



**Professional Art Practice:**

*The Digital Feminine*

**Thesis:**

*The Digital and the Hyperreal, with reference to artwork by Signe Pierce and Lauren King.*

By Lauren Pascal King

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for Master of Fine Arts at Rhodes University.

**November 2019**

**Supervisor:** Rat Western ([n.western@ru.ac.za](mailto:n.western@ru.ac.za))

## Abstract

This MFA is a visual art critical investigation of digital representations, manipulations, and exploitations of feminine figures in cyberspace. The particular focus of this study is centred on the work of self-titled reality artist Signe Pierce, as well as my own practical body of work: *The Digital Feminine*. Case studies of Pierce's practice include *Big Sister* (2016), *Halo* (2018), *American Reflexx* (2013) and *Reality Hack* (2016). Through these case studies I examine the nature of identity formation online as underscored by notions of performativity as well as arguments for the use of feminine aesthetics as feminist critique, specifically through the use of the 'Venus Flytrapping' method.

Jean Baudrillard famously theorised the hyperreal and the simulacra, claiming that human experience is a simulation of reality<sup>1</sup>. My MFA thesis addresses contemporary concerns relating to issues of reality, perception, the gaze, and identity in an increasingly virtual world. The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed massive changes in technology, and its subsequent commercialisation marked new territories for mass media, politics, entertainment, social life, and the art world. Avant-garde modern art movements shattered previously held standards of traditional artistic production, thus ideas surrounding the 'art object' and the role of artists themselves were fundamentally changed. In a postmodern world where nothing is sacred and life is experienced through the simulacra of the screen, the hyperreal takes over. I investigate how real-world socio-political issues, particularly those related to gender, transcend into the digital realm of cyberspace through discussions of Donna Haraway's 'cyborg feminism' and Judith Butler's ideas of gender performativity, as well as Erving Goffman's ideas of everyday performativity.

My final body of work for the professional art practice component of this MFA is realised in the form of an immersive installation that straddles the virtual and the real. Influenced by digital and hyperreal aesthetics (such as VapourWave), this installation also explores various expressions of femininity that an individual can express both online and in real life.

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<sup>1</sup> Baudrillard, 1994.

## **Declaration of Originality**

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged by complete references. This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for Master of Fine Arts at Rhodes University. I declare that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at another university.

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Signed

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Date

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I would also like to thank my supervisor Rat Western, who has been my lecturer since I started my undergraduate Fine Art degree in 2014. She has been my 'art mom' for the past six years, and her immeasurable depth of knowledge and experience in the visual arts, more specifically digital art, performance, and installation, have fundamentally helped shape me into the artist I am today.

Thank you to the staff at the Rhodes University Fine Art Department for their continued support and guidance over the years.

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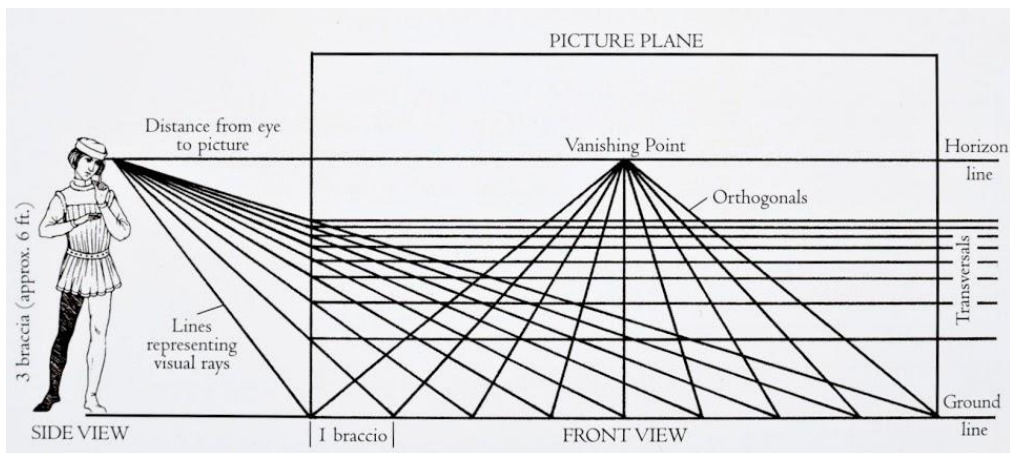


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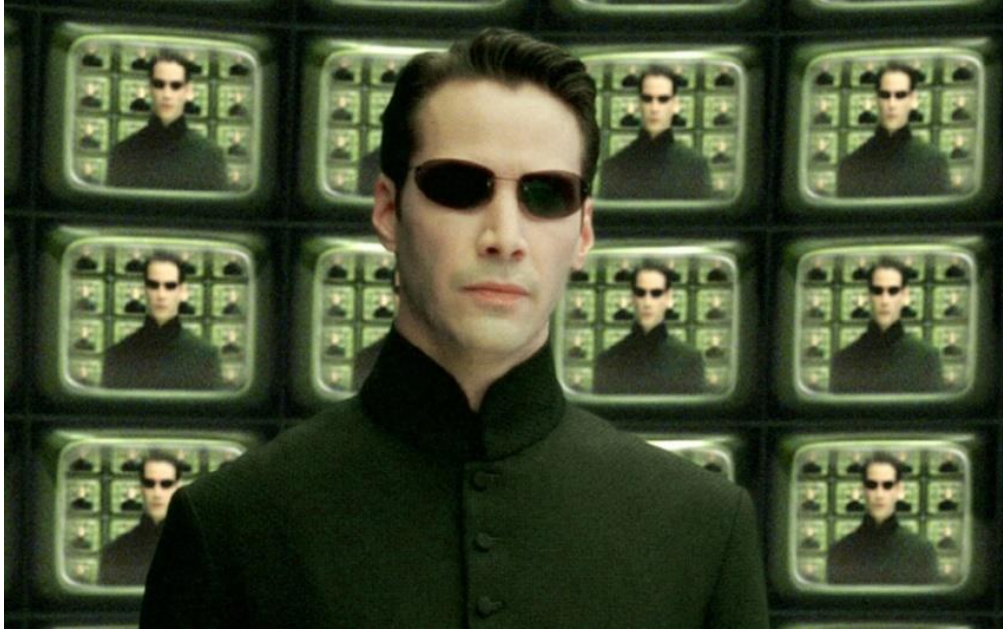


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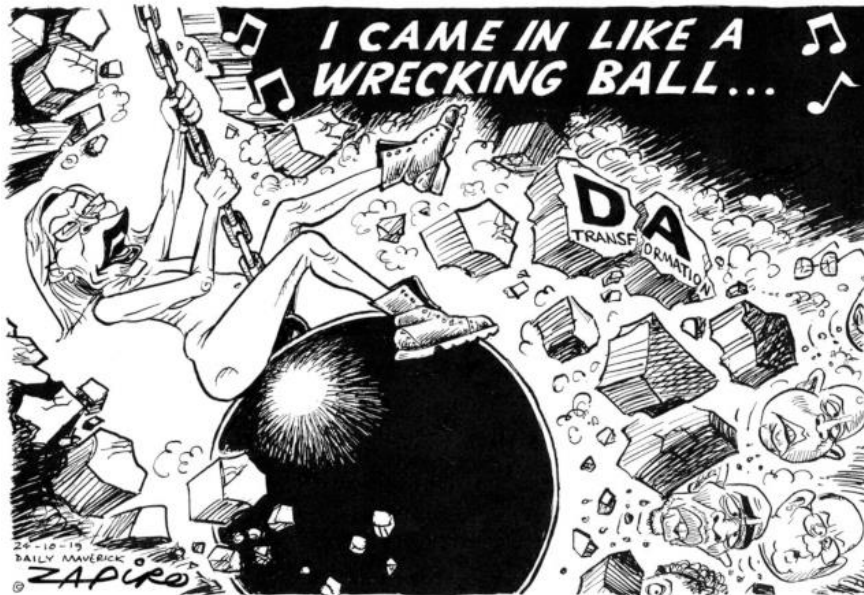


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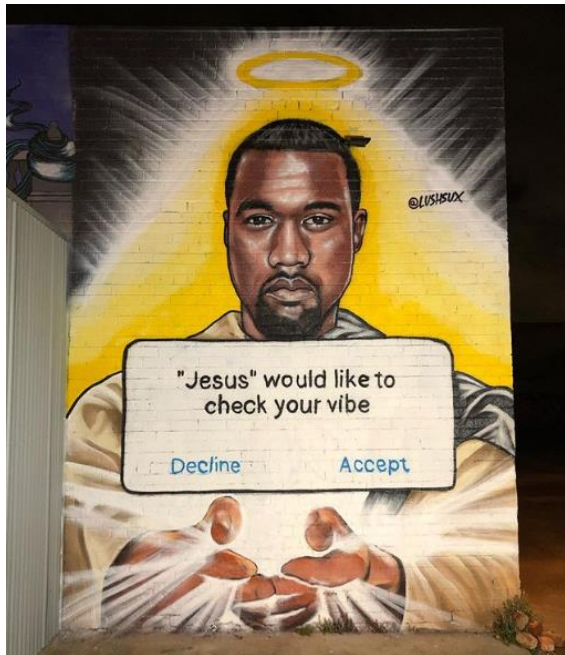


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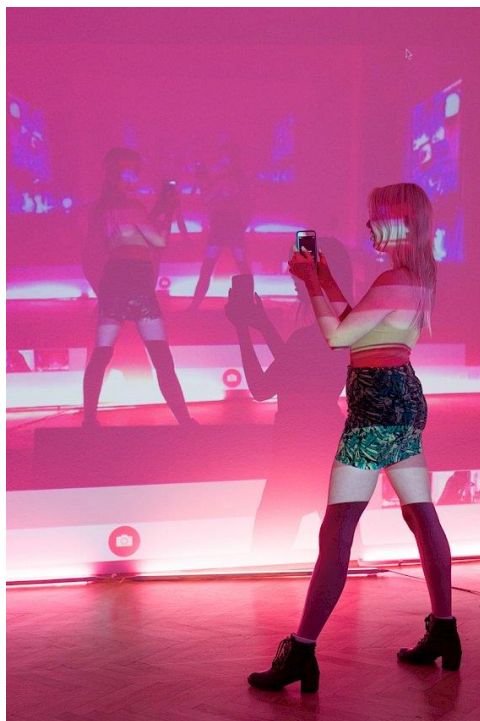


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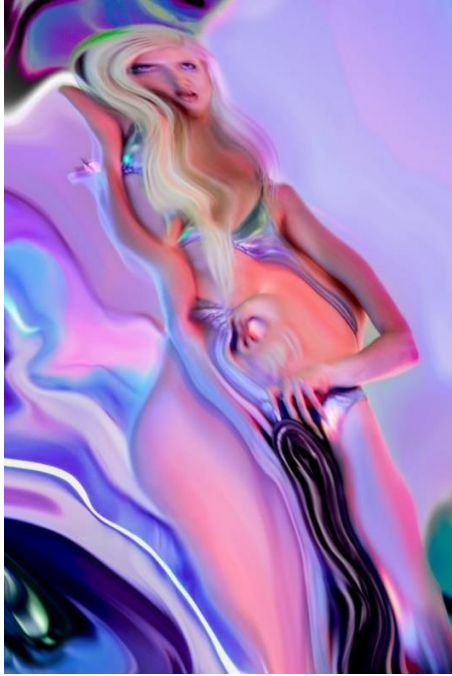


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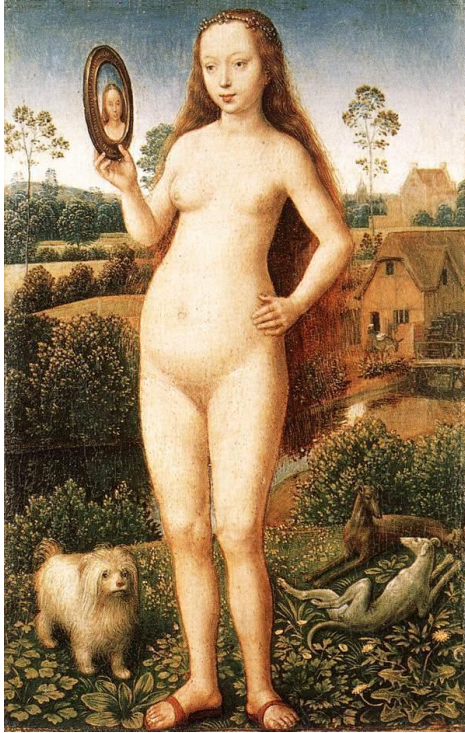


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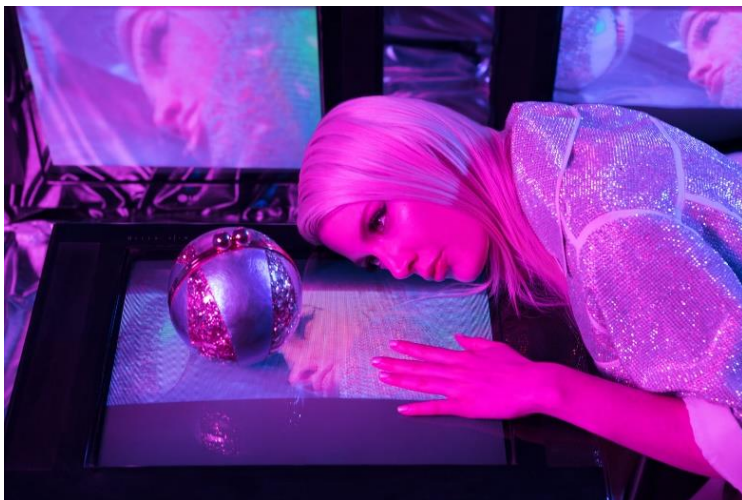


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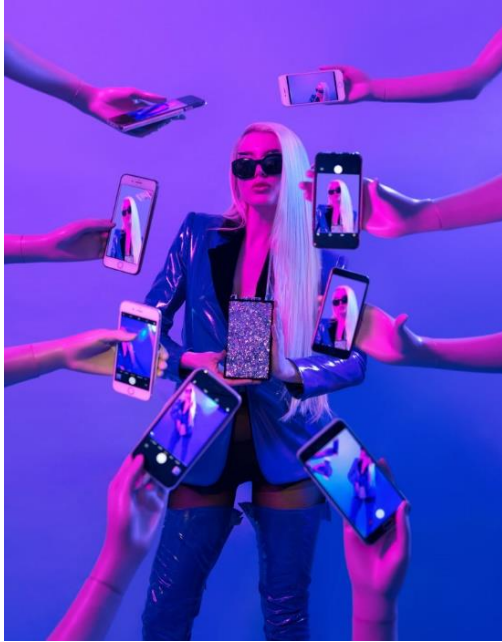


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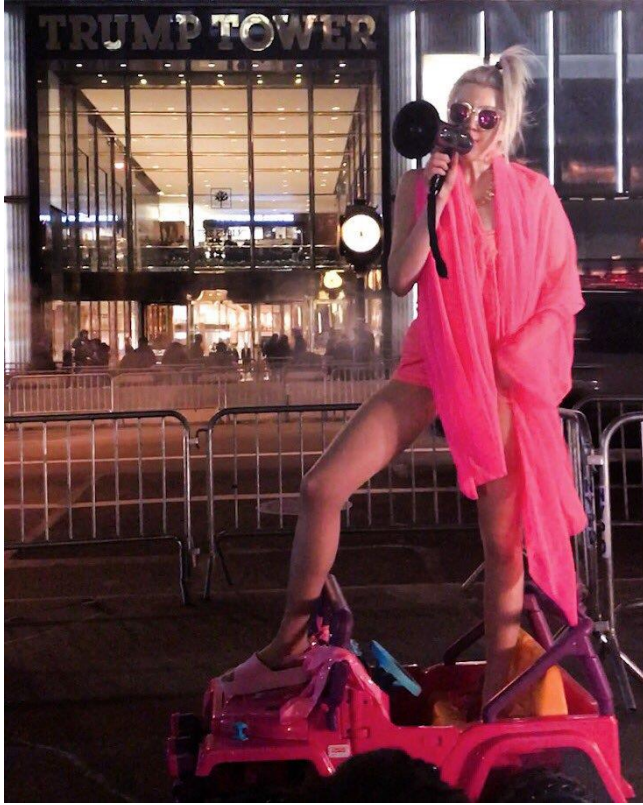


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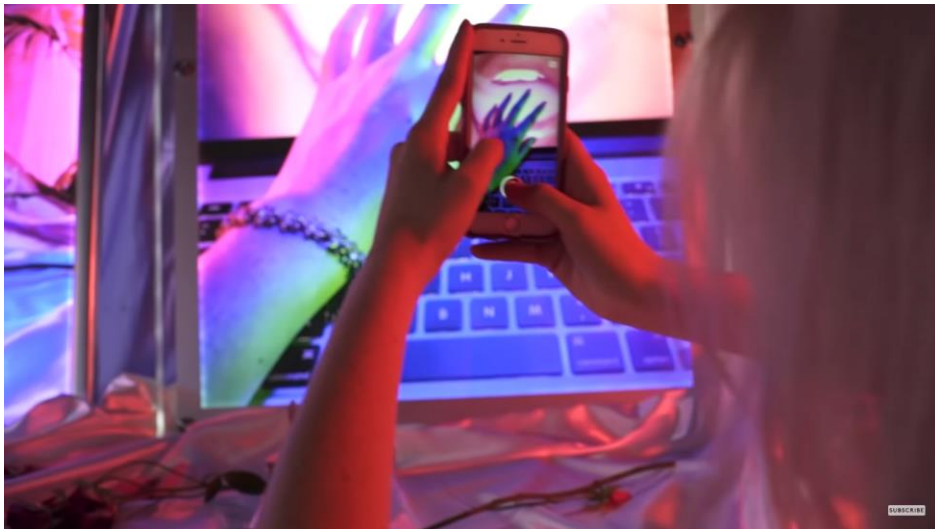


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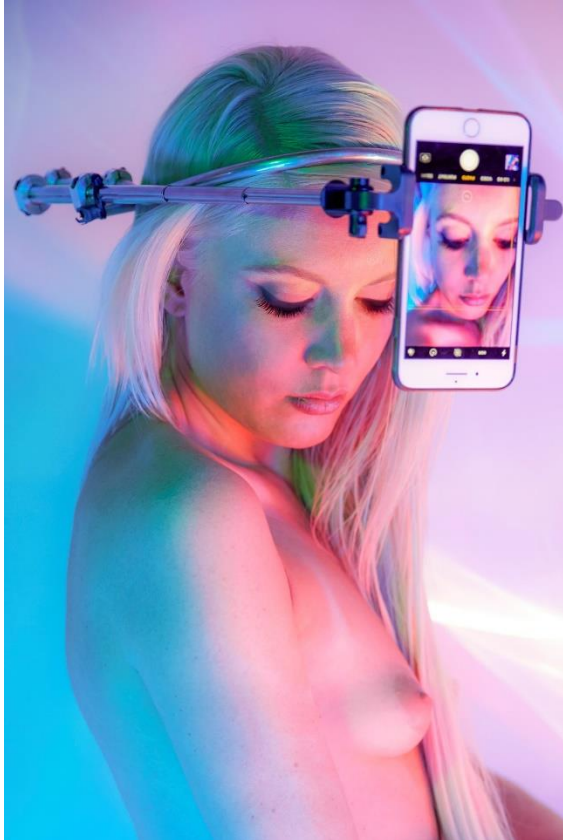


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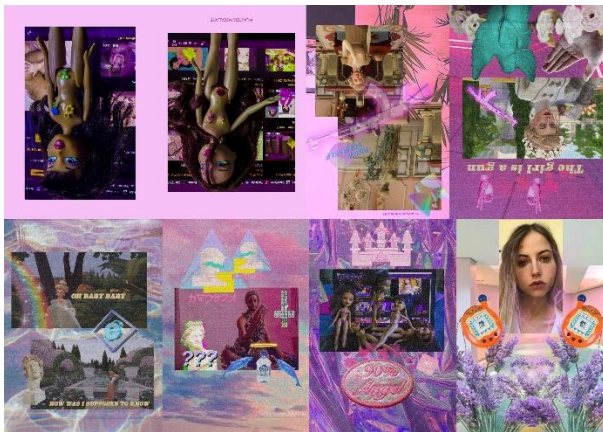


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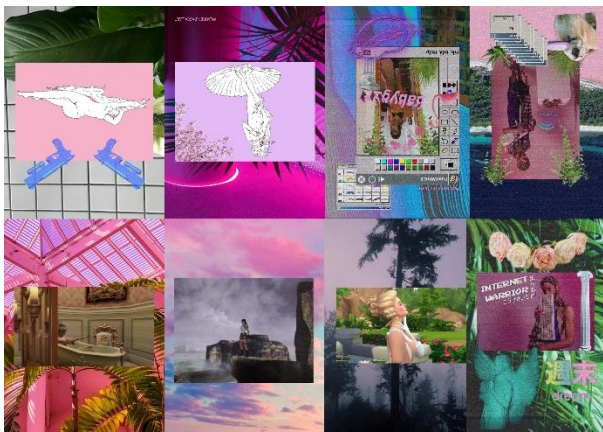


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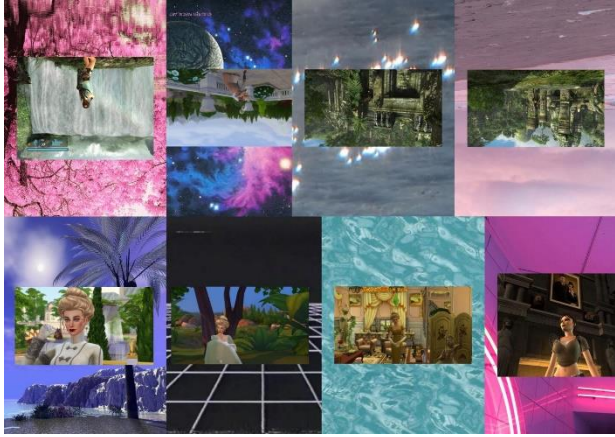


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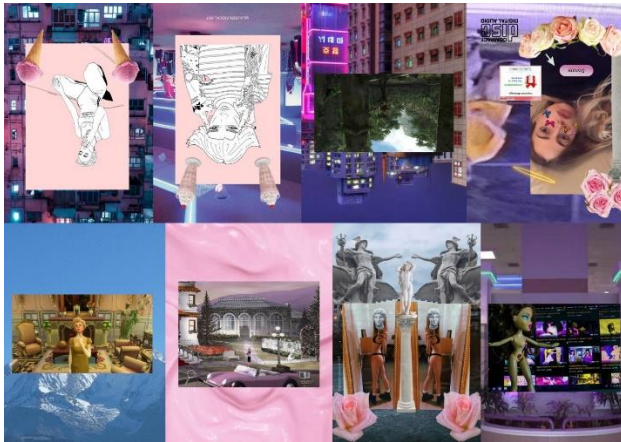


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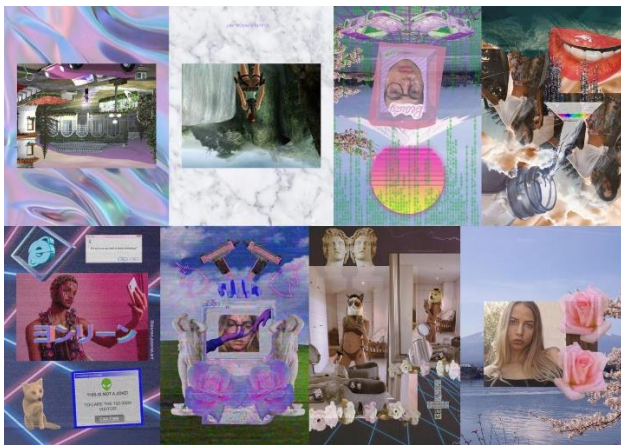


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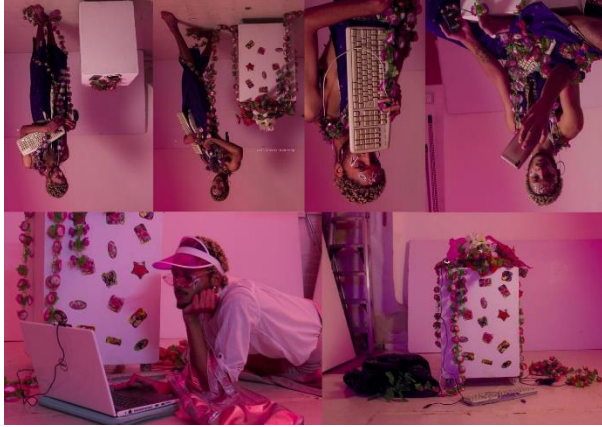


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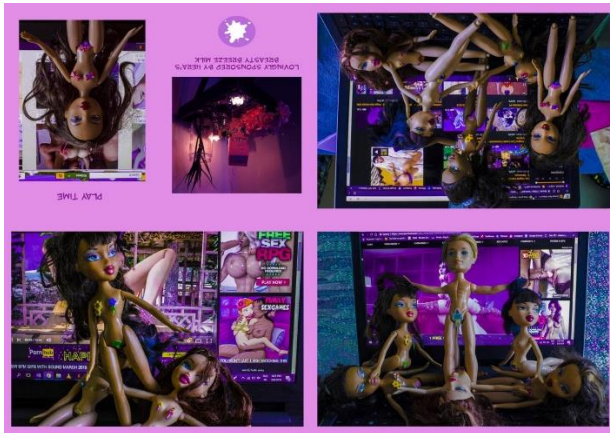


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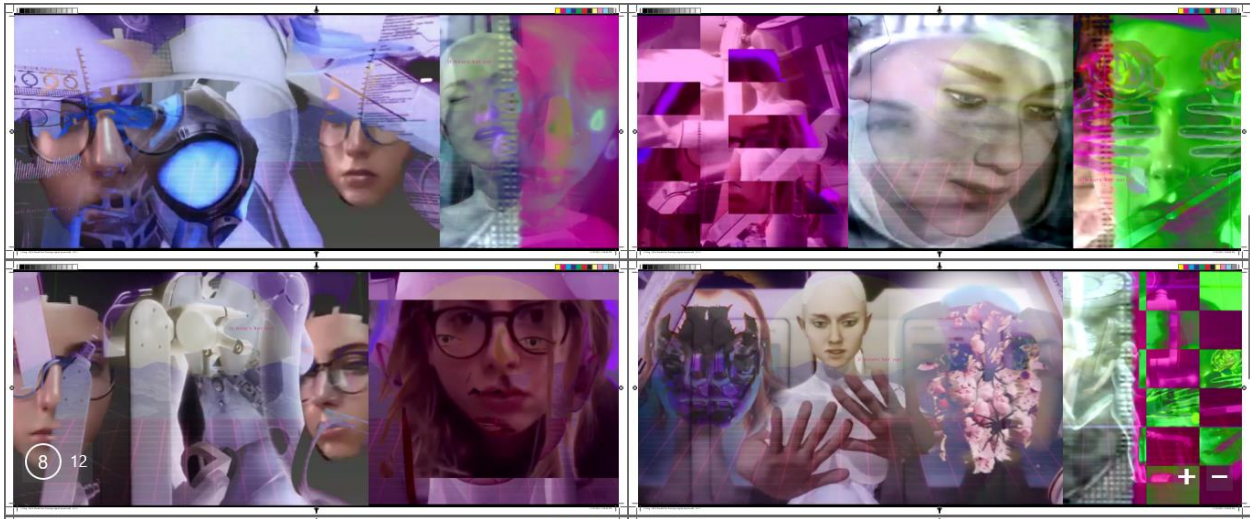


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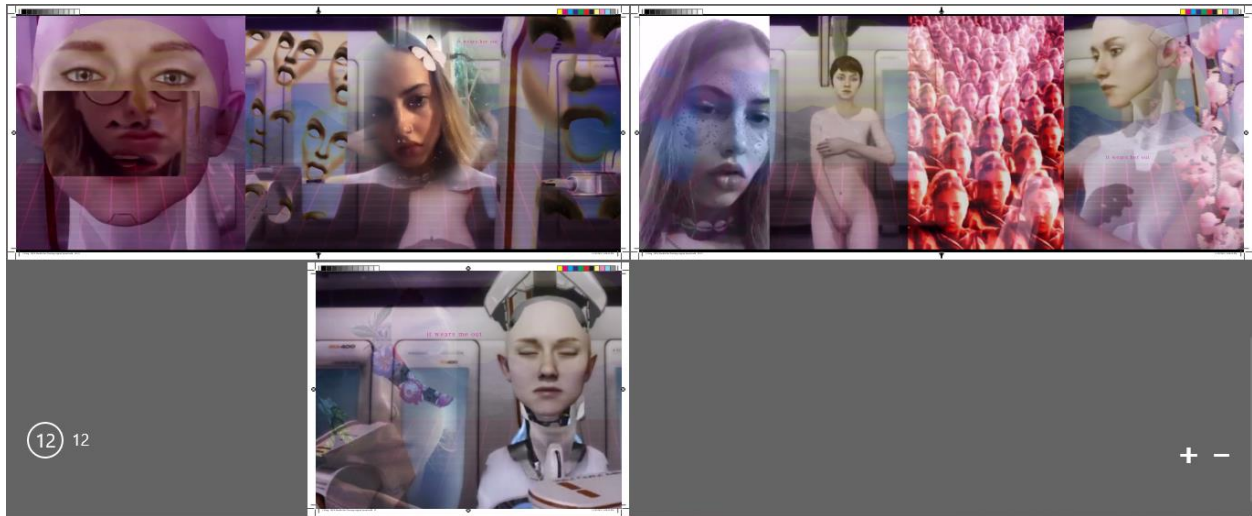


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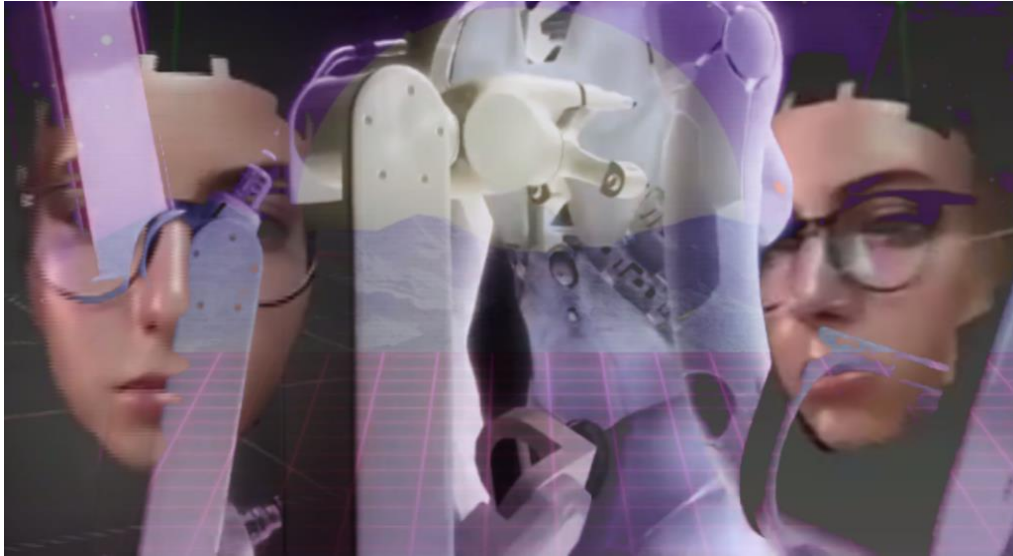


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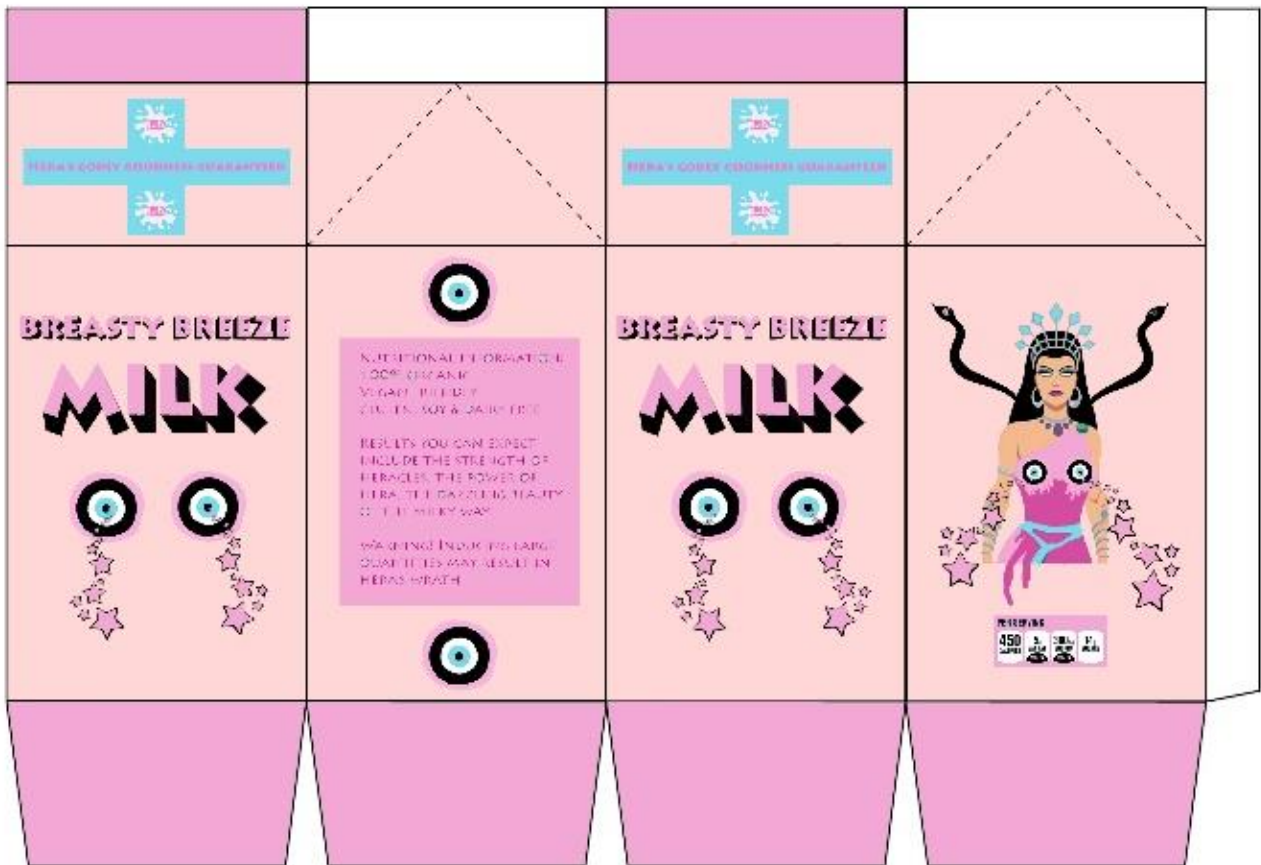


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Figure 90. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.



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Figure 92. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.



Figure 93. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.



Figure 94. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.



Figure 95. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.



Figure 96. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.



Figure 97. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.



Figure 98. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.



Figure 99. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.



Figure 100. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.



Figure 101. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.



Figure 102. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.



Figure 103. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.



Figure 104. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.



Figure 105. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.



Figure 106. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.



Figure 107. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.



Figure 108. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.



Figure 109. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.



Figure 110. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.



Figure 111. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.



Figure 112. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), video still.





Figure 113. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), unedited video still.



Figure 114. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), unedited video still.



Figure 115. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), unedited video still.



Figure 116. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), unedited video still.



Figure 117. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), unedited video still.



Figure 118. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), unedited video still.



Figure 119. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), unedited video still.



Figure 120. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), unedited video still.



Figure 121. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), unedited video still.



Figure 122. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), unedited video still.



Figure 123. Lauren Pascal King, *Milk & Mash* (2019), unedited video still.



Figure 124. Lauren Pascal King, *Digital Dreamscapes* (2019), video still.



Figure 125. Lauren Pascal King, *Digital Dreamscapes* (2019), video still.

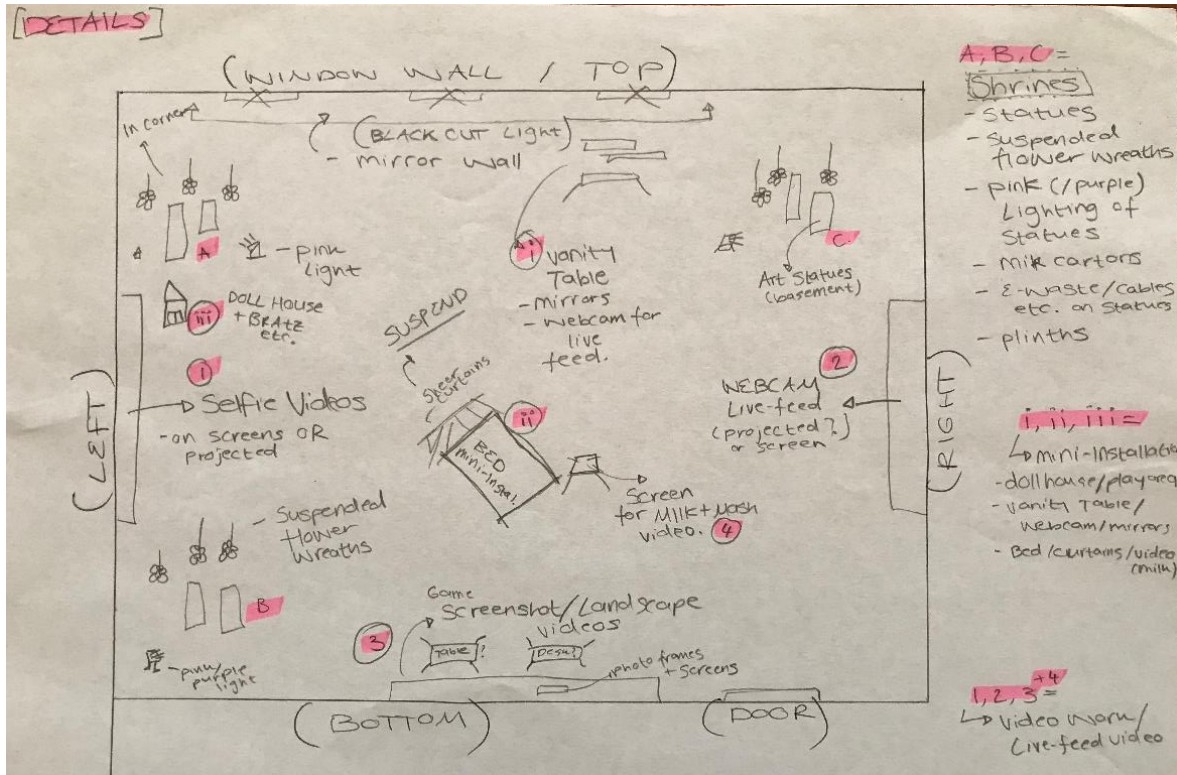


Figure 126. Lauren Pascal King, *The Digital Feminine* (2019), installation floor plan.

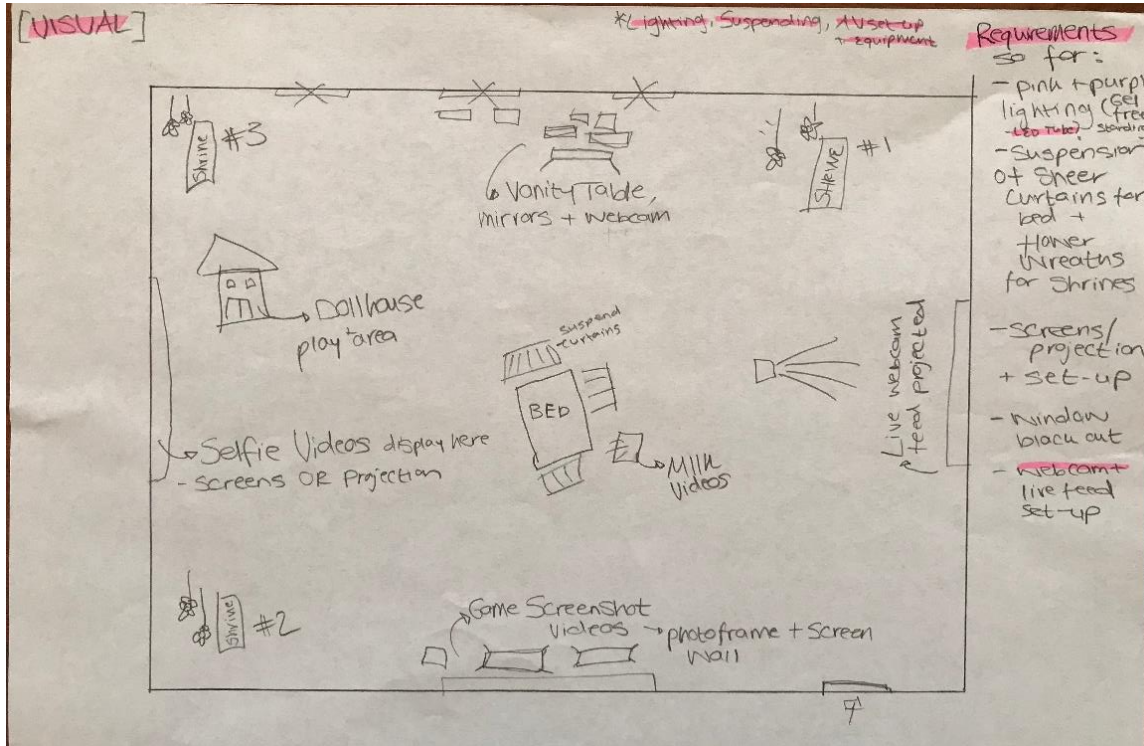


Figure 127. Lauren Pascal King, *The Digital Feminine* (2019), installation floor plan.



Figure 128. Lauren Pascal King, *The Digital Feminine* (2019), multimedia sculpture (painted and glittered toiletries); shrine décor.



Figure 129. Lauren Pascal King, *The Digital Feminine* (2019), multimedia sculpture (recycled batteries and string); shrine décor.



Figure 130. Lauren Pascal King, *The Digital Feminine* (2019), immersive installation process documentation.



Figure 131. Lauren Pascal King, *The Digital Feminine* (2019), immersive installation process documentation.



Figure 132. Lauren Pascal King, *The Digital Feminine* (2019), immersive installation process documentation.



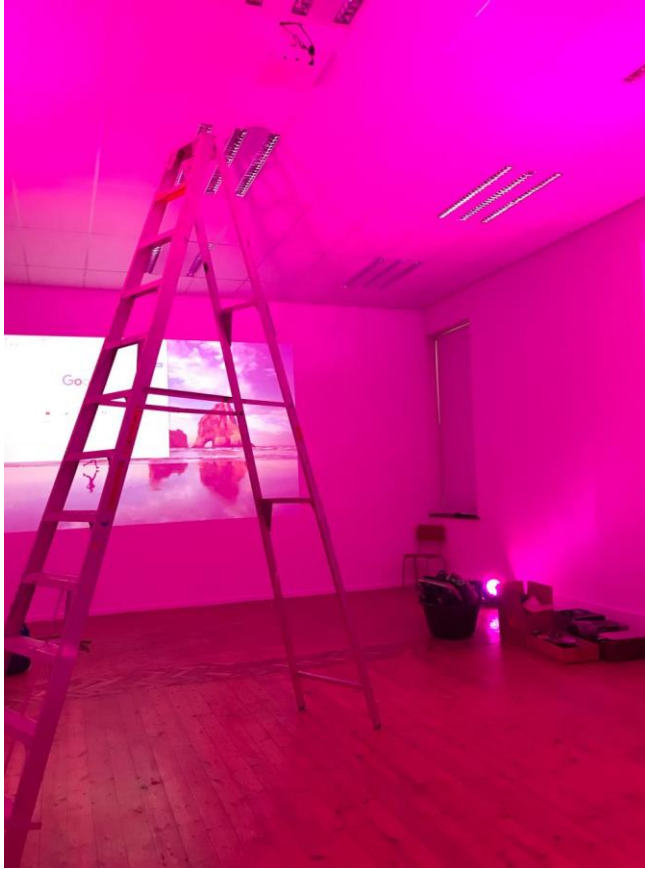


Figure 133. Lauren Pascal King, *The Digital Feminine* (2019), immersive installation process documentation.

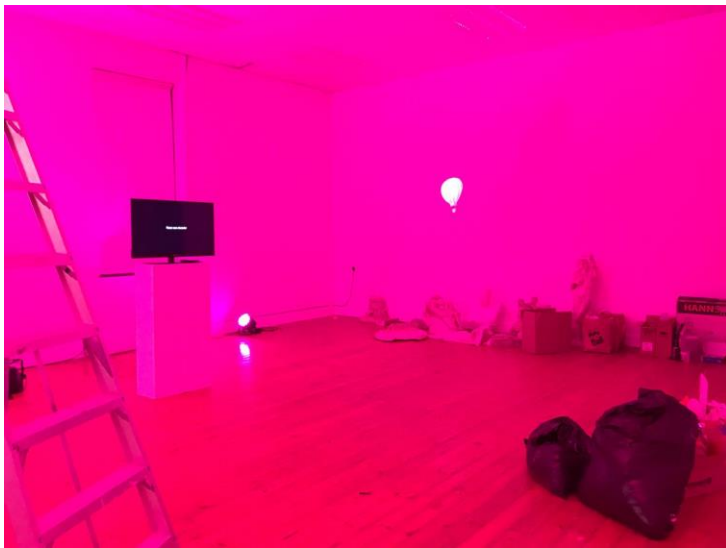


Figure 134. Lauren Pascal King, *The Digital Feminine* (2019), immersive installation process documentation.



Figure 135. Lauren Pascal King, *The Digital Feminine* (2019), immersive installation process documentation.



Figure 136. Lauren Pascal King, *The Digital Feminine* (2019), immersive installation process documentation.

## INTRODUCTION

The nature of reality has been a topic of keen interest for philosophers, scholars, and artists alike throughout the centuries. From Plato's allegory of the cave (which emphasised how reality can be manipulated), to the invention of the camera lens (which fundamentally altered European constructions of perspective), and to canonical science-fiction films like *The Matrix* (1999) (red pill or blue?), questions concerning ideas of reality, and simulations thereof, have never been more pressing than in the digitised climate of modern existence (figs. 1, 2, & 3). Mass media—television, cinema, radio—is in no way a new phenomenon, and scepticism towards its effect on consumers' perceptions of reality and their value systems have not, historically, been uncommon among scholars. Arguments both for and against the role of mass media in modern society, and particularly in visual culture, will be discussed and briefly outlined in this chapter in order to provide an art historical context for this research and practice.

Although modern forms of mass media have secured their place in daily life—the use of smartphones and the internet has become commonplace in a globalised, capitalist free-market society—cyberspace and modern communication technologies remain a relatively recent innovation in comparison to other traditional forms of media. Indeed, a large portion of academia and research across humanities and science fields is dedicated to the study of new technologies and their sociological, cognitive, and biological effects on society and individuals. The exponential and rapid rate at which technology develops, however, creates a turbulent cycle of production and advancement, the effects of which cannot possibly be wholly diagnosed before a new variable is thrown in the mix. This inevitably requires further study or contemplation from both scholars and artists. Even through conducting this research and practice over the course of two years it became clear to me, as an artist and a scholar, that the accelerated, accumulative nature of technological developments—technological singularity—is virtually impossible to keep track of.

*Trying to keep up with the Kardashians isn't easy, folks!*

*Neither is keeping up with trends, politics, or fake news.*

In this chapter, theorist Jean Baudrillard's ideas of reality and postmodernism will be employed as a framework for discussing the representation and interaction with constructions of reality in

virtual environments. Rather than labouring to present concretised conclusions to questions that frankly cannot be fully answered, my research focuses on this current moment in visual culture—one where the virtual and the real are blurred like never before in human existence.

This moment is not novel; Plato, Neo, and the camera lens are proof of this. So if this moment—the moment where the nature of existence, of reality comes into question—is not new, then why bother with it at all? I am interested in what led us here. What are the art historical precursors for this particular crisis of reality? How are artists in the world dealing with these questions today? As this chapter will show, artists have been engaging innovatively with technology since its inception and spread across consumer culture. What they did then was novel for their respective period. But is it possible to be truly innovative in a postmodern world given that, the idea that nothing is original and that it's all been done before, lie at the root of postmodernism? Where does this leave contemporary artists, specifically those engaging with digital media and ideas of reality? Now more than ever, the dichotomy of high and low art should be challenged. Despite much work that has been done to demystify the western European art canon and its subjectivities, hierarchies and expectations of the art world, these are still somewhat informed by lingering traditional standards and tastes. How one navigates this terrain as an artist in an Instagram-driven world can be fluid in nature. I am interested in contemporary artists who, like myself, are drawn to a merging of high and low culture, tasteful and kitsch, classic and commercial.

Chapter One introduces American artist Signe Pierce as a visual and theoretical case-study, discussions of which will illustrate the ideas and practice underscoring this MFA, in addition to ideas of hyperreality and perception. Chapter Two focuses on the performance of self and cyberfeminism, also in relation to Pierce's practice and methodology. Lastly, Chapter Three provides an overview of the ideas and concepts relating to my final body of work, as well as a thorough overview of my final installation/exhibition.

## CHAPTER ONE: The Digital and the Hyperreal

*Let us set the scene: reports of 'fake news' and polarising misinformation play out on a global stage, and a seemingly infinite array of Reality TV programs are broadcasted alongside political spectacles. Televised food competitions are juxtaposed with party electoral debates. Donald Trump's outrageous Twitter account makes for guaranteed headlines. Russia and the USA play table tennis with the media to the world's amusement and bewilderment. Mmusi Maimane leaves the Democratic Alliance, causing a media frenzy. Cue the Helen Zille cartoon from political cartoonist referencing Mylie Cyrus' infamous Wrecking Ball (2013) music video (fig. 4).*

*Hey now, hey now: this is what memes are made of. Trending hashtags have developed their own language or 'virtual vocabulary'<sup>2</sup>. Hashtags that demand social justice: #MeToo, #AmINext?, #Time'sUp. Suddenly gender-based violence is trending. The Weinstein Company's time is certainly up in the wake of Harvey's sexual assault allegations. Meanwhile on Netflix and elsewhere in TV and cinema, a massive wave of 80s nostalgia hits (minus the gender and race politics of the time); synthesisers are everywhere and suddenly we're transported back to the shopping mall we forgot ever existed since the Amazon.com takeover. We don't want the politics of the period, but we'll bask in the irony of those kitsch retro aesthetics. The style of this period is making a comeback in the latest wave of idealised cultural nostalgia. Your mom's old clothes and your dad's tennis sneakers are cool now. Memes about life in modern society are shared and posted across online platforms, which are then spray-painted onto walls by an anonymous Instagram artist. His throngs of followers vote on which popular internet meme they want to see next manifest in reality (fig. 5).*

*Consumers narrate and archive their daily lives and experiences on various social media platforms, creating a visual feedback loop of lived experiences.*

*Social life in turn is informed by this feedback loop. These lived experiences are, however, fundamentally mediated and virtual.*

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<sup>2</sup> These 'virtual vocabularies' are a straightforward example of how normalised 'tech talk' has become in everyday conversations, both online and face-to-face. Using words such as 'hashtag' in everyday speech and shortened terms like 'LOL' or 'OMG' also illustrate the fluidity with which virtual and 'real' life converge as hyperreality.

*Their societal acceptance and normalisation take for granted that these are genuine or real interactions.*

*Herein lies the paradox of the virtual and the real in contemporary society.*

*Herein lies hyperreality.*

*#ParadoxVirtuallyReal*

## PART A: The Simulacra of the Screen

*There is no real, there is no imaginary, except at a certain distance. What happens when this distance, including that between the real and the imaginary, tends to abolish itself, to be reabsorbed on behalf of the model?*

- Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994:118)<sup>3</sup>

What is ‘real’ in an increasingly virtual/hyperreal world? Writing in the 1980s, French theorist Jean Baudrillard formulated ideas of hyperreality that emphasised the tension between the virtual and the real. Baudrillard argues in his philosophical treatise *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994) that the hyperreal is the result of a collapse between the real and the imaginary. The term ‘simulacrum’ has been used in art history to refer to a representation or imitation of an object or person, and has historical connotations of being lesser than, or inferior to, the idea of an ‘original’. Plato’s theory of ideas argued for a distinction between “the thing” itself and its images in the world, drawing out the differences between the “original” and the “copy”, the “model” and the “simulacrum” (Deleuze and Krauss, 1983: 45). Representation, as opposed to simulation, fundamentally relies on a principle of equivalence between signs/symbols<sup>4</sup> and the real. In other words, representations are premised on the “utopian” idea that meaning can be formulated and maintained through signs’ presumed correspondence with reality (Baudrillard, 1994: 6). Simulation operates conversely, and is premised on “the radical negation of the sign as value”, truth or meaning. Value exchange between signs, symbols, and the real are rendered meaningless. The idea of hyperreality indicates the inability to distinguish between reality and simulations thereof, threatening fundamental dichotomies between true and false, real and imaginary (ibid: 3). Representation gives way to simulation, enveloping the entire structure of representation and system of signs as pure simulacra.

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<sup>3</sup> The English version referenced in this research was published in 1994; Baudrillard’s original French text was published in 1981..

<sup>4</sup> Baudrillard begins his philosophical treatise by unpacking the differences between representations and simulations. Drawing from the principles of semiotics, the sign/symbol relationship here refers to the principles of signifier (physical objects in the world) and the corresponding signified (metaphorical; the concept, idea or thought associated with the physical object). Baudrillard contests this equivalence of the sign and the real.

Modern spaces such as hypermarkets represent hyperreality in this Baudrillardian perspective: a “hyperspace of commodity” in which consumers travel to and fro to collect and find objects (ibid: 75). There are countless billboards plastered along highways—signature in any modern metropolis—which guide consumers on their journey to hyperreality. There is no release from this “total screen” where the gaze is presented an endless, “uninterrupted” display of commodity (ibid). Products and billboards play the role of “equivalent and successive signs”, and employees dedicated to the task of maintaining this façade of “surface display” (ibid). The objects are not mere commodities, nor signifiers of subjective meaning; rather, the object becomes a kind of assessment or interrogation for the consumer. The consumer, caught in a perpetual cycle of responding to tests and messages in the media, can only seek answers in the very objects which pose the question. Consumers are summoned to hyperreal spaces in an attempt to satisfy these questions, further perpetuating and participating in the cycle of regulation, in the “verification of the code” (ibid). In this particular “universe of simulation” the “self-service” nature of hypermarkets emphasises its emptiness, and the homogenised space lacks any mediation but succeeds in assembling consumers and objects in a “space of direct manipulation” (ibid). The gaze manifested in billboards seduces consumers into choosing “complete serenity”, and simultaneously observes them in “the activity of consumption” – much like hypermarket surveillance cameras, which form part of the backdrop and “décor of simulacra” (ibid: 76).

### *#TheSimulatrix*

Signe Pierce is an American artist whose work primarily deals with the question of reality and what is ‘real’ in the age of technological singularity<sup>5</sup>. She uses her body, her surroundings, and digital technology to tackle social issues of gender, identity, and sexuality (fig. 6). Pierce is fundamentally interested in how technology, access to overloads of information, and cyberspace, impacts human perceptions of reality and truth. Drawing from Baudrillard’s ideas of hyperreality and simulacra, Pierce strives to create a critical framework through which to perceive the nature of hyperreality and everyday experience in relation to exponential technological expansion. Key to this framework is the oversaturation of mass media and information, and to what extent these effect lived experience and reality. Pierce refers to Baudrillard as the “godfather of the simulacra”,

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Technological singularity’ refers to accelerated progress which defines the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, resulting in fundamental changes for human life and its relationship with increasingly intelligent technologies (Vinge, 1993). It thus describes the exponential rate at which modern technology develops.



who prophesied that “The Hyperreal Becomes The Real” (2018a). The phrase serves as a mantra for Pierce, attempting to manifest it through considerations of her own performances. Pierce applies Baudrillard’s formulation of the simulacrum—not a mere copy of the real, but a copy that actually becomes the real, resembling a greater truth—to her practice as a self-titled ‘reality artist’. For Baudrillard the ‘original’ seems to have no location, but can be infinitely recreated through the simulacra of a screen.

The term ‘reality art’ was coined by Pierce to describe her kind of work, which engages with all aspects of contemporary digital life as a medium for artistic creation, and feels that it is the most appropriate form of identification for her artistic practice. Although she has a formal arts education and engages with multiple mediums including photography, installation, performance, and video, Pierce advocates for the relevance of reality art in the canon of visual production. As society accelerates into “new territories of existence” (2018a), so too should art forms. Pierce argues that “art is applicable to all aspects of life” and exists “anywhere with a Wi-Fi connection, no longer confined to traditionally acceptable spaces of visual display or performance such as galleries or theatres” (ibid). She describes this approach to artistic production as “embracing one’s own life as a medium” through “capturing and exporting a curated slice of existence in media” (ibid). A large part of Pierce’s work is underscored by its engagement with online social media platforms such as Instagram, utilising this as a means of “subversive expression and presentation to be consumed by an online audience” (ibid). The virtual space of expression and display that Instagram simulates, enables her to explore this “meta-modernist” approach to “acting and living in the age of technological singularity” (ibid).

By breaking the boundaries of conventional art knowledge and production through an exploitation of the digital tools provided in the modern era, Pierce aims to create new spaces—both physical and virtual—in which gender roles, ideas of femininity, and technology are subverted in an attempt to cultivate new dialogue and ways of understanding hyperreality (D’Angelo and Pierce, 2017) (fig. 7). Pierce’s work uses interactive digital technology—which by its nature vacillates between the virtual and the real—to blur the line between everyday life and performance. Drawing inspiration from the everyday—the paradoxical spectacle and banality of it—and popular culture, Pierce shifts traditional artistic sensibilities and conventions beyond the space of the gallery and into the real world. For Pierce, the “increasingly virtual arena” (2018a) in which individuals

conduct their lives online results in an inability to distinguish between what is performance and what is real life, underscoring its hyperreal nature. After all, who's to say when the performance ends if the (selfie) cameras are always on? Pierce argues that the constant uploading, narrating, and archiving of lived experiences on digital stages such as Instagram further thrusts human experience and "lived scenarios into an unreal, hyperreal void"(ibid).

In *15 Million Minutes of Fame: Reality Art in the Digital Sphere* (2018a), a manifesto<sup>6</sup> of sorts published in *Bauhaus100*, Pierce comprehensively discusses her ideas and philosophies of reality art. Users online are engaged in performative acts, creations of avatars and maintenance of digital personas. She explains that every image that is uploaded to Instagram—spectacular or mundane—creates a framework of perception in which users' present augmented versions of their physical selves. Further, this presentation and curation of an augmented self and heightened personae is an inherently performative act in the sense that an altered self is being presented to an audience. Pierce discusses the subversive and expressive potential of augmented aesthetics such as face-filters on Instagram and Snapchat, arguing that "the face filter is the mask of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (ibid). These "modern geometric masks" are worn and captured in the selfie-cameras of smartphones, whereby the software's facial recognition system scans users' faces into its matrix and transforms them into doe-eyed puppies or bunnies, accompanied by vocoded sound playback (ibid). Where the average individual may use these filters to either play with or hide one's image, Pierce argues for face filter technology as an opportunity for a reality artist to "subvert or pervert ideas of masking and presenting an online identity" (ibid). After all, artists have a historical reputation for "musing, using, and misusing new technologies to present new ideas" (ibid). Why should an engagement with Instagram and augmented aesthetics be any different?

### *#WaysOfSeeing*

Perceptions of reality have a long history within the art canon, and a fundamental shift in perspective was marked by the invention of the camera. The invention of the lens and the rapid advance in modern camera technology had an unparalleled effect on the way that humans experience, and conceive of reality. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger (2008) explains how European

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<sup>6</sup> Pierce is adept in her ability to effectively convey her thoughts and ideas in an accessible yet eloquent and rich manner. She has a thorough grasp on what she means by, and intends to achieve, as a 'reality artist', and presents transgressive strategies for understanding and engaging with issues of reality and identity, especially in relation to hyperreal existence both offline and in cyberspace.

perspective, developed during the Renaissance, had been the traditional standard of perception: the viewer is visually privileged and appears to be at the centre of their own universe, god-like in their scope. This god-like idea of perspective arranged the world for the spectator making “the single eye the visible centre of the world” (ibid: 16). Perspective thus centres everything on “the eye of the beholder”; all visual information converges on the eye as the “vanishing point of infinity” (ibid). Perspective was applied in paintings and drawings throughout the Renaissance period and beyond in western art, and ultimately became the aesthetic standard for artists. The invention of the camera lens threw European standards of perspective into disarray. In isolating and capturing transitory appearances, the camera shattered the idea that images were “timeless”, and what one saw now depended on their relative “position in time and space” (ibid: 18). The camera had major implications for ideas of ‘originality’ and ‘uniqueness’ of an image or an artwork through its singular ability to capture and infinitely reproduce an image of an artwork such as a painting. As a form of reproduction and way of seeing, the camera is charged with some degree of distortion (ibid: 20). It changed the way humans saw the world, and the “visible” started to take on new meaning (ibid: 18). The invention of the camera thus had a fundamental impact on visual practices such as painting. 20th century art movements, such as Cubism, embraced and experimented with new forms of pictorial display and warped perspective. Whilst Renaissance perspective had favoured a singular, god-like field of vision, the camera lens provided the means with which to capture multiple perspectives of reality. This inspired the Cubists, who broke artistic conventions of perspective to instead capture “the totality of possible views” available from all points of the subject depicted (ibid: 18) (fig. 8). In essence, the ‘eye’ of the camera was responsible for a huge shift in how humans understood reality and the world around them. The cultural and philosophical effects cameras and photography have had on reality, is by no means limited to the scope of art history. The mere fact that every smartphone or portable electronic device currently on the market is equipped with some degree of camera capabilities should be telling of the degree to which the invention of the camera impacted modern society.

### *#WaysOfBeingSeen*

In a series of self-portraits done in collaboration with *Broadly* for *Vice’s Privacy & Perception* issue, Pierce uses photography and her body to explore how anything can be manipulated in modern media (2018b) (figs. 9-11). She exploits the mechanics of the camera lens and illustrates

its ability to distort perspective and warp the ‘truth’ of an image, portraying herself in ways that are “paradoxically abstract, digital, literal, and real” (ibid) (fig. 9). Although the images in the series appear to be digitally edited or manipulated, they are not (fig. 10). Through the use of warped mirrors, bodily contortions, and experimental camera angles, Pierce presents images that would otherwise appear to surely be digitally manipulated. The fundamental question of this series considers how “real life isn’t always what it seems”, and how “real life” can be just as manipulative as the “digital world” (ibid). The series also explores ideas of performing for a machine through the act of taking selfies (fig. 9 & 11). The act of capturing a selfie is “alienating” in itself: one performs for their smartphone device in physical solitude, captures the desired image, edits the media, and can finally export and share the final product when they are satisfied (Pierce, 2018b). All of this behind-the-scenes mediation is typically hidden. This self-portrait (fig. 11) captures Pierce as she attempts to capture herself provocatively, which she argues has a “vulgar” and “pornographic” element to it (ibid). This highlights the tension between the act of taking selfies, and the act of seeing or admiring a selfie. Ideas regarding performance of self and everyday performativity of the mundane underscores the performative nature of Pierce’s work, which will be further unpacked in the second chapter in detail.

## **PART B: The Media Machine**

*In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation. ... The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.*

- Guy Debord, *The Commodity as Spectacle* (1977)<sup>7</sup>

In order to conduct a comprehensive analysis of Signe Pierce and her work's place in the context of contemporary artistic production, it is necessary to trace and unpack some of the art historical references, genres, and precursors for her artistic practice. There is an exhaustive expanse of research and scholarship dedicated to the role and effects of mass media and popular culture on the art canon, as well as general concerns among artists and critics relating to the rapid increase of technological advancement in modern societies (which will be briefly outlined). Visual analysis and a detailed aesthetic, socio-cultural, and philosophical investigation of Pierce's work will form the backbone of the research relating to my practice and the construction of Pierce's oeuvre.

Certainly, engagement with digital technology, gender, and perceptions of reality are not novel themes in contemporary or even historical artistic production, and that is not what this paper aims to propose. Rather, this research should shed light on some of the more nuanced aspects of Signe Pierce's work and philosophies as a reality artist, and to illustrate some of the strategies she employs to create this fusion of lived reality and artistic production. Signe Pierce is not breaking the wheel, but it could be argued that she captains a ship steering it on an entirely different course. A closer look at the historical context of some of the ideas and practices relating to her work; such as photography (perception, the gaze, perspective), gendered performance, cyberfeminism, and simulationist aesthetics will be useful in contextualising the role and legitimacy of 'reality art' in contemporary artistic production. Cyberfeminism and Pierce's performative methodologies will be discussed in the following chapter with reference to Donna Haraway and Erving Goffman

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<sup>7</sup> Durham and Kelner, 2006: 117.

respectively, while this chapter focuses on establishing the core theories relating to perceptions of reality that underpin Pierce's practice. First and foremost, a comprehensive overview of the art historical context for reality art must be established.

As Signe Pierce's practice illustrates, digital mass media and communication technologies have provided artists who are interested in breaking traditional modes of expression with new forms, strategies, and mediums with which to experiment. As these technologies became increasingly omnipresent, artists who utilise these technologies became increasingly concerned with addressing computer-dependant culture, and examining the complex relationship between consumer technologies and daily life. In her book *Internet Art* Rachel Greene (2004) provides a comprehensive historical overview of artists' engagement with modern technology and cyberspace. Early themes and strategies among pioneering internet and digital artists included "instructions, appropriation, dematerialisation, networks, and information" (ibid: 9). Largely underpinned by theories of the hyperreal and simulacra as formulated by Baudrillard in works like *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), the 1980-90s witnessed salient trends in artistic production that included appropriative, hyperreal, and simulationist techniques (Greene, 2004: 26). Focus shifted towards the context and aura of an artwork, and to the increasing tension between the real and the virtual. Artists were engaging with systems, theory, and advertising. Objects and materials of consumer culture were considered with new developing visual languages engaged in iconophilia and consumers' internalisation of media experience. Themes of surveillance also come to the fore in artistic expression during this period, and artists took to using computer technology to create "immersive, interactive environments" which shifted the traditional audience experience of an artwork from that of mere passive viewer (ibid: 28).

Prior to this, in the 1960s, contemporary artists engaged with themes of automation, mechanisation, and technology as seen in movements like conceptual art and groups such as Fluxus and EAT<sup>8</sup> (Experiments in Art and Technology). Conceptual art witnessed the rise of installation techniques, the use of the body, and live art—all of which form the basis of Pierce's practice to some degree. Conceptual art advocated for the ephemerality and dematerialisation of the art object,

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<sup>8</sup> EAT included members such as Andy Warhol (a big inspiration for Pierce in terms of Pop Art's transgression of high and low culture, and its exploitation and engagement with popular culture in the art world), and experimental composer John Cage (whose strategy of using 'found' sound in his work resembles that of Vapourwave's audio/visual pastiche techniques).

privileging idea over form. The movement's focus on materiality and ephemerality remain a major point of interest for contemporary artists and scholars engaging critically with the digital age: the nature of modern technology, specifically the internet and cyberspace, is fundamentally "decentralised and ephemeral" (ibid: 8). It is interesting to note the similarities in trends such as dematerialisation over the decades, and how they each manifest in their respective period. The Fluxus movement can be considered an influential precursor for many contemporary artists engaging with the internet and technology in terms of its strategies and methods. 'Events' or 'Happenings'<sup>9</sup> (that were signature of the movement) pushed art, the traditional 'art object', and the experience of it, beyond the gallery walls and ultimately demanded an alternate way of viewing from its audience. Largely based on the unpredictable implementation of instructions or premises, Happenings were a precursor for the interactive and experimental nature of Pierce's work, especially with regards to her performances in both the gallery and in public spaces. These Events or experiential spectacles problematized and challenged the role of the artist by removing their physical mediation and control from the production of the artwork. Even earlier, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, movements such as Dada—focused on breaking away from traditional modes of visual representation and production, instead engaging with codes, instructions, and chance-like events—would seem to preface the mechanical basis of modern software in terms of its coded, instructional, and algorithmic operating system (ibid).

Nam June Paik, a member of the neo-Dada group Fluxus and an influential Korean American artist working with mass media technologies, had a particular interest in the use of television as a medium. Often referred to as the founder of video art, Paik transformed the television into an art object by exhibiting his installations in galleries, blurring the line between high and low culture through his use of commercial aesthetics. The way Paik installed and curated his work with television sets and screens has an almost sculptural quality to it, in terms of the composition of multiple objects coming together to form a whole (fig. 12). It is in this way that I would argue modern machines and contemporary art objects in the above sense are not so much different as they are alike in form. Removing it from its private, domestic setting and inserting it into the 'sacred' gallery space, Paik's work with the television ultimately transforms the object from that of a "traditional broadcast platform" to that of an "interactive canvas" (Greene, 2004: 9). As a

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<sup>9</sup> These types of performative and chance-like events/explorations were part of a salient trend in conceptual art movements of the 1960s, characterised as a multimedia art spectacle or experience (Greene, 2004: 19).

mere commercial consumer object, the television simulates the omnipresence of a consumer-targeted machine, emitting a unidirectional signal to viewers. By inserting this commercial electronic box of passivity into the gallery space and setting up reception apparatuses for it, Paik shifted the commercial and unidirectional television apparatus to create more participatory and interactive spaces (ibid). Paik was transgressive in terms of how he conceived of the screen as an alternative mode of display, thus the television screen emerges as a pictorial device (fig. 13). He signalled to the fluid potentials of the medium, presenting alternate strategies for contemporary art objects and installations. Engaged as it is with the simulacrum of the screen, and exploring how screens have fundamentally shaped the way we look at and experience the world, it should be no surprise that some of Pierce's work aesthetically references Paik's work in terms of his installation techniques and engagement with the digital media available of their respective times.

The art historical context for the use of mass media technologies in artistic production has been contentious among some institutions, with critics having varying opinions on the fundamental artistic nature (or lack thereof) of modern communication technologies. Although it is clear that critical analysis of technology and artistic production is not a novel terrain to traverse in academia, it can be argued that modern society is still experiencing aftershocks from a fundamental shift in the human perception of reality caused by personalised, recreational, and commercial use of digital technology. This shift has had an unprecedented effect on the role of the artist, the role of the art object, and the role of the art canon itself in modern society. The widespread technological takeover over the last century, especially the commercial rise of the internet and personal computers that occurs from the 1980s onwards, drastically shifted western traditional modes of materiality, distribution, and consumption of art—fundamentally changing the definition of artistic production in the digital age (Greene, 2004: 12).

The proliferation of commercial mass media and rapid digitisation that occurred during the 1980-90s throughout modern society resulted in an increased consumer dependence on the use of technology in everyday life. Mass media and commercial means of artistic production were deemed lowbrow and regarded with scepticism among art institutions and scholars. Cultural theorists such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer<sup>10</sup> argued that mass media manipulates the

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<sup>10</sup> Theorists such as Adorno and Horkheimer belonged to the Institute for Social Research and the Frankfurt school. In exile from fascist Europe, these scholars travelled to America and came to believe that American media culture was “highly ideological” and functioned to “promote the interests of US capitalism” and the free-market economy (Durham



consumer's perception of reality, exerting control and influence over how an individual makes sense of the world. According to this argument, mass media (and by extension mass art) is deemed "mind-numbing", absent of any "active thought" or genuine consideration on the part of consumers or audiences (Lopes, 2010: 31). A passive mind is more likely to become a subject of control, thus a consumer's mindless consumption of media can act a vehicle for manipulation. These critics emphasised the role of television and movies in feeding their audiences, or consumers, with a "formulaic diet" that maintains the media's position of control, influence, and manipulation (ibid: 32). Consumers thus run the risk of conflating what they experience on shiny screens with reality. The same line of thinking can be applied to contemporary mediums of mass media such as the internet and social media (which are inextricably entangled with everyday human experience and therefore informs expectations of it). Adorno's *How to Look at Television* (1954), examines the consequences and hidden mechanisms that are at play in television, both psychologically and practically. By applying a descriptive and psychodynamic framework, television and cinema can be assessed in terms of its ability to influence multiple layers of the viewer's subconscious. Adorno's aim was to expose the concealed mechanisms of visual media—which operate in plain sight under the "guise of fake realism"—in an attempt to call attention to the effects they have on audiences and consumers (ibid: 213). Arguments surrounding this concealed deception were fundamentally concerned with how the repetitive, ever-present, and standardised nature of mass media culture would impact consumers' ability to wade through a turbulent sea of information and resist external manipulation. It became a pressing question whether individuals would be able to safe-guard themselves, or have their forces of psychological resistance weakened.

On the other hand, theorists like Walter Benjamin presented a more optimistic view on the workings of mass media and commercial reproduction in relation to art. In his essay *The Work of Art in the Mechanical Age of Reproduction* (2008<sup>11</sup>), Benjamin explores the impact that mass media's integration into the art world has had on modern society, especially in terms of replacing older, traditional forms of high culture and modes of artistic production. He explains that the idea of authenticity (dependent on the concept of an "original") was fundamentally challenged by the

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and Kellner, 2006: 4). They believed American culture industries were "organised according to the structures of mass production", rapidly manufacturing mass-produced consumer products that resulted in generating a "highly commercial system of culture" whereby the "values, lifestyles, and institutions of American capitalism" were sold to the public (ibid). This forms the foundation for the blatant fact of commodity fetishism in late free-market capitalism.

<sup>11</sup> Originally published 1936.

invention of photography and its accelerated “process of pictorial reproduction” (ibid: 2-3). At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, technical modes of reproduction (offset lithographic and photographic printing for example) had reached a standard that enabled a wider dissemination of reproductions of works of art, causing a profound change in how the public were impacted by them, and thus (through a more democratised form of access) secured a place of its own in the artistic process (ibid). For example, the medium of film itself is premised on the very technique of mechanical reproduction in its rapid display of consecutive and sequential images. Whereas earlier eras placed an emphasis on the originality and aura of an artwork, modern mass reproduction of art works shattered this traditional emphasis, freeing mass culture from the mystification of high culture. Benjamin believed that, removed from the confines of high culture, mass media culture could revolutionise the art world and the very notion of art itself.

The above discussion brings to mind being told when you were young that television will turn you into a vegetable or give you square eyes. Now, everyone is glued to their screens, even those sceptical adults. Whatever the various critics could or couldn't reconcile among themselves and their divergent opinions towards the integration of mass media and popular culture within the art world and consumer society, the simple fact is that we are currently in uncharted terrain with regards to the long-term effects of the degree to which perceptions of reality is digitally mediated. Whether or not individuals have developed subjectivity strategies to safe-guard themselves from the constant flux of media and information in the digital age is an increasingly difficult question to answer.

Signe Pierce's practice, however, is a significant example of artistic inquiry into this question. Artists such as Pierce should be noted for her engagement with ideas of perceived reality through the use and exploitation of technology such as Instagram, and for developing alternative strategies of production and display in modern artistic production. Despite her work having a huge online presence, Pierce is not limited to the realm of the virtual. Her work has been shown in prestigious galleries across the globe. Pierce has performed and exhibited at *MoMA* (New York City), *Palais de Tokyo* (Paris), the *MoCA* (Los Angeles), *Museum of Fine Arts* (Leipzig), and *Galerie Nathalie Halgand* (Vienna). Although she has a formal arts education and has had exposure with big-time galleries, Pierce does not feel that everything she does has to, or should be, limited to the scope or framework of the 'art world'. It is worth noting here that the majority of the research gathered on

Signe Pierce for this paper has been through articles and interviews available on various online media and culture publications such as *VICE*, *Bauhaus 100*, *Dazed Digital*, *Plastik Magazine*, and *Refinery29*. Her *Bauhaus100* manifesto (as discussed earlier) is probably the most exhaustive compilation of the fundamental ideas of reality art currently available. Formal academic art writing and critical analysis about Signe Pierce or her work is severely limited, which signals an urgency for further cultural, theoretical, and artistic inquiry.

## **PART C: Reality Art & Retro-Futurism**

*Flash forward to the present, where the concept of space and the stage has morphed from physical into digital, creating a perceptual and dimensional paradigm flux. To be a person who plays with heightened personae on social media in even the slightest way is to be a performer, in that you are presenting a filtered and selective curation of self. We may not inherently think of ourselves as acting when we're posting something to our Instagram, but an act of representation unfolds the moment we upload an image or status update to our online accounts. Splices of our mundanity become mini-productions when we're seen and screened in the theatre of social media.*

- Signe Pierce, *15 Million Minutes of Fame* (2018a)

*From a Baudrillardian perspective, this figuration of the Internet as a kind of cybernetic terrain works to undermine the symbolic distance between the metaphoric and the real. It abandons the 'real' for the hyperreal by presenting an increasingly real simulation of a comprehensive and comprehensible world.*

- Mark Nunes, *Jean Baudrillard in Cyberspace* (1995: 315)

The increased presence of simulations of reality is exacerbated by social media networks, television programming networks, advancements in augmented reality technologies, entertainment industries, and even by political spectacles. Pierce argues that one is never truly alone when the presence of someone else on the other side of a screen is always guaranteed (Gagnon and Priganica, 2017). In the era of fake news and consumer access to advanced software, it is increasingly difficult to discern the truth. Signe Pierce regards Instagram as one's very own personalised reality TV show, a genre which is a quintessential example of simulations of reality in contemporary culture. It is a space of "hyper-mediation" where smartphone cameras become an extension of the body, navigating one's physical and virtual existence alike (ibid). Of course some users experience more success in cultivating an online presence or persona; nonetheless, access to the fundamental tools of Instagram—production and distribution of media—is democratised among users, such that

anyone can be the star of their own *Truman Show* (ibid). The ‘influencer’ culture<sup>12</sup> that exists on Instagram demonstrates how some users have manipulated the platform to their personal and professional gain, and recalls an earlier phenomenon witnessed in reality TV—that of the “ordinary celebrity” (Grindstaff, 2012: 24). Although the genre existed before their time, public reality TV figures like Kris Kardashian serve as inspiration for Pierce in terms of their entrepreneurial approach to the construction and manufacturing of people’s lives into multi-million dollar platforms (Arida and Pierce, 2018).

In terms of mass media and popular culture, the reality TV genre presents an interesting strategy of simulating the real, and exemplifies some of the simulational techniques that underscore the hyperreal. In *Reality TV and the Production of ‘Ordinary Celebrity’: Notes from the Field*, Laura Grindstaff (2012) contextualises the performative strategies within reality TV in similar terms to Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective of the performative nature of social interaction<sup>13</sup>. The television genre’s main export is ‘reality’ in some form or another. Here, ordinary people are subject to the camera’s gaze and invited to step into the spotlight. A genre in which ordinary people integrate with commercial media, reality TV is, however, produced by professionals in the entertainment industries who “construct the necessary conditions of performance” whereby real people or ‘performers’ attempt to “serve themselves to these performances<sup>14</sup>” (ibid: 22).

Although the new millennium is generally considered by media critics as the beginning of the reality TV Empire, the genre has historical roots in western popular culture, taking its precursors from as early as the 1950s. Most notable of these precedents is perhaps the early vérité<sup>15</sup> documentary-style series *An American Family* (1977), which pioneered American reality TV in the contemporary sense of the genre (ibid). In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994: 29-30), Baudrillard refers to *An American Family* (1977) in his discussions of hyperreality. The show documented the

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<sup>12</sup> Influencer culture is also prominent on the video sharing/streaming site YouTube, whereby ‘YouTube celebrities’ emerge on the platform with an opportunity to then monetize their content through paid advertising, promotional content, patrons etc. Instagram works in a similar way to this, and the more capital one invests in their online presence, the more likely they are to expect financial (and social) gains.

<sup>13</sup> Goffman’s theories will be discussed in the following chapter.

<sup>14</sup> This is what Grindstaff (2012: 22) refers to as “self-service television”. She explores the concept of the “ordinary celebrity” as exemplified in the reality TV genre, and “how it operates for so-called ordinary people” through “gendered, classed, and racialized dimensions” (ibid).

<sup>15</sup> This technique takes its name from the French word, translating to ‘truth’. Cinema vérité is an early example of documentary-filmmaking techniques which focused on letting life unfold ‘organically’ for of the camera lens, paving the way for reality TV filmmaking.

lives of the Loud family—a typical and idealised white, upper-class family, a California home with three garages, and assured social and professional status in their community—which was clearly “hyperreal by the very nature of its selection” with its “statistical perfection” (ibid: 30). Baudrillard explains how this homage to the idealised American family, and its glorification through the camera lens, results in its very demise:

“[This] Ideal heroine of the American way of life...is, as in ancient sacrifices, chosen in order to be glorified and to die beneath the flames of the medium, a modern fatum” (ibid).

He also follows that:

“Because heavenly fire no longer falls on corrupted cities, is it the camera lens that, like a laser, comes to pierce lived reality in order to put it to death” (ibid).

During the filming of the show, The Loud family experienced genuine personal crises which ultimately resulted in the separation of the parents. The show was aired nonetheless, and members of the family went on to be interviewed and chronicled in the media after the show’s departure. Baudrillard begs the question: would controversy have ensued had the cameras not been present? Did the conflict emerge organically or as a result of TV being there? What was so interesting about the Loud family for Baudrillard was the “illusion of filming as if TV weren’t there”, and the producer’s proclamation that the Loud family “lived as if we were not there” (ibid: 29). This formula is absurd and paradoxical, the truth or falsehood of which is utopian. The “*as if we were not there*” being equal to “*as if you were there*” (ibid: 29). The “microscopic simulation” of lived experience that operates in reality TV and vérité filmmaking techniques signals to the pleasure derived from the exposure of the real in its “fundamental banality” and “radical authenticity” (ibid: 29). This Baudrillardian perspective of pleasure derived from the banality of lived experience can be expanded to the pleasure that is derived from the endless and mindless scrolling of Instagram and Facebook homepages.

A major player in the hyperreal game, unparalleled in its reach and scope, has been the internet. From the perspective of artistic and cultural production, the impact that the internet has had on visual culture can be contextualised in terms of its simulation of space and interactivity. As an ephemeral and decentralised entity, it simulates a crowded form of contemporary space: a chaotic

and diverse virtual space where both the everyday and exotic, private and public, autonomous and commercial exist simultaneously (Greene, 2004: 8). Further, its interface—whether it be in the form of a desktop computer, laptop, or smartphone—exists as “both a channel and a means of production” (ibid). The commercialisation of the internet, in addition to the fluidity and speed with which information can travel across various platforms and hardware, has fundamentally changed the experience of art (ibid). From a Baudrillardian perspective, the screen thus becomes a “hyperreal vehicle” for traversing a “simulated world” (Nunes, 1995: 315). Today the internet hosts an array of online subcultures<sup>16</sup> that engage with audio and visual aesthetics of digital life in cyberspace. They are often retro in aesthetic, with a specific tinge of millennial nostalgia in their ironic reference to obsolete and outdated tastes, sensibilities, and technology. The association of nostalgia with millennials—generally categorised as those who reach young adulthood in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, having been born in the 80s or 90s—and modern internet subcultures and their aesthetics may be rooted in the fact the youth who grew up with this now outdated technology (which would have been state-of-the-art at the time) are inextricably connected, once physically and now emotionally, to this era of obsolescence and to rapid technological change and progress. Unlike previous generations whose early childhoods’ would not have been as deeply characterised by commercial engagement with technology—comparatively, at least, to the level of engagement that was later to come with the introduction of personal computers, smartphones etc. —millennials are entrenched in a time where the information age really started to put its foot in society’s door. They grew up in a world that no one in the history of the human race had ever grown up in before; the advent of the internet was a new and unprecedented variable thrown into the mix. And what better way for millennials to express their residual feelings from growing up in a rapidly transforming, relentlessly progressive, and digitised postmodern world than on the internet?

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<sup>16</sup> Vapourwave’s popularity online was preceded by subcultures known as ‘Chillwave’ and ‘Seapunk’. These contemporary, audio-visual, online micro-cultures emerged and spread on Tumblr – a popular image sharing/reposting social media network website which has somewhat dwindled in its widespread popularity in the wake of other popular image and video sharing sites like Instagram. However, it should be noted that artists such as Signe Pierce still engage with Tumblr as a means of keeping an online portfolio or archive of sorts. Pierce explains that Tumblr and Instagram both appeal to her more than the notion of her own professional website where a formal portfolio of all her work would exist. She advocates for the “honesty” and “accessibility” afforded in the ability to use a smartphone to capture, edit, and upload works instantly to Instagram and Tumblr (D’Angelo and Pierce, 2017).

One of the most notable contemporary examples of these subcultures is Vapourwave. Vapourwave<sup>17</sup> is an internet based visual art-pop and music movement whose aesthetics, often deliberately kitsch or in poor taste, are an amalgam of 80s and 90s pop culture and technology during the era (Menorath, 2016). Both the audio and visual aesthetics of Vapourwave are informed by media and information oversaturation in the digital age of late capitalism. The aesthetic utilises recycled iconography and references outdated cultural and design artefacts such as large boxy computers, VHS cassette tapes, *Windows95*, *Internet Explorer*, early-day *Microsoft Paint* and *PowerPoint* tools and texts/fonts (Trainer in Glistos, 2017). Through the juxtaposition of modern and outdated technology with western classical art references and digital aesthetics, Vapourwave evokes a sense of millennial nostalgia and hyperreality through pastiche and collage techniques, borrowing from all “generic forms of mass media” (Glitsos, 2017: 100). In essence Vapourwave is an audio-visual immersion into millennial nostalgia, driven by a hyper-saturated digital archive of recycled aesthetics.

### *#HyperrealAesthetics*

It would appear that internet-based art movements and subcultures (such as Vapourwave) have emerged as a “visual consequence” of hyperreality (Menorath, 2016: 50). Oversaturation of commodity culture in late western capitalism underscores the movement’s message: one of “existentialism, millennial nostalgia, globalisation, and satire around capitalist advertising” (Menorath, 2016: 51). This satire is achieved by juxtaposing desirable elements of consumer products with a context that is deliberately poor in terms of traditional artistic conventions (ibid). Vapourwave combines digital and analogue, botanical, and classical art aesthetics that evoke the paradoxical nature of nostalgia between “memory and forgetting”, which is pervasive in contemporary western culture, occurring as a result of “media saturation” (Glistos, 2017: 104). The use of neon colours, particularly neon pink and purple, predominate Vapourwave aesthetics. The inclusion of classical Greco-Roman sculpture as well as pot-plants, palm trees—indicators of taste from a time past, as well as having contemporary taste-value, as exemplified through luxury fashion brand *Versace’s* iconic use of Greek legend Medusa’s likeness in their branding—and

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<sup>17</sup>The movement takes its name, ‘Vapourwave’, to parody a tactic among computer companies known as ‘vapourware’ in which non-existent products are promoted in an effort to ward off competitors (Koc, 2017: 61). The name thus underscores Vapourwave’s fundamental criticism of this kind of capitalist sleaze that exists in neo-liberal free-market economies.



technological interfaces drawn from Windows95 are combined in an ironic statement which is both millennial nostalgia and anti-capitalist political comment (figs. 14, 15, 16).

Academic research often neglects to draw out the very real art-historical connections in contemporary internet genres such as Vapourwave. There are clear strategic and aesthetic references to historical art movements such as Dada in terms of collage techniques and its “artistic irreverence”, as well as aspects of Surrealist collage (Glistos, 2017: 111). Drawing from the readymade and collage techniques as formulated by the Dadaists, Surrealists developed various forms of collage that included *prollage*: cutting two or more images into strips and then reassembling them; and *rollage*: cutting strips from multiple copies of the same image and then mounting them in a “staggered sequence” (ibid: 111). As both a visual art and music genre, a typical example of Vapourwave art can be seen in the album artwork for the Vapourwave music group called *Macintosh Plus* (Glistos, 2017). Their seminal album *Floral Shoppe* (2011) epitomises the Vapourwave style: a Roman bust is displayed against a neon pink background, and an image of the sun setting over a city skyline is displayed below bright turquoise Japanese language characters (fig. 15). The cut-and-paste nature of *Floral Shoppe* (2011) illustrates that Vapourwave’s digital collage techniques are almost directly influenced by these modern art precursors. Aesthetically, there is also a low-tech/high art irony at play between the nostalgia for obsolescent digital icons and obsolescent high art icons of Greco-Roman sculpture. This interplay between what is ‘good taste’ (classic sculpture) and what is ‘poor taste’ (80’s aesthetic kitsch) is conflated through this juxtaposition. The comment is that it has ‘all been done’ and whilst there is nostalgia there is also a comment on how signifiers of taste or signifiers of sophistication are entirely time specific and constructed. The faux Greco-Roman sculptures and marble finishes of top end malls are subsequently abandoned when economic crisis strikes. The once futuristic digital interfaces of Windows 95 have become almost ‘cute’ in their associations now with low-tech. Vapourwave is postmodern pastiche meets Ozymandias.

Scholars who have theorised about Vapourwave have noted the internet genre’s salient references to abandoned spaces of capitalist consumerism such as ideas of ‘dead malls’ and shopping centres (Glistos, 2017: 103). In *Vaporwave, or music optimised for abandoned malls*, Laura Glistos (2017: 103) describes the genre’s fetishisation of these empty spaces as an exploitation of the “cultural cringe” of the 1980s aesthetic. Vapourwave satirises the emptiness of western hyper-capitalist

society through this appropriation of the “phonic and visual aesthetics of 1980s American ‘mall’ culture” (ibid). The “lingering representations” of this fetishized period are thus exploited by the genre, challenging the contemporary state of neo-liberalism; a system which thrives on the free-market of capitalism and globalised consumer culture (ibid).

Although she does not directly identify as a Vapourwave artist—Pierce prefers to resist any labelling besides ‘reality artist’—there are correlations in both Pierce’s practice and Vapourwave aesthetics, especially with regards to an audio-visual investigation of hyperreality. Her photographic practice is underscored by oversaturated images of the everyday, and pays close attention to lighting and editing choices in an attempt to encourage audiences to interrogate notions of artificiality and authenticity. The photographic series *Faux Realities* (2017) is a collection of images produced between 2015-2017 through which Pierce explores what it means to be ‘real’ in an artificial world (Gamble and Pierce, 2017) (figs. 17, 18, 19, 20, 21). Her solo show at *Annka Kultys Gallery* in London where photographic prints were exhibited marks the transition of Pierce’s work from the virtual to the physical, since her photography primarily existed online prior to this. The *Faux Realities* (2017) exhibition serves as a “physical commemoration” for some of Pierce’s best digital works, most of which had already earned success online in Tumblr and Instagram communities through thousands of likes, reposts, and reblogs (ibid). The photographic series questions whether one can truly be sure of what is real in a situation where everything can be mediated and manipulated in media. In her *Vice/Broadly* (2018) photographic series, Pierce focused on warped perspective through ‘analogue’ means—distorting perceptions of reality and perspective here through the use of mirrors, reflective materials, an iPhone selfie camera (figs. 9, 10, 11). In *Faux Realities* (2017), however, she presents images that appear to be ‘real’ in their form and content but the nature of how these images were digitally captured and created is unclear to the viewer (figs. 17-21). Were these images edited post-production and manipulated in *Photoshop*? Or did Pierce capture these hyper-saturated scenes organically, without interference from digital editing software? Does it make a difference? Online audiences constantly question how Pierce does her lighting and whether she uses *Photoshop* or not, which serves as the conceptual grounding for the exhibition. The images “explore a spectrum of techniques” to create the ‘realities’ on display: some were found scenes captured through analogue means, while some were fully fabricated in a studio, and some of them used artificial lighting while others were edited in *Photoshop* (Gamble and Pierce, 2017). Her self-reflective engagement with these various

methodologies in photography adds a “meta-narrative” to the overarching concept that explores “what is real?” for both the audience and for Pierce’s artistic practice and ideas.

In *Simulated Beauty (Las Vegas)* (2017), Pierce captures a scene in which Greco-Roman statues are featured alongside an escalator which appears to be situated within some sort of architectural simulation of a classical Greco-Roman-inspired environment (fig. 18). This is evident in the use of grandiose pillars and fountains, as well as the curved balconies and the detailed, intricate wall/ceiling design elements. The painted ceiling, captured in hues of pink and blue, is placed in the top right corner of the image, visually indicating that both the statues—with their arms outstretched towards the simulacra of the sky painted on the ceiling—and the escalator are reaching towards ‘infinity’, or the heavens above. This ‘reaching’ imagery evokes notions of transcendence: transcendence of the real into the hyperreal, and divine transcendence in the digital world. Multiple Greco-Roman inspired visual elements juxtaposed alongside the backdrop of technological, hyperreal Las Vegas (which as a site epitomises capitalist-fuelled notions of excess and fantasy) exposes the virtual, simulated nature of these kinds of hyperreal spaces: a space in which reality, fantasy, and the need to consume in excess come together all at once. The result is pure simulacrum: a representation, an illusion, a fantasy, a reality, a hyperreal representation, a postmodern pastiche of perspectives.

In *Strip Mall of the Gods (Hollywood, CA)* (2017) Pierce continues her travels in hyperreality and finds herself outside the neon-glow of a self-service laundromat (fig. 19). The scene captured features an array of Greco-Roman statues in a mostly empty carpark at night, bathed in neon hues of blue from the laundromat signage. This image has visual themes of the hyperreal in terms of its engagement with space and aesthetics, as previously discussed with relation to hypermarkets and shopping malls. The *Faux Realities* (2017) series further engages with the aesthetics of the hyperreal through images of surveillances cameras. *Panopticon Gaze* (2017) and *Technocamo* (2017) both depict surveillance cameras in a neon glow (figs. 20 & 21). There is a gaze reversal at play in these photographs, whereby Pierce captures and puts a lens on that which typically watches and observes us. Further, *Technocamo* (2017) illustrates tensions between the real and the virtual by juxtaposing hyperreal surveillance aesthetics with the natural green décor of the space (fig. 21).

## **CHAPTER TWO: Keeping it real in Cyberspace**

The previous chapter laid down the groundwork for ideas of hyperreality and perception; ways of seeing and ways of being seen in a digital world. Contemporary female artists such as Signe Pierce demonstrate how virtual life in cyberspace and social media have revolutionised the ‘stage’ of reality, causing major shifts in human interaction, social life, and ideas of self. This chapter will further unpack and discuss the performative nature of social life in contemporary digital existence, specifically how the female body navigates cyberspace.

## **PART A: The Performance of Self**

*The stage presents things that are make-believe; presumably life presents things that are real and sometimes not well rehearsed. More important, perhaps, on the stage one player presents himself in the guise of a character to characters projected by other players; the audience constitutes a third party to the interaction—one that is essential and yet, if the stage performance were real, one that would not be there. In real life, the three parties are compressed into two; the part one individual plays is tailored to the parts played by the others present, and yet these others also constitute the audience.*

- Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956: vi)

*To exist in the 21st century is to be highly susceptible and adaptable to change. The internet is an oceanic swell where endless surges of images and information wash over our psyche, ebbing and flowing all day, every day. A perceptual discord floods our consciousness every time we open an app or refresh our feeds. When we upload our thoughts and experiences to our social channels, we become vessels of endless content, pouring ourselves into a collective perception. We overwhelm our peripheries and drown our sensibilities into something increasingly unreal, an endless tide of virtuality.*

- Signe Pierce, *15 Million Minutes of Fame* (2018a)

The nature of social life online can be likened to the image of sailing a “leaky boat” through cyberspace: a “vast sea” where the private user data of those navigating its “swelling waters” escapes and spills, caught in a current of information and identities (Allen, 2000: 1176). In the swell and storm of this disruption, the “performance of life”, perceptions of reality, and the “art experience” itself are undergoing a turbulent sea of change, providing artists with new opportunities to fuse their lived experiences into “mediated art” (Pierce, 2018a). Signe Pierce wades through an ocean of information as it perpetually grows exponentially, seeking innovative

ways through which to ironically use one's own life as a medium for artistic production and expression.

The internet is historically a masculine invention, governed and managed by men. Over decades of commercialised use of the internet, however, slight shifts have occurred in terms of women's role and presence in cyberspace. Nevertheless, complex gender conventions that exist to undermine women and restrict their accessibility in real life are extended into the realm of cyberspace. In short, men and women do not have the same experiences online just as they do not have the same experiences in the real world. The internet may provide the opportunity for individuals to exercise fluid identities across a wide range of platforms, and to overcome physical boundaries of space and time, "opening transnational and transcultural connections" (Bernard, 2000: 26). But various systemic forms of violence which result from a patriarchal culture that privileges the white male—women as easy targets for harassment; being perceived as inferior and subordinate to their male counterparts; the fact of women being held more accountable and even shamed for their private behaviour and choices in comparison to men—are extended to life online, thus women's presence and subsequent treatment online fundamentally differs from that of men's (Allen, 2000: 1179). This contradicts utopian conceptions of the internet as an entity that can wholly transcend real-world social issues such as gender, race, and class through democratising access to information and creating a global network of communication.

Given that real-world socio-economic, race, and gender politics are at play in cyberspace, issues of identity in the digital age are further complicated for women in the simulated space of virtual communication provided by the internet. Identity formation is "a complicated, fluid, and complex process", further complicated by modern conditions of digitisation (Morrison, 2016: 244). In *Creating and Regulating Identity in Online Spaces: Girlhood, Social Networking, and Avatars*, Connie Morrison (2016) explores how women, especially young girls, have a unique experience online in comparison to their male counterparts. In the process of online identity formation girls are often confronted with "popular discourses around feminine ideals", and have potentially limiting options of either championing or denying such ideals, or to "blindly" follow with little consideration paid to such issues (ibid: 244). The layered and relational power structures of real-world cultural politics can be as effective in women's oppression and ability to cultivate an individual identity in cyberspace as they are in the real world. The general online experience for

females is underscored by media-generated myths of beauty and “normative discourses” of femininity, womanhood, and girlhood that discipline and regulate how they choose to present themselves in cyberspace (ibid: 244). In Morrison’s discussion of the virtual existence of women and girls online, Michel Foucault’s notion of ‘heterotopia’<sup>18</sup> is employed to describe this idea of ‘space’ or ‘place’ online, perceived as a “widely mediated electronic space” (ibid: 245). Foucault explored the idea of ‘heterotopia’ through the metaphor of a mirror: Thus, heterotopia’s allusion to mirrors and reflections emphasizes the innate pressure of the gaze within virtual space, especially for women.

John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* (2008) was discussed in the previous chapter in relation to European Renaissance perspective and how the invention of the camera fundamentally shifted human perception of reality. Berger’s critical visual analysis of traditional European nude paintings applies to ideas of mirrors, screens, and the digital gaze in this chapter, as well as the notions of vanity and shame that are often associated with women and how they choose to present themselves online. Girls are taught and persuaded from childhood to continually survey and observe themselves, such that a woman’s self is fundamentally split in two parts: the surveyor and the surveyed (Berger, 2008: 46). The fact of being an observer and the observed constitutes two distinct but inseparable elements of female identity: in routinely considering how she appears to others, a woman’s sense of being in herself is superseded by a “sense of being appreciated as herself by another” (ibid: 46). This objectification of the female self operates in relation to the male gaze and the power structures manifest within it, whereby men look at women, and women watch themselves being looked at. The observer or surveyor part of the woman’s self is implied to be distinctly male, whereas the observed or surveyed part of the self is female—turning herself into “an object of vision: a sight” to behold (ibid: 47). To illustrate his argument, Berger refers to the Christian creation story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to discuss the criteria and conventions which historically signified women as sights to be seen and judged. When Eve eats the apple and encourages Adam to do the same, she is blamed by God and her punishment comes

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<sup>18</sup> Foucault describes ‘heterotopia’ as a “placeless place in which one can see oneself where one is not” (Morrison, 2016: 245). Although not formulated at his time within the context of online presence and identity, Foucault’s notion of heterotopia offers an interesting perspective with regards to the relationship between the virtual and the real. Further, Foucault’s ‘heterotopia’ alludes to Goffman’s notions of performativity, the theatricality of everyday social interaction on a ‘digital stage’ and the idea of performing for an “imagined audience” online—as well as performing for an imagined audience in the ‘real world’ in everyday life (Davis, 2016: 146).

in the form of being made subservient to man. In this reading, man is the agent of God in relation to the scorned woman. The depiction of this Bible story during Renaissance painting focused on depicting this moment of Eve's shame—not shame in relation to Adam, but in relation to the spectator (fig. 22). Regardless of particular subject matter, nude paintings always guarantee the implication that the female subject is aware of being seen by a spectator (ibid: 49) (fig. 23 & 24). When traditions in painting became more secular, nudes were realized through other themes such as vanity. The mirror was employed as a means of signifying feminine vanity, and these vanity nudes often depicted women either holding or looking into a mirror, allowing the spectator to observe them observing themselves. The moralising of this vanity was hypocritical—a man paints a naked woman because he enjoys the sight of her naked body, yet when he puts a mirror in the woman's hand and titles the painting *Vanity*, the woman as depicted for the man's own visual pleasure is morally condemned for having the very same admiration for herself (ibid: 51) (fig. 25). Berger notes that outside of European traditions ideas of nakedness and nudity are less supine—inactive or passive—and that men and women are more likely to be depicted as equal active agents in the scene.

Pierce's *Pink Noise* (2018) is a photographic series that references classic iconography in art history in an attempt to represent art futurisms that inform the “fantastical world” of this *Girl of the Future* (Rezkallah and Pierce, 2018) (figs. 26-32). The series features various visual references to Greco-Roman mythology such as the *Myth of Narcissus*, and popular art history iconography such as the *Mona Lisa*:

*The Myth of Narcissus, a cautionary tale straddling the nature of self vs. selfie; person vs. personas;*

*Devotional Shrines, dedicated to worshipping the phenomenon of the feminine within the scope of new media;*

*A Neon Mona Lisa, with a digital gaze and a photo-shopped consciousness (ibid).*

Ideas of vanity underscore the photographs, which feature simulated reflection pools and life-size iPhone screens—the aesthetics of the hyperreal come to life in a pink and purple spectacle (figs. 26, 27 & 30). Mirrors and screens are synonymous in this world of the future, where one may gaze endlessly into their own reflection, lost in the beauty and pixels of it all. Signe Pierce, or the *Girl*



*of the Future* in this case, explores ideas of how the ‘divine feminine’ transcends time and space on a virtual stage, manifesting herself in these digital realms and worlds.

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), Erving Goffman applies principles derived from theatre to a sociological account of human interaction, thus forming his dramaturgical perspective of social life. Goffman likens the nature of everyday human interaction to that of a theatrical performance in terms of how individuals (performers) play a range of different roles (masks) in social settings and situations (stage), whilst adapting different personas (costumes) depending on the situation (ibid). In this dramaturgical perspective, performers or actors (individuals) will use the information they acquire in the presence of others, and any pre-existing knowledge of them they may be privy to, to inform how they perform for a given audience, and to influence the audience’s attitudes or behaviours towards the actor in turn (ibid: 8). First impressions of, and information conveyed by others, in social situations act as “sign-vehicles” through which the performer bases their subsequent assumptions and actions (ibid: 1). Goffman’s use of the word “performance” in this context refers to the activity of an individual that specifically occurs during sustained presence before “a particular set of observers”, which constitute an audience, and this activity having some degree of influence over other individuals present (ibid: 13). Performers generally maintain a more or less fixed “front” which is the “expressive equipment” that functions to define the situation for the audience (ibid). The ‘front’ of social interaction is likened here to the front stage of theatre; the setting of the stage for a particular theatrical performance or act that provides context for the scene through use of props and stage dressing. The front stage in this sense refers to the particular setting of the social situation that plays out “before, within, or upon” the space (ibid). ‘Sets’ in the real world—spaces of human interaction ranging from public to private spaces such as the household, the office, or the grocery store—are more physically stable than theatre sets in the sense that they maintain their particular décor, setting, and corresponding social expectations. Thus, when entering social situations, individuals must adjust their performances according to the particular setting they find themselves in. In addition to the physical staging or front of social interaction, Goffman describes a “personal front” that is employed in social interaction in the form of an individual’s “appearance and manner” (ibid: 14). The personal front is comprised of the particularities of a performer’s identity such as professional status, clothing, age, gender, bodily postures and movements, speech patterns, facial expressions, and other signifiers of that nature. In essence Goffman’s dramaturgical

perspective offers some interesting insight into ideas of identity and social interaction as a sustained and continued performance—which varies depending on the context—informed by an individual’s impressions of others, and of how others may view them. His view exposed how even the most mundane, ‘everyday’ aspects of social interaction requires some degree of performativity, though performers and audience engage in these performances unwittingly.

Signe Pierce notes that the classical dramas and analogue performances which defined traditional notions of theatricality will not disappear from existence in a hyperreal world; rather, the internet and social media networks have revolutionised the very definition of the stage (2018a). Pierce is not alone in this line of thinking—Goffman’s performative perspective has been applied in contemporary studies as a means of contextualising digitally mediated communication on the internet. The application of Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective of social interaction to the nature of electronic communication reveals how performers online construct relational identities through process and product. Self-presentation online can essentially be divided between process—the backstage preparation—and product—the front stage of performance (Davis, 2006: 145). The backstage preparation process involves content preparation, crafting Tweets and status updates, selectively choosing which images to edit and post, and determining what biographical information is relevant (ibid). The process or backstage preparation is what determines how all this information and content is framed for online audiences. The front stage is comprised of the performer’s finalised posted content, which denotes the product phase of online self-presentation: it is through the finalised product that users present themselves and make identity claims online (ibid: 145). In Goffman’s perspective, the front and back stage are relational categories, thus one must ask *back/front stage for whom?* Users online choose whom they wish to share profile content with and from whom they wish to conceal it through privacy settings or through selective ‘groups’ on social media platforms that one may join. For example, the content users post on Instagram may vary from what they choose to share on Facebook, depending on who they follow or are connected with on each platform respectively. Having colleagues on social media can influence the type and extent of information users wish to share about their personal lives, whereas if user’s friend list or follower base is largely made up of a user’s friends or close acquaintances, they may be more inclined to share more openly and freely about themselves and what they do in their daily life.

Goffman's dramaturgical perspective relies heavily on the social interaction being rooted in "synchronous face-to-face communication" (ibid: 145), which electronic communication online obviously transcends. This begs the question, considering the vast and intersecting communication networks available on the internet, as to what degree of control performers (users) have over "identity-relevant information" (ibid: 146). This stage of online spaces has become so normalised that it is practically invisible due to its regular integrated use in everyday life. The normalisation of virtual communication and the way it informs social interaction, communication, and relationships has the effect of daily contact online becoming an extension of the self that one may expect to find in a physical space, and this virtual self is not generally seen as something 'separate to' the virtual self.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed major breakthroughs in critical studies concerned with identity politics, Feminist and queer theory challenged heterosexual constructions of gender and identity, rejecting western humanist discourses that "conflate the universal with the masculine" and "appropriate all of culture as masculine property" (Butler, 1988: 530). Third-wave-feminism emphasised individualism and diversity within the field, underscored by ideas of intersectionality—the recognition and inclusion of marginalised bodies, voices and narratives in academic discourse, and interrogating the multiple layers of oppression that vary depending on race, gender, and class. Feminist theorist and philosopher Judith Butler introduced and popularised the idea of 'gender performativity', fundamentally challenging historically held ideas of heterosexual masculine/feminine binaries as natural fact. In *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory* Butler argues that gender is not a "stable identity" or the origin point of agency from which one acts, but is rather formed and maintained through a "stylised repetition of acts" (1988: 519). In this perspective, gender is established through the "stylisation of the body"—the seemingly mundane nature of "bodily gestures, movements, and enactments" in fact create and maintain the "illusion" of a corresponding and "abiding gendered self" (ibid). In order to reproduce and maintain a culture of masculine/feminine gender binaries and heterosexual kinship, anthropological requirements such as marriage—confined to a "heterosexually-based system"—ensures the reproduction of human beings in culturally "gendered modes" that adhere to the illusion of heterosexuality as natural fact (ibid: 524). Further,

theorists such as Foucault argue that the association of scientific sex<sup>19</sup> with a separate corresponding gender (i.e. male or female), underscored by an assumed natural “*attraction*” to the opposite sex/gender, is the unnatural result of various cultural constructs of gender, sex, and kinship coming together to service heterosexual reproductive interests (ibid: 524). In other words, the cultivation of bodies into separate sexes with “*natural*” appearances and “*natural*” heterosexual dispositions or preferences is one of the ways in which this gendered system of “compulsory heterosexuality” is concealed and maintained (ibid 524). Butler quotes feminist scholar and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir who claims that “One is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman”, which speaks volumes to Butler’s argument that the body is a “historical situation” onto which gender is circumscribed and conditioned (ibid: 519; 521).

### *#TheDivineFeminine*

Through her work and practice, Signe Pierce explores what it means to be gendered from birth. Through an amalgamation of aesthetics associated with both girlhood and womanhood, Pierce “exposes the absurdities of femininity” as a means of subversive political statement (Gamble and Pierce, 2017). As discussed in the previous chapter with regards to Vapourwave aesthetics, Pierce employs a predominantly pink and purple colour palette throughout her work and personal appearance. Employing feminine aesthetics as a means of feminist critique is one of the methods through which Pierce subverts gender roles and norms, claiming that there is power to behold in embracing the aesthetics that are “typically associated with a femme identity” (ibid).

*Barbie Jeep* (2017) is a performance piece in which Pierce subverts girly aesthetics as a means of political statement (figs. 33-37). The piece featured Pierce riding from Times Square to Trump Tower in New York City on a bright pink Barbie Jeep—an automated kids’ cars that actually steers and drives—announcing on a megaphone that “pussy grabs back” (Gamble and Pierce, 2017) (fig. 33). The piece was inspired by the commercialisation and socialisation of femininity that is implemented during girlhood<sup>20</sup>, and Pierce wanted to create a framework that could function as a subversive critique for the “crisis of femininity” through this performance (ibid). This crisis is the result of the commercialisation and socialisation of femininity, from girlhood and into

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<sup>19</sup> ‘Sex’ as designated by the sexual organs and genitalia an individual is born with.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Girly’ colours such as pink and purple being assigned to young girls, as well as the domestic and maternal nature of the toys and activities aimed at them all contribute to the socialization of femininity that Pierce and I refer to in our work.

womanhood, which aims to package and mass-produce the ideal girl or woman, and assigns her an appropriate role to play, setting high standards of expectations for her appearance and behaviour. Pierce argues that the ideal woman in Trump's America is one that "exists solely to be objectified", thus Pierce's 'Barbie Girl' in this performance is a satirical take on a woman who is "DTBO (Down To Be Objectified)", because isn't that exactly what the 'ideal' woman represents? The absurd sight of a grown woman riding a little girls' toy was naturally comical to witness, in addition to the fact that the car itself moved very slowly (figs. 34 & 35). She explains that the absurd and comedic aspect of the performance drawn from the hampered mobility of the Barbie Jeep is a metaphor for the "slower and less mobilised trajectory" that women are set on from as early as birth and childhood (ibid). The fact that it was five degrees Celsius outside during the piece, and Pierce wore nothing more than a short pink dress and pink drapery, adds to the metaphor for the endurance it requires to fight the patriarchy (ibid) (figs. 36 & 37). Ultimately Pierce created a spectacle in reality that illustrates the bizarre nature of this hyper-femininity, the absurdities associated with femininity, and what it would look like if an adult woman adopted the same aesthetics that were thrust upon her as a child.

## **PART B: Performing the Cyborg**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the widespread takeover of mass media and communication technologies, and the commercial spread of the internet has had irreversible consequences for the way humans make sense of their reality and their interactions with others in society. As a result, women's presence in cyberspace has since become a significant topic of discussion among scholars and artists. In response to the innately contentious relationship between women and technology, movements such as 'cyberfeminism' began to emerge in the 1980s – a time in late-capitalism when information technology and the internet started to secure its place within commercial consumer culture (Greene, 2004: 62). In *Internet Art* (2004), Rachel Greene retraces the art historical context in which women's engagement with modern technology emerged. Movements like cyberfeminism scrutinised and analysed the politics of how gender, race, and class inform "technoculture" in an attempt to navigate and contextualise women's relationship with modern technology (ibid: 62). Discursive networks and artist collectives who identified with the tenants of cyberfeminism thus developed as a result of the cyberspace 'takeover', whereby the "shifting space between mass media and physical being" has come to define the "complex fabric of contemporary life" (ibid: 12). The three general positions proposed by cyberfeminists focus on a) women's position in modern technological disciplines or occupations and gender-based divisions labour within these industries/fields, b) addressing women's experiences of technoculture with relation to its "effects on work, social life, and leisure", and c) commenting on the ways certain technologies are gendered, potentially feminising or eroticising them in this gendering process (ibid: 62). Interrogation of the sexualised or technical language/vocabulary used in relation to digital spaces and technology, and subversion or manipulation of these technologies, are methods through which cyberfeminism endeavours to address the complexity and power dynamics of gender identity politics online.

Besides Tumblr, Instagram is the social media platform Pierce engages with most frequently, utilising it for both its aesthetics and as a means of distribution. As has been established, it is often her preferred medium through which to create and curate her work. Some of the strategies Signe Pierce employs in her work online is reminiscent of the subversion or manipulation of gendered digital vocabularies as seen in the description of cyberfeminism's strategies above. Pierce places

hyperreal text<sup>21</sup> and language alongside videos or selfies captured in her current surroundings. The use of language rooted in digital ‘languages’ or codes is a result of the collapse of the real and the virtual, whereby online language, social cues, and codes inform interactions and experiences offline, in ‘real life’. Signe Pierce has formulated a vocabulary of hyperreal terminology to define her experience of reality in the digital age. Among these are ‘simulational aesthetics’, ‘sexxxxthetix’ (a combination of ‘sex’ and ‘aesthetics’), and the ‘simulatrix’. ‘Simulatrix’ is a term Pierce often uses to describe modern existence in hyperreality. It combines the terms ‘simulation’ and ‘matrix’, which are both cornerstones in ideas of the hyperreal. Pierce illustrates the opportunities provided by cyberspace to cultivate ways of understanding and making sense of life in a digital world through the creation of critical ‘virtual vocabularies’.

Alongside movements such as cyberfeminism, ‘cyborg feminism’ was introduced by Donna Haraway in the 1980s. Between the 1980s and mid-1990s, the term ‘cyborg’ related to theories of popular network technologies at the time, and generally “referred to a cultural dependence on technology” (Greene, 2004: 64). Cyborgs were also a popular topic for science fiction, which fantasised about mechanical takeover and presented ideas concerning technology as an extension of the body. Haraway’s idea of the cyborg advocated for a politically feminist aesthetic and theorised about the impact technology had on bodily reality (ibid). In her canonical essay *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* (1985), Haraway claims that the distinction between science fiction and social reality is an “optical illusion” (2006: 117). The manifesto unpacks Haraway’s notion of the cyborg, defining the term as a “cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (ibid). She argues for the cyborg as a means of “fiction mapping” social and bodily reality, and as an “imaginative resource” through which to explore this tension and hybridisation of human and machine. Thus cyborg feminism conceives of the body as site or map of power and identity, foregoing the limits imposed by the “mundane fiction of Man and Woman” (ibid: 146).

Haraway claims that “the relation between organism and machine has been a border war” (2006: 118). She explains that this ‘war’ between bodies and technology is a result of the harmful

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<sup>21</sup> ‘Hyperreal text and language’ refers to the kinds of words Signe Pierce has developed as a part of her hyperreal vocabulary, such as ‘simulatrix’ and ‘sexthetix’.

traditions of western science and politics, which are synonymous with traditions of racism, male-dominated capitalism, exploitation of natural resources for commercial gain in the form of cultural products, and Othering to reproduce the self (ibid). In addition to possibilities for human pleasure and satisfaction, science and technology creates a “matrix of complex dominations” among bodies and machines (ibid: 147). Haraway suggests that ‘cyborg’ imagery can provide an escape from the “maze of dualisms” which have come to define how humans make sense of their bodies and their tools (ibid). The ‘cyborg’ myth is concerned with transgressing these boundaries and binaries of “mind and body, animal and machine, idealism and materialism” (ibid: 121).

Haraway (2006: 119-120) identifies the collapse of three distinctive boundaries which enable her cyborg’s existence: the boundary between human and animal<sup>22</sup>, the boundary between organism (“animal-human”) and machine<sup>23</sup>, and the boundary between the physical and the non-physical. In discussions of the hyperreal, Haraway’s third distinction—between physical and non-physical—is perhaps most noteworthy. The collapse in boundaries between the physical and the non-physical, the real and the virtual—is particularly relevant in contextualising the impact modern technology and machinery has had on materiality and human experience, resulting in a hyperreal world. Haraway argues that the increasing inability to distinguish man from machine is what makes these advancements so “deadly” (ibid: 121). She cites Baudrillard in claiming that these machines—politically and materially—are about consciousness, or rather “simulations” thereof (ibid). When Haraway (ibid: 120) says that “modern machinery is an irreverent upstart God, mocking the Father’s ubiquity and spirituality”, she is referring to the quintessential “microelectronic” nature of these devices, such that “they are everywhere and they are invisible”. Humans, in comparison, are not so fluid; they are inextricably bound by their material and opaque nature. The cyborg thus

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<sup>22</sup> Haraway’s first boundary between human and animal collapses during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in western scientific culture, whereby the distinctive features which supposedly set humans apart as unique and superior to animals (e.g. language development, use of tools, social behaviours, mental events) lose scientific credence (2006: 119). The line between human and animal is reduced as a result of developments in biology and evolutionary theory over time, which has “simultaneously produced modern organisms as objects of knowledge” (ibid).

<sup>23</sup> Haraway’s second distinction between organism and machine collapses as a result of advancing cybernetic machinery. Pre-cybernetic machines were structured by a dualism between materialism and idealism, and were not independent agents or self-governing entities (2006: 120). Haraway describes this pre-cybernetic machinery as a caricature – “not man, an author himself” – of the “masculinist reproductive dream”; the failure of the machine in achieving “man’s dream” resulted in machine’s mockery of it. Machines of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and onwards, on the other hand, have made ambiguous the distinction between the “natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed” (ibid). The result is a scepticism towards the fundamental nature of these machines, as Haraway notes that “our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (ibid).



embodies the essence of both human and machine, transgressing boundaries that make ever more ambiguous the nature of reality in a postmodern, hyperreal world.

Shifts in materiality were discussed in the previous chapter in relation to how modern technology and digitisation have fundamentally changed the experience of art and art 'objects'. In this chapter, shifts in the materiality of bodies in digital space become key to an investigation of contemporary artistic production. The nature of electronic communication, specifically that of webcam communication, creates a new kind of social space where the private is performed for the public (Knight, 2000). In the case of cams, the interaction is initiated by the one who is being watched or observed on the screen, as opposed to the observer being the active agent of interaction. Cams make manifest contemporary issues of "surveillance, community, the cyborg, domestic space, intimacy, pornography, and self-image" (ibid: 21). In the context of artistic production, cams represent their own form of artistic practice, deeply rooted in an art historical context with correlatives in documentary filmmaking and production, self-portraiture, and performance. The webcam as a medium for artistic practice serves as the wired 'eyes' for the augmented collective unconsciousness or memory that the internet represents, providing a "digital extension of the human faculty of vision" (ibid: 22). Opinions from critics vary in terms of whether the "extension of the body into the corpus" of the internet is a positive or negative development (ibid: 22). Some caution that, synthesising the language of the body with the language of the media could further complicate women's presence in cyberspace in that the body either becomes "idealised" as technological apparatus or fragmented in the form of "automation and the cyborg, half metal/half flesh (ibid: 22). An idealised body becomes a commodity, and the latter concern about cyborgs signals to the complications of superimposing the language of technological media onto the body.

Through the application of cyberfeminism and exploring the idea of the cyborg, a large part of Pierce's focus is on the idea of humans losing themselves in, and to, technology (Todd, 2016). Signe Pierce discusses ideas of cyberfeminism and the 'cyborg' in her work, stating that she sees herself as "part cyborg, part ... iPhone girl" (ibid) (fig. 38). She argues that the information age has provided women with an historically repressed voice, or "access to a microphone", whereby they are able to assert their agency and express themselves in ways that were never before possible through the use of "the internet and new technology" (Refinery29, 2016). The deeper we venture into the matrix—the "iPhone generation", the information age, the era of technological

singularity—the more our humanness, our “flesh and blood”, gets left behind (Pierce in Todd, 2016). Pierce is interested in what it means to be human, to be a body, and not just “a body attached to a machine” (ibid). In discussions of the use of feminine aesthetics as feminist critique, Pierce explains that it is ultimately an individual’s choice how they choose to express themselves or their femininity, and it is especially important to respect one’s choice of expression, though she personally feels that embracing her femininity is what empowers her most (Pierce and Weiss, 2019). Pierce understands that femininity has often been used as a tool of exploitation by overarching societal mechanisms/systems of patriarchy—normalised beauty standards, for example, or pressures to conform to societal expectations of what an ideal ‘woman’ is—and recognises that even some feminist narratives negate tenants of femininity that are rooted in patriarchal oppression (ibid). Pierce treats these views with respect and acknowledges the potential pitfalls of simply perpetuating rather than subverting ideas of femininity or the ideal woman, noting that in her experience gender non-conforming, non-binary, and queer individuals often tend to avoid these “signifiers of femininity”, and regard this kind of approach as potentially antithetical to the non-binary agenda (ibid). In other words, there are very legitimate concerns amongst marginalised groups that feminine aesthetics can perhaps push gender norms or idealised standards of femininity further. In Pierce’s case, with deep respect for an individual’s decision or attitude towards how they present themselves, it is important to make space for all types of beauty and expression, including those who happen to feel “femme-powered” by embracing aspects of femininity (ibid). For her, the “demonization of femininity” is in fact a “continued exploitation” of the ‘Divine Feminine’, an idea which will be further discussed in chapter three (ibid). The way Pierce reclaims her power is through embracing the power that surrounds the female energy she chooses to radiate and exudes. The subversive strategies Pierce employs in order to ensnare and flip the gaze, will also be discussed below and in Chapter Three with regards to the ‘Venus Flytrap’ methodology.

A performance piece and viral video titled *American Reflexx* (2013) captures the essence of the cyborg and ideas of cyberfeminism in Signe Pierce’s work (fig. 39). The infamous piece was filmed in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina USA in collaboration with Pierce’s former partner Alli Coates. The two women paired up and set off on a completely unscripted and ‘real’ journey, a social experiment into the hyperreal streets of the American South. Adorned in a revealing skin-tight dress, neon platform heels, platinum blonde hair, Pierce aimed to embody the “hyper-

sexualised female form” that the media favours in film, television, pornography, and cyberspace (figs. 40 & 41). Pierce concealed her face with a shiny reflective metal mask, literally reflecting the gaze back on those she encountered on the streets (Todd, 2016). From there, the women let the crowds guide the piece. They knew it would be controversial—Pierce was performing very provocatively—but they had no idea just how ‘real’ and visceral it would get. What Pierce aimed to do with this performance was to take a sex object and “flip the gaze” on those who would typically consume her (ibid). This ultimately resulted in Pierce getting physically and verbally assaulted, having transphobic slurs shouted at her, being shoved to the ground and injured (fig. 42 & 43). *American Reflexxx* (2013) was ground-breaking with regards to Pierce’s reality art approach and philosophies in that the audience is not only an interactive part of the piece, but also an essential guiding force in the creation process. The violent and hostile reactions from both men and women in the on-looking and taunting crowds, and “the angry mob that formed under the assumption that she was trans”, illustrates what happens when a body is used as a canvas to display the idealised, hyper-sexualised, and feminine form, and the inevitable disdain it is met with (ibid). Although society holds women to this idealised standard in the media, if they actually choose to adopt or actualise these ideals they run the risk of being belittled and demeaned, regarded as inferior or “stupid” (Pierce and Weiss, 2019). For Pierce, this represents the deep roots of patriarchal manipulation that seeks to “belittle and demean women”, and sells women the idea that they are less powerful than they actually are (ibid). It’s often a lose-lose situation when it comes to expressions of femininity for women and those who identify on the female gender spectrum. The “nameless, faceless” woman who doesn’t have an identity or agency in media representations, whose primary purpose is to function as an object, is thrown off the screens and into the streets in *American Reflexxx* (2013). The fact that this woman is literally faceless, concealed by her reflective mask, is unsettling for those who are used to the easy and digestible consumption of female bodies. They are forced to reckon with themselves, subject to the gaze they usually bestow upon another; the woman, the object. The result is hate and violence.

### *#BigSisterIsWatchingYou*

In *Watch Me! Webcams and the Public Exposure of Private Lives*, Brooke A. Knight (2000: 21) discusses how the voluntary exposure of the self through webcams – and by extension, ‘selfie’ cams – “shifts the surveillance model” of Jeremy Bentham’s panoptic view through the application

of the subjects' free-will to participate in being watched or looked at. Through the performance of the private for the public, cams as a medium are inextricable from "issues of surveillance, community, the cyborg, domestic space, intimacy, pornography, and self-image" (ibid). As a subversive engagement tactic with the gendered aesthetics of technology, 'Big Sister', a play on the masculine connotations of surveillance culture, is a concept Pierce coined as an attempt to manipulate and challenge the male gaze. Pierce is wary of the insidious consequences that can result from the constant uploading of media online and the negative impact it can have on an individual's personal safety and privacy, especially as a feminine body in cyberspace (Arida and Pierce, 2018). It has become commonplace to see people covering up the webcam (and sometimes even the speaker) of their laptop with some tape, in an attempt to ensure some security against ominous data-thieves. Pierce is sceptical of the legitimacy of 'the Cloud' (remotely storing and/or backing up your data online), whereby tech corporations sell consumers the idea that their data is safe, secure and privately stored in the 'Cloud'. Meanwhile, users are not fully in control of who has access to their personal information as this 'Cloud' operates as a disembodied virtual entity. For Pierce surveillance culture is synonymous with "male hackers", and the constant threat of being observed or attacked online is reminiscent of the ways in which women are constantly observed and perceived as objects in real life e.g. walking down the street (Refinery29, 2016). Pierce argues that women can use technology as a tool to combat the oppressive aspects of patriarchal society, which is where characters or personas like 'Big Sister' come into the picture. In the space of the internet, it is not only how we look (in terms of appearance as well as the gaze) or what is reflected back, but also the omnipresence of who is looking at us and for whom we may be performing. In this sense, the screen—that which one gazes upon to access the internet on whatever device is at hand—is a metaphor for a mirror; one whose gaze is unwavering. The mirror metaphor references the idea of the selfie (and related ideas of vanity and nudity) as well as the Orwellian type surveillance allied to the internet. Of the many ways in which user data is captured on the internet, 'Big Brother' type surveillance is manifested through webcams (fig. 44).

Pierce directly confronts and tackles these controversial issues of surveillance and uses webcams as a medium in *Reality Hack* (2016), a performance piece that took place at the MoMA in which Pierce performs the 'Big Sister' persona (fig. 45). The piece formed part of an installation/curated performance series where different artists would take to the stage in fifteen minute intervals. In this piece, 'Big Sister' is an embodiment of surveillance fetishism and eroticising ideas of data.

Although characterisation and personas form a large part of her work, Pierce is reluctant to label herself as a ‘performance artist’ simply because she believes that ‘performance’ implies fake-ness, or inauthenticity (Refinery29, 2016). Rather, she advocates that the characters in her performances all come from, as well as inform, a real part of her identity, albeit “turning up the saturation on various aspects” of herself (ibid).

In *Reality Hack* (2016) Pierce subverts the masculinity of surveillance culture as her character takes on the role of a “data-dominatrix” who seeks “vengeance for some of the male gaze” (ibid) (figs. 46, 47, 48). True to the nature of cyberfeminism, Pierce often utilises satire and parody in her characterisation as a means of provoking “critical consciousness” (Greene, 2004: 64). During her allocated fifteen minutes of the performance series, Pierce lured her audience into the room where she would then “slam the door and alarm” the audience with a microphone device that distorts her voice (D’Angelo and Pierce, 2017). Pierce proceeded to confront her audience with “banal security info” questions and “interrogate” the audience about their ‘data’ (ibid). Hence the title of the piece *Reality Hack* (2016); Pierce was “hacking for information” from her audience, an act that the internet performs all the time, but in the context of the gallery space (ibid) (fig. 46). The questions Pierce accosted her audience with, parody the linguistic aesthetics of the internet and hacking: “Does it turn you on when your personal information is used to create relevant target ads that show up on your Facebook newsfeed?” (ibid). Throughout the performance, ‘Big Sister’ appears to be “turned on by data mining”, which signals Pierce’s attempt to “fetishize surveillance” through this persona (ibid) (figs. 47 & 48). Through Pierce’s use of the microphone to distort her voice and the projections of herself in the performance space, and the juxtaposition of cyberspace surveillance aesthetics in the gallery space creates a hyperreal atmosphere in which virtual aesthetics manifest in the physical. Pierce’s viewers were invited to enter this intimate space which simulated a bedroom, to lay on the bed and “ponder the burgeoning disappearance of private spaces within the era of smartphones<sup>24</sup>” (ibid). ‘Big Sister’ seduces the concepts, tactics, and aesthetics of surveillance to encourage people to question who is on the other side of their screens, and who else is actually present in the presumed privacy of the bedroom.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17998424497039316/?hl=en>

In addition to ‘Cyborg’ in *American Reflexxx* (2013) or ‘Big Sister’ in *Reality Hack* (2016), ‘Halo’ is a persona created and performed by Pierce, driven by the idea that human interaction is dying (ibid). *Halo* (2018) (fig. 49) seeks to synthesise woman and machine and is a metaphor for how human life is mediated through technology, smartphones in particular (Refinery29, 2016). Pierce theorises that people have started to become avatars of themselves, essentially mutating into digital media versions of themselves. For *Halo* (2018) Pierce contacted an industrial designer with the simple request to make a “selfie stick for [her] face”, which becomes more than a prop but rather an extension of the artist’s body (ibid). Whenever Pierce is ‘Halo’ she cannot be looked in the eye as the smartphone attached to her customised selfie stick device obscures her real face, thus the only direct representation of her face is simulated through that of the screen. The selfie camera as a medium explores various ways of looking, seeing and watching oneself as well as others, including the performative means to see oneself being seen. Pierce took ‘Halo’ to the hyperreal streets of New York City and visited Times Square, where people on the streets were able to watch her watching herself, without ever actually meeting her gaze (figs. 50 & 51).

## CHAPTER THREE: The Digital Feminine

*Picture the skyline right over the sky,*

*Picture your image right over your eye*

*Now you see you see it fall,*

*Now you see you see you fall.*

*See you friends around the temple on the street downtown,*

*Run forth and tell them all the truth that you've found*

*One by one they go up inside...*

*Seeing through the golden light*

*Pierce that ceiling with the light that you find,*

*Try behold the spirit it can burn your eyes*

*You hold the fire and catch your soul*

*I held the fire and I want it so, again...*

*Seeing through the golden light*

*Now I can see how the seasons all repeat,*

*And that love makes new things out of nothing that it needs.*

*The generation born will grow from all the crimes before,*

*And then stack up all the heads*

*That are piled outside your door.*

*I understand that I exist in the between,  
Of what was and what will be in those blurry vision scenes,  
That appear but pass us by and for a moment get you high,  
'Till you find your way back down  
Become the truth you've found.*

- The Black Angels, *Yellow Elevator #2* (2010)

*"What's Hyperreality?" you ask. It's ... an excessive sprawl made up of simulational aesthetics, consumer-driven athletics, and single-use synthetics, straddling the physical void of actuality amidst the onslaught of virtual takeover & post-truth makeover.*

- Signe Pierce, *One Night In Hyperreality* (2019)<sup>25</sup>

Much like Signe Pierce, my artistic practice invariably resists being 'boxed in' to one medium or genre. I consider myself an artist and theoriser first and foremost; a digital artist and creator more specifically. Throughout the duration of this MFA I sought to adopt tenets of Pierce's reality art approach in that everything is 'fair game' within the modern digital era when it comes to the process of artistic production. This includes engaging with smartphones and their software capabilities to produce work, and embracing Instagram aesthetics for artistic research and practice. With advanced iPhone technology available at the tip of my fingers, I've continuously captured and documented moments of mundanity in my life in an attempt to conceptually investigate ideas of the 'augmented self' in cyberspace. I do, however, believe there is merit in the old saying *you have to know the rules to bend them properly* in terms of mastering your craft before really having fun with it and pushing the boundaries of what is considered 'art'. Hence my practice is obviously not limited to that of smartphones, but also advanced creative *Adobe* programs. The capabilities of

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/signepierce/?hl=en>



smartphones and Instagram itself have nonetheless provided subversive tactics of engagement with the themes that underscore this MFA.

My final body of work is not at all realised in the sense of a single art object or even objects, but rather an immersive experience that seeks to convey concepts that are heavily embedded, visually at least, in the world of popular culture and mass media. As such, the objects on display are not something that I would expect someone to necessarily want to buy or walk away with (barring the zine publications). Which is in fact exactly what I aim to achieve in this immersive experience; to further push the boundaries of experiential, conceptual art rather than commodified art and art objects. The sacred gallery space, although not thought of in the same sense of a supermarket, shopping mall, or grocery store, is fundamentally also a space of consumption. Perhaps not quite the same physical consumption of food or other consumables such as drugs or alcohol, the gallery space nevertheless represents symbolic consumption of ideas, bodies, and objects. My installation aims to intervene with the standard expectations of this space of consumption—one in which there may be a clear and distinct art object available for symbolic consumption—through methods such as bringing the private into the sacred albeit public gallery space, and juxtaposing these with surveillance aesthetics and the absurdities of femininity. The ideal result of this immersive experience, for me, will be achieving the feeling of an alluring uncanniness, a virtual spectacle grounded in the physical.

Throughout my research on Signe Pierce's methods and practice, as well as further reading into the creation of avatars in cyberspace, I decided to embark on my own virtual performative journey through a persona which allows me to explore my practice and ideas online. In 2018 when I started my MFA I created an Instagram account which has allowed me to explore the themes and aesthetics that influence my practice and thesis first-hand<sup>26</sup>. I created a persona for my online self whom I refer to as 'Miss King' or 'Lauren Pascal'. I was interested in the juxtaposition created between 'miss' (feminine) and 'king' (masculine), as well as the fact that both 'Lauren' and 'Pascal' closely resemble the masculine form of the original French names. I did not have to craft this; my given birth name is Lauren Pascal King. It seems fated that 'Miss King' would find her

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/lauren.pascal.art/?hl=en>

place in the world of cyberspace, exploring the vast abyss that awaits her, navigating the turbulent seas of information with a critical eye.

The title for this exhibition is *The Digital Feminine*, a play on the notion of ‘divine’ feminine figures as illustrated throughout western mythology, classical art, and which I have employed in my practice. Drawing from Signe Pierce’s tried and favoured methodology of ‘Venus Flytrapping’ as discussed in *Weapons of Mass Seduction*, arguments for feminine aesthetic as feminist critique express how femininity can be used as a subversive tool for artistic creation (Pierce and Weiss, 2019). Ensnaring the male gaze—inviting it in and giving it a taste of what it wants—and then flipping the switch in order to “inject some actual ideology into it” (ibid). The ‘Venus Flytrap’ methodology is the idea of using the “inherent divine feminine energy of sexuality, beauty, and prowess”, and the idea of ‘beauty’ as a magnetic force that draws viewers’ attention to an artist’s work using the body, the female form, and seduction and sensuality (ibid).

Pierce explains how the idea of using a “beautiful façade” to draw people in is a similar tactic used in architecture for example, some of which she claims have seductive tendencies with their lush aesthetics and neon lighting. This is visually illustrated through her photography work such as the *Faux Realities* (2017) series discussed in Chapter One (figs. 17-21). This “beautiful façade” and warm energy that draws the viewer in, represents the ‘Venus’; the divine feminine energy (ibid). Once the attention of the viewer is caught, the act of flipping the switch and the gaze to introduce something more nuanced, provocative, or conceptual, represents a subversive tactic to invite people into the realm of what the artist seeks to convey. Through a means of seduction, Pierce argues that this ‘Venus Flytrapping’ tactic is effective in communicating ideas to those who would typically steer clear of any discussion involving the ‘F-word’ (feminism) (Arida and Pierce, 2018). When addressing behavioural or social issues in an attempt to denounce the male gaze, Pierce argues that it can be counteractive to “alienate” those which one wishes to educate (ibid). The bottom line here is agency. If an individual feels empowered by embracing the more idealised aspects of femininity, and it is on her own terms, then that is their choice to, and it is my place to respect it. I am for a feminism that is inclusive of all kinds of expressions of gender and identity, and it is important to be open to note that women are also contributors to the normalisation of feminine ideals. Some women champion their femininity to the detriment of others; in other words, women can feel pressure from not only men, but other women to conform to certain ideals and

standards that are associated with femininity. The idea of ‘Venus Flytrapping’ may seem slightly devious to some who feel threatened by outward displays of sexualised femininity, but in a world where women are invariably demonised regardless of how they choose to express (or repress) their femininity, reclaiming femininity and employing it within artistic practice as a means of subversion, is a reasonable response to patriarchy. It is simply tapping into basic human desire, the attraction to beauty and spectacle, and the need for things to be easily consumed and “easy to exist in” (Pierce and Weiss, 2019). It is a way of effectively communicating the more nuanced and complex theoretical dialogues that go on internally when engaging with, and creating work that, uses expressions of femininity as feminist critique—a way of luring people in and then, once their attention is caught, introducing the deeper concepts behind what it is you’re doing.

*You catch more bees with honey.*<sup>27</sup>

Further, the visual reference, photographing, and exploring of dead physical spaces is not merely about “nostalgia porn”; it’s a deeper exploration and investigation of a modern condition of the “*death of the real*” (ibid) (fig. 51).

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<sup>27</sup> Pierce and Weiss, 2018.

## **PART A: Body of Work**

My final body of work for this MFA is realised in the form of an immersive physical/digital installation ‘experience’. The conceptual and practical point of departure for this installation is an exploration of how feminine figures or characters are digitally represented, manipulated, and/or exploited in cyberspace. These observations will be appropriated in their practical manifestation; turned on their heads or utilised ironically in combination with images from art history, western classical mythology and meme culture. The aesthetics of Vapourwave art and Signe Pierce’s practice has influenced both image/video production, choice of lighting, and props in my exhibition to create a blur between the virtual space of the screens present and the ‘real’ physical world of the installation. The installation consists of various spaces which all speak to one another with reference to the virtual world of digital media in a physical ‘real’ space. The installation elements include multimedia sculptures and ‘devotional shrines’, packaging/product design and assemblage, collage art, multiple original zine publications, video art (both found and original content), performance, illustration, art direction, and photography.

The zines have almost come to form their own sub-body of work in that they are a physical archive of the majority of digital work and experimentation that I have done throughout this MFA, but work that is ultimately not a ‘main’ feature in the final installation. There are eight A4 folded-style zines in total, which all serve as ‘party favours’ that viewers can take away with them. The images included in the zines were drawn from multiple sources: some of my own photoshoots, screenshots/stills from videogames, selfies taken with Instagram face filter effects, various memes, references to classical western art and mythology, and Vapourwave aesthetics (figs. 52-59). The digital manifest in the real: most of these images were previously only available online on Miss King’s Instagram profile. Rather than printing the various images as large scale individual prints to be displayed on the gallery wall—which would be the more traditional method of gallery display—the creation of a zine seemed to be a much more appropriate means of conveying the themes and aesthetics that my MFA has undertaken and explored. In addition, practical and logistical concerns regarding the lighting of photographic prints in the installation space become important as the various projections, screens, and coloured artificial lighting would not present an ideal situation for displaying large-scale, good quality prints. Ultimately the method of presenting

a large part of my experimental and digital portfolio in the form of a simple A4 printed and folded zine evokes ideas of capitalism's throw-away culture and excess. This whole venture kicked off with *The Digital Femizine* (2018) (fig. 52) which represents my earliest attempts at working within this medium. Aesthetically, it evokes themes of Vapourwave, the 'divine feminine', and references classical and contemporary feminine figures in cyberspace, as well as popular internet memes. Of course, a young Bill Gates lurks in the background somewhere in the pages of this zine. Initially I printed out various selected images and tried the cut-and-paste collage method, the analogue method if you will. Ultimately I found that designing the zine on *Photoshop* first and then printing and folding the digital version resulted in a much cleaner, cohesive publication. It also makes more sense conceptually that the pages would be virtually processed before manifesting in the physical.

The process is as follows:

Digital content is compiled through means of selfies, game screenshots, photographic and installation concept shoots, all of which deal with ideas of the tension between the virtual and the real, as well as the various representations, exploitations, and manipulations of feminine figures in virtual realms such as cyberspace, selfie cameras, and game-worlds.

These composite series' are respectively edited and digitally processed through both professional means (*Adobe Creative Suite* programs such as *InDesign*, *Photoshop*, *Premiere Pro*, and *Illustrator*), as well as amateur means such as free (but advanced nevertheless) smartphone photo-editing collage apps and Instagram's infinite array of filters.

The final zine template, divided into 8 pages, is printed out and hand-folded by myself. Due to this method of zine template design, no zine looks the same as each fold results in a slightly different look depending on how accurately I have cut out the borders and folded the pages.

Through the creation of the zines' content on multiple levels and platforms, both analogue and digital, I feel that this series illustrates a conceptually and aesthetically interesting method of displaying digital work in physical space. The zines will be on display and available to be taken from a display set up in the installation space, amongst little bowls of sweets and such. Through this method of display and invitation for viewers to take a zine for free, I am trying to evoke ideas

of children's parties and 'party packs', the sugary little goodie bags which are given out to each child when they leave the function. The childlike elements of the display are juxtaposed with the content of the zines, some of which are mature and sexy images, featuring nudity and other non-child-friendly imagery. One of the zines in particular features images from an experimental photoshoot I did that explored the absurdity of femininity through the juxtaposition of 'girly/childlike' and 'sexy' aesthetics. This zine, titled *Play Time* (2019), is composed of various *Bratz Dolls* from my childhood without any clothing on (partially due to the fact that I have lost them all since childhood), displayed alongside a laptop screen opened on the 'cartoon' category on *Pornhub* (fig. 59). The dolls' private parts (chest and crotch) are censored with girly stickers as a play on the censorship of women's bodies on social media online versus the glorification of the naked women in pornography. Like most of my work, this series explores various expressions of femininity, ranging from the aesthetics and activities of girlhood to the sexualised, idealised fantasy woman and object of desire in porn and elsewhere in the media. It also evokes more taboo ideas of little girls' early experiments with sexuality through play. I defy anyone to find a grown woman who can't recall a time in her childhood when she may have experimented to some degree with simulations of sexuality through play, dolls, and toys.

The *Bratz Dolls* from my childhood also feature in an early experiment with the aesthetics of technological desire, the sacred and divine, and western classical art themes. *The Garden of Eden* (2018) is a mini-installation/experiment that plays with ideas of the temptations of technology, and draws visual reference from the Biblical story of Adam and Eve (fig. 61). This piece represents an earlier example of experiments with the sacred and divine, the virtual, and the classical western Biblical or mythological reference in my practice. God's watchful eye has here been replaced with the perpetual gaze of the webcam, and the apple from the tree has been replaced with a USB flash drive. The idea is to evoke classical western ideas of divinity and beauty with a technological, hyperreal twist. The blurring of the virtual and the real. An instigation of how classical myths and narratives play out on a virtual, contemporary stage.

After playing with dolls came playing *The Sims*, which is essentially a virtual dollhouse. You create your characters, customise them to your heart's desire, and have absolute control over your characters' lives and actions. You play god, with pixels. One could say playing with dolls is one of the first ways in which children, specifically little girls, learn to play god. They learn the power

of storytelling through the creation of fantasy narratives for their inanimate friends. They have the power to manipulate the situation however they see fit. They are in full control of the context, the narrative, and the outcome of the situation at play, both literally and figuratively. Perhaps this is why little girls enjoy playing with their dolls so much: it provides them, from a young age, a space in which they can be fully in control of a situation, and have absolute power over it—like in the real world, where this is not always the case for women and girls. This is probably also why life simulation games such as *The Sims* franchise are typically associated with a largely female player base. Many girlhood play activities are centred on gender-stereotypical ideas of motherhood and domesticity through playing with dolls and plastic kitchen sets for example; even in girlhood ideas of the homemaker and the perfect wife who cooks for her husband, cleans the house, and looks after the kids are evoked through gendered play and activity. My fourth year honours exhibition was also realised in the form of an immersive installation, and focused on different representations and exploitations of female characters in gaming, as well as investigating how gaming culture, and the games themselves, are fundamentally gendered, masculine, and largely exclusive. The game screenshot series is inspired by the aesthetics and theories I learned through my fourth year work, and is really what started this interest in the tension between the virtual and the real. In the virtual world of videogames, real world politics are no more exempt than they are in cyberspace.

Screenshots from experiments I made within the virtual world of my childhood videogames such as *The Sims*, *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, and *Barbie* games are featured in the *Digital Dreamscapes* (2019) zine (fig. 55). The zine features various screenshots from these games in which the female protagonists explore their respective virtual worlds against the backdrop of Vapourwave-inspired imagery that evokes paradise, neon, the digital, and the exotic. Other screenshots from this ‘girl game’ series are featured in *Internet Explorer* (2019), which also features some of my illustrative digital work, selfies, and a photoshoot that explored feminine and digital aesthetics (fig. 54). The blonde female sim that is featured throughout the game screenshot series was specifically designed in-game by me to visually emulate the aesthetics of an upper class 18<sup>th</sup> century woman, a feminine figure you may expect to find in a Rococo painting (fig. 60). The aforementioned photographic series gets its own personalised zine, *Pink Trash* (2019) (fig. 58). *The Girl is a Gun* (2019) is an amalgamation of all three components—the *Bratz Dolls* and *Pink Trash* photographic series’, and the game screenshot series—as well as another one of my selfies with Vapourwave-inspired editing and imagery (fig. 53).

In addition to the series of A4 folded zines described above, of which there are eight in total, there is one stapled booklet-type zine that is printed on card titled *Fake Plastic Love* (2019) (figs. 62, 63 & 64). The series is comprised of various stills/screenshots of one of my final video pieces, *My Augmented Selfie* (2019), which features footage from the teaser trailer for the adventure videogame *Detroit: Become Human* (2018) overlaid with footage of myself wearing various Instagram face filters (figs. 65 & 66). The videogame trailer shows the creation of one of the main female protagonists, an AI robot named Kara, and her mental/cognitive configuration and test programming during her making (fig. 67). Video footage that I spent a few months archiving on Instagram using the ever-evolving array of face-filters is used in *My Augmented Selfie* (2019) as a way of visually exploring the synthesis of body and machine in a virtual space. Face filters have become commonplace on Instagram, the technology previously having gained popularity on the *SnapChat* platform. These face filters largely include cutesy, fresh-faced, lip-plumping and nose-thinning virtual masks that have honestly made me question for the first time whether or not I should consider getting a nose job to achieve this perfect nasal slenderness (fig. 68). In addition to filters that digitally emulate an attractive, feminine ideal, there are also filters that capture the cyborg essence of these kinds of facial recognition technologies, which suggest more uncanny effects of synthesising bodies and machines (figs. 69 & 70). The idea of getting lost in our screens is taken quite literally in some of these filters, which is why I find them so interesting to work with as I feel they are innately imbued with a depth of rich themes relating to automation, cyborg feminism, and performativity in the form of virtual masks (figs. 71 & 72). A few printed booklets, the contents of which captures the aesthetic and conceptual essence of *My Augmented Selfie* (2019) will be on display in the installation for viewers to look through, and the video will be projected onto one of the walls in the gallery space, looping throughout. Most of the selfie video footage I capture focuses on my gaze, which, in addition to the frequent meeting of the gaze with the robot Kara in the videogame trailer, represents Miss King's watchful gaze within these virtual (projected video) and physical (the gallery) spaces.

Another element of my work, *Hera's Breasty Breeze Milk* (2019), is scattered throughout the installation as part of the 'feminine' décor within each space, and references ideas of fertility, motherhood, breasts, milk, dairy products, grocery/supermarket aesthetics (figs. 73, 74 & 75 ). The cartons also evoke ideas of commodity fetishism through the packaging and sale of something that is natural and free (in terms of no capital needed to produce it) like breast milk. The packaging



design specifically uses imagery that visually resembles breasts and semen, although they are not presented as such. The ‘evil eyes’ on the cartons refer to a pair of breasts and nipples, while the creamy white milk splatters and splashes on the *100% Organic* label subtly evoke ideas of the infamous ‘cum shot’ featured in pornography. The milk cartons are an attempt to illustrate some of the paradoxes of femininity that are associated with female breasts. I feel it is necessary to differentiate between male and female breasts as the former are simply not held to the same standards of censorship, lust, and shame. Female breasts are treated differently depending on the context: in pornography they are viewed with attraction, desire, and lust. Online platforms such as Instagram, on the other hand, are rife with algorithms that are specifically designed to search for and flag any posts featuring exposed female nipples, ready to censor and remove any posts that violate their community guideline standards. Even in the case of Instagram there are often double standards and a lack of consistency in terms of which posts are flagged and/or taken down, leaving it unclear as to what exactly the problem with female breasts. I once had a friend who posted a photo she took, on her cell phone, of a *painting* of a nipple. Instagram got wind of this post, and shortly removed my friend’s post: the infamous photo of a painting of a nipple.

In line with exploring girlhood aesthetics as an adult woman, another important element of the installation is a Vapourwave, Pop Art inspired dollhouse that I constructed out of scratch from mostly found materials (figs. 76 & 77). In retrospect, the style of collage I used achieved a similar aesthetic to that of Pop artist Richard Hamilton’s famous collage piece *Just what is it that makes today’s home so different, so appealing?* (1956) (fig. 78). The cutting and pasting of domestic imagery to ‘decorate’ the home, in both cases, represents a satirical illustration of the ‘ideal’ modern (or hyperreal) home, specifically with regards to gender roles. *Miss King’s Dream House* (2019) is my take on the idea of *Barbie’s Dream House*, and it basks in the domestic roles assigned to women by having pink and kitsch appliances and furniture. The dollhouse also utilizes Vapourwave aesthetics to evoke ideas and imagery of paradise through the inclusion of Greco-Roman statues and pillars, draped greenery and plants, a pink and purple pixelated skyline, and collaged wallpaper that visually reference the vintage, retro aesthetics of bedrooms, bathrooms, and homes from the 1950s (fig. 77).

Vapourwave aesthetics also inform my video piece *Milk & Mash* (2019), a title given to specifically reference the domestic and kitchen related stereotypes that are typically associated

with women, as well as the performance part of the piece featuring *Hera's Breasty Breeze Milk* (2019). Influenced by Vapourwave-style video art which mainly consists of nostalgic found footage and sounds from the 80s and 90s, the piece includes my own footage in which I perform 'Miss King' using a variety of props to indicate ironic elements of my character that expose the absurdities of femininity *Milk & Mash* (2019) is essentially divided into four separate parts, which each ebb and flow<sup>28</sup> like the ocean of cyberspace:

*How to be pretty*: the opening section which features retro 80s inspired synth music (fig. 79), a narration from a 1940s video in which a woman gives young girls a class in manners, appearance, exercise, and proper diet: how to be pretty. This is juxtaposed with imagery from Disney films (figs. 80, 81 & 94), retro found-footage of women performing their nightly routines (fig. 82), women in the kitchen (fig. 83), classic childhood girl-heroes *The Powerpuff Girls* making milkshakes (fig. 84), a pair of women trying to cross the finish line with the help of their fairy godmother (fig. 85) and distractions from the *Mean Girls* (fig. 86) and a good old 80s aerobics class (fig. 87).

*Cleanliness*: an eerily narrated continuation of essential lessons for women in personal hygiene and cleanliness, featuring a woman showering in a swimming cap with the early Kardashians (figs. 88 & 89), a videogame character showering in a cage as the male guards observe her (fig. 90), more female videogame characters getting trouble from men (figs. 91 & 92), beauty pageants (fig. 93 & 95), feminine shaving products (figs. 96 & 97), and Kardashians in the office (fig. 98).

*Simulatrix Shaving Horror Story*: a continuation of the Kardashian's virtual journey in my installation, but first the horrors of shaving are played alongside the backdrop of Neo waking up from the Matrix (figs. 99-104), and then back to the Kardashian clan as they haunt Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) (figs. 105-112).

*Milk Mommy*, the closing chapter of this story, featuring Miss King's performance footage (figs. 113-123).

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<sup>28</sup> This refers to the fading in and out of videos in *Milk & Mash* (2019), which is inspired by the metaphor of the ocean as a turbulent sea with waves of information and media that ebb and flow. This metaphor is further illustrated by the inclusion of an old surfboard in the installation space: *surfing the web*.

Through the ‘Milk Mommy’ performance as Miss King I allude to both girly and sexy archetypes of the feminine through the use of various props. A pink baby rattle, a dummy, a baby dolly, and other toys are employed in my performance to signify the aesthetics and gender norms that are assigned to little girls from birth and during childhood. Other elements of my archetypal character include more erotic and sensual signifiers of femininity such as my gestures, revealing clothing, and use of phallic objects in sexually suggestive ways. In an attempt to subvert the gendering of masculine/feminine methods of ‘play’, the phallic objects used for this performance are mainly ‘boy’ toys such as plastic swords or guns. Intentionally awkward and potentially humorous, I point to both the absurdity of a grown woman playing with dolls and the absurdity of generalised erotic play for an unseen spectator. This pantomime is an extension of what, although socially normalised, is equally absurd: a little girl playing mommy to an inanimate baby doll.

*Miss King’s Dream House* (2019), another area of the installation, is an ironic homage to the play areas little girls typically have when growing up: the dollhouse, the dolls, the toys, the pink, the purple in all its girly glory. This undercurrent of absurdity but also interplay between the ‘toys’ of childhood and the adult ‘toys’ of the bedroom is carried through in the dollhouse. In relation to the gendered aspects of play in the video, the dollhouse (inspired by girlhood, Vapourwave, and Pop art) was built using recycled boxes from an online meal delivery service known as *U-Cook*, which delivers custom-chosen meals with pre-packaged and rationed ingredients to the customer’s doorstep. It eliminates the need for the consumer to travel to and from the grocery store, as well as the effort of choosing and planning the meals. It was important for me to try engage as much as possible with readily-available materials in constructing this piece, specifically those which speak directly to the cycle of consumer culture in a hyperreal society such as food packaging, preparation, and delivery. It speak to the throw-away culture that capitalism encourages, in terms of physical food waste—which is a crisis in and of itself that the world is currently facing—and virtual waste in terms of the infinite, unquantifiable amount of data that is uploaded, stored, and distributed in cyberspace. Having constructed the base of the dollhouse from the *U-Cook* delivery boxes, the next step was to transform the house into an art object that conveyed ideas of consumerism, girlhood, femininity, and virtuality. When a convenient service such as this comes onto the market, the role of the woman as cook, feeder, and nurturer may be under fire, or perhaps just reassigned. What is the result when the need for this role is eliminated?

The game screenshots that I used for some of the A4 zines are also used in a video series of ‘virtual landscapes’ that are placed in multiple ‘frames’ (screens) on a wall that is supposed to emulate the traditional hanging of pictures (landscape paintings, for example) on the walls in homes as well as in public spaces to signify taste and sophistication. The video piece title is synonymous with the zine that uses its imagery, *Digital Dreamscapes* (2019). This is a reference to Foucault’s idea of heterotopia, a space which mirrors what is outside of it (reality) but is somehow ‘other’, contradictory, or transforming (Foucault and Miskowiec, 1986). Land is represented as a possession and a material marker of status in traditional landscape paintings, whereas this virtual landscape is immaterial. The videos are mostly still images (videogame screenshots from *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, *Barbie* kids’ games, and *The Sims*) which are juxtaposed with imagery from classical art paintings. There is a specific focus on feminine figures and landscape art aesthetics within the choice of paintings used, which ebb and flow in and out of one another; a visual reference to the deep sea of cyberspace (figs. 124 & 125). This piece explores ideas of ‘composition’ in classical art and painting, and breaks down the meaning of the word: ‘comp-posit-ion’. ‘Pose’ here refers to the posture and poses of the feminine figures throughout the series, as well as the feminine figures referenced from classical art imagery that flow in and out of the game screenshots. I link this to ideas of the ‘composite’, in this case the composite worlds of videogames: an amalgamation of code, visual imagery, simulation algorithms and the like. This all speaks to the construction of an image, be it the ‘virtual’ images in videogame worlds or ‘real’ images such as a landscape painting, which represent seemingly natural landscapes despite being constructed themselves.

## PART B: Installation Overview

There are three main spaces within the installation which each speak to varying expressions of femininity in ‘female’ spaces: the bedroom or ‘boudoir’, the dollhouse play-area, and the vanity table. The floor plan for my installation maps out these different areas as well as where screens, the projector, and lights will be placed (figs. 126 & 127). The bedroom area uses my actual bed for the installation display, and is dressed in my girliest, pink, flowery bed sheets. This is not an intentional reference to Tracey Emin<sup>29</sup>—the choice was honestly more logistical at first—but the conceptual implications of using my own bed in my masters’ exhibition became apparent in terms of the reality art approach, and everyday performativity which is a major theme in this body of work. Most of the décor for this area, and for most of the installation in fact, is sourced from my own bedroom and home. A lot of the props used for the video performances and décor in the installation space are also from my fourth year work and practice, most of which is sourced from my childhood. My mom being a bit of a hoarder has paid off in terms of being able to access real remnants from my girlhood for my artistic practice (the same is true for the videogames that went into the making of my game-screenshot series). Props used in my video performances will form part of the play area décor as a homage to playing dress-up and the dress-up/costume boxes kids sometimes have growing up. Fairy wings, tutus, wigs, toys, robes, lingerie, and the like are included in this dress-up area.

The vanity table is made up of multiple mirrors and is decorated with some of the glittery purple toiletries. Ideally, viewers will feel comfortable enough to take selfies<sup>30</sup> in this area. This area mainly explores themes of the gaze, vanity, looking at oneself, and the act of being seen. To further emphasise these themes, a live-stream of the space will be captured with a webcam (placed near the entrance) that projects onto a wall in the space. The live webcam stream, playing in real-time, also speaks to ideas of virtuality and the gaze in cyberspace, manifest here in the ‘real’ world. Viewers in the space will be captured on the webcam as it is recording live, and their digital selves

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<sup>29</sup> Emin famously presented *My Bed* (1998) at the Tate Gallery, which featured her own unmade bed from home presented organically in all its mess and glory as an artwork, and was groundbreaking at the time (Tate, n.d.).

<sup>30</sup> This is something I noticed happened during my fourth year installation, which was inside of a changing room with many mirrors. Viewers took selfies in front of the mirrors, bathed in the neon pink lighting. The aesthetic appeal of neon pink is alluring for most, and ideally a similar effect will be achieved in this vanity table area.

will be projected onto the wall closest to the installation entrance. Further, they will also be able to watch me watching them in the projection of *My Augmented Selfie* (2019), which will be projected onto the opposite wall playing on a loop. Milk & Mash (2019) will be the main source of sound for the installation. The narration from the first and second sections of the video (*How to be pretty* and *Cleanliness*, respectively) should create an eerie atmosphere that will seem to the viewer as if they are being spoken to or addressed. On the wall opposite from the vanity table area will be multiple screens playing videos from my game screenshot series, and represent the digital frames through which we conduct our existence. Where one might find to expect still pictures or static photographs in frames, the viewer will instead find blurring, moving images, mounted as virtual frames of reference to digital spaces and our digital selves.

Multiple shrines scattered throughout the installation space reference the ‘devotional shrines’ from Signe Pierce and Eli Rezkallah’s *Pink Noise* (2018) series. These shrines are made up of classical art statues, plastic flower wreaths, some of the *Breasty Breeze Milk* (2019) cartons, and toiletries which I transformed into purple glittery ‘toys’ (fig. 128). The shrines are lit up in a pink glow, signifying their sacredness or divinity. In addition to the other décor, e-waste I have collected will be used to ‘dress’ the shrines. Part of this are recycled batteries that have been tied and linked together almost like Christmas or fairy lights (fig. 129). Real, decaying flowers will be in amongst the bright pink and purple plastic flower wreaths. The dressing and décor of these shrines will attempt to convey the tension between the virtual and the real through the juxtaposition of the real (but dying) and the fake, and of the outdated technology with the advanced AV logistics of the installation. The neon pink lighting used for the installation is a reference to femininity, as well as its sensual ‘red-light district’ connotations. Neon lighting is a symbol of modernity, as well as for sex and pleasure. The two meet in this virtual yet real space<sup>31</sup> (figs. 130-136).

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<sup>31</sup> Although images of the final installation for examination are not available at the time of submitting this thesis, there are images documenting the early stages of installation in the list of illustrations.

## Conclusion

During the last two years of completing this MFA I have learned that cyberspace is indeed a turbulent sea that represents uncharted virtual territories, a space in which it is possible to assume alternate forms and occupy digital identities. This space, however, is not entirely utopian as real-world socio-political issues transcend into the realm of the virtual. Hyperreality: the real and the virtual are one and the same. The particular focus of this MFA has been how gender politics operate in this digitised space, particularly focusing on representations, manipulations, and exploitations of feminine figures in cyberspace. Internet sub-cultures and other elements of low-brow popular culture have become irreversibly integrated into the world of visual arts through social media platforms such as Instagram, blurring the lines between sophisticated taste and easily consumable goods like never before. Online social media platforms, Instagram in particular, have provided a digital stage through which individuals conduct their daily lives. The normalised integration of this virtual stage and its acceptance and legitimacy in everyday life represents the hyperreal takeover that artists like Signe Pierce and myself are interested in exploring. Pierce's reality art approach to artistic production has inspired my practice in terms of the use of feminine aesthetics as feminist critique, some of the methods I have engaged with in my body of work, and certain installation techniques such as audio/visual equipment and lighting choices.

The themes, aesthetics, ideas, and theories explored and discussed throughout this MFA has resulted in an immersive installation experience which blurs the line between the virtual and the real. The installation's engagement with the aesthetics of cyberspace and exploring the absurdities of femininity through a juxtaposition of sexy, feminine and 'girly' aesthetics should ideally result in a sensual, uncanny experience.

The ocean of cyberspace should be waded through with caution as the male gaze is always at large; although, one should never forget to dip their toes in the water and have a little fun with the crazy waves of virtuality. There is agency to be exercised in the depths of these seas, and Miss King will be damned if she doesn't bask in the glistening glory of it all.

# Appendix A

Poster for advertisement of MFA exhibition:





## Appendix B

### Exhibition blurb:

*Seeing through the golden light  
Now I can see how the seasons all repeat,  
And that love makes new things out of nothing that it needs.  
The generation born will grow from all the crimes before,  
And then stack up all the heads  
That are piled outside your door.*

*I understand that I exist in the between,  
Of what was and what will be in those blurry vision scenes,  
That appear but pass us by and for a moment get you high,  
'Till you find your way back down  
Become the truth you've found.*

- The Black Angels, *Yellow Elevator #2* (2010)

### **Simulacra:**

*A representation or imitation of a person or thing ... such as a statue or a painting, especially of a god.*

### **Hyperreality:**

*In semiotics and postmodernism; an inability of consciousness to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality, especially in technologically advanced postmodern societies.*

Miss King put on her reality goggles & took a dive—a leap of faith, if you will—into cyberspace.

This is what she found.

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