels’ Cinquantenaire Museum at the popular Ukiyo-e exhibit. I had been studying museum selfies from an academic standpoint for several months, analysing how they affected visitor experiences of museums and how they fit within museums’ use of mobile media and their focus on visitor experience. Though taking selfies had become more acceptable and even encouraged by many museums, especially on this day, I could not overcome the feeling of being self-conscious of my actions.

It may seem paradoxical that a person engages with museum objects in a meaningful way by turning their back to them, but that is precisely what happens when visitors take a museum selfie. John Falk, who has researched and written extensively about visitors and museums, realized that the main reason visitors go to museums is to construct their identity.³ Museum selfies enable identity construction, allowing visitors to relate and interact with the museum object, their self, and their social network.

Selfies became a very popular medium in 2010, facilitated in large part by the front-facing smartphone camera, which allowed people to compose and take a selfie while seeing the image on the smartphone’s screen. In addition, there was the convergence of photo-editing software and the ability to use social media apps like Instagram or Facebook to immediately take, enhance, and publish one’s selfie. John Urry, a sociologist who wrote about (among other things) the tourist gaze, differentiated the selfie from the typical tourist photograph. Rather than showing where one had travelled to one’s community after returning home, the selfie is shared in real time and proclaims, ‘here I am right now.’⁴ This allows networked travel, where one’s social group can participate by sharing their own experiences or comments, even when geographically separated.

Tools from postphenomenology, a discipline within philosophy of technology, can help tease out the technologies that mediate visitor’s experiences and relationships with museum objects. These tools can help us investigate the variety of ways one can conceive of the selfie (its multistability), as well as enable us to look specifically at the selfie as a technologically mediated practice (embodiment relation) and as an object that can be read (hermeneutic relation).⁵ I will use these tools to

² Museum Selfie Day was started by Mar Dixon and occurs annually on or around January 20th. Selfies are uploaded to Twitter or Instagram (or other social media sites) and tagged with #MuseumSelfie. From her blog at www.mardixon.com, she describes it as “a FUN DAY to encourage people to visit museums and participate a bit with art or collections.”
demonstrate how the museum selfie mediates the museum visitor’s experience and contributes to their identity construction.

A NOTE ABOUT SELFIES

*Photography, though not an art form in itself, has the peculiar capacity to turn all its subjects into works of art.*

Though selfies were often portrayed negatively in popular media when they first became popular (and sometimes still are), current research in the social sciences has been demonstrating how selfies can be an empowering tool to facilitate the construction of one’s (primarily online) identity. The Saachi Gallery in London even had an exhibit of selfies in 2017, indicating the acceptability of the selfie-as-medium. There are many genres of selfies, even several genres of museum selfies. Most museum selfies can be considered basic selfies, something to be shared with a person’s social network with only minor thought to creative or aesthetic aspects. However, these still contribute to a person’s online construction of self, and the museum setting adds value to that construction. The selfie becomes part of a person’s larger narrative, often being one part of a series of selfies posted to social media sites such as Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat. Rather than viewing the museum selfie as superficial, the selfie can be considered a creative way of interacting with museum objects and constructing one’s identity.

TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIATION

*I take the technologies into my experiencing in a particular way by way of perceiving through such technologies.*

The main technologies that affect museum selfies are the smartphone and the museum itself, both of which will be explained below. The details of the technologies and how they mediate our relation to the world ground the larger concept of ‘non-neutrality’ in situated and material ways. Melvin Kranzberg, a historian of technology, wrote, “Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral.” This idea balances the extremes of looking at technology as either being deterministic (technologies control how we behave) or completely neutral (technologies have no effect on our behaviour). According to postphenomenology, every technology will have both enabling and constraining features. People can be creative by playing within (and testing) the limits of what is technologically enabled and constrained.

THE SMARTPHONE

Once a user becomes familiar and experienced with the

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phone’s camera and apps, the smartphone recedes into the background of the user’s awareness and allows the user to focus more predominantly on the crafting of the selfie. For my selfies, I used an iPhone 5s and its front-facing camera, which enabled me to use the screen to compose my selfie images. I did not use any apps to alter the photos with filters nor share them immediately with my social network, though this is a common practice. Instead, I used Apple’s Photos post-processing software program to slightly enhance my photos.

Though the smartphone’s display and front-facing camera have enabled selfies to proliferate in popularity, some of the constraints have resulted in negative repercussions. For example, the small size of the screen narrows one’s ability to see, reducing the size of the image and limiting the depth of field. The difficulty of seeing and positioning oneself for selfies has resulted in unfortunate and costly museum accidents, where selfie takers have knocked over priceless works of art by backing into them when gazing at their smartphone screen in an effort to frame both themself and the art object.\(^\text{12}\)

Galit Wellner, author of a postphenomenological study on cell phones, describes another enabling/constraining aspect with how the smartphone acts as both a window (opening virtually to one’s social network that is not present) and a wall (closing off interaction with people in one’s immediate surrounding).\(^\text{13}\) Since taking a museum selfie is performed in front of an audience but is intended for a virtual audience, the act can make the proximate audience feel alienated.\(^\text{14}\) This partly explains why I felt self-conscious taking selfies and why other people may find selfie-taking to be annoying. I was sensitive to the fact that the people around me could see me taking selfies, though they were excluded from the final object that carried most of the meaning.

MUSEUM EFFECT

Michelle Henning, a scholar of media and museums, views the museum as a form of media.\(^\text{15}\) By using this idea we can look at how the museum mediates a visitor’s experience. In the Ukiyo-e exhibit, the main display area was quite dark with only the museum objects themselves being well-lit. Though this enabled the focus of the visitor’s attention onto the art, it constrained my ability to create a clear selfie with both the artwork and myself, forcing me to position my face close to the artwork so I could share in its lighting. The display cases (vitrines) also kept me from getting too close to the art. However, I adapted by using the glass cases to create selfies by positioning myself around the corner of the glass while taking a photograph (figs. 1 & 2). Thus, the constraints enabled new opportunities and contributed to the creation of interesting selfies.

\(^{12}\) A statue of St. Michael was knocked over and destroyed in Lisbon in 2016 and in July 2017 a selfie-taker knocked over an entire row of art objects that were on pedestals at The 14th Factory in Los Angeles.


Moving beyond the primarily physical aspects of the museum, there is also a sociocultural phenomenon called the museum effect. Valerie Casey is one of several researchers who have analysed museum visitor-object relationships and have described the museum itself as having an effect on everything, both people and objects, which enter through its doors. Museums re-contextualize objects from their origins through specific narratives, proximity to other objects, the use of labels, and through contextualizing meta-language. However, Casey and others point out that objects also become meaningful just by entering through the doors of the museum. They become identified as culturally important by virtue of being chosen by a museum. Again, the idea of enabling and constraining is raised. The importance of the object might be enabled, but seeing the object for what it originally was, or even in new ways by the visitor without the filter of the museum, is now constrained.

RELATIONALITY AND SELF-CONSTRUCTION

The Photograph (the one I intend) represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object.

Museums are an excellent place for inspiring creativity and art itself. It is common for art students go to museums and sit with a painting to create a study, learning by doing. Museum selfies can be creative and artistic studies as well, capturing the relationships between the museum art object, the museum space, and the individual (fig.3). As I took my museum selfies, I was relating to the art objects and part of me was objectified and became part of the art process. The museum effect enhanced myself-as-selfie, adding to the construction of my online identity. By creating these selfie studies in museums, we explore and discover new layers of our selves, which we then share with our networked community.

16 Some of the scholars who have written on the museum effect are André Malraux, Svetlana Alpers, Michelle Henning, Valerie Casey, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett.
17 Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography, Macmillan, 1981, p. 14. Though he was reflecting on being photographed by another, the words are still quite appropriate for the context of the selfie.
Fig. 3 *Busts.* The use of black and white helps reduce the difference between the sculpted head and myself. With heads facing similar directions, the viewer is encouraged to view the relation between the two.

Casey writes that museums began more simply, without as much mediation between visitor and museum object (though there still was some museum effect). Since then, museums have increasingly distanced the visitor and object physically (through glass cases, ropes, security guards, etc.), as well as through narratives (such as audio tours, labels, and exhibit themes), moving to highly mediated performances of the object. Selfies can help reduce this distancing by allowing the visitor to bypass some of the museum’s framing, allowing for unique interactions with the museum object. The museum selfie places both the visitor and item into an objectified relation (in a way that normal photographs of museum objects do not do), which can then be reflexively gazed upon by the visitor, as well as their social network, creating new interpretations and narratives that are less dependent on the museum curator (figs. 1-4).

**fig. 4 Designer Fallacy.** Looking like I was kissing the Easter Island statue was not my intention. However, it was a good reminder that once a photo is posted on the internet, it is outside of one’s control and open to appropriation.

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This objectification is not fixed as a single narrative, but is rather comprised of multiple ways of interpretation, sometimes referred to as an item’s *multistability*. Don Ihde, founder of postphenomenology, uses this term to describe how things have more that one stable way of being. Selfies, as objects, can be read (this is further discussed in the Hermeneutic Relations section below) in a wide variety of ways. People who do not know the selfie taker may see a selfie as being shallow or self-absorbed because they do not understand the possible hidden narratives that may only be known by the visitor and some in their social network. Their network may then comment on the posted selfie, participating in real time with the visitor’s experience, sharing and adding to the experience. One selfie can offer various, multistable impressions, depending upon who looks at them and how.

One of the basic tenants of postphenomenology is that new technologies will always both enable and constrain. Selfies help enable the visitor’s self-construction by focusing attention on the relation between the visitor and museum object. However, this keeps the visitor from solely focusing on the museum object, leading some to fear that the visitor may not be deeply experiencing the object itself. However, this does not need to be an either/or issue. A visitor can take a selfie and then stand and appreciate the museum object, benefiting from both ways of experiencing the museum object.

**EMBODIMENT RELATIONS: SELFIE AS PRACTICE**

Ihde describes four ways that technology can mediate our relation with the world, using the general formula “I-technology-world” to capture this concept. The two relations that are most relevant for museum selfies are *embodiment* and *hermeneutic*. The practice of taking a selfie involves Ihde’s concept of embodiment. To take a selfie, we look *through* our smartphone screen to compose the image of ourselves in relation to our surroundings. In so doing, our field of composition is reduced to the smartphone’s display screen, and the smartphone becomes an extension of us. Typically, this embodiment relation in postphenomenology is formalized as:

\[
(I\rightleftharpoons \text{technology}) \rightarrow \text{world}
\]

I, through the technology, relate to the world. However, because we are seeing an aspect of ourselves through the technology, the selfie practice can be written as:

\[
(I\rightleftharpoons \text{technology}) \rightarrow (i\rightleftharpoons \text{world})
\]

This second “i” represents the self as a visual object, used primarily for composition of the self. So, I, through the technology, relate to the world and an objectified part of my self. For a more artistic type of selfie, after I framed the photo to the desired composition, I then turned my own gaze

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19 For a recent opinion piece, see Francis X. Clines, ‘A Starry Night Crowded with Selfies’ in *New York Times*, 24 September, 2017, p. SR8
21 For more in-depth discussion on all 4 relations, see the first chapter in Rosenberger & Verbeek op. cit. (note 5), pp. 7-41.
away from the smartphone and towards the museum object, changing my relation to the object rather than to the viewer of the selfie.

HERMENEUTIC RELATIONS: SELFIE AS OBJECT

While reviewing my museum selfies as objects, I found it to be a much more normalized photographic experience. My “self,” which was so dominant in the action of taking the selfie, dropped away to become a mere “object” within the photos. This leads to Ihde’s hermeneutic relation, where one reads an object (such as a thermometer) to acquire an understanding of the world without directly experiencing it. In this case, the selfie is an object that has been (or is about to be) posted to social media. After capturing the museum selfie, it is first read (or interpreted) by the visitor before being shared to make sure it portrays the visitor’s intent.

For example, in figure 1 the focus was on me relating to the object, with the background of the museum and visitors resembling a somewhat chaotic cubist motif due to taking the photo through the glass case surrounding the museum object. This image reflected my agitated state of my mind, which was trying to resolve out how to take a selfie without being seen. For me, figure 1 accurately reflects the turmoil that I experienced, though the question then becomes do the people who look at, or read, this selfie get the same meaning? Another way to interpret the museum selfie is by looking at what is being emphasized in the photo. For example, in figure 2, the museum object plays a much more dominant role, and I am faded to an almost ghostly apparition behind two panes of glass.

Once the selfie is posted to the Internet, it can become appropriated and even changed by others. The visitor may limit this by only sharing it with their trusted network, but even this does not guarantee that it won’t be reconstructed with other meanings. Ihde refers to this as the designer fallacy, 22 which is when something is intended for one purpose but then used for another. For instance, figure 4 could possibly be interpreted in a way I did not intend. It could appear that I am kissing the Easter Island head, which would lend this image to being appropriated in a way that I would prefer to avoid.

Using Ihde’s hermeneutic formula, we can understand this relation as the “I” relating to, or reading, the technology to interpret the world. The original formula is represented by:

\[ I \rightarrow (\text{technology–world}) \]

Adapting this to once again include the objectified “i” of the selfie, the equation shifts:

\[ I \rightarrow (\text{technology-i-world}) \]

The museum selfie captures a part of the visitor and their relation to the museum object in an objectified, readable manner.

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CONCLUSION

In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing.23

Museum selfies are both technological practices and objects that mediate a visitor’s experience with museums. The selfie breaks with the traditional way of experiencing the museum, possibly to the chagrin of more stoic and reserved museumgoers. Selfies support the effort of the visitor to go to the museum in order to develop their self-identity. Additionally, they can empower the visitor to relate in new and personal ways with an object, ways not dictated by the museum.

Rather than seeing selfies as good or bad, they can be seen as enabling certain abilities while constraining others. Selfies help enable the networked travel concept, where one’s social network can participate in real time even when they are not geographically present. However, this ability may alienate some proximal visitors who see the selfie being taken, but do not share in the selfie as an object. When taking a selfie through the screen of a smartphone, a visitor’s vision is constrained, potentially endangering irreplaceable museum items. While taking a selfie temporarily distracts a visitor’s gaze from focusing specifically on the museum object, visitors are not limited to doing either one or the other, allowing selfies to be an additional way of experiencing museum objects.

Moving forward, museums can help ensure that visitors safely engage with museum objects through taking selfies. This will allow visitors to redefine and explore their relationship with the museum, its objects, and their own social network. Museum selfies can be a way to help the museum become more popular and valuable to the people it serves.

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*Note: The printed journal article has all figures in black and white.
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