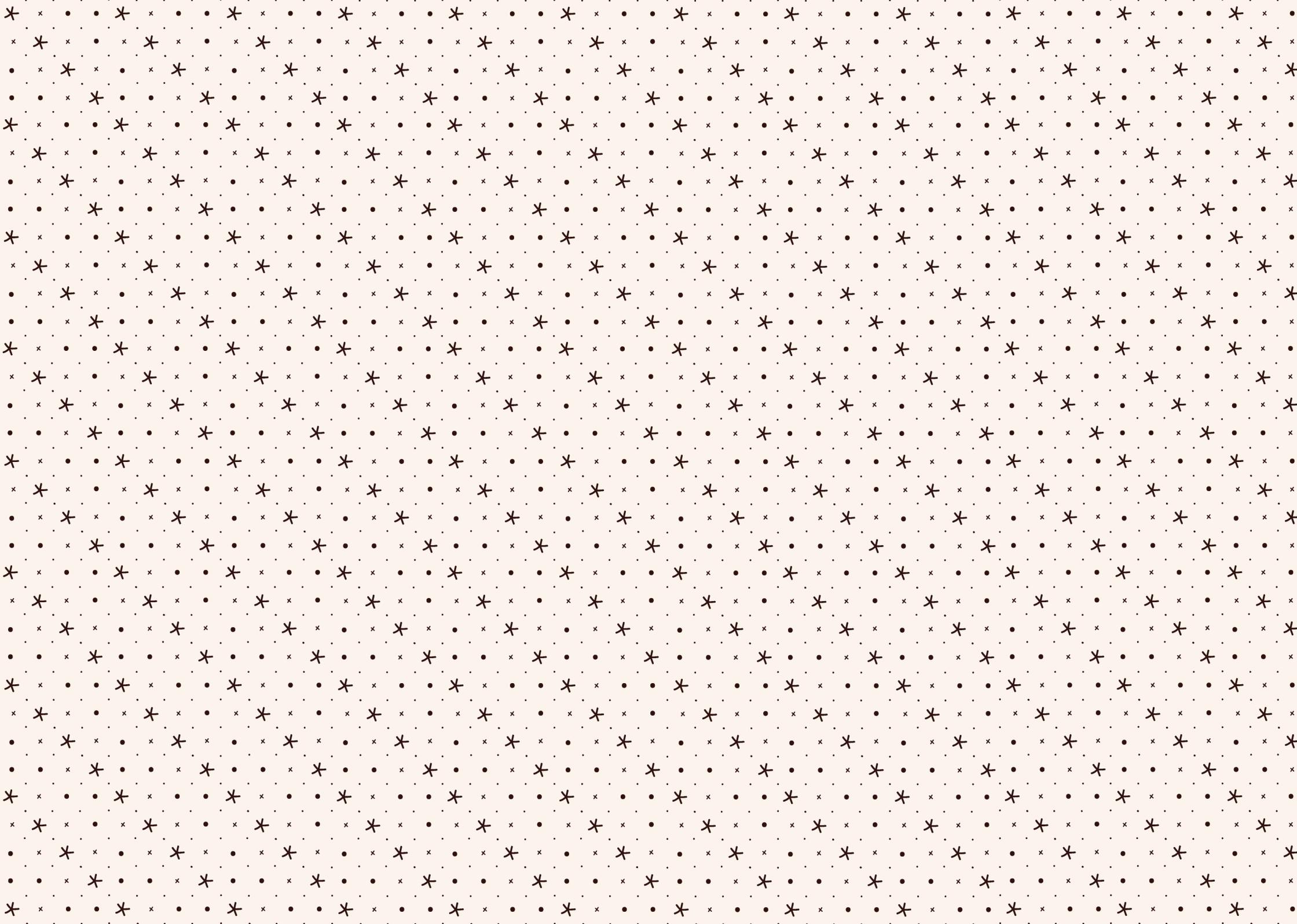


# TAH

## VOL.2





In the editor's letter to TAH VOL.1 we wrote "TabloidArtHistory is a stitched up landscapes of how to interact with pop culture, art history, and our place within it." Almost two years after we conceived of VOL.1 and this sentence still calls to the essential of what TabloidArtHistory is, and what TAH was created to explore. In the past two years since we started the TabloidArtHistory account and published our first zine, we have been asked countless times about the relationship between Art History and Pop Culture. We have questioned and problematised both categories, and we have read much being written our practice - sometimes writing ourselves, reflecting further on the nature of what we do, and why we do it.

It has been a little while since we selected the writing to be published in the copy of TAH VOL.2 that you are holding right now (or looking at on your screen), and a lot has happened since we first met up last March to read over all the submissions we had received. In this space of time between the words were selected and finally published, we wrote dissertations, graduated from university, got full-time jobs or changed industries, and moved from one side of the country to the other. We have cried and laughed a lot. We spoke, organised, wrote and designed for all the many projects TabloidArtHistory has had the chance to have been involved with over the past year. We've had a long, full year, and a lot of time to reflect even deeper and further on what TabloidArtHistory is. And yet, reading through TAH VOL.2 one last time today, it feels that all the pieces we had chosen back in March have only kept getting more relevant. As politics continue to collide with art history, creating a path through various exhibitions, private views and exhausting scraps of small talk, it feels more important than ever to reach out to those who are working to renegotiate the elitist and patriarchal structures within academia, and the art world in general.

From the "stitched up landscape" we mentioned in VOL.1, this issue feels to us like a road-map, guiding our understanding of art, writing and producing, and our appreciation and understanding of what pop culture and art history are, and how they interact.

Further from comparing Pop Culture and Art History, this issue presents a number of works that exist ambiguously between both of these categories - be it through their subject matter, or in their respective creative forms. TAH VOL.2 seeks not only to draw comparisons, or to demystify the ever-fruitful relationship that continues to exist between Pop Culture and Art History, but it also wants to transform the way we see both of these categories, and the way we read and write Art History. TAH VOL.2 is a testament to what happens when we embrace the wider spectrum of what culture is, defying the categorisation of so-called "High" and "Low" and challenging what we see and how we see it. That is, a more relevant art writing, and a more fulfilled cultural enjoyment.

Working with the artists, writers and creators within these many pages has made the sweat, the tears and the frustrations of the past year worth it, and it has heighten its joys and victories. As this body of work has evolved, so have we. Certain things take time, and need the time. This was one of them, and so we hope you will take your time and enjoy every bit of this zine as much as we have enjoyed making it.

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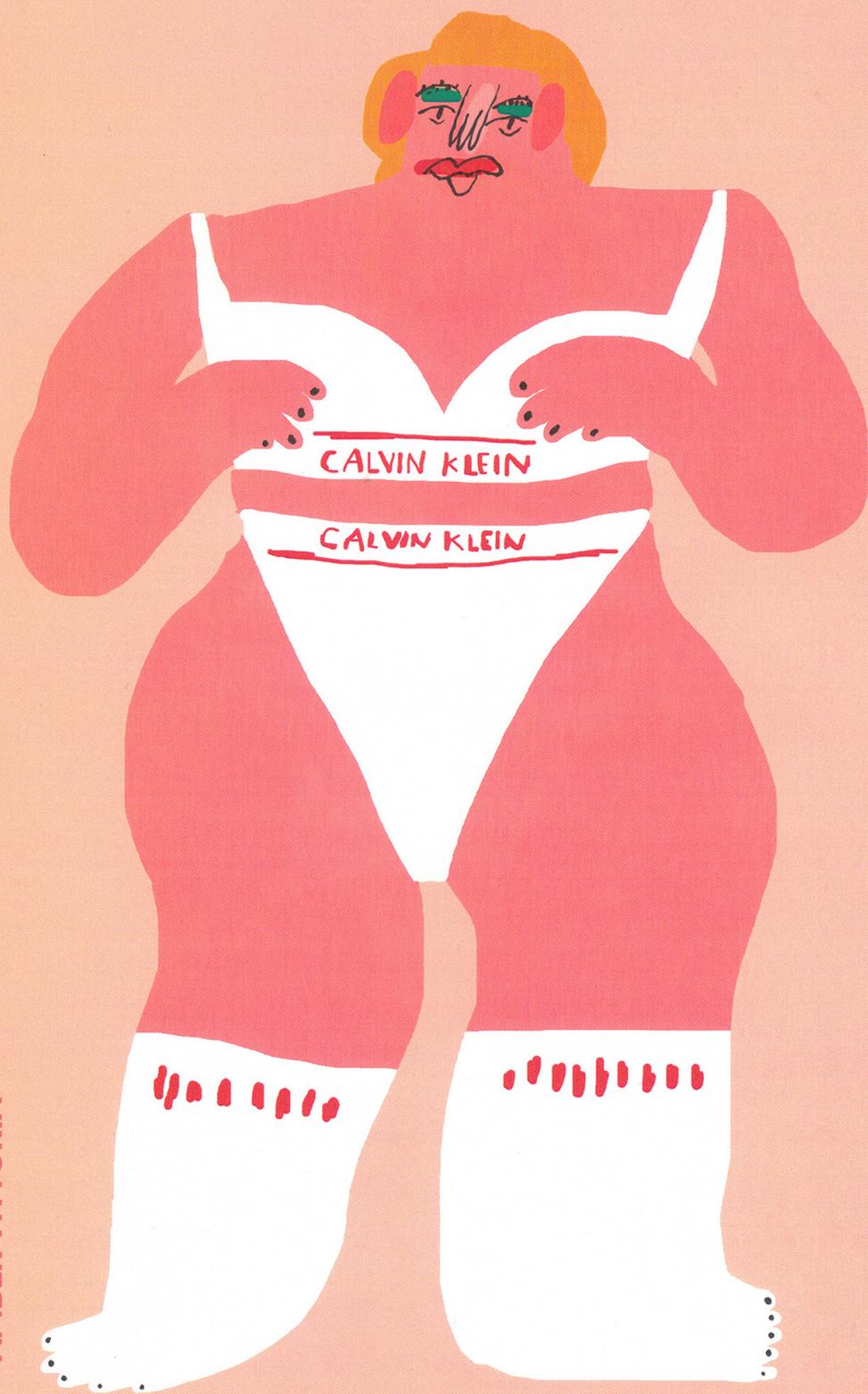
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# Technologies of the Selfie

WORDS: DILSHANIE PERERA  
ART: ANKE KNAPPER



## TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF(IE)

In late 2016 the New Museum opened a retrospective of the Swiss video artist Pipilotti Rist. I went to see it just after the New Year - a few days after John Berger's passing; and so his oeuvre, his voice, and his work were all on my mind. The exhibition's titular piece, *Pixel Forest* (2016), was installed across a large area of the third-floor gallery. Consisting of grapefruit-sized oblong and spherical biomorphic lights suspended from ceiling to floor, the translucent shapes cycled through a visible light spectrum of colors, warm to cool and back again, through which gallery visitors could walk. Upon entering the *Pixel Forest*, my partner and I noticed a curious thing. Every single person within the installation was taking a selfie. The lighting was such that it cast an ethereal glow on their faces, indigo shifting to hot pink in luminous contrast. Selfie-taking was almost an automatic reaction. Hands reached into pockets and purses, arms extended outward and up for the best angle, faces pivoted slightly and froze with smiles in place. No one was not taking a picture. We too were not immune, wondering how we would look bathed in the gently saturated glow. As others entered the installation, they would reach for their phones within seconds.

This seeming contagion was perhaps a real-time instance of what philosopher Rene Girard has called "mimetic desire." In our imitation of others, we were not simply imitating their actions, but also embodying their desires as our own. They wanted to see themselves reflected in the mirror of their smartphone screen, to fix that moment via a digital photograph, all with the idea that they would share that image in the cool light via text, Instagram, or Snapchat. The act of seeing others taking a selfie generated in us that same set of desires. In Girard's formulation, mimetically produced desire can lead to conflict, since all parties want the same thing. In this case it was to be seen, recognized, and validated. The smartphone and its apps allow the displacement of any potential rivalry onto the networks that comprise social media, where the rivalries proliferate in the form of who is acquiring more likes. I have an unsubstantiated theory that selfies tend to get more likes than other pictures, more than photos of your breakfast, your cute puppy, the landscape shots of the places you've been, and your avant-garde art photos (It turns out that unless you're Teju Cole, Cindy Sherman, or Gueorgui Pinkhassov – @\_tejucole, @cindysherman, and @pinkhassov, respectively – no one wants to see your experimental work that challenges the



## A MIRROR HELD UP TO LIFE

The writer and art critic John Berger's 1972 book *Ways of Seeing* still serves a pedagogical function. As a widely-cited collection of essays that was also a BBC series, it breaks art criticism out of the sole purview of museum curators and has us look at works of art. Berger is less interested in the formal compositional qualities of a painting than he is in having us consider the conditions of its production. Was the artist who painted a group of Dutch aristocrats with potato-shaped heads and dead-eyed expressions living in penury at the time, and thus expressed his discontent through portraiture? What motivated the European aristocratic obsession with the nude female subject always looking out toward the viewer, as if addressing a spectator? And this line, from Berger, which is astute and chilling in its condemnation:

*"The mirror was often used as a symbol of the vanity of women. The moralizing, however, was mostly hypocritical. You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure."*

The male gaze here establishes the viewing subject as a normatively heterosexual man. The female subject of the painting becomes a sexualized body, an object on display for the titillation of the viewer. The placement of the mirror serves to both discredit the person depicted and also place the (male) viewer in a position of moral superiority to the ostensibly vain woman. The male gaze has a corollary in what cultural critic Lili Loofborouw's has theorized as the "male glance" – an attitude of distancing and diminishing female presence or creative production. The male glance begins from a position of dismissal and negates female intentionality. It reasserts expertise and moral superiority back

toward he-who-deigns-to-glance. But the selfie as a form both disrupts and sometimes reasserts certain kinds of normative gazes and glances, as we shall see below.

The mirror selfie complicates our reading of Vanity in the digital age. It is not sufficient to say that the proliferation of selfies is an indication of the narcissism of the 21st century. We have always been indulgent and omphaloskeptic. The mirror selfie has been a feature of photographic self-portraiture even from the time of the early film cameras. But when the cameras became mobile, then digital, then miniaturized and attached to phones with increasingly high resolution, the mirror selfie came into its own as an intelligible subgenre of photograph. This is what it typically looks like: the subject-photographer frames themselves in a mirror and snaps a photograph. That's all. Sometimes the mirror is in their homes, as in a full-length mirror, and we get to see their body or their outfit. Sometimes the mirror is in a public place, like a restaurant bathroom, and we get to see the subject's face and hair and neatly put-together appearance. The foremost celebrity producer of mirror selfies today is Kim Kardashian West. Each post of hers taken in the mirror retains a break-the-internet quality. She is a canny self-portraitist and an auto-erotic photographer, as evinced by the body of work on her Instagram page and her coffee table photo book *Selfish* published in 2015. Most of the mirror selfies she posts are pictures of her either topless or naked, with arms or censor bars strategically placed to make the photos publishable on app-based platforms. Take, for instance, a photograph from 2016. Kardashian depicts herself as a nude, facing the bathroom mirror with her head angled slightly to contemplate her own reflection on the phone screen she holds up. She takes the photo as she looks at her own image. This fact changes her mirror selfie into an image that disrupts a clear exchange of gazes and the kind of moralizing that would be possible in the time that Berger describes above. Kardashian transforms herself into an erotic object available to the male gaze, but her own gaze is directed back at herself via the screen of the phone. In this way, Kardashian creates a loop of seeing that invites the viewer in while ultimately neither acknowledging nor including them. She gazes at her own reflection and sees herself in full while the viewer is assigned the role of the voyeur, looking in but forever remaining apart. The viewer's praise, condemnation, or excitation remains irrelevant.

This closed loop, in which the selfie-taker gazes back upon the self, has become a fundamental fact of looking in the 21st century. In engagements with photographs on social media, all circuits lead eventually back to one's own face, whether owing to the discontents borne of mimetic desire or the fact that being seen and validated through likes and comments is a fleeting form of

recognition that needs to be renewed by posting more selfies. It is a recursive process, one that we are cursed by. This mode of self-consideration is new and is tied to the development of the front-facing camera on our smartphones. When you open the front-facing camera feature, the phone screen acts as a mirror. It does not depict what the camera's eye sees; it depicts the reflected version of yourself, what you see when you look into a mirror. That's why you experience disappointment after the shutter clicks and the image is flipped in your photo cache. This is what you actually look like to others. It is you, it looks like you, but it is not-quite the image you had hoped for. Post-production is essential.

Front-facing cameras debuted in 2003 on an Ericsson Z1010 flip-phone, and then were installed into smartphones as of the iPhone 4 debut in 2010. Initially conceptualized as a convenience for video-conferencing, the front-facing camera on our phones enables the mass production and circulation of selfies on social media. A feature designed to make video chats portable, a tiny camera installed behind the black mirror at the front of your phone has altered the way we see ourselves and others around us. The face looks back at the viewer from precisely an arm's length away. This remains touching to me, that the particular length of someone's arm is captured in each selfie that they take. Almost everyone takes a selfie with one's reach at full extension. We keep ourselves and consider ourselves through a screen, archly, always at an arm's length.

• • • •

## TWO CHEERS FOR THE THIRST TRAP

The Kardashian nude mirror self portraits also exist within another genre of selfie known as "thirst traps." These are typically sexy photos designed to titillate the viewer and also elicit a response in him. I am using the pronoun "him" here purposefully because the normative gaze solicited by the thirst trap selfie is the male gaze. Thirst traps are the call, to which the emoji with heart eyes sent as a comment or DM would be the most tame response.

Both beauty and thirst are culturally ascribed. The "thirst trap" genre is named as such in a moralizing move that short-circuits. The subject-who-posts such an image is deemed narcissistic, an



# THE FACE THAT LAUNCHED A THOUSAND SHIPS

“

*I often ponder when the contributions I and my peers have to give the arts will be valued without the need of us propping up conversations with superficial knowledge of western art history and literature.*

”

*Navigating the Arts is  
Scandalous*

As a wide eyed first year studying public relations I had no clue what the PR and communication industry really was; I was as clueless as Stacey Dash and Kanye are about race relations. However, I liked talking and writing, which apparently are the fundamental skills to being a 'good' PR person.

After my first internship in a top 10 consumer PR company, I knew PR wasn't for me. I could not fathom the thought of chasing journalists to do reviews of toasters, and seeing my line manager cry everyday put a distinct fear in me. I decided I didn't want to waste my life by doing a meaningless job which would stress me out.

After a long week of uni deadlines I scrolled through internet streaming sites wanting to be distracted from the impending realities of life (such as becoming a graduate.) I came across Scandal, a political communication drama, written by Shonda Rhimes and featuring Kerry Washington as Olivia Pope, a crisis communication expert who runs the White House and "fixes" the images of the political elite with her comrades of white hats. I was hooked. Moreover, it re-energized me to pursue a career in PR with a focus on strategic communication. Although now I've ended up in the Arts the show taught me the importance of identity branding and relationship building

Not only did Scandal help me navigate the murky world of PR, I have now realised that the show helped me increase my cultural capital, as the storylines were etched in the history of art and literature. This was a subliminal form of solidarity from Rhimes, who I believe purposely wanted the show to educate as well as entertain audiences.

I recently got talking to a man who had been working in the Arts for over twenty years. My usual interactions with white middle class men are uncomfortable AF! I had been pushing myself to find common ground with people who I usually have nothing in common with, and refrain from shouting "burn all white patriarchal institution down," flicking my weave and then walking off. We began to discuss recent exhibitions we had visited in London, we both had seen the Princess Diana exhibition in Kensington Palace, and began to muse over how good it was. I let him know how much my mother loved the late royal with him interjecting in parables about Helen of Troy, comparing their beauty and influence. I was able to respond with: "The face that

launched a thousand ships." I could immediately see he was impressed with my knowledge of the Trojan War. He gave me his card and told me to get in touch if I ever needed help with securing internships or job applications.

Hunny, just like Joanne, I had just scammed my first caucasian!! I was not slightly interested in Greek Mythology but #SPOILER in season 4 episode of 7 of Scandal, Tom, a secret service personnel, is arrested for the assassination of the president's son, and when interviewed by Olivia, he repeatedly says to her that she is the face that launched a thousand ships.

I was so intrigued by the storyline that I spent an entire evening researching Helen of Troy. I felt empowered by the re-telling of the story, which depicted a black woman as so beautiful and powerful that she was able to start a war between nations - in this case, the President and the Director of the NSA. I probably did learn about Helen of Troy in an English or History class, but the story wasn't why she was memorable to me; it was because her story was re-told through characters I could connect with.

Being able to draw upon this literature reference in this instance helped me to navigate ANOTHER uncomfortable situation, and I used it to increase my supposed value. The Arts is one of the oldest and most middle class sector in western society. Artists and art professionals from working class background have found it extremely difficult to forge a career, as the sector is extremely underpaid. Those like me who withstand the financial burden are then faced with another barrier: class. I'm constantly having to code switch because my cultural references are devalued in western art society, and the evidence of this is by analysing how many public galleries have acquired black art, and what voices have an authority in the industry.

The Arts is fancy, and I guess that is the appeal: constant private views in swanky venues, artwork doing great backdrops for instagram photos. However, in the midst of all the fun, I always feel alone. I stick out, not because I'm the only black girl in the room, but because I don't have the same social or cultural capital as those I encounter. I have also learnt very quickly I am unable to mess up without serious repercussions, so actually screaming "burn down these elite institutions" is a fancy that plays in loop in my head.

In the last season of Scandal, a painting is gifted to Cyrus Beene, The Boy In a Red Vest. In reality, the 1888- 1889 Paul Cezanne painting is valued at over £67 million, it was stolen in 2008 and recovered in 2012, and press images show armed police surrounding the painting, emphasising its value.

I often ponder when the contributions I and my peers have to give the arts will be valued without the need of us propping up conversations with superficial knowledge of western art history and literature. It is scandalous that voices like mine are rarely invited to contribute in the Arts.

I guess Papa Pope was right in season 3 episode 1, I will have to work twice as hard to have half of what they have. I will continue to aim high, who knows maybe like Scandal's series finale, I too, like Miss Pope, will have my portrait mounted on the walls of a prestigious gallery, citing my contributions to the creative and cultural industries. ■

**WORDS: BEE TAJUDEEN**

# IMMIGRANTS, WE GET THE JOB DONE?

The hit musical *Hamilton*, which premiered on Broadway in 2015, was a rarity. Both a critical darling and a commercial hit, it seemingly subsumed all cultural conversation in America for a few months. In the current unsteady political climate, the show's unabashed eagerness and hopeful messaging have proven to be a significant facet of its staying power and popularity. However, the outsize appeal of *Hamilton* to communities of colour, and to its generally left-leaning audiences alone do not legitimise it as a radical production. Unfortunately, the inability of *Hamilton* to liberate minorities from the forces of capitalist production can be seen as a function of the impracticalities of Broadway theatre in general.<sup>1</sup>

The musical details the life of Founding Father Alexander Hamilton, a man who through a combination of luck, impatience, and sheer willpower left behind an American legacy of military accomplishments, oratory pre-eminence, and indelible political acumen. *Hamilton*'s writer-composer-lyricist-leading-Renaissance-man Lin-Manuel Miranda, who was born in New York to Puerto Rican parents, was already an established figure on Broadway before the show premiered: his previous full-length musical *In the Heights* won the Tony Award for Best Musical in 2008. The narratives of *In the Heights* centred a group of residents of New York's Washington Heights area, facing growing financial pressures that forced many to move into different neighbourhoods. This story, set in the mid-aughts, consisted entirely of a cast of people of colour: depicting gentrification in this setting would have looked odd on a group of predominantly white faces.

*1 - Of course, one could argue that the musical's drawbacks stem from its dedication to the historical narrative it portrays. However, I am analysing *Hamilton* from its context as a modern production and its particular framing of American history.*

In *Hamilton*, the casting of predominantly actors of colour transposed Alexander Hamilton's drive into a parable for immigrants "who get the job done," i.e. those who strive against all the odds to overcome strife and attain success. Hamilton's life was apt for this narrative. Constantly facing insecurities due to his outsider status as a child of illegitimate birth from the West Indies, Hamilton's industriousness was a method of escaping his demons and fraught past. By repurposing this white narrative (as well as that of the other Founding Fathers) with black and brown bodies, *Hamilton* not only contains a metaphor for the historical figure's ostracisation in his own life but serves as a parable for the hopes and dreams of marginalised communities. In doing so, the musical's casting becomes an intentional act of historical revisionism.

Though critical responses to *Hamilton* remain mostly dotting, a small number of historians and critics have remarked that the musical's narrative has perpetuated a variety of sociocultural ills. The most prominent of these voices is perhaps that of Dr. Lyra D. Monteiro, who reads the casting of these actors of colour as a racialised act that minimises the role that slavery played in the foundation of American democracy. In her analysis, she notes that it is "problematic to have black and brown actors stand in for the great white men of the early United States in a play that does not

## HAMILTON, RACE AND REPRESENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY THEATRE

WORDS: KENO KATSUDA

acknowledge that the ancestors of these same actors were excluded from the freedoms for which the founders fought.”<sup>2</sup> Considering that the musical’s primary source material is that of a biography of Hamilton written by white historian Ron Chernow, it is unsurprising that slavery is written about as a minor player or an afterthought in the show’s narrative. And, while Hamilton was, in theory, an abolitionist, like many of his contemporaries, these beliefs tended to extend only to the limits of his ambitions.

Of course, any interpretation of historical events accompanies some artistic license. As Vox’s Aja Romano has argued, Hamilton’s critics are missing the point entirely as its text is, in fact, metatext - i.e. fanfic: a reinterpretation of existing texts and history.<sup>3</sup> The Guardian’s Mark Lawson posits a similar argument, calling Hamilton an example of an “*alternate history*.”<sup>4</sup> However, we also need to remember that like all fanfic, the musical is based on a specific historical narrative - however fantastical its representation may be.

Unfortunately, this is where the issue of the show’s progressiveness becomes apparent. It is unsurprising that Hamilton has gained popularity in these increasingly tumultuous times, as Hamilton has become almost a form of cultural shorthand for liberals. President Obama famously attended a performance of the show with his family and later extended an invitation to the cast to perform excerpts at the White House. When Vice President Mike Pence attended a performance shortly after Donald Trump’s electoral victory, the show’s audience booed his presence. The event made headlines. During the Winter Olympics of 2018, New York Times op-ed columnist Bari Weiss tweeted “*Immigrants: we get the job done*” in response to figure skater Mirai Nagasu’s performance. However, many responded and pointed out to Weiss that Nagasu was not a naturalised citizen but an American-born national. Though Weiss’s tweet was not ill-intentioned, it demonstrates the extent to which Hamilton’s messaging has become extrapolated and saturated in American culture to the extent that it can be used to stand for almost everything.

This shorthand has allowed Hamilton to become a beacon for the American liberal cultural elite; a means to publicly demonstrate one’s wokeness

2 - Monteiro, Lyra D. “Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s Hamilton.” *The Public Historian* 38, no. 1 (2016)

3 - Romano, Aja. “Hamilton Is Fanfic, and Its Historical Critics Are Totally Missing the Point.” *Vox.com*. July 04, 2016.

4 - Lawson, Mark. “Hamilton Is Creative and Radical - in the Proud Tradition of Musical Theatre.” *The Guardian*. December 26, 2017.

by engaging in culture and supporting performers of colour. There are performative displays of both wealth and cultural cache to be claimed for being one of the lucky few who have seen performances featuring the show’s original cast, or even attending the show’s Off-Broadway run. However, the seats that are being filled at performances of Hamilton are mostly white, not black or brown bodies. Ironically, the popularity of the show has rendered it almost wholly inaccessible to the communities of colour that it purports: two years after opening, premium tickets are still sold for upwards of a thousand dollars per seat.

This phenomenon only goes to highlight that merely existing as a black person or a person of colour in society is a performance in and of itself. People of colour continually must refine their appearance and behaviour to appear palatable in “civilised society,” ensuring that physical bodies of colour are constantly negotiated. Last year, after President Trump referred to South American and African nations as “shithole countries,” many immigrants tweeted out their narratives of personal exceptionalism, referring to their significant achievements, accomplished as immigrants living in the United States and other wealthy Western nations. Though impressive, these tweets reinforced the pervasive narrative that immigrants are required to go to this extra length to prove themselves deserving of a place in (white) society.

As a musical drawing from rap and hip-hop, Hamilton being arguably one of the most significant cultural and economic successes of the decade is a seemingly liberating action. Because its lyrics have been influenced by these musical legacies responsive to structural oppression, Hamilton is equally incapable of disentangling itself from its racial politics. Black art in recent decades has often used the accumulation of capital as a means of reframing the discourse from black bodies used as literal capital (as it has through slavery to today’s prison industrial complex), to bodies capable of accumulating incredible displays of material wealth, particularly visible in contemporary hip-hop. However, there remains the question of whether taking advantage of capitalism can be truly liberating for people of colour. Many immigrants and people of colour still do not have opportunities available to them for upward mobility

because of the restrictions placed upon them, except in alternative narratives in which they have the power of being white - while still living in real life under unpalatable conditions for attaining upward mobility and happiness.

Further, theatre critics, particularly those in long-standing institutions like the New York Times, hold inordinate sway over the commercial and critical discourse of Broadway theatre. As writers of the establishment, there exists no body of critical discourse in these mainstream outlets that serve to question capitalism's function within the context of reviews of productions themselves. As a result, we are left only with the veneer of true critique, lacking in the means by which we can genuinely question the functions of theatrical practice. Though theatre is of course not limited to the commercial sphere (i.e. Broadway), it is undeniable that what critics like the NYT's Ben Brantley write hold considerable sway over the whole of theatrical discourse, and the commercial successes of productions. This leads to the question of precisely what social space exists for people of colour in performances of big-budget Broadway productions. No matter how "woke" these white audiences or critics are, there is no winning for people of colour if artistic production ultimately exclusively serves the tastes and desires of those privileged enough to access it. There is no winning if critical and commercial success is still dependent on the white gaze.

Regardless of its historical accuracy (or lack thereof), Hamilton tells the uniquely American myths of exceptionalism, neoliberalism, and the resulting accumulation of capital to its audiences. The show's narrative moves at a clip, stopping only at notable landmarks in Alexander Hamilton's life for significant military or historical events. In the show's running time of two and a half hours, it's difficult to reflect upon the undramatic and slow changes of historical progress that occur as a result of fiscal changes over the far more dramatic, immediate acts of the political process like voting or duelling to the death. That being said, by neglecting to represent these monetary policies, Hamilton attempts to extricate the American economy from its history of the use of slavery as human capital. It is odd that the show doesn't even hint at this connection between race and capitalism, particularly as one of Alexander Ham-

ilton's most significant accomplishments was establishing America's national bank. Though the fanfic that is Hamilton frames race and capital as separate concepts, black and brown bodies remain trapped by the forces of industry and capitalism, ones that have spawned both the contemporary prison industrial complex and immigration detention centres in the present day.

Of course, the act of performing on Broadway is a world away from labouring against one's will in prison. Nonetheless, both forms of work are being provided by black and brown bodies for the benefit of white audiences and consumers. So the question we are left with is whether it can be liberating for black and brown bodies within the production of Hamilton to perform this narrative about the Founding Fathers. Broadway desires to remove itself from the structures of capitalism while appealing to its liberal audiences through identity politics. Though the audiences of Hamilton are mostly social progressives, the show unintentionally exposes the mechanisms of the neoliberal framework. Its narrative assumes that one's sheer power and potential are enough to drive fame, success, and a place in history, while the slower and more insidious mechanisms of "progress" and oppression are hidden from view. In the end, the most terrifying irony of Hamilton is that its narrative continues the American project of "Founders Chic" under the guise of revolution and evolution.<sup>5</sup>

5 - Brands, H. W.  
"Founders Chic."  
*The Atlantic*.  
September 01,  
2003.

There are an infinite number of plays and musicals that are far more deserving of extensive criticism than Hamilton being performed on New York's Great White Way. It is undeniable that Hamilton is a seismic achievement that has furthered the representation of immigrants and people of colour possibly more than any other piece of American theatre this century. Cultural criticism of Hamilton acknowledges this, indicating that Miranda's artistic production is something that necessitates addressing. A critique of Hamilton is a critique of the limits of the narratives and problematics that exist within Broadway and commercial theatre in general. But the production still tells a story of exceptionalism and of a consensual public masking itself as dissensual. In sum, the question that remains is of what kind of revolution Hamilton truly desires. ■



**NIGHTHAWKS AT THE DINER  
/ OF EMMA'S 49ER THERE'S A  
RENDEZVOUS  
/ OF STRANGERS AROUND A  
COFFEE URN TONIGHT - TOM  
WAITS**

In a empty coffee shop in 2018, Spencer Pratt - former reality tv star, now full time social media creator - stands at the counter filming the barista pouring him an espresso. In 1942, Edward Hopper paints a lonely scene of an almost deserted diner. Across centuries and across mediums, this image of isolation and solipsism has persisted. Art created with different intentions, but ultimately creating the same sensation of solitude in the viewer. In Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* the artist invites us to be voyeurs - he places us in the shadows across the street, so we can watch and judge the lonely figures inside. And what is social media if not the most wide and explicit invitation from creators to gawk and pass judgement on the minutiae of their lives and works? All art invites us to stare and to judge - and the most eviscerating art is that in which we find our own truths pointing back to us. We press our face against the glass of the diner (or against our phone's screen) to look closely, and end up seeing just us reflected back. Alone with the artist, and alone with ourselves.

This year, at the 10th annual Shorty Awards, Pratt won the title of Snapchatter of The Year. Pratt swaggered up to the podium to collect his award wearing the Snapchat logo, a winking ghost, as a plushie on a lanyard around his neck and on his backpack. In his acceptance speech, Pratt said several times that this was the best day of his life, barring his wedding day and the birth of his child. He recounts:

*"When I went into Snapchat offices I did cry, I was like thank you, I was scary [referring to his life post The Hills] like, the most hated person on planet earth, beating like OJ, Casey*

*Anthony, lots of these terrible people. And Snapchat gave me a new world where people don't flick me off all day long, occasionally I get it - it's ok, but I get a lot more love, so thank you for this platform, it's such a blessing."*

Social media doesn't transform identities - it transfigures them. It cannot change who you are as a person, but as Pratt puts it, it can give you 'a new world'. It allows you to transmute your appearance into whatever you want it to be. It quite literally lets you put a filter on your life. We are artistic directors orchestrating an endless performance piece on a micro scale - every snap, every story and every pic is crafted to give our audience a very specific impression of ourselves. We are endlessly performing and creating the image of ourselves that we want to be true.

This is why Pratt's social media output is so enigmatic. It's not an exaggeration to say that most, if not all, social media platforms are used to create a heightened, more interesting version of ourselves. On apps traditionally used for flexing, stunting or otherwise finessing, why does Pratt make himself such a tragic figure? A typical snap shows him meditatively eating a burrito, nodding solemnly along to music played through tinny phone speakers. He is overlooked by a large close up portrait of his own face that hangs on the wall in his house, his blue eyes staring out resolutely and unsmiling. A digital Ozymandias. Look, ye mighty, on my works and despair, don't forget to like and subscribe. This composite of egotism and bathos is remarkable as a stand-alone image, but it becomes all the more significant considered in the wider terms of Pratt's social media canon.

His snaps show him doing the same rituals every day, almost always alone. He makes an espresso. He goes to the gym and gets someone to film him doing the same clean and jerk he always does. He goes to his favourite coffee shop and films the barista making him an espresso. He feeds hummingbirds nectar, while standing rigid as a statue. He eats some soup (with the elucidating caption, "SOUP LIFE"). He cooks a single slab of meat on his Traeger grill, referring to himself as 'Chef Pratt Daddy' throughout. He drinks a large glass of red wine while dancing badly to the same Taylor Swift song, the one he listened to that morning while he was filming his espresso filtering into his Hermes cup. The next day he does those same activities, in a slightly different order, perhaps swapping the "soup life" for the "burrito life". Apart from his wife and son, practically the only other people in his videos are service workers. All the while he talks to the camera in the most irritating and insincere faux-gangster voice imaginable. At some point after *The Hill* ended, Pratt decided to drop his natural *Abercrombie and Fitch* tone of voice, and start using AAVE phrases, which he unfortunately now tries to use as catch phrases - "we

out here", "gang gang gang", "playa" are interspersed throughout his speech in a way that seems cringey and insincere even to me, a white middle-class girl from Lincolnshire.

Were Pratt an art student, he could easily claim this ritualistic content was a performance piece. It would be a series, installed in galleries with a catalogue explaining that it was a commentary on capitalist society. But crucially, and bizarrely, this is in fact Pratt living his best life. He has chosen to host a podcast called "Make Speidi Famous Again", and it's almost impossible to tell if it is conscious subjugation as a marketing ploy, or just his sincere wish to be famous again. Perhaps it doesn't matter what it is, regardless of intent his output is the same: a man performing the same actions, day in and day out, shouting "we out here playa" into the void, because he wants to be something more.

Perhaps, the intent of the artist is irrelevant - what's more telling is your reaction as a viewer. Does Hopper's quiet, empty diner in *Nighthawks* make you feel cosy and peaceful, or do you feel a stab of existential dread? Does Pratt filming himself, alone while smoking some meat strike you as hilarious, or sad? When asked in an interview about the lack of communication in his art, Edward Hopper replied, *"It's probably a reflection of my own, if I may say, loneliness. I don't know. It could be the whole human condition"*. When you stare into the void of Spencer Pratt's social media machine, what stares back at you? ■

**WORDS: KATE SCOTT**

**ART: SHAMANTHI RAJASINGHAM**

I'm staring at my computer screen, at the blur of pixels shaping a painting. Two women in long dresses with their hair wrapped back off their faces are working together to decapitate a bearded man. One, in a bright yellow dress, is wielding the sword, while the other wears a royal blue dress and is bent over the man, frowning and holding him down. The man's face is pushed down onto the bed, his eyes rolling back in his head and mouth slightly open, the hand of the woman wielding the sword is twisted tightly into his hair. Blood is dripping down the side of the bed, and spreads out beneath him to stain the sheets, while a deep red blanket is draped across the lower half of his naked form. This painting is of a Biblical story, the beheading of Holofernes, in which the Jewish princess Judith is helped by her maidservant to behead the drunken general of the enemy army, thus saving the town of Bethulia. I'm sat at my desk at home, when I see this painting, flicking through an article in The Guardian about an artist called Artemisia Gentileschi. This is the first place I encounter her, the brilliant artist who has become famous for her rape, the ensuing trial and torture, and her striking paintings of Biblical women.

E Y E

In 1612, at the age of 18, Gentileschi was tortured with thumbscrews in a courtroom in Rome. She was tortured because she was testifying against the man who had raped her after her father pressed charges (of 'property damage') against her rapist. It draws a heart-breaking, devastating, and deeply compelling image for us. The painter whose hands were damaged in a violent act of misogyny and victim-blaming, using these same hands to paint a dramatic, graphic image of revenge. Gentileschi is most celebrated in popular culture for the perceived autobiographical elements of her work; she is seen as the rape survivor who went on to paint about what happened to her and we try to see her face in all the women she painted. The moment I read Gentileschi's story and saw her work I felt connected to her. I felt proud of her for her bravery and strength and deeply angered for the trauma she had experienced. It is unsurprising in many ways then, that Gentileschi's art (and by extension herself) has become a symbol for survivors, a way to express feelings we are not supposed to feel, a place to explore our anger and understand our pain.

A N

I am walking through the ornate, intimidating, marble surroundings of the Scottish National Gallery in Edinburgh. Years after first reading that article I have been unable to shake Gentileschi's impact, and so I've paid the money to come see a collection of paintings I have very little interest in – save one. I make my way carefully through each room, spending a few minutes on each painting to get my money's worth. Out of the corner of my eye I suddenly see

the blue sky and yellow cloth, the pale skin of a frightened figure and I shed the pretence, walking as quickly as possible without drawing attention to myself in the hushed gallery environment – over to Artemisia Gentileschi's Susannah and the Elders.

I take a seat in front of a young woman bathing, two older men are staring at her, leaning over a wall to see her body more closely.

A N

The painting is in one of the side rooms and so for a few minutes I sit alone with Susannah. She is also seated on the edge of a fountain, legs soaking up to her knees in the water. Around her body is a white sheet which seems hastily grabbed to conceal her body, one breast remains visible. Her face is tilted upwards – her body language screams discomfort and fear. In the right hand side of the painting, two men are leaning over the wall, almost reaching out to her. Their faces are hard to see but their hands are painted with intense detail and their skin is redder, more weathered than the pale, vulnerable skin of Susannah. The story in the Bible goes that Susannah is bathing in her garden when two elders secretly observe her and threaten to claim she was meeting a man in the garden unless she 'has sex' with them. She refuses, and is ultimately almost put to death for 'promiscuity' until the elders are cross-examined and disagree on the tree under which Susannah was supposedly meeting her lover. I sit and

F O R

stare, the colours more vibrant and the emotion of the picture stronger than I had expected. Several people pass, pausing only for a moment and I feel a tug at my heart, a connection to Gentileschi and the hands that painted each part of what I see in front of me. Gentileschi painted this image multiple times, the first in approximately 1610 (prior to the trial) shows a more visibly distressed Susanna than the one I am looking at now (painted later in 1622), which shows Susannah rigid with fear, frozen perhaps at the moment of realisation. Gentileschi also painted many Judiths, one shows Judith and her Maidservant in the act of leaving with Holofernes' severed head in a basket, the sword resting on Judith's shoulder, comfortably against her bare neck. I wonder what we would think of these characters she created if the trial had never taken place, or if by some freak accident we'd lost all record of it. Who would Gentileschi be to us without that?

E Y E

Artist Kathleen Gilje created her own version of Susannah and the Elders, a stark black and white reference to the x-ray images created when revealing underpaintings. Her Susannah is screaming, struggling and wielding a knife (in reference to the knife Gentileschi threw at her abuser after the assault). Artist Kehinde Wiley, who recently painted official portraits of Barack and Michelle Obama has painted his own

versions of Judith and Holofernes. His series of Judiths show a black woman with the head of a decapitated white woman in her hands, against a bright floral background. These paintings were the subject of racist anger and indignation after he painted the Obamas, held up as shocking because of what they showed. To me, it is the essence of Gentileschi's Judith made modern, the oppressor defeated by those that have had to experience the oppression. The image is unflinching, provocative, asking the viewer to analyse their preconceptions and bringing discomfort to those who see themselves in the beheaded rather than the executioner.

As Judith and Susannah are painted and brought to life over and over, so too is Gentileschi. Books, films, essays, and plays are made of her life. Words are put into her mouth over and over - she becomes a different person for everyone. There is even a film of her life that totally alters what happened, pushing it far into the realms of fiction with little respect for the fact she was a real person, making the court case and the pain into a love story. Why are we so obsessed with Gentileschi? What leads us to stare at her paintings and seek out the autobiographical meanings? At work here there is of course the well-known phenomenon of assumptions being made about the work of women artists - it must be autobiographical - as well as the fact there are few women artists from that time period celebrated at the same level as their male counterparts.

Before attending the Beyond Caravaggio exhibition I sat and read the comments on a Facebook post about the exhibition and watched men arguing about how Gentileschi was not good enough to have her work hanging amongst those artists. Not one of them seemed to understand the power that Gentileschi's images have had which reach far beyond that of her contemporaries, even Caravaggio himself. Then, in researching this essay, I came across several articles that described Gentileschi's art and her story as 'empowering'. It is a word that fills me with a bitter frustration. Perhaps because it has become so overused and with it has ceased to mean much at all, but also because Gentileschi's Judith, if read as a cathartic expression of anger against her rapist, is not empowering. It is about a lack of agency, which can only be rebalanced with a violent and bloody act. I hesitate to join in the debate because I know what the image means to me personally and that means I can never judge it objectively, I know what I want it to be showing me. But if it is indeed Gentileschi's rapist under the sword as I want to believe, we must remember that the sword is nonetheless only paint. In reality, there was nothing she could do, and if painting this was an act of revenge, we must not forget that she could never know what this image would come to mean. There is no justice in the sword of Judith to me, however deserved it is still the blind anger of Biblical vengeance, seeking retribution

no matter the cost to Judith - an eye for an eye.

Gentileschi's work, in particular her paintings of Susannah and Judith are fascinating to us because it is rare to see women painting their own stories from this time (although we shouldn't forget she struggled for acceptance and recognition in her lifetime). It's more than that though: the way we perceive her paintings allow us to look unflinchingly at a woman's pain, at a survivor's pain. We think we can see her suffering in the face of Susannah, her righteous anger in the face of Judith. As I sat staring at Susannah and the Elders, I wondered what she would think of this. How would she feel to know we can read the transcript of her experiences, and what would it feel like for her to see her story intertwined with her work like this? There is no way to answer those questions. I know that I have found a great deal of comfort and power in her work, as many other survivors clearly do too. It is so rare to see the power Judith has over Holofernes, the raw anger and simple, violent revenge is not a narrative often available to survivors and it can be a source of great solace, a place to feel your anger.

By writing this I too have applied my own story and interpretation to the life of Gentileschi, a real person who loved and laughed, suffered and cried. I have forced my own definition onto her work, despite the knowledge that male artists are rarely given this level of scrutiny to the role their lives play in their work. Gentileschi is a ghost we can apply our stories to, who we can look to for a kind of representation and apply new narratives and meanings to and as her work is used as inspiration. But it feels important to me to remember when we look at her work that this is not a device or a dramatic story. What she went through was real, it must have informed her work but we can never ask her about it, or about how she would like to be remembered. Ultimately, we are left with these images and those that her work influenced. As I sat in front of Susannah, her face stuck in that endless gasp, looking at the only painting by a woman in that entire exhibition, I felt many things; but mostly I was grateful to Gentileschi for what she created, because of what it has given me. I walked out of the gallery with my heart full: of all the characters in that gallery I couldn't find myself represented until I saw Susannah. ■



## THE TWILIGHT ZONE: WEIRD WOMEN

Let us begin at the beginning – at the hour of Twilight: a world hovering between sleeping and waking, night sky trembling on the cusp of morning. When Twilight steps into the world of Art – one that claims itself radical and progressive – with the toes of one foot still curled deep into a night that is not quite last night (a past that is not quite past) and the heel of the other digging into the floor of a morning that is not quite yet a new day (a present that is not quite present), she often finds herself stepping into a hallway separating the Feminism room and the Anti-racism room. She is a strange sort of ghost, one with gumption, quasi-corporeal apparition squeezing through from under the door jamb like an overflow of sticky syrup; yet when she raises her oozing fist to knock on the door –either one– her knuckles seep through the surface with a little squelch. Her request to enter goes unheard yet what is that shadow of a sound buzzing low in the canals of your ears, that whisper of wind raising the gooseflesh on your skin, that ugly stain blooming mysteriously on your door? Perhaps there is a world you're missing in those twilight moments between consciousness and unconsciousness.

Twilight thus finds a congenial affinity with Jacques Derrida's *Spectre*, who has been described in *Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* as: "a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit..."

**WORDS: SOH KAY MIN**  
**ALL ART: WASIMA FARAH**

some 'thing' that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other."<sup>2</sup> Neither something nor another, and both one and the other – Derrida's words provide us with a poignantly precise description of the intersectional anti-racist and feminist artistic activity that occurs within what we shall call in this essay the Twilight Zone: that spatial-temporal area of bleary murkiness, characterised by being undefined, intermediate, mysterious; that becoming dimension in which our intersectional woman-spectre Twilight lives and breathes, performs and sings, continues to haunt us all.

2. Ibid

Continuing in the vein of Derrida, "it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in this essay I posit that it is flesh and phenomenality that give to (most) feminist art its spectral apparition, particularly when considering the mediums of performance and body art. As the celebrated Lucy Lippard once wrote, "when women use their own bodies in their art work, they are using their selves; a significant psychological factor converts these bodies or faces from object to subject."<sup>3</sup> Lippard's comment has since been taken on by a new generation of young feminist performance artists, including Oriana Fox, who boldly proclaimed, "the women objectified throughout the history of Western art (and popular culture) had not spoken until the performance artists of the 1970s imbued them with agency by embodying their images in the flesh."<sup>4</sup> Women artists have indeed voiced their agency with a rousing passion – yet one wonders if all of them have been heard amidst the ringing reverberations within the echo chambers of the multiplicity of feminist conversations. Yet, as Trinh T. Minh-ha wrote, "without other silences, however, my silence goes unheard, unnoticed; it is simply one voice less, one more point given to the silencers."<sup>5</sup> One must thus acknowledge that within the feminist movement itself, already persecuted as it is, there lies a further internal persecution of women of colour. Speaking to the threat women of colour experience from white feminism – or the threat white feminism perceives from Third World feminisms? – Trinh T. Minh-ha further expounds:

"It is not unusual to encounter cases where the sense of specialness, which comes here with being the 'first' or the 'only' woman, is confused with the consciousness of difference. One cannot help feel-

1. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York, London: Routledge, 1994), 5.

3. Lucy Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women's Body Art," *Art in America*, Vol. 64, no 3 (May 1976), 79.

5. Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Difference: A Special Third World Women Issue," *Feminist Review*, No. 25 (Spring, 1987), 8.

4. Oriana Fox, "Once More with Feeling: an abbreviated history of feminist performance art," *Feminist Review*, 96(2010), 120.

ing 'special' when one figures among the rare few to emerge above the anonymous crowd and enjoys the privilege of preparing the way for one's 'unfortunate' sisters...Thus, despite my rhetoric of solidarity, I inwardly resist your entrance into the field, for it means competition, rivalry and, sooner or later, the end of my specialness. I shall, therefore, play a double game: on the one hand, loudly assert my right as a(n exemplary) woman, to have access to equal opportunity; on the other hand, quietly maintain my privileges by helping the master perpetuate his cycle of oppression."<sup>6</sup>

6. Ibid," 13-4.

In her landmark essay *Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex*, Kimberlé Crenshaw called out the "problematic consequence of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis."<sup>7</sup>

Crenshaw pointedly noted "that black women encounter combined race and sex discrimination implies that the boundaries of sex and race discrimination doctrine are defined respectively by white women's and Black men's experiences."<sup>8</sup> In this sense, black women are seen as either 'not feminist enough' for the dogma of white feminism or 'not black enough' for black anti-racist politics, rendering their experiences doubly invalid by virtue of taxonomical impurity in the eyes of both camps. Crenshaw's research focuses in particular on the wider legal and social discrimination faced by black women in America, but this essay seeks to apply the framework of intersectionality to all women of colour, and by proxy, all women artists of colour. Furthering the arguments put forth by Crenshaw, Trinh, and other scholars of intersectionality, this essay posits that the work of women artists of colour, floating in that Twilight Zone between the closed doors of Feminism and Anti-racism, trapped between the past and present of both movements, lends itself convivially to Derridian spectral analysis. The lived experiences of women of colour tend to exist as ghostly spectres – translucent, murky, not-quite-acknowledged in the eyes of the law, society, and the art world.

In the words of Martin Hägglund, "what is important about the figure of the spectre, then, is that it cannot be fully present: it has no being in itself but marks a relation to what is no longer or not yet."<sup>9</sup>

8. Crenshaw, 143.

7. Kimberlé 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(1), Article 8," 139.

9. Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008), 82.

Indeed, the artistic twilight zone exists in that liminal space between its relation to a history of misogynistic and imperialistic violence, and a nervous anticipation of what is to come from this history. Time is thus a haunted entity. Borrowing from the late Mark Fisher, a hauntology is a failure of the future, with two provisional directions of failing: firstly, toward a future which in actuality is no longer, but which risks a "traumatic 'compulsion to repeat', a structure that repeats, a fatal pattern"<sup>10</sup> and secondly, toward a future which in actuality has not yet happened, but which operates on an attraction toward an anticipated futurity that shapes the present.<sup>11</sup> Fisher's use of the term hauntology originates from Derrida, for whom a phonetic pun on the French 'hauntologie' both builds upon and deconstructs the English 'ontology'. Opposing the ontological premise of a sensuous Being, Derrida launches an interrogation into an alternative mode of thinking existence via hauntology: "what does it mean to follow a ghost? And what if this came down to being followed by it, always, persecuted perhaps by the very chase we are leading?"<sup>12</sup> In answer to his own line of questioning, Derrida concluded, "here again what seems to be out front, the future, comes back in advance: from the past, from the back...Each time is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end of history. Let us call it a hauntology."<sup>13</sup>

10. Mark Fisher, "What is hauntology?" *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 66 No. 1 (Fall 2002), 1

11. Ibid.

12. Derrida, 10.

13. Derrida, 10.

Fisher has expounded upon Derrida's project's succinctly in the following passage: "haunting can be seen as intrinsically resistant to the contraction and homogenization of time and space. It happens when a place is stained by time, or when a particular place becomes the site for an encounter with a broken time."<sup>14</sup> This brokenness of time involuntarily conjures flashbacks of blood and violence afforded by an imperialist history of misogyny and racism interjected with today's bursts of brutality and a dreaded paranoia of the potentiality of what tomorrow might plunder. As Derrida has foretold, "from the lips of a master this watch word (life) would always say something about violence."<sup>15</sup> History becomes – is always becoming – a spectre of life. We need only recall the hurt He has inflicted upon women of colour – Hottentot Venus, Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks and Angela Davis. On another side of the world, unnamed East Asian and Southeast Asian 'comfort women' of the 20th century wars. And today...in today's

14. Fisher, "What is hauntology?" 19.

15. Derrida, xvi.

'globalized' and 'progressive' world there are young Southeast Asian brides mail-ordered to America. On the streets of Delhi, there are men, having experienced a woman's rejection, reward their audacity with acid; in bedrooms in a lover's embrace there are women hurt and humiliated, forced to submission when fondness falls apart and (racialized) fetishism comes forth. The situation is as such: "No matter which side I belong to, once I step down into the mud pit to fight my adversary, I can only climb out from it stained."<sup>16</sup> The bodies of daughters of colours are thus stained by time, sites for encounters with, as Shakespeare's Hamlet would say, a "time out of joint."

16. Trinh, 11.

Another salient point that Derrida has raised is that "hegemony still organises the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting. Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony."<sup>17</sup> The art practices I speak about in this essay thus come into themselves in a Twilight Zone haunted by narratives lurking on the margins of the dominant discourses of art world hegemony. Specifically, this essay discusses the spectres of the strange, which Fisher describes in *The Weird and the Eerie* as having to do with "a fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience."<sup>18</sup> Fisher rightly pointed out in his account of such strange spectres that fantastic creatures such as vampires and werewolves somehow seem less strange than the scientifically proven black hole in the universe – indeed it is as if Twilight herself inspires more fear and repulsion than a blood-sucking vampire. If one is to believe the urban myth that a vampire must be invited into one's home before he/she can enter, it seems somewhat sad that Twilight does not even have that chance – when she knocks on a door she is not heard, therefore she can never be invited to cross into the threshold of any door. She remains stranded in the hallway between the closed doors of Feminism and Anti-racism. Fisher argues that "the weird and the eerie...allow us to see the inside from the perspective of the outside."<sup>19</sup> Twilight, who is forever on the outside, is therefore in Fisher's estimation very much weird and eerie.

17. Derrida, 45.

18. Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 8.

19. Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 10.

Further, Fisher expounds that "the weird...involves a sense of wrongness: a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist,

or at least it should not exist here.”<sup>20</sup> This remark demonstrates why Twilight, the cosmic ghost of the woman artist of colour standing at the intersection of feminist and anti-racist discourses, struggles to make herself seen and heard. Traveling from Fisher at this point, I argue that Twilight engenders not simply a sense of wrongness but a sense of reverse wrongness; one borne out of a collective historical guilt. After all, in the face of accumulated atrocities against people of colour and particularly women of colour it is easier to deny that they ever took place than to bear the overwhelming emotional weight of History. It is easier to reverse the sense of wrongness and once again put Twilight in her rightful place under the category ‘wrong’. Paraphrasing Trinh T. Minh-ha, “it is, indeed, much easier to dismiss or eliminate on the pretext of weirdness [difference] (destroy the other in our minds, in our world) than to live fearlessly with and within weirdness [difference(s)].”<sup>21</sup> Undertaking a close examination of critical race and gender theory, this essay ultimately seeks to show that the Art World can only benefit from opening its doors to a Twilight Zone is if it is to truly progress, in a radical fashion, from its defensive position of denial, suspended in time and space.

21. Trinh, 8.

## ADRIAN PIPER: THE MYTHIC BEING

Adrian Piper once said: “I embody the racist’s nightmare, the obscenity of miscegenation, the reminder that segregation has never been a fully functional concept, that sexual desire penetrates social and racial barriers, and reproduces itself. I am the interloper, the alien spy in the perfect disguise, who slipped through the barricades by mistake. I have infiltrated your conventions and your self-presentational styles. I represent the loathsome possibility that all of you are ‘tainted’ by black ancestry. If someone can look and sound like me and still be black, who is safely white?”<sup>22</sup>

Enter the Mythic Being. According to Fisher, “the mythic...is something more than the merely fictional, just as it cannot be reduced to the fantastic. Rather, the mythic is part of the visual infrastructure which makes human life as such

20. Ibid, 15.

22. Adrian Piper, “From a Paper Delivered at the Politics of Identity Panel,” *Women Artists News* 12, no. 2 (June 1987) 6.

23. Fisher, *The Weird and The Eerie*, 97.

possible.”<sup>23</sup> The Mythic Being is the persona of “an anonymous, third-world young boy,”<sup>24</sup> a ‘visual infrastructure’ created and assumed by Adrian Piper between the years of 1973 and 1976. Masquerading as the Mythic Being, the fair-skinned and petite Piper stalked down the streets of New York in sunglasses, an afro wig and a moustache, cigarette dangling from her (his) lips. Sometimes the Mythic Being gawked at white women in public squares (*The Mythic Being: Cruising White Women*, 1975); sometimes he went to Piper’s art shows. Once, he mugged a young white man (*The Mythic Being: Getting Back*, 1975). Piper confessed that as the Mythic Being, her demeanour changed: “I swagger, stride, lope, lower my eyebrows, raise my shoulders, sit with my legs wide apart on the subway, so as to accommodate my protruding genitalia.”<sup>25</sup>

Remarking on her experiences embodying the Mythic Being, Piper has said, “people reacted to me as though I were a black male, and that’s incredibly unpleasant. White women would clutch their purses and go into neighbouring cars on the subway – the usual bag of tricks.”<sup>26</sup> Piper’s account of how she was treated as the Mythic Being hardly seems unfamiliar – be it in previous writings by other black writers or prescribed in the telling of urban cautionary tales by one’s neighbourhood white suburban mum, there is always a story to be recalled about the public danger posed by black males – “the threat of Black Power.”<sup>27</sup> Time truly seems out of joint – or not moved at all – when one recalls Frantz Fanon’s account of an experience uncannily similar experience to that of the Mythic Being’s on the subway, in the ground-breaking chapter “The Fact of Blackness” in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*:

“In the train it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person. In the train I was given not one but two, three places...it was not that I was finding febrile coordinates in the world. I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other...and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea...I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors.”<sup>28</sup>

Fanon’s account of the black experience in public space in 1950s France echoes a hauntological

24. John P. Bowles, *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment*, 231.

25. Piper, “Notes on the Mythic Being,” in ed. John Perreault, *Ongoing American Fiction III*, special issue *TriQuarterly* 32 (Winter 1975).

26. Piper, “Black Like Me: Conceptual Artist Adrian Piper gets Under Your Skin,” interviewed by Adam Shatz, *Lingua Franca* 8, no. 8 (November 1998), 46.

27. Bowles, 235.

28. Fanon, 112.

spectre that is at once felt and feared but also deliberately ignored. Bringing Derrida's hauntology into dialogue with Fred Moten's black anti-ontology, this essay now highlights an important passage from the latter:

*"it is not that blackness is ontologically prior to the logistic and regulatory power that is supposed to have brought it into existence but that blackness is prior to ontology (...) It is the anoriginal displacement of ontology (...) It is ontology's anti – and ante – foundation, ontology's underground, the irreparable disturbance of ontology's time and space."*<sup>29</sup>

A major influence of Derrida's spectres was Shakespeare's Hamlet – specifically the line "time is out of joint." Indeed, Moten's understanding of blackness as a disturbance of ontology's time and space – a disjoint – echoes eerily with Derrida's imagining of the hauntological spectre. As has been highlighted earlier in this essay, Fisher has noted that the mythic transcends what is fiction and fantasy – rather it is one person's fiction and fantasy – and more significantly, as this essay posits, fear – projected onto another's reality. To quote John P. Bowles, a key scholar on the works of Adrian Piper: *"if the Mythic Being looks familiar, then the viewer must acknowledge his or her responsibility for having created him."*<sup>30</sup> If a viewer did recognise in the Mythic Being the ghostly apparition of an aggressive black male and responded accordingly in avoidance, Piper achieves her goal in forcing her viewer to confront an inner guilt and fear of reciprocal violence. As Fanon has said, *"ontology – once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside – does not permit us to understand the being of the black man."*<sup>31</sup>

The Mythic Being as a spectre of blackness thus enters the twilight zone, drawing the viewer into a liminal space that has tricked them into confessing their secret shame and fear – fear that is after all, based on a hauntological imagination. To quote Bowles again, *"the Mythic Being, as fantasy, establishes a racialized norm for blackness in the American imagination – the naturalised justification for an unspoken racist ideology reappropriated to make it available for critique."*<sup>32</sup>

The Mythic Being's perceived aggression and tuggery has led many art critics and historians

29. Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 112(4), Fall 2013, 739.

30. Bowles, 242.

31. Fanon, 110.

32. Bowles, 236.

to mistakenly characterise Piper as *"an angry black woman whose works blame viewers for the lifetime of racist and sexist discrimination she has endured."*<sup>33</sup> Even feminist critics partial to Piper's works have interpreted the artist's Mythic Being series as an autobiographical manifestation of her 'male ego'<sup>34</sup> – the very same Lucy Lippard who said, *"when women use their own bodies in their art work, they are using their selves"*<sup>35</sup> being one of them. I argue that this is at best, a superficial and one-dimensional analysis – Piper has demonstrated that the work, rather than being autobiographical, was a critical and self-conscious undertaking – and at worst, a reflection of a deeper underlying discrimination of race and gender against black women. In casting the Mythic Being as Piper's 'male ego' Lippard and other feminist critics of the same view deny Piper her self-identity as a woman – as if as a black woman, she is not woman enough, her blackness prevents her from being totally woman, because blackness is all masculinity, dominance, aggression.

According to Bowles, *"the Black Power and Black Arts movements established an ideal of black authenticity that cast blackness as masculine, heterosexual, menial."*<sup>36</sup> While there is a certain truth to the Black Panthers' role in perpetuating an image of macho black hypermasculinity, and that the Panther women were known to be just as fierce as their male counterparts, to associate the entire race with a masculine gender profile seems firstly ludicrous and secondly eliminates any space for black femininity. Cheryl Clarke has argued that *"women poets of the Black Arts Movement demonstrated blackness by adopting the self-consciously angry tone and violently revolutionary rhetoric they and their male peers considered masculine: black women claimed solidarity with black men by 'acting – like a man,' challenging normative femininity, but also reiterating the gendered articulation of blackness."*<sup>37</sup> This is substantiated by Frantz Fanon's psychoanalytic writings on white perceptions of black sexuality:

*"For the majority of white men the Negro represents the sexual instinct (in its raw state). The Negro is the incarnation of genital potency beyond all moralities and prohibitions. The women among the whites, by a genuine process of induction, invariably view the*

33. Bowles, 2.

34. Ibid.

35. Lippard, 79.

36. Bowles, 235.

37. Ibid, 239.

*Negro as the keeper of the impalpable gate that opens into the realm of orgies, of bacchanals, of delirious sexual sensations...*"<sup>38</sup>

38. Fanon, 177.

Further quoting Fanon, "one is no longer aware of the Negro but only of a penis; the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He is a penis."<sup>39</sup> Blackness is thus turned into a phallic substitute. Blackness is phallic. Black women cannot be totally female because by default of their blackness they must harbour phallic sympathies. Nothing if not a re-iteration of the phantasmagorical gendered meta-association of blackness with masculinity (versus the Orientalist association of Asian ethnicity with femininity – but more on this later). To recall the iconic Sojourner Truth:

39. Fanon, 170.

"That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?"<sup>40</sup>

40. Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman?" (speech, Akron, Ohio, Women's Rights Convention, 1851), Sojourner Truth Memorial, <http://sojourner-truthmemorial.org/sojourner-truth/her-words/>

Returning to Kimberlé Crenshaw, "given this understanding, perhaps we can begin to see why black women have been dogged by the stereotype of the pathological matriarch."<sup>41</sup> According to Bowles, "The Mythic Being's masculinity appears always excessive and unnatural but it is also inherent to the complex and contradictory image of the black woman as Amazon and matriarch."<sup>42</sup> Echoing Crenshaw's sentiments, Bowles also noted that "outspoken black women found themselves derided as traitors by both white feminists and black men, as if they were somehow neither women nor black."<sup>43</sup> Considering blackness as a political reality, one can see even from Fanon, one of the foremost writers against anti-blackness, that black women experience an exclusion from blackness itself. In the chapter "The Woman of Colour and the White Man" in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon tells us of the position of the woman of colour:

41. Crenshaw, 156.

42. Bowles, 238.

43 Ibid, 230.

"For, in a word, the race must be whitened; every woman in Martinique knows this, says it, repeats it. Whiten the race, save the race, but not in the sense that one might think: not 'preserve the uniqueness of that part of the world in which they grew up,' but make sure it will be white."<sup>44</sup>

44. Fanon, 47.

Fanon's comments on the Martinique woman of colour and her preoccupation with 'passing' or assimilating into whiteness have a strange resonance with Piper's personal account, "Passing for White, Passing for Black". In this essay, Piper comments, "just as white Americans are largely ignorant of their African – usually maternal – ancestry, we blacks are often ignorant of our European – usually paternal – ancestry."<sup>45</sup> This comment speaks to a deeper history of sexual exploitation during slavery, in which "ownership of the female slave on the plantations generally came to include owning her sex life. Large numbers of white boys were socialized to associate physical and emotional pleasure with the black women who nursed and raised them, and then to deny any deep feelings for them. From other white males they learned to see black girls and women as legitimate objects of sexual desire. Rapes occurred, and many slave women were forced to submit regularly to white males or suffer harsh consequences."<sup>46</sup>

45. Piper, "Passing for White, Passing for Black," Adrian Piper Research Archive, 2009[1991], 11.

46. F. James Davis, *Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1991), 38.

Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, was first published in 1950s France, well after the abolition of slavery and in a different setting to American slave plantations, yet Fanon's comments about women of colour and their relations with white men sting when considering the history of racial and sexual exploitation experienced by black women; one that, while not necessarily an experience common to all, was, and is, an experience that could be common to all black female slaves – an exploitation of intimacy that happens in the private realm, thus superficially acknowledged but not innately known to black males, or to the publicly gendered political reality of blackness fuelled by the hyper-masculinity of the Black Power movement. Recalling Toni Morrison's lament of the black woman as 'stain', there is a conversation to be had with Fisher who views haunting as an entity 'stained' with time. Therefore in embodying the persona of the Mythic Being, it is not difficult to see that Piper was enacting "her inability to inhabit norms of race

47. Bowles, 231.

48. *Ibid.*, 238.

or gender.”<sup>47</sup> Speaking through the male persona of the Mythic Being as a black female artist, Piper effectively “draws upon the virulently macho anger and hypersexuality popularly attributed to black women in the 1970s”<sup>48</sup> without invoking the very image of the angry black woman already typified in the minds of a white audience. Thus, the Mythic Being, “suspended between difference and identification...becomes, in Piper’s account, a paradoxical figure of liberation.”<sup>49</sup>

Yet at the same time, petite and fair-skinned Piper never quite achieved a whole oneness with the Mythic Being – “as if she aspires to but never quite achieves either blackness or masculinity.”<sup>50</sup> Recalling *The Mythic Being: I/You (Her)* series, a set of ten black-and-white photographs tracing Piper’s transformation from a young girl to the Mythic Being, one viscerally feels the pain of growing up being neither black nor white, (heteronormatively) man nor woman; of being betrayed by both blackness and whiteness, maleness and femaleness. The series begins with an innocuous photograph of a young Piper and another girl – a friend, an adolescent infatuation? – both smiling at the camera, with a speech bubble written in black felt-tip that said:

*“It is only because of the defects in my personality that I can finally say this to you. I am protected and strengthened by my inadequacy. I am secure, smugly secure, for my personal flaws will constitute a more than adequate defense against whatever your response might be to what I have to say to you.”*

The anger and hurt resonating from the text first strikes the viewer as at odds with the image, as one cannot discern from the photograph any ‘defect’, or any point of tension, between the two girls – it looks like any other photograph of two adolescent girls. Piper, with her fair skin, looks no different from the other girl in the black-and-white photograph. In the words of Bowles, “*If the spectre of the black lesbian haunted black women as someone they had better not be, this was a position the Mythic Being embraced and in The Mythic Being: I/You (Her), Piper’s angry expression of sexual desire for another woman...*”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, if one is to follow to heteronormative narrative that to be manly is to be sexually attracted to women, and

49. Bowles, 229.

50. *Ibid.*, 230.

51. Bowles, 240.



to be womanly is to sexually desire men, then homophobia plays right into the overarching theme of black hypermasculinity. The series progresses in a similar fashion, with the same photograph of the two smiling girls, but with increasingly haunting and revealing captions:

***The Mythic Being: I/You (Her) #1, 1974 (Black and white photograph with black felt-tip pen)***

*"It is only because of the defects in my personality that I can finally say this to you. I am protected and strengthened by my inadequacy. I am secure, smugly secure, for my personal flaws will constitute a more than adequate defense against whatever your response might be to what I have to say to you."*

***The Mythic Being: I/You (Her) #3, 1974 (Black and white photograph with black felt-tip pen)***

*"You hurt me, and betrayed my trust, and for that I will never forgive you. In fact, I would like nothing better than that you see yourself as I do, with the contempt that I do. Because of you, there is a coldness in me, a suspiciousness towards you in all your guises, all your appearances. Because of you I withhold my feelings, for I could never trust you not to [?] all over them."*

***The Mythic Being: I/You (Her) #5, 1974 (Black and white photograph with black felt-tip pen)***

*"I might reason with you, share with you, even extend an offer of help or support; I might indulge with pleasure in lovemaking fantasies about you. But you will never elicit an emotional commitment from me. Take care that you ask of me no more than that we will laugh together; for you will be disappointed, if you do."*

***The Mythic Being: I/You (Her) #8, 1974 (Black and white photograph with black felt-tip pen)***

*"But insist again that this is your doing, your fault, your choice – not mine. I insist that from the fact of my appearance you jumped to the wrong conclusion as you always do. You instinctively perceived me as the enemy, and nothing I say or do is sufficient to change that. You punish me for how I look, when that is both irrelevant and out of my control."*

Yet, as the series progresses, and the words grow more vicious, Piper's image undergoes a slow metamorphosis, adding sunglasses and facial hair, until the young girl at the beginning is gone and the Mythic Being is in her place. Meanwhile, the other girl in the photograph slowly fades away, as if swallowed by the blackness of the photograph's background. A young white girl, swallowed by blackness; the meta- association to the endemic fear of black men, blackness, destroying, devouring white girls in America, American whiteness, could not be more pointed. *"I embody everything you most hate and fear"* – this line in the speech bubble in Piper's iconic oil crayon drawing *The Mythic Being: I Embody* (1975) here springs to the forefront of one's mind, a jarring and painful realization, particularly when viewed in dialogue with the last photograph in the *I/You (Her)* series, which features the Mythic Being alone with the speech bubble reading:

*"But you took me off guard once, and it was very painful. I will never give you the opportunity to do that again. My defences have solidified; there's nothing I can do. It sickens me to realize that I have grown incapable of overcoming the distance between us. I hate you for doing this to me, and myself for allowing it to happen."*

At the heart of Piper's work as the Mythic Being is the removal of her self, but the *I/You (Her)* series holds a special significance in the conversation about intersectional feminism – the speech bubbles first reads as a direct address to the general American public as a message from the Mythic Being, the black man, the pariah of American society, but in the context of the image of sisterhood and love the series begins with, contains a second subliminal hauntological message from Piper, as both the young black girl erased from the image and the black woman artist behind the image, addressed to her white 'sisters' in the feminist movement. One might recall again that Lucy Lippard had called the Mythic Being an expression of Piper's 'male ego', thereby dismissing Piper's position of intersectionality between whiteness and blackness, male and female, and in 1987, Barbara Barr accused Piper in the journal *Women Artists News* of being "a white woman whose assertion of blackness is 'nonsense'", and of trying to co-opt blackness as a way of seeming

52. Barbara Barr, "Reply to Piper," 6.

'exotic' and to gain the affirmative advantage of being a minority.<sup>52</sup> And as one can imagine, Barr's comments are only one example of the betrayal and hostility from white sisters in the fight against the patriarchy women of colour must constantly endure. It is as Audre Lorde wrote:

*"Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance, and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns. Now we hear that it is the task of black and third world women to educate white women, in the face of tremendous resistance, as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought."*<sup>53</sup>

54. Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 95.

In the words of Fisher, *"the illusion of linearity is shattered by the eerie repetitions and simultaneities of a mythic time."*<sup>54</sup> A mythic thing, a mythic being, is then something that disrupts the illusion of linear, progressive time, a being constantly haunted by events that have passed and events that have yet to come. This resonates with Piper's assertion that it is the very "mythic character"<sup>55</sup> of the Mythic Being that brings him to life. To quote Bowles quoting Piper, *"The Mythic Being does not represent any particular person or character. Instead, what makes the costume convincing – what makes it real – is what Piper calls its 'mythic character.' The Mythic Being is 'a fictitious or abstract personality that is generally part of a story or folktale used to explain or sanctify social or legal institutions or natural phenomena."*<sup>56</sup> And the folktale here returns to the urban myth of the dangerous black man; the social and legal institutions recall acts of racialized police brutality; the natural phenomena of Darwinian evolution from black noble savage to enlightened white man. Thus, like Twilight, the Mythic Being roams the streets, the hallways, the subway carriages, the galleries, as a "ghostly spectator, eternally viewing, taking in everything, recording and reflecting on everything"<sup>57</sup> yet remains, as always, invisible.

53. Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1981), 100.

55. Piper, "Preparatory Notes for the Mythic Being," in *Adrian Piper, Out of Order, Out of Sight 1, Selected Writings in Meta-Art: 1968-1992* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 107.

56. Bowles, 258.

57. Piper, "Preparatory Notes for the Mythic Being," 100-101.

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## PATTY CHANG : MELONS (AT A LOSS)

If Africa is haunted by the phantasm of virulent masculine dominance then conversely, it can be said that Asia is haunted by the spectre of feminine submission. Doubly so, if the black woman is haunted by the stereotype of the angry Amazonian matriarch then the Asian woman is haunted by the stereotype of obliging and obedient exotic oriental wife. As Edward Said wrote in his polemic text *Orientalism*:

*"The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination...The Orient was Orientalised not only because it was discovered to be 'Oriental' in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it could be – that is, submitted to being – made Oriental."*<sup>58</sup>

Therefore the work of Chinese American artist Patty Chang has an important place in the Twilight Zone. Staring dead-on at the camera – staring at you – her 1998 video piece *Melons (At a Loss)* begins with Chang, in a white bustier, saying: "when my aunt died, I got a plate." She then proceeds to balance a plate on her head – though it is unclear if it is the commemorative plate in question. Procuring a knife out of thin air, she begins sawing through her left breast while narrating a story about the plate she received upon her aunt's death – which one might assume is an heirloom passed down from Chang's aunt in some sort of obscure ethnic ritual, but is revealed to be just a printed copy of the original porcelain plate Chang's aunt and uncle had received at their wedding. As Chang revealed in an interview with Eve Oishi, *"In Melons I explain receiving a commemorative plate when my aunt dies, and this is often understood by audiences as Chinese custom, whereas it's really a made-up story to fill a lapse in emotional memory."*<sup>59</sup>

There is no further explanation as to why copies of the plate were given out upon Chang's aunt's death. Through arduous sawing and painstaking plate-balancing, slowly it is also revealed that Chang's breast is not flesh and fat but in fact all fruit – to be precise, a melon. The double revelation of the false plate funeral ritual and the false

58. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003[1974]), 5-6.

59. Patty Chang, "Interview with Patty Chang," interviewed by Eve Oishi, *Camera Obscura* 54, 18(3), 127.

breast has the jarring effect of making the viewer question if there was any truth in their existing knowledge to begin with – did Chang even have a dead aunt at all? Does porcelain china have any significance to the ethnic Chinese?

Yet by merely entertaining these questions, one falls for the red herring of authenticity: as Eve Oishi remarked, *“there is...often an assumption that Asians, particularly Asian women, represent a transparent authenticity. So anything you talk about that seems autobiographical becomes this kind of ethnographic spectacle.”*<sup>60</sup> Chang works within the same tropes as Piper in the sense that her work begins with the removal of her self – yet, as with receptions to Piper’s work and that of many minority artists, Chang’s work has also often been seen as autobiographical in nature, whereby the narrator is conflated with the actual author and a fictional work is cast as autobiography, and the work is then read as ethnography rather than as an artistic undertaking. As the literary theorist Laura Hyun Yi Kang further expounds, *“there is a certain lament that the text is not being read as ‘literature,’ further raising the question of whether there is or can be a discrete field of ‘Asian American literature’ or ‘Asian American culture’ apart from the identity-based demands of fidelity to historical, ethnological and linguistic verities.”*<sup>61</sup> The entanglement of autobiographical reality with ethnographic exoticising that occurs at the site of Asian identity is thus as Edward Said wrote:

*“The Orient therefore alternated in the mind’s geography between being an Old World to which one returned, as to Eden or Paradise, there to set up a new version of the old, and being a wholly new place to which one came as Columbus came to America, in order to set up a New World (although, ironically, Columbus himself thought he discovered a new part of the Old World). Certainly neither of these Orientals was purely one thing or the other: it is their vacillations, their tempting suggestiveness, their capacity for entertaining and confusing the mind, that are interesting.”*<sup>62</sup>

62. Said, 58.

In response, Chang noted: *“Art is not always an accurate source of information; people in this line of work make things up. Only if they [the audience] come in expecting something does their perception get manipulated.”*<sup>63</sup> With this statement, Chang reveals the complexities of being a woman artist

60. Eve Oishi, “Interview with Patty Chang,” 127.

61. Laura Hyun Yi Kang, *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2002), 33.

63. Chang, “Interview,” 127.

of colour, of standing stranded in a hallway between closed doors. On one hand, there is the frustration of never being seen as an artist before being marked by race, gender, or class, and on the other, there is the inability and frankly, personal resistance, to detach oneself from one’s positionality, from the hallway where one belongs, to move into and adapt to paradigms of heteronormative male supremacy, or dogmatic white feminism. Indeed the conundrum is as bell hooks writes in her essay *Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness*, asserting her choice to work and resist from within the margins, from within a space of marginality:

*“Yet what I have noticed is that those scholars, most especially those who name themselves radical critical thinkers, feminist thinkers, now fully participate, in the construction of a discourse about the ‘Other.’ I was made ‘Other’ there in that space with them. In that space in the margins, that lived-in segregated world of my past and present. They did not meet me there in that space. They met me at the center. They greeted me as colonizers.”*<sup>64</sup>

64. hooks, 208.

Perhaps what is so jarring about Chang’s work is that its (auto-)voyeurism, its (auto-)perversion, its (auto-)nomous action, is unexpected. For instance, when Chang’s *In Love* (2001), a video installation reverse-edited to look as if she were sharing a kiss with her parents when in fact they were jointly eating an onion, showed at the Guggenheim Museum, audience reactions were, in the words of Eve Oishi, *“audible expressions of discomfort and unease”*<sup>65</sup> – yet, is the original Oedipal complex not one borne out of the child’s conflicting desires for his/her parents? After all, the role of the Oriental or Asian female body in the heteronormative white male imagination is to be passive in response to his every action; to be pliant to his every perversion, to unveil herself each time for his every voyeuristic impulse. In this sense, the Asian woman’s body becomes the site of profound fantasy and possibility – but only when such fantasies and possibilities are projected onto her, from men of her ethnicity, white men, white women ... When the first wave of feminism first gained traction in Europe, it began, as with all movements, with an outspoken and collective expression of resistance. Yet, should the Asian woman even dare to express any desire autonomously, the action translates into anger. In her

65. Oishi, “Interview with Patty Chang,” 125.

essay Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster, Mitsuye Yamada recounted a student's response to an anthology of outspoken Asian American poetry: *"It made me angry. Their anger made me angry, because I didn't even know the Asian Americans felt oppressed. I didn't expect their anger."*<sup>66</sup> Indeed, it is only natural that one is surprised when an object – for in anthropologizing, ethnologizing the Asian or Oriental individual, one is in effect objectifying – expresses anything, least of all anger, for expression is surely something only subjects are capable of. To quote Trinh T. Minh-ha:

*"They [the (white) subjects], like their anthropologists whose specialty is to detect all the layers of my falseness and truthfulness, are in a position to decide what/who is authentic and what/who is not. No uprooted person is invited to participate... unless s/he makes up her/his mind and paints her/himself thick with authenticity. Eager not to disappoint, I try my best to offer my benefactors and benefactresses what they most anxiously yearn for: the possibility of a difference, yet, a difference or an otherness that will not go so far as to question the foundation of their beings and makings."*<sup>67</sup>

67. Trinh, 14.

Chang's performance of a made-up ethnic ritual could then be read, superficially, as an eager attempt to offer her audience, her benefactors and benefactresses, that so-craved possibility of difference, that little experience of the exotic they are privy to watch, voyeuristically, through a screen, yet remain shielded from by that very screen. Yet the genius in Melons is that Chang had never claimed to be telling any truth – as with Piper's Mythic Being, if the viewer recognized anything in Chang's performance, it is because it was familiar to their secret, internal fantasy of the exotic other. However, more than just an inside joke Chang and perhaps other ethnic Chinese who recognize that there is no such thing as a commemorative plate- giving funeral custom, the narrative of the made-up story to fill an emotional lapse in memory speaks to a deeper, more troubling sense of rootlessness, of being stranded in a dark hallway that leads off in one direction toward a forgotten, shadowed past and in the other toward an equally obscure future – a palpably known experience common to the collective migration of coloured bodies, particularly that of Asian American migrants during the Second World War. As Yamada recounted of her experience as a second-gener-

66. Mitsuye Yamada, "Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster: Reflections of an Asian American Woman," *Bridge, An Asian American Perspective*, Vol. 7 No. 1, Spring 1979, p. 35.

69. Ibid 39.

ation Japanese American (Nisei), there existed a struggle, not unlike during American colonization, between embracing a New World (America) and letting go of the Old World (in Yamada's case, Japan): *"this was the period when everyone in the country was expected to be one-hundred percent behind the war effort, and the Nisei boys who had volunteered for the Armed Forces were out there fighting and dying to prove how American we really were."*<sup>68</sup>

68. Yamada, 38.

The Asian American woman's experience here differs from the African American woman's in that the former, for the most part, succeeded, by way of the patriarchal conditioning that dictated *"we (young Asian girls) may be listened to and responded to with placating words and gestures, but our psychological mind set has already told us time and again that we were born into a ready-made world into which we must fit ourselves,"*<sup>69</sup> in the assimilation process to become the *"visible minority which is invisible"*<sup>70</sup> while the latter is divided between those who successfully snuck or 'passed' into whiteness, as Piper put it, and those who chose not to, or could not, remaining visibly black. Thus what marks Chang's work as different from Piper's is that while offering a possibility of difference, Chang simultaneously offers a possibility of sameness to other women (by which I mean, white women) – a shared anatomy, a shared fetishization and objectification of the female body endured by women of all colour, in the form of her fake engorged melon-breasts, that allows her work to be included more readily in a genealogy of white women artists such as Judy Chicago, Carolee Schneemann and Marina Abramovic.

70. Ibid, 36.

Yet, what is easily missed in the work of a 'visible minority which is invisible' is that the blown-up caricature of femininity in Melons (At a Loss) perhaps speaks more to the *"particular strain of Orientalist discourse that constructs women as hyperfeminine, exotic, passive objects of white heterosexual male desire"*<sup>71</sup>. While the Mythic Being spoke to the discourse of black hypermasculinity, than it does to the general objectification of woman's bodies, whereby 'general' tends to refer normatively to the white body – male or female. In this sense, both Piper and Chang are addressing the same problematic – the white heteronormative imagination – performing and parody-

71. JeeYeun Lee, "Why Suzie Wong is not a Lesbian: Asian and Asian American Lesbian and Bisexual Women and Femme/Butch/Gender Identities" in ed. Brett Beemyn and Michele Eliason, *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Anthology* (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 130.

ing it, making available for critique through art. Therefore, to easily situate Chang's work within a genealogy of white feminist art is to elide the ethnic and diasporic tensions of her work which are as foundational to her oeuvre as her expressions of the female body – it is to deny Chang's simultaneous relations to other women artists of colour such as Piper and Ana Mendieta, and to bring the argument back to the beginning. And, to bring the conversation back to the beginning, to the hour of Twilight, it is to open the Feminist door to Twilight, only to lock her in and prevent her from ever entering the Anti-racism room.

What is maddening, infuriating, yet simultaneously provides the oil that keeps fueling the fire of their work, is that while both Piper and Chang work to confront their audiences with their inner illusions and false truisms, in the Art World that remains stubbornly blind to the Twilight Zone, they are met with predictable responses: accusations of the 'threat of Black Power' for Piper, and multiplied fetishism of the Asian woman for Chang. The fact of these visceral responses, however, demonstrates that though the Twilight Zone may remain invisible and unseen, it does not mean that Twilight goes unnoticed, unfelt. Like passing through a ghost, one shivers and feels the eeriness of Twilight's phantom activities pushing at the doors in one's bones. As Derrida wrote, *"everything begins by the apparition of a spectre. More precisely by the waiting for this apparition. The anticipation is at once impatient, anxious, and fascinated: this, the thing ("this thing") will end up coming."*<sup>72</sup> Furthering Derrida, this thing, Twilight, has not only already come, but has always already been here, lurking in the hallways. In the Twilight Zone, work has never ceased in the open hallway, and as bell hooks wrote:

*"This is an intervention. A message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer. Marginality as site of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators."*<sup>73</sup> ■

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72. Derrida, 2.

73. hooks, 209.

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# KILL! KILL!

## ROLEPLAY MURDER FANTASIES AND THE GROTESQUE IN THE WORK OF LANA DEL REY

WORDS: KATE PEEBLES

*"And the Lord God said unto the woman, What is this that thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat."*

As early as Eve's bite into the apple, women have faced moral classification by men. Among other attributes, our representations and perceptions have been tied to notions of duplicity. This phenomenon has been culturally envisaged by Simone de Beauvoir's theorisation of womanhood as inherently 'other'.<sup>1</sup> As Beauvoir discusses, one effect of this othering is the idea of the 'feminine mystery'.<sup>2</sup> She notes that men often encourage this quality of feminine mystery as a means to keep men intrigued by women.<sup>3</sup> Even when women comply with this male desire, we are punished, deemed disingenuous or vain. As in the paradoxical Madonna/Whore dichotomy, a woman cannot succeed by embodying a singular role in patriarchal society; each label lends itself to criticisms. For the past several decades, feminist theory has examined women in ways beyond heteronormativity. Instead, identity and sexuality have become grounded in the desires of women as individuals. Mainstream feminist discourse has largely operated with implicit racial lines within dialogues of feminine identity and female sexuality. bell hooks' appraisal of feminist film theory in 1992 applies dispiritingly well twenty-six years later:

*"Despite feminist critical interventions aimed at deconstructing the category "woman," which highlight the significance of race, many feminist film critics continue to structure their discourse as though it speaks about "women" when in actuality it speaks only about white women"*<sup>4</sup>

It is important to remember the normalised white focus that has structured hegemonic feminist discourse, the ideas of which become totalising when they implicate all women. In this essay, I will examine constructions of identity in the discography of Lana Del Rey. The artist once remarked, 'Whenever people bring up feminism, I'm like, god. I'm just not really that interested'.<sup>5</sup> The dismissal smacks of the white privilege to be apolitical, and suggests an equally apathetic artistic practise. And yet, gender roles and identity constructs dialogue throughout her work. In what ways can her music be read as liberating? And for whom?

1. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1949), 26.

2. Beauvoir, 206.

3. *Ibid*, 246

4. bell hooks, 'The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators' in *Movies and Mass Culture*, ed. John Belton (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 255.

5. 'Cover Story: Lana Del Rey Is Anyone She Wants to Be', interview by Duncan Cooper for *Fader*, 2014.

In scenes from her short film *Tropico* (2013), Del Rey dances with sultry languor in a misty, bluish-hued Garden of Eden. The scene enacts the Book of Genesis as Eve bites into the apple, creating original sin. She is garlanded in a bikini of leaves and roses; un-naked, she is postlapsarian Eve. The Garden footage, in which Del Rey winds a white snake around her body and grinds against an Adamic figure played by model Shaun Ross is spliced with scenes of the artist dressed in a light blue veil as the Virgin Mary. The video flashes between the dark hued, intoxicating garden scene and the muted white space in which Del Rey poses as Mary. The sense of splitting and doubling is echoed in the video's opening moments, in which soft-edged footage of a John Wayne lookalike is overlaid with a voice announcing, "And John said, 'Let there be light!'" Immediately, the world of *Tropico* is established on pluralistic terms, paralleling sex and purity, pop culture and the Book of Genesis.

Consider the identities at play: Lana personifies both the idolised Marian figure and the first woman to be scapegoated, embodying both sides of the Madonna and whore dichotomy. That Del Rey is capable of multiple personas is nothing new in terms of various identity performances expected by women every day, but the visual spectacle of the video renders their juxtaposition in high contrast, celebrating Del Rey's autonomy to appear however she desires. Most significantly, that this desire is hers. In one way, Del Rey's identity expression links to the idea of the 'narcissistic gaze' that film director Anna Biller identifies as an element within her work drawn from Laura Mulvey's famous essay: the mirrored gaze of a woman revelling in her feminine performance.<sup>6</sup> This gaze is evident when Del Rey is dancing in the Garden; her bearing is sensual and confident. Conversely, the clips of Del Rey dressed as the Virgin Mary show the singer forlornly gazing at herself in a cracked mirror, presumably grieving Eve's bite into the apple. As with identity throughout the work, the moment is a contradiction. In a sense, the grief is genuine; through the prescription of a string of identities (virgin, wife, woman past her prime) grief becomes a part of female life. Women are particularly pressured to feel guilt for any 'loss of innocence'. Mostly, the juxtaposition is a playful

6. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" *Screen* 16, issue 3 (1975). Anna Biller website, 'About' section. Read bell hooks' 'The Oppositional Gaze' for a more well-rounded perspective of women and cinema.

one. The overlaid track ('Body Electric') is already playfully blasphemous, and throughout her work, Del Rey appears unfazed by pressures to adopt a singular identity. If Del Rey is consciously playing with identity tropes, then what is she saying?

Across her work, there are at least three regular processes of reconfiguring power in gendered relations: the grotesque perfectionism of del Rey's identity construction, the grandiose style she uses to describe herself and her lovers, and the recurring act of killing them within her songs.

I'll begin with the first process. Almost all her songs hold traces of female archetypes, frequently collaging motifs of the ingénue, the other woman, the temptress, the scorned lover, and the troubled Hollywood star. Her expressions of the subjectivities range from playful and teasing to disturbing and melancholic, but each tone she conjures is tightly controlled, and her assuredness in self-presentation never wavers. Through an immaculate attention to lyrical detail, Del Rey's personas amass an unassailable troupe of every classically desirable woman. She sings as the loyal wife, the other woman, and the worshipping girlfriend. In her music, there is a juxtaposition between the vulnerability she exposes, and her painstakingly articulated beautification of the emotions expressed. Her commitment to roleplay, particularly due to its consistent depth, enacts a process of grotesque self-manipulation.<sup>7</sup> The tendency seems a contemporary fascination in contemporary culture: the commitment to perfection in self-presentation resembles a self-aware version of Elaine's neuroses in *The Love Witch* (2016). Ultimately, Del Rey's transformation (or transmogrification) of self into art is a masochistic reflection of emotional labour in society today. Her elaborately constructed expressions allow emotional catharsis by listeners, but the scope her performance risks her own emotional condition at the cost of embodying every role that society fantasises a woman will hold. Even this masochism is empowering, just as it is true that in BDSM interactions between dominant and submissive partners, submissives hold the true power of the exchange. However real the submission may feel, it is on grounds accepted by the submissive.

7. See Rémi Astruc's *Le Renouveau Du Grotesque Dans Le Roman Du Xxe Siècle*, in which he frames the grotesque as something which contains doubleness, hybridity and metamorphosis, qualities which strongly describe del Rey's plural identity in her music.

A second allocation of power exists in Del Rey's lyrics. Often noted for her grand and cinematic style, much of her music has the sounds of an epic production, with orchestral backing and lengthy instrumental sections. Her lyrics occupy a similarly elevated space. Though the singer often laments failed romances in her work, mundane relationship problems are nowhere to be found. *"IDying by the hand of a foreign man happily"*, *"you're my cult leader"*, *"someone as dangerous, tainted, and flawed as you"*, and *"you're my religion"* are a few of her phrasings. On the surface, she seems to elevate the men in her songs; in fact, she is reducing them to objects within her larger narrative of love and pain. Their specific elements are insignificant, and the men she speaks of blur together into one troubled man through the opaque terms she uses to describe them. Del Rey asserts emotional detachment and power through her willingness to turn her intimate experiences into plot points, heightened by her disinterest in the ordinary, specific, human elements of the men she sings about.

The singer heightens renegotiations of power to a third, more intense ritual in songs in which she kills her lover. These instances are rare, but speak strongly to a tendency that Love Witch director Anna Biller describes: *"[M]ost or all women have a core inside that's afraid of men – often the same men they are attracted to"*.<sup>8</sup> In many of her songs Del Rey spotlights this fear, and in others she enacts violent role-reversal. In "Kinda Outta Luck", an unreleased track, del Rey sings *"Is it wro-wrong that I think it's kinda fun/When I hit you in the back of the head with a gun?/My daddy's in the trunk of his brand new truck/I really want him back but I'm flat outta luck"*. The lines provide the song's chorus, sugary and biting, charged with adrenaline and flatly lacking remorse. The mood of the song, the murderous lyrics, and the cinematic quality of the composition combine to create an opulent dance track about a party girl who kills for fun. This sounds like something men could be afraid of. Del Rey's pronouncement of murder is equally light-hearted in another unreleased track, "Serial Killer". Del Rey brags, *"Baby I'm a sociopath/sweet serial killer/on the war path/I love you just a little too much"*, in an upbeat pop number with a spare backing beat. Of course, there is a non-literal component of del Rey's 'serial killing', in the sense that she is a seductress who knows she

8. Anna Biller website, 'Other Work' section, 'Bluebeard Movie' subsection.

will win your affection and cast you aside. But there is also an unsettling aspect of the song, through the contrast of its dark lyrics and playful remorselessness, as well as through the inclusion of the word 'sociopath'. Culturally, we imagine sociopaths to be men, and we often discuss this phenomenon with regards to their romantic relations. Upon hearing Del Rey proclaim herself a sociopath who can't help but kill men, one gets the sense that she is empowered by her flippancy. After all, it is women who are expected to be emotionally overwhelmed, and generally men who (wrongly) justify mistreatment with an overabundance of passion. In both of the songs, she voids the universal fear of violence at the hands of men with a vengeful playfulness that intoxicates the listener.

Let's return to my initial reservations. Her work clearly corresponds with larger cultural dialogues surrounding gender, roleplay, relationships, and power. Many times, her songs articulate the complex, contradictory feelings attached to performing female-ness. But there are questions: How can her music be read as wholly empowering when the tropes she relies are often specific to white women? Does her reclamation of the tropes inadvertently endorse racist delineations between white and non-white femininity? Even more glaringly: Can a woman whose music videos feature appropriation of indigenous dress and contemporary Mexican-American subcultures produce empowering work? A wealthy, upper middle-class white woman whose lyrics freely incorporate AAVE? There's more than enough to trouble listeners. Being a white woman myself introduces its own aspects to the analysis: it certainly isn't my place to decide what artists marginalised listeners do or do not find empowering, nor my place to demand that listeners are constantly affirming the scope of empowerment within the music they listen to. What I can say is this: Del Rey's discography is not structured by widespread empowerment. A piece of art which positions itself as universal through the Christian origin story of the universe is not universal when it draws on cultural images tied distinctly to white womanhood, or worse, appropriates images linked to women of colour. Whether or not Del Rey cares about feminism, she is an influential celebrity with a large platform. And her work will continue to speak for itself.



# NARCISSUS

a poem by Saint Torrente,  
with photographs by Poppy Marriott

I was looking into the mirror of the photography studio you were renting.  
You handed me my heels and said "come" and I did.  
They were stilettos, and they came up to my thighs.  
I wear them when I perform, and I love them.

And your giggles from behind the camera, and its clicking, and the flashes of  
lights (that I didn't know were plugged in)  
were the sweetest kisses.  
Because they were terrifying and natural all at once.

I was being kissed and feeling myself negotiating spaces between kisses, with  
my breath held.

Did you see me holding my chest out as my shoulder blades turned?  
Did you see me struggle with where to put my fucking hands?  
Did you see me pointing my eyes at you; then at the back of the room; then at  
the lens,  
then towards a horizon in Asilah that I saw as a child, when my mum  
would take me to Morocco?

(That's obtuse, but I've been seeing a speech therapist and she tells me weird  
visual cues like that to get me to adjust my posture.)

When I was that age I was just learning "boy"  
And staring into big water and seeing my reflection, and wishing I could swim,  
And staring into my reflection became a pastime.

So when I get home from our shoot, and see that you've sent me a Dropbox  
folder,  
I pick the eyelash glue from my face and rub the last bits of paint out of my  
eyebrows.  
And I open the photos up, surprised.

I notice I look like some nymph.

It takes a moment, but I realise that this abstracted version of myself,  
Through your camera, and covered in flowers, and gawking slack-jawed into  
the middle distance,  
Is the most gender I have ever felt,  
And I wish I could feel that much gender all the time.





Last New Year's Eve I got set up with a tuxedo, and when I looked in the mirror  
I hated myself,  
I thought I looked like a daemon and I didn't know how to reconcile my mother  
telling me I was handsome.  
And when I told my dad how I felt he furrowed his brow and scoffed.  
He had just bought me a suit, to be fair (when she is ready I will get her some  
Judith Butler).

But these photos feel different.  
And they cannot change like I can, but I can see myself changed in them.  
And for the next few days I catch glances of myself in mirrors and think  
"beautiful?"  
But probably not... still a boy...

When I show a photo to my friend Laurie he agrees that I look feminine, and  
maybe it's all for real. ■



In "*Imitation and Gender Subordination*," Judith Butler states "*since I was 16 being a lesbian is what I have been.*" The sentence, peculiar in its syntax, alludes to the opposing philosophical realms of performativity and ontology. Butler's aim as an academic is to impart a philosophical and political intervention in gender studies. Where other scholars, such as Foucault, focus on historicity in the study of sexuality, Butler's approach is rooted in ontology— the philosophy of being. Much of the scholar's work serves to point out that being is different to "be being." Ontology is preoccupied with the being and existence of things and is often contrasted with agency, the doing of things, the performance of acts. Butler argues that the performative, to a certain degree, seeps into the ontological.

Emilio Bianchic is an artist that examines the notions of performativity, being and identity through unconventional means: notably, through the practice of nail art. In her piece on the significance of nails within fine art, Kerry Doran argues that this medium carries symbolic value as "*the province of those who are relegated to supporting roles societally,*" – usually a feminine trope within the service economy. The writer, however, states the case for nail art as the ultimate democratic medium and this is visible in Bianchic's work. In their 2014 video piece EASY SIMPLE NAIL ART TUTORIAL FREE FEMINIST FIFA LANA DEL REY ROAR, a "*gender conscious free nail art tutorial,*" Bianchic proclaims that everyone has nails and everyone can be an artist. Throughout the piece, the artist provides tongue-in-cheek instructions that border on the absurd. For instance, Bianchic instructs the viewer to draw a horizontal jade line through their nails in order to destroy the patriarchy; they recommend using a cotton bud to eliminate the traces of any excess nail varnish, in the same way one can eliminate their "*sexist, heteronormative and phallogocentric attitudes.*"

Impractica II (2016) is another example of Bianchic's confluence of nail and high art. In this piece, the artist examines the manufacturing of identities and their uselessness in the real and virtual world. The video piece, which translates to 'impractical,' shows the artist screwing in lightbulbs with outlandishly long acrylic nails. Once the lightbulb is installed and functional, the video abruptly cuts to a new light fixture, where the artist can be seen performing this same act – the task begins to feel Sisyphean. Bianchic's nails serve as a statement against usefulness and practicality and as an interesting statement regarding queer productivity. Through their nails, the artist functions at the intersection of the absurd and the scholarly, popular culture and high art.

Bianchic's practice uses the nail as a blank canvas and a plinth – a medium that at once embodies anonymity but is also deeply personal. In 2013 the artist gained access to an exclusive Facebook group for Latin American nail professionals, marking their acceptance into the forum by posting a picture of a leopard print design on their toenails. The post garnered thousands of comments, most of which centered around their gender identity – the size of their feet, the hair on their toes – many questioned whether they were a man or a woman. Bianchic converts the photograph and its platforms – Facebook and Instagram – as sites of performance. Similarly, Bianchic's video collective BasicTV (which translates to Basic TV) describe all their videos as performance. The trio utilise a mixture of trash culture, pop and the banal in extremes, demonstrating that facets of sexual identity can be performed. BasicTV's Youtube channel features tutorials such as How to Wash a Car (2014), a reenactment of every objectifying Hollywood car-wash scene that has ever existed. In Conceal (2018), what initially appears to be a make-up tutorial, devolves into a surreal, digitally manipulated morphing and concealing of bodies. Frenemies (2017), is simply a choreographed dance to Kelly Rowland's Kisses Down Low. This collection of videos is not too dissimilar from the content you may find someone in their early teens making or subscribing to, but their overstated performances point towards something slightly different.

In stating that "*being a lesbian is what I have been*" Butler is not arguing that sexuality is simply a performance, rather, that the boundaries between ontology and performativity are not as distinctly marked as is traditionally believed. Similarly, Bianchic's work pushes the notion of performativity to its absolute boundaries. The artist blurs the lines between the lens-based media the artist uses to document their nails and the medium of performance, suggesting a new reading of video and photography as performance. Latin American Pop Art has always differed from its Euro-American counterparts in its inherently political subject matter – Bianchic's work is no different. The artist's nails serve as an act of defiance against traditional gender and sexual identities. ●



~  
*I Will Be  
the First Person  
to Have Sex in  
Manhattan*  
~

A POEM BY ARON CANTER AND HOLDEN TAYLOR,  
WITH ART BY GEORGE MORTON

**X.** The distance between my life and my imagination eroticized: two people fucking but not touching; two people masturbating in opposite corners of a large room otherwise reserved for galas and elaborate weddings: where people profess love that doesn't or couldn't exist; two people that see but can't hear each other; two people that can't say what they are thinking and desiring, but they are thinking and desiring the same thing: each other.

My circumstances are again conspiring against the cultivation of my talent. One day one of us will realize the futility of our efforts.

**X.** A north-south block in Manhattan is .05 of a mile: in this distance there exists you and I and thousands of others: there exists possible energies between and because of us: there are steps and missteps and stumbles and we bump into each other and meet and there are sparks or no sparks or love or erotic energy expanding and exploding: we touch and become, briefly, one: people around us aggrieve us for our respite, our unmovement: the machine, because of our embrace, has slowed, is in gridlock: a bottom line not met but we have met and maybe together we head uptown, sixty odd blocks, to the Met and hide within its erotic confines.

**X.** Can we please, if you may, discuss the varying eroticism of cities: we cannot do so comprehensively or with much authority (we have only had select sex in a select few cities) but:

DC is not an erotic city, could never be an erotic city (the baggy suits the sad sacks swim in do not allow for much excitement). New York thinks of itself erotic, and is, but the stiff necks are doing everything they can to paint it vanilla — and I am culpable. Dallas is a dirty, glitzy place that has an eroticism but a shameful one — it is garish and patriotic (I can't maintain an erection if there is, in any periphery, a waving flag). Portland is whatever erotic is not, which some people can get into — mostly whites with pretensions and strange fixations on farmer's markets. I've never been to Phoenix and hopefully never will; I sense a latent, insidious eroticism there that isn't what I'm into: what's more, in the sense that it should not exist, neither then should people fuck within its confines (in doing so they only perpetuate its unlawful being).

San Francisco, a hometown of sorts, is flaccid and of poor texture — too much goretex and too many windbreakers, too many start-up athleisure wool shoes — I've seen the best minds of my generation hysterically naked in their quest to make the feet of rich folk more comfortable, starving themselves in tepid coastal weather as they construct powerpoint presentations for angelheaded investors. New Orleans is erotic and often drunk; there is sex in the swamps and under the oak trees — in New Orleans people can fuck freely, or I imagine it this way: there is pain and beauty there.

Anything unknown is erotic, so that covers everything I don't have a real sense of. Maybe I should move someplace where the erotics speak to the shifting tides that make me, to the places I've been at and am launching towards, maybe there is a cogent ethic to all of this.

New York is erotic because it must be (if it weren't where else would we go?) — it has folds in years and boroughs. Staten Island is erotic in its macho queer-ness; I am (you are) Staten Island. Manhattan, I imagine, was once the erotic capital of the world, now it has such tight cheeks its bowel movements (the L train, the F, the A, the 2) have halted and stalled, are incessantly slow — there is an intimate relationship between erotic energies and other, presumably, unerotic bodily (civic) functions: chaos can be erotic but chaos in the form of dysfunction is, well, dysfunctional. There are too many — this being either cause or symptom — temperature-controlled doghouses perched outside of grocery stores for most unbalanced folk to get off.

The eroticism that is downtown is projected and forged from success so violent as to have festered nonconsensually. I don't think — and if I recall correctly there are studies on this — people have sex in Manhattan anymore; maybe they never have. They go elsewhere. Or abstain wholly. No masturbation either. Very little touching. Like the Shakers.

**X.** I can confirm after years of study — archaeological and palliative, survey and psychoanalytic dissection — no one has ever had sex in Manhattan but I will be the first:

**X.** I am both walking through Manhattan and recreating the touch, the seen, the felt distance that made such an impression.

**X.** I will be the first artist in Manhattan since Patrick Ewing. I will be the first person to have sex in Manhattan. Kristaps, even, is not having sex in Manhattan. Only in the offseason, in Latvia: sources, they are saying.

I will have consensual and beautiful sex in every neighborhood in Manhattan aside from Tribeca; there I do not think I could perform.

I will give a handjob in Washington Square Park (directly underneath the Ai Wei Wei installation and it will be profound). I will be on the receiving end on Canal St. There will be simultaneous orgasms in a jewelry repair shop on the Upper East Side, just out of reach of the Met's gaze and it will be glorious and beautiful: legends of this trust will be tacked along to every transaction tendered within the building (a broken gold necklace fixed and imbued with ecstasy).

I will be John Starks on the baseline!

If not then surely it will be Franky "Smokes" Ntilikina who will be the first artist in New York: he will remain ever young and wiry and stout and a thin French cigarette will dangle ever gently from between his two lips; he will be an icon, a star, transcendent and humble and he will compel, we pray, New York back to its rightful eroticism.

**X.** New York is the hours I spend lying horizontal, fixated; Manhattan is that cultivated imagination. As I am the circumstances that conspire against me, I envelope in the city as I enveloped erotically, and the touch, the seen is recreated in tension, in the language of music, in sense. Oh the distance is everything, remember that: remember that this essay is about distance, despite the fostered meanderings that may pique your intellect (which is, itself, a form of distance). It occurs to me that the how of I am typing, the just so as I am pressing against these keys, reflects the how of my press from just last night as I pressed into my lover's back, and the sense of being seen and being needed, the sense of fullness and knowing is reignited.

**X.** People in Manhattan eat too many salads to have sex: I think this is fundamental to their erotic purgatory, their interpretation of the American experience. They are doing too much cocaine and eating too many salads to be erotically involved in any manner. It is true that leafy greens are assuredly erotic: their deep colors pantomime coital eye-contact (the chroma of the iris, the shifting radiance of skin), the crunch as they give way to teeth is the threshold we toy with: when prepared with touch these are aphrodisiacs, are foreplay, are love.

But it is sad, it is sad the way these salads are tossed by latex-gloved hands behind smudgeless glass: hairnets and white aprons with startup logos on chests: they do not want to toss this salad but they do so so quickly, so very efficiently: ergonomic is the antithesis of the erotic: fitbits and keurig machines: could you fuck well if your orgasm existed, foremost and prematurely, in the space between cells of a google spreadsheet shared with you by a potential partner.

It is sad, maybe most so, how nourishing these salads portend to be: how our experience of our consumption of them is exquisite and sensational and, by and large, empty. A void composed of arugula and unsalted walnuts dressed in a red beet vinaigrette.

**X.** Each block of Williamsburg has, quickly, gone away from any semblance of eroticism: Metropolitan Ave is now where they parade their eroticlessness daily: which is to be, starkly and explicitly differentiated from exhibitions of asexuality or celibacy: these being approaches veritable and celebrated: these being dispositions imbued with selfhood and nuance rather than the (corporate) imposition of the unerotic: the lycra-hiding of the erogenous, the dry and mass institutionalizing of sterility and polite luxury: a prioritization of comfort over its foil pushed through mailchimp newsletters: a triumph of mindless consumption over mindful (erotic) interaction and combustion.

Ironically: the birth rate here has maintained: people are not fucking but are creating new (sexless) lives that they push about in plush strollers (which, in turn, further divorce us, the innocent and wanting, from greener pastures).

**X.** I will be the first artist since Walt Bellamy and Bernard King. The first artist since Andy Warhol but he ruined it so I won't include him. The first artist that still cares and the first artist that does it for its own sake, on its own. I'll be the first artist that drinks, it's amazing that every artist until now has not only been unerotic but sober. I'll be the first artist that does my art not obsessively, not as a lifestyle (not as a brand), but because with it life springs forward and without it life is just what it is: sexless, flaccid, patriotic and political: unsexed and vexless.

**X.** If I give up on wanting, will things begin to fall into place as I had imagined, or will I be willless, without will: you see we don't (nor does anyone really) care whether you have sex or fuck or get fucked in Manhattan, in New York, in Albany or even in San Jose (bless you, San Jose). That's not what this is about; it couldn't be.

Because a private matter remains ever a private matter (even when exhibited).

But there is, you see, sex in these streets: sex in these bodegas, in our forever open retail stores and endless shitty bars, slithering in between painted-on bicycle lanes there is sex, there is the erotic in our manholes, there is the engaged and turned on blinking in the greens and yellows of our stoplights, of the red of the stop sign, there is sex and its energy supporting the suspension of both the Williamsburg and Manhattan bridges; there is sex connecting the burroughs, it is underground too; the subway seats they stick, you see: there is an energy we swim in and are subjected to and this, not who fucks or how, is our concern.

**X.** A confession before we go any further: I'm a quitter. It's an important and versatile aspect of my personality, and it's erotic, which is why I don't belong here. Maybe I should move some place where the variance of my ideas and the imbalance of my equilibrium allow for all that which resides within me to not just whisper out of my body but to flow from me, the way I always imagined it, the way I intended it. My belief in myself is being tested.

Maybe I should move someplace where I will love my art, maybe staying put is keeping me from it, maybe there is a logical ethics to all of this. Maybe this place is: Oakland but I've heard rumors its losing ground to the creeping capitalists across the water. Maybe it is, better, Berlin where I can express myself erotically (what is more erotic than an expat: shunning the one born-label we can): where I can fuck with a flag in my face because that flag cannot, no matter its width or breadth, wrap its stripes around my naked body.

**X.** If I confess will that make me better: if I confront my bad thoughts where will that take me: I am the face of society and all of its harms reside in me.

**X.** I am the body of culture and all of its sickness is festering: the silence is a reckoning itself, and I accept culpability.

**X.** I can't keep ahold of my ideas, though I believe in them, though they should be honored. My imagination and I are staring at each other and at the same distance in front of us. My imagination fosters a city of consensual sex with firm, blooming foundations. This is like the green cities in Planet Earth and the green cities in Dr. Seuss and the green cities in science fiction and the green cities no amount of money can muster and no amount of activity can actualize with no chance to be realized but still I see it. My imagination and I are staring at each other and at the same distance and we see the same thing: the first artist in New York City in centuries, sexed, so sexed, and it's Whitman, again, singing to me.

**X.** Who you fuck is political and New York City has gone apolitical and it makes me sad. It makes me angry (and then sort of aroused).

**X.** I will eat peanut butter to show my support for sex (do you want to share a jar?). There are rumors that De Blasio, Big Bird, is having sex in Queens but these are unsubstantiated and licentious. Maybe I have heard wrong and he has been having sex with Queens in the secluded saunas of the Park Slope YMCA before work but this too is unsubstantiated and potentially licentious. Hilton Als has sex, I think, but I do not know where. They want to try him as a criminal but we won't allow it. If people in Manhattan masturbated using only their imaginations maybe the world could be good again. There is no Tinder or Grindr in New York only a sexless app they call Bumble which compels people toward unaware celibacy and has only contributed to the sorry state we find ourselves in.

Instead of being an artist, I'm going to work on my body, I will become the underwear model of my dreams. I don't think I wanted to make art to be a big shot, but at this point who is to say, the distance between that version of myself and who I am now is the distance between any two people that do not share a life.

**X.** There have, in the last ten years, been, I think, upwards of four relationships forged in all of Manhattan. They each lasted, roughly, three years and never once did any of them result in sex. They were merely arrangements of comfort and economy. Sometimes participants of these arrangements fled for the greener grounds of New Jersey to have sex but there they felt shamed and listless: because the norms of one's home stick like prejudice and scar. We, though, remain in the city and it is wonderful, albeit weathered and frigid.

**X.** See: you and I will go to the the most Manhattan of buildings — the Metropolitan Opera House or the Guggenheim or Gracie Mansion or Madison Square Garden or some ugly and sexless luxury tower somewhere, (somehow) in Williamsburg, which is more Manhattan than Manhattan these days — and you and I will go to the top floor, we'll take the stairs, and sit cozily with one another admiring the view and all it has to give: the horizon line will reach far beyond any recognizable area, but nonetheless it will still be Manhattan (it will always be Manhattan): I will see you and I: I am painting with Hockney in my ear whispering his queer direction; I am dribbling a ball with Clyde guarding me tight, his hand controlling the helm of my waist, guiding and suggesting permission; you are singing with Charlie Parker providing you gravity and momentum; you are writing poetry with Whitman as your editor, your muse, he stands before you naked and unmoving (aside from his batting eyes): you, beautiful in the midmorning light, are an artist fully articulated and I a performer in the Village, twice nightly, and daily we are reading to ourselves in Manhattan (as it is its own language): we are doing it honest, realized: the park sprawls behind us not as a backdrop but a history, not as decoration but as necessary to the worlds we express and our sentiments, they are seamless and unmoored. ■





# CONTRIBUTORS

### NAILS ART AS AN ACT OF DEFIANCE: EMILIO BIANCHIC'S NAIL ART

• **DIEGO CHOCANO** is a UK based curator and art historian from Peru. Having lived in seven different countries and being of both indigenous and European descent, he has dedicated his career to decolonial theory and the decolonial practice of exhibition making. In 2016 Chocano published *Ars Poetica* a printed publication exploring the colonial nature of language and the subversive potential of translation theory. The publication has featured in various exhibitions and art book fairs at institutions including the Museum of Modern Art and Convoi Gallery in Buenos Aires, as well as Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh.

### I WILL BE THE FIRST PERSON TO HAVE SEX IN MANHATTAN

• **ARON CANTER** is a poet and a essayist. He formerly made performance art with A Theater Genesis and is a background actor at The Met.

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### TWILIGHT ZONE: WEIRD WOMEN

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### TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELFIE(S)

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• **POPPY MARRIOTT** is a non-binary film photographer & visual artist from London who focuses on documenting women & LGBTQIA+ people in the arts. They're a triple water sign and fascinated by witches. Their ongoing project 'tilted' aims to provide real representation of gender-non-conforming folk by creating strong, powerful images of people who identify outside of the strict gender binaries we've all had forced on us from birth.

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• **NATALIE MAVROTA** considers herself as a creator of all sorts, mainly focused on illustration and graphic design. She is based in Athens, Greece. She is fixated on exploring popular beliefs of the past and the future. Her current big project is an illustrated book of medieval Greek tales.

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### IMMIGRANTS, WE GET THE JOB DONE? HAMILTON, RACE AND REPRESENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY THEATRE

### NARCISSUS

### ILLUSTRATION

### COVER AND ILLUSTRATIONS

**I WILL BE THE FIRST  
PERSON TO HAVE  
SEX IN MANHATTAN**

• **GEORGE MORTON** is a London based illustrator. His work largely uses bold, contrasting colours combined with the occasional (tasteful) nude, dog or flower arrangement. While he works mostly with editorial clients, his personal work focusses mostly around portraiture and still life pieces.

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**KILL! KILL!  
ROLEPLAY, MURDER  
FANTASIES, AND THE  
GROTESQUE IN THE  
WORK OF LANA  
DEL REY**

• **KATE PEEBLES** is an art historian and writer based in Edinburgh. She curated the 2017 exhibition National Anthem at The Number Shop Gallery which raised the money for the Scottish Refugee Council and the American Civil Liberties Union. Her research interests include performative identity, art world inequalities, the politics of urban planning and design, and the American South. Non-academic interests include Matthew McConaughey and chihuahuas. She is originally from Texas.

**TECHNOLOGIES OF  
THE SELFIE(S)**

• **DILSHANIE PERERA** is a writer and ethnographer based in the United States. She writes about meteorological imagination, predatory capitalism, visual culture, and environmental degradation, among other topics. She has conducted research in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and is currently working on a book project about cyclones, changing landscapes, and visualization in weather forecasting.

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**NIGHTHAWKS AT THE  
DINER / OF EMMA'S  
49ER THERE'S A  
RENDEZVOUS....**

• **KATE SCOTT** is a community manager based in London. When her first love, the MTV reality show Rich Girls, ended, she knew she would devote the rest of her life to the study and appreciation of pop culture ephemera. Since then, she's put aside any IRL hobbies or pursuits, and devoted countless hours to social media and memes, yielding absolutely nothing.

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**TWILIGHT ZONE:  
WEIRD WOMEN**

• **SOH KAY MIN** is an arts practitioner working between the intersections of contemporary art and critical theory. She is interested in the performativity of writing as an artistic and aesthetic method, taking an experimental approach to the practice of writing to perform, through text, her various preoccupations which range from the history of colonial conquest to its contemporary capitalist manifestations to intersectional feminism. Kay Min currently works at the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, and is also co-organiser of independent initiative *A Weekend Affair*, an art symposium-festival addressing the specificities of her home city Singapore's relationship with coloniality and capital.

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• **BEE TAJUDEEN** is a curator and the founder of Black Blossoms, a platform which promotes black women artists and creatives by hosting regular exhibitions, panels, and screenings throughout the United Kingdom. Currently, Bee is studying a PgCert in Academic Practice: Art, Design and Communication at UAL, and will begin teaching a course 'Art in the Age of Black Girl Magic' at Tate Britain in October 2018. She hopes to inspire a new generation of artists and art professionals to tackle socio-political issues through their creative practices.

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**I WILL BE THE FIRST  
PERSON TO HAVE  
SEX IN MANHATTAN**

**THE FACE THAT  
LAUNCHED A  
THOUSAND SHIP:  
NAVIGATING THE  
ARTS IS  
SCANDALOUS**

## NARCISSUS

• **SAINT TORRENTE** is a singer, producer, writer and performer based in South East London. Bringing together bombastic pop music, dance, theatre and performance art, they perform at music venues and queer cabaret spaces around London. They also host and curate Nightplayer, a regular pop music and performance night at Rye Wax in Peckham. Originally from Gibraltar, their work is centred in the intersection of popular and queer culture, positioning the pop star and the drag queen as today's foremost cultural commentators.

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## AN EYE FOR AN EYE

• **MEL REEVE** is an archivist and writer living in Glasgow with her enormous cat. She had an essay on surviving sexual assault published in 404 Ink's Nasty Women, and an essay on LGBTQ+ history published in Monstrous Regiment's 'The Bible' anthology. She has had creative writing published in The London Reader, 404 Ink's lit mags and more. She is also part of fear of making art press ([@fomapress](#)), a small zine distro based in Glasgow, and is part of Glasgow Zine Library.

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NIGHTHAWKS AT THE  
DINER / OF EMMA'S  
49ER THERE'S A  
RENDEZVOUS....

• **SHAMANTHI RAJASINGHAM** is an artist and illustrator from Colombo, Sri Lanka, currently based in Sydney, Australia. In her art, she explores the subtle complexities of paradigms and metacognition, creating works that evoke introspection. Her work has been shown in leading Sri Lankan galleries, and she has been featured in Imago Mundi's publication on notable Sri Lankan contemporary artists.

Her illustration work has been commissioned by clients including Penguin Random House and the Indian Quarterly. Her mural work has been commissioned by clients in both corporate and community-based fields.

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MINI-PRINT AND  
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# F U N D T H E A R T S

**XXY MAGAZINE:** XXY magazine is a non-binary fashion, design, culture, and politics magazine for misrepresented voices. [@xxymagazine](#)

**DARDISHI FESTIVAL:** an anti-racist feminist zine and festival for Arab and North African womxn's art and literature. [@dardishi](#)

**EMOTIONAL ART MAGAZINE:** a magazine feeling its way through art - Issue #1 all about hating the Tories. [@emotionalartmag](#)

**CWDT:** Art, Vibes, Mayhem - London's most intense and funky art shows. [@cwdtldn](#)

**WAIA:** un média pour les femmes millenials noires et francophones. [@waiafr](#)

**FEMME COLLECTIVE:** London based project dedicated to increasing gender equality in the music industry. [@femmecollective](#)

**BI HISTORY:** Exploring the history of bisexuality and highlighting the role of bi activists in the LGBTQ+ history. [@bihistory](#)

**THE GREAT WOMEN ARTISTS:** Celebrating female art daily. [@thegreatwomenartitsts](#)

**SPIT COLLECTIVE:** a collective based in Edinburgh and Glasgow dedicated to creating space for underrepresented and misrepresented identities and experiences. [@spitcollective](#)

**SECOND SHELF BOOKS:** Bookshop of rare books, first editions, and re-discovered works by women at 14 smiths Court in London. [@secondshelfbooks](#)

**QUEER APALACHIA:** A celebration of queer voices and identities from Appalachia and the South. [#ruralresistance](#) [@queerappalachia](#)

**MESH MAGAZINE:** printed magazine exploring vulnerability based in Montréal. [@mesh.magazine](#)

**CONDO COMPLEX:** Collaborative exhibitions between galleries. London | New York | Mexico City | Shanghai | Sao Paulo. [@condo\\_complex](#)

**FASHION REVOLUTION:** Global movement calling for greater transparency in the fashion industry [@fash\\_rev](#)

**ART HISTORY BABES:** Corrie, Nat, Ginny & Jen drink wine and discuss all things visual culture. Podcasts and videos weekly / art daily / memes always. [@arthistorybabespodcast](#)

**AFC SADLADS:** expressing football through music, film and art. [@footballarthistory](#)

**LESBIAN ART HISTORY:** Just three lesbians with opinions on art. [@LesbianArtHist](#) (on Twitter)

Fund The Arts is an ever growing list of organisations doing great and needed work in the arts, that you can donate your time, money and/or attention to. If you run one, or know one, please let us know by keeping in touch at [tabloidarthistory@outlook.com](#), or via our twitter [@TabloidArtHist](#) and instagram [@tabloidarthistory](#).

We are interested in all forms of individual and group actions, collective, organisations, blogs, press, charities, internet corners. This list has been compiled from submissions by the TAH team, and our followers on Social Media.



