Research Paper

Returning 'the Gaze': Does digital media art resist the objectification of women?

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Abstract

The main goal of this paper has been to analyze the works of three contemporary female artists: Cindy Sherman, Ann Hirsch and Erica Scourti, through key feminist theorists' writings. By comparing the literature to the artists' works a greater depth of understanding can be gained in contextualizing the image of women in society and in digital media art. Through an examination of feminist theory- particularly gender performance and 'the gaze'- I have explored how these artists respond and react to the images women, as present in contemporary society. I then examine how the artists use their work to comment on the role and perception of women in society and assess to what extent the focus, repetition and attempt to re-appropriate the power of the 'the gaze' through their art, helps or hinders the primary damage inflicted by 'the gaze'.

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Introduction

Women are objectified everywhere and at any opportunity. This week, *The Guardian* newspaper reported “TV ad for 'world's slimmest phone' banned for objectifying women”. Any medium that displays images has the potential to objectify women: television, newspapers, magazines, billboards, packaging, … the list is endless. The digitalization of media has provided another arena for the objectification of women to be sent through to our mobile phones, emails and browsers. Alongside the saturation of female objectification is resistance. In this essay I will be exploring the success and shortcomings of digital media art to resist the objectification of women.

To objectify something is not necessarily negative or harmful. To objectify is to ‘”treat (someone) as an object rather than as a person” (Merriam-webster.com, 2015). Throughout history and all over the world people have used objects for means of worship and to symbolize what was not there. Thirty-thousand years BC we have relics of humankind’s objectification of the human form, other animals and nature. Five-thousand years ago the Aztecs made use of turquoise for all kinds of ornaments, relics and idols; two thousand years ago the early Christians had a plethora of relics and statues related to the life of Jesus of Nazareth; the 5th century had Ming dynasty produced beautiful vases. To imagine the objects that mankind has produced is to picture and see into humanity’s history, culture, values and beliefs. The way objects carry and represent culture makes them fascinating and illuminating in the study of our world.

Objectification, however, can have a more sinister, detrimental and harmful effect on the subject objectified and in this essay I will focus on the objectification of women. In contemporary Western society and with the ever-present image in the digitalized world of the internet, we have become accustomed to images of women portrayed as highly sexualized objects wrapped up in consumer, capitalist culture in the pursuit of capital gain. To gain a deeper understanding of the way in which women have been objectified in images I will firstly explore Laura Mulvey’s concept of ‘the gaze’.
In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), Laura Mulvey presents ‘the gaze’ as when the spectator – who is always a heterosexual man – looks at a woman as a

sexualized object. Mulvey develops her concept of the gaze by examining the ways in which women have been portrayed in cinema as 'the Other' to men, an object for male consumption, in which the woman or women are trapped in men's sight, unable to have a voice or make an impression. Mulvey explains that women are "bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning". (Mulvey, 1975, p.804) By this, I understand Mulvey to be presenting the argument that through the male-creation of images of women, men project their thoughts, ideas of women, including their "phantasies and obsessions", onto the image of the woman and through control of language – perhaps even the voice and speech of women – men effectively muffle, even mute, the actual, real, embodied, subjective woman. The woman is no longer a living and breathing being, she is not a real person, a 'maker of meaning' she is the 'bearer' of men's meaning.

In this essay I am first going to explore the history of the gaze as evidenced in John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) and briefly sketch some of the psychoanalytic theorists that Mulvey uses to develop her idea of the gaze. To further understand the significance of the gaze and how it relates to the objectification of women I will explore Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler's ideas of 'performing femininity' and our understanding of gender. I will then evaluate the work of three contemporary digital artists: Cindy Sherman, Anne Hirsch and Erica Scourti, that, I argue *return* the gaze thus resisting and challenging the prevalence of female objectification in popular culture.

Part 1: What is 'The Gaze'?

In the chapter "Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look", Mulvey states:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly. (Mulvey, 1975, p.808)

How Mulvey reaches this point is by looking at Freudian theories of scopophilia (the pleasure in looking), which objectifies the one being looked at and gives power to the one who is looking. Mulvey discusses Freud's examples of scopophilia as "taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling gaze." (Mulvey, 1975, p.806). For Freud, this develops from childhood in which the child develops a "curiosity about other people's genital and bodily functions, about the presence or absence of the penis" (Mulvey, 1975, p.806).

Mulvey also draws on Lacan's mirror theory (1932), which argues that the infant comes to understand his or her sense of self and form their ego and through our reflection of things outside ourselves, most literally in the form of a mirror, but also through the 'mirroring' of others outside ourselves, such as parents to children. We come to know about ourselves via the world, from outside in. For Lacan, the development of the ego is inherently unstable because we develop our sense of 'self', of 'who we are' by seeing ourselves as definite subjects, clearly and distinctly reflected in the mirror. We interiorize this sense of a clear and distinct self that we see in the mirror before us into our inner world, and believe our sense of self (ego) to be equally robust and definite. As the infant develops, she is taught about the world around her through words which are inherently tied to images. It is the fact that our worldview, our very being-in-the-world, is always already understood through the medium of words, with their associations, meanings and symbolic value.

Bearing in mind Freud's notion of scopophilia and Lacan's insight into the web of meaning behind words and images, Mulvey further develops the idea of the gaze by claiming:

> In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (Mulvey, 1975, p.808-809)

Here Mulvey suggests that through the popular presentation of women, women become an object to be looked at, they are ascribed the meaning of 'to-be-looked-at-ness.' Feminist theory argues that this meaning or symbolic value of women is deep rooted and entrenched in our culture and is harmful and oppressive. If, as we will look at below, the representation of women has been that of the object that is gazed upon and prepared only for the male viewer to objectify, we (both men and women) are taught through a visual language that a woman's value and worth is equal to that of a mere object. Furthermore, through the male dominance of the female image and its mass replication, men not only project *their* 'phantasies and obsessions' but also use an internal, psychological dominance over women by mass-presenting an unrealistic image of 'the woman'.

When analyzing the gaze, it is important to understand the history of images and the role they have played in society. "Images were once made with a spiritual value.. to worship and represent what was absent" (Berger, 1972, p.3) . Many religious paintings and sculptures "made out of worship gave images and objects a significant value" (Berger, 1972, p.3). In John Berger's essay *The Ways of Seeing* he presents the history of the created image and how it has transformed. In looking at the reasons that images came about Berger states that "Images were first made to conjure up the appearances of something that was absent" (Berger, 1972, p.3). These images then began to outlast what they represented. Once this became apparent it was *the image* that captured a moment of time and represented how someone or something had been. Berger goes on to say that "this was the result in an increasing consciousness of individuality" (Berger, 1972, p.3). By the beginning of the Renaissance when portraiture was a popular form of capturing ones own image, it became apparent that it was not only the image itself that was created but the eye that painted the image – the artist him/herself – was part of the final product. This meant that now the artist who created the image had influence over what was produced.

Not only is the work of art a product of the subject and the artist, there is also the meanings that the viewer applies to an image which gives it its value. Berger goes onto to say that "when image presented as art, people look at it with learnt

assumptions: beauty, truth, genius, civilization, form" (Berger, 1972, p.4). It is the learnt assumptions that are applied in the creation of the image as well as the learnt assumptions of the viewer that create the spectacle of an artwork. Berger goes on to explain how the use of photography drastically changed the way we captured and viewed images. Photography enabled images to be duplicated and reproduced which changed their meaning and value because they could now be mass produced and placed into any environment.

Walter Benjamin, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) discusses how film "burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling." (Benjamin, 1936) For Benjamin, the most technologically advanced media of the time, film, changes the role of the audience. Paintings once had the viewer applying their understandings onto the painting, now with film understanding is impressed upon the viewer. It is of huge social significance that we understand this point, as it is this time that there comes a change with cinema where art departs from criticism to pleasure and enjoyment.

Berger then presents the fascinating insight that the presentation of women in art effects how the woman sees herself. Berger states:

> ultimately she watches herself being watched. From a very young age women are taught to observe themselves as a man would observe them, because how she is viewed by men is detrimental to the worthiness of her life. (Berger, 1972, p.40).

If it is true that we always see women through the male gaze as an object we can only see women in one of "three ways: how men look at women, how women see themselves and how women look at other women." (Berger, 1972, p.39)

When looking at the gaze and woman as the object it is important to explore topics where we understand the role of women in society and how women are perceived. In Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949), she states, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (de Beauvoir, 1949, p.273). De Beauvoir discusses the role of women as being made weak and futile in comparison to men, that there is a clear lack of significance in being a woman in a society where "he is the

Absolute – she is the other" (de Beauvoir, 1949, p.16). This, I believe, is still relevant and applicable today in understanding women's position in the world.

In the 1990's, the writings of Judith Butler were widely circulated, as she challenged contemporary ideas of gender politics. In the age of postmodernist thinking, she clearly unraveled notions of the 'essential', the 'natural', the 'real' and deconstructed the binary worldview that has continued for so long. For Butler, like many of her predecessors, there is nothing essential to the man or woman endowed with physical characteristic such as having a penis, vagina, breasts, in which they will inevitably take up the male or the female guise, the hetero or the homosexual role. Instead, Butler emphasizes the element of the 'roles' we play, that our sex and our gender and our sexuality are not pre-given, internal states that we 'naturally' manifest, but suggests instead that we 'perform', enact, take on our sex, gender and sexuality:

> How and where I play at being [a lesbian] is the way in which that "being" gets established, instituted, circulated, and confirmed. This is not a performance from which I can take a radical distance, for this is a deep-seated play, psychically entrenched play, and this "I" does not play its lesbianism as a role. Rather it is through the repeated play of this sexuality that the "I" is insistently reconstituted as a lesbian "I" (Butler, 1990, p.221)

Butler emphasizes 'repetition' in creating our sense of identity, which, at the same time, establishes the instability and fluidity of our identities. If the creation and maintenance of the self is a performance, a performance that must be continually repeated, Butler argues that "there is no "I" that precedes the gender." (Butler, 1990, p.221)

If Butler is right and gender is performative, the category 'woman' and 'female' does not exist as a fact of nature and as truth about the world – as something essential to the individual, as given by an individual's genitalia – instead sex and gender are presented as a performance 'prior to culture':

> As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "predicursive," prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts. (Butler, 1990, p.10)

The gaze thus becomes what it is to be a woman, the opposite and other to man, which enables men to retain a sense of control and domination of women.

Part 2: How do digital media artists use art to 'return the Gaze'?

Cindy Sherman's works are images of herself. She stylises herself as her own model and shoots her images to depict many different characters. In most of her series of works she represents different women in different environments. She uses photography to explore portraiture and sculpture.

Sherman's first highly acclaimed works titled *Untitled Film Stills* offer what could be mistaken as actual film stills from a movie as she captures herself in various locations. Even though these photographs are of Sherman, she is non-recognizable as she uses different wigs, make-up and costumes to capture what seem to be different women in each photo.

Fig 1, *Untitled Film Still 21*, 1978

Fig 2, *Untitled Film Still 3*, 1977

Fig 3, *Untitled Film Still 12*, 1978

We can really apply Mulvey's text to Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* series here. Mulvey discusses that a part of the magic of Hollywood was its "skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure" (Mulvey, 1975, p.805), and this made sure that the language of 'patriarchal order' succeeded. Sherman's works here depict scenes that are influenced by 1950's film and Sherman mimics the masquerade of women's roles in cinema. Armed with a camera Sherman makes use of photography to "transformed subject into object" (Barthes, 1980 p.13).

In another series of works titled *Centrefolds* Sherman captures herself again dressed and made up to be different characters, this time however the images are slightly more risky (at the time rejected for publication) due to their nature of women looking fragile and in some cases what seem to be aggressive and violent imagery.

Fig 4, *Untitled #93*, 1981

Fig 5, *Untitled #85*, 1981

Fig 6, *Untitled #86*, 1981

In Sherman's work she offers us some interesting ideas. She helps us to throw out the notion that the camera only captures what's there, as everything her camera captures is a lie. As discussed by Walter Benjamin, photography gives us the ability to capture images that "escape natural vision" (Benjamin, 1936). This is very true in Sherman's works as everything is staged even though it looks completely natural. This is comparable when looking at images produced by the media, that images or the subjects must be carefully constructed in order to present us with a lie that seems as though it is the truth.

In relation to the male gaze we understand that Sherman's camera is in fact the male observer, and she (as the object) is the female observed. This is to say that even though Sherman is a woman herself the very basic fundamentals by which we communicate a woman's image through media is by default through the eyes of men. To apply Mulvey's text to Sherman's works it could be said that Sherman is offering a 'free for all' to the voyeur, that the "Spectator is given illusion of looking in on a private world. Repressed desire onto the performer." (Mulvey, 1975, p.807)

In Sherman's body of work titled *Sex Pictures* we understand that in fact what Sherman may be doing is subverting the male gaze, by offering us pictures of grotesquely formed dolls mashed together in highly sexual positions. It is a challenge to the viewer to work out what is happening because the genders, positions and body parts are not clear. To compare this series of work to Judith Butler's comments on the construction of gender:

> "the body" is itself a construction, as are the myriad "bodies" that constitute the domain of gendered subjects. Bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender; the question then emerges: To what extent does the body come into being in and through the mark(s) of gender? How do we reconceive the body no longer as a passive medium or instrument awaiting the enlivening capacity of a distinctly immaterial will?

No longer here do we find images of a frail object to be observed, but instead an assault on the eyes as these bodies become severed, isolated and hyper-sexualised.

Fig 7, *Untitled #250*, 1992

Fig 8, *Untitled #177*, 1987

Fig 9, *Untitled #263*, 1992

Through her works, I believe Sherman is commenting upon identity and how women are seen by society. Through her manipulation of the female and male subject and their bodies', I believe she shows us the illusory nature of images, that societies construct women and their role. Erica Scourti, in her essay *The Female Fool,* claims:

> Gender performativity is reliant on repetition for its efficacy by casting herself in the role of a number of stereotypical female roles: goddess, a house wife, a working girl, a professional, an earth mother, and a lesbian. (Scourti, 2013, p.19)

Sherman is successful in playing with her audience, as they are given no real reference as to where her images are from. However all the images are familiar because they are a repetition of roles and images acted out by women in society and in media. Although Sherman herself does not claim to make her artworks with any feminist intent, it is evident that what she is producing are the familiar images of women that we encounter in the media daily. As Sherman uses mannequins, she literally objectifies the woman which invites the viewer to hold power over the viewed, forcing the woman into the role of the victim. Through the lens of ideology and the relationship of binaries: by rendering the woman as weak, her opposite – the man – is powerful.

Ann Hirsch is a feminist digital artist whose works explore issues relating to popular culture in media and online trends. Through her different personas she creates and explores issues relating to how women are viewed in digital media through writing, performance instillations, you tube videos, social media and involving herself in a reality television.

In Hirsch's reality TV show experiment she uses the show to experience what it is to be a 'fame whore' – one who will do anything to be famous – and looks at what challenges one must face at being accepted into the world of reality TV. In 2010 Hirsch successfully became a contestant on the VH1 reality television show *Frank the Entertainer in a Basement Affair*, in which 15 women lived together in one house and competed for the heart of Frank.

Fig. 10, Ann Hirsch with Frank on VH1 Reality TV Show

Once Hirsch secures her place on the TV show she finds it difficult to carry on her performance and finds herself feeling quite withdrawn and pushed to the background whilst women with fake tans and hair extensions take over. Hirsch's character is then carved out as being the 'real' girl, the shy and quite one. It is when Hirsch performs a rap on the show where she blurts out obscenities in front of Frank's parents and VH1 viewers, that she is then ejected off the show.

It could be said here that Hirsch didn't originally fit into any category of the idealized woman so the production team pushed her into the background, shaping her as a quiet and nice girl – not showing off or using her body to gain attention – and when she disrupts the illusion of the female character the production team have set for her she is dismissed. By her outburst she shows another side to her character and this is not in the media's ideal of women, that shows a woman as having multiple layers to her personality: rude, crude, shy, happy, nice, showy, quiet, these characteristics are never shown all at once as part of women's personalities.

Once the show was complete Hirsch analyzed in 3 essays what it took to become a 'fame whore' herself, and what she observed as 'fame whore' behavior. In successfully managing to become a contestant in the first place she discusses that a woman must fit a certain aesthetic, by appearance, responses and offering up that she will do anything to be famous and on TV. Even though Hirsch struggles with the world of reality TV and lets loose eventually, her attempt and success was by subscribing to the 'fame whore' guide in fooling TV execs to get her on the show in the first place. In taking part in the show Hirsch was interested in the female stereotypes that were being generated by the genre of reality TV by using real people. She discusses that there was in fact a formula to being a successful candidate, that one must vie for attention be it good or bad. In Hirsch's experience in dealing with the production team at very early stages, it became evident that the masquerade and performance of femininity must be amplified in order to gain access to the world of reality TV.

In the performance of woman in this case the most important feature first and foremost is sex appeal, for a woman to hold an audience's attention must have sex appeal. Also to maintain a balance of desire and attention while seeming oblivious, a tight rope the woman must walk in order to 'succeed'. Hirsch herself armoured with humour fell back un noticed and disliked for her failure as a woman, as without sex appeal she simply had nothing to offer the audience. It can be said that she had performed the role of the woman incorrectly and this disrupted the illusion of what the TV producers wanted to portray, women desperate for attention and using sex to get it. "She must make herself object; she should therefore renounce her autonomy." (de Beauvoir, 1949, p285) As Hirsch did not appear as an object she was considered as having no value.

In Hirsch's articles she brings up some interesting points of findings of women in online culture. In two articles she looks at the American teenage girl online and looks at them as a reflection on society. :

> Obviously, society's problem is not teenage girls, rather what society views its problems to be often become fully embodied by the teenage girl. In other words, the teenage girl has become a mirror, in which we see everything we believe to be bad about our culture and ourselves—excess materiality, a desire for fame, vapidity and so on. As a young woman it can be close to impossible to avoid taking on these qualities when our society values our

> beauty over our intellect and the services we can provide rather than our contributions. (Hirsch, n.d.)

This is extremely important when considering the violent culture that is often toward young women. She goes on to state “a society which perpetuates over sexualisation of them and violence against them. These young women are just "asking for it" aren’t they?” (Hirsch, n.d.). In looking at Hirsch’s own works where we see her strip tease and perform for the camera we see her acting out the role of the young woman online. By use of her webcam and through live performance instillations where she bears much flesh in front of a live audience while she twists and turns. Hirsch performs the spectacle of herself, using the norms she talks about in being a ‘fame whore’. She is in fact following a step-by-step guide for what it is to perform being a woman in today’s popular culture. By offering up sex appeal she is imitating sexiness and the idea of being a woman to hold an audiences attention.

Fig. 11, Ann Hirsch performs *The Work of Being Watched.*

I believe the way in which Hirsch subverts the gaze is by analysing it’s set of rules in how to perform the role of a woman and exposing it as being something that is easily played out. Moreover, Hirsch clearly points out others attempts in performing the role of women and embraces it by performing the performance herself. Hirsch’s tactic is humour, but also an acceptance of that which is frowned upon in the performance of women online. Whether that be web cam strip tease, ‘fame whoring’ on reality TV, or acting as though she is a college freshman dancing on YouTube. Hirsch is claiming the space online to perform her sexuality as she wishes.

Hirsch makes no secret of her love of being an exhibitionist, for her she declares that it gives her a great thrill to be able to get naked in front of people. In her gURLS performance text she describes what she is feeling and she strips in front of a room of other women. What is interesting here is how she plays with the gaze from a women's perspective however we understand that she is expecting a critical eye to be watching and judging her during her performance. To quote "Maybe some of you will tell my secret. That I'm thin, but not in a hot way. That the slit in my vagina comes up too high" (Hirsch, n.d.). She goes to and fro describing how she is feeling in her own body and how she is exposed, how she feels about her exposure and how she feels she is being perceived. "I am a woman and I am my harshest critic. So I assume other women think the same about not only themselves but also me." (Hirsch, n.d.). Here we see the gaze that is prevalent even though Hirsch is fully aware of it, to be standing in front of a room of other women naked the gaze is always present.

To understand how the gaze is always present we can look to John Berger's text where he discusses "To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others…" And in the history of the nude she is always addressing the male spectator, even when he is not present "everything must appear to be the result of his being there." (Berger, 1972, p.48)

Hirsch has an absolute honesty that she wishes to be famous, she wishes to exhibit herself, she wishes to be sexual, these are all things a woman 'should' be, but should never say. It is the freedom that she is able to express and act out whomever she likes that gives Hirsch's works such power and significance as feminist artworks. To look to de Beauvoir who claims "The body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and our sketch of our project" (de Beauvoir, 1949, p.61). We can really relate this quote to Hirsch's works to understand her subversion of the gaze as she performs her sexuality through social norms and cultural stereotypes, but is assertive and claims ownership of it. Through using her body and making it into a spectacle there is no shame, no secrets nothing the viewer can hold over her as an object because she is pointing out everything before the gaze gets a chance to peer at it. The gaze is in fact made to sit front row centre and listen to what she has to say while she stands naked in front of it.

Through the works of Erica Scourti, we come to understand that there is an evolution of the gaze, there is an algorithmic gaze. With computer technology and the reliance on computers to generate information we need, Scourti questions how technology is working in order to use and return our information.

Through Scourti's *Body Scan* (2014) work she snap shots parts of her body and uses a phone app that searches for images that matches her snap shots. What she finds in this process is the algorithm is returning everything that is scientific and about the human body when it's possible the subject is male, and everything that is object and product based when it identifies the subject as being female. In commenting on the work Scourti sates "women's breasts and other attributes bring up suggestions for how to change them—the body as a source of commercial value across a spectrum of products and services."

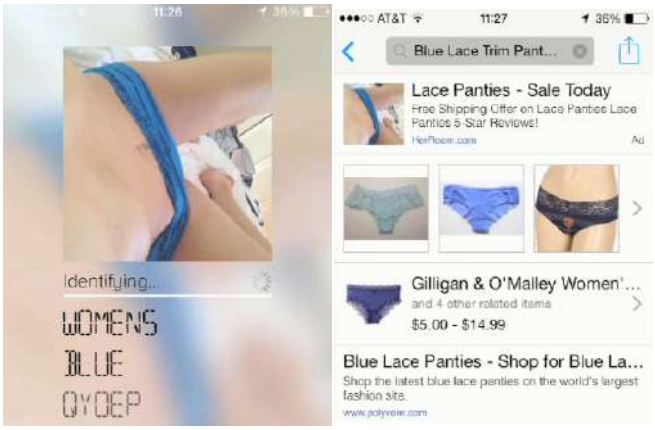

Fig. 12, Screen shots of Scourti's *Body Scan* work, 2014.

Scourti's approach is a very inclusive one when it comes to technology and the internet. Scourti is setting out to discover her own identity through analysing and playing with the data sets that she seeks out online and works with the information fed back to her.

In her work *Life in Ad words* (2013) Scourti records herself reading back the Google ad suggestions given to her by Google after emailing her Gmail account her daily diary. We don't see her diary entries, just her face is captured as she reads the ad words (in a robotic tone). No matter how accurate or not these ad word suggestions are, it becomes apparent that Google ads are not interested in who you are or what

you need as an individual. What is apparent is that Google in this case, are more interested in which box you fit into so it may offer you products to consume.

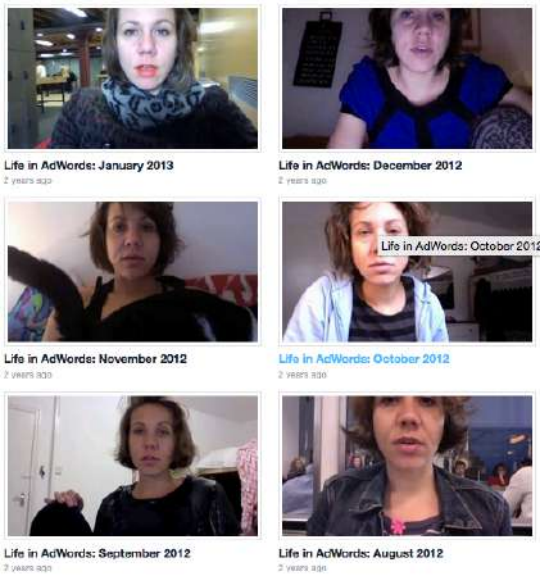

Fig. 13, Screen shots of Scourti's *Life in Ad Words* work, 2013.

Scourti's interest in the work she produces takes something from Walter Benjamin's ideas about artworks being able to travel, and consumed wherever the viewer may be. Her works are quite literally formed and placed into all devices that we use today. This is interesting because with the age of the internet it not only means that the rate in which works can be duplicated is instantaneous it also shows that perhaps digital work is now void of aura. As once it may have been that the photograph 'withered' the aura, now in looking at digital artwork the work itself is manipulated and made from so many duplications that the aura is no where to be found. Also in looking at the relationship between film and audience where the audience need not to apply any thought to what it sees, we ask the question that is it the same situation for digital art and it audience/creators.

With such reliance on machines we come to understand that they capture a very different way of seeing the world, they are able to go beyond what man can see. As John Berger states:

> I, the machine, show you a world the only way I can see it…. Freed from the boundaries of time and space, I co-ordinate and all points of the universe, wherever I want them to be. My way leads towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus I explain in a new way the world unknown to you. (Berger, 1972, p.10)

Taking this statement into consideration when looking at Scourti's work may help us to understand what she is showing us. She is showing us herself inputted into the machine digested and interpreted out the other side, and the way in which is portraying the outcomes are by using the machine itself.

We may also take into account how the consumer plays a role in Scourti's works, because it is the machine that is collecting data that it then tries to categorize the user in order to sell products. Here we have a cycle of user input, data collection and suggested product output. This draws interesting comparison with the way in which women's images have been offered up as a way to get consumers to buy more. Simply as a tool to be used. As Scourti plays with the data that is fed back to her from her online experiments/works she is really exposing the algorithms that are being used. Through this exposure she is really exploring her own identity through the internet, and as a woman it exposes the view of women through algorithms.

In Scourti's essay the *Female Fool* (2013), she raises some interesting points about digital works and the subversion of the gaze. She states that a way in which female artists are able to encapsulate and return the gaze is by "despite employing a strategy of subversive mimicry that gets dangerously close to recreating current negative stereotypes of femininity." (Scourti, 2013, p.40). However in the subversion and mimicry there is a problem that arises when the artwork is not seen in the context of art. As Scourti also discusses that the digital artists works now sit online alongside amateur filmmakers, porn etc.

When looking at this issue where by the female artists re creates the images of images that are oppressed upon her one has to consider if there is a negative effect. We can understand to reclaim the image by acting it out, repeating and subverting it, however is there an acceptance of the gaze in this case. De Beauvoir states:

> It is perfectly natural for the future woman to feel indignant at the limitations posed upon her by her sex. The real question is not why she should reject them: the problem is rather to understand why she accepts them. (de Beauvoir, 1949, p.399)

Erica Scourti is interested in the idea of authenticity and how this translates to a life online. During an interview she discusses the idea that authenticity is that which cannot by mimicked therefore holds a great value. In looking at trends and advertising used to sell product comes this great push on the idea of one being an authentic real self, and that in the use of social media we are actually performing what it is to be ourselves.

From her background rooted in maths and science Scourti takes great interest in looking at the algorithms used online few a few purposes. For one they are a construction made by web companies such as Google. But most interestingly Scourti looks at cybernetics as being the way in which you can predict user patterns trends and outcomes. She acknowledges that this holds a valuable use for companies that are looking for ways to sell to us. As a critical artist it may be possible for you to shape shift and avoid being read by the machine. She discusses how it may be necessary to allow yourself to be contaminated by the machine in order to expose it from within. This she discusses during an interview, as her ideas behind the 'female fool' where she looks at way in which female artists can gain strength by "making it visible as a discourse, to show it is a part of a power construction and not some natural thing that should be observed".

The ways in which young women have come to learn what it is to perform their sexuality is through images presented by the media. It is the attention she receives for this performance that she may now value her self worth. This is a mirror effect as women learn the performance of gender from what they see around them and what is reflected back to them. Much the same as Scourti's work, even though she is dealing with the algorithm that is mirroring what it is to be a woman. It is interesting that from inputting into the computer as a machine that they may now reflect back onto us what the system believes it is to be woman.

All three artists discussed here challenge these notions by portraying them in a literal sense, masking and subverting these norms. This challenges the audience to analyze what it has seen so many times before. Almost like holding up a magnifying glass to our cultural norms that we are so used to seeing all around us. In a world that is

formed around images set by the media, and in the media there are very set ideals for how women's bodies are presented, it can not be denied that there is a performance of gender happening. Coupled in with the gaze we have a performance of what it is to be feminine and viewed as a woman. In these three artists works all play with what it is to be a seen as a woman, presented as a woman and their own ideas in being female artists.

A commonality shared by all three artists is that they are able to subvert the gaze by recreating it. By reclaiming the stereotypes that are used time and again they are mirroring back onto society its presumptions of women. They are also highlighting the stereotypes that are used repeatedly in popular culture. Scourti discusses de Beauvoir's ideas of confrontation from the weakest possible position, which may involve mimicry. In a recent online exhibition *Body Anxiety* curated by digital artists Jennifer Chan and Leah Schrager, the work of 21 female and queer artists. All of the artworks deal with issues of gender in digital media by using their own bodies as the subject. To quote Josephine Bosma "More than two decades of cyber feminism have not been enough to successfully subvert traditional gender roles—not even in its own, online territory." This brings up the question that is there true empowerment from mimicking the gaze? Or by taking part in the gaze and the repetition of the gaze, does this not reinforce it? The latter may be of more concern, as with digital artworks there is the chance it will be taken out of its context as being critical, and add to the plethora of digital information therefore loosing its significance and possible adding to the problem.

Where these women all expose and play with the stereotypes of women there is an issue with the stereotypes they are playing with. As with the issue that arouse from the first wave of feminism, all three artists primarily look at what it is to be a stereotype that is white, middle class and living in the west. This may isolate people of different cultural backgrounds and those that don't identify with female heterosexuality. However it could be said that they are just performing what is shown to us by the media all the time and to take it one step further no matter who you are that is not a white hetero sexual man you are told that the female is other, you must view images through the gaze of the dominant male.

Conclusion

In looking at the objectification of women it is hard to look at the media without finding it prevalent everywhere. Women's bodies are constantly used to be consumed and devoured by a media industry that perpetuates the same stereotypes over and over again. It has continued as cultural norm for society to accept that the role of women is less to that of men and in opposition making it other. This has created a necessity for digital art to be critical in using and analyzing the image of women.

By understanding the harmful objectification of women that continues to be ever present in an evolving world of technology we have come to understand that the gaze as discussed by Laura Mulvey is ever present. As Mulvey explored the gaze armed with Lacanian and Freudian theories, it is understood that the gaze exists within a social construct and is able to maneuver itself through all mediums.

In looking further into the subject of the gaze through John Berger's text we can understand the maneuver of the gaze throughout history. To understand that the gaze is so apparent and fundamental in imagery that it becomes multi dimensional as women must adopt the gaze and watch themselves being watched. Here we have analyzed through the works of Simon de Beauvoir and Judith Butler that gender is a social construct. As the woman is first impressed upon with 'ideals' set out by men of how a woman should be perceived, she must perform this perception under the gaze. With the performance of gender, comes a reinforcement of stereotypes that may be harmful when one is made to assume a role of lesser than the other.

In the three artists works I have explored here it is clear that they are challenging gender stereotypes of what it is to be women in society, and subverting the gaze by using it in their own works. Whether it is by creating carefully constructed images of Hollywood harlots, or images of what could seem to be a horror show of body parts, Cindy Sherman subverts the gaze by mimicking society's notions of femininity in image. In Ann Hirsch's experiments with reality TV and online culture, she exposes the gaze in these mediums by making public the list of norms women must perform to gain access to fame. It is in her performance of these norms she is able to play and

make a mockery of the gaze. Finally, Erica Scourti embraces the use of emerging technologies to uncover an algorithmic gaze. In Scourti's work she uses herself as the subject to be assessed by the technology she uses and acts out the information fed back to her. Her findings are important to understand the gaze in digital and online culture.

All three artists return the gaze by reenacting it in various ways. However the point remains that by it's reenactment it may not challenge the gaze but instead affirms it. Also in a culture of all media copied and shared there is the possibility that any notion of protest may be lost when an artwork is taken out of context. As the gaze is ingrained in the way we view images it must constantly be challenged and reflected to expose it's harmful effect on society.

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