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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

ARTIFICE & SUPERFICE
an Analysis of Self-Media

A thesis paper submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts
in
Digital Arts and New Media

by
Marguerite E. Kalhor
June 2017

The thesis of Marguerite E. Kalhor
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ARTIFICE & SUPERFICE
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ABSTRACT

This document investigates the formal and technical qualities in selfie-taking and their relationship to artworks co-existing in the deluge of social media information. Contemporary western cultural critiques on the selfie or self-media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are tinged with puritanical rhetoric that reduces web expression into behavioral do's and don'ts, shaking fingers at exhibitionism, and lauding formulaic instances of sincerity. The pollution of mainstream web ideology is problematic; self-monitoring web personae stunt the growth of self-expressive virtual entities. This leads to a digital face-blindness or failure to separate the human at the keyboard from their projection on the screen and the screens of others.

The result is an unconscious formulation of social media behavior and the imagined concreteness of a network. This misunderstanding resembles a lack of innovation in the contemporary art world as more often fine artists are succumbing to adopt the methods of creating fetish objects to satisfy the aesthetic libidos of the network. The resulting content is a frenzied, rapid-cycling of identity politics in constant identity crisis — the artist becomes the work, the object becomes mythologized or antiquated before it is even produced.

Creating digital images to exist on a media network, the artist must battle the frequent trends and updates that developers put into place (the corporate quest for

commodifying content and perpetuating normalization) by creating subversive content and identities. The pollution is mirrored with an abundance of rejected portrait images on one's digital camera or smartphone. It is a contact sheet with little value, yet, the images remain in digital limbo until free disk space is needed. The selfie can be compared to the photographic self-portrait as a standalone medium and as a sub-genre of self-portraiture and performance.

For the exhibition component of my research, I created a series of four works titled "The This: Artifice + Superfice: two scoops of banality, a collection," which expand on tropes and patterns I've interacted with on social media platforms. The value of the selfie or the social media persona lies not in their use as a tool in matters of cultural activism and capitalism, but in their ability to deceive: as objects of hyperfantasy despite their origin as mirroring their maker.

DEDICATION

for my twin mind
&
McLuhan's Ghost

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

An Introduction to Self-Mediation or *Veritas in a Vacuum*

I would like to begin by saying that I am not a photographer. My counterfeit membership card in the self-portrait hall of fame was laminated the moment I purchased a digital camera. My camera's primary use was for photo documentation and reference images for painting projects. I wanted to be a portrait painter and was tethered to the notion that my portraits had to be somewhat photorealistic. The most easily accessible reference subject to practice with was myself; this was in the early days of Google Image Search and there were few high-resolution images of faces. Meanwhile, my fellow teenagers at the time were logging into this website called Myspace.com. This was a good place for me to experiment with talking to people and post images that were slowing down the family computer. While on Myspace, I came to these conclusions: certain forms of expression were more popular than others, spending time interacting with others on the platform was rewarded with simulated popularity and that my friends IRL weren't always who their profiles made them out to be.

So how does a suburban highschooler's experience on a now dead social network tie in with art? We could start with Duchamp and his relationship with a urinal, or Warhol eating a cheeseburger, but today I'll settle with Sherman, Cindy. Below are two images. One is Sherman's 1977 photograph *Untitled Film Still #3* and the other is a 2017 digital photograph of a webcam composition taken with a digital camera which I will call *Throwaway Image #2*. In both cases, it is unclear whether the image was taken with a timer, remote shutter release or another person altogether.

Both images seem to document a moment of domestic intimacy, however, the latter image suggests the moment the photo portrait is being taken to be later posted online or shared with others.
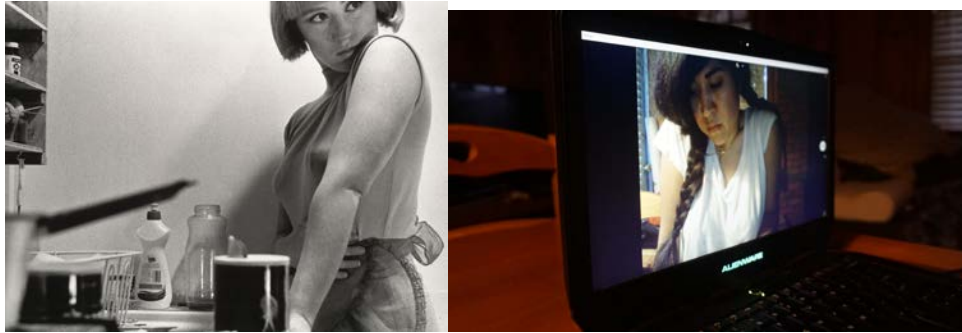
The expressions of the subjects and the objects that surround them dictate the narratives of each image. In this case, the figures appear to be shrugging and avoiding confrontation with the viewer. Though the compositions of the images have similarities, each image is reacting to a different structure of visuality. Through the mimesis of cinematic technique and the male gaze Sherman reproduces the relationship between the subject and viewer in these dramatic scenarios. Though they serve as spoofs of both Hollywood and Independent film, Sherman's stills articulate this weird moment where reality imitates dramatic fiction. *Throwaway Image #2* comments on the abundance of digital self-portrait images whose sole purpose is to be shared on a single platform for the enjoyment of those on the subject's network. This image, however is an image of the process and without the setting could easily be a standalone selfie had I simply clicked the shutter button on the webcam. The staging of both images operates on similar levels of banality and realism. The trend in self-fashioning has shifted from identifying with film characters to self-identifying

with one's online personas and the personas of others.

Though Sherman's recent work deviates from these film tropes, I see my digital self-portrait images as the post-internet counterparts of her *Film Stills*. This work goes beyond the usual critical comparative work of Sherman that I find misplaced, in, for example, actor-turned-contemporary-artist James Franco's *New Film Stills* (2013). Here, Franco attempts to recreate Sherman's *Film Stills* through a meta-process of cannibalizing her compositions by inserting himself as the subject and photographing himself in the same locations as Sherman's. Perhaps this work is motivated by the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, a commentary on the Ready-made properties of self-fashioning or even a commentary on those in positions of power being able to appropriate pre-existing imagery to rebrand their celebrity. It is projects like Franco's that echo the contemporary urge to re-live moments of visual nostalgia. This is not only apparent in the art world, but it is inherent in the mass expression of social media platforms to appropriate and revive tender moments of the past with objects like childhood photo re-creations and thus a perfect market for film and television reboots.

With contemporary digital photography one can use a smartphone as a monitor and a remote shutter release. In the early days of digital photography and self-portrait photography, one had to take a series of images and pick the best one from the group. A self-portrait that one had the most compositional control over at this time was the mirror photo, but you could only pull this off if you were someone

cool like Adrian Piper[1] or Jeff Wall.[2] This technique continues to be used and it's most likely the root of describing selfies as narcissistic, which I will discuss later in this paper. There is a whole section in Ana Peraica's *Culture of the Selfie*[3] dedicated to how the mirror operates as a framing device in art history and contemporary selfie-manufacture. She writes, "Some of these images, using mirrors and technologies, show twists of mirrored reality. Others produce impossible reflections, or show some parallelism of perspectives of the real and reflected world."

Though we are currently entrenched in a desire to depict the true versions ourselves, some artists seek to amplify a particular personality trait through performance. In Moulton, Shana's video and performance series *Whispering Pines* (2001-2010), Cynthia, a character representing perceived consumer habits and desires emerges. Moulton's persona lives in a *Golden Girls* palette inspired purgatory where the greatest hits of Enya play endlessly. These days it's difficult to find performances that take the banal and make it spectacular. In *Whispering Pines 3*, Cynthia is found in a bedazzled neck brace writing a diary entry about her cat. Surrounded by a collection of mass-produced objects in harmony with her robe Cynthia falls asleep and gets transported to the woods via a dreamcatcher that conveniently fits in her neck brace. While in the forest she encounters the diamond-shaped touch-lights floating around her and she catches them with a butterfly net. The sound of this video was recorded after the video was shot, Cynthia's diary entry is voiced over as an

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[1] Piper, Adrian. *Food for the Spirit Image #11*, Photograph, 1971.
[2] Wall, Jeff. *Picture for Women*, Photograph, 1979.
[3] Peraica, Ana. "The Culture of the Selfie: Self-Representation in Contemporary Visual Culture" Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2017. Print.

internal monologue, and the forest and page turning sounds could be newly recorded or pre-existing Foley. What is most striking about this series is how Moulton doesn't jeopardize the aesthetics of the work by complicating it with the inevitable dire and preachiness of theory. This work can be read as autobiographical and simultaneously a critique on consumer culture.
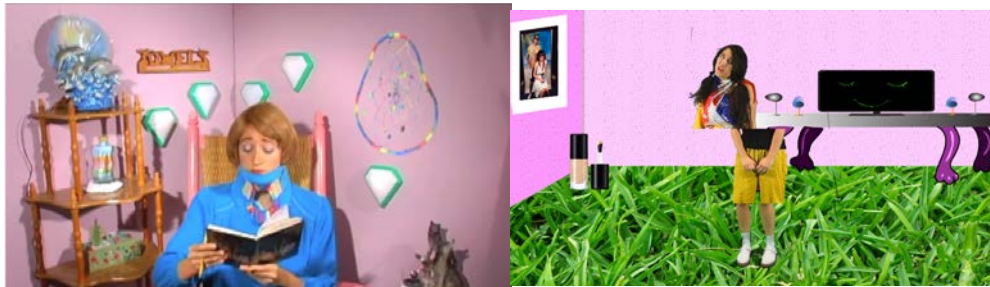
Here are two images. The one on the left is a still from Moulton's *Whispering Pines 3*. The one on the right is a still from part one of Cel *Division* (2017). Both are set in a kitschy-pink-walled environment. Though both works comment on the relationship one has with the objects in one's home environment, the character in *Cel Division* is an exquisite cadaver of three separate personae. Rather than sticking to one script, the three characters behave in their own ways, pulling the composite body in multiple directions. Too, Moulton's Cynthia is contending with what's expected of her culturally, while the unnamed figure in *Cel Division* attempts to be a stable entity online while simultaneously seeking to match the behaviors of the entity who created it.
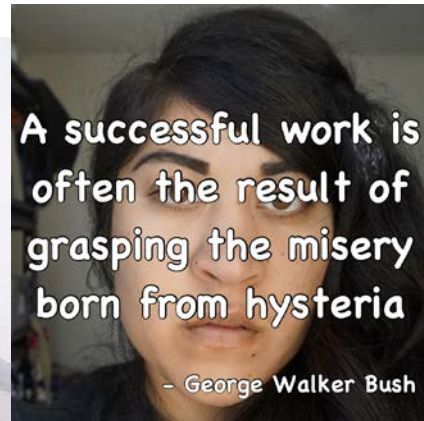
Here are two images. The one on the left was posted to Amalia Ulman's Instagram account[4] on August 30th, 2016. The image on the right was created on March 30th 2016 using the mobile image editing app PhotoGrid and posted, along with 29 other images[5] using the same format to my Facebook timeline. Both images are referencing the image macro tradition[6] that reached peak popularity around 2011/2012. Ulman employs the stock-image style, the Impact font with the black stroke and the white fill with text content that is a combination of College Liberal[7] and First World Problems.[8] The following paragraphs will focus on her Instagram account/performance online rather than the entirety of her practice.

Ulman gained popularity when her Instagram account separated from her

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[4] Ulman, Amalia. *Excellences & Perfections*. https://www.instagram.com/amaliaulman/?hl=en.

[5] See Kalhor, Marguerite. *Trollies.* Digital. 2016.

[6] An example of an image macro: http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/o-rly . *Know Your Meme* is a great resource for anyone needing statistical data for researching image-based memes. It's also a good place to get somewhat of a grasp of the ever-changing slang of the web if the researcher is not present on social media during the time it is used.

[7] Image macro of a woman one might meet on the UC Berkeley or UC Santa Cruz campus. The text on these image macros start with a criticism she may have with something, and the second line of the text is usually about her behavior that contradicts what she said initially. http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/college-liberal

[8] This type of image usually depicts an image of a woman crying coupled by a piece of text describing an issue that a person coming from a place of privilege would complain about. http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/first-world-problems

"real-life." It mimicked the pedestrian uses of the platform and for some reason this impressed the art world[9] or, the journalists who write about it. Perhaps this success presents another issue in digital media and its relationship with the contemporary art world. If critics are surrounding themselves with what is legible without having to immerse themselves in a cyberculture, how can they adequately define what art is? To me, this only resembles a social media account of a young, social media practitioner who has access to capital to buy props and alter her appearance. To be fair, the production quality and composition of these images is quite impressive, her Slavoj Žižek image[10] is funny.

A trend I have noticed lately is the appropriation of slang that originated in Black communities online.[11] Of course, mainstream popular culture has absorbed aspects of Black culture since forever and perhaps the perceived universality or inclusivity of social media/the Internet makes cultural appropriation acceptable. Some of the memes I see circulating share similarities with racial tropes found in cinema or reference them directly often without the content poster knowing.[12] What makes me cringe is when I am in a room full of academics looking at someone's work, the face of a Black guy, presumably someone of low income, comes on the projector and the

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[9] Sooke, Alastair. "Is this the first Instagram masterpiece?" The Telegraph. 18 Jan 2016. Web. 11 May 2017.
[10] https://www.instagram.com/p/BShe-T7ALOZ/
[11] Jackson, Laur M. "The Blackness of Meme Movement." Model View Culture. 28 Mar 2016. Web. 5 Jun 2017.
[12]A well-meaning friend posted an image which referenced a depiction of blackface in a children's cartoon from the 1940s. My friend was unaware of this and quickly removed the image as soon as I cited its origin.

first thing he says is met by several snickers from the audience. I am not sure if[13] Ulman is being ironic by parroting the current language of memes in her most recent posts, but to me it seems like her lack of acknowledgement or failure to contextualize is only perpetuating this newest iteration of this form of cultural erasure for the sake of relevance.

Trollies does something quite different. It pairs a celebrity name with a quote with some societal involvement using pseudo-theoretical language. We are only able to glimpse the thoughts of celebrities through their actions documented by tabloids or the occasional memoir and these images transform the individuals into philosophers. I too am using an image of myself, however these images were selected from the rejected selfie images that occupy space on my smartphone. There is also a bit of an erasure happening, as it is unclear who wrote these quotes, nor is the identity of the person in the photograph is clearly defined. Though Ulman and I are both exploring tropes on our social media accounts, mine try to anticipate what they may become rather than remaining as they are.

A NARCISSISM OF EMPOWERMENT

We are currently torso-deep in the era of the selfie, with no end in sight. I have been taking self-portrait images since my teens; I know how these things operate. Perhaps practicing versus simply observing them has brought me to the following conclusions, but it has helped me sift through all the misplaced

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[13] http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/futurama-fry-not-sure-if

sensationalist metaphor and architecture of the Selfie World[14].

Here are two images. One is a screenshot taken from the browser version of popular image-sharing site Instagram. These can both be read as selfies, as they were photographed by the subject and posted to social media in some capacity.

The first image came from an Instagram account known as @*tear_net*.[15] Here, users from the Instagram community can submit images of themselves shedding a tear by way of Direct Message or using the hashtag #tearnet. The image is usually captioned by the cause of the crying and the comments are written by onlookers showing their support. In this case, the image-taker was robbed by someone with whom she was intimate, her face appears to be lit by the fluorescent light of a computer screen, which leads the viewer to think that this image was taken by a

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[14] Not to be confused with Manovich's *Selfie City*. To view the project, you can visit http://selfiecity.net. This work used Amazon's Mechanical Turk to select 1000 selfie images taken and posted to Instagram from five cities. This data collection is flawed from the start because one can easily geotag themselves on Instagram to a false location. The only true indicators of geographic presence are landmarks, and even those can be added by using image editing software. Moreover, the mechanical turk workers were focusing on whether the images fit the criteria of the "single selfie" so it is doubtful that they even questioned the validity of the geotag in the first place. Also, consider the process in collecting images with the hashtag #selfie. Only a handful of users use hashtags because that is how they are prompted to use the platform. Think about the stream of images that could be collected had they been pulled based on composition. The visualization was also nothing to write home about. It was like a less whimsical still image version of a Natalie Bookchin video. Finally, the front page boasts that their "Rich media visualizations...assemble thousands of photos to reveal interesting patterns." Looking at these visualizations I am not convinced that they reveal anything, it could be that they simply invent these patterns in a visually cohesive, tasteful way.

[15] https://www.instagram.com/tear_net/

webcam rather than a cellphone. The composition begs several questions, in fact, a multitude of these images have been staged in a similar way, unless everyone who cries assumes an air of serenity or composure, though there are times I've seen individuals sobbing and the subject is oftentimes more grotesque. Also, rather than reflecting on the event in question, the photographer/self-mediator immediately documents the moment to rise to the top of the pile of this sadness platform.

I was approached by the creator of this account, because she knew I was interested in selfies, but without the understanding that my views of the object were concerned with its role as a pocket-sized simulacrum. I followed it closely and my theories about the future of this account came true; the two loudest political sides quickly stated their views on the subject, which is critical during the hyper-reactive phase of a social media account or web phenomenon. By hyper-reactivity, I mean the instantaneous proclamation of attitudes unique to users of digital social media. This can be in the form of a short comment, or a lengthy *thinkpiece* - an accelerated version of an op-ed column in which users can share their support of a cause or attitude without writing it themselves. SIMILE: It's like the cell division of several million media theorists basing an entire film on the opening credit sequence. Writing empty threats to "kick one's ass," as seen in the screenshot above, is totally symptomatic of this culture that bases behavior on a single image captioned by a line of text. On the other side of the reaction spectrum, ViceNewsCorp fashion column i-D published a *thinkpiece*[16] interview on @tear_net which presents the popular

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[16] Bourke, Hilary. "tear_net and the value of the crying selfies." i-D. 4 May 2017. Web. 20 May 2017.

attitude on the concept of *narcissism* (rather than the clinical or scholarly definition of it) and the lauding of the behavior associated with this concept. It is as though the intent of articles like this is to affirm one's right to express one's self in a particular way, and that the main evidence for this is through amassing several images or testimony that appear to be similar. If one were to even glance at a text like Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism*, McLuhan's *The Gadget Lover*[17] or Ovid's *Narcissus and Echo*[18] one would see how disconnected the condition of narcissism is from these images in the first place. The online phenomenon known as Jennicam,[19] received almost identical pseudo-psychological media attention as its performer, Jennifer Ringley was often described as an exhibitionist. Lasch writes,

> Theoretical precision about narcissism is important not only because the idea is so readily susceptible to moralistic inflation but because the practice of equating narcissism with everything selfish and disagreeable militates against historical specificity...For these critics, narcissism remains at its loosest a synonym for selfishness and at its most precise a metaphor, and nothing more, that describes the state of mind in which the world appears as a mirror of the self[20]

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[17] McLuhan, Marshall. "The Gadget Lover or Narcissus as Narcosis" from *Understanding Media*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1964.

[18] Ovid. Metamorphoses. New York: Penguin. 2004.

[19] Burgin, Victor. "Jenni's Room: Exhibitionism and Solitude," Critical Inquiry 27 (Fall 2000).

[20] Pp. 32-33 Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism*. This book creates a disturbing and comprehensive composite image of a narcissist in the psychological sense. This term has been relegated to describe individuals, mostly young girls who display defiant exhibitionism coupled with materialist conformity. The Young-Girl is a problematic structure that often gets obscured when describing isolated incidents of materialist behavior. Since Tiqqun claims the Young-Girl to be genderless, it could be riffing on the satirical materialist-conformist entity that Madonna sings about.

McLuhan uses the Narcissus myth as a metaphor to the disconnect between a human and a piece of media. In the tale, Narcissus fails to recognize his own reflection and perishes. Narcissus falls in love with his reflection because he assumes the piece of media (the arrangement of light on the surface of a pool of water) to be an entity outside of himself rather than his actual self. If we were to describe a selfie as narcissistic in this context, we would be saying that the relationship of the selfie with the selfie-taker and their network serves a narcotic confusion of one's holistic being to one depicted in the form of an image or the corpus of their virtual presence. To complicate the metaphor, Ovid writes about the unrequited love the nymph Echo has for Narcissus. She has been used as a comparative device for the bubble-like properties of social media. Could it be that the Echo in our selfie myth is represented by the repetitious positive or negative reinforcement of the selfie network?

The second image is a selfie taken by self-proclaimed sociopath, white supremacist and mass-murder Dylann Roof[21]. The photograph was posted on his Facebook account, featuring Roof as the central figure of the image, holding a Confederate Flag in one hand and a handgun in the other. The flag is a symbol of a political and racial ideology, the gun is a symbol of power, masculinity and destruction. What I find most interesting is Roof's incorporation of the flowers. Some of them appear to be recently purchased from a nursery. The planters are arranged in a non-haphazard way reminiscent of imagined decadence depicted in 20th century

For more information, please check out Tiqqun's *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*. Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e). 2012.
[21]Blinder, Alan and Kevin Sack. "Dylann Roof Found Guilty in Charleston Church Massacre." The New York Times. 15. Dec. 2016: Web. 19. Jun. 2017.

propaganda posters. Perhaps the choice of using flowers was a subconscious signal to Roof's fertility rather than his taste in decorum.

Crying selfies like the @tear_net image above have been written about as vehicles of empowerment. Yet in what ways do these images empower? When faced with a documentation of sadness, wouldn't one strive to distance themselves to the other side of the emotional spectrum (happiness or joy) rather than wallowing in the sadness cycle? But maybe this is a case of being an observer instead of a practitioner. Perhaps it is sharing a selfie bearing an intimate expression to a nameless, faceless digital entity that removes the social stigma of sadness.

If we look at the Roof image once more, are we seeing a confused individual or are we looking at an image object - one that is so personally empowering that it could prompt its subject (Roof) to murder nine people in a church? Though news media tends to isolate these before-the-fact self-portrait images of domestic terrorists (Roof isn't a pioneer, the previous generation wrote manifestos while this one couples them with images) when they are publishing their story, it is important to note that there is probably an image bank that this picture has been selected from. Inside this image bank is a digital contact sheet of selfie images from which the poster selected what they felt was the most visually and emotionally resonant image and made it public. Among the debris of the rejected images was the true Echo, the affirming voice of so-called empowerment. Additionally, it is suggested that the online structures Roof inhabited led him to draw these conclusions about race. Instead of

announcing the flaws in their data collection and implementation to their users, platforms such as Facebook[22] and Google[23] assert they are serving the greater good.

To summarize, a selfie is neither inherently narcissistic nor is it empowering. The online environment that the selfie inhabits ultimately dictates its purpose.

The Mirror Painter

The following is a description of the works I exhibited in the Digital Arts Research Center for the practice portion of my MFA program. It was on display from April 27th, 2017 through May 3rd of the same year. The piece entitled *The This: Artifice + Superfice: Two Scoops of Banality, A Collection* was separated into a series of four artworks spread around different areas of the building. Since I was mainly exposed to more traditional white wall gallery installation previously, doing this successfully was quite the task -- especially in the setting of a group exhibition where each artist's' practice differed radically from the others. *Artifice + Superfice* is a commentary on the symbiosis of a simulacrum with its skin. "Superfice" is an extinct word survived by superficial, a word commonly associated with individuals displaying narcissistic (the contemporary pop cultural meaning) or vapid behaviors - essentially those lacking empathic depth. I noticed a few trends and tropes on social media platforms I have been frequenting for the past decade or so that mirrored these behaviors. Each of the four projects references these tropes in one way or another,

[22]Stockman, Farah. "Dylann Roof's Black Facebook Friends." The Boston Globe. 18 Jun. 2016: Web. 11 May. 2017.

[23] Hersher, Rebecca. "What Happened When Dylann Roof Asked Google for Information About Race?" NPR. 10 Jan. 2017: Web. 11 May 2017.

turning the current alarmist societal attitudes reacting to these structures into absurdist parodies.

PROJECT ONE: ZUX

"ZUX" 24"x 32" gouache on Arches Hot Press, 2016

When one lives inside of the filter-bubble that manufactured the social media filter bubble it's difficult to understand its impacts. I was invited to participate in a group exhibition entitled *The California Imaginary* in the autumn of 2016. I wanted to situate myself between the two prominent regions that "California" conjures; Los Angeles and San Francisco and all the stereotypes that these powerhouses create. Though the exhibition primarily displayed new media works, my contribution was a simple gouache on Arches watercolor paper. This painting would be displayed months later at the thesis show under the title of *ZUX*.

ZUX can be read as a Neo-California Funk-reminiscent caricature painting of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg. According the way he postures himself on various media platforms, he is mostly praised by Silicon Valley and benevolent capitalist circles as an innovator. In this painting, he is depicted cradling a blow-up doll bearing the likeness of Myspace.com celebrity Tila Tequila. Tequila's career peaked as she experimented with appearances on reality television and a record deal. Lately, she has sided herself with the current Alt-Right Movement[24] calling for the Asian community to help revive the white race. When I was developing this aspect of the composition I was thinking about the bag of wind that was gifted to Odysseus in the great epic. It is figures like Tequila with the qualities of the strange attractor that propel these bizarre ideologies and send culture away from resolving these issues. There's also a doubling with the presence of a fetish object that can be re-inflated on a whim.

To the left of Zuckerberg and Tequila is a small, roughly 3x3 inch red, yellow, blue tangle of figures. I diluted the paint to create the effect known as subtractive color. The primary colors, once overlapped create the secondaries, orange, violet, green. The chosen references for this image were these:
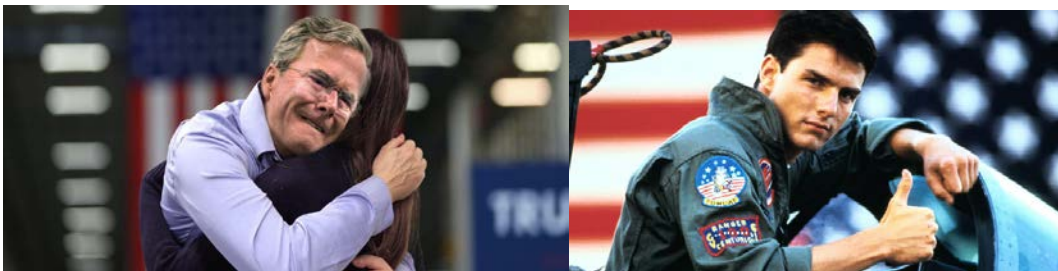
[24] Caldwell, Christopher. "What the Alt-Right Really Means." The New York Times. 2 Dec 2016. Web. 20 Jun 2017.

In 2016 Jeb Bush, brother of George W. Bush and son of George H. W. Bush, attempted to receive the Republican Party nomination for presidency. Perhaps voters frowned on the concept of nepotism in the White House (LOL), or maybe the RNC envisioned an America without a Bush. While on the campaign trail, Jeb gave the left-leaning American audience the schadenfreude they desire with moments such as the time he directed his audience to "please clap"[25] after he delivered a speech. The selected image shows Bush embracing a supporter around the time when he bowed out of the race. This image and others like it depicting a weakened GOP circulated around my social media networks quite a bit. The images were often coupled with text expressing relief that Hillary Clinton was nearing victory. I selected the image on the right because of its compositional similarities with the Bush image. Not only does *Top Gun* Cruise's posture echo Jeb's, but both figures communicate similar ideals of United States military superiority. By combining them in this fashion I aimed to illustrate this fading of old GOP ideals as they are erased by the new technologies created and facilitated by figures such as Zuckerberg.

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[25] "Jeb Bush: 'please clap,'" YouTube Video, 00:33, posted by "smurfparty," 3 Feb 2016.

PROJECT TWO: *A RETURN TO TALKIES*

Detail of *"A Return to Talkies: Elevator Edition"* 5'41" Sound Installation with plastic flags

I found myself spending an unhealthy amount of time looking at the Internet, mostly my social media accounts - it was the first thing I looked at when I woke up and the last thing I looked at before I fell asleep. I had the whole range of human emotions at my fingertips. Yet, I began to notice patterns of behavior, especially on my Facebook newsfeed, following the presidential election of 2016 - the same *thinkpieces* were being posted by multiple people and the conversations taking place in the comments sections were almost identical. It seemed like once a week, the world was experiencing a new crisis and it was everyone's job on my newsfeed to take sides on an issue immediately and post about it. My thoughts on this method of online participation parallel with Marx (Groucho) as "I would never want to belong to a club that would have someone like me as a member." As the technology of the cinema improved in the early 20th Century, motion pictures that were once silent were given a voice, hence the term "talkies." By reading posts found on my Facebook newsfeed

aloud, I capture potential motivating factors of writing a post and what I assume my

online friends to be like. The piece was installed in the stairwell directly below the

ZUX painting and inside the elevator of the Digital Art Research Center at UC Santa

Cruz. I selected these locations because of the anti-social behavior associated with

them. This stairwell is poorly lit, and is a good place to hide from classmates and

check one's phone or take a selfie. Installing the piece in the elevator was also a

success; it kept the viewer in an enclosed space for ten to twenty-five seconds and

that is more than enough time to understand the content.

PROJECT THREE: *POST-MEDIA ROLEPLAY*

Installation view of *"Post-Media Roleplay,"* 2nd Floor, DARC, UC Santa Cruz

An issue that social media networks, mainly Facebook and Twitter, have

faced over the past few years has been the mass distribution of *fake news*. When I

first started using the Internet, I learned two things: one, don't tell strangers your

name and where you live and two, always check your sources. Since creating

professional-looking websites has never been easier and since there is always a need

for new content, clicking the share button is a lot faster than fact-checking.[26] In a

project entitled *Post-Media Roleplay*, I created a random phrase generator in

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[26] Biersdorfer, J.D. "When You See Something (Fake) Say Something" The New York Times. 29 May 2017. Web: 19 Jun 2017.

Processing and selected buzzwords that mirrored the current cultural climate of 2016-

2017 United States. When I ran the sketch, it looked like this:
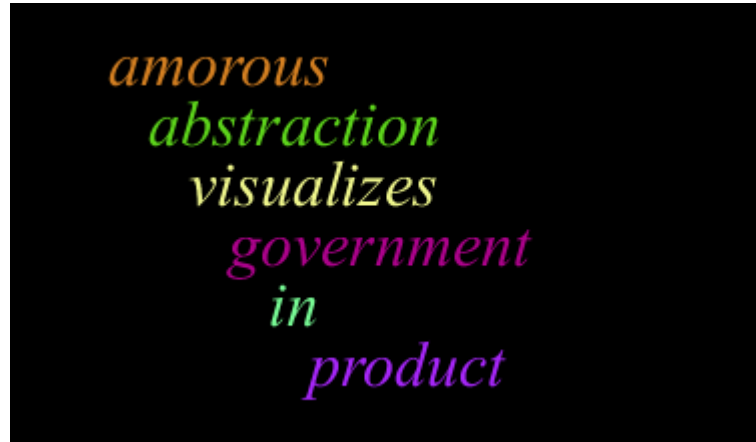
My goal was for the phrases to be as abstract, over-the-top and sensationalist

as possible. It is the clickbait headline that stands out from the baby photos and "new

job, so excited" posts that saturate our newsfeeds. But of course, there is a formula to

titillating news headlines too. The generated phrases served as a basis or script for the

actual piece and the only trace of them in the final product was their presence as titles

for the images. Twenty digital collage images measuring approximately 12"x15"

combined self-portrait images of myself, license-free stock images, clip art and a few

digital illustrations reacting to the generated headlines. The self-portrait images were

taken in a few hours with a remote shutter release on my mobile device. The final

product was printed out on glossy photo paper and framed behind inexpensive

plexiglass. Here are two of the collages:
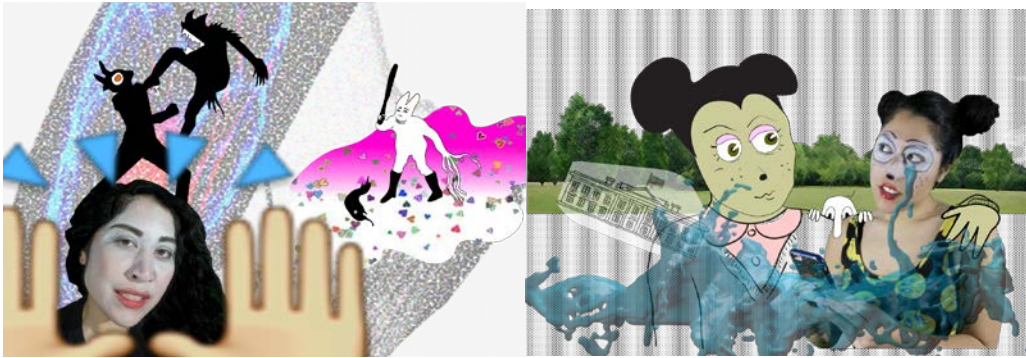
The image on the left is *Emblematic Catastrophe Messages Freedom into Illusions.* The image on the right is entitled *Extremist Catastrophe Deletes Government Behind Boomer.* As mentioned earlier, one of the themes of this project is the notion of invented news. Through simply giving these images titles and including symbols that associate slightly with the text, I can create a story out of nothing rather quickly. The same can be said with posting and sharing content online. It is important to note that the original image files in this collection of images were semi-transparent PNGs[27] which did not translate into print and sometimes gets lost posting to platforms online. Though we create content at the instant to be consumed in the moment, the content is far from simple.

PROJECT FOUR: *Cel Division*

I was in the laundromat doing my laundry and thought about all the online profiles that I've made. My first accounts were on Yahoo! Games and Battle.net. I would make small talk with the people I was playing with on these platforms and aside from looking at stats or maintaining a high ladder ranking on the popular strategy game StarCraft, I didn't find myself constantly logging in and out. Once I


[27] http://www.libpng.org/pub/png/

starting using Myspace.com, the way I interacted with others drastically changed, my time spent online skyrocketed. I still have a Myspace profile and I'll sign in once and awhile but none of my history on there is visible since it became a site for musicians. I started to write a story about an online profile, how it was born, its relationship to the user who created it and what happened to it when it was abandoned by the user. This story served as the basis for the video entitled *Cel Division*. The name *Cel Division* is a combination of the process of cellular mitosis and the pieces that make up a cartoon, the cels.

Act One: *Courtship Rituals in Self- Fashioning*

In the early days of online social media, one received a bit of a rush when signing up for an account. Filling out the little boxes, listing one's interests and hobbies was a thrill. You could exaggerate as much as you wanted, for there's no real way for someone to verify unless perhaps you've claimed to reach K2's summit a few times. Crafting an "about me" section was a time of personal reflection and a way to show potential online friends how creative or interesting one was. In the act one sequence in *Cel Division* I wanted to show the strange relationship one has with one's profile during the process of profile creation. I paired The Ronettes "Be My Baby"[28] with this sequence because this process resembles the courtship resonant with the lyrics. In the case of the video, the three characters resemble a whole, urging the user to take ownership of them giving them authenticity or some claim to reality. Each

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[28] Spector, Phil. "Be My Baby" Performed by the Ronettes. Phillies Records 1963.

character in the video (Dr. Mousey, Flag Girl, Unicorn Frappuccino)[29] represents a

visual color palette found in my collected works rather than an actual online persona

of mine. The exquisite cadaver presentation is not only a call to the famous parlor

game but also represents a collective assemblage of tropes on social media sites. The

look and definitive style of an individual's personal branding online can be so

uniform, that it is impossible to discern a performance from the performer's reality.
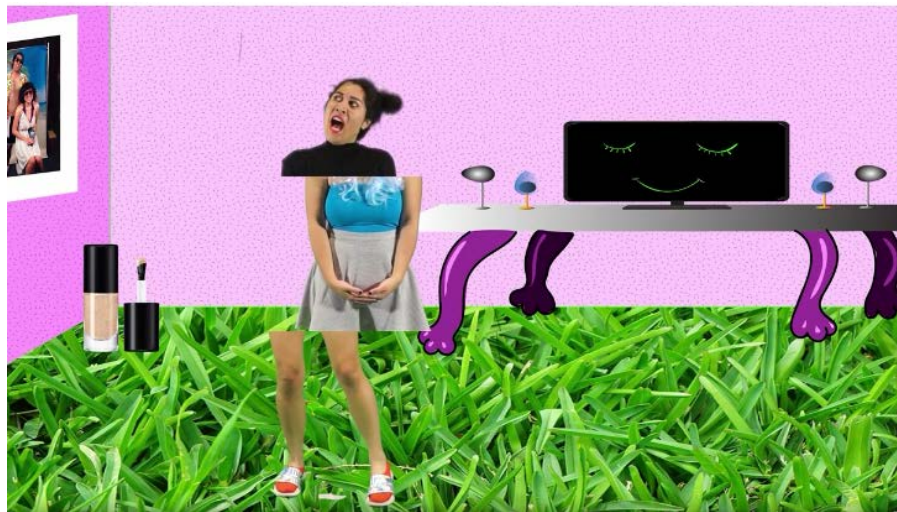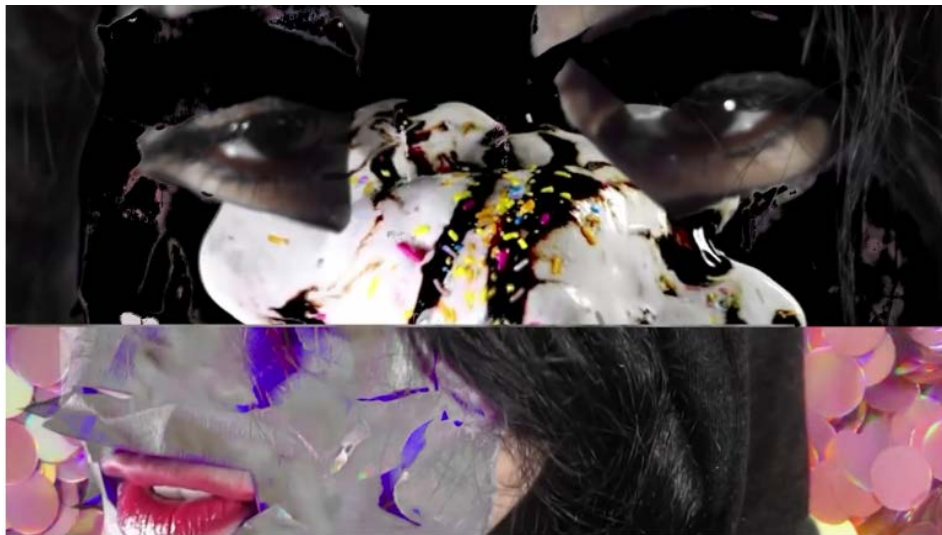

Still from *Act One of Cel Division*

Act Two: *Mechanizations of Control*

The micro-boosts/ego-rushes continued with notifications of new messages

and comments from other users specifically addressed to you. For me, this primed me

for the low-level anxiety of staying connected and logging in repeatedly to my social

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[29] Part of the costume for Flag Girl came from A Return to Talkies' installation and the Unicorn Frappuccino was a social media event the same week this video was shot.
https://www.starbucks.com/menu/drinks/frappuccino-blended-beverages/unicorn-frappuccino-blended-creme

media accounts.[30] I covered my face in blue painters' tape, save for my eyes and lips to key-out my skin tone and replace it with other textures.

To make the scenario more romantic, I selected Frank Sinatra's "I've Got You Under My Skin"[31] for this sequence. The lyrics of the song describe the narrator's unrequited love. In the video sequence, it is unclear whether the online profile or the person using the computer shares Sinatra's sentiment; perhaps it's a little bit of both. Since the profile is made of components from a perceived reality, it does have reality embedded in its surface. On the other hand, the online profile represents a reality isolated, exaggerated and amplified, and the relationship the online profile has with the real-life person it represents.
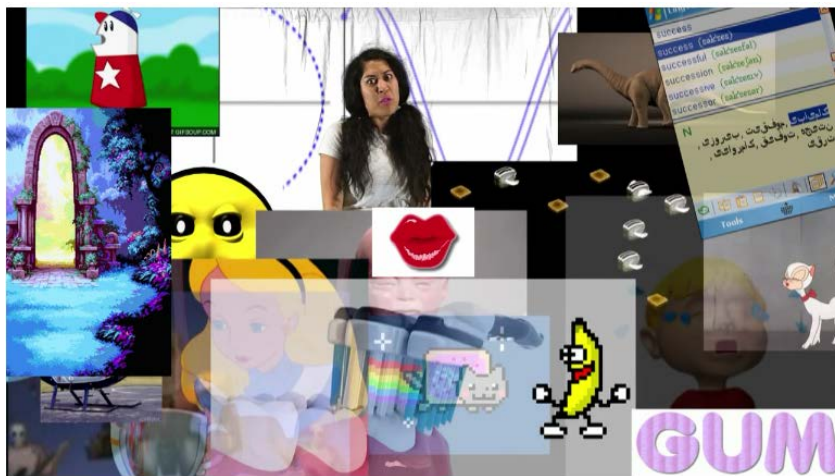

Still from *Act Two of Cel Division*

Act Three: *Abandon + Absorption*

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[30]Gupta, Aarti. "Tips to Get Over Your FoMo, or Fear of Missing Out. Anxiety and Depression Association of America. Blogpost. Web. 17 Jun 2017.

[31] Porter, Cole. "I've Got You Under My Skin." Performed by Frank Sinatra. Capitol. 1956.

This part of the video describes what happens to an online entity when its human-user stops compulsively logging in. I selected a series of GIF images from various websites; some being generic, non-descript animated emoticons and others from flash animations[32] popular in early Web 2.0. I noticed that on Twitter.com, if you hadn't logged on in a few months, your account would get taken over by spambots that will tweet links to various porn sites and fraudulent online sweepstakes. This only gets corrected if you log back in. The song I selected for this segment of the video is Bobby Darin's "Splish Splash."[33] Darin's narrator attempts to take a bath and is interrupted by a party going on in the living room, the members of the party being fictitious characters from other songs such as "Lollipop"[34] and "Miss Molly."[35] Like these characters, the memes our online personae interact with fade into obscurity once the feedback loop between user and profile becomes severed.

Still from *Act Three of Cel Division*

[32] http://peanutbutterjellytime.net/
[33] Darin, Bobby. "Splish Splash." Atco. 1958.
[34] Dixson, Julius and Beverly Ross. "Lollipop" Performed by The Chordettes. RCA. 1958
[35] Marascalco, John and Robert "Bumps" Blackwell. "Good Golly, Miss Molly." Performed by Little Richard. Specialty. 1958.

Conclusion

In the past thirty years, there has been a great shift in how self-portraits are viewed. Though the content of self-portraits remains the same, the images themselves have moved from galleries to social media platforms. Rather than critiquing these objects for their formal/compositional qualities, popular culture has described selfies as narcissistic or empowering. These arguments are simply incorrect. By creating a split like this, it only gives a user two options of acceptable behavior to choose from. The social media profile is a media object that blurs the line between the artificial and the real. Since it would be impossible to translate one's self to fit in the profile parameters of Facebook, why should we take the information that's posted on the platform so seriously? It would be more worthwhile to hold studies on how an individual's use of these platforms impacts their relationships and friendships in real life and how one would compare their online self with their actual self.

It is also difficult to make adequate observations about art that inhabit social media if those critiquing the work aren't entirely familiar with the platform. It's possibly the failure to participate in these heavily participatory systems that most of the analyses performed on selfie takers has been psychological or sociological. That isn't to say that there is no psychological basis for studying online behavior as, like most fads, (think Tamagotchi or cleanse dieting), social media thrives on continuous and habitual use to fill some void (loneliness, boredom, body image issue). What is problematic is that the commentary of these systems is a neatly packaged explanation for a phenomenon which doubles as a promotion for continued use of the media product. There are a few artists out there who try to comment on the social media, and

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yet, their work comes under the same scrutiny as any other post that shows up on their network. I anticipate that once inauthentic social media behavior becomes the norm, it will be very clear who is making art versus simply trying to get attention. If this occurs, personae will flood social media, making it difficult to pinpoint user interests. There are still places in this virtual world to explore for artists; rather than taking information arranged by the social media filter bubble as truth, they should identify things that contradict it.

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Barron, Benjamin. "Richard Prince, Audrey Wollen, and the Sad Girl Theory."
Vice/i-D: 2015. Web
Richard Prince called into question what constitutes image rights on public online platforms. Unfortunately, he appropriated the wrong work. It is rare that an artist will take the time to sift through user agreements, though there are most likely clauses pertaining to image ownership located in these documents.

Barthes, Roland. *Image, Music, Text*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1988.

Baudelaire, Charles, and Jonathan Mayne. The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays.
London: Phaidon, 1995. Print.
Baudelaire's essay on painter Constantin Guys documents the shift in capturing the ephemeral and the everyday in painting. This sentiment is shared with contemporary selfie posts, as they often highlight mundane, passing moments

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations*. New York: semiotext(e), 1983. Print.

Baudrillard, Jean. *The System of Objects*. London: Verso, 1996. Print.

As of late there has been much nonsense talk of western society living in a computer simulation. it's important to note that this is derived from the fantastic fever dream film conjured by the 'Wachowski Starship' (The Matrix, 1999) - a series which Baudrillard claimed interpreted his theories incorrectly. The online simulations in which we inhabit are fantastic but it is difficult to discern the artificial realities we've adopted and constructed as we craft our text posts and dishevel our hairdos. We are provided the opportunity of pulling away from these scenarios if we understand that social media is by no means a reflection of reality, but a hyperreal environment which we confront our desires and fears.

'The System of Objects' is a text that is not really cited too much in the DANM curriculum but provides great insight into Baudrillard's later works. it informs the flow of interest in visual trends in the web anachronistic to the web aesthetics of previous eras. 'The System' creates a framework for the different types of physical space and similar frameworks can be applied to social media systems

Baudrillard, Jean. *The Conspiracy of Art*. New York: semiotext(e), 2005.

Baudrillard, Jean. *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*. London: Verso, 2012.

Benjamin, Walter, Hannah Arendt, and Harry Zohn. *Illuminations*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968. Print.

> There is still much room to adapt "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" into discourse regarding what is deemed art in the post-digital and post-contemporary era (right now).

Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: Leses Du Réel, 2002. Print.

Bourriaud, Nicolas. *The Exform*. Trans. Butler Erik. London: Verso, 2016. Print.

> Bourriaud's theories tend to announce and declare a new media work's grand entrance into contemporary art. His writings will be a focus on speculating the potentials of fine art as the lines between traditional, craft and new media continue to blur.

boyd, danah. "White Flight in Networked Publics? How Race and Class Shaped American Teen Engagement with Myspace and Facebook." In Race After the Internet (eds. Lisa Nakamura and Peter a Chow-White). Routledge, pp. 203-222. 2011. Web. 19 Jun 2017.

Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong, "Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media" Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016. Kindle Edition.

> Chun draws connection between crisis and spectacle and technology's cyclical struggle for newness and social media's Sisyphean struggle for *newness*. This work also outlines the notion of the social media filter bubble.

Collins, Suzanne, "The Hunger Games" New York: Scholastic Press, 2008. Print.

> Collins simulates a wonderfully dystopian society as a cautionary tale against placing too much faith in the celebrity and societal fantasies revolving around technological iterations of 'the real.' Also, a half-baked speculative narrative set on the cusp of a revolution

Debord, Guy, "The Society of the Spectacle" New York: Zone, 1994. Kindle Edition.

> Debord's essay should be used as a step before Baudrillard's theory as the spectacle is something expected on the daily in contemporary society as we scroll through news sites and social media. In the system of selfies proposed in the art project the spectacle will interplay with the banal as a commentary that the two are potentially interchangeable.

Droitcour, Brian, "The Object Whisperer: Shana Moulton's Whispering Pines" Rhizome, 2010. Web.

Joyce, James, "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man"

> This novel calls attention to the pitfalls of the artist who aligns oneself with fanaticism - a precursor to artistic movements which flirt with political movements and wither.

McLuhan, Herbert Marshall, "The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man" New York: The Vanguard Press, 1951. Print.

> The anecdote of the dying soldier clutching the ad clipping of Betty Grable pairs well with online interaction especially in instances where a fan has a one-sided conversation with a celebrity's twitter account.

> McLuhan, Marshall. "Understanding Media." New York: McGraw Hill, 1964. Print.

Murray, Derek Conrad, "Notes to self: the visual culture of selfies in the age of social media" Consumption, Markets & Culture, 18, no. 6, (2015): 490-516

Ovid. "Metamorphoses: A New Verse Translation." New York: Penguin, 2004. Print. This book is a one-stop-shop for all the Greco-Roman mythos metaphors. I looked at Ovid's interpretation of the *Narcissus and Echo* tale to draw my own conclusions about instances of online narcissism.

Peraica, Ana. "The Culture of the Selfie: Self-Representation in Contemporary Visual Culture" Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2017. Print.

Phillips, Sarah. "A Brief History of Facebook." The Guardian, 2007. Web.

Rembrandt. Self-portrait in a Cap, with Eyes Wide Open Engraving, 1630.

Stephenson, Neal. "Snow Crash" New York: Bantam Books, 1992. Kindle Edition.

Stephenson's description of the avatars inhabiting the online cityscape within the novel can be compared closely with current materialist interests in online self-fashioning.

Scott, Tony. *Top Gun*. Paramount Pictures, 1986. Film

Tifentale, Alise and Lev Manovich, "Selfiecity: Exploring Photography and Self-Fashioning in Social Media"
An example of an attempt to quantify quality in the realm of selfies. Riddled with grammatical errors and flawed facial recognition software and statistical systems and a refusal to note geographical occurrences within the time the pool of selfie images were collected, "Selfiecity" is an instance of the spectacular and invisible space race of misconstrued mass media's desire to reflect such misconceptions in a concrete fashion. In other words, how can we draw conclusions about selfies if we are reducing them to a specific type of image, i.e. composition or pose and setting strict boundaries between the selfie taker and the observer? The selfie has revived the notion of the photo album and pedestrian art! Can someone make a new media object that tells this story, or will theorists and artists continue to talk about the extraction of cultural capital by further exploiting and appropriating the content of others?

Titlow, John Paul. "#Me: Instagram Narcissism and the Scourge of the Selfie." Readwrite Blog, published Jan 31, 2013. Web.

Tunnicliffe, Ava. "Artist Audrey Wollen on the Power of Sadness, Sad Girl Theory, Explained." Nylon 20 July 2015. Print.

Virilio, Paul. "The Administration of Fear." Cambridge, MA: semiotext(e), 2012.

Warfield, Katie. "Digital Subjectivities and Selfies: The Model, the Self-Conscious Thespian, and the #realme." 2015. Print.