

Ann Shelton

Technologies of the self... REDUX



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Envy6011 - Real Fine Art

The photo, a girl
Bridget Riggall-Cuddy

At fourteen I became fond of the 'Nirvana section' in our family library. A teen at the time of Cobain's death, my eldest sister's collection of the band's publications and ephemera remained interspersed in the shelves of photo albums, plunked books, and high school art projects. Mostly photo books, reading wasn't required to gather what these publications lamented. Facsimile pages of Cobain's personal journal meant understanding to the shared style of published fan letters. All perforated, my favourite was both book and bedroom poster collection. Belonging was a tear-away. I had accessed something authentic and feeling, becoming their adherent-looking like them, looking at them.

Ann Shelton's 1997 photobook *Redeye* operated kind of similarly in the Elam Library. A semibalance of artistic being more attainable than romantic, it was easy to fashion ourselves in its pages. In its likeness to the magazines and music videos we were so versed in sourcing, and to our lives as they played out at art school and on K Road in our early 20s, the book was assurance. With the early lives of authority figures looking a lot like our own—oufits, openings, parties—all became a vital part of what would be our own myth.

A creation story of those in galleries, books, and lecture theatres, we verified Redeye and made it look—her outfit, makeup, attitude—before, during, after, a night out. Imposing conventions and behaviours from our photographic current onto the visual field, we make these images selves.

Populated in the 2000s, the selfie allowed media personalities to cut out the middleman of the paparazzi, and provide fans with instant self-authored images via social media. Designed to 'serve face' the selfie is characteristically unconcerned with image quality, composition, or background noise. Made a convention through the proliferation of new media technologies and their cultural byproducts (such as Instagram and the Influencer), the selfie has overcome the categorical method of taken by others, are now also selves; a sensibility that grows as everyday photo-taking aims more and more for the highly shareable self-image.

The dominant subjective qualities of the photograph and its companion mediums, increasing-ly commonplace, were brought into heavy questioning by the feminisms of the 1970s. The effort of analysing and disrupting the 'male gaze' as a pervasive social structure was also met with the encoding of a 'female gaze'. So Shelton put herself behind and in front of the camera. Subjects not of a white-cis-hetero-male desire or experience were documented for the record, while the formal qualities of a distinctly female visual and narrative storytelling were devised to counter its usual role as spectacle to male protagonists and audiences.

There were also those who clowned, costumed, and camped the male gaze and their own bodies as its object, reproducing it through satire to weaken the default nature of its codes and their use in women's advertising. Then, a kind of 'gaze positivity', where male desirability was reclaimed as something acceptable to one's own image and its circulation. These strategic frames for the photographic image contended by 70s feminisms and the history of desirability as a women's marketing tool unfold much differently on social media today.

The nine photographs selected from Shelton's mid 1990s - early 2000s portfolio for REDUX throw into relief today's culture of image making and viewing. With the artist herself the subject of each, these photographs take on familiar narrative and purpose. These are documents of the artist's look—her outfit, makeup, attitude—before, during, after, a night out. Imposing conventions and behaviours from our photographic current onto the visual field, we make these images selves.



Before the Hero party, K Road



Verona

South Auckland nightclub



Monica magazine shoot, Teststrip, K Road



Petrol Station, K Road



London nightclub



Verona restroom



At home, K Road



At home, K Road

Only one of these photographs appears as it taken by the artist herself, yet we know these are self-portraits. They are her setup, concept, practice. The scene of each emulates qualities of a studio environment. Standing against flat-coloured backgrounds sourced through happenstance, the subject is lit by a halo of artificial light from the camera's red-eye-giving flash - albeit for the ready-made halo found in the backlit Mobil Gas logo. The artist has positioned herself, handing to friends instruction and her Olympus mju snapshot camera. Shelton replicated her photographic style and method through others photographing herself.

Treating herself to these makeshift 'shoots' the artist went about recording her ordinary as if it were anything but, almost as we do today. Misplicing the codes of fashion and music photography to her everyday, the artist burlesqued the frames of fame and the photograph as its producer. As Giovanni Intra put it: *Of course it all amounts to the same thing: that glamour is a regime performed by photography*.^{*} Shelton's turn of the century self-portraits purposefully and playfully replicated the authority of the photographic image.

In her ongoing enquiry into the photographic image-making has transferred from mass media to the self-publishing social media user, greater power dynamics remain reproduced in this aestheticization of everyday life. Riffing on Tiquan's Theory of the Young-Girl as 'capitalism's ultimate form of living merchandise',^{**} Hannah Black maps the happening of women's online self-image-making online in *Further Materials Toward a Theory of the Hot Babe*.^{***} Today the "authentic" self of ideology requires a surplus made up of selves that are not perceived as "authentic"—among them is the *Hot Babe*.... Once, only the professional *Hot Babe* adorned all major media outlets: now social media makes of everyone a *Hot Babe*, should they be willing. *What is private, secret, is not the detail of the*

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*Giovanni Intra, 'Drive by Shootings', Pavement, August 1996, pg. 6.
**Tiquan, 'Preliminary Materials for a Theory of a Young Girl', *Semiotext(e)*, 2012.
*** Hannah Black, 'Further Materials Toward a Theory of the Hot Babe', *The New Inquiry*, July 15, 2013, <https://thenewinquiry.com/further-materials-toward-a-theory-of-the-hot-babe>

