

Identity and Authenticity on Social Media: 'How to Take a Selfie' for Instagram with Artist Andy Kassier

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Abstract

Selfies and posies dominate the social media platforms of the Internet as 'Social Photos.' They mean a new type of photography made ubiquitous by networked, digital sharing, that functions as a unit of social communication. Especially, Instagram imagery is social photography to the degree that its central use is more expressive than informational when the recording and documenting of reality is not its own end, but a means for communicating an idea or an experience. Since social media enables everyone to take, to publish and to distribute photographs and to receive instant feedback in the form of likes, hearts, shares, and comments as well as other kinds of visuals, a staging competition is underway today. The vast amounts of images of the self circulating on social media are not only a new visual language for current status reports and biographical storytelling but also always stand in competition with each other. Social photos are competitive images for the most effective resonances, which take their starting point in impressing, affirming, and emotionalizing. The social photo mainly functions as a strategic representation by creating effective new forms of staging.

The Berlin-based conceptual artist Andy Kassier examined them for an ongoing Instagram art project. With 'How to Take a Selfie,' he explores the pictorial world of the Instagram generation, focusing in particular on the self-portrayal and self-marketing of young men on the Internet. The desire for confirmation and recognition in social media has led to specific new role models for the Millennials and Centennials, which Andy Kassier recreates in front of the smartphone camera. In the act of performance and re-enactment, these become visible not only as image types and social categories but also lead to the question of what is real about this extensive staging culture on Instagram. The search for identity and the desire for singularity and authenticity are on the one hand a drive for the social photo, but on the other hand, there is always the suspicion that everything on Instagram is just a fake. For many today, however, the creative, self-fabricated in the image is the expression of an identity that no longer distinguishes between real and virtual, true and false. However, Andy Kassier's Instagram art project still struggles with the old question of what can be experienced as authentic in the digital representations of the Internet 2.0.

The Social Photo and the Selfie on Instagram

Today the generation of the Millennials is not only socialized with the Internet and its ubiquitous digital communication platforms but is also particularly fixated on identity and authenticity online and offline respectively. However, to be authentic only means to play another social role in life. While Erving Goffman already diagnosed for the post-war generation growing up with the mass medium of television that we all play theatre in everyday life¹, the perfect performance and creative staging of the self have long since become a creative imperative for the younger generation of the social media era. The current 'identity-performativity' of the Millennials still bases on the unquestioned general conviction that "Much of the cultural understanding and development of social media centres on creating and maintaining ourselves as fixed selves, as real-name profiles, as selves-as-brands."²

In times of fake news and deep-fake, however, the longing for radical authenticity seems abundantly romantic. Paired with an authentic appearance, the desire for singular individuality and personal perfection is omnipresent, even if this ends in fashionable conformity and optical uniformity. The much-ridiculed figure of the 'hipster' is a perfect example of this nowadays. Besides, the technologically networked generation of the globalized age has already developed its new role models. Social identity is constituted and communicated in and with images in a double sense. With the help of social photography, a new universal language has been created, as Nathan Jurgenson remarks: "The social photo is an especially prominent technological mediation of our lives, a powerful contemporary example of how reality is augmented—how connected digital cameras can articulate the self and sociality rather than inherently diminish or destroy them. To see through the logic of images, to consider how we speak with them and build the self through the audience they garner and the status they can afford is also to describe digital connection as something potentially intimate and as real as writing instead of as a venture into some virtual plane. Social photos epitomize the technological nature of conscious experience, of sight, speech, and human sociality; they exemplify the embodied and social nature of the machines that make them."³

Since social media⁴ enables everyone to take, to publish and to distribute photographs and to receive instant feedback in the form of likes, hearts, shares and comments as well as other forms of visuals (e.g., in the form of emojis, GIFs, or memes), a staging competition is underway today.

The vast amounts of images of the self circulating on social media are not only a new visual language for current status reports and biographical storytelling but also always in competition with each other. Social images are competitive images for the most effective resonances, which take their starting point in impressing, affirming, and emotionalizing. The social photo, to use Nathan Jurgenson's term⁵, serves not only communication rather than information but functions also as a strategic representation by creating effective new forms of staging. The success of selfies⁶, for example, is measured on Instagram⁷ by the quantity and quality of resonance they receive, which is metrically identified by the number of clicks, likes, shares, comments, etc. displayed on the glowing screen.

Moreover, often, it is not even the old criteria that once applied when it came to identifying a good photograph that makes up its success today. It is no longer only a particular aesthetic and formal originality of the picture that is decisive, but also who shows what, to whom, when, and for what purpose. A social image is no longer primarily a document that records what was or is but is instead directed towards the future by preparing specific resonances with its recipients. In this sense, it can also be characterized as an independently acting agent in a broader social network: A selfie can therefore also be seen as an ambassador who conducts visual identity politics and is supposed to do agile persuasive work. In the majority of cases, the selfie therefore nowadays has to represent—and not only since Kim Kardashian's selfie series⁸— the thriving, healthy, and happy individual in society.

Whoever sets himself in the scene, makes himself an image with the smartphone camera in his hand, at the same time always makes himself a self-assured image of himself. Who knows how to stage himself for the camera skillfully and creatively, can ultimately also determine the image that others receive from him. These daily creative staging performances with the smartphone are ultimately also about a constructive image production that constitutes the self out of a synthetic combination of mental and real images. The young German artist Andy Kassier (born 1989)⁹ investigates this fact with artistic and creative research as well as with a subsequent impressive meta-work.

Andy Kassier - Instagram Success

The work of the Berlin-based conceptual artist consists of self-portraits or selfies, sculptures, videos, and mixed-media installations, in which he focuses above all on current discourses of wealth, success, fame and the related self-representation of our time. A vital part of his artistic work deals with the phenomenon of the self-staging and self-marketing of young men on Instagram—with a particular focus on the cultural reception of the self in the digital sphere of the Internet.

How does our understanding of identity and authenticity change in the increasingly technologically networked world? What does it mean when the Centennials' biggest career wish is to become an influencer or YouTube star? When self-optimization and a perfect performance are seen as an investment and a fundamental basis for a successful as well as a happy life?

Andy Kassier deals in particular with the logical relationship between success, wealth, and happiness. While a few years ago Fischli & Weiss asked 'Will happiness find me?'¹⁰, Andy Kassier searches for it specifically on the various social media platforms on the Internet—according to the motto '*Fake it till you make it!*' What happiness and the associated aspects of wealth, beauty, health, sex, narcissism, good life, and permanent travel to the most beautiful locations in the world mean for a post-internet generation nowadays is what Andy Kassier is basically dealing with in his ongoing artistic Instagram project 'How to Take a Selfie'¹¹, which has been running since 2013 (Fig. 1).

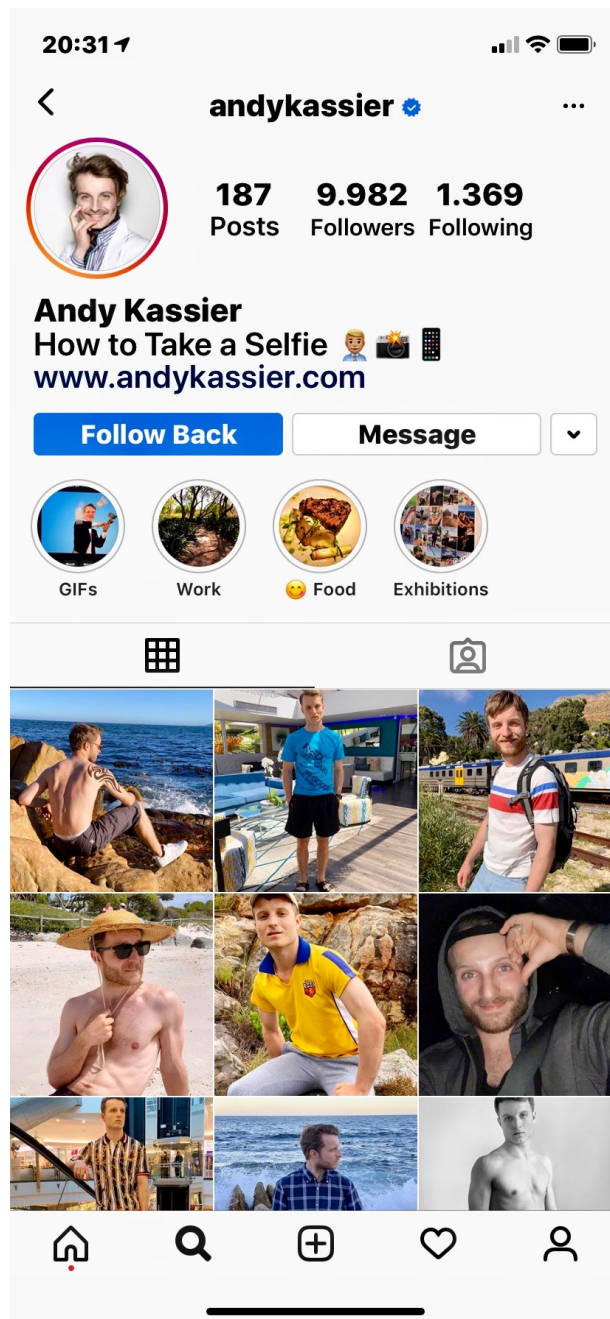


Figure 1: Andy Kassier's Artistic Instagram project 'How to Take a Selfie', since 2013. Screenshot of Pam Scorzin's iPhone.

To him as a contemporary conceptual artist the popular social media platform Instagram not only serves as a digital showcase for his works and back-stage stories but also, as for the post-internet artists Leah Schrager (born 1983) and Amalia Ulman (born 1989)¹², primarily as artistic material—both for artistic and creative research and functions as an integral work component. Like the famous photo-artist Cindy Sherman, Andy Kassier is not only an artist-photographer but also first and foremost a performer in front of and for the camera. During her time as an art student, the American artist (born 1954) created numerous photographs for the first time under the concept of transformation and masquerade, combining many elements of theater and film.¹³ For more than 35 years now, Cindy Sherman has repeatedly used facial expressions, gestures, poses, make-up and costumes as well as props and set design to visualize a multitude of stereotypical role models and female identities.

Andy Kassier, on the other hand, focuses on the new role models and gender clichés of young men on Instagram, that has so far received less attention and has not yet been discussed in gender studies at large. These new self-presentations, which have been established on various social media platforms by the Millennials and Centennials, are somehow located between the search for identity and the crisis of authenticity: What is considered male today? Which forms of masculinity, virility, and sexuality are fashionable today? So, how does one become an ego-brand today? How do digital representation and the real self come together? What is real, and what is fake in self-presentation on social media like Instagram? The old question remains, what is the relationship between appearance and being? Moreover, do we still have to think in this dialectic today?

In 2018, Andy Kassier and the US-American artist Signe Pierce (born 1988) performed '*On the internet, nobody knows you are a performance artist*' live at the NRW-Forum Düsseldorf (Germany), thus bringing the supposedly virtual back into the real—IRL—; art and life merge in this art project. Last, not least, the baseline of #Finstagram (Fake Instagram) has been used by the Millennials and Centennials for some time now. One is entirely enlightened that not everything that is shown on Instagram might be real. So, everything just like in the legendary glossy commercial 'My house, my car, my boat.'¹⁴ Andy Kassier himself worked as an assistant in advertising photography for several years during his studies (2012-2018 with Mischa Kuball and Johannes Wohnseifer at the Academy of Media Arts in Cologne, among others); and we suspect he knows all the commercial marketing tricks. Stylistically, he draws on the surreal, super-perfect advertising aesthetics of the eighties, the Golf generation with their Yuppies and Poppers—back then when everything was analog, and

Photoshop was still in its infancy, but not all the less staged and deceptive. Andy Kassier not only achieves a necessary disruption in the playful game of ironic affirmation with this nostalgic retro aesthetic, as it is so popular with the Hipster today, but also mischievously expands the discussion of what could be real, genuine and credible on social media by another dimension: For what could be fake about an iPhone photograph that shows the artist himself, posing in the midst of a real scenery with real pieces of equipment (i. e., from the worn hip fashion to the accessories or used status symbols), as a trusty document? Andy Kassier's selfies and posies are entirely self-directed, often with self-timer and with low-key or only for the moment of recording borrowed props. The focus of the camera is always on the person in the picture and the character that is to be exemplarily depicted. Andy Kassier then personifies them all like a trickster: the golfer, the poser, the grinder, the manager, the hustler, the hipster, the skater, the vegan, the emo, the nature boy, the beach boy, the fitness coach, the rich guy, and so on (Fig. 2-3).

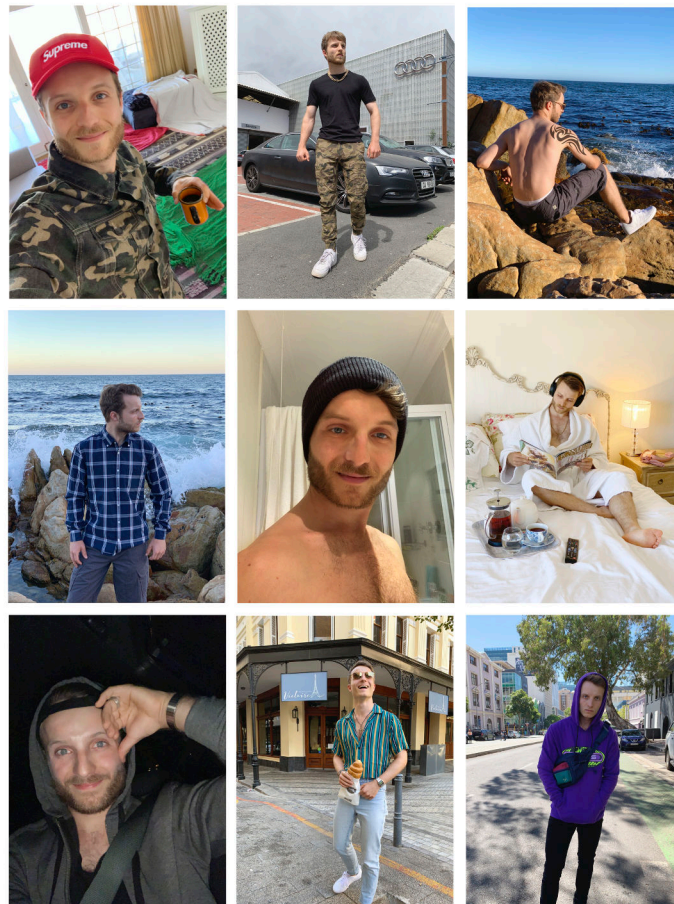


Figure 2: Andy Kassier's personifications of male role models on Instagram.
Photos: Courtesy of the Artist © Andy Kassier (Berlin).



Figure 3: Andy Kassier's personifications of male role models on Instagram.
Photos: Courtesy of the Artist © Andy Kassier (Berlin).

Andy Kassier is visible everywhere and yet disappears behind all selected and staged roles. Compared to Andy Kassier, the German artist colleague Martin Liebscher (born 1964), on the other hand, appears in his multiple self-portrayals as a pure ego-shooter.¹⁵

Almost always, there are concrete models for his Instagram postings. Appropriation and re-enactment, reconstruction and reflection, adaptation and citation serve here as proven artistic methods for Andy Kassier's growing encyclopedia of male role models of the first decades of the 21st century. In 2017, the famous fashion bloggers of Dandy Diary (Jakob Haupt and David Roth)—inspired by Hans Eijkelboom's *'People of the 21st Century'*¹⁶—compiled and mixed the notoriously repetitive Instagram images of female fashion bloggers in an amusing video entitled *'Influencers of the 21st Century'* and on an Instagram account of the same name without any further comment.

Andy Kassier's social image collection, on the other hand, thrives on the performative content of its ambiguous re-enactments. His long-time Instagram art project is, therefore, more than just an actualization of August Sander's epic photographic series. It is foremost to be interpreted as tactical re-enactment. His funny selfies and posies on Instagram are primarily to be seen as images about images, as the staging of stagings.

In addition, Andy Kassier's social photos are at the same time always images standing in a specific context that has a meaningful effect on their interpretation: Instead of work titles and year dates, they carry additional information and come along with more (made-up) data—such as Chris Drange's *'Relics'*¹⁷ or Richard Prince's notorious Instagram series¹⁸. As ephemeral social media postings, Andy Kassier's social photos are being published with additional text messages such as coaching wisdom, guru mantras, geotags, and above all trendy hashtags, all of which are intended to control the interpretation of their purely visual content (Fig. 4-6).

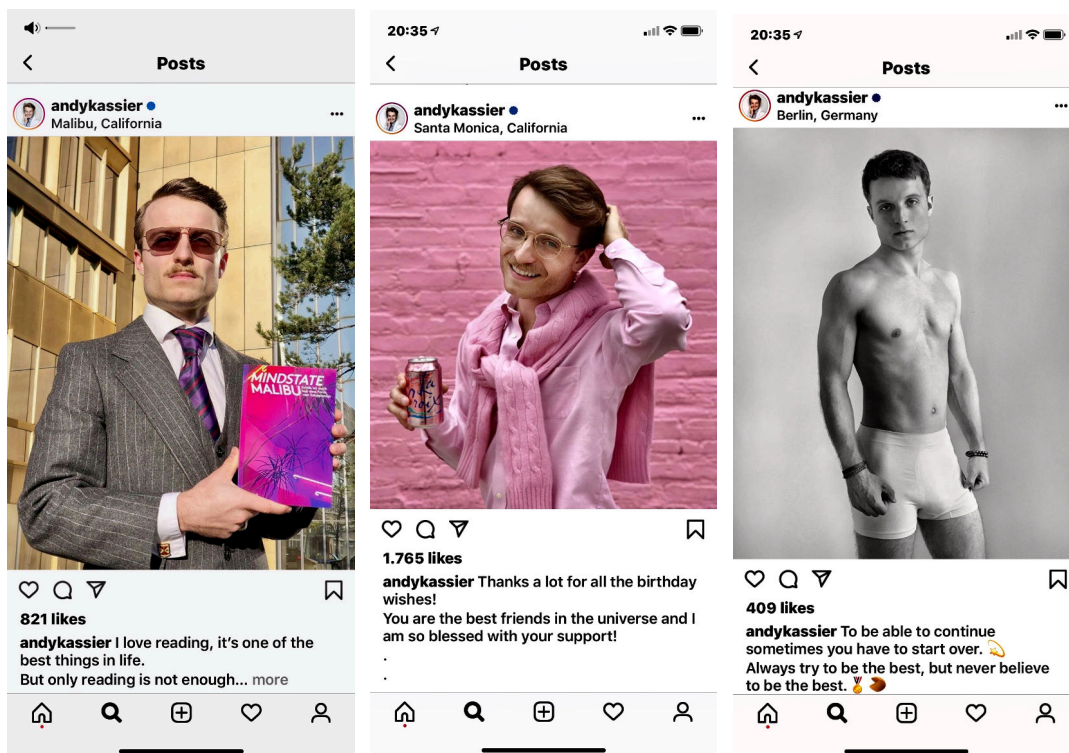


Figure 4, 5 and 6: Andy Kassier's social photos. Screenshot of Pam Scorzin's iPhone.

Only in this complex reception process do fictions emerge from facts; here, the social photograph begins to deceive and to lie to its audiences. Besides, interactions take place with the followers and the hidden algorithms of the digital platform, which ultimately have a decisive influence on when, where and how often these fleeting social images become visible to whom in the grids of the streams. Here, too, it is no longer just the aesthetics of the photographic images that determine (social) success, but rather their visual rhetoric—for example, whether they could be relevant to anyone at all.

For young artists, this can even mean that they no longer have to wait for an appreciation and confirmation from critics and theorists of the art system. They are ultimately not dependent on their voices any longer. Today, on Instagram, they can quickly gain a wider reach for further success on the global art market and even a significant fan base—as long as they meet the zeitgeist of the influential digital natives. With his funny artist GIFs, Andy Kassier now reaches at least millions people. Being networked today means everything, especially for the international artist career.

The global art scene, on the other hand, already knows its proven "Instagram artists" of the post-Internet generation; but that sounds almost like an insult. Visual art outside the established framework of museums and the art market is still considered by many to be much too pop(ular). However, this does not stop some contemporary artists from paying particular attention to the 'instagramability' or 'likeability' of their artworks today. Moreover, as with the amateurs, the aim is to demonstrate their singular (because easily recognizable) signature style. Regardless of the minimization to the Instagram format, works of art today sometimes achieve maximum range. Global Contemporary Art seeks proximity to the social media imagery of the present—amidst the same recurring motifs of luxury, lifestyle and beautiful living, tourism, fashion, fitness, and global food trends that launch celebrities and influencers. That is how brands are built today!

Success is just a smile away on Instagram

What brings everything together, in the end, is the unconditional will for total aestheticization and all-encompassing staging. Both serve fast communication and indispensable connectivity: "Edgar Gómez Cruz concisely states that 'photography has gone from being a medium for the collection of important memories to an interface for visual communication. Today, the global flow of image-speak among those who do not write in the same language allows for new possibilities in visual communication'"¹⁹. The most successful Instagram postings currently resemble those of the commercial consumer world and pop culture. They inform or inspire, emotionalize, and entertain by telling small stories visually and thus inform their followers about news in an entertaining and seemingly direct personal way.

By scrolling and swiping continuously through Instagram's feeds and grids, one can learn what is meant by hashtagged terms in the image streams. Constantly recurring image motifs and patterns, which stand for the most successful postings, quickly crystallize out. In this medium, professionals and amateurs compete side by side for the best visual stagings. Posting (hyper-)images, i.e., images linked in a variety of ways, is above all a very competitive business and an open competition for favor and attention for the artistic and creative achievements of all kinds demonstrated here (—or shouldn't we better say 'photo filters' today?). The masses will hopefully reward these with instant reactions and direct comments. At the beginning there is a 'Like' (or a little red heart); at the end in the best case a so-called 'Lovestorm'. Shitstorms, on the other hand, are the new tear. That is especially true for new internet artists around the world.

The 'Instagramification' of our everyday life is thus also an expression of a comprehensive evaluation society in which every performance today is instantly evaluated and ranked. The winners benefit significantly from this new type of multiplier marketing and social networking. Money, fame, and honor—as always—for the chosen ones or the prestigious rise to the postmodern Olympus of Celebrities (see *The Kardashians*) attract them to the utmost. Singular signature style and spectacular staging talent are here the essentials for the ultimate success status of a *Famous for being famous*, as Andy Warhol has already clairvoyantly predicted in the Pop Art era.

The other Andy, meanwhile, distributes self-designed and self-printed banknotes with his smiling face as giveaway stickers at his public appearances and continues to look forward to great fame. Andy Kassier made it; at least, such it seems when we look at his Instagram account while he assures us: "I did my research, I dedicated myself to this image and this persona and developed its existence in reality as well as in its documentation. Hard work and patience, it sounds cliché, but I truly mean it. (...) I think I created this persona that allows me to question aspects of wealth, gender, consumption, status, but also the medium itself. My work is often so exaggerated that it is obvious that it is not real. But I don't think that reality exists in social media; it's a playground."²⁰

Ultimately, Andy Kassier's Instagram art project still struggles with the old question of what can be experienced as authentic in the virtual spheres of the Internet 2.0; because it seems, again formulated with Nathan Jurgenson, "Social media have been made to capture the essence, the 'truth' of ourselves, to be a document, a record, and, as such, to stimulate life within boxes, categories, cells in a database, to make an object of subjectivity. Much of social photography bases on this anxious design. Each image is wrung through profiles that keep track of likes and followers and thus the success of every image and every person."²¹ Thus, *'Success is just a smile away'* was, by the way, the original header and former baseline for Andy Kassier's now with a blue tick verified Instagram account - so, check it out, guys!

Author Biography

Pamela C. Scorzin is an art, design and media theorist, and Professor of Art History and Visual Culture Studies at Dortmund University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Department of Design (Germany). Born 1965 in Vicenza (Italy), she studied European Art History, Philosophy, English and American Literatures, and History in Stuttgart and Heidelberg (Germany), obtaining her M.A. in 1992 and her Ph.D. in 1994. She was an assistant professor in the Department of Architecture at Darmstadt University of Technology from 1995 to 2000. After completing her habilitation in the history and theory of modern art there in 2001, she was a visiting professor in Art History, Media and Visual Culture Studies in Siegen, Stuttgart, and Frankfurt am Main. Since 2005, she is a member of the German section of AICA. She has published (in German, English, French, and Polish) on art-historical as well as cultural-historical topics from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century. She lives and works in Dortmund, Milan, and Los Angeles.

Notes

1. See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), passim.
2. Nathan Jurgenson, *The Social Photo. On Photography and Social Media*. (London/ New York: Verso, 2019), 87.
3. Jurgenson 2019, 112.
4. See Jan Alteheger, *Mythos Social Media. Die Ästhetik der Täuschung*. In: Reihe Welt | Gestalten, Bd. 1, ed. by Lars C. Grabbe and Oliver Ruf (Marburg: Böhner-Verlag 2019), cover: "Soziale Netzwerke sind wie ein permanentes Klassentreffen, jeder will zeigen, dass er es zu etwas gebracht hat. Es werden Eindrücke, Momente und Urlaubsfotos gepostet und geteilt, mit dem Bestreben nach mehr Anerkennung und Aufmerksamkeit, nach mehr Klicks, Likes und Followern. Für die meisten gehört der Blick auf das Smartphone mittlerweile zum Alltag wie das Zähneputzen oder die Morgentoilette. So bauen sich völlig neue soziale Rollen und Kreise auf. Sie bilden Verbindungen und Konstrukte – codiert von Einsen und Nullen –, die neue Zugehörigkeiten und Identitäten schaffen."
5. See Jurgenson 2019, pp. 8-9 and 17: "The term 'social photo' can be limiting because all photos are social in a sense (a critique equally applicable to the term 'social media'). My interest here is with a type of photography made ubiquitous by networked, digital sharing, though many of its characteristics can be found in different degrees in pre-social media photography, especially amateur snapshots (Polaroid sharing in particular). For my purposes here, what fundamentally makes a photo a social photo is the degree to which its existence as a stand-alone media object is subordinate to its existence as a unit of communication. (...) Photography is social photography to the degree that its central use is more expressive than informational, when the recording of reality is not its own end but a means for communicating an experience."
6. Cf. Wolfgang Ullrich, *Selfies. Digitale Bildkulturen*. (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2019).
7. Cf. Katja Gunkel, *Der Instagram-Effekt. Wie ikonische Kommunikation in den Social Media unsere visuelle Kultur prägt*. (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2018), passim.
8. Cf. Kim Kardashian West, *Selfish: More Me! With New Selfies 2015-2016*. (New York: Universe, 2016).
9. Visit the website of the artist on the internet at the URL: <https://andykassier.com>. (I want to thank Andy Kassier for the inspiring talk we had in Dortmund on 26 June 2019. Dedicated to Ryan B. - my love, the All-American Guy, male model, and fashion companion).
10. See Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *Findet mich das Glück?* (Köln: Walther König, 2001).
11. See the Instagram account at the URL: <https://www.instagram.com/andykassier/>.
12. See Alicia Eler, "Amalia Ulman's Instagram performance exposed the flaws in selfie culture" on CNNStyle. (29 March 2018), available on the Internet at the URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/amalia-ulman-instagram-excellences-perfections/index.html> (Last access: July 2019).
13. Cf. Gabriel Schor, *Cindy Sherman. Das Frühwerk 1975-1977*. Catalogue Raisonné. (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz 2012).
14. See Tim Theobald, "Warum Jung von Matt und die Sparkasse den legendären 90er-Spot neu auflegen" (11 October 2018), available on the Internet at the URL: <https://www.horizont.net/agenturen/nachrichten/mein-haus-mein-auto-mein-boot-warum-jung-von-matt-und-die-sparkasse-den-legendaeren-90er-spot-neu-auflegen-170283> (Last access: July 2019).
15. See Pamela C. Scorzin, "Martin Liebscher. Liebscher ist jeder," in: KÜNSTLER. KRITISCHES LEXIKON DER GEGENWARTSKUNST, Ausgabe 97, Heft 4, 1. Quartal 2012 (20 Seiten).
16. Watch it on <http://dandydiary.de/influencers-of-the-21st-century/> (Last access: July 2019).
17. See Anika Meier, "Starkult auf Instagram. Heiligenverehrung im 21. Jahrhundert. Chris Drange." (19 July 2017), available on the Internet at the URL: <https://www.monopol-magazin.de/instagram-chris-drange>. (Last access: July 2019).
18. See Jerry Saltz, "Richard Prince's Instagram Paintings Are Genius Trolling." (23 September 2014), available on the Internet at the URL: <https://www.vulture.com/2014/09/richard-prince-instagram-pervert-troll-genius.html>. (Last access: July 2019).
19. Jurgenson 2019, 13-14.
20. Andy Kassier cited by Sabrina Steinek, "Network is everything. Interview with Andy Kassier." (3 October 2017), available on the Internet at the URL: <https://whereaboutnow.com/journal/network-is-everything>. (Last access: July 2019).
21. Jurgenson 2019, 111.

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