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# Self-representation in the Age of the Internet. Social Media as a New Tool for the Construction of Identity in Contemporary Art

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## Abstract:

As we were looking on the Instagram profile of Amalia Ulman in 2014, we were able to see depictions of a perfect life, which showed luxury goods, healthy food and optimistic selfies against different backgrounds and situations. In the time she posted these pictures, she had generated a story about a young woman that escaped from a provincial rural life in order to find her fortune in the big city. But the girl's plan failed and she gave in to an excessive life. Through the use of Yoga, extreme forms of diet and even breast surgery the girl creates a new identity for herself. The idea of the artist was to play with storytelling and social media. So it came that Ulman, between May and August 2014, enacted her own persona and amassed close to 65,000 followers on Instagram. She created a fictional self on Instagram and declared her Instagram identity as a performance entitled "Excellences & Perfections". In Ulman's performance, social media is experienced as a new medium in contemporary art and focuses on the self-expression of young girls in the Internet age.
The significance of Social Media as an important medium for self-representation in contemporary art becomes even more evident when connected to the work of Ai Weiwei. The publication of his own opinion and interest in social media is reflected in Ai Wei Wei's work in a form that is not to be stated until now. Through the use of social media, the related disclosure of his privacy and the perfect handling of the expectations of his audience, he constructed his own cult image. This constructed identity is reflected in his very autobiographical related works. In my presentation, I would like to explore how artists make use of social media in their work and how this practices influences the question of self-representation in contemporary art in the internet age.

## Key words:

## Introduction:

"Identity is one of the basic concepts of our culture. Identity defines structure. Identity enables us to perceive something from the flow of the indistinguishable. Our very culture hinges on naming something and distinguishing it from among everything. Within culture, the regulated coexistence of individuals in a community, identity plays a constitutive part in describing and naming the individual […]."[i]

What I want to talk about today, is how artists make use of material from social media in their work and how this practice influences the question of self-representation in contemporary art in the age of the internet.

A traditional emphasis in the artistic discourse surrounding identity is formulated by the functions of artistic self-staging and representation in self-portraits, written self-relations as well as performative acts. The public appearance of an artist gains a new dimension with regard to of the discussions about documentation of the self and social media in the field of social and cultural studies. In recent years, the use of social media along with the creation of digital personalities has played a significant role in our contemporary society and global culture. It comes as no surprise, young artists belonging to the generation of the so-called "digital natives" use the internet and the web 2.0 as an artistic medium. This generation of artists creates works of art with the consciousness of the networks in which they exist. A few years ago, it would have been inconceivable to examine the influence of social media like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram on the society and consequently on contemporary art. Although Facebook was founded in 2004 and rapidly became an important component of everyday social life, its effect on society and art was not instant.[ii] Recently however, the use of social media has become a major tool in society, because it enables people to create a digital personality that is shared with the public. A society without social media is hardly imaginable, because they feed the public's interest with the life and thoughts of other people. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and countless blogs have become ubiquitous means of communication, as well as means for the creation of new communities on the internet. Web 2.0 represents for artists of today what

Hollywood films represented for Andy Warhol's generation and what television represented for Nam June Paik's. In other words, it has become a form of artistic expression and aesthetic reference.

During the past decades, the conditions of art production, distribution and presentation have undergone significant change, due to the emergence of the internet. The invention of the web 2.0 has radically transformed popular culture. Our personal life has become commonplace of personal and professional expression. A central characteristic of this development, which particularly shapes present societies, is the importance of individualization. Nowadays, social status is not assigned by social affiliation to a family or class. It has to be achieved by the individual - within basic social conditions. Only thereby it becomes possible that self-representation and the forming of one's, unambiguous identity becomes a cultural example. In 1992, Stuart Hall specified the classic sociological definition of the self as follows: "Identity is formed in the 'interaction' between self and society. The subject still has an inner core or essence that is 'the real me', but this is formed and modified in a continuous dialogue with the cultural worlds 'outside' and the identities which they offer".[iii] Seventeen years later Jan Hinrik-Schmidt, a scientific assistant for digital interactive media and political communication at the University of Hamburg, introduced the term *Identity Management* to the discussion about identity.[iv] Hinrik-Schmidt explains that the most important issues of *Identity Management* are identity and representation. He also adds that the definition of identity can be multi-layered and that various aspects of philosophy, psychology and sociology can be relevant for its definition. More specifically, he defines the quality of self-representation in the web 2.0 as an instrument for identification and as a means to express one's personality to the outside world. It is interesting to note that Haller also places the concept of the "outside" as central to his argument. With the term of "outside", both authors designate the society. Therefore, "interaction" with the "outside" or with the society, constitutes an integral part of the discourse around identity, which is connected to the topic of self-representation in the age of the internet. This opening towards the "outside", meaning the comparison with the society, becomes an instrument to consolidate one's personal identity.

At this point, it is essential to my argument to talk about the characterization of social media. There have been significant debates about the concept of web 2.0, also known as social media or social networks. There are various types of social media that need to be distinguished.[v] Although many would probably agree on the fact that Wikipedia, YouTube, Facebook, and Second Life belong to the larger group of social media. I equate social media with the more specific term of social networking sites. I quote: "social networking sites are applications that enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends to have access to those profiles, and sending e-mails and instant messages between each other"[vi]. In other words, we can define social media as websites that permit users to connect, create and share user-generated content.
The use of the term *social media* emphasizes the socializing aspect of the online arena. Indeed, the practice of self-representation is widely perceived as synonymous with the spaces of web 2.0. Self-representation has become an everyday part of online participation.[vii] I want to argue that while interaction with a community may be the reason for self-representation online, social media, very often, creates the condition of such representation. At the first sight, one may think that social media is about socializing and not about self-representation. But in order to participate and to interact in online socializing, people must represent themselves. Thus self-representation is a condition of interaction in the online space. This clearly demonstrates that self-representation remains a central issue in the discourse around social media.

In order to analyze the effect of social media on self-representation, we now need to take a closer look at how artists reflect this phenomenon in their work and at what its consequences are. Did the use of social media change the art-historical discourse around self-representation? To answer this question, I would like to discuss two art projects that point out new possibilities for experimentation with self-expression, which have expanded out of digital technologies of the web 2.0. First, I would like to introduce the Instagram-Performance *Excellences & Perfections* by Amalia Ulman. Second, I would like to talk about Ai Weiwei and his intensive use of social media. I have decided to discuss these two positions because they present two very different approaches to the web 2.0.

## Identity between reality and virtuality:

Let us simply begin by entering Amalia Ulman's Performance *Excellences & Perfections*. When looking at Amalia Ulman's Instagram profile in 2014, one could see depictions of a perfect life, which showed luxury goods, healthy food and optimistic selfies on different backgrounds and situations. Simultaneously to posting these pictures, she generated a story about a young woman that escaped from a provincial rural life in order to find her fortune in the big city. The Instagram project consisted of three phases: In phase one, she left her boyfriend and went to L. A. to become a model. In the second phase she drifted towards social exclusion, took drugs, and finally had to go to rehab. In the third phase she found herself caught again in the practice of Yoga, extreme forms of diets and a breast surgery. In this way, the artist created a new identity for herself. Between

May and August 2014, Ulman staged her own persona and counted close to 89,000 followers on Instagram.[viii] What her Instagram-followers did not know is that everything was invented. Her aim was to make people reflect on the artificialities and thoughtless "likes" of online social interaction. In her performance, Amalia Ulman demonstrated that social Media is a place striving for authenticity. "The idea was to play with storytelling and social Media, but I didn't want it to be too obvious. So it started organically, and the first photos were modified extensions of myself. Others are found and appropriated images. Everything was scripted,"[ix] explains Ulman "I spent a month researching the whole thing. There was a beginning, a climax and an end. I dyed my hair. I changed my wardrobe. I was acting: it wasn't me."[x] Even after she finished the experiment and announced that everything was a performance, many fans continued to follow this staged story – they were not able or they did not want to see the truth. Ulman's motivation behind the project was to expose the discrepancy between fiction and reality in social media. With this work, she showed her fascination for the roles and clichés of self-representation in the internet age.

The discussion around the self and self-representation in art history is not a new phenomenon. At this point, we need to take a closer look at the discourse around the idea of self-representation in art history. From an art historical perspective, identity and self-representation are negotiated since the Renaissance in the genre of the (self-)portrait. (Self-)Portraits distinguish themselves mainly by their relationship with concepts, such as mimesis and poiesis, but also by the ideas of individuality, resemblance or self-portrait in the mirror image. Since the baroque age, a free creative mind flowed in the creation of portraits, in which the self of the artists became visible in the image. The portrait was an analysis and pose at the same time. An interesting example in this context is Rembrandt. Rembrandt, one of the big artists of the golden age of the Netherlands, has probably painted more self-portraits than anyone else. Approximately 90 self-portraits are known. In his book *Faces,* Hans Belting wrote an intriguing article about Rembrandt and the self-portrait. Belting remarks in his text, that Rembrandts self-portraits are always present in the plural and that at the same time, those are instruments of his staging.[xi] Belting's observation, that the self-portraits are instruments of staging is of considerable interest, since not all portraits of Rembrandt can be seen as autonomous self-representations. In some cases Rembrandt used his own facial features in "tronies"[xii], small-sized character- or costume-studies. It also happened that the artist interposed his portrait in paintings on biblical and historical subjects. The present painting is a serious and tense self-portrait. The forehead is wrinkled and the mood of the artist is rather obscure. Hence, it is obvious that one tries to link this depressed disposition to the painter's life biography. For instance, Jacob-Frisian tries to connect Rembrandt's mood with his life and his creative crisis, which was probably provoked by the death of his beloved wife Saskia in 1962. Nevertheless, such an interpretation is based on the assumption that the artist has questioned and revealed his self. But with this interpretation, one aims to pass by the latest research on Rembrandt's intentions. As Belting explains, the artist did not only have the analysis of his self in mind – Rembrandt was more interested in painting an absorbing picture. At that time, self-portraits were not limited to privacy and they showed emotions that were mostly staged in theatrical roles. This is also the direction of the artists' masquerade: The cape with brocade border, the drop earrings, the reddish-brown robe do not correspond to the usual clothing of that period. They underline the fact that the artist certainly staged himself in a theatrical role. This observation demonstrates that Rembrandt was already playing with the topic of reality and fiction in self-representation.

A large part of the photos, which belong to the performance of Amalia Ulman, are selfies. In some of them, she posed on beds wearing lingerie, in bathrooms of hotel rooms or after a big shopping trip with a lot of bags. In others, she portrays herself in sexy party-outfits or right after waking up, holding guns or crying in bed. This points out the fact that Ulman thought about self-representation in selfies and about the gap between reality and fiction in portraits. Karen Ann Donnachie sees the selfie as a medium in which we construct and transmit identity, or a fake entity, which we call our self.[xiii] And the selfie allows or implies a never been there self-determination of this digital appearance with which we become experts in posing, framing and in other revaluing of our self-representation. In my opinion, the digital appearance of the self in a selfie can be compared with the self-representation in the self-portraits of Rembrandt. In both cases the reality is not illustrated, the pictures play with roles and fictive emotions. Both, self-portrait and selfie, are instruments of staging and can be seen as character- or costume-studies.

In Ulman's performance, social media is experienced as a new medium in contemporary art and focuses on self-expression in the internet age. The current digital image culture revolves around sharing and signaling, which calls for new politics and ethics of looking and being looked at. With an increasing visibility, new technologies and global communities users are not only participating in but also actively enhancing surveillance practices. "Ulman's Instagram account is a parade of carefully arranged flowers and expensive lingerie and highly groomed interiors and perfectly displayed brunches. These images are excessive but also believable – because they're so familiar" said critic Brian Droitcour[xiv] about Ulman's work. For many privileged users, social media is a way of selling one's lifestyle, of building one's brand. Through social media, art is reintroduced into everyday life, creating a loop between the two contexts. The fact that she broaches the issue of every day's life in her work is

nothing new. This connection to everyday life is the most powerful attribute of social media and brings self-representation to a new level. Texting, Tweeting and posting photos position the self. These locate the person in a public world, which has no local boarders. Through the web 2.0 now everyone is exposed to the world. This brings to the fore new questions of voyeurism, self-determination and exhibitionism.

## The Artist as a Brand:

The significance of social media as an important medium in contemporary art becomes even more evident when connected to the work of Ai Weiwei. He is the perfect example to show how powerful and convincing an artist can be in influencing his self-representation in the internet and the outreach it can generate. Ai Weiwei has a completely different approach to the web 2.0 compared to what has just been discussed regarding Amalia Ulman. The chosen medium of the blog is, in spite of his popularity in the popular culture, not yet omnipresent in the art world. I would like to analyze the blog of Ai Weiwei to find out how important the medium of the blog is for Ai Weiwei's work. When Ai Weiwei agreed to begin his own blog in October 2005, the artist had only rarely been – according to his own words – in contact with the internet. Before that, he did not have any computer, as the artist mentioned during an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist.[xv] These premises led to the blog at the address blog.sina.com.cn/aiweiwei. Four years later, on the 28th of May 2009, the Chinese government closed the blog and its content was entirely removed from the internet. His blog contained more than 2700 articles, several thousand photos and millions of readers' comments.[xvi] Already in 2006, the blog had more than 1'000'000 visitors and reached to 17 million readers shortly before the elimination in 2009.[xvii] Every day the artist was active on the blog for several hours and sometimes uploaded up to twelve posts. The blog was originally written in Chinese and has been translated between 2008-2011 by Lee Ambrozy into English and published in 2011 under the title *Ai Weiwei's Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digitally Rants, in 2006-2009.*

"If to express oneself one needs a reason, let me say that to express oneself is the reason". This was the first sentence, which Ai Weiwei posted on the 19th of November 2005 on his blog. This sentence summarizes what one expects from the contents at first sight. One expects the blog to be like a private notebook of the artist – a notebook in which the artist has collected his thoughts and comments for four years. It is therefore not a matter of keeping his thoughts private and intimate, but rather of presenting them to a wide audience and of becoming a public figure. Weiwei wrote government-critical statements but also artistic, aesthetic, philosophical and socio-political statements. The government did obviously not accept Ai Weiwei's position to express his opinion freely and the strategy to involve the reader in the events: On the 28th of May 2009 the blog was extinguished. After the blockage of his blog, Weiwei found another way to communicate with the world: He learnt how to handle Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. With more than 316'000 followers on Twitter, 60'000 followers on Facebook and 220'000 subscribers on Instagram, the general public has accepted these new media of communication extremely well. In contrast to his blog the comments were not only posted in Chinese but also in English. This allowed him to share his ideas, activities and thoughts with an international public. The need to express himself and to be understood can be observed as particularly distinctive in the person of Ai Weiwei. His opinion is omnipresent: On Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, almost on every social media Platform, lots of statements of the artist can be found. Weiwei's interest in the refugee's crisis in Europe clearly illustrates this fact. Ai Weiwei has set up a studio on the Greek island of Lesbos to highlight the plight of refugees. "As an artist, I have to relate to humanity's struggles ... I never separate these situations from my art" said Ai Weiwei in a Interview with *The Guardian*. His project and his opinion about the crisis went viral - his accounts were overflowing with photos and statements concerning this crisis. In my opinion, Ai Weiwei is aware of the wide reach of social media and uses this consciously to convey his opinion and to shape his artistic persona. I argue that this linguistic framing even has the strength of forming a discourse: He supports the staging of the interpretation of his works as politically and socially critical. Hence, with such a narrow interweaving of life and work, one has to ask: Is Ai Weiwei's work dissociable from his public self-representation in the social media?
Through the use of social media, the related disclosure of his privacy and the perfect handling of the expectations of his audience, he is able to construct his own cult image. The idea of understanding life as a piece of art also becomes a leitmotif in Ai Weiwei's work. To connect life and work with one another is not a new idea in the art world. Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol had pursued the ideology that every person is an artist.[xviii] Ai Weiwei can also be associated with this tradition. When the public perceives Ai Weiwei as a Chinese political artist, it is astonishing to find out that he does not negate his identity. On the contrary he takes part actively in the construction of both his national as well as his artistic identities. The artist favors this characteristic localization of his identity by using different formats in his work. In this context, the concept of the cult figure and the creation of a myth speaks for Ai Weiwei's vast popularity, as well as for the reminiscence in meaning of the blogs in popular culture and in the art-historical discourse. In this context it can be stated that Ai Weiwei uses social media very specifically to form his artistic identity and to actively shape the discourse around his art.

Ai Weiwei can be characterized as an international world artist. He is 58 years old, he has been exhibiting since the years 2000 in yearly 15-35 group exhibitions and has between three and eight single exhibitions per year in the whole world.[xix] Since the beginning, photography occupies a central part in his work. Especially selfies and photos around his personal life are central subjects in his photography. In her article *Star der Oberfläche: Selbstinszenierung in der Gegenwart* (*Star on the Surface: Self-staging Today*), Rachel Mader indicates the development of the motive of the self-portrait and links it with the insecurity in the designation of his function.[xx] Thereby she marks the self-portrait as a "document of the artistic identity" and says that artists use self-portraits "to play with roles and for the legitimization of its position".[xxi] Mader's statement can be applied very well to the artist's selfies. Ai Weiwei's selfies can be seen as a "document of his artistic identity". Indeed, his succinct physiognomic features and the huge presence of his face in all different kinds of medias make his appearance unmistakable. His staging as a witness of a police raid, as a victim of the Chinese state or as an observer of injustice, rises his portrait up to a worldwide-approved icon in which the audience sees a martyr of the Chinese society. Michael Groblewski states the origin of such art-figures in the viral spreading of an appearance.[xxii] His active presence in the public sphere is, an important component of his viral power. Besides, this activity is connected with the wish to leave nothing to hazard. In that respect, Ai Weiwei is comparable to Joseph Beuys. Groblewski writes that Beuys did not leave anything to chance and carefully staged his actions and discussions. I argue that Groblewski's considerations associated with Beuys' appearance can be applied to Ai Weiwei. It was possible for him to construct his role first through the blog and later on, through different kinds of social media.

Besides, the choice of the medium is as important as the choice of the audience. The relationship between the artist and the viewer also seems to be a central aspect of Ai Weiwei's persona. By choosing a medium such as internet, it becomes possible for the artist to reach a wide target group. Interestingly enough, Weiwei does not specifically target an art audience. By using social media, Ai Weiwei primarily reached internet users and the general public. Weiwei cannot reach such a wide audience with his art and his presence in the social space enables him to reach a mass audience that raises him to the level of a cult figure. Nevertheless, I believe that Ai Weiwei functions in that manner only to a certain extent because every product he creates is the result of a clearly thought-out system. This system depends on the massive use of social media to disseminate his art as well as his opinion, which is intimately connected to it.

## Conclusion:

Today's social media platforms confirm what Andy Warhol had assumed in 1968: "In the future, everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes."[xxiii] Whether singing or dancing, with make-up-tutorials or as a camgirl - the possibilities to get 15 minutes of fame are varied. The body becomes the central material of this self-representation in the internet, private and public rooms become the stage of the performance. Together with the example of complete staging, like the performance of Amlia Ulman, appearance on social media has become common among pop-stars. Take for example Kim Kardashian with her 44.1 Millions of 'followers' or 'friends', known as THE star of Instagram and Twitter. She documents her life publicly and therefore shares apparently authentic intimate insights with her fans. Jerry Saltz asserted in 2015 that reality-TV-star Kim Kardashian succeeded with her book *Selfish* Andy Warhol.[xxiv] He wrote, that Kim Kardashian "compressed grandiosity, sincerity, kitsch, irony, theater, and ideas of spectacle, privacy, fact and fiction into some new essence".[xxv] Through a close observation, one can notice that a meticulous planning, which is part of the marketing strategy of these personalities, underlies the perfect digital appearance. This phenomenon perfectly fits to Ai Weiwei's practice. He spends a lot of time publicly exemplifying his lifestyle by showing his activities, such as working, doing research, eating, playing with his son, etc. Like the strategy of the *reality star*, he uses this strategy to gain maximum attention and to provide a relevant context for himself and his work. Ai Weiwei is using social media to strategically manage the perceptions of his work – transforming it from a series of isolated projects to a streaming feed that transforms the artist's identity into a recognizable brand. This constructed identity is reflected in his autobiographical works.

At the beginning of the talk I have asked how the use of social media influences the question of self-representation today. On the one hand I have shown that the phenomenon of self-representation can be inscribed in an ongoing art-historical discourse. On the other hand, I have shown how social media has changed today's society. We photograph, save, store, share, and view in new ways. This presents different potentials and problems regarding public self-representation. Mobile technologies, as well as new means for digitalizing and archiving older analogue photographs in online albums, blogs, and various social media, bring to the fore new questions of identity construction, intimacy and surveillance. I would even go one step further and argue that trough social media artists are not anymore representing themselves. With the perfect planning and staging, as I have shown through the example of Ai Weiwei they can become a corporate identity.

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[xii] Dutch for faces

[xiii] Karen ann Donnachie, "Selfies, #me. Glimpses of Authenticity," in *Ego Update*, ed. Alain Bieber (Cologne: Walther König, 2015).

[xiv] "Amalia Ulman: Excellences & Perfections," New Museum, accessed February 2016, http://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/amalia-ulman-excellences-perfections.

[xv] Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Ai Weiwei Speaks with Hans Ulrich Obrist* (London: Penguin Books, 2011) 47.

[xvi] Obrist, *Ai Weiwei Speakes*, 19ff. During an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist in 2009 Ai Weiwei states that his blog was visited from more than 4 million people. Obrist, *Ai Weiwei Speaks,* 84.

[xvii] This means 20'000 visitors a day.

[xviii] Michael Groblewski and Oskar Bätschmann, ed., *Kultfigur und Mythenbildung: Das Bild vom Künstler und sein Werk in der zeitgenössischen Kunst* (Berlin, Akamdie, 1993).

[xix] See Ai Weiweis curriculum vitae, Galerie Urs Meile (https://galerieursmeile.com/artists/artists/ai-weiwei//biography.html).

[xx] Rachel Mader, "Star der Oberfläche: Selbstinszenierung in der Gegenwart," in *Legitimationen: Künstlerinnen und Künstler als Autoritäten der Gegenwartskunst*, ed. Julia Gelshorn (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), 61ff.

[xxi] Mader, "Star der Oberfläche," 69-70.

[xxii] Michael Groblewski, "...eine Art Ikonographie im Bilde," in *Kultfigur und Mythenbildung: Das Bild vom Künstler und sein Werk in der zeitgenössischen Kunst*, ed. Michael Groblewski and Oskar Bätschmann (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993), 52ff.

[xxiii] Hervé Vanel, ed., *Warhol Unlimited* (Paris: Paris-Musées, 2015).

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