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Self-Obscured: Selfies, Neoliberalism, and the Violence of Cute

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ABSTRACT

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As social relations increasingly take on the market logic of neoliberalism, the question of "reality" becomes increasingly passé. There is no longer a "real," nor a "truth," only markets. These "face-tuned" selfies become advertisements; but who or what is the product?

Vulnerability and self-image inform this series of oil paintings, particularly those of women. Social media has capitalized on and commodified these experiences, and my work establishes a dialogue between the "selfie" and its art historical forebear, the idealized female portrait. The latest trend in a long series of image editing tools is a suite of apps intended for "face tuning," the resultant images embodying a discordant ambiguity— they're not meant to

represent “reality,” nor are they meant to be a conspicuous departure from it. The accumulation of multiple portraits, each vaguely similar with homogenized features, subdued backgrounds, and distant gazes, accentuates this dissonance.

This phenomenon transforms users into “aesthetic entrepreneurs,” both boss and worker, brand manager and product alike, under this new social media market paradigm. My work examines the rise of “nano-surveillance” of self-image and its resulting self-exploitation specific to women; idealized beauty standards are imposed through the use of filters, air-brushed skin, plumped lips, enlarged eyes, and slimmed features. I translate these facets of the “tuned” selfie into larger-than-life paintings; the square format, grid-like installation, and frustratingly similar facial features mimic the feed found on social media platforms, while the repetition of flat paintwork, hard edges, and a muted palette represent the de-individualizing of aesthetic identity.

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the ways the internet has changed the dynamics of American social life, but rarely are these analyses grounded in any material critique of the base political economy atop which the cultural superstructure resides. Further, feminist analysis and critiques of the late-capitalist period are often not economic critiques, nor do they attempt to deconstruct the dominant ideology along material lines. There have been, however, recent attempts to reintroduce the language of class relations back into the feminist discourse— e.g., talk of "emotional" labor — but such terminology is invoked metaphorically, and typically used in a pop-psychological context to describe individual interpersonal relationships. So-called "aesthetic labor," on the other hand, is a concept grounded in a material analysis of the neoliberal economic order— it is not a purely cultural signifier.

By examining 21st-century, neoliberal ideology, and by consciously locating a feminist critique of online "influencer" culture within an actual economic framework, we are able to more accurately examine the intersection of gender, class, power, politics, and art inherent in the "content" generated by online entrepreneurs as participants in the increasingly atomized "gig economy." Nearly all online interactions today are monetized; an examination or critique of digital content is incomplete if not subject to an economic analysis in tandem with a cultural and feminist reading of "face-tuned" "selfies"— source material for the body of new work accompanying this paper. Through an examination of the culture of narcissism resultant from the shift away from "reality" to "representation" via the age of mechanized image reproduction, we can examine "selfies" as a type of neoliberal portraiture, evocative of the loneliness and nihilism that encapsulates this era.

THE ECONOMY OF SELF

A. Neoliberal Entrepreneurship

In the temporally post-modern, late capitalist era, human relations increasingly begin to take on the logic of markets. Wondering, for example, if some person or experience is "worth your time," or, more broadly, to conceive of time as having a "worth" at all, and then measuring that "worth" (likely in monetary terms, however abstract) against an imagined personal (possibly material) gain or loss from having interacted with someone or having consumed a cultural product; this is a decidedly transactional, capitalistic conception of the human processes of socialization or cultural participation.

Yet the late capitalist political economy demands that we, its subjects, produce ourselves in this way; our time, our labor, indeed our very *selves* have market-determined values, and these values determine, or at least inform, how we behave, with whom or what we interact, what we consume and, most germane to the concerns of this paper, how we present ourselves in our daily lives, both on- and off-line. The post-Fordist conceptual framing of one's *self* as "brand" now permeates all human activity.

Increasingly, *actual* money, rather than, say, the fanciful and outdated concept of "*social* capital," features in our personal interactions: Every engagement between two or more people online[1] generates profit for, at the very least, the owner of the platform on which they're engaging. Interactions online are traditionally mediated by capital: 1. via the "rent" paid to intellectual property holders who initially developed the protocols by which the communication is technically possible; 2. via the access fees paid to telecommunications companies and hardware and software manufacturers that physically own and produce the infrastructure

[1] Or via text message or cellular phone call or…
[2] An "unboxing" video of Disney-themed Kinder surprise eggs by YouTube channel "FluffyJet Toys" has amassed more than 43 million views since its publication in Oct. 2012 ("12 Surprise Eggs et al.").

technologically necessary to get online; and 3. via the staggering amount of ad revenue generated by "the attention economy" in total, both in the production and consumption of "content." In traditional, Fordist capitalist terms, it could be said that these three aforementioned economic powers comprise the "means of production" commonly referred to as the internet. If the internet is the means of production, the online service— Facebook or Gmail or CNN.com— then, is the commodity; the digital denizen is simply the consumer. And so it was until the age of influencers.

Whereas, in the previous iteration of the attention economy ("1.0"), social-media engagement only generated actual ad dollars for platform owners and digital landlords (the aforementioned corporate entities that own the actual fiber-optic infrastructure and physical routing devices undergirding the internet), today, in attention economy "2.0," increasingly, users operate for themselves as *attention entrepreneurs*, earning actual, rather than "social," capital in exchange for consumption of their product, their digital "self."

Consider the popular YouTube genre of "unboxing videos," a genre of digital video wherein a YouTube personality dissembles the packaging of a popular product (tech novelties ['gadgets'], toys and pop cultural totems [eg., 'Funkopop' statuettes], one-off, artificially-scarce pairs of designer sneakers) whilst providing color commentary for a massive[2] audience. The videos generate revenue in the traditional ("1.0") ways; consumer attention is converted into ad revenue and split among corporate owners of the means of production, a traditional Fordist (or television industry) arrangement save for one brand-new element: the addition of the video's subject-object.

[2] An "unboxing" video of Disney-themed Kinder surprise eggs by YouTube channel "FluffyJet Toys" has amassed more than 43 million views since its publication in Oct. 2012 ("12 Surprise Eggs et al.").

Formerly, this person was an actor and was simply compensated for the market-value of their time, either as a flat fee or as a percentage of the entertainment product's overall revenue. This still adheres to an essentially "Fordist" division of labor: The actor is simply another member of the "assembly line" who exchanges labor for monetary compensation. Now, however, in the attention economy "2.0," roles become harder to define: In an "unboxing video," what is truly the "product"? Is it the physical "widget" being "unboxed": the Kinder egg or Nintendo Switch or Nike AirMax sneakers? Or, is the "product" the video itself, and if so, what about the *human* subject-object of the video, the one actually doing the "unboxing" and commentary? Further, should the unboxing video be considered an advertisement, even if it wasn't produced by or on behalf of the entity responsible for the widget being unboxed? What *exactly* is the commodity for sale in this new economy; is it different than the entity underwriting its production, and if so, how?

Infamously resistant to a singular, academic definition, the political-economic term *neoliberalism* nevertheless can be used, in this context, to describe this new economic arrangement wherein consumer and product seemingly merge. As Foucault notes in *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1979):

> The characteristic feature of the classical conception of *homo oeconomicus* is the partner of exchange and the theory of utility based on a problematic of needs. In neoliberalism— and it does not hide this; it proclaims it— there is also a theory of *homo oeconomicus*, but he is not at all a partner of exchange. *Homo Oeconomicus* is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself. This is true to the extent that, in practice, the stake in all neoliberal analyses in the replacement every time of *homo oeconomicus* as partner of exchange with a *homo oeconomicus* as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings (226).

Foucault's analysis, though dated, nevertheless begins to illuminate this core ideological reworking— inchoate at the time of the above lecture but fully formed in the social media age— of neoliberal subject as "personal entrepreneur" rather than (what Foucault calls "exchange partner," but) what Marx would call "worker"— the distinction being, in Marxist terms, whether one's "life activity" is evaluated by its use value (the value of something based on its utility) or its exchange value (the value of something as determined by its market value) (Marx 9). As such, the transition away from a traditional, twentieth century production of self as "worker" (wherein one's labor was something external to one's "self" and used toward the creation of a commodity to sell), to a twenty-first century *neoliberal* production of oneself as "entrepreneur" (wherein one's labor is used toward the production of one's "self" as the commodity being sold) finds the neoliberal subject unable to untangle his/her "personal life" from his/her exchange identity: they are one and the same.

Whether or not we actually earn our living as online personalities, we are nevertheless ideologically conditioned as neoliberal subjects to produce ourselves as entrepreneurs, either as the literal "director" of our own personal corporation or brand (as is the case with the various iterations of professional "influencers"), or as the producers of our own satisfaction as consumers.[3] Thus, in the "attention economy," to be either a producer or consumer of "content" is to produce oneself as foremost a digital enterpriser, either in the production and commodification of your "self," or in the production of your own pleasure. Both "productions" are entirely self-interested; one's "self" is a commodity either way.

[3] In the notes of the Foucault lecture, the text refers to Henri Lepage's discussion of economist Gary Becker in Lepage's *Tomorrow, Capitalism:* "In [Becker's] perspective the consumer not only consumes; he also produces. What does he produce? His own satisfaction" (163).

B. The 'Gig Economy'

The ideological shift from the production of self as "worker" to the production of self as "entrepreneur" has material ("real-world") implications too: an increasingly larger percentage of "millennial"-generation workers' income is now derived from "alternative work"— labor performed "on spec" or under contract status rather than as part of a traditional employer-employee relationship. A Deloitte study of U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data found that from 2003 to 2015, the percentage of millennial income received from "alternative work"[4] jumped from 57% in 2003 to 72% in 2015; the same study predicts 42 million "gig economy" workers by 2020, over a quarter of the American work force.[5] This transition away from full-time employment and toward independent, contract work is often couched in sentiments that frame independent work as being to the workers' benefit, as it allows them more freedom and autonomy than traditional employment; however, any serious look at the actual inner workings of the "gig economy" reveals that the arrangement overwhelmingly favors employers. A 2017 Center for American Progress report found that by transitioning to independent-contractor arrangements, a company can save up to 30 percent of its labor costs[6]. Another study found only half of all gig-economy contractors earned enough money to survive with independent work.[7] Independent-contractor work is low-paying, precarious, demeaning, and isolating— *this* is the type of "entrepreneurship" referred to by neoliberalism's reimagining of the global workforce as being comprised of atomized entrepreneurs rather than workers. Millennials, by and large, do not

[4] Income earned from independent-work, "gig economy" jobs such as Uber driver, Postmates delivery person, Amazon contractor, 'Fiverr' freelancer, etc.
[5] Monahan, pg. 5
[6] Walter, pg. 2
[7] Roose, par. 12.

"prefer" this arrangement to traditional full-time work: they are "gig economy" workers by necessity, not by preference.[8]

Today's neoliberal "entrepreneur" should therefore not be confused or conflated with the mythical American self-made, boost-straps hoisting, Horatio Alger creation— the "entrepreneur" designation is simply in reference to an increasingly fractured, powerless workforce. There is, however, a novel and curious caste system forming within the gig economy milieu. The bottom, similar to the traditional capitalist hierarchical structure, is occupied by those who contract their own labor, e.g., Uber drivers, TaskRabbit "taskers," Fiverr freelancers— this is, in Marxist terms, the gig-economy "proletariat." The new petite-bourgeoisie, however, is increasingly comprised of a new group of neoliberal entrepreneurs known as "influencers."

[8] "Yet for all of its app-enabled modernity, the gig economy resembles the early industrial age, where workers worked long hours in a piecemeal system, workplace safety was nonexistent, and there were few options for redress. Despite its focus on emerging technology—apps, smartphones, contactless payment systems and review systems—the sharing economy is truly a movement forward to the past" (Ravanelle 5).

CULTURAL COGS

A. "Influencers": The Economics of Narcissism

The new gig-economy petite-bourgeoisie do not sell their labor, *per se*— they are their own product. They are the Instagram models, video game "streamers," YouTube personalities, podcasters, and "vloggers" that function, loosely, as an ersatz media class amongst online "entrepreneurs." But what they create cannot be considered "culture"— at least not in the artistic or intellectual sense of the word. Their output— "selfies," "unboxing" videos, "vlogs," podcasts, video game streams— is commonly referred to, blandly, as "content": a type of cultural *product*, maybe, but not, as of yet anyway, even considered "low" or "pop" *culture*.

However, insofar as the neoliberal ideology is totalizing enough to reduce all human activity to economic arrangements, "content," at least for the interests of this paper, *can* be critiqued in cultural terms using cultural frameworks— in fact, according to postmodern theorists like Frederic Jameson, "content" fits within the confines of a term like "postmodern," because content, among other things, is reflective of "…The transformation of reality into images, the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents."[9] We can consider "content" as simultaneously both a cultural and economic product, as most "postmodern" art, by definition, is similarly situated in both categories.

"Content," though, differs from "art" in various ways, and for our purposes we can draw the following distinctions: first, "Content" is an economic product first, (perhaps) a cultural product second. Even the term "content" itself explicitly references commerciality, as the term is derived from "Sponsored Content," which is a label applied to advertising that has been intentionally designed to appear as editorial content. Often referred to as "native advertising" or

[9] Jameson, pg. 49.

"advertorial" (a portmanteau of "advertising" and "editorial"), the function of "sponsored content" is decidedly financial— a serious consideration of its value as "art" is just as appropriate in this instance as would be a serious consideration of the artistic value of liposuction advertising on the New York City Metro. Such advertising may in fact have value as a type of cultural "text," as we will discover; it does not, however, have value as "art," as its commercial genesis precludes it from possessing artistic value.

Influencer "content" is merely advertising for the influencer, whose digital "self" is the product: the content merely serves to drive more traffic and digital "engagement" to the influencer's monetized social media profiles. The larger the number of digital followers an influencer has, the more money their "content" can generate via ad revenue. There is a bit of a paradox inherent in the "influencer / content / ad venue" paradigm, however: "Content," by definition, depends on "revenue," which in turn depends on engagement. However, if there is no engagement nor revenue, is "content" still "content"? If an influencer posts content, but no one is around to "like" it, does it still generate revenue? (No.)

Thus, "content" without audience is simply narcissism: it is artless self-expression without an audience and without a purpose other than as a kind of digital mirror in which the would-be influencer sees themselves reflected. Christopher Lasch, in *The Culture of Narcissism*, defines the narcissist's motivation as such:

> Notwithstanding his occasional illusions of omnipotence, the narcissist depends on others to validate his self-esteem. He cannot live without an admiring audience. His apparent freedom from family ties and institutional constraints does not free him to stand alone or to glory in his individuality. On the contrary, it contributes to his insecurity, which he can overcome only by seeing his "grandiose self" reflected in the attentions of others, or by attaching himself to those who radiate celebrity, power, and charisma. For the narcissist, the world is a mirror, whereas the rugged individualist saw it as an empty wilderness to be shaped to his own design (33).

An "influencer" is, then, a narcissist who has monetized her narcissism, and, because all influencer "content" is centered on the influencer herself— her experiences, her opinions, her image— her "product," that is, the thing that is exchanged for money, is her digital "self." In this way, the "influencer" is probably the *most* neoliberal of all neoliberal subjects/entrepreneurs: she produces her own satisfaction *by* producing herself as a commodity.

B. Celebrity Worship

That the Instagram accounts with the most followers and unique views belong to celebrities shouldn't come as a surprise, although what is at least somewhat surprising is that of the top twenty most-followed Instagram accounts, not a single one belongs to an actor[10][11]— yesterday's pinnacle of fame and glamor, who typically rose to fame portraying someone else. Today's most popular celebrities are famous for portraying themselves. Though their professions range from "Footballer," to "musician," and "businesswoman," they are all known primarily as "personalities." Their output, with which millions of followers engage every day, can only be considered "content": it is overwhelmingly self-centered, and its purpose is promotional, not artistic or expressionistic. It is shallow and sentimental and disposable, like all other "content" of this kind.

The most popular content successfully mimics a "relationship"— the viewer is now privy to the candid, off-stage thoughts and feelings of her favorite pop star or footballer, and, perhaps most important, delights in seeing *herself* in the daily goings-on of these personalities and narcissistically projects herself into this "secret" world carefully curated for her consumption. This is narcissism monetized: the relationship between influencer and follower is a transactional,

[10] "List of Most-Followed Instagram Accounts," accessed March 09, 2020.
[11] Technically, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson (#4 on this list) first gained fame as a professional wrestler.

"attention economy" relationship, strictly mediated and motivated by capital, that is designed to feed both parties' psychic cravings for admiration, excess, and grandiosity. Lasch, in *The Culture of Narcissism,* first quotes American anthropologist Jules Henry, noting that, "Psychosis is the final outcome of all that is wrong with a culture,"[12] then illuminates the clear link between a society's political economy and the psychological issues plaguing its populace:

> Every age develops its own peculiar forms of pathology, which express in exaggerated form its underlying character structure. In Freud's time, hysteria and obsessional neurosis carried to extremes the personality traits associated with the capitalist order at an earlier stage in its development—acquisitiveness, fanatical devotion to work, and a fierce repression of sexuality. In our time… The growing prominence of "character disorders" seems to signify an underlying change in the organization of personality, from what has been called inner-direction to narcissism… The stimulation of infantile cravings by advertising, the usurpation of parental authority by the media… and the rationalization of inner life accompanied by the false promise of personal fulfillment, have created a new type of "social individual" (68).

In other words, whereas traditional, turn-of-the-century Freudian psychoanalysis concerned itself mainly with "hysteria" symptomatic of the *repression* of "personality" (e.g., one's "true" thoughts and feelings), today's psychic maladies emanate from an overabundance of it. This is, Lasch observes, at least partially attributable to a change in political economy, from early Fordist capitalism to the late, de-industrialized consumer capitalism that began to fully emerge in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As the privatization and commodification of every public good and relationship ("neoliberalism") gradually seeps into every facet of government and public life, so too does it seep into our individual, unconscious minds. A "market" approach to human relationships does not lead to psychologically fulfilling lives for neoliberal subjects—the narcissism inherent in both celebrity influencer (who derives pleasure from being admired)

[12] Lasch, pg. 58

and their followers (who derive pleasure from projecting themselves into the influencer's charmed life) is indicative of the erosion of authentic (non-mediated) social relations under neoliberal totality. The "celebrity influencer," as archetype, perfectly exemplifies the shallow narcissism of an era wherein individuals ideologically produce themselves first and foremost as entrepreneurs of their own satisfaction.

But the "celebrity" aspect of the "influencer" grift is not limited to people traditionally famous via television, music, and sports: most influencers are influential for being influencers—a kind of mind-bending 21st century koan that resists rational interpretation yet also is a perfect sign of the times. Simply defined, "influencers" are non-traditionally-famous people who nevertheless have amassed online followers and influence by cultivating and posting media related to their "lifestyles." Theirs is perhaps the purest distillation of what might be referred to as "the (neoliberal) spectacle"— an entire existence, on- and off-line, comprised of banal, insipid "content" narcissistically begging for "engagement." This type of "influencer" is the Jay Gatsby of the gig economy, the final perch of the ascendant American striver, version 2.0.

C. The (Neoliberal) Spectacle

French Marxist theorist Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* famously, presciently, described "the spectacle" as "…a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (10). It is:

> …both the result and the project of the dominant mode of production. It is not a mere decoration added to the real world. It is the very heart of this real society's unreality. In all of its particular manifestations—news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment—the spectacle represents the dominant model of life. It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choices that have already been made in the sphere of production and in the consumption implied by that production. In both form and content the spectacle serves as a total justification of the conditions and goals of the

> existing system. The spectacle also represents the constant presence of this justification since it monopolizes the majority of the time spent outside the production process (10).

The rise of the "influencer," then, portends a slightly updated, *neoliberal* spectacle; the difference is that, whereas Debord's societal hierarchy broadcasts top-down— that is, the owners of the means of production *also* own the means of media production and use their exclusive ownership of these means to propagandize either of their own interests in the form of news, advertising, entertainment— the *neoliberal* spectacle, on the other hand, finds its entrepreneur-subjects doing the propagandizing all by themselves, for theirs and their followers' narcissistic satisfaction. The neoliberal spectacle society still sees its personal relations mediated by images; the difference is that neoliberal influencers are not, in actuality, the bourgeoisie class— they simply play the upper class on the internet. Though they're certainly well-compensated (particularly when keeping in mind that the actual nature of their "job" involves having their photograph taken), they are not true *owners* of the means of the production, though they may very well produce themselves as "upper class." And, if the majority of their followers believe this to be true, well… isn't it?

OPTICS

A. "Post-Truth"

The 2016 election of Donald Trump to the American presidency seemed to many in the legacy media (television and newspaper journalists, mostly) as a reckoning: "facts," it began to dawn on them, are simply not "Facts" any longer— at least not to the near-majority[13] of the American electorate who knowingly voted for an unabashed liar. Though all Presidents in modern American history have been well-documented liars,[14] this was the American press' first encounter with a truly shameless liar who simply refused to ever back down, no matter how big and blatant the lie, nor how petty the truth it was meant to conceal. This, of course, was the attention-grabbing part of Trump's mendacity— the lying was often, strangely, both blatant and unnecessary— but this was hardly the watershed cultural moment it was made out to be. "Truth," since (at least) the dawn of the postmodern era, has been understood, at least by certain members of the intelligencia, to be ideological— socially constructed, "manufactured." What was new and odd about Trump's lies was the extent to which they were *not* ideological— these were the kind of lies Americans had already grown quite accustomed to via "reality" television, professional wrestling, and social media influencers. "Jerry, just remember," says *Seinfeld's* George Constanza, "…it's not a lie if *you* believe it" ("The Beard"). The same is true in the inverse: if you choose to believe it, then it's not a lie.

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[13] Trump famously eked out an electoral-college victory though Clinton won the popular tally by 2,868,686 votes— Trump received 46.1% of the vote to Clinton's 48.2% yet is still considered to have "won" the election; the veracity of even his electoral victory was suspect from the jump.

[14] Reagan, forced to admit not only his complicity in the Iran-Contra scandal, but also his prior lies about his complicity in Iran-Contra, "apologized" to the American people thusly: "A few months ago I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and my best intentions still tell me that is true, but the facts and the evidence tell me it is not"— still one of the best ex post facto non-denials in American political history ("I Take Full Responsibility For My Actions", para. 13).

Reality television "works" because it's quite obviously staged, but who cares—the viewer is still getting the narcissistic satisfaction of projecting her/himself into others' psychodrama; he or she is still vicariously experiencing the thrills of social transgression by watching adults behave like toddlers. In a sense, the reality television viewer is actually a much savvier consumer of media than the non-reality television viewer because s/he considers her/himself "in" on the joke of the medium: *everything* on TV is fake, including and especially the news.

The *real* rubes, reality-TV junkies might say, are the ones that haven't seemed to grasp this yet— they are the so-called "reality-based community,"[15] and their quaint dedication to the notion of "objective" (read: non-ideological) "truth" has, ironically, blinded them to the "real" political remaking of American media and culture. "Truth"— as an objective, empirical, reportable phenomenon located outside of ideology, in "reality"— has, like human social relations, morality, and culture before it, been now completely subsumed by capital. Journalist Chris Hedges, writing in *Empire of Illusion* about professional wrestling, observes how the world of professional wrestling, obviously, obnoxiously "fake" yet widely beloved, so aptly mirrors post-cold war, neoliberal American media and culture:

> City after city, night after night, packed arena after packed arena, the wrestlers play out a new, broken social narrative. No one has a fixed identify, not the way a Russian communist or an evil Iranian or an American patriot once had an intractable identity. Identities and morality shift with the wind. Established truths, mores, rules, and authenticity mean nothing. Good and evil mean nothing. The idea of permanent personalities and permanent values, as in the culture at large, has

[15] This phrase, first attributed to an unnamed senior advisor to president George W. Bush, was used derisively to describe members of the liberal intelligencia who hadn't yet been able to understand the new social, economic, and political order well underway by 2004: "The aide said that [reporters] were 'in what we call the reality-based community,' which he defined as people who 'believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.' I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. 'That's not the way the world really works anymore,' he continued. 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will -- we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do'" ("Faith, Certainty, and the Presidency of George W. Bush").

> evaporated. It is all about winning. It is all about personal pain, vendettas, hedonism, and fantasies of revenge, while inflicting pain on others. It is the cult of victimhood (31).

This neoliberal, narcissistic, nihilism reached its apotheosis with the election of Donald Trump, but its seeds were sown long ago. The remaking of the American citizen into the neoliberal entrepreneur begat a "culture of narcissism;" it begat this exact "culture of victimhood" in which aggrieved, white, petite-bourgeoisie[16] men (*and* women[17]) voted for a well-documented sexist, racist, and xenophobic liar. Liberals were aghast— polls, famously, had indicated a Clinton blow-out. But Trump voters don't care that Trump lies to them because everyone else lies to them, too— professional wrestling is way more fun when you embrace the unreality, or, in our previously discussed socio-economic terms, if you refuse to cede the production of your satisfaction to a "reality" that you do not control. You— the almighty neoliberal consumer— have every right to curate your world however you see fit. In fact, it is your patriotic duty as economic subject to do so. This is what the liberal pundits and media class could not understand after Trump won: "Truth," for decades, has simply been another consumer choice; Americans aren't "misinformed," they just prefer the lie.

B. The Image

American historian and former Librarian of Congress Daniel J. Boorstin published *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* in 1961— twenty years before Baudrillard's

[16] According to a Brookings Institute study of exit poll data, 2016 saw an increase of voters with incomes over $50k annually— up from 59% of the electorate in 2012 to 64% of the electorate in 2016. Trump won this voter group with 49% of the vote to Clinton's 47% ("A reality check…").
[17] Pew Research data indicates 47% of white women voted for Trump while 45% voted for Clinton ("An Examination of the 2016 Electorate").

Simulacra and Simulation[18] and a full fifty-five years before "Fake News" would enter the public lexicon. In *The Image*, Boorstin writes of "…a world where fantasy is more real than reality, where the image has more dignity than its original" (72). "Pseudo-events" are, according to Boorstin, events that are *not* spontaneous, planned "for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced," are not reducible to one clear interpretation, and are usually intended to be self-fulfilling prophecies (23). Bush landing on the USS *Abraham Lincoln* in a full flight suit beneath a "Mission Accomplished" banner; Trump descending the golden escalator to announce his candidacy for President— the Gulf War, famously, according to Baudrillard[19]: these are "pseudo-events," dreamt up by PR firms, masquerading as "news." Boorstin— like Baudrillard, Debord, Hedges, and many others after him— meticulously traces the rise of the pseudo-event to the turn of the century: the genesis of the mechanized reproduction of images. Nearly one hundred years before 24-hour cable news made pseudo-events a mainstay of American media, "Man's ability to make, preserve, transmit, and disseminate precise images— images of print, of men and landscapes and events, of the voices of men and mobs— now grew at a fantastic pace" (Boorstin 25). Slowly but surely, Boorstin asserts, "News gathering turned into news making"— and Americans came to prefer pseudo-events to "real" ones (26).

The mechanical reproduction of the image, writes proto-Frankfurt School social critic Walter Benjamin, functionally obliterates all notion of what is a "copy" versus what is an "original": "The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity… Confronted with its manual reproduction, which was usually branded as a forgery, the original

[18] Baudrillard begins this landmark text with an epigraph from Ecclesiastes: "…The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth— it is the truth which conceals there is none. The simulacrum is true" (1).
[19] Baudrillard's "The Gulf War Did Not Take Place" is a seminal postmodern text wherein Baudrillard argues that the ubiquitous, stylized media representation of the war made it impossible to distinguish between the "actual" war and its televised counterpart.

preserved all its authority; not so *vis a vis* technical reproduction" (3). In Baudrillard-ian terms, the map has come to replace the territory it represents[20]: the mechanically reproduced image is no longer a "representation" of an "original"— the image simply *is*. The implication for our pseudo-celebrity neoliberal entrepreneur-subject, in the gig/attention-economy, is that one's "content" is not a representation of one's "self." A "selfie" is a pseudo-event; it is a reproduction without an original. It is not art; it is commerce— it is an advertisement for itself. There is no "creator" just as there is no "original"— the image appears on a screen: a context-less head or face, or body, often belonging to an "influencer," or model; often female, amongst the rest of the spectacle.

In their analysis of what they term "beauty politics," academics Ana Elias, Rosalind Gill, and Christina Scharff attempt to reconcile more traditional, "second-wave" and intersectional feminist views with "post-feminism"— a "contemporary cultural sensibility that proclaims that women are now 'empowered' and 'equal,' hence able to return 'freely' to 'all things feminine and 'girly'" (Lazar 375). In essence, "post-feminism" exhorts women to re-locate their liberation within the all-encompassing consumerist / entrepreneurial framework of neoliberalism. Elias et al. further examine neoliberalism's ideological reproduction of its subjects as entrepreneurs; women, they argue, are additionally tasked under the neoliberal paradigm with *aesthetic* entrepreneurship:

> Like the neoliberal subject more broadly, the aesthetic entrepreneur is autonomous, self-inventing and self-regulating in the pursuit of beauty practices. Preoccupations with appearance, beauty and the body are turned into yet another project to be

[20] Baudrillard, in "Simulations and Simulacra," uses an example from a Borges short story to illustrate the gradual replacement of the "real" by its representation— in this case, a 1:1 scale map laid over an Empire that degenerates as the Empire does; Baudrillard inverts the metaphor to explain the concept of "simulacra"— in Baudrillard's inversion, it is the territory, not the map, that gradually disappears.

> planned, managed and regulated in a way that is calculative and seemingly self-directed (Elias et al. 39).

Again, the commodification of the image in the new gig economy adds a literal element to the somewhat figurative usage of "entrepreneur" in Elias' and others' critique of neoliberalism— for hundreds of thousands of female Instagram influencers, models, "cam-girls," and cosplayers, this "aesthetic" entrepreneurship is no metaphor. While a select few influencers and models reside at the top of the gig economy pyramid, the rest of the hierarchy resembles a more traditional capitalist arrangement; the majority of these aesthetic laborers are actually what might be considered the internet working class, and, similar to the function of capitalist ideology "IRL," the reigning neoliberal ideology dictates that these workers produce themselves as individual entrepreneurs to obscure their true relation to the conditions of cultural, and material, production. The economics of digital, aesthetic labor are just as oppressive on-line as off.

A. The Violence of Cute

The wide eyes, exaggerated lashes, plump lips, skin smattered with childlike freckles— eerily reminiscent of a Bratz doll, and often with the intention of resembling one— cute is currency on Instagram. Filter after filter will allow the user access to whatever aspect of themselves they wish to alter. 'Face-tuning'—the app which allows one to smooth, whiten, enlarge and enhance the eyes, minimize the nose and reshape virtually any aspect of the face or body—produces a version of the individual that is idealized yet infantilized. Smooth, clear skin, wide eyes and puckered lips, these alien features are sexualized with false lashes, pink lipstick and teardrop, heart or baby bottle emojis (Figure 1). The altering of one's appearance, the reduction of recognizable features, the emergence of the silent, helpless, little girl with pigtails, a choker and quite possibly a band-aid across her nose, is intentionally dehumanizing— a violent act upon oneself, in the pursuit of "social," and literal, capital.

This conscious transformation of self from human being into cute-object is ~~literally~~ the literal reproduction of one's "self" as commodity: The "cute-object" is powerless, vulnerable, and without agency. Sianne Ngai writes in her landmark essay on the subject, "… the formal properties associated with cuteness — smallness, compactness, softness, simplicity, and pliancy — call forth specific affects: helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency" ("The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde" 6). For Instagram models, who ply their trades via sexual imagery, the transformation of one's image from human female to sexual tchotchke evokes two simultaneous affective responses in the (presumably male[21]) viewer: First, the rush of sexual domination[22]

[21] It is likely safe to assume that at least a majority of the viewers and appreciators of this type of "content" are male for the simple reason that the "cute-ified" imagery serves foremost as a type of pornography wherein the female

followed quickly thereafter by a kind of reflexive feeling of what philosopher of art Denis Dutton refers to as "cheapness." Dutton, quoted as part of Natalie Angier's reporting on the subject, says of cuteness: "Cute cuts through all layers of meaning and says, let's not worry about complexities, just love me…That's where the sense of cheapness can come from, and the feeling of being manipulated or taken for a sucker that leads many to reject cuteness as low or shallow" (Angier par. 17). The "complexities" that Dutton refers to can only be understood as the complexities inherent in any authentic, un-commodified and non-transactional human relationship; Instagram "cuteness," having obliterated any notion of the "reality" of complex human relations, simply, knowingly offers up the "cute-ified" imagery as a simple, powerless, sexual commodity.

The "cheapness" Dutton refers to is the nagging, perhaps sub-conscious suspicion on the part of the viewer that however intoxicating and compelling the "cute-ified" imagery might be on the surface, it is in fact not "real"— the domination of the cute-object is simply the trading of commodities: One's attention (or, as in the case of some Instagram models who feature paid Snapchat or Only Fans access, one's money) for the illusion of dominating the sexually vulnerable without having to subject oneself to the "complexities" of actually entering a human relationship. One cannot help calling to mind the sad cliché of a strip club patron who pathetically insists to his friends that the stripper whom he paid for a lap dance really liked him. The "cheapness" inherent in all online "relationships" mediated by capital is amplified by "cuteness"— the "cute-ified" visual object can be understood as a kind of sexual totem of the

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subject has willingly handed over her power to a dominating male— it is not a stretch to take as a given that this is the precise fantasy these images are selling.

[22] Ngai: "To be sure, cuteness can be a powerful and even demanding response to our perception of vulnerability in an object; according to the scientists Angier interviews, the pleasure that images of puppies or babies arouse can be intense as those 'aroused by sex, a good meal, or psychoactive drugs like cocaine,' acts or substances shown to stimulate the same regions of the brain" (*Our Aesthetic Categories* 24).

"post-truth," "hyper-normalized"[23] era: Something that is obviously, overtly "fake" and merely transactional of course feels shallow and cheap once consumed, yet the consumer nevertheless feels angry at having been manipulated.

Referring to Angier's reporting on the biological response to cuteness, Ngai, in *Our Aesthetic Categories*, notes: "Even in the context of a project describing cuteness in explicitly biological terms, we find the language of commodities entering the picture ('cheapness'), as if there were no better metaphor for how one might feel 'manipulated or taken for a sucker' than our relation to this especially peculiar object" (25). In the particular case of Instagram face-tuning, "cheapness" is no metaphor: Under the neoliberal paradigm, human relationships— particularly, as we have noted, online relationships— are ideologically, inherently understood to be transactional. Yet the violent recoil at the recognition of one's manipulation by these images is still shocking— not unlike the disappointment of comparing one's grey, wilted— *actual*— Big Mac to the plump, technicolor wonder bouncing into frame on one's plasma TV. We "know" advertisements are fake. And yet we express surprise, disappointment, anger at having been cheated by something widely understood to exist solely for that express purpose— to cheat us.

B. The 'Face' of Feminism

Perhaps nowhere is the gulf between advertisement and reality wider than in female beauty standards as dictated by print, film, and internet advertising. Besides serving as the prototype— the ur-Image— after which today's Instagram entrepreneur models herself, the

[23] Another "post-truth" signifier, the term "hypernormalization" was coined by anthropologist Alexei Yurchak in his book about the dissolution of the Soviet Union, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* — the people of the Soviet Union, Yurchak writes, knew the system was failing but, unable to imagine an alternative, nevertheless carried on as if it were in fact fully functional. This became a self-fulfilling prophecy, and Soviet citizens began to willfully ignore obvious signs of the country's obvious degradation until such self-deception was materially no longer possible. Similarly, consumers of clearly altered Instagram content experience discontent when content they knew to be fake turns out to be just that.

notion of the "damage" done to "realistic" female beauty standards by digital manipulation is a notion so widely accepted that it has become a kind of liberal feminist cliché. And though this precise media critique— that the over-manipulation of images creates beauty standards that are impossible to achieve, thus negatively affecting scores of (young[24]) women's self-esteem— is nearly ubiquitous in popular media and culture, the over-abundance of face-tuning and Photoshopping online suggests that in the time since the critique was first lobbied, the exact opposite of its intention has occurred. We no longer expect or wish for advertisements to more closely resemble "reality"; we, on the contrary, have molded "real life" to more closely resemble advertisements.

Warhol, of course, is widely regarded ~~as~~ to be among the first of major figures in the art world to incorporate this nascent ontological switch into his art, and though he did not single-handedly usher "Pop" art into existence[25], his prior career as an advertising illustrator makes him an easy synecdoche for the whole "movement." After his initial successes with the iconic Campbell's soup cans and silk-screened celebrity "portraits" (arguably the most famous of which are both female beauty paragons, Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe), Warhol moved into "disaster pictures": images of a newspaper headline proclaiming "129 DIE IN JET!;" manipulated photographs of the electric chair, car crash victims, and suicides. Among his most well-known "disaster pictures" are the series of Monroe images that appeared around this time,

[24] It is nearly always "girls" or "young women" that are invoked as the group whose self-esteem stands to be the most damaged by these advertisements. What does it say about the ingrained patriarchal ideology that no one, including the most ardent espousers of this particular complaint— seems to be at all concerned with the feelings of women past the age of 30? Is it implied by this line of critique that "older" women (i.e., women over 30) no longer have any real business attempting to meet beauty standards anyway, and therefore simply could not despair over this inability to reconcile "reality" with media imagery? Or is it that "older" women simply have become hardened and jaded enough by the gap between female representation in popular media and their objective "reality"— inured by decades of "post-truth" media exposure— that they no longer expect parity between their lived experiences and their "screen lives"? Either interpretation is troubling in its own way.

[25] The long list of Warhol's forebears is well documented, and a complete accounting of all of them is sadly beyond the scope of this paper.

including the so-called "Marilyn Diptych," apparently begun just one day after Monroe's suicide in 1962. Notes Pop Art historian Eric Shanes:

> For [Monroe's] image Warhol… reproduced a photo of the dead star over areas of flat colour that suggest perfect skin, perfect hair, perfect eyeliner, perfect flesh and perfect lip colourings, thereby making Marilyn look as artificial and banal as possible. In one of the Marilyns Warhol even set the film star down on a field of gold, thus reminding us that the lady was at the cutting edge of a vast industrial apparatus for transforming her manifold attractions into gold. Arguably an even more inventive contribution to the Marilyns series is the Marilyn Diptych of 1962 in which Warhol contrasted the actress's 'perfect 'and colourful public persona with her messy, disintegrating, uncolourful and gradually fading private self (42).

It is taken for granted that Warhol's subject-matter transition from soup cans to celebrities was a commentary on precisely the type of commodification undergone en masse by today's Instagram models and influencers, the key difference being of course that today's neoliberal subjects are encouraged to commodify *themselves*, whereas Warhol's portraits suggest commodification via mass-produced culture at large. Indeed, an invocation of Warhol's now-cliché "15 minutes of fame" prognostication strikes us, in our post- post-modern era, as rather "on the nose"— obvious on its face. But Shanes' formal reading of Warhol's Marilyn series— the flat color producing Monroe as "banal"— is nevertheless newly relevant in the context of face-tuning and "cute-ification." Pop Art as a "movement," (or, as Shanes points out, it is perhaps more accurate to refer to it as "Mass-Culture" art, and regard it as a "cultural dynamic," rather than a "movement"[26]) was, from its inception, primarily concerned with the commodification of culture as the result of the then-burgeoning, dovetailing forces of advertising and mass-production. Warhol's portraiture— particularly of Monroe but true of nearly all of his work from this period— aims not to represent its subjects as people but as products. It is no small wonder, then,

[26] p. 9

that the "Warhol effect" (a photo filter that digitally transforms the subject into one of Warhol's silk-screened portraits) continues to be one of the most popular Instagram filters, and was included as an effect in Apple's "Photo Booth" software at its launch in 2007[27]. In Silicon Valley parlance, the commodification of human beings is no longer a "bug"— an unintended, negative consequence of the age of mass production and consumption, as Warhol saw it— it is instead a willful, intentional, encouraged act. It is a "feature."

[27] "Photo Booth." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 16 Apr. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photo_Booth.

HERE AND NOW

A. How Did We Get Here?

Since Rizzoli published Kim Kardashian's collection of selfies entitled, "Selfish "in 2015, her photographic self-portraits have been compared to a multitude of artworks, from Courbet[28] (Figure 2) and Raphael,[29](Figure 3) to Anna Mendietta.[30] (Figure 4).

Though the term 'Selfie 'is relatively new lingo, photographic self-portraiture dates back as far as 1839, when Robert Cornelius took the first Daguerreotype 'Selfie'[31]; self -portraits rendered in oil paint date back to Jan Van Eyck's "Portrait of a Man in a Turban," 1433[32] (Figure 5). The artists' inclusion of the self in their work evolved from the stylistic to the literal; for example, Velazquez's insertion of himself into his masterpiece "Las Meninas," 1656 (Figure 6) is both obvious ~~yet~~ and discrete— at least by current standards. Self-portraiture is introspective, yet in examining the self, one must consider the self in the context of the world one inhabits; it is impossible to escape the social, political and economic context. In Warhol's self-portrait, 1966 (Figure 5), we see the artist's image reproduced in square multiples, layers of vivid color emulating the economic landscape of consumer culture that was indicative of 1960s America— a ~~foretelling~~ prescient metaphor that is presently as relevant today as ever.

In *Portraiture,* 1991 author Richard Brilliant writes:

> Making portraits is a response to the natural human tendency to think about oneself, of oneself in relation to others, and of others in apparent relation to themselves and others…Portraits establish the conditions and circumstances of

[28] Whitehouse, Matthew. "These Kim Kardashian Selfies Are Remarkably like History's Greatest Self-Portraits." *I*, 3 Apr. 2018, i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/mbx3qx/kim-kardashian-selfies-art-history.
[29] Dazed. "Kim vs the Classics." *Dazed*, www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/gallery/19757/23/kim-vs-the-classics.
[30] Whitehouse, Matthew. "These Kim Kardashian Selfies Are Remarkably like History's Greatest Self-Portraits." *I*, 3 Apr. 2018, i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/mbx3qx/kim-kardashian-selfies-art-history.
[31] Cornelius, and Robert. "[Robert Cornelius, Self-Portrait; Believed to Be the Earliest Extant American Portrait Photo]." *Home*, 1 Jan. 1970, www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004664436/.
[32] Eyck, Jan van. "Jan Van Eyck: Portrait of a Man (Self Portrait?): NG222: National Gallery, London." *The National Gallery*, 1 Jan. 1970, www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jan-van-eyck-portrait-of-a-man-self-portrait.

> the viewer's gaze; they shape the psychological process that implicates the viewer, as a respondent, in answering the question posed by the portraitist, 'who is the "you" that I am looking at and how may I know it?' Knowledge of others is also knowledge of oneself, and perhaps for that reason self-portraits are so important to the analysis of portraiture, for in them the patron, the subject, and the artist are often one.[33]

B. The Relevance of Portraiture

In contemporary neoliberal society, where we 'the individual' are already enmeshed in every aspect of content that we consume, the selfie *en masse* is the next logical step as an artistic medium of expression; additionally as the artist rendering the artist taking the selfie, the artist now has the ability to control representation's meta-narrative, as an observer, interpreter and documentarian of the subject, interpreting the subject interpreting themselves. "All portraits envisage a complex transaction between the implied viewer and the subject, an allusion as essential to the viewer's role as it is imaginary." [34]

The selfie is the quintessential portrait of today— not only is it transactional, ~~but~~ it is also a mirror of the psyche of the subject through the projected self. The artists' rendering of this process is as relevant as portraiture has ever been, both as a cultural critique and as a means for the artist to act as a medium not only between subject and self and viewer and self, but as a critic of the industry of culture and the implications it has on self perception.

The artist Richard Prince is famous for his appropriated 6ft ink-jet blow-ups of Instagram personalities' images (Figure 8), selling for one hundred thousand dollars.[35] Rendering the image by hand, I employ the ability to sculpt the subject's face, a practical rumination on the

[33] Brilliant, Richard. *Portraiture*. Reaktion Books, 2013.
[34] Brilliant, Richard. *Portraiture*. Reaktion Books, 2013.
[35] Munro, Cait. "Richard Prince Instagram." *Artnet News*, Artnet News, 26 May 2015, news.artnet.com/art-world/richard-prince-steals-instagram-photographs-sells-100000-301663.

differentiation between face and filter, form and film, feature and fabrication. The utilization of oil paint merges contemporary context with historical craft, the tangibility of the paint, canvas and the investment in process elevating the subject from a product for spontaneous consumption to formal artifact. A limited color palette is employed in the painting *@ninjacat* (Figure. 8), as an illustrative communication of the homogenization of the female identity, the emotional detachment of subject from viewer, initially resultant of the use of the face-tune filter, is now accentuated through the employment of flat paintwork and the economy of detail. In the paintings *@fffjolla* and *@kidjess,* the faces are seen through the lens of filters that add playful details such as freckles and rainbow tears— neither distract entirely from the enhanced lips and lashes, rendered with bold lines, vivid color and subject isolated from its context that conjure associations with pop art and fashion illustration. Features that are traditionally sexualized, lips, eyes, hair— are enhanced with vivid color, highlights, and volume— skin tone, clothing, and background fade away, the viewer now confronted with clusters of altered feminine features, enhanced by way of filter then brush to the precipice of macabre.

CONCLUSION

The images produced by this class of aesthetic laborer— the "selfies," with varying amounts of digital manipulation— are commodities of a new age of narcissistic loneliness, of digital worker atomization, of neoliberal nihilistic despair. The portraiture of our time is a reflection of a subject so obscured by its desire to be vendible that it surpasses the self into the realm of an inhuman, cute-ified "likeness." These Images— mass-produced and digital— masquerade as a statement on female "empowerment," yet they offer up the feminine mystique as a sexual trinket. "Truth," "art," "culture," "love," "sex," and "connection" have been completely subsumed by capital; the pervasive and totalitarian neoliberal ideology bombards us via internet spectacle with reassurance that this is all, actually, *good*. "Rise and grind!" we tweet out into a cold, indifferent ether, with distant hopes that we too someday might afford the endless narcissistic supply reserved only for the select few most gifted grifters. Ours is a time of monetized narcissism, of the production and reproduction of the human soul as fungible commodity, and the alien apparitions we find staring back at us, glassy-eyed, are the art of an LED map without a territory— the final output of a culturally barren, spiritually strip-mined empire whose rough beast has finally been reborn, online, for the very last time.

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Appendix

Figure 1
Instagram *@attyson*, Selfie, 2020

Figure 2. Left: Gustave Courbet, *Self-portrait (The Desperate Man)* (1843–45) Right: Kim Kardashian West, Kim Kardashian West, *Ugh I hate falling sleep with all of my make up on!*

Figure 3. Top: The three Kims (instagram @kimkardashian) Bottom: Raphael, *The Three Graces*, oil on canvas 1505

Figure 4. Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Facial Hair Transplants)* (1972) / Kim Kardashian West, *I mustache you a question...but I'll shave it for later* (2012)

Figure 5. Jan van Eyck, *Portrait of a Man*, oil on panel, 0′ 10″ x 0′ 7″, 1433

Figure 6. Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas,* oil on canvas, 10′ 5″ x 9′ 1″, 1656

Figure 7. Warhol, *Self Portrait*, acrylic, silkscreen ink, pencil and ballpoint pen on linen
22 5/8 x 22 5/8 inches, 1966

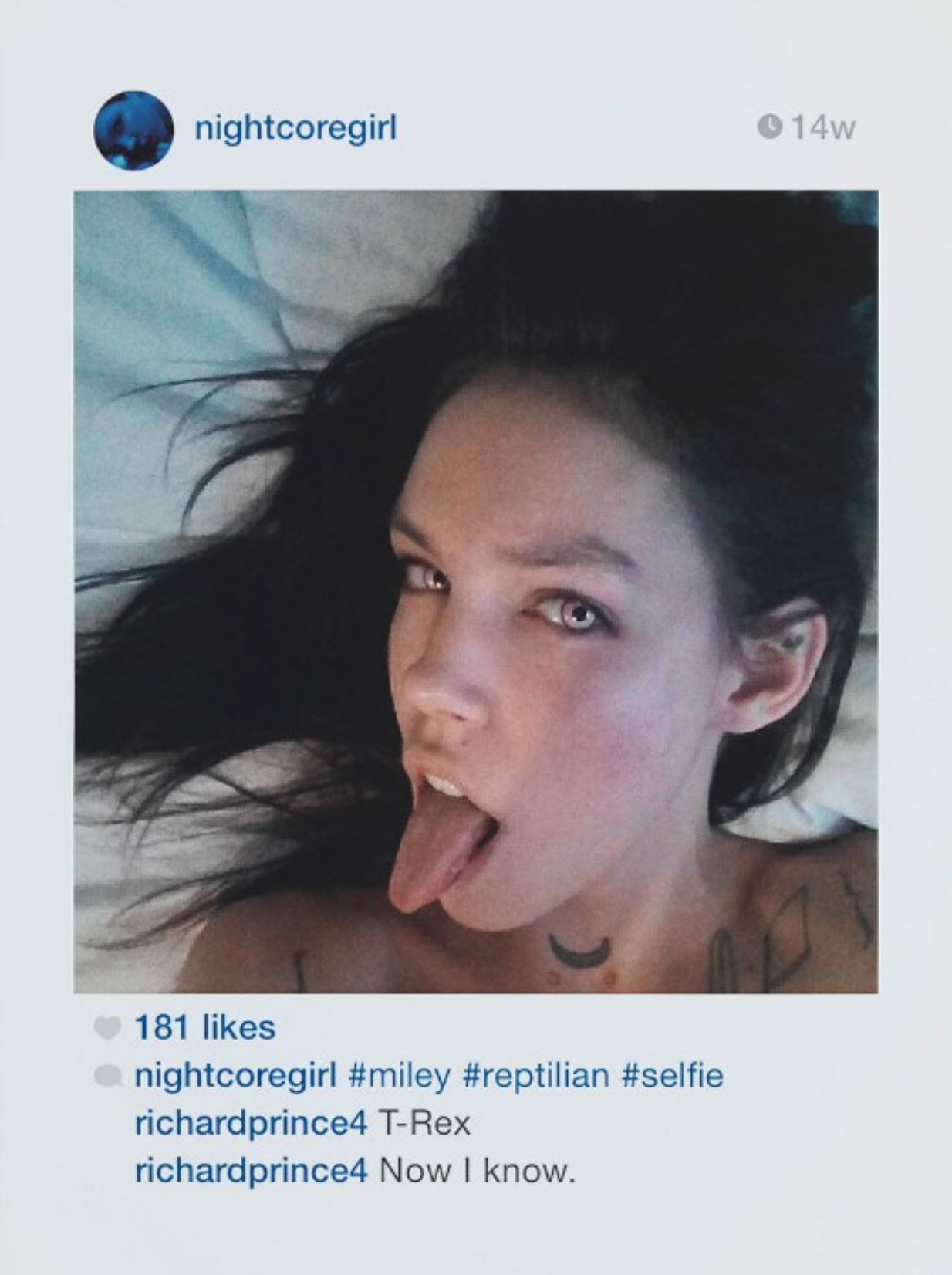

Figure 8. Richard Prince, *Untitled (Portrait),* Inkjet on canvas, 65 ¾ x 48 ¾ inches, 2014

Figure 9. Anja Honisett, *@ninjacat* 2019, Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches, 2019

Figure 10. Anja Honisett, *@ffjolla*, Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches, 2019

Figure 11. Anja Honisett, *@kidjess*, Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches, 2020