



Faith Holland, *Lick Suck Screen 2*, 2014, online digital video, color, sound, 1 minute 11 seconds. From "Body Anxiety."

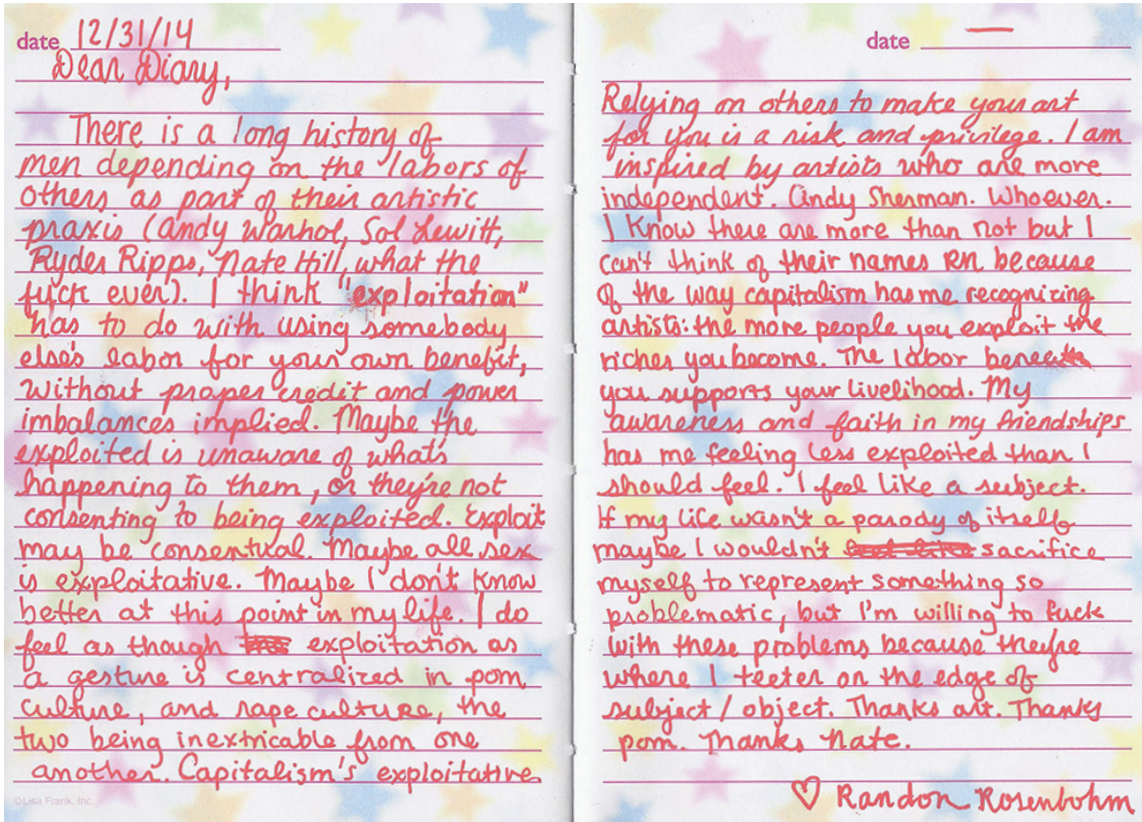
# Women on the Verge

JOHANNA FATEMAN ON ART,  
FEMINISM, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

**“WHENEVER YOU PUT YOUR BODY ONLINE**, in some way you are in conversation with porn.” The large-type epigraph on the landing page of the online exhibition “Body Anxiety” was culled from an interview with artist Ann Hirsch, whose frustrated musings in ☆Ξ, or Starwave, an invitation-only Facebook group for “Internet-savvy” women artists, curators, and writers, spurred Jennifer Chan and Leah Schrager to organize the show. But the tensions percolating in “Body Anxiety” are long-standing. This unruly collection of work from mostly little-known artists, many from overlapping feminist subsets of the male-dominated Net art and alt-lit worlds, addresses perennially contentious issues of representation (pornographic and otherwise). They take as a given that social media—as a platform for art, activism, and sexual expression, and as a potent facilitator of image appropriation and abuse—is the primary context for such investigations today.

While no one involved with the show is exactly eager to publicly name-check Net artist—*cum*—painter Ryder Ripps or eminent pioneer of appropriation Richard Prince, it’s these artists’ recent uses of sexy photos from women’s Instagram accounts that have brought brewing discontent to a head in the Starwave community. Ripps’s exhibition “Ho,” on view at Postmasters Gallery in New York this past winter, hit especially close to home; his oil paintings based on digitally distorted portraits of fitness model and health guru Adrienne Ho were





Randon Rosenbohm, *Scanned Diary Entry About Exploitation 12/31/14, 2014*, digital image, dimensions variable. From "Body Anxiety."

all the more galling because Ripps is a peer of young Starwavers. The most scathing critics of his new work characterize it as banal theft and sexist defacement of a woman's images, calling out the puerile double entendre of the show's title while they're at it.

In recent conversations, Chan and Schrager, both artists themselves, told me they intentionally launched the "Body Anxiety" website on the opening date of "Ho," not as a protest per se, but as a pointed alternative. In their lengthy, highly personal curatorial statements, they focus on their activist desires to promote work in which the artists use their own bodies to push back against an online culture of hidden-camera porn and violently misogynist trolling. As Chan notes, there's bravery inherent in such self-exposure, because the threat that the images "could be decontextualized and aggregated for entertainment or ridicule produces an invariable amount of anxiety for any woman who chooses to show her face and body online." Schrager, in her text, coins the term *man hands* for the phenomenon by which women's images of themselves accrue status and art-market value when used by male artists.

But what pushing back means, and what it looks like, is pretty much up for grabs. Resistance is co-opted so quickly in our moment of screen grabs and reblogs that one obvious question is: Why fight it?

It's no surprise that for a lot of artists, gaming the system is more appealing, or simply more feasible, than changing it, and there's no doubt that much of the work in the show walks right up to that well-trodden line between criticality and complicity, deploying "Internet babe" tropes with and without irony. "Body Anxiety" is heavy on performance-based work, selfies, references to online girl culture, and riffs on porn-site etiquette and aesthetics. Randon Rosenbohm's piece *Scanned Diary Entry About Exploitation 12/31/14, 2014*, is the only self-

consciously didactic piece; in loopy red cursive text on diary pages printed with pastel stars, the artist merges the look and language of juvenile confession with a philosophical rumination on art-world and sexual exploitation, questioning her own acquiescence. Other contributions are considerably more oblique. Net artist Faith Holland's work is represented by a series of videos she's uploaded to her channel on the porn-video-sharing site RedTube. Using popular tags such as HOT BBW to drive traffic to her work, she thwarts viewers with anticlimactic content. In *Lick Suck Screen 2, 2014*, for example, she gamely takes her shirt off and smiles shyly, but then, instead of delivering the implied blow job, she licks the webcam lens. As her video becomes a tongue-colored abstraction, hardcore GIFs loop in the frame below it. The funniest work is by Hirsch, author of the show's epigraph. In the piece *dance party just us girls, 2014*, from her ongoing video project "horny lil feminist," 2014– (she posts new work on her website about once a week), the screen is split. On the left is a shot of Hirsch reclining, cropped at her bust; on the right is a close-up of her crotch. She and her vagina both wear glasses and move to the beat of tween sensation Ariana Grande's "Love Me Harder." The artist uses a trippy spiral warp effect on both shots, reminiscent of Ripps's manipulations of Ho's photos.

As Schrager writes, the artists' "bodies appear as fantasies, mutations, glitches, nightmares, mundanities, dating profiles." All content morphs and mutates online; it's an assumption implicit in these artists' work. If they practice mirroring as a critical strategy, they are mirroring not only tropes of representation but the ways in which those representations morph and mutate, move and shift, the way they are *used*. The flux, trickery, and metamorphoses that are a staple of online and IRL fantasy worlds are present in "Body Anxiety" as both aesthetic and critical tactics.

Two performance views of Ann Hirsch, *The Scandalishious Project, 2008–2009*, online performance, YouTube. From "Body Anxiety."



The flux, trickery, and metamorphoses that are a staple of online and IRL fantasy worlds are being used as both aesthetic and critical tactics.

WHEN I MET WITH HIRSCH in 2013 to talk about two projects she created that year—the iPad app *Twelve* and the two-person play *Playground*, both based on her childhood relationship with a pedophile she interacted with in an AOL chat room in the 1990s—I was surprised to hear her call herself a "sex-negative" feminist. (It's an identification I'd hear echoed in conversations with other women I spoke with while researching this article.) Her appropriation of the epithet given to antiporn activists by their "sex-positive" feminist adversaries in the '80s isn't an alignment with an antiporn analysis or agenda, though. It's tongue-in-cheek, a contrarian response to the dominant strain of titillating and palatable pro-sex feminism visible in the mainstream today.

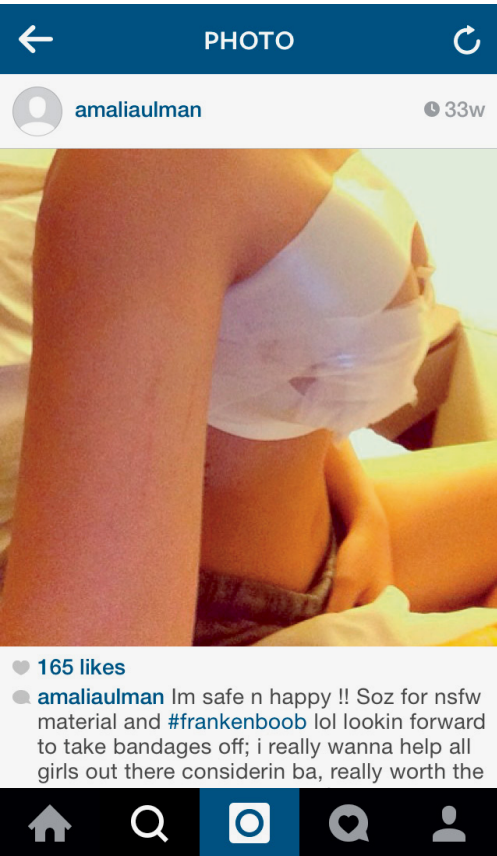
Hirsch, not yet thirty when we met, had already produced an influential body of performance and video work exploring emerging popular forms of women's sexual self-expression. For *The Scandalishious Project, 2008–2009*, she channeled a wacky college freshman named Caroline and became a YouTube "camwhore" at the phenomenon's dawn, mixing hipster references, self-parody, and cultural criticism with provocative dancing. Hirsch told me that she hoped to break down a stark dichotomy she noticed while watching vloggers and camwhores on YouTube. Women didn't show their faces if they posted provocative clips of their bodies, and if they wanted their monologues to be taken seriously, they didn't present themselves sexually. "Once you show yourself as sexual you immediately open yourself to trolling and harassment," she said. With Caroline she hoped to combine "the shaking butt and the talking head," to carve out space for more complex self-representations. Though the work is humorous—a *Scandalishious* video in which she gyrates and thrashes around on her bed to Heart's "What About Love?" while wearing a turtleneck and sporadically lip-synching is representative of the tone—her aim was serious: to test the radical promise of new, democratic Web platforms for feminist self-representation; to disrupt technogender defaults as they emerged. Hirsch shared the findings of her informal sociological experiment with an art audience in gallery performances, but on YouTube she reached far beyond this rarefied world, becoming part of a new form of popular entertainment—participating sincerely, enjoying the attention, and scoring two million hits.

The double life of *Scandalishious* is a precursor to more recent works in which social media is both sub-

ject matter and context, such as Amalia Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections, 2014*. Using trending hashtags and tropes of online feminine display to gain followers and "likes," Ulman's performance unfolds on her Instagram account @amaliaulman. American Apparel meets Martha Stewart in this fake vérité series of polished selfies in luxe settings, a feed replete with aphorisms, underwear, and pretty food. But there's also a calculated edge: videos of the artist crying, gun photos, and the before-and-after narrative of Ulman's (fictional) breast-augmentation surgery. A purposely bleak experiment in the merging of brand development and gender production, the project offers little hope for the progressive potential of social media. While most of her feminist post-Internet peers embrace at least a scrap of Donna Haraway's cyborg dream—the figure of the cyborg seems somehow implicit in Schrager's "fantasies, mutants, glitches, nightmares"—Ulman most clearly illustrates the pioneering theorist's grave caveat: "The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism."

Hirsch's relative optimism is hardly naive, though. As *Playground* suggests—and the mostly upbeat mood of her camwhore persona notwithstanding—she was disabused early of any romanticized ideas about life in cyberspace. Through the dialogue of her characters Anni, based on Hirsch at age twelve, and an older man with the AOL handle jobe, she captures the emotional intensity of cybersex for a child. As the story progresses, Anni is turned on, flustered, creeped out, and finally terrified by jobe's requests. (He asks her to insert a pen into her vagina and mail it to him.) Watching a performance of the work, which was commissioned by Rhizome, at New York's New Museum in October 2013, I was moved by Hirsch's translation of chat text into spoken dialogue. In contrast to Frances Stark's 2011 video *My Best Thing*, where the disembodied nature of chat-room sex is played up to comic effect, *Playground* illustrates the heart-pounding exhilaration and fear that animated Hirsch's online interactions.

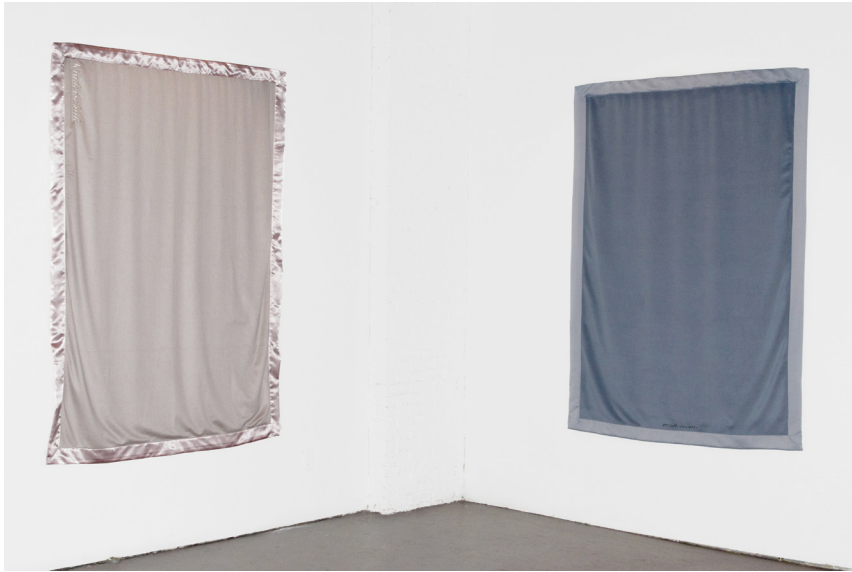
The intensity of online experience is what I talked about first with Rachel Rabbit White, a cultural critic and sex journalist, who introduced herself to me on the street outside the museum after the play. She also introduced me to her friend—author Marie Calloway, the much-maligned (and I think brilliant) literary enfant terrible who, earlier in the year, had



Two screen captures from Amalia Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections, 2014*, online performance, Instagram, April–September 2014.







Left: View of “Filip Olszewski and Bunny Rogers: If I Die Young,” 2013, 319 Scholes, New York. From left: *Kinderschule*, 2013; *Oceane Dreams*, 2013.

Below: Bunny Roger’s *Cunny Poem Vol. 1*, 2014, bound paper, 8 ½ x 6 ¼ x ½”.

created a furor with her sexually explicit work of autofiction *what purpose did i serve in your life*. We agreed it was strange to hear men in the audience laugh during some of the play’s most disturbing moments, which led White to tell me enthusiastically about a recent event where there were no men present: The previous August, curator Zoë Salditch had organized “gURLs,” an evening of readings and performances for women and “those who identify on the feminine spectrum” at Transfer gallery in Brooklyn. In a recent e-mail, White recalled her excitement about the night. “For a while, the ‘scene’ in New York was so male,” she wrote, complaining about “the whole ‘alt lit’ thing, those poems with flattened syntax that favored jokes.” (A little more than a year later, that scene would be roiled by sexual-assault allegations against its male leaders.) But during that summer of 2013, there was “something in the air among these young women, girls, who were utilizing social media, creating things and putting them on the Internet.”

Later that night I searched for the event’s press release, curious about its neo-separatist ethos and wondering which artists had participated. (Four of the women featured in “gURLs” also have work in “Body Anxiety”—Hirsch, White, Angela Washko, and Kate Durbin.) This is how I learned of Bunny Rogers. Rogers’s fascinating body of work—writing, coding, performances, photographs, sculptures, and installations—is united across media by themes of friendship, child sexuality, and cybermythology and by a striking personal iconography that includes ribbons, unusable chairs, and animals. A handmade quality characterizes much of this material, even or especially her online projects. The simple, decorative

HTML of her website meryn.ru, which looks like a maladroitly designed personal home page from 1998 rather than a professional artist’s online archive, might be the best example. While it’s less dated, her Tumblr poetry blog Cunny Poem has a similarly guileless quality—at first glance. Rather than playing off the aesthetics of the early Internet, Cunny Poem, ongoing since 2011, trades on Tumblr’s status as a platform tailor-made for girl culture’s impulse to share stuff (as documented in “Body Anxiety” by *Women as Objects*, 2011–13, Durbin’s flowery and fanged mix of GIFs and memes, digital drawings, and poetry reblogged from teenage girls).

Some of Rogers’s poems resemble cut-ups, and she has said they are “collages of previously posted Facebook status updates, notes to myself, and collected or stolen text.” Her writing—intimate, tersely urgent, and full of strange spellings that could be typos—is conceptually sophisticated as well as boldly juvenile. She embraces sentimentality, angst, self-exposure, and strong opinions, such as the one expressed in “@ one with the screaming in my head”:

Adorability is fuckability  
because children are adorable  
and men want to fuck children  
Acknowledge or die wow  
You are dead to me

In her work in other media, Rogers’s references to the sexualization of children are often just as direct,

even confrontational, as in the exhibition “If I Die Young,” 2013, a collaboration with Filip Olszewski at the Brooklyn gallery 319 Scholes. The front gallery was filled with small speakers, each playing a cover of the eponymous pop song performed by a young girl. Together, these audio clips, ripped from YouTube, formed a composite children’s choir. Twin-size blankets filled the rear gallery like satin-trimmed monochrome paintings, the hue of each one determined by the average pixel color of a photo taken from an online “child modeling agency.” They’re abstract memorials: No trace of the source images remains except for the websites’ digital watermarks embroidered on the fleecy fabric. One muted blanket is emblazoned with the mysterious tag OCEANE DREAMS, another with the blatant PRETEEN PUSSY.

Rogers’s “Pones” series, 2009–, is just as disturbing. Poning is planking’s perverse sister, a porn-inflected performance that evokes a child’s game, a teen prank, and a meme. With her back perfectly straight and head up, Rogers poses on her hands and knees in the middle of a street, in a tree, on a boulder. Is she a pony? A dog? A chair? In assuming this position of obedience and sexual access in absurd settings, she seems to both mock and give in to a repressed cultural obsession. In an e-mail to me, Hirsch broached the question of criticality directly, recalling that when images from the “Pones” series began circulating, “there was a ‘debate’ between some people in the ‘post-Internet’ art scene, questioning what those were about. . . . I was perplexed at first, but then I saw she was really

on to something with this combination of sexuality, innocence, darkness, complacency.”

Hirsch wrote that she sees an affinity between Rogers’s work and her own, an overlap in subject matter, though Rogers’s approach is “poetic,” and her own “more straightforward.”

What strikes me is their similarly compelling, though stylistically very different, renderings of the psychic bleed between real and online worlds—a blurring that’s particularly prone to occur when Internet spaces and platforms are explored with escapist passion, sexual curiosity, or utopian hope by kids. Both artists show the perils of this interstitial space without extracting a moral. Body anxiety is partly a function of the pressure to be perfect, but it’s also partly a function of this condition—what does embodiment, cyborgian or otherwise, really mean in this context of constant slippage?



Left and right: Two stills from Hannah Black’s *My Bodies*, 2014, digital video, color, sound, 3 minutes 30 seconds. From “Body Anxiety.”

Below: Bunny Rogers, *Untitled*, 2010, digital image. From the series “Pones,” 2009–.



## Which bodies (or artists) get to be freedom’s icons and emissaries?

**ONE OF THE STRONGEST PIECES** in “Body Anxiety” is artist and writer Hannah Black’s *My Bodies*, 2014, a short video that, contrary to the curatorial emphasis on women’s images of themselves, doesn’t show her body. Chan told me she thinks of the piece as the show’s “thesis statement,” a metacommentary on what it is to have a body—and what it means to represent that body—in a society of gender and racial hierarchies. The piece begins with a montage of images Black found by googling “CEO” and “executive.” The slide show of cropped corporate portraits is accompanied by a discordant sound track of short samples culled from R & B–inflected pop songs: While watching a succession of white guys in suits, we hear Rihanna, Beyoncé, and Mariah Carey, among others, sing the phrase “my body.” The second section of the video is a poem presented in title cards that appear over images of subterranean caves. Proposing a scenario of reincarnation, the poem begins, “If you die with your arms around a red skinned dog / bathed in the light of your laptop”; in an interview, the artist asks, “If you came back . . . would you have the body of a woman again? Or a woman of color?”

Writing about the inclusion of her video in “Body Anxiety” in an e-mail, Black reflected that the piece is “partly a critique of the white-feminist conception of the body, the heritage from the ’60s and ’70s which involves the affirmation of white nudity, displaying the agency of white naked bodies.” It’s a heritage that informs one of the central artistic strategies of the show. When we spoke, Chan expressed self-critical despair—prompted in part by comments on ☆≡—over the inadequate presence of women of color and of queer and trans artists in “Body Anxiety.” She wondered whether the focus on work that took pleasure in performances of femininity—all those Internet babes—played a role in the unconscious skewing of the curatorial selection toward conventionally attractive white women artists. While many of the show’s artists—unclothed and not—contest the appropriation of women’s sexuality in porn, mass culture, and men’s art, fewer challenge popular feminist representations of sexual liberation. Which bodies (or artists) get to be freedom’s icons and emissaries? Our conversation underscored the show’s place in a history of bold and imperfect feminist artists’ attempts to provide political correctives—or simply provocative counters—to sexism in the art world, in mass culture, and in everyday life.

Whatever the flaws of “Body Anxiety,” or the limits of the network of young artists its curators drew from, the exhibition is an important representation of the feminist malaise of a generation, those whose critique of porn culture emerges

from their own formative sexual experiences and from their ongoing engagement with porn and other zones of sexual expression online. As skeptical inheritors of the third-wave pro-sex torch, they share no unified agenda, only a cultural predicament. If to put an image of one’s body on the Internet is to frame it with the apparatus of porn, to lose control of its circulation, and to expose oneself to the cultural anxiety, sexist scrutiny, and confounding hostility that attend the gesture, then what’s the way forward? There’s no single path, of course. But in many of the standout works that have emerged from this scene, young women—in registers of resignation or defiance, didactically or through performing the intertwine-ments of “sexuality, innocence, darkness, complacency”—seem to pull off the paradoxical feat of taking back their images at the very moment of surrender. □

JOHANNA FATEMAN IS A MUSICIAN, A WRITER, AND AN OWNER OF SEAGULL SALON IN NEW YORK. SHE IS WORKING ON A BOOK ABOUT ANDREA DWORKIN. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

