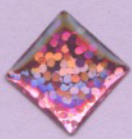
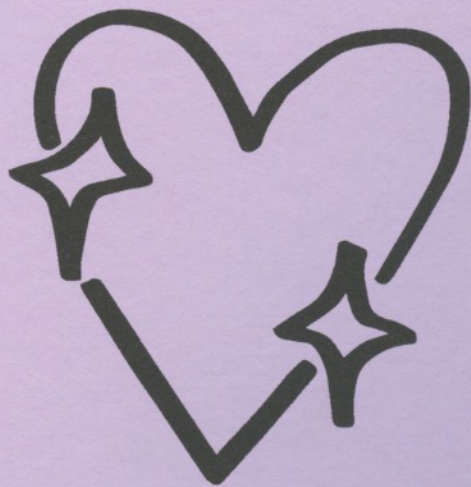


Alt - Text
Selfies



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Note from the editors

Pages 3–11

1,601 words

Olivia Dreisinger

Bojana Coklyat

Finnegan Shannon

☆ **Dear reader,**

Thank you for being here with our project, a celebration and collection of alt text selfies.

Alt text selfie is an open term. Our understanding of what an alt text selfie might be is always shifting and changing. Selfies and self-descriptions are often visually focused, but, to us, an alt text selfie doesn't need to center around visuals, or literally describe an image. As the selfies gathered in this book exemplify, alt text selfies can blend smell, taste, touch, sound, and more. At their core, alt text selfies are an access practice, tools for connecting across sensory experiences and distance.

The chapbook is organized as follows: thirty selfies, two essays, and contributor bios. We wanted the chapbook to be selfie-forward. There are birthday selfies, sexy mirror selfies, selfies written collaboratively, memory selfies, landscape selfies. Selfies that play with colour, smell, emotions, textures, time. Two essays are included at the end of the chapbook. Thomas Reid writes about the importance of self-description. Andrew Leland writes about disabled self-portraiture.

Below, we've included reflections from each of us about our relationship to this project, to give a bit more context about

how and why this project came to be. We've also included a short note about our process and our own alt text selfies. We hope you enjoy this alt text experiment!



Olivia Dreisinger
Bojana Coklyat
Finnegan Shannon

Reflections from each of us

I (Olivia) was interested in alt text as small, contained micro-stories, often about disabled life (joy, pain, sleep). I noticed that the descriptions would inject a narrative into the image that I would have never been able to access. Alt text is a special meeting place between conventional image captions and disability writing. If Bojana and Finnegan saw alt text as a kind of poetry, I was seeing alt text as a kind of post-Internet literature, one that had been sadly overlooked. Writers were working with emails, chat logs, sms, tweets, screenshots, emoticons, Facebook posts, and so on, but I wasn't seeing anything being done with alt text! Where was alt text? I also believe that writing image descriptions is a good exercise: it makes you sit with a specific moment and challenges you to translate that into words. What I appreciate about alt text selfies, more specifically, is that

they give me richer language to understand my imperceptibly unwell body, to talk about disabled feelings, disabled time, and other concepts which aren't necessarily visual.

☑ Olivia

I (Bojana) come to this project weaving two parts of myself into it. As a blind artist and activist, I have been driven to create and find new approaches to accessibility. For me, this has meant collaborating on projects like this, which is a vibrating revelry of creativity and collaboration. I was most drawn to seeking out the descriptions which evoked a visceral reaction in me. To provide more context, at the beginning of this project, I had enough vision to zoom in a great amount and be able to gather the visual essence of someone in a photo. As I've started to lose more of my vision these past couple months, I find the part I struggle with most is not being able to see friends and loved ones' faces. I have these moments of feeling like I'm falling as I look at my brother, or my own face. Then, just as quickly, I come back to myself and hear a voice, feel a hand, smell a slight musk, and someone makes me belly laugh. This is what the project represents to me. It's a way of knowing someone other than seeing. This project also begs the question, how much are we missing by just looking? In the pages ahead, you will get to know several individuals in ways you would not have, had we just put together a collection of selfie images. These

selfies have been carefully chosen to reflect what we have noticed as transformative ways of using alt text. Please enjoy.

✉ Bojana

For me (Finnegan), I tuned into other people's self-descriptions because I often struggle to describe myself. I'm a newish out trans person and I love being in the current uncertainty and chaos of my gender. But I sometimes ask myself: How do I put this giant tangle into a sweet quip in the alt text of a selfie that is mostly about my birthday, or being on the beach, or my new hat? And, do I even want my gender to be legible in that way? Who do I want perceiving me, and how?

Through luck and social media, I came across Nicole Erin Morse's book *Selfie Aesthetics: Seeing Trans Feminist Futures in Self-Representation Art*. Morse writes about images, but there are big parallels to written self-representations. I want to share a couple of passages from the prologue and introduction of the book that I found particularly interesting in connection to this project. I've included the original passage, and a rewrite which de-centers the visual, and points to how these passages might help understand alt text selfies.

p. 1

“Selfies are usually assumed to make a simple and individualistic claim: ‘I am.’ ... As trans cinema studies scholar Eliza Steinbock writes, building on Paul Frosh’s research, selfies express an intersubjective, mutual act of recognition: ‘I see you showing me you.’”

→→→→ I witness you, revealing to me, some of you.

p. 3

“The image itself doesn’t entirely control how it is interpreted; the viewer—and their biases, fears, allegiances, and commitments—is critical to producing the image’s meaning.”

→→→→ The alt text itself doesn’t entirely control how it is interpreted; the reader—and their biases, fears, allegiances, and commitments—is critical to producing the alt text’s meaning.

p. xii

“... selfies express and create complicated relationships to the self and to others ...”

→→→→ ... alt text selfies express and create complicated relationships to the self and to others ...

p. 17

“I argue that selfies can contribute to an ‘undercommons’ of resistant knowledge production and circulation, depending in part on how they are created—and how they are read.”

→→→→ I argue that alt text selfies can contribute to an ‘undercommons’ of resistant knowledge production and circulation, depending in part on how they are created—and how they are read.

In this book, I hope you get a taste of the collaborative self-creation that goes into both creating and reading alt text selfies. I find it a great pleasure and responsibility and I hope you do too.

✉ Finnegan

Our process

This project started when we connected through Olivia’s podcast. Olivia suggested a collection of alt text selfies and, well, here we are now! We wanted to cast a wide net for selfies, so we held an open call. We also reached out to friends/colleagues/internet crushes, soliciting selfies from them.

From the 100+ descriptions we received (all of which are featured on AltTextSelfies.net), we knew we could

only fit thirty in our chapbook. In narrowing down the submissions, our focus was on including a variety of styles, approaches, and perspectives. We each compiled a list of our thirty favourites, then organized them to see if there were overlaps, and automatically moved those into our final selection. From this selection, we each chose our top six. Finnegan plotted these into an Excel spreadsheet, sorting them into different vibes: narrative, funny, word economy, multi-sensory, sexy, objects, movement, nature, lush description, fashion, smell, animals, collaborative, disabled body, emotions, gender play. We wanted to better understand what an alt text selfie could be.

As with any selection process, we all felt some heartbreak around the abundance of wonderful selfies and our limited publishing space. But our hope is that this is just a start, that the future holds many more celebrations and publications of alt text, in all its varied and delightful forms.

Our alt text selfies

A selfie of me (Olivia) standing in my living room. I'm using an Instagram filter that envelops my body in CG flames. Because: fiery internal pain. Also because: I am sexy. I hold the phone camera high above my head, my face smiling softly into my phone. I am a young-ish white woman with

dark brown hair pulled back into a ponytail.

These days I (Bojana) am going more on memory of my face than what I could see in a mirror. Yet, I do know I recently dyed my hair multiple layers of blond, honey, and maple. My hair is wet from the lake and smells like the outdoors. I'm smiling brightly and am looking straight ahead. My usually peach skin has now tanned into a golden shade. It's the summer, and I'm wearing a red and white polka dot bikini and white-rimmed sunglasses, which complete the retro look. As I write, I feel a little shy about describing myself as "sexy" in my bikini, even though it is there to see. It fits me well, and I feel and look like a 1950s pin up. Delving back into this moment, I can hear the chimes and the lake lapping at the shore, and feel my skin warming to the sun, a slight breeze caressing my skin.

A selfie of me (Fin). This selfie is not a photo of me. It is a photo I took of a lightning bolt character I found on the side of an electrician's van. The lightning bolt is me. I'm bright, genderfluid, goofy, and giving a thumbs up. My facial expression conveys a smiling-through-the-chaos-of-life vibe. As I type this at the keyboard, I'm a mid-30s white person with short buzzed hair, sweating in my summery studio.





Selfies

Pages 13–35

30 Selfies

3,350 words

Yemisi

A Black femme stands beside a brick wall avoiding the rain. Black chunky headphones blasting drum and bass sit on top of their short hot pink curls. They wear a black hoodie tucked away under a snakeskin olive green raincoat.

Sugandha Gupta

I am a petite woman with Indian features but in white. Due to Albinism I appear white with fair skin, creamy white eyebrows, violet eyes, small pointed nose and full lips. I am smiling with my teeth visible and have black eyeliner. I also have a thin silver nose ring and platinum blonde fine short hair.

Kyla Jamieson

Series of five self-portraits:

1. Is a bathroom mirror selfie from last summer, when I had a tan. I'm wrapped in a white towel and my wet hair is slicked back. Warm sunlight coming through an off-stage doorway illuminates my face, neck, and the centre of my chest.
2. An uncherished loyalty card on muddy ground next to a sidewalk and some scraggly grass. Only one of the squares has been stamped. The scene is sunlit.
3. A jar of pickles framed by a cutout for serving food in the plexiglass at a closed beachside concession stand. The jar sits on a metal counter, with painted green board behind it and the plexiglass. Reflected in the plexiglass is a blue sky and mountains over which white clouds linger.
4. Video of a metallic pinwheel spinning in the wind. It's stuck in the dirt of a white sidewalk planter filled with brown stubs and bare dirt. It faces the base of a telephone pole with what appears to be pastel green fungi growing on it, and there is green grass around the planter.
5. Sidewalk cracks with one tiny little weed growing up.

Hanna Sheehan

I appear on the screen of a CCTV reader which is placed on a desk. I am a white, femme presenting non-binary person with albinism. I have short blonde hair, bangs, and a septum piercing. I took this selfie with my iPhone, which is out of frame. The screen around me is teal and I am wearing an off-white knit sweater. There is a computer monitor next to the CCTV and a large print keyboard in front of it. The room appears to be an office or study room in a library. I seem to be studying or thinking. The tone is pensive and somewhat angsty.

NEVE

NEVE holds themselves up out of their wheelchair in a tricep/scapular powered rise. They have brown skin, a flirty gap tooth, Josie and the Pussycats flippy short strawberry red hair, a foppish dark brown mustache and a black tshirt with the shoulders cut which reads I LOVE BEING TRANS.

George Wu Teng

A rare instance of George in the wild, standing in front of a mirror in the bathroom of the restaurant he works at. He's cocked his torso to the side at an egregiously sassy angle, hand-on-hip, other wielding his phone to snap the photo, as if to say, "Oh yeah. Not only am I a dishwasher, I also play the piano." He looks horrible, the amount of grease and sweat in his hair and on his brow breaching health-code-violation levels, and he has, on this evening, discovered the wonders of saying "hoo-AHH" while lifting heavy objects. It gives him a little boost, a little acute strength, even. Box of veggies? Hoo-AAH. Big thing of garlic sauce? No problem boss man watch this move: hooo-AAAH.

It's four hours into his shift, and he has another four to go. After he finishes the dishes at work he'll go home and shower. "I'll imagine I'm the hugest dish," he thinks. "I'll be scrubbed clean. Here I go!! Into the steamer!!!"

Joselia Rebekah Hughes

happy birthday to me! i'm 32! sooo i'd usually use this opportunity to expound on the status of my thought process and how i feel and tie some neat, funny well considered bow. welp, like your favorite jamaican restaurant with the good fish head soup and rich, deep brown oxtail gravy —HAPPY JAMAICAN INDEPENDENCE DAY—me nuh have dat fi offa today! today i'm soaking the expansiveness of my life in. today i'm feeling NOT thinking through! if you want to understand my outfit—copped at the local rainbow—go read Hood: Index 3 on my website. slide me a gift! slide me some money! slide me words of precise intention and well timed matter! slide me some peace! i will be rocking at my crib with my bestie and my mama like the itty bitty baby wrestler i am, feeling loved and releasing all that does not serve the abundance that my spirit taps into. happy birthday to me! happy birthday TO ME!

[Image Description: Joselia, this instagram's narrator is celebrating her 32nd birthday. She is sitting on her front verandah on a green metal chair. Her yellow hatted head—Kangol terry cloth bucket— is tilted to the right. Her eyes are facing right, perhaps indicating anticipation for the future of which she knows is simply and expansively as well cultivated presence in present. A white face mask dangles from her ear. She is wearing a spaghetti strap, tie dye print, stretchy one piece outfit that she bought at a local Rainbow. In the background is an aloe plant in a blue pot.]

Josephine Sales

In a service elevator between two x-marks on the floor;
A person is seated in a bright orange power wheelchair
waving a hand caught in blurred motion.

Alexandra Box

ID #1 Defeating the purpose of a seamless bra is the strap that slips out beyond the covering of my cream turtleneck tank top. I, a white person, stand with one hand on my hip and one hand raised holding an iPhone my friend Elizabeth passed down to me. I happily received this gift knowing the lithium wasn't bought on my dime. In my undergrad I weighed, sifted, and used approximately thirty grams of lithium for ceramic glazes. I regret this for obvious reasons. One strap of my work overalls sits on my left shoulder. I remember feeling embarrassed for not knowing how to tighten the straps at the time of my flight home from Vancouver. I was embarrassed by my low-hanging straps and for wearing a face shield in addition to my mask. My other eye, the left one, is softly open showing my green-brown eye. My brown hair is golden from the sun and my cheeks are pink also from the summer sun. I smirk at the camera—and the first thing I assume the viewer would rest their gaze on but the last thing I will tell you—is my menstrual cup sitting in the socket of my eye as if it were a monocle.

ID #2 I take a picture in a moving car. My cellphone camera captures myself, and my cousins Tallulah and Elliott. All three of us wearing seatbelts, faces turned to the camera. Our white skin is in various stages of tan, burnt, from the summer sun. My cousins hide their faces, Tallulah with a printer-paper fan and Elliott with a clear plastic water bottle.

Amy Berkowitz

my orange cat and I both look tired but we're in good spirits. she's resting a paw on my knee.

Nimo Ali

a black woman sitting at a picnic table with her hands raised in reverence. 10 bags of 8 kinds of Doritos in front of her.

Emilie L. Gossiaux

I am standing in the middle of a grassy field in Scotland, it is almost nighttime, and there are wispy clouds in the sky. A gray brick train station is behind me in the distance. I have long brown hair that is blowing in the wind and over my face, it is chilly and the air smells like wet dirt. My eyes are half closed, and my lips are partially open, like I am about to say something. I'm wearing a heavy denim coat, a blue skirt with white flowers on it, and black Doc Martens. My legs are covered in goosebumps, and I am tired from the journey to Glasgow. In my left hand, I am holding onto my guide dog London's leash, she is a golden Labrador Retriever. She's standing next to me, and looking at the camera. Her ears are alert and perky, and the flash from the camera is reflecting in her eyes.

Vanessa Ehecatl Santos

A Queer femme indigenous interdisciplinary artist finding the sunset @ Lake Abiquiu in NM located two mi from their home. The subject is positioned in the last remaining rays of the bleeding sunset on a perfectly outcropped peach rock as an expert sunset chaser would. On the edge of an ancient ocean crimson red stone bed while hues of lavender, sky blue, heavenly pink and deep juicy orange co-mingle in the sky. The water infused with the power of the sacred spider grandma dances and sparkles in the background behind the artist who is also wearing a black bra, indigo blue garter, black lace underwear and neon green fishnets while they reach up with heavy arms towards the dragon sprite clouds above.

Niya Abdullahi

This picture is candid, an action shot. A young melanated woman twirls on the beach. She is in a state of bliss. The luminous Gulf of Aden is set behind her as she immerses herself in the beautiful Somaliland sun. Her long, flowy, navy blue hijab, covers her head and wraps her body.

Trusha Chauhan

Things seen: A woman after a haircut. A glowing pink smile animates her face but is pierced shut indicating an unsettled rumbling inside her. Black hair is blown out to perfection. Smoothed tresses sweep across the sharp edges of her jaw and rest softly on her chest. Things unseen: The taming of Medusa's ringleted mane with a potion made of tears wept for unrequited love. The elixir was spritzed on her twisted strands and then activated with heat until the neutralisation was complete.

Jodie Kirschner

An exploded moment of self-reflection, something we all might be afraid of—a hard or soft look at ourselves in beautiful poetry, a selfie polarized by the look in each other’s eyes. My arms are numb, weak holding up my phone. My rib cage is tender, leaning to contort my spine. Sitting down alone, nauseous and dizzy. I’m as comfortable as I can be in clothes on land. I have beautiful blue eyes that all my friends fall in love with, prisms that change in the mood lighting of my life, revealed in bright sunlight in surprise. My eyelids swell in love and grief for all the things done to my body beyond my consciousness. Dilated pupils tracking my scars, cuts lazily sewn together with violent force. I’m working hard to embody my sick, twisted, barren self. I’m a mirror freak, heartbroken, far beyond the trembling task of looking at myself, and because of that you won’t ever forget me or my wind-blown hair drenched in oils.

louise hickman, kevin gotkin, and the in-between

Kevin is in two places at once. They are on their couch, buoyed by pillows, looking past the camera the way presidents often do in portraits. They are a scruffy white person with short brown hair. They wear asymmetrical gold hoop earrings and a gold chain necklace gifted by a group of friends for their 32nd birthday. On a shelf behind their couch at home in Lenapehoking, there are three plants: two ZZs and a Crown of Thorns. But they are at home only on the screen of a laptop that is elsewhere, in London, on the kitchen counter of the photographer, Louise Hickman, who is a very small square in the top right of the Zoom window where she is remotely joined to Kevin for this portrait. Kevin-on-screen is atop a small box on the table, just behind a mug that says I ♥ LONDON. Behind the screen there is a Money Plant and a Jade Plant, just behind the part of the screen where Kevin's plants are at home so that they almost seem to be one unit of houseplants, except Kevin's are a scale smaller on the screen.

On the wall behind is the bottom of a poster that says SAN FRANCISCO. And there's an outlet with a white MacBook power cable that snakes along and loops into the side of the computer, like Kevin himself is plugged into the wall and might disappear if unplugged. This is an intentionally crafted aesthetic of remote crip connection, an ordinary scene of Kevin and Louise's friendship and collaborations.

Gracen Brilmyer

Gracen, a white non-binary person with a brown bowl cut, sits with one knee up holding a bottle of prosecco. They wear a white and blue striped shirt, round brown glasses, and an oxygen cannula.

Cielo Saucedo

White leather bows on either side of a pale sun-shadowed face become long animal ears. They sit on black pigtail braids. The air is colored fragrant by purple wisterias. It's bright like spring, bright like silver jewelry.

Thai Lu written by Alexandra Box

Thai's hand reaches out from the left upper-side of the image, gesturing as if to grab something. Their hand is wrapped in semi-transparent dressings covering their raw skin that peaks out between each dressing pad. There is a bunched pile of dressings on their wrist that resembles the flowers in a corsage. Thai's hand is rested on a single piece of plush paper towel on a white background.


Alex Masse

Alex looks up to the winter clouds and the sun bursting through them, wearing a grin of uninhibited glee. In this timed selfie, they are caught mid-stim, one hand aflutter at their side and another slightly raised. They don several layers of several patterns, a self-made collage of stripes, flannel, and plaid. Snow sticks to their skirt and kisses their dark curls, their pale fingers flushed in the cold. They are at peace, framed by frosted evergreens.

M. Leona Godin

With a mischievous smile I'm leaning toward a vibrantly violet-colored gin and tonic that sits on the wood picnic table in front of me. The drink matches my sunglass lenses and luscious Violet Ambrosia perfume. My 70's blouse has a lace-trimmed square neckline that gathers the groovy, multi-colored striped and polka-dotted polyester material into loose folds. Around my neck hangs a silver and blue-stone evil-eye pendant and my earrings are dangly, silver molecular botanical metal cutout designs. I've got palish skin, long, straight brown hair, and am wearing lipstick—violet-colored, of course!

Candystore

Candystore, a trans-y white-bodied lifestyle drag queen is standing in profile, looking at the camera over the rims of white cat eye sunglasses, chin just barely kissing shimmer bare shoulder in flagrante. It's called romantic when one's shoulders are bare. There are also poofy champagne sateen sleeves to be had, a three-quarter turn, lots of golden hair. It's called glamour when the sunglasses obscure the tired under eye—who really has time for foundation in quarantine? Besides, the “foundation,” my friends, is crumbling. Let's make a new one! For that, I've also slapped on a chunky pair of hot pink python-print platform heels and some workout pants, replete with neon green thong (aka whale tailing) in front of this shelf of old ass books, stunting my way to a workshop mwaw  Oh. What am I reading? #PieceOfCake by #BernadetteMayer and #LewisWarsh, two faves!

beyza durmuş

hot mirror selfie on the bathroom. wearing a black graphic crop tee with black panties. my hair wet and im feeling good.

Rachel Shipps

A slightly blurred image centers my hand, semi-artfully posed with thumb and one finger touching, and fingers glittering with violet sparkle polish, in front of a stove and its orange embers; in my mind in the image, I've just received news that I am offered what was my favorite job though its pay is not good and my mind is blurry too with disbelief and excitement. It's the end of what has been a hard autumn, 2014. I'm looking at this picture again and feel an echo of the same heat, the same excitement, the touch of my own finger on the textured nail, and I'm barely conscious of my feet on the carpeted floor, in 2022.

Kathleen Granados

My face is positioned towards the sky as wide stone stairs in the park lead upwards behind me. It's the first day of feeling the warmth of the sun; welcoming it, my eyes are closed. As the light pours over my skin, it feeds the surrounding plant life. Grasses and shrubs poke from the soil; they too, look towards the sun. Soft breezes visit through the small hairs around my temples and short ponytail, enjoying the new temperature. Groups of bare trees around the staircase stand eagerly. Remember, they seem to say—fullness is here, waiting.

Jerron Herman

I, a chocolate shirtless brother, face away from the camera bisected in blue and red tones. I extend my right arm in a luxurious curve as I lean left. My other, spastic arm holds in a fist behind my back.

QuestionATL

This is hip hop artist Question coming out of Atlanta, Georgia. I'm a biracial man with dreadlocks sitting here with a cane in a shirt that says "Make America Dope Again."

E.Klunder

A shadowy photograph, in colour. A close up on a hand, softly and proudly holding a shiny pink cane by its handle. The person's skin is white and the cane's braided pink strap hangs from the wrist. There's a scrunchie visible on the wrist too and it's made of a bright orange, red and black flame print fabric. In the background, we see the shadowy lower half of the face of the cane holder. A side glance. A big soft furry black and white sweater. A golden Aries medallion hanging round the neck. Glossy wet fuchsia lips.

Andy Slater

Before a wall of glass bricks, I lean against a splintering wooden post. I am smirking. My lips are ample and I never show my teeth. My dimples remind my family of Beau Bridges but I miss the reference entirely. I have a salt & cayenne pepper beard: deep red & grey. It hangs about 4 inches below my chin and climbs like thick moss up my face. My moustache curls inwards. I've had it since Y2K...My eyebrows are bushy like a wizard's and my eyes are deep blue as I've been told but not everyone can agree on that. They are focused straight ahead with the left one turning inward.

My high forehead is topped by shoulder length dirty blond hair. It curls at the ends like an unravelled treasure map or parchment. My hands are on my hips, pushing back my unbuttoned red denim jacket. My belt buckle is a large silver octopus. Even though the buckle is worth noting it is not the reason that I'm holding open my jacket. My t-shirt has a large airbrush portrait of myself with Tupac on my left and Biggie on my right. We all have blunts in our mouths. The quality of the airbrushing is that of an independent vendor at the Mega mall. It is impressive enough to be considered professional but with the perfect amount of awkward proportions and fucked up perspectives that proves the dude was no perfectionist. Reconsidering the details of

my T-shirt we can now understand that my smirk is one filled with confidence and, “that’s right . . . That’s me, motherfucker. This is a custom fit.” The left leg of my well-worn black jeans crosses over the right. The tip of my black Chelsea boot digs into the dirty asphalt.

Above my head is a paper flyer that is stapled to the wooden post. The focus of the flyer is a large, bold, black arrow pointing down towards my head. Above the arrow are the words, “it’s true!” handwritten in black cursive. My white tipped cane lays flat on the asphalt and up against the glass brick wall. If you believe that the actions of an inanimate object could be considered blasé then that’s what would totally apply to this here cane.



Essays

Pages 37 – 61

“I Is Someone Else”: A Sidelong Glance at the Disabled Self-Portrait

Andrew Leland

2,587 Words

Pages 38 – 50

Making a Case for Self-Description: It’s Not About Eye Candy

Thomas Reid

1,690 Words

Pages 52 – 60

“I Is Someone Else”: A Sidelong Glance at the Disabled Self-Portrait

Andrew Leland

We read images just like we read sentences. Every detail—a line of teeth gleaming across a smile, a pissed-off bird glowering on a fencepost—shapes the meaning of what surrounds it. Every color is an adjective, every angle a verb, every nostril a punctuation mark. The alt text selfies assembled in this book forcefully articulate this point: the practice of writing alt text, which began as a way of making images accessible to blind or low vision people who wouldn't otherwise have access to them, is at its heart a process of translation. This essay is an attempt to understand the mechanics that underlie this process of carrying the visual into the realm of the verbal. What is the grammar of photography, and how does it change when a photo becomes alt text? How does alt text's status as an accessibility practice change the politics of photography's troubled relationship with disability and the othering gaze? To answer these questions, I want to start not with photography, or disability, but with poetry. One imperative of the alt text form is to reduce a picture's thousand words'-worth down to a lean few hundred. This puts an enormous amount of pressure

on each word. And no one has more experience putting pressure on short pieces of language than poets.

In 1871, the sixteen-year-old French poet Arthur Rimbaud described his efforts to become an artist in a letter to his teacher. “It has to do with making your way toward the unknown by a derangement of all the senses,” Rimbaud explained. “It’s wrong to say *I think*: one should say *I am thought*....I is someone else.” This last, famously ungrammatical line—in French, *je est un autre*—captures the alienation that any artist must feel (at least according to Rimbaud), rattling the coherence of a stable identity to turn oneself strange, into another. “Tough luck to the wood that becomes a violin,” Rimbaud added.

The acts of self-portraiture (selfie-portraiture?) collected in this book make Rimbaud’s artistically ungrammatical idea literal. In the self-portrait, the *I* is always othered: the first person metamorphoses into the third, though perhaps not entirely—elements of both perspectives remain. One thinks oneself, becoming both thinker and thought; the selfie’s subject is both seer and seen. Estrangement, ideally, leads to illumination.

After his teenage poetic exploits in France, Rimbaud traveled to Ethiopia and Yemen, where he exported

coffee and later brokered an arms deal with King Menelik II. (Rimbaud's time in Africa—he was part of the first wave of Europeans to visit Ethiopia, and “the first known European to take photographs of Harar” (O'Dell 447)—was marked by both overt racism and a deep engagement with the region's languages, cultures, and politics.) In letters home, Rimbaud managed to include some travel selfies: “These photographs are of me, the one standing on the terrace of the house,” he wrote, providing a kind of alt text or image description for his sister, despite the fact that she had the photos right there:

The other standing in the café garden, another with arms crossed in a banana garden. All of these are a little washed out because of the dirty water I'm forced to use to clean them with. The next ones will be better. They're only sent as a reminder of my face, and to give you some idea of the landscape here.

But all self-portraits are developed with Rimbaud's “dirty water”—if the gaze of the other distorts the image, one's self-regard can be just as muddying. I recently completed a memoir about my experience of becoming blind, which felt like an extended, book-length exercise of inhabiting this self-estranging idea of *I is someone*

else; I was at once the storyteller and the story, and I couldn't always be sure I trusted myself to present my life fairly—who let this guy in here with his camera, and what the hell is he looking at?

This experience, of turning the wood of my everyday life into a book-shaped violin, felt oddly encapsulated at the end of the writing process, when I decided to include an image description, or alt text, alongside my author photo. This photo was taken by my friend, the photographer Gregory Halpern, on my porch. As I attempted to describe the image (I have enough residual vision to see it, with some ambivalence), I found myself adding adjectives that a more neutral describer wouldn't dare deploy, calling myself a “faintly chubby, not-bad-looking middle-aged white man.” When I asked some alt text connoisseurs (in fact, the editors of this volume) what they thought, they made a simple suggestion that ended up feeling radical: “Could it be written in the first person?” they asked.

Wait, I thought, are you *allowed* to write alt text in the first person? Of course there are no official rules for this emerging artform, but somehow the style of the caption—usually written in an impersonal third-person voice of authority, the same one that intones the copyright page and dust-jacket copy—had taken

over my authorial alt text. But it was jarring for these readers to hear these personal descriptions—my faint chubbiness—in that voice. By writing the alt text in the first person, I wrested some of the third person away from Greg’s image of me. I had injected some selfie into his portrait.

This is one of the remarkable things about alt text as a form, and the gift of the *Alt Text Selfies* project: the reminder it offers of the describer’s ability to be a person, and not just a caption-copywriting, ersatz authority. The self-describers in this book offer a range of details that any other viewer of these photographs would never know. If Yemi hadn’t written their description, for instance, we’d never know that the black chunky headphones sitting on top of their “short hot pink curls” are blasting drum and bass. It’s only in Emilie Gossiaux’s self-description that we learn that “the air smells like wet dirt.” A range of modalities beyond the visible arise: a rich efflorescence of sounds, smells, and feelings.

In some cases, it’s only through description that we learn that an image is a selfie at all. In Kyla Jamieson’s self-portraits, only one has a human form; the rest might be described as a series of melancholy objects caught in an indifferent landscape. We see an “uncherished”

loyalty card lying on the ground; a jar of pickles at a closed beachside resort; a metallic pinwheel spinning in the wind. These objects (in Jamieson's description, they hardly feel inanimate) become images of the self. In "We Are Real," the poet and songwriter David Berman of the band Silver Jews sings:

*My ski vest has buttons like convenience-store
mirrors and they help me see*

That everything

In this room right now

Is a part of me

This is the same gesture Jamieson makes by seeing a pickle jar as a self-portrait in a convex mirror: through the distortions of our self-regard—the reflections in our convenience-store-mirrored eyes—the world is a part of us as much as we are a part of it.

This is a unifying, transcendent kind of seeing. But the gaze is just as capable of alienation. In her book *Staring: How We Look*, the disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes, "We may gaze at what we desire, but we stare at what astonishes us."

Garland-Thomson anatomizes all the various ways that visibly disabled people experience the (usually unwelcome and non-consensual) stares of strangers. We become subjects of astonishment, revulsion, curiosity, and appraisal. And one of the best ways to study this sort of looking is when it becomes exposed on film, seen through the lens of a camera.

In 1916, the American photographer Paul Strand built a machine that would help him engage in this sort of looking without being caught. He attached a decoy lens to his camera, and hid his real, functioning lens off to the side, perpendicular to the false one, within an “extended bellows.” This allowed him to appear to shoot in one direction, while his camera (and its viewfinder) actually caught his unwitting subject. (Had he intentionally built a Rimbaudian artmaking machine, one that operated in a paradoxical second and third person simultaneously, pointing in two directions at once?)

Strand brought his contraption to New York City’s Lower East Side, which at the time was teeming with street peddlers and recent immigrants from across Europe. The most iconic image he produced from this body of work, *Blind Woman, New York* (1916), depicts a woman standing against a wall. She wears a sign with the hand-painted word BLIND around her neck, just below

a city-issued medallion authorizing her to panhandle there. Her head tilts toward the right of the frame. Her right eyelid is closed tight, likely the result of an enucleated eyeball, or another effect of disease. But her left eye is strikingly large and vivid, and despite the boldface BLIND label that she wears, it appears to gaze off at some unseen object with intensity.

This image, according to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (where it is collected), immediately became an “icon of the new American photography.” The same year he took this photograph, Strand produced *Abstraction, Twin Lakes, Connecticut*, which the Met places among “the first significant abstractions intentionally made with a camera.” Inspired by the formalism of contemporary painting, Strand appears to treat the blind woman as he does the bowls of fruit in his Connecticut cottage: as a figure to be composed and abstracted into a modernist image of fragmented form. In other words, Strand’s gaze seems not nearly as invested in the social humanism of its documentary subject as it is in the formal intrigue expressed by her mismatched eyes, which appear, like his trick camera, at once blind and seeing. These divergent eyes are visually ungrammatical, another photographic analogue of Rimbaud’s “I is someone else” (or, sorry, “eye is an other”). According to the critic Sanford Schwartz,

Strand's photos are "cityscapes that have faces for subjects," an idea that inverts Kyla Jamieson's approach to her selfies, which find her face in the city's pinwheels and pickle-jars. In *Blind Woman, New York*, it's the nondisabled photographer who uses the disabled person's image as a metaphor for the city, or the camera, or wherever else his imagination leads him.

Was Strand drawn to this image because of the way it seems to mock or mirror his own project? The woman's sidelong glance appears to be looking at something, but her blindness suggests that this eye, too, is a decoy. There are many blind people who appear to see, whose eyes dart and fix, but in their experience, they see nothing. And likewise, there are blind people with eyes that passersby read as blanks, but that still gather visual information. Strand's image is the antithesis of a selfie: an extractive, literally duplicitous portrait, reifying the familiar, estranging message that looking at disability usually engenders. If the Rimbaudian artist says that *I is another*, here the photographer's gaze says something more damaging (and much less interesting): *You are someone else*.

But what happens when the disabled gaze turns back on itself? Having read the alt text selfies in this book, I long to read the 1916 blind woman's description

of herself. Would it sound as abject and abstract as Strand's photo seems to insist it is? Or would it sound more like the alt text selfie of the blind writer M. Leona Godin, who in her portrait wears a "mischievous smile" and "luscious Violet Ambrosia perfume"? Godin's experience, as she enjoys a gin and tonic at a picnic table, and that of the anonymous blind woman begging on the street are obviously radically divergent. But Strand's image omits any possibility that the blind woman's life might contain joy, or any complexity beyond a mask of suffering and an emblematic, metaphorical gesture of deceptive looking.

While he was in Harar, Rimbaud developed a tumor on his knee that eventually forced him to return to France, where his leg was amputated. His arms later became paralyzed, and he died soon afterward. In this final chapter of his life, Rimbaud looked at himself as a disabled person with totalizing self-pity: "All I do is cry, day and night; I am a dead man; I am crippled for life," he wrote in a letter. "Death would have been preferable to much of what I've been going through. What is a crippled man to do in the world?"

If Rimbaud's self-portraits from Africa intentionally included backdrops that gave its viewer "some idea of the landscape here," once he lost his leg, disability

crowded everything else from the frame. “Beside me I see nothing but these cursed crutches: I cannot take a step, cannot exist, without these sticks,” he wrote. “When I am walking I cannot look at anything but my solitary foot and the ends of the crutches.” As Emily Jane O’Dell observes in an illuminating article about this understudied time in Rimbaud’s life, this experience pushed the poet out of the first, and into the second person. “Your head and shoulders slope forward, and you slump along like a hunchback,” he wrote to his youngest sister, Isabelle.

You tremble at the sight of objects and people moving around you, frightened they’re going to knock you over and break the other leg. People sneer at the way you hop along. When you sit back down you have lifeless hands, and armpits rubbed raw, and the face of an idiot. Despair overwhelms you once more.

In his experience of disability, Rimbaud’s self-estrangement—his *I* becoming, like the wooden leg he disdained, *another*—arises not from any artistic derangement of the senses, but a bodily one. He sees himself, perhaps, in the same way that Paul Strand, and the rest of the passersby on the street, saw the

blind woman. In another letter, he described himself as an “immobile lump.”

Rimbaud is, of course, entitled to his despair; one can only speculate that, if he'd survived to live with his disability longer, he could have found some peace with it, or even something approaching the casual joyfulness that Godin finds in her blind selfie. The disabled selfie need not—indeed must not—be free from images of pain; the crucial point is only that the disabled subject herself be the one to describe and name it. Jodie Kirschner's alt text selfie here elegantly expresses the difficulty of regarding oneself in a world that stares at disabled people with pity, revulsion, and intrigue. It's this pain, she writes, that makes her image indelible, and beautiful, in the first place.

“I'm a mirror freak,” Kirschner writes,

heartbroken, far beyond the trembling task of
looking at myself, and because of that you won't
ever forget me or my wind-blown hair drenched
in oils.

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Citations

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Making a Case for Self-Description: It's Not About Eye Candy

Thomas Reid

When the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020, the world changed forever and a spotlight shined on systemic inequality in areas such as the following:

- Police brutality and systematic racism
- Inequitable healthcare
- Overworked and dissatisfied employees

That spotlight radiated outward enabling others to see new possibilities. Working from home, an accommodation to some and a necessity for others, became more commonplace. The world became aware of Zoom and other online meeting platforms. Eventually, even corporations began including self-description and pronouns in meeting protocols.

Over the past few months, there's been some debate on including self-descriptions in meetings and presentations. The opposition has come from individuals within the Blind community both directly and in response to questions from non-Blind people seeking

to understand the effectiveness of the practice. Is it performative, or is it access, or a combination of both?

A self-description provides information about a person that non-blind people passively glean. This includes identity characteristics such as skin color, gender identity, hair length and texture, wardrobe, and more.

In the Reddit thread titled "How do you feel about people self-describing before they speak in professional presentations?," the author, a sighted grad student, was putting together accessibility guidelines for academic presentations. A colleague suggested presenters "briefly describe themselves along the lines of gender, race, or other distinguishing features" to make the conference accessible to those who are Blind or have low vision. The grad student asks if self-description is helpful and if so what specifically is preferred and should it be the default or available upon request.

The consensus, in this thread at least, self-description isn't important and wastes time. According to some Reddit responders, as well as other individuals presumably in the community, the practice 'elevates' the relevancy of race, skin color, and ethnicity.

I've been in meetings and presentations where

attendees or presenters were asked to provide self-descriptions without any advanced notice or education. There's an awkward moment of silence as people struggle to figure out what exactly they should describe about themselves and how much detail they should provide. However, just because some are uncomfortable or uninformed doesn't mean the process itself is pointless.

Allowing time for thought and preparation along with some guidelines can alleviate excessive description and the search for the right adjectives. One such resource, "Self-description for inclusive meetings" from VocalEyes, a UK based audio description services company, provides some explanation of the benefits of self-description to those who are Blind or have low vision. This document offers a template for preparing your own in advance of any meeting or conference. That preparation makes the difference between long uncomfortable descriptions which can include information about things off screen that aren't even visible to those with sight.

In an article in the National Federation of the Blind's *Braille Monitor* titled "A Case for Why We Should Not Do Visual Descriptions of Ourselves," the author Mark Lasser claims to offer his view as to "why this

practice is a bad idea with potentially worse outcomes.” Although he never actually describes the potentially bad outcome, Lasser claims “we are elevating race, gender, and age, and ignoring what sighted folks often notice such as physical attractiveness, unusual or unconventional surroundings or clothing, blemishes, weight, or things that might be paramount to a sighted user and pointedly avoided in someone providing self-description.” Purporting we’re missing the bigger picture, he goes on to describe race, and gender as “the most superficial and arguably useless details while what we might really want to know is excluded from the visual description.”

It’s an absurd and uninformed argument that providing descriptions of our identity; race, gender, age elevates its importance, while studies have clearly shown the effect identity has on just about all aspects of our lives including healthcare, wages and home ownership.

Perhaps some of the distress on the part of the self-describer is about drawing attention to that which is visible but yet rarely examined or discussed. For many, the act of providing description is a means of recognizing diversity. In a society where whiteness is the default, evident in products from “nude” Band-Aids to all sorts of fashion products, white people have few

reasons to describe their complexions.

It's not surprising that Black people and other people of color seem much more versed in this practice using a variety of terms like dark skin, tan with red undertones, brown, copper, bronze and more to describe ourselves. An example of my personal introduction including self-description is as follows: "I am a brown-skinned Black man with a smooth shaven bald head, full neat beard wearing dark shades and a black hoodie with the words. "I am my ancestors" printed on the front. My pronouns are he, him, his."

I've been fully aware of my description all my life. My blackness was first pointed out when I was in first grade at a predominantly white school. A third grader chose to refer to me using a different word, but it was clearly based on the level of melanin in my skin.

For those who can relate to being pulled over by the police or stopped on the street and told, "You fit the description" of a suspect, you have no choice but to be acutely aware of your distinguishing features. Because we live under white supremacy, my race is 'elevated' whether I like it or not. My self-description, only 39 words taking less than 15 seconds to recite, could literally save my life.

During a meeting or a presentation, where the stakes are hopefully lower, I'd hope that my description reveals some insight to things that are of importance to me and who I am. Those in attendance can choose to do whatever they like with that information.

In a Twitter thread on self-description Cristina Hartmann, a writer who identifies as DeafBlind, and a "closet Latina," claims she can "tell a lot from feeling on someone's skin."

I became Blind as an adult 18 years ago. There are definitely things we can glean through scent, sound, and touch but I wouldn't recommend substituting over a self-description. I have held onto a sighted guide's elbow or the lower triceps and made assumptions about their workout routine. I've never casually touched someone and made assumptions about their race or ethnicity. Hartman suggests that we shouldn't assume visual details are superior to other senses such as tactile, olfactory or auditory when perceiving people. I've even contemplated whether my desire for access to visual information is a sign of internalized ableism. Am I trying to regain what I once had? I explore alternative ways of entertainment including audio-based dramas, books, and games. I navigate in public spaces using sound as beacons and even welcome the chance to

not only find but recognize the specific type of coin or object when it falls on the floor. But it's just undeniable, our world is biased toward the visual. This doesn't mean self-descriptions only benefit sighted people, but it acknowledges that the world is centered on visual culture that I have to participate in like so many others.

As a Blind podcast producer, I still need to consider images for each episode. This seemingly audio-only platform is, according to Podcast Movement, one of the largest podcast conferences, "a visual medium" where artwork and graphics play a major role in helping listeners find your content.

Hartmann goes on to write in her Twitter thread, "I can tell a lot about you how you move your hands and body." All people, not just those of us who are Blind, have a chance to learn to make more use of our other senses when available. When incorporating self-descriptions into a meeting or conference protocol, the process should be encouraged, but remain optional. It should be stressed that the intent is to verbalize what's already visible to most and does not need to make anyone uncomfortable or self-conscious.

Similarly, it shouldn't fall to the Blind attendee to request this type of access. This policy forces individuals to

self-identify. For many, especially those new to the experience of vision loss or uncomfortable identifying as Blind, doing so raises a real fear of the potential loss of livelihood and stigma.

Accessibility is about making space for anyone to attend and participate. It creates a welcoming environment. And access needs can conflict and evolve over time. Access is not calling ahead to a venue or restaurant and requesting a ramp in order to get into the building. It's not checking the schedule for the one showing of the new blockbuster action movie offering captions or audio description.

As we slowly move one day to a post-pandemic world, small gains in access which helped people with disabilities are slowly receding as society 'returns to normal.' Calling for the elimination of self-descriptions is another example of a reduction in access.

Self-description is not a magic wand. It will never provide an equivalent experience to what a sighted person gleans from observation. It's about providing access to information, increasing a Blind attendee's opportunity to "observe" and participate. For many, it requires a bit of instruction and practice. But what if 15 extra seconds during an introduction encourages all

presenters to think about how to make their talks more accessible such as describing their slides, videos, and graphs, offering large-print paper copies of their talk, slowing down for the captioner and interpreter, using a microphone, or at the very least asking the question to the audience, “Can everyone access the information here today?”

I’m not a fan of award shows and their red carpet segments and I don’t consume sports or reality television, but I would fully support any effort to increase our access to all content even if the details may bore me. I’m willing to “suffer” through 15 seconds of poor self-description understanding that the true goal is normalizing the inclusion of Blind people in spaces where we have traditionally been left out. Everyone has a role and responsibility in building a culture of access, even if it takes some time and effort.

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