



This series contains people, places, and things in,
A VISUAL CONVERSATION ABOUT **PORTRAIT** AND **SOCIAL** PHOTOGRAPHY

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ALEX GWAZE

A VISUAL CONVERSATION BETWEEN PORTRAIT AND SOCIAL PHOTOGRAPHY



MIRROR
PUBLIC

ALEX GWAZE

*This book is dedicated to my day one followers,
Mom and Dad.*

Prologue

There are two kinds of mirrors that most people are familiar with; 1.) the plane mirror that allows an individual to view an unobstructed reflection of the Self that appears to be backward, since it is reversed left to right – and 2.) the two-way mirror, that affords a ‘spectator/s’ the opportunity to look through the mirror and scrutinize an individual’s actions, unobserved. The first mirror assists a person in considering their physical appearance, allowing for grooming and reflecting on their countenance from their own perspective. The second mirror is the underlying accelerator of the rapid emergence of ‘Social’ Photography as a popular practice.

With all the public information about any famous person, topic, location, event or product now ‘googleable’ on the Internet, there seems to be nothing new for ‘digital natives’ to discover other than the elusive Self. The Self has become the ‘new frontier’ and the smartphone camera is at the forefront of this quest, unearthing and exhibiting different kinds of public images everyday. ‘Social’ Photography is theoretically a **two-way ‘public mirror’** that reposit and exhibits numerous micro-expressions or ‘reflections’ of ‘the Self’.

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The Public Mirror Project

“In the hall of mirrors of the Internet, the phenomena of photo-sharing provides a complex environment for projection and perception of the Self, in which the authors are no longer, for the most part, artists but rather the ordinary persons”. (Donnachie, 2015)

The Public Mirror is a photographic project that illustrates a visual conversation between two genres of Photography - traditional Portrait photography and ‘Social’ Photography. Traditional Portrait Photography aims to document the personality, attitude, ‘essence’ or ‘aura’ of the subject or a group. This is done through a combination of poses, backdrops, lighting, and clothing. The focus of the image is usually the subject’s face and eyes - and if it is a group portrait, the photographer, not only has to capture the identity of each person, but also indicate the kinds of relationship/s they have with each other. These kinds of images are often captured in studios or in the subject’s natural setting; ‘Social’ Photography differs from traditional Portrait Photography in this regard.

The majority of social images are not captured by professional photographers. Social images are ‘mobile’ and self-expressive; often times the photographer is the subject (in the case of selfies) or they direct the photographer on the kind of photo they want.

The intention is to reflect the ‘Self’ or ‘Selves’ temporal-mood, activities, and kinship - not record the subject/s ‘aura’, persona, and hierarchy.

Unlike Portrait Photography which is a more ‘polished’ “20 x 24” composition, taken to preserve a memory of an ‘actual’ person; ‘ordinary photographers’ images exhibit a social networking site / application (SNS/A) user’s personal interests and ‘ideals’, primarily in three categories – people, places, and things. Researchers Hu et al (2014) identified (8) popular types of photos from these (3) categories – namely, selfies, friends, activities, captioned photos (pictures with embedded text), food, gadgets, fashion, and pets. The same study also observed (5) kinds of users – selfie-lovers, friends / family / pet lovers, texters / taggers / captioners / citers, foodies, and fashion / gadget lovers. These (8) types of images and (5) kinds of users can be merged into (6) subjective types of posts or SNS/A ‘**scenes**’ – (i) Activity, (ii) Participation, (iii) Identity, (iv) Glamour, (v) Protest, and (vi) Spectacle.

A SNS/A post or ‘scene’ is often autobiographical and ordinarily recorded by the user or a ‘trusted’ peer and self- published either privately to a group of followers or publicly. Users are normally depicted performing a pre-existing social activity or in a situation that is socially affluent and warrants recognition and accreditation - for example, going out to dinner, visiting a famous landmark, going to a concert or party, vacationing, graduating, working, protesting or exchanging a gift. The ‘action’ depicted might be deemed trivial, but such ‘scenes’ often require some form of performative expression/s, and the re-enactment - coupled with documentation of said activity (usually via mobile phone), frequently results in some form of social capital or status being assigned to the performer of the ‘scene’. What differentiates ‘Social’ Photography from all other art forms is that it is a public, vernacular, dialogic and collaborative discipline that asserts that every moment we experience has meaning, even if that meaning is trivial.

Specifics

“Rather than forming a barrier between photographer and subject, the smartphone is experienced as multiple consolidated technologies in one device: a mirror, a camera, and a door to communicate with a social media platform”. (Warfield, 2017: 78)

Because ‘Social’ Photography is often regarded as a meaningless pastime - with much of the disdain assigned to the practice of taking selfies - this project opted to embrace the duality, mobility, accessibility, intimacy, and communicative qualities of the smartphone, and conjoin it with traditional Portrait Photography’s meditative and measured approach - to depict a conversation between the Photographer (Portrait Photography) and the Self (‘Social’ Photography). Twenty African participants from (4) cities and (2) countries, collaborated with the photographer to create this series of images. The participants ranged from musicians to cashiers to film-makers, students, make-up artists, models, dancers, engineers, and IT specialists, just to name a few. Instead of capturing a fleeting moment that will be disseminated on social media, the participants were encouraged to conceptualize a more ‘permanent’ SNS/A ‘scene’ that best reflects their current ‘aura’, for a photo-book. A date was set to capture the ‘scene’. On the date, the photographer took several portraits of the participants in their chosen scene according to his designs; each participant also took several selfies in the same scene, according to their own desires. This project did not explore the problematic notions of an ‘authentic’ objective image associated with Photojournalism; rather it acknowledged the subjectivity of all man-made images, and created vignettes that reference ‘real’ world experiences, persons, activities, environments or ‘photographable’ moments.

The (40) portraits in this series are a mirror of ‘Social’ Photography’s illegitimate relationship with the Creative Arts, and at the same time each participant’s use of SNS/A practices (such as hashtags and acknowledging the presence of a camera), exemplify how millennials use this ‘pseudo -supernatural’ doorway to communicate their Self to the public.

Key:

- All images in the series were selected with the individual participant’s input.
- The landscape orientated portraits were taken by the Photographer with a DSLR camera, with the exception of the portrait of the Photographer, which was captured by one of the participants.
- The circular selfie profile pictures were taken by the participants with a smartphone.
- All the captions were supplied by the participants.
- The Reflection comments of the participant’s captions were supplied by the Photographer.
- The design and layout of each portrait is a re-imagining of Instagram’s interface.
- All the images in the series were influenced by pre-existing content on each participant’s social media account.

PROFILES

(i) Activity

‘Social’ photographers actively curate what to document, and upload the best ‘scenes’ that say - “Look at me”, “I was here”, “This is what I do”; as visual evidence of their most animated and enterprising experiences. The ideal active-social images are ‘highlights’ from the ‘frozen moments’ of a user’s actions that re-present a trifactor of evidence in one image – the ordinary person, in the extra-ordinary location, engaging in the enviable activity or interacting with that special ‘thing’. In the broadcast era celebrity was something a person *was*; in the Internet era, micro-celebrity is something people *do*. (Marwick, 2015)



@Chisanga / Cape Town, South Africa.
"One year later, upside down is right side up". #PoleFitness #ThePoleProject #PoleArt #BlackGirlsPole





@Hloks / Midrand, South Africa.
"Everyday is a playday. We don't stop". #PantsulaForLife





@Noli / Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.
"If music be the food of love then play on player". #crushingonphotographer





@Luvo / Cape Town, South Africa.

"There is nothing that can bring your soul peace that being around nature". #ItsAllAboutGrace



(ii) Participation

‘Social’ Photography’s interaction with SNS/As characterizes it as a participatory medium. “Being ‘here’ allows for observation and being ‘there’ calls for participation”. (Nichols, 2005: 116) “Group selfies are particularly striking examples of this, where the photographer is usually at the forefront of a mass of faces and bodies, visibly participating in the process of composing the image as it is taken”.(Frosh, 2015: 1612)

@Ras, Clara & Minnie / Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.
"Nothing we can say when the future filmmaker captures the love of her dear parents".



@Sunny & Aya / Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.
"Me and my cousin." #mycutiepie



@Yoza & Katt / Johannesburg, South Africa.
"Just an ordinary day".





@Lindelwa,Sinovuyo & Olwethu / Johannesburg, South Africa.

"Sometimes being with these two is all the therapy I need ... Everything is funnier, when you're with your Besties ... Taking pictures is our 4th friend." #rooftop photoshoot#Crazyfriends



(iii) Identity

Identity exhibited through presentations of the Self are a necessary element of social life; the individual's self-image and his/her interpretation of his/her own experience cannot be divorced from the concept of society, culture and historical contexts. Nichols (2015) observed this dichotomy, outlining that in such public forums as *Instagram* and *Tumblr* the face is supposed to reflect personality while maintaining a human presence online, therefore it is often the subject of public scrutiny, especially when placed in tags like #selfie. “We learn to see ourselves photographically: to regard oneself as attractive is, precisely, to judge that one would look good in a photograph”. (Sontag, 1977: 85)



@Asanda / Cape Town, South Africa.

"Is it true that your space reflects who we are? I choose to live in colourful spaces, they express who I am!"
#colourfulpersonality #colourfulspaces



@Ole / Gweru, Zimbabwe.

"Saka u don't believe kuti ndini? Manje ndini!! Moda kubelivhiswa 1st..well believe!! It's me". #IlikeFlowers



@Sharmaine / Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.
"Because I deserve a real crown". #NoStickers #NoFilter



(iv) Glamour

By putting oneself in the public eye, especially in the permanent yet fluid space of the Internet, the Self is commodified and given a life of its own apart from its artist; becoming a product, that projects power and glamour through the consumption of people (followers) and access to places and things (brands). (Nichols, 2015) Glamour, according to Berger (1972: 148) “is the after-effect of the industrial society, which moved towards democracy by acknowledging the pursuit of individual happiness as a universal right ... it is dependent on widespread social envy”.



@Suqea / Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

"I hope this world doesn't break you. Take it easy, breathe and start again". #beautifulscenery





@Ben / Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.
"Dressed for success". #menstyle #slaykings #fashionpassion



(v) Protest

Despite being an avenue for brands to maintain the status quo, 'social' images have also become a means to protest consumerism and mainstream media's iconography / narratives. The popularity of the unofficial image of 'real' people, in 'real' locations, doing 'real world' activities in the 'now now timeline' has bypassed the filter of mainstream culture, demystifying celebrity culture and public perception, and simultaneously creating an autonomous 'space' for ordinary voices and marginalized communities to flourish. "As a mass art form, photography is not practised by most people as an art; it is mainly a social rite, a defence against anxiety, and a tool of power". (Sontag, 1977: 7)

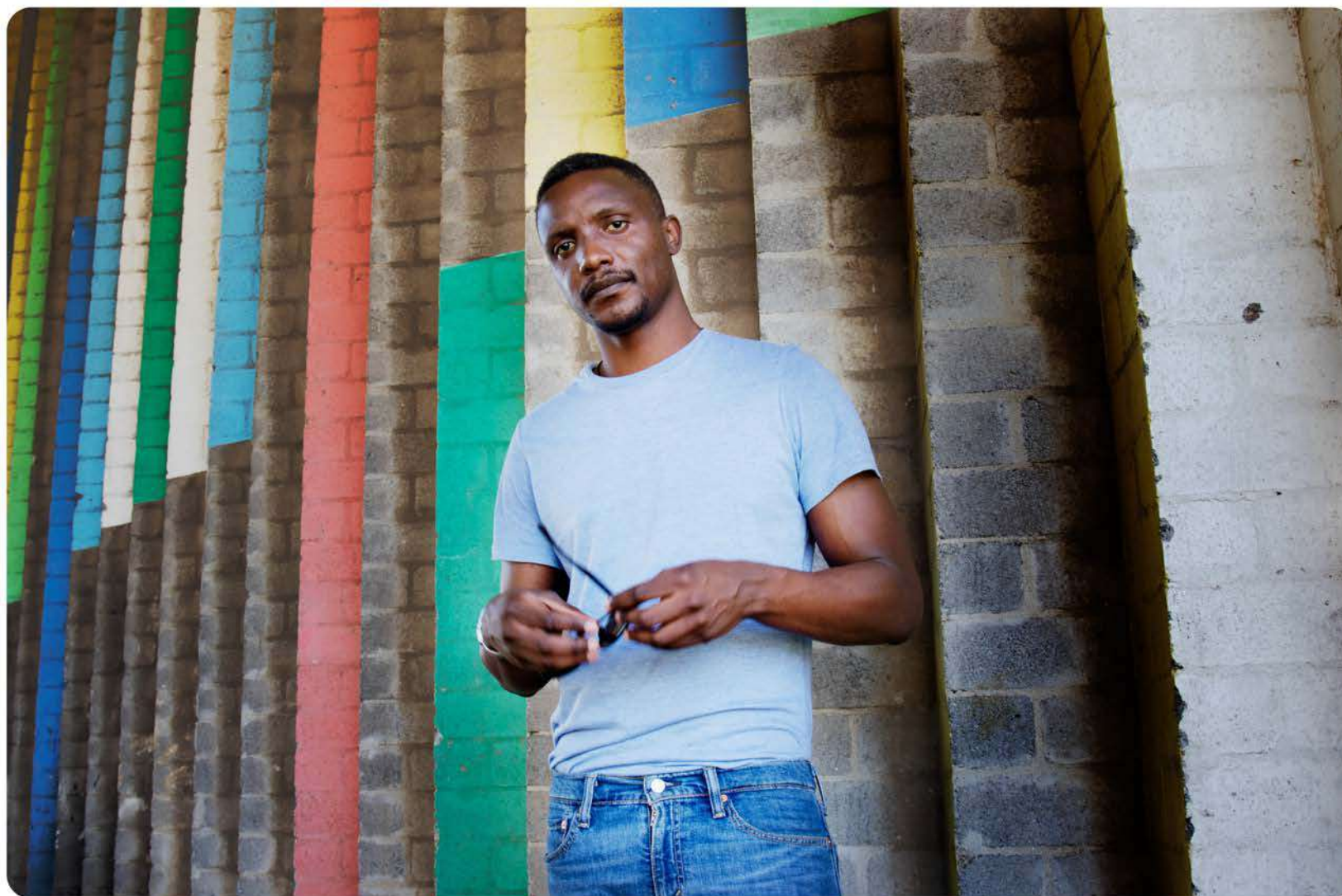
"Document the moments you feel most in love with yourself - what you're wearing, who you're around, what you're doing. Recreate and repeat". #WarsanShire

@Oyama / Cape Town, South Africa.





@Alex / Cape Town, South Africa.
"Freedom fighter, fighting for personal freedom". #NoFollowing





@Vanessa / Johannesburg, South Africa.

"Put down the bleach, your skin is not dirty. You are comprised of Mahogany and Chestnut. You have the rings of culture etched into your melanin. Don't let the white lights blind you to your beauty".



(vi) Spectacle

Not all 'social' imagery depicts 'reality'; some 'social' photographers embrace the subjectivity of the discipline and construct inauthentic, irrational and visibly edited images that seek to be understood purely as aesthetic works of art. This is because 'Social' Photography is a vernacular art-form that produces gestural 'finger pointing' content that directs our attention to different perspectives of everyday life. Doane (2007) claims that the photograph is never anything but an antiphon of 'Look', 'See', 'Here it is'; an index finger, directing attention onto a present object: look at "this", "that", "here", "now", and personal pronouns "I," and "you".



@Sibondha / Cape Town, South Africa.

"I see the potential of all these bright colours to unite the people of the south". #Unityforall #Africancolours





@Vuyo & Ayanda / Cape Town, South Africa.

Who watches the watcher when the watcher isn't watching? Liberation is about loosening up a bit, in the midst of strangers and old friends". #liberation #oldfriends #freedom





@Rue / Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.
"An oldie but a goodie". #classicmoves





@Thuls / Gweru, Zimbabwe.
#NoCaptionsPlease



REFLECTIONS

@Asanda: Your environment becomes you and vice versa. #LiveInYourOwnWorld

@Ben: Don't hurt them. #FashionKilla

@Chisanga: Practice makes perfect. #BlackGirlMagic

@Hloks: Why stop. #SharkMode

@Lindelwa,Sino&Olwethu: Friendship is worth its weight in gold. #ThreeMuskerteers.

@Luvo: Peace and grace seem like a natural fit for the soul. #TheGreatOutdoors

@Noli: Loving that dress. #FreshKink

@Ras: Future documentary fillmmaker? #FamilyMatters

@Rue: You can't beat experience. #VauxhallVelox1956

@Sibondha: Colours should have no borders. #SADC

@Sharmaine: Rocking two crowns I see. #AuNaturale

@Sunny&Aya: Sister from another mother. #FamilyFirst

@Suqea: Happiness is overrated, but it's such a great tickle. #DontWorryBeHappy

@Thuls: #Beep

@Ole: I see you brother. #IamAbeliever

@Oyoma: There is just something wonderful about being able to freeze time - then comeback to it, and feel the same way. #KodakMoments

@Vanessa: Maybe she is born with it. #MaybeItsMelanin

@Vuyo&Ayanda: I've never liked being watched by anyone, but these days everybody's watching everybody. #LiberateUsFromYourPhones

@Yoza&Katt: Ordinary is underrated a'int it? It costs a lot of time and effort just to be average. #DaysOfOrdLives

@Alex: It's amazing how many people, places and things I got to experience because I brought my camera. #FreedomAintFree #Talking2MySelf

Acknowledgments

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