

The Asian Reporter

Volume 24 Number 6
March 17, 2014
ISSN: 1094-9453

The Asian Reporter is published on
the first and third Monday each month.

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News Service **Associated Press/Newsfinder**

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MY TURN

■ Dmae Roberts



The age of the selfie

During this month's Oscar ceremony, host Ellen DeGeneres took a photo with several celebrities at Hollywood's Dolby Theatre. She wanted to break the record for the most "tweeted" photo in history. More than 3 million people "retweeted" the photo on Twitter. People everywhere even posted their own versions of Ellen's celeb photo as if it's already iconic. "Selfies" — self-portraits taken with a cellphone at arms length — are currently the second-most popular form of online self-documentation after personal blogs.

Never before in our culture have people been as keen to document their world and themselves. Some do it with marketing know-how, as if they're branding a product for sale: a dose of honesty and authenticity mixed with a cosmetic portrayal of what we want people to see of ourselves. Intimate, heartbreaking, newsworthy, or silly, a selfie can be cemented in gleeful play or in agony as grotesque as Edvard Munch's "The Scream" in 1895.

Vincent van Gogh, Rembrandt, and other artists painted self-portraits in lieu of an artist's model. Munch himself took a selfie with his first camera. Photographic selfies have been around since the invention of the Kodak Brownie box camera in 1900.

One of the first teen selfies was reportedly taken by Russian Grand Duchess Anastasia Nikolaevna, the daughter of Nicholas II. She was 13, alone, and held a mirror toward the camera. She then mailed her photo enclosed in a letter to a friend.

I took my first self-portrait in 1979 when I bought a Canon 35mm camera with a self-timer. Yes I wanted to learn how to use the camera, but it was also an attempt to see myself as others might see me. Through the years I've continued to take self-portraits, but my very first digital-age selfie was taken in front of a mirror with my first iPhone. I posted it on Facebook in 2007. There was more response to that photo than any of my more professional photos.

As a radio memoirist, I've used a tape recorder to produce autobiographical stories about my own life — one was so painful I was weeping in the studio as I tried to record the narration.

As a playwright and essay writer, I've written about my family and been criticized for airing my family's dirty laundry. After writing about the turbulent relationship with my mother, a few people confronted me and said I was a bad daughter.

I've received inquisitions from people I'd never met before who did not seem to understand that to write or to create a documentary about one's life as a piece of art doesn't mean you can readily engage one-on-one with a stranger to deconstruct what you so painfully put together.

I've interviewed thousands of people over the last 30 years and I am all too often discomfited by my own role as a confessional. Yet I start off interviews with "Tell me ..." It's a precious gift, the personal story, and sometimes I've wondered why anyone would reveal their deepest, darkest secrets to me, especially when I'm holding a microphone. I believe it comes down to the need to talk to someone who is truly listening, the need to reveal what we so wish to share with another human being.

When working with writers and radio producers to tell their own personal stories, I ask: "What makes your story worth telling?" I ask that of myself. Always. When we question ourselves, it speaks to introspection, not of doubt, but of the search for a universal tie that might connect us with another person. When one looks for that connective tie not out of self-interest but as a way to empathize with your audience, then this public self-revealing becomes self-revelation — something larger than vanity or self-promotion.

What comes with social media and easy media production is the ability to not only document every moment of our lives, but to be our own publicity machines. While a great many of the stories are worth telling, it also presents a barrage of uncurated and questionable content for future anthropologists of the digital age to study.

Utilizing social media I can present a selfie, or a concept of myself, that is acceptable and ageless. It can extend a career despite ageism or garner friendships with people faraway. It can create a narrative when you are full of prosperity or when you're struggling. A selfie may accurately present or deceptively distort the truth, but it's a quick way to document your inner self for later viewing.

When writing a personal blog or in a diary, there has to be insight into one's inner turmoil in order to create words on a page. A selfie, on the other hand, is instant and unpredictable, and ultimately a glimpse of an individual in a myriad of emotions. It can be a vision of one's self, but also a view of what's as unfathomable and quizzical as van Gogh's vacant stare with a bandage over his ear or Mona Lisa's supposed smile.

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