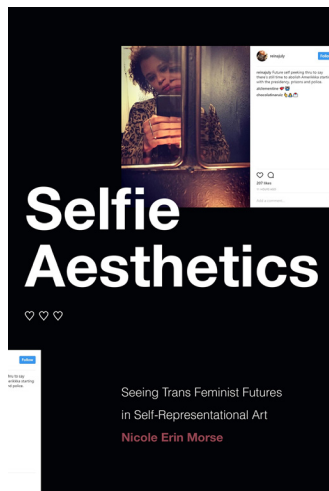


FRANCESCA ROMEO

Selfie Aesthetics: Seeing Trans Feminist Futures in Self-Representational Art, by Nicole Erin Morse



How do imagined futures come to fruition through creative, candid, and challenging modes of self-representation? Can selfies, in aggregate, form a compelling critical resistance to modes of oppression? In *Selfie Aesthetics: Seeing Trans Feminist Futures in Self-Representational Art*, Nicole Erin Morse unlocks the potential of imagining

a world in which trans rights are innate and the freedom to inhabit one's body and identity without fear of political retaliation or physical violence is secured. However, Morse recognizes the difficulty of procuring such a future and positions selfies as neither a simple resolution to ongoing social and political strife in the domain of trans identity nor a uniformly effective countervisuality that secures power. Morse, instead, argues that selfies assist in constructing provocative online exchanges in which trans visual interventions form "an alternative mythology for selfies in which self-representation produces the self as relational, resistant, fragmented, and collectively created" (xii). Thus, their argument rests upon the idea that self-formation is a coconstitutive process enacted through a network of digital call-and-response. In this way, trans self-representations function as improvisational, participatory, nonlinear interactions that can subvert dominant cultural frameworks.

Throughout their book, Morse urges viewers to move closer and to freeze the stream of images in their feeds in favor of formal contemplation. Their text foregrounds a visual studies approach by deploying selfie aesthetics as a mode of analysis. In the process, Morse deftly weaves strains of trans discourse, queer theory, and media studies, building upon an expanding body of literature concerned with the critical implications of trans self-representation (such as Derek Conrad Murray's recent anthology, *Visual Culture Approaches to the Selfie*, in which Ace Lehner situates trans selfies as contemporary art).

While Morse carefully attends to the formal elements of selfies as images, they also situate them as emblems enmeshed in a digital matrix. From specific technologies and shifting codes (both social and computer generated) to the publics and counterpublics that arise in their wake, Morse explores the refracted gaze that emerges from the circulation of trans selfies, underpinning their currency as complex cultural objects.

Chapter 1 examines the strategy of doubling—a trope intrinsic to photography, in which mirrors, shadows, reflections, and long exposures create multiple visions of oneself that Morse categorizes as "mise en abyme" (xiv). Triangulating the work of Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, Tourmaline, and Vivek Shraya, Morse undoes the default reading of trans as synonymous with fluidity in favor of showing how trans self-representations are material constructions that do indeed offer moments of fixity, even if these instances are fleeting, proffering opportunities for collaborative world-building. Fundamental to this chapter is Morse's refutation of Lacan's mirror stage. Instead of understanding the self as a stark moment of recognition in which an individual enters into an egoistic relation to the world distinct from its perceptual phenomena, Morse contends that the multiplicity engendered by portraying a mise en abyme renegotiates the boundaries between self and other, self and lover, self and world, eroding didactic binaries.

In chapter 2, Morse deconstructs the ever-expanding archive of selfies produced by Zinnia Jones (aka Lauren McNamara) and the complications of a digital community that can be receptive, encouraging, and inspiring—as well as hostile, reactionary, and frighteningly intimate—in its interrogation of, and response to, Jones's images. Morse examines how Jones courts this contradictory reception through an improvisational stance that celebrates potentialities. By shifting archives of transformations into and out of sight, by deleting profiles and then reinstating them, Jones highlights the unpredictability of the digital in which one can appear and then retract, all the while changing personae, intentions, and appearances.

Examining Jones's multiple iterations, Morse characterizes selfies as experimental serial representations that move beyond the idea of gender as a performance always enmeshed within power relations of domination and resistance as originally popularized by Judith Butler. Instead, Morse looks to the power of improvisation as a collective fashioning through which each of Jones's selfies becomes

an artifact that can then expand outward, altering the discourse around self and collective, individual agency, and participatory politics.

In chapter 3, Morse examines the necessity of seriality and fugitive forms of knowledge production as an antidote to the visibility/invisibility binary that constitutes much of representational politics. Eliding this binary is necessary, for, as Morse points out, the idea that greater visibility always generates greater freedom and acceptance is a normative stance that negates the precarity of trans embodiment, especially for trans women of color. Morse attends to how transness is capitalized upon, distorted, surveilled, and manipulated by a dominant culture that extracts and manipulates trans selfies for a political agenda independent of their creators. In so doing, Morse utilizes the notion of conceptual “trap doors” that can provide trans subjects with quick exits and liminal spaces within which trans knowledge can be safely produced (81).

Morse articulates how radicality is often cultivated in the shadows through a formal analysis of serial selfies produced by Alok Vaid-Menon and Che Gossett. A dimmed visibility can thus produce zones of knowledge impervious to classist assumptions, white-supremacist violence, or cisgender respectability politics, providing the necessary space to imagine trans feminist futures free from danger and assault.

Chapter 4 explores the temporality of selfies and questions the default assumption that nonlinearity is a form of resistant “queer time” that always delivers freedom from the dominant, linear norm (96). Morse shows the asynchronous and nonlinear nature of *all* subjects engaging in online exposition and discussion. When nonlinearity is embraced as a form of queer or trans resistance, it avoids a necessary critique of capitalist culture, which seeks to absorb and reframe trans selfie aesthetics in accordance with heteropatriarchy.

To elide trans conscription in the service of capitalist dominance, Morse examines the process of revising expansive video projects posted to YouTube and illuminates how Natalie Wynn (aka ContraPoints), and Zinnia Jones (again), exploit the mutability of their digital personae. Morse thus points to how multiple histories can be rehearsed and staged as disjointed circuits; from within these recursive practices, the materiality of self-exploration and presentation are made apparent. While digital tools may enable aesthetic flexibility, such as Jones’s use of “superimposition,

picture-in-picture reframing, insert shots of new material, and censorship through pixelization,” Morse emphasizes that these techniques consistently expose the calculated forms of labor that produce trans digital identities (107).

The concluding chapter of Morse’s text looks toward trans feminist futures as the foundation for trans selfie projects that can prompt intersubjectivity and forge collectivities, exposing an intergenerational desire to unearth trans histories that have been occluded or erased. Thus, one individual’s project that exposes a personal, situated, embodied experience cannot be understood apart from a history informed by the echoes of artists such as Claude Cahun, whom Morse addresses in their introduction. Morse would do well to expand the context in which they situate trans selfies, perhaps exploring the work of Tseng Kwong Chi, Nikki S. Lee, and Yasumasa Morimura, and drawing upon a broader art-historical repertoire of self-portraits that have also challenged the strictures of race, gender, ethnicity, and identity in innovative ways. Nevertheless, Morse’s narrow focus on digitality successfully makes an expedient point by using Cahun’s oeuvre (among others’) to highlight how contemporary trans selfies are actually palimpsests in which layers of history merge to produce “speculative archives” (115).

Such intergenerational correlations between past and present become ever more urgent when cast against the current fight for trans liberation. With laws attempting to restrict trans rights and to police trans bodies, this era of irrational and reckless conservatism tangibly threatens trans lives. Morse’s book not only expands upon the theoretical importance of trans selfies but is a project of political necessity in its insistence that trans lives must, without equivocation, translate into tenable futures where security and equality can be affirmed. Quite explicitly, a trans feminist invitation to look, engage and cocreate these future worlds mobilizes the selfie as one facet of a larger movement that requires constant adaptation, reinvention, remix, and subversion, all of which are features opportunely intrinsic to the digital age.

FRANCESCA ROMEO is an assistant professor of communication at the University of Tampa whose scholarship examines the nexus of digital media and political violence.

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