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## Notes to self: the visual culture of selfies in the age of social media

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This paper explores the cultural fascination with social media forms of self-portraiture, commonly known as “selfies,” with a specific interest in the self-imaging strategies of young women in their teens and early 20s. Ubiquitous on social media sites like Facebook, Tumblr, Flickr, and Instagram, the selfie has become a powerful means for self-expression, encouraging its makers to share the most intimate and private moments of their lives – as well as engage in a form of creative self-fashioning. Popularly regarded as a shallow expression of online narcissism, the selfie is both adored and reviled; yet it flourishes as one of the most effective outlets for self-definition. Through a critical engagement with a history of feminist representational politics, this paper explores the political urgency at the heart of the selfie phenomenon, and contemplates whether the urge to compulsively self-image is mere narcissism, or a politically oppositional and aesthetic form of resistance.

**Keywords:** feminist theory; selfie; photography; social media; visual culture; Vivian Fu; Noorann Matties; Francesca Romeo

### Introduction

In the past two years, the term “selfie” has become the focal of considerable debate. The phenomenon of compulsive self-representation on social media sites has been written about in major news outlets like *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*, among many others (Carr 2015). However, most talk of selfies is focused (unfairly) on young women, forming into a critique of their apparent narcissism as a kind of regressive personality trait. The young women themselves often characterize the selfie (on social media sites) as a radical act of political empowerment: as a means to resist the male-dominated media culture’s obsession with and oppressive hold over their lives and bodies.

This notion takes on great significance in social media culture, when confronted with the sheer volume of self-representations by women in their teens to mid-20s. Viewed individually, they appear rather banal, commonplace, and benign. Taken en masse, it feels like a revolutionary political movement – like a radical colonization of the visual realm and an aggressive reclaiming of the female body. Even if there is no overt political intent, they are indeed contending with the manner in which capitalism is enacted upon their lives. That reading of the selfie revolution may seem more than a bit charitable, because the gesture itself has been popularly characterized as

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something rather pitiful: as an expression of narcissism and self-loathing – or even as a consequence of profound loneliness. It has no positive or redeeming connotations and appears to personify all that is trivial about the human condition. As noted in a *New York Times* article on 19 October 2013, writer Jenna Wortham attempted to present a more generous viewpoint of selfie culture, situating it within the context of social media and emergent Internet-based technologies:

But it's far too simplistic to write off the selfie phenomenon. We are swiftly becoming accustomed to – and perhaps even starting to prefer – online conversations and interactions that revolve around images and photos. They are often more effective at conveying a feeling or reaction than text. Plus, we've become more comfortable seeing our faces on-screen, thanks to services like Snapchat, Skype, Google Hangout and FaceTime, and the exhilarating feeling of connectedness that comes from even the briefest video conversation. Receiving a photo of the face of the person you're talking to brings back the human element of the interaction, which is easily misplaced if the interaction is primarily text-based. (Wortham 2013, 1)

This paper aims to give insight into a very contemporary discussion about the impact of technology and social media as a means to disseminate and share images. The term selfie, in its popular usage, is meant to delineate a very particular engagement with technologies of image making – specifically, the spontaneous self-portrait, taken with a range of consumer-based devices: smart phones, tablets, laptop computers, as well as digital and film cameras. In the digital era, personal cameras have become so ubiquitous, that compulsive self-imaging is engendering a new consumer-based language in the visual realm. In addition, social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr enable the easy and spontaneous dissemination of images – a phenomenon that has led to public debate about the potential corrosive effects of technology on our individual and collective selves.

Often discussed as a negative consequence of capitalist consumer-based consumption, the selfie appears to represent a critique of youth who have become subsumed within a troubling consumerist fixation with the superficiality of self-imaging and the cult of personality. The consequences of this characterization are what concern me most, specifically the gendered implications that link young women, self-obsession, and what could be described as an insatiable consumerism – that according to Acocella (2014), has “made Americans, especially women, dependent on commercial products,” consumed by narcissism, and ultimately deprived of self-reliance. *New York Times* writer David Carr (2015) echoes Acocella's sentiment that selfies are the product of a combustible mixture of media fixation, capitalism, and narcissistic self-absorption. In this investigation, my aim is to produce a productive counter-reading of the “selfie,” one that advances the possibility that popular forms of female self-imaging may offer the opportunity for political engagement, radical forms of community building – and most importantly, a forum to produce counter-images that resist erasure and misrepresentation.

### **The selfie and its discontents**

Oxford English Dictionaries' definition of selfie defines it as a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website. According to Oxford Dictionaries, the term is not a new one, and is believed to have originated on an Australian online forum in 2002. Cultural

fascination with this phenomenon led Oxford Dictionaries to proclaim selfie their 2013 Word of the Year: a distinction that has inaugurated its introduction into the public consciousness. The pseudo-controversy surrounding the imaging of US President Barack Obama in the act of taking a selfie pic (along with British Prime Minister David Cameron and Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt) while at Nelson Mandela's memorial on 10 December 2013 speaks to the media-fueled characterization of the gesture as a gratuitous and excessive expression of narcissism. The casual gesture received widespread scrutiny; especially on social media, where the President's behavior was likened to that of a petulant, self-absorbed, and mannerless 14-year-old girl (McCalmont 2013). Like one journalist, Christine Erickson proclaimed, "It looks like Barack Obama has taken a few pointers from Sasha and Malia" (the US President's two teenaged daughters) (2013). Comments like this one were the general sentiment expressed in the media in the wake of the Mandela event.

There has been a steady stream of female journalists and psychologist's quick to condemn the supposed navel gazing of overindulged teenage girls. According to psychologist Jill Weber, the selfie is an expression of those with a poor self-outlook: "In my experience, girls who repeatedly post selfies struggle with low self-esteem" (Walker 2013). In a 19 November 2013 *New Yorker* article, journalist Sylvia Killingsworth wrote:

selfies are everywhere these days. They feature prominently in Sofia Coppola's *The Bling Ring* (2013) as a cinematic trope – the main characters take dozens of pictures of themselves partying at Hollywood clubs and wearing pilfered designer clothing and upload them to Facebook. (2013)

Kate Losse makes similarly ridiculing assessments in a 5 June 2013 *New Yorker* piece, stating that "Self-portraits shot with cell phones, or 'selfies' – cheap-looking, evoking the MySpace era – became a sign of bad taste." She goes on, "The subject of the MySpace bathroom selfie – with its tableaux of bathroom counter, mirror, face, and upper body – always looked alone. Selfies were for people without friends; the savvy moved on to more advanced networks" (Losse 2013).

Most of the selfie-related articles posted in major news outlets focus on the personality flaws of the overindulged, namely, suburban teens and celebrities. It is a terminology overflowing with judgment, sarcasm, and derision. However, one of the more perplexing dimensions of the selfie craze is a contradiction between the cultural legitimation of the term, and the complete and utter condemnation of the act itself. There continues to be a concerted effort to ground the term selfie into the cultural consciousness: there are now books on the subject, dedicated blogs, and a television sitcom – but despite the media attention, the compulsion to take and share selfies continues to be the butt of the joke (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup>

The legitimation of the term selfie is a type of ideological scapegoating that synthesizes a range of fears about technology's creeping infectiousness into a legible subjectivity: a new Otherness designed to absorb our judgment and condemnation. Like the demonized single parents of former UK Prime Minister John Major's socially conservative "Back to Basics" campaign, or the enduring social blame of parasitism placed on single African-American welfare mothers in the USA – the young white female is the perfect foil for a menu of clichéd anxieties about technology's uncanny ability to make fools of us all. In *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* (Tiqqun 2007) by the French journal *Tiqqun*, the young girl is theorized as consumer society's total



Figure 1. Noorann Matties, *Self portrait crying during refeeding*, 2014. © [Noorann Matties]. Reproduced by permission of artist.

product and model citizen: she is the object and subject of late capitalism: *she can only seduce by consuming*. Her body is a commodity.

### On post-feminism and the selfie

For the purpose of this paper, I characterize this phenomenon in terms of post-feminism: a controversial and polarizing terminology often used to delineate generational and political shifts among feminists. Post-feminism began in the early 1980s, during the rise of Third-Wave feminism. A contingent of leading feminists in academia began proclaiming that feminism is dead; a move believed to assert the obsolescence of feminism in the face of its radical revision. The basic idea behind the movement is that feminism had achieved its goals. Third-Wave feminists had for some time, critiqued early expressions of feminism for ignoring the plight of women of color, as well as women outside the West. Since its early formulation, the term post-feminism has been used in a myriad of ways. This paper appropriates the term in the service of understanding the representational strategies of women in what could be characterized as the post-feminist moment (post-Second and Third Wave).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, my aim is not to assert that feminism is dead, nor am I suggesting that gender inequality is a thing of the past. On the contrary, I am interested in critically unpacking how young self-proclaimed feminists negotiate a space for political action that breaks from Second- and Third-Wave Feminism – and seeks to create a radical new aesthetics of the female body.

In their edited volume, entitled, *Interrogating Post-feminism*, scholars Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra claim that “post-feminism is defined by class, age, and racial exclusions; it is youth obsessed and white and middle class. Anchored in consumption as a strategy and leisure as a site for the production of the self,” (2) post-

feminism associates itself with pleasure and lifestyle and the notion that feminism has accomplished its goals and is now a thing of the past. The authors are critical of post-feminist consumer culture: which they characterize as a fixation on an affluent elite that elevate consumption as a means to contend with the dissatisfactions of daily life. However their real claim is that post-feminist culture works in part to incorporate, assume or naturalize aspects of feminism – to commoditize it via the figure of woman as empowered consumer (2). In the book’s introductory pages, the authors make a clear distinction between feminist *politics* and post-feminist *culture*; a delineation meant to interrogate the impulse to think that post-feminist media representation somehow signals the widespread rejection of feminist oppositional politics on the part of young, entitled women. Post-feminism does have politics deeply embedded within it, but it takes a certain privilege as self-evident; a fact that is perceived as annihilating of feminism.

In this regard, Tasker and Negra (2007) suggest that post-feminism is very similar to other “posts,” particularly post-Civil Rights discourse in the USA. Both movements can be defined as having a moral ambiguity that is rooted in consumer culture, excess, and commodity fetishism. There is no overt politics of the margins, no rhetoric of victimization. Rather, there is an implicit understanding that the victories of Civil Rights and the victories of the Feminist Movement have liberated their respective generations; affording them the privilege to image themselves beyond trauma, while still understanding and mobilizing the oppositional and radical force of self-representation. In African-American discourse, the term post-black was used as a means to characterize a generational shift in artistic production that rejected a politics of the past. Curator Thelma Golden, who coined the term, described it in contradictory terms:

It [post-black] was a clarifying term that had ideological and chronological dimensions and repercussions. It was characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as “black” artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested in redefining complex notions of blackness. (2001, 14)

For Golden, post-black is not a rejection of blackness, nor is it a post-racial stance (as it is often mischaracterized),<sup>3</sup> but rather a means to resist accepted notions of blackness that are hetero-patriarchal at their core – and have relegated women and those who are queerly identified to the margins of its political, cultural and representational imperatives. Having been raised in a period of post-Civil Rights optimism, Golden endeavors to create an expanded understanding of black identity that transcends the limitations of past resistance movements:

As a child born in the mid-1960s, I imagine I hold a certain degree of nostalgia for the passion and energy that created the nationalist/aesthetic dogma of the 1970s Black Arts Movement [ . . . ] which allowed me to thrive in the words and actions of late 1980s multi-culturalism. (2001, 14)

I reference post-feminism because it is a conflicted terminology that, like post-blackness, does not signify the end of feminism (or the notion that gender inequity is a thing of the past), but rather is an effort to redefine its parameters and step out beyond the dogmas of the past (Bae 2011; Hall and Rodriguez 2003; Holmlund 2005). Emanating from the “selfie” movement is a feminism that is aggressively oppositional, yet takes on different forms and has new agendas and commitments. In this formulation, the *feminism* in post-feminism is not simply an umbrella term signifying

a history of political activism, but is actually a direct reference to a specific *regime of representation* that privileged the experiences of certain women over others. If we think about post-feminism as a theory of representation, it becomes possible to understand how young women (particularly those of color) seek to redefine the parameters of feminism in a manner that grants them recognition. The idea that post-feminism is inherently annihilating of feminism, or is a form of willful naiveté, is perhaps too simplistic and dismissive of young women who are struggling for self-definition. Indeed, post-feminism is a problematic term and one that has been mobilized in troubling ways. However, my aim here is to think about it in relation to other *posts* that have functioned as space-clearing gestures: as a means to make room for new identities, new politics, and new forms of visual expressiveness.

### Post-feminism and social media in the blogging era

Social media is now inundated with blogs by young women in their late teens to early 20s, who self-consciously and aggressively describe themselves as radical feminists, while posting pictures of themselves in various states of dress or undress – or at times completely nude, or engaged in sexual and/or pornographic activity.<sup>4</sup> The *production of the self* takes center stage, but also a contradictory mix of vulgarity and radicalism; one where a young girl will post a sexually provocative self-portrait and then defiantly follow-up with an impassioned written diatribe about rape and the abuses of women. Often a pinup-style selfie will be followed by re-blogged images of iconic women of the past. The selfies are fascinating because they are almost always tinged with nostalgia for 1940s/1950s fashion aesthetics for women, mixed with the Betty Page-style pin-up. Many of the women wear tattoos as an ironic contrast to the hyper-feminine, sexual fantasy that defines the ideal woman of the 1940s–1950s.<sup>5</sup> Constantly bombarded with objectifying and unattainable images of beauty in popular media, young girls in the blogosphere respond by constructing an image of themselves as a sexual fantasy, to be consumed online, and in the public domain. But I argue this gesture is not meant as titillation for the male gaze, rather it is designed to embrace femininity and sexuality; celebrate the history of women; reject unhealthy beauty standards promoted by the media; and advance a body-positive attitude. This is explored by Schuster (2013), who suggests that sexual activism is among the political concerns of the socially engaged post-feminist blogger. The contradiction, of course, is that the images they produce explore what Tasker and Negra characterize as formulaic female sexualities, where these young women “enthusiastically perform patriarchal stereotypes of sexual servility in the name of empowerment” (2007, 3).

Among the representational tropes of post-feminist oppositional politics is the imaging of menstrual blood: a defiant gesture that is meant to be confrontational and to elicit a condemning response in viewers. For many young female image-makers, the perceived cultural revulsion for menstruation – and to a lesser degree, female body hair – symbolizes the historical abuses of patriarchy and the oppressive social control often exerted over female bodies. To image what for many may be perceived as the intimacy of personal hygiene is an act of willful defiance and a means to claim agency – despite the fact that one’s distaste for images of blood may arguably stem from an array of other issues.

There are numerous female bloggers who have built considerable reputations making snapshot-style photographs documenting their personal lives and intimate relationships. Among the visual tropes popularized by these individuals are gritty



images of menstrual blood: self-portraits often presented in the context of sexual encounter – or images of the artist’s contending with the banalities of feminine hygiene products and the often-hidden routines of menstruation (e.g. Bobel and Lorber 2010; Bystrom 2012; Cochrane 2009; Hecht 2012). Contemporary artist/blogger Sandy Kim (Santolalla 2013; Zambelich 2012) is one exemplar, as is the controversial young photographer Petra Collins, who generated debate for a t-shirt she designed for the similarly controversial clothing company American Apparel (McGuire 2013). Collins is known for her photographic work that regularly depicts nude adolescent-looking girls in a sexually provocative manner. American Apparel, the popular clothing outfitter, has been accused of creating sexualizing images of youth that border on the pornographic, leading to public legal battles and charges of sexual harassment (e.g. Bruni 2014; Daum 2007; Hiltzik 2014; Misener 2012; Murray 2012; Sweney 2013; Tilda 2014). For American Apparel, Collins created a t-shirt design consisting of a crudely rendered line drawing of a hand caressing the lips of a woman’s splayed vagina (with ample pubic hair), while red blood flows from within it. Legs wide open; the image presents female genitalia and pubic hair and what appears to be a masturbating and menstruating woman of indiscernible age.

The culture of selfies is intriguing when taken in mass, because the sheer number of such images is staggering. On the social media sites Tumblr and Flickr alone, there are innumerable blogs containing self-portraits by young women, usually standing alone, frontally and facing a mirror, holding a camera at their midsection. The cameras range from iPhones and small digital point and shoots, to film and digital single-lens reflex (SLR), to medium-format film cameras. And the range of quality is broad from the pixilation of cheap cameras, to the lushness of professional film. What unifies these images, however, is a shared obsession with self-fashioning; an embraced narcissism that turns navel gazing into high culture, and leisure-based consumption into a virtue. Fashion plays an important role in selfie culture. Many of the personalized blogs feature young women taking on various personas through alterations in dress, hair, and makeup; sometimes in an effort to recreate iconic fashions of the past, or to mimic looks that are ubiquitous in commercial beauty culture. The intentions of these young women undoubtedly vary greatly, but as we will see as this article progresses, the aim of some female bloggers is to achieve some sort of recognition, to make themselves present in the world, and to create the kind of unique style and personhood that would not be represented otherwise.

Criticisms of this phenomenon wrongly suggest that racial diversity is almost completely absent in this world: characterizing it as a white and middle-class culture of personal excess – where young women grapple with their privilege and kept status, by considering their place in the world, and musing about the effects of patriarchy on their lives. Their heroes range from artists Nan Goldin, Cindy Sherman and most recently Laurel Nakadate, to the iconic self-portraits of Francesca Woodman; the late photographer who committed suicide in 1981 at the age of 22. Goldin and Woodman are probably the most influential visual references, and many photography-inclined female bloggers attempt to recreate the aesthetic and melancholic self-obsessions of their heroes. The striking prevalence of young female photographers attempting to replicate the snapshot aesthetic of Goldin is staggering, as articulated by photography curator Susie Bright:

One only has to teach a class of undergraduate photography students to realize [Goldin’s] influence. Her ideas infuse all new work that deals with close family members, friends or



ideas of community. She gave legitimacy to an approach that has crudely been adopted and understood as “snapshot style” or “diaristic.” I would go as far as to say her work has come to represent an entire style. (quoted in O’Hagan 2014)

The blogging format allows not just for the display of personal images and “selfies,” but also the re-blogging and sharing of erotica found on other blogs. This forms the core of sites like Tumblr, which enable like-minded folks to find each other and form communities: intellectual, sexual, political, and otherwise. A component of a blogger’s ability to self-construct is to take on the role of curator; the one who understands the zeitgeist and can make sense of the media deluge. To do so is to be empowered and develop loyal online cult following. In a recent article, journalist Greg Spielberg considers the phenomenon of popular women’s blogs dedicated to showcasing sexual content:

Women aren’t just the dominant subject of the Internet, they’re increasingly the controllers. Ladies make up more than half of the U.S. social media population: 58 percent of Facebook, 64 percent of Twitter and 82 percent of Pinterest. They post, share and comment more than men [...] The moral neutrality and the huge rise of women’s voices means a more balanced, and much larger, erotic representation on the Web. There’s no better example than on Tumblr, where women are showcasing their sexual voice. (2013)

In her brilliant essay “A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body,” Mulvey (2006) charts the emergence of feminist aesthetics – and what she terms a new politics of the body that arose in the 1970s. During this crucial period, women artists contributed to widespread efforts dedicated to undoing the preponderance of gender inequity in the USA. As Mulvey asserts, “artists were arguing for a politics of the margins” (2006, 285) and they utilized the female body in an activist mode in an effort to expose how representation (and misrepresentation, for that matter) plays its part in the maintenance of inequality. Cindy Sherman’s infamous self-portraits are widely understood to have been instrumental to feminist efforts concerned with interrogating what Mulvey calls “dominant meanings” (in images of women) that are ubiquitous in popular visual culture. Sherman’s aesthetics recuperates a politics of the body (a political aesthetics) that employs masquerade and *mise-en-scène* to construct often-disturbing representations of the feminine (Mulvey 2006, 285).

There is no doubting the importance of Sherman’s contribution to our understanding of the ideological function of images. It would not be a stretch to suggest that the artist wields the female body in a politically oppositional manner that has both influenced and emboldened young women artists for over three decades. And Sherman is not alone. There is a lengthy history of female self-representation: especially in photographic history (Germaine Krull, Marianne Breslauer, Ilse Bing, Vivian Maier, and Sally Mann are early examples). Artists Cindy Sherman, Adrian Piper, Lynda Benglis, and Hannah Wilke (and most recently LaToya Ruby Frazier) have each employed performative self-portraiture in an approach that essentially laid claim to the kind of creative dominance and authority usually associated with male artists. Nevertheless, the pioneering work of these individuals (with the exception of Cindy Sherman) remains marginal in many respects and are all too often lumped into the amorphous category of postmodern conceptualism – or dismissed as pretentiously liberal and academically stilted musings on oppression.<sup>6</sup>

While feminist representational politics are as important today as they ever were, there are visible changes in the aesthetic and conceptual strategies of artists working

in what is often termed the post-feminist moment. Whether intentional or not, the work of many young female artists expresses an exhaustion around the rallying cry to continue the charge against the objectification of women in popular visual culture – and wearied by an activist obsession with male desire and the scopophilic violence of its gaze.

This shift is most present in the production of many young female photographers. In their artwork, an interest in the fetishized female imago remains, but is subverted and rendered less overtly politicized.<sup>7</sup> I do not believe this change signals a rejection of feminism, but perhaps a radical rethinking of its visual rhetorics. In many respects, their images can be accessed without a prehistory of feminism and feminist aesthetics. And for lack of a better term, this production could be labeled post-feminist art – as problematic as that demarcation may prove to be. This article is therefore concerned with the problem of “post” as it plays out within art discourse. There is a great skepticism around the notion of post-feminism – and rightly so. However, within the realm of African-American visual art, the concept of post-blackness is embraced, despite the stubborn persistence of a few detractors. Post-Feminism and Post-Black in the visual arts does not signal that we are in a post-Feminist or post-racial moment *per se*: that the presence of gender inequity and racial intolerance are no longer with us. These are widely held misperceptions subtending our understanding of their presence. As I have mentioned previously, both signal a shifting aesthetics and a shifting usage of black and female bodies as subjects of representation. The post-feminist label has many definitions, uses, and applications and is symptomatic of warring agendas and divergent notions around the efficacy of feminism altogether.

There should indeed be concern with the deployment of the post-feminist label – which is so often utilized to signal feminism’s obsolescence, or to depoliticize it altogether. My central aim, however, is to examine what are problematically regarded as the post-political conceptual and visual strategies of young female cultural producers – without casting them as incommensurate with the aims of feminism. The images in question are preoccupied with the female gaze – as ill defined and elusive that term has proven to be (e.g. Adamson, Chave and Covollino 2013; Bowers 1990; D’Souza and McDonough 2008; Friedberg 1993). Ultimately, the female gaze is a somewhat controversial notion because while its consideration is potentially empowering, it also places the female image-maker in the position of objectifier. The feminist critique of images has always been preoccupied with locating and deconstructing the gendered aspects of visual culture – particularly as it relates to patriarchy, inequality, and female disempowerment. In many respects, the notion of the male gaze has become somewhat cliché in academia – it is thrown around a bit too casually (especially in art history and studio art programs). Part of the skepticism around the female gaze emerges from the acknowledgement that women still face such incredible amounts of inequality – that it remains the power dynamic (socially/culturally) that truly defines the negative power of the gaze. However, post-feminists might claim that it is a bit simplistic to suggest that if men hold the power (politically, economically, institutionally) their gaze is inherently objectifying, voyeuristic, and ideologically violent – and that women could therefore not occupy such a power position. Such attitudes might very well constitute the disempowerment of feminism or perhaps a negation of the ideological functions of representation as they pertain to women’s struggle for equality.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, my concern here is with the potential presence of a new set of visual practices employed by a contingent of emerging artists. The post-feminist moniker, if applied in our current cultural context, suggests a binary between what would be

construed as “progressive” versus “regressive” art practices (Jones 1993, 25). Falling under the regressive would certainly be the continued preoccupation with masculinist desires and phallogocentrism – contrasted against a progressive move toward an aesthetics that naturalizes feminist agency and claims a certain privilege as a matter of fact. In that regard, would the presence of a female gaze disrupt the traditional empowerment/disempowerment binary (in terms of the interaction between the image-maker and the subject)? Art theorist Amelia Jones is adamant that any universalist reading of women’s art rely “on the maintenance of certain modernist and ultimately masculinist models of artistic value” (25). While I certainly agree with Jones that critiques of feminist art by mainstream (and largely white male) critics and scholars tend toward the universalist, which is ultimately an undermining gesture – there is still a decisive shift in the visual practices of women artists that foregrounds the female gaze. Whether or not this shift can be decisively characterized as universal is yet to be determined, but in my formulation, it does not inherently constitute an act of disempowerment.

### Selfie or self-portrait?

While Tasker and Negra (2007) are quite harsh in their assessment of post-feminist media culture, I find something much more salient and meaningful: namely the rise of a newly politicized and empowered female presence. Many young women in the blogosphere self-consciously characterize themselves as “intersectional feminists”: as women concerned with gender equality, but not at the expense of other oppressions – namely racial, sexual, and class-based. The term selfie has complicated and reframed cultural understandings of photographic self-representation in such a way that it perverts and stigmatizes a gesture that is mobilized for a diversity of reasons.

There is perhaps a distinction to be made between the popular notion of the selfie: the visual expression of vanity that is ubiquitous on social media sites like Facebook – and the more artistically motivated photographic self-portrait. As a visual form they can be totally indistinguishable, but the intentions that drive their production and social function vary greatly. Photographer Francesca Romeo, an active blogger and self-portrait taker, exhibits her work in galleries, yet she is also an avid user of social media – specifically Tumblr and Instagram: both online forums where she can distribute an array of images from spontaneously taken cell phone shots, to lushly composed photographs taken with a medium-format film camera. Born in 1976 in Fremont, California, Romeo’s images are beautiful, if not brutally frank explorations of addiction, indulgence, friendship, death, and the complexities of intimacy. Her photographic series and accompanying documentary *Mars* (2000–2002), chronicled her time as a bartender at the legendary Mars Bar, located in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The photographs are black and white, and have a gritty, saturated tonality that gives them a harrowingly timeless quality. *Elegy*, the artist’s follow-up series of color photographs, picks up where *Mars* leaves off, and intimately follows the lives of close friends as they struggle with everyday life. Her subjects, many of which are men, are clearly suffering from some form of addiction – and the excesses of their daily routine, combined with the extremity of bar life, is clearly visible in their expressions. Many of the bar’s regulars have since succumbed to their addictions and Romeo captures the horrors of these experiences with a heartbreaking clarity (Romeo 2009a, 2009b).

In certain instances, *Mars* is deceptively reminiscent of Nan Goldin’s famous series *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, though the young photographer’s work is less narratively romantic and intentionally aesthetic. A more apt comparison might be Swedish

photographer Anders Petersen's infamous series *Café Lemintz*. There is something unapologetically authoritative, and disquietingly exploitive about Romeo's suite of images. *Mars* is often difficult to process, because the photographs reveal a problematic set of relations between image-maker and subject. Romeo is participant, enabler, and exploiter simultaneously. She often speaks about the problematic nature of being an entitled white female both engaging in and documenting the self-destructive activities of largely disempowered individuals. Her ability to remove herself from those circumstances at any given time – and fall back on a support system unavailable to her subjects – creates a palpable source of tension that permeates the entire series. And that objectifying distance is disturbingly contrasted with the extreme intimacy necessary to construct such images.

If anything, issues of social class, and a certain sense of entitlement that I felt in commenting upon my environment were at play in the mars bar work. Because I had the perspective of the bartender, and dysfunction was the norm, I held this incredibly complex position of being at once: enabler, critic, confidant, friend, lover, voyeur and participant (as well as deriving my income from all the people that I was documenting). I was also generally, more educated than my subjects, which lends itself to further complications. I derived my power from knowing that the people around me were disenfranchised, and that the majority of them would not progress out of the bar and into productive lives (though I don't think I was entirely conscious of this at the time). And because I was trusted, because I had built relationships with my customers prior to filming them, it was with relative ease that I was able to make the work. Other filmmakers and photographers had tried to do projects about the mars bar, but they never got very far because they didn't understand the incredibly volatile dynamics of the environment, so they would always end up taking what amounted to "slumming it" type tourist snapshots. I actually knew the life histories of most of my subjects. (from interview with Romeo 2010, 25 September 2013)

I mention Romeo's more formal portraits, because it is within this work where a distinctly female gaze is established: one where the artist forcefully constructs an alternative way of looking that is unapologetically female. In other words, it aggressively asserts a specifically female visual experience and aesthetic point of view. It is a gesture that personifies the political dimensions of selfie culture as a young woman's form of visual expressiveness. Romeo's portraits of others reveal an intimacy and interiority that she demands of her own self-representations, and therefore the selfie enables for the most intimate dimensions of private life to be revealed and exposed. The forced candor is where the exploited force of her photographic practice emanates from – though it is also where her feminist agency is established as a form of resistance. There are those who might suggest that, as a young woman in a male-dominated society (and art world), the agency Romeo wields as an image-maker is ultimately undermined – or less effective. That reading would be reductive, and surely, power functions in more complex ways than that. It would be more accurate to suggest that the agency she claims is aggressively feminist, while her gaze embodies the kind of exploitive force most often associated with male photographers (Figure 2).

Perhaps more important is that Romeo's photography envisions a space (and working method) for women artists that is not concerned with talking back to men. When looking carefully at the photography of Francesca Romeo, it is hard not to think about Mulvey's (2009) famous essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in which she explores the voyeuristic tendencies in mainstream Hollywood cinema. Mulvey was rightly concerned with the manner in which women were portrayed (all too often as hyper-sexualized fetish objects for male viewing pleasure; that women



Figure 2. Francesca Romeo, *Ryan*, 2009. © [Francesca Romeo]. Reproduced by permission of artist.

functioned as the “image,” or the object of representation, that is subject to the now-mythical male gaze). There is little argument there. But how do we begin to think about the manner in which women see beyond the traditional power dynamic (active male image-maker/passive female subject)? Is there any other way to think about what and how women see that builds upon these dynamics? For example, it would be hard to imagine a more uneven power relationship than that between Romeo and her subjects in *Mars*. This is not to say that her work is intentionally exploitive or demeaning of her subjects. But there is a sense of bravado – or a type of authorial ease that permeates the work. There is nothing restrained or apologetic about her gaze. The way Romeo sees has force and that quality defines both her photography and filmmaking efforts. The issue of female agency in feminist representational strategies has long been debated. As a result, an argument could be made that for many feminist intellectuals; it is unsettling to think of a young entitled female fully embodying the exploitive authorship traditionally associated with male artists (Jones 2002; Leonard 2011). That notion is relatively new. In fact, these attitudes are similar to

the criticisms of exploitation directed toward Nan Goldin in the 1990s. Golden is often credited (or perhaps blamed) with creating the heroin-chic aesthetic that emerged in fashion circles in the 1990s (Garratt 2002).

This problematic is repeatedly evidenced in the conceptual strategies of female photography students – where their work could be read as perhaps too concerned with critiquing and subverting the male gaze – while failing to ponder the complex power dynamics that impact their own acts of looking. Should they consider that there is such a thing as empowered female looking? In that regard, Romeo's production does not need to claim, emulate, or appropriate the agency or brashness that is so synonymous with male artists (particularly photographers) as a form of affectation. Her work embodies this quality inherently. Both *Mars* and *Elegy* are disquieting precisely because of the agency she wields over her subjects.

Her portraiture functions as a staging to explore the very nature of authorial power – and often as a platform to reassert that authority over her male subjects. In so doing, she harnesses the potency of photographic portraiture as a means to reclaim what was taken or lost in past moments of intimacy. Considering Romeo's conceptual approach in terms of the power she wields over her sitters – can female photographers dominate their subjects (particularly men) . . . can they exploit, sexualize, or simply objectify? If women wield “the power of the look” then are they in turn non-exempt from the perils of image making? Romeo speaks openly about intentionally embodying and wielding the gaze of an imagined male viewer – or simply wrestling with her sexual past through the camera:

The female gaze . . . I find that when I shoot men that they look like children to me. They become vulnerable in a way that is always unexpected, no matter how old they are. And it's such a strange experience for me, because almost all of the men I have photographed, I have also had sex with at some point in my life. I only state that because oftentimes my impulse to photograph these guys is born of some unvoiced desire on my part to revisit something intimate, or create a context that might lend itself to eroticism, and that's what in fact happens when I am looking at them, is that my maternal impulse emerges, and in some way, the act of photographing them becomes a way of taking care of them . . .

. . . The gaze that I use to look at myself, is almost always in reference to an imagined male viewer and is constructed from years of feeling confused about my own supposed femininity – both denying it and amplifying it, because that is what we are taught implicitly as women – that somehow our sexuality should be wielded as a force in any given situation to get what we want. And so much of my photography is rooted in a history of responding to male artists with their brash, raw, irreverent and misogynist impulses, and wanting to somehow emulate them and destroy them at the same time. At the basis I think are common threads (at least I find) of vulnerability, a desire to get close, a need to rebel and a constant process of having to assert oneself in response to male domination while concurrently wanting to feel “safe” in the presence of men. (from interview with Romeo 2010, 25 September 2013)

The relation between image making and female self-empowerment is a dominant feature of Romeo's photographic practice and the self-portrait is always present. Romeo's intervention (which can be characterized as a type of feminist representational politics) seeks to break from a fixation with the male gaze; a gesture that she describes as a means to claim agency, while still acknowledging the struggle against a patriarchal logic.

Romeo, like many young female photographers of her generation, have been influenced by Second-Wave Feminist critiques, most notably Laura Mulvey's



aforementioned canonical writing on the male gaze and female representation in the cinema. In it, Mulvey (2009) introduces the term “male gaze” and critically explores how gendered power dynamics are evidenced, maintained and consumed in popular cinematic representation. On her Tumblr blog *Notes on the Divine, Notes on Despair*, the photographer posts a mix of portraits and self-portraits that are interspersed with written diaristic entries that poetically recount the intricacies and banalities of her life. Romeo’s “selfies” are more self-consciously aesthetic than what we might associate with social media: they are beautifully lit, with warm and saturated tones, and sculptural light. Combined with the diary entries, Romeo’s self-portraits bring a sense of drama and melodramatic grandeur to the everydayness of life – which highlights the self-aggrandizing and myth-making force of the Internet as a powerful means for self-definition and creative reinvention. However, the tension between the selfie and the self-portrait converges in her image-making practice in interesting ways, because, while feminist agency drives much of her work, the trivializing of the selfie tends to reduce or diminish her more heady aesthetic aspirations. That said, Romeo has always taken self-portraits, even though she rejects the term “selfie,” which for her has negative and belittling connotations:

Selfies to me are something entirely different than self-portraiture, though technically they are exactly the same. I was surprised when I first heard the term, because it was voiced in a comment under a picture I posted on instagram and phrased as an insult, “Ha, I never thought you would be the kind of girl to take selfies.” Which struck me as odd and made me feel embarrassed, and a part of me wanted to justify myself by claiming that I was a photographer and have been taking self-portraits since I was 7 years old and why couldn’t the person that left that comment just fuck off . . .

I think the big shift for me between my work as an artist and whatever I post on instagram is that the art is considered, has depth, is contextualized by themes and metaphors that run throughout a body of work, while the instagram stuff may look the same as my other work because I have a certain style, or are attracted to certain ways of lighting an image, but that the format doesn’t lend itself to profundity because my audience is preconceived before I even make an image – so there is no spontaneity – it is merely an advertisement. (from interview with Romeo, 25 September 2013)

### **Social media self-fashioning and the selfie as political activism**

While Romeo makes a distinction between the selfie and the self-portrait (Figure 3), Vivian Fu and Noorann Matties reject this difference and therefore their work tends to blur the line between these designations. The enigmatic work of Taiwanese-American photographer Vivian Fu has intrigued me for the past three years and has been instrumental in my ever-evolving interest in Internet-based forms of self-portraiture. Fu is part of an emergent generation of photographers that has developed almost exclusively within social media circles. Fu is a master at self-promotion and is keenly aware of the needs and interests of young women who spend considerable amounts of time online. Blogging culture has become an extremely powerful force that has created complex social networks and affiliations between individuals who, in most instances, live great distances from each other. In fact, one of the most remarkable features of blogging culture is the way that complete strangers – often separated by great geographic distances – form communities and lasting bonds that inspire creative collaboration.<sup>9</sup> Fu has become known for her self-portrait work that focuses on her sexuality and her relationship with her white boyfriend, who she met while attending art



Figure 3. Francesca Romeo, *Self portrait at the bar, in between coasts*, 2013. © [Francesca Romeo]. Reproduced by permission of artist.

school at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Fu, like many of her fellow female photographers, is obsessed with the work of Nan Goldin and seeks to create her own facsimile of the elder artist's saturated, gritty, realism and intimacy. Goldin's snapshot, heroin-chic style, has become the standard for lifestyle photography and hipster aesthetics of the Internet generation. Fu's photography bears a similarity to other young female artists of her generation like Petra Collins and Sandy Kim, both of whom are protégés of photographer Ryan McGinley (Freeman 2013). McGinley built his representation as a chronicler of youth culture, with his grainy, saturated images of young people who populated New York's urban underworld. Blurring the lines between documentary, fine art, and fashion, McGinley perfected an aesthetic that could be defined as a type of subcultural chic, that has its roots in the photography of Larry Clark, Goldin, and the late artist Dash Snow (a friend and collaborator of McGinley).

Working in a similar mode to her forebears and contemporaries, Fu shoots exclusively in film, preferring the 35 mm point-and-shoot camera aesthetic. For more formal and conceptual work, she uses a medium-format camera, however, like Romeo, she is extremely active on the social networking sight Instagram, sharing cell phone pics that document her life. It is her snapshot "selfie-style" self-portraits that have garnered the most attention – specifically the images that explore the intimacies of her romantic relationship. Fu is rather outspoken about the importance of the "selfie-style" self-portrait as a radical form of self-definition: one that enables for the undoing and interrogation of painful ethnic stereotypes:

I have always been aware of racialized stereotypes. Self-portraiture became a way for me to own my identity as an Asian-American woman. I wasn't really any of the

representations of Asian women that were being shown to me, which were either highly submissive and infantilized or very aggressive femme fatale types, and really, those ideas of Asian women probably only really exist because they are archetypes made up by white dudes. I wanted to show myself as an Asian woman the way that I was that differed greatly from these pre-existing ideas about Asian women. I am also a sexual person and self-portraiture and the documentation of my romantic relationships was also a way to own my sexuality as MINE and not as a something that was to bring my partner pleasure . . .

. . . I want to show my strength and vulnerability, I want to be defiant of the visual imagery that I was presented with that sought to make me feel proud of my culture from the perspective of white men, whose sole intentions were to objectify and sexualize and eroticize me. I wanted to shake the ideas that were placed upon me and my body and my identity because my parents came from the east and my eyes were slanted and my skin is yellow that seemed to overshadow the person that I actually am. My photographs, although quiet, are my rebellion. (From interview with photographer Vivian Fu on 28 September 2013)

Fu's self-portrait work extends beyond selfies and snapshot-style images, into the realm of constructed narrative in her ongoing series, *Asian Girls*. The series was inspired by the artist's discomfort around other Asian women, who she perceived as a threat and intrusion when among her predominantly white friends. In an interview, Fu stated that she was antagonistic and rejecting of her Chinese background in her youth, which she believed stemmed from feelings of internalized racism:

I think that this was also sort of heightened by the fact that I had very few Asian friends growing up, mostly because I grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood, but also because I carried (and probably still do carry) some level of internalized racism. I think I viewed myself as "different" from the other Asian girls I knew because I at the time viewed myself as more "westernized" and interested in "white people stuff," which was probably the product of some stupid juvenile rebellion against my parents which translated stupidly into rebellion against the culture that my parents tried to impart onto me. (From interview with photographer Vivian Fu on 28 September 2013)

In the *Asian Girls* series, Fu takes full-color photographic portraits of herself with another Asian woman. Taken with the lushness of medium-format film, the images are subtly evocative of hidden tensions between people of color that are engendered by societal racism. In each photo, Fu and her sitter gently touch each other: a gesture that, in another context would seem benign, but here it represents a profound rejection of the forces of intolerance that create lasting divisions and self-hatreds. In *Me and Yui, Castro, April 2014* (Figure 4), Fu and a friend sit closely together on a porch, each gazing into the camera. The *mise-en-scene* is purposefully mundane, but the interaction between the two youthful subjects conveys a tension that is palpable, but not overtly articulated. It is a series about the subtleties and psychological complexities of intra-ethnic conflict. There is something extraordinary about Fu's contradictory engagement with the gritty realism of Goldin, which she rearticulates as a young 20-something Asian woman's assimilationist narrative – and her more politically self-aware *Asian Girls* series, that seems to interrogate her own racial longings. Even the aesthetic greatly differs between the two bodies of work. The documentary-style images have a DIY (do it yourself) feel about them that compliments what appears to be a self-consciously hipstery documentation of her descent into the reckless abandon of subcultural whiteness. Grainy and often out-of-focus images of her heavily tattooed friends, nude self-portraits, and heavily saturated shots of domestic intimacy populate her



Figure 4. Vivian Fu, *Me and Yui, Castro*, April 2014. © [Vivian Fu]. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

blog and professional website. However, the *Asian Girls* series has the pristine aesthetic of professional fine art work: it is at once austere, intellectual, and serious in its self-awareness.

Carefully composed and conceptualized, the *Asian Girls* series has none of the overt sexuality that Fu plays with in her documentary-style work. She resists playing with stereotypes of Asian women, imaging her herself and her sitters with a hint of modesty and conservatism in dress. We see this in another image from the series entitled



*Me and Wenxin, Mission, April 2014* (Figure 5), a beautiful photograph of Fu and friend imaged frontally and standing shoulder-to-shoulder. Framed horizontally, the image captures its two subjects as they peer downward at the camera. The visual effect creates a tone of defiance, willfulness, and strength, as the subjects' gaze is directed seriously and imposingly at the viewer. Based in San Francisco, Fu utilizes the city in every shot, in this instance, a city block within the Mission neighborhood. In a sense, Fu and her subject are engulfed by congested buildings and power lines, but they still manage to convey an intensity that is imposing in its affective resonance. The contrast between each series is exemplified in a photograph entitled *Bruise, Mission, July 2014* (Figure 6), a cropped image of the artist lying on her stomach and skirt hiked up just enough to expose a large heart-shaped bruise. Her head fully cropped out of the image, Fu's portrait is a take on Nan Goldin's similarly composed 1980 photograph *Heart-Shaped Bruise, NYC* – though the younger artist's reimagining is more self-consciously aesthetic and is reminiscent of the reclining nudes and Orientalist odalisques immortalized in the history of modern Western painting. The red and blue stripes of her blouse, bright purple skirt, and turquoise, black, and purple leopard-print panties have a contrasting eloquence that appears more aware of its desire to find beauty in banality – yet, Fu is attempting to both construct and mythologize her physical attractiveness in such a manner that deviates dramatically from the psychological harshness of Goldin's abjection.



Figure 5. Vivian Fu, *Me and Wenxin, Mission, April 2014*. © [Vivian Fu]. Reproduced by permission of the artist.



Figure 6. Vivian Fu, *Bruise, Mission*, July 2014. © [Vivian Fu]. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

While Fu's photography is engaged in an overt politics of identity, this quality is often subsumed within a type of hipness that dulls the sting of its more heady explorations into the intricacies of race, gender and sexuality. A similar approach is at work in the photography of Noorann Matties, an artist in her early 20s, who Fu met initially online – eventually forming a friendship and aesthetic kinship.

Based in Baltimore, Maryland, Matties is a student at the prestigious Maryland Institute College of Art and like Fu, her slightly older San Francisco-based colleague, she shoots exclusively in 35 mm and medium-format film. Also an active blogger, the emergent photographer documents the goings-on of her daily life: relationships, health issues, creative crises, fashion and popular culture obsessions, and her ever-increasing engagement with body modification. However, the politics in her representational approach emanates most powerfully in her self-portrait work. Half Pakistani and half white, Matties's ethnically ambiguous subjectivity is always at the forefront of her images. Like Fu, many of her photographs seem to represent an individual struggling with both their privilege and their alterity, in social milieus that are predominantly white. And similarly to her compatriot, her images feel almost like an assimilationist ballad: tinged with desire and longing for acceptance and normativity – all while claiming the ideologically assigned gravity of racial difference. Petit, strikingly thin and heavily tattooed, Matties is a fascinating subject, whose brown skin and South Asian features belie her suburban art school hipsterism – a quality she is certainly aware of and fully maximizes.

What is perhaps most arresting about Matties's work is the convergence of gender-based and racial consciousness: a new representational politics that is speaking most powerfully to the complex lives of young women of color, whose experiences have never been acknowledged by either anti-racist movements in the USA, or by the



dictates of mainstream feminism. Despite her youth, Matties is extremely sophisticated in her engagement with gender and race, and she is rather outspoken about the importance of self-portraiture and selfies to her photographic practice:

I started imaging myself heavily when I was at a very solitary point in my life, there simply was no one else around to photograph so I turned the lens on myself. The reason, however, that I kept imaging myself was that I started to realize that I just wasn't seeing young brown women depicted the way I was photographing myself anywhere else. I remember growing up seeing nothing but white women shown on TV and online and in galleries and museums, it really messed with my sense of self and my sense of self worth as a little brown girl. I want to contribute to the visibility of brown women everywhere, and I want to do it in a way that is poignant and honest about the struggles that I and many other young women face. I want to make honest work and to be able to remember myself as I am, tears and zits and all. (From an interview with Matties on 19 April 2014)

Matties's unique brand of self-obsession breaks somewhat from Fu's interest in sexuality and racial stereotypes, and explores themes related to beauty routines, physical modification, and the physical and psychological toll caused by eating disorders. In one of her more compelling black-and-white self-portraits entitled, *Self Portrait as My Stomach* (2013) (Figure 7), Matties is imaged from the waist, so that her head and lower half of her body is cropped out of the picture frame. The image is carefully composed to only reveal the artist's bare midriff and just a hint of her breasts that peak out from beneath a white t-shirt, that is most likely being pulled upwards and held by her mouth, or pinched between her chin and chest. Sitting purposefully at her lower waist are the artist's hands, as they clasp a black Olympus point-and-shoot camera. The image has an awkward elegance to it: it is both beautiful and strained in its



Figure 7. Noorann Matties, *Self portrait as my stomach*, 2013. © [Noorann Matties]. Reproduced by permission of artist.



Figure 8. Vivian Fu, *Self portrait taking selfie*, December 2014. © [Vivian Fu] Reproduced by permission of artist.

compositional and physical dimensions, though it also conceals something that is allusive and difficult to pin down – a quality that rests somewhere between self-loathing and self-adoration. It is a theme that is repeated in Matties’s photographic series *Rituals* from 2014, a body of work that was featured in *The Huffington Post* in April 2014 (Parks 2014). *Rituals* is a series of snapshot portraits of young women, as they apply makeup in front of mirrors (Figure 8). In the artist’s own words, the photographs are meant to capture a very private and intimate moment:

Forced to examine ourselves in ways many normally avoid, *Rituals* as a project sought to capture the moment in which we our lives become devoid of distraction and we become intimately aware of ourselves. By photographing people’s personal beauty rituals I attempted to capture this awareness, this intimacy that occurs only when one is forced to examine their own body, the most basic thing that is theirs, and build upon it. (Matties 2014)

What stands out about the series is the remarkable diversity of subjects in terms of race and ethnicity. *Rituals* is deceptively banal in its capturing of something that is so commonplace as to be entirely overlooked – but it also assigns value to the private lives of young women, while still having criticality toward the often-unobtainable aesthetic demands placed upon them. The range of physical and ethnic types speaks to the devaluing of women who all-too-often fall outside of the normative beauty standards

promoted by Hollywood and the fashion industry. Although, I would argue that Matties is ultimately more concerned with advancing a decidedly female gaze. Should we be inclined to move beyond a judgmental reading of selfie culture, the female gaze emerges as the primary visual operation at work: a claimed representational agency that is as political as it is personal.

The uniqueness and specificity of Matties' gaze is at the heart of her ever-growing popularity. Her blog and photography website are dominated by selfies of various sorts, in fact, on both sites, there are dedicated sections for self-portraits where these images are accumulated. The types of selfies are incredibly diverse, from shots captured in bathroom mirrors, to the artist carefully posed in pastoral scenes, to the cheap playfulness of photo-booth portraits taken in shopping malls.

The photo-booth is becoming increasingly popular on the blogs of young women and Matties is an active user of these now dated forms of public image making. The photo-booth allows for the creation of multiple shots within a brief duration of time, allowing for strips of photographs in grid-like formations. The effect recalls a Warholian-style repetition whereby Matties presents herself as an icon of sorts. The very form itself grants a certain quality of value, yet in her photo-booth portraits, she displays various emotions that would normally be hidden. In one image, Matties is presented in two strips of vertically oriented portraits that are side-by-side. In the first headshot, she looks rather blank and emotionless, but as the images progress downwards, she begins to cry. Above the portraits are the words "I Love You." In another, we see Matties pinching the loose skin under her arm in one frame, in another is a cropped shot of her midsection with shirt raised as she pinches the fat on her waist, and in a third, she squeezes a patch of skin on her thigh. Each of her photo-booth portraits focus on some aspect of her physical appearance: none are conventional or idealizing and the cartoonish graphics above and below the images contain phrases like "Daddy's Little Girl" and "Fabulous Princess." Unlike Fu's overtly sexual self-portraits, Matties's selfies are incredibly melancholic in tone and focus more attention on the physical and health-related struggles that young women face – in fact, she is incredibly frank about her own struggles with Anorexia. As a visual diary, Matties's blog is a haven for young women fighting similar battles, even while it simultaneously functions as a fantasy space in which to be remade and ultimately desired and worshiped.

## Conclusion

The philosopher Slavoj Žižek once said that fantasy is not about an individual creating a scenario in which they get everything they want. On the contrary, an individual's fantasy is about creating a scenario in which "he or she is desired by others" (Žižek 2012). When Žižek uttered these words, he was thinking critically about the relationship between ideology and popular cinema – however, his rather playful explication of fantasy continues to find resonance when I consider the self-imaging strategies of young women in the age of social media. The selfie is so often regarded as a form of narcissism in the Freudian sense: a perversion whereby an individual "treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is usually treated . . . he strokes and fondles it till he obtains complete satisfaction" (Freud 1991, 3). In its most pessimistic characterization, to take selfies is to stroke and fondle the self in a masturbatory display of self-aggrandizement. Freud's pathologizing of narcissism was concerned with the relation between the ego and external objects – and we might surmise

that popular understandings of the selfie suggest a dysfunctional taking of oneself as a sexual object as a means of achieving validation and pleasure. In “The Young-Girl as Technique of the Self,” Tiqqun asks, “What is pleasure?” It is an important query when considering the role of pleasure within the bizarre world of social media egoism – particularly the largely female-driven landscape of “selfie-laden” blogging culture, where the spectacle of female bodies is the dominant driving force. The visual power of online self-portraiture is rooted in a type of pleasure that is voraciously claimed: an oppositional desire and enjoyment in oneself as a response to a culture of devaluing and misrepresentation. Tiqqun suggests that “[t]here is nothing in the Young-Girl’s life, even in the deepest zones of her intimacy, that escapes alienated reflexivity, that escapes the codification and the gaze of the Spectacle . . . *For the Young-Girl, what is most secret is also most public*” (2007, 48).

Vivian Fu’s photograph, *Self Portrait Taking Selfie*, perfectly embodies these notions in its self-conscious and highly constructed engagement with the artist’s own prolific and sexualized practice as a selfie-taker. Fu is well attuned to the public discourse on this mode of image making, stating: “To me this photograph is about my self awareness in my self portraiture. This is about my performance of imaging myself, but also about controlling even the image of myself imaging myself” (interview with Fu, 14 February 14). Freud’s problematic formulation of narcissism – the idea of taking oneself as a sexual object – is only useful in its most cynical and judgmental dimensions – but it also allows just one entry point into the contemporary phenomenon of Internet-based self-imaging. Fu’s intervention here is more satirical and more meaningfully holistic in its critique of a society dominated by an obsession with images. And it is important to remember that *Self Portrait Taking Selfie* is not a selfie, but rather a constructed narrative photographic tableau, that wields its self-conscious *mise-en-scene* in the service of making a meta-commentary on what, for many, is actually a meaningful and thoughtfully realized gesture. The image plays with the fraught matrix of seeing and being seen that the late writer Susan Sontag wrote of in her influential book, *On Photography* (2001). The selfie does not simply comment upon a narcissistic need to *see oneself* in an idealized state, rather it makes one aware of the predatory nature of looking: the voyeurism in gazing at others and the implied pleasure in knowing that one is being gazed upon. As Neil Evernden recounts in his critical reassessment of *On Photography*, Sontag states the following: “there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them . . . it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed” (Evernden 1985, 73). In this photo, Fu turns herself into an object to be viewed and adored, while simultaneously engaging in the predatory act of voyeurism. Like Žižek suggests in his thoughts on fantasy, Fu creates a scenario in which to be desired; but most importantly, she creates a scenario in which she can begin to desire herself.

In their *notes to self*, the young female photographers discussed in this essay, claim a representational agency that transcends the gender-specific slights and ideological trivializing of young women’s efforts to define themselves; to make themselves visible, in a cultural climate that continues to negate, ridicule, malign, and sexualize them. Maybe the selfie is an instinct of self-preservation: a survivorship reflex – and perhaps it is in the young woman’s representational contending with the most dehumanizing conditions of late capitalism, that they are able to envision themselves anew and to transcend the depreciatory vision that is so often imposed upon them.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes

1. For popular culture references to the selfie phenomenon, see Kardashian (2015), Fallon (2014), and “Selfie Blog,” (2015). The television show *Selfie*’s original run was scheduled for September–December in 2014, but was canceled by ABC on 7 November 2014.
2. For a comprehensive and fascinating breakdown of post-feminism’s emergence in intellectual culture, see Hall and Rodriguez (2003). The authors unpack the origins of the term post-feminism as it was introduced and eventually debated within popular media circles of the 1908s. In their analysis of past debates, the authors identify four postfeminist claims: support for the feminist movement has dramatically eroded; many women are becoming increasingly anti-feminist; there is an increasing sentiment that the movement is irrelevant; a new version of feminism has emerged that breaks from the past.
3. For critiques of post-blackness, see Baker and Simmons (2015), who argue that the term “post-black” represents the post-racial aspirations of an entitled black elite. The popular book *Who’s Afraid of Post-blackness: What It Means to Be Black Now* by Touré inspired Baker’s collection of essays (Touré 2012). Touré argues that popular notions of blackness are too rigidly defined; creating a notion of racial authenticity that excludes and demeans large segments of the African-American community. Despite Touré having never claimed a post-racial stance, there is a growing discourse that characterizes his arguments in such a manner.
4. Various scholars have studied the phenomenon of young women actively participating in online social media culture in the twenty-first century. One notable example is Schuster, who in her study of young women’s online activism and feminist engagement in New Zealand, argues that there is a generational divide that separates young women from second- and third-wave feminism (Schuster 2013). She further suggests that the technological divide between generations has the effect of concealing young women’s political participation from older feminists who are disconnected from Internet culture. Blogging culture and social media platforms like Facebook thus enable young women to connect despite significant geographic distances and demographic differences.
5. For an example of a popular blog on the social media platform Tumblr, see *Margot Darling*, <http://margotdarling.tumblr.com/>. Having amassed a significant following on social media, Margot regularly posts selfies depicting herself nostalgically as a 1950s-era pinup. Heavily adorned in theatrical makeup and costuming, she often poses in lingerie and other provocative outfits – while also discussing fashion, grooming, makeup routines, sex, and the daily banalities of her life.
6. For an in-depth critical unpacking of Cindy Sherman’s influence on younger generations of female photographers, see Dalton (2000). Dalton explores the evolution of performative self-portraiture as a conceptual gesture that many female photographers wield as a politically urgent and oppositional manner.
7. In her exploration of late artist Hannah Wilke’s (who died in 1993) photographic work documenting her battle with cancer, Amelia Jones locates a turn in performative self-portraiture away from a male gaze-centric critical approach, towards a very personal investigation into death and the complexities of identity (Jones 2002). For additional writing on feminist self-portrait photography in the postmodern age, see Lowenberg (1999).
8. As evidenced in online journalism and blogging circles online, there is a growing sentiment among young self-proclaimed feminists that the notion “male gaze” is outmoded and should be abandoned. The argument is that women should resist an over-fixation with the power



dynamics and gendered complexities of male viewing – in favor of a more assertive claiming of female agency. See Liu (2014).

9. For a detailed investigation into feminist blogging and politically engaged social media activity by young women in New Zealand, see Schuster (2013). She charts the growing popularity of the Internet as a forum for feminist activity, although she suggests that a divide is growing between elder (Second Wave) and younger (Third Wave) feminists, due in large part by the latter's embrace of technology. Schuster also explores the Internet (and social media) as a means for young feminists to build online communities and to develop a sense of belongingness.

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