The art of the selfie

How we all became masters of the self-portrait. by Waldemar Januszczak
THE ONE SHOW

Above and left: with the aid of some wigs, the photographer Juno Calypso transformed herself into Joyce, a character she created to explore feminine identity. These portraits were taken during a solo vacation at a couples-only hotel with a time-lapse camera.

PAST MASTER

Top right: you needed extremely nimble fingers to produce a selfie in 1889 — as demonstrated by Vincent Van Gogh.

HOW TO BREAK THE INTERNET

Bottom right: first strip off and take a selfie, then post it online and watch mayhem ensue. NB: this only works if you are a global celebrity with your own reality TV show, like Kim Kardashian.

HERE'S LOOKING AT ME

Painters used to be the only people capable of self-portraiture, but now we are all at it. As a new Saatchi Gallery show celebrates the selfie, Waldemar Januszczak asks if vanity itself is now an art form.
That's the thing about selfies. From the start they were never about the real you. They were always about an imagined "you" — a construct.
What's interesting about Michelangelo's Sistine self-portrait is that it is an early example of role-playing. This isn't Michelangelo, the real belief. This is Michelangelo pretending to be the skin of St Bartholomew. He's acting out a part. And that's the thing about selfies. From the start they were never about the real you. They were always about an imagined "you". A construct.

It's a true story of Kim Kardashian "curating" her own nudity on Instagram, or Cindy Sherman imagining herself to be Caravaggio, or the woman you sit next to in the office dressing up as Cindy Sherman imagining herself to be Caravaggio, as it was of Michelangelo "curating" his nudity in the Sistine Chapel. In the world of the selfie, no one is really them.

Artists were the first selfie-takers because they were the only creatives in the past who could actually do them. What is now easy used to be difficult. Before the advent of smartphones and mirror functions, only those who could paint and draw to a high standard were capable of preserving a convincing likeness. Not only did you need to stare into a mirror for hours, wresting with your own reality, but you needed also to say something meaningful. Looking like you was never enough.

In the world of the great self-portrait, the most well-known were the real creators of the world. In the world of the selfie, the world is full of everyone. What began as a phenomenon of self-representation has turned into something else. It's a phenomenon of social media, of instant self-expression, of instant self-representation.

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Wherever we look, there we are.
On Instagram, on Twitter, on Facebook.
In every corner of the cosmos, we, us, me, moi are staring back at us.

WATCH THIS SPACE
Top: the Japanese astronaut Akihiko Hoshide communicates the profound wonder of the universe in a selfie during a spacewalk in 2012.

POLLS POSITIONING
Centre: the crowd turns its back on Hillary Clinton for a mass selfie at a rally last September.

GRIN AND BEAR IT
Right: the suicide belt (later found to be fake) worn by the EgyptAir hijacker Self Eldin Mustafa (left), did not deter a British passenger, Ben Innes, from posing with him in March 2016. "I wanted him to understand I was human," Innes later explained.

Exhibit yourself
As part of From Selfie to Self-Expression, Saatchi Gallery and Huawei are running a competition, #SaatchiSelfie. Open to anyone 16 or over worldwide, entrants can submit up to six creative selfies. The best will be exhibited, the top 10 will be shown on large screens and winners will receive Huawei’s newest smartphone. The overall winner will be announced at a VIP launch at the Saatchi Gallery on March 30. The competition opens tomorrow. Submissions at saatchigallery.com/selfie. The Sunday Times Magazine will also run some of the winners.