

THE CULTURE ISSUE

The Unselfie

Photographs by Alec Soth

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What do you look like?

You are the world's leading authority on the subject. You have studied your face for many years, with life-or-death intensity, in almost every mirror and tinted car window and unrippled pond you have ever passed. You are the Sir Isaac Newton of your own face: the one true discoverer of its laws of motion, its particular gravity.

You are also, simultaneously, the very least qualified person in the world to know what you look like. You have no idea. You have never actually seen your face — not truly, from the outside, the way other people see it. This is because of a nonnegotiable quirk of the human anatomy: You have to use your own face to look at your face. You are both observer and observed.

Selfies make us unhappy (those of us who disdain them) not for the reasons we say they do — the primping, the vanity, the narcissism — but because they isolate this basic discomfort at the center of human life. They flog us with the lumpy, rock-solid knot of subject versus object. Whether or not we ever decide to show our selfies to the world, we all take these images mentally, simply by existing. We present ourselves, and we think about that self-presentation. Even a hermit presents himself in his hermitude.

When he joined Instagram in 2013, the photographer Alec Soth felt the urge to post a selfie. Instead, he started posting a series of photos he labeled “unselfies.” These were selfies in which his face was obscured — by snow, mist, motion, a glass of

water. In his unselfies, Soth balances right on the mirrored edge of the selfie paradox. He gives in to the urge as he undermines it. The unselfie documents and annihilates. What we most want to see, what the traditional selfie most wants to show, is absent — and so we are forced to look even harder. *SAM ANDERSON*

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