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## The New York Times

**JASON FARAGO**  
CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

# Instagram As a Mask Or Canvas

Cindy Sherman affirms we are rarely the selves in our selfies.

MEDIA HACKS have Twitter, excitable teenagers have Snapchat and middle managers have LinkedIn, but in the art world, the social network of choice remains Instagram, where all the world's beauty is gridded into squares.

That photo-sharing app is the de facto broadcast medium for new exhibitions, and it's an agora, too, for artists and curators in a field dispersed worldwide. For the most part artists use Instagram like the rest of us: as a document of everyday fascinations, a bit scrubbed up for public consumption.

But the photographer Cindy Sherman — who knows more than most about the deceptions of selfies — has quietly been exploring Instagram's potential for something more than self-promotion. She created a private account on the service last October while in Tokyo; last week, without warning, she unlocked her account and changed

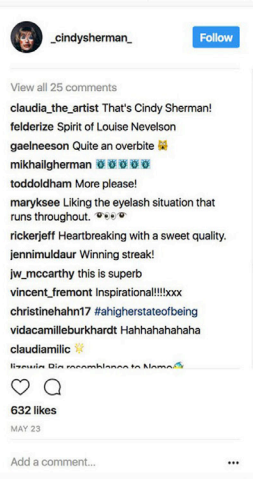
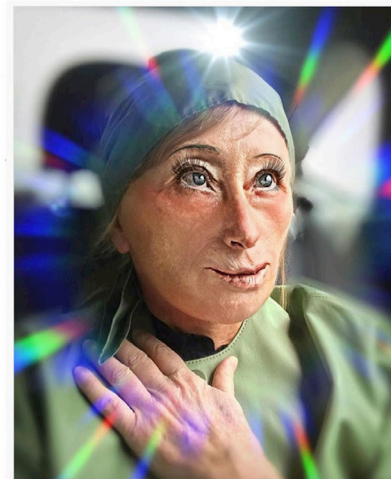
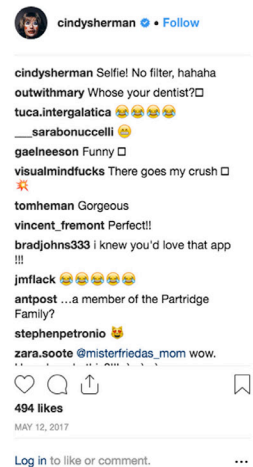
Cindy Sherman uses apps to manipulate her Instagram selfies.

her handle to @cindysherman. (She originally went by @misterfriesdas\_mom, in honor of her pet macaw.) At a stroke, she revealed not only quotidian 'grams of sunsets and lunches, but also more than three dozen distorted selfies, deformed by unnatural smudges, copious flares and kaleidoscopic reflections.

I can't say why she decided to make public the nearly 600 photographs on her account, but I'll call it an act of generosity from an artist who is less outgoing than most Instagram hounds. Her new mobile selfies are by turns outlandish, hilarious and poignant. They demystify the influences and experiments of a great artist, even as they also point to the gap between Ms. Sherman's vital, unsettling practice of sideways self-portraiture and the narcissistic practice of selfie snapping.

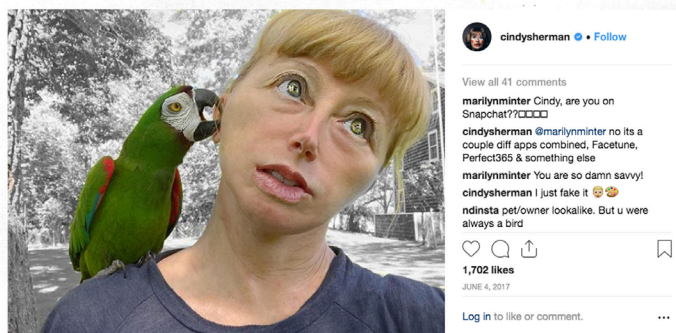
Since her epochal "Untitled Film Stills" (1977-80), Ms. Sherman has put herself at the center of her deep-thinking photography for four decades, but she has never been as extroverted as her art might suggest. Her first Instagrams — which I'm disinclined to treat as artworks; they were meant for private circulation — documented Japanese rice fields and chickens in East Hampton, snow on pine needles, pil-

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CINDY SHERMAN

# Instagram as Canvas or Camouflage



The artist Cindy Sherman alters her selfies, but not to perfect them.

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allow clouds from an airplane window; there was even a little food porn.

Like most other artists on Instagram, she also used her account to record shows she saw (more than two dozen pictures at the Fondation Louis Vuitton's recent blockbuster of the Shchukin Collection) and to celebrate other artists, including the activist South African photographer Zanele Muholi, who also uses disguises in her self-portraiture.

Only in mid-May did Ms. Sherman turn to her phone's front-facing camera. The change seems to have come when she downloaded Facetune, an app that permits radical retouching with the swipe of a finger. "I'm good at using my face as a canvas," Ms. Sherman told *The Guardian* in 2011, and Facetune permits exactly that; users can smudge their skin with corrective balms, zap moles and wrinkles, and reshape their heads as if they were made of Plasticine. She also uses Perfect365, a makeup simulation app, though the artist's garish eye shadow and clownish blushes are surely not what its marketing team has in mind.

In her first Instagram self-portrait, from May 12, she appears with shrunken eyes and intensely white teeth, and her skin is softened into artificial mistiness. A day later she became more aggressive, distorting her lips and mottling her skin with digital soot. Sticking to the 16:9 aspect ratio of the iPhone, rather than the standard square format of Instagram, Ms. Sherman quickly produced more than three dozen self-portraits that, though clearly not made with the same rigor as her art, still resonate with the best of her studio works. (She posted two more just this past weekend.)

A post from May 23, in which she appears with weathered skin against prismatic background light, rhymes with her self-portraits as society doyennes of the late 2000s — but she shot this one in the back of a car. In an alienlike selfie with her macaw, taken on June 4, she stands before an incongruous rural backdrop, as in the horizontal "Centerfolds" done with rear-screen projections. Others are consonant with her colorful clown series and darker "Horror" pictures, and some disjunctive digital additions even recall the prostheses of her fierce "Sex Pictures" of the early 1990s.

At first Ms. Sherman may have just been playing around with the push-button filters of retouching apps, simulating her studio trickery as a goof for friends. But while Fac-

etune and Instagram don't add up to an artistic medium, they can serve as something like a sketchpad or daybook. And where self-obsessed Instagrammers rely on the retouching apps to buff, clean and fictionalize themselves, Ms. Sherman is paradoxically using her feed to let her many masks fall.

From the "Untitled Film Stills" on, Ms. Sherman has disappeared into her photographs — playing received stereotypes of women in the late 1970s and early 1980s, or vanishing into the muck and dirt of her 1990s grotesqueries. Yet recently she posted two selfies from a hospital bed; in one her skin is as rouged and smoothed as a Kewpie doll; in the other it's weathered and furrowed, and her face is scrunched into a detumescent sphere. If the cleaner selfie recalls her underrated doll photographs, and if the more distorted selfie harks back to her more macabre photos, these are nevertheless direct testimony to her own body in pain. She also posted an image of a hospital

## An account goes public and a private photo gallery is unleashed.

meal — meat and potatoes drowned in brown sauce, the opposite of food porn — and a video from the point of view of her bed, in which visitors out of frame sing a hymn for her hospital roommate. Seen amid these denuded 'grams, the hospital selfies are an especially poignant offering from an artist who has always eluded autobiography.

Just a year ago, in an interview with *The New York Times*, Ms. Sherman had a clear opinion about sharing photographs on social media: It was trivial. "It seems so vulgar to me," she said. Evidently she changed her mind, and yet something of her initial judgment endures in her ghoulish selfies and uncommon personal disclosures.

One of the most important lessons of her photography is that the roles and appearances that lock in social norms aren't imposed from on high. *We perform them ourselves*, and the mark of their perniciousness is that we don't even notice. Now Ms. Sherman has reaffirmed online that we are almost never the selves in our selfies — and that the most hazardous disguises are the forced smiles we now whiten with our index fingers.

CINDY SHERMAN