

Let's talk about Gender, Baby!¹

**Analysis of a return of feminist themes in contemporary art
in connection to popular culture**

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¹ Planningerock, Song title, 2013

This particular baby has been raised in quite a specific way, shielded for the first years of its life from any kind of gender-conception going beyond the physical differences between a man and a woman. Its parents and their friends, being not particularly gender-role-conformist themselves, helped establish a diverse view of people as distinctive individuals rather than a focus on somebody's coincidental gender. It vaguely recalls entering the first social environment in which it experienced how clearly already children identify with the roles attributed to their sex.

Obviously I cannot say that I have not been influenced in other ways, or by other parties and factors, but overall I feel okay with being female and also what might be considered to be “feminine” aspects of my personality or appearance, without making it too big a part of my identity. I have never suffered from being born a woman, but I know that people have and still do, and on the other hand men's personalities are shaped after a mold that simply cannot apply to every human with a y-chromosome. It seems terribly unlikely and also rather boring, if it were true. As I don't see my view on this subject-matter reflected in the world surrounding me, I have been preoccupied with the issue for quite some time, combining sociological, psychological as well as aesthetic interests. I feel a sense of obligation to form a critical position in this respect as the triviality that is often ascribed to the subject leaves an unpleasant aftertaste. Anyone declaring feminism to be passé or a boring conversation topic about something that has already been resolved, is clearly facilitating a repressive system, whether it be with bad intention or just out of inconsideration. It has become apparent that also the historical exploitation of women (or at least its relevance today) is being denied, without any valid argument, instead with much conviction and confidence. This complicates discussing the topic.

Through this general interest and coming from a possibly privileged pre-disposition, I have developed a more concentrated fascination with the diversity of female or feminist identity and its self-representation, specifically in contemporary art and under consideration of the significance of the internet. After giving an overview on the actuality of the subject and its broader (pop-)cultural context today, I will use exemplary artists and works in order to identify and define the large variety of positions and approaches, and also specify my own position towards them. Eventually I aim to overcome some of my conditioning and pre-conceptions. As the status of women is still varied all over the world I find it important to stress I will be considering a primarily Western view.

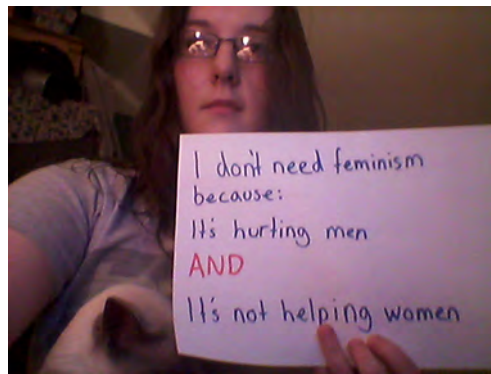


The New F-Word

The term “feminism”² seems to be incredibly diluted and polluted through decades of misinterpretation and overuse, it has become dirty, toxic, the new F-word. So unpopular in fact that only a very small portion of humanity wishes to associate themselves with it. Numerous people today seem to feel the need to explicitly distance themselves from the label, some in more reflected

² Oxford dictionary: The advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes.

ways, like Susan Sarandon claiming to rather describe her position as a humanist³ one, to be taken more serious in the discussion and be less alienated by feminism's negative connotations of man-hating etc. She instead focusses on the obvious claim for equality and a balance of the two genders (which strangely often is not seen to be the interest of feminism). Or, in less reflected ways, like Salma Hayek, another celebrity to publicly dissociate herself from the word when she received an "Equality Now" award (of all situations!) and stated "I am not a feminist. If men were going through the things women are going through today, I would be fighting for them with just as much passion. I believe in equality", a statement which she by now has revised a bit. It seemed absurd that she as an activist for equality would shy away from declaring herself a feminist, but this only shows just how much negativity and bizarre notions are by now associated with the label. Also pretty much every woman that took the time to upload her opinion and a picture of herself on womenagainstofeminism.tumblr.com⁴, participates in making it once again crystal clear that even people openly sharing their opinion can be extremely uninformed about and misled by the thing they are taking a stand against.



It is quite apparent that more women than men are at all busy with the subject, which might seem "natural" but adds to the complications around the term. When attempting to speak with some men about the subject, a frequent response still seems to be a sort of conditioned fatigue and enervation towards it, as well as a pre-conception that talking about feminism automatically requires one to defend oneself as a man. This should not be a necessity at all, but makes a discussion so much more hard if not impossible in some cases. On the contrary it seems to be a necessity to redefine the parameters of the discussion around feminisms and find a tone that allows everyone to add to it without the paralyzing fear of saying something un-feminist, especially considering the entanglement with queer issues and the multitude of feminist strains. Which leads to another misconception, the idea that all feminists agree on everything and share the same ideals, which is not just very unlikely but also empirically wrong.

The numerous misunderstandings also include the assumption that feminism is equivalent for a strive towards matriarchy, or even worse, mysandric tendencies, while I presume that for the majority of self-identified feminists this is not the case at all.

The problem is that partaking in, or distancing oneself from something should always be based on consideration, observation and forming an opinion on and a position towards something, not on half-cooked beliefs that have been primarily adapted or misunderstood rather than contemplated. It is unreasonable to expect someone to accept a persons position if their opinion is not communicated well or clearly based on ignorance. (This obviously is a rule applicable to both sides, a lot of the contemporary feminism is terribly uninformed, humorless and self-referential, infantilizing its own agenda by not taking their opponent seriously but rather celebrating everybody who is, by coinci-

³ This could be misleading as the term is primarily used to describe a rationalist approach or system of thought emphasizing on the human rather than supernatural matters. The attempted statement is probably that the focus should lie on both sexes rather than just the female part of humanity. Adds to the confusion about the term.

dence, female⁵.) It is problematic that meeting this kind of blind sentiment with anger or clichéd phrases, repeating what has formed the misinterpretation in the first place, will not change any point of view. In addition to that, the blurred definition makes it harder and much more energy-consuming to identify as feminist or even openly disagree with a slightly sexist statement. Writer Evie Wyld put a finger on it when she said in an Interview:

“Feminism is a misused word, and I like to feel like I’m a feminist. But there are days when I’m tired and shy and feel like I don’t want to live up to that, and let myself be squeezed out of a sexist conversation. Part of the problem of being a feminist is that you feel you have to be actively doing things to relieve women’s plight. Actually, what feminism is is just thinking we should have the same rights as men.”⁶

It is important to clarify, that not every feminist stands for or wants exclusively the same things. A new way of discussion and an updated, diversified and more accurate vocabulary seems appropriate, if not necessary to bring the issues further in any way and particularly to include people that felt left out in the conversation or unaffected by the subject-matter so far.⁷

I find the obvious urge of dissociation from the label confusing, as it strikes me as much more sensible to just redefine the term better and with much more subtlety, rather than supporting its misinterpretation by shunning it as well.

Why the feminist issue is so very “today”

There recently has been a noticeable re-occurrence of critical positions or at least somewhat raised awareness towards existing gender-roles and identities, a veritable feminism-buzz. It is likely the first time since the 70's that it is permeating the public sphere to this extent. That might be connected to the increasingly liberal atmosphere within western society, and a higher tolerance threshold and permissiveness of mainstream media; it certainly is materializing within all sorts of different fractions of contemporary culture. It still seems a necessity to define the position of the woman within society, even though the status of women has been declared to be equal to the status of the man in the human rights and the legislation of many countries in the second half of the last century.

Generally spoken, there has been a definite shift in the public reception, self-perception and interest range of participants of the so-called 3rd⁴ or by now even 4th wave feminisms. While I am highly skeptical towards the generalizing of everyone interested in the topic of feminism into a homogenous mass, I rather mean to stress that on the academic stage the focus has widened from what has really never just been about women's liberation, to queer theory, sex work, the abolition of gender roles, sex- and porn-positivity, non-western women and very much also on incorporating men into the discussion and anticipated change of paradigms (because really, why shouldn't they be included and interested?).

A feminism informed by post-modern thinking where notions of body, queerness, gender, sexuality and hetero-normativity have been destabilized and the role of language in reinforcing inequality has become apparent. One focus of postmodern feminism is to show the construction of gendered identity.⁵ Noticeable is a distancing from the second wave feminism, as it seeks to be much less universal.

Next to the continuous academic discourse, people with a large variety of backgrounds and metiers suddenly seem to be occupied with the subjects of gender-inequality and/or non-relatable stereotypes, the theme has quite widely and vaguely permeated mainstream culture. Videos about

⁴ Rebecca Walker, *Becoming the Third Wave*, in *Ms.* (January/February 1992) pp. 39-41.

⁵ http://www98.griffith.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/handle/10072/38904/66824_1.pdf?sequence=1

street harassment go viral⁶ the book tour of the young American director/actress/author Lena Dunham for *Not that kind of girl*⁷ is pretty much sold out everywhere (plus of course there is endless but also often rather simplified discussions on whether her HBO TV-show *GIRLS* is in fact feminist, racist or just all-together uninteresting) and Emma Watson is the new poster-woman for an inclusive feminism after holding a speech at the UN for the launch of a new campaign called *He for She*⁸. There was Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Ted-talk titled *We should all be feminists*⁹ which was promptly sampled by Beyoncé in her song *Flawless* in 2014. The former Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg (who was ranked #10 of the 50 "Most Powerful Women in Business" by *Fortune* Magazine in 2014), released her book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*¹⁰, she also sponsored the recent *Ban Bossy* campaign¹¹. Even Beyoncé's dubious take on feminism seems worthy of broad discussion in the media and is interpreted to be "inspiring"¹², while in my opinion it is not reflecting feminism in all its diverse meanings, but is instead a performance of female power and success in the show-business that ignores a number of crucial factors. There is a clear discrepancy between her claim to be a "modern feminist" and the continuous objectification of her own body. I still think it is great and very important that she is publicly standing up for equality and by associating herself with feminism showing the broad variety of opinions and appearances of feminists.



Society seemingly lets non-threatening, mostly rather feminine women take the stage and allows for them to become a figurehead of a soft feminism, instead of really inspiring progression or questioning the standards of a still patriarchal system. It is possible that these women are not even aware of their exploitation, as they can easily be distracted by the engorging effect of fame on the human ego. It makes perfect sense that any position more radical is being invalidated by characterizing it as emotionalized and aggressive, but this is also so obvious that it can be surprising to see how large the part of the population partaking in this defamation is.

There has materialized a populist and rather unreflective form of feminism that is commercial, a symbolically charged commodity highly compatible with capitalist interests and resembling a sort of brand, as could be observed on Karl Lagerfeld's Chanel catwalk at Paris Fashion Week, where half boiled feminist slogans¹³ on demonstration signs were carried by the usual array of skinny,

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1XGPvbWn0A>

⁷ Dunham, Lena (2014): *Not that kind of girl*. [A young woman tells you what she's "learned"]. New York: Random House.

⁸ <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2014/9/emma-watson-gender-equality-is-your-issue-too>

⁹ Adichie, Chimamanda (2013): *We should all be feminists*. TEDxEuston, Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU_qWc

¹⁰ Sandberg, Sheryl; Scovell, Nell (2013): *Lean in. Women, work, and the will to lead*; New York: Knopf.

¹¹ Campaign to prevent a confidence gap between genders based on how assertive boys are "leaders" while assertive girls are referred to as "bossy". (<http://banbossy.com/>)

¹² <http://mic.com/articles/77147/15-most-inspiring-feminist-beyonce-quotes>

¹³ E. g. "History is Herstory", "Women's Rights are more than Alright", "Ladies First", "Feminism not Masochism" and "We can match the Machos"

ethereal creatures, seemingly empowered but really just puppets in a play of the master of (fashion world)misogyny. This form of superficial feminism is easily digestible and not too hardcore to be on board with, even for the unconvinced, but it is also simply a catwalk of platitudes, as opposed to real reflection and action.



This aspect is not to be confused with an accurate and invested examination of actual tendencies and cultural phenomena. It has been referred to as Feminism™ by philosopher and lecturer Nina Power, who also stresses that not all that is concerning itself with feminist topics and is popular necessarily fits that category. While for example the aforementioned TV-series *GIRLS* might not be quite as subversive as it could be, it is still “doing something interesting” and depicting a definite shift within the post- *Sex and the City*- generation¹⁴.

The significant change to a much more individualist manner of living incorporates a very distinct focus on self-discovery and -fulfillment, meaning essentially that the modern individual is constituted by so many factors and has become so self-aware and analytical that it is too complex and fluctuating to be really graspable. There is exhibitionist porn-actresses that don't grow tired of stressing the fact that they are doing what they are doing by choice and have never felt exploited, the same goes for ostentatiously strong, fun-loving, fulfilled sex-workers that enjoy the good pay and manage to extract a feeling of empowerment from their work, which I would never want to question, but which also makes it very hard to remember that the majority of prostitution is involuntary and effectively destroying lives. It is not impossible for me to accept that there might be women selling their bodies by choice, even if it might strike me as bizarre, but that should not overshadow what I consider to be the larger percentage of the sex-workers, the forced and illegal one, consisting of abduction, human-trafficking, drug-addiction and unhealthy dependence of women on their hustlers.

There is also a more invested way of dealing with the matter. There is a cascade of relatively young blogs associated with contemporary feminism, like Karley Sciortino's very sex-positive *Slutever*¹⁵, *Snippets* of Sarah Nicole-Prickett¹⁶, who is the founding editor of the new erotic magazine *Adult*¹⁷, there is *eschergirls.tumblr.com*, accumulating imagery of how women are drawn in illustrated pop-media, *feminist frequency*¹⁸ which was created by Anita Sarkeesian, the woman that was threatened with rape and a bombing before giving a talk (she eventually had to cancel) at a university about female representation in video games. There is a wide range of new magazines, like *Salt*¹⁹, *Girls Like*

¹⁴ Interview with Nina Power in *Tender* #5, p.31, available at <http://docs.tenderjournal.co.uk/tender-5.pdf>

¹⁵ <http://slutever.com/>

¹⁶ <http://snpsnpsnp.tumblr.com/>

¹⁷ <http://adult-mag.com/>

¹⁸ <http://www.feministfrequency.com/>

¹⁹ <http://saltmagazine.bigcartel.com/>

*Us*²⁰ and *Tender*²¹ and books that have been published in the last couple of years, some bewildering and a strange mix of outdated and applicable, like Naomi Wolf's *Vagina*²², some slightly fresher and more diverse, like *One Dimensional Woman* by Nina Power²³.

Very interesting is a recent revival of reading groups, discussing texts like the *Preliminary Materials to A Theory of the Young Girl* that was published by the French philosophical journal *Tiqqun* in 1999²⁴ or the essay *A cyborg manifesto. Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century* by theorist Donna Haraway²⁵ in 1991, just after the internet became a thing (that like today, nobody quite understood). By now these reading groups are sometimes virtual, but also take place in different locations in real life, reminding of the reading and consciousness raising-circles for women that were quite popular in the 70's. It is in many cases stressed though that these groups today are (as opposed to the female-centric gatherings in the 70's) strictly non-gendered, thus open and inclusive of men, women, and all the genders in between.

The model of all-female-communities is also being used today again by many young artists, whether it be in response to the male-dominated art-world or to strengthen the network and means of exchange between female creatives. Using the web for virtual coalition, for example via blogs, email-lists and hashtag-hyperlinks, has proven handy for coordination and in order to mobilize activism and awareness that has materialized on- and offline. This phenomenon (in a non-art-context) has been referred to as *Networked Feminism* in an article by Tom Watson²⁶. He says that through the internet there is a freedom to widely share "real emotion", which is what explains the potency of networked feminism. Exemplary is a secret Facebook-group I recently joined, the description reads "Discussion (and meetups) between a network of internet-savvy women creatives, including the topics of gender, diversity, equality, and representation, but not limited to them. All-levels welcome, feel free to remove yourself at any time." and the posts are a menage of exchange of information, links to interesting material online, virtual discussion and plain net-art-gossip. There recently was a long thread listing obviously sexist quotes from gallerists and artists towards the women in the group, which was a very interesting read as it shows how shockingly alive and kicking a kind of thoughtless, "I didn't mean anything by it"-sexism is in the artworld.

It is a valid question to ask whether excluding men from these initiatives is reasonable at all and to analyze the possible reasons for it. It makes sense to form an environment or group in which you can explore and express yourself without the pressure of being compared to YMP's²⁷, subjected to pure, unequivocal misogyny and what else can be experienced as a burden for women in the art world, or having to justify your outrage and anger but it is also undeniable that this can easily turn into a self-referential circle, excluding men and thus isolating itself from a possible dialogue, even if unintentional. This may also add to the confusion that feminism is just something for women to be concerned with, which clearly it should not be.

²⁰ <http://www.glumagazine.com/>

²¹ <http://www.tenderjournal.co.uk/>

²² Wolf, Naomi (2014): *Vagina*. Revised and updated. Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press.

²³ Power, Nina (2009): *One-dimensional woman*. Winchester, UK ; Washington, USA: 0 [Zero] Books.

²⁴ Translation of extract available at

http://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/preliminary_materials_for_a_theory_of_the_young_girl

²⁵ Haraway, Donna Jeanne (1990): *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.

²⁶ Watson, Tom (2013), *Networked Women as a Rising Political Force, Online and Off*, available at <http://techpresident.com/news/23135/networked-women-rising-political-force-online-off>

²⁷ young male painters

My empowered milkshake brings all the boys to the yard

A massive topic of recent dispute has been whether female performers in the music industry are reinforcing and enabing patriarchal and sexist patterns within the business or in fact empowered and liberated through dressing and moving overtly sexual. I guess it's just one of these things where minds will split, as it is so hard to judge when something is in fact self-exploitative or at least accepting and catering to an external exploitation and when it is truly a choice, unless it is openly addressed by the performer in question. Artists commonly discussed in this context are Rihanna, Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé, Iggy Azalea, Lady Gaga and the recently blossomed Miley Cyrus. Somewhat different but connected is the phenomenon of female infantilization in K-Pop girl bands. There seems to be a strange desire to see women as sort of woman/girl hybrids in some Asian cultures, as can be well observed in Mangas as well as the japanese Kawaii²⁸ phenomenon in terms of uber-cute, girlish feminine gender performance.

The contrast to the hypersexual but also distinctly fierce performances of the mentioned western musicians is rather interesting. Though definitely feeding some aspects of the popular demand for exposed skin=sex-appeal and suggestive dance and lyrics, they are also making a point of being indeed very strong, confident female figures. When Nicki Minaj repeatedly sings about fellow rappers being "her sons", she is in fact infantilizing them, marking her senior position at the forefront of a prospective dawn of female rappers. She sings about giving them formula, putting them to bed, scolding them, and refers to herself as "papa". Especially in a verse like

"All these bitches is my sons
And I'mma go and get some bibs for 'em
A couple formulas, little pretty lids on 'em
If I had a dick, I would pull it out and piss on 'em"²⁹

she manifests how she associates power or overpowering somebody with masculinity, the act of urinating on somebody (which is obviously facilitated by the penis) is the act of ultimate humiliation. The metaphore of motherhood is completely twisted though, instead of painting the picture of a nurturing, proud, supportive woman it seems to be all about dominating her worthless offspring and letting them know who is the ultimate authority. On the other hand, in the video of the song *Anaconda*³⁰ she is not only clearly objectifying herself as well as other women, she also refers to very stereotypical behaviour patterns by mentioning how her boy Troy "Bought me Alexander McQueen, he was keeping me stylish", when she's done it with Michael "I make him buy me Balmain" which is a perfect example of what is considered to be that mysterious feminine power over men, which is basically equalling manipulation through sex. It also shows how women are participating in maintaining misconceptions about them in the air, like the myth that every women is happy when she has a fine pair of heels on her feet. Which is not to say that a women can't be into shoes, by all means, I guess it should be clear by now, everybody can be into everything they want. Except for little boys that want to play with dolls that is, of course... She often references receiving oral pleasure as well as promoting an obviously more diverse body-image. "Fuck the skinny bitches! Fuck the skinny bitches in the club!". Altogether, she seems to at least feel empowered and

²⁸ The word "kawaii" originally derives from the phrase 顔映し, which literally means a "radiant face", but more commonly referred to the blushing of an embarrassed person. Over time, the meaning changed into the modern meaning of "cute". Kawaii on Wikipedia – The Free Eyclopedia, available at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kawaii>

²⁹ Nicki Minaj - Did It On Em, Pink Friday: Roman reloaded, released by , Cash Money and Universal Motown/Young Money, 2010

³⁰ Nicki Minaj (2014), *Anaconda*, The Pinkprint, released by Young Money Entertainment, Cash Money Records, and Republic Records

maybe that's really all it needs. But I can't help but find it cringeworthy to look at her calculated movements that are so clearly being directed towards a male gaze.

It is quite a similar self-representation to Iggy Azalea's. The good thing in both cases is: there seems to be no sign of body-shame, they love their bums and their pussys and are not shy about it at all. They clearly get something out of showing themselves, whether it be an exhibitionistic urge that finds satisfaction or a subconscious subjection to standards within the field is almost impossible to distinguish it seems, as it is not even clear how many people are watching the video because they truly enjoy that music and many for the rather erotic visuals. The problem is perhaps that these things become so interlocked that it is indiscernable, for the audience, analyst but also the performers themselves.

Beyoncé is repeating some of the same patterns, being ostensibly confident and open about her body, wearing revealing clothing, moving seductively and singing a great deal about love and all that is real closely connected to that ever-exciting theme. Looking at her younger, more planned and elaborate videos, it becomes apparent that she is also struggling with her identity as a woman and her influence on how women are perceived and regarded. Whether "Pretty Hurts", a song/video from her "visual album" about beauty standards and the ordeal women have to put themselves through in order to adhere to them, as well as how they are pressured to do so is really getting its message across ideally when she herself is looking once again extremely gorgeous and well-maintained (even whilst rubbing vaseline all over her teeth) in the clip remains a bit dubious, but it does strike me as interesting that she is trying to make this her content. Another song/ video that is interesting in this respect is "Grown Woman" from 2013. The theme is, quite surprise, her having become a "big girl". The main chorus line being "I'm a grown woman, I can do whatever I want" illustrates a real sense of empowerment and freedom. It seems also to be connected to some ethnic-identity issues as part of the video is set in a jungle-like scenario with other WOCs performing dance-moves vaguely reminiscent of tribal-dances. Also a recurrent theme: the sizable derriere of the queen. Interlaced is home-video material showing a young Bey with a young Kelly Rowlands dancing and singing boisterously. The clip ends with her majestically sitting on a bed, sporting an ethnic head-dress and holding three young children in her arms and on her lap, then the camera zooms in as she breaks in to a big, mucho sympatico smile and finally leans in to kiss the Jesus-like curly boy in the ultimate motherly gesture.

Maybe the song is really more of a reassurance and a confirmation of the fact that she has, in fact, "made it" and thus more about her genesis as a successful woman than per se a woman as such. But then,

Go girl (go girl)
She got that bum (that bum)
That girl can get whatever she wants
That girl (hey girl),
She got that tight (that tight)
Them boys,
They do whatever she like
I'm a grown woman³¹

pretty much makes it clear that she is at least aware of the fact that yes, her physique may have played a major part in her successful career, even though she does not seem to critically engage with that observation at all, but rather celebrate the fact that she can "control them boys" with it. Oh well.

These women surely are capitalizing on their own bodies, because society enables them to do so.

³¹ Beyoncé (2014), Grown Woman, Beyoncé, released by Parkwood Entertainment and Columbia Records

But of course by actually doing it, and defending it as “their choice”, they somehow legitimize or at least encourage other women to do the same. The false pretense of empowerment can lead to the failure of recognizing the still thriving oppression and sexism in popular media, which would then lead to a slowed down process of eliminating or counter-striking said oppression.

Two radical feminist positions towards the subject would be the radical libertarian feminist approach of supporting sexualized portrayals of women as this means one remains their freedom of self-expression. On the other end of the spectrum of feminist opinions would be the radical cultural feminists, who reject this view strongly as for them this equals corroboration with patriarchal oppression.³²



Cyber-Women and Cyber-Men

What is clearly observable, is that the way to concern oneself with the construct of gender today is strongly influenced, like many other areas of modern-day-life, by the web and the important status that social media have taken. Self-(re)presentation is ubiquitous, and whether it is consciously or not, everybody partaking in any form of social media is participating in that kind of performance of the self. In her 1995 essay *Cyberspace is not Disneyland: The Role of the Artist in a Networked World*, Amy Bruckman³³ says, already: “The art of the self-portrait has never been so popular”. Already back then it was obvious how the internet influenced everyday-life, which is now so extremely shaped by how frequent and how thorough one is choosing to make a mark about oneself online. A distinction between both realms, the virtual and what is considered the tactile, actual reality, seems impossible and almost irrelevant.

In the beginnings of cyber-culture, meaning the end of the 80's when the first chatrooms were made available to a broader community, the net seemed to hold endless possibilities of overcoming gender-boundaries as well as differences in race or class. Potentially, everybody could choose to be whoever they wanted to be, for as long as they wanted to be it. Of course besides being a promise, this turned out to also be a curse, as this was purely bound to the virtual sphere. In reality you simply cannot pretend to be white when really you are black. In Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*³⁴ she clearly wanted to mobilize women to embrace the brand new technologies and use them for a feminist cause. This was very much opposing the at that time very common opinion that women belonged to the sphere of nature while men belonged to machines³⁵. The text-based internet

³² Glantz, Jaime (2013): “Women in Popular Music Media: Empowered or Exploited?”, *The Spectrum: A Scholars Day Journal*: Vol 2, Article 5, Available at <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1018&context=spectrum>

³³ Amy Bruckman (1995), *Cyberspace is not Disneyland: The role of the Artist in a Networked World*, available at <http://www.cc.gatech.edu/fac/Amy.Bruckman/papers/getty/disneyland.html>

³⁴ Haraway, Donna Jeanne (1990): *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.

³⁵ Fernandez, Maria and Malik, Suhail (2001), *Whatever happened to the Cyborg Manifesto*, *Mute Vol 1. No. 20 – Digital Commons?*, at <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/whatever-happened-to-cyborg-manifesto>

provided a liberation from the physical body, the freedom to impersonate as many and diverse identities as possibly wanted online. Multiple User Domains, Role Playing Games etc. enabled this and for a short period of time the anonymity of the net seemed to make cyberspace a post-human place, holding endless glorious possibilities³⁶.

The aspired utopian post-race, post-gender environment never really came into existence though and many unforeseen problems appeared instead. The non-distinct line between the real and virtual body became apparent through the first virtual deceptions and rape-cases. There was a case of a male, middle-aged psychiatrist appearing in chatrooms as an elderly woman named Julie, a hoax that was perceived as extremely betraying and fraudulent, so the (obviously possible) gap between the person performing and the person performed was seen as immoral, which makes clear that authenticity was something desired already then and explains the shift from the first excitement about the provided anonymity to the postmodern anxiety that nothing is authentic anymore³⁷.

Maybe it is important to mention that cyber-feminism sounds much more like an organized movement with an articulated political agenda than it actually was. According to scholar Jessie Daniels

"Cyberfeminism refers to a range of theories, debates, and practices about the relationship between gender and digital culture..." and "within and among cyberfeminism(s) there are a number of theoretical and political stances in relation to Internet technology and gender as well as a noticeable ambivalence about a unified feminist political project"³⁸

In the end, the major indications of social hierarchy have not really become irrelevant and sexual appeal seems almost more important than ever. The manner in which the internet is used today "generally reinforces normative gender roles (with minor yet notable exceptions)"³⁹. As most devices today seem to be more and more designed to be perceived as a natural extension of the body, it gets easier and easier to forget the device entirely and thus to not acknowledge the gap between an online identity and a physical one has become possible.

Today the internet contains the potential of overcoming shame, while it seems to be a rule that you have to present the core of your essence, (but your essence at its best), you can easily influence how you are seen, and this construction might become who you consider yourself to be. The alter ego that the internet enables one to foster, allows for filtering out all aspects of one's personality one is not feeling 100% confident about or that are not perceived as "presentable". Every blemish or flaw can be corrected and a lie remains a potential truth until it is compared with reality. Our relationship to technology seems to be in dire need of re-evaluation as obviously this entanglement can lead to a loss of "true" identity, a sort of minuscule, conditioned rather than medical, Multiple Identity Disorder.

Pink Feminism

The internet and its effect on image distribution in combination with possibilities of image-manipulation through technologies has also lead to a new kind of aesthetic. People can expose not only themselves but also the work they produce and are much more likely to distribute it and gain recognition as the network is automatically magnified. The possibilities of connecting with like-minded

³⁶ Wilk, Elvia (2013): Where Looks Don't Matter and Only the Best Writers Get Laid. How the feminist internet utopia failed, and we ended up with speculative realism, available at <http://theclustermag.com/2013/05/feminism-and-other-unfulfilled-promises-of-the-text-based-internet/>

³⁷ Cf. Wilk, Elvia (2013), loc. cit.

³⁸ Daniels, Jessie Rethinking Cyberfeminism(s): Race, Gender, and Embodiment, *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*

³⁹ Cf. Wilk, Elvia (2013), loc. cit.

people are not just applicable to angsty teenagers that feel misunderstood but also aspiring artists that use the structures they have grown up with to showcase their, often digital, works and start collaborations with people from different places they would otherwise simply not be aware of, and potentially bring it back to a physical format.

Two interesting examples of web-based collectives are the online platform *The Ardorous*⁴⁰ which has been started by the American photographer Petra Collins, as well as the East London Gallery space *Gal*⁴¹, which was founded by the Swedish Arvida Byström and Hanna Antonsson, who coincidentally are also part of *The Ardorous* (which is highlighting quite well how there is much interconnection between many of the artists that are active and engaged right now). The space is sporting a bright pink floor, their trajectory is to “uncode what we know as girly”⁴². This is what they say about the space on the facebook-page: “Newly opened and yet to be defined, we know, when a Gal grows up post 2k, the internet is hard to escape. Just as the www that raised us, we are still happy to announce this physical space afk”⁴³.

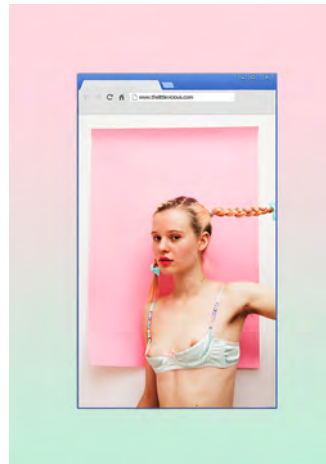
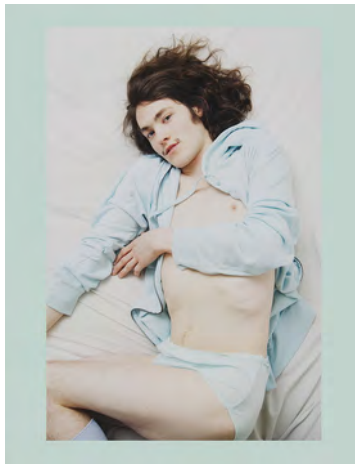
In her personal work Byström questions the common gender-conceptions. Mostly working as a photographer and often modeling herself in the pictures she takes, she is also using the tools of a graphic designer as well as making installations. She has risen to acknowledgment through her distinctly pastel-colored dream-scape of a tumblr, featuring many pictures and gifs of herself as well as many female coded objects (like lipsticks, fashion-items, a bunch of glitter, stickers and books by the Brontë sisters). She has been criticized for potentially undermining the effect her open display of her own body may have, as it is fitting quite neatly into the ideal of beauty she claims to be unhappy about and be willing to change. Obviously nobody can really chose their body-type, and your thoughts and opinions while maybe being influenced by, should still be considered independent from your body. Of course there is many different ways of exploring the subject, but by showing her body alongside many different others, she is promoting a very body positive message, as well as being to at least a certain extent subversive, as she is drawing attention to the narrow-minded and heavily conditions position of modern society towards for example female body-hair, through her own physical appearance as well as her work. Other recurrent themes in her photography are menstruation, men depicted like women, new technology (lots of screens – phones, mac books, screenshot-collages, gifs etc.) and a not so ironic depiction of Disney-esque identity of modern girls and women. Everything she does is drenched in internet-aesthetics, while not being explicitly about sexuality much of it still has a hint of erotica... She is a child of her times, and definitely not trying to hide it, but while she states to be unwilling to be put into a category and trying to avoid this through the strategy of staging herself in as many stereotypical roles as possible, this does not become entirely apparent when looking at her work. Through the coherent use of candy-color and naked bodies, it becomes a bit flat-looking and has a repetitive feel to it.

⁴⁰ <http://www.theardorous.com/>

⁴¹ <http://galspace.tumblr.com/>

⁴² Stachiwitsch, Kira (2013): Whats up in LNDN Arvida?, Indie Magazine no.41, Winter 2013/14

⁴³ <https://www.facebook.com/Galspace>



The curatorial statement of the last exhibition of members of *The Ardorous*, which is more outspokenly reserved for female members, reads:

“This exhibit aims to create a new landscape, a Gynolandscape, which rejects the classic phallogentric narrative of sex and sexuality of the female body. Gynolandscape questions our current Western ideology of ‘femininity’ and demonstrates how a new generation of female artists are paving the way to a more fluid future. The works in this show are produced by female artists from diverse backgrounds ranging in ages 16-50 that illustrate their struggle with identity and sexuality in the context of femininity.”⁴⁴

The work to be found on this website is a mix of photography, photomontage, digital as well as analogue collage, drawings, and video-stills. There is series titled “unicorn princess power”, “girls with guns”, “depression calls”, “mutual consent”, “we all have nipples”, “the hairless norm” and “there will be blood”⁴⁵; to mention just a couple of titles that might give an impression on the predominant interest. The pieces are partly very young, crafty and using a lot of stereotypically feminine material, again lots of glitter, body-hair, teen-sex and the depiction of female bodies and environments. The themes are pretty much in-you-face, women wearing lingerie with beards, women with wigs on their genitals, appropriated porn material, phallic symbols etc.

These rose-tinted aesthetics in a quasi post-feminist era seem to loudly proclaim the right to use things with an explicitly feminine undertone, to not let themselves be restricted out of a fear of feeding into a common cliché. This “Pink Feminism” in fact utilizes stereotypical visual language, at least partly, not necessarily as a critique but rather as an act of salvaging what is considered immature, soft and feminine. This is an interesting approach I feel, rather than adapting to an impersonal, detached and “masculine” visual language, it does the exact opposite, bathing in an excess of girliness. It is taking the risk of appearing slightly unreflected and can be easily misunderstood at times, as it may be avoiding real examination of some of the implications of the visuals.

“Pink Feminism” also isn't timid when it comes to the use of blunt reference and crass, obvious imagery. One of Petra Collins' collaborative projects was a T-shirt for American Apparel, featuring a printed illustration made by Alice Lancaster of a menstruating vagina engaged in masturbatory activity. Obviously intended to be a provocation and demanding a more realistic depiction of female sexuality, the T-shirt is not just a drawing, but becomes a statement when being worn. When asked what her point was exactly, Collins says that it seems silly that in the sheer mass of sexually violent imagery her T-shirt, featuring a simplistic line-drawing instead of full-on photography, appears still to be shocking and in fact disgusting to some, even though it is only displaying what is natural, nothing deviant or perverse at all. She is especially interested in the fact that also a lot of girls seem

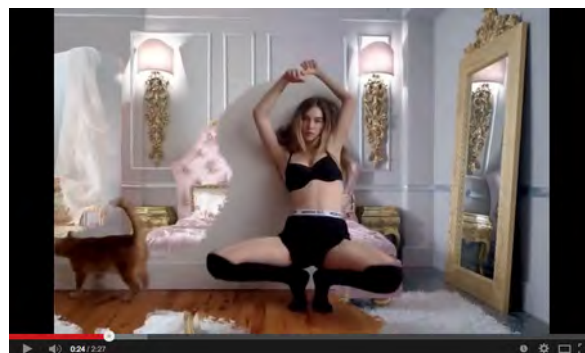
⁴⁴ <http://www.theardorous.com/gynolandscape/>

⁴⁵ All published on theardorous.com

very disturbed by the graphic t-shirt, finding particularly the pubic hair repulsive. She is essentially searching to expose the people who are uncomfortable with its theme, in order to confront them with their own conditioning.⁴⁶ Interestingly enough, her Instagram account has been cancelled earlier this year, even though no regulations seemed to have been violated, because of a picture of her lower body in underwear with a bit of pubic hair poking out on the sides. This clearly shows the taboo status of physical normality and how social media is supporting this narrow-minded perception of body culture, essentially succumbing to, if not promoting, society's unrealistic standard of femininity.



It seems troubling when the immediacy of the medium leads to total exposure, seemingly as a means of liberation and to show extreme body-positivity, while really the female body-as-subject is being used rather unreflectingly (whether it be “personal” or in artistic work). A pioneer of this kind of self-exploitative playfulness is in my opinion one of Petra Collins' frequent collaborators Alexandra Marzella, going also by the pseudonym Rosey Diamond⁴⁷ and her tumblr name “artwerk6666”. Seemingly extremely exhibitionistic, this lady is not just being open and comfortable with her body; she also clearly enjoys displaying her naked body online. A video to be found on her youtube channel shows her seductively dancing to the sound of Beyoncé's *Drunk in Love* with the glitchy photo-boothed backdrop of a lush, pink bedroom, a cat gliding in and out of the frame. It is unclear whether this is intended to be art or just a bit of experimentation or the ironical reflection on collective imagery... maybe that's for the best. It is of course not the fact that a woman is comfortable with her physique and enjoying showing it, it is the way she does it, almost being proud of not giving a shit about who sees her. But of course she does, because why else would she put this material online. Her action seems shallow, not thought through yet extreme.



⁴⁶ Patrick McGuire, Chatting with Petra about her menstruation vagina shirt, available at <http://www.vice.com/read/chatting-with-petra-collins-about-her-menstruating-vagina-shirt>

⁴⁷ <http://dismagazine.com/discredit89plus/users/profile/98>

Both Byström and Collins, while definitely being critical of something, don't seem to have fully shaped their expression just yet. While being candid is tendentially worth supporting, it is obviously also quite important what is being said, and how. I wonder whether the urgency or in the case of Arvida Byström the ostentatious girlyness isn't overshadowing the missing precision of the criticism. On the other hand, working in a more subdued manner will probably attract less attention, so at the very least in this way awareness is being raised which I find worthy of support.

Both of them are also closely connected to teen -powerhouse Tavi Gevinson, the founder of Rookie⁴⁸, an online magazine, which started out as her personal fashion blog when she was 12. She says about Rookie in connection to feminism: “Well I am a feminist – I just think the label reflects my beliefs – but, you know, we say Rookie is a website for teenage girls, not a *feminist* website for teenage girls. That's not because I'm not proud to call myself a feminist, but when you're calling attention to a project you can very easily be pigeonholed by choosing certain identifiers. And while I'm happy to talk about feminism and happy to be a girl, I do sometimes feel like,

“Why does everything I do have to be viewed through a lens of 'feminist or not'? Like, can't I ever do or create anything just as a *person*? That's a privilege that men have over women and white people have over people of colour.”

So she does kind of the opposite, not labeling the things she does, remaining the right to produce extremely “feminine” work if you will, while having very strong convictions about the issue and being aware of how restrictions are coming from both a feminist dogmatic angle as well as a society that denies its relevance while still treating men and women differently.

All four of them, Bystrom, Collins, Gevinson and Marzella have modelled and did photoshoots for the feminist fashion-label *Me and You* by Julia Baylis and Mayan Toledano. Their lingerie-line featuring chaste underpants with the word *feminist* printed on the derriere, has had the spotlight shone upon by a recent article in the New York Times, titled *Young Women Say No To Thongs*. In the article they make clear that

“There's nothing wrong with wanting to be more traditionally sexy and wearing a thong; that doesn't mean you're not a feminist. This is a step toward embracing more variety in what's offered.”⁴⁹

Amalia/Ann/Melanie/Jesse

Feminist art is inherently connected to menstruation blood in many minds, I dare to assume. The outspokenly female art produced in the context of the women's movement around the 70s has paved the way for female creative producers, but also implanted an image of a woman unrolling paper from her vagina in the collective memory. These days there is a spotlight shone on the new “digi-feminist-artists”, some of them more explicitly integrated the theme into their work, others are treating completely differently and much more loosely. The themes range from the three P's (Porn/Period/Patriarchy) to female (self-)representation, the virtual vs the real body, gender performance and femininity, but are also entangled with criticism towards the effect of the grand diversity of technological tools and media. Here an introduction to the works of four artists who produce partly similar, partly very different work, most of them influenced by the post-internet era we find ourselves living in without fully grasping what it means.

⁴⁸ <http://www.rookiemag.com/>

⁴⁹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/28/fashion/young-women-say-no-to-thongs.html>

The Antichrist's-Instagram

Using social media in her scripted online-performance *Excellences and Perfections*⁵⁰ which took place over the duration of four months in 2014, Argentinian artist Amalia Ulman impersonated different female stereotypes. By doing this, she chose to consciously expose herself to the (at least highly potentially male) gaze. Catering to a very specific class-related taste by posting pictures of herself but also objects that have become symbols for a certain group of middle-brow people, including latte-art, flower-arrangements, many selfies in a wide diversity of reflective surfaces, her supposedly just retouched breasts (in a naïve yet obscene manner), Ulman is blurring the lines between reality and virtual reality, “real” and virtual persona. She thus exposes the methods and techniques with which we shape our own personalities by performing something we want to be a part of or represent to others. If the performance is coherent and convincing enough, maybe we can become the person we aspire to be?

As Ulman moves between different roles, impersonating different clichés of class and gender, she relies a lot on visual reference and her own body, but also uses language as a means of deception. *Excellences and Perfections* is about bodies as objects to be marketed and improved, vessels to transport a person over class-division and physical flaws, via the means of money. Ulman says about herself, in a lecture called *Do you follow?*⁵¹ organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art and Rhizome⁵² (and read in an unnervingly bored tone, badly enunciated and monotonous in a way that makes it very hard to stay focused), that her “openness had at one point turned into a commercial strategy”⁵³. She mentions that she found herself “unintentionally performing the stereotype of the artsy brunette (...), the eager learner that requires to be saved by the male director of a museum or some school of fine arts”⁵⁴. Apparently this was taken as motivation to look at ways to boycott herself and the capitalist tone of her own impressions. She is using these impressions in order to make a point of the facility with which one can direct an audience, or change how people perceive themselves.

She has assembled pictures and arranged them in her timeline, transforming her Instagram as well as Facebook accounts into visual essays, telling the stories of characters that had been inspired by people she had researched or followed before. By adapting to their methods of self-representation and using the narrative structure of both applications, she incarnated the character of “the cute girl” (based on mostly Korean girls she found on Instagram, incorporating elements of extreme cuteness, tumblr, pink-nipples, kawaii, bruises and bondage); naive sexuality with a pinch of American Apparel modelling aspiration. Quoting Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* she says:

“the model phantasy is probably the most widespread contemporary dream shared by young women from all backgrounds”⁵⁵.

In one of her narratives, telling the story of a provincial girl coming to the big city with the dream to become a model, but in the end turning to drugs and online matchmaking services that connect her with a sugar-daddy who makes her feel bad about herself and then offers to pay for her improvement, leaving her broken, addicted and insecure to return back to her hometown, she explores what she refers to as the “faux-feminist empowerment”, by forming an assemblage of staged im-

⁵⁰ <http://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/amalia-ulman-excellences-perfections>

⁵¹ <http://new.livestream.com/icalondon/ica-site-do-you-follow-art-circulation-3>

⁵² A website and affiliate in residence at the New Museum in New York, a leading international organization to support art and technology, online since 1996, available at rhizome.org

⁵³ Cf. <http://new.livestream.com/icalondon/ica-site-do-you-follow-art-circulation-3>

⁵⁴ Cf. <http://new.livestream.com/icalondon/ica-site-do-you-follow-art-circulation-3>

⁵⁵ Wolf, Naomi (1990), *The Beauty Myth - How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, p. 41, New York: William Morrow and Company.

ages combined with quotes of actual women identifying as sugar-babies⁵⁶. These statements, that seem to come from a place of complete conviction of the women's control over themselves and their decisions, are deeply disturbing, as they are misleading themselves, supporting a system that forces them to act according to a role they did at no point consciously choose. This is leaving them in the delusional belief that they really do only want to look “their best” (e. g. small-nosed, big-breasted and shapely enough but not too shapely) for themselves, and not for a man. In the end, the character goes through a nervous breakdown, a reaction on actual internet trolling.

She further investigates how we look at images, and how images shape, absorb and possess us. The use of language seems secondary in this specific project, but still of some sort of significance as also through language she adapts the different roles and describes for example, in a belittling and somehow astoundingly honest way her (faked) breast-enlargement.



Ulman makes a point of saying that human sorrow and especially female pain, are of the highest entertainment-factor to an audience or as Amalia Ulman puts it:

“The sadder the girl, the happier the troll.”⁵⁷

Some women are facilitating this tendency by adjusting their behavior to the constructed image they made of themselves. If they are sad or hurt, and they are displaying and staging this pain online using certain language and a bunch of emoticons, it becomes something cute, their pain makes them sexy. The ordeal they have put themselves through gets down-played by themselves, which is as disturbing as the wave of positive response Ulman got for her “honest” act of self-improvement.

Also beyond the characters she has hosted, she seems to embody a rather un-transparent and somehow consciously feminized identity. Resembling a young, pretty, fragile girl in both her appearance and her way of speaking, she almost seems to embrace a certain feminine vulnerability, when at a lecture usually wearing a flat, doll-like non-expression and speaking in a soft and distinctly bored whisper, as if still performing. Hence she keeps embodying an enigma, disclosing much about her way of looking at and dealing with issues and therefore also herself, but keeping unclear what is fact and what fiction and not really giving much of a possibility to clearly discuss what she did, or does, as an artist. She is operating from beneath a layer of Swarovski glitter and imaginary silicone, feeding the conditioned and violently claimed desires of people and in this way exposing them.

⁵⁶ According to Urbandictionary.com: “A young female or male who is financially pampered/cared for by a sugar-daddy or sugar mama in exchange for companionship (i.e. sexual favors).“

⁵⁷ <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2014/oct/28/transcript-do-you-follow-panel-three/>

Maybe, by fulfilling expectations, she aims to escape them, but in all honesty I'm not fully convinced.

The question is, whether representing these social archetypes in a manner that obscures the distinction between real life and artistic expression, while not disclosing the intent until a certain point, is somehow perpetuating a gender-normative role-system, without being overtly critical but in rather secretive persiflage. There remains a doubt whether there shouldn't a bit more responsibility taken, whether it is not dangerous to potentially reinforce the reality that she tries to question. Only within the aftermath, when the performance is disclosed as such, can the piece be perceived as what it is. Before, it could have easily stimulated young girls to also alter their bodies, seeing how great it can be. What Ulman does well however, despite being semi-articulate and seemingly only vaguely critical, is expose the way that women are participating in their own stereotyping and sometimes unknowingly conforming to external expectations. It also becomes apparent in her work how stylization and augmentation of the self (whether it be through "smoothing out the edges" with photoshop, a pleasant photographic angle or cosmetic surgery) can be experienced as a method of revealing one's true essence. It can mean a freedom, but it can also be disorienting.

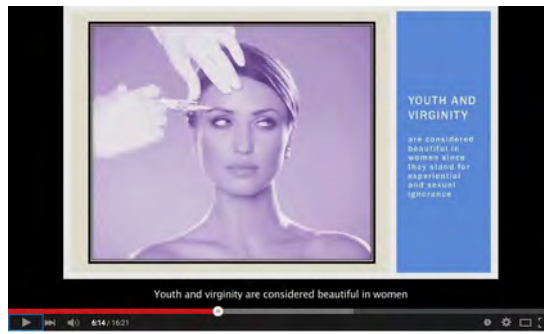
The pseudo self-improvement enabled by the internet seems to be not based on actually looking at who you are and what kind of person you want to be, but on how you want people to perceive you. Essentially one can pretend to already be who one aspires to become, without making real, lasting alterations. Being looked at and public as well as abundant appreciation seemingly has become a common and influential fundament in terms of identity-construction and self-value. That realization (if in fact a truth) is deeply upsetting and is connected to the surge of image-circulation and possibilities for self-display on the web, it certainly increases the self-imposed exposure to external judgement.

In a more defined work, a video-essay or almost educational film titled *The Future Ahead - Improvements for the further masculinization of prepubescent boys*, she explores society's obsession with Justin Bieber and his genesis from an angelic, thus feminine young boy to a post-pubescent star mimicking masculine body-language and -traits, thus visibly alienating himself from the strange conspiracy of being a lesbian. She goes quite in depth into notions of gendered beauty, methods of (real and fictional) body-modification and points out how Bieber's heterosexuality is simply crucial for his business.

She is clearly interested in the relation between trends in plastic surgery and economic situations, and looks at celebrity culture almost as if it were performance art, so neatly tucked into our current culture that nobody, not even the participants, notice it. About the work of Orlan she says: The "reality" of this [body augmentation] and the standardization of this pain is actually more grotesque, from my perspective, than any bizarre portrait of it.⁵⁸

That seems to sum up her intentions in her own work quite well, it seems more important for her to reproduce, or just slightly alter/exaggerate apparently mundane everyday objects, notions or phenomena and dissect their meaning and importance by doing so.

⁵⁸ Interview with Amalia Ulman in Kaleidoscope, Issue 23, November 2014



The pseudo self-improvement seems to be not based on actually looking at who you are, but how you want people to perceive you. Essentially you can pretend to already be who you aspire to become, without making real, lasting alterations. Being looked at and public as well as abundant appreciation seemingly has become a common and influential fundament in terms of identity- and confidence building. That realization (if in fact a truth) is deeply upsetting and is connected to the surge of image-circulation and possibilities for self-display on the web, it certainly increases the self-imposed exposure to external judgement.

The Overshare (or what am I without being considered special?)⁵⁹

Another artist using the internet and its existing patterns and paradigms by literally immersing herself in them is Ann Hirsch, an American artist who is represented by *American Medium* in NYC and *Arcadia Missa* in London. By fluently moving between gender roles, performing both male and female fictional characters in the form of cam-whore youtube video's, a complete online personality named Jason Biddies that has social media presence and uploads videos of himself on youtube, but also real-life performances like *Just some girl crying in the corner*.⁶⁰ She as well stages fictional characters as potentially real “users”, each of them symbolizing a different stereotypical personality or gender-model. The spectrum of types she portrays seems to be much more varied and maybe somewhat more deeply researched than the collection of personas Amalia Ulman offers. A statement of the character Jason Biddies goes as follows:

“Jason is me, man. Just a regular dude living in Brooklyn, trying to get by, have a nice life, meet some ladies, hang out with my bros, smoke some weed, doing my thing. I make videos of my life because WHY NOT? Why the hell not you know? I’m proud of who I am and I want everyone to know it. And a lot of guys I know can’t clean a fucking toilet. And that is disgusting. But they NEED to know because the ladies will come over to hang, chill or get freaky and they will get turned off by that toilet. So I’m trying to help my bros. Just let them know, it’s simple, man, you can do it. You don’t need your mom to do it. That’s what I’ve been learning every day. It’s about coming of age as a MAN”.⁶¹

She created a man who personifies hetero-normativity at its best. Naive, unreflected, mildly obnoxious and overall conventional. It is this kind of silly, non-malevolent normality that becomes highly offensive when observing it in close-up. The underlying question seems to be: Why *do* a lot of regular people feel the apparently irresistible urge to upload themselves and share what really needn't be shared? Whether or not of any intellectual or aesthetic value, or simply unreflected and obviously private matters, it is still being looked at, by a number of people, however insignificant, and thus has an impact on reality as it becomes part of its representation.

⁵⁹ Ann Hirsch, 2013, in the video *I, Decay Part III: Body Conscious*

⁶⁰ A performance of Hirsch sitting in a gallery on the ground, crying for a variable time, interacting with visitors. In collaboration with Bitsy Knox for *Bcc #7* curated by Karen Archey and Dave Harper at Stadium in NYC, March 2012.

⁶¹ Ann Hirsch talks Jason Biddies with Ana Cecilia Alvarez, at <http://topicalcream.info/editorial/ann-hirsch/>



By imitating male-coded gestures and language, she is portraying this man in an almost painfully authentic, yet slap-sticky manner, which underlines the ludicrousness of real men behaving like this. Sitting with spread legs, flexing the biceps in front of a mirror, high-fiving like crazy and eating lobster with her hands, she caricatures the ultimate joke, a person that really believes in this being the equivalent of strength, vigor and masculinity, in the worst case even supremacy. She ridicules through (somewhat hyperbolic) reproduction. This reminds of Cindy Sherman and her exaggerated photographic self-portrayals, showing a broad variety of self-ascribed roles.

Hirsch is occupied with the notion of exposing herself to a visible, actual audience, but also the invisible, semi-anonymous viewership online. Through numerous performances and projects she has explored different ways of self-exposure and -presentation. Responding to the contemporary portrayal of women in the media, she became a camwhore⁶² for her *Scandalishious* project and also a contestant of the Vh1 reality dating show *Frank the Entertainer...In a basement Affair*.⁶³ Rather than blaming the women partaking in this kind of self-degradation she critiques the system that manipulates these people, then stigmatizes and shames them for having been so manipulated.⁶⁴ This is obviously connected to the earlier observation of human misery being entertaining, which is strongly reinforced by TV-culture. One of her goals is not only to point out the tragedy of the self-imposed position of the camwhore personality, but also to humanize the men engaging with camwhores. Her performances are, as she says, about loneliness and the desire for attention, and the differences between genders in dealing with these things.

Her most recent work, a website titled *horny little feminist*⁶⁵ features a collection of video explorations of internet-feminisms and female self-exploitation with the self-proclaimed goal to “break down existing stereotypes”⁶⁶. Her focus has shifted much more to include tropes of pornographic bodies and the recent surge of erotic self-portrayal and the impact this has on one's own sense of physicality and sexuality.

Just like Amalia Ulman she is reproducing stereotypical (online-)behavior, but she shows much more clearly that she is acting in a pseudo-reality. She also has a very defined position, whilst using her experiments to re-shape it and adjust it constantly. Her critique is obviously being directed more towards a society enabling self-exposure and -exploitation than towards a person unreflectingly participating in it. She seems equally interested in the (exhibitionistic) characters she is mimicking and the voyeuristic onlookers.

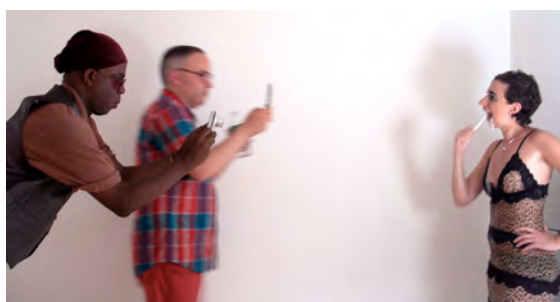
⁶² A shamelessly exhibitionistic webcam user, often women who earn money or simply gain attention by performing sexual or non-explicit acts via webcams for an audience

⁶³ http://www.vh1.com/shows/frank_the_entertainer_in_a_basement_affair/series.jhtml

⁶⁴ Chan, Jennifer; Farkas, Rosza; Hirsch, Ann and Kinsey, Cadence (2012): *Becoming Camwhore, Becoming Pizza, Mute*, available at <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/becoming-camwhore-becoming-pizza>

⁶⁵ <http://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/it-is-i-ann-hirsch-horny-lil-feminist>

⁶⁶ Manifesto by Ann Hirsch, <https://vimeo.com/119646766>



Feminism is a party everybody should want to join⁶⁷

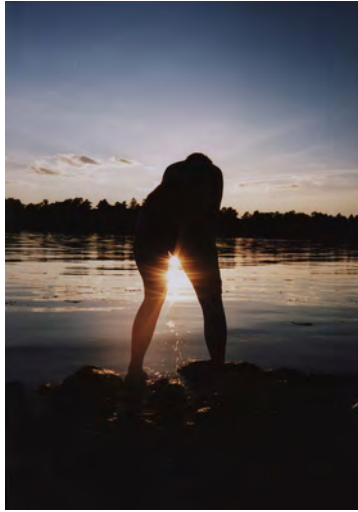
Also very much circulating around the modern conception of “femininity” and its representation and perpetuation via the media (again in modern western society) is the Amsterdam based artist Melanie Bonajo. To contrast this on-sided perspective, and to counter the predominantly male depiction of the female body throughout art history, she often shows women how they really are and look, creating imagery without any hidden agenda of either pleasing a man or advertising a product. She consciously does not want to participate in the shared, constructed fantasy about women and their nudity inevitably being linked to sexuality. The naked body per se is nothing erotic, it rather is our natural state, polluting it with constant sexual connotation can distort the healthy relationship to ones own nudity. Particularly the censorship of her youtube video *Pee on Presidents*⁶⁸, showing a slideshow of many pictures of her and her female friends publicly urinating in a diversity of places and positions to the sound of a song of Bonajo's band *Zazazozo* after which the video was titled, sheds light on how arbitrarily censorship is applied, in a non-transparent and gender-biased manner. It resembles the procedure one has to undergo when entering the Vatican: as a woman your skirt should cover your knees, as a man – who cares how short your khakis are. For sure: not God, as male knees don't carry sin. This kind of censorship and filtering adds to a giant misconception of how women as such (should) look and behave.

These totally unrealistic constructs do not only influence how men perceive women and build expectations, but also the identities of women, feeling unnatural in their not perfectly polished and not thoroughly sexualized womanhood. According to Bonajo, the kind of imagery like her work of pissing women or also a series of self portraits when she is crying, is necessary for her to in fact “feel normal as a woman”.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Melanie Bonajo, 2012 (Quote from Blijveld, Annelies [2012]: Genital Panik in De Appel Arts Centre: An Event for Equality, Essay in Spheres {Melanie Bonajo}, Issue Nr. 1, Published by Phillippe Karrer)

⁶⁸ Melanie Bonajo, *Pee on Presidents*, available at <https://vimeo.com/85516891>

⁶⁹ Frank, Priscilla (2014): Meet The High Priestess Of The Anti-Selfie, Danish Artist Melanie Bonajo (NSFW), available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/15/melanie-bonajo_n_5811496.html



Interesting is also her view on her own practice. She tries to prove that it is not really logical to equate an “objective”, factual, impersonal work to a masculine approach and emotional, intuitive approaches with femininity, and neither is the conclusion that a masculine approach is more interesting. As agreeable as I find this, it also strikes me to be a small problem, again a woman is trying to make this point, by making personal, emotional, spiritual works or works about Nature. Corresponding with her manner of working from a very personal perspective and putting so much of yourself in the work, is the effect of identity loss.

“You can not escape from becoming a character of yourself because you are always referring to some stereotypical human patterns which are universal, but caught in their own time. I have chosen to be patient and stick to my beliefs and now I see works that were made 10 years ago find their place. Every generation has its own answers or revised answers to the same "feminist" questions it seems.”⁷⁰

In her Performance *Genital Panik: An Event for Equality* at De Appel in 2012, she clearly references to the Valie Export performance *Action Pants: Genital Panik* that took place in Munich in 1968. By replacing the gun of the original performance with the neon-colored pubic triangles, she wants to rid the genitalia of their sexual connotation and turn them into symbols. The revealing trousers are used metaphorically to question where ones gaze and focus lingers. Following an open call to participate, directed to men and women via social media, as to be part of the opening of the exhibition *Topsy Turvy* at De Appel, a press conference took place. It's description goes as follows:

“How to make the best of our last days? The performance reflects with humor serious issues and problems which face humanity in the (nearby) future. By proposing alternative modes of being an attempt is made to find a poetic language to discuss the crisis of our times – the lack of equality between people from different gender, class, race and the exhaustion of our natural environment caused by human greed. The speakers propose to adopt a more female-centric world view including the possibility of post-polarity as a state of being. Supposedly 'natural' modes of behavior will be questioned and put to trial. Typically female characteristics seen as weaknesses, such as empathy, intuition, irrationality, sensitivity, nurturing will be reversed to strengths and inevitable elements to survive in the future. The idea of nature being the sole realm of the human being is deeply sadning to me.”⁷¹

Working much less internet-based than the previous examples, Bonajo also has a very specific view of femininity and gender-constructions. Rather than working with the exaggerated mannerism to which a woman might turn in order to perform a certain womanhood and imitating it, she counters with the representation of realistic women, from a distinctly female point of view. She is exposing how censorship can affect the gender-identity just as much as what is perpetuated via advertising and media, and with humor, yet also very seriously she is addressing these subjects throughout her

⁷⁰ Cf. Frank, Priscilla : loc. cit.

⁷¹ Cf. http://melaniebonajo.com/files/melaniebonajo-web20135_v2.pdf

multi-faceted work. As the only one she is using a direct reference to a previous “feminist” work, even though obviously all the other examples are to some degree informed and influenced by what has been done before.



The Statement-Artist vs the Artist with a Statement

It strikes me as odd that while there are many artists (let’s not kid ourselves: predominantly female) that have an opinion on the matter and naturally also concern themselves in their work with it, there are not so many that have shared these views without making it the big topic of their œuvre. It seems somehow self-restricting, on the other hand it also apprehensive to not make it part of the work out of fear to be interpreted as being riding on a semi-political trend-wave.

A quite versatile and interesting way of concerning herself with self-representation, queer visibility, transparency, sex and virtuality, is the British artist Jesse Darling, who has recently risen to a new level of (internet-) popularity. She prefers to be referred to as “they”, as she doesn’t identify as a cis-female, I will however refer to her as *she* in this text. Being not only critical towards gender-normativity but also the ideals of neo-liberal post-fordism⁷², she seeks to emphasize an idea(1) of community and exchange with other artists. Social media become part of her work, or at least some sort of artistic output, like her twitter account. She does make a point though of not having these things confused with her artistic practice. Writing is a major part of her artistic research process as well as practice and she appears to have a high level of awareness concerning the influence of interfaces and net-lingo on people’s realities and behavioral patterns.

While Darling, as a person, seems very strongly affiliated with the (artistic) discourse around gender, not all of her work is overtly addressing the subject. It just seems to be a very confident and secure, yet comparably subtle undercurrent in the work, rather than being extremely obvious or crude. Next to filming herself and her friends, she is also making sculptures and installations. The animated gif is one of her favorite media, as she describes it to be “the most Brechtian and didactic”⁷³, referring to the gestural aspect of it and its estrangement from the original material via compression and growing unclarity/dispersion. The internet and its side-effects, connectivity but also disconnections or dissociation, shape us and the world around us.

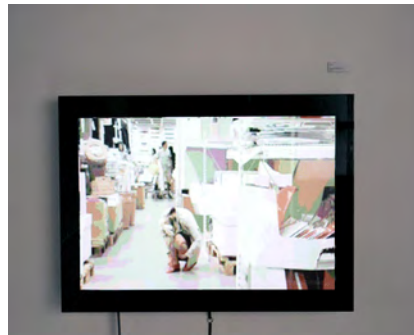
In her work *iKee (Stockholm Syndrome)*⁷⁴ from 2012, Darling performs herself (as she often does in her videos) in an IKEA store. The images of the animated gif that has been made and compressed from HD video material, are showing Darling in a fairly feminine, orderly outfit having a break-

⁷² Wikipedia says: “Post-Fordism is the name given by some scholars to what they describe as the dominant system of economic production, consumption and associated socio-economic phenomena, in most industrialized countries since the late 20th century.”

⁷³ <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2012/nov/5/artist-profile-jesse-darling/>

⁷⁴ Jessie Darling (2012), at Arcadia Missa, London

down and crying, first standing, later kneeling on the ground, as shoppers are passing by. While being obviously a comment on the tristesse of the generic look and the unifying, in the sense of de-individualizing, power and effect these places have, enabling some sort of sad, non-explicit collectivity so to say, it also seems to be concerned with the damage one is doing to oneself or experiencing when producing work, as well as people turning into (or exposing themselves as) the ultimate capitalist participants and egocentrics, not caring much about a strangers emotional turmoil when steering decisively towards the register in order to purchase a new Frosta stool and Svelvik bed frame. One's own prospective comfort out-rules the possible empathy.



Additionally, even though this might not be intended, it plays with the stereotype of the overly-emotional woman, overwhelmed by feelings she can not cope with and is unable to repress, leading to the discomfort and perplexity of others.

Much more explicitly dealing with (bodily) self-representation is *Lil Icarus*, a short video created for the *National Selfie Portrait Gallery*, the blue light of the sunbed reminding of the screen illuminating our faces while were browsing online deep in the night. A childlike, high-pitched, digitally abstracted voice is reciting a slang-infused poem:

“they say we're livin in the end times, talkin bout global warmin,
talkin bout the new blue ice age bb late capitalism's like,
its almost over & easier to imagine the end of the world
like me ya know I jus wanna look good naked -
u dun know everybody got a selfie-by date
im not afraid to die
u wanna know what u gonna look like on the slab of the morgue
u betta come lie down nexta me, bb
fly little icarus/
i jus wanna make the very most of the gift called life“.

The general theme is a somewhat nihilistic and detached worldview that seems to be predominant in the western world these days, especially visible and seemingly trivial in the internet's vernacular. The contrast of being so removed and exposing oneself to the limit is stressed by the unemotional presentation of the woman's naked body. The viewer might even wonder why Darling moves the camera to expose her entire body in the very end of the video, as it is clear the entire time that she is lying on a tanning bed and this traditionally happens in the nude. Is nudity only real when it is shown in its entirety? Or is the viewer just confronted with his/her own intrinsic desire? The reference to the myth of Icarus in the voiceover can be interpreted to be about the unfortunate topic of failed ambition, in his case to fly with man-made wings, which potentially leads to tragic death, ending a non-satisfactory life. The goal has not been reached, but at least there was a defined goal. When the voice stops speaking, after the name of the artist and date of production have been blended in and out, a new shot shows the woman's face and naked torso, still lying flat on the tanning bed, being apparently a crude metaphor for the “slab of the morgue”, the woman, obviously holding the camera herself in true selfie-manner, is blinking profusely at the lens with a more or

less neutral facial expression. It is shown for what it is, NOT the ultimate act of self-exposure, but rather a form of self-representation and clearly always an act of staging.



What is interesting is that the “selfie” as a medium is that it is a clearly gendered phenomenon. Even though there is of course also male specimen of humanity participation in the modern self-portraiture, the “Young Girl” is, according to Tiquun, the ultimate prosumer, “a model citizen of commodity society”, consuming ideology as well as goods.⁷⁵ The selfie is a product, produced by the body it is depicting. Self-marketing, not individualistic but generic, as most true selfies show the same head-tilt, snouty mouth and top angle. The phenomenon is received as a proof for digitality-driven narcissism, deeply trivial, or an outcome of internalized sexist self-perception. Responding to the *Theory of the Young Girl*, Hannah Black, a friend of Darling's and busy with the notion of the body and overcoming it, is writing about a comparable phenotype, alluding to and at the same time ridiculing the authors of *Young Girl* and their rather specific writing style: “The Hot Babe is a gendered concept. She is a radical (non-)subjectivity, thrown out of the wage relation only to reappear at the market's core. Those who look at her and see only a machine are the machine of her becoming.”⁷⁶

Showing yourself naked, as Darling briefly does in the clip, says one thing about you: it was of importance to you to, well, show yourself in the nude to other people. However small the effort of uploading, it still stays a decision. Who the observing people are and the direction of their gaze is out of your control and remains obscure, but what can be controlled, is how good you look in that picture. When one's highest aspiration is being adored (for what one looks like, rather than other qualities), that seems to be a troubling condition and system of self-evaluation.

Darling seems to be the most intellectually informed and eloquent of the mentioned artists. Being the only one identifying as queer, not a woman per se, her approach comes from a different point of view. While being incredibly verbal about her identity, non-artschool-background and dabbling in the sex-work industry, she is the only one producing work that is partly stripped of her opinions. Obviously being an artist is already constituting a large chunk of identity itself, but Darling's position as such does not always seem to be laden with her criticism of gender-dichotomy.

Conclusive Thoughts

What has become clear I feel, is the extreme diversity of positions and artistic approaches towards the subject. Feminism can not be seen as one consecutive and unanimous movement, neither can feminist art or rather artists with a feminist motive in their work be thrown in a pot together. Over the years the manifestations of feminism in the arts have become much more varied and thus also

⁷⁵ Cf. Gram, Sarah (2013): *The Young Girl and the Selfie*, at <http://text-relations.blogspot.nl/2013/03/the-young-girl-and-selfie.html>

⁷⁶ Black, Hannah (2013): *Further Materials Toward a Theory of the Hot Babe*, available at <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/further-materials-toward-a-theory-of-the-hot-babe/>

the outcomes are very diverse. This consternation appears to have very different levels of depth, being constituted of endless factors, experiences, taste and observations. While some artists seem to be putting more importance on loudly voicing a general concern about what they think is going on, others meticulously dissect specific behavioral patterns and phenomena in order to expose them. Also the attributes ascribed to male and female artists are dismantled and researched, the position of oneself and how one is perceived and treated as a woman within the art-world is discussed.

Formally as well as regarding the content, works with feminist impetus differ as immensely as other work. What is observable is how a current sense of (artistic) emancipation seems to include the feeling of liberty to use imagery and visual methods (of amongst others self-depiction) that would have been frowned upon by what is considered to be old-school feminism. The effect the internet and technology in general have had on these forms of expression is very much apparent. The mechanisms are used and explored, for example the selective sharing that is presented under the false pretense of being completely open, or the real, unconscious exposure of the self to the unknown.

Identity is tricky, and so is having a stable opinion for some. But providing clear definitions and arguments as well as the careful use of (visual) language may help to clarify positions, for oneself and also to others, and that seems very necessary. I find criticality towards ones own conditioned state and attempting to overcome it one of the most important qualities in a substantial person, especially considering that it is apparently very easy to unwillingly participate in a cliché, even when consciously trying to avoid or highlight it. One has to consider the point-of-view and level of information of the audience, I suppose.

The networking-possibilities provided by the net are also used extensively. There seems to be an extreme interconnection between many of the artists, and feminist net-art has already become a genre. Whether that is a good or bad thing is quite hard to say.

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