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Daniel Larkin, "Before Selfies, There Were Self-Timers," *Hyperallergic*, September 4, 2014

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ART

Before Selfies, There Were Self-Timers



Daniel Larkin September 4, 2014



Sigrid Jürgenssen, "Untitled" (1973/2006) (image courtesy the Austrian Cultural Forum)

People were photographing themselves long before the advent of iPhones. A collection of proto-selfies from the mid to late 20th century come together at the Austrian Cultural Forum for the summer exhibition *Self-Timer Stories*, curated by Felicitas Thun-Hohenstein. These photographers span generations of cameras with evolving self-timer features that allow a delay between the click and the exposure. The self-

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timer also serves as a kind of metaphor for how these artists — almost entirely women — freeze a moment in time for their own senses of self.

These self-portraits have an uneasy relationship with glamour. For example, in “Pin Ups” (1971), Friedl Kubelka snaps a photo of herself in a mirror wearing black lingerie. But the camera covers her face and denies the viewer a clue about what she thinks of her reflection. That blockage is critical. Pin-up photography isn’t about revealing the inner motions of a woman’s mind; it’s about her body. Kubelka denies us the polite fiction of the happy come-hither face.



Friedl Kubelka, “Pin Ups” (detail) (1971) (photo by author for Hyperallergic) (click to enlarge)

Birgit Jürgenssen’s *Untitled*(1973/2006) portrait series also uses camera blockage, albeit to more formal ends. In one shot, the camera hides her neck, giving her head a floating quality while her shoulder shines underneath. In another, the camera blocks out some pulled-back hair, drawing attention to her forehead. In yet another, Juergenssen hides most of her face behind the camera, leaving us with shoulder, arm, and

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torso. It's such a refreshingly different way of seeing a women's body, as compared with the standard in glossy magazines and advertising — like taking a shower with a new lover for the first time and seeing their body from unexpected, awkward angles. These viewpoints can be gorgeous.

The self-portrait in the Western avant-garde tradition is a celebration of unlikability, the unorthodox, the unhinged, the unusual (the list of “un”s could go on). It's in this spirit that the artists in *Self-Timer Stories* are working. And that strategy contradicts with the function of the online selfie, which is there to get and keep followers, to accumulate likes, and to show the world how likable you are. This show confirms that unlikable can be fascinating, and that what visual culture often deems agreeable in a woman can be problematic. (The show does include three men, all of whom have a non-normative relationship with their gender identity that shows in the work.)



Laurel Nakadate "February 9, 2010," from the series "365 Days: A catalogue" (2011) (Image courtesy the Austrian Cultural Forum)

One of the most recent photos in the exhibition, Laurel Nakadate's "February 9, 2010," entirely lacks the selfie's lightness even though it was

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shot like one. It's too vulnerable for social media (and in fact was made in response to it). Nakadate shows herself alone in pain in an airport bathroom. The camera blocks her neck to frame her crying face, along with the framing on either side of her long brown hair. The fingers of one hand with red painted nails clutch the camera. Nakadate's photo brings home how much the artifice of looking feminine does little to actually help women — even if she's engaging in another kind of artifice, that of art, herself.

Whereas Nakadate shows a moment of catharsis, Francesca Woodman's "Self Portrait at Thirteen" (1972) is about refusal. Woodman looks away from the camera while holding a remote control that commands it. The exposure timing creates a tubular, low-fi psychedelic effect. It's as if she's not only refusing to be seen, but also trying to dissolve the very idea of a clear view at the bottom of the picture plane.



Francesca Woodman, "Self Portrait at Thirteen" (1972) (Image courtesy the Austrian Cultural Forum)

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Oscar Wilde once quipped, “A man’s face is his autobiography. A woman’s face is her work of fiction.” We haven’t made enough progress if Wilde’s words can still ring far too true. The women in *Self-Timer Stories* claim their right to make their faces autobiographical or not show them at all, giving the finger to convention along the way. The strategies and time periods are diverse, but when so much of today’s visual culture is wrapped up in smiling selfies, that artistic comfort with unlikability and refusal of polite fictions takes on even more resonance.

Self-Timer Stories continues at the Austrian Cultural Forum (11 East 52nd Street, Midtown, Manhattan) through September 8.