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Programme of Study: Photography in the Arts

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Assignment Title: Essay

Question 1:

Using at least 3 examples, consider how image makers have utilised digital technology to explore at least one of the following: Conflict, the Environment, Identity, the Surveillance State, the Technology Society?

Illustration List

-Fig 1: Sherman, Cindy (2017-2018) N/A Available at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/05/magazine/instagram-cindy-sherman-ugly-beauty.html> [Accessed: 4 December 2024].

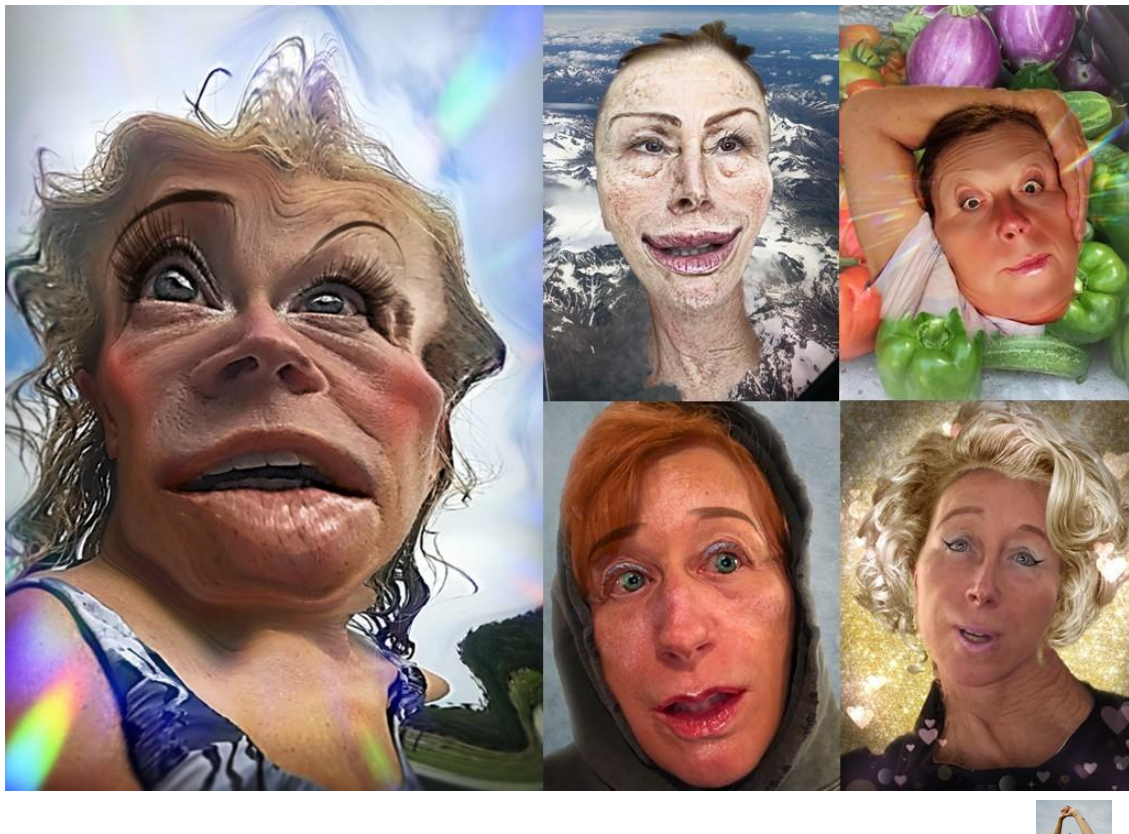
-Fig 2: T. Dugan, Jess (2021) *Self-Portrait (Reaching)*, Available: *What we see women & nonbinary perspectives through the lens*, pg 28-29

-Fig 3: Reyes Morales, Hannah (2021) *Butanding*, Available: *What we see women & nonbinary perspectives through the lens*, pg 111-112

This essay will explore how image makers engage with the theme of 'Identity' through the medium of digital technology. By analysing their practices, this essay aims to highlight the complex connections between theoretical concepts and practical applications. Furthermore, it will delve into a range of relevant and credible literature related to this theme to provide a deeper level of insight, enhanced understanding, and potential solutions to intricate issues surrounding identity in the digital age. Artists such as Cindy Sherman, Jess T. Dugan, and Hannah Reyes Morales have used digital technology to guide them through the topic of identity, creating fluid identities and magnifying marginalized voices. Using Digital portraiture, social media, video art and Ai, Artists have highlighted the performative and self-defined nature of identity, often breaking down traditional binaries. Through social media, artists perform and manipulate stereotypes, which displays how digital spaces can shape identities.

Cindy Sherman is a renowned artist predominantly known for her series *untitled film stills* taken from 1977-1980 which are infamous for Shermans impersonation of female stereotypes, reinforced by mass entertainment. Sherman is also known for her “chameleonic powers of metamorphosis”

(Dahshan, n.d.) with each self-portrait depicting Sherman disguised as a different woman and challenged a new stereotype. In 2016, Sherman created a private Instagram account that was then made public in August of 2017 where she continued her self-portraits that challenged stereotypes of identity using selfies.



Sherman posted cartoonish and caricatured versions of her selfies, each image being edited in a way that made her look odd or misshaped. Her work shared through her Instagram represents the identity that we share with each other. When we meet someone, we present ourselves as the version we want them to perceive us as, but often the version that they are presented with gets warped and skewed by events.

“They are some of the first pure protagonists in Sherman’s work:

These women are not metaphors, they are not waiting to be represented, rescued or destroyed. They are gloriously, catastrophically themselves, and we meet them on their own terms — as we so frequently meet each other — in stacy, embarrassing, endearing selfies launched into the world.”

(Schjeldahl, 2018)

Schjeldahl suggests that while these images follow Shermans style, they depict women differently. For the first time, Sherman’s women are not a representation of metaphors or female stereotypes but rather a representation of being one’s true self. Her work on Instagram displays women as authentic individuals, mixed with embarrassment and endearment. Schjeldahl tells us that we meet these women “on their own terms”, meaning that they are presenting themselves as the version they wish for us to perceive but because of the way these images are edited our perception of them is skewed. This leads us to believe that these images are a representation of our identity and how we are perceived by other.

Cindy Sherman utilises digital technology in various ways including her use of filters and digital manipulation as well as using social media to blur the line between the private and public self. With the creation of digital

technology, there has been an increase in the use of filters and image manipulation. Every celebrity on social media uses filters and digital manipulation to create a better version of themselves to be seen by the public, Sherman utilises this to alter her images in ways that could not be done without digital technology. This constructs a version of herself that is not true and forms a new identity.

The average person uses social media to post parts of the lives online for the world to see and Sherman uses this to her advantage. By using social media, she blurs the line between what is and isn't real, her work balances on the line of nonsensical selfies and meaningful photography.

Cindy Sherman employs the use of digital technology to not only obscure the lines between private and public, but also to construct new, complex identities that explore the ways in which individuals present themselves to others in a digital world. She uses tools such as filters and image manipulation to highlight the nature of representing ourselves and reflection on how digital platforms allow carefully created imagery to shape the way we are perceived offline.

Jess T. Dugan is an artist who uses video, sound, writing, and drawing, with a focus on photography to explore the intricacy of personhood, relationships, desire, love and family. As Dugan states on their website, their work draws from their own experiences and their queer and nonbinary identity. Their work reflects their firm belief in the importance of representation and the profound impact of storytelling. *Look at me like you love me* is a series of images from 2015-2022 that explores identity, love, vulnerability, and self- acceptance.



Fig 2.

Self-Portrait (Reaching) is a self-portrait of the photographer stretching/ reaching. This image is an exploration of the photographer's identity as a queer and nonbinary individual, photographing themselves in a public space with their scars showing, including their top surgery scars.

"Self-Portrait (Reaching) is part of my

long-term project *Every Breath We Drew*, an intimate and highly personal

meditation on identity, desire, and the search for meaningful connections with others.” (Dugan. 2023)

Dugan expresses that this series of images is a personal project to them, helping them explore their identity through highly personal meditation. This series helps them search for meaningful connections as well as exploration of identity.

A lot of transgender individuals may express being uncomfortable or insecure of their top surgery scars as they are a reminder that they are not biologically male or another gender. So, photographing yourself as a transgender person while exposing those scars, helps you to explore your identity and how to become comfortable in your own skin regardless of how society view you.

“Photography saved my life. As an adolescent, I discovered that by taking a Polaroid picture of myself dressed as a girl, I could escape the confines of boyhood. I have continued to use photography as a way to verify my existence and to see myself, my relationships, my evolution” (Drucker. 2018)

Drucker states that taking self-portraits of herself dressed as a woman helped her see herself as a woman and escape being a boy. Self-

portraits helped Drucker explore her identity and confirm how she viewed herself. This suggests that photography can and is used to explore identity and help one become comfortable with their identity and who they are/ want to be.

By using digital technology, Dugan captures themselves in more detail. With the use of analogue cameras, there is often noise cluttering the image but with the use of digital technology, the noise is minimised. This allows Dugan to photograph their scars and themselves in more detail and depth which allows them to explore their identity more.

As well as this, using digital technology means that capturing self-portraits is simpler and allows them to capture more images. If Dugan were to use analogue cameras, they wouldn't have room to fully explore themselves because using analogue creates more difficulty as well as having to wait for the results of the images. Using analogue means not having instant results which in a series of images that aims to explore a topic such as your own identity creates difficulty in knowing how you've captured your identity and how it could be viewed. So, using digital technology, allows Dugan to have instant feedback to help them know how they've captured themselves and what shot should be next as well as being quicker and

simpler, so they have more time to explore their identity rather than setting up.

Jess T. Dugan utilises digital technology to focus on exploring their identity over exploring how to use the camera in a way that best suits their series of images as well as capturing their body in depth and detail to confront their scars and physical proof of their transition. Through this medium, Dugan captures their body in depth and detail, confronting both their scars and physical evidence of their transition. The use of digital cameras allows Dugan to freely explore their identity as a transgender person, confronting their fears of not fitting societal expectations of masculinity and helping them see themselves as they truly are, rather than how society dictates they should be.

Hannah Reyes Morales is an artist who uses photography to focus on exploring how historical memory and current events influence and shape everyday life. Morales is a part of an ongoing organisation and residency project titled *Emerging island*, This project focuses on coastal communities and their cultures. *Emerging Islands* was created by 4 artists with art and

art adjacent backgrounds, including: writing, curating, photography, communications and creative strategist. One of the projects from *Emerging Islands* that Morales collaborated on was titled *Follow The Water*. “The world is more water than land—in an archipelago, this truth is a daily lived experience. Water connects us to that which is all around us, and within us.” In 2022, *Follow the Water*, an outdoor photography exhibition, was launched in La Union, Philippines. *Follow the Water* aimed to bring a spotlight to the country’s marine biodiversity, highlight climate threats, and celebrate Southeast Asia’s waters. As a part of this collaborative project, Morales created *Butanding*, an image of a fisherman feeding whale sharks.



Fig 3.

In Tan-awan, a community of 2,000 individuals, locals built the largest non-captive whale shark tourism hub, attracting millions of visitors over the last decade. Fishermen feed shrimp to whale sharks, ensuring tourist encounters, which has boosted the town's economy, created jobs, and funded a high school. However, conservationists warn this disrupts the sharks' natural behaviour. Morales states that balancing the community's survival and the needs of specific in the natural world is challenging. The community that the locals have built is a part of their identity because they came together to build it from the ground up. This means that being a fisherman and feeding the whale sharks to keep them around for tourism is also a part of their identity. By photographing a fisherman feeding whale sharks, Morales captures part of his identity as well as the identity of his community.

“Identity refers to our sense of who we are as individuals and as members of social groups.... Our ideas about our identity are also influenced by the social groups to which we belong. This concept is called social identity. (Exploring the concept of Identity. 2021)

This article explains the concept of identity as individuals and as groups, the writer states that identity is how we view ourselves, both as individuals and as groups/ communities.

“i·den·ti·ty

- a. The condition of being a certain person or thing
- b. The set of characteristics by which a person or thing is definitively recognizable or known
- c. The awareness that an individual or group has of being a distinct, persisting entity” (The American Heritage dictionary of the English Language. 2022)

By combining what the previous articles states and the definitions of identity from the dictionary, we can conclude that identity is made up of who we are. Different characteristics and traits define each person and create individuality, this encapsulates the meaning of identity. For the fisherman photographed, his community is what defines him, and his community is centred around the tourism that feeding these whale sharks bring so photographing him in the ocean feeding these whale sharks captures a part of not only his community’s identity but also his individual identity by displaying his role in the community.

Morales has utilised digital technology by photographing above and under the water in one frame. While there are analogue cameras that are able to

shoot underwater, shooting with analogue provide a different set of challenges than shooting underwater with a digital camera. The first challenge is film, with a digital camera there is no requirement for film, so your only limitation is your SD card, digital cameras also have higher ISO and better low light performance than an analogue camera. Typically, lighting underwater is rather poor so using a camera that has better low light performance is a requirement. Using a digital camera over an analogue camera results in images with better quality as well as being more convenient, versatile and reliable. Morales utilises the benefits of using digital technology to shoot both above and below the water. capturing both the man and the whale sharks. If Morales were to capture only the man or only the whale sharks, the context surrounding the image would be lost and wouldn't represent or explore the man or the community identity.

By utilizing digital technologies convenience, versatility and reliability, Morales has captured the essence of not only the man feeding whale sharks but also the community that has been built on. The entire community has been built on the fishermen feeding the whale sharks to ensure that tourists have an encounter with them, the result of feeding

whale sharks has helped the community create jobs, brought industry and money as well as bringing education by building a high school. Morales has utilised digital technology and capture an image that represents the fundamental basics of the community, which depicts both the fisherman/men identity as well as the community's identity.

Digital technology plays an important role in representing and exploring identities, offering a wide range of opportunities for individuals to express themselves. It can be utilized in a variety of ways, such as through the use of cameras, social media platforms, and other digital tools, allowing people to capture, share, and portray both individual and community identities.

Cameras, for example, allow individuals to create visual representations of themselves, while social media provides a space to explore identities while blurring the lines between real and fake. Through these digital channels, individuals have the opportunity to explore and experiment with different traits and characteristics of their identities, breaking away from traditional limitations. The power of digital technology lies in its ability to provide a more dynamic and versatile platform for self-expression, making it easier than ever to shape and communicate both personal and societal identities

in diverse and meaningful ways. As a result, digital technology offers a unique level of freedom, flexibility, and accessibility for people to present, examine, and reimagine who they are. In conclusion, digital technology plays a vital role in shaping and representing identities, allowing artists to explore and express complex themes in ways that were not possible with traditional methods. By analysing the works of artists like Cindy Sherman, Jess T. Dugan, and Hannah Reyes Morales, we see how digital tools such as social media, digital cameras, and digital manipulation have enabled them to challenge stereotypes, express personal narratives, and depict communities. These artists utilize digital technology not only to present identities but to also explore the fluidity and performative nature of self-representation. By blurring the lines between the private and public self, and by using digital technology's versatility, they offer new perspectives on identity, whether it's through manipulated selfies, personal self-portraits, or capturing the essence of a community.

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