

## Capturing culture through the selfie cam

*Robert Graham*

*“Sometimes we use the mediation of technology to help us see ourselves better, to understand ourselves or to improve ourselves, or simply to imagine someone to speak to, a ‘dear diary’ to tell our secrets to when nobody else will listen. Other times we want to share our experiences with others.”<sup>1</sup>*

### Introduction

The quote above was collected early on in my reading of Jill Walker Rettberg's text *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology: How We Use Selfies, Blogs, and Wearable Devices to See and Shape Ourselves*. The quote jumped out at me because I knew that is what I wanted to accomplish with this unit. In today's world of high-end smartphones and more social media than any other kind of media, my students use technology extensively throughout the day. My students post photos to various social media platforms to accumulate likes, share images, and connect with others; but what is really going on here?

The selfie, yes, the often-ridiculed photo of one's self can be a tool for serious reflection. I have seen my students take and retake selfies, make edits, apply filters, and finally post. The whole process of the selfie is thought to be highly social and non-educational, but is it really? When a student snaps a selfie and decides to retake it, what just happened? In the opinion of this art teacher (me), I see an artistic critical thinking process. This bit of critical thinking may be the fastest blip of actual thinking, but it is still there. As a student looks at the image (selfie or not) and decides to retake if they are making the decision that the image is not good enough. That single decision is the inspiration for this unit. The decision is the choice to edit the world around them. Students who apply filters and make edits to their photos are actively sculpting the image of themselves in the eyes of the viewer.

### The decision

Is this good? Is it cute? Do I look tough? Should I post? These are just some of the questions that fly through a selfie-takers' head when they are first seeing their photo after it has been taken. From an artistic stance, this decision is part of the editing and reflection processes. The ability to reflect on a personal creation or decision, and then use that reflection productively is an essential life skill and one that I teach in the art room. In my classroom, I aim to teach not only art related skills but also to strengthen the critical

thinking skills my students use daily. Art is the method I use for the teaching of efficient and effective critical and creative thinking.

## Background

This school year I left my elementary school for five years to pursue a new path as an art teacher at Christiana High School. This position is completely new to my district and me. Students range from 6<sup>th</sup>-grade honors level to 12-grade high school students. The middle school students are part of the Middle School Honors Academy, a small all-honors level middle school housed in the Christiana High School Campus. My middle school students have high standards for themselves and their education. They have applied, been tested, and accepted their position in this new school.

I am responsible for writing the curriculum for all my courses. My middle school students will experience a hybrid of my choice-based learning philosophy where I never tell a class what we are making, and a more traditional discipline-based art education. Disciplined based art is an old-school method of teaching art. Students learn from the master artist before them, practice skill, and study the medium methodically. During a choice-based lesson, I teach my students about techniques, process, artists, history, cultures, and materials. Once loaded with their new information for the day I set my class free to use the lesson or techniques any way they want. I encourage experimentation and celebrate the failures and the successes equally. Everything is relevant to the artist and should be used in the creative process. The combination of these two methods of teaching will provide my middle schoolers with a rounded view of the world of art and an opportunity to express themselves creatively.

My high school classes receive a similar style of teaching, with more of a focus on the choice-based art style. I want my older students to draw from all they have experienced in their past to generate an idea that expresses a thought. We look at various types of art from all parts of history and the world. In addition to traditional art classes, I also teach digital photography. This class is taught using students' smartphones, due to a lack of cameras. I welcome the use of cell phones in my class because I want my students to realize how much of a tool a smartphone can be. In photography class, we learn about the basics of composition, styles of photography, how to play with perspective, and lighting basics of the camera. I teach my students to use photo editing software to manipulate and enhance their images. Using this software students can remove objects from images, add them in, change the mood of a photo through lighting and color, and apply artistic edits.

## School Demographics

Christiana High School is situated in Newark, Delaware. My school, which was built back in the '60s, enrolls around 800 students. That large group of students is divided up into a multitude of different academic situations and placements. Within Christiana's

campus, there is a budding middle school. The Middle School Honors Academy (MSHA) is in its second year as a school of existence, and we are growing fast. The plan is that by next school year Christina school district will have a full Honors level middle school. The MSHA is housed inside the Christiana campus, but middle school students have separate classrooms, facilities, and staff from the high school students.

Along with the Honors middle school, there is an honors level high school program. Students enrolled in this program participate in honors level classes in addition to mixed academic level electives on campus. Honors students spend part of their day at Wilmington University, working on college-level coursework. At graduation, students who completed the full honors level course will have accumulated over 20 college-level credits. Christiana is also home to multiple alternative style school settings. These various settings are designed to place students in an environment where they can have the most success. Students at Christiana come from a range of situations; about 40% of my students fall into the low-socioeconomic category, 8% are English language learners, and 12% are receiving special education services.

## **Rationale**

A picture is worth a thousand words.

For my photography course, which is the focus of this unit, I want my students to learn to use their cameras and their photographs to do something more than just accumulate likes and comments on social media. My students will be challenged to use their cameras as tools to document the cultures around them. Changing my students' mindset about their cameras will be a challenge, but I know that once they make the distinction between the camera as a device, and the camera as a tool for documentation, they will be able to photograph subjects and themselves at a more professional level. My students are part of a culture made up by their phones and social media, through the study of it I aim to awaken them to their role in the culture as well as how to utilize it as a tool for self-reflection and growth.

I believe that a basic photography class is something that all students should take. Humans have never had more access to cameras and photo editing tools than they do today. My students deserve the opportunity to learn about the camera they keep in their pocket, and to fully explore what an impact it can have. The impact of camera access today is seen regularly on social media and the news. It is only a modern phenomenon that we can see firsthand footage as often as we do. The events occur, but it is the documentation, through a photograph, and publication, through social media, that take a negative act like crime or harm and spark a movement. A camera is a tool, just like the pen.

The course will be laced with history, technique, processes, vocabulary, and assignments. In today's world, any photographer that wishes to make a profit must be able to take on an assignment and complete it. I designed the course to be a blend of technical/skill related assignments and job-related photoshoots. Students are challenged to take photos that meet criteria, tell stories, and capture the essence of their subject no matter what that subject may be. To begin, I assign students technical photoshoots like using different forms of composition or creating and finding the elements of art and principles of design in photographs.

## **Objectives**

### **Learning objectives**

- Communicate through group critique about the ideas and messages seen in a visual image
- Analyze subject matter and composition to enhance the theme or idea of a photography
- Define and identify the differences between a selfie and self-portrait
- Identify cultural ideals and how they affect culture or group
- Document, through self-portraiture, a series of, or parts of, a student's culture
- Arrange a cohesive presentation of images that tell the story of a culture or its appearance over time
- Compare and contrast historical and contemporary uses of self-imagery

## **Culture**

Culture is learned and shared. Culture is all the things that we as humans do, believe in, remember, live by, build (or manufacture) and plan for. Culture is also a biological adaptation and developed in human beings over the centuries of evolution. The human species is genetically programmed to learn about its culture. This means that humans are not preprogrammed to a culture, thusly we can learn any culture we are born into or spend a significant amount of time in. We as humans adapted to have culture to benefit our lives and allow us to accomplish more. In prehistoric times, ancient humans relied on culture to function in their early societies. The ancient human practiced rituals, habits, and gender roles; all part of culture. Today, we also rely on culture to function within our societies.

Culture has changed the way we live and allowed us as humans to spread out farther on this planet than any other species. Our adaptation to have culture has allowed us as a species to develop solutions to our problems. Clothing, for example, is a cultural response to biological evolution. At some point in ancient history, early humans lost their fur/hair. These early humans adapted by making clothing. This idea caught on, and thousands of

years later we have the fashion industry and public laws enforcing the requirement of clothing.

Cultural evolution is much faster and more direct than biological evolution. While a biologic evolution may take thousands of years, cultural evolution can occur more rapidly. Cultural evolution may be sparked by a large event, invention, tragedy, or any other large-scale occurrence. The evolution occurs when a group of people living together is affected by and react to the stimulating event.

## **On Anthropology**

Anthropologists study culture; they approach it holistically with the belief that everything is interrelated. An anthropologist focuses on the “norms” of a culture, as well as the extravagant. During a study period, an anthropologist will observe the activities carried out by a group of peoples, participate in the customs of daily life, and interview members of the culture or group being studied. There are two main sides of anthropology: academic and practice. In academic anthropology, the anthropologist studies a group or culture to document their lives and tell their stories. The academic anthropologist is concerned with the accurate documentation of the practices and beliefs of a group and the education of others about that group. The practicing anthropologist is hired to study a group or culture in order to cause change. A practicing anthropologist may be hired by a private company, a large organization, government agency, or any other employer. Their goal is to observe the group or culture and collect information to inspire change. This change may be something vastly important like climate conservation and use of energy or more capitalistic like the creation of effective advertising campaigns. These two fields in anthropology are both alive and well today. In this unit, I will help guide my students into a more academic style of anthropology.

## **Ethnography**

An ethnography is the result produced through the study of people and cultures; it is both a science and an art. Like a biography being a document about one person, an ethnography is about one or more groups or cultures. An ethnographic researcher must be able to observe all parts of a culture or group of people without passing judgment or drawing conclusions. The ethnographer pays attention to the daily activities of the group they are studying. During the period of study, the ethnographer is doing many things, not just documenting what they see, but also looking for the true culture. The phenomenon of *culture* is created out of believing in one tradition of practice, but in reality, diverging from that belief. As an anthropologist, my students will be challenged with deciphering between their own cultural ideals and their actual practices, they will observe their subjects to decipher between the ideals and the actuals. Ethnographic research is both a skill and an art.

## Photography and Visual Anthropology

*“The best photography is a form of bearing witness, a way of bringing a single vision to the larger world.”<sup>2</sup>*

The term *Visual Anthropology* is used to describe the ethnographic work of studying the production of images and symbols by cultures or groups of people. These images can be artworks, photography, videography, advertisements, or computer media. Along with the production of images, visual anthropology also studies how these images are used, viewed, shared, and traveled. Visual anthropology also encourages the use of images and film to document any type of ethnographic work.

The Society for Visual Anthropology, a subgroup of the American Anthropological Association, founded in 1984 developed the idea to use images and photographic techniques in ethnography.<sup>3</sup> The society credits Margaret Mead, a well known American anthropologist, for being one of the pioneers in using film and photography as scholarly ethnography.<sup>4</sup> Mead was born in Philadelphia on December 16, 1901 (death November 15, 1978). During her career, she studied cultures across the globe and published several ethnographic works. Mead also worked as the curator for the American Museum of Natural History.<sup>5</sup> It was noted that Margaret Mead began to voice her opinion that anthropology had become dependent on words and words alone. “In her 1960 AAA Presidential address [...] she pointed out what she saw as shortcomings of the discipline and urged anthropologists to more effective use of cameras. Recognizing the potential of ethnographic films as an educational means of conveying basic anthropological concepts, agencies such as the National Science Foundation helped provide funding for filmic endeavors.”<sup>6</sup>

Today the field of anthropology, much as any other field of study, has fully embraced the use of images in its work and utilizes modern camera technology as a tool. The photograph itself holds a kind of eternal life, or the power to stop time. In a quick google search of *100 images that changed the world*, we see things like the flag raising on Iwo Jima, Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother*, The Hindenburg explosion and many more moments of history and culture froze in time. The collection *100 Photos*<sup>7</sup> assembled by the TIME corporation of TIME magazine is a collection of photos that changed the world. I found the quote at the beginning of this section, on the about the collection page of the website and thought it was the perfect frame of mind to be in when discussing the use of photography in anthropology. Since the invention of the camera, there has been the photographer, the person there to capture the moment. Today, we utilize photos as a medium to analyze, remember, or document life as it happened, the benefit is that the image is no longer fleeting.

## Humans of New York

I want to take a moment to investigate the viral blog, *Humans of New York*, as it was one of the inspirations for the development of this unit. The creator of the project is Brandon Stanton, a photographer who set out on a self-prescribed photography project. Stanton stated on the project's website, "Humans of New York began as a photography project in 2010. The initial goal was to photograph 10,000 New Yorkers on the street and create an exhaustive catalog of the city's inhabitants."<sup>8</sup> I have always found this photo series inspiring and really enjoy not only the photos but also the stories behind the photography. In his use of the camera as a tool, Stanton can capture the existence of a person at that moment. Stanton's use of story and identity in his image have always drawn me in.

I have always been interested in storytelling. I remember back to my elementary years when storytellers would come in and share folktales. Being visually minded I was able to translate the storyteller's word into pictures in my mind, and eventually, through my practice in visual art, reproduce them visually. The oral tradition of storytelling is the first and most well-known form of human communication. Having deeper meaning than just civilian conversation, the oral tradition refers to the oral to aural passing of knowledge, storytelling, and passing of ideas. The collection of images in *Humans of New York*, in my mind, modernize this ancient tradition of listening to a story. The expression of your own personal story, as discussed below, is part of the human culture.

## Cindy Sherman

Using the camera as a tool to document the likeness of a person is a highway for reflective thinking. The image is a platform to critique its subject. This critique can be seen in the work of Cindy Sherman. Born in 1954, Sherman is a contemporary American artist whose work "present a sustained, eloquent, and provocative exploration of the construction of contemporary identity"<sup>9</sup> Sherman's work is a critique on the topics of gender, feminism, and the gaze. In her photographs, Sherman assumes the role of subject and of the photographer. Stepping out from behind the lens, she is using the camera as a tool to document herself as a critique of other parts of modern culture.<sup>10</sup> Sherman adorns herself with over the top make-up and costume to draw critical and exaggerated ideals about women, pop culture, fashion, and advertising, and film.<sup>11</sup> In my opinion, the selfies I see on social media often remind me of her work, specifically "Untitled #35". The way a selfie taker may dress, pose or adorn themselves to come off as a better version is highly reminiscent of what Sherman is doing in her photographs.

Her exaggerated style will help students understand how they can manipulate ideas to force the view to understand. The collection of her work is a great example of how the photographer can document, critique, and even ridicule a culture.

## **Non-Photographic works**

### **Frida Kahlo**

“With techniques learned from both her husband and her father, a professional architectural photographer, she created haunting, sensual and stunningly original paintings that fused elements of surrealism, fantasy and folklore into powerful narratives”<sup>12</sup> Frida Kahlo was a Mexican artist who is known for her collection of self-portraits. Kahlo established herself in her art through the bold accent of her features, culture, and self-image. Through a well-known gaze and famous eyebrow, Kahlo painted artworks that highlighted her cultural heritage and feministic agenda. In addition to surviving polio as a child, Kahlo continued to lead a life of suffering after being involved in an accident where she was by a vehicle and a rather toxic relationship with the Mexican mural artist Diego Rivera. Painting from her bed, in a body cast, Kahlo devoted her work to representing herself and her life. A quick internet search of her name will result in documentaries, biographies, and images of her work. Kahlo is well known in the art world for her perseverance and truthful representations.

## **Ourselves and Technology**

### **The Selfie**

“A self-portrait produces a collapse between seeing and gazing of the subject”<sup>13</sup>

The selfie, those pictures we all have and take of ourselves with our phones. Why do we do it? I think the reasons why we take selfies are as diverse as the people who take them, but I want to focus on a few specific reasons to selfie (and yes, we can use it as a verb now). The first being a form of documentation. Scroll through any social media platform and you will find images of people's faces with arms reaching for you, the viewer, as if they are trying to pull you into the image, in front of some landmark, event, person, or thing that they need to claim experience with. The documentation selfie claims "I did that, and here is proof." It is the modern day “been there, done that, and bought the t-shirt.” The documentary selfie is then thrust onto social media, often seconds after it was composed, to start collecting feedback from the photographer's peers. This feedback comes in the form of likes and comments. It is almost as if the experience of being somewhere amazing (or worthy of a selfie) is not a sweet a taste as the approval of our peers. It is human nature to seek out those who support us, hence the development of culture and the biological adaptation to thrive within one, which I discussed previously.

The second reason for taking selfies that I want to focus on is ego. That little voice in our heads that says, “you look good.” These selfies are not always uploaded right away; in fact, many of them are left on the user's camera roll. These selfies taken for the entrapment of the self are also part of the selfie culture. The ego-driven selfies can be



used as mirrors that reflect a moment in the past rather than the present. The photographer chooses to share or not to share their image; it is their opportunity to filter the image of themselves they put out into the world. "Selfies and photographs are tools for self-improvement and self-knowledge and the power relationships that shift and are contested when new groups of people share their self-representations in the public sphere"<sup>14</sup> The public sphere and its widespread availability has created a new trough for our egos to feed on.

During the process of writing this unit, I became more and more aware of my students snapping selfies. Assuming my newly acquired anthropological skills, I started to observe them. My students were taking photos of themselves on their phones, their friends' phones, and any other device that had a camera. When I asked a few students why they do this they answered with "I don't know" or "because I look good." This made me wonder if my students' selfie habits are fully conscious decisions, or are they just so tuned into using devices that they automatically take these types of picture. Why do they even take these pictures? Psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, in an article from the New York Times, states "...adolescents think people are more interested in them than they actually are, that people are always looking at them and taking note of what they are doing..."<sup>15</sup> The article continues to illustrate how the desire to take a selfie is naturally embedded in teenagers, but now they have cell phones and social media to document and publish it. Teenage students use their selfies to turn their pretend audience into reality. This digital reality is as real to my students as the air they breathe. As a millennial myself, I am aware of this online/digital world, but it isn't reality. To my students, the life captured on their screens is seems just as real as the life in front of their face.

## Identity

Our identity is every part of us, our experiences, desires, families, communities, and cultures. As we go through life our identities change and develop. In the childhood years, our students are taking in new ideas and experiences, analyzing them into parts of themselves. In school, my students exhibit several identities, sometimes all at once. The ownership of an identity is an interesting idea to consider in respect to students. In school, students are part of a community and subscribe, by choice or sometimes by force, to the expectations of society in respect to that community. When I witness my student's change their behavior as they move from one class to another I wonder, what persona is their favorite? Which one is best for them to learn? This ability to assume different personalities is only enhanced by students' access to social media and cameras. A camera is a tool that students will use to document themselves. The selection process of what is shared versus what is deleted is what I consider assimilation to a cultural ideal.

This opportunity to filter the image of ourselves that we put out into the world creates the chance for us to have our personal ideals validated. Similar to a cultural ideal, a generalized and expected representation or behavior of a culture, our personal ideal is the person we want to be. This ideal is not always the same as the person we truly are. Through our modern practice of farming for likes on social media, we are receiving validation for our personal ideal. This validation can be a driving force to become our own idea or a crippling realization that we are not the person we wish to be. The ideal self-versus the real self is a topic my high school and middle school students struggle with quite often. They are at a time in their life where they are realizing they are going to have to claim their own identity as their own creation and responsibility. Some individuals are rather passive with this claim, as their personality allows for it; while others are screaming who they are, or who they want to be, at the top of their lungs.

This process of figuring out who they really are wrings students through the grip of school culture, pop culture, family culture, and their social culture. As I discussed above, all culture is learned and shared; it is also a human need to have culture. Through social media, the learning and sharing of culture have become micromanaged. The choice to use social media can cause users to edit, redact, or fabricate parts of themselves.

Social media is a platform to have our story heard. In her book *Damaged Identities Narrative Repair* author Hilde Lindemann Nelson explains the idea that having our stories heard is a basic human need. She states “...individuals or groups can identify themselves through stories of nonmoral self-definition, weak moral self-definition, or strong moral self-definition, though they can repair their identities only through the last two kinds.”<sup>16</sup> Nelson continues to explain the idea and use of counter stories. She defines a counter story as “...the story to repudiate an incorrect understanding of who she is and replaces this with a more accurate self-understanding. Reidentifying herself in this way commits her to a future course of action that expresses who, morally, she takes herself to be.”<sup>17</sup> The counter story is what we produce when we feel that our identities are being challenged. An uploaded selfie of the ideal self is a counter story, created to sculpt the way we are being seen by the gaze of social media and the public digital realm. Counter-stories are our opportunity to refill the trough for our online narcissistic selves.

### Viewer vs photographer

To get students in the right frame of mind for this unit I want to discuss the relationship between the photographer, photograph, and the viewer. In the world of art, there are multiple reasons artists choose to create. Many artists make work to fulfill a personal need to create things. The more industrialized artist may create to complete orders, while another may create for the beauty in great design. What about the selfie photographer? By definition, the selfie is an image we take of our self, but is it always for ourselves?

The photographer is the person who takes the picture, the being that presses the release button on the shutter, or in this case taps the screen. The photographer is responsible for all parts of the shot like the lighting, framing, composition, subject, focus, background. Once captured, the photographer is also fully responsible for the life of the image. The choice to delete or destroy lies completely in their hands. The photograph itself has one job, to exist. Through simply existing, the photograph is documenting a moment in time. A photograph by nature cannot have any feeling or agenda because it simply is an inanimate object. It is not until the photograph is seen by the viewer that it conveys a message or emotion.

The viewer is the entity responsible for the interpretation and story of the photograph. The viewer is the person who is taking the time to look at the photograph. The amount of time the viewer spends with an image depends on the success of the relationship between the photographer and the photograph. A successful image will hold the attention of a viewer longer than the previous or following image; the same is true with all art. Art is the competition for attention, and the same is true with the selfie. A selfie is competing with the world around it for the attention of the viewer. This attention can be positive or negative, but either way, the photograph is doing its job. The photographer is the one who is responsible for the type of attention the image receives.

## **Strategies**

### **Personalized Learning**

I utilize personalized learning/self-directed teachings style in my classroom. Each student in my photography class is able to work at their own pace through an online classroom that I have created. While in class, students utilize computers and programs to accomplish learning objectives or practice tasks. Each lesson is taught twice, once by me to the whole group and once through videos linked within the online classroom. I either find videos on YouTube that teach the topic at hand or create a screencast myself. I prefer to find the videos on YouTube for my students for two reasons. The first reason, selfishly, is time; finding videos is much faster than creating and editing my own. Secondly, I like to find videos posted by different people because they offer my students a different explanation of accomplishing the same task. Sometimes this outside instruction or direction is just what a student needs to fully grasp the topic.

Students complete classwork on a rolling schedule where multiple assignments are given at the beginning of the week and students have a set amount of time (usually two weeks) to get them done. I find that this personal paced learning style is very organic because it allows students to progress and practice what they need on their own time. Due dates are posted as a suggestion, with the end of the marking period being the final due date for all work. Additionally, I provide extra challenge work for students to complete. This challenging work is designed to keep students on pace with the general class but

allow them time flexibility if needed. Challenge work is posted as extra credit and has a stricter due date. A learner-directed classroom is a place where students think critically about their choices, strengthen their visualization skills, and develop collaboration techniques.

## Visual Literacy

Visual literacy is a term used in the art education work to describe a student's ability to process and communicate with images. Every day students are bombarded with advertisements and designs aimed to change the way they think or feel. The art room is the place where students learn how images work and what parts of an image do to our eyes, brain, and thoughts.

Visualization is the ability to see a thought; it is a skill that can be taught and refined. Students with strong visualization skill are more capable of explaining their ideas because they have a clear representation of it in their mind. When students are tasked with independently coming up with an idea, they are forced to develop their visualization from scratch, pulling from their mental library of every image they can remember to craft a new and creative idea.

Visual Literacy is also a valued skill when it comes to reading comprehension. The ability to build and understand images mentally allows a young reader to illustrate a text as they read it. The film reel that readers develop in their head allows them to make connections, analyze characters, organize thoughts, and make conclusions.

## Critical Observation

A critical observation is a statement made as part of a critique. A critique is an event that occurs through the artmaking process. Artists critically observe their own work as they are creating it, making choices along the way. This work-in-progress style of observation is not only essential, but it is completely natural to the artmaking process. In addition to the artist's own observations, there are also critical views of the audience. This is where the viewer will formulate ideas and read into a piece of art. To successfully critically observe an image or work of art the viewer must be willing to withhold judgment until they are positive they have seen everything in the image. The premature judgment of artwork can lead a viewer down the wrong path of interpretation and ruin the art experience. Below, in the critique activity, I discuss how to correctly critically observe an image or artwork.

## Activities

### Selfie or Self-Portrait Critique

For this activity, students will take several images of themselves and submit two for critique. These two images should be in contrast with each other, one on each end of the spectrum of the selfie to a self-portrait. Both images will be displayed or project next to each other for the group to view. The class will begin to discuss the successor faults of the photographs from an artistic stance. We will use a modeled method of criticisms. This model follows a specific sequence of events: describe, analyze, interpret, judge.

To start, the group will describe what they see, on the most basic level. Students will state what is in the photographs, what is the subject, what is in the background. At this stage participants should not place any kind of personal thought into the assessment of the photographs; the conversation should remain very basic and descriptive. Once the group has verbalized all aspects of the compositions, we will progress to the next stage, analyze. In the analyze stage of art criticism, we will begin to make connections between objects or parts of the composition.

### Photographic Blog or Photo Essay

After spending some time looking at and discussing the photographic work *Humans of New York*, the work of Cindy Sherman, Frida Kahlo, and their own preexisting selfies students will choose an aspect of their culture to document photographically. They may choose to form a visual ethnography of their true self, capture different cultural ideas, or embark on a self-selected path of selfie-documented cultural aspects. Students will start on the long-term process of capturing selfies that highlight their culture. In the assembly of selfie images, students will document the three large parts of culture: how they act and behave, how they think, and what makes up their culture,/material culture. To document how they behave students will photograph themselves in action (or lack of action) throughout parts of their day. To capture how they think, I will challenge my students to play with lighting and setting. Students will use effects like shadows and spotlights to change the mood of their selfie to reflect their thinking. And finally, the material culture. Students will take selfies with parts of their culture. This section of the photo essay will be the most natural, as this is the most common style selfie. Students will selfie with their morning coffee, pets, possessions, etc.

The final assembly of these images will manifest into a publication either online or in print. Students will create their images into a timeline that takes viewers down the path of their idea. Like a written essay, the photographic essay will have introductions, idea statements, explanations of ideas, and a culminating section. Students will develop a storyline of culture and display it for the view. Online photo essays will be published via

the blog site of a student's choice. Print photographs will be displayed in any way a student should see fit to best illustrate their idea.

### **Artist Statement**

The artist statement is a document or recording that allows the artist, or in this case, photographer to frame the viewers' mind. A solid artist statement is essential to the successful interpretation of an artwork. To better control the relationship between the viewer and the image, the photographer will draft and publish a statement about their work. In the statement, the artist will explain their thought process before, during, and after the photographic process. The statement should include the backstory of the idea and the process of self-review and critical observation. Students will describe their thought process through the beginning, middle, and culmination of the body of photographs. After explaining their thoughts to the viewer, students will communicate their message of culture. Were they attempting to capture the cultural idea vs the truly practiced culture? Or mocking a popular cultural occurrence? The overall voice and message of the body of photographs are up to the student to decide, but it will be put into writing in the statement. Each student will complete an artist statement that will help cultivate the story they are attempting to illustrate through their images. Each statement will be published with their photo blog/photo essay. Students will read their statements to the class during the final critique of the assignment.

### **Student Resources**

Time magazine's 100 images that changed the world<sup>18</sup> 100photos.time.com. A collection of historic photos that students can view to get a feel for what kinds of thing make a meaningful image. The website also explains a brief history of all the images in the collection.

Photopea: [www.photopea.com](http://www.photopea.com), A web-based image editing software. This free to use website can help students edit their photos. There are easy to find video tutorials online (search for them)

Jpgmag.com, A website devoted to photography. It posts challenges and contests which students can enter to get feedback on their photos and build a resume.

## Resources

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<http://societyforvisualanthropology.org/about/>. Information page about to society of visual anthropology, a great starting point.

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## **Appendix A**

### National Core Art Standards

VA: Cr3.1.IIa: Engage in constructive critique with peers, then reflect on, reengage, revise, and refine works of art and design in response to a personal artistic vision

This art standard addresses throughout the choice-based art-making process and in the critique activity. Students and artist naturally bounce ideas off one another during the process of creating. During the critiques, students are engaged in constructive criticism of their work and the work of their peers.

VA:Pr4.1.IIa: Analyze, select, and critique personal artwork for a collection or portfolio presentation.

Students will meet this standard as they begin to take and assemble their photographs. Students will select, omit, and edit their images into the final assembly of their photographic essay.

VA: Pr6.1.IIa: Make, explain, and justify connections between artists or artwork and social, cultural, and political history

During the conversations about culture and through the study of the artists, artworks, and styles mentioned in this unit, students will make connections between their own thoughts and their culture. The topic of the cultural ideal will force students to compare the way art can impact a cultural identity

VA: Re.7.2.IIa: Evaluate the effectiveness of an image or images to influence ideas, feelings, and behaviors of specific audiences.

As students are selecting the way in which they will exhibit their photos they will be thinking about how the display of their photographic essay will convey its message to the viewer. Also, through our conversations about the viewer, photograph, and photographer, students will need to conclude to who and what they are trying to say through images.

VA: Cn11.1.IIa: Compare uses of art in a variety of societal, cultural, and historical contexts and makes connections to uses of art in contemporary and local contexts.

Looking at the work of Cindy Sherman and Frida Kahlo will take students through the process of comparing the use of the self-portrait as a tool for reflection. Students will analyze how the selfie can be transformed into a self-portrait via the platform in which it is seen.

## Common Core Standards

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C

Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

During the critiquing process, students will engage in conversations about ideas greater than what they see before them. Students will discuss the deeper meaning and value behind the images and offer an explanation of their own work.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D

Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections considering the evidence and reasoning presented.

During the critiquing process, students will be met with opinions and viewpoint that oppose their own. In these discussions' students will need to professionally address and accept that others are going to perceive their work differently as they do. Students will respond to opposing viewpoints to understand the difference in opinions.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Students will draft artist statements that convey the meaning behind their artwork. The artist statement is a time to clarify and frame the viewers' thoughts prior to or during the viewing of artwork.

## Notes<sup>19</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Rettberg, Seeing Ourselves Through Technology How We Use Selfies, Blogs, and Wearable Devices to See and Shape Ourselves, 2.
- <sup>2</sup> Goldberger, Ben, Paul Moakley, and Kira Pollack. "About the Project
- <sup>3</sup> About the SVA." Society for Visual Anthropology. Accessed November 06, 2018. <http://societyforvisualanthropology.org/about/>.
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- <sup>7</sup> Goldberger, Ben, Paul Moakley, and Kira Pollack. "About the Project | 100 Photographs | The Most Influential Images of All Time." Time. Accessed November 06, 2018. <http://100photos.time.com/about>
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- <sup>13</sup> Peraica, Ana. *Culture of the Selfie: Self-representation in Contemporary Visual Culture*. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2017.
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<sup>15</sup> Walker, Alex. *How the Selfie Conquered the World*. Nytimes.com. March 2, 2018. Accessed January 20, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/02/style/how-the-selfie-conquered-the-world.html>

<sup>16</sup> Lindemann Nelson, Hilde. *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Goldberger, Ben, Paul Moakley, and Kira Pollack. "About the Project | 100 Photographs | The Most Influential Images of All Time