The Evolution of the Body in Contemporary Art and Digital Media: Asger Carlsen, Julie Rrap, Leah Schrager, Juliana Huxtable

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Abstract

Digital media has fundamentally altered the way the body in contemporary art is represented and viewed inside the museum and gallery and on the screen. From technical production facilitated by photographic editing to global visibility by an interactive audience, the myriad platforms of digital media have created a contemporary visual culture that reflects a shift from body-consciousness to body-centricity. While social networking sites have fostered inclusive communities shaped by bodily images and identities, technological advancements that manipulate and fragment the body have empowered artists to question and critique the enduring lure of corporal objectification and truth in an age of increased visual presence, physical difference, and cultural diversity. This thesis seeks to examine how the creative processes and fields of display peculiar to the digital age have influenced the representation and reception of the body in the contemporary digital age of the twenty-first century. It investigates the impact of digital media, including social media, on the making and meaning of the body as a concept in the artistic practice of four contemporary artists of different generational ('Baby Boomer', 'Generation X', and 'Millennial') and gender perspectives: Asger Carlsen; Julie Rrap; Leah Schrager; and Juliana Huxtable. Despite the shared concentration on bodily representation using a digital lens, each artist amplifies a unique aspect of contemporary body culture derived from the digital landscape of filmic affect and the materiality of screen violence, feminist discourses on body objectification and commodification, the sexualised body and online pornography, and bodies contextualised by queer and racial politics. These changes in digital culture and process have resulted in contemporary interpretations of the abject, uncanny, and grotesque, and encouraged the emergence of the online persona.

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I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Introduction

In 2021, the singer-songwriter, Billie Eilish, posted her British *Vogue* cover on Instagram (figure 1).[1] The photograph presented her wearing lingerie-style attire that accentuated her curvaceous figure, which she had until then famously kept hidden under baggy clothes, and broke previous records for garnering an incredible one million likes in six minutes.[2] On Instagram, influencers and celebrities, including notable example Kim Kardashian, maintain successful careers in part through the representation of their bodies, popularising the selfie and legitimising a style of fame that has been historically denigrated.[3] Elsewhere, OnlyFans has democratised transactional amateur sex work and enabled anyone to display their body for financial gain.[4] These examples not only suggest the potential for user-created or curated content online to transform the way in which bodies are viewed, but also highlight the enduring fascination with the representational body. Additionally, on free pornographic websites, amateur and hardcore pornography is easily accessible, with the global consumption of objectified and violent imagery resulting in increasingly early exposure to children and adolescents.[5] In news, mainstream media, and true crime, depictions of violent and violated bodies are not only ubiquitous, but used as entertainment.[6] Time and again, political controversies return to the body, with Donald Trump elected US president despite

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[1] Laura Snapes, "'It's All About What Makes You Feel Good': Billie Eilish on New Music, Power Dynamics, And Her Internet-Breaking Transformation," *Vogue*. May 2, 2021, accessed October 18, 2022. https://www.vogue.co.uk/news/article/billie-eilish-vogue-interview.

[2] Tom Wood, "Billie Eilish Breaks Instagram Record for The Second Time," LADBIBLE, May 5, 2021. https://www.ladbible.com/entertainment/music-billie-eilish-breaks-instagram-fastest-million-likes-record-again-20210505.

[3] Christopher Moore, Kim Barbour, and Katja Lee. "Five dimensions of online persona." *Persona Studies* 3, no.1 (June 2017): 3

[4] Paul Ryan, *Male Sex Work in the Digital Age: Curated Lives* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 120.

[5] Carmine Sarracino and Kevin M. Scott, *Porning of America: The Rise of Porn Culture, What It Means, and Where We Go from Here* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), 157-160; Shelley Walker, Meredith Temple-Smith, Peter Higgs, and Lena Sanci, "'It's Always Just There in Your Face': Young People's Views on Porn," *Sexual Health* 12, no. 3 (2015): 200.

[6] Kelli S. Boling, "True crime podcasting: Journalism, justice or entertainment?" *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media* 17, no. 2 (October 2019): 161-178.

being on record saying, "grab them by the pussy."[7] Despite all manner of social changes, bodies remain central in politics, entertainment, news and art.

As such, this thesis contends that while bodies remain one of the most ubiquitous subjects in contemporary art, the production, representation, and reception of the body have been transformed in response to the digital age. Therefore, the aim of this research is to investigate the impact of digital media, including social media, on the evolution of the body in contemporary art, with a focus on the work of four artists spanning different generations of digital exposure: Asger Carlsen (Generation X); Julie Rrap (Baby Boomer); Leah Schrager (Generation Y or Millennial); Juliana Huxtable (Generation Y or Millennial).[8] Each artist utilises various forms of digital technologies, from photography to social media performance, to construct different types of bodies contextualised by theories of digitalisation and studies of gender and sexuality, particularly feminist discourses. Feminism and queer theory are positioned as central to this study, as they have significantly informed the ways in which digital media has impacted the representation and perception of bodies. The following research investigates how digital media, as a versatile artistic tool and pervasive form of visual culture, has impacted the representation of bodies in contemporary art.

While there has recently been significant research into the impact of digital media on representations and perceptions of the body, particularly on social media, the ways in which digital technology has influenced contemporary artistic depictions of bodies is an area that

[7] Sarah J. Gervais and Sarah Eagan, "Sexual Objectification: The Common Thread Connecting Myriad Forms of Sexual Violence against Women," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 87, no. 3 (2017): 232; The New York Times, "Transcript: Donald Trump's Taped Comments About Women," October 8, 2016, *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html.
[8] These generations are not listed chronologically and reflect the thematic structure of the thesis. They are defined at the McCrindle website: Mark McCrindle, "Demographics: The generations defined," McCrindle, accessed November 2, 2022. https://mccrindle.com.au/article/topic/demographics/the-generations-defined/.

invites further research.[9] In exploring the diverse ways digital media has transformed the representation of the body in contemporary art, especially in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the ensuing discussion concentrates on four key areas of artistic representation: 1. digital manipulation, photographic truth and the grotesque; 2. third wave feminism and commodification; 3. fourth wave feminism and online persona, and; 4. intersectionality, inclusivity and social media communities. These topics are enriched by and build on studies that demonstrate how digital technologies have directly influenced the transformation of the body in a "cyber era."[10] The year 2000 is treated as a starting point for this study, notwithstanding comparative references to Contemporary art in the 1980s and 1990s, as it represents the shift from the primarily analogue age to the intensity of digital communication prevalent in the twenty-first century. Rapidly changing, often contradictory body cultures distributed across digital media in this period are explored, particularly concerning social attitudes towards embodiment, from the toxic cult of thinness versus body positivity, to self-sexualisation and objectification, to the inclusive and intersectional identities embraced on social media.[11]

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[9] See Nicola Rivers, *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave: Turning Tides* (Springer International Publishing, 2017); Crystal Abidin, *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2018); Melissa Gronlund. *Contemporary Art and Digital Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Eve Shapiro, *Gender Circuits: Bodies and Identities in a Technological Age* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Amy Shields Dobson. *Postfeminist Digital Cultures: Femininity, Social Media, and Self-Representation*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2015); Katrin Tiidenberg and Emily van der Nagel, *Sex and Social Media* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2020); Murray, Derek Conrad. *Visual Culture Approaches to the Selfie*. (Milton: Taylor and Francis, 2021)

[10] See Amanda du Preez (ed.), *Gendered Bodies and New Technologies: Rethinking Embodiment in a Cyber-Era* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009); Susan Broadhurst and Sara Price (eds.), *Digital Bodies: Creativity and Technology in the Arts and Humanities* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Joanna Zylinska, *The Cyborg Experiments: The Extensions of the Body in the Media Age* (London: continuum, 2002); Anne Marie Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

[11] Helana Darwin and Amara Miller, "Factions, frames, and postfeminism(s) in the Body Positive Movement," *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 6 (February 2020): 873-890; Nicola Rivers, *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave: Turning Tides* (Springer International Publishing, 2017), 71-75.

This research is structured through a literature review and four case study chapters, each focussing on one of the four primary artists, contextualised by comparative artists and influences. Each featured artist is, in turn, used to explore the range of ways digital media has impacted contemporary representations of the body in art. Throughout each chapter, selected artworks are analysed and contextualised by the pervasive and dynamic body culture stimulated by digital and social media in the twenty-first century. Carlsen, Rrap, Schrager, and Huxtable have been selected for discussion because they repeatedly depict the body in varied digital media practices and theoretical perspectives that open a pathway for future research on other contemporary artists immersed in digital body cultures. Additionally, these four key artists deliberately reference unique aspects of digital culture in their work conceptually, utilising digital media as both a material and intellectual tool. They also often situate their own bodies as subjects, though rarely as traditional self-portraits, instead using their bodies to explore ideas. Additional rationale for the selected artists is their unconventional representations of the body across different series, readily available artist statements, engagement with multiple mediums, and what I have identified as under-researched aspects of their practice.

Chapter Two positions this study within the context of digital media, the history of the body in art, and the evolving landscape of feminist discourses and body theory. It includes discussion of major themes concerning past and present bodily representation to establish a foundation from which to analyse the four artists. Feminism is identified as a significant area of influence on the representational body's interaction with digital technology. Attention is given to the representation of the body in response to third and fourth wave feminism, from biologically focussed work, performance, and abjection, to sexualised bodies and intersectionality. The role of digital media in encouraging fourth wave feminism and

associated imagery is explored, questioning whether the idealisation of users' lives on social media has created an avoidance of the ugly and uncomfortable aspects of bodies or a return to digitally enhanced ideals of beauty following the focus on 'real' and abject bodies in contemporary art of the 1990s.[12] The rise in accessible digital pornography and subsequent pornofied visual culture is also considered, informing the complex relationship between objectification and empowerment.

Chapter Three examines the photographic practice of the Danish artist Asger Carlsen. The discussion shows how photographic truth and perceived realism are convincingly manipulated in Carlsen's digitally edited photographs of the body to create a sense of discomfort and ambiguity. The bodily abstruseness of these digital photographs is contextualised by the impact of violence on the body in contemporary digital culture, contributing to the emergence of the contemporary grotesque. Carlsen's experience as a crime photographer is, in turn, considered against comparable artists like Weegee, whose career trajectory conjoining crime photography with artistic photography is echoed by Carlsen's practice. Digital processes and third wave feminism, including the evolution from a primarily analogue to digital landscape and the resulting impact on commodified representation, are explored in Chapter Four through Australian contemporary artist Julie Rrap. As digital technology has evolved, Rrap's photographic representations of the body have become more complex. With her career extending back to body art and performance in the 1970s, her multimedia practice has sustained focus on feminist corporeality.[13] Digital technology both enables the creation of Rrap's work and is integral to the concepts behind it,

[12] See Francis Arackal Thummy, *The concept of beauty in the media: How the media propagates unrealistic body images and beauty standards* (Munich: GRIN Verlag, 2015); Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 153, 156-7.
[13] See Elizabeth A. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994).

as she frequently references digital culture within her subversion of the commodified female body.

Chapter Five explores the role of social media, fourth wave feminism and digital persona in representations of the artistic body online in the work of American contemporary artist, Leah Schrager. Her extended social media practice is highly self-directed and sexualised, drawing on pornography aesthetics and online conventions, reflecting her identification as a fourth wave feminist.[14] Schrager's engagement with feminism and identity are primarily explored through an examination of her online persona, Ona Artist. Digital media has also challenged the hierarchical separation between the traditional artistic body, pornography, advertising, and personal imagery. Accessible digital technology and the rise of social media have enabled people of all backgrounds and abilities to display their imagery to a potentially unlimited audience. Schrager therefore also demonstrates the rise of the amateur digital artist and the changing legitimation of contemporary art in the digital age.

In Chapter Six, the representation of marginalised and traditionally othered identities, including racial, sexual and gender identities, are explored in reference to the impact of social media communities, examined through Juliana Huxtable's multidisciplinary digital practice. Huxtable repeatedly constructs her imagined African American racial heritage and transgender identity in her fantastical digital works, which also directly reference social media and digital culture. Her work is not only demonstrative of the rise of inclusive representation and intersectional feminism online, but also suggestive of the potential for constructed body depictions to subvert limiting attitudes regarding embodiment. The

[14] Anna Freeman, "How to create a famous Instagram alter-ego," *Dazed*, March 2, 2020, https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/32881/1/how-artist-leah-schrager-created-her-famous-instagram-alter-ego-onaartist.

conclusion not only argues for the significance of digital media on creative practice for these diverse contemporary artists but argues that their works demonstrate an alignment with the accelerated change in body politics on digital and social media since 2000. After two decades under the influence of rapidly changing and openly accessible digital media technologies, from Web 2.0 to the metaverse, augmented by social media scrutiny, body-consciousness has shifted to a form of constructed body-centricity that is resolutely detached from real bodies in contemporary art.

Chapter Two

Digital Media and the Evolution of the Body in Art

Artistic representations of the body in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have evolved in accordance with changing cultural attitudes toward the body in conjunction with the development of new technologies. Thomas Koerfer positions the advent of the Polaroid instant photograph and its subsequent increase in popularity and accessibility in the 1970s as a pivotal event in the evolution of the representation of the body, allowing both artistic and personal exploration of the body in private settings.[1] Artists like Lucas Samaras, in addition to countless amateur photographers at home, were able to depict their own bodies without third party intervention, as the film was developed instantly. Smartphones, equipped with self-facing cameras and accessible photo-sharing applications, are the contemporary equivalent in terms of personal bodily exploration and immediacy.

Digital photography in the twenty-first century is a central aspect of contemporary visual culture and contemporary art production. From snapshots shared in personal communication to news and commercial media, digital photography is also an equally prominent tool used by contemporary artists to interrogate representations of the body in realistic, hyper-realistic, and fragmented figures and forms. Due to the positioning of digital photography as a central communicative tool in twenty-first century society, the photographic image is a dominant feature in representations of the body in the contemporary digital age. The technical evolution of digital photography has been identified as a key factor defining visual

[1] Thomas Koerfer, "As if in a mirror – the influence of the cinema on the depiction of the body in contemporary art," in *Stripped Bare: The Body Revealed in Contemporary Art,* ed. Marianne Karabelnik (New York: Merrell, 2004), 77-82.

representation and communication in the post-industrial world.[2] The emergence of social media, particularly platforms like Instagram, has further contributed to the centrality of the photographic image in contemporary communication and art. Through altering the landscape of communicative visual culture, social media has informed the way the body is explored by artists and given them a new platform in which to exhibit their work, as seen in the work of Leah Schrager and Juliana Huxtable, chapters five and six.

The significance of digital technology in not only art but all contemporary communication is reflected in our increasing reliance on technology. Drawing on the ideas of sociologist Daniel Bell, Simon Lindgren has claimed that the technologically enabled ease of sharing information, whether by television, internet or radio, is the defining characteristic of the information age.[3] Nick Couldry similarly situates the exchange of visual information as influential in transforming society, removing traditional barriers between countries and cultures, allowing the flow of information to be both immediate and consistent.[4] On Instagram, for example, amateur and professional artists alike are able to display their work to audiences without gallery intervention. Additionally, digital media is utilised to remove boundaries within traditionally hidden social communities, such as LGBTQ spaces, allowing wider access.[5] The online landscape is dependent on interconnectedness, creating an environment in which communication is central.[6] Ralph Schroeder similarly positions digital media as being one of the most influential factors in defining contemporary society.[7] Each

[2] Elisabeth Eglem and Monica Tavares, "Between Technological and Social Evolution: Digital Photography as a Framework for (Im)Material Experiences," *Studies in Visual Arts and Communication* 5, no. 2 (2018): 2.
[3] Daniel Bell, *The coming of post-industrial society: a venture in social forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 12-14; Simon Lindgren, *Digital Media and Society* (London: Sage Publications, 2017), 10.
[4] Nick Couldry, *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012): 1-3.
[5] Yossi David and Christian Baden, "Reframing community boundaries: the erosive power of new media spaces in authoritarian societies," *Information, Communication and Society* 20, no. 1 (2018): 110-15.
[6] Klaus Jensen, "Intermediality," *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*, 6 (2008): 2385.
[7] Ralph Schroeder, "Towards a Theory of Digital Media," *Information, Communication & Society* 21, no. 3 (2018): 323-4.

artist examined in this thesis responds to the changing digital landscape, in which the centrality of digital technology in contemporary communication is necessarily reflected in the visual media created. Claims regarding the significance of digital media draw upon Manuel Castell's conceptualisation of the network society, in which communicative changes have altered human experience.[8] The different types of power within these networks are further explored in *Communication Power,* confirming the influence of virtual spaces in transforming communication.[9] The reproducibility of media has also been positioned as a fundamental aspect of the way in which evolving technology has shaped society, from the twentieth century to digital reproduction today.[10] Drawn from Walter Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, the influence of reproducibility also suggest that the act of reproduction changes the way images are understood and engaged with.[11]

While the internet has dramatically altered the accessibility of images, the availability of art online also frequently removes contextual information and invites new interpretations. As a result, the role and demographic of the viewer has been impacted, which has further implications on the art produced.[12] The changes in the use of digital photography are also reflected in the ever-increasing user engagement with amateur, otherwise known as personal, photography.[13] Increasingly, personal or amateur digital photographs are taken as communicative tools, as opposed to keepsakes.[14] The changing functions of the personal

[8] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 500-509.
[9] Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 64-71.
[10] Tamara Trodd, *The Art of Mechanical Reproduction: Technology and Aesthetics from Duchamp to the digital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 1-4.
[11] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 217-251.
[12] Pamela Carter-Birken, "Interpretation and the Role of the Viewer in Museums of Modern and Contemporary Art," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 51, no. 2 (April 2008): 171-172.
[13] José van Dijck, "Digital Photography: Communication, Identity, Memory," *Visual Communication*, 7, no. 1 (February 2008): 58.
[14] van Dijck, "Digital Photography," 58-60.

digital photograph are particularly evident on social media platforms such as Instagram, where the images are both shared and used as a source of inspiration for the creation of such images. As advancements in digital technology grow and social media applications like Instagram reach greater audiences, the traditional separations between art and communication or entertainment media diminish.[15] While most of the images on social media are created by the general public rather than professional artists, there are a growing number of artists utilising the platform to share content with a wider audience.[16] Additionally, advertising companies are frequently utilising the high rates of audience engagement to promote their products.[17] Image-centric applications such as Instagram allow contemporary artists, advertisers, and the general public to capture, edit, and share images within the same online platforms. As the perceived boundaries that have traditionally separated high and low culture become increasingly blurred, the ways in which audiences consume, share, and interpret art and images of the body are changing. In this way, social media and the global connectivity of the internet have fundamentally altered the way images are viewed and understood in daily life, popular culture, and the realm of high art.[18] These changes are particularly relevant to the representation and reception of the body in contemporary art, which has an extensive history of provoking powerful reactions from viewers, including within contemporary society.[19]

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[15] Jessica Guynn, "Instagram Stretches Reach to 500M Users," *USA Today*, June 21, 2016, http://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2016/06/21/instagram-hits-500-million-monthly-users/86158968/.
[16] Kylie Budge, "Virtual Studio Practices: Visual Artists, Social Media and Creativity," *Journal of Science and Technology of the Arts* 5, no. 1 (December 2013): 19.
[17] Jeffrey K. Rohrs, *Audience: Marketing in the Age of Subscribers, Fans and Followers* (Somerset: Wiley, 2013), 77-78.
[18] Thomas S. Eberle, "Photographing as Creative and Communicative Action" in *Culture, Communication, and Creativity Reframing the Relations of Media, Knowledge, and Innovation in Society*, eds. Hubert Knoblauch, Mark Jacobs, and Rene Tuma (Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH, 2014), 147-148.
[19] Elizabeth C. Childs, *Suspended License: Censorship and the Visual Arts* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 23-24; David Marr, *The Henson Case* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2008), 64.

Ben Davis has highlighted the relationship between Instagram and contemporary art trends by linking the popular photo-sharing platform to John Berger's seminal *Ways of Seeing,* first published in 1972.[20] Davis suggests that applications such as Instagram are the logical next step in visual culture, linking the envy-inducing nature of social media with Berger's analysis of glamour and aesthetic ambition.[21] Davis argue that Instagram is merely the democratisation of a continuing artistic tradition, with popular Instagram images tackling the same subjects ubiquitous throughout western art history, that "#foodporn is still-life; all those #selfies, self-portraits."[22] Derek Conrad Murray has similarly linked contemporary artists using the selfie as their subject with the politicised body art emerging from the 1970s.[23] Challenging the idea that social media is a solely narcissistic medium separate from the art world, Murray analyses the work of a number of contemporary artists such as Vivian Fu and Noorann Matties, who incorporate selfies and social media in their art practice.[24]

Similarly, Jerry Saltz has presented the selfie as a logical continuation of the genre of self-portraiture, while Priscilla Frank demonstrates the political empowerment of several contemporary artists, including Molly Soda and Petra Collins, using selfies and social media as "a radical weapon for change."[25] The changing digital landscape has a demonstrable impact on the representation of bodies, from advertising and digitally informed commodified bodies, to social media persona art. Digital media has also been utilised to bypass traditional

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[20] Ben Davis, "Ways of Seeing Instagram," Artnet, accessed June 12, 2016, https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/ways-of-seeing-instagram-37635; John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972).
[21] Davis, "Ways of Seeing Instagram."
[22] Davis, "Ways of Seeing Instagram."
[23] Derek Conrad Murray, "Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media," *Consumption Markets & Culture* 18, no. 6, (July 2015): 497-498.
[24] Murray, "Notes to Self," 297-298.
[25] Jerry Saltz, "Art at Arm's Length: A History of the Selfie," *New York Magazine republished on Vulture,* February 3, 2014, http://www.vulture.com/2014/01/history-of-the-selfie.html; Priscilla Frank, "How Artists Are Using the Selfie as a Radical Weapon for Change," The Huffington Post, accessed June 10, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/10-artists-who-use-selfies-as-their-radical-weapons_us_55e7393ae4b0c818f61a303b.

limitations, as mediums like photography, video and social media performance are widely accessible.[26] The potential for selfies and self-representational body artwork to be utilised as tools of empowerment, particularly for young women, also situates this period of technological change amongst a long history of feminist interaction with art and visual media.

The complex relationship between digital representations of bodies and contemporary feminism is heightened by an online culture which ensures the internet is an ideal space for misogyny which thrives in anonymity.[27] Women's images of their bodies are even more at risk of being used against them, particularly if they have been posted online or have publicly declared their support of feminism.[28] These factors have led to an increase of online self-representation whereby artists, in addition to the general public, are situating their selfies in relation to fourth wave feminism by representing themselves online in ways which demand visibility, as explored in the art of Leah Schrager in chapter five.[29] The rise of this trend, sometimes termed "selfie feminism," has also received backlash for continued representation of white, able-bodied, attractive women who conform more to the conventions of the male gaze than they do challenge it.[30] Sheila Pinkel further suggests that the representation of women's bodies in the mass media has provoked contemporary artists to depict their own physical reality through digital art as a natural response.[31] As the typical media representation of the body is idealised, objectified, and commodified, the body in contemporary art can be read as a response to visual culture, either in adherence to cultural standards, in rejection of

[26] Judith K. Brodsky, *Dismantling the Patriarchy, Bit by Bit: Art, Feminism, and Digital Technology* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2021), 76.
[27] Emma A. Jane, "Online Misogyny and Feminist Digilantism," *Continuum (*March 2016): 284-286.
[28] James Wolcott, "Me, My Selfie, and I," *Vanity Fair* 56, no. 12 (December 2014): 132.
[29] Murray, "Notes to Self," 493-494.
[30] Aria Dean, "Closing the Loop," The New Inquiry, accessed January 23, 2017, http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/closing-the-loop/.
[31] Sheila Pinkel, "Women, Body Earth," in Women, Art, and Technology, ed. Judy Malloy, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 40.

them, or through deconstructing their power and purpose. The rise of the body positivity movement, in which social media users post their bodies of all shapes, sizes and abilities, also demonstrates a rejection of objectified and idealised media portrayals.[32] Following in the tradition of artist like Jenny Saville and Cindy Sherman, whose representations of their own bodies were often utilised to confront the way women were represented in mainstream media, the artists featured throughout this thesis often utilise their own body to explore contemporary, digitally influenced culture.

The global connectivity of the internet and immediacy of digital image sharing has added a new social and psychological dimension that further complicates representations of the body in popular culture and contemporary art. Critics have suggested that applications such as Instagram have contributed to a warped perception of the reality of other people's lives and bodies.[33] These digital platforms can in turn have a negative impact on users' body image and self-perception as potentially inadequate or dysmorphic.[34] Social media culture therefore has the potential to place an inordinate amount of scrutiny and intensity on the body as a problematic source of comparison and validation.[35] Despite users consciously constructing their social media profiles to portray idealised impressions, users often do not make the connection that everyone else is similarly manufacturing the representation of their bodies and lives.[36] While the desire to display and compare the physical appearance of oneself

[32] Alexandra Sastre, "Towards a Radical Body Positive: Reading the Online 'Body Positive Movement'," *Feminist media studies* 14, no. 6 (2014): 929-31.
[33] Hui-Tzu Grace Chou and Nicholas Edge, "'They Are Happier and Having Better Lives Than I Am': The Impact of Using Facebook on Perceptions of Others Lives," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 15, no. 2 (2012): 117-21.
[34] Jasmine Fardouly and Lenny R. Vartanian, "Social Media and Body Image Concerns: Current Research and Future Directions," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 9, (2016): 1-2.
[35] Mariska Kleemans, Serena Daalmans, Illan Caarbat, and Doeschka Anschütz, "Picture Perfect: The Direct Effect of Manipulated Instagram Photos on Body Image in Adolescent Girls," *Media Psychology* 21, no. 1 (2018): 93-110.
[36] Jessica Winter, "Selfie Loathing," Slate, accessed August 20, 2016, http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2013/07/instagram_and_self_esteem_why_the_photo_sharing_network_is_even_more_depressing.html.

against the presentation of others is a fundamental human drive that forms the basis of the theory of social comparison, it is often based on superficial information and values.[37] Constructed authenticity is a central aspect of artistic representations of the body online and in social media performance. Martin Hammer suggests that this orchestrated presentation of the self through pictures similarly functions as a way of distancing the artist from viewer, despite the visual suggestion of intimacy.[38] Contemporary artists are responding to the changes in bodily representation online through their own body performance and presentation, frequently incorporating digital manipulation.

More so than other traditional mediums such as painting and sculpture, photography has inspired complex debates over the distinction between art or science, and its relationship to reality. Tom Gunning positions this association between photographic images and reality as the "truth claim."[39] Throughout history, photography has been subjected to debate around its intent and construction. Scott Walden suggests that there is a common-sense relationship between photography and truth.[40] The association with photographic truth and accuracy informs the way representations of the body are viewed. Historically, analogue photography has been more closely associated with objectivity due to both the enduring perception that they have not been edited and their relationship with indexicality.[41] The rise of digital photography has therefore resulted in confusion surrounding the veracity of viewing photographic images as indexical.[42] Analogue photographs transfer information via light

[37] Leon Festinger, "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes," *Human Relations* 7, no. 2 (May 1954): 117-119.
[38] Martin Hammer, *The Naked Portrait: 1900-2007* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2007), 39.
[39] Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs," *Nordicom Review* 1-2 (2004): 39-41.
[40] Scott Walden, "Truth in Photography" in *Photography and Philosophy: Essays on the Pencil of Nature,* ed. Scott Walden (Malden: Blackwell Pub, 2008): 91.
[41] Scott Walden, "Objectivity in Photography," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 45, no. 3 (2005): 262; Eglem and Tavares, "Between Technological and Social Evolution," 2; Paul Levinson, *The Soft Edge: A Natural History and Future of the Information Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1997), 41, 43-4.
[42] Stephen Prince, "True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory" *Film Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (Spring 1996), 28.

sensitive chemicals, whereas digital photographs transfer information through numerical data.[43] While analogue photographs can contain an unlimited amount of information, they are typically indistinct when enlarged. Digital photographs retain the set amount of information but are able to be enlarged clearly within the boundaries of that information size.[44]

However, while the method of image capturing has changed from light sensitive emulsion to numerical data, the adherence to an indexicality can still be seen to remain intact due to its transference of real-world matter, into signifier of this matter.[45] It can therefore be argued that the indexicality of the photographic image is not dependent upon its incorporation of light sensitive chemicals.[46] The confusion regarding the perceived indexicality of photographs also contributes to the complex role digital photographs hold in contemporary society, including digitally altered deepfake likenesses and other AI simulations. These technologies are perceived as simultaneously objective yet easily manipulated, as both art and science, as personal keepsakes, and public communication. The idea of photographic truth is particularly significant to the artists examined in this thesis, as each artist works with digitally manipulated photography which appear realistic or engage with an online audience who view these images through a lens of perceived realism and authenticity online. As such, the subversion of the realism and objectivity associated with photography is one of the distinctive features of artistic representations of the body in contemporary in the digital age.

[43] Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs," 40.
[44] Eglem and Tavares, "Between Technological and Social Evolution," 2.
[45] Yuriko Furuhata, "Indexicality as 'Symptom': Photography and Affect," *Semiotica* 174, no. 1-4 (2009): 182, 196.
[46] Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs," 40.

Digital manipulation and bodily distortion

Digital manipulation in contemporary photography has resulted in the amplification of "malleable" or distorted bodily forms facilitated by analogue photography.[47] The rapid evolution in digital technologies has enabled images to be highly edited with accessible and easy to use software.[48] Film theorist Stephen Prince suggests that through technological advancements, the viewer's understanding of the realism of heavily manipulated photographs is able to be more easily controlled.[49] This idea has been described as "perceptual realism" by Prince.[50] It refers to the extent to which images conform to what the viewer perceives as real. Prince defines the process as "the replication via digital means of contextual cues designating a three-dimensional world."[51] He gives the example of *Jurassic Park* to illustrate the separation between perceived reality and what the camera can capture. Through depicting what the viewers expect to see, artists and filmmakers can create artificial environments which appear more perceptually realistic than un-staged ones. Applying this to photographic art, the implementation of advanced digital technology can make the unreal appear real.

The subversion of the perception of visual reality is also drawn from Baudrillard's hyperreality.[52] Hyperreality refers to when a simulated image, object or person becomes more perceptually real than, or acts as a stand-in for, its real-life counterpart. In essence, the simulation "replaces" the reality it was emulating.[53] The viewer's perception of reality has been impacted as a result since what appears visually realistic is not necessarily real, causing

[47] Michelle Henning and Carole Baker. "The Subject as Object," in *Photography: A Critical Introduction,* ed. Liz Wells (New York: Routledge, 2021) 249-251.
[48] Ohad Fried et al., "Editing Self-Image," *Communications of the ACM* 63, no. 3 (March 2020): 70-1.
[49] Stephen Prince, "Through the Looking Glass: Philosophical Toys and Digital Visual Effects," *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind* 4, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 20.
[50] Prince, "True Lies," 27-37; Prince, "Through the Looking Glass," 20 -21.
[51] Prince, "Through the Looking Glass," 20.
[52] Eugene L. Arva, "Writing the Vanishing Real: Hyperreality and Magical Realism," *Journal of narrative theory* 38: 1 (2008): 60.
[53] Philip Pond, *Complexity, Digital Media and Post Truth Politics a Theory of Interactive Systems* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 14.

confusion between reality and imitation.[54] Digital advancements have contributed to this growing hyperreality, as the imitations become more advanced and widely circulated. Digital technology has resulted in an even more highly warped perception of reality and simulation than analogue photographs of the body. Alternatively, Susan Sontag references Plato's allegory of the cave to suggest that while reality may be dependent on perception, rather than an objective truth, photography is a medium that is not a representation of reality but rather "material realities in their own right."[55] Sontag suggests that due to the indexicality of photography, photographs are real in and of themselves, further complicating the idea of photographic truth.

As photographs already have a history of being perceived as objective, advances in digital technology have increased the possibilities for both artistic manipulation and audience confusion over the clash between reality and artifice, as demonstrated in Asger Carlsen's ambiguous photographs, discussed in chapter three.[56] Koerfer's assertion that the advent of Polaroid instant photography altered the representation of the artistic body was true for both the accessibility of the medium and the manipulation it allowed.[57] In the 1970s, the work of Lucas Samaras typified this artistic manipulation of the body in photography and remains a key predecessor to contemporary digitally manipulated art. In his series, *Photo-Transformations9/15/73* (figure 2), Samaras photographed himself repeatedly with a Polaroid SX-70 camera and instant film which, due to the slow fixing time of the chemicals, allows immediate manipulation of the photographic image.[58] Once the photograph had been taken

[54] Paulo Barroso, "From Reality to the Hyperreality of the Simulation," *Texto livre* 15 (2022): 4.
[55] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2010), 179-80.
[56] van Dijck, "Digital Photography," 70.
[57] Thomas Koerfer, "As if in a mirror – the influence of the cinema on the depiction of the body in contemporary art," in *Stripped Bare: The Body Revealed in Contemporary Art,* ed. Marianne Karabelnik (New York: Merrell, 2004), 77-82.
[58] Raymond Hernández-Durán, "Phototransformation (10/25/73), 1973; Phototransformation (4/4/76), 1976; Phototransformation (7/31/76), 1976 by Lucas Samaras," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 25, no. 1

and an instant copy ejected from the camera, Samaras altered the image by pushing and pulling the gel emulsion gel while it was still developing. The resulting works depict Samaras' often nude body transformed into forms barely recognisable as human. Because of the instant Polaroid medium, the images challenge the viewer's perception of reality, as this form of photography is typically not able to be edited. The complexity of distinguishing photography as art or science further heightens the potential for visual manipulation.[59]

In contemporary art, possibilities for photographic manipulation of the body have grown in accordance with advancing photographic technology. Due to the history of the medium, however, many viewers remain attached to the idea that the photographic image is at least a somewhat accurate reflection of life. Despite the associations between analogue photography and truth, pre-digital film photographs were also able to be similarly manipulated.[60] However, contemporary computer and smart phone technology has amplified this form of manipulation by increasing both the accessibility of the digital medium and its interface with commercial digital culture. In the 1990s, Adobe Photoshop became an accessible computer technology which enabled advanced photo editing.[61] As Photoshop became ubiquitous, the term "to photoshop" subsequently also evolved to describe digital photographic editing.[62] Digital editing became so advanced and pervasive that it has also been used to perpetrate criminal offences or produce ethically controversial imagery.[63]

(1999): 48; Peder Lund, Lucas Samaras, accessed October 18, 2022. https://www.pederlund.no/exhibitions/polaroids-from-the-70s

[59] Derrick Price and Liz Wells, "Thinking about photography: debates, historically and now," in *Photography: A Critical Introduction,* ed. Liz Wells (New York: Routledge, 2021), 16-20.

[60] Walden, "Objectivity in Photography," 262; Levinson, *The Soft Edge,* 41, 43-4.

[61] J. D. Swerzenski, "Fact, Fiction or Photoshop: Building Awareness of Visual Manipulation through Image Editing Software," *Journal of Visual Literacy* 40, no. 2 (2021): 104-5.

[62] Swerzenski, "Fact, Fiction or Photoshop,"104-5, 117.

[63] Mario Biagioli, "Before and after Photoshop: Recursive Fraud in the Age of Digital Reproducibility," *Angewandte Chemie* 58, no. 46 (2019): 16334-5; Deirdre Carmody, "Time Responds To Criticism Over Simpson Cover," *The New York Times*, June 25, 1994, https://www.nytimes.com/1994/06/25/us/time-responds-to-criticism-over-simpson-cover.html.

As this technology has evolved, digital photographic editing has increasingly transferred to phone editing applications, known as 'Apps'. Smartphone technology has enabled, for the first time, image capture, editing, and publishing from one device. Smartphone applications utilise software which contain photographic filters and editing tools, including the option to move, blur, copy or merge features of the image.[64] The resulting image can end up looking vastly different from the original, transforming the real into the hyperreal. Instagram images can also be captured and edited on the same app before sharing to the public. On Instagram, popular digital manipulation includes an artificially 'vintage' filter, which is aesthetically reminiscent of analogue photography. Filters, presets, and editing can be used in such a way that they often obscure the 'truth' of the photographic image, with major consequences for bodily perception. Not surprisingly, young people are particularly familiar with and adept at using this technology.[65] Photographic manipulation is also prevalent in selfies, which are themselves an important aspect of the representation of the body in the contemporary digital age.[66]

Despite repeated controversies over manipulated imagery of the body, the pervasiveness and power of editing software, and the history of photography as malleable from its earliest incarnations. Many viewers remain attached to the association between photography and reality, reflecting the belief that seeing is believing due to link between optical veracity and

[64] Dean Keep, "Artist with a Camera-Phone: A Decade of Mobile Photography," in *Mobile Media Making in an Age of Smartphones,* eds. M. Berry and M. Schleser (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014), 21.
[65] Mark Cocks, "The Enduring Fragility of Chemicals and the Software Aesthetic," *Photographies* 2, no. 2 (2009): 197.
[66] Christine Lavrence and Carolina Cambre, "'Do I Look Like My Selfie?': Filters and the Digital-Forensic Gaze," *Social Media + Society* 6, no. 4 (2020): 1-2; Derek Conrad Murray, *Visual Culture Approaches to the Selfie* (Milton: Taylor and Francis, 2021).

safety in human evolution.[67] In this way, digital technology has invited new possibilities for contemporary artists to subvert the viewer's trust in the conventional relationship between photography and truth or objectivity. As a result of the propensity for viewers to believe what they see, combined with technological advancements, manipulated digital imagery is becoming more convincing with developments in deepfakes and AI technology.[68]

Deepfakes use algorithms and AI content to create fake images and videos that blur the distinction between realistic human faces, false testimonies, and unauthentic identities.[69] As increasing information is shared online, this technology has more data to drawn upon, thus creating more realistic representations, such as photo-realistic photographs and videos of celebrities without consent.[70] Deepfakes, AI and realistic digital manipulation have, in this way, contributed to the rise of increased scepticism and disinformation in what has been termed post-truth society.[71] Although it can be argued that this is merely a continuation of the naturally subjective nature of information, the digital landscape of the twenty-first century has made it possible for information to be both easily manipulated and widely shared without permission and in violation of privacy.[72] The resulting environment of ambiguity combined with the enduring truth myth associated with photography have laid the foundation for hyper manipulated yet perceptually realistic imagery that challenges notions of reality concerning the representation of the body in contemporary art and digitally mediated culture online.

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[67] Carl Gelderloos, "Simply Reproducing Reality—Brecht, Benjamin, and Renger-Patzsch on Photography," *German Studies Review* 37, no. 3 (2014): 561-64; Tim C. Kietzmann, Stephan Geuter, and Peter König, "Overt Visual Attention as a Causal Factor of Perceptual Awareness," *PloS one* 6, no. 7 (2011): 1-9.
[68] Loveleen Guar, Saurav Mallik, Noor Zaman Jhanjhi, "Introduction to DeepFake Technologies," in *DeepFakes*, ed. Loveleen Guar (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2022), 1-8.
[69] Robert Chesney and Danielle Citron, "Deepfakes and the New Disinformation War: The Coming Age of Post-Truth Geopolitics," *Foreign affairs* 98, no. 1 (2019): 147-55.
[70] Jan Kietzmann, Linda W. Lee, Ian P. McCarthy and Tim C. Kietzmann, "Deepfakes: Trick or Treat?" *Business horizons* 63, no. 2 (2020): 145.
[71] Saifuddin Ahmed, "Navigating the Maze: Deepfakes, Cognitive Ability, and Social Media News Skepticism," *New media & society* (2021): 2-3.
[72] Sophie Maddocks, "'A Deepfake Porn Plot Intended to Silence Me': Exploring Continuities between Pornographic and 'Political' Deep Fakes," *Porn studies* 7 (2020): 420.

The perception of the internet as ephemeral has further contributed to an altered perception of reality and facilitated the perceived dematerialisation of digital data.[73] Despite technological changes, the materiality of internet artefacts remains, albeit in a different form due to the unique attributes of the medium.[74] These attributes include access, numerical data, reach, and the seemingly unlimited transformation and manipulation ability. Digital materiality is further explained by Amanda Lagerkvist, who compares social media updates to music, in so far as both exist in the world, yet are intangible and rely on perception of the audience.[75] The confusion surrounding the perceived dematerialisation and ephemerality of the internet further complicates the representation of bodies, social and parasocial relationships, and authentic identity. For virtual bodies, this complexity of digital materiality is especially pertinent.[76]

The digital distortion of the body in contemporary art is also manifest in the technologically modified body. Influential artists such as Stelarc, Patricia Piccinini, Orlan, Laurie Anderson, Moon Ribas, and Neil Harbisson, have addressed the array of issues and possibilities that arise from the interaction between machine technology and embodiment. Alternately termed as the hybrid body, cyborg, and cybernetic art, these artists address the relationship between the body and futuristic technologies in a continuing alliance between art and science that in a simplistic sense extends back to early modern anatomical studies by Renaissance artists, such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. In *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway proposes a theory for understanding the potential of technologically altered bodies as a demonstration of

[73] Grant Bollmer, *Theorizing Digital Cultures* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2018): 27.
[74] Paul M. Leonardi, "Digital materiality? How artifacts without matter, matter," First Monday 15, no. 6, (2010): https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v15i6.3036.
[75] Amanda Lagerkvist, *Digital Existence: Ontology, Ethics and Transcendence in Digital Culture* (Milton: Routledge, 2019), 51.
[76] Mark B. N. Hansen, *Bodies in Code Interfaces with Digital Media* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 127.

social and technological progress and futuristic ideals, freeing the body from its physical and social limitations.[77] The rise of space exploration, the Cold War, increased medical advancements and the ever-growing rise of machine technology in the lives of everyday consumers created an environment in which ideas of a new, technologically improved embodied experience emerged.[78] In her articulation of the cyborg body, Haraway situated the cyborg in opposition to Foucault's biopolitics, identifying new ways of relating to embodiment which are politically and culturally transgressive through the dismissal of conventional gendered restrictions towards bodies.[79] Similarly, as scholarship into the materiality of the body continues to evolve, the cyborg body offers a potential to bypass the limitations of the real physical body.[80] Francesca Alfano Miglietti has argued that the technologically impacted or cyborg body is the contemporary manifestation of the transgressive body.[81] Parallels have also been drawn between data and genome sequencing.[82] As such, the separation between human and machine is increasingly ambiguous.[83] The impact of ideas of technological embodiment and intervention are present throughout the artistic exploration of the body in the digital age, including the feminist articulation of the digitally mediated body by artists such as Julie Rrap.

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[77] Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Manifestly Haraway*, eds. Donna J. Haraway and Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016) 7-11.
[78] Cecilia Asberg, "The arena of the body: the cyborg and feminist views on biology," in *Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture*, eds. Rosemarie Buikema and Iris Van Dertuin (New York: Routledge, 2007), 25.
[79] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 31-33; Francesca Alfano Miglietti, *Extreme bodies: the use and abuse of the body in art* (Milan: Skira, 2003), 162.
[80] Kathleen Lennon, "Expressing the World: Merleau-Ponty and Feminist Debates on Nature/Culture," in *New Feminist Perspectives on Embodiment*, eds. Clara Fischer and Dolezal Luna (Champagne: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 132.
[81] Miglietti, *Extreme bodies*, 115.
[82] Caroline Bassett, Sarah Kember, and Kate O'Riordan, "Feminist Futures: A Conditional Paeon for the Anything-Digital," in *Furious: Technological Feminism and Digital Futures*, eds. Caroline Bassett et al. (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 3.
[83] Kevin Warwick, "The Disappearing Human-Machine Divide," in *Beyond Artificial Intelligence The Disappearing Human-Machine Divide*, eds. Jan Romportl et al. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015), 1.

The relationship between performance art and digital technology is also central to the representation and concept of the body in art today. Artists like Leah Schrager draw upon the history of performance art to construct online personae, while Juliana Huxtable utilises digital technology via film, lighting, and music in her multimedia live and recorded performances. Technologically informed performance art, popularised by artists like Laurie Anderson, was also utilised performance to explore the social construction of gender identity and feminist conceptualisations of embodiment, including reproductive technologies.[84] Technological body intervention extends to platforms such as virtual reality, in which embodied experience is literally technologically altered.[85] Anderson's early implementation and enduring use of digital technology including electronic music and multimedia in live performance situates her as a key example of cyborg body representation, and is influential to younger artists like Huxtable. In the contemporary digital age, performance art has expanded into new realms with the advent of social media and widely accessible internet. Artists such as Schrager and Amalia Ulman are challenging the definition of performance art in their online persona works. The emergence of online personas can also be seen in part as a response to the requirement for data, juxtaposed with the perception of general online anonymity.[86] Additionally, the changing verification of identity online, as seen on social media, may contribute to a more complex presentation of identity.[87] Social media also impacts how people perceive authentic identity interaction, demonstrated in the performativity of taking multiple selfies before displaying the best one, in addition to curating shared content.[88]

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[84] Maria Murphy, "Voicing the Clone: Laurie Anderson and Technologies of Reproduction," *Feminist Review* 127, no. 1 (2021): 57.
[85] Laurie Anderson and Bonnie Marranca, "Laurie Anderson: Telling Stories in Virtual Reality," *PAJ* 40, no. 3 (2018): 38-41.
[86] Christopher Moore, Kim Barbour, and Katja Lee, "Five dimensions of online persona," *Persona Studies* 3, no.1 (June 2017): 2-3.
[87] Emily van der Nagel, "Embodied verification: Linking identities and bodies on NSFW Reddit," in *Mediated Interfaces: The Body on Social Media,* eds. Katie Warfield et al. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 53.
[88] Lyndsay Michalik Gratch and Ariel Gratch, *Digital Performance in Everyday Life* (Milton: Taylor and Francis, 2021), 31-32.

Artists like Schrager utilise online persona to explore social media performance as a long-term creative practice, drawing upon traditional performance art, cyber identity, and anonymity in the context of sexual commodification online.

The synergy between conventional ideas of feminine beauty and objectification of the ideal body prevalent in digital media not only runs parallel with the cultural phenomena of intermediality but also a continuing interest in abjection. However, the rise of digital media appears to have encouraged a move away from depicting overt visual abjection as a central strategy of body representation, as popularised in the twentieth century, moving toward the utilisation of disgust to produce a similar effect.[89] Abjection gained popularity within contemporary art following Julia Kristeva's publication of *Powers of Horror* first published in 1980 and was strengthened by the Whitney Museum's *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* exhibition in 1993.[90] George Bataille had previously proposed a theory of abjection, however Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare argue that this has been obscured by Kristeva's more well-known conceptualisation.[91] The transgression of bodily boundaries are particularly indicative of abjection, commonly manifest through bodily fluids, especially taboo excretions such as menstrual blood and semen, as it disrupts the belief of having a definite boundary between the self and the outside world, a notion which provides comfort and security.[92] John Lechte illustrates a more comprehensive view of abjection, which not only includes the transgression of bodily boundaries, but also states of transition such as

[89] Jane Polkinghorne, "HEAVE, HO, HA: Disgust, humour and failure in contemporary feminist art." In *Feminist Perspectives on Art: Contemporary Outtakes*, eds. Jacqueline Millner and Catriona Moore (New York: Routledge, 2018), 157-58.
[90] This is the English translation, translated in 1982 from the original French Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection, 1980; Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare, "Introduction: approaching abjection" in *Abject Visions: Powers of Horror in Art and Visual Culture,* eds. Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 1-2.
[91] Arya and Chare, "Introduction,"1-2.
[92] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1-4; Arya and Chare, "Introduction" 2; Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Pornography, Art and Sexuality,* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 31-32

aging, which is marginalised as physically distasteful and a natural bodily process to be delayed.[93] For these reasons, throughout the twentieth century, abjection was often utilised in feminist representations of the body to subvert the objectification of bodies. A contemporary counterpart to this form of body representation is suggested through the exploration of discomfort and disgust in the work of Rrap and Carlsen.

Gender, sexuality, and feminisms

Perceptions of pornography, the gaze, and embodiment, have each been significantly influenced by feminist discourses on the body. In contemporary culture the body remains central to feminism, both in representation and in terms of theories of empowerment and social movements.[94] Furthermore, the accessibility of the internet and social media have transformed economic opportunities for women and marginalised groups.[95] In addition to increasing options for earning potential, social media has also been used for sharing trauma, seeking support and building communities.[96] Digital media has also, perhaps most significantly, contributed to the emergence of a fourth wave of feminism. Notwithstanding debates on the value of feminist categorisation, the distinct waves of feminism are useful for examining the ways in which changing attitudes and generational perspectives influence the way in which the body has been represented and perceived, in both past and present traditions of art and digital media.

[93] John Lechte, "Abjection, Art and Bare Life" in *Abject Visions: Powers of Horror in Art and Visual Culture,* eds. Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 15.
[94] Victoria L. Bromley, *Feminisms Matter: Debates, Theories, Activism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 8.
[95] Kylie Jarrett, *Feminism, Labour and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2015), 17-18.
[96] Jessica Ringrose and Kaitlynn Mendes, "#WhoNeedsFeminism? Mapping leaky, networked affective feminist resistance," in *Mediated Interfaces: The Body on Social Media*, eds. Katie Warfield et al. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 131-132.

The impact of digital media to facilitate shared information regarding feminist theories, in addition to the way in which digital culture has directly contributed to the emergence of fourth wave feminism, position the changing waves of feminism as integral to the representation of the body in the digital age. As digital technology has evolved, and as feminism has progressed, the approach to representing the body has changed. I argue it is the symbiotic relationship that is responsible for much of the visual transformation in body representation, including the emergence of online persona, social media art, fourth wave sex positivity and greater possibilities of intersectional representation. The sustained, complex relationship between representations of bodies and feminism position the two as inextricably linked.

Contemporary representations of the artistic body have been drawn largely from third and fourth wave feminist perspectives, which are separated by distinct visual styles and conceptual approaches. These differences include a focus on advertising and objectification in third wave feminism, in contrast to fourth wave's embrace of sex positivity and potentially sexualised representation, exemplified by artists Rrap and Schrager respectively, chapters four and five. This is not to say that second wave feminism did not have a significant impact on representation of the body in art, the influence of which continues today. In the 1960s and 1970s, second wave feminists challenged the restrictions placed upon the body in both representation and identity in society, moving away from the classical ideal.[97] One of the initial focuses of feminist representation in art of all forms during the mid-to-late twentieth century was to address the neglect of women artists from canonical art history.[98] Works such

[97] Laurel McKenzie, "Women in Unity: Re-Imaging the Female Body in Art," *Etropic* 15, no. 1 (2016): 125; Helen McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities: the Female Nude in Art* (London: Routledge, 2001), 2.
[98] Gill Perry, "Introduction: Gender and Art History," in *Gender and Art,* ed. Gill Perry (New Haven: Yale University Press in Association with the Open University, 1999), 23; Linda Nochlin, "From 1971: Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," ARTnews, January 1971, republished May 30, 2015, accessed

as Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party,* 1979 (figure 3), challenged the idea of the historical superiority of male artistic and patriarchal culture, through the overt inclusion of previously overlooked female artists and historical figures.[99] Griselda Pollock has referred to works like Chicago's as stemming from the "need to rectify the gaps in historical knowledge created by the consistent omission of women of all cultures from the history of art."[100] As such, Cornelia Butler has positioned feminist art of the 1970s as the most important art movement from the post-war period.[101]

The political upheaval and biological focus of second wave feminism also resulted in the growth of performance art, which saw some feminist theorists object to the essentialist implications of bodily representation.[102] When female artists presented their bodies in performance or body art, some audiences and critics, notably including theorists Mary Kelly and Lucy Lippard, were critical of the idea of female artists being accomplices in the sexualisation and objectification of female bodies by patriarchal media.[103] However, in doing so the female body was conflated with the patriarchal view of the female body-object, reducing the artist's agency and positioning the body as an inherently sexualised figure.[104] Amelia Jones argues that, while some critics derided performance art for reinforcing essentialist ideas and patriarchal objectification of women, when viewed through a feminist

November 2, 2022. https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists-4201/

[99] Tal Dekel, *Gendered: Art and Feminist Theory* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 41.

[100] Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999), 23.

[101] Cornelia Butler, "Art and Feminism: An Ideology of Shifting Criteria," in *Wack: Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Lisa Gabriella Mark (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), 15.

[102] Erin Striff, "Bodies of Evidence: Feminist Performance Art," *Critical Survey* 9, no.1 (January 1997): 1-2; Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 22-4.

[103] Kelly, "Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism," 41-52; Jane Weinstock, "No Essential Femininity: A Conversation between Mary Kelly and Paul Smith," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 5, no. 1-2 (1985): 152; Lucy Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women's Body Art." *Art in America* 100, no. 11 (2012): 131-139.

[104] Knafo, *In Her Own Image: Women's Self-representation in Twentieth-century Art,* 93-94.

lens and phenomenological system, most of the criticised performance art becomes inherently anti-essentialist and feminist.[105] Regarding biologically focussed works, Lynda Nead suggests that while simplistic representation of the female body with focus placed upon the genitalia problematically reinforces essentialism in contemporary society, it was integral to feminist progress in the 1970s.[106] Debates regarding the potential objectification of representing an artist's own body is of continued relevance in a time of self-representational art online, and is central to the way the body is represented in contemporary art, as directly explored by Schrager.

Feminist artworks of the 1970s and the debate which surrounded them also provided crucial underpinning for the eventual move towards a more fluid representation of gender and the body in art. Building on these foundations, third wave feminism emerged between the 1990s-2000s, depending on location.[107] In contrast to the overt politicisation and activism of second wave feminism, third wave feminism prioritised embodied experience. Helen McDonald determines the evolution of gender expression as moving towards "gender ambiguity," in contrast to the more explicitly political gender art of the 1970s and 1980s.[108] This is echoed by Gillian Perry, who views the feminist art and theory of the period as marked by a focus on "fluidity and instability."[109] Judith Butler famously addressed this idea of fluidity in her foundational text *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,* first published in 1990. Butler suggested gender is "performative" as opposed to essential, and understood as binary only when considered within the specific cultural norms and standards of a given

[105] Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, 24.
[106] Nead, *The Female Nude,* 66.
[107] Kristin Aune and Rose Holyoak, "Navigating the Third Wave: Contemporary UK Feminist Activists and 'third-Wave Feminism,'" *Feminist Theory* 19, no. 2, (2018): 184.
[108] Helen McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities the Female Nude in Art* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 99.
[109] Gillian Perry, *Gender and Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press in Association with the Open University, 1999), 29-30.

society.[110] Ian Burkitt has articulated the concerns some critics had with Butler's dismissal of materiality, claiming she is more interested in the construction of the body rather than embodied experience.[111] Responding to the debate surrounding her rejection of materiality and apparent inference of gender as a conscious choice, Butler later clarified that the performativity of gender is an often unconscious repetition of behaviour which is dependent upon the subject's environment.[112] Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman similarly proposed that gender is "constituted through interaction."[113] The performativity of gender is referenced by Schrager and Juliana Huxtable, who each explore performance, social constructs, and personal identity through their work. In an age of social media usage and online persona, identity performances gain new significance.

Recent studies have identified a fourth wave of feminism that is directly aligned with digital culture.[114] Fourth wave is partially characterised by the importance of social media as a medium of communication and political activism.[115] The dates attributed to the beginning of fourth wave differ between theorists, with some maintaining that it does not yet exist and is merely a social media expression of third wave ideology.[116] Others acknowledge the emergence of a fourth wave, but suggest that not much has actually changed, positioning it primarily as a younger generations' claims of empowerment through body modification, both

[110] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 183-193.
[111] Ian Burkitt, *Bodies of Thought Embodiment, Identity and Modernity* (London: SAGE Publications, 1999), 88.
[112] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 44-49; Irene Costera Meijer and Baukje Prins, "How Bodies Come to Matter: An Interview with Judith Butler," *Signs* 23, no. 2 (1998): 278-79.
[113] Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," *Gender and Society* 1, no. 2 (June 1987): 129.
[114] Ealasaid Munro, "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?," *Political Insight* 4, no. 2 (2013): 22-5; Ruxandra Looft, "#Girlgaze: Photography, Fourth Wave Feminism, and Social Media Advocacy," *Continuum* 31, no. 6 (2017): 892-902; Jennifer Baumgardner, *F 'Em: Goo Goo, Gaga, and Some Thoughts on Balls* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2011), 243-252.
[115] Looft, "#Girlgaze," 894.
[116] Munro, "Feminism," 23.

cosmetic and digital, and hyper-sexualisation, with limited ideological progress.[117] Some authors argue for the limitations of using the feminist 'waves' as a lived experience of feminism within different countries and communities, instead positioning waves of feminism as broad trends in ideology and renewed interest.[118] In the United Kingdom, Kristin Aune and Rose Holyoak claim that feminism is identifiably behind United States feminism, thus aligning 2018 feminism as third wave, stating it began "a decade later" than in the United States.[119] Crucially, these authors also position social media as third wave and, as a result, argue fourth wave feminism is not yet applicable in the United Kingdom.[120] In contrast, Ealasaid Munro identifies the existence of a fourth wave of feminism that has been informed by the internet and social media.[121] Cancel or call-out culture online is also a significant aspect of fourth wave feminism.[122] Others position online community formation and activism as key characteristics.[123] The widespread participation with interactive social networking has also been positioned as a fundamental aspect of fourth wave feminism.[124] As artists included in this thesis, most notably Leah Schrager, identify as fourth wave feminist and are, I argue, distinct from third wave feminist, fourth wave feminism will be referenced throughout this thesis to describe contemporary, particularly online, feminism.

Fourth wave feminism and digital media have also facilitated the increase of sex-positive feminism.[125] Chapter five artist Leah Schrager exemplifies the complexity of fourth wave

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[117] Rivers, *Postfeminism(S) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave*, 25; Negar Shiva and Zohreh Nosrat Kharazmi, "The Fourth Wave of Feminism and the Lack of Social Realism in Cyberspace," *Journal of Cyberspace Studies* 3, no. 2 (2019): 132.
[118] Aune and Holyoak, "Navigating the Third Wave," 185.
[119] Aune and Holyoak, "Navigating the Third Wave," 184-88.
[120] Aune and Holyoak, "Navigating the Third Wave," 186.
[121] Munro, "Feminism," 22–5.
[122] Shiva and Kharazmi, "The Fourth Wave of Feminism and the Lack of Social Realism in Cyberspace," 134; Munro, "Feminism," 22–5.
[123] Shiva and Kharazmi, "The Fourth Wave of Feminism and the Lack of Social Realism in Cyberspace," 130-31; Baumgardner, *F 'Em: Goo Goo, Gaga, and Some Thoughts on Balls*, 250-2.
[124] Munro, "Feminism," 23-24; Looft, "#Girlgaze," 894.
[125] Munro, "Feminism," 24; Rivers, *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave*, 24.

feminist body representation, as her work explores her self-proclaimed empowerment while being so visibly sexualised it could, in some instances, be categorised as pornographic. The ubiquity of pornographic images online has altered the accessibility of a once restricted medium.[126] This has resulted in a pornofied visual landscape, in which pornographic conventions have impacted many aspects of visual media.[127] Crucially, the ubiquity and availability of pornography has grown dramatically throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century as a consequence of the increasingly wide scope of the internet utilised by a global audience. As a result, there has been a resurgence of the moral panic apparent during other pivotal moments in the history of pornography, such as the advent of the printing press during the Renaissance and invention of photography.[128] Historically, feminist theorists such as Adrienne Rich, Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig regarded pornography as a tool for keeping women as objects of male ownership and domination.[129] Despite this, Schrager and fourth wave feminists like her position her sexualised work as both feminist and empowering. Fourth wave feminism provides a framework to interrogate the complicated relationship between sexual empowerment and objectification.

Christy Mag Uidhir argues that if an image is identified as pornographic, it cannot also be art.[130] While the conventional contemporary tendency is to position pornography and art as opposing fields of representation, Hans Maes instead argues pornographic art is a valid

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[126] Feona Attwood, "Cybersexuality and Online Culture," in *A Companion to New Media Dynamics,* eds. John Hartley, Jean Burgess, and Axel Bruns (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 341-42.
[127] Brian McNair, *Porno? Chic!: How Pornography Changed the World and Made It a Better Place* (London: Routledge, 2013), 41; Sarracino and Scott, *Porning of America,* 117-24.
[128] Marina Wallace, "Exposures," in *Seduced: Art and Sex from Antiquity to Now*, eds. Marina Wallace, Martin Kemp, and Joanne Bernstein (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 2007), 88-9; Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (New York Routledge, 2002), 1-2.
[129] Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence (1980)." *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 3 (2003): 20; Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (New York: Cornell university Press, 1985) 199-200; Monique Wittig, "The Straight Mind," *Feminist Issues* 1, no. 1 (1980): 106.
[130] Christy Mag Uidhir, "Why Pornography Can't Be Art," *Philosophy and Literature* 33 no.1 (April 2009): 193.

category of representation which seemingly transgresses conventional boundaries.[131] Simon Fokt similarly states that even within the most frequently cited definitions used to separate art from pornography, the existence of "pornographic art" remains a legitimate category of visual representation.[132] If pornographic art is incongruous, Fokt argues, the current definitions of art are similarly delegitimised.[133] Luc Bovens instead argues that the distinction between art and pornography is the depiction of graphic detail, which restricts the phenomenal relationship between image and viewer.[134] Both Maes and Fokt maintain that these theories oversimplify the matter and do not account for subjective interpretation or changing cultural attitudes.[135] Mari Mikkola goes further by suggesting not only does pornographic art exist, but that the primary intention of pornography does not necessarily have to be inducing sexual arousal.[136] Audre Lorde further positioned pornography as separate to the erotic, stating that pornography and eroticism are "two diametrically opposed uses of the sexual."[137] Jerrold Levinson conversely argues that while there undeniably exists images that are both "artful" and pornographic, these are not necessarily art.[138]

The perceived separation between art and pornography, or pornography and the erotic, recalls Kenneth Clark's influential articulation of the difference between the naked and the nude, arguing that mastery over the depiction of the naked body enabled the subject to be viewed

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[131] Hans Maes, "Who Says Pornography Can't Be Art," in *Art and Pornography: Philosophical Essays*, eds. Hans Maes and Jarrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 40; Hans Maes, "Art or Porn: Clear Division or False Dilemma?" *Philosophy and Literature* 35, no. 1 (2011): 57-63.
[132] Simon Fokt, "Pornographic Art - a Case from Definitions," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 52, no. 3 (July 2012): 299-300.
[133] Fokt, "Pornographic Art - a Case from Definitions," 299.
[134] Luc Bovens, "Moral Luck, Photojournalism, and Pornography," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 32, no. 2 (June 1998): 214-5.
[135] Maes, "Drawing the Line: Art Versus Pornography," 391-95; Fokt, "Pornographic Art - a Case from Definitions," 299-300.
[136] Mari Mikkola, "Pornogrpahy, Art and Porno-Art," in *Pornographic Art and the Aesthetics of Pornography*, ed. Hans Maes (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 27-34.
[137] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Revised edition (Berkeley, Crossing Press, 2007) 55-56.
[138] Jerrold Levinson, "Erotic Art and Pornographic Pictures," *Philosophy and Literature* 29, no. 1 (2005): 236-37.

without the usual embarrassment; that this is the "body re-formed."[139] In contrast, David Freedberg suggested that it is a form of learned repression that prevents the viewer from reading artworks depicting the body as sexual, rather than a distinction between naked or nude representation.[140] John Berger claimed that nakedness was a more honest state than the representation of the nude body in art, while Elizabeth Cross affirms that the nude is fantasy, nakedness reality.[141] Lynda Nead similarly argues that the naked body cannot exist in representational form, that all depictions of the unclothed body belong to varying categories of nude representation.[142] The entanglement between the unclothed body and arousal is central to the representation of bodies.[143] The accessibility of internet pornography coupled with the contemporary trend towards visual ambiguity in body art, have also contributed to transgression of conventional "frames" regarding perceived distinctions between art, pornography, and advertising.[144]

Pornofied visual culture is also seen in the overt sexualisation of women's bodies on social media. The self-sexualisation often conforms to pornographic aesthetic conventions and has been argued as perpetuating the objectification of women.[145] The relationship between feminism and pornography is nuanced. While it can be argued that the material itself is ethically neutral, the industry exploits women and perpetuates dangerous ideas, therefore becoming damaging overall. I suggest there is nothing to prohibit someone being involved in

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[139] Clark, *The Nude*, 1.
[140] David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 17.
[141] Berger, *Ways of Seeing,* 54; Elizabeth Cross, *The Naked and the Nude,* (Ballarat: The Art Gallery of Ballarat, 2008),17.
[142] Nead, *The Female Nude,* 15.
[143] Sarah Toulalan and Kate Fisher, "Introduction," in *The Routledge History of Sex and the Body in the West: 1500 to the Present,* eds. Sarah Toulalan and Kate Fisher (London: Routledge, 2013), 11.
[144] Beth A. Eck, "Nudity and Framing: Classifying Art, Pornography, Information, and Ambiguity," *Sociological Forum* 16, no. 4, (December 2001): 609-10.
[145] Laura R. Ramsey and Amber L. Horan, "Picture This: Women's Self-Sexualization in Photos on Social Media," *Personality and Individual Differences* 133, (2018): 85.

pornography and identifying as feminist, however, as seen in the work of Leah Schrager. It is not the pornographic actors involved that are inherently anti-feminist, but rather the patriarchal system upon which the pornographic industry is built. The sexualisation of women's bodies as a method of empowerment is a particularly striking example of the difference between earlier and fourth wave feminism.[146] Conversely, it has also been argued that an anti-pornography clash between different interpretations of feminism is nothing new, extending back to the 1970s and continuing today.[147]

The self-sexualisation of some artists who identify as fourth wave feminists, including Schrager and Huxtable, also consciously engage with the male gaze. Laura Mulvey proposed that visual pleasure arises out of the tension between narcissism and eroticism, where the presumptive male viewer uses female representation as a reflection of his own attributes and identity, while simultaneously viewing her as an object of desire.[148] Drawing upon Freud's discussion of scopophilia and Lacan's theory of the ego, this theory – termed the "male gaze" – has subsequently become applied to all forms of visual art.[149] In traditional conventions of representation, tropes such as the reclining nude or idealised female figure are particularly subject to criticism of the passive, objectified female body at the mercy of the male gaze. The gaze is directly confronted by contemporary digital artists like Schrager, who positions her work as feminist and self-empowered, while consciously adhering to the male gaze.

Fourth wave feminism and social media have also influenced the way in which users' lives are presented online. The idea of a gendered performance or "mask" has been previously

[146] Rivers, *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave*, 24.
[147] Prudence Chamberlain, *The Feminist Fourth Wave: Affective Temporality*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 51.
[148] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (October 1975): 10-12.
[149] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 6-18.

theorised by Joan Riviere, in reference to the desire to disguise homosexuality, or in order to be considered equal to women's male counterparts.[150] This mask also informs Butler's conceptualisation of gender performativity.[151] The application of this concept to contemporary visual culture is highlighted by Amanda du Preez, through connecting Riviere's concept of feminine mask to the history of hysteria and, subsequently, "cyberfeminism."[152] du Preez extends this argument to claim that the politics of embodiment are an integral aspect of technological renderings of bodies.[153] As contemporary art becomes increasingly engaged with digital media through creation, dissemination, and reception, the theoretical underpinnings of gender identity, feminism and representation become increasingly entangled with this technology. It is not practical, however, to separate online identity entirely from offline, as each influences the other in an interdependent relationship.[154] The representational digital body can, therefore, be simultaneously a fantasy created by hyper-reality, virtual reality, artificial reality, and mixed reality as much as a reflection of reality.

Intersectional feminism, as defined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989, is also a central aspect of third and fourth wave feminism.[155] Intersectional feminism refers to the cumulative oppression faced by people of colour, and the intersection between multiple forms of marginalisation.[156] Audre Lorde explained this by identifying the way in which Black women

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[150] Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10, (1929): 303-306.
[151] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191-192.
[152] Amanda du Preez, "For Real: Hysteria, Transsexuality and Femininity-as-Masquerade," in *Taking a Hard Look: Gender and Visual Culture,* ed. Amanda du Preez (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 237-38; du Preez, *Gendered Bodies and New Technologies*, 73-85.
[153] du Preez, *Gendered Bodies and New Technologies*, xxi – xxiv, 74-7
[154] Eve Shapiro, *Gender Circuits: Bodies and Identities in a Technological Age* (New York: Routledge, 2010); 96.
[155] Jones, "Introduction," 8; Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics, *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 8, (1989): 139-167.
[156] Jones, "Introduction," 8; Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," 139-67.

face greater oppression than Black men due to the interaction of their race and gender, and as such are at an increased physical and mental risk, demonstrated through the example of forced birth.[157] Drawn from Black Feminism and Critical Race Theory, intersectionality seeks to redress the privileging of white feminism in both mainstream media and feminist theory.[158] bell hooks further identified that racism and sexism are fundamentally connected.[159] In confrontation to the systematic erasure of the experiences of people of colour, theorists and artists, including Juliana Huxtable, discussed in chapter six, have sought to reframe the focus of the conversation toward a more inclusive representation, specifically where artists and curators from traditionally marginalised groups represent their own experience. The widespread move towards diversity and inclusive representation is also seen in the #ownvoices hashtag trending, initially popularised regarding young adult fiction, before being used in reference to all forms of media.[160] Within Australian art communities, this move toward inclusive representation has also demonstrated the need to create space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and curators.[161] With interactive social media enabling online activism and feedback from those outside traditional positions of power, the digital age is also encouraging a more inclusive bodily representation.[162]

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[157] Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches,* 46-8.
[158] Devon W Carbado et al., "Intersectionality: Mapping the Movements of a Theory," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 10, no. 2 (2013): 303-304.
[159] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 53; bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto, 1982), 6.
[160] Leonie Rutherford, Katya Johanson, and Bronwyn Reddan, "Ownvoices, Disruptive Platforms, and Reader Reception in Young Adult Publishing," *Publishing Research Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (2022): 573-85.
[161] Brenda L. Croft, "Still in My Mind: Gurindji Location, Experience and Visuality," In *Feminist Perspectives on Art: Contemporary Outtakes,* eds. Jacqueline Millner and Moore Catriona. (New York: Routledge, 2018): 72; Hetti Perkins and Mami Kataoka, "Revelations and Revolutions," *Art Monthly Australasia*, no. 305 (2018): 31-35.
[162] Stacy J. Kosko et al., "Marginalised Youth Activism: Peer-Engaged Research and Epistemic Justice," *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 23, no. 1 (2022): 136-137; Rachel M. Schmitz, Jonathan S. Coley, Christine Thomas, and Anibal Ramirez, "The Cyber Power of Marginalized Identities: Intersectional Strategies of Online LGBTQ+ Latinx Activism," *Feminist Media Studies* 22, no. 2 (2020): 271-272, 283-6.

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the role of gender in the representation of the body has remained a central aspect of artistic interpretation and cultural contextualisation, reflecting broader societal changes that have encouraged wider discussion and debate. As Gill Perry has observed, gender is not just limited to representations of the body and can affect the "conception, production and interpretation" of works of art of any genre and subject.[163] However, as the body has historically been closely associated with gender, it has remained a focus throughout modern and contemporary art. The complex relationship between gender, feminist discourses, and digital technology, is one of the key factors that informs representations of the body in contemporary art.

LGBTQ representation and identity in digital culture

The contemporary artistic body has also been heavily informed by the cultural shift towards increased social awareness regarding LGBTQ identities, and the dissolution of previously upheld restrictions. Social restrictions extend to sexual identity conception, where the attitudes and expectations of the society create an environment of what Rich describes as "compulsory heterosexuality," which can limit fundamental identity exploration, and the perception of normality.[164] Also identified as the "heterosexual contract" these attitudes inform social acceptability and constrain what people even conceive as possible.[165] Historically, LGBTQ communities have been further marginalised by mainstream media and news outlets, with both reportage and fictional representations focussing on LGBTQ stories primarily through crime or health issues.[166] Emerging out of a time of increased internet

[163] Gillian Perry, "Introduction: Gender and Art History," in *Gender and Art,* ed. Gill Perry (New Haven: Yale University Press in Association with the Open University, 1999), 8.
[164] Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence (1980)," *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 3 (2003): 11-48.
[165] Wittig, "The Straight Mind," 105-110.
[166] Phillip M. Ayoub, and Jeremiah Garretson, "Getting the Message Out: Media Context and Global Changes in Attitudes toward Homosexuality," *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no. 8 (2017): 1064-5.

accessibility and the ability to immediately share opinions to a broad audience on social networking platforms, mainstream media have been forced to make greater efforts towards social inclusivity.[167]

One of the notable representations of homosexuality prior to widespread LGBTQ activism was in the art of Francis Bacon, who repeatedly painted male nudes, including works which suggest homosexual acts, throughout his career. Works such as *Two Figures* (figure 4), were unique for the period, as many of Bacon's peers were representing homosexuality in more ambiguous visual forms.[168] The influence of Bacon's strange body representations are seen on artists like Carlsen, chapter three.[169] Steven Dubin positions the Stonewall Riots in 1969 as a key event in queer artistic representation, with the artwork prior to this period being typically more "muted" than that which came after.[170] Amongst the most prominent artists of the time was Robert Mapplethorpe, whose representation of sexuality within the photographic body has become one of the most infamous. Mapplethorpe produced an extensive body of work comprising primarily of photographs of sadomasochistic sexual acts, still lifes, portraits and self-portraits, and male and female nudes. Conservative values were increasingly present in the culture and politics of this period, ensuring the work was received with less nuanced interpretation than contemporary counterparts, such as the American photographer Paul Mpagi Sepuya (born 1982), discussed in chapter six.[171]

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[167] Erin B. Waggoner, "Bury Your Gays and Social Media Fan Response: Television, LGBTQ Representation, and Communitarian Ethics," *Journal of Homosexuality* 65, no. 13 (October-November 2017): 1877-1890.
[168] Rina Arya, "Constructions of Homosexuality in the Art of Francis Bacon," *Journal for Cultural Research* 16, no. 1 (January 2012): 43-5.
[169] Milene Larsson, "An Interview with Asger Carlsen," Vice, accessed September 15, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/ex5484/an-interview-with-asger-carlsen.
[170] Dubin, *Arresting Images,* 161.
[171] Steven C. Dubin, "The Trials of Robert Mapplethorpe," in *Suspended License: Censorship and the Visual Arts,* ed. Elizabeth C. Childs (Seattle: University of Washington Press: 1997): 380-403.

With the advent of social media, users can voice their disapproval of mainstream media and consumer brands attitudes towards LGBTQ issues as an effective way to create change.[172] In recent years, LGBTQ stigmatisation has decreased, with evidence that young generations brought up in this time of LGBTQ representation are less prejudiced than ever before.[173] A move towards a more inclusive society has also contributed to a more nuanced representation of bodies. Contemporary activists have made progress towards dismantling conventional gender and sexual binaries, with greater awareness of multifaceted bodily experience being demonstrated throughout contemporary western culture. For example, many government forms now include more than two genders, and increasing numbers of institutions have gender neutral bathrooms. The body as a site of complexity is by no means a new idea. However, the contemporary emergence of greater LGBTQ understanding has shed new light on the idea of embodied identity which challenges heteronormative binaries.

Amelia Jones and Erin Silver have proposed the use of a queer theory drawn from the contemporary move towards inclusivity, which prioritises intersectionality while rejecting the separatist issues within earlier feminist theory.[174] In their collection *Otherwise*, Jones and Silver collated a variety of chapters which provide an range of points of view and proposed methods of an inclusive, contemporary "queer feminist practice."[175] Jones has argued that there has been a contemporary move towards queer feminism in other humanities disciplines, yet a "visible and influential queer feminist art history remains elusive."[176] One proposed reason for this could be that the emergence of a feminist art history that has become prevalent

[172] Amy B. Becker, and Lauren Copeland, "Networked Publics: How Connective Social Media Use Facilitates Political Consumerism among LGBT Americans," *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 13, no. 1 (2016): 22-3, 33-4.
[173] Alison Keleher and Eric Ran Smith, "Growing Support for Gay and Lesbian Equality Since 1990," *Journal of Homosexuality,* 59, no. 9 (October 2012), 1307-26.
[174] Amelia Jones and Erin Silver, "Queer Feminist Art History: an imperfect genealogy," in *Otherwise,* eds. Amelia Jones and Erin Silver (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 33.
[175] Jones, "Introduction," 2.
[176] Jones, "Introduction," 2-3.

across academia and art theory has been primarily "articulated… largely from a middle-class, urban, white, and heteronormative point of view."[177] Jones and Silver claim there is a mutually beneficial relationship to the incorporation of both feminist and queer theory into one practice.[178] The merging of related but distinct theories of reading images of the body is particularly visible in the work of Juliana Huxtable, chapter six, whose unconventional representations of embodiment simultaneously explore identity and transgress boundaries between race, gender, and sexuality. The increase of LGBTQ representation and the influence of social media in facilitating this change is an important aspect of the representation of the body in the digital age. As the body remains a central subject within politics, ideologies, and identity, the changing social attitudes towards the body, including LGBTQ identity, remain significant. The following research examines the ways in which the digital age has transformed contemporary representations of the body. The four key artists featured demonstrate the influence of this range of theoretical perspectives, including generational exposure to digital and social media, and the history of corporeal representation

[177] Jones, "Introduction," 3.
[178] Jones, "Introduction," 2-12; Jones and Silver, "Queer Feminist Art History: an imperfect genealogy," 40-41.

Chapter Three

Grotesque Bodies and Digital Embodiment: Asger Carlsen

A defining feature of the body in contemporary art is the depiction of ambiguous forms which utilise digital technology to create highly manipulated bodies that challenge perceptions of reality. Danish contemporary artist, Asger Carlsen (born 1973) frequently explores this through his representations of fragmented and dysmorphic bodies, using digital photography to create sculptural human-monstrous forms. Having previously worked as a photojournalist and crime photographer, Carlsen's subsequent artistic practice typically combines numerous photographs, primarily of the female body, into one surreal figure.[1] The images, shot on digital cameras and compiled later in Photoshop, often appear more sculptural than photographic.[2] Emerging through experimentation with Adobe Photoshop and elements like the Clone Tool, which copies chosen pixels from the image and duplicates them in the designated target area, Carlsen creates images that explore the uncomfortable aspects of embodied life.[3] Influenced by his early career experience in crime photography, Carlsen draws on his background stylistically and repeatedly throughout his oeuvre in an exploration of the contemporary uncanny and grotesque. Carlsen's constructed bodies, which appear visually realistic but are heavily edited in post-processing, challenge conventional understandings of truth in digital body cultures. Carlsen's creative practice is further positioned as the logical conclusion to the often violent or objectifying depiction of bodies in

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[1] Milene Larsson, "Asger Carlsen's New Book is a Girl," accessed May 3, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/8gv385/asger-carlsen-hester; Bogomir Doringer, "Archiving Faceless," in *Faceless: Re-Inventing Privacy Through Subversive Media Strategies,* eds. Bogomir Doringer, and Brigitte Felderer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 64.
[2] Digital America, "Asger Carlsen Q+A, Digital America," accessed February 7, 2022, https://www.digitalamerica.org/asger-carlsen-qa/; Alexxa Gotthardt, "Asger Carlsen's Photographs Tap into Our Fascination with Physical Manipulation," accessed February 7, 2022, https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-asger-carlsen-s-photographs-tap-into-our-fascination; Ruby Hutson-Gray, "Asger Carlsen," Dazed, accessed February 7, 2022, https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/15159/1/asger-carlsen.
[3] Digital America, "Asger Carlsen."

the contemporary digital age, examined through his bodily creations which are at once disturbing and alluring.

Visual ambiguities of digital bodies

In Carlsen's 2012 series, *Hester*, twenty-one headless bodies are depicted in digitally manipulated photographs that meld realism with visual distortion. Multiple body photographs are combined in Photoshop to create ambiguously human sculptural forms. The bodies are composed of photographs of female models, sometimes with the inclusion of the artist himself. [4] The resulting images challenge conventional notions of human identity and embodiment. While *Hester 08* (figure 5) is identifiable as human via the barely visible vulva and single leg, from the waist up the chest morphs into an organic form of deep rolls of skin that is at once familiar and monstrous. Carlsen subverts the viewer's understanding of the human body, joining limbs and removing any visible head to create an image that is visually confusing and psychologically disturbing. *Hester (08)* exemplifies visually realistic impossible bodies that conjure the black and white aesthetic of the images invoked in the genres of film noir, horror, and science fiction, as well as the detached objectivity of documentary reportage. Contemporary cultures of crime and violence mediated through digital media, specifically graphic sexual acts depicted in pornography and increasingly accessible, uncensored depictions of bodily violence, situate Carlsen's work in the tradition of the grotesque. Contrasting the bodily representations of Julie Rrap, Leah Schrager, and Juliana Huxtable, Carlen's bodies are treated as shape-shifting forms of alterity or 'otherness' as opposed to explorations of identity construction or gendered performance. They not only

[4] Milene Larsson, "An Interview with Asger Carlsen," Vice, accessed September 15, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/ex5484/an-interview-with-asger-carlsen.

defy nature but also play with the viewer's assumption of truth and accuracy in photographic imagery.

The disturbing forms and their incongruity as human bodies in *Hester* are amplified by the generic, rundown workspace backgrounds. Carlsen has combined the austerity of black and white photography with full flash, further editing the flesh forms within Photoshop to replicate their appearance as analogue photographs.[5] This effect enhances the reference to crime or documentary style photographs. As demonstrated in *Hester 08*, Carlsen utilises this constructed documentary style in the lighting and perspective, where the subject is captured slightly off centre, giving the impression of impulsivity, while the horizon line of the ground meeting the wall remains perfectly aligned. The location of the shoot further implies candidness, as the floor is left bare and paint-marked, with contrasting grey scrape marks extending across the top right of the wall. The staging also creates a sense that more is happening behind the scenes than what is captured on film. In composing the image to appear spontaneous, Carlsen heightens the illusion of impossible bodily form as a real, living entity that he has merely stumbled upon. This illusion serves to enhance the realism of the work, as Carlsen challenges the viewer's perception of both embodiment and reality. Carlsen also challenges binary notions of gender and identity in combining multiple bodies, including his own, in a reinterpretation of the traditional artistic nude.[6] Gender ambiguity is also reflected visually, through a combination of identifiably female features in the depiction of the hairless vulva, and purposeful ambiguity in the torso.

[5] Larsson, "Asger Carlsen's New Book is a Girl."
[6] Larsson, "An Interview with Asger Carlsen."

In his 2010 photograph, *Untitled* (figure 6), Carlsen creates an even more ambiguous and imposing bodily form. Despite the evocation of limbs, the body has been transformed into a massive, unidentified object that seems out of place in what appears to be a wide, suburban driveway or street, complete with parked cars and gawking onlookers. The dark sky and monumental aspect of the strange object creates a feeling of unease, akin to a still image from an old black and white science fiction film, which is amplified by the ambiguity of the subject and mysterious narrative. With its rough texture and asymmetrical shape, the form is not only framed by movies centred on alien objects, such as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *The Arrival* (2016) but is suspended between an implied ancient past and futuristic vision. In contrast to the majority of Carlsen's work, *Untitled* (figure 6) is not identifiably human. It not only demonstrates the wider possibilities of the digital editing process when taken further than the figures in *Hester* but also the power of the body to conjure notions of otherness, foreignness, and invasion.

The image also demonstrates the influence of Carlsen's background as a crime photographer, which he repeatedly draws upon throughout his work.[7] The implied spontaneity of Carlsen's mysterious *Untitled* (figure 6) is enhanced by the figures' casual appearance, leaning on the car, and lying on the ground, while staring at the bizarre form in the centre of the scene. As with many of Carlsen's works, the image is psychologically unnerving. The use of black and white colouring and harsh flash are also references to film photography, reinforcing the sense of realism, despite the strange forms.[8] Analogue photography is often more readily associated with accuracy due to the historical perception that it was not edited.[9] This is a false

[7] Public Delivery, "Asger Carlsen's photos – Fascinating & disturbing", Public Delivery, accessed November 12, 2021, https://publicdelivery.org/asger-carlsen/.
[8] Beth A. Eck, "Nudity and Framing: Classifying Art, Pornography, and Ambiguity," *Sociological Forum* 16, no. 4 (December 2001): 616-17.
[9] Walden, "Objectivity in Photography," 262; Paul Levinson, *The Soft Edge: A Natural History and Future of the Information Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1997), 41, 43-44.

assumption, however, as photographic artists, including Henry Peach Robinson (1830-1901) and Man Ray (1890-1976), often manipulated analogue photographs using multiple exposures, solarisation, and airbrushing. Regardless, photography has historically been positioned as more objective than other two-dimensional mediums, with André Bazin identifying subjective perspective as the "sin of western painting," which analogue photography and moving image countered.[10]

The contemporary impact of constructed imagery which appears realistic on representations of bodies is also seen on social media. The act of editing self-portraits has existed throughout history. However, with the accessibility of advanced digital technology, average users today can edit their images to realistic, often hyper-realistic, standards, concealing both subtle and excessive manipulation.[11] This digital facility impacts how users view themselves and is prevalent across advertising and entertainment media.[12] Due to the way in which people process and perceive images, when manipulating photographs, the creators often exploit the weaknesses in viewers visual processing.[13] As a result of visual ambiguity, Carlsen, and artists like Lucas Samaras before him, exploit the viewers' belief in the perceived realism of photographs by depicting subjects that intentionally transgress the boundaries of physical possibility. In their depiction of subjects, often monstrous or surreal in their creation, they explore the limits of the notion that seeing is believing.[14] The potential for seamless and realistic digital manipulation has increased as technology has evolved. Unlike the obvious manipulation in Samaras's polaroid image *Photo-Transformation 9/15/73* (figure 2), Carlsen

[10] Andre Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," *Film Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1960): 7.
[11] Ohad Fried et al., "Editing Self-Image," *The ACM* 63, no. 3 (March 2020): 70-71.
[12] Fried et al., "Editing Self-Image," 73; Allison J. Lazard, Mary A. Bock, and Michael S. Mackert, "Impact of photo manipulation and visual literacy on consumers' responses to persuasive communication," *Journal of Visual Literacy* 39, no. 2 (March 2020): 104.
[13] James O'Brien, and Hany Farid, "Exposing Photo Manipulation with Inconsistent Reflections," *ACM Transactions on Graphics* 31, no. 1 (2012): 1.
[14] Gelderloos, "Simply Reproducing Reality," 561-564.

creates images that are aesthetically reminiscent of unedited analogue photographs. Images which appear visually realistic despite evident manipulation demonstrate one of the fundamental changes to the artistic representation of the body in the digital age. This style of representation has emerged in response to both the technological advancements that enable sophisticated editing, and in response to the dominant visual culture purporting the attainability of unrealistically ideal bodies.

Carlsen's work is also situated amongst a history of bodily manipulation exploring abjection and cultural pressures. The perceived importance of boundaries in the categorisation of the representational body extends to the physical body itself. Kristeva suggests that abjection, an area of body representation as well as a psychological state, arises out of the breakdown of distinct borders.[15] It is, then, the breaching of boundaries, both physical and psychological, that causes repulsion and abjection, with the most important border being between internal and external, or subject and object.[16] The growth of the diet industry since the 1990s has further informed exploration of the abject and grotesque in body representation, particularly in reference to the role of gender within embodied experience.[17] Jenny Saville famously explored gendered limitations in a visual challenge to conventional notions of bodily beauty, especially contemporary conventions of corporeal femininity, by depicting its opposing extreme.[18] Artists, particularly those aligned with third wave feminism, have continuously returned to the concept of body modification, from weight loss to tattoos, in response to idealised and objectified representations of bodies displayed in mainstream media.[19] The

[15] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.
[16] Nead, *The Female Nude,* 32.
[17] Michelle Meagher, "Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust," *Hypatia* 18, no. 4 (November 2003): 36-37; Linda Nochlin, "Floating in Gender Nirvana," *Art in America* 88, no. 3 (March 2000): 234.
[18] Meagher, "Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust," 23-41.
[19] Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 165-84.

focus on bodily manipulation and abjection can also be seen as a response to the real body's "disappearance" in the digital age, through the increase of virtual spaces and highly edited bodily imagery.[20] As seen in *Hester (08)*, *Hester (04)* (figure 7), and *Hester (05)* (figure 8), Carlsen creates forms that are both human and monstrous, alive and dead, reinforcing the transitional state as the most psychologically threatening.[21] Carlsen depicts this transition through bodies merging into each other, and the ever-present threat of movement or collapse implied within his imagery. The abject body is not an object or subject, but instead exists in between these two states.[22] Liminal space is again referenced in Carlsen's work, where bodies are simultaneously undeniably edited yet visually conform to documentary-style analogue photography, further implying objectivity. Basia Sliwinska compares this abject body to the figure of Medusa, as "distorted, fragmented, wrong and lacking."[23]

Bodily decay and death are additional aspects of abjection.[24] Carlsen also incorporates these ideas through references to death and the disfigurement of bodies. *Untitled* (figure 9) 2012, demonstrates the presence of death and disfigurement in the fallen pose, collapsed on the ground. More so than many of Carlsen's works, this image is immediately identifiable as human, and only upon closer inspection reveals that the figure is distorted in some way. While Carlsen's work is not traditionally abject, in that it does not use abject materials such as hair and blood, his highly manipulated imagery contains ideas of abjection and disgust in his complex reimagining of the grotesque body. The reinterpretation of the abject and

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[20] Christine Ross, "Redefinitions of Abjection in Contemporary Performances of the Female Body," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 31, (Spring 1997): 149.
[21] Nead, *The Female Nude,* 31; Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), 97.
[22] Rina Arya, *Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 4.
[23] Basia Sliwinska, *The Female Body in the Looking-Glass: Contemporary Art, Aesthetics and Genderland*, (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2016), 83.
[24] Jenny Keane, "Fragmented Fetishes: Monstrosity and Desire in Women's Contemporary Time-Based Art" in The *Monster Imagined: Humanity's Re-Creation of Monsters and Monstrosity*, ed. Laura K. Davis, and Cristina Santos (Oxford: Oxford Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2010), 125-6.

grotesque is, I suggest, a response to the violent and dehumanising visual culture of the twenty-first century, in which graphic and objectifying imagery is widely accessible online.

Similarly, Carlsen's deformed, artificially realistic bodily forms respond to the tradition of uncanny representation, first theorised by Ernst Jentsch in 1906, with its sensory connotations of fear and uncertainty.[25] The uncanny is particularly seen in the space of ambiguity around whether or not a subject is alive, as seen in the common childhood perception of dolls coming to life.[26] The uncanny is often also produced in response to missing facial features or limbs, as also pictured throughout Carlsen's *Hester* series.[27] In the contemporary digital landscape, the uncanny is also seen in digital renderings of artificial bodies in video games and films.[28] Photography is particularly linked to the uncanny due to its relationship to indexicality.[29] Distorted facial movement likewise add to this perception of advanced digitally created forms being perceived as uncanny.[30] These artificial humans also result in what is known as the uncanny valley, where digital creations in robotics or digital media reproduce human representation with enough accuracy as to create a repulsion or fear within the viewer.[31] In an era of advanced digital technology, it has been suggested that technology now holds the potential to instead bypass this uncanny valley.[32] For Carlsen, the uncanny remains present throughout the perceived realism of the bodily forms and their positioning as both human and

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[25] Ernst Jentsch, "On the Psychology of the Uncanny," *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 2, no.1 (1997): 7-16.
[26] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 78; Jentsch, "On the Psychology of the Uncanny," 12
[27] Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 1-2; Freud, "The Uncanny," 67, 76-77.
[28] Angela Tinwell, *The Uncanny Valley in Games and Animation* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2015), xiii- xxii, 1-6
[29] Britt Salvesen, "Confirm You Are a Human: Perspectives on the Uncanny Valley," *International Journal for Digital Art History*, no. 6 (2021): 10.
[30]Angela Tinwell, et al., "Facial Expression of Emotion and Perception of the Uncanny Valley in Virtual Characters." *Computers in Human Behavior* 27, no. 2 (2011): 741- 748
[31] Masahiro Mori, trans. Karl F. MacDorman and Norri Kageki, "The Uncanny Valley [from the Field]." *IEEE Robotics & Automation Magazine* 19, no. 2 (2012): 98-100.
[32] Darragh Higgins, et al., "Ascending from the valley: Can state-of-the-art photoreal- ism avoid the uncanny?" (Paper presented at ACM Symposium on Applied Perception, SAP '21, Association for Computing Machinery, New York, September 16-17, 2021), 1-5. https://doi.org/10.1145/3474451.3476242

other, real and artificial. These dualities further identify the forms as psychologically powerful, drawing from the uncanny, grotesque, and abject. Carlsen's advanced digital editing only heightens the grotesque and uncanny associations, as the forms reveal no visual indication of technological intervention, confronting the viewer with the potential for these impossible bodily forms to exist within reality. Steve Dixon has called the depiction of the uncanny created through and responding to digital technology "cybernetic-existentialism."[33] For Carlsen, associations with the uncanny strengthen the power of the bodies to confront viewers' anxieties and unease, enabling a more psychologically and technologically advanced representation of disturbing bodily forms.

Crime photography and digital violence

The almost forensic focus on bodily fragmentation and documentary visual style of Carlsen's art not only reflects the influence of his experience as a crime photographer but also pays homage to artists like Arthur (Usher) Fellig (1899-1968), known as Weegee.[34] These influences are visible in Carlsen's *Untitled* 2010, (figure 6) and *Untitled* 2012, (figure 9). In the former image, the outdoor residential setting and inclusion of shocked onlookers invites direct comparison to the style of crime photography in which the photographer captures the entirety of the scene from the periphery. Conversely, the latter image is more indicative of the physical consequence of crimes, as the body is depicted fallen and abandoned, as if in the aftermath of violence. Both images recall aspects of the bodies and environment depicted in Weegee's photographs (figure 10) and (figure 11), positioning Carlsen's work amongst a history of disturbing body photography.

[33] Steve Dixon, "Uncanny Arts and the Aesthetics of Cybernetic-existentialism," *Technoetic arts: a journal of speculative research* 16, no. 2 (2018): 197-99.
[34] See Anthony W. Lee, and Richard Meyer, *Weegee and Naked City* (Los Angeles: Getty Foundation, 2008); Kerry William Purcell, *Weegee* (London: Phaidon, 2004); Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Public Delivery, "Asger Carlsen's photos."

Digital technology has also increased access to violent sexual imagery online, with the additional pervasiveness of mainstream media often glamorising the violence.[35] Representations of bodily violence have not only increased in volume, but also become more "graphic, sexual, and sadistic."[36] While Carlsen's photographs do not directly depict violent actions, the twisted limbs, bruised or puckered skin, and headless forms conjure the aftermath of brutal encounters. As seen in *Hester (08)* (figure 5) and *Untitled* (figure 9), Carlsen draws upon the contemporary media landscape of vivid violent and violated bodies with both visual and psychological subtlety. The invisible narrative is instead created using stark lighting and dirty, impersonal backgrounds to frame his monstrous bodies. Psychological turmoil is similarly suggested through the disfigurement of the body and its lonely existence as the sole figure in the frame.

Studies suggest that people now spend more time consuming digital media than sleeping, with online pornography being one of the most viewed forms of digital media.[37] By the early 2000s sixty per cent of television programs contained violence, and seventy per cent of top grossing films contained firearms, suggesting that violent content is an everyday part of many people's media consumption.[38] However, perceptions regarding violence are also subjective.[39] More perceptually graphic imagery containing close-ups and gore, for instance, is perceived as more violent regardless of context, even when an identical violent act is

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[35] Craig A. Anderson et al., "The Influence of Media Violence on Youth," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 4, no. 3 (2003): 101.
[36] Monisha C. Nayar-Akhtar, "Do We Glorify Violence in Our Culture? Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Media and Violence," *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 36, no. 6 (2016): 510.
[37] Dr Jessica Taylor, *Sexual violence in the media: Portrayals and prevention* (UK: VictimFocus Publications, 2020), 4, 9.
[35] Victor Strasburger, and Barbara Wilson, "Television violence: 60 years of research," in *Media violence and children: A complete guide for parents and professionals,* ed. Douglas A. Gentile (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers/Greenwood Publishing Group, 2014), 167; C. A. Anderson, and B. J. Bushman, "Psychology. The Effects of Media Violence on Society," *Science* 295, no. 5564 (2002): 2377-9.
[39] James W. Potter et al., "Perceptions of Television: A Schema," *Media Psychology* 4, no. 1 (2002): 27-29.

depicted from further away or without graphic depiction.[40] Carlsen's work highlights the complexity of representational violence as he uses fusion and fragmentation to indirectly echo contemporary cultures of violence and objectification, yet the absence of graphic imagery prevents them from being viewed as violent in and of themselves. Throughout his *Hester* series, the bodies are depicted as awkward and deformed, yet are never shown as injured or bloodied. Rather than portray overt violence, Carlsen instead examines psychological violence and discomfort. His works are thus suggestive of the impact of a culture of media violence, rather than explicit visualisation of specific violent acts.

Overtly abusive and violent pornography is readily available in digital media, and often depicts violence against women, as also demonstrated in the rise of "revenge porn."[41] Alexa Dodge goes so far as to contextualise revenge porn cases with Judith Butler's theory of the "digitization of evil."[42] Violent acts are also more easily captured and shared with the increased availability of smart phones with cameras.[43] Digitised representations of gendered sexual violence have been shown to have damaging consequences not only for those depicted, but also for viewers.[44] Furthermore, news reports are often biased and contain myths regarding sexual violence, including suspicion of victim statements and perpetuation of misogynistic attitudes concerning inducement of violence by bodily display and choice of clothing.[45] Media depictions of sexual violence have also been linked to increased negative

[40] James W. Potter, and Stacy Smith, "The Context of Graphic Portrayals of Television Violence," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 44, no. 2 (2000): 302.
[41] Anastasia Powell, and Nicola Henry, *Sexual Violence in a Digital Age* (Melbourne: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 119; Saracino, and Scott, *Porning of America,* 159.
[42] Alexa Dodge, "Digitizing Rape Culture: Online Sexual Violence and the Power of the Digital Photograph," *Crime, Media, Culture* 12, no. 1 (2016): 65
[43] Powell and Henry, *Sexual Violence*, 2.
[44] Dodge, "Digitizing Rape," 65-6.
[45] Cynthia Carter, and C. Kay Weaver, *Violence and the Media* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2003), 37-38; Jenny Kitzinger, "Media Coverage of Sexual Violence Against Women and Children," in *Women and Media*, eds. Karen Ross, and Carolyn M. Byerly (Malden, Blackwell Publishing, 2004): 29-30.

perceptions of victims by 'othering' them.[46] Digital media violence is not limited to images depicting violent acts, however, and can include the objectification of women in mainstream media, which in turn normalises violent and discriminatory attitudes, as seen in the objectifying comments of US president Donald Trump, for example.[47] The normalisation of the sexualisation and objectification of women is further expressed in "lad culture" and casual sexism.[48] These damaging attitudes towards bodies are made implicit throughout Carlsen's work. In *Hester (03)* (figure 12), the figure is literally objectified, rendered as an abstract sculpture on a shelf, without identity or autonomy. The figure retains just enough physical details to identify its origin, as seen through the hint of spine, puckered, and stretched skin, and suggestion of joints in the curved edges. Despite being comprised of photographs of human bodies, the figure is barely identifiable as human, and is othered as both a beautiful object and a grotesque body. Referring to his *Hester* series, Carlsen went so far as to state he sees the series as "purely as a sculptural project and a complete departure from my effort to make good photographs."[49] Carlsen's figures, that are both subject and object simultaneously, reference the culture of media violence, attitudes toward bodies, and artistic abjection.

Contemporary media violence is also explored online through activist response, as seen in movements such as Black Lives Matter and Me Too. Black Lives Matter, for instance, emerged as a powerful collective response to disproportionate levels of violence perpetrated

[46] Sarah J. Gervais, and Sarah Eagan, "Sexual Objectification: The Common Thread Connecting Myriad Forms of Sexual Violence against Women," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 87, no. 3 (2017): 232.
[47] Gervais and Eagan, "Sexual Objectification," 232.
[48] Alison Phipps, Jessica Ringrose, Emma Renold, and Carolyn Jackson, "Rape Culture, Lad Culture and Everyday Sexism: Researching, Conceptualizing and Politicizing New Mediations of Gender and Sexual Violence," *Journal of Gender Studies* 27, no. 1 (2018): 6.
[49] "Assembling realities: interview with Danish artist Asger Carlsen," Where's Art, accessed November 15, 2021, http://www.wheresart.eu/assembling-realities-interview-with-danish-artist-asger-carlsen/.

against African Americans, often by police.[50] Battaglia, Edley, and Newsom have written a call for action in inclusivity and awareness of intersectionality in both the media portrayal of violence and the academic response.[51] Tarana Burke has also referenced this lack of intersectionality and representation.[52] In entertainment media, violence against bodies is also prevalent. Television shows like *Game of Thrones* have been cited as examples of media portraying sexual assault gratuitously, in a way that may desensitise the viewer.[53] Graphic violence has also been widely viewed through news stories like Abu Ghraib.[54] These images have been referred to as pornographic, or torture porn, heightening the association between bodily violence and digital pornography.[55]

As a result of a violent visual landscape, attitudes towards bodies have been impacted.[56] For children consuming violent media, for example, studies have demonstrated a connection to increased violent behaviour.[57] Viewing representations of violence have been correlated with antisocial behaviour and desensitisation.[58] It can also lead to more disinhibition and increased fear.[59] Desensitisation accustoms the viewer to violence, so they are more tolerant of violence and see fewer acts as being violent, while cultivation theory argues that the more an

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[50] Cedric D. Hackett, "For the world to see: Bestiality Against Black Bodies and the Deleterious Effects of Predisposed Media Disclosure," in *Violence Against Black Bodies: An Intersectional Analysis of How Black Lives Continue to Matter*, ed. Sandra E. Weissinger, Dwayne A. Mack (New York: Routledge, 2017), 168-174; Elwood Watson, "The fires of racial discontent are still burning! Intensely!" in *Violence Against Black Bodies: An Intersectional Analysis of How Black Lives Continue to Matter*, ed. Sandra E. Weissinger, Dwayne A. Mack (New York: Routledge, 2017), 29-34.
[51] Judy E. Battaglia, Paige P. Edley, and Victoria Ann Newsom, "Intersectional Feminisms and Sexual Violence in the Era of Me Too, Trump, and Kavanaugh," *Women and Language, Academia* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 165.
[52] Tarana Burke, "MeToo is a movement, not a moment," TED: Ideas worth spreading, accessed November 8, 2021, https://www.ted. com/talks/tarana_burke_me_too_is_a_movement_not_a_ moment.
[53] Taylor, *Portrayals and Prevention*, 6, 11.
[54] Sarracino and Scott. *Porning of America,* 137.
[55] Irene Peano, Eirini Avramopoulou, *Porno-Graphics and Porno-Tactics: Desire, Affect, and Representation in Pornography* (Baltimore: Project Muse, 2020), 88.
[56] Craig Anderson et al., "The Influence of Media Violence on Youth," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 4, no. 3 (2003): 103-4.
[57] Nayar-Akhtar, "Do We Glorify Violence in Our Culture?" 510.
[58] Joanne Cantor, "Media Violence," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 27, no. 2 (2000): 30.
[59] James W Potter, *On Media Violence* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 1999), 1.

individual consumes violent media, the more they expect violence in their lives.[60] Karyn Riddle argues that a theory of "vivid media violence" accounts for this relationship between digitally depicted violence in the media and the effects on watchers.[61] The impact of viewing violence is confirmed via longitudinal studies.[62] However, the impact may not be entirely negative, with some studies citing the potential for violent representation to encourage empathy and self-reflection.[63]

Carlsen's work reflects the complicated relationship between empathy, desensitisation, and objectification. For Carlsen, his *Hester* works are sculptural forms, created from the raw material of bodily photographs, without the intention of objectification.[64] However, objectification is undoubtably present in the imagery, although to different extents based on viewers' perception. Works like *Hester (03)* (figure 12) particularly position the body as literal object, devoid of identifiable humanity. Yet the image can also be seen as aesthetically beautiful, elevating the body to the status of sculpture. Additionally, the stretched skin and implication of movement reference the visual language of aliens or parasites invading human bodies in science fiction horror movies, yet conversely also suggest the possibility of birth and transformation. Similarly, works like *Hester (04)*, (figure 7) can be read as both a disfigured, objectified body, and humorous alien figure caught mid-dance. The subjectivity of perception also reflects this possibility of humour in many of the images. Throughout Carlsen's work, humour is juxtaposed with grotesque physicality, inviting a reading of the images as both darkly comedic and tragic, reflecting the broad and complex range of human emotions and experiences. In Carlsen's representation of perceptually realistic, contemporary

[60] Carter and Weaver, *Violence and the Media,* 10-11.
[61] Karyn Riddle, "A Theory of Vivid Media Violence," *Communication Theory* 24, no. 3 (2014): 304-305.
[62] Anderson, and Bushman, "Psychology," 2377.
[63] Anne Bartsch et al., "More Than Shoot-Em-Up and Torture Porn: Reflective Appropriation and Meaning-Making of Violent Media Content," *Journal of Communication* 66, no. 5 (2016): 761.
[64] Larsson, "An Interview with Asger Carlsen."

grotesque bodily forms, the culture of physical violence, objectification, and the continual idealisation of the human body is combined.

Debates concerning the impact of media violence are similarly applied to pornography and its increased pervasiveness online. The increase of amateur pornography with the advent of digital technology has been particularly significant in the last several decades.[65] While some point to this pornofied visual landscape as being detrimental, possibly even dangerous, others suggest that the causal relationship between misogyny and pornography has been overstated.[66] Regardless of the behavioural outcomes, it is evident that the contemporary visual landscape of violent and graphic imagery has an impact on the perception of bodies, reflected in Carlsen's strange bodily forms. Carlsen's experience as a crime scene photographer is also indicative of the impact of violence on representations of the body. While Carlsen worked primarily for newspapers to document crimes as a photojournalist, the specificity of style in capturing crime scenes is heavily influenced by legal crime scene photography. Crime scene photography seeks to capture the incident for legal purposes, and therefore prioritises accuracy, detail, and objectivity. For legal photographs, for instance, photographs must be a "fair and reasonably accurate representation."[67] Additionally, the association between photojournalism and objectivity is fundamental to the medium, to the extent that "'visual truth' is central to the content and purpose of photojournalism."[68] Through ensuring that his artistic work remains visually reminiscent of crime photography, Carlsen draws into question the idea of visual truth and objectivity.

[65] Sarracino, and Scott, *Porning of America,* 46.
[66] Brian McNair, "Rethinking the Effects Paradigm in Porn Studies," *Porn studies* 1, no. 1-2 (2014): 163.
[67] Stan Sholik, *Legal Photography: A Complete Reference for Documenting Scenes, Situations, and Evidence for Civil Cases*, (Buffalo: Amherst Media Inc., 2015), 9.
[68] David Finkelstein, "Photojournalism: Arthur Fellig (Weegee) and Homai Vyarawalla," *Journalism Practice* 3, no. 1 (2009): 108.

The three "cardinal rules" of crime photography have been stated as "1. Fill the frame; 2. Maximise depth of field; 3. Keep the film plane parallel."[69] These techniques are all visible in Carlsen's *Hester* series. Throughout the series, Carlsen fills the frame with the body forms by maintaining a close perspective to them, eliminating all unnecessary information, while still capturing any background detail important to locate the subject within the space.[70] In *Hester (08)*, for example, the focus is undoubtably the ambiguous human form centred in the composition, yet located and framed by the space in which it resides. Carlsen's choice of environment, a generic backdrop that could as easily be an abandoned warehouse as an artist studio, is crucial in locating the forms within a space of the unknown. It remains unclear what the forms are, or where they reside, and this is central to the psychological power of the images. The depth of field is also often relatively deep in his work, as seen in *Hester (04)* (figure 7), resulting in all elements of the photograph remaining in relative focus. This is partially responsible for the distanced, objective perspective of the images, situating them as notable curiosities rather than people with complex individual identities. Additionally, the film plane remains parallel in many of his images, as seen in *Hester (05)* (figure 8). Through replicating the visual language of crime scene photography, Carlsen further situates the depicted bodies as real, and encourages the associations with bodily violence.

Additionally, photojournalism has been transformed through social media and the participatory nature of the medium, allowing immediate eyewitness accounts in what is known as "citizen photojournalism."[71] This change echoes the democratisation of digital manipulation enabled by technological advancements, allowing anyone to create images that

[69] Edward M. Robinson, *Crime Scene Photography* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2007), 24.
[70] Robinson, *Crime Scene Photography*, 24-25.
[71] Virginia Guerrero García, and Bella Palomo, "The Crisis of Photojournalism: Rethinking the Profession in a Participatory Media Ecosystem," *Communication & Society* 28, no. 4 (2015): 36; Frank Möller, *Visual Peace* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 6.

challenge viewers understandings of visual accuracy. Crime photojournalism also has a complicated relationship with spectacle, as seen in true crime and pulp entertainment.[72] It is evident that after leaving his career as a crime scene photojournalist, Carlsen continued exploring his fascination for dark and disturbing imagery.[73] *Untitled* (figure 9) references the documentary style of Carlsen's previous career, and the violence seen in his earlier experience. More recognisably human than many of his photographs, it depicts a figure collapsed on the ground, arms and head either dismembered or out of view. Ambiguity is central to Carlsen's work, where the viewer is never entirely sure what they are witnessing when confronted with the powerful ambivalence created by the realistic yet distorted body.. As with *Hester 08*, the documentary associations are enhanced through Carlsen's use of black and white photography, full flash, objective and distanced viewpoint, gritty interior, and the implied spontaneity of the figures position, appearing as though they have fallen. A sense of violence, more commonly invoked by bodily fragmentation or dismemberment, is referenced through the merging of multiple bodies into one figure.

References to documentary and crime photography are evident throughout Carlsen's oeuvre, generating parallels with the work of Weegee, (figure 10 and 11). Weegee's work was renowned for its gruesome and accurate portrayal of New York crime during the 1940s. His work was primarily published in mainstream media during this period, but he gradually began exhibiting his work in galleries including the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York.[74] He later left behind crime photography and began photographing celebrities and

[72] Will Straw, "Formal Strategies in the True Crime Photograph," *Etudes Photographiques* 26, (2010): 1-2; Eamonn Carrabine, "Just Images: Aesthetics, Ethics and Visual Criminology," *British Journal of Criminology* 52 (2012): 463; Eammon Carrabine, "Seeing Things: Violence, Voyeurism and the Camera," *Theoretical Criminology* 18, no. 2 (2014): 134-58.
[73] Larsson, "An Interview with Asger Carlsen."
[74] David Hopkins, "Weegee and Warhol: Voyeurism, Shock and the Discourse on Criminality," *History of Photography* 25, no. 4 (2001): 358.

socialites. In Los Angeles during the 1950s, Weegee focussed on celebrities and nudes. In his representation of the body, Weegee created warped perspectives which often removed the identity of the subject and instead created incongruous abstract forms through photographic distortion.[75] Despite his own personal interest, he faced criticism for his transition away from the crime photography he had become known for.[76]

Regardless of critical response, photographs from Weegee's Los Angeles work displays his fascination with the limits of human physicality, and the absurdity of the body as an idealised form. His response to the brutality inflicted on bodies witnessed during his time as a crime photographer, in addition to the superficiality and adoration of the celebrity body, appears to be explored in his distorted figures. The technical creation of Weegee's work also underwent major changes during his transition away from crime photography. The effects implemented in his *Distortion Series* (figure 13) are created through experimental visual manipulation in a time before Photoshop. Weegee incorporated "plastic lenses, mirrors, and kaleidoscopic prisms" as well as varied darkroom techniques in a style which he termed the "elastic lens."[77] Carlsen's artistic trajectory echoes Weegee's transition from crime photography to ambiguous representations of bodies.[78] The visual associations between Weegee and Carlsen, coupled with Carlsen's "low tech" photographic approach juxtaposed with complex technological editing, reiterate the connection between crime photography and the body in Carlsen's work.[79] Like Carlsen, Weegee sought to explore the limits of the representational body through his *Distortion Series*. His *Distortion Series* work was perceived to conflict with the cultural attitudes of the time, where the destruction captured in his crime photographs and

[75] Richard Meyer, "Photography Is Elastic: Weegee's Cockeyed View of Hollywood," *American Art* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 33-34.
[76] Meyer, "Photography Is Elastic", 33-37.
[77] Meyer, "Photography Is Elastic," 34.
[78] Hopkins, "Weegee and Warhol," 358.
[79] Larsson, "An Interview with Asger Carlsen."

reconfigured in his distortion series were viewed to be at odds with the romanticised ideals of Hollywood. Carlen's digitally manipulated figures similarly conflict with the contemporary era of idealisation and beautification of the body on social media.

The contemporary grotesque

The influence of the idealised and objectified body on social media, and broader mainstream media including advertising and entertainment, has contributed to an inherently contemporary exploration of the grotesque. This contemporary grotesque has emerged in part due to the apparent aversion to the ugly or vulnerable aspects of embodiment. Not as explicitly referential of horror as the traditional grotesque, this interpretation is a more ambiguous exploration of unsettling aspects of embodied experience, unified by a sense of discomfort, disquiet, and disgust. As seen through the combination of realistic photographic images and grotesque associations, Carlsen explores the uncomfortable aspects of the body. Carlsen's explorations of violence, vulnerability, and death, bring the horrors of contemporary embodiment to life.

Although what is seen as grotesque is highly dependent upon period, enduring elements remain.[80] The grotesque has historically been associated with ideas of fertility and mortality, with the word's etymological origins derived from the "grotto," implying an inherent association with the internal.[81] Development of what is viewed as grotesque is drawn from a variety of elements including psychoanalysis, mainstream media and philosophy.[82] The grotesque also often utilises humour and absurdity.[83] In contemporary usage, the grotesque

[80] Geoffrey Harpham, "The Grotesque: First Principles," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34, no. 4 (1976): 461.
[81] Frances S. Connelly, *Modern Art and the Grotesque* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.
[82] Connelly, *Modern Art,* 1.
[83] Frances K. Barasch, *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings* (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2018), 10.

refers to a wide variety of themes, primarily related to the extremes of human and visual experience.[84] It is also often associated with deformed or misshapen figures and instability.[85] Traditionally, it has typically been closely linked to the body, especially fear of the female body.[86] In contemporary culture, the grotesque can also include things like body modification, heavy tattooing and piercings.[87] The relationship between bodies and the grotesque has also changed with the increase of digital technology in daily life, and the way in which that informs understandings of embodiment.[88] Contemporary manifestations are found across increasingly diverse mediums including film and television, photography and video games.[89] Noël Carroll suggests that it may be the increase in entertainment and consumable media as a whole that has facilitated this contemporary expansion of the grotesque.[90]

Carlsen explores the contemporary grotesque throughout his *Hester* series, in the creation of ambiguous, misshapen bodies. While a more traditional interpretation of the grotesque is explored in *No Joke,* Carlsen's collaboration with photographer, Roger Ballen, *Hester* is a contemporary reimagining of the subject. In *Hester*, visible bones under stretched skin – features often associated with the vulnerability and mortality – demonstrate Carlsen's interest in the grotesque. The inclusion of these features similarly identifies the depicted forms as

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[84] David Summers, "The archaeology of the Modern Grotesque," in *Modern Art and the Grotesque,* ed. Frances S. Connelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 20.
[85] Connelly, *Modern Art,* 2-4.
[86] Kirsten A. Hoving, "Convulsive Bodies: The Grotesque Anatomies of Surrealist Photography," in *Modern Art and the Grotesque,* ed. Frances S. Connelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 221; Maria Makela, "Grotesque Bodies: Weimar-Era Medicine and the Photomontages of Hannah Höch," in *Modern Art and the Grotesque,* ed. Frances S. Connelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 196.
[87] Mircea-Ioan Lupu, "Grotesque as Aesthetic Identity: From Medieval Illumination to Contemporary Art," (paper presented at the 8th Edition of The International Conference on European Integration - Realities and Perspectives, Danubius University of Galati, Romania and the University of Camerino, Italy, 18-19 October 2013), https://proceedings.univ-danubius.ro/index.php/eirp/article/view/1491/1376.
[88] Barbara L. Miller, "The New Flesh," Afterimage 26, no. 5 (1999): 6-7.
[89] Noël Carroll, "The Grotesque Today: Preliminary Notes Toward a Taxonomy," in *Modern Art and the Grotesque,* ed. Frances S. Connelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 292.
[90] Carroll, "The Grotesque Today," 309.

human, which heightens the association with the grotesque through the realisation that the bodies have been deformed and rendered other. As previously established, it can also be seen as an extension of his experience as a crime scene photographer.[91] The depersonalised, distanced view of the unsettling figures recalls the presumptive strategies Carlsen would have employed to photograph images of violence and death with clarity and objectivity. This visual language is carried over into Carlsen's works, whereby *Hester* is depicted in a style which confirms the body's position as an object of curiosity or documentation. In works such as *Hester (03)* (figure 12), Carlsen again removes most identifying features of the photographed subjects, while ensuring others, specifically those which suggest the grotesque or monstrous, remain clear. The bodies in *Hester (03)* are unidentifiable as human if not for the recognisable hint of spine, muscle, and clavicle. In removing individual identifying features, Carlsen removes the personal identity of the depicted bodies.

A similar approach is found in Jenny Saville's paintings, which are not about "revealing a sense of their personality" but are rather an exploration of physicality.[92] For both Saville and Carlsen, identity is secondary to a more universal expression of human experience.[93] Through her work, Saville uses the body as an object to exaggerate, manipulate and transform. Saville also represents the contemporary grotesque, which draws upon traditional notions of disgust in a patriarchal society, situating women's bodies as objectionable for merely existing, as seen in *Propped,* 1992 (figure 14).[94] Carlsen's work similarly utilises psychological discomfort in his treatment of the body as malleable, akin to a lump of clay, transforming

[91] Larsson, "An Interview with Asger Carlsen."
[92] Martin Gayford, "Living in Flesh, Feature: Jenny Saville Interview," 180, no. 623 (2014): 70; Francesca Maioli, "Nomadic Subjects on Canvas: Hybridity in Jenny Saville's Paintings," *Women's studies* 40, no. 1 (2010): 85.
[93] Laura G. Powell, "Shift in Seeing: Contemporary Artist Jenny Saville Uses Abjection to Reject the Male Gaze," (Ph.D. diss., College of the Arts, California, 2019), 53.
[94] Powell, "Shift in Seeing," 35.

limbs through photographic editing while preserving the appearance of candid documentary photographs. In doing so, Carlsen suggests a style of grotesque imagery which is visually ambiguous and psychologically disconcerting. Saville's work similarly explores the malleability of the body depicted in technical acuity, drawn from a culture of violence and visual manipulation.[95] For artists utilising digital technology like Carlsen, the potential for psychologically disturbing associations is heightened through the visual clarity of this contemporary medium, which enables technically advanced manipulated figures to appear real.

As with abjection, it is an effect of the grotesque to produce the urge to define a boundary between the viewer and the viewer's fear, which is, in the case of the grotesque, produced by the representational other.[96] Carlsen's deliberate blurring of boundaries in the gender and identity of the bodies in *Hester* further renders them aesthetically and psychologically grotesque. Historically positioned as the opposite of beauty, in that it elicits disgust or discomfort, the grotesque has been utilised as a powerful method of confronting psychological unease through art.[97] In the representation of female bodies, the implementation of the grotesque through exaggeration, distortion, hyper-realism or unmasked vulnerability has been a way to address the subjugation and objectification of women. Like abjection, the grotesque body transgresses boundaries and threatens the psychological comfort of the viewer.[98] Due to traditional associations between the grotesque and the instability of the body, surrealist photography has been frequently utilised in explorations of

[95] Francesca Maioli, "Nomadic Subjects on Canvas: Hybridity in Jenny Saville's Paintings," *Women's Studies* 40, no. 1 (2010): 77.
[96] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 4; Nead, *The Female Nude:* 32; Frances S. Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 116.
[97] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement,* trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 180.
[98] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 4.; Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture,* 116.

the grotesque.[99] There is also a relationship between crime photography and a surreal aesthetic, as bodies are captured "almost floating" amongst a crime scene.[100] The use of grotesque imagery in Carlsen's work creates unease through the surreal, nightmarish bodily forms and the dissolution of boundaries. As quoted on Carlsen's website in an essay by Aaron Schuman, Georges Bataille's identification of the cultural need for "extreme states of being" is a grounding inspiration behind Carlsen's investigation of the fluidity and constraints of embodiment.[101] Concerned with the representation of the grotesque within culture, Carlsen's work similarly provokes strong, often uncomfortable psychological reactions.[102]

Carlsen creates artworks that simultaneously repulse and entice the viewer through his use of transgressive imagery and association. Part of the enduring appeal of the grotesque is the way in which it enables the viewer to explore subconscious fears and desires.[103] Additionally, the power of the grotesque to encourage the continual gaze of the viewer through disgust or confusion is also utilised to encourage the prolonged attention of the audience. Details which may otherwise be missed, such as the stretch marks and misplaced navels, are revealed to the viewer through this process. Creating a viewing experience of enduring fascination, the complexity of psychological embodied experience is revealed to the viewer with a sensory sensitivity. Carlsen's exploration of both disgust and beauty is further amplified by the way in which the grotesque is defined in part by the physical and psychological impact of

[99] Hoving, "Convulsive Bodies," 221.
[100] Laura Mallonee, "The Grisly, Fascinating History of Crime Photography," Wired, accessed February 10, 2022, https://www.wired.com/2015/12/burden-of-proof-exhibition-crime-photography/.
[101] Aaron Schuman, "Asger Carlsen: Blistercard," Asger Carlsen, accessed September 2, 2018, http://www.asgercarlsen.com/text/.
[102] Fred Botting, and Scott Wilson, eds., *The Bataille Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 340.
[103] Matthew Kieran, "Aesthetic Value: Beauty, Ugliness and Incoherence," *Philosophy* 72, no. 281 (1997): 387.

multiplicity.[104] In his series *Hester,* Carlsen confronts the potential for multiple realities, genders, and bodies through his amalgamation of individual models into one new form.

The psychological other in embodied experience

Carlsen's implementation of the aesthetics of the grotesque and uncanny within his work also creates associations between contemporary bodily identity and the psychological other. For artists like Carlsen the othered body is also indicative of the cultural attitudes, restrictions and shame placed on bodies.[105] As established, explorations of psychological discomfort through digitally manipulated imagery echoes the discomfort of the body in a highly visual culture, whereby the pressure to present oneself as aesthetically idealised conflicts with the vulnerable truth of embodiment. The resulting forms induce a sense of unease through their resistance to conform to boundaries. In *Hester (04)* (figure 7), most identifying features are obscured, although the body form is more recognisably human in the shape of the buttocks and limbs. Gender has not been disguised entirely, as seen in the suggestion of female genitalia, yet the form is not evidently female either, as indicated by the buttocks on the opposite end where a human head would ordinarily be situated. Here Carlsen is also careful to include the stretch marks, belly button, folds of skin, and indents of bone meeting skin in both spine and limb, all of which serve to position the figure within the aesthetics of grotesque and disgust in relation to what is perpetuated as the standard for bodies in contemporary media. Through the inclusion of features such as stretch marks, Carlsen reflects the absurdity of beauty ideology that shames naturally occurring bodily features in preference of unattainable beauty ideals.

[104] Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture*, 5-6.
[105] Helen Fielding, Gabrielle Hiltmann, Dorothea Olkowski, and Anne Reichold, *The Other Feminist Reflections in Ethics*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007), 110.

Carlsen's examination of complex bodily forms in the *Hester* series can be seen to represent disgust of the other in multiple facets. The bodies are othered through their monstrous appearance, recalling disfigurement and mutation, and through the inclusion of details which provoke disgust, including rolls of skin and body hair. Additionally, the obfuscation of details which encourage the viewer's sense of empathy, such as facial features, further position the forms in *Hester* as other. The forms are also positioned as both familiar and unfamiliar, recalling Kristeva's identification of the role of the uncanny and abject in positioning oneself as foreign or other.[106]

Simone de Beauvoir's articulation of the positioning of women as other, due to their historically limited social power and rhetoric surrounding maleness as the human default, further strengthens the associations of otherness in Carlsen's *Hester* series.[107] Gendered associations are strengthened through Carlsen's references to the tradition of the female nude, and the name Hester. Carlsen stated he named the series after the street in New York he was living on when he created the works.[108] He also chose it for something that could not be easily located concerning "culture and reference."[109] However, the title is also significant for its gendered usage as a primarily female name. In exploring monstrosity and otherness in the representation of the body, Carlsen references the tradition of the female object, subject to the gaze of the male artist and viewer. The use of primarily female models in the creation of the gender ambiguous series further references the othering of women, as Carlsen positions himself as the creator of the female body, reshaping it into sculptural forms and removing

[106] Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 181-5.
John Mowitt, "Strangers in Analysis: Nationalism and the Talking Cure," in *Julia Kristeva, 1966-96: Aesthetics, Politics, Ethics*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London: Taylor and Francis, 1998), 48; Sara Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004) 189-190.
[107] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage, 2011) 6-7.
[108] Gregory Jones and Meghan Maloney, "The Surrealistic World of Asger Carlsen," In the In-Between, accessed June 12, 2021, https://www.inthein-between.com/the-surrealistic-world-of-asger-carlsen/.
[109] Jones and Maloney, "The Surrealistic World of Asger Carlsen," accessed June 12, 2021.

signs of individual female identity. In his representation of primarily female bodies abstracted through digital technology to remove most personal identifiers, Carlsen reinterprets the traditional concept of the body, especially the gendered nude, through a constructed representation of the other and grotesque.[110] Carlsen's complex aesthetic is achieved through the exemplification of the visible features of bodies, particularly female bodies, which are culturally regarded as undesirable or repulsive.[111]

Having worked primarily with female models for the series, Carlsen also included some photographs of his own body in the depiction of muscle.[112] Including his body within the female forms can also be seen as the manifestation of male dominance over female embodiment and identity. However, the desexualisation and sculptural focus of the images invite a more nuanced reading of Carlsen's intent. In using female models, altered into gender-ambiguous forms, Carlsen further subverts the tradition of the female nude. The inclusion of Carlsen's own body in the images compiled to create *Hester* can also be seen as a way for the male artist to locate himself within female embodied experience. The tradition of the male artist inserting himself or his own bodily material into their work is seen in the work of other contemporary artists including Andres Serrano and Marc Quinn.[113] Theories on the psychology behind this behaviour may range from narcissism to a reaction to the male inability to create life through birth. It can also be seen as the desire to become part of the artistic subject, for the artist to view himself as a physical extension of the work.

Due to the history of the male gaze and objectification of women, Carlsen's *Hester* series also enables the possibility to read into the male artist's insertion of images of his muscles, a

[110] Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture,* 5-6.
[111] Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture*, 116.
[112] Larsson, "An Interview with Asger Carlsen."
[113] Grant Pooke, *Contemporary British Art: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2011) 176.

traditionally male-associated aspect of human physiology, within a disfigured female form. However, Carlsen places the emphasis on the sculptural process of his work, reducing the importance of the models, himself included, to mere medium.[114] When questioned about the gender of the pictured bodies, and by implication the models in addition to the created forms, Carlsen instead answers only in regard to the final creation, stating "I think they're not anything, really."[115] Carlsen views the *Hester* artworks as gender-non-specific or gender-neutral, stating that, while the series is in conversation with the female nude, he has "no desire to photograph naked girls, and I'm definitely not trying to make fun of the female nude."[116] He goes on to clarify that the series is concerned with sculpture, surrealism and "classic nude photography" of no specified gender.[117] As a Generation X artist, Carlsen's statements play into ideas associated with third wave feminist discourse on the significance of women's lived experiences and female empowerment.[118] While his work is not explicitly exploring feminist ideas, it is evidently informed by attitudes towards bodies, particularly female bodies, which remain inescapably entangled with feminism. By inserting his own body amongst the female models, Carlsen negates the classification of binary gender, with his physical presence reaffirming the ambiguity of the forms created through digital manipulation. His representation of multiplicity, ambiguity and instability is also a means of exploring the absurdity in both the personal psychological attitudes towards the body, and the wider representation of the body in contemporary media.

As established through Kristeva's positioning of the importance of borders, the digitally manipulated and distorted bodies in Carlsen's *Hester* series also transgress boundaries of

[114] Larsson, "An Interview with Asger Carlsen."
[115] Larsson, "An Interview with Asger Carlsen."
[116] Larsson, "An Interview with Asger Carlsen."
[117] Larsson, "An Interview with Asger Carlsen."
[118] Shelley Budgeon, *Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Gender in Late Modernity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 79.

bodily representation, heightening their psychological power. Bodily ambiguity is taken further in *Hester (05)* (figure 8), which conceals any recognisable bodily details including extremities and genitals. The body is transformed into a mound of flesh with no obvious usage or capability beyond its sculptural form. The sculptural quality of the body does not render it static, however, as the skin folds and dimples reveal the effects of gravity upon the skin. Throughout his *Hester* series, Carlsen presents the body as a site of unease and rebellion. The body appears to refuse to be controlled or contained, as mounds of flesh threaten to move unexpectedly. This possibility of movement heightens the sense of horror, as the recognisably human points of movement, typically extremities or head, are distorted to the extent that the form is left monstrous.

It is this implied possibility of life and movement given to the grotesque forms which differentiates Carlsen's work from other sculptural bodily works. It is the advent of life in man-made or altered otherness, as with Frankenstein's monster, that creates this psychological unease.[119] In a static, purely sculptural form, the body holds the possibility of beauty or nobility. However, once this permanence is removed and the form suggests that at any moment they will breathe, move and, by implication, think, it is positioned as horror. Through his skilled use of digital technology, Carlsen creates a series of work in *Hester* which reinterprets traditional notions of the psychological other and grotesque, moving towards more ambiguous, contemporary representation.

No Joke

In 2016, Carlsen collaborated with Roger Ballen for the series *No Joke.* Comprised of 37 highly edited photographs, *No Joke* continues both artists' fascination with the subconscious,

[119] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein Or, The Modern Prometheus* (London: Electric Book, 2001), 60.

the grotesque, the body, and the 'truth' of photography. In the creation of the series, Carlsen and Ballen exchanged photographs and ideas, using base images of themselves or of nude models left over from other projects, which they then altered using both analogue and digital media.[120] In works such as *Rats* (figure 15), Carlsen and Ballen incorporate hand-drawn elements and digital manipulation of the physical characteristics of the model with images of rats. The result is a nightmarish scene which confronts fears of bodily transgression, using established horror imagery of rats climbing across human flesh, resulting in a representation of the grotesque. The model's face, edited beyond anything recognisably human, evokes the horror of the mutant or deformed human head, explored through film and art by creators such as David Lynch. The crudely drawn eyes and open mouth similarly recalls Edvard Munch's (1863-1944) *The Scream,* 1893, further locating the piece within the realm of psychological horror.

Carlsen and Ballen's collaboration began as a commission for *VICE* magazine in 2013, subsequently expanding into an exhibition and book.[121] As Carlsen lives in New York and Ballen in South Africa, digital technology was integral to all aspects of their collaboration, as the pair communicated via Skype and email.[122] Ballen also has a history of exploring the veracity of the photographic image and the body as a site of monstrosity and otherness, especially relating to complicated histories of racial representation in South Africa.[123] Throughout his career, he has repeatedly used the body as a subject to digitally manipulate

[120] Karen Kedmey, "Two Artists Build and Break Bodies—Including Their Own—in a Dark, Twisted New Show", accessed May 3, 2018, https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-two-artists-build-and-break-bodies-including-their-own-in-a-dark-twisted-new-show.
[121] Roger Ballen, and Asger Carlsen, "A Place of the Inside Out: Images by Roger Ballen & Asger Carlsen", Vice, accessed May 15, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/wd4jkz/place-of-the-inside-out-000500-v20n7.
[122] Kedmey, "Two Artists Build and Break Bodies."
[123] Lewis Johnson, "Others and their others: Spectrality and monstrosity in the photographs of Roger Ballen," *Double Dialogues*. *Approaching Otherness* 20 (Summer 2009): https://www.doubledialogues.com/article/others-and-their-others-spectrality-and-monstrosity-in-the-photographs-of-roger-ballen/

and distort. Like Carlsen, Ballen works primarily in black and white photography, similarly enhancing the relationship between documentary photography and truth, while simultaneously affirming its status as fine art. The dichotomy of documentary and artistic associations is unique to the medium, where it is the more technologically advanced medium of colour photography that is often more readily associated with amateur photography and, therefore, manipulated imagery.[124] As with Carlsen, Ballen incorporates surreal, often grotesque imagery within his images. Models are frequently highly distorted, as he seeks to interrogate the "absurdity of the human condition."[125] Ballen's work also conveys a gothic aesthetic as his imagery highlights the horror of embodiment. The grotesque shares outcomes with the gothic in its ability to allow the viewer to confront subconscious anxieties.[126]

Throughout the years Ballen's imagery has become increasingly ambiguous. As with Carlsen and Weegee, Ballen's early photographs were documentary-style images of outsiders within the community he was living. Over time, the ambiguity of expression and intent reflected on the faces of many of his early subjects have changed into ambiguity of bodily form. Beginning in the early 2000s, Ballen incorporated more hand-drawn imagery within his work as seen in images such as *Artist* (figure 16). Ballen's experience photographing his early subjects remains evident even in his most surreal images. Additionally, like Carlsen, the inclusion of elements such as peeling paint and dirty surfaces enhance the implied candidness of even the most heavily edited images. In leaving the background without a sense of time or place, in the collaboration between Carlsen and Ballen the horror of the subconscious and unknown is explored through an identifiably contemporary approach which combines digital

[124] Beth A. Eck, "Nudity and Framing: Classifying Art, Pornography, and Ambiguity," *Sociological Forum* 16, no. 4 (December 2001): 616-617.
[125] Sean O'Hagan, "Photographer Roger Ballen: 'I can live with myself,'" *The Guardian,* April 6, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/apr/05/roger-ballen-outland-interview.
[126] Patrick McGrath, "Transgression and Decay'" in *Gothic*, ed. Christoph Grunenberg (Boston: MIT Press, 1997), 153.

technologies and hand drawn elements. The work additionally subverts the tradition of photographic truth in images, referencing both documentary photography and the grotesque.

Transgressive bodies and the representation of disgust

In regarding Carlsen's artworks as grotesque, their power as transgressive bodies is also evident. The disruption of societal ideals through the representation of bodies as a site of disgust and the grotesque is an enduring subject of contemporary artistic inquiry.[127] In contrast to contemporary airbrushing and social media filters, the bodily representations by artists like Carlsen confront the complexity of embodiment. Through the depiction of the bodily details associated with disgust, such as stretched or loose skin and stretch marks, these works reject beauty ideals, confronting instead the aspects of bodies that society encourages people to hide, as also seen in Saville's paintings.[128] Michelle Meagher suggests that instead of provoking reactions of disgust, Saville is interrogating disgust within her work, while evoking disgust in viewers over the ways in which women's bodies are judged and regulated in contemporary culture.[129] Carlsen similarly uses digital manipulation and the aesthetics of the grotesque to place disgust on the corruption and vulnerability of the body, in addition to the culture in which the contemporary body resides, rather than evoking disgust at the individual bodies represented. The body is not treated as one individual body, but a universal body. Through the incorporation of disgust within the depersonalised but often female body, the viewer is confronted with the contrast between life and death, while simultaneously confronting the hierarchical convention of the contained female-object and male creator-viewer.[130]

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[127] Bettina Papenburg, "Grotesque Sensations: Carnivalising the Sensorium in the Art of Wangchi Mutu," in *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics,* ed. Bettina Papenburg, and Marta Zarzycka (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 158-172.
[128] Meagher, "Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust," 24.
[129] Meagher, "Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust," 24-25.
[130] Papenburg, "Grotesque Sensations," 166.

Carlsen's use of disgust, ambiguity and the grotesque also recall the paintings of Francis Bacon (1909-1992), whom he has identified as an inspiration behind his *Hester* series, inviting comparable associations of psychological distress.[131] Bacon's paintings are likewise less about the subject, revealing greater emphasis on the representational feelings of embodiment and the viewer's personal reaction to the often-ambiguous embodied experience depicted. Bacon utilised the body in art as a way of confronting anxieties surrounding the corruption of the body. The body will age, feel pain, may face violence, and will face death. In the depiction of bodies which are shown as fractured or deformed, the associations between corporality and mortality become evident. The potential for violence, death and decay is seen throughout Bacon's work. In *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (figure 17), dated 1944, Bacon demonstrates some of his most overtly grotesque work, the influence of which is evident throughout Carlsen's *Hester* series. In the depiction of monstrous forms, which imply humanity through recognisable features such as spine, ribs, shoulder blades, teeth, ears, and the head profile depicted in the left in the triptych, Bacon blurs the boundaries between self and other.

As with Bacon, Carlsen explores the body as a site of psychological unease. However, Carlsen's work is heavily reliant on contemporary digital processes, and is thereby situated firmly in the twenty-first century. The influence of artists such as Bacon, whose depiction of bodies as ambiguous forms with multiple possibilities for transformation and complexity of experience, are evident in Carlsen's work. Drawing from the representational history of bodily experience explored through art, Carlsen combines this with the contemporary reliance on digital media. The use of digital photography and editing to create perceptually

[131] Larsson, "An Interview with Asger Carlsen."

realistic images of impossible bodies similarly demonstrates Carlsen's transgression of boundaries. This subversion of the traditional artistic body also confronts the viewers' anxieties surrounding embodiment, while providing opportunity for more complex representation, speaking to the potential for transgressive bodily imagery to confront psychological discomfort.

As digital technology has evolved, artistic representations of the body have been transformed. One way in which this has occurred has been through the increase of accessible technology facilitating complex yet accessible photographic editing. This technology has enabled images of bodies which appear realistic yet are highly edited to be created and shared by everyday users across social media. Technological developments have, in turn, influenced the ways in which bodies are viewed and understood. Additionally, as digital technology has transformed the visual landscape, violent and graphic imagery is more readily viewed by users online. Carlsen draws upon the contemporary culture of bodily violence and constructed realism in his exploration of grotesque, uncanny, ambiguous figures. The emergence of this contemporary grotesque is indicative of the way in which digital technology is facilitating complex reinterpretations of historical artistic subjects.

Utilising the primarily female models' bodies as material to construct new bodily forms, Carlsen also both adheres to and rejects the traditional male artist archetype. As the bodies are not intended to be read as gender specific, Carlsen demonstrates the role of the body in art as a contemporary multifaceted creation, while remaining tied to the history and complexity of female nude representation. Furthermore, Carlsen's bodies which appear visually realistic despite obvious manipulation are an example of the way in which understandings of truth and accuracy in body photography are challenged in contemporary digital culture. Carlsen's work

is demonstrative of the contemporary re-emergence of the psychologically uncanny, abject, and grotesque body, which is influenced by a culture of representational violence, and the disruption of truth and reality in digital photography.

Chapter Four

Gendered Complexities of Digitalised Feminist Bodies: Julie Rrap

The potential for digital technology to transform the way in which bodies are represented and understood is also seen in feminist response, as explored by Australian artist Julie Rrap (born 1950). Throughout her prolific career, Rrap has explored gender and embodied experiences through varied artistic mediums.[1] Rrap was introduced to art through the work of her brother, Mike Parr (born 1945), and assisted him in his controversial performance practice.[2] After contributing to Parr's work in the form of photography and performance, Rrap felt compelled to create work in which she was the creator and subject, in what she called a "perverse drive" in response to her experience as the sister of an established artist.[3] During this period Rrap changed her name from Julie Ann Parr to Julie Rrap, an action she refers to as an important aspect of her feminist artistic practice and identity.[4] Rrap also draws from her experience as a politically active university student in the 1960s-70s, where she participated in demonstrations advocating for women's empowerment and artist's rights.[5] Her interest in the use of digital technology to interrogate feminist perspectives of the body can be traced back to her early use of film photography to investigate the role of women in family and social structures.[6] During the 1980s Rrap lived in Europe, which also influenced her approach to the representation of the body.[7] Frequently referencing second and third wave feminism and body art, in a variety of mediums including photography and video, Rrap continues the

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[1] Julie Ewington, "Julie Rrap Artist Profile," MCA, accessed May 1, 2022, https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/artists/julie-rrap/.
[2] Victoria Lynn, *Julie Rrap: Body Double* (Sydney: MCA and Piper Press, 2007), 53.
[3] Terrance Maloon, "Interview with Terrance Maloon" in *Julie Rrap*, eds. George Alexander et al. (Annandale: Piper Press, 1998), 115.
[4] Maloon, "Interview with Terrance Maloon," 115.
[5] Lynn, *Julie Rrap: Body Double,* 17.
[6] Catriona Moore, "Rraproachment with Art History," in *Julie Rrap*, eds. George Alexander et al. (Annandale: Piper Press, 1998), 16.
[7] Nets Victoria, "Julie Rrap," accessed March 12, 2022, https://netsvictoria.org.au/artist/julie-rrap/.

tradition of utilising contemporary mediums for producing transgressive representations of traditionally objectified female bodies.[8] The exploration of gender identity through the representation of the body in art has remained a central focus of her practice.

Overstepping commodification and objectification

Overstepping (figure 18), dated to 2001, interrogates the fetishisation and commodification of women's bodies in the digitally saturated culture of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As Rrap's most well-known work of art, *Overstepping* exemplifies the utilisation of digital technologies to represent challenging, unconventional bodies as a form of feminist representation. The iconic work undermines the societal expectations of female bodies to meet standards of beauty and desirability promoted by digital media. Rrap takes this idea to its literal extreme, morphing the woman's feet into the shape of the high heeled shoe. The deformed heeled feet simultaneously reference the physical discomfort of these impractical shoes, the physical and psychological restrictions placed upon a woman's body, and the objectification of the female body. The foot has become merged with the idea of a feminine shoe, turning the woman's lower limbs into a literal object for display.

The clean white background, studio flash photography, and model pose of the front foot similarly recall the aesthetics of fashion photography and advertising, further implicating the image as an object of consumption. Notwithstanding the capacity for images to generate different meanings, the painted nails evoke the time and effort a woman is expected to put into beautifying her physical appearance. The colour red also reveals the societal significance of marketing, as red remains linked to perceived desirability that has been expected of

[8] Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, "Forward," in *Julie Rrap: Body Double*, ed. Victoria Lynn, (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), 6.

women. Rrap further references the societal restrictions placed upon the woman's body, drawing parallels with Chinese foot binding and cross-cultural neck stretching practices.[9] The custom of deforming the female body to adhere to cultural ideals of beauty is historically documented, and remains relevant in contemporary society. While most of these customs are not currently practiced, other socially acceptable bodily interventions, including piercings, hair removal, extreme and restrictive weight management and exercise, and the growth in the cosmetic surgery industry indicate that the pressure to modify the female body remains prevalent.

The fragmented nature of the legs displayed separated from their body and presented instead in the cold, depersonalised association of the blank white space, further evokes the idea of a commodified female body. The fragmentation of the body is another reoccurring image within feminist body art, directly echoing the way in which the female body has been subjugated, objectified, and fetishised.[10] *Overstepping* also recalls Linda Nochlin's exploration of the fragmented body as a metaphor.[11] Rrap's work and *Overstepping* in particular have previously been examined through this lens of fragmentation and fetish.[12] While fragmentation and fetish are undeniable aspects of her work, I view *Overstepping* specifically in regard to its engagement with the commodified body, positioned as a feminist response. *Overstepping*, as with much of Rrap's work, is a key example of the response to the body in advertising and entertainment, and the way in which advanced digital editing has

[9] Claire M. Renzetti, ""Foot Binding," in *Encyclopedia of Interpersonal Violence*, eds. Claire M. Renzetti, and Jeffrey L. Edleson (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2008), 277; Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) 132-34; Melinda Watt, "Extreme Fashions," in *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion*, ed., Valerie Steele (Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2005), 430-32.
[10] Joanna Mendelssohn, "Her Own Woman: Julie Rrap," *Photofile* 81, (2007): 35.
[11] Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 8.
[12] Lynn, *Julie Rrap: Body Double,* 97.

enabled more psychologically powerful interrogation of the objectification of women's bodies.

In *Overstepping*, the body is stripped from the ownership of the woman inhabiting it, yet the woman's identity remains dependent upon it. Here, the posture of the heeled shoe has become the shape of the foot itself, suggesting this uncomfortable position is now natural to the woman, having been accepted as an inherent part of her physicality and identity. It similarly references the ways in which cultural ideals of beauty are adopted and internalised by women, who in turn perpetuate the patriarchal ideals that were historically forced upon them. The act of internalising the attitudes of the oppressor can also be seen to explore the ubiquitous attitude of internalised misogyny, revealing that a woman living in a patriarchal society may often adopt the sexist, discriminatory, harmful ideals of patriarchal culture.[13] Rrap's *Overstepping* depicts a woman whose feet have literally adhered to the restrictions placed upon her, either through external force, or through her own submission. In her exploration of the ways in which media representations of women are both harmful and inaccurate, Rrap challenges the role of digital media in the construction of an unachievable feminine ideal. Works like *Overstepping* undermine the believability of the photographic medium, in addition to the construction of femininity, both in media and through literal surgical enhancement.[14]

While Rrap has continued the exploration of the objectification of the female body throughout her later work, *Overstepping* remains the most overt example within her oeuvre.

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[13] Dawn M. Szymanski, Arpana Gupta, Erika R. Carr, and Destin Stewart, "Internalized Misogyny as a Moderator of the Link between Sexist Events and Women's Psychological Distress," *Sex Roles* 61, no. 1-2 (2009): 107.
[14] Julie Rrap, "Overstepping, 2001," Museum of Contemporary Art, accessed November 20, 2017, https://www.mca.com.au/collection/work/2008.9/.

The aesthetic of *Overstepping* is also bolder in its stylistic choices, echoing the more direct thematic underpinnings of the work. The bold style was also a sign of the time in which the piece was created. The 1990s and early 2000s were visually dominated by advertisements and pop culture imagery that embodied a glossy, loud aesthetic.[15] The visual media in this period, including advertising, television, and movies, were, in many instances, overtly and unapologetically sexist. The emergence of female led television shows in the late 1990s dealing with subversive feminist themes framed by the supernatural, for example *Buffy* and *Charmed,* simultaneously reaffirmed sexist notions of the objectified, physically 'perfect' idealised woman, while also challenging the notion of woman as secondary to the male figure.[16] Bands such as *Spice Girls* similarly capitalised on notions of empowerment, becoming synonymous with the term Girl Power, while perpetuating the objectification and sexualisation of their members through dress and choreography.[17] Allison Yarrow attributes the commodification of female empowerment as one of the key ways in which feminism was both co-opted and damaged.[18] Additionally, in mainstream media, feminism was often dismissed or derided.[19] Through the use of appropriative marketing and the vilification of female figures in the news, the 1990s created what Yarrow calls a "bitchification" of women in culture.[20] This characterisation of women, combined with the changes to the advertising and entertainment industry, created a period of overtly sexualized and sexist representation.[21]

[15] Yarrow, *90s Bitch,* 16-18.
[16] Claire Elizabeth Charles, "New Girl Heroes: The Rise of Popular Feminist Commentators in an Era of Sexualisation," *Gender and Education: Making Sense Of The Sexualisation Debates: Schools And Beyond* 24, 3 (2012): 317; Patricia Pender, "Kicking Ass Is Comfort Food: Buffy as Third Wave Feminist Icon," in *Third Wave Feminism,* eds. S. Gillis, G. Howie, and R. Munford (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007) 224-7.
[17] Yarrow, *90s Bitch*, 286-89.
[18] Yarrow, *90s Bitch*, 12.
[19] Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, (New York: Picador, 2020), 85-89.
[20] Yarrow, *90s Bitch,* viii.
[21] Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pig,* 26-31.

Contemporary attitudes towards objectification in advertising have shifted, which Amanda Zimmerman and John Dahlberg attribute to generational differences including contemporary feminism's emphasis on sex-positivity.[22] As feminism progressed, feminist ideas were also integrated into advertising.[23] However, while there has been progress, the objectification of women in advertising remains a prevalent and insidious aspect of contemporary society and digital culture.[24] Even when marketing strategies or campaigns address feminist concerns through the use of feminist-signifying imagery, such as Dove's infamous *Real Beauty* campaign (figure 19), they continue to utilise them for their own capitalistic imperative.[25] Similarly, in the advertisement *Evolution (The Evolution Of Beauty)* (figure 20), Dove appropriates feminist techniques of highlighting the extent to which advertising images are edited, to situate their brand within a space of female empowerment and feminist virtue-signalling. [26] Also positioned as corporate social performance, value or virtue signalling is common online, particularly on social media.[27] However, the lack of fundamental feminist change in the views of the creators is highlighted by the art director's sexist and objectifying claim that he intentionally sought to choose a model who would "require quite a bit of makeup to look the model type" for the advertisement.[28]

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[22] Amanda Zimmerman, and John Dahlberg, "The Sexual Objectification of Women in Advertising: A Contemporary Cultural Perspective," *Journal of Advertising Research* 48, no. 1 (2008): 72.
[23] Karen Ross, *The Handbook of Gender, Sex, and Media* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 371; Nina Akestam, Sara Rosengren, and Micael Dahlen, "Advertising "Like a Girl": Toward a Better Understanding of "Femvertising" and Its Effects," *Psychology & Marketing* 34, no. 8 (2017): 796-797.
[24] Sofia Bratu, "Gender Representation in Advertisements," *Analysis and Metaphysics* 12, (2013): 166-71; Erving Goffman, *Gender Advertisements* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 169.
[25] Josée Johnston, and Judith Taylor, "Feminist Consumerism and Fat Activists: A Comparative Study of Grassroots Activism and the Dove Real Beauty Campaign." *Signs* 33, no. 4, (2008): 960-963.
[26] Benjamin Riley, "Selling Virtue: 'Woke' Advertising and Corporate Ethics," *Screen Education* 97, (2020): 49-52.
[27] Jacob Brower, Saim Kashmiri, and Vijay Mahajan, "Signalling Virtue: Does Firm Corporate Social Performance Trajectory Moderate the Social Performance–Financial Performance Relationship?" *Journal of Business Research* 81, (2017): 86, 93.
[28] Avi Dan, "Dove Invented 'Femvertising' But Its Latest Stunt Didn't Wash with Consumers,' *Forbes*, accessed May 11, 2017, https://www.forbes.com/sites/avidan/2017/05/11/dove-invented-femvertising-but-its-latest-stunt-didnt-wash-with-consumers/#215be50156b6.

Sometimes known as “femvertising,” this commodification of activism is problematic, and can be arguably more destructive than the more overtly objectified alternative.[29] The digitally modified body offers a future in which the body is free from this insidious and enduring form of commodification. As digital media became more ubiquitous in contemporary culture, Rrap similarly employed digital technologies to increasing degrees, while simultaneously referencing the impacts of digital technology on embodiment. Through harnessing the fragmented and deformed body’s ability to confront the viewer, Rrap utilises digital technology to further explore the possibilities of transgressive body imagery in the digital age.

Rrap’s *Overstepping* came out of a time that was often less thematically or stylistically subtle than what is prevalent in contemporary culture.[30] In subsequent years, the digital manipulation of photographic images had become prevalent to the extent that by 2019, it became common for images on Instagram to have been digitally altered.[31] This digitally mediated escalation is due to both social positioning and the commodification of self-representation online.[32] The rise in the digital manipulation of images of women’s bodies has ensured that images such as Rrap’s *Overstepping*, which were confronting and visually subversive at the time of creation, are now achievable by anyone with a smartphone.

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[29] Nina Akestam, Sara Rosengren, and Micael Dahlen, “Advertising "Like a Girl: Toward a Better Understanding of "Femvertising" and Its Effects,” *Psychology & Marketing* 34, no. 8 (2017): 795-806; Sara Champlin, Yvette Sterbenk, Kasey Windels, and Maddison Poteet, “How Brand-Cause Fit Shapes Real World Advertising Messages: A Qualitative Exploration of 'Femvertising',” *International Journal of Advertising* 38, no. 8 (2019): 1240-63.

[30] Amanda Zimmerman and John Dahlberg, "The Sexual Objectification of Women in Advertising: A Contemporary Cultural Perspective," Journal of Advertising Research 48, no. 1 (2008): 71.

[31] John Mingoia et al., “The Relationship between Posting and Photo Manipulation Activities on Social Networking Sites and Internalization of a Tanned Ideal among Australian Adolescents and Young Adults,” *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 1 (2019): 4-5; Philly Renfrew Center Foundation, “Afraid to be your selfie? Survey reveals most people Photoshop their images, 2014,” accessed April 22, 2020, https://renfrewcenter.com/news/afraid-be-your-selfie-survey-reveals-most-people-photoshop-their-images.

[32] Weng Marc Lim, “Understanding the Selfie Phenomenon: Current Insights and Future Research Directions,” *European Journal of Marketing* 50, no. 9/10 (2016): 1777.

Additionally, audiences now assume that many self-representational images have been edited, despite the most prominent practitioners of this technique, exemplified by Instagram influencers, often remaining reluctant to reveal the true extent of digital manipulation.[33]

Changes to digital technology have precipitated a transformation in the way in which bodies are represented in contemporary visual culture. In her subsequent work, Rrap has continued to focus on women's identities and bodies in patriarchal society, interrogating a visual language which is less direct, but perhaps more insidious. As digital media is now both the subject of research and the means by which the research is carried out, Rrap's work echoes this by centring digital media as both the method of production, and the concept explored.[34] Her work exemplifies the way in which digital technology has facilitated the move toward a more ambiguous, complex bodily representation, while still drawing from the previous generation of feminist artists such as Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke, who used the body in art as a political strategy.

Generations of feminist art

Throughout her career, Rrap has responded to feminist discourse as it evolved. Her repeated references to performance art to examine embodiment draw from second wave feminism, while much of her work is visibly influenced by third wave feminism's exploration of gender performativity, such as *Overstepping* (figure 18)*, Body Double* (figure 21-22). Additionally, more recent works such as *Soft Targets* (figure 23-24), and *Fleshstones* (figure 25-27) appear to be heavily informed by the prioritisation of digital media and ambiguity in contemporary feminism. Rrap's artistic strategies encapsulate the transition from 1970s body art to

[33] Mingoia et al., "The Relationship between Posting and Photo Manipulation," 515-516.
[34] Gunnar Liestøl, Terje Rasmussen, and Andrew Morrison, *Digital Media Revisited: Theoretical and Conceptual Innovation in Digital Domains*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 2.

contemporary forms of bodily representation, demonstrating the impact of this evolution on art and bodily representation in general. Catriona Moore claims Rrap "straddles three generations of feminist art" as her work fits into what she describes as the "seventies body," the rejection of essentialism of the 1980s, and the 1990s "Bad Grrls."[35] The generational differences in feminism are particularly relevant regarding discussions of the representation of bodies. As feminist attitudes towards the representational body have changed, along with an increased sexualisation of mainstream media and normalisation of nudity online, younger feminist artists such as Leah Schrager, discussed in chapter five, use digital media in ways which may appear to conflict with earlier notions of feminist representation. For Rrap, digital technology appears to be utilised as an effective means of challenging the commodification of the body in popular media, while responding to the concerns of third wave feminism.

The complexities of intergenerational feminism and wider change in social attitudes towards the body, nudity, and notions of gender and sexuality, in addition to advances in digital media, have altered the simplistic categorisation of artist within a specific 'wave' of feminism.[36] Digital technology has been fundamental to this evolution, with digital media further accelerating changes in feminist representation.[37] While it is evident that Rrap adheres to a different style of feminist representation and ideology than an artist like Schrager, the interplay between generations and social attitudes is more complicated than a linear advancement. Despite the markedly different visual landscape that digital technology has facilitated, earlier waves of feminism produced influential modes of bodily representation which Rrap continues to draw from, key among them being performance art.

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[35] Moore "Rraproachment with Art History," 19.
[36] Jacqueline Millner, and Catriona Moore, eds., "Introduction," in *Feminist Perspectives on Art: Contemporary Outtakes* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2018), 3-4.
[37] Nicola Rivers, *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave: Turning Tides* (Springer International Publishing, 2017), 107-109; Tegan Zimmerman, "#Intersectionality: The Fourth Wave Feminist Twitter Community," *Atlantis* 38, no. 1 (2017): 64; Munro, "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?" 23-24.

Digital performance as a feminist strategy

A significant aspect of the contemporary body in the digital age is its ongoing relationship to feminist performance art. Rrap's performance practice stemmed from her involvement in Parr's examinations of embodiment, pain and masculinity.[38] In addition to creating props and participating in her brother's performances by dressing as him, Rrap used video and photography to document Parr's work, using lighting setups suited to documenting objects, rather than conventional methods for photographing human subjects.[39] By lighting the subject from both sides, Rrap flattened the surface and heightened the perceived objectivity of the photographs. In works such *Overstepping* (figure 18), Rrap references common themes in performance art including embodied identity, patriarchal standards of beauty perpetuated by entertainment media and advertising, and the objectification of female bodies.

Rrap's artistic trajectory echoes the history of performance art. Developing out of a time of political turmoil during the 1960s and 1970s, feminist performance art emerged from a desire to provoke and politicise, using the artists body as an activist tool.[40] Further back, Harold Rosenburg accounts for the movement of action painting to be an "event" rather than a picture, situating abstract expressionism as the presumptive precursor to performance art, one in which artists drew from and expanded with the use of their own bodies as primary medium.[41] Events known as Happenings have been similarly credited as ancestors to performance art. Drawn from Dada and Surrealism, Happenings, named after a work by Allan Kaprow, were popularised during the 1950s and 1960s.[42] These works placed greater emphasis on the environmental interventions and installations created by the artist, as

[38] Lynn, *Julie Rrap,* 17.
[39] Lynn, *Julie Rrap,* 53; Moore "Rraproachment with Art History," 17.
[40] Erin Striff, "Bodies of Evidence: Feminist Performance Art," *Critical Survey* 9, no. 1 (1997): 1-2; Jeanie Forte, "Women's Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 2 (1988): 217-235.
[41] Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," Art news, (1952): 22.
[42] Tate, "Art Term: Happening," accessed April 2, 2020, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/h/happening.

opposed to the focus upon the artist's own body which eventuated in the rise of performance art. Feminism was central in early performance art, rejecting the traditionally masculinist modes of artistic creativity such as painting and sculpture. Performance was, instead, a medium in which women were at the forefront. The politicised nature of early performance works, from artists such as Schneemann, helped cement the enduring association between performance and feminism, in opposition to the use of women's ideal naked bodies as human paintbrushes exemplified by Yves Klein's *Anthropométries* series (1960). However, Schneemann's work not only engendered controversies over its explicit expression, including the taboo subject of the female genitals, but also for conforming to the male gaze due to the artist's conventionally attractive appearance.[43] Frequently, if the female artist performing is conventionally attractive, she risks her image being sexualised and objectified on top of not being taken seriously.[44]

The role of the body in performance art has been similarly important to the development of the medium. Its initial development during the 1960s fostered the convergence of the women's movement, sexual liberation, and antiwar politics toward an increase in activism surrounding reproductive rights, and positioned body focussed performance art as a confrontation between power and politics.[45] In Australia, early performance art often stemmed from activism and protest art.[46] During the following years, performance and body art continued to evolve beyond these early conceptions. Amelia Jones identifies Cindy

[43] Danielle Knafo, *In Her Own Image: Women's Self-representation in Twentieth-century Art* (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), 89, 96; Rebecca Schneider, *Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997), 37; Amelia Jones, *Body Art/performing the Subject (*Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 130-133.
[44] Lucy Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women's Body Art." *Art in America* 100, no. 11 (2012): 133.
[45] Jayne Wark, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 12-13.
[46] Anne Marsh, *Body and Self: Performance Art in Australia 1969-92* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6.

Sherman's film stills as an example of the photographic direction body art moved into after the initial 1960s-1970s popularisation of more intimate and uncensored live performance pieces.[47] According to Jones, the other direction, specifically within the United States, included the move toward large-scale, polished performance pieces such as Laurie Andersons's work, the influence of which is seen on artists like Huxtable, discussed in chapter six.[48]

Performance ideas and aesthetics have a continued impact on contemporary representations of the body in the digital age. Rrap's art practice reflects the continued influence of performance art, with much of her work drawing from the political defiance of early feminist performance artists, reworked using digital photography and contemporary aesthetics, as seen in works like *Overstepping.* Additionally, bodily ambiguity and physical movement reminiscent of dance is depicted in works like *Fleshpool* (figure 28), 2004 and *Body Double* (figure 21-22), 2007. In the contemporary digital space, performance has evolved to also include online performance and social media persona. As digital media has transformed the ways in which performance can be created, viewed, and interpreted, performance art has expanded to cover more than was possible in the 1960-70s.[49]

Historically, the body as an expression of the female artist's experience, identity, imagination, or as a device for exploring conceptual, political, or philosophical ideas, had been overlooked. This is what Jones, elaborating upon Simone de Beauvoir's argument of male transcendence in patriarchal society, identifies as the societal allowance for male artists

[47] Amelia Jones, "Survey," in *The Artist's Body*, ed. Tracey Warr (London: Phaidon, 2012), 21.
[48] Jones, "Survey," 21.
[49] See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked the Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993); Phillip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture,* 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008); Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007)

to explore transcendence, while the female artist remains trapped within the confines of the body.[50] As such, feminist performance art was used as a way of addressing the subjugation of bodies within a patriarchal culture, the influence of which is seen throughout contemporary digital culture, including the #MeToo movement.[51] Similarly, the act of women taking up physical space with their bodies in a performance piece has a direct link to the ways in which women have been taught to be seen but not heard, whose opinions have been historically dismissed, and whose bodies have been controlled. Rrap references the idea of taking up space within her installation works, such as her earlier work *Vital Statistics* (figure 29), 1997, and *Body Double* (figure 21-22), 2007, in which the occupation of space and relation between the artists and viewers' bodies echo the physical imposition and interaction found in traditional performance art.

Despite performance art often being used to confront the reductive views of the objectification of women, when a woman represents her own body and identifies as feminist, accusations of narcissism are common.[52] In the digital age, this is most overtly reflected in the association between social media use and narcissism.[53] While the styles of representation and mode via which they are disseminated has changed, the enduring conflation with the representation of women's bodies, especially in those who identify as feminist, and their existence as narcissistic, remains prevalent.[54]

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[50] Jones, *Body Art/performing the subject*, 194-5.
[51] Hannah Bonner, "Performing Archives in the Present: Exploring Feminist Performance Art, the Politics of (in)Visibility, and the Archive in #Metoo and #Timesup," *South Central Review* 36, no. 2 (2019): 33-51.
[52] Wark. *Radical Gestures,* 169; Jones, *Body Art/performing the subject*, 25; Anne Burns, "Self(ie)-discipline: Social regulation as enacted through the discussion of photographic practice," *International Journal of Communication* 9, (2015): 1716-18.
Seunga Venus Jin, and Ehri Ryu, "'The Paradox of Narcissus and Echo in the Instagram Pond' in Light of the Selfie Culture from Freudian Evolutionary Psychology: Self-Loving and Confident but Lonely," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 62, no. 4 (2018): 570-571; Holly Peek, "The Selfie in the Digital Age: From Social Media to Sexting," *Psychiatric Times*, 31, no. 12 (December 2014): 28.
[54] Imogen Tyler, "Who put the 'Me' in feminism?": The sexual politics of narcissism." *Feminist Theory*, 6, no. 1 (2005): 26.

Narcissism in body objectification and self-representation

Narcissism, originally rooted in myth and expanded upon in psychoanalytic theory, has been engaged with as a powerful artistic strategy in the evolution of body representation in the digital age.[55] The term is sometimes conflated with narcissistic personality disorder, defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition (DSM-5) as a disorder in which people exhibit a range of symptoms pertaining to self-perception and interpersonal communication.[56] However, pathological narcissism is a different concern than narcissistic tendencies.[57] Additionally, despite public sentiment often suggesting otherwise, young people today are not more narcissistic than their predecessors.[58] Narcissism as a trait or perceived action, rather than diagnosis, is intwined with self-representation as a complex, possibly subversive or beneficial tool. Jones specifically identifies narcissism's potential as a strategy in the exploration of identity, personhood, and otherness.[59] While the idea has often been denigrated, engaging with narcissism can disrupt the patriarchal limitations imposed upon female bodies. Kristeva has also discussed narcissism in relation to psychological development, and situated it as the precondition to abjection.[60] This continues on from Freud, who positioned narcissism as an aspect of the ego in the psychological development of sexuality.[61] Similarly, Lacan attributed narcissism to the mirror stage of development.[62] It can

[55] Jean Laplanche, et al. *The language of psycho-analysis* (London: Karnac Books; 1988), 255-7.
[56] "DSM-IV and DSM-5 Criteria for the Personality Disorders, 2012", American Psychiatric Association, accessed October 14, 2022, https://www.psi.uba.ar/academica/carrerasdegrado/psicologia/sitios_catedras/practicas_profesionales/820_clinica_tr_personalidad_psicosis/material/dsm.pdf.
[57] L. C. Morey, and B. H. Stagner, "Narcissistic Pathology as Core Personality Dysfunction: Comparing the DSM-IV and the DSM-5 Proposal for Narcissistic Personality Disorder," *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 68, no. 8, (2012): 912.
[58] Eunike Wetzel, Anna Brown, Patrick Hill, J. M. H. Chung, R.W. Robins, and B.W. Roberts, "The Narcissism Epidemic Is Dead: Long Live the Narcissism Epidemic" *Psychological Science*, 28, no. 12 (2017): 1845.
[59] Jones, *Body art: performing the subject*, 46-47.
[60] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 13.
[61] Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: an Introduction," in *Freud's 'On Narcissism – an introduction,* eds. Peter Fonagy, Ethel Spector Person, and Joseph Sandler (London: Karnac, 2012), 5-7.
[62] Kathleen Woodward, "The Look and the Gaze: Narcissism, Aggression, and Aging," *SubStance* 18, no. 58 (1989), 74.

also be seen as an important role in self-esteem regulation.[63] These psychological perspectives on narcissism demonstrate that it is not an inherently negative attribute, but can instead be an integral aspect of identity formation. Similarly, Danielle Knafo states that while male artists have historically positioned women as objects for their own gratification, it is erroneously assumed that women representing their own bodies do so with a similarly objectifying intention.[64]

Rrap comprehensively explores ideas of narcissism, otherness, and identity in the 60-second looped video, *Fleshpool* (figure 28). Using digital technology, Rrap confronts the complexity of narcissism as a feminist expression in a work that parodies the moralistic view of being literally consumed by narcissism. Her body is seen dissolving into what appears to be her shadow before turning into an amorphous pink flesh pool. The body then remerges as it reverses out of the pool, transforming into a recognisable human form once again. Rrap references Narcissus in the work, a body consumed by its reflection, in addition to the complexity of embodied identity.[65] The depicted *Fleshpool* functions as a physical representation of the way in which Ovid's Narcissus is finally completely absorbed by its image.[66]

Fleshpool also references performance art and a female body unbounded by laws of physicality, as it dissolves and reconfigures in and out of the ground, further dismissing the boundaries of embodiment. These references include the imposed boundaries of gender,

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[63] Andrew D. Brown, "Narcissism, Identity, and Legitimacy," *The Academy of Management Review* 22, no. 3 (1997): 643, 672-3.
[64] Knafo, *In Her Own Image,* 21.
[65] Lynn, *Julie Rrap,* 63.
[66] Kelly Dennis, "The Image Made Flesh: A Photographic Re-Reading of the Pygmalian Myth," in *Metamorphosis: Creative Imagination in Fine Arts between Life-Projects and Human Aesthetic Aspirations,* ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2004), 247.

identity, and the limitations imposed by socio-cultural standards. Similarly, the nude figure dissolving into the ground and re-emerging further references the history of nude representation. Through depicting a nude figure which is unbounded by physical restrictions, Rrap portrays a body free from impositions of patriarchal restriction. For the female nude, a figure historically associated with the male gaze, objectification and limiting artistic convention, Rrap's subversion of the style can further be identified as feminist. In portraying her own nude body as dissolving and reforming, Rrap also demonstrates her own ownership of her body and denies objectification.

In exploring feminism and narcissism, Rrap connects the two in a way that is indicative of the perceived connection between vanity and womanhood. In her interpretation of the nude succumbing to narcissism, Rrap draws parallels between the social restrictions that dictate women's bodies conform to specific standards of physical appearance yet criticise those who demonstrate an interest in cultivating and displaying their body. The double standard is a central aspect of the way in which artists in the digital age are grappling with the complexity of bodily representation. Rrap's reference to narcissism is also indicative of the contemporary derision of social media self-representation as an inherently narcissistic platform. The positioning of the self at the centre of digital images is inherent to accusations of narcissism.

Frequently depicting her own body in her work, Rrap actively explores narcissism in her conceptual representations of embodiment, rather than as a self-portrait or representation of her own identity.[67] While self-portraits are perhaps the most widely popularised forms of artistic self-representation, artists utilising digital media to explore feminist ideas in contemporary art appear to be drawing from a more ambiguous form of self-representation,

[67] Lynn, *Julie Rrap: Body Double,* 51-2.

popularised in performance art. Influential artists including Hannah Wilke and Carolee Schneemann used their own bodies to explore ideas and enact the performance of gendered identity through their work, instead of a representation of the individual self. They also often referenced the increased commodification of the body in popular culture, primarily the female body in advertisements.[68] Artists like Wilke, though repeatedly accused of narcissism in her time, sought to combat the ideology of a commodified female body through her visual insistence that bodies that exist in society are inherently performative, and that an unmediated true self is impossible to represent.[69]

Artistic bodily representations which utilise the figure to explore concept or feeling, versus a self-portrait, are what Jones identifies as the difference between representational and simulacra depictions of bodies.[70] The exploration of the simulacrum body is even more pertinent to the contemporary digital age, in which representations of bodies are increasingly viewed via two-dimensional images as copies of copies.[71] These depictions have increasingly become an integral part of contemporary artistic representations of the body. One of the key feminist artworks Jones positions as simulacrum is Sherman's *History Portraits series,* 1988-90 (figure 30), in which she overtly reinterprets other art historical images.[72] Similarly, in Rrap's *Persona and Shadow series,* 1988 (figure 31) she uses her own body as a vessel to reinterpret historically significant works by other artists.[73] Here, the body is manipulated into something that separates the image from Rrap's actual, photographed body.[74] In doing so,

[68] Bratu, "Gender Representation in Advertisements," 166-71; Goffman, *Gender Advertisements* 166-171.
[69] Knafo, *In Her Own Image,* 112-117.
[70] Jones, "Survey," 35-37.
[71] Jones, "Survey," 35.
[72] Jones, "Survey," 36-37; Amelia Jones, "'The "Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27, no. 4 (2002): 947-78.
[73] Victoria Lynn, "Julie Rrap," in *Know My Name,* ed. N. Bullock et al. (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2020), 322–323.
[74] Joanna Mendelssohn, "Her Own Woman," 35.

artists like Sherman and Rrap utilise the body as a way in which to explore the performativity and conventions of identity, rather than a representational subject. For Rrap, the use of her body is designed to "unsettle relations of social and cultural power."[75] Rrap herself has recognised the use of her body to be "disembodied," rejecting the association of self-portraiture, but rather utilising her body as an available subject to explore the more universal "female body" in general.[76] In doing so, Rrap demonstrates the separation of body as representation and body as sign.

Due to Rrap's physical appearance, in that she adheres to conventional standards of beauty, she could be perceived as conforming to the perpetuation of the male gaze.[77] Hannah Wilke faced the same criticism, when her *SOS Scarification Series* (figure 32) of 1974, among other works using a similar strategy, were dismissed as narcissistic.[78] The abundance of conventionally attractive, able-bodied, Caucasian women's bodies represented in art has justifiably drawn criticism due to the historical lack of varied representation. Other second and third-wave artists, including Rrap, have used similar strategies to challenge the commodification and subjugation of women's bodies in contemporary culture, yet risk reinforcing the cultural values they seek to dismantle through their own physical adherence to culturally mediated ideals typically targeted at a male audience.[79] However, it is evident Rrap uses her body not as a representation of herself, but as a reflection of broader ideas. Additionally, Rrap disrupts these criticisms by subverting the male gaze through manipulation of the imagery of her body, and through conscious construction of the image

[75] Moore "Rraproachment with Art History," 17.
[76] Lynn, *Julie Rrap,* 52.
[77] Wark. *Radical Gestures,* 169; Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures Of Rebirth," 133; Schneider, *Explicit Body in Performance*, 37; Jones, *Body Art/performing the Subject,* 130-133.
[78] Knafo, *In Her Own Image,* 104.
[79] Schneider, *Explicit Body in Performance,* 37; Jones, *Body Art/performing the Subject,* 130-133.

which denies simple objectification.[80] She does this through the distortion of her conventionally attractive body in works such *Fleshpool* (figure 28), *Body Double* (figure 21-22) and through the utilisation of abjection in works such *Horse's Tale* (figure 33) and *Milkdown*, (figure 32).

Rrap further addresses the judgment regarding women's bodies and representations in works such as *Overstepping.* Here, the impossible bodies portrayed in advertising are contextualised by the perceived narcissism of women attempting to conform to culturally propagated standards exacerbated in digital media.[81] The pervasive yet simplistic correlation between self-representation and narcissism is amplified in an age of social media, where young women who engage with the aesthetic conventions of platforms like Instagram are regularly labelled as narcissistic. [82] While the frequency in which such accusations are made has likely increased due to the popularity of mediums which encourage self-representational image sharing, the basis of the accusation has existed throughout history.[83]

Digital media as a feminist tool of embodiment

The digital media utilised in Rrap's work is also integral to the seamlessness of the representational body's transformation across conceptual and physical boundaries. Using digital media including video, photography and editing software including Photoshop, Rrap

[80] Ewington, "Julie Rrap Artist Profile,"; Hannah Fink, "Julie Rrap," The University of Melbourne, The Vizard Foundation Art Collection of the 1990s, accessed March 21, 2022, https://www.vizardfoundationartcollection.com.au/the-nineties/explore/julie-rrap/.
[81] Susan J. Douglas, "Narcissism as Liberation," in *The Gender and Consumer Culture Reader,* ed. Jennifer Scanlon (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 267-268.
[82] Jin, and Ryu, "The Paradox of Narcissus and Echo in the Instagram Pond," 570-571; Singh, Farley, and Donahue, "Grandiosity on Display," 311; Peek, "The Selfie in the Digital Age," 28; Kristindottir, Kolbrun Harpa, et al. "Narcissism and Social Media: The Role of Communal Narcissism." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 19 (2021): 1-4.
[83] Sara Konrath, "The Empathy Paradox: Increasing Disconnection in the Age of Increasing Connection," in *Handbook of Research on Technoself: Identity in a Techological Society,* ed. Rocci Luppicini (Hershey: IGI Global, 2013), 204-204, 215, 218.

constructs a smooth transition from recognisable bodies to disquieting, ambiguous figures and identities. For example, in both *Fleshpool* and *Body Double* (figures 21-22), it is the ease with which the body transforms into otherness that creates contrasting unease for the viewer. As with photography, audience reactions to video images are highly informed by the perceived realism created.[84] Similarly in *Overstepping*, the foot is seamlessly digitally manipulated into the form of the heeled shoe, whereas in *Fleshstones, Mark Bush* (figure 27), 2003, the bodies are digitally morphed into the shape of rocks.[85] In her incorporation of photography, video and digital editing, Rrap challenges the viewer's perceptions of fixed ideas of identity and gender. Instead, bodies are explored as transformative constructs. Rrap not only incorporates digital technology but also interrogates digital media references to advertisements and popular culture, further positioning her work in conversation with 1970s performance art.

Body Double is an amalgam of both digital process and concept, demonstrating the importance of digital technology within Rrap's unconventional representations of the body. With silicone rubber casts of Rrap's body placed on the ground, one facing upwards and the other facing downwards, projections of a male or female figure, which changes gender throughout the 11-minute loop, move across the work from one cast to the other. At times the projections settle upon the casts, inhabiting the body with the identity of the projection. This leads to moments of gender incongruity, such as when the male projection settles on the female sculpture, appearing as a "hermaphroditic figure."[86] The projections are triggered by

[84] Stephen Prince, "True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory," *Film Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 27-37.
[85] Jo Daniell, "Julie Rrap Body Double," *MCA Education Kit,* October 10, 2022, http://artissues-bodyrepresentation.weebly.com/uploads/1/4/7/8/14783914/julie_rrap_body_double_education_kit_final_2.pdf, 14; Lynn, *Julie Rrap: Body Double*, 97, 129
[86] Lynn, *Julie Rrap*, 91; Mendelssohn, "Her Own Woman," 35.

audience movement, thus involving the viewer in the changing bodily identities.[87] Through this involvement, audiences are positioned as central to the construction of embodied identity, asking them to consider their own complicity in the way western society views gender and identity.[88] In addition to the references to performance and body art, the potential fluidity of gender is addressed in the way Rrap's figure morphs between male and female.

The body casts on the ground also evoke classical sculpture, one of the most enduring forms of bodily representation in western art. Rrap subverts the permanence, stability, and gendered materiality associated with marble and bronze statues, recreating them in rubber and placing them flat on the ground, removed from the traditional grandeur and stability of the plinth. As the body projections move from cast to cast, the video form of the sculpture travels in unexpected routes, creating what Rrap terms "turbulence."[89] Turbulence further enhances the synergistic relationship between artwork and viewer, as the audience witnesses the implied unpredictability of their presence on the bodily representation. Digital technology is also central to the work, with the digital video projected upon each body cast.[90]

Rrap further utilises digital technology to create subversive representations of the body through her relationship to the audience. By challenging the audience with representations of bodies which defy traditional boundaries or artistic conventions, Rrap creates artworks that are conceptually complex and ambiguous. Jones has referenced Rrap's persistent inclination to explore the limits in the relationship between the audience and artist, acknowledging the

[87] Lynn, *Julie Rrap*, 91
[88] Julie Rrap and Dr Vincent Alessi, *Julie Rrap: Remaking the World,* (Parkville: The Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2015), 46.
[89] Julie Rrap, *Turbulence*, 3rd Auckland Triennial 2007, accessed May 3, 2018, https://aucklandtriennial.com/static/archive/2007/artists/rrap.html; Lynn, *Julie Rrap*, 91.
[90] Mendelssohn, "Her Own Woman," 35.

ways in which Rrap's representations of her body resist simple understanding.[91] Throughout her career, Rrap has utilised new technologies as part of her process of challenging traditional hierarchies and aesthetics inherently associated with the female body. Though the subversion of artistic conventions and cultural standards, Rrap repositions the contemporary body as a site of conceptual mutability. Simultaneously, by denying easy categorisation or simplistic interpretation, Rrap demonstrates her trust in the viewer's own perception, thereby encouraging active and more complex critical engagement, asking them to question the limitations and realities of embodied experience.

Rrap's cyborg body

The limitations of embodiment, feminist theory, and digital technology are similarly explored in Rrap's engagement with the cyborg body.[92] Cyborg aesthetics and ideas became linked with feminism primarily in response to the challenge confronting the enduring associations between sex and implicit behavioural differences. Feminist theorists including Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler sought to reframe the biological association with patriarchy and anti-feminist beliefs by highlighting the separation between sex and gender.[93] The cyborg body further offered a counterpoint to determinism, essentialism, binaries and patriarchal control.[94] For Haraway, the cyborg suggests an escape from the fixed dichotomies which dictate normative identity and experience in society.[95] The cyborg body rejects oppositional

[91] Amelia Jones, "Time passing upside down: Julie Rrap's 360-degree self-portrait," *Art in Australia* 49, no. 3 (Autumn 2012): 476.
[92] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 3-90.
[93] Asberg, "The arena of the body: 26-27.
[94] Asberg, "The arena of the body," 31-32; Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 827.
[95] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 8-9.

dualisms, including the separation between nature and technology, instead situating the cyborg body as an amalgam of both physicality and codification.[96]

The influence of digitally modified bodies is explored throughout Rrap's oeuvre. *Overstepping* directly references the potential for altered human forms, as limb becomes merged with utilitarian and aesthetic object, the heeled shoe, in what has been labelled a "sex-and-cyborg narrative." [97] In *Soft Targets,* (figure 23-24), 2004, Rrap portrays her own body transformed into potential weapons, referencing firearm technology. The technological influence on the body is also explored in her 2000 kinetic sculpture*, Powerwalker*, in which the metal sculptural foot moves and taps when triggered by a viewer's presence.[98] The digitally transformed body is also explored through *Body Double*, where the technologically formed figure slides effortlessly from male to female, often depicted simultaneously as both. The incorporation of digital technology to subvert the gender binary is central to the cyborg body, and demonstrative of the importance of digital media within Rrap's work.

Drawn from socialist feminism and influenced by the writings of many including Octavia Butler, Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig, Mary Douglas, the cyborg body rejects the patriarchal attitudes which separate women from science, instead calling for a conceptualisation of embodiment which places scientific and technological intervention at the forefront.[99] However, the cyborg also challenged feminist ideas by questioning distinctions between biology, technology and culture.[100] In contrast to Rrap's emphasis on the impact of technology on the physical body, artists like Stelarc instead suggest that the body is

[96] Anne Marie Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996): 11-12.
[97] George Alexander, "Sex in the Cyborg: Julie Rrap's Overstepping," *Artlink* 22, no. 1 (2002): 29.
[98] Lynn, *Julie Rrap: Body Double*, 106.
[99] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 52-54.
[100]Asberg, "The arena of the body," 32-3

obsolete.[101] Amongst the most well-known of Stelarc's works is the *Ear on Arm* project, (figure 35) 2007-8, in which the artist had an ear grown in a laboratory and then attached to his arm, with the intention of it being able to "hear" via inserted microphone.[102]

Stelarc's intent to broadcast what his extra ear hears across the internet also challenges the role of the body in personal identity and privacy boundaries by allowing his body to act as a device which transcends physical boundaries.[103] Unlike Rrap, who repeatedly affirms the tactility and physicality of embodied existence, Stelarc rejects the necessity of the body, pursing the possibility of existence beyond the "limits" and obligation of the body.[104] As Jones argues, Stelarc's exploration of the obsolete body is undermined by the fact that he exists without the features which would hold one back from overcoming their embodiment, both within the conceptual exploration, or within contemporary society.[105] The extent to which his body allows him to function in the world with an advantage over many others is not invalidated by the fact that Stelarc is from a Greek immigrant family, as Jones points out, as it is the way he is perceived which most greatly impacts how he is treated.[106] In society, his body remains a privileged masculine body.

In his incorporation of machine technology within the de-individualised representational body, Stelarc suggests a cyborg future which rejects all sensual and tactile implications of human embodiment. Rrap, in contrast, proposes a use of the cyborg body to reject

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[101] Michael Filas, "My Dinner with Stelarc: A Review of Techno- Flesh Hybridity in Art," *The Information Society* 29, no. 5 (2013): 290.
[102] Ear Stelarc, "Ear on Arm, 2008," Stelarc, accessed February 2, 2017, http://stelarc.org/?catID=20242; Filas, "My Dinner with Stelar," 288.
[103] Filas, "My Dinner with Stelarc," 288; Stelarc, "Ear on Arm, 2008."
[104] Howard Caygill, "Stelarc and the Chimera: Kant's Critique of Prosthetic Judgment," *Art Journal* 56, no. 1 (March 1997): 48; Ashley Crawford, "Stelarc," *Art Monthly Australasia*, 248, (April 2012): 10-11; Dr Marquard Smith and Stelarc, *Stelarc: The Monograph* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 137.
[105] Amelia Jones, *Self Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 177.
[106] Jones, *Self Image*, 197-198.

masculinist, patriarchal ideas, by instead using technological intervention to highlight the tactility and physicality of the body, rather than to conquer it. This tactility is most overtly demonstrated in works such as *Overstepping,* where the physical details of the figure are emphasised rather than removed. Wrinkles, skin discolouration and natural texture are highlighted, with even the cyborgian heeled point portraying human physicality through the implied discomfort signalled by the tell-tale redness of the distorted flesh. The discolouration also positions the figure as more identifiably human, provoking the viewer to consider times of their own physical discomfort. Despite the impossibility of the form, and implied technological intervention for the foot-shoe-hybrid to exist in real life, Rrap's cyborg bodies remain identifiably human. Throughout her oeuvre, Rrap's work can be seen to draw from cyborg aesthetics and ideas, while maintaining the inescapabilty of physical embodiment, and the prejudices and restrictions that remain tied to it. In doing so, Rrap demonstrates the unique quality of the artistic body to address concerns around gendered social attitudes, while reaffirming the physicality of embodied identity through exploration of tactility and technological intervention.

The indexicality of photography and tactility of the body

Ideas of the tactility of the body are also identified as central to Rrap's exploration of embodiment in the digital age, referencing how the "body has become data."[107] In contemporary society, biotechnologies are similarly significant, altering the "sequential ordering of human codes."[108] The changing of bodily codes is also indicative of the history of mark-making and bodily modifications. The idea of signifier inscriptions upon the body, as found in digitally represented bodies, are also found in physical cultures.[109] These

[107] Lynn, *Julie Rrap: Body Double,* 97.
[108] Francesca Alfano Miglietti, *Extreme bodies: the use and abuse of the body in art* (Milan: Skira, 2003), 163.
[109] Elizabeth Grosz, "The Body as Inscriptive Surface." In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, ed. Elizabeth Grosz, (St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994) 138-143

inscriptions on the body are found in most cultures, with styles and methods differing between each. The contemporary western manifestation of this mark-making includes diet and exercise.[110]

Rrap's exploration of the presence and tactility of the body is indicative of an increasingly digital world, and her enduring interest in the feminist ideology of representation and embodiment. *Body Rub* (figure 36), in 2006, appears to directly explore the indexicality and tactility of photography. In *Body Rub,* Rrap creates a series of abstracted bodily forms by combining photographs of herself printed and then abstracted by applying graphite. She then created head-shaped erasers which she used to further alter the printed images.[111] The process of reshaping these printed bodily representations literally becomes part of the work, resulting in the corresponding video work *Mind over Matter,* (figure 37). In addition to the material intervention, Rrap resituates the digital photographic image within a context of tactility, undermining the perception of the objective, two-dimensionality of photography. Objectivity and tactility further reference the indexicality of photography, recreating the physical imprint of the captured image through direct physical mark-making.[112] In series such as *Body Rub,* Rrap disrupts the objectivity of her images through physical intervention with the eraser-head. Whereas in works such as *Soft Targets* (figure 23-24), she reinforces the perception of a photographic truth through bright lighting and flat white background, encouraging the audience's inclination to view photographs as 'real,' despite her digital intervention.[113]

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[110] Grosz, "The Body as Inscriptive Surface," 142.
[111] Lynn, *Julie Rrap: Body Double,* 73.
[112] French, "Julie Rrap", 36.
[113] Martin Lister, *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture* (London: Routledge, 2013), 9; Scott Walden, "Objectivity in Photography," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 45, no. 3 (2005): 262; Elisabeth Eglem and Monica Tavares, "Between Technological and Social Evolution: Digital Photography as a Framework for (Im)Material Experiences," *Studies in Visual Arts and Communication* 5, no. 2 (2018): 2.

The assumption of a photographic reality has endured, in part, due to the medium's technical differences from more established art forms such as paintings and sculpture, and the historical debate surrounding photography's categorisation.[114] Photography's status as art or science has also changed over time.[115] Where the artist's hand is directly evident in more traditional mediums, in some cases literally through brushstroke or carved mark, photography allows the artist to remain distant in the mind of the viewer. The photograph is constructed through the artist's intent and set-up, however the camera's role as an intermediary between the subject and the artist has historically been one cause of the perceived separation between artist's hand and resulting photograph.[116] This also references art criticism through medium specificity, which positions the value of the work as the extent to which it is "unique to the nature of its medium."[117] The derision of both photographic and performance mediums have often resulted from medium specificity, as the subject of the work is more frequently the focus, while the artist creation and talent is ignored or viewed as secondary.[118] In *Body Rub* (figure 36) 2006, Rrap subverts this notion by centring her own artistic hand. Depicted on top of the photographs, the hand drawn elements of *Body Rub* visually demonstrate her artistic process. Through the inclusion of the artists hand, Rrap positions the photographs underneath as being as much of an artistic creation as the drawing on top. In doing so, Rrap's work provokes consideration of the tactility of the body, the ephemerality of the internet, and contemporary cultures of body modification.

[114] Derrick Price and Liz Wells, Thinking about photography: debates, historically and now, in *Photography: A Critical Introduction,* ed. Liz Wells (New York: Routledge, 2021), 16-20.
[115] Richard W. Christopherson, "From Folk Art To Fine Art: A Transformation in the Meaning of Photographic Work," *Urban Life and Culture*, 3, no. 2 (1974): 124-27.
[116] Luc Boltanski, and Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 78.
[117] Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Charles Harrison (London: Harper Row 1982), 6-7.
[118] Boltanski and Bourdieu, *Photography*, 78.

Through applying a traditional technique upon a contemporary digital photograph, Rrap entangles the increasingly technological body with the inescapable physicality of human embodiment. The feminist implications remain throughout, as Rrap continues to utilise her own body, depicted and then obscured. Evidence of physical intervention further positions the body depicted as Rrap's own, denying the male gaze and objectification through the physical mark making, which recalls graffiti tagging or signing one's name on their belongings. Rrap explores her ownership of her body in a digital age in where bodies are frequently positioned as commodities, utilising a medium with a history of complex associations with creation and possession. The pervasiveness of commodification is enhanced in an age of social media and copyright, where possession over imagery is often ambiguous, due to the rapidly evolving digital technology and global reach of online platforms.[119]

Shooting the subject

Photography's association with possession, echoed by the language utilised, such as to 'capture' a subject, is examined in the series *Soft Targets* (figures 23-24) 2004. In this series, Rrap explores the direct correlation between shooting an image using a camera and shooting a target with a weapon. *Soft Targets* is comprised of thirteen life sized photographs of Rrap's own body, digitally photographed then manipulated.[120] The photographs have been taken under direct lighting, which serves to flatten the perspective of the bodily forms. The lighting, perspective and depth of field are reminiscent of Rrap's earliest work photographic work, in which the goal was to capture the subjects objectively, without artistic intervention.[121] In doing so, Rrap explores the ambiguity and complexity inherent in bodily representation in the

[119] Jani McCutcheon, "Copyrighting Culture: Photography and the Public Domain," *Photography & Culture* 11, no. 3 (2018): 271; Corinne Tan, *Regulating Content on Social Media: Copyright, Terms of Service and Technological Features* (London: University College London, 2018), 1-8.
[120] Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, *Julie Rrap – Soft Targets, 2004*, (Paddington NSW: Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery: 2004), Exhibition catalogue, accessed April 21, 2019, https://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/news/releases/2004/10/14/82/.
[121] Maloon, "Interview with Terrance Maloon," 114-5.

digital age, where representations of the body can appear both realistic and obviously edited, encouraging both intimacy and distance.

The dualism of contemporary body representation is echoed throughout *Soft Targets*, which, as with much of Rrap's work, holds multiple meanings. The titles in the series are taken from "specialist firearm terminology."[122] *Boat Tail* (figure 24), for instance, refers to: "Bullet of tapered base or truncated conical base design, which raises the ballistic coefficient factor by reducing the aerodynamic drag, providing greater stability at subsonic velocities."[123] By referencing firearm terminology, Rrap further links the process of photography with shooting a firearm.[124] Utilising language as a method of addressing the position of power a photographer yields over the subject was most famously explored by Susan Sontag, who claimed that to photograph a human subject "turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed."[125] The language used in reference to photography echoes what Sontag describes as the predatory act of capturing someone in a photograph, as to photograph someone is to both view an aspect of themselves the subject does not see, and to capture permanently an aspect of knowledge the subject themselves does not hold.[126] The complicated nature of photographing people is echoed in the language used, and is, for Sontag and Rrap, an act of possession.

Rrap explores possession and ownership by subverting the conventions of bodily representation, both by using her own body as the subject and further by obfuscating the body's appearance through the ambiguous forms represented. The use of shadow is also

[122] Lynn, *Julie Rrap: Body Double,* 142.
[123] Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, *Julie Rrap – Soft Targets, 2004*.
[124] Lynn, *Julie Rrap: Body Double,* 142.
[125] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2010), 10.
[126] Sontag, *On Photography*, 10.

notable for the implication that the represented body exists beyond what is visible in the photograph, with shadows being cast from limbs that cannot be seen, such as in *Boat Tail (BT)* (figure 24). In this series, the body is both real and unreal, as the act of capturing a body through the camera inherently transforms it. Rrap's shadows extend beyond the expected forms of a shadow when the figure is hit with harsh light. However, the idea that shadows are static is as deceptive as the idea of a photographic truth. By exaggerating the shadow forms, Rrap heightens the familiarity of the images, while encouraging the viewer to question the reality of what they are seeing.

The use of the artist's own nude female body as a subject of unconventional representation which references violence, possession, and the lack of an objective photographic truth, is also an inherently transgressive use of the body and subversion of the traditional female nude. This is reiterated by Blair French, who positions the works as both vulnerable and defiant, challenging the historical notions of the representational female body.[127] Throughout the series, it is difficult to ascertain "where analogue process ends and digital reworking begins" in terms of the abstract representation of the bodies in these works.[128] The style of the imagery and Rrap's play with shadow, dimension and perspective confound conventional markers of perspective and physicality. French defines this as Rrap thereby evading "entrapment in the gaze."[129] Rrap's face is not visible in most images and her body is twisted into positions suggestive of human physicality while simultaneously evoking surreal imagery.

As digital advancements further shape the nature of combat, Rrap's *Soft Targets* also evokes the dehumanised manner of killing people through the use of digital technology, enabling the

[127] Blair French. "Julie Rrap: Soft Targets," *Eyeline,* no. 59 (Summer 2005-06): 37.
[128] French, "Julie Rrap, 37.
[129] French, "Julie Rrap, 38.

controller to be far removed from the destruction they create, termed "remote warfare."[130] The accuracy of the idea of technologically enabled distance has been debated, however, as modern drone control may not be dissimilar to being in an aircraft.[131] It can also be argued as a continuation of the way in which varied technologies have always historically been utilised to create personal distance from harm during war.[132] However, the potential for digital technology to enable greater violence as a result of both practical ease and the psychological distancing created remains contemporaneously relevant, and is explored through the confronting association between violence and the representation of the violated body.[133] It is not Rrap's nor Sontag's assertion that shooting a gun is physically or literally similar to shooting a camera, rather it is the exemplification of the way in which language can be used to reference multiple concepts simultaneously in order to echo the similarities in power and possession in both acts. Rrap's choice of medium further reiterates the complexity of embodiment in contemporary technologically advanced society, and the potential for these advancements to be both constructive and destructive. While French states that these images are not demonstrative of a digital aesthetic and are rather "sensual" works, I instead suggest that they are highly representative of the aesthetic of the contemporary digital body.[134] The digital manipulation of bodies into strange new forms, combined with maintaining features which both identify them as human and recall associations with the abject, position these works as examples of bodily representation responding directly to the growth of digital technology in all facets of life, as also seen in Carlsen's *Hester* series.

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[130] Jolle Demmers and Lauren Gould,"The Remote Warfare Paradox: Democracies, Risk Aversion and Military Engagement." E- International Relations, accessed June 20, 2020. https://www.e-ir.info/2020/06/20/the-remote-warfare-paradox-democracies-risk-aversion-and-military-engagement/

[131] Jeangène Vilmer, and Jean-Baptiste, "Not So Remote Drone Warfare," *International Politics* (2021): 1-22. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-021-00338-9.

[132] Rubrick Biegon, Vladimir Rauta, and Tom F. A. Watts, "Remote Warfare - Buzzword or Buzzkill?" *Defence Studies* 21, no. 4 (2021): 431.

[133] Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, *Julie Rrap – Soft Targets, 2004*.

[134] French, "Julie Rrap," 39.

Digital media and Rrap's body politics

While Rrap's work is not overtly activist, it is inherently political. The incorporation of political views within artworks depicting the body is reminiscent of early 1960s-70s performance art; however, unlike this earlier conception of body art, contemporary representations more often appear to avoid activism in favour of nuanced political ideas woven within the already multifaceted art works. The volume of political ideas shared online in contemporary society may contribute toward more subtle representation of political ideology. In pre-digital periods, political art was an essential aspect of political discourse and activism. Artists used their artistic platforms to bring attention to issues, including feminism. In the contemporary digital age, access to information has increased through the internet and subsequently enhanced by platforms such as Twitter, giving voice to members of society who would not otherwise be heard by those in positions of power.[135] Additionally, social media sites allow greater specificity in political activism, as a larger volume of people are publicly engaged in political discourse.[136] Increasingly, digital media is utilised in activism.[137] Grassroots movements, for example, are able to find audiences online.[138] Twitter has also been used in political campaigns.[139] Additionally, movements like Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street grew dramatically via Twitter.[140] However, conversation does not necessarily equate with action, as a result online activism has sometimes been termed

[135] Mark Nartey, "Centering Marginalized Voices: A Discourse Analytic Study of the Black Lives Matter Movement on Twitter," *Critical Discourse Studies* 19, no. 5 (2021): 523-525; Rachel M. Schmitz, Jonathan S. Coley, Christine Thomas, and Anibal Ramirez, "The Cyber Power of Marginalized Identities: Intersectional Strategies of Online Lgbtq+ Latinx Activism," *Feminist Media Studies* 22, no. 2 (2020): 272.
[136] Rachel Loney-Howes, and Bianca Fileborn, *#Metoo and the Politics of Social Change* (Cham:Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 2; Bonner, "Performing Archives in the Present," 33.
[137] Joss Hands, "Activism and Technology," in *@ Is for Activism: Dissent, Resistance and Rebellion in a Digital Culture*, ed. Joss Hands (New York: Pluto Press, 2011), 29.
[138] Simon Lindgren, "The Potential and Limitations of Twitter Activism: Mapping the 2011 Libyan Uprising," *TripleC* 11, no. 1 (2013): 207.
[139] Joss Hands, "Power-Law Democracy," in *@ Is for Activism: Dissent, Resistance and Rebellion in a Digital Culture*, ed. Joss Hands (New York: Pluto Press, 2011), 120.
[140] Jordana J. George, and Dorothy E. Leidner, "From Clicktivism to Hacktivism: Understanding Digital Activism," *Information and organization* 29, no. 3 (2019): 1; Deborah Gambs, "Occupying Social Media," *Socialism and Democracy* 26, no. 2 (2012): 55.

"slacktivism" to describe online activism without offline follow through.[141] Others have argued that while online activism does not necessarily equate with offline activism, social media has also been positioned as "gateway drug" to further activism.[142] Significantly, Twitter also allows immediate sharing of information, from a disparate range of sources.[143]

The influence of political engagement on social media is evident throughout the art of Schrager and Huxtable, discussed in chapters five and six respectively, positioning Rrap's work as indicative of the evolution from the pre-digital era and this new form of political engagement. Rrap's political engagement reflects a time of increased media representation and accessibility of information beyond the limited and highly regulated news channels, via access to the internet. Importantly, her work is often referencing the time before the rise of interactive social media, demonstrating the impact of digital, as opposed to social, media. In her works which can be read as more political, such as *Soft Targets* (figure 23-24), the representation of the body can also be seen to question the mental gymnastics used in the justification of drone killings. *Soft Targets* can be read as political and can even anti-war, yet through the subtlety of political signalling and the amalgamation of multiple concepts into one complex work. The series remains visually distinct from the types of activist artwork popularised by second wave feminists and that of fourth wave social media artists Schrager and Huxtable, suggesting an identifiably third wave, digitally influenced political style of imagery.

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[141] Cristian Vaccari et al., "Political Expression and Action on Social Media: Exploring the Relationship between Lower- and Higher-Threshold Political Activities among Twitter Users in Italy," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20, no. 2 (2015): 222; Derek Moscato, "Media Portrayals of Hashtag Activism: A Framing Analysis of Canada's #Idlenomore Movement," *Media and Communication* 4, no. 2 (2016): 10.
[142] Vaccari et al., "Political Expression and Action on Social Media," 232.
[143] Axel Maireder, and Julian Ausserhofer, "Political Discourses on Twitter Networking Topics, Objects, and People" in *Twitter and Society,* ed. Katrin Weller (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 306.

The landscape of perceptually realistic uncanny bodies

Rrap uses digital media to reference political issues that are often hidden from public consciousness, referencing immigration and the environment as her inspirations in her 2003 series *Fleshstones* (figure 25-27).[144] Like Carlsen's *Hester* series, Rrap was interested in using photography to explore sculptural representation, inspired by Henry Moore and Auguste Rodin.[145] In contrast, however, Rrap used the bodies of male friends, family members and acquaintances, in order to dismiss the tropes surrounding the female body in the landscape.[146] Created by photographing the landscape and the male bodies separately and later combining the two images through photo-editing software, Rrap continues the exploration of the possibilities of digitally manipulated photography in bodily representation.[147] As seen throughout *Hester,* the forms in *Fleshstones* hint at bodily representation only in the inclusion of nipples, body hair and fine detailed flesh. The incorporation of disembodied bodies into landscape also provokes associations as to the convention of both landscape and body art, in addition to referencing the particularities of the Australian landscape.[148] Incorporated seamlessly within the environment, Rrap's digitally manipulated photographs create moments of disbelief as the eye seeks to fully fuse the *Fleshstones* within the landscape. Like the forms in *Hester,* Rrap's figures are visually confronting for their ability to appear both real, further enhanced by the otherwise normality of the depicted landscape, while simultaneously existing as monstrous, uncanny creations.

[144] Adrian Parr, "Julie Rrap: fleshstones", Arc One Gallery via Monash Collections online, 2003, accessed April 18, 2019, http://repository.erc.monash.edu/items/show/66563; Megan Backhouse, "Flesh Taking Form", The Age, 9 August, 2003**,** http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/08/06/1060145719411.html; Adrian Parr, "Art politics and climate change," in *New Directions in Sustainable Design,* ed. Adrian Parr, and Michael Zaretsky (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 9-10.
[145] Parr, "Art politics and climate change," 9-10.
[146] Backhouse, "Flesh Taking Form."
[147] Backhouse, "Flesh Taking Form."
[148] Adrian Parr, "Stone into Flesh," *Artlink* 23, no. 3 (September- November 2003): 58-59.

Rrap further undermines the notion of an idealised body contrasted against a wild and untamed landscape, in addition to the tradition within art and literature of bodies transformed from stone into flesh, brought to life through the combination of the artist's skill and desire. Through depicting intentionally ambiguous form, Rrap encourages the viewer to question whether the *Fleshstones* are coming to life, or if are they dying; a natural part of the environment or placed from elsewhere.[149] The digital editing of the image enhances their otherworldly perception, as the *Fleshstones* themselves are seamlessly created as amorphous rolling forms that appear as actual living creations. Rrap explores the uncanny surrealism of the body existing in an altered state, that is neither real nor unreal, existing instead somewhere in between. She creates this ambiguity through the differentiation between dimensional representation, created primarily with light and shadow, drawing on Rrap's previous experience working with documentary style photography, further echoing Carlsen's practice. The borders of the *Fleshstones* are also clearly defined, suggesting multiple layers of edited imagery and creating the sense of the bodies existing within the landscape temporarily, as if in a dream or hallucination.

Adrian Parr, discussing Rrap's series, also references Rrap's interest in the confrontation of the pervasive issue of bodies trapped within detention centres.[150] Detention centres are positioned as part of an enduring history of colonisation and control in Australian land as quoted by Rrap as "containing both beauty and fear: A contrast that saw European occupation attempt to transfigure and colonise both the land and its indigenous population."[151] The history of confinement is central to the series, as the association with detention centres is also

[149] Parr, "Julie Rrap: Fleshstones."
[150] Parr, "Julie Rrap: Fleshstones."
[151] Parr, "Julie Rrap: Fleshstones."

referenced through the ambiguity of representational bodies and their lack of autonomous identity.[152]

The use of surrealism or dreamlike representation has been frequently utilised throughout art and literature as a device in confronting issues of immigration and displacement, partially due to the power of the surreal or literary magical realism to subvert traditional boundaries within the audiences mind.[153] Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West*, for example, utilises magical realism to create a dreamlike story of the universality of home, belonging and desire for autonomous bodily control, bypassing prejudices and social realism in order to exist as an exploration of complex experiences. This enables the ideas to be experienced in the abstract and emotional, rather than as a political statement, creating a more affecting work. Rrap achieves a similar impact in *Fleshstones*, where the political engagement remains tied to the inherent human identification with the subjugated body, evading the didactic limitations of traditional political statements. George Alexander argues that it is important for artworks that addresses ideologies to avoid the approach of moral teaching. In this way, Alexander identifies Rrap as an example of an artist successfully confronting patriarchal culture without "ramming pre-digested moral down our throats."[154]

Discussing *Fleshstones*, Parr points to the figures lack of occupation of the place in which they are situated as a signifier of the political statement Rrap is making, a common theme throughout not only this series but many of Rrap's body representations.[155] In her representation of male bodies depicted as strange ambiguous forms, Rrap also subverts the tradition of the idealised female nude body represented amongst nature, and the implication

[152] Parr, "Julie Rrap: Fleshstones."
[153] Mohsin Hammad, *Exit West* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017)
[154] Alexander, "Julie Rrap: Hide and Seek," 9.
[155] Parr, "Julie Rrap: Fleshstones."

of the female as Mother Nature figure. The enduring association between female bodies and nature is also related to beauty, passivity, fertility, and ownership by men. In representing the body in a way that defies associations with traditional femininity, Rrap repositions the digitally mediated body as a transgressive subject, utilised to confront the viewer and question attitudes towards bodies.

Ambiguity and abjection as feminist representation

Another feminist tactic employed by Rrap is the use of ambiguity and abjection. As with many of her contemporaries, Rrap is interested in representing the body as a subject to elicit emotional and psychological responses. The contemporary implementation of digital media, through the manipulation of recognisable bodily forms into surreal creations which provoke uncomfortable reactions, reconfigure the artistic body as a subject beyond the physical. For Rrap, this is often created using abjection and ambiguity. Rrap has repeatedly explored abjection throughout her practice, most notably in the representation of breasts with milk casts in her 2005-06 work *Milkdown* (figure 32) and her 1999 series, *Porous Bodies*. In these works, Rrap incorporates abject material, including milk, blood, urine, a cow tongue, false teeth, and horsehair. Each substance is removed from its intended place and resituated among unfamiliar environments, either placing them away from any other physical matter, or upon her own body. Works such as *Love Bird Teeth* (figure 38) and *Blood & Urine Heart,* both made in 1999, are removed from any other human representation, yet retain the horror of their human origin. Abjection is also closely associated with the physical sensation of repulsion.[156] The physical response produced from seeing material that transgresses bodily

[156] Danielle Jacquart, and Claude Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Oxford: Polity Press, 1985), 1.

boundaries, is in a state of transition such as decomposition, or disregard, like rubbish, is a key identifier of abject material.[157]

Similarly, the desire to reject the abject material, by either turning away or mentally denigrating the abject subject, is a central aspect of abjection.[158] It is the desire to repel abject matter which provides a possibility of transgression for artists like Rrap, who utilise the inherent physical response produced to undermine the social structures which use this response to privilege some groups and marginalise others.[159] By incorporating abject material, Rrap is able to encourage the audience to confront the relationship between the physical reaction they have to abject matter and the learned social associations which problematically link abject material with patriarchal, racist and heteronormative social ideals. For instance, Butler identifies the role of abjection in the socio-cultural attitudes towards homosexuality through the exclusion from heterosexual social ideals, and in the crossing of social boundaries.[160] Verbal abuse often aimed at those believed to be same-sex attracted is further representative of the role of abjection in regards to embodied identity, as the othering of homosexuality seeks to exclude and expel, positioning homosexual attraction as abject in and of itself.[161] It can be argued that our racist, patriarchal society has linked abject materials

[157] Nead, *The Female Nude*, 32; Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 85; Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla, "Abjection and the Politics of Feminist and Queer Subjectivities in Contemporary Art," *Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 13, no. 1 (2008): 65; Hanjo Berressem, "On the Matter of Abjection," in *The Abject of Desire the Aestheticization of the Unaesthetic in Contemporary Literature and Culture*, ed. Konstanze Kutzbach, and Monika Mueller (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007): 34; Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 181-2; Douglas, *Purity and Danger,* 97; Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla, "Abjection and the Politics of Feminist and Queer Subjectivities in Contemporary Art," *Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 13, no. 1 (2008): 65.
[158] Nead, *The Female Nude,* 32; Kathy Smith, "Abject Bodies Beckett, Orlan, Stelarc and the Politics of Contemporary Performance," *Performance Research* 12, no. 1 (2007): 66.
[159] Gutiérrez-Albilla, "Abjection and the Politics of Feminist," 65-66, 68, Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 178-182.
[160] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 181-2; Butler, *Bodies That Matter,* 21, 96-7. Christopher Pullen, *LGBT Transnational Identity and the Media* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 12-13.
[161] Rina Arya, and Nicholas Chare, "Introduction: approaching abjection," in *Abject Visions: Powers of Horror in Art and Visual Culture*. ed. Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 4.

with social value judgements which marginalise women, cultural and ethnic minorities, and those who do not conform to gender binaries or heteronormativity.[162]

The transgression of boundaries therefore has the power to be utilised as a tool within identity politics. This can also apply to gender, whereby within theories of abjection, the female body is always positioned as at greater risk of crossing the boundaries which produce abject responses.[163] The act of menstruation and childbirth particularly position women's bodies as less 'secure' within the boundaries of abjection.[164] The representation of abjection can, therefore, work to destabilise socio-cultural attitudes and prejudices.[165] Rrap repeatedly explores the transgressive and feminist possibilities of abjection, seen in works such as *Milkdown* (figure 32). *Milkdown* demonstrates Rrap's integration of contemporary digital media with traditional performance art aesthetics, as the repetition of stills echoes the performance art of Hannah Wilke in her *S.O.S. - Starification Object Series,* 1974-82 (figure 34). The inclusion of abject matter further positions the work as both feminist and transgressive.[166] The representation of a tactile substance such as milk is also powerful for the way in which it positions the two-dimensional photographic image within a more physically evocative space.

While Rrap has included abject material within many of her works, it is in the body works such as *Milkdown* and *Horse's Tale* (figure 33) 1999, where Rrap creates the most powerful examples of abjection. However, these examples of abject material are less common

[162] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 179-182; Rina Arya, "Taking Apart the Body: Abjection and Body Art," *Performance Research* 19, no. 1 (2014): 7.
[163] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,*101; Nead, *The Female Nude* 32; Andrew E. Benjamin, and John Fletcher, *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 92-93, 95-98; Christine Ross, "Redefinitions of Abjection in Contemporary Performances of the Female Body," *Res* 31, no. 31 (1997):154.
[164] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 101-102.
[165] Arya and Chare, "Introduction," 4.
[166] Price, and Shildrick, *Feminist Theory and the Body,* 7.

throughout Rrap's work in the twenty-first century, as she has instead moved towards a more subtle exploration of disgust and unease. Jane Polkinghorne suggests that in the contemporary artistic landscape, contemporary artists have increasingly moved beyond abjection in their confrontation of the complexities of embodiment, yet the influence of abjection can be found in feminist art concerned with disgust.[167] As with abjection, utilising disgust within art can be a way to disrupt the separation between viewer and artwork, enabling greater emotional response.[168] In Rrap's *Fleshstones* series, the visceral repulsion and psychological unease of the bodily forms dismantles the barriers between artist, subject and viewer. As with Carlsen's *Hester* series, the monstrous bodies demonstrate a contemporary alternative to abjection, explored through digitally manipulated forms which trick the eye into appearing real, combined with psychological horror. In both Rrap and Carlsen's work, disgust is provoked through unsettling associations with death, violence, or deformity. Polkinghorne suggests that the "intersection of humour, disgust and failure" represent a contemporary feminist alternative to traditionally abject material such as body fluid or decay.[169] As seen in both Carlsen and Rrap's ambiguous yet recognisably human forms, humour, failure and particularly disgust are central to the effect produced, which echoes that created by abjection.

Digital technology has facilitated a visible change in feminist representations of the artistic body. With her career spanning decades and a continued focus on the representation of the body, Julie Rrap exemplifies this shift. Advancing digital technology and resulting digital culture have been critical in advancing the field in identity, embodiment, and feminism, in

[167] Jane Polkinghorne, "HEAVE, HO, HA: Disgust, humour and failure in contemporary feminist art," in *Feminist Perspectives on Art: Contemporary Outtakes*, ed. Jacqueline Millner, and Catriona Moore (New York: Routledge, 2018), 157-158.
[168] Polkinghorne, "HEAVE, HO, HA," 157-59.
[169] Polkinghorne, "HEAVE, HO, HA," 157.

addition to allowing for greater accessibility and freedom in photographic and video creation. Through the examination of key artworks, the theories upon which they have been constructed, and the historical landscape in which they were created, it is evident Rrap's oeuvre demonstrates the impact digital technology has had on the concept and creation of the body in art, especially photography. Rrap's work particularly exemplifies the use of digital media in the representation of bodies which explore the evolution of third wave feminism and the commodification of the body. Drawing from cyborg theory, performance art, advertising and media aesthetics, and abjection and ambiguity, Rrap's work represents the contemporary body as a complex, digitally mediated figure. Regarding feminist representations of the body, digital technology has been integral in the development of a contemporary artistic body which both draws from and challenges previous iterations of feminist corporeal representation.

Chapter Five

Performing the Sexualised Body as Digital Persona: Leah Schrager

"Duchamp said the urinal was art; I say I am art. You decide."[1]

The next generation of feminist body representation is explored by American artist Leah Schrager (born 1983). After studying dance and biology at the University of Washington, Schrager later earned a Master of Fine Arts from The New School's Parsons School of design in 2015.[2] Her online art practice exemplifies the blurred lines between the role of the artist, legitimised by the museum and gallery, and general social media user. Primarily exhibiting on Instagram and her own website, Schrager's practice incorporates photography, painting, music, live webcam performance and, in her most established work, the construction of an artistic persona on Instagram.[3] This persona, known as Ona Artist, intersects with representations of the sexualised female body in digital culture targeted at social media interactivity.[4] Schrager's digital practices not only bypass traditional modes of artistic display and legitimisation but are also positioned to align with a sexualised, fourth wave feminist declaration of empowerment, and conscious engagement with narcissism reflective of contemporary bodily representation online.[5] While adhering to the aesthetic conventions of digital sex work, Ona Artist is firmly situated as an artistic persona, in an exploration of celebrity and internet culture.[6] Schrager has explored other artistic personas which have

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[1] Leah Schrager, "Sarah White Therapy: The Original Naked Therapy Practice," Leah Schrager, accessed September 15, 2020, https://leahschrager.com/portfolio/sarah/.
[2] Leah Schrager, "About," Leah Schrager, accessed November 22, 2021, https://leahschrager.com/about/.
[3] Schrager, "About."
[4] Leah Schrager, "Ona Artist," *Instagram*, September 15, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/onaartist/.
[5] Amanda M. Jansson, "Leah Schrager's female gaze – An Interview," *Kaltblut Magazine*, March 1, 2018, https://www.kaltblut-magazine.com/leah-schragers-female-gaze-an-interview/.
[6] Leah Schrager, "Celebrity," Leah Schrager, accessed January 22, 2017, http://www.leahschrager.com/portfolio/celebrity/; Josephine Platt, "Meet the Digi Feminist Artist Living out Two Alter Egos," Hunger, accessed May 20, 2017, http://www.hungertv.com/feature/meet-the-digi-feminist-artist-living-out-two-alter-egos/.

similarly challenged boundaries between art and sex work throughout her career, including the Naked Therapist, Sarah White.[7] Her work seeks to challenge patriarchal ideas behind the way women in the media are portrayed as sexual commodities made for and consumed by the male gaze.[8]

Pers*Ona*

Bent over the banister in the centre of the frame, Schrager's Ona Artist, (figure 39) 2020, recalls the aesthetics of pornography, 'camgirls' or glamour models.[9] Her legs and buttocks are the primary physical features on display, while her face, partially covered by her shoulder and hair, remains firmly in the distance. The caption reads "I got us a room. What you wanna do?" implying intimacy and candidness. Crucially, the statement is both assertive in her direct tone, while also inviting direction from the viewer, complicating the idea of a passive woman functioning in relation to male dominance. Both her pose and the caption locate the image as sexual, as Schrager invites the audience to visualise themselves as part of the narrative. Her conventionally attractive body is thin yet curvaceous, with pale, flawless skin, positioning the image within the aesthetic of idealised feminine, sexual imagery. Schrager's high heels and minimal clothing further identify the piece as conventionally "hetero-sexy."[10] As with many photographs of Ona Artist, Schrager's depiction of her body as a sexually objectified figure is complicated, as she is the one objectifying herself, using the same visual language traditionally used by men objectifying women.

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[7] Schrager, "Sarah White Therapy."
[8] Leah Schrager, "Self-Made Supermodels: On Being an Instagram Model As A New Form Of DIY, Digital, Feminized Performance," Rhizome, accessed May 7, 2017, http://rhizome.org/editorial/2016/sep/08/self-made-supermodels/.
[9]Theresa M. Senft, *Camgirls: Celebrity & Community in the Age of Social Networks* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 59.
[10] Amy Shields Dobson, "Hetero-Sexy Representation by Young Women on Myspace: The Politics of Performing an 'Objectified' Self," *Outskirts: Feminisms along the Edge* 25, (2011): 1-14.

Throughout Schrager's Ona Artist Instagram, she repeatedly depicts her body in provocative, sexualised, self-objectified images. Most of the Ona images feature similar elements, including the fetishisation of traditionally sexualised body parts such as buttocks, breasts and crotch through exaggerated poses and close ups. Unlike Rrap, whose objectified and fragmented depictions of body parts are always unsettling and overtly subversive, Schrager's fetishisation of the body conforms to more conventional depictions of patriarchal objectification. When viewed collectively, the photographs are numbing in their consistent objectification and uniformity. The response is reflective of contemporary pornofied culture, as when viewers become used to seeing an abundance of sexualised or graphic imagery, the effect can be desensitising.[11] The desensitisation echoes the proposed potential effects of pornography, in which users seek out more graphic imagery as they become desensitised to 'softer' pornography.[12]

The comments from the online audience further locate the image as sexual, with many remarks openly objectifying Ona, as seen in *#29 of 40* (figure 40) in 2019, with comments often including tongue, peach and eggplant emojis, which have come to colloquially symbolise sexual desire.[13] The self-promotion and sexualisation, provocative captions, and Schrager's direct responses to commenters further situate the work within the tradition of a digital sex worker or cam girl. Schrager's Instagram collage of self-portraits (figure 41) 2020, demonstrates her examination of the role of the body in the emergent space of self-

[11] Noraini Md Yusof, Esmaeil Zeiny Jelodar, and Shahizah Ismail Hamdan, "Continued Visual Objectification: The Image of the Fair Sex in Occidental Advertisements," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 5, no. 20 (2014): 2887; Joanne Cantor, "Media Violence," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 27, no. 2 (2000): 30.
[12] Catherine Itzin, "Pornography and the Construction of Misogyny," *The Journal of Sexual Aggression* 8, no. 3 (2002): 25; E. Quayle et al., "The Internet and Offending Behaviour: A Case Study: Pornography and Sexual Agression," *The Journal of Sexual Aggression* 6, no. 1-2 (2000): 95.
[13] Samantha Thomson, Emily Kluftinger, and Jocelyn Wentland, "Are You Fluent in Sexual Emoji?: Exploring the Use of Emoji in Romantic and Sexual Contexts," *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 27, no. 3 (2018): 228.

proclaimed feminist persona art on social media. Conceived of as an intentionally sexualised figure, what Schrager calls a "hyper sexy" Instagram model, she uses representations of her body in order to gain followers and notoriety, while also seeking to question the way in which women's self-sexualisation is controlled.[14] Ona Artist is one of what Schrager calls heteronyms, as they exist as aspects of herself, known as both Ona or Ona Artist.[15] Schrager's chosen name is an important aspect of her work, as usernames are a crucial aspect of identity curation online, and Schrager's choice both references the word pers*ona* and identifies her as an artist.[16] The name was also chosen to denote references to masturbation through the word onanism, also drawn from the word woman in Japanese, and the associative sound of female empowered "owning it."[17]

Ona is what Schrager considers an exploration of "celebrity-as-art-practice."[18] The construction and exploration of celebrity similarly references historical male artistic tradition, as in Andy Warhol.[19] However, while Schrager has gained notoriety and a large online following with her Ona work, she does not appear to have reached a level of fame and artistic recognition she predicted.[20] Created in 2015, Schrager created Ona Artist with the stated aim of turning the persona into a celebrity figure by 2020.[21] Schrager has been posting content as

[14] Schrager, "Self-Made Supermodels."; Ann Finel Honigman, "3 Million People Follow Artist Leah Schrager's Cam-Girl Instagram Project. In a New Interview, She Explains Why She's Ending It," *ARTnews,* January 2, 2020, https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/leah-schrager-artist-cam-girl-interview-1202673901/.; Anna Freeman, "How to create a famous Instagram alter-ego," *Dazed*, September 22, 2016, https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/32881/1/how-artist-leah-schrager-created-her-famous-instagram-alter-ego-onaartist.
[15] Schrager, "Ona Artist."
[16] Emily van der Nagel, "From Usernames to Profiles: The Development of Pseudonymity in Internet Communication," *Internet Histories* 1, no. 4 (2017): 327.
[17] Kathy Battista, *New York New Wave: The Legacy of Feminist Art in Emerging Practices. (*London: I.B. Tauris, 2019): 65.
[18] Schrager, "Celebrity."; Platt, "Meet the Digi Feminist Artist."
[19] Battista, *New York New Wave,* 66.
[20] Honigman, "3 Million People Follow Artist Leah Schrager's Cam-Girl Instagram Project."
[21] Leah Schrager, "Ona – 3m Instagram," accessed August 20, 2020, https://leahschrager.com/ona; Schrager, "Self-Made Supermodels."

Ona consistently, amassing a following of 3.6 million on Instagram as of September 2020.[22] After five years of work, Schrager stated her intention to end the piece in January 2020, expressing disappointment with the art world for not giving her the credit she felt she deserved.[23] She stated that she experienced a "lack of support…from the art world and Instagram."[24] This reaction is notable both for her prioritisation of the audience above her internal artistic motivation, and her continuation of the Ona piece, which is still active as of August 2022, and has grown to an audience of 5.1 million.[25]

Schrager considers the perceived public reluctance to acknowledge her as both artist and sexy celebrity to echo the purpose of Ona, to subvert "puritanical art world prejudice" with the creation of her "DIY sexy celebrity."[26] Throughout her work, Schrager is explicitly interested in addressing the hypocrisy that enables male artists to create sexualised images of women, while female artists sexualising themselves are, she argues, "not respected."[27] She further highlights that women who engage in sex work are then not taken seriously, as if sex work and feminism are mutually exclusive.[28] Schrager positions her work as a way to confront the limitations of how women are allowed to portray themselves, suggesting that by depicting her body how she desires, she is working towards what she views as progress in the elimination of boundaries of representation.[29] The rejection of limitations is a central argument regarding representations of aesthetically sexualised, sex-positive feminism, which centres the individuals experience of empowerment in opposition to the view that sexualisation and

[22] Schrager, "Ona Artist."
[23] Honigman, "Million People Follow Artist Leah Schrager's."
[24] Honigman, "3 Million People Follow Artist Leah Schrager's Cam-Girl Instagram Project."
[25] Schrager, "Ona Artist."
[26] Freeman, "How to create a famous Instagram alter-ego."
[27] Adriana Pauly, "Leah Schrager Confronts Sexuality in Feminist Art," Adriana Felizia Pauly, accessed April 16, 2022, https://adrianapauly.com/2016/04/11/leah-schrager-confronts-sexuality-in-feminist-art/.
[28] Honigman, "3 Million People Follow Artist Leah Schrager's Cam-Girl Instagram Project."
[29] Margaret Williamson Bechtold, "Three Questions with Leah Schrager," A Womans Thing," April 19, 2016, https://awomensthing.org/blog/three-questions-with-leah-schrager/.

objectification are inherently anti-feminist.[30] Schrager further positions sexualisation as just another artistic material, which she views as particularly important for female artists to be able to utilise in their earning potential.[31] While the imagery Schrager posts as Ona is comprised of copious sexualised photographs of her body in various stages of undress, giving the appearance of an amateur sexualised model or camgirl, this effect is intentionally constructed by Schrager, drawing from the pornographic iconography of the digital landscape.[32]

Crucially, Schrager self-identifies as a fourth wave feminist, and positions her work as an exploration of her desire to control representations of her body and sexuality.[33] The sense of control appears to be a key factor in the positioning of self-objectification as empowering.[34] Schrager's sex-positive imagery is indicative of a central aspect of digital feminist representation in the twenty-first century, as is her intentional play with narcissism, a derision that has been aimed at primarily young women representing their own bodies online via selfies.[35] When used as an insult, as the term often is in popular-culture, particularly in its relation to selfies, narcissism is merely used to suggest the subject is self-obsessed.[36] As covered in chapter four, the very positioning of narcissism as problematic has also been

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[30] Lori J. Marso, "Feminism's Quest for Common Desires," *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no. 1 (2010): 263-4; Michaele L. Ferguson, "Choice Feminism and the Fear of Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no. 1 (2010): 247.
[31] Sarah Cascone, "This Instagram Artist Isn't Mad That the Internet Made a Meme Mocking Her Racy Selfie Shoot—She Just Wants to Be Tagged," *Artnet news*, July 15, 2019, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/leah-schrager-viral-meme-1600057.
[32] Honigman, "3 Million People Follow Artist Leah Schrager's Cam-Girl Instagram Project."
[33]Amanda M Jansson, "Leah Schrager's female gaze – An Interview," *Kaltblut Magazine*, March 1, 2018, https://www.kaltblut-magazine.com/leah-schragers-female-gaze-an-interview/; Freeman, "How to create a famous Instagram alter-ego."
[34] Amy Shields Dobson, *Postfeminist Digital Cultures: Femininity, Social Media, and Self-Representation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2015) 39.
[35] Imogen Tyler, ""'Who Put the 'Me' in Feminism?: The Sexual Politics of Narcissism," *Feminist Theory* 6, no. 1 (2005): 33-34, 40; Derek Conrad Murray, "Selfie Narcissism, Consumerism, and the Pathologizing of Women,"in *Visual Culture Approaches to the Selfie,* ed. Derek Conrad Murray (Milton: Taylor and Francis, 2021): 188-194.
[36] Derek Conrad Murray, "Selfie Consumerism in a Narcissistic Age," *Consumption, Markets and Culture* 23, no. 1 (2020): 21-28.

debated recently, as narcissism when used colloquially often only refers to enjoying looking at oneself, which is not inherently problematic and could in fact be potentially radical.[37] Additionally, forms of body art can be seen to intentionally disrupt the enduring association between women's self-representation and narcissism.[38]

Schrager's reclamation of sexualised imagery and narcissistic presentation are important factors of fourth wave feminist art, explored through her persona work that confronts the distinction between art and pornography, prioritising her personal feeling of empowerment.[39] Additionally, the boundary between what is perceived as tasteful sexual representation or vulgarity is dependent upon conventions of representation and classist, racist and ageist hierarchies.[40] Schrager's work seeks to challenge conventions and limitations through her defiant self-representation. The power Schrager has over her own sexualisation is further explored in her later work *Man Hands*, where her response to the male patron's influence is performed as overbearing, leading to her eventual emancipation. Each of these reactions, performed for her audience via Instagram photographs and captions, remain ambiguous as to the authenticity of the experience she is depicting. As with much of Schrager's work, the audience is never sure of what is real and what is performance.

The overt sexualisation of Ona highlights a contentious aspect of bodily representation on social media, utilising a style of imagery more common with pornography and advertising. Conventions of sexualised imagery are displayed in many of Schrager's Ona images, (figure 42) 2018, often with her body positioned as the focus of the piece, reducing her face to an

[37] Greg Goldberg, "Through the Looking Glass: The Queer Narcissism of Selfies," *Social Media + Society* 3, no. 1 (2017) 8-9.
[38] Erin Striff, "Bodies of Evidence: Feminist Performance Art," *Critical Survey* 9, no. 1 (1997): 1, 11-12.
[39] Honigman, "3 Million People Follow Artist Leah Schrager's Cam-Girl Instagram Project."
[40] Emma Phillips, "'It's classy because you can't see things': data from a project co-creating sexy images of young women," *Feminist Media Studies* 22, no.3 (2020): 709-710.

afterthought. Here, her only clothing is pale pink lace underwear, further positioning the image as conventionally feminine, intimate, and youthful in nature. However, the lingerie is juxtaposed against Schrager's assertive self-sexualisation, which is reinforced by her pose, with her legs stretched into the air and her hand caressing her ankle. In contrast to Rrap's *Overstepping,* Schrager's representation of female legs is more identifiably sexualised, playing into the conventions of objectified female bodies. Schrager's pose, as with many of her images, also evokes the positions of yoga and dance, both of which Schrager claims she has practiced daily since her youth.[41] She attributes the beginning of her interest in the female body to this experience, which is reflected throughout her work via her flexibility and physical awareness.[42] Schrager's interest with yoga is also notable due to yoga's problematic associations with performativity, privilege, and racism.[43] On Instagram, images of people practicing yoga are frequently performative rather than instructive, and overwhelmingly feature young, thin white women.[44] Contemporary western yoga has also been largely commodified.[45] This commodification can result in othering those who do not fit into the limited conception of a yogi as displayed on social media.[46] These criticisms regarding the representation of yoga on social media are similarly reflected in the work of Schrager, whose sexualised performance online, while being positioned as feminist, can also be seen as promoting a regressive view of idealised feminine identity. She is also pictured on a bed, further enhancing the associations with sex and intimacy, in addition to the voyeurism implicit in watching sex acts. The bedroom setting is also evocative of amateur sex work, in

[41] Platt, "Meet the Digi Feminist Artist."
[42] Platt, "Meet the Digi Feminist Artist."
[43] Angela Hinz et al., "Is This What a Female Yogi Looks Like? A Content Analysis of Yoga Images on Instagram," *Body Image* 36, (2021): 117.
[44] Hinz et al., "Practice or Performance? A Content Analysis," 175-83.
[45] Nandini Bhalla and David Moscowitz, "Yoga and Female Objectification: Commodity and Exclusionary Identity in U.S. Women's Magazines," *The Journal of Communication Inquiry* 44, no. 1 (2020): 101.
[46] K. Alysse Bailey et al., "Is #Yogaforeveryone? The Idealised Flexible Bodymind in Instagram Yoga Posts," *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 14, no.5 (2021), 838-839.

which the space is utilised intentionally to construct an artificial sense of intimacy. However, throughout Schrager's work, the bedroom is also a feature that implies autonomy over her sexualisation and is akin to her studio as digital performance artist, suggesting that she is the one in charge of the image, her body, and her representation.

Alongside Ona's Instagram page, Schrager also performs as a musician under this persona. Her songs, available via her website, are as sexualised as her persona's Instagram, with lyrics including "I smell yr cock in every beer, come sleep with me."[47] She also markets herself as an expert in cultivating an Instagram following from sexualised self-images, offering coaching services to women looking to grow their own following.[48] Throughout, Schrager positions her work as identifiably fourth wave feminist, and promotes empowerment through self-sexualisation and independence.[49] Schrager subsequently introduced an OnlyFans website in 2020, which she sells sexually explicit videos while performing as Ona.[50] Utilising OnlyFans, a site in which users pay for a variety of creator content including art, but which has become known for pornographic content, is indicative of Schrager's increasingly sexually provocative work.[51] The sexualised aspects of her persona are challenging for their adherence to pornographic or commercial conventions, with an absence of traditional art identifiers, beyond Schrager's own insistence that they are art.[52]

[47] Leah Schrager, "Music," Ona, accessed July 22, 2022, https://onaartist.com/music/; Leah Schrager, "Lyrics," Ona, accessed July 22, 2022, https://onaartist.com/lyric/.
[48] Leah Schrager, "Your Best Insta," YBI, accessed October 14, 2022, https://www.yourbestinsta.com/
[49] Nicola Rivers, *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave: Turning Tides* (Springer International Publishing, 2017), 24.
[50] Leah Schrager, "It's Just a Phase, Leah Schrager," Leah Schrager, accessed July 22, 2022, https://leahschrager.com/phases/.
[51] Bethan Michael-Fox, "What Do You Want?," *New Formations* 100, no. 100 (2020): 216.
[52] Schrager, "About."

The tension between performance art and pornography was given explicit expression in another of Schrager's persona's, Sarah White, founder of *Naked Therapy*, created in 2010 and ending in 2014. Performing as White, Schrager enacted the role of a therapist who unclothed to the level her "clients" request via webcam.[53] While she has no psychological training or certifications, Schrager states on her website "I consider myself highly skilled at talking, listening, and counselling while also being arousing."[54] Performing in a negligee and glasses, before undressing further if requested, Schrager's utilisation of the stereotypical imagery associated with the pornographic objectification of female professionals echoes Schrager's own superficial performance of a therapist without training. On the *Naked Therapy* website, Schrager is adamant that *Naked Therapy* is a therapeutic resource, not an artistic performance.[55] However, on her artistic website and in interviews, she clearly positions the work as performance art.[56] As a result, her controversial performance confused audiences regarding intention and garnered media coverage outside of traditional art journalism.[57] In an article published in *Psychology Today*, her intention is positioned as credibly therapeutic.[58] Other articles, like that published on *Vice* by Sean J Patrick Carney, who engaged in Schrager's *Naked Therapy* project as a client, acknowledge both her artistic performance and the possible therapeutic benefits.[59] Throughout the performance, Schrager explicitly used nudity to mimic intimacy. The conflation between nudity and intimacy is a reoccurring theme throughout Schrager's work and is a key factor in the artistic body on social media.

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[53] Schrager, "Sarah White Therapy."
[54] Schrager, "Sarah White Therapy."
[55] Schrager, "Sarah White Therapy."
[56] Schrager, "About."; Kurt Mcvey, "Leah Schrager: Manifestations," *White Hot Magazine of Contemporary Art*, February, 2019, https://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/leah-schrager-manifestations/4158.
[57] David J. Ley Ph.D., "Naked Therapy: Believe it or not, this Naked Therapist has things to teach us," *Psychology Today*, September 25, 2014, https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/women-who-stray/201409/naked-therapy.
[58] Ley, "Naked Therapy."
[59] Sean J. Patrick Carney, "I Went to Naked Therapy™ ," Vice, August 26, 2014, https://www.vice.com/en/article/jmbae7/i-went-to-naked-therapy.

Pornofied culture online and in Schrager's feminist persona

The pornofied online visual culture which Schrager references is evident throughout all forms of media in the contemporary digital age.[60] The combination of the accessibility and ubiquity of pornography online, the familiarity that many young people have with pornofied aesthetics if not pornography itself, and the continual prevalence of raunch culture, have created a visual environment in which overtly sexual imagery is inescapable.[61] In this way, the sexualisation of some images by social media artists can be seen to challenge the very thing they are criticised for presenting. By using their own bodies and asserting complete control over how they are presented, in some instances earning an income from these images, it can be argued that they are using a language familiar to them in order to challenge the culture in which they exist.

While no one can control what happens after the images are shared, accessible digital media allows both artists and users complete control over the creation of their image. If the goal is to dismantle objectification and commodification of women's bodies, then a crucial step in getting there may be for women to demonstrate control over their own bodily representation by using the visual language that is learned by existing in a sexualised culture online. Additionally, for internet-savvy young artists like Schrager, they can also be seen to be "gaming the system," utilising sexualised conventions to their advantage, rather than working to dismantle them entirely.[62] As with Rrap using the imagery of advertisements which objectified women in order to challenge the culture the imagery was drawn from in *Overstepping*, fourth wave artists are using their bodies to challenge the way women are

[60] McNair, *Striptease culture,* ix.
[61] Meagan Tyler and Kaye Quek, "Conceptualizing Pornographication: A Lack of Clarity and Problems for Feminist Analysis," *Sexualization, Media, & Society* 2, no. 2 (May 2016): 1.
[62] Johanna Fateman, "Women on the Verge: Johanna Fateman on Art, Feminism, and Social Media," *Artforum International* 53, no. 8 (2015): 220.

objectified through their interpretation of contemporary sexualised culture, using distortion, imitation, subversion, and asserting themselves as the focus.

The utilisation of pornographic aesthetics in non-pornographic imagery is an aspect of what has been referred to as "porno chic", as McNair explains, expanding on an 1973 article by Ralph Blumenthal.[63] For young people especially, pornography is a part of their visual language.[64] Sexualised representations in all forms are increasingly pornographic in style.[65] Pornographic aesthetics are frequently seen in fashion, music videos and popular entertainment media at large.[66] The pornofied landscape is similarly seen in advertising, via images which are suggestive of hard-core pornography.[67] As young people are more desensitised to shocking imagery online, advertisers go to greater lengths to shock.[68] For those of Schrager's generation, the abundance of sexualised imagery invariably informs their view of bodies, sexuality, and the extent to which objectification is expected. As a result, much of the representation of bodies on social media adhere to conventions, either intentionally as a way of imitation or compliance, or subconsciously through the natural assimilation of the visual language with which users are most familiar.[69]

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[63] McNair, *Porno? Chic!: How Pornography Changed the World and Made It a Better Place,* 40-4; Ralph Blumenthal, "Hard-core" grows fashionable—and very profitable," The New York Times, January 21, 1973. https://www.nytimes.com/1973/01/21/archives/pornochic-hardcore-grows-fashionableand-very-profitable.html.
[64] Shelley Walker et al., "'It's Always Just There in Your Face': Young People's Views on Porn." *Sexual Health* 12, no. 3 (June 2015): 201.
[65] Monique Mulholland, "Walking a Fine Line: Young People Negotiate Pornified Heterosex," *Sexualities* 18, no. 5-6 (2015): 732.
[66] Marco Rovaris, "Rap and Porn Aesthetics in Pop Culture: The Turning Point Ofhow Many Licks?," *Porn Studies* 2, no. 1 (2015): 101-102; Meagan Tyler and Kaye Quek, "Conceptualizing Pornographication," *Sexualization, Media and Society* 2, no. 2 (2016): 8.
[67] Sarracino and Scott, *Porning of America,* 117-124.
[68] Neil Kirkham, "The New 'Porno-Chic'? Fashion, Consumption and Film Pornography," *Film, Fashion & Consumption* 1, no. 2 (May 2012): 218.
[69] Beth T. Bell, Jennifer A. Cassarly, and Lucy Dunbar, "Selfie-Objectification: Self-Objectification and Positive Feedback ("Likes") Are Associated with Frequency of Posting Sexually Objectifying Self-Images on Social Media," *Body Image* 26, (2018): 83.

Schrager's Ona persona can be seen as an example of exploring and responding to the normalisation of sexualisation and objectification. As seen in another Ona image, (figure 43) 2019, Schrager's works are highly sexualised and visually reminiscent of pornographic imagery. In this work, Schrager announces her Patreon website, in which she sells more sexually explicit content. Here she acts out the role of a pornofied 'school-girl' with a cherry provocatively in her mouth. The pornographic references that are evident throughout the Ona series are particularly pronounced here. Schrager's outfit is identifiable as a sexualised school uniform complete with white socks, a mini skirt pulled up around her waist and high platform heels. She is once again pictured with her head at the furthest point of the image, while her legs, buttocks and crotch are in the centre of the visual field. Her personal identity here is even less apparent than previous Ona images, as she has not only placed emphasis on her body ahead of her face, but her uniformed appearance further locates her within a generic sexual fantasy.

Digital media pornification has also been positioned as part of a sexual revolution.[70] For those seeking to assert their own sexual autonomy, working within the sex-positive, pornofied aesthetic conventions can be seen as a statement of self-determination. The pornographic representation of the body can further be seen as transgressive in its denial of the religious and reproductive roles of the body.[71] Working within these aesthetic conventions, porno-chic is identified as a visual strategy, which also assumes pornography is both familiar to and understood by audiences.[72] For fourth wave feminist artists who have come of age in this atmosphere, pornography culture is a native part of their communicative environment.

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[70] Steve Garlick, "A New Sexual Revolution? Critical Theory, Pornography, and the Internet," *Canadian Review of Sociology* 48, no. 3 (August 2011): 222.
[71] Rebecca Saunders, *Bodies of Work: The Labour of Sex in the Digital Age* (Champagne: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 21.
[72] McNair, *Porno? Chic!: How Pornography Changed the World and Made It a Better Place,* 37.

Schrager typifies sexualised, fourth wave feminist representation. While her images within her Ona Instagram often conform to pornofied aesthetics, Schrager explicitly asserts her own empowerment and feminist values.[73]

The Artist Is F#cked

In 2020-21, Schrager exhibited a new series titled *The Artist Is F#cked,* with the first instalment called *My First Time*. Displayed in Schrager's own bedroom, which she called Bedroom Gallery, NYC, she streamed the work to a larger audience on OnlyFans, (figure 44). Even more provocative than her earlier work, *The Artist Is F#cked* series depicts Schrager engaging in various sexual acts which she films and sells on her Only Fans website. For *My First Time, The Artist is F#cked* (figure 45), Schrager stated she was photographed "sucking on a twelve-inch dildo."[74] In contrast to her earlier work, which largely tries to replicate a candid, intimate photographic style, *My First Time* is highly stylised. The animated, pop art style and bright, bold colouring reference comic art, while the leaf and hands graphics are reminiscent of social media aesthetics. The explicit nature of the work, depicting Schrager with a sex toy in her mouth, is both confronting and humorous, though comparatively subtle, as the decorative, comic style negates some of the sexual context. *My First Time* both increases the sexualisation of Ona, while simultaneously appearing less traditionally objectifying.

During the performance, Schrager discusses each work displayed on her walls while being live-streamed. After discussing the works hanging on the walls surrounding the bed, Schrager

[73] Freeman, "How to create a famous Instagram alter-ego."
[74] Schrager, Leah. "My First Time." December 13, 2020. Accessed February 20, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CItKLtvBcYq/?

performs sexual acts on the bed in the centre of the room with "an unidentified male."[75] Significantly, *My First Time* was created in response to an important art dealer who told Schrager that her work was too overtly sexual for the art market, yet invited her to give him a "private example of what I do on my OnlyFans."[76] This response is indicative of the hypocritical and sexist behaviour Schrager seeks to confront within her work, creating *The Artist Is F#cked* inspired from a sense of personal empowerment and "retribution."[77]

The Artist Is F#cked series demonstrates a more explicit example of the sexualisation of Schrager's Ona persona, where the lines between pornography and art are intentionally blurred, as Schrager is shown engaging in sexual acts. The subversion of the boundaries between pornography and art is, however, an established subject in contemporary art practice, one of the most notable examples being Jeff Koons' 1991 *Made In Heaven* series, (figure 46). Featuring the artist and his then-wife Ilona Staller, pornographic stage name Cicciolina ('little chubby one'), the series depicts explicit sex acts in a kitsch, "white trash" aesthetic.[78] Despite the response from critics that believed otherwise, Koons' argued his use of pornographic imagery was not solely utilised for sensationalism, but was also a response to Masaccio's *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* and the nature of celebrity.[79] Part of what has been proposed as identifying the work as art instead of porn, is the knowledge of the intent and context about the featured subjects.[80] Works like Koons' *Made in Heaven* series provide a precedent for contemporary artists engaging with pornographic iconography within their

[75] Beatrice Hazlehurst, "Did 2020 set us free from the stigma of online sex?," iD Vice, December 31, 2020 https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/88avag/porn-onlyfans-and-online-sex-work-in-2020.
[76] Hazlehurst, "Did 2020 set us free from the stigma of online sex?."
[77] Hazlehurst, "Did 2020 set us free from the stigma of online sex?."
[78] Mimi Vasilaki, "Why Some Pornography May Be Art," *Philosophy and Literature* 34, no. 1 (2010): 229.
[79] Joanne Bernstein, "Playing with the Edge," in *Seduced: Art and Sex from Antiquity to Now*, eds. Marina Wallace, Martin Kemp, and Joanne Bernstein (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 2007), 190.
[80] Mimi Vasilaki, "Why Some Pornography May Be Art," *Philosophy and Literature* 34, no. 1 (2010): 229; Christy Mag Uidhir, "Why Pornography Can't Be Art," *Philosophy and Literature* 33 no.1 (April 2009): 198.

practice. The visual similarities between Koon's work and a pornographic image can also be seen to blur the lines between pornography and art.[81] Furthermore, the categorisation between the two categories has historically changed over time.[82]

The boundary between pornography and performance art has previously been explored by artists like Annie Sprinkle.[83] Sprinkle, who was a sex worker before engaging in performance art, frequently references pornography and prostitution within her artistic performance.[84] Her explicit nudity and sex acts performed in front of audiences challenge the distinction between art and pornography, while being positioned as feminist.[85] Like Koons, Sprinkle believed that her intent was what defined her performance as art as opposed to porn.[86] Authenticity is also explored here, as it is not immediately apparent to the audience whether Sprinkle's performance is entirely fictional or incorporating confessional disclosure.[87]

The representation of blurred boundaries is contemporaneously relevant as a central aspect to the artistic body engaging with fourth wave feminism and social media. Brian McNair has argued that the blurred boundaries between all visual mediums including advertising and art have resulted from the increasing sexualisation of contemporary culture.[88] He suggests that images of the body that challenge the separation between art and pornography are often the

[81] Vasilaki, "Why Some Pornography May Be Art," 229.
[82] Vasilaki, "Why Some Pornography May Be Art," 230.
[83] Erin Striff, "Bodies of Evidence: Feminist Performance Art," *Critical Survey* 9, no. 1 (1997): 12-13.
[84] Linda Williams, "A Provoking Agent: The Pornography and Performance Art of Annie Sprinkle," *Social Text* 37, no. 37 (1993): 117; Tyler Stoddard Smith, "Hustling for a higher cause," in *Whore Stories: A Revealing History of the World's Oldest Profession*, ed. Tyler Stoddard Smith (Avon: Adams Media, 2012), 98-99.
[85] Patrick Campbell, "Censoring the Body: Whores, Goddesses and Annie Sprinkle," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 10, no. 3 (2000): 55.
[86] Striff, "Bodies of Evidence," 13.
[87] Marla Carlson, "Performative Pornography: Annie Sprinkle Reads Her Movies," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1999): 238.
[88] McNair, *Porno? Chic!: How Pornography Changed the World and Made It a Better Place,* 43-44; McNair, *Striptease culture,* 205-207.

cause of controversy.[89] Furthermore, contemporary works of art that cross boundaries in conventional representations of gender or perceived morality, for example, are typically met with more criticism or greater "visceral" response.[90] This idea is echoed by Nead, who explains that the boundaries between categorisation keep the representational nude safe in the eyes of the viewer, while representations that remain unclear or purposefully subvert categorisation become challenging.[91] Nead extends the discussion on boundaries to include the containment of the female body, the most notoriously depicted body in western art and pornography.[92] It is when the body denies these boundaries that it is seen as dangerous.

While the reaction to Schrager's work has been divisive, her professed sex positivity has also been praised as advancing efforts to destigmatise sex work.[93] She simultaneously acknowledges her choice to represent her own body in a way that will receive sexual attention and that has been historically objectifying for women, while choosing to perpetuate the style of imagery for her own perception of self-empowerment.[94] Through prioritising her own desire for empowerment and control over her own representation, Schrager appears to accept the problematic history of sexualisation while diminishing her own role in maintaining it. Similarly, she does not appear to recognise the privilege she holds as a conventionally attractive, able-bodied woman. For example, it would be distinctly harder for someone who does not adhere to patriarchal beauty ideals to perform a practice of reclaiming her own sexuality though mimicking the types of sexualised media that surrounds her.[95] Part of what

[89] McNair, *Striptease culture,* 165-166.
[90] Kieran Cashell, *Aftershock: The Ethics of Contemporary Transgressive Art* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 12-13.
[91] Nead, *The Female Nude,* 11-12; 31-33.
[92] Nead. *The Female Nude,* 31-33.
[93] Hazlehurst, "Did 2020 set us free from the stigma of online sex?."
[94] Adam Lehrer, "Artist Leah Schrager on Sex-Positive Selfies, Instagram Fame, and Naked Therapy," *Forbes*, April 25, 2017, https://www.forbes.com/sites/adamlehrer/2017/04/25/artist-leah-schrager-proliferates-sex-positive-feminist-selfies-through-social-media.
[95] Rosalind Gill, "From Sexual Objectification to Sexual Subjectification: The Resexualisation of Women's Bodies in the Media," *Feminist Media Studies* 3, no. 1 (2003): 103-104.

makes Schrager's work complex is how she is able to utilise her conventionally attractive body to challenge the established dynamic of male creator-female subject, and claim empowerment and control over her own sexuality, in a way in which many others cannot.

The selfie, narcissism, and representational autonomy

Schrager's first live performance, *Angles on a Woman*, occurred in 2019 at Montauk Beach House. In the performance, she photographs herself using an iPhone and a selfie stick, in a variety of poses ranging from demure to almost pornographic (figure 47-49). The contrasting positions are intended to reflect the different ways women use signifiers such as poses, facial expressions and camera angles to convey different identities online.[96] The resulting images of her taking the selfies, photographed from an outside perspective by an unnamed photographer, along with the selfies themselves, were published on her website and Ona Artist persona Instagram (figure 50) in 2019. One of the audience members, unaware that it was an art performance, filmed Schrager photographing herself (figure 51) 2019. The audience member posted the video of Schrager with the added text "still loving our generation" on the video footage, which is expressed with implied sarcasm which denigrates the perceived self-obsession of millennials. The video footage subsequently became an internet meme, with many mocking Schrager for her apparent narcissism.[97] Additionally, Schrager claimed that even when requested, many who were reposting the video refused to credit her as the artist or model.[98] Schrager has stated this refusal confirms the misogynistic

[96] Leah Schrager, "Angles on a Woman 2019 Highlighted," Leah Schrager, accessed September 12, 2020, https://leahschrager.com/portfolio/angles-on-a-woman/.
[97] Sarah Cascone, "This Instagram Artist Isn't Mad That the Internet Made a Meme Mocking Her Racy Selfie Shoot—She Just Wants to Be Tagged," *Artnet news*, July 15, 2019, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/leah-schrager-viral-meme-1600057.
[98] Cascone, "This Instagram Artist Isn't Mad."

attitudes towards women's bodies in the age of social media, as the audience member unintentionally proved Schrager's point by assuming a lack of agency on her part.[99]

Other images in the series (figure 47-49) 2019 also demonstrate the overt sexualisation and objectification of Schrager's Ona persona. Positioned on all fours, with her selfie camera aimed behind her, Schrager readily plays into the visual conventions of a pornographic actress.[100] Acting out this role in public, amongst an unaware audience, further associates her presentation with exhibitionist amateur pornography. While Schrager argues for the artistic merit and self-empowerment of the piece, she does not acknowledge the problematic factors of self-sexualisation and objectification. By positioning her work as purely the artistic exploration of self-empowerment, Schrager does not address the ways in which she is perpetuating the objectification of women's bodies for male gaze, and the way in which objectification is often demanded.[101] The economic and social imbalances which contribute to how women's bodies are used and perceived, and the limitations around the types of bodies which can profit from this self-objectification, also remain unaddressed.[102] She similarly appears to position the other users mocking commentary on her sexualised exhibitionism as a reflection of judgement. She does not appear to consider, however, the lack of context provided to the audience of the performance, as most were unaware it was a performance at all.[103] While online viewers can readily identify Schrager's performance as artistic by following links to her website, in live performances like *Angles on a Woman*, Schrager

[99] Cascone, "This Instagram Artist Isn't Mad."
[100] McNair, *Porno? Chic!: How Pornography Changed the World and Made It a Better Place,* 36-7.
[101] Hayley Mowat et al., "'For Myself and Others Like Me': Women's Contributions to Vulva-Positive Social Media," *Feminist Media Studies* 20, no. 1 (2020): 37.
[102] Dobson, *Postfeminist Digital Cultures,* 14, 37.
[103] Cascone, "This Instagram Artist Isn't Mad."

appears to have either expected the audience to know it is a performance, or was hoping they did not in order to provoke a reaction.[104]

Inherent to the divisive reception *Angles on a Woman* received was Schrager's engagement with selfie photography. Often dismissed as narcissistic, advocates of the selfie argue its value as a means of expression and identification.[105] Representation via social media has allowed users to create a more inclusive depiction of contemporary identity, and can impact broader social attitudes, as seen in body positivity and activism around menstruation.[106] Through selfies, users can experience a sense of control over the way in which they are represented. For those from marginalised groups or cultural minorities, this can be especially important.[107] Similarly, imagined lives and experiences can be explored.[108] Selfies can also act as subversive political imagery and promotional tools.[109] Despite legitimate benefits, the selfie often remains linked to accusations of narcissism and objectification.[110] The criticism is also inescapably linked to a patriarchal society, given accusations of narcissism are often gendered.[111]

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[104] Cascone, "This Instagram Artist Isn't Mad."
[105] Derek Conrad Murray, "Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media," *Consumption Markets & Culture* 18, no. 6 (2015): 491-493.
[106] Mowat et al., "'For Myself and Others Like Me,'" 37-38: Jacqueline Gaybor, "Everyday (Online) Body Politics of Menstruation," *Feminist Media Studies*, 22, no. 4 (2022), 910.
[107] Patricia Routh, "The Politics of Transformation: Selfie Production of the Visually Marginalised," in *The Digital Transformation of the Public Sphere: Conflict, Migration, Crisis and Culture in Digital Networks*, ed. Athina Karatzogianni, Dennis Nguyen, and Elisa Serafinelli (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016) 369-370.
[108] Edgar Gómez Cruz and Helen Thornham, "Selfies Beyond Self-Representation: The (Theoretical) F(R)Ictions of a Practice," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 7, no. 1 (2015): 7.
[109]Jonathan Schroeder, "The selfie in consumer culture," in *Visual Culture Approaches to the Selfie,* ed. Derek Conrad Murray (New York: Routledge, 2022): 172-179; Mehita Iqani and Jonathan E. Schroeder, "Selfie: Digital Self-Portraits as Commodity Form and Consumption Practice," *Consumption, Markets and Culture* 19, no. 5 (2016): 407.
[110] Holly Peek, "The Selfie in the Digital Age: From Social Media to sexting," *Psychiatric Times* 31, no. 12 (December 2014): 28.
[111] Anne Burns, "Self(ie)-discipline: Social regulation as enacted through the discussion of photographic practice," *International Journal of Communication* 9, (2015): 1716-18.

Performance is also inextricably linked to selfies and is an important aspect to the representation of bodies on social media. Schrager's work, *Infinity Selfie 3 (or SFSM– Safe for Social Media),* 2016, (figure 52) references this contemporary photographic trend. Here, the image repetition, which is visually reminiscent of the optical illusion found in a hall of mirrors, simultaneously removes the explicit sexuality present in her work as Ona, while highlighting the voyeurism inherent in watching someone look at themselves. The repeated image also invites associations with the multiple photographs many social media users take to create the perfect pseudo-spontaneous image, amplified by the selfie stick in her hand, in addition to the monotonous repetition of the same visual tropes found throughout social media. Here, Schrager is not only the subject of a selfie, but is also incorporating signifiers of selfie culture, including the selfie stick, the pouted expression, the awkward pose that only looks good in photos. Similarly, in *Selfie-Examination* (figure 53) 2015, the iPhone camera is depicted as part of the construction of the image. By including the camera and the implied creation of the image, Schrager references the constructed nature of the selfie, and, more broadly, the representational of the self, online.

Fourth wave feminism and self-objectification in social media

Schrager's Ona Artist is indicative of the complex way the artistic body in social media engages with sexualisation, objectification and fourth wave feminism. Her work is a key example of the emergence of a more self-sexualised and self-objectified representation, which centres empowerment and personal control. Ona Artist also demonstrates the complexities of sexualised self-representation, and the critical differences between representations of the body, gender, and sexuality in the context of digital media and third versus fourth wave feminist discourse. The potential problems with such sexualised representation are detailed in objectification theory, which posits that through the cultural

normalisation of objectifying women's bodies, women learn to attribute their value to their outward appearance, thus disempowering them. The subsequent internalisation of these societal attitudes is seen in the reoccurring tendency for women to view themselves from the "observers' perspective."[112] Women are consistently objectified throughout western culture, while additionally in recent years the cultural objectification has extended to an expectation that women now self-objectify when presenting themselves.[113] The act of self-objectification is also related to feelings of body shame, more so than merely consuming objectifying imagery.[114] Furthermore, self-objectification has many established impacts on mental health, including depression and eating disorders.[115] These are produced through feelings of anxiety, a difficulty being absorbed in activities with the persistent outward awareness that hinders full participation in numerous activities, and a lack of awareness of their own internal bodily experiences.[116]

Self-objectification is critiqued in feminism in part because of the potential outcomes. However, it has also been argued in the context of fourth wave feminism that self-objectification and sexualisation can be an act of defiance and empowerment.[117] Through the rejection of the traditional male creator, the women's choice and control over their own body instead prioritised. The prioritisation of 'choice' throughout feminist ideology highlights the way in which self-sexualisation and objectification can be argued as personally empowering

[112] Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, "Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1997): 177.
[113] Beth T. Bell, Jennifer A. Cassarly, and Lucy Dunbar, "Selfie-Objectification: Self-Objectification and Positive Feedback ("Likes") Are Associated with Frequency of Posting Sexually Objectifying Self-Images on Social Media," *Body Image* 26, (2018): 83.
[114] Bonnie Moradi and Yu-Ping Huang, "Objectification Theory and Psychology of Women: A Decade of Advances and Future Directions," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (2008): 383.
[115] Fredrickson and Roberts, "Objectification Theory,"185.
[116] Fredrickson and Roberts, "Objectification Theory," 182-185.
[117] Laura R. Ramsey and Amber L. Horan, "Picture This: Women's Self-Sexualization in Photos on Social Media," *Personality and Individual Differences* 133, (2018): 88; Miriam Liss, Mindy J. Erchull, and Laura Ramsey, "Empowering or Oppressing? Development and Exploration of the Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 37, no.1 (2011): 55-68.

yet damaging for women more broadly.[118] Additionally, personal reactions vary between women, as it is evident, for example, that those like Schrager who enjoy being perceived as sexy, gain a sense of empowerment from self-sexualisation. Conversely, those who do not actively desire being viewed this way by the general public experience more detrimental effects of sexually objectifying imagery.[119] There is no universal definition of personal empowerment, and it is through challenging artists like Schrager that these issues are explored.

The complicated exploration of empowerment via sexualisation is a key factor of fourth wave feminism.[120] Schrager, like many who utilise social media extensively, came of age in the 1990s, when sexualisation was prevalent across entertainment media.[121] Increasingly sexualised visual culture later evolved into the raunch culture of the early 2000s, whereby women increasingly began conflating feminism with self-sexualisation and objectification.[122] The perception of self-sexualisation being tied to empowerment due to the control of women's own bodies, and the subversion of conventional sexualisation, can also be seen as a reaction to prior conceptions of feminist imagery.[123]

The potentially problematic factors of "choice feminism" have been debated in recent years, in response to a digital culture which prioritises individual identity and freedom over political ideals.[124] Self-sexualisation is complex, as it can be seen to reaffirm the objectification of

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[118] Marso, "Feminism's Quest for Common Desires," 263-4; Michaele L. Ferguson, "Choice Feminism and the Fear of Politics," 247-51.
[119] Mindy J. Erchull and Miriam Liss, "Exploring the Concept of Perceived Female Sexual Empowerment: Development and Validation of the Sex Is Power Scale," *Gender Issues* 30, no. 1-4 (2013): 49.
[120] Rivers, *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave:* 24.
[121] Yarrow, *90s Bitch*, 38-39.
[122] Yarrow, *90s Bitch*, 39, 300-303; Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs,*1-5.
[123] Rivers, *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave,* 79-80.
[124] Linda R. Hirshman, *Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World* (NY: Viking Penguin Group, 2006), 26-27; Rachel Thwaites, "Making a Choice or Taking a Stand? Choice Feminism, Political Engagement and the Contemporary Feminist Movement," *Feminist Theory* 18, no.1 (2017): 65-67.

women, while the individual person may claim empowerment from it. Similar responses are also seen in regards to sex work, where some view it as inherently objectifying while others argue the relationship between pornography and objectification is reductive and problematic.[125] Negative consequences arising from personally defined empowerment through sexualisation are also seen when women who choose to engage with sexualised representation online often also face having their images re-distributed without context or consent, complicating the perceived empowerment and control initially experienced.[126] Sexualised empowerment may also have a tendency to appear rebellious at first, before perpetuating female objectification if continued.[127]

Additionally, even definitions of empowerment have been debated.[128] Lamb and Peterson have addressed the subjective nature of empowerment and the dangers of sexualisation, challenging the association between control over sexualisation and genuine empowerment. Peterson suggests that it is problematic to dismiss girls' identification of self-empowerment, lest it perpetuates a culture of telling women how they feel.[129] Lamb, however, questions whether conflating self-sexualisation with empowerment only perpetuates the patriarchal and capitalist desire to position women's bodies as commodities.[130] Authenticity is again also drawn into the debate. Lamb highlights the importance of "authentic" sexuality as opposed to performative, which is further questioned by Peterson as the term authentic is complex and

[125] Feona Attwood, "Pornography and Objectification," *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 1 (2004): 8.
[126] Anne Burns, "In Full View: Involuntary Porn and the Postfeminist Rhetoric of Choice," in *Twenty-First Century Feminism: Forming and Performing Femininity*, eds. Claire Nally and Angela Smith (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 113-114.
[127] Lizbeth Goodman, "Sexuality and Autobiography in Performance (Art)," *Women* 5, no. 2 (1994): 130.
[128] Zoë D. Peterson, "What Is Sexual Empowerment? A Multidimensional and Process-Oriented Approach to Adolescent Girls' Sexual Empowerment," *Sex Roles* 62, no. 5-6 (2009): 307.
[129] Peterson, "What Is Sexual Empowerment?," 308-9.
[130] Sharon Lamb, "Porn as a Pathway to Empowerment? A Response to Peterson's Commentary," *Sex Roles* 62, no. 5-6 (2010): 315.

subjective.[131] This is also complicated by the way in which conforming to the heteronormative notions of idealised appearance is correlated with greater social media attention.[132] It is later agreed that media literacy is an important precursor for sexual empowerment.[133] Lamb and Peterson's work suggests that if Schrager is aware of the commercial imperatives of the pornography industry, the objectification of bodies in media and the damage possible from these factors, her decision to utilise the conventions of sexualised representation is empowering, at least for her as an individual.[134]

Schrager appears to reference the widespread objectification of women's bodies, addressing the complex history of body representation throughout her self-sexualised work. As Rosalind Gill suggests, self-sexualisation enacted through the claim of empowerment often aesthetically conforms to the male gaze and may therefore suggest the internalisation of the gaze rather than a rejection of it.[135] However, engagement with the male gaze and heteronormative ideals around sexuality does not necessarily have to be objectifying. In politicised, contemporary feminist movements, such as SlutWalks, women frequently dress up in stereotypical portrayals of provocatively sexual appearance, in order to resist and protest against the regressive views of those who correlate dressing like a 'slut' with inviting sexual assault.[136] From this perspective, the male gaze is confronted, challenging the

[131] Sharon Lamb, "Feminist Ideals for a Healthy Female Adolescent Sexuality: A Critique," *Sex Roles* 62, no. 5-6 (2009): 302; Peterson, "What Is Sexual Empowerment?," 308.
[132] Jenna Drenten, Lauren Gurrieri, and Meagan Tyler, "Sexualized Labour in Digital Culture: Instagram Influencers, Porn Chic and the Monetization of Attention," *Gender, Work, and Organization* 27, no. 1 (2020): 42; Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund, "Gendered Visibility on Social Media: Navigating Instagram's Authenticity Bind," *International Journal of Communication* 13, (2019): 4983; Laura R. Ramsey and Amber L. Horan, "Picture This: Women's Self-Sexualization in Photos on Social Media," *Personality and Individual Differences* 133, (2018): 85.
[133] Sharon Lamb and Zoë D. Peterson, "Adolescent Girls' Sexual Empowerment: Two Feminists Explore the Concept," *Sex Roles* 66, no. 11-12 (2011): 703.
[134] Lamb and Peterson, "Adolescent Girls' Sexual Empowerment," 704-5.
[135] Rosalind Gill, "From Sexual Objectification to Sexual Subjectification: The Resexualisation of Women's Bodies in the Media," *Feminist Media Studies* 3, no. 1 (2003): 104-5.
[136] Kaitlynn Mendes, *Slutwalk: Feminism, Activism and Media (*Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) 1; Jessica Ringrose and Emma Renold, "Slut-Shaming, Girl Power and 'Sexualisation': Thinking through the Politics of the International Slutwalks with Teen Girls," *Gender and Education* 24, no. 3 (2012): 333.

normalisation of positioning women's bodies as instigators of sexual coercion and violence by male perpetrators.[137] The walks aim to subvert the sexualisation and objectification of women through collective self-sexualised public action as a mode of empowerment that rejects the simplistic misogynist correlation between clothing style, bodily display, and sexual consent.[138] The derogatory slur of the word slut is also reclaimed in a similar way as the term 'queer' has been reframed as an inclusive concept in contemporary vocabulary of LGBTQ communities.[139]

Schrager's work conforms to the aesthetic identifiers of the male gaze and conventions of sexualisation and objectification, bringing with it a history of women's subjugation and disempowerment fuelled by those complicit in patriarchal power structures.[140] However, she also strategically positions her work as an expression of her own empowerment. In doing so, Schrager confronts established power dynamics, locating herself as a young woman in control of her sexualised bodily display.[141] Schrager herself directly states that she is "into fourth wave feminism (the kind of female performance enabled by the internet) and pro-sex feminism."[142] In works such as Ona Artist (figure 54), Schrager aligns her self-representation with aesthetic markers of sexualisation and objectification in her contorted pose, which is positioned for the benefit of the presumed male gaze, disregarding her own comfort and natural posture for the sake of sex appeal.

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[137] Ringrose and Renold, "Slut-Shaming, Girl Power and 'Sexualisation'," 334.
[138] Ringrose and Renold, "Slut-Shaming, Girl Power and 'Sexualisation'," 334.
[139] Jo Reger, "The Story of a Slut Walk: Sexuality, Race, and Generational Divisions in Contemporary Feminist Activism," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 44: 1 (2015): 98; Rituparna Borah and Subhalakshmi Nandi. "Reclaiming the Feminist Politics of 'Slutwalk'," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 14, no. 3 (2012): 420.
[140] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (October 1975): 10-12.
[141] Feona Attwood, "Through the looking glass? Sexual agency and subjectification online", in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity,* eds. Ros Gill and Christina Scharff (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 212.
[142] Freeman, "How to create a famous Instagram alter-ego."

Viewers of Instagram overall are roughly equally distributed between male and female, with slightly more male viewers in total.[143] The majority are young men, with the biggest user age demographic being 25-34, closely followed by 18-24.[144] However, Schrager's audience is "94 percent male," and her aesthetic conventions are traditionally associated with the heterosexual, male gaze.[145] Schrager maintains, however, that her work is both empowering and celebratory of both her own pleasure and that of her viewers, and criticises the positioning of conventionally idealised bodies as problematically adhering to the male gaze.[146] The female or queer gaze proposes a possible alternate way of reading sexualised images.[147] There is also the Black or oppositional gaze.[148] Yet Schrager's work defiantly embraces the male gaze in terms of her pose and attire, both of which adhere to heteronormative representations of sexualised women in patriarchal culture.[149] The poses are often seductive yet submissive, with some reflecting a burlesque, striptease element of coquettishness. The references to burlesque further echo the way in which neo-burlesque performance has frequently interacted with feminist and sex-positive exploration.[150] Female sexuality has frequently been policed through puritanical and patriarchal ideology, despite male artists historically profiting off their representations of female sexuality.[151] Schrager confronts this hypocrisy throughout her work, centring her own feelings of empowerment and

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[143] Statista, "Distribution of Instagram users worldwide as of January 2022, by gender," Statista, accessed March 17, 2022, https://www.statista.com/statistics/802776/distribution-of-users-on-instagram-worldwide-gender/.
[144] Statista, "Distribution of Instagram users worldwide."
[145] Beatrice Hazlehurst, "From Cam Star to Pop Star: ONA's Takeover," *Paper,* May 21, 2018, https://www.papermag.com/ona-interview-2570022328.html?rebelltitem=6#rebelltitem6.
[146] Freeman, "How to create a famous Instagram alter-ego."
[147] Christopher Pullen, *Straight Girls and Queer Guys: The Hetero Media Gaze in Film and Television* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 41-44; Cordelia Freeman, "Filming Female Desire: Queering the Gaze of Pop Music Videos," *Cultural Studies* 34, no. 6 (2020): 1009-10, 1027-8; Jenn McCollum, "Morsels of Body: Photographic Love and the Queer Gaze in Madame Bovary," *Journal of Gender Studies* 23, no. 2 (2014): 162, 164-5.
[148] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race And Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 116-119.
[149] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 16.
[150] Lynn Sally, *Neo-Burlesque: Striptease as Transformation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 226-233; Maggie M. Werner, "Deploying Delivery as Critical Method: Neo-Burlesque's Embodied Rhetoric," *Rhetoric Review* 36, no. 1 (2017): 55-56.
[151] Gemma Commane, *Bad Girls, Dirty Bodies: Sex, Performance and Safe Femininity* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2020), 129-132.

autonomy, while simultaneously eliminating the male creator. Additionally, the similarities between burlesque, sex-work, modelling, and the contemporary positioning of pole dancing as mainstream exercise, provoke questions as to the actual differentiation between each sexualised activity and the judgement each provoke, something which Schrager questions in her own persona work.[152]

The engagement with sexualised aesthetics is further referenced through the clothing choices depicted throughout Schrager's Ona Artist Instagram (figure 41), which also physically adhere to the heteronormative, pornographic aesthetic, featuring stereotypes of male desire and porn imaging including the sexy schoolgirl, maid and nurse.[153] Despite Schrager's conventionally attractive appearance and poses aligning Ona Artist with beauty ideals, she argues the dismissal of sexualised representation pandering to the male gaze is simplistic and reductive.[154] The conflation of physical beauty and the male gaze can also be seen in the work of earlier feminist artists whose adherence to conventional beauty standards impacted their reception as feminist artists.[155] However, undoubtedly, conventional visual indicators of male desire are present throughout Schrager's Instagram profile, which firmly situate her as the object of heteronormative desire.[156] Schrager herself acknowledges this, yet identifies the construction of the image as adhering to the male gaze, not her conventionally attractive appearance, stating she loves and welcomes the male gaze, intentionally utilising it as a technique of visual seduction.[157]

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[152] Kay Siebler, "What's So Feminist About Garters and Bustiers? Neo-Burlesque as Post-Feminist Sexual Liberation," *Journal of Gender Studies* 24, no. 5 (2015): 572.
[153] Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 41-43; Pamela Church Gibson, "Pornostyle: Sexualized Dress and the Fracturing of Feminism," *Fashion Theory* 18, no. 2 (2014): 189-206.
[154] Freeman, "How to create a famous Instagram alter-ego."
[155] Kathy Battista, *New York New Wave: The Legacy of Feminist Art in Emerging Practices (*London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 67.
[156] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16: 3 (October 1975): 10-12.
[157] Pauly, "Leah Schrager Confronts Sexuality in Feminist Art."

The performance of intimacy and authenticity on social media

The potential pitfalls of female sexualisation and objectification are more comprehensively explored in Schrager's Instagram performance, *Man Hands,* 2018-2020. Funded by an unnamed patron, the piece explores the restrictions of artistic expression, the difference between the male and female gaze and audience, and woman's control over her own self-image and body.[158] *Man Hands* was created in response to her anonymous patron's offer to fund a "SFW/ 'female friendly' artistic persona."[159] Schrager claims she was paid one million USD to create the series of works.[160] The title is simultaneously a direct reference to the influence of the male patron funding and dictating the direction of the work, and the way in which male artists depicting women's bodies are ascribed more value than female artists representing themselves.[161] Schrager earlier explored the patriarchal double standard of women's representation in the exhibition she curated with Jennifer Chan, *Body Anxiety*, 2015.[162] In the artist statement for the exhibition Schrager references the concept of *Man Hands* directly, using it to describe the value placed on male artists over women, even when depicting the same subject.[163]

Throughout the performance of *Man Hands*, Schrager depicted herself on her namesake Instagram profile as a less objectified but still highly sexualised artist and model, continuously referencing the creation of her work in the Instagram image captions. In doing

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[158] Leah Schrager, "An American Dream," Leah Schrager, accessed January 15, 2021, https://leahschrager.com/portfolio/an-american-dream/.
[159] Honigman, "3 Million People Follow Artist Leah Schrager's Cam-Girl Instagram Project."
[160] Kurt Mcvey, "Leah Schrager: Manifestations," *White Hot Magazine of Contemporary Art*, February 2019, https://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/leah-schrager-manifestations/4158; Wall Street International, "Leah Schrager: 22 Feb — 17 Mar 2019 at the Roman Fine Art in New York, United States," WSI Mag, accessed February 2, 2021, https://wsimag.com/art/50455-leah-schrager.
[161] Max Lakin, "Leah Schrager is an Ethnographer of the Extremely Online," Garage, accessed September 12, 2020, https://garage.vice.com/en_us/article/vb9aka/leah-schrager-body-art.
[162] Leah Schrager and Jennifer Chan, "About," Body Anxiety, accessed January 15, 2021, http://bodyanxiety.com/about/.
[163] Leah Schrager, "The Female Painter: Body Anxiety," Leah Schrager, accessed January 15, 2021, http://bodyanxiety.com/leah/.

so, she explored the dynamics of the patron-artist relationship within the work. While Schrager never exposes who her patron was beyond claiming he was the "son of a very well known artist" she references the challenging aspects of the relationship throughout.[164] As seen throughout the Instagram performance (figure 55), her works are confessional and intimate in nature, performing an intimacy with her audience which is inevitably artificially constructed. Intimacy here is created through the bedroom setting, furthered by the unmade bed and her confessional caption detailing the turbulent relationship, which Schrager describes in intentionally cryptic messages throughout the captions of the work.[165] Schrager's patron is described as "supporting a large part" of her work for *Man Hands,* before a relationship breakdown.[166] The confessional captions also reference the online trend of "oversharing."[167] However the very notion of oversharing itself has been identified as problematic, with roots in women's oppression extending back to second wave feminism.[168] Online oversharing has also been positioned as a contemporary equivalent to consciousness-raising groups.[169] These associations further underscore the way women's feminist identification are continuously maligned. Throughout *Man Hands,* the work also functions as a performance of intimacy and authenticity, with Schrager's captions detailing her concerns, primarily the patron's control over her artistic output. While it is never made explicit if the patron is real or merely part of the performance, sharing it online in this way is undeniably intentional, positioning the work as both feminist and an example of constructed authenticity.

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[164] Schrager, "It's Just A Phase, Leah Schrager"
[165] Phoebe Maares, Sandra Banjac, and Folker Hanusch, "The Labour of Visual Authenticity on Social Media: Exploring Producers' and Audiences' Perceptions on Instagram," *Poetics* 84, (2021): 8.
[166] Honigman, 3 Million People Follow Artist Leah Schrager's Cam-Girl Instagram Project."
[167] Tina Sauerlander, "Reflecting on Life on the Internet: Artistic Webcam Performances from 1887 to 2017," in *Self-Representation an Expanded Field: From Self-Portraiture to Selfie, Contemporary Art in the Social Media Age*, ed. Ace Lehner (St. Alban-Anlage: MDPI, 2021), 129.
[168] Rachel Sykes, "'Who Gets to Speak and Why?' Oversharing in Contemporary North American Women's Writing," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43, no.1 (2017): 151-74; Tracy L. M. Kennedy, "The Personal Is Political: Feminist Blogging and Virtual Consciousness-Raising," *S & F online* 5, no. 2 (2007): 4.
[169] Jessica Megarry, *The Limitations of Social Media Feminism: No Space of Our Own* (Cham: Springer, 2020): 183-229.

The idea of social media being an authentic representation of the lives of its users is pervasive, and yet is at odds with much of the performative behaviour demonstrated on the platform.[170] It is the perception of authenticity, also known as calibrated amateurism, that enables persona works like Schrager's to be taken literally by some viewers, further allowing it to simultaneously function as a subversive examination of the performative body online.[171] Performative or constructed authenticity is a central aspect to social media communication.[172] Predating social media, influential artists like Tracy Emin encouraged the popularity of this constructed confessional approach in contemporary art, which seeks portray intimacy and authenticity via vulnerability.[173] Subsequently, the disclosure of intimate details is central to contemporary communication and what has been identified as a confessing society, drawn from Foucault.[174] However, like Emin, the intimate and extremely personal nature of Schrager's work may hinder her being taken seriously.[175] Criticism of Emin's work similarly centres around perceived narcissism and conscious construction of vulnerability.[176]

While both Emin and Schrager seek to construct a perception of authenticity and intimacy within their work, their approaches vary significantly. Emin's work is confrontational and

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[170] Ruxandra Looft, "#Girlgaze: Photography, Fourth Wave Feminism, and Social Media Advocacy," *Continuum* 31, no. 6 (2017): 900.
[171] Crystal Abidin, *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2018), 92.
[172] Kimberly Ann Hall, "The Authenticity of Social-Media Performance: Lonelygirl15 and the Amateur Brand of Young-Girlhood," *Women & Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory: Texting Girls: Images, Sounds, and Words in Neoliberal Cultures of Femininity* 25, no. 2 (May 2015): 128-129; Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, "Being 'Really Real' on Youtube: Authenticity, Community and Brand Culture in Social Media Entertainment," *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture & Policy* 164, no. 1 (2017): 72.
[173] Christine Fanthome, "Articulating Authenticity through Artifice: The Contemporary Relevance of Tracey Emin's Confessional Art," *Social Semiotics* 18, no. 2 (2008): 231; Avelino Nildo, "Confession and Political Normativity: Control of Subjectivity and the Production of the Subject," *Revista brasileira de ciências sociais* 32, no. 93 (2017): 15-16.
[174] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (London: Penguin, 1981), 59; Andreas Fejes and Magnus Dahlstedt, *The Confessing Society: Foucault, Confession and Practices of Lifelong Learning (*London: Routledge, 2013), 2.
[175] Laura Lake Smith, "Telling Stories: Performing Authenticity in the Confessional Art of Tracey Emin," *Rethinking History* 21, no. 2 (2017): 297.
[176] Christine Fanthome, "The Influence and Treatment of Autobiography in Confessional Art: Observations on Tracey Emin's Feature Film "Top Spot," *Biography* 29, no. 1 (2006): 30; Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "The Rumpled Bed of Autobiography: Extravagant Lives, Extravagant Questions," *Biography* 24, no. 1 (2001): 4.

visually raw, which heightens associations with honesty, as common visual indicators of authenticity include apparent imperfections, mistakes, and a visible absence of filters.[177] Authenticity is often also related to sincerity, honesty, and spontaneity.[178] Conversely, Schrager's work appears visually idealised and intentional, conforming to conventional standards of beauty and desirability. Yet despite the different visual outcomes and stylistic approaches to the objectification of women's bodies, each artist asserts their own control over their body, identity and representation, and each work is carefully constructed to manufacture a perception of authenticity and intimacy. In contrast to the visual markers of authenticity utilised by Emin, namely the perceptually unflattering depiction of refuse and mess, denoting the uncomfortable and potentially traumatic aspects of womanhood, Schrager utilises a different method of portraying authenticity. She does this primarily via the encouragement of parasocial relationships between herself and the audience.

The cultivation of perceived authenticity via parasocial relationships is particularly relevant on social media, where the audience feels intimately connected to the person they are viewing, whether celebrity or digital influencer.[179] The complexities of these parasocial relationships have been further complicated by social networking sites like Twitter, which enable actual communication between celebrities and fans.[180] These relationships can also encourage feelings of friendship.[181] In the discussion of infamous early social media performance *lonelygirl15*, in which an actress pretended to be a teenage girl in troubling

[177] Maares, Banjac, and Hanusch, "The Labour of Visual Authenticity on Social Media," 8.
[178] Maares, Banjac, and Hanusch, "The Labour of Visual Authenticity on Social Media," 2; Meredith Salisbury and Jefferson Pooley, "The #Nofilter Self: The Contest for Authenticity among Social Networking Sites, 2002–2016," *Social Sciences* 6, no. 1 (2017): 2.
[179] Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl, "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance," *Psychiatry* 19, no. 3 (1956): 215; Hailey Scherer et al., "'Leave Britney Alone!': Parasocial Relationships and Empathy," *The Journal of Social Psychology* 162, no. 1 (2022): 128-129.
[180] David C. Giles, *Twenty-First Century Celebrity: Fame in Digital Culture* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018), 51-53.
[181] Amanda N. Tolbert and Kristin L. Drogos, "Tweens' Wishful Identification and Parasocial Relationships with Youtubers," *Frontiers in Psychology* 10, (2019): 10-13.

circumstances in a series of YouTube videos, Hall points to the early intimacy and do-it-yourself association of pre-2010 social media as the reason for the enduring association of authenticity, even in the face of overt manipulation.[182] The work of *lonelygirl15* and its cultural impact inspired countless subsequent remediations of similar styles of online performance. The access afforded by social media is also an important aspect in the authenticity illusion, as platforms such as Twitter allow communicative access to presidents, and Instagram 'stories' feature reveals snapshots into celebrities' real lives.[183]

As a result of increased accessibility, combined with the growth in popularity of amateur video blog or 'vlog' style YouTubers, the associations of authenticity and intimacy remain prevalent amongst social media, regardless of the increasing commercialisation of each site. Constructed authenticity enables viewers to feel like "active participants" in the social media performer's life.[184] The parasocial dynamic is often also utilised as a successful marketing tactic.[185] Direct communication between influencer and audience heighten the strength of parasocial dynamic as a strategy.[186] When digital influencers disclose personal details in a confessional manner, trust and the parasocial relationship further increases, as does the audiences intent to purchase what is being advertised.[187] The perception of intimacy is often

[182] Hall, "The Authenticity of Social-Media Performance," 128-129.
[183] Sarah Frier and Matthew Townsend, "FTX to Crack Down on Paid Celebrity Posts That Aren't Clear Ads," Bloomberg Technology, accessed May 22, 2017, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-08-05/ftc-to-crack-down-on-paid-celebrity-posts-that-aren-t-clear-ads; Crystal Abidin, *Internet Celebrity,* 6, 91-2.
[184] Lidia Marôpo, Ana Jorge, and Renata Tomaz, "'I Felt Like I Was Really Talking to You!': Intimacy and Trust among Teen Vloggers and Followers in Portugal and Brazil," *Journal of Children and Media* 14, no. 1 (2020): 33.
[185] Priska Breves et al., "Blind Trust? The Importance and Interplay of Parasocial Relationships and Advertising Disclosures in Explaining Influencers' Persuasive Effects on Their Followers," *International Journal of Advertising* 40, no. 7 (2021): 1209-210.
[186] Chih-Ping Chen, "Digital Gifting in Personal Brand Communities of Live-Streaming: Fostering Viewer-Streamer-Viewer Parasocial Relationships," *Journal of Marketing Communications* 27, no. 8 (2021): 878.
[187] Fernanda Polli Leite and Paulo de Paula Baptista, "The Effects of Social Media Influencers' Self-Disclosure on Behavioral Intentions: The Role of Source Credibility, Parasocial Relationships, and Brand Trust," *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice* 30, no. 3(July 2021): 302-304.

more valuable than audience size.[188] In Schrager's work, her confessional captions addressing the viewer directly can be seen to encourage a perceived intimacy, undoubtedly used to gain further audience engagement.

It has been suggested that constructed authenticity is just another manifestation of personal branding used by Hollywood celebrities of the twentieth century, though performed more effectively with digital media.[189] For celebrities, these associations of authenticity and relatability have direct monetary value, as they gain social capital and, subsequently, have greater earning potential as a result.[190] Valentinsson explores pop star Lady Gaga as an example of the importance of social positioning in celebrity culture. For Lady Gaga, the conscious decision to behave distantly with media professionals, whilst performing a more intimate and authentic-seeming style of identity in her direct communications to fans via Twitter, positions her perceived identity as dismissive of traditional media, while remaining relatable and authentic to her fans.[191] Her reticence towards commercialised media, contrasted against her engagement with social media, positions her perceived identity as being more like her fans than her celebrity or journalistic peers.

Similarly, celebrities like Kim Kardashian have been able to capitalise on the perceived intimacy and accessibility of social media, constructing for themselves a celebrity status

[188] Hanna Reinikainen et al., "'You Really Are a Great Big Sister' - Parasocial Relationships, Credibility, and the Moderating Role of Audience Comments in Influencer Marketing," *Journal of Marketing Management* 36, no. 3-4 (2020): 292.
[189] Jennifer M. Whitmer, "You Are Your Brand: Self-Branding and the Marketization of Self," *Sociology Compass* 13, no. 3 (2019): 1-2, 7; David C. Giles, *Twenty-First Century Celebrity: Fame in Digital Culture* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018), 132.
[190] Mary-Caitlyn Valentinsson, "Stance and the Construction of Authentic Celebrity Persona," *Language in Society* 47, no. 5 (2018), 715.
[191] Mary-Caitlyn Valentinsson, "Stance and the Construction of Authentic Celebrity Persona," *Language in Society* 47, no. 5 (2018), 737.

which would likely otherwise be limited to tabloid style fame.[192] Schrager also utilises constructed authenticity through her derision of critics, galleries and academics, contrasted against her active engagement with fans.[193] In doing so, she appears to position herself as a more relatable and authentic artist, in opposition to the commercialisation and corporatisation of the traditional gallery complex. Identity positioning via social media also underscores the enduring association between user generated content in social media, and intimacy.

In later images from the *Man Hands* series (figures 56, 57, 58), Schrager details the breakdown of the relationship, documenting the patron's desire for control over her work and what she identifies as his inability to see her authentic self, as referenced in her confessional captions. Complicating the boundaries between reality and performance, Schrager has subsequently claimed the series was about "a model working with a private producer and navigating the attentions and tensions of that complicated yet profitable process."[194] These works similarly appear to serve as a direct reflection of how Schrager sees the art world, where her more sexualised work like *Sarah White, Naked Therapy* and Ona Artist are viewed without artistic context and therefore misunderstood.[195]

The work produced for *Man Hands* led to Schrager's *The American Dream Project, 2018*. Reflecting upon her experience creating work for *Man Hands,* Schrager located the project as an "irl/online memoir" of the creative process and complexity of working with a producer.[196]

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[192] Christopher Moore, Kim Barbour, and Katja Lee. "Five dimensions of online persona." *Persona Studies* 3, no.1 (June 2017): 3.
[193] Lehrer, "Artist Leah Schrager on Sex-Positive Selfies."
[194] Leah Schrager, "It's Just A Phase, Leah Schrager," Leah Schrager, accessed July 22, 2022, https://leahschrager.com/phases/.
[195] Margaret Williamson Bechtold, "Three Questions with Leah Schrager," Inside & Out, accessed February 22, 2021, https://awomensthing.org/blog/three-questions-with-leah-schrager/.
[196] Leah Schrager, "An American Dream," Leah Schrager, accessed January 15, 2021, https://leahschrager.com/portfolio/an-american-dream/.

Her original Instagram documentation of both *Man Hands* and the associated *American Dream Project* has since been archived.[197] Schrager "officially" ended *Man Hands* on 23 March 2020, with her 2020 post *Goodbye, Man Hands* (figure 59). As of February 2021, Schrager had never publicly revealed the patron's identity, and it remains ambiguous whether they were real, or merely part of the artistic performance.[198] Following the end of the work, Schrager offered the "truth" of the *Man Hands* experience, selling what she claimed was the true story of their interaction as an artwork (figure 60) in and of itself in 2020. As with much of Schrager's work, *Man Hands* suggests intimacy and truth while remaining an artistic performance. The caption invites the perception that one can buy intimacy from Schrager. While she does appear to be selling the story, the fact that it was a performance undoubtedly results in the 'truth' also being at least partially performative. The association with truth and authenticity is intentionally cultivated by Schrager throughout her persona work and is a central aspect of the social media landscape, in which amateur users and candid images are perceived as inherently more authentic.[199]

Persona and the labour of identity construction

Another definition of authenticity in relation to social media representation is consistency between online and offline presentation of self.[200] However, the artificiality of social media presentation, as encouraged by the commodification of everyday users' bodies and lifestyles, has created an environment in which the construction of a performative identity online has

[197] Conifer, "Leah Schrager Instagram," Conifer, accessed February 15, 2021, https://conifer.rhizome.org/leah/an-american-dream/list/leahs-instagram/b1/20200701200654/https://www.instagram.com/leahschrager/.
[198] Mcvey, "Leah Schrager: Manifestations."
[199] Kimberly Ann Hall, "The Authenticity of Social-Media Performance: Lonelygirl15 and the Amateur Brand of Young-Girlhood," *Women & Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory: Texting Girls: Images, Sounds, and Words in Neoliberal Cultures of Femininity*, 25, no. 2 (May 2015): 128-129.
[200] Salisbury and Pooley, "The #Nofilter Self," 2.

become normalised.[201] The performative online environment has encouraged the rise of the artistic persona on social media, particularly on Instagram. Another key factor contributing to online performativity appears to be the failure of the utopian ideal of an anonymous yet safe and intimate digital culture.[202] Anonymity is increasingly rare online, due to the data management and website cookies, enumerate occurrences in which a real name, password and email are needed, and the proliferation of terms of service agreements.[203]

The imagined freedom and supposed lack of prejudice that was imagined to be found on the internet never fully came to fruition.[204] The supposed freedom afforded by digital and social media have also created an environment in which employees are expected to remain reachable after hours, as everyone is now expected to have communicative technology on hand, so the impetus to respond immediately is compounded. Additionally, professionals are often expected to behave as celebrities online in terms of self-branding and marketing themselves online.[205] This has resulted in the utopian ideal of an anonymous, equal and uninhibited global online culture disintegrating.[206] The performance in constructing online identities, even in as simple a way as choosing which pictures to share and which to keep private, has further contributed to the emergence of artistic personas on social media.[207] As social media participants respond to the limitations on their privacy and social behaviour, the desire to create a separate or performative other identity increases.

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[201] Abidin, *Internet Celebrity,* 91.
[202] Katrin Tiidenberg et al., "'I'm an Addict' and Other Sensemaking Devices: A Discourse Analysis of Self-Reflections on Lived Experience of Social Media," (paper presented at 8th International Conference on Social Media & Society, SMSociety '17, Toronto Canada, 28-30 July 2017), DOI:10.1145/3097286.3097307.
[203] Christopher Moore, Kim Barbour, and Katja Lee, "Five dimensions of online persona," *Persona Studies* 3, no. 1 (June 2017): 2.
[204] Mikhel Proulx, "Protocol and Performativity: Queer Selfies and the Coding of Online Identity," *Performance Research* 21, no. 5 (September 2016): 114.
[205] Eric Stoller, "Our Shared Future: Social Media, Leadership, Vulnerability, and Digital Identity," *Journal of College and Character*, 14, no. 1 (February 2013), 7.
[206] Moore, Barbour, and Lee, "Five dimensions of online persona," 2.
[207] Moore, Barbour, and Lee, "Five dimensions of online persona," 5.

However, the labour that is put into the construction of these personas is more extensive than the visual style suggests.[208] In 2018 Schrager turned the growth statistics of her Instagram persona into an art series itself, in the series *Numbers,* 2018 (figure 61-62) 2018.[209] The emphasis placed on the numerical growth of her Ona Instagram profile further positions Schrager's use of persona as a constructed artistic practice, demonstrating her conscious growth as a form of artistic celebrity creation. These works also underscore the labour that goes into her work. In works such as *Seriality*, (figure 63) 2018, Schrager depicts the photographic outtakes that go into one her Ona Instagram images. Shown on a black background, with many photographic frames of similar yet slightly distinct poses, the image is reminiscent of traditional analogue photographic contact sheet. Schrager's aesthetic approach positions her work as just as labour-intensive as traditional art photography, while also demonstrating the conscious construction of the persona she is seeking to create.

For social media users seeking an audience, the curation of feeds, and work to promote an image's popularity via hashtags, is known as visibility labour.[210] Despite the time-consuming work often utilised to encourage engagement, it is often not visually apparent. The hidden labour of social media also extends to the manipulation of the Instagram algorithm.[211] Even amateur users who engage with social media to share their photographs with family and friends are engaged in a labour, as they construct the set of images and edit them to create the

[208] Moore, Barbour, and Lee, "Five dimensions of online persona," 1.
[209] Leah Schrager, "Numbers 2018," Leah Schrager, accessed August 20, 2020, https://leahschrager.com/portfolio/numbers/.
[210] Crystal Abidin, "Visibility Labour: Engaging with Influencers' Fashion Brands and #Ootd Advertorial Campaigns on Instagram," *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture & Policy* 161, no. 1 (2016): 86-100.
[211] Victoria O'Meara, "Weapons of the Chic: Instagram Influencer Engagement Pods as Practices of Resistance to Instagram Platform Labor," *Social media + society* 5, no. 4 (2019): 8; Maares, Banjac, and Hanusch, "The Labour of Visual Authenticity on Social Media," 4.

identity they wish to convey. As such, artists and general users alike are able to create identities and craft personal narratives, which are highly constructed yet conceal their construction through the nature of the platform. This labour is again referenced in Schrager's *Growth* #5 - #6, (figure 61-62) 2018. Comprised of screenshots of the social media status website socialblade.com, the figures show the growth of Schrager's Ona Artist persona from a social media engagement perspective. Despite the amateur appearance of the photographs on the Ona profile, it is evident Schrager has put extensive time and energy into constructing and perpetuating the persona, in addition to seeking publicity to gain more followers and acquire artistic celebrity.[212]

In works such as *#30 of 40* (figure 64) 2018 from her American Dream series, part of the work *Face Girl vs Ass Girl* (figure 65) 2018, Schrager explores the performance of authenticity and intimacy. The piece was displayed alongside *#29 of 40* (figure 40) 2018. Crucially, *#29 of 40* was posted on the sexualised social media account of the persona Ona Artist, while *#30 of 40* was published on her personal artist profile. The contrast in comments is striking, as the supportive and encouraging yet limited number of comments from *#30 of 40* are juxtaposed against the deluge of explicit comments on *#29 of 40*. Schrager uses these images to explore difference in how women are treated based on self-presentation. Using the aesthetics of candid photography, Schrager positions both images as casual and intimate. Additionally, she uses text and familiar posing in the selfie photo *#30 of 40* to position it as more authentic and relatable, whilst positioning *#29 of 40* as sexually provocative in pose and caption, which reads "something fits better than my Calvins'." The juxtaposition utilises the audience's preconceptions of intimacy, authenticity, and relatability in online environments to examine the way in which differing modes of presentation impact audience reaction.

[212] Schrager, "Self-Made Supermodels."

The role of self-determination is also complexly interwoven with online personas. The manifestation of the individual's agency is complicated, as each case would fundamentally be engaging with different levels of social adhesion and autonomous agency.[213] Sara Sylvester uses Schrager as an example of the identity construction that is occurring via social media performance, stating that identity is now formed partly online in a symbiotic relationship, not merely as an individual's representation of self when engaging with social media.[214] Schrager is not only exploring identity through her digital persona work, but is also examining the specific relationship between her physical and representational body, fourth wave feminism, and the contemporary social landscape. In her consistent focus on her body, Schrager further demonstrates the centrality of bodies in art, social media, and identity.

Schrager's series *Manifestations,* 2019, continues her exploration of these ideas of objectification, sexualisation and performance. The series conforms to the artistic visual conventions to a greater extent than her Ona persona, and as such position the work as more easily identifiable as art opposed to pornography. Schrager identifies the aesthetic departure from Ona as the "female friendly" aspect of the work, referring to the extent to which she conforms to the male gaze.[215] Schrager has noted negative feedback when she represents her body in a way which more overtly conforms to the male gaze and is positioned as highly sexual.[216] The *Manifestations* series and work titled *Waiting for Gianni* (figure 66) are more visually reminiscent of paintings than digital photographs. Despite the painterly appearance and apparent visibility of 'brush strokes', these works are created through digital

[213] Marshall, Moore, and Barbour, "Persona as Method," 302.
[214] Sylvester, "The Theatre of the Selfie," 61–107.
[215] Mcvey, "Leah Schrager: Manifestations."
[216] Pauly, "Leah Schrager Confronts Sexuality in Feminist Art."

photographic manipulation. As with the *Man Hands* series Schrager appears to be modifying her self-representation based on what she perceives as more socially acceptable to her target audience.

For Schrager, altering her behaviour and representation based on audience reaction is a reoccurring theme. The performance associations throughout *Man Hands* also echoes the performativity of social media. Social media culture encourages users to curate the images shared to portray idealised narratives of their life and self, in order to control their self-image and receive positive feedback.[217] Aspirational lifestyles and conventional beauty are commonly depicted in order to attract views.[218] More sexualised or objectified images are correlated with greater 'likes.'[219] Consequently, idealised representations of women's faces and bodies in particular are negatively correlated with women's perceptions of their appearance.[220] Social standards further complicate what is posted on social media, as authenticity is respected, yet socially dictated stylistic choices necessitate a level of performativity.[221]

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[217] Sofia P. Caldeira, Sofie Van Bauwel, and Sander De Ridder, "'Everybody Needs to Post a Selfie Every Once in a While': Exploring the Politics of Instagram Curation in Young Women's Self-Representational Practices," *Information, Communication & Society* 24, no. 8 (2021): 1086; Beth T. Bell, Jennifer A. Cassarly, and Lucy Dunbar, "Selfie-Objectification: Self-Objectification and Positive Feedback ("Likes") Are Associated with Frequency of Posting Sexually Objectifying Self-Images on Social Media," *Body Image* 26, (2018): 87.

[218] Crystal Abidin, "In$Taglam: Instagram as a Repository of Taste, a Burgeoning Marketplace, a War of Eyeballs," in *Mobile Media Making in an Age of Smartphones*, eds. Marsha Berry and Max Schleser (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014), 121-122.

[219] Laura R. Ramsey and Amber L. Horan, "Picture This: Women's Self-Sexualization in Photos on Social Media," *Personality and Individual Differences* 133, (2018): 88-89; Bell, Cassarly, Dunbar, "Selfie-Objectification," 87.

[220] Madison Politte-Corn and Jasmine Fardouly, "#nomakeupselfie: The Impact of Natural No-Makeup Images and Positive Appearance Comments on Young Women's Body Image," *Body Image*, 34, (September 2020): 234; Jesse Fox et al., "Effects of Taking Selfies on Women's Self-Objectification, Mood, Self-Esteem, and Social Aggression toward Female Peers," *Body Image* 36, (2021): 197-198.

[221]Suvi Uski and Airi Lampinen, "Social Norms and Self-Presentation on Social Network Sites: Profile Work in Action," *New Media & Society* 18, no. 3 (2016): 461.

Real time performance and enduring persona

Artists on social media are increasingly exploring the interplay between fourth wave feminism, performance, personas, and the artistic body. In addition to Schrager, New York based Argentinian artist Amalia Ulman has utilised social media in her creation of an artistic persona and digital performance. Ulman's *Excellence And Perfection* series is a key example of an artist constructing an identity online, to an audience who were mostly unaware that it was a performance. In Ulman's case, there was even less awareness of the constructed performance of the five-month-long piece, as unlike Schrager, there was no linked artist website at the time which contextualised her Instagram presence as performative. It was not until the end of the piece that she revealed to viewers that it had been constructed.[222] While her Instagram following grew throughout this time, a number of additional followers were purchased for her by artist Constant Dullaart.[223]

The feminist implications of a woman eliciting complete control over the creation and dissemination of her image is a central aspect of social media which contemporary artists are exploring. As websites like Instagram become more popular within both the art world and public domain, the distinction between reality and artifice has become increasingly ambiguous.[224] Ulman explored the disconnect of social media from reality in her Instagram based photographic performance.[225] From the project's inception on 19 April 2014, Ulman spent five months creating an online performance work later titled *Excellences & Perfections,*

[222] Rachel Corbett, "How Amalia Ulman Became an Instagram Celebrity," Vulture, May 20, 2017, http://www.vulture.com/2014/12/how-amalia-ulman-became-an-instagram-celebrity.html.
[223] Corbett, "How Amalia Ulman Became an Instagram Celebrity."
[224] Hui-Tzu Grace Chou and Nicholas Edge, "They Are Happier and Having Better Lives Than I Am: The Impact of Using Facebook on Perceptions of Others' Lives," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 15, no. 2 (February 2012): 117-119.
[225] Cadence Kinsey, "The Instagram Artist Who Fooled Thousands," *BBC Culture*, March 7, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20160307-the-instagram-artist-who-fooled-thousands; Aria Dean, "Amalia Ulman: Gentle Deception," Topical Cream, accessed May 20, 2017, http://topicalcream.info/editorial/amalia-ulman-gentle-deception/.

presented to thousands of viewers via her Instagram account (figure 67) 2014. During this time, Ulman depicted herself and her life as conforming to a range of social media stereotypes. She consistently mimicked the behaviour she saw popularised on Instagram, ensuring her work in most cases appears interchangeable with other young, female users. The fictionalised identity Ulman was depicting progressively became more extreme, yet her persona remained plausible due to the aspirational and confessional profiles which are prevalent across Instagram.[226] Ulman's persona was assumed to be real by many viewers, primarily because these Instagram users were already accustomed to such representations of women.[227]

The intentional imitation of the common ways young women portray themselves in online communities stemmed from Ulman's own recognition that she had already been unconsciously participating in a fictionalised portrayal of herself online.[228] As with many young women, Ulman had been portraying herself in a manner which affirmed the way she wanted to be perceived, integrating the visual cues associated with idealised versions of her own lifestyle.[229] Identifying as a young female artist, Ulman realised she was unintentionally subscribing to the aesthetic conventions present in the representation of young female artist as found online.[230] As with any subculture, specific Instagram styles of images are associated with each popular lifestyle and identity, unifying thousands of users within an identifiable code based on how they want to be perceived, resulting in a cycle of conformation and

[226] New Museum, *Amalia Ulman: Excellences & Perfections*, an exhibition at the New Museum, New York from April 19, 2014, http://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/amalia-ulman-excellences-perfections.
[227] New Museum, *Amalia Ulman: Excellences & Perfections*.
[228] Dean, "Amalia Ulman – Gentle Deception."
[229] Molly Langmuir, "Amalia Ulman is the First Great Instagram Artist," Elle, September 16, 2016, http://www.elle.com/culture/art-design/a38857/amalia-ulman-instagram-artist/.
[230] Langmuir, "Amalia Ulman is the First Great Instagram Artist."

validation. Ulman challenges the artifice present in these highly curated representations of identity and lifestyle, while transgressing the boundaries between art and other visual culture.

Her ever-changing persona as represented through photographs is reminiscent of the work of Cindy Sherman, whose own work similarly challenged notions of femininity, beauty, and gender-construction. In one particularly publicised photograph, Ulman used tape to bind her breasts, which along with a caption describing her #frankenboob, implying she was recovering from breast augmentation surgery (figure 68) 2014.[231] Ulman eventually revealed her intention for her performance.[232] Accusations of narcissism, established as a common complaint against social media users in general, were prevalent.[233] As explored in chapter four, claims of narcissism are not exclusively aimed at digital artists. Prior to social media, performance artist like Orlan also intentionally incorporated narcissism and cosmetic surgery within her performance art in an interrogation of beauty ideals.[234] Jones also suggests that the utilisation of narcissism within art can be a way of challenging the very association between women and narcissism.[235]

Despite the established history of performance art, many were critical of Ulman's deception, believing what they had witnessed on her account to be real.[236] Users were often unable to reconcile that what they had believed to be an intimate glimpse into another user's life had been a performance. Manufactured authenticity and intimacy is also seen in the growing

[231] New Museum, *Amalia Ulman: Excellences & Perfections*.
[232] Corbett, "How Amalia Ulman Became an Instagram Celebrity.".
[233] Alastair Sooke, "Is This the First Instagram Masterpiece?,"18 January 2016, *The Telegraph*, January 18, 2016, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/photography/what-to-see/is-this-the-first-instagram-masterpiece/.
[234] Danielle Knafo, *In Her Own Image: Women's Self-Representation in Twentieth-Century Art* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), 160-161.
[235]Amelia Jones, *Body Art/performing the Subject (*Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 175-176.
[236] Rachel Small, "Amalia Ulman," *Interview*, October 14, 2015, http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/amalia-ulman/#_.

number of companies paying popular Instagram users to promote lifestyle brands and sell products, which are commonly implied to be authentic snapshots of the users' daily life.[237] Through her work Ulman encourages a scepticism towards all forms of media, not only social media such as Instagram, dismissing the ethical concerns of tricking thousands of people by claiming her work raises necessary questions about authenticity and trust.[238] Additionally, the merging of social media persona and perceived real-world identity further demonstrates the influence of Haraway's cyborg body.[239] Ulman's work further functions as a comment on media representation of women, and the role many users play in perpetuating stereotypes in representation of themselves. It is also an exploration of contradictory identities and the social codes which limit these contradictions.[240] *Excellences & Perfections* has since been shown in Whitechapel Gallery and Tate Modern.[241]

In her 2015-16 series *Privilege* (figure 69-71), Ulman constructed another persona that was enacted online. Throughout the series, Ulman staged a pregnancy, primarily within an office setting, utilising the mundane familiarity of the corporate environment to comment on the contemporary standard of success that centres "repetition, propaganda" in its definition.[242] In

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[237] Hannah Francis, "Cash for Posts: The Murky Ethics of Social Media Stardom," *The Sunday Morning Herald*, November 7, 2015, http://www.smh.com.au/technology/web-culture/cash-for-posts-the-murky-ethics-of-social-media-stardom-20151105-gkrs29.html; Sarah Frier and Matthew Townsend, "FTX to Crack Down on Paid Celebrity Posts That Aren't Clear Ads," *Bloomberg Technology*, August 5, 2016, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-08-05/ftc-to-crack-down-on-paid-celebrity-posts-that-aren-t-clear-ads; Abidin, *Internet Celebrity*: 6, 91-92; Jeff Bercovici, "Instagram and Product Placement: Is there A Filter for Transparency?," *Forbes*, May 30, 2012, https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffbercovici/2012/05/30/instagram-and-product-placement-a-blurry-line-gets-blurrier/#36871ef45f19.

[238] Rob Horning and Amalia Ulman, "Perpetual Provisional Selves: A conversation about authenticity and social media,"Rhizome, accessed May 22, 2017, http://rhizome.org/editorial/2014/dec/11/rob-horning-and-amalia-ulman/.

[239] Fateman, "Women on the Verge,"221.

[240] Langmuir, "Amalia Ulman is the First Great Instagram Artist."

[241] Sooke, "Is This the First Instagram Masterpiece?."

[242] Fiona Duncan, "Escape From L.A. With Amalia Ulman: The Multidisciplinary Artist On Privilege, Performance, And Her Sidekick Pigeon, Bob," Sense, accessed August 25, 2020, https://www.ssense.com/en-us/editorial/culture/escape-from-l-a-with-amalia-ulman; Anni Iris, "Why Artist Amalia Ulman Is So Necessary in the Age of Fake Heiress Anna Delvey," *Galerie Magazine*, July 4, 2018, https://www.galeriemagazine.com/amalia-ulman-prefigured-anna-delvey/.

an aesthetic departure from *Excellences & Perfections*, Ulman positioned *Privilege* as a parody of 1990s office culture, through the use of simple, bold palette of black white and red, dated cubicles, and 1990s typography.[243] Ulman incorporated pregnancy within the piece as a way to question the expectations and limitations placed upon mothers, and the assumptions made about normative adulthood.[244] Furthermore, growing up with parents who Ulman believed did not act like conventional adults, and without traditional rules or limitations, Ulman stated she subsequently fetishised both the performance of adulthood as seen in media, and strict rules and regulations, leading to an interest in S&M and Catholicism.[245]

The act of fetishising what the dominant culture depicts as normative or desirable, in addition to that which is denied from personal experience in youth, similarly encourages the performance of young adults mimicking film and television characters. The social performance and subconscious mimicry is only heightened in the age of social media, where in the ability to construct an identity entirely of the users choosing is easier than ever before. Ulman's social media performances appropriate performative behaviour, creating a parody of both the behaviour itself, and the institutional and cultural attitudes that have enabled it. More overtly than Schrager, Ulman's work consistently references the constructed nature of gender, as she suggests the repetition of banal visual signifiers of feminine beauty and wellness on social media all serve to create a learned behaviour which is endlessly repeated.[246] Ulman's work itself functions in a similar way, through imitating the conventions

[243] Duncan, "Escape From L.A. With Amalia Ulman."
[244] Nate Freeman, "I'm Laughing at Myself a Little Bit': Amalia Ulman on Her Show in London, and Ending Her Instagram Performance," Artnews, May 22, 2017, http://www.artnews.com/2016/10/04/im-laughing-at-myself-a-little-bit-amalia-ulman-on-her-show-in-london-and-ending-her-instagram-performance/; Duncan, "Escape From L.A. With Amalia Ulman."
[245] Duncan, "Escape From L.A. With Amalia Ulman."; Li Bowen, In Conversation with Amalia Ulman, , *Ocula Magazine*, July 27, 2018, https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/amalia-ulman/.
[246] Rob Horning and Amalia Ulman, "Perpetual Provisional Selves: A conversation about authenticity and social media," Rhizome, accessed May 22, 2017, http://rhizome.org/editorial/2014/dec/11/rob-horning-and-amalia-ulman/; Sooke, "Is This the First Instagram Masterpiece?."

associated with Instagram popularity, Ulman reflects the performance of everyday users back to themselves. In doing so, Ulman suggests that identity construction through repetition is a central feature of the contemporary body on social media. It is also a key way in which artistic representations of bodies have been informed by the digital age.

Molly Soda also uses social media and her own body as part of a performance art practice, exploring the role of the internet and social media on the way women experience embodied identity. Soda, born Amalia Soto, is a Puerto Rican-American artist who gained recognition for her digital artwork published on social media platforms such as Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook and more recently, Instagram. Represented by Annka Kultys Gallery in London, Soda's work has been displayed in both online exhibitions and within the traditional gallery setting. Credited as a web-cam performance artist, Soda uses digital media, primarily photographs, web-cam video, and digital collage, to explore the representation of young women in social media websites including Tumblr, Instagram and YouTube. Social networking sites are integral to Soda's practice, as she both publishes her work in these platforms and references the culture of these digital platforms within her work. Soda identifies primarily as a digital artist working online. However, pieces including webcam videos and screenshots of her online activity have also been exhibited in physical exhibitions, challenging the boundaries between online and traditional physical exhibitions.[247] The way in which contemporary digital artists like Soda are removing the boundaries between digital and physical artwork echoes the complexity of boundaries between private and public in an increasingly online world.[248]

[247] Eddy Frankel, "Molly Soda: Comfort Zone, TimeOut, accessed September 3, 2017, https://www.timeout.com/london/art/molly-soda-comfort-zone.
[248] Kim Barbour and Lydia Heise, "Sharing #Home on Instagram," *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture & Policy* 172, no. 1 (2019): 41.

Soda frequently references the online spaces popular with teenage and young women, including those which were popular during her own teenage years. Websites such as MySpace, the now-defunct AOL chat rooms, LiveJournal, and YouTube are referenced in her practice, incorporating the stereotyped behaviour associated with each platform within her artwork. In works such as *Sad Clown Makeup Tutorial* (figure 72) 2016, Soda imitates the behaviour common on social media, reflecting viewers' behaviour back to them through exaggerated mimicry. Published on YouTube, Soda performs make-up tutorials which dismiss female beauty ideals and parody the earnestness of other uploaders on the platform.[249] Her interest in the amount of work put into appearing natural and relatable is apparent in her own rejection of aesthetic convention.[250] As with Schrager, Soda's use of her bedroom as the setting for much of her artwork enhances the perception of intimacy felt by the viewer. The depiction of the bedroom also evokes associations of authenticity and vulnerability.

On YouTube, as in other social media platforms, Soda both embraces and dismisses the unspoken conventions of the popular platform users.[251] By utilising the aesthetics popular within these spaces, Soda explores the role of online spaces in the conception of self-identity and community interaction, while simultaneously questioning the language and attitudes which are used to dismiss young women's interests as vapid. Each space Soda references has its own conventions and style, which Soda explores as unique language. Many of these online spaces and the aesthetic conventions they popularised have changed dramatically since the original conception Soda references. Websites such as MySpace have undergone significant change since their heyday in the early 2000s, while the once ubiquitous 'Dollz' and glitter graphics are no longer fashionable. In her use of these nostalgic symbols of the millennium-

[249] Molly Soda, *Sad Clown Makeup Tutorial,* 2016.
[250] Vivi Kallinikou, "Molly Soda's Comfort Zone," Artrabbit, September 3, 2017, http://www.annkakultys.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Press_Molly_Soda_2016.11.29_Artrabbit.pdf.
[251] Kallinikou, "Molly Soda's Comfort Zone."

era internet, Soda evokes the earliest forms of contemporary social media spaces occupied by young women.[252] The kitsch, saccharine aesthetic of these graphics echoes the ways in which women are continuously infantilised, in addition to the condescension many women and girls face when they show an interest in the pink, glittery objects which are marketed towards them. Reference to this hypocrisy is prevalent throughout the work of artists such as Molly Soda and Schrager, in addition to Rrap, as explored in chapter four.

The patriarchal attitudes towards women's autonomy and the complexity of self-sexualisation and objectification in feminism is also confronted in Soda's repeated exploration of the ways contemporary women experience shame.[253] Most directly explored in her series *Should I Send This?* 2015 (figure 73) 2015, Soda published nude photographs of herself and sexual text messages both online and simultaneously in a physical zine in a confrontation of weaponised shame.[254] The work was created in direct response to the growing number of celebrities whose personal images had been hacked and shared without their consent. As with Schrager, Soda uses intentionally provocative images of her body in order to assert power over her own sexuality and body in a culture that objectifies and sexualises women's bodies, whilst denigrating them if they choose to represent themselves in a similar manner. *Should I Send This?* Interrogates the idea of "leaked nudes," a colloquialism for photographs of naked bodies published online without the subject's consent.[255] In an effort to interrogate the repressive attitudes around women's nudes, and to confront her own interest in bodily control, Soda shared images of her body, essentially "leaking her own nudes," something

[252] Molly Soda, accessed September 20, 2020, https://mollysoda.hotglue.me/
[253] Charlotte Jansen, *Girl on Girl: Art and Photography in the Age of the Female Gaze* (London: Laurence King, 2017), 153; Charlotte Jansen, "Bedrooms, Karaoke and Glitter: Molly Soda Makes Her Solo Show Debut," Art Slant, accessed September 3, 2017, https://www.artslant.com/lon/articles/show/44582.
[254] Molly Soda, "Should I Send This?," Newhive, accessed Septemberr 5, 2017, https://newhive.com/mollysoda/sendthis.
[255] Kallinikou, "Molly Soda's Comfort Zone.".

other women have also done.[256] While Soda claimed the images were originally intended just for her, she later shared the images willingly as part of her art practice.[257] The complex, often contradictory form of sex positivity entangled with self-objectification is seen throughout Ulman, Soda and Schrager's practice, and is a defining characteristic of much of the fourth wave feminist body art on social media.

Censorship and content restrictions in social media

Another outcome of the growth of the internet and subsequent accessibility to reproductions of artworks previously found only in galleries and print mediums, has been the decontextualisation of art viewed online. In part due to the often-ambiguous distinction between practising artist and general social media users, censorship has remained a factor within contemporary art online. The body is particularly problematic for artists using the internet, as most social media platforms which artists and museums utilise for self-promotion, such as Instagram and Facebook, have guidelines which prohibit certain imagery from being uploaded.[258] These criteria are often confusing and contradictory, resulting in substantive controversy over what is prohibited and why.[259] The policies have repeatedly resulted in the censorship of recognised works of art. In April 2017, photographs by established artist Imogen Cunningham were removed from the Boston Museum of Fine Art's Instagram page, for violating community standards.[260] In another example, Melbourne auction house

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[256] Kallinikou, "Molly Soda's Comfort Zone."; Jansen, *Girl on Girl: Art and Photography in the Age of the Female Gaze*, 156; Katrin Tiidenberg and Emily van der Nagel, *Sex and Social Media* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2020), 114.
[257] Kallinikou, "Molly Soda's Comfort Zone."; Jansen, *Girl on Girl: Art and Photography in the Age of the Female Gaze*, 156.
[258] Instagram, "Community Guidelines," Instagram, accessed May 20, 2017, https://help.instagram.com/477434105621119/; Facebook, "Community Standards," Facebook, accessed May 20, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards#nudity.
[259] Leo Kelion, "Facebook Revamps its Takedown Guidelines," *BBC News*, March 16, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-31890521.
[260] Malcom Gay, "MFA Among Museums Hit by Instagram Censorship," *25 April 2017, The Boston Globe*, March 16, 2015, https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/art/2017/04/25/mfa-among-museums-hit-instagram-censorship/tbPEbiVJOle06PzS71giuL/story.html; Alyssa Buffenstein, "MFA Boston is the Latest Museum

Mossgreen was unable to advertise a Charles Blackman painting featuring two naked women.[261]

In addition to general issues of censorship and the decontextualisation of art when taken out of its intended gallery setting, debates around sexism in censorship are also increasingly seen online. As a result of policy restrictions, feminist artists and general users have questioned the sexism present in such policies. Some point to the double standard in Instagram's terms of service which allow male nipples to be shown freely, but female nipples are prohibited. In June 2014, artist and professor Micol Hebron posted an image of a male nipple with the following caption:

> Here you go – you can use this to make any photo of a topless woman acceptable for the interwebs! Use this 'acceptable (male) nipple template', duplicate, resize and paste as needed, to cover the offending female nipples, with socially acceptable male nipples (like a digital pasty). You're welcome.[262]

Hebron's post was widely shared and was included in an article on Hyperallergic on 20 June 2014.[263] Another copy of a male nipple, which utilised Hebron's idea and source from the Wikipedia commons, was shared on social media by numerous celebrities to thousands of viewers (figure 74) 2014. The story and Hebron's image were later shared on Huffington

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Driven Crazy by Instagram Censorship," Artnet News, accessed May 20, 2017, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/boston-museum-instagram-censorship-937019.

[261] Michaela Boland, "Facebook bans Charles Blackman nude painting from Mossgreen auction post," *The Australian*, February 28, 2017, http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/facebook-bans-charles-blackman-nude-painting-from-mossgreen-auction-post/news-story/9e0899bd48f1b985e2543e96a3a235f5.

[262] Micol Hebron, "Micol Hebron Facebook," Facebook, accessed May 29, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10154172790975752&set=a.58578100751.83816.582515751&type=3&theater.

[263] Alix Taylor, "Your Concise Guide to Social Media's Female Nipple Policies," Hyperallergic, accessed May 12, 2017, https://hyperallergic.com/131620/your-concise-guide-to-social-medias-female-nipple-policies/.

Post, Buzzfeed, Elle, and have since "gone viral."[264] The image has subsequently been widely used to cover female breasts uploaded to Instagram and Facebook, mocking the double standard in the policies. There have also been profiles created expressly to question these policies, such as @genderless_nipples, where close cropped nipples of indeterminate gender are uploaded in protest of the gendered policies.[265] The restrictive double standard and the cultural attitudes which create it have been a central focus of the Free the Nipple movement.[266] Created in 2012 by Lina Esco, the movement questions the gender inequality behind laws which require different modes of dress dependant on gender.[267] The movement has gained significant traction on social media, with many celebrities and high-profile public figures declaring their support to thousands of followers. As such, social activism online is directly influencing representations of the body in contemporary art. Artists engaging with social media and digital technologies are often responding to these issues within their work, with artists like Schrager and Ulman continuously exploring the socially imposed restrictions placed upon the body online.

SFSM (Safe for Social Media)

Schrager explores this visual culture of censorship, self-sexualisation and autonomous female representation in the series *SFSM (Safe for Social Media)*. Here, the way in which male creators are afforded more freedom and value, and the challenges in online censorship, is explored through self-representation.[268] Underscoring censorship of women's bodies online

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[264] Taylor Pittman, "Women Take on Body Censorship with Help from Male Nipples and Photoshop," The Huffington Post, accessed May 15, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/women-fight-nipple-censorship-with-photoshop_n_7735738; Annie Stevens, "Will Male Nipples Help the Censorship Battle?," *Elle*, July 7, 2015, http://www.elle.com.au/news/today-were-all-thinking-about-male-nipples-5997.
[265] @Genderless_nipples, accessed May 20, 2017, https://www.instagram.com/genderless_nipples/
[266] Free the Nipple, "Free the Nipple: How far will you got for equality?," Free the Nipple, accessed May 15, 2017, http://freethenipple.com/.
[267] Lina Esco, "Free the Nipple' is Not About Seeing Breasts," *Time*, September 11, 2015, http://time.com/4029632/lina-esco-should-we-freethenipple/.
[268] Lehrer, "Artist Leah Schrager on Sex-Positive Selfies."

and reflecting Hebron's nipple imagery as a strategy of circumventing sexist restrictions, Schrager alters nude photographs of herself until they are able to be readily shared on social media. Schrager uses the combination of obscuring the details of her naked body and repositioning the works within a more traditional art rather than pornographic iconography, to bypass Instagram nudity guidelines and position the works as 'acceptable' art.[269] These works explore the ways in which art displayed online needs to conform to specific restrictions in order to avoid censorship. The series also suggests that it is the patriarchal conventions of "man hands" that are responsible for the need for Schrager to alter her own images of her body in order to gain artistic recognition and perceived value.[270] While male artists like Richard Prince are able to depict sexualised, objectified images of women's bodies while retaining perceived artistic merit and accolades, women like Schrager are continuously questioned and criticised for representing their own bodies.[271]

In works such as *Infinity Selfie 3 (or SFSM– Safe for Social Media),* (figure 52) 2016, Schrager is represented in a similar pose and expression as that on her Ona artist profile, with her legs spread towards the camera. However, the nudity of the *Infinity Selfie* series is obfuscated by repetition of the image within an image. While the *Infinity Selfie* series depicts Schrager in a state of implied nudity, in much the same poses as her Ona artist profile, the digital manipulation of the image ensures it is more readily accepted as art. Schrager's interest in the hypocrisy of the contemporary art world, and the restrictive attitudes regarding the representation of women's bodies is again explored in *Selfie-Examination*, (figure 53)

[269] Grace Banks, "6 Female Artists on What the Male Gaze Means to Them," Repeller, accessed February 17, 2021, https://repeller.com/male-gaze-definition/.
[270] Banks, "6 Female Artists on What the Male Gaze Means to Them."
[271] Max Lakin, "Leah Schrager is an Ethnographer of the Extremely Online," Garage, accessed September 12, 2020, https://garage.vice.com/en_us/article/vb9aka/leah-schrager-body-art.

2015 and *Instabond Blue* (figure 74) 2017.[272] Here, the act of manipulating the photographs with digital editing or paint, removes accusations of obscenity and reaffirms their validity as art. Social media has influenced the representation of the body in several fundamental ways, namely via the emergence of fourth wave feminism, self-objectification and the growth of the online persona in the work of contemporary artists. Leah Schrager is a leading example, as she has an extended social media practice that is highly sexualised, draws on pornography aesthetics and conventions, and she identifies her work and beliefs as feminist. Schrager's Ona Artist is an example of an online artistic persona and is utilised to explore the complexity of constructed performance on a platform that retains, however erroneously, associations of candidness, authenticity, and truth.

Through crossing boundaries of censorship, socially acceptable representation, hierarchical gallery structures, and exploring controversial subjects including self-sexualisation, objectification and narcissism, artists like Schrager demonstrate the complexity of the artistic body in contemporary social media. Prioritising their autonomous control and engaging in enduring persona work, Schrager and Ulman utilise their own bodies to enact digital performances that respond to contemporary visual culture and fourth wave feminism. The performance of the work is integral to both the medium and the concept, as social networking sites like Instagram encourage identity management through image curation and repetition. Through their use of their own bodies, these artists also demonstrate the importance of autonomy in the fourth wave feminist digital space.

[272] Alexandra Genova, "Exploring the Blurred Lines Between Celebrity, Sex and Art," *Time*, May 2, 2017, http://time.com/4761944/celebrity-sex-art/.

The intersection between fourth wave feminism, interactive social media, and artistic representations of the body is an aspect of what makes bodily representation in the digital age distinctive. Artists like Schrager are responding to these conventions of social media, regarding the reclamation of objectification, the sexualisation of one's own body, and the performativity implicitly encouraged by the platform. While it is impossible to identify a clear timeline of artistic representation, it is evident that fourth wave feminism, objectification, self-sexualisation, empowerment and control are key aspects of the contemporary artistic body on social media. Additionally, this fourth wave feminist, pornofied, user led environment has encouraged the growth of the artistic persona. Furthermore, the style of art performance is associated with authenticity and therefore has the potential to be utilised as an artwork which is ambiguous in intention, confusing the audience as to its position as art, pornography, or amateur user content. These factors have also created a bypass for the usual gallery hierarchy. Artists like Schrager exemplify these integral aspects of the contemporary artistic body on social media.

Chapter Six

Digital Bodies, Queer Identities, and Racial Politics: Juliana Huxtable

The potential for the internet and social media to encourage feminist representation and identity exploration is explored in the work of Juliana Huxtable, through the incorporation of her African American and transgender identity amongst a landscape of fantastical bodily imagery. Huxtable was born intersex in 1987 and raised male from birth, later identifying as a transgender woman and changing her name and pronouns.[1] Throughout her practice, she uses digital technology and social media to explore the relationship between her gender and racial identity, in response to the way the LGBTQ experience is often kept separate from discussions of race.[2] Through her visual and performance art, Huxtable prioritises intersectionality.[3] During her childhood, Huxtable faced racial and gender discrimination and bullying.[4] She has also stated that she felt unfairly criticised in college for depicting her racial identity, while Caucasian students never faced similar criticism.[5] By interrogating these aspects of her lived experience, Huxtable explores the construction of embodied identity in the contemporary digital age through photography, performance, video, and social media.

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[1] Charlotte Burns, "Juliana Huxtable interrogates 'older, whiter versions' of history at MoMA," *The Guardian*, November 7, 2015, accessed November 2, 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/nov/06/juliana-huxtable-moma-performa-15-new-york; Antwaun Sargent, Artist Juliana Huxtable's Bold, Defiant Vision, Vice, accessed March 25, 2019, https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/exmjkp/artist-juliana-huxtables-journey-from-scene-queen-to-trans-art-star-456; Guggenheim, "Collection Online: Juliana Huxtable," accessed August 14, 2022, https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/juliana-huxtable.

[2] Hector Y. Adames and Nayeli Y. Chavez-Dueñas, "Reclaiming All of Me: The Racial Queer Identity Framework," in *Queer Psychology: Intersectional Perspectives,* eds. Kevin L. Nadal and María R. Scharrón-del Río (Champagne: Springer International Publishing AG, 2021), 65-67; José Quiroga, "From Republic to Empire: The Loss of Gay Studies," *GLQ* 10, no. 1 (2003): 133-37.

[3] Amelia Jones, "Introduction: sexual difference and otherwise," in *Otherwise,* eds. Amelia Jones and Erin Silver (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016) 8; Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 8, (1989):139-67.

[4] Burns, "Juliana Huxtable interrogates 'older, whiter versions' of history at MoMA,"; Sargent, "Artist Juliana Huxtable's Bold, Defiant Vision."

[5] Christiane Paul, *Digital Art*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 84-85.

Utilising her own body in many of her artworks, she explores the art historical nude, political symbolism, identity politics, racial and gender prejudices within the United States, her own upbringing, and an imagined genealogical history. Huxtable's multifaceted use of digital and social media are created within the context of the LGBTQ community, through research into her racial and cultural identity that extends beyond what she was taught in school or by her family, and through her digital photographic and editing practice and online display. Each of these digitally mediated factors have been key in Huxtable's exploration of intersectionality, transition, history, and the potential for transgressing binaries.

Nuwaubianism, afro-futurism and alternate histories

Central to Huxtable's practice is her use of the internet and social media to inform her artistic representations of the body and research her cultural identity.[6] Accessible internet was particularly important for researching aspects of her African American and transgender identity which are not part of canonical history, in addition to subsequently developing her interest in alternate histories and conspiracy theories. Huxtable seeks to understand queer and racial history, thereby visually locating herself within a new historical – and personal – discourse.[7] As a result of research into her cultural identity and heritage online, Huxtable developed an interest in the Nuwaubian Nation and ideas of alternative histories.[8] These alternate histories offer both literal and symbolic liberation from the limited canonical histories, as dictated by Caucasian ideas of supremacy, western patriarchal culture, and conventional art historical discourses.

[6] Lynn Hershman Leeson and Juliana Huxtable, "Personae of Interest," *Artforum International* 54, no. 10 (2016): 316.
[7] Leeson and Huxtable, "Personae of Interest," 316.
[8] Hanna Hurr, "Juliana Huxtable," Mask Magazine, March 20, 2019, accessed November 10, 2020. http://www.maskmagazine.com/the-street-issue/work/juliana-huxtable.

In *Untitled in the Rage (Nibiru Cataclysm)* (figure 75), Huxtable explores race, gender, alternate history, and social media culture, representing herself amongst a science fiction background as a nude, green figure. Her body is depicted as three dimensional, while the background remains flat and artificial. Her green skin is obviously painted on, with the mottled paint marks still visible. Despite these alien identifiers, Huxtable's humanity remains at the forefront even within this fantastical environment. Both the title and colour are references to Nuwaubianism, a modern religious movement also known as the Nuwaubian Nation. Founded by Dwight York or 'Malachi' (b. 1935) in the late 1980s, Nuwaubianism was initially a branch of Islam, which later evolved to incorporate multiple belief systems, including Islam, Christianity, and, Judaism, combined with Egyptology and UFO religion.[9]

Huxtable repeatedly references Nuwaubianism throughout her practice, utilising it as a tool to explore the complexity of disenfranchisement and alternate history.[10] She has clarified that she does not "seriously believe in it, but I think it's a brilliant way of using science fiction to construct an idea of the world that's based in reality but that imagines something completely different. An alternative way of explaining and theorizing about Black people."[11] She incorporates these references to cults and conspiracy theories associated with Nuwaubianism and UFO religions due to the way they differ from "official narratives."[12] Huxtable also reconfigures aspects of this alternate belief system within a genealogical framework to redress the restrictive attitudes and injustices aligned with her African American and

[9] Anderson Scott, "The United Nuwaubian Nation Of Moors," Oxford American, October 4, 2016, https://www.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/970-the-united-nuwaubian-nation-of-moors.
[10] MOCA, "Introducing: Lorraine O'Grady and Juliana Huxtable, Part 1," MOCA, accessed August 2, 2022, https://www.moca.org/stream/post/introducing-lorraine-ogrady-and-juliana-huxtable-part-1; Solomon Chase, "Juliana Huxtable's Conspiracy Logic,"Ssense, accessed May 18, 2022, ssense.com/en-us/editorial/culture/juliana-huxtables-conspiracy-logic; Ben Vassar, "Juliana Huxtable finds her true self through the internet," *The Michigan Daily*, February 10, 2019, https://www.michigandaily.com/arts/juliana-huxtable-finds-her-true-self-through-internet/.
[11] Hurr, "Juliana Huxtable."
[12] Will Furtado, "Non-Binary Coding: Juliana Huxtable On Taking Apart Our Notions of Identity," 1 December 2017, *Sleek Mag*, December 1, 2017, https://www.sleek-mag.com/article/juliana-huxtable-interview/.

transgender identity. She uses digitally altered representations of her own body to interrogate conventional cultural norms regarding gender and sexuality, while also exploring race and cultural identity through intersectional feminism. These digitally created effects are used as a strategy for creating visual ambiguities that challenge binary constraints of heteronormativity.

Reflecting the esoteric concepts embedded in Nuwaubianism, theology, science fiction, and identity politics are also combined in *Nuwaubian Princess* (figure 76), dated to 2013. Positioned within an imagined, futuristic landscape of desert sand and glowing multi-coloured sky reminiscent of the aurora borealis or astrophotography, Huxtable depicts herself in duplicate, one image of herself in the foreground and the other in the distance behind sand dunes. The shimmering moon also imbues the landscape with a celestial atmosphere. *Nuwaubian Princess* is an early example of Huxtable's exploration of alternate histories and Tumblr aesthetics.[13] As with all of her Nuwaubian imagery, Huxtable's skin has been coloured green, a reference to the Nuwaubian belief that their descendants were extra-terrestrials who first came to earth with green skin, before turning brown upon settlement on earth.[14] In some theories, the green skin has been proposed to be a result of the levels of oxygen on earth, resulting in the air oxidising their skin.[15] The colours green and gold, particularly the merging of the two in the creation of an iridescent or glowing appearance, are found throughout Nuwaubian iconography, including within the design of the Tama-Re complex, where several hundred Nuwaubian believers settled during the 1990s (figure 77).[16]

[13] Guggenheim, "Collection Online: Juliana Huxtable."; Hurr, "Juliana Huxtable."; Louisa Ellen Stein, "Tumblr Fan Aesthetics," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom,* eds. Melissa A. Click and Scott Suzanne, Routledge, 2018), 86–97.
[14] Stephen C. Finley, Margarita Simon Guillory, and Hugh R. Page, Jr., *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience* (Boston: Brill, 2015), 217.
[15] Susan Palmer, *The Nuwaubian Nation: Black Spirituality and State Control* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 42.
[16] Palmer, *The Nuwaubian Nation*, 71-72.

The title of the work is taken from a character Huxtable repeatedly returns to, in which she situates herself within Nuwaubian iconography as a contemporary "Nuwaubian princess."[17] She frequently depicts both this Nuwaubian princess and other characters in her practice, creating reoccurring personas in her works, as also explored by Schrager.[18] However, unlike Schrager, Huxtable does not spend extended periods performing as these characters or interact with an online audience, but rather revisits them throughout her practice using a digital photographic lens. The way in which digital technology facilitates the possibilities of persona is referenced as an interest to Huxtable.[19] Most prominent and reoccurring of these is her Nuwaubian princess persona. In comparison to Schrager's focus on sexual performance in on social media, Huxtable primarily explores her personal identity construction with a cultural focus, utilising persona through performance that extends beyond the online landscape into an in-person interaction. Her work blends traditional performance art with references to digital culture, as seen in works such as *THERE ARE CERTAIN FACTS THAT CANNOT BE DISPUTED,* 2015, (figure 78) where Huxtable references the impact of digital technology in enabling personas via video games, avatars and social media.[20] Furthermore, Huxtable has identified the way in which she interacts with Twitter as helping her to decide which character she will be on that day, or her "alter ego of the moment."[21] Huxtable explores the complexity of identity construction through reference to social media, photography, performance art and musical performance.

Inspired by the creativity and cultural significance of Nuwaubian beliefs, Huxtable states that inserting herself within the iconography of this belief system enables her "to reclaim and feel

[17] Jarrett Earnest, "Juliana Huxtable: In Conversation with Jarrett Earnest", SFAQ, accessed April 18, 2021, https://www.sfaq.us/2016/03/juliana-huxtable-in-conversation-with-jarrett-earnest/.
[18] Brian Droitcour, "Juliana Huxtable," *Art in America* 105, no. 8 (2017): 124.
[19] Leeson and Huxtable, "Personae of Interest." 316.
[20] Leeson and Huxtable, "Personae of Interest." 316.
[21] Leeson and Huxtable, "Personae of Interest." 319.

comfortable in my body but not in a way that is separated from my Blackness."[22] She is interested in interrogating conspiracy theories and their appeal for disenfranchised groups, without necessarily believing them herself.[23] Huxtable explores her own embodiment through Nuwaubian narratives and iconography to merge fantasy with reality, incorporating her lived experience as a person of colour with the creative freedom enabled by exploring alternative histories. Her body therefore becomes othered as a literal depiction of herself as descended from extra-terrestrials, which echoes the othering of her body in contemporary society as both a transgender woman and African American. The inclination to explore the contemporary body's potential for transgressive identity representation is evident throughout the work of artists like Huxtable and speaks to the potential for bodies to reflect socio-cultural attitudes. Huxtable's use of digital media allows her to explore controversial ideas including ones that are often positioned as conspiracy theories or cults.[24]

Science fiction influences throughout her work similarly position Huxtable's work as fantastical, allowing the audience to engage with challenging concepts regarding discrimination and systematic oppression through a depersonalised, filmic lens. Science fiction is also significantly utilised to imagine alternate futures for people of colour, known as Afro-Futurism.[25] Afro-Futurism reimagines history in a way that most African American's do not have access to.[26] It has also been positioned as a way of mentally escaping enslavement

[22] Earnest, "Juliana Huxtable."
[23] Chase, "Juliana Huxtable's Conspiracy Logic."
[24] Alex Fialho, "Juliana Huxtable:Juliana Huxtable Talks About Conspiracy And Her Show At Reena Spaulings," Art Forum, May 20, 2022, https://www.artforum.com/interviews/juliana-huxtable-talks-about-conspiracy-and-her-%20show-at-reena-spaulings-68284; Joseph E. Uscinski, *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018): 7; Julius Bailey, "The Final Frontier: Secrecy, Identity, and the Media in the Rise and Fall of the United Nuwaubian Nation of Moors," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 2 (2006): 303.
[25] Mark Dery, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (London: Duke University Press, 1994), 180; Lisa Yaszek, "Afrofuturism, science fiction, and the history of the future," *Socialism and Democracy* 20, no. 3 (2006): 41-60.
[26] Joni Boyd Acuff, "Afrofuturism: Reimagining Art Curricula for Black Existence," *Art Education* 73, no. 3 (2020): 14.

and the eclectic hybridity of Huxtable's imagined cultural identity and genealogy can also be interpreted in this way.[27] Afro-Futurism is both futuristic and referential of history, with time treated as a non-linear construction.[28] Technology is also central to the genre.[29] A prominent contemporary example in entertainment media is the movie *Black Panther* (2018).[30] Afrofuturism has also been utilised for "understanding the Black experience."[31] There is also a strong history of queer Afrofuturism that presents a queer utopia.[32] It has been argued that queerness and race are interconnected, and Afrofuturism draws upon both.[33] Additionally, there are parallels between Afrofuturism and queer theory in their challenge to "the status quo."[34]

The influence of Huxtable's interest in conspiracy and alternate histories, including Afro-Futurism and Nuwaubianism, is seen in several of her self-representational works.[35] In *Untitled in the Rage, (Nibiru Cataclysm)* (figure 75) and *Nuwaubian Princess,* 2013, (figure 76), Huxtable depicts herself as an extra-terrestrial figure amongst a fantasy landscape. In both works, Huxtable's questions the way in which African American and transgender bodies are viewed by positioning her body as literally alienated. As a transgender African American

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[27] Dann J. Broyld, "The Underground Railroad as Afrofuturism: Enslaved Blacks Who Imagined a Future and Used Technology to Reach the "Outer Spaces of Slavery," *Journal of ethnic and cultural studies* 6, no. 3 (2019): 170.
[28]Omotayo O. Banjo, *Media across the African Diaspora: Content, Audiences, and Influence* (Boca Raton: Routledge, 2018), 77.
[29] Susana M. Morris, "Black Girls Are from the Future: Afrofuturist Feminism in Octavia E. Butler's 'Fledgling'," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 3/4 (2012): 152.
[30] Myron T. Strong and K. Sean Chaplin, "Afrofuturism and Black Panther," *Contexts* 18, no. 2 (2019): 58-59; Dann J. Broyld, "The Underground Railroad as Afrofuturism: Enslaved Blacks Who Imagined a Future and Used Technology to Reach the 'Outer Spaces of Slavery'," *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 6, no. 3 (2019): 170; Banjo, *Media across the African Diaspora,* 72.
[31] Strong and Chaplin, "Afrofuturism and Black Panther," 58.
[32] Clayton D. Colmon, "Queer Afrofuturism: Utopia, Sexuality, and Desire in Samuel Delany's 'Aye, and Gomorrah'," *Utopian Studies* 28, no. 2 (2017): 327.
[33] Amandine H. Faucheux, "Race and Sexuality in Nalo Hopkinson's Oeuvre; or, Queer Afrofuturism," *Science-Fiction Studies* 44, no. 3 (2017): 563.
[34] Gibson Ncube, "'Human Beings Have a Hard Time Relating to That Which Does Not Resemble Them': Queering Normativity in Nnedi Okorafor's Lagoon," *Scrutiny 2* 25, no. 2 (2020): 71.
[35] Shira Backer, "Juliana Huxtable," in *Surround Audience: New Museum Triennial 2015*, eds. Lauren Cornell and Helga Christoffersen (New York: Skira Rizzoli Publications, 2015), 177.

woman, Huxtable's identity has not only been historically marginalised and overlooked, but also objectified, with discourse frequently fixated on the body.[36] Through engaging with conspiracy theories, Huxtable questions the constructed nature of mainstream history and cultural identity which positions African American transgender identity on the periphery.[37] She uses references to and motifs associated with conspiracy theories as modes of engaging with culture and knowledge.[38] Huxtable describes her approach for seeking out alternate systems of belief as radical due to its requirement for active engagement and questioning of authority.[39] While she acknowledges her own paranoia, the act of seeking alternate belief systems is also positioned as a rational response to the chaotic state of the world.[40] Her approach is echoed by research that indicates a substantial number of the population believe in at least one thing that could be termed a conspiracy theory.[41]

Huxtable explains Nuwaubianism as the belief that "Black people are the direct descendants of aliens, and that the white race was specifically created as an evil spawn from one of the original Black reptilian people who decided to exploit his brothers and sisters so that he could gain domination over the planet."[42] The movement has faced controversy throughout its history, not only for perceptions that its members were behaving as a cult, but also due to the legal issues faced by the leader, including child molestation and racketeering.[43] Despite these disreputable complications, Huxtable is interested in Nuwaubianism's mythological power for reimagining an alternate history in which people of African descent are prioritised within

[36] Laverne Cox and bell hooks, "bell hooks: A Conversation with Laverne Cox," *Appalachian Heritage* 43, no. 4 (2015): 24.
[37]Furtado, "Non-Binary Coding."
[38] Chase, "Juliana Huxtable's Conspiracy Logic."; Fialho, "Juliana Huxtable."
[39] Fialho, "Juliana Huxtable.'; Furtado, "Non-Binary Coding."
[40] Chase, "Juliana Huxtable's Conspiracy Logic."; Furtado," Non-Binary Coding."
[41] Jovan Byford, *Conspiracy Theories a Critical Introduction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011), 6.
[42] Hurr, "Juliana Huxtable."
[43] Bailey, "The Final Frontier: Secrecy, Identity, and the Media in the Rise and Fall of the United Nuwaubian Nation of Moors," 303-4; Scott, "The United Nuwaubian Nation Of Moors.".

positions of power across cultures.[44] Nuwaubianism also redresses the Eurocentric history of slavery which relegates those of African heritage as inferior and other.[45] Notwithstanding its problematic origins, reclaiming individual and collective power has been identified as a central goal of Nuwaubianism, in an effort to create an identity divorced from historical oppressors and continued social inequities and injustice.[46]

Huxtable's response to Nuwaubianism is also influenced by liberation theology.[47] She has stated that while the Black churches she grew up in were not strictly aligned with liberation theology, the influence was evident.[48] Through her representation of radical racial alternate histories, Huxtable positions her work as transgressive and intersectional. Her photographs also employ exaggeration via conspiracy theories that take the fundamental truth of discrimination and oppression and heighten it, as a metaphor to echo the actual ways in which African American history diverges from mainstream narratives. This is significant because accounts of African history, from the perspective of African voices, were suppressed and reconfigured during slavery in favour of politicised narratives justifying white Eurocentric superiority in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and continued via contemporary racial discrimination.[49] The resulting loss of family history is also a component of a racist history.[50] The genealogical knowledge lost during this period of history is also

[44] Hurr, "Juliana Huxtable."
[45] Cristovao Nwachukwu, "Nuwaubian Pan Africanism: Back to Our Root," *African Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (May 2021): 95.
[46] Emeka C. Anaedozie, *Nuwaubian Pan-Africanism: Back to Our Root* (London: Lexington Books, 2020), 31.
[47] Hurr, "Juliana Huxtable."
[48] Hurr, "Juliana Huxtable."
[49] Theodore E. Thornhill, "Resistance and Assent: How Racial Socialization Shapes Black Students' Experience Learning African American History in High School," *Urban Education* 51, no. 9 (2016): 1127; Nancy M. Morrow, "The Problem of Slavery in the Polemic Literature of the American Enlightenment," *Early American Literature* 20, no. 3 (Winter 1985/1986): 236-55; James Delbourgo, "The Newtonian slave body: Racial enlightenment in the Atlantic World," *Atlantic Studies* 9, no. 2 (June 2012): 185-207.
[50] Heather A. Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 190-200.

increasingly explored through contemporary mainstream entertainment.[51] The loss of information has lasting impacts on enduring, systemic racism. The profoundly disturbing reverberations of slavery have been interpreted as contributing to ongoing mass incarceration, and a disproportionate accounts of Black deaths in custody.[52] Up to one in three African American men will be incarcerated if things continue as predicted and they are roughly six times more likely to be imprisoned than white Americans.[53] Huxtable's reference to continuing racism throughout her work inform her desire to locate herself within an alternate or imagined reality.

Nuwaub Chair (figure 79), 2012, is an example of Huxtable's early experimentation with Nuwaubian symbolism. Unlike the artist's later works, including *Nuwaubian Princess* of 2013 and *Untitled In The Rage (Nibiru Cataclysm),* (figure 75), 2015, *Nuwaub Chair* remains firmly grounded in reality, with Huxtable's brightly painted body the only visual aspect of the otherness.[54] In contrast, the scenery in *Nuwaubian Princess* and *Untitled in the Rage (Nibiru Cataclysm*) both imply alternate fantasy worlds. *Nuwaub Chair* is particularly significant for its simultaneous positioning of Huxtable as both alien or other in a familiar environment, implying her otherness as a possible threat or invader, while also depicting her as the only vibrant and colourful focal point in an otherwise dreary setting. The juxtaposition of presenting Huxtable as other, with all the associated potential for unease and danger, while

[51] Thomas Edge, "'Who Do You Think You Are?': Examining the African-American Experience in Slavery and Freedom through Family History Television," *Journal of American Culture* 40, no. 4 (2017): 342: PBS, "African-American Genealogy," PBS, May 31, 2006.
[52] Patrick Elliot Alexander, *From Slave Ship to Supermax: Mass Incarceration, Prisoner Abuse, and the New Neo-Slave Novel* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018), 5-6; Dennis Childs, *Slaves of the State: Black Incarceration from the Chain Gang to the Penitentiary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 25-26; Aaron D. Fox et al., "Deaths in Custody and Following Release," *Journal of Health and Human Services Administration* 41, no. 4 (Spring 2019): 45-84.
[53] Michelle Alexander, *New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 9; Christopher Muller, "Exclusion and Exploitation: The Incarceration of Black Americans from Slavery to the Present," *Science (American Association for the Advancement of Science)* 374, no. 6565 (2021): 282.
[54] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage, 2011) 6-7.

also highlighting her position as the most interesting aspect of the image is reminiscent of the appropriation of African American culture in popular entertainment media.[55] Huxtable takes this alienation further, however, by positioning herself as othered even within the African American community, commenting on how her transgender identity is kept separate from her racial identity. [56] The chair is also significant for its representation of the American Flag, which firmly positions the setting within the United States, with the associated history of slavery and racial discrimination.

Nuwab Chair also references Huxtable's interest in exploring conspiracy theories from the perspective of analysing the disenfranchised and politically discontent.[57] Examining the root of the growth in popularised conspiracy theories, Huxtable emphasises widespread dissatisfaction over political ideology as a key aspect present within conspiracy theories, linking those from all ends of the political spectrum by their shared frustration of an "untrustworthy government."[58] By linking these different ideologies to the cause of dissatisfaction with political reality and the urge to look for answers elsewhere, Huxtable undermines the idea of a universal history, and suggests an alternate reading of representations of African American identity. These examples, as with many of Huxtable's works, have the potential to be seen as confronting and alienating in so far as they explore ideas that purposefully challenge accepted historical narratives. The challenge is, however, an integral aspect of Huxtable's digital, identity-based practice. Through incorporating transgressive ideas such as Nuwaubianism, Huxtable challenges conventional social constructs and limiting binary concepts of gender and politics as well as gender-politics.

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[55] Baruti N. Kopano, "Soul Thieves: White America and the Appropriation of Hip Hop and Black Culture" in *Soul Thieves: The Appropriation and Misrepresentation of African American Popular Culture,* eds. T. Brown and B. Kopano (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1-14.
[56] Earnest, "Juliana Huxtable."
[57] Chase, "Juliana Huxtable's Conspiracy Logic."
[58] Chase, "Juliana Huxtable's Conspiracy Logic."

Huxtable does not present these conspiracy ideas as the truth, but instead explores their potential to destabilise prejudicial binaries and imbalances of power stemming from notions of white supremacy.

Restoring the loss of history through intersectional representation

Throughout her work, Huxtable also interrogates the ideals of early internet usage, where democracy and freedom of access were purported to allow for greater equality and inclusivity.[59] However, the ephemerality of the internet and the resulting loss of information, particularly information created by marginalised and minority groups, is troubling to Huxtable, and at odds with the utopian possibilities the advent of the internet proposed.[60] Huxtable cited the dissolution of the once popular Encyclopaedia Africana as an example of the loss important representation and documentation of minority histories in online mediums.[61] The Encyclopaedia Africana was created by Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates Jr as a book to accompany the famed Encyclopaedia Britannica, before later being transferred to a primarily digital source as the publishing industry transformed.[62] The website was later shutdown in what Huxtable claims was a failure to compete with Wikipedia.[63]

The loss of information is particularly significant for African American history which was fractured during slavery and the subsequent enduring discrimination which continues to prioritise Eurocentric history.[64] Even in the US education system, when African American

[59] Burns, "Juliana Huxtable interrogates 'older, whiter versions' of history at MoMA."
[60] Burns, "Juliana Huxtable interrogates 'older, whiter versions' of history at MoMA."
[61] Burns, "Juliana Huxtable interrogates 'older, whiter versions' of history at MoMA."
[62] Henry Louis Gates, "The Encyclopedia Africana," *Social Dynamics* 29, no. 1 (2003): 131-44; Michael Benjamin, "In Search of the Grail: The Conceptual Origins of the 'Encyclopedia Africana,'" *Information & Culture* 49, no. 2 (2014): 204-33.
[63] Burns, "Juliana Huxtable interrogates 'older, whiter versions' of history at MoMA."
[64] Thornhill, "Resistance and Assent,"1127.

history is taught, it is often biased and inadequate.[65] When historical African American figures are discussed, the information is often limited in focus, sometimes ignoring the more controversial figures such as Malcolm X, and lacking in context.[66] Studies also suggest teachers are resistant to acknowledge white privilege, and have not done enough to address the "achievement gap."[67] Conducting research independently from mainstream curricula has been identified as the most commonly practiced strategy of resistance.[68] This is similar to what Huxtable is doing, through her extensive web-based research which led to further acts of resistance, via engagement with counter-narrative conspiracy theories. Research of all forms is also evidently a way for Huxtable to deal with generational trauma and reclaiming her own history divorced from racist mainstream conceptions. When questioned about the validity of the belief in an ephemeral internet, Huxtable conceded that perhaps it does not disappear, but becomes so hidden that the average user will have no way to access the archived work.[69] The impermanence of the internet is a reoccurring theme explored in her work, and echoes the loss of Huxtable's own racial history.[70] Huxtable sees the loss of information online as the transformation of the internet from the possibility of a democratic medium of sharing information and recording histories into a space run by algorithms.[71] This is what she views as the "oligarchic control" of online environments.[72]

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[65] Thornhill, "Resistance and Assent,"1127, 1138; James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: The New Press, 2018), 19.
[66] Thornhill, "Resistance and Assent," 1138; Derrick P. Alridge, "The Limits of Master Narratives in History Textbooks: An Analysis of Representations of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Teachers College Record (1970)* 108, no. 4 (2006): 662-63.
[67] Sabina E. Vaught, and Angelina E. Castagno, " 'I Don't Think I'm a Racist': Critical Race Theory, Teacher Attitudes, and Structural Racism," *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 11, no. 2 (2008): 98-102.
[68] Thornhill, "Resistance and Assent," 1138.
[69] Leeson and Huxtable, "Personae of Interest," 316.
[70] Adrienne Edwards, "Relishing the Minor: Juliana Huxtable's Kewt Aesthetics," MOMA, (2015), 1. https://www.moma.org/d/pdfs/W1siZiIsIjIwMTYvMDEvMDUvOWF2bGY1dGlheF9NUDAxOTEyOF9KdWxpYW5hX0h1eHRhYmxlX0ZJTkFMLnBkZiJdXQ/MP019128_Juliana_Huxtable_FINAL.pdf?sha=c7926cb946ae0a60.
[71] Burns, "Juliana Huxtable interrogates."
[72] Leeson and Huxtable, "Personae of Interest," 313.

The idea of alternate histories and utilising the internet to locate aspects of history not taught in mainstream schools is explored in Huxtable's *THERE ARE CERTAIN FACTS THAT CANNOT BE DISPUTED,* (figure 78), 2015. Huxtable incorporates digital technology in her use of photography and video, social media references, and intersectional body politics within a performance piece. *THERE ARE CERTAIN FACTS THAT CANNOT BE DISPUTED*, co-commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and Performa, directly addresses Huxtable's interest in marginalised cultures and contemporary social media. The 54-minute-long conceptual performance explores history, knowledge and power through the lens of Huxtable's interest in online alternate histories.[73] Huxtable also appears to draw upon social debates around keeping confederate monuments perceived as racist, while not retaining African American history.[74] As established, structural racism and manipulation of history has enduring effects, as seen in the disproportionate percentage of African Americans incarcerated in prison.[75] The distortion of history and the systematic racism built on a history of slavery is referenced throughout Huxtable's work, seen in the repeated illusions of slavery and the proposition of alternate historical imagery.

THERE ARE CERTAIN FACTS THAT CANNOT BE DISPUTED examines Huxtable's enduring interest in the way in which history is perpetuated, and who it excludes.[76] The divide between how history is represented by the dominant culture, in this case Caucasian western patriarchy, and the alternate histories Huxtable proposes, is demonstrated

[73] Edwards, "Relishing the Minor," 1-2.
[74] Heather A. O'Connell, "Monuments Outlive History: Confederate Monuments, the Legacy of Slavery, and Black-White Inequality," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43, no. 3 (2020): 460-61.
[75] James B. Stewart, "Using History to Make Slavery History: The African American Past and the Challenge of Contemporary Slavery," *Social Inclusion* 3, no. 1 (2015): 131.
[76] Edwards, "Relishing the Minor, 1-6.

experimentally through a variety of visual and auditory forms.[77] The performance is structured in three parts, each exploring a different subject. 'TRANSITION', the first of the three acts, focusses on the evolution from early humanity to contemporary life, and the influence of digital technology.[78] The abstract imagery hints at our relationship to history and the contemporary imagery that perpetuates and defines how we view this history.[79] The large screen depicts moving images of historical re-enactment scenes from film, followed by a nude image of Huxtable on a black background, flipped horizontal over an ambiguous landscape moving image. Huxtable then stands in front of the screen and recites ambiguous, spoken word poetry.[80] 'MOURNING' is the second act and examines Huxtable's feelings of loss over the ephemerality of the internet and the resulting loss of information, as explored through abstract visuals and lights, a violinist and singer, drummer, and Huxtable's own distorted spoken word piece.[81] 'AVATARS*',* the final main act, reconceives historically significant films in digitally mediated ways.[82] In one example, Huxtable describes the moving image as "twelve years a slave as assassin's creed the movie." The imagery is reminiscent of Cindy Sherman's historical reconfigurations of women, with a similar sense of parody, play and subversion of familiar iconography.[83]

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[77] John Chiaverina, "It's Always a Question of Fantasy': Juliana Huxtable On Her Indisputably Brilliant Performa Commission," Artnews, accessed April 1, 2021, https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/its-always-a-question-of-fantasy-juliana-huxtable-on-her-indisputably-brilliant-performa-commission-5388/.
[78] Edwards, "Relishing the Minor," 1.
[79] João Ricardo Mateus, "The Narratives of Juliana Huxtable and DeForrest Brown Jr.," *CITAR Journal*, 11, no. 1 (2019): 24.
[80] Juliana Huxtable, "Juliana Huxtable There Are Certain Facts That Cannot Be Disputed," YouTube. January 9, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2W2hpfKrtu4.
[81] Edwards, "Relishing the Minor," 1; Huxtable, "Juliana Huxtable, There Are Certain Facts That Cannot Be Disputed," YouTube.
[82] Edwards, "Relishing the Minor," 1.
[83] Mateus, "The Narratives of Juliana Huxtable and DeForrest Brown Jr.," 5; Pamela Karantonis, "Staged Photography and the Performance of Autofacture: Cross-Genre Impersonation in Cindy Sherman's Self-Portraits," *International Journal of the Arts in Society* 3, no. 2 (September 2008): 37-44.

The combination of film, oratory, and historical reverences reveal the subjective nature of popularised history, encouraging the viewer to question the way history is taught and consumed in educational and entertainment contexts.[84] The entire performance is ambiguous and chaotic, with still and moving images offset by music and lighting effects changing rapidly throughout. Huxtable is positioned in front of the screen for much of the performance, reciting poetry, dressed in a what appears to be a combination of white historical underwear and subcultural internet styles including "Etsy goth," "POC at the Ren Faire," and "steampunk cosplay," as designed by Patric DiCaprio. [85] The performance exemplifies Huxtable's use of the internet and social media to interrogate intersectional representation, alternate histories, and her own embodied identity. In contrast to Schrager, whose engagement with social media is largely performance based, Huxtable also utilises the internet to examine her personal racial and cultural history.

Social media communities, identity construction and language

Huxtable first became well-known on the microblogging website Tumblr, although her blog has since become inaccessible after the website changed its content restrictions.[86] These restrictions came into practice in 2018, where it would then ban "photos, videos, or GIFs that show real- life human genitals or female-presenting nipples" and the depiction of sex acts.[87] Prior to these restrictions, Not Safe for Work or NSFW content was allowed, and was often mixed in with other imagery which had nothing to do with sexuality, locating sex on Tumblr

[84] Artsy, "At Performa, Juliana Huxtable Takes a Web-Induced Journey through Time," Artsy, accessed April 10, 2021, https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-juliana-huxtable-s-historical-cosplay-explodes-the-past-and-present.
[85] Steff Yotka, "How 'Etsy Goth' and 'Steampunk Cosplay' Inspired Vaquera's Costumes for Juliana Huxtable," *Vogue*, November 16, 2015, https://www.vogue.com/article/juliana-huxtable-moma-performance-vaquera-costumes; Artsy, "At Performa, Juliana Huxtable Takes a Web-Induced Journey through Time.".
[86] Hurr, "Juliana Huxtable."
[87] Katrin Tiidenberg, "Playground in Memoriam: Missing the Pleasures of Nsfw Tumblr," *Porn Studies* 6, no. 3 (2019): 364.

as just one part of the blogger's identity and lived experience.[88] Known as the "porn purge," Tumblr's increased censorship also demonstrates the power of corporations to impact censorship and sex-positive attitudes.[89] These restrictions were especially consequential for marginalised groups who do not have as many other communities.[90] It was also one of the only mainstream social media platforms which had previously allowed sexual imagery of all bodies, by all participants. Despite significant protest from the community, Tumblr enacted the restriction, positioning it as "a better, more positive Tumblr."[91]

Tumblr was significant for Huxtable in terms of both the creation of what she perceived as her "alternate community" online and her artistic development.[92] The function of subcultural communities as a way of creating connections is an important aspect of social media and in the twenty-first century has the power to transform these collectives into mainstream groups. In posting images, videos, and text to social media platforms, users 'tag' content with relevant information so that others can locate them. The resulting communities can be avenues of support and counter disconnectedness, allowing users opportunities to create subcultures or collectives online.[93] However, interactions are often brief and anonymous, complicating the process.[94] The turnover of social media platforms that function in this way is also continuous, as seen in the fall of Myspace and the rise of current popular app, TikTok.

[88] Ashley Vex, "Tumblr Porn Eulogy," *Porn Studies* 6, no. 3 (2019): 359-60.
[89] Jacob Engelberg and Gary Needham, "Purging the Queer Archive: Tumblr's Counterhegemonic Pornographies," *Porn Studies* 6, no. 3 (2019): 352.
[90] Tiidenberg, "Playground in Memoriam," 364.
[91] Jessica Ogden, "'Everything on the Internet Can Be Saved': Archive Team, Tumblr and the Cultural Significance of Web Archiving," *Internet Histories* 6, no. 1-2 (October 2021): 113-114.
[92] Leeson and Huxtable, "Personae of Interest." 315.
[93] Byron et al., "'Hey, I'm Having These Experiences': Tumblr Use and Young People's Queer Connections," 2239.
[94] Paul Byron et al., "'Hey, I'm Having These Experiences': Tumblr Use and Young People's Queer Connections," *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 2239.

For communities that have been historically marginalised, including LGBTQ and people of colour, online communities have been particularly important.[95] Similarly, due to heteronormative assumptions, people who identify as LGBTQ often need to repeatedly disclose to new people if they want them to know their gender or sexual identity.[96] From Tumblr's earliest days, the micro-blogging site had a large LGBTQ community.[97] Arguably, the role of social media platforms as important communities for LGBTQ people has partly been a response to the decline of real-world queer institutions and increase of people utilising the internet.[98] Additionally, Tumblr distinguished itself from other platforms by the politics popularised within the community. Open misogyny and the "alt-right" has been more common on platforms like 4chan, for example, a social networking platform that has been shrouded in controversy.[99] While on Tumblr, queer and feminist politics were central to the culture created.[100] Feminist memes and humour were also an integral aspect of the Tumblr community.[101]

While Tumblr is still perceived as an inclusive queer, feminist and sex-positive social network, its reputation has been somewhat diminished by the increased content restrictions.[102] Nevertheless, it has been particularly successful at subverting gender norms due to the structure of the platform, in which users either reblog or post their own content to

[95] Bryce J. Renninger, "'Where I Can Be Myself … Where I Can Speak My Mind': Networked Counterpublics in a Polymedia Environment," *New Media & Society* 17, no. 9 (2015): 1514.
[96] Jesse Fox and Rachel Ralston, "Queer Identity Online: Informal Learning and Teaching Experiences of LGBTQ Individuals on Social Media," *Computers in Human Behavior* 65, (2016): 635.
[97] Marty Fink and Quinn Miller, "Trans Media Moments: Tumblr, 2011–2013," *Television & New Media* 15, no. 7 (2014): 611.
[98] Andre Cavalcante, "Tumbling into Queer Utopias and Vortexes: Experiences of LGBTQ Social Media Users on Tumblr," *Journal of Homosexuality* 66, no. 12 (2019): 1732-3.
[99]Jessalynn Keller, "'Oh, She's a Tumblr Feminist': Exploring the Platform Vernacular of Girls' Social Media Feminisms," *Social media + society* 5:, no. 3 (2019): 8-9; Jessica Ringrose and Emilie Lawrence, "Remixing Misandry, Manspreading, and Dick Pics: Networked Feminist Humour on Tumblr," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 692.
[100] Mondin, "'Tumblr Mostly, Great Empowering Images,'" 288.
[101] Ringrose and Lawrence, "Remixing Misandry, Manspreading, and Dick Pics," 690.
[102] Alessandra Mondin, "'Tumblr Mostly, Great Empowering Images:' Blogging, Reblogging and Scrolling Feminist, Queer and BDSM Desires," *Journal of Gender Studies* 26, no. 3 (2017): 282.

their individual Tumblr pages, which appear on their follower's dashboard as a jumbled, decontextualised assortment of images and text.[103] The Tumblr aesthetic has also been interpreted as more confessional and artistic than most social networking sites.[104] Tumblr style is also reminiscent of scrapbooking, a form of creativity traditionally associated with femininity.[105] The "teen girl" Tumblr aesthetic is "immediate, hyper-embodied, raw and vulnerable."[106] Huxtable references these aspects in her 2015 works *Untitled (Casual Power)* (figure 80) and *Untitled (Destroying Flesh)* (figure 81). The Tumblr aesthetic is visible in the purple colour palette and soft, wavy background reminiscent of "gorgeous gradient-filled Tumblr themes."[107] The monologue text, written without conventional grammar in some places, further references the youthful, feminine style of confessional text on Tumblr.[108] The kitsch aesthetic of these purple clouded backgrounds in *Untitled (Casual Power)* and *Untitled (Destroying Flesh)* are also indicative of Tumblr visual styles, where otherwise derided trends and cute or "kewt" aesthetics are frequently popularised again via the image sharing website.[109] This aesthetic also references "internet ugly" which has been deemed the "internets folk art."[110]

This collection of content curated on each users Tumblr reflects the users individual perspective.[111] Additionally, the demographic of primarily young people and "relative

[103] Fink and Miller, "Trans Media Moments," 622-23.
[104] Alicia Eler and Kate Durbin, "The Teen-Girl Tumblr Aesthetic*," Annka Kultys Gallery, accessed May 11, 2022, http:// hyperallergic.com/66038/the-teen-girl-tumblr-aesthetic/.
[105] Sumin Zhao and Michele Zappavigna, "Digital Scrapbooks, everyday aesthetics & the curatorial self: Social photography in female visual blogging," in *Multimodality and Aesthetics*., eds. Elise Seip Tønnessen and Frida Forsgren (New York: Routledge, 2019), 226-236.
[106] Eler and Durbin, "The Teen-Girl Tumblr Aesthetic*."
[107]Nick Douglas, 'It's Supposed to Look Like Shit: The Internet Ugly Aesthetic," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (2014): 331.
[108] Ingrid Brett and Sarah Maslen, "Stage Whispering: Tumblr Hashtags Beyond Categorization," *Social media + society* 7, no. 3 (2021): 4, 12.
[109] Edwards, "Relishing the Minor,"1-3.; Louisa Ellen Stein, "Tumblr Fan Aesthetics," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom,* ed. Melissa A. Click and Scott Suzanne. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 86–97.
[110] Douglas, "It's Supposed to Look Like Shit," 336.
[111] Mondin, "'Tumblr Mostly, Great Empowering Images,'" 289-290.

obscurity" from general public positioned Tumblr as a more perceptually private and experimental social media platform.[112] As a result of all of these factors, queer communities thrived on Tumblr.[113] There is also a large community of queer people of colour on Tumblr.[114] These subcultural communities on Tumblr specifically were formed primarily via hashtags. In addition to traditional hashtagging, which locates the post within a searchable categorisation algorithm, Tumblr hashtag conventions also evolved to utilise hashtags as a confessional space. The text here is often seen as stream of consciousness writing, supplemental to the primary post.[115]

Online social networks like Tumblr can also be seen as safe spaces or sanctuaries, known as third spaces, third places or counter publics, where marginalised people can create their own communities free from the judgement of broader society.[116] Huxtable uses these places throughout her work, referencing the communities in which she explored her identity and the specific subcultural aesthetic conventions found within them. These virtual spaces are an important aspect of social media, as they also allow identity exploration that is largely free from the pressure and conventional limitations of the outside world, in addition to enabling community networking and activism.[117] These online communities provide a place for

[112] Vex, "Tumblr Porn Eulogy," 359.
[113] Vex, "Tumblr Porn Eulogy," 360.
[114] Alexander Cho, "Default Publicness: Queer Youth of Color, Social Media, and Being Outed by the Machine," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 9 (2018): 3183; Allison McCracken, "Tumblr Youth Subcultures and Media Engagement," *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 1 (2017): 151.
[115] Brett and Maslen, "Stage Whispering," 4, 12.
[116] Rosemary Pennington, "Social Media as Third Spaces? Exploring Muslim Identity and Connection in Tumblr," *The International Communication Gazette* 80, no. 7 (2018): 620-21; Bryce J. Renninger, "'Where I Can Be Myself … Where I Can Speak My Mind': Networked Counterpublics in a Polymedia Environment," *New Media & Society* 17, no. 9 (2015): 1514-15; Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," Social text 25-26, no. 25/26 (1990): 56-80; Constance A. Steinkuehler and Dmitri Williams, "Where Everybody Knows Your (Screen) Name: Online Games as "Third Places"." Journal of computer-mediated communication 11, no. 4 (2006): 885-909.
[117] Adela C. Licona. "(B)Orderlands' Rhetorics and Representations: The Transformative Potential of Feminist Third-Space Scholarship and Zines." *NWSA journal* 17, no. 2 (2005): 104-105; Bharat Mehra, Cecelia Merkel, and Ann Peterson Bishop. "The Internet for Empowerment of Minority and Marginalized Users." *New media & society* 6, no. 6 (2004): 786-91.

intersectional identity exploration and discussion, creating space for those who identify with multiple traditionally marginalised identities.[118] Ace Lehner suggests that the unregulated nature of social media has enabled trans and nonbinary people to represent themselves without the mainstream social limitations or prejudices[119] Virtual communities are not free from gender politics, however, and come with their own potential for oppression.[120] Yet, for artists like Huxtable, finding such a community online, in which her identity was both normalised and related to, had a direct and significant impact on her work. Throughout Huxtable's oeuvre, she makes continual references to the visual aesthetic conventions of social media sites like Tumblr. Huxtable's experience confirms Eve Shapiro's research findings on the empowering role the internet has played in the "development and growth of the trans community into a social movement."[121]

In addition to creating safe spaces and communities in which users can find people with whom they relate and display artworks to a wide audience, social media also assists with identity formation. Online, gender and sexual identities are often explored and enacted without the traditional judgement of the personal social community.[122] Young people who identify as LGBTQ have often been excluded from traditional, in-person social networks.[123] Crucial identity development can therefore take place online.[124] Users are often also able to

[118] Frank Y. Wong, "In Search for the Many Faces of Community Resilience among LGBT Individuals," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 55, no. 1 (2015): 240.
[119] Ace Lehner, "Trans Self-Imaging Praxis, Decolonizing Photography, and the Work of Alok Vaid-Menon," *Refract* 2, no. 1 (2019), 52.
[120] Brad McKenna and Hameed Chughtai, "Resistance and Sexuality in Virtual Worlds: An LGBT Perspective," *Computers in Human Behavior* 105, (2020): 8.
[121] Eve Shapiro, "'Trans' Cending Barriers: Transgender Organizing on the Internet," *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 16, no. 3-4 (2004): 176.
[122] Michelle Carter and Varun Grover, "Me, My Self, and I(T): Conceptualizing Information Technology Identity and Its Implications," *MIS Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2015): 932; Fox and Ralston, "Queer Identity Online," 635.
[123] Lynne Hillier and Lyn Harrison, "Building Realities Less Limited Than Their Own: Young People Practising Same-Sex Attraction on the Internet," *Sexualities* 10, no. 1 (2007): 83.
[124] Hillier and Harrison, "Building Realities Less Limited Than Their Own," 84-5;

control whether or not their sexual or gender identity is displayed, allowing interaction without necessarily identifying oneself as part of the LGBTQ community.[125] LGBTQ youth in particular have been found to spend a large amount of time and place particular importance on online communities.[126] Utilising social media to enact LGBTQ identity can also be seen as an important aspect of affirming identity congruency. When behaviour and outside perception is in alignment with how an individual perceives their identity, based on both collective and individual aspects, identity is "verified" and an increase in self-esteem is experienced.[127]

However, some social media websites can be seen to discriminate against LGBTQ individuals through their design, as in the Facebook "real names policy" or through the suggested "people you may know," which, more so than cis-gendered heterosexual users, leaves LGBTQ users vulnerable to attack by publicising their gender or sexual identity.[128] Additionally, the risk of either "catfishing" or blackmail for those from marginalised communities are more likely and carry more serious consequences, depending on their social community.[129] The potential for discrimination online is evident in the fact that despite the positive aspects, LGBTQ social media users have also been shown to have more negative experiences with social media than non-LGBTQ users.[130] There are also possible benefits of

[125] Fox and Ralston, "Queer Identity Online," 635.
[126] Zach Schudson and Sari van Anders, "'You Have to Coin New Things': Sexual and Gender Identity Discourses in Asexual, Queer, and/or Trans Young People's Networked Counterpublics," *Psychology and Sexuality* 10, no. 4 (2019): 354.
[127] Carter and Grover, "Me, My Self, and I(T)," 933.
[128] Vanessa Kitzie, "'I Pretended to Be a Boy on the Internet': Navigating Affordances and Constraints of Social Networking Sites and Search Engines for Lgbtq+ Identity Work," *First Monday* 23, no. 7 (2018): DOI:10.5210/fm.v23i7.9264.
[129] Vanessa Kitzie, "Affordances and Constraints in the Online Identity Work of LGBTQ+ Individuals, " *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 54, no. 1 (2017): 224.
[130] César Escobar-Viera et al., "'I Don't Feel Like the Odd One": Utilizing Content Analysis to Compare the Effects of Social Media Use on Well-Being among Sexual Minority and Nonminority Us Young Adults," *American Journal of Health Promotion* 34, no. 3 (2020): 291.

identity performance online for those from LGBTQ communities.[131] One participant of a study positioned his use of male images to represent his identity online as part of his transgender expression before transitioning in real life, attempting to communicate his "authentic identity" in representing himself as male online.[132] However, throughout social media, high value is placed on perceived authenticity.[133] The insistence of real names via policies is also related to perceptions of authenticity, which further complicates the way in which trans people are perceived online, as chosen names are an often important aspect in respecting transgender identity.[134]

An additional challenging aspect to Tumblr specifically, and most social networking sites in general, is the subcultural vernacular and popular culture references.[135] For Tumblr, the method of communicating via tags is particularly important. As previously suggested, tags are not only used to identify other likeminded users in the search feature, but are treated as an extension of individual user's commentary.[136] Through user-created social tagging, Tumblr posts are categorised and searchable by an entirely collaborative structure.[137] The user-led structure is both advantageous to the diversity of identity represented on the platform, allowing for a seemingly limitless categorisation structure, while simultaneously excluding those who are unfamiliar with the vocabulary and references used on the platform.[138] Social media and broader internet culture have also significantly impacted language, with members

[131] Kitzie, "Affordances and Constraints in the Online Identity Work of LGBTQ+ Individuals," 225.
[132] Kitzie, "Affordances and Constraints in the Online Identity Work of LGBTQ+ Individuals." 224-5.
[133] Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, "Being 'Really Real' on Youtube: Authenticity, Community and Brand Culture in Social Media Entertainment," *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture & Policy* 164, no. 1 (2017): 72.
[134] Meredith Salisbury and Jefferson Pooley, "The #Nofilter Self: The Contest for Authenticity among Social Networking Sites, 2002–2016," *Social Sciences* 6, no. 1 (2017): 20.
[135] Byron et al., "'Hey, I'm Having These Experiences,'" 2254-55.
[136] Avery Dame, "Making a Name for Yourself: Tagging as Transgender Ontological Practice on Tumblr," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 33, no. 1 (2016): 23-6.
[137] Dame, "Making a Name for Yourself," 26-7.
[138] Dame, "Making a Name for Yourself," 27; Byron et al., "'Hey, I'm Having These Experiences,'" 2254-55.

of the LGBTQ community asserting their own preferences for terminology, pronouns and labels.[139] As a result, language has evolved from historically restrictive gender categories to that which is increasingly self-determined. Despite significant progress, marginalised communities still feel the effects of oppression via enduring economic and social inequality in addition to social othering, ensuring social networking sites remain central to creating communities for marginalised groups.[140] However, the possible "micro-minoritisation" of these already historically marginalised communities could possibly cause further segregation.[141] The potential continued marginalisation is also seen when access to platforms dictates how communities are formed.[142] Similarly, as seen in reference to Tumblr, those who are unfamiliar with the vernacular are often left alienated, even when they belong to the subcultures or communities the unfamiliar language is being used for.[143]

Huxtable's work references subcultural and self-determined language, as seen in the works *Untitled (Casual Power)* (figure 80) and *Untitled (Destroying Flesh)* (figure 81), both executed in 2015. The visual aesthetic and language of these works are indicative of subcultural internet communities. Moreover, the combination of lyrical, 90s referential text is also reminiscent of Tumblr aesthetic conventions.[144] Here, the body in contemporary digital culture is explored in reference to social media platforms and the reconfiguration of identity as a changeable, socially mediated construct. The language is the literal content of the piece, with the background denoting it as a work of social media art. Huxtable's embodied

[139] Rob Cover, *Emergent Identities: New Sexualities, Genders and Relationships in a Digital Era* (London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2019), 1-2, 14-15.
[140] Cover, *Emergent Identities,* 93; Cees J. Hamelink, "Global Justice and Global Media: The Long Way Ahead" in *Media and Social Justice* eds. Sue Curry Jansen, Jefferson Pooley, and Lora Taub-Pervizpour (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011): 27-33.
[141] Cover, *Emergent Identities*, 15; McCracken, "Tumblr Youth Subcultures and Media Engagement," 151-61.
[142] Mary Griffiths and Kim Barbour, *Making Publics, Making Places* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2016), 2.
[143] Dame, "Making a Name for Yourself," 27; Byron et al., "'Hey, I'm Having These Experiences,'"2254-55.
[144] Hurr, "Juliana Huxtable."

experience is expressed through language, unlike much of her work which features her physical body. These works identify Huxtable's early social media usage in her youth as a fundamental aspect to the development of her work and position Huxtable's identity exploration as mostly occurring online.[145]

Identity theory, drawn from sociology and psychology, allows several ways of understanding the formation of self-identity.[146] Identity is also perceived as hierarchical, as the most fundamental aspects of one's self-perception are also the most important in which to maintain and portray.[147] Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke identify three aspects of identity as the fundamentals upon which identity is constructed: role identities, which identify a person through their function in society regarding job or relationship, social identities based on the groups to which the person belongs, and person identities, which are individualised character traits.[148] Additionally, structural symbolic interactionism addresses the relationship between social structures, self-identity, and social behaviour.[149] For this purpose, identity is examined through the lens of social identity, in relation to social relational groups, and structural symbolic interactionism. Collective identity is similarly relevant to social media identity construction. An aspect of social identity theory, collective identity relates to identity perpetuation through activism.[150] This relates to Huxtable's work via transgender rights, and her own interest in anti-discrimination, intersectionality, creating safe digital spaces online and working to challenge public opinion regarding binary gender and sexuality.

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[145] Yuan Li, "Identity Construction in Social Media: A Study on Blogging Continuance," *Behaviour & information technology* 41, no. 8 (2021) 1671-88.
[146] Jenny L. Davis, Tony P. Love, and Phoenicia Fares, "Collective Social Identity: Synthesizing Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory Using Digital Data," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 82, no. 3 (2019): 254.
[147] Carter and Grover, "Me, My Self, and I(T)," 933.
[148] Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2000): 224-225.
[149] Sheldon Stryker and Peter J. Burke, "The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (2000): 285.
[150] Davis, Love, and Fares, "Collective Social Identity," 254.

For artists like Huxtable, the internet and social media specifically are evidently influential beyond social communities, but additionally as part of identity formation and maintenance. The usage of the online environment as a method of identity creation is indicative of the growth and increasing importance of digital technology, with the concept of "IT identity" used to explain online identity formation.[151] The increased presence of information technology within users' daily lives has enmeshed personal and social identity with IT practices.[152] It has also seen the expectations placed upon how one behaves and interacts with the world transformed to a global setting, beyond the historical locally-specific social constructs.[153] IT identity can therefore be an important aspect for digital users maintenance of identity.[154] Problems with IT identity and online identity maintenance occur when the user's actions or perceived behaviours are at odds with their self-identity.[155] Similarly, difficulties can occur when IT users perceive their identity as directly linked with IT. While some users develop a dependence upon IT usage, relatedness instead refers to the non-pathologized act of user's identity being linked to it usage.[156] Unlike Schrager, who utilises personas as an artistic tool enacted on social media, Huxtable draws upon IT theory as a central aspect of her identity formation, in addition to her utilisation of individual personas she revisits throughout her work.

[151] Greta L. Polites et al., "Understanding Social Networking Site (Sns) Identity from a Dual Systems Perspective: An Investigation of the Dark Side of Sns Use," *European Journal of Information Systems* 27, no. 5 (2018): 600-1.
[152] Carter and Grover, "Me, My Self, and I(T)," 932.
[153] Carter and Grover, "Me, My Self, and I(T)," 932.
[154] Carter and Grover, "Me, My Self, and I(T)," 951.
[155] Polites et al., "Understanding Social Networking Site (Sns) Identity from a Dual Systems Perspective," 601.
[156] Polites et al., "Understanding Social Networking Site (Sns) Identity from a Dual Systems Perspective," 602.

Michelle Carter and Varun Grover identify IT identity as part of material identity, a theory that links identities to places or objects.[157] In Huxtable's case, this presents itself not only in her connection with online LGBTQ communities, but additionally through her identification as a digital and online artist, who came to prominence on Tumblr and continues to utilise multiple social media websites in her practice. As a young woman coming of age online, the internet was profoundly influential on Huxtable's identity formation. In addition to her identification as a transgender African American woman, identities which she first explored and perpetuated online, Huxtable is also a digital artist who directly references social media within her work. I suggest that IT identity theory is an increasingly important aspect of contemporary digital life and is integral to the work of certain artists who grew up online, as demonstrated by Huxtable. Furthermore, it confirms an important shift in the artistic representations of bodies in the digital age. For artists like Huxtable, the use of digital technology and the internet is fundamental to every aspect of her work. In contrast to Schrager, Huxtable's use of digital media appears to have more comprehensively influenced her personal identity formation, in addition to artistic style and persona. The extent of this influence is likely due to Huxtable's reliance on social media communities as safe spaces to connect and create community with other LGBTQ youth and people of colour.[158]

Intersectional feminism and the artistic exploration of race, gender, and sexuality

The relationship between race and LGBTQ identity is also explored by Huxtable and is a significant aspect of the way in which digital media has influenced artistic representations of the body. The reluctance to embrace intersectionality to account for the specific and compounded issues faced by people of colour has resulted in a hegemonic representation of

[157] Carter and Grover, "Me, My Self, and I(T)," 933.
[158] Byron et al., "'Hey, I'm Having These Experiences': Tumblr Use and Young People's Queer Connections," 2239.

"white middle-class" feminism.[159] In confrontation to the systematic erasure of the experiences of people of colour, artists such as Huxtable and Paul Mpagi Sepuya have sought to reframe the focus of the conversation toward a more intersectional and inclusive representation. As outlined in chapter two, Amelia Jones and Erin Silver have suggested the use of a queer feminist reading of art history in order to counter the limitations that prioritised white, heteronormative, cisgender perspectives.[160]

The complexity of homosexual or non-binary identity for African American's is also explored by Derek Conrad Murray, who suggests the perception of a heteronormative ideal has relegated difference to outside the boundaries of "normative Blackness."[161] The idea of multiple oppressed identities interacting to create greater oppression is one of the central aspects to Huxtable's engagement with feminism, and is referenced throughout her work.[162] bell hooks similarly argued that "racism is fundamentally a feminist issue because it is so interconnected with sexist oppression."[163] Despite this, white feminism has often not acknowledged the extent of racial oppression.[164] In conversation with bell hooks, transgender actress Laverne Cox explains that "injustice for many of us happens at the intersection of multiple identities."[165] Pervasive mainstream public reluctance to engage with conversations surrounding race has remained one of the most enduring criticisms of western white feminism, and one which Huxtable challenges within her work.[166] While she often explores transgender identity in her practice, works such as *Untitled (Psychosocial stuntin')* (figure

[159] Jones, "Introduction," 8; Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,' 139-67.
[160] Amelia Jones and Erin Silver, "Queer Feminist Art History: an imperfect genealogy," in *Otherwise,* ed. Amelia Jones and Erin Silver (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 2-33.
[161] Derek Conrad Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity after Civil Rights* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 14.
[162] F. Tormos, "Intersectional Solidarity," *Politics, Groups & Identities* 5, no. 4 (2017), 708; Earnest, "Juliana Huxtable."
[163] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 51-2.
[164] bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto, 1982), 6-7.
[165] Cox and hooks, "bell hooks," 3.
[166] Jones, "Introduction," 8; Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," 139-167.

82), place stronger emphasis on her racial identity. Huxtable also argues that the perception of much of her work is coloured by the fact that she is a transgender artist, and even in works in which her gender identity is not explicitly explored, it is the prevailing interpretation of the audience. She therefore suggests reading the abstract work of "straight white men" through the same lens, extrapolating what their artwork explores about their heteronormative identity.[167] Intersectional feminism is also seen on social media, with Tumblr feminism frequently featuring the text of bell hooks in a series of popular memes, for example.[168]

Huxtable explicitly explores the intersection between race, gender, and multifaceted nature of her identity in *Untitled in the Rage (Nibiru Cataclysm)* (figure 75). Huxtable's pose combines references to traditional African and Egyptian portraiture with popular Afrocentric imagery from her childhood. [169] This is underscored by her adoption of a surname derived from the 1980s television series, a sitcom about an educated and upwardly mobile African American family set in New York City, *The Cosby Show*.[170] Crucially, she digitally altered her proportions to reference symbols of both African American and transgender identity.[171] These representations of Afrocentric imagery are what Huxtable refers to as "Black household art," and their clichéd but socially-defiant nature are of continued interest to her, with references found throughout her figurative work.[172] Her anklet similarly alludes to cultural tradition, with the use of such adornment reinforcing unity and shared culture within African American communities. The anklet can also be interpreted as a motif connoting

[167] Earnest, "Juliana Huxtable."
[168] McCracken, "Tumblr Youth Subcultures and Media Engagement," 151.
[169] Juliana Huxtable, Frank Benson and Andrew Durbin. "Juliana Huxtable and Frank Benson In Conversation with Andrew Durbin" in *Surround Audience: New Museum Triennial 2015*, ed. Lauren Cornell and Helga Christoffersen (New York: Skira Rizzoli Publications, 2015), 33-34.
[170] Huxtable, Benson and Durbin. "Juliana Huxtable and Frank Benson In Conversation with Andrew Durbin" 33-34.
[171] Che Gossett and Juliana Huxtable, "Existing in the World: Blackness at the Edge of Trans Visbility," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, eds. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley and Johanna Burton. (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2017) 48.
[172] Gossett and Huxtable, "Existing in the World: Blackness at the Edge of Trans Visbility," 47.

slavery.[173] In addition, the relationship between shackles and handcuffs draws parallels between modern incarceration rates and slavery.[174] The style of ankle cuff is given a variety of incarnations throughout history, typically indicating a person's status as a slave or their confinement and restriction.[175]

These symbols combined with her sexualised position and adherence to traditional ideals of feminine beauty invite the viewer to consider contemporary societal views of femininity. Huxtable's conscious creation of her body as the objectified female nude, merged with the culturally familiar representations of idealised African American womanhood, challenge simplistic binary notions of identity. Huxtable also references Post-Black theory, which rejects the binary and restrictive notions of African American experience popularised during the civil rights era.[176] Post-Black theory instead seeks to move beyond the limitations of representation and identity.[177] Murray argues that by being forced to fit into to a white patriarchal society, African American communities adopted the same homophobic and misogynistic views as their oppressors.[178] The wilful ignorance regarding the implications of colonialism on people of colour highlights the need for intersectionality. Huxtable's interrogation of these ideas instead encourages discussion of the varied cultural constructs which utilise separation and boundedness as a way of controlling bodies which threaten racist, heteronormative, patriarchal systems of power.

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[173] Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 245; Maria Holtrop, "A Slave Shackle with a Story," *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin* 63, no. 2 (2015): 152.
[174]Joseph Yannielli and Christine Whyte, "Shackles and Handcuffs: The 'Special Relationship' of Racist Policing," History Workshop, accessed April 1, 2022, https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/author/yannielliwhyte/.
[175] Nicholas Maritz, "The Truth About Ovambo Women's Copper Ankle Rings," *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 74, no. 209 (2019): 16.
[176] Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art*, 24.
[177] Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art*, 24.
[178] Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art*, 28.

The exploration of intersectional queer representation is also seen in the art of Paul Mpagi Sepuya. As with Huxtable, Sepuya has similarly sustained continued focus on the construction of identity and exploration of intersectional queer experience, albeit through a cis-gendered masculine homosexual lens. Through his visual deconstruction of the photographic process, Sepuya references the paradigms of identity and social structures that privilege Caucasian masculine heteronormativity. Sepuya's work is also heavily reliant upon digital photography. However, Sepuya does not use social media as an artistic tool, instead using his Instagram profile as a traditional social networking tool and behind the scenes look at his creative process. Often depicting nudity and using his friends as models, his work is positioned as an example of contemporary artists utilising digital technology to explore race and queer identities, through more traditional aesthetic conventions.[179] In works such as *Mirror Study OX5A6571* (figure 83), Sepuya uses mirrors and torn up fragments of prints of his own photographs, layered on top of each other to give the appearance of a fragmented, deconstructed body. He appears to utilise the mirror and the fragmentation of representation it creates as a way of undermining the construction of identity through both the control of the pictured subject and the social restrictions which dictate much of identity presentation. Sepuya also directs the focus upon the deconstruction of photography as both an artistic method and as a site of political power.[180] In doing so, Sepuya utilises photography as a way of interrogating the way in which visual media presentation impacts that which it is depicting.[181] Sepuya's continued focus of the inclusion of the camera within his work underlines the construction of both the physical image and identity.

[179] David Velasco, "Project: Paul Mpagi Sepuya," *Artforum international* 57, no. 7 (2019): 173.
[180] Barry Schwabsky, "Playing With Mirrors: Two artists push the limits of what cameras can do," The Nation, accessed May 2, 2017, https://www.thenation.com/article/pushing-the-limits-of-photography/ (6 August
[181] Schwabsky, "Playing With Mirrors."

In *Darkroom Mirror Portrait (_2060194)* (figure 84), Sepuya further positions himself as the creator in the construction of the image, in control of all that unfolds within the frame. By situating himself so prominently in the center, flanked by two men on the precipice of contact, Sepuya also implies that he is in control of them. His manifestation of creator and controller has obvious parallels with a God-like figure, but it is the associations between Sepuya's role as the author of the construction of the image, and implied identity and experience within it, that complicates the work. By situating himself as the literal and conceptual center of the work, Sepuya challenges the conventions which perpetuate the oppressive structures of racist heteronormativity throughout contemporary society. Sepuya often depicts the interaction between himself and his subjects, as in *Mirror Study (0X5A6571)* (figure 83), resulting in small moments of considered tenderness as Sepuya and his subject negotiate their position, both literal and figurative, in the photograph. His interrogation of control is also at odds with the contemporary social media driven landscape of constructed selfies, which seek to appear candid.[182] In doing so, Sepuya hints at the constructed nature inherent within both the photographic process and queer identity.[183] Control is similarly referenced throughout Huxtable's work, primarily in the way in which she creates the work, in addition to utilising social media to bypass traditional artistic institutions.

While Huxtable's largely youthful audience is primarily found online and in nightclubs, Sepuya's work is usually displayed in contemporary gallery settings, suggesting his audience is comprised of an older, more traditional and art-savvy demographic. In *Mirror Study (0X5A6571),* Sepuya plays with the tradition and the structural history of studio portraiture,

[182] Kimberly Ann Hall. "The Authenticity of Social-Media Performance: Lonelygirl15 and the Amateur Brand of Young-Girlhood," *Women & Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory: Texting Girls: Images, Sounds, and Words in Neoliberal Cultures of Femininity*, 25, no. 2 (May 2015): 128-29.
[183] Andrea K. Scott, "Paul Mpagi Sepuya Mines the Queer History of the Portrait Studio," *The New Yorker*, March 29, 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/paul-mpagi-sepuya-mines-the-queer-history-of-the-portrait-studio.

specifically the separation between portraits created for private versus public consumption, acknowledging the enduring association between portraiture and racist colonisation.[184] Through his representation of queer male bodies, Sepuya explores the potential for such a traditional medium to subvert conventions relating to race and sexuality.[185] Sepuya's work also references influential artists like Robert Mapplethorpe, and the associated Culture Wars which arose from this era of photographic nude representation.[186]

Sepuya's exploration of fragmentation, gender expression and conventional beauty is also explored in Huxtable's *Untitled in the Rage, (Nibiru Cataclysm)* (Figure 75), in a very different visual style. In *Untitled in the Rage, (Nibiru Cataclysm)*, Huxtable references these coexisting identity labels and can be seen to utilise ambiguity and digital technology in the depiction of a more inclusive identity. The influence of Nuwaubian ideas is again referenced in the colour of Huxtable's skin and her positioning amongst a fantasy rendition of the desert. The image is also immediately identifiable as incorporating digital technology, while the flat, digitally manipulated appearance of the background implies digital creation, the intentional acknowledgement of the artist's hand, and an otherworldliness.[187] In *Untitled in the Rage, (Nibiru Cataclysm)*, Huxtable also demonstrates an interest in interrogating beauty and the power dynamics supporting idealised feminine beauty. Her appearance is carefully constructed, garnering media attention that she attributes to the inherent power of gendered notions of beauty.[188] In doing so she also seeks to encourage critical discourse on the nature of performative gender and beauty ideals.[189]

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[184] Vinson Cunningham, "How Radical Can a Portrait Be?," *The New Yorker*, May 5, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-importance-of-the-faces-on-the-walls.
[185] Cunningham, "How Radical Can a Portrait Be?."
[186] Guggenheim, "Implicit Tensions: Mapplethorpe Now," Guggenheim, accessed August 22, 2019, https://www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/mapplethorpe.
[187] Backer, "Juliana Huxtable," 177.
[188] Earnest, "Juliana Huxtable."
[189] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 189-193.

Huxtable argues that performing a gender normative expression of traditional beauty is powerful, even though this form of power is one she finds people are unwilling to discuss.[190] The complexity of wanting to explore aesthetic beauty without being limited by it is similarly reiterated by Schrager in chapter five, and suggest the significance of this attitude within fourth wave, digitally influenced feminism. The adherence to conventional ideals of feminine beauty is also used to explore racial and gendered stereotyping, specifically in relation to the difference between the stereotyped imagery of Caucasian and African American women.[191] For Huxtable, her identity as an African American and transgender woman shares historical roots as identities that have both been discriminated against and fetishised. As such, she utilises her performance of normative beauty to be heard as a transgender artist of colour, and as a means of interrogating traditional gender identity.[192] Her conscious adherence to a culturally dictated beauty and presentation of feminine normativity references the continued interest in gender performativity in the digital age, drawn from Judith Butler's conceptualisation of gender construction and performance.[193]

In addition to live performance pieces such as *THERE ARE CERTAIN FACTS THAT CANNOT BE DISPUTED* (Figure 78) and her depiction of characters or personas as in *Untitled in the Rage (Nibiru Cataclysm)* (Figure 75), Huxtable also performs as a DJ and considers it an aspect of her art. The incorporation of music is also used by Schrager in her inclusion of musical performance persona. Huxtable's DJ performances are an important aspect of her political and personal expression.[194] Seeing DJ performance as less classist and

[190] Earnest, "Juliana Huxtable."
[191] Edwards, "Relishing the Minor," 3.
[192] Earnest, "Juliana Huxtable."
[193] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 183-193.
[194] John Twells, "FACT mix 706: Juliana Huxtable," FACT, accessed December 10, 2021, https://www.factmag.com/2019/05/09/juliana-huxtable-fact-mix/.

elitist than more traditional or 'high' artistic mediums, Huxtable also integrates her musicality with commentary on gender and human rights.[195] She uses the power of music to subvert patriarchal gender expectations, often choosing to play tracks featuring female voices, revelling in having "'bros'' listen to women's voices for two hours."[196] Huxtable does not prioritise any singular artistic medium over others, choosing instead to incorporate multiple mediums within her practice.[197] Her multidisciplinary approach is also reflected in the nature of social media, and in her experience as a Tumblr micro-blogger and through DJ sampling.[198] The interrogation of performative gender and social norms is also seen in drag, where performers utilise exaggeration to construct characters.[199] Huxtable's work is often inspired by drag and New York City ball culture, which popularised many aspects of burlesque drag performance to the mainstream.[200] She was herself part of "New York City-based collective House of Ladosha" which is heavily inspired by drag culture.[201] In reference to transgender artist Holly Woodlawn who starred in several of Warhol's films, Murray suggests that the adherence to feminine stereotypes at once subverts and confirms to traditional gender stereotypes.[202] The dichotomy of adhering to beauty standards and stereotypes while simultaneously challenging them is similarly present in Huxtable's work.

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[195] Twells, "FACT mix 706."
[196] Brooke Powers and I-D Team, "'Struggle is what creates beauty' — a conversation with Juliana Huxtable," i-D, accessed December 10, 2021, https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/xwddk7/struggle-is-what-creates-beauty-a-conversation-with-juliana-huxtable.
[197] Powers and Team, "'Struggle is what creates beauty'."
[198] discwoman, "Juliana Huxtable," discwoman, accessed December 6, 2021, http://www.discwoman.com/roster/juliana-huxtable.
[199] Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas, *Rupaul's Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture the Boundaries of Reality (*Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 289.
[200] Andy Battaglia, "Heavenly Bodies: How Electronic Music Transgressed Gender And Genre In 2015," NPR, accessed December 10, 2021, https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2015/12/11/459252324/heavenly-bodies; Emma Konst, "5 Queer Artists Here to Set the World on Fire," *Singulart Magazine*, June 12, 2019, https://blog.singulart.com/en/2019/06/12/5-queer-artists-here-to-set-the-world-on-fire/.
[201] Konst, "5 Queer Artists Here to Set the World on Fire."
[202] Murray, *Queering Post-Black,* 175.

Gaga Feminism and Black Camp

The incorporation of kitsch or fetishist aesthetics within the use of the artists' own body is also demonstrative of what Halberstam refers to as "Gaga Feminism."[203] Not solely about the singer herself, Gaga Feminism instead utilises Lady Gaga as an example of the unapologetic politics of the younger contemporary generation.[204] The wariness of these loud forms of feminist identification by older feminists is also evoked by the digitally conversant work of Schrager, whose overtly sexualised feminism is perceived as counterintuitive to more traditional conceptualisations of feminism. In this way, Gaga Feminism strategically repositions the outdated cultural norms associated with sexuality, gender, and identity.[205] Halberstam identifies Simone de Beauvoir as an example of her definition of a Gaga Feminist.[206] The dismissal of essentialist gender characteristics and the consciousness of the performativity of gender binaries links these two theorists, separated by decades. For Halberstam, Gaga Feminism is the contemporary manifestation of de Beauvior's view of the construction of gender in relation to social norms. Utilising the example of Lady Gaga, Halberstam proposes a contemporary model of feminism which is at once aware of the constructive nature of gender, while using visual cues and actions to challenge these customs.

The rebellious aspect of Halberstam's Gaga Feminism and the emphasis on the value of outspoken performance of gender is particularly relevant to drag performance and feminine pop stars. Halberstam's theory of disruptive, loud feminism is inclusive of feminine presentation or performativity which incorporates suggestive and sexualised clothing, both the adherence to and rejection of beauty ideals, in addition to the fetish or kitsch aesthetics. Halberstam's Gaga Feminism also encourages the confrontational, political symbolism

[203] J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), XIII.
[204] Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism,* XIII.
[205] Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism,* 22.
[206] Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism,* 26.

employed by both Gaga and Huxtable. Using this framework, it can be argued artists like Huxtable are contemporary examples of an unapologetic form of performative femininity and intersectional feminism, which is becoming progressively entwined with digital technology and internet culture.

Halberstam's definition of Gaga Feminism is particularly relevant to artists who defy simple categorisation, or who do not fit within the outdated ideals of a "polite," educated, presumably Caucasian, view of a specific type of feminism which, Halberstam argues, remains fundamentally opposed to confrontational feminism.[207] Intersectional feminism, queer theory and Gaga Feminism are, in turn, ways of addressing reductive views of feminist theory. Halberstam also uses her concept of Gaga Feminism to rebel against the traditional conceptualisations of feminism which marginalise minorities and non-normative gender expression, instead privileging heteronormative Caucasian feminism. As with heterosexual communities, within homosexual communities there has also been a history of marginalising aspects of sexual and gender identity that do not fit within the "homonormative" majority.[208] This includes the propensity for essentialist views on gender extending to the exclusion and marginalisation of transgender people, which has been a criticism of earlier waves of feminism.

Intersectional feminism and the subversion of stereotypes of gender are similarly utilised in Black Camp, which Huxtable also appears to reference.[209] Beyoncé is cited as an example of Black camp, subverting oppression by celebrating and playing with the conventions of

[207] Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism,* 7.
[208] Susan Stryker, "Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity," *Radical History Review* no. 100 (2008): 147-48.
[209] Constantine Chatzipapatheodoridis, "Beyoncé's Slay Trick: The Performance of Black Camp and Its Intersectional Politics," *Open Cultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017): 407.

African American and queer culture.[210] Recently, she has also celebrated queer ballroom or ball culture while simultaneously reclaiming the Black roots of disco and dance culture in her *Renaissance* album.[211] Ideas of Black Camp have also been applied to the popular Trinidadian rapper, singer, and songwriter, Nicki Minaj, in what has been termed "nicki-aesthetics" which is hyper-sexual yet humorous, extravagant, and embraces superficiality.[212] This work can also be linked to a tradition of burlesque and erotic performance, which incorporates similarly flamboyant imagery and sexualised feminine representation.[213] Michael Jackson and Prince are similarly used as examples of African American artists exploring camp flamboyance with political intention to defy racial stereotypes.[214] As Susan Stryker states, camp is used in reaction to a harmful mindset that transgender women are "really men" while transgender men are "really women."[215] The complexity of embodied identity and intersectional feminism is explored through works like *Untitled (psychosocial Stuntin')* (figure 82), where Huxtable's self-representational figure denies limitations. Through Huxtable's presentation of her nude body as simultaneously sexual, political, transgender, African American, Nuwaubian, and historical, digitally constructed and conventionally beautiful, Huxtable utilises the representation of the contemporary nude to challenge the limitations dictated by societal conventions of gender norms. As a result of

[210] Chatzipapatheodoridis, "Beyoncé's Slay Trick," 415.
[211] Carrie Battan, "Beyonce's "Renaissance" Shocks some life into a culture gone inert," The New Yorker, August 3, 2022, accessed October 12, 2022. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/08/15/beyonces-renaissance-shocks-some-life-into-a-culture-gone-inert; Lester Fabian Brathwaite, "On Beyoncé's *Renaissance*: To be queer, gifted, and Black…oh what a lovely, precious dream," EW, August 4, 2022, accessed October 12, 2022. https://ew.com/music/beyonce-renaissance-tribute-to-black-queer-culture-ball-scene/.
[212] Uri McMillan, "Nicki-Aesthetics: The Camp Performance of Nicki Minaj," *Women & Performance* 24, no. 1 (2014): 79-85.
[213] Alexandria Cunningham, "Make It Nasty: Black Women's Sexual Anthems and the Evolution of the Erotic Stage," *Journal of Black Sexuality and Relationships* 5, no.1 (Summer 2018): 63-89.
[214] Anna Pochmara and Justyna Wierzchowska, "Nobody Knows My Name: The Masquerade of Mourning in the Early 1980s Artistic Productions of Michael Jackson and Prince," *Open Cultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017): 643.
[215] Stryker, "Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity," 147-148.

Huxtable's rejection of boundaries, combined with her political imagery, her representation of the contemporary body is inherently transgressive.

Frank Benson's *Juliana* and the public response to transgender representation

The complexities of intersectionality, identity and misogyny were demonstrated to Huxtable during her inclusion in the New Museum's *2015 Triennial: Surround Audience*.[216] The exhibition introduced examples of her work to the mainstream public and was accompanied by a life-size sculptural representation of her body by Frank Benson. While Benson's sculpture was received with substantial public attention and critical acclaim, Huxtable felt her own work was minimised, which Huxtable attributed to being overshadowed by sculpture, which she agreed to do before knowing it would be in the triennial.[217] In reaction to the sculpture, she felt audiences wanted to "consume" her body and saw her as a muse more than an artist.[218] Huxtable has also spoken about the exhibition audience's reluctance to acknowledge her transgender identity and race simultaneously, stating "Black people would see it as "Black art," but most of the people in the New Museum instead saw it as "digital" and "trans."[219] For the exhibition, Benson created a life-sized sculpture of Huxtable, *Juliana* (figure 85), in the form of a hyper realistic 3D printed figure. situating Huxtable amongst the tradition of the artistic nude.[220] As her body proportions continued changing significantly throughout the time of the sculpture's creation, it became a "sort of pastiche" of her body at different times.[221]

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[216] New Museum, "2015 Triennial: Surround Audience, 2015," New Museum, accessed December 5, 2021, https://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/the-generational-triennial.
[217] Earnest, "Juliana Huxtable."
[218] Earnest, "Juliana Huxtable."
[219] Earnest, "Juliana Huxtable."
[220] Kevin McGarry, "At the 2015 New Museum Triennial, A high-tech take on nude sculpture," *The New York Times Style Magazine*, February 24, 2015, https://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/02/24/frank-benson-new-museum-triennial/.
[221] Mark Guiducci, "Meet Juliana Huxtable: Star of the New Museum Triennial," *Vogue*, February 27, 2015, https://www.vogue.com/article/juliana-huxtable-new-museum-triennial.

Huxtable's work for the exhibition consisted of four inkjet prints, including two poems and two self-portraits, from the series, *Universal Crop Tops For All The Self Canonized Saints Of Becoming* (figure 86), which were positioned on the wall in front of Benson's sculpture. The curatorial intention of the display was to create a dialogue between the artworks. Benson did not anticipate the extent of the positive response of the transgender community to his sculpture of Huxtable, only realising its significance as an inclusive representation of the nude after multiple people confirmed it was their first time seeing a sculpture of "a body that they could relate to" in a large museum.[222] While this reaction was overwhelmingly positive, Huxtable felt positioned as the muse of the piece, diminishing her role as conceptual collaborator, and overshadowing her own work in the exhibition.[223] Additionally, Huxtable's *Untitled in the Rage (Nibiru Cataclysm)* was chosen as one of the holding images on museum's website, suggesting that her work remains most effective in both reach and concept when presented online.[224]

Benson's *Juliana* sculpture is a contemporary rendition of the nude as a category of high art.[225] Drawing from Classical Greek sculpture and the tradition of the reclining nude, specifically the *Sleeping Hermaphraditus*, Huxtable is depicted as a contemporary reinterpretation of the ideal nude, queer, cyborg figure coated in a luminous oil-slick metallic paint. The piece similarly draws from Manet's *Olympia* in the subversion of the genre of the reclining nude and depiction of race.[226] Huxtable was heavily involved in the representation of her body regarding the pose, with both artists drawing from ancient art and cultural

[222] Sargent, "Artist Juliana Huxtable's Bold, Defiant Vision."
[223] Earnest, "Juliana Huxtable."
[224] Guiducci, "Meet Juliana Huxtable."
[225] McGarry, "At the 2015 New Museum Triennial."
[226] Melissa Gronlund, *Contemporary Art and Digital Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 184.

symbolism in the construction of her form. Her hair is represented in her identifiable braids draped across her body, and the green tinged paint is reminiscent of her Nuwaubian photographs.[227] While the science fiction element is heightened through the visual associations to Princess Leia (figure 87), Huxtable's hand is also positioned into the gesture of jnana (otherwise known as gyan or gyana) mudra, a symbol of wisdom or knowledge in Indian culture.[228]

In the intentional visibility of breasts and genitals and depiction of Huxtable's continuously changing body at the time, Benson and Huxtable further reference the transitory and indeterminate state of the contemporary body. Gronlund describes these transgressed binaries as "man/woman, subject/object, artist/artwork, human/thing, erotic/untouchable."[229] Through the depiction of Huxtable's body, Huxtable and Benson reject these traditional binaries, portraying Huxtable's body as a complex, contemporary example of human identity, while simultaneously positioning her as an example of beauty and desire through the Classical pose merged with a futuristic aesthetic. Through the depiction of Huxtable in the form of the traditional idealised female nude, both Benson and Huxtable challenge culturally normative standards of gender and beauty.

The sculpture similarly transgresses boundaries of physical and digital representation and process. While Benson's work appears as a Classical bronze sculpture, the piece is an entirely digital creation drawn from Huxtable's real-world-physical presence, which has then been printed and repositioned as a physical entity again. Benson photographed Huxtable before

[227] Earnest, "Juliana Huxtable."; Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, "Juliana, Frank Benson," accessed August 17, 2019, https://www.icaboston.org/art/frank-benson/juliana.
[228] Cain Carroll and Revital Carroll, *Mudras of India: A Comprehensive Guide to the Hand Gestures of Yoga and Indian Dance* (London: Singing Dragon, 2012), 100.
[229] Gronlund, *Contemporary Art and Digital Culture*, 184.

refining the image through computer software, then 3D printed the final form using rapid-prototype plastic, later painting the form.[230] The process of transforming a three-dimensional physical body into a digital rendering and then back into a physical object is also integral to the conceptualisation of the final work.[231] The resulting widespread circulation of digital photographs taken of the sculpture in situ is similarly important and indicative of contemporary society's relationship to images. [232] As with much of Huxtable's own practice, Benson views this digital process, concept, and response to the work as integral to the piece. The sculpture is not merely constructed with the use of 3D printing and digital technology, but instead the digital 3D model is the aspect that Benson views as the artwork, whereas the print is merely the physical manifestation of the original.[233] These influential technological advances in the art of sculpture are an important aspect of the work, as the way in which the medium has been transformed through digital technology is of particular importance to Benson.[234] Additionally, the use of digital technology in the creation of the work has also altered the "tangibility" of sculpture, traditionally one of the mediums defining characteristics.[235] Through the incorporation of digital technology into the conceptual aspects of the work, beyond mere medium, these artworks challenge traditional perceptions of the separation between the physical and digital.

Huxtable has, in turn, noted her own complicated relationship to the sculpture, and the response it elicited.[236] As noted, while she had agreed to pose for the sculpture when it was intended to be shown in a London commercial gallery, including it in the New Museum's

[230] Sargent, "Artist Juliana Huxtable's Bold, Defiant Vision."
[231] McGarry, "At the 2015 New Museum Triennial."
[232] Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, "Juliana, Frank Benson."
[233] McGarry, "At the 2015 New Museum Triennial."
[234] Huxtable, Benson, and Durbin, "Juliana Huxtable and Frank Benson," 34.
[235] Christiane Paul, *Digital Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 61-62.
[236] Earnest, "Juliana Huxtable."

Triennial caused considerable media attention that Huxtable felt was misguided, in so far as it relegated her to the role of passive muse.[237] Her response demonstrates Huxtable's desire to provoke and challenge the audience through transgressive identity work, and her reluctance to be pigeonholed. Huxtable had also previously expressed her desire to not be used as an educational, literal representative body, but instead asserts her ability to explore and represent the fantastical elements of her identity as a contemporary artist, rather than prescribe to the demanding cultural expectations of a transgender artist.[238] These hopes directly contradicts much of the public response to Benson's *Juliana*.[239] While Huxtable had no way to control the audiences response to the work, the situation does demonstrate the way in which more traditional representations are more readily accepted by audiences with the space of the museum or gallery.

The response to the work may also be indicative of the viewer's relative level of awareness of intersectionality and social justice issues. "Woke" culture is also referenced throughout social media and is an unavoidable aspect of audience responses. The Merriam Webster online dictionary defines woke as "aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)."[240] While the concept of woke extends back to episodes of "Black activism" in the US during the 1940s, there has been a recent commodification of woke culture since around 2015.[241] The "white saviour" is, in turn, a

[237] Earnest, "Juliana Huxtable."
[238] Gossett and Huxtable, "Existing in the World." 49.
[239] Earnest, "Juliana Huxtable."
[240] Merriam Webster, "Woke," Merriam Webster, accessed May 12, 2022, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/woke?utm_campaign=sd&utm_medium=serp&utm_source=jsonld.
[241] Abas Mirzaei, "Where 'woke' came from and why marketers should think twice before jumping on the social activism bandwagon," *The Conversation,* September 9, 2019, https://theconversation.com/where-woke-came-from-and-why-marketers-should-think-twice-before-jumping-on-the-social-activism-bandwagon-122713; Akane Kanai and Rosalind Gill, "Woke? Affect, Neoliberalism, Marginalised Identities and Consumer Culture," *New Formations* 102, no. 102 (2020): 21.

related common theme, which enables the white male artist to garner more attention.[242] Similarly, in an interview with Jarrett Earnest, Huxtable questioned the way the gallery gained significant praise for its timely representation of a transgender women, specifically as to whether the inclusion of her nude figure was utilised to signify inclusivity and acceptance at the expense of fostering mainstream interest in Huxtable's own work.[243] Woke culture is criticised for the potential to exist as an echo chamber, where comments are merely circulated without interrogation, preaching to the converted.[244] Assumed knowledge may be one influence in accounting for Huxtable's disappointment in the reaction from the general public, as they may not have been aware of the complexities of transgender representation.

Moreover, Huxtable frequently references inside knowledge throughout her work, which can be alienating to general viewers. She does so in her exploration of Nuwaubianism, and the utilisation of Tumblr aesthetics and culture. Huxtable's use of inside knowledge is similarly reflected in the criticism of communities which give traditionally marginalised people a safe space, however in doing so can be seen to further separate them from broader public, creating further marginalisation. [245] On social media, this is reflected in queer communities on Tumblr, and communities like "Black Twitter."[246] Woke culture is also central to Black Twitter, which draws on a "substantial Black presence."[247] Hashtags or "blacktags" are used to locate the online community within the broader twitter universe.[248] Black Twitter is also

[242] Francesca Sobande, "Woke-Washing: 'intersectional' femvertising and branding 'Woke' bravery," *European Journal of Marketing* 54, no. 11 (2020): 2730.
[243] Earnest, "Juliana Huxtable."
[244] Joseph Ching Velasco, "You Are Cancelled: Virtual Collective Consciousness and the Emergence of Cancel Culture as Ideological Purging," *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 12, no. 5 (2021), 2.
[245] Cover, *Emergent Identities,* 15; McCracken, "Tumblr Youth Subcultures and Media Engagement," 151-61.
[246] Sarah J. Jackson, "(Re)Imagining Intersectional Democracy from Black Feminism to Hashtag Activism," *Women'sSstudies in Communication* 39, no. 4 (2016): 378.
[247] Monique Cherry-McDaniel, "Woke: Employing Black Textualities to Create Critically Conscious Classrooms," *English Journal* 106, no. 4 (2017): 41; Sarah Florini, "Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin': Communication and Cultural Performance on 'Black Twitter'," *Television & New Media* 15, no. 3 (2014): 223.
[248] Sanjay Sharma, 'Black Twitter? Racial Hashtags, Networks and Contagion," *New Formations* 78, no. 78 (2013): 48.

associated with activism and responding to racially motivated crimes, as seen in the murders of George Floyd and Michael Brown, and the Black Lives Matter movement.[249] Online, racial identity is signified in different ways, with the lack of a corporal body.[250] This can be seen as racial identity performance, also seen with the alternate idea of "acting white" online.[251] While Huxtable appears to draw upon knowledge common within the online communities she inhabits, she does not account for lack of context when viewed by the wider public.

Additionally, Huxtable does not appear to acknowledge the physical differences between her work and Benson's. While her works are 2D, colourful inkjet prints displayed on a wall, Benson's work is an imposing sculpture on a plinth positioned in the centre of the gallery space. Huxtable's works in *Universal Crop Tops For All The Self Canonized Saints Of Becoming* (figure 86), were, in contrast, a contemporary visual representation of the body and identity, created through digitally altered photographic prints. The aesthetic of the purple clouded backgrounds in *Untitled (Casual Power)* (figure 80), and *Untitled (Destroying Flesh)* (figure 81), are also reminiscent of social media aesthetics some audiences may be unfamiliar with.[252] Here, the body in contemporary digital culture is explored in literal reference to social media platforms and a description of the pressure placed on bodies by mainstream media. The other two works in the series situate the text-based works within a more ambiguous landscape of bodily representation. *Untitled in The Rage (Nibiru Cataclysm)* explores the body from the perspective of alternative African American histories, giving rise

[249] Marc Lamont Hill, "'Thank You, Black Twitter': State Violence, Digital Counterpublics, and Pedagogies of Resistance,' *Urban Education* 53, no. 2 (2018): 286; Jackson, "(Re)Imagining Intersectional Democracy from Black Feminism to Hashtag Activism," 375.
[250] Florini, "Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin,"223.
[251] Florini, "Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin,"234; Raven S. Maragh, "Authenticity on 'Black Twitter': Reading Racial Performance and Social Networking,' *Television & New Media* 19, no. 7 (2018): 591.
[252] Hurr, "Juliana Huxtable."; Stein, "Tumblr Fan Aesthetics." 86–97.

to discussions on the limitations imposed on African American identity and history through the fantastical reimagining of a race descended from aliens. *Untitled (Psychosocial stuntin')*, similarly explores race and embodied identity in contemporary culture, through Huxtable's depiction of herself as a character, in a play on African American popular culture. Her hair is again integral to the work, as her long braids are instead fashioned into traditional bantu knots.[253]

Huxtable's reference to social media aesthetics extends to the combination of images, each with similarly vibrant colouring and identity-based themes, yet in aesthetic contrast through text versus bodily representation. These aesthetic and conceptual qualities ensure Huxtable's series is situated in an entirely contemporary digital context, combining aspects of fine art with the aesthetic of social media representation. Huxtable's four inkjet prints, positioned on the wall opposite Benson's sculpture, were created through a composite of photography and digital manipulation, before being printed. While both Huxtable and Benson's works are constructed primarily from digital processes, Benson's sculpture remains more closely tied to the history of nude representation through the appearance, if not actual process, of hand-crafted bronze sculptural form. The spatial positioning of the two works undoubtedly influences the way in which the audience responds to each piece, and the attention each artist receives.

Through its proximity to Benson's representation of Huxtable, created in an entirely contemporary, digitally influenced manner, yet with undeniable references to Classical sculpture, Huxtable's series becomes more grounded within both time and place than it otherwise would have been. However, the physical imposition of the sculpture, which places

[253]Earnest, "Juliana Huxtable."

the focus heavily on the physicality of the representational body, also limits the potential for more conceptual readings of Huxtable's *Universal Crop Tops for All the Self Canonized Saints of Becoming* series, specifically in reference to the alternate history and cultural elements of her work. The focus on Benson's representation of Huxtable, without similar engagement with Huxtable's own self-representation, reaffirms to Huxtable the historical tendency for those in power to speak for those who are not. This cultural propensity to praise those in positions of social privilege for their representations of people from minority identities, while simultaneously marginalising those from the represented communities when they represent their own experience, has continued throughout history.

As a Caucasian male artist, Benson possesses an inherent privilege regarding the ways in which he is treated in society, which unavoidably bleeds over into the ways he is treated by the art world and audience. While his position of privilege is acknowledged by Benson, nothing appears to have been done curatorially or critically to redress the focus on Benson's portrayal of Huxtable's identity above her own self-representation, displayed in proximity. The stylistic differences between the two pieces, however, complicates the issue in so far as they will naturally receive different responses based on both scale and style. Carefully articulated curatorial or artistic decisions could possibly have resolved Huxtable's feeling of further marginalisation. Huxtable's work could have incorporated her performance, for instance, activating the space. Alternatively, the prints could have been placed in a smaller space around the sculpture, enabling the two works to speak to each other without as much outside interference.

For Huxtable, she found that the critical conversation surrounding the triennial work remained too focussed on biographical information.[254] This is significant as Huxtable's series is at once more experimental and more personal than Benson's, whose reinterpretation of a Classical statue is a recurrent theme in the representation of the body in art.[255] Huxtable, however, incorporates experimental text amongst overt associations to social media culture, addresses the appropriation of African American culture, and explores the possibility of alternate, science fiction-based histories through the representation of her nude body. Each of these images is heavily referential of social media culture and the changing way the body is represented in the contemporary society. These images together explore Huxtable's identity as African American, transgender, "internet baby" and politically disenfranchised.[256] Paired with Benson's sculpture, Huxtable's body is at once historical and futuristic. These artworks and their reception highlight the complicated relationship between the body and digital technology the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

Transition

Huxtable has also repeatedly referenced the importance of transition within her work. Even within Benson's sculpture for which she was primarily the model, the documentation of transition is also integral to the piece. As previously mentioned, *Juliana* is a composite of the changing shape of Huxtable's body over time rather than a direct representation of a fixed bodily form, contrasted against the permanence of the sculptural medium.[257] Huxtable's interest in cultural archives and the documentation of her identity within history is reflected in Benson's representation of her body, situating a multifaceted identity within the traditional

[254] Leeson and Huxtable, "Personae of interest," 319.
[255] Huxtable, Benson, and Durbin. "Juliana Huxtable and Frank Benson,' 33-34.
[256] Leeson and Huxtable, "Personae of Interest," 315.
[257] Guiducci, "Meet Juliana Huxtable."; Evan Pavka, "Addition, Renovation, Demolition, Re-Use," The End, *Kapsula Magazine* 3 (August 2016): 21, https://kapsula.ca/releases/KAPSULA_THEEND.pdf; Huxtable, Benson, and Durbin. "Juliana Huxtable and Frank Benson," 34.

art history canon. Through rendering the transitory nature of identity into a permanent sculpture, Benson situates Huxtable amongst a history of representation that has traditionally excluded people of colour and non-binary gender. Referring to herself as a "cyborg, cunt, priestess, witch, Nuwaubian princess," Huxtable intentionally refuses to subscribe to stereotypical, outwardly defined categories.[258] Interested in blurring the boundaries throughout her work, Huxtable rejects the traditional confines of binary identity, exploring instead the complex and multifaceted experience of embodiment, while acknowledging the potential for transition through time. Beyond gender, transition to Huxtable refers to her personal experience of "racial, geographical, and ideological transitioning."[259]

Kris Grey and Jennie Klein examine the potential for exploring existence within transition, allowing for analysis of artwork which deals with gender to remain free from the common trap of tying transgender theory to essentialism. They instead identify a mode of reading art through a lens of feminism which is less concerned with binaries and remains more occupied with 'indeterminacy and transition,' specifically in relation to a contemporary emergence of "trans* visibility."[260] As a performance artist, Grey also explores their own transition within their work, identifying as gender-queer and using the pronouns "she, he and they" interchangeably.[261] Grey argues for a conceptualisation of transgender identity which explores identity within the transition, as opposed to focussing on two binaries which can be

[258] Backer, "Juliana Huxtable," 177.
[259] Huxtable, Benson, and Durbin. "Juliana Huxtable and Frank Benson," 34.
[260] Kris Grey and Jennie Klein, "Trans*feminism: fragmenting and re-reading the history of art through a Trans'* perspective," in *Otherwise: imagining queer feminist art histories*, eds. Amelia Jones and Erin Silver (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 321; **"**a latin prefix, *trans* (without the asterisk) means across, beyond, or on the opposite side. Trans* with the asterisk is a linguistic manifestation that aims to umbrella many different identities, bodies, and configurations that could be seen as defying gendered conventions and expectations including but not limited to transgender, transsexual, gender queer, non-binary, agender, etc.'
[261] Grey and Klein, "Trans*feminism," 322; Kris Grey, "Bio." Kristin Grey. Accessed October 22, 2022. https://kristingrey.com/page/1-Bio.html

travelled between.[262] Grey has undergone hormone treatment and surgery, but rejects the idea that it was for the purpose of fitting into a binary gender, instead utilised as a way to "craft a queer form that defies binary categorization."[263] Grey also references the transition between gendered presentation which remains separate from both gender identity and sexuality in reference to the historical figure of Jean Carroll (1908-1972). Carroll, the famed Coney Island "Bearded Lady" removed her beard to marry her lover, but in order to retain her career as a circus performer she was subsequently extensively tattooed and became known as the "Tattooed Lady."[264] Grey identifies this example of nonconforming gender presentation as an illustration of the long yet largely overlooked history of complex gender identities, while Klein suggests that readings such as these highlight that "the categories of gender are always already mutable and always already in transition."[265]

It can also be argued that the propensity to reduce transgender identity to either an issue of sexuality or one of gender overlooks the complexity of the experience.[266] In contrast to feminism or early Gay Rights theories, transgender theory, from which Huxtable, Grey and Klein draw from, positions transgender identity as a "a modality rather than a category."[267] Grey and Klein's conceptualisation considers the aspects of sexuality and gender as two separate areas of identity that exist independently of one another in theory, while also interacting to create unique experiences and prejudices in the same manner as race, class and homonormative sexual orientation.[268] Their theory of transgender identity allows for more

[262] Grey and Klein, "Trans*feminism," 323.
[263] Grey and Klein, "Trans*feminism," 324.
[264] Margo Demello, *Body Studies: An Introduction* (London; New York: Routledge, 2014), 218.
[265] Grey and Klein, "Trans*feminism," 324-9.
[266] Stryker, "Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity," 145-57.
[267] Stryker, "Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity," 148.
[268] Stryker, "Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity," 148-49.

critical exploration and activism relating to the power dynamics and privileges within the LGBTQ community.

Despite advancements in education and visibility, the desire to position gender identity into two oppositional categories remains prevalent across contemporary western societies. Artists and theorists like Grey, Klein, and Huxtable challenge these essentialist stereotypes surrounding gender identity and propose more complex ways of reading gender-focussed art. Through exploring the representation of the body within the grey area of non-binary and non-essentialist gender presentation, the possibility for more complex understandings of identity become viable. The prioritisation of more nuanced understandings of gender similarly encourages a reading of artworks such as Huxtable's which reject the limitations of the binary and instead allow encourage greater understanding of the complexity of human identity.

The rejection of binary gender is explored in Huxtable's series *INTERFERTILITY INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX: SNATCH THE CALF BACK* (figure 88) of 2019. Here, Huxtable references "Furry" subculture, which finds its origins online, particularly in virtual worlds, as an outgrowth of science fiction fandom.[269] Furries refer to people who are unusually interested in anthropomorphic animals, often with the association of dressing up as the animals.[270] The role of the internet was fundamental to the emergence of Furry subculture, utilising interactive online communities to create new identity conceptualisations.[271] The

[269] Mary Heinz, "'There's A Little Bit of That Magic Where I'm Becoming Something Else': LGBT+ Furry Identity Formation and Belonging Online," *The Journal for Undergraduate Ethnography* 10, no. 2 (2020): 21-37; Joe Strike, *Furry Nation: The True Story of America's Most Misunderstood Subculture* (Jersey City: Cleis Press, 2017), 1-12.
[270] Kevin J. Hsu and J. Michael Bailey, "The 'Furry' Phenomenon: Characterizing Sexual Orientation, Sexual Motivation, and Erotic Target Identity Inversions in Male Furries," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 48, no. 5 (2019): 1349.
[271] Cover, *Emergent Identities,* 71-2.

subculture is also often intersecting with LGBTQ identities.[272] Additionally, for some, it is primarily utilised as a way to connect and create community, while for others it indicates a discomfort with their own physical embodiment.[273] In popular media depictions of furry identities, the participants are typically linked to sexual fetishisation.[274] While the public perception of the subculture is often sexualised, not every furry participates in the sexual aspects.[275] However, the sexual association remains prevalent and has often been weaponised against the subculture, leading to the perception of deviancy by those outside the community.[276] Huxtable draws upon all of these complex aspects of the subculture in her work, using the subculture as a metaphor for the type of non-binary, unrestrictive, post-racial identities she envisions as an outcome of rejecting binaries and building online communities.[277]

In *Cow 2* (figure 89), dated to 2019, Huxtable reimagined herself as part cow, part human. She is pictured leaning back with her legs spread, with multiple misshapen udders in place of her breasts and genitals. Her ears have been comically enlarged, and her hair twisted into horns. Her body is painted in a cow pattern outlined with neon pink. *Cow 2*, as with many in the series, hovers between realism and cartoonish aesthetics, blending elements of Huxtable's method of photography and digital editing. The result is a human-animal hybrid that is at once confronting, humorous and provocative. Huxtable refers to these hybrid creatures using

[272]Heinz, "'There's A Little Bit of That Magic Where I'm Becoming Something Else,'" 30-2;
[273] Gerbasi et al., "Furries from A to Z (Anthropomorphism to Zoomorphism," *Society and Animals* 16, no. 220 (2008): 220.
[274] Hsu and Bailey, "The 'Furry' Phenomenon," 1350.
[275] Terrance B. Grey, "Furry Sexuality: Conditioned Fetishes a Better Explanation Than Erotic Target Identity Inversion," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 49, no. 1 (2020): 49.; Joseph Erbentraut, "Furries Set The Record Straight: There's Nothing To Be Afraid Of," *The Huffington Post* December 18, 2014, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-are-furries_n_6342184.
[276] Heinz, "'There's A Little Bit of That Magic Where I'm Becoming Something Else,'" 22.
[277] Makayla Bailey, "Juliana Huxtable Let's Skip The Essentialism And Devour The Semantics," Flaunt, accessed April 25, 2021, https://flaunt.com/content/juliana-huxtable.

the concept of "fursona," which is defined as a unique "furry-themed avatar."[278] Through these works, Huxtable also references agricultural modification and the ways in which people have consistently sought to change nature.[279] As with much of Huxtable's work, American politics and restrictive social attitudes towards bodies and identity are also an inspiration behind the series.[280] Huxtable's press release artist statement for the work is written as an all-caps statement of the violence endured, (appendix B).[281] The text is suggestive of both Huxtable's actual lived experience, while also working as a reflection of the anamorphic personas she has created for the series.[282]

Part of the series was displayed amongst custom built structures reminiscent of public bathroom stalls in the centre of the gallery (figure 90). The utilisation of the public bathroom in the space can be seen not only as indicative of the confronting nature of the show, but also implicitly speaks to the stereotypes and controversy surrounding the use of public bathrooms for people who identify as transgender.[283] Huxtable again references public bathrooms and discrimination in her 2013 collaboration with Amos Mac, *Rest* (figure 91). The work alludes to the contentious ongoing international debate played out across multiple news mediums and social commentaries concerning the villainisation of transgender people wanting to use public bathrooms. It evidences the way members of the trans community are subject to prejudices

[278] Courtney N. Plante et al., *CAPE: A Multidimensional Model of Fan Interest* (Commerce: CAPE Model Research Team, 2021), 264; Bailey, Juliana Huxtable Let's Skip The Essentialism And Devour The Semantics."
[279] Whitney Claflin, "Juliana Huxtable's Interfertility Industrial Complex: Snatch the Calf Back and the Pursuit of Desire," Topical Cream, accessed April 25, 2021, https://www.topicalcream.org/features/juliana-huxtables-interfertility-industrial-complex/.
[280] Aisha Harris, "Juliana Huxtable's Next Chapter," *The New York Times*, August 10, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/10/t-magazine/juliana-huxtable.html.
[281] Juliana Huxtable, "Juliana Huxtable at Reena Spaulings," Contemporary Art Daily, accessed April 28, 2021, https://contemporaryartdaily.com/2019/10/juliana-huxtable-at-reena-spaulings-2/.
[282] Michal Love Michael, "Juliana Huxtable's Bold New Work Shows Bodies as Alternate Species," *Paper Magazine,* October 17, 2019, https://www.papermag.com/juliana-huxtable-infertility-2640989647.html?rebelltitem=11#rebelltitem11.
[283] TransHub, "Health and Gender Affirmation in NSW, Bathrooms," TransHub, accessed April 25, 2021, https://www.transhub.org.au/allies/bathrooms.

and microaggressions in daily life. Throughout the series, Huxtable combines confronting imagery, humour, and identity in an exploration of the possibilities of transition and non-binary identity.

Social and digital media have not only impacted the inclusivity of representation in popular media and encouraged intersectional artistic engagement for LGBTQ artists but also in terms of racial diversity. The role of digital media on intersectional representations of the body in the contemporary age is explored throughout Huxtable's work. For Huxtable, both digital media and social media are fundamental to her art practice. Her artistic processes are heavily reliant on the digital technologies, even within her live performance works. Through social media, Huxtable has found a sense of community with others who relate to her identity as a transgender African American woman. Unlike Schrager, Huxtable's use of identity construction online remains overtly tied to her own personal identity construction. Her use of personas and fursonas are a means of exploring her lived experience and multifaceted gendered, sexual, and racial identity as a contemporary artist. Huxtable's use of social media reflects the importance of social media communities for many marginalised people.[284] Huxtable also engages with social media to bypass the capitalistic imperatives of the art world, embracing the freedom to exhibit and engage with viewers and artists using social media as well as the traditional gallery system.[285] Conversely, the complications Huxtable faced in bringing digital and politically complex work into the New Museum's Triennial demonstrates the limitations and possible problems when transferring web-based art into the traditional gallery space. These factors have all contributed to Huxtable's exploration of

[284] Tiidenberg, "Playground in Memoriam," 364.
[285] Gossett and Huxtable, "Existing in the World," 44.

intersectional representation, and the potential for transition and complex self-representation to bypass binary restrictions.

Throughout her work, Huxtable continuously references the ways in which the online environment has shaped her identity and her understanding of her culture. Through her use of alternate histories, Huxtable proposes fantastical ideas which challenge preconceptions of African American culture. In her transgressive representation of human-animal hybrids, she draws upon internet subcultures to suggest a way of viewing bodies that is not reliant on binary gender or sexuality. These more complex, variable views of queer identity are at odds with the societal proclivity to adhere to strict binaries. In drawing on theories of queer theory and intersectionality put forward by Jones, Halberstam, Crenshaw and Butler, artists like Huxtable challenge the essentialist stereotypes surrounding racial, sexual and gender identity, while asserting consideration of intersectional experience. Through examination of their work, the way in which digital and social media has encouraged varied intersectional representation, and the influence of this on the artistic body, is demonstrated.

Conclusion

Digital technology has transformed the representation of bodies in contemporary art. Accessible digital technology has seen the emergence of perceptually realistic digital manipulation, leading to a contemporary grotesque. In mainstream media, the commodification of women's bodies has provoked a feminist response within digitally mediated art. Interactive social media has facilitated the growth of fourth wave feminism and a sexualised digital landscape, contributing to the growth of the artistic persona online. The accessibility of the internet and social media have also enabled those of traditionally marginalised identities to create communities and advocate for social progress, leading to an artistic body that is intersectional and identifiably contemporary. Drawing upon the extensive history of the body in art, each chapter and corresponding featured artist demonstrate what I identify as significant features of the artistic body in the digital age. The focus on four primary artists as case studies has enabled each of these areas of the contemporary body to be examined and contextualised amongst a rapidly changing digital environment, with creative practitioners spanning different generations of digital exposure. Additionally, the emerging artists featured, including Schrager and Huxtable, have not yet been the subject of the same extensive research as more established artists. As digital technology has enabled greater numbers of amateur artists to find audiences than ever before, the role of artists from outside the traditional gallery system will only increase in importance.

In utilising these artists as case studies, ways in which the artistic body has been transformed in the contemporary digital age has been explored, resulting in several key findings. Significantly, it has revealed the emergence of advanced digital manipulation as a strategy to subvert viewers perceptions of photographic reality. This advanced digital manipulation,

combined with the role of digital media on the development of fourth wave feminism, increased intersectionality, digital communities, and online persona art, demonstrate the impact of digital technology on contemporary representations of the body. These factors have informed the way bodies are represented in a period of unparalleled digital progress. As digital technology continues to evolve rapidly, these changes will continue to grow, as possibilities for believable manipulation and potentially limitless online networking increase. This research is situated as a step towards understanding the impact digital culture has on contemporary artistic depictions of bodies. Crucially, the chosen artists have also exposed the importance of digital media on both concept and creation. This symbiotic relationship is one of the defining characteristics of the contemporary artistic body in the digital age. It is not merely medium, method, display, or concept, but a combination of these qualities that define the influence of digital technology on the representations of bodies. The fact that the featured artists could not create their work without digital media further demonstrates the influence of digital technology.

Technological advancements have also contributed to the growth of an unsettling, ambiguous contemporary grotesque, emerging from the increase of violent digital media and digitally manipulated photography. In an era of accessible and often violent digital pornography, misogynistic hate speech and abundance of graphic imagery online, I argue that representations of violence have become normalised in digital culture. Simultaneously, the creation of bodies which appear visually realistic despite editing intervention is positioned as an example of the way in which understandings of truth and accuracy in body imagery is challenged in contemporary digital culture. Digitally manipulated, visually realistic and unsettling photography is further positioned as a logical conclusion to the violence and objectification of bodies in the contemporary visual landscape. This style of bodily imagery

is demonstrated through Asger Carlsen's *Hester* series, and Julie Rraps's *Fleshstones* and *Soft Target's*, which are at once disturbing and alluring, human and other. As such, a significant impact of digital technology is the believability and ease of image manipulation, which analogue does not allow. The resulting digitally edited photographic style is further suggested as one contemporary alternative to abjection, utilised to explore the uncomfortable aspects of embodiment. As imagery increasingly becomes viewed on screens, perceptions of physicality and abjection have been impacted, while our fascination with feelings elicited by disgust remain.[1] I suggest that contemporary artists instead appear to be incorporating unease and discomfort via more subtle visual styles, such as digital body manipulation and distorted realism. Artists like Carlsen exemplify this style of bodily manipulation, which depicts discomfort in a similar strategy to abjection, with a more understated emphasis on the grotesque and uncanny. Julie Rrap's work also echoes the trend away from abjection as her increasing use of digital technology and reference to digital culture coincides with her move away from abject imagery. I suggest that the digitally manipulated body imagery as created by Carlsen and Rrap may be a contemporary method of exploring bodily and psychological unease, violation, and mortality.

The emergence of advanced digital manipulation and continued fragmentation is another key outcome of digitally informed visual culture. Fragmentation, which has frequently been utilised for patriarchal or commercial purposes, is instead suggested as an integral aspect of empowerment and feminist representation in contemporary digital art. Artists such as Rrap and Schrager are able to subvert the visual culture which positions fragmented, disembodied bodily forms as consumerist material, by using this dominant visual language and

[1] Jane Polkinghorne, "HEAVE, HO, HA: Disgust, humour and failure in contemporary feminist art." In *Feminist Perspectives on Art: Contemporary Outtakes*, eds. Jacqueline Millner and Catriona Moore (New York: Routledge, 2018), 164.

deconstructing or undermining it. They achieve this by highlighting the ugly or unfavourable aspects of the body, rather than idealisation and objectification, in the case of Rrap's *Overstepping,* or through questioning the utility of the presentation through repetitive exploration of the sexualised or commodified forms, as seen in Schrager's work.

The ease of digital technology is also integral to the changing visual landscape. As access has increased, digital media enables greater variety of representation and facilitates interaction from greater numbers of people, further enabling an increase in collaborative internet.[2] As a result of these factors, more voices are heard, and more varied amateur artistic representation is presented to audiences. Additionally, digital media has impacted language and visual culture, which has an evident impact on artistic representations of all kinds. Crucially, the digital landscape has also transformed visual and youth culture, which undoubtably impacts future generations of artists.

Another significant outcome is the continued centring of the artist's own body, beyond traditional self-portraiture. The self is instead used as the medium for exploring concepts or as a performance device. This utilisation of the self as an artistic device additionally challenges the perception of selfies, perhaps the most recognisable consequence of digital influence on body representation, as merely narcissistic or attention seeking. Rather, through the examination of fourth wave feminism, Schrager's sustained online persona and Huxtable's identity work, selfies can also be read as a contemporary communicative tool, locating the subject, and asserting their perspective. Additionally, selfies incorporate a perception of intimacy that self-portraits do not traditionally possess. Both Schrager and Huxtable demonstrate the potential power of representing varied identities and experiences in

[2] Grant Bollmer, *Theorizing Digital Cultures* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2018): 23.

this contemporary visual medium. Furthermore, as seen in the work of Schrager, Ulman and Huxtable, artists are not only using their physical depiction to represent their own identity, but are, more intriguingly, frequently exploring identity construction and fluidity through the growth of online artistic personas.

Viewed through the proposed significance of the selfie as a communicative device, enabling identity exploration and feminist representation, selfies and selfie-style imagery are positioned as instrumental to the art created by young contemporary artists like Huxtable and Schrager.[3] Their work draws directly upon the conceptualisation of the selfie as a tool of empowerment, assertion of presence, and exploration of identity. Communicative image sharing and enduring persona work demonstrates a fundamental difference in visual communication that has emerged directly due to the growth of digital technology and social media. While these works also draw upon the established history of artists working with their own body, as also seen in the work of Carlsen and Rrap, their engagement with online artistic persona positions their work as technologically specific and identifiably contemporary. It is therefore notable that the artists who most comprehensively engage with social media, both in display of their artwork and in their personal identity exploration, are the ones who engage with selfie theory and artistic personas.

Generational differences are also demonstrated through the changing waves of feminism, which similarly emerged as central to the contemporary artistic body in the digital age. The

[3] Derek Conrad Murray, "The Evolution of the Selfie: Influencers, Feminism, and Visual Culture," in *Visual Culture Approaches to the Selfie,* ed. Derek Conrad Murray (Milton: Taylor and Francis, 2021), 91; Priscilla Frank, "How Artists Are Using the Selfie as a Radical Weapon for Change," The Huffington Post, accessed July 13, 2022, http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/10-artists-who-use-selfies-as-their-radical-weapons_us_55e7393ae4b0c818f61a303b; Edgar Gómez Cruz and Helen Thornham, "Selfies Beyond Self-Representation: The (Theoretical) F(R)Ictions of a Practice," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 7, no. 1 (2015): 6-7.

impact of these generational changes is demonstrated through the differing approaches of Rrap and Schrager, for instance while Rrap critiques objectification, Schrager actively engages with it. The initial impact of digital technology on both feminist theory and feminist representation of the body in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century has been revealed through the analysis of Julie Rrap's oeuvre. Throughout her career, Rrap has responded to feminist discourse as it has progressed. In doing so, Rrap's work references the impact of digital technology on the evolution of third wave feminist body and performance art. Examining Rrap's oeuvre has also highlighted the difference between her perspective and emerging fourth wave feminist representations, further positioning digital media as central to the progression of feminist art. Regarding the commodification of the female body in digital culture, Rrap's use of digital technology to undermine the problematic depiction of bodies created and disseminated by digital technology is also noteworthy. Her intentional use of digital media to challenge the images found in digital media is suggested as a key aspect of the body in contemporary art. The co-option of aesthetics, medium and process is also integral to Rrap's subversion of beauty and bodily standards as it reveals the absurdity in culturally imposed ideals. A similar approach is seen in Schrager's more provocative representations of female sexuality and objectification. For both artists, despite their different approaches, digital technology both enables the creation of work, while also being integral to the conceptualisation behind the work.

The subsequent emergence of fourth wave feminism and the artistic persona on social media is indicative of the communication and political changes which have been facilitated in part by interactive social media and accessible internet. Significantly, digital media can be seen to have influenced the growth of fourth wave feminism in and of itself, as the internet is identified as key to its development. The influence of fourth wave feminism on the way

artists are representing the body in digital media is indicative of a style of artistic representation born directly from the growth of the digital age, as most comprehensively explored by Leah Schrager's artistic persona Ona Artist. Ona Artist is confronting for her use of aesthetics and poses, which often conform more to the conventions of pornography than art. Schrager claims the subversion of conventional boundaries is what she is utilising to assert her ownership of her sexuality. Self-sexualisation is both a central and controversial aspect of fourth wave feminism and is a significant aspect of the representation of the body in the digital age.[4] The debate surrounding sexualised feminist representation is echoed by the focus on Schrager as key artist, as she remains a figure of controversy in terms of both artistic merit and feminist representation. The focus on Schrager as a controversial, online artist also demonstrates the rise of the amateur digital artist and the changing landscape of art in the digital age. These factors establish the impact of social media on the representation of the body in art: in terms of conceptual artistic response, as an artistic medium, and as a space to bypass the traditional gallery system entirely.

As the representation of bodies remain tied to feminism, the impact of digital media on feminist theory is central to the how contemporary bodies are represented and understood. Digital technology and social media specifically have also enabled social progress and encouraged intersectional representation, which is reflected in the art created. Juliana Huxtable's work is positioned as an example of contemporary depictions of the body which explore the relationship between race, gender and sexuality that challenge conventional boundaries within art history and identity politics. Her use of alternate histories and conspiracy theories is further suggested as an example of the way in which artists are utilising

[4] Laura R. Ramsey and Amber L. Horan, "Picture This: Women's Self-Sexualization in Photos on Social Media," *Personality and Individual Differences* 133, (2018): 85.

the freedom of the internet to challenge limiting ideas of historically marginalised identities. The freedom of information, including more comprehensive history of race and LGBTQ identities than provided in most education systems, has a significant impact on the way embodiment is represented and understood. Online communities have had an important influence on the way in which portrayals of sexuality, gender and race in mainstream media have evolved. I argue that this is largely due to social media, as it has enabled feedback from average audiences, creating a demand for more inclusive representation, and created significant subcultural communities. These changes are directly reflected in the art created.

Using Grey and Klein's proposition of a more fluid and complex feminist reading of gender, identity and embodiment, and Jones and Silver's articulation of queer feminist intersectionality, the artists featured can also be seen to exemplify the possibility of multifaceted identity and embodiment in the digital age.[5] The challenge to historically problematic aspects of feminism, including essentialism and the disregard of intersectionality, demonstrates one way in which digitally-informed feminist artists are using representations of the body. These are visibly digital, contemporary works, drawn from an online environment that has contributed to a more nuanced understanding of identity. For these artists, Judith Butler's conceptualisation of gender performativity is ever present, enacted through their continuous engagement with and subversion of the stereotypes of idealised femininity and hetero-sexy objectification.[6] Halberstam's articulation of a loud, defiant feminist representation that similarly situates identity as performance, can also be

[5] Grey and Klein, "Trans*feminism," 321-4; Amelia Jones, "Introduction: sexual difference and otherwise," in *Otherwise,* eds. Amelia Jones and Erin Silver (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 2; Amelia Jones and Erin Silver, "Queer Feminist Art History: an imperfect genealogy," in *Otherwise,* ed. Amelia Jones and Erin Silver (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 33

[6] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 140-41; Amy Shields Dobson, "Hetero-Sexy Representation by Young Women on Myspace: The Politics of Performing an 'Objectified' Self," *Outskirts: Feminisms along the Edge* 25, (2011): 1-14.

used to conceptualise the way in which artists on social media, such as Schrager and Huxtable, are using representations of their bodies to confront oppressive systems and attitudes, whilst simultaneously engaging with visual stereotypes of racial and gendered representation.[7] In reading the contemporary artistic body as a transgressive, feminist figure, in addition to the suggested significance of self-representation to bypass social restrictions and oppression, its potential as tool of political, social, personal and artistic importance is revealed. This nuanced exploration of the body as multifaceted similarly reflects a period of social change, in which gender, sexuality, and personal identity are more readily understood as existing within a spectrum rather than traditional binary.

Drawing upon varying feminist ideas across generations, the enduring centrality of feminism on all representations of bodies, and the contradictory and ever-evolving ways of reconciling with embodiment in a patriarchal society, is demonstrated. In a contemporary digital culture, these ideas can reach wider audiences and rapidly progress into new ways of understanding and representing the body. The accessibility of information and ability to communicate online has not only impacted personal identity formation, as demonstrated in Huxtable's identification of social media as fundamental to her emerging identity, but also encouraged intersectional understanding of feminism. Significantly, each artist featured depicts bodies which defy binary identity classification. These are instead representational bodies which explore fluidity, ambiguity, and possibility. Whether visually, through the ambiguous, multi-gendered, digitally constructed images of Carlsen and Rrap, or the varied possibilities of embodied identity represented through the personas of Schrager and Huxtable, this contemporary body denies simplistic categorisation. The denial of traditional bodily

[7] J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 22-6.

representation can further be seen to echo the nebulas nature of the online environment, which is constantly in flux.

The artistic possibilities afforded by technological progress have resulted in range of artistic outcomes. The emergence of realistic manipulated body representations has enabled the creation of uncanny bodily forms, seen in both in the idealised, filtered Instagram influencer, and the art of Carlsen and Rrap. My research also suggests that the criticism of selfies and works which utilise selfie style is more reflective of a patriarchal society which continues to devalue women's work, in addition to generational differences which ensure those unfamiliar with online environments misread the visual language and intention, than an inherent problem with the style of body representation. As exemplified by Huxtable and Schrager, selfie-informed online works of art can also function successfully as political, feminist, and transgressive works, in direct opposition of the perception of selfies as narcissistic. Similarly, the influence of the commodification of women's bodies in advertising and mainstream media continues to be an influential factor in how bodies are understood and represented. This suggests that artists exploring objectification are not perpetuating their own objectification, but rather working with the visual language of the dominant culture. Furthermore, the changing waves of feminism have had a demonstrable impact on the representation of bodies in contemporary art. As fourth wave feminism has emerged online, the relationship between digital technology and contemporary feminism cannot be overstated.

From a medium specific standpoint, digital media is distinct due to the utilisation of data, the altered perception of permanence, the impact to perceived photographic reality and the immediacy of access. Digital technology is also distinct from prior mediums due to the processing differences, resulting in quicker and easier advanced image manipulation, with no

education or training required. The ease of tools, along with minimal cost, results in less barriers to entry and have enabled greater potential for intermediality and amateur participation.[8] Digital technology has also impacted viewers perception of reality, with advanced digital manipulation, deepfakes and AI technology creating a landscape in which truth is often difficult to define. For artists like Carlsen, the technological advancements have enabled the creation of images which trick the eye and unsettle perceptual boundaries of embodiment. Digital technology has also enabled Rrap's subversion of commodified female bodies, which both utilise and respond to digital technology. Social media has also created an environment for Schrager to display her sex positive feminist ideas, which would otherwise be shut out of traditional gallery environments. Social media and accessible internet provided Huxtable with the tools and platform to both research and represent her identity and experience, in a way historically marginalised communities are often not given the opportunity to do so.

As bodies remain a central feature of contemporary art, are politically and culturally significant, and foundational to personal identity, this thesis contributes to an important area of contemporary art scholarship. The artists chosen each represent key areas of the contemporary artistic body that I believe have emerged in response to evolving technology and a growing digital culture, specifically: digital manipulation, photographic truth, and the contemporary grotesque; third wave feminism and commodification; fourth wave feminism and online persona; and intersectionality, inclusivity, and social media communities. Additionally, each artist featured uses digital media as a medium while simultaneously referencing digital culture to explore complex political and philosophical ideas, exemplifying

[8] Hannah Phillips, "Heterophobia: Subverting Heterosexual Hegemony through Intermedial Applied Performance for Young People," *Research in drama education* 21, no. 3 (2016): 329.

the way digital representations of the body can be used to confront dominant ideas and limitations. The challenge to dominant ideas is a key outcome of the access afforded by digital advancements, including social media and personal use technology, and is one significant positive outcome of the digital age. I further contend that these changes in digital media representation have advanced feminism and intersectional representation, while simultaneously raising questions regarding objectification, the enduring male gaze, and the challenge to visual truth in an age of increased digital manipulation. Idealised, commodified bodies are now ubiquitous in mainstream media, as is explicit imagery including pornography and violence online. However, these changes have also encouraged diverse representation, greater ability for artists to find audiences, access to information, and the emergence of fourth wave feminism. Throughout, the body in both art and society remains far from obsolete in its continuing digital evolution.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Digital Definitions

Digital technology

Digital technology refers to the systems and tools which process data and facilitate digital programs, including computer, digital photographic, and mobile technology.

Digital media

Digital media refers to machine readable, visual, and audio, technologies and interactive communicative tools, including video and digital photography, using digital technology.[1]

Social media

Social Media refers to interactive platforms which enable use-generated content to be created and shared amongst other users, including both those known to the user and outside of their immediate community.

Social Networking Service or Sites

Social networking service or sites refers to communicative online networks which enable interaction between people, often facilitating online communities organised by shared interests.

Digital age

'Digital age' is used to refer to the present-day availability and sharing of information primarily through the Internet. It is another way of referring to the Information or Cyber Era. Throughout this thesis the term digital age will refer to the ubiquity of digital technology in the twenty-first century.

[1] Richard Smith, "What Is Digital Media," October 15, 2013, Centre For Digital Media. https://thecdm.ca/news/faculty-news/2013/10/15/what-is-digital-media.

Appendix B: Huxtable Press Release Artist Statement

I AM NOT ONE FOR THE FAINT HEARTED

THE WHOLE OF SO CALLED COUNTER CULTURE MASQUERADING AS DEATH OBSESSED LIBERTINES WITH NOTHING TO OFFER BUT COSTUMES SAFELY SACRILEGIOUS STYLING

YOU COULDN'T WALK A DAY IN MY SHOES ...

COMPREHEND THE VIOLENCE I'VE ENDURED ...

IVE CHOSEN TO GO BEYOND
PETTY PERFORMATIVE MUSICAL SUBGENRES, REGURGITATED FASHION ICONOCLASM ...

THE BLACK AND CRIMSON TIDES THAT APPARENTLY MARK YOUR MELANCHOLY

WHERE YOU HAVE ADORNED YOUR BODY WITH THE DATED CHAOS OF SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE,
A NECK TATTOO
4 MORE PIERCINGS THAN CONSIDRED MODEST

I HAVE, THROUGH ELECTIVE VIOLENCE
MUTILATED MY BODY BEYOND THE RECOGNIZEABLE

A SKINGRAFT TO BUILD A PHALLIC TAIL FROM MY TAILBONE AN INTERIOR PATCHED TOGETHER FROM WHAT HUNG
MY RIBS SHAVED DOWN TO FIT MY FAVORITE CORSETTE BONES CHIPPED FROM MY CHIN AND MOUNTED AS HORNS

IVE INVAGINATED MY THIGHS MY TAINT
AND MY THROAT

I'VE WOVEN THE MARGINS OF MY MARGINALITY INTO A SURFACE FROM WHICH IT CANNOT RETURN

I AM MY FORESHADOWING, DOOM IN ITS DESIGNATION ANAUTHENTIC DARK ONE, RARE BREED
THE RAVEN RACED
RACING

TO INVAGINATION

RACING FROM
HETEROSEXUAL COUPLES WITH ANDROGYNOUS APPEAL OBSCURING AS RITUAL THE UNCHALLENGED RITE PROCLAIMING TO THE OTHER THEIR LOVE OF DEMOLITION CONVENIENTLY AVOIDING THE FRIGHTS OF THE NIGHT

ILL GIVE YOU THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT, ASSUME IT'S DUE TO A LACK OF ALTERNATIVE UNTIL HERE UNTIL NOW

IN THE UNREDEMPTIVE CHAOS OF PANDROGYNY AN INVITATON TO MURDER THE ROMANTIC
PURITANICAL

COHESION OF OF THE BODY

THIS IS NO PERIOD PIECE IN BLACK
SORCORESS COSTUME IN SPRING
OR A LOVE SONG FOR A FICTIONAL PALE FACED VAMPIRE

I AM WAITING IN THE UNSEEN
COMING UNDONE BY THE CHAOS OF ITS INDISTINCT VISION HACKING AND RE-ARRANGING
THROUGH THE POSESSED ARM OF THE SURGEON
ELECTIVE MUTILATION OF SEXUAL COHESION, SCATTERING THE SITES OF IDENTITY PRODUCTION
ALL OVER MY FORMER BODY

I ASKED SATAN FOR DIRECTION,

AND WAS GUIDED THUSLY, VAGINOPLASTY 3 TIMES

THREE NEW PUSSIES, BLEEDING FROM BETWEEN MY LEGS, BLEEDING FROM THE BACKS OF MY THIGH

THEN A LARYNGECTOMY,

ANUS IN THROAT, THE STOMA NOW MY TIGHTEST AND MOST EROGENOUSLY SENSITIVE ORIFICE
IF THERE IS A DARK QUEEN,
I AM HER

AND SHE IS ME

Juliana Huxtable is an artist, poet, performer and DJ born in Bryan-College Station, Texas. She attended Bard College. Recent shows and performances include epigenetic with Carolyn Lazard at Shoot the Lobster, New York, Transformer: A Rebirth of Wonder at 180 The Strand, London, Kiss My Genders at Hayward Gallery, London, Producing Futures - An Exhibition on Post-Cyber-Feminisms at Migros Museum, Zurich, and Penumbra with Hannah Black at Performance Space. Juliana is a 2019 United States Artists Fellow.