Too Much, Not Enough
On Representation and Identity-Fraught Screen Culture

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Terminal Project Report

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Part 1: *Bling Bling*

"Shiny is youth. Shiny is fertility. Shiny is uncorrupted. Shiny smells like the interior of a new car. Shiny is six-ty-five golf courses in Palm Springs in the middle of the worst drought in a century. I love shiny, because the moment you see something shiny, you know there's going to be something rotten or scary nearby."
-Douglas Copeland, Shiny, E-flux SuperCommunity: Diabolical Togetherness Beyond Conteporary Art

The first image uploaded to the Internet in 1992 started as a joke. The image featured four wom-en clad in bright and sparkly Do-wop era costumes with mile high hairdos to match. *Les Hor-ribles Cernettes*, as they were called, were an all-female parody band based in the CERN labo-ratory of World Wide Web Creator Tim Berners-Lee[1]; singing scientific-theme songs such as "Collider" and "Microwave Love". "The Horrible CERN girls" wrote playful and melancholy lyr-ics that played out the woes of dating a work-obsessed physicist. This sentiment of comedic re-lief set the stage for 26 years of digital spectacle, preceding a culture of outlandish performativity.

In its infancy, what held photography opposite to painting was its indexical relationship to the real. Photography—counted on for generations as a fixed image of reality—in fact shares a number of salient features with painting: fragmentariness, arbitrary frames, etc.[2] Both exist as biased representations of subject and object. In a single moment—the split second of a shutter release—the gap between painting and photography are leveled. In a single moment, the self becomes split—a double image as it were. What is captured in the image of the *Cernettes* is the presence of their bodies, their staged and spar-kly get-ups, their parodied personas. What is fragmented is their identities. Ironically, or perhaps not, the group's first YouTube video—a gimmicky performance of their song "Collider" [3]—almost complete-ly obliterates each member's face from over exposure and low resolution or perhaps digital decay.

If we trace the history of image making, before the introduction of new media, to when paint-ing's fictive "realism"—a style that strives to be invisible as such—was most prominent, we can nar-row in on Dutch Genre painting, famous for this artistic category. Amongst the most endem-ic iconographic concepts within Dutch paintings are the "Vanitas". These are often categorized as still life's (a few portraits) that include large bouquets and tilted platers of perishables on the verge of decay. Perfectly translucent glassware, skulls, insects, and other symbolic elements serve as both a celebration of wealth—dictated by a period when the Netherlands experienced prosperity due to plundering and colonization—and simultaneously a moral lesson of excess and a remind-er of life's temporality. [4]The formal construction of such an image has held its ground ever since, providing a platform on which contemporary photography and advertisements have been built.

1   Andrew Hough, *How the First Photo was Posted on the Web 20 Years Ago*, The Telegraph, July 2012,

2   Martin Jay, *Scopic Regimes of Modernity* (from *Vision and Visuality*- Edited by Hal Foster), 1988, pg. 15

3   Onlis99, LHC- *Collider*, Youtube.com, July 2007

4   Segal Sam, *A Prosperous Past*, p 29

In Abraham Van Beyeren's still life from 1667[1], the viewer is confronted with a scene of opulence. A silk-like napkin drapes in a familiar manner and glossy platers of ripe fruit and bursting grapes spill out towards the table's edge. A lobster of highly saturated red lays artfully in the foreground of the image—its body glistening as if plucked straight from a pot boiling water. Van Beyeren, a master of textures, renders two translucent, almost sparkly wine glasses and dishware of various gleaming metals. Rendered in rich jewel tones, it is shiny. It is shiny save for one small mouse that sits on the edge of platter—a symbolic element that according to Dutch scholar Dr. Segal, "represents in general the mundane, sinful life and in particular gluttony."[2] In *Scopic Regimes of Modernity*, Martin Jay states of Buci-Glucksmann's research, "the baroque self-consciously reveals contradictions between surface and depth."[3] In contrast to "analytic" one-point perspective, the use of the anamorphosistic mirror, either concave or convex, that distorts the visual image[4] (most noticeably seen on Van Beyeren's shiny glassware reflections—or the mirrored image in Van Eyke's Arnolfini Portrait) reveals the conventional through its dependence on materiality and surface quality. These attempts at rendering a heightened visual experience in turn also reveal the artifice of glamour, wealth, luxury, and other attempts at representing the unrepresentable. In much the same way, Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Music Lesson*[5], a photograph taken of a life size wax replica of Vermeer's *Music Lesson*, exposes its function as a contemporary image through the distortion of the floor created by the ocular shape of the wide-angle photographic lens.

Baring a striking formal resemblance to Van Beyeren's still life is set designer Sophie Leng's image from her editorial series that presents only a few elements on a table covered in rich burgundy velvet cloth: a bouquet of beautiful if not slightly droopy flowers, a yellow high-heeled shoe, a blue glass bottle of Tom Ford perfume, and a Gucci purse designed to look like 1960's model of a Fuji-film camera. In the background, wallpaper of dark green palm leaves gives visual separation to objects placed before it. Though the elements themselves are certainty less glossy than in Van Beyeren's painting, the sentiment feels equally glamourous. Leng's design suggests a portrait of feminine figure, a scene from a hotel, a luxurious tropical getaway. As Jay states, "We might also discern a complementary fit between the valorization of material surface in Dutch art and the fetishism of commodities no less characteristic of a market economy."[6]

Glamour is widely used as a sale's tool, effectively so because it functions as a reality distortion field. It allows us to fantasize, to lose ourselves in desire. For Virginia Postrel, "The desires glamour serves and intensifies are never purely physical. They are emotional. Those desires–for love, wealth, power, beauty, sex appeal, adulation, friendship, fame, freedom, dignity, adventure, discovery, self-expression, or enlightenment–vary from person to person and culture to culture. But glamour suggests they can all be attained through personal transformation or escape from current circumstances. Glamour leads us to imagine ourselves in the other: another person, another place, another life." [7] Perhaps glamour and the power of imaginative transformation is why works like Van Beyeren's *Vanitas,* which hints at the need to transcend a sinful life of gluttony, and Leng's photograph, which beckons us towards escapism, hold such attention. Both images expose our fascination with the mutability of the self.

1 Segal, Sam, *A Prosperous Past*, Pg. 174

2 Segal, Sam, *A Prosperous Past*, Pg. 176

3 Martin Jay, Scopic Regimes of Modernity, from Vision and Visuality- Edited by Hal Foster, Pg. 17

4 Martin Jay, Scopic Regimes of Modernity, from Vision and Visuality- Edited by Hal Foster, Pg. 17

5 "Sugimoto's work examines the concepts of time, space and the metaphysics of human through images of wax figures, treating the photograph as an ethereal time capsule and challenging its associations of the 'instant.'", quotedfrom the Artit's bio.

6 Martin Jay, Scopic Regimes of Modernity, from Vision and Visuality- Edited by Hal Foster, Pg. 15
7 Virginia Postrel, The Power Of Glamour: Longing and the Art of Visual Persuasion, 2017, pg. 59

These histories inform my own practice. In *Lay Waste*, I reference historical Dutch still life paintings with bronze and silver platters filled with Vaseline coated piles of food. A pair of bare legs enters the frame to jump repetitively on what is revealed to be a mattress. Heavy breaths create a crescendo of tension and desire building to stark halt, and the figure leaves a sticky scene of destruction in its wake. What is once a gloss coated scene of glamour and mystery collapses quickly (in both a literal and figurative sense) as the artifice is revealed; the image destroyed, examining the nature of the constructed image.

Les Horribles Cernettes, cover album

Segapeli, *Lay Waste* (Stills), 2018

Abraham Van Beyeren, Still Life, 1667

Sophie Leng, Editorial, 2017

Part 2: *Gross Fatigue*

"Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of one-tenth seconds, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly embark on adventurous travels."
-Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction

Cindy Sherman's series *Untitled Film Stills* examines female iconography of the 1950s. In each photograph, shot in black and white film, Sherman disguises herself as different female archetypes of narrative cinema. Though there is no distinct reference point to each image, the viewer finds themselves looking with a sense of familiarity as Sherman performs "the girl next door," "the girl in a new city," "the girl in trouble."[1] If, as Simone De Beauvoir states, "one is not born a woman, but becomes one,"[2] then Sherman's photographs not only suggest an examination of culturally prescribed limits of female identity but depictions of possibility. "After all, Sherman becomes–however fleetingly–all these women."[3]

As cinema gave way to Internet videos, the self-made celebrity enters the scene. Viewers now have seemingly intimate relationships with individuals who vlog their daily lives, role-play, show off their latest purchases, or rant about a subject. In YouTube's early years, low-tech camcorder footage of adolescent boys performing skateboarding tricks, pranks inspired by the 2002 film *Jack Ass*, and teens performing earnest cover songs drove viewer traffic. But with the rise of Reality TV, and advancement and availability of consumer level cameras, YouTube's once low-tech home videos fell to the wayside as highly composed bizarre performances filled our screens in high resolution. Trending and viral videos included the "Kylie Jenner challenge," in which participants use a shot glass to create a vacuum over their lips, producing an engorging effect, and "bath challenges" in which participants filled their bathtubs with an excess of material ranging from noodles to glitter to marbles. Other videos like "Mukbangs" feature individuals eating large amounts of food in front of the camera and ASMR videos in which the performer engages in the pseudoscience of "autonomous sensory meridian response" –characterized by a brain tingle that occurs from a visual and/or auditory stimulus–film themselves gingerly touching everything from hair to skin to various objects using a high sensitive microphone to capture the sounds. Each type of video seems to oscillate between exhibitionist and intimate, bizarre and curiously fascinating, seductive and repulsive, highlighting the lonely space of the internet.

Like Sherman's film stills which allow us to examine ourselves as both limited and potential "types," I often ask of my positon–as a consumer of Internet culture–what it means to participate in screen-based experiences. My work has taken the form of performative video, durational video, and sculptural screens that reference the body, billboard advertisements, or the solitary experience of viewing on a laptop screen. The materials of these works are filmed, photographed, and mined from the Internet to reflect on internet phenomena and cultural behaviors. The absurd performativity of these videos becomes (at times) prioritized over idealized glamour as an act of deflection, an attempted comedy routine that both negates and reveals an underlying source of tension.

My work in the studio triangulates between fame, obsession, vulnerability, and desire within an identity-fraught screen culture. *Proportional To Her Delicate Emptiness* presents two screens placed face-to-face. On each screen, found YouTube footage of a female figure ravenously eats a plate of spaghetti noodles. They face each other in an endless cycle of consumption, never filled, never satisfied. Chosen because each figure bears physical resemblance to myself and to each other, the two body-like structures act as a mirrored reflection of one another—their likeness blurred and blended, consuming each other's image. Perhaps they are in conversation, their gaze pointed at one another; perhaps they are the same figure bearing witness to the self. In *Overturnturnover*, a figure (whose face and torso are never seen) slowly and continuously rolls on a bed of food and grease-stained sheets. Continuously repositioning the body, the pair of glossy feet turn over again and again with no relief . Contents from a destroyed a still life spill about the scene slick with high definition shine. Each subtle movement, clank, and squish is amplified on an otherwise silent stage (Liam machando) *Overturnturnover* examines the tension between abject and desire, the individual and our performative self.

I seek relationships between viewer and author, reality and artificiality, vulnerability and the spectacle. I filter these connections through the lens of both Post-Internet Feminism and Historical 17th century painting, in which the moral lessons of excess were depicted through glossy piles of bursting grapes on the verge of rot, and shiny translucent glassware. Utilizing both filmed and appropriated images, I work to negotiate my own identity, vulnerability, and anonymity through historical and contemporary media.

1 Dahlia Schweitzer, *Cindy Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills"*, Los Angeles Review of Books, May 2014,

2 Simone de Beauvoir, ,*The Second Sex*, p 6

3 Dahlia Schweitzer, *Cindy Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills"*, Los Angeles Review of Books, May 2014,

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still # 6*, 1977

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #27*, 1977
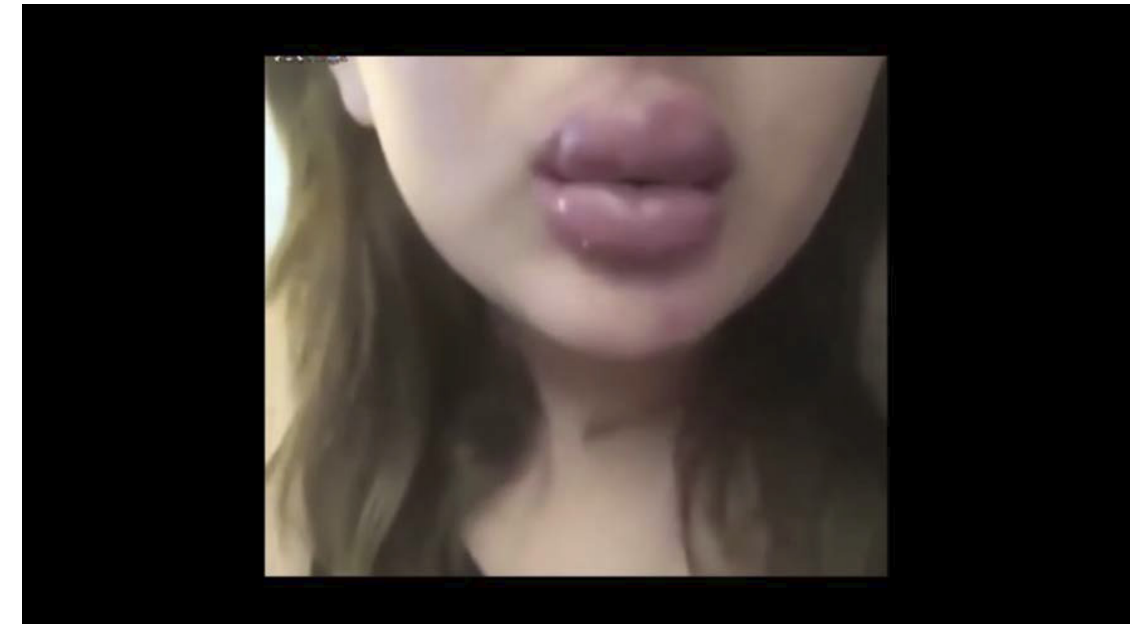
Segapeli, *Engorgeous* (Still), 2015
*Kylie Jenner Challenge Participant

Sas-ASMR Mukbang video still, YouTube 2018

FrivillousFox ASMR, video still, YouTube 2019

Nicole Skyes, Glitter Bath Challenge video still, YouTube 2018

Segapeli, *Proportional To Her Delicate Emptiness*, 2017

Segapeli, *Overturnturnover* (Still), 2018

Part 3: *Becoming*

"Bowie's hero is no longer a larger-than-life human being carrying out exemplary and sensational exploits, and he is not even an icon, but a shiny product endowed with post-human beauty: an image and nothing but an image." — Hito Steyerl, The Wretched of the Screen

In her essay *Spam of the Earth*, Hito Steyerl addresses representation by focusing on an irreducible excess at the core of image spam, a residue of unattainability, of which it's composed. In *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational. MOV File*, Steyerl presents five lessons of invisibility,[1] which poses questions like: Are people hidden by too many images? Do we become images and nothing but images? And mostly poignantly, what do we identify with at this point? Likewise, Douglas Copland extends his critique of the politics of shine in *SuperCommunity* by paralleling glamour and its seedy underbelly with the Japanese notion of honné and tate-mai: the private face and the public face.[2] This doubling of the self is articulated in the work of Gillian Wearing—specifically the series *Masks*, in which she photographs herself wearing latex masks casted from her own face, grotesquely blurring the line the between fiction and reality.[3] In Marilyn Minter's glossy prints of Pamela Anderson, the star is photographed covered in a variety of indistinguishable fluids—water, soap, sweat, tears, or cum. What is striking about this series the distortion of Anderson's well known image. The viewer is left questioning who the figure is though Minter has not done much in the way of disguising. The star is not herself in the Playboy spreads we know, yet in Minter's prints, stripped of her iconographic persona becomes unrecognizable[4], examining the tension between the images we create and the reality in which we exist.

In thinking through the ways in which we might become an image or become hidden by images, *Untitled (viewfinder)* exists as a two-channel video installation that examines a kind of self-aware time—"one that represent the very relationship of self to self"[5]. On the left screen, I film myself staring directly into the barrel of the camera lens, which serves to simulate direct eye contact with the viewer. On the right channel, my image seeks to meet its own gaze in the screen of the view finder not visible to the viewer. This doubled image of the self reflects our post-internet condition, which Hito Steyerl refers to as our "Warhol/Marilyn Monroe logic of existence, our illusionary body that glides through the world,"[6] as the two images of my own face, varying only slightly in gaze, seem to present two vastly different individuals.

1 Hito Steyerl, *The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation* (from e-flux journal: *The Wretched of the Screen*),
2 Douglas Copeland, *Shiny,* (from e-flux journal *SuperCommunity: Diabolitcal Togetherness, Beyond Contemporary Art*, 2017

3 Gillean Wearing, *Self Portrait of Me Now In Mask*, 2011, framed c-type print.

4 Rabinowitz, Cay Sophie, *A Pathology of Gamour: An Interview with Marilyn Minter*, Parkett Magazine Vol 79, , p 116-139

5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Reception*, Pg. 426 outlined in Birnbaum's *Chronology* Pg. 38

6 Hito Steyerl, *A Think Like You and* Me (from e-flux journal: *The Wretched of the Screen*) pg 47

Gillean Wearing, *Self Portrait of Me Now In Mask*, 2011
framed c-type print.
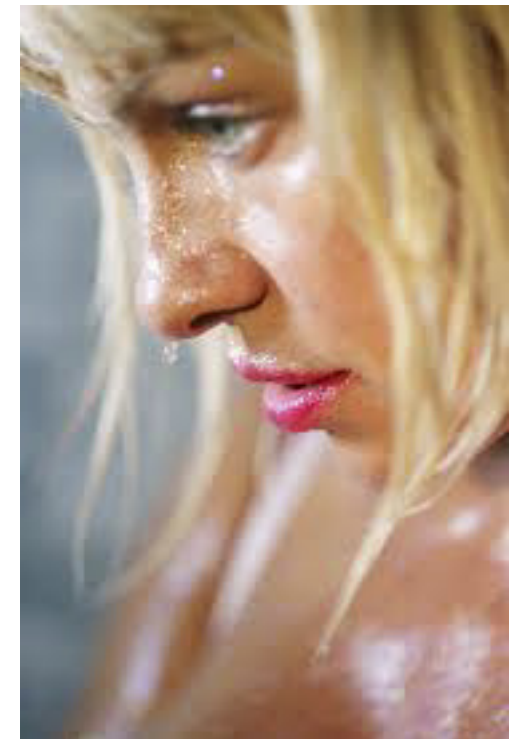
Marilyn Minter, *Pamela*, C-prints

On the flipside of performing for the camera is invisibility. Here the term 'invisibility' can be understood as not a means of withdrawal from representation, but rather as a means of being present at the same time as being intangible. *Odd Ill Eskew*, the unease of something gone wrong: where we lose ourselves in the veil of gloss we create. As the figure lays with their back to camera they are hidden behind a scene of lavish goods, embedded in the image. Moving slowly from a flat corpse-like pose to a seductive reclined position that references history's many portraits of a reclining female figure. The figure stays with their back to the camera, refusing to acknowledge the viewers' gaze. The image is so dark and the figure so still, fading defensively into the background.[1] Tension builds through a lack of escalation—the viewer is caught in a cycle of waiting. Each loop brings the figure back down to their corpse pose, building with no resolve and the figure is once again lost and forgotten in the viewer's line of sight.

This reclaiming of the body situates a history of problematic representations of the reclining nude against its camouflage, its embedded-ness, its artificial loss of identity[2] as an act of defense and deflection. Much like military tactics in which war ships were painted in bold dizzying patterns as a means of disguising their positon on the horizon, *Odd Ill Eskew*'s 'dazzle camouflage' examines our mimetic sense of 'becoming.' For Neil Leach, the term 'becoming' is not a matter of representation, but of affect. "All forms of becoming are essentially about becoming other, and involve a creative engagement with the other on the part of the subject."[3] We can also associate 'becoming' with that of assimilation or adaptation, but in doing so, we might question this interaction with a world that facilitates a condition of 'becoming'—at what point does the breakdown between self and other "become imperceptible"?[4]
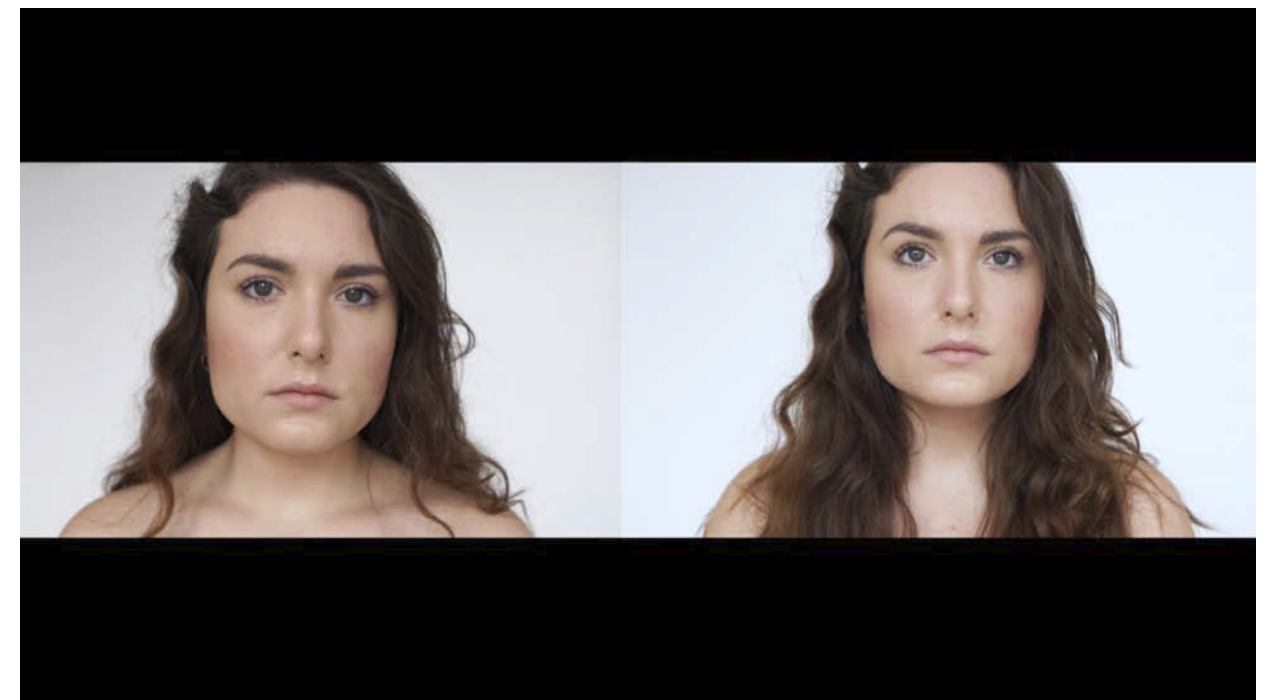
Segapeli, *Untitled Viewfinder* (Still), 2017

1   Neil Leach, *Camouflage*, Pg.77

2   Neil Leach, *Camouflage*, Pg.73

3   Neil Leach, *Camouflage*, Pg.73

4   Neil Leach, *Camouflage*, Pg.99

Segapeli, *Odd, Ill, Eskew* (Still), 2018

Segapeli, *At The Still Point* (Stills), 2019

Part 4: *Ennui*

"I am always present and still in the past, and already in the future. I'm always here and also elsewhere. I as ego come in between these two modes. I am only in this doubling, and I emerge in this displacement."
-Robert Sokolowski, Displacement and Identity in Husserl's Phenomenology

If the image is the 'event,' the performance, that which activates the viewers gaze with the click of the shutter or pushing of the 'upload' button, then *At The Still Point* explores the liminal space between that which constructs the 'event.' Resting between prelude and aftermath, still and moving image, *At the Still Point* depicts a melancholy scene of vulnerability which pushes past the anxiety of production into a point of quiet reflection—a point of stillness. The camera slowly rotates from above looking onto a figure laying over the edge of the bathtub. During a single 4-minute rotation, the female figure is segmented and disembodied by the ever-shifting frame and the innate distortion that occurs with re-presentation. Her stillness broken only by the lethargic tapping of her long acrylic fingernails, which echo against ambient white noise. To quote Birnbaum, "At times, it seems to transmute into an image—an image of emptiness verging on abstraction." [1] In an examination of Edmund Husserl's theory of time difference, Birnbaum states that Husserl, "distinguishes between different kinds of past time and different capacities the subject has of relating to it: the recent past which is still given in immediate proximity to the ongoing perpetual flow, and the past which has already faded into the oblivion and, therefore, needs a special act of recollection to become present again." [2] Looking at Husserl's theory of time difference might suggest the ways in which *At The Still Point* presents a kind of time flow where the reader loses a sense of time itself. With no indication of time passage, no natural shift in light, no change in sound, the image moves slowly and continuously becoming one without time, an image of timelessness, looping in perpetuity.

Timelessness is most often experienced in the dark space of the movie theater or the void of the Internet where time passes without our awareness, or seems to halt itself for that moment of viewing. These moments of viewing conflate time—historical time, cinema time, time of the Internet— into one dimension and lacks discernable contours. [3] It is through this altered sense of time passage that the ego is disarmed and a space for exploration of alternative modes of self, or rather representation of the self emerges.

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1 Daniel Birnbaum, *Chronology* Pg. 53
2 Daniel Birnbaum, *Chronology* Pg. 57

3 Kant, quoted in Brinbaum's *Chronology* Pg. 43

What is fascinating to me about finding specific moments in media culture, such as Internet trends, films, and advertisements is the way in which we formulate our own sense of identity through the mediated representations of others. This constructed image of ourselves is pivoted against reality, resulting in what Simone de Beauvoir refers to as "The Double Self".[1] You accidentally catch yourself in the mirror or in someone else's Instagram story and are caught off guard by the reality of your own image, experiencing a momentary feedback loop when our actual-self and perceived-self collapse.

My work seeks to investigate how visual culture affects how we identify with images. It is here I return again and again, asking myself: How do we cope with the trauma that comes as (our own) digital bodies and identities become things to manipulate, distribute and dispose of? Do we become images amongst images, lost in a void of digital trash?

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1 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Pg. 6

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