Challenging the self: an examination of the media's role in creating idealized bodies and the artists that challenge them.

Jessica Oberdick
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CHALLENGING THE SELF: AN EXAMINATION OF THE MEDIA’S ROLE IN CREATING IDEALIZED BODIES AND THE ARTISTS THAT CHALLENGE THEM

By

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A Thesis
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ABSTRACT

CHALLENGING THE SELF: AN EXAMINATION OF THE MEDIA’S ROLE IN DEALIZED BODIES AND THE ARTISTS THAT CHALLENGE THEM

Jessica Oberdick

December 1, 2017

Seeking to understand the media’s influence over society, and the way the media motivate us to conform to specific ideals, this thesis focuses on how female bodies in particular are consistently idealized and objectified in mainstream media. Through television, print, and the internet, the media serve as our world’s main means of mass communication. Noting this, this text seeks to understand the female body’s historical objectification through art history and genres of the nude, how this has transferred to contemporary media, and finally states that these stereotypes and norms can be challenged through the work of contemporary artists. By reclaiming the female body, reclaiming nakedness, and denying objecthood, female artists today have the power to counter the idealized images of the media with images of their own. The work of these artists celebrate difference and advocate for not one ideal form but many.
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INTRODUCTION

My interest in examining the ways artists challenge traditional media stereotypes stemmed from a reading of the book *Trickster makes this World* by Lewis Hyde. Hyde examines myths of the trickster character from Greek, Norse, and Native American mythology to understand the role of the trickster character in society. He finds that by creating mischief and mayhem, the trickster demonstrates that certain cultural practices are damaging or oppressive to various groups. Trickster not only helps to liberate those groups, but helps the elite understand why their actions are wrong. For Hyde, and for myself, the characteristics of trickster can be found in society’s artists, who through their media not only describe and depict cultural stereotypes but often challenge them. In this way both trickster and the artist reshape the world around them by exposing oppressive patterns, and examining how keeping order can be cruel to marginalized people.

What I was particularly drawn to, however, was Hyde’s chapter on cultural shame, and the short myth he shares from a Chinese-American author whose mother, at the time of her first menstruation, shared a myth “that she must not repeat to anyone”. The myth focused on an Aunt back home in China, who bore an illegitimate child and because of the shame this inflicted on herself and her village, committed suicide and infanticide by drowning herself and the baby in a
well. The myth, meant to warn young girls against participating in sex outside of marriage, teaches them that their sexuality is shameful, and we can be sure that this myth is not one that just exists in Chinese culture. Young girls across the western world are taught that pregnancy prevention is their responsibility, and the full shame of becoming pregnant outside of marriage falls on them.

For women shame culture is especially relevant as they are taught from an early age to be particularly conscious of their actions and their actions’ consequences. These experiences of shame become subconscious regulators that dictate our actions and behavior, a form of unrecognized internal regulation that keeps us in line with the acceptable ways of being society has dictated.

In my efforts to better understand the ways society and the media exercise control over societal norms and individual’s bodies, I found myself examining the artwork of artists who conceptually strove to address issues of gender oppression and stereotyping, while simultaneously educating myself on the history, theories, and concepts of gender, feminism, regulation, and idealization. The initial result of this concluded in two exhibitions, the first a solo curated exhibition *Objects and Others: Perspectives on Gender and Sexuality*, and the second a co-curated endeavor *Meet Your Neighbors: Feminist and LGBTQ+ Perspectives*. While the former most strongly represented the goals I was attempting to achieve by highlighting stereotypes of women in the media, and confronting them with new visual imagery, the latter accumulated to be a wider exploration of stereotypes, gender and artist activism. Throughout the duration of *Meet Your Neighbors*, weekly conversations were held that highlighted the
struggles individual artists were attempting to challenge, and the strength of the discussions greatly enhanced the meaning found within the artworks.

The second result of this work has amounted to the following text, which aims in the first chapter to understand how the media is able to continually stereotype women, and how this effects woman in society. The second chapter analyzes artists who are working to challenge the presence and stereotypes of the media through their artwork, and looks at the connection between artists and social protest, and what happens when the two combine.
CHAPTER ONE:

THE SELF, CULTIVATION THEORY, AND BODY REGULATION:

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

Figure one: Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait #4*, silver gelatin print, 1996

In a black and white landscape, photographer Laura Aguilar has stretched her naked body alongside a small pool of water where its form reflects along the water’s surface. The image reveals the exposed curves of her body as she rests, as comfortably as one can, undressed in an open landscape. Cropped just
above the utmost ridge of her arm, the ups and downs that outline her body, and its reflection in the water mimic a vast mountain landscape reflecting in a lake. The image is both carefully posed and candid, expressing a high level of bodily comfort, while purposefully addressing an audience not used to seeing a form that so forcefully varies from the thin and idealized bodies they’ve come to expect and admire.

Audiences today are no strangers to seeing nude or near nude bodies of women in the media. In fact, with the near constant exposure and saturation of images by the media in our daily lives, it is arguable that we have become accustomed to seeing mostly nude bodies regularly. Unlike the image of Aguilar above, however, today’s audiences are most familiar with and accepting of the heavily doctored images of women that are most prevalent in advertising campaigns, film, and television. Most often, the images of women reveal young, flawless bodies, with thin stomachs and large breasts. Highly sexualized, their bodies and beauty are naturally unattainable, and yet millions of women strive to reach and attain the standards of beauty most prevalent in our media. This chapter seeks to analyze the control the media has over the bodily norms of women in our current society, why we strive to replicate them, and what it is that makes the media a leader in setting the standards for body appearance and satisfaction. While there is no shortness of nudity in art, a topic we will discuss more broadly later, there is an inherent difference between the imagery we see in the media and of that created by artists. The work of artists comes from a place of inner self expression and is in many ways self-serving. The imagery we see in
the media, advertising, and popular culture, however, is produced to make a sale. Its goal is to influence its audience, where the goal of art, especially of the art we will look at, is to ask its audience to thoughtfully consider its concepts. This separation of intent allows artists to challenge the imagery of the media by confronting audiences with alternatives to the mainstream. Whether confrontational or passive, these alternatives offer audiences an opportunity to examine and discuss the norms and stereotypes they may otherwise overlook.

There is no mistake that the sexualization of women and girls in the media are highly troubling, and much research has been done exploring the issues and side effects on society this sexualization and objectification has caused. One of the key criticisms of advertising and the media today is that it creates a culture where the objectification and self-objectification of women’s bodies becomes a societal norm. A 2010 report by the American Psychological Association (APA) found that the high exposure to the sexualization of women and girls in the media leads girls to see themselves as objects.\(^1\) Defined by the APA, the term sexual objectification describes situations where either part of a woman’s body—her legs, torso, etc. stand in as representation for the body or person as a whole, her self-worth is determined by her sexual appeal, or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon her person.\(^2\) Sexual objectification often leads to self-


objectification, which occurs when women begin to view themselves as objects and attempt to see themselves as they believe others perceive them. In their essay on objectification theory, Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts fully detail the presence and problems of sexual and self-objectification. Their analysis shows that not only are women looked at more often than men, but men’s gazing upon women is more often accompanied by derogatory commentary.³ This social gazing is reflected in the media as well. Advertisements with men and women more often depict the male gazing at the female than the reverse.⁴ Further research has found that since the 1950’s there has been a sixty percent increase in images of women that portray them in decorative or sexualized roles, and women’s bodies are four times more likely to appear exposed than men’s bodies.⁵ In a research study by Julie M. Stankiewicz and Francine Rosselli that looked at 58 different magazines of various categories including men’s magazines, women’s fashion, adolescent magazines, and home magazines, it was found that women appear as sex objects in print advertising in approximately half (51.8%) of advertisements featuring women.⁶ This number

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⁵ Julie M. Stankiewicz and Francine Rosselli, “Women as Sex Objects and Victims in Print Advertisements,” published online, *Springer Science + Business Media*, (2008): 582 It is noted that this rise in sexualized images of women is a direct response to women’s increased presence in the workforce and in universities.
⁶ Stankiewicz and Rosseli, “Women as Sex Objects and Victims in Print Advertising,” 584.
raises to 75% when looking at men’s magazines alone. This same study also analyzed the percentage of magazines in which women are depicted as either victims or aggressors of violence, finding that women are twice as likely to be portrayed as victims, and that if presented as an aggressor, 75% of the time they were also portrayed as sex objects. It should also be noted that in magazines directed toward adolescent girls, women were found to appear as sex objects in 64% of the advertisements containing women.  

In the advertisement shown below of Dolce & Gabbana we find nearly all of the above to be true and exhibited. A single, passively posed and nearly nude woman lies on the ground surrounded by fully suited, aggressive looking men.

The effects of this objectification carry into women’s personal lives as well. In contrast to men, research has shown that women considered overweight or unattractive have lower educational and economic attainment, and face higher levels of workplace discrimination if viewed as unfeminine. Based on this evidence, it is no wonder women not only feel pressured to conform to societal standards of beauty, but internalize messages of the male gaze, making their perceived obsession with appearance a gendered norm. In fact, with greater popularity of digital cameras and greater ease of use in photo editing software, we are finding more and more that women at home are editing photos of

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7 Stankiewicz and Rosseli, “Women as Sex Objects and Victims in Print Advertising,” 586.
themselves so that they better conform to popular beauty standards before uploading the images on to social media platforms.

Figure two: Advertisement for Dolce & Gabbana, 2013
A survey by the Daily Mail for example, found that over half of women surveyed admitted to altering their photos before uploading to social media.\textsuperscript{9} In a 2015 research paper “How Gender-Stereotypical are Selfies” a group of German researchers, surveyed over 500 selfies consisting half of men and half of women, and compared them to advertisements to see how much they conformed to gender stereotype roles. Using categories of gender display developed in the late 1970’s by researcher Erving Goffman, the images were rated to determine the percentage of men and women that conformed to these traditional forms of gender display. These categories include: 1. Relative size, (where women are most commonly depicted as smaller and lower than men) 2. Feminine touch (women are more likely to be caressing themselves or another object) 3. Function ranking (traditional job settings with men in an executive role and women assisting) 4. Ritualization of subordination (women are generally lower than men to symbolize social status and subordination) and 5. Licensed withdrawal (women are depicted as withdrawn from the social situation at hand). The category of body display would be added years later, stating that women are usually wearing revealing, if any clothing. The conclusion of the study determined that the selfies were more stereotypical than the magazine adverts, with the

selfie takers scoring higher in four of six categories.\textsuperscript{10} This study reveals that the saturation of gender conforming and idealized images of women has become so saturated into our daily lives, our attempts to conform to standards of beauty and gender are increasing as well.

We can attempt to understand why greater conformity to idealized standards of beauty would result from the influx of images by considering theories of identity and the role society and the media play in establishing body norms and regulating behavior. In this paper we will analyze three. The first is the theory of the looking glass self, and the second is cultivation theory, which deals more directly with the role of the media. Thirdly we will look at Foucault’s theories of regulation and power, and discuss how the theories of the looking glass self and cultivation theory tie with his arguments on society as a normalizer and rule maker for individual’s body autonomy.

In 1902 Charles Cooley introduced the concept of the looking glass self, a theory that asserts that our personal identities, and the development of our inner selves, is created through our interpersonal interactions within society. Cooley describes this as our “imagination of our appearance” to others, but also our “imagination of his judgement” to our appearance.\textsuperscript{11} What this means is we develop the idea of ourselves by understanding how we believe others perceive

\textsuperscript{10} Nicola Döring, Anne Reif, and Sandra Poeschl, "How gender-stereotypical are selfies? A content analysis and comparison with magazine adverts" in Computers in Human Behavior, Volume 55, Part B, (February 2016): 955-962.

us and what their judgements of us may be. As a result, we begin to behave in ways that reflect how we think they think of us. In other words, our interactions in society are like interactions with a series of mirrors that reflect our identities back at us, reminding us how we should look and behave. It should be noted that the development of the self is a process that occurs over time, through extended interactions with society. These interactions can contribute to our perceptions of our selves at a specific moment and are conditional based on the people around us and the degree to which we hold their opinions.

Cooley’s work on the self concentrates on that which is empirically identifiable or the self we exhibit to others, not the inner self or ego as is commonly discussed by other theorists. He concentrates on the singular “I”, and argues that to describe oneself as “I” is to initiate an inner feeling of who “I” is. Thus, for Cooley, the self that individuals describe is a combination of feelings one has about oneself. This is why criticism or ridicule one may face of their self is often met with hostility or animosity. Cooley’s theories are not necessarily based on a lack of individualism, but more a commitment to the idea that the individual is not separable from society, but a living member of it. In essence, individuals do not make society, but society makes individuals. This makes sense as Cooley’s theory is contingent upon the idea that we could not have an

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"I" if there were no "you". Cooley’s concept of "I" or the self begins at birth, and runs parallel with our desire for control and power. As infants, we begin to illustrate control over our limbs and bottles, and as we grow the desire for power is exercised over other objects that are "mine" as well as other individuals. Consider a toddler’s temper tantrum to get what he/she desires.

For women living in a society that places an exceptionally high value on their physical appearance, Cooley’s argument is especially relevant. In his descriptions of self-development, Cooley delves further into issues of self-esteem, and the degree into which our self-feelings are tied to other’s opinions of us. When we become preoccupied with how others see us, we begin to lose focus of our identities because we become solely consumed with how we wish to appear. Suddenly we adopt the viewpoints of others onto ourselves, and our self-worth becomes fully dependent on others’ approval. It is not just the approval of our peers that we are after, however, but the approval of our communities and the societies in which we live. Cooley describes the "I" as a feeling, an emotion similar to anger or sadness. When we say “I” we feel something about ourselves. As social beings this sense of I is tied to pride and shame—but the pride and shame come from our thoughts of “you” and “they”. In Cooley’s words: “The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of

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ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another’s mind.”\textsuperscript{16}

As was stated above, more and more women are digitally altering images of their bodies before placing them on to social media sites. This suggests that we feel so strongly that our bodies must meet certain societal norms we are willing to take the extra time to manipulate them before posting. Considering the average woman weighs between 140-150 pounds and wears a size 14, not a two or four as the average actress or model does, we can only assume that women are looking elsewhere for direction on how to look.\textsuperscript{17} Consider then, it is estimated that the average American TV viewer watches five hours of television per day,\textsuperscript{18} a number that does not include media consumption on our phones, computers or tablets. Further, clothing and beauty brands almost exclusively rely on thin models to represent them in advertisements, even those that advertise extended or plus size fashion. It comes then as no surprise that many Americans may have altered assumptions about their societies and the people who occupy them.

Cultivation theory suggests that the more we consume media, the more we begin to believe that the world of the media exists. In other words, “heavy television viewers rely on what they see on television as representative of reality.” Due to this, heavily portrayed content such as violence, particular occupations, and representations of race and sex contribute to TV viewers’ assumptions of reality. The overrepresented entities are seen as norms by heavy viewers, and shape their perceptions of the world. For example, in terms of televised violence, researchers have found that heavy viewers of television are more likely to overestimate their risk of being the victim of a violent crime, and overestimate the crime rate in the area they live. This phenomenon, called “Mean-World Syndrome” was identified by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1970’s. Of note, heavy viewing of television at the time was considered five hours per day, the average rate for viewers today.

Further analyses show that violence depicted in the media most often occur toward Hispanics or black men or women, children or the elderly. Additionally, key TV characters are often white men, which means we continually see televised worlds from the perspective of a white, middle class male. The

dichotomy of active male/passive female is not a new one in media criticism. Writers such as Laura Mulvey and Jean Kilbourne have articulated how the media continue to treat the female body as a commodity or object for the gaze of the heterosexual white male. Mulvey’s 1989 essay “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema” was one of the first to attack the inherent sexist nature of cinema, and focused on her theories of the male gaze. She argued that within cinema, all scenes are shot through the perspective of the male and for the male’s viewing pleasure. Because of this control and consistent perspective, women too are forced to view women on screen through the eyes of the male. This perspective transitions to everyday life, and women begin to view themselves and other women through the eyes of the hetero male as well. Kilbourne compliments Mulvey’s original theories by tying them to issues of advertising and other forms of media. In Kilbourne’s many essays and films, she exposes how women’s bodies are consistently used to sell products in a sexualized nature—even when sex has nothing to do with the item at hand. Consider the image below for Tom Ford. The text states that they are selling a fragrance for men, but the image is a cropped shot of a woman’s breasts. Kilbourne elaborates on how women’s bodies are often cut up, objectified, and reduced to only their sexual elements, reinforcing ideas that for a female, body image is all that matters—another aspect perfectly detailed in the Tom Ford advertisement.

In terms of body image, and specifically women’s bodies, those shown in media are often young, thin and conventionally attractive, and their sizes, weights, and physical features differ greatly from population averages.24

Figure three: Advertisement for Tom Ford for Men Fragrance, shot by Terry Richardson, 2007.

Body image refers to internalized ideas we have defining how our bodies should look, a definition created by the ideals of our society, which influences our perceptions and feelings towards our own bodies. Content analysis has found that 33% of women portrayed on television are below average weight, and the thinner the actress, the more praise they typically receive from males. For TV viewers, this establishes a belief that young, thin, and attractive women are the ideal and also that they are the norm—a false belief that leads to low levels of self-esteem and low body image in women. As Jean Kilbourne says in her most recent film on the effects of advertising, “Killing us Softly 4” (2010), “Ads sell more than just products. They sell values, they sell images, they sell concepts of love and sexuality, of success, and perhaps most important, of normalcy.” A recent Victoria Secret advertisement for a new lingerie line details this perfectly. The image shows several tall, thin women dressed only in bras and underwear with the caption “The Perfect Body.” While this may be meant as a reference for the lingerie, the ad gives the impression that these women are society’s ideal. For African Americans and other minorities, representation in the media comes at an even higher cost. Not only are they expected to conform to the media’s imagery, but they are also forced to confront other damaging stereotypes as well. Scholars studying the way blackness is portrayed in the media demonstrate that the media often portray black women in stereotypical roles—as single mothers,
mammies, or jezebels. Further, black women are expected to meet Western ideals of beauty—and those depicted on television and in advertising are often light skinned, have long straight hair, and light colored eyes. In fact many darker skinned women often have their skin digitally lightened on magazines, including artist m.i.a shown below on the cover of Nylon magazine. As author Bell Hooks states concerning the representation of black women in the media, “(representation) determines how blackness and people are seen and how other groups will respond to us based on their relation to these structured images.” Other minority women also suffer at the hands of the media. Latina and Asian women are most commonly displayed as sexualized “exotic others”, most commonly appearing in roles that put them in the position of “love interest” for white men. (Recall Latina actress Jennifer Lopez in Maid in Manhattan or Lucy Liu as a dragon lady in Kill Bill) The same holds true for Native American women, who are most often portrayed as strong and powerful, but also exotic, beautiful and lustful. This stereotype was dubbed the “Pocahontas Paradox” by researchers Portman and Herring. The messages the media carries with it about the social structure are clear and powerful, and as researchers Dwight E.

27 Dwight E. Brooks and Lisa P. Hébert, “Gender, Race and Media Representation”, 300-301.  
28 Dwight E. Brooks and Lisa P. Hébert, “Gender, Race and Media Representation”, 299.  
Brooks and Lisa P. Hébert state in the essay “Gender, Race and Media Representation” (2006) concerning minority representation “the way they are portrayed in the media is crucial because stereotypes of underrepresented people produce socialization in audiences that unconsciously take this misinformation as truth”\textsuperscript{30}.

![Figure four](image)

Figure four: An advertisement by Victoria Secret in 2014, seems to suggest that the nearly identical thin models shown have the perfect body.

\textsuperscript{30} Dwight E. Brooks and Lisa P. Hébert, “Gender, Race and Media Representation”, 302.
Figure five: The edited image of singer m.i.a. is shown on the cover of the magazine NYLON (left), January 2014. Her skin drastically whiter than in reality (right).
Figure six: An image for AirFrance, 2014, shows a white woman dressed in what appears to be traditional Japanese clothing and style, exoticizing and sexualizing their culture.
Figure seven: The promotional poster for Maid in Manhattan, 2002, a film where Latina actress Jennifer Lopez plays the love interest for white actor Ralph Fiennes
Unfair stereotypes and unattainable aesthetics are not all that is problematic. Women’s bodies are often transformed and manipulated so that they are made to look like other products, further enforcing the idea that women’s bodies are objects to be consumed, or bodies are cut up so that all we see are breasts, toned torsos, or long heeled legs—forcing us to ask what actually is for sale. As Kilbourne notes, all of these manipulative ads achieve is a dehumanization of women, turning us into animals or objects for consumption. While most believe that they are not susceptible to things like advertising and stereotypes portrayed on television, in reality these images penetrate our subconscious and influence the things we buy, the way we view ourselves and others, as well as our actions and behaviors both socially and privately. “Only 8 percent of an ad’s message is received by the conscious mind;” says Rance Crain, editor in chief of Advertising Age, “the rest is worked and reworked deep within the recesses of the brain, where a product’s positioning and repositioning takes place.” This message holds true for all forms of representation with media. Based on cultivation theory—what we see most often on our televisions is what we believe to be true in society. If we are constantly forced to view these televised realities through the eyes of middle class white men, whose interests in women are focused only on what their bodies have to offer, why wouldn’t we see women like this in everyday life?

Considering the ways our ideas of reality are construed through cultivation theory, and how our selfhood is developed in regard to the theory of the looking glass self, we can begin to appreciate ways in which the media plays a strong
role in manipulating our ideas of how the female body should look. In the journal article “The Influence of TV Viewing on Consumer’s Body Image and Related Consumption Behavior” (2007) the argument is made that body perceptions are related to TV viewing, leading to a gap between what is real and what is the idealized self.\(^\text{31}\) In fact, the article shows that advertising studies have found that viewers who consume advertising with attractive models will have temporarily raised comparison standards for physical attractiveness, and enhanced belief about the importance of physical attractiveness.\(^\text{32}\) In a similar research study, “Social Comparison and the Idealized Images of Advertising” (1991) by Marsha L Richins, Richins describes four controlled studies that used college students to determine to what degree advertising images influenced their sense of personal attractiveness, and to what extent advertisements with highly attractive models altered how they rated the attractiveness of others. The study, published in *The Journal of Consumer Research*, asked two sets of participants to rate the attractiveness of college students who had previously been rated as average by a separate control group. While one group was asked to rate the college students after rating a variety of advertisements with attractive models, the second group was asked to rate the same college students after viewing ads that contained no models. The result of this study found that, at least temporarily, the individual’s scales for rating attractiveness shifted after viewing the ads with the models. The


students whom viewed the advertisements with attractive models rated the average college students at a lower level than those who viewed ads that did not contain models.\textsuperscript{33} These studies suggest that viewing the idealized images of models impacts our interpretation of reality and the attractiveness of other individuals and perhaps even ourselves. When we are consumed by images of ideal and beautiful bodies and features, we come to expect these forms to exist in reality. Understanding that our selfhood is based on how we perceive the world around us, we are disappointed when we realize these forms are not attainable.

When we pull together these theories on the looking glass self and cultivation theory we can see how easy it is for a divide to form between our real and idealized selves. Ultimately this divide leads to body dissatisfaction, and attempts at improving or altering the self to meet the requirements of our looking glass or ideal self. With the growing presence of media in our lives, and more importantly the growing abundance of images that saturate our days, it is clear the media work as a key tool in shaping the development of our selves, and our understanding of the societies in which we live. The media’s continued sexualization of girls and women, and the continued presence of idealized and impossible female bodies, have conditioned women and men to view these impossibly thin forms as normal. Any other body shape becomes abnormal or abhorrent. Further, the sexualization of women’s bodies is also normalized,

contributing to notions that women’s worth is solely tied to their appearance and the use of their bodies.

I would like now to tie concepts of the looking glass self and cultivation theories with theories of societal regulation of bodies. A key way to do this is by examining Michel Foucault’s theories on power and his writings on the prison system and discourse on body autonomy. In his theories on regulation, Foucault compares the regulatory nature of prison systems to the regulatory norms of society. He uses the term “discipline” to describe the ways that bodies are regulated in society, and the ways populations are managed. Foucault’s argument focuses on the panopticon, a wheel shaped prison structure with a tower in the center. From this tower all prisoners whose rooms make up the rim of the prison, are under a state of constant surveillance, which forces them to essentially jail themselves, since they are always uncertain if they are being watched. For Foucault, the structure of the prison system, its commitment to reforming, reeducating, and normalizing the abnormal delinquents it houses, is little different than the other institutions within society that also focus on regulating a society’s citizens. Hospitals, schools, etc. not only structurally resemble the prison building, but share common goals: to normalize individuals, and make them profitable and useful members of society.

The panopticon’s state of constant surveillance is also present for those of us outside the prison system. Our guards however are the leaders of society, those we have given power over us to set the norms and rules of our communities. As Foucault says in Discipline and Punish (1979) “The judges of
normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the social worker-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based.\textsuperscript{34} Foucault’s panopticon metaphor for society is an illustration of the discipline of bodies, and the regulations and surveillance they surrender to. We conform to the norms of society so that we do not face the shame and embarrassment of being abnormal. Susan Bartky furthers Foucault’s theories in her essay “Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” (1997) arguing that gender is a cultural creation, and that constantly changing social practices, ingrained since birth, determine femininity by controlling the movements, actions, and appearance of the female body. Like the constant gaze of the guard upon the prisoner, women’s bodies have been socially forced to confine their movements, and internalize the fact that they are always on display.

In terms of the media, they perhaps have emerged as one of the strongest judges and regulators of society in the modern age. Not only are they capable of bombarding us with constant imagery of how we should behave and how we should look, they also are in the position to chastise anyone who does not conform to the rules of society. It is within the media’s control to determine what is and who is and is not important. For example, in the 1980’s and 1990’s, researchers found that there were significant differences in the ways men and

women were portrayed in the news—men were more likely to be shown with up-close pictures of their faces, while women were usually shown in full body shots. This phenomenon, dubbed “Face-ism,” was found to be attributed to dominance and intelligence—when subjects were asked to rate perceived intelligence of individuals in photographs, the same individual in a close-up shot was viewed as more intelligent than when viewed far away. This same practice also occurs in instances where race is a factor; black men are more often shown in distant photos than up close.35 We can take this study a step further when we consider the ways men and women are portrayed in the media and in advertisements. Women are often undressed, sexualized, and in positions of passivity, while men are shown in positions of power and action.

The conclusion I adopt from studying these theories and how they relate to the over-sexed and idealized image of women is that our society has assigned women and femininity a role based on appearance alone. Denied voice, personality, and intelligence, the role for women remains to be defined by her ability to be feminine, and thus her ability to conform to an idealized image. For the last hundred years, women have challenged their role as second rate citizens throughout the western world. Once confined to the domestic duties of the home, women in the western world have ascended great peaks to gain rights to education, rights to vote, and rights within the workforce. And this was not

without great challenge. In the course of western history, philosophers and scientists have made it their mission to prove the inherent weakness, susceptibility to madness, and diminished intelligence of women in comparison to men.

Figure eight: Various covers of the men’s magazine GQ prove theories of “face-ism”, and is a clear example of the over-sexualization of women.
In 2017, we find ourselves facing similar challenges and restrictions to our rights. In our current political climate, we have been faced with the trauma that millions of U.S. citizens are willing to turn their heads and elect a political leader who has spoken of sexually assaulting women, who values women’s worth based on their appearances and hisses nasty nicknames. These citizens turn their heads on blatant sexism to further their political agendas, thus allowing and giving permission to others to feel comfortable enough to do the same. Further, it is not just men who voted for our current political leaders. We must of course ask ourselves, why, in this new age of feminism, is it that women continue to ascribe to the rules of femininity as though they are naturally ingrained within our psyche and we remain choiceless in these matters? As Susan Bartky states, the disciplined female body is maintained by women because of the social sanctions that result from not conforming. Lack of intimacy, failure to get the jobs one wants, socially enforced shame, and a sense of incompetence all result when women fail to maintain their efforts toward achieving the ideal look and attitude.

Given the above positions, we return now to the photograph of Laura Aguilar resting naked within the black and white landscape of her photograph. We can now more appreciate the stance the presence of her exposed body takes against current societal norms. As an overweight woman, her body represents the exact opposite of what we currently consider ideal, and with its exposure it

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challenges standards of beauty and decency. For the media do more than tell us which bodies to covet, they tell us what is appropriate to be seen and what isn’t. While the media expose the near nude bodies of thin women daily, overweight individuals are often publicly chastised and ridiculed. Forced daily to feel shame for the body they possess. Aguilar opposes this public shaming and ridicule by posing naked, and feeling comfortable while doing it. As a self-taught photographer, lesbian, and overweight Latina women, Aguilar is no stranger to being marginalized in many aspects of society. Her work is a confrontation to this daily marginalization, and as an artist, she strives to create images that “compassionately render the human experience,” and attempts to give voice to the marginalized and invisible. To do so, she exhibits no shame in the curves or shapes of her body, but allows it to be exhibited for anyone to view.

37 Laura Aguilar, from “Queer Arts in Los Angeles,” http://almalopez.com/projects/QALA/AguilarLaura/AguilarLaura.html
CHAPTER TWO: THE ARTIST/ACTIVIST

As images saturate more and more aspects of our lives, imagery is becoming one of the most powerful disseminators of information today. We rely on quick snaps and videos to learn about important updates in the world, but also to learn about current trends as they apply to our lives. This ever-increasing reliance on images for information puts artists into a unique position to educate and inform audiences like never before.

In the previous chapter, we looked at artist Laura Aguilar and the strength of her imagery to challenge body norms reinforced within society by the media. Many of the artists examined in this chapter fall in to the category of artist activist, a genre of art where process is often more important than materials. These artist activists often use new media or performance in their practice, staging their work so that they can use the media as a tool for promoting it. Others use traditional media tools to draw attention to their art—billboards, flyers, etc., to harness the greatest audience reach they can. Others, like Laura Aguilar, use traditional media to challenge present day social norms, and allow their subject matter to speak for them.

In the past artists activists appear/are employed most often during times of tense social change. Consider U.S artist employment and involvement during
World War II, and the heavy reliance on propaganda and posters to ignite patriotic feelings in the public through the WPA, or conversely the use of art to protest the Vietnam War. In 1967 artists and writers developed Angry Arts Week, a public art anti-war campaign that consisted of numerous public out-cries from both popular and unknown artists of the time. This suggests, as is often stated, that artists simply respond to the norms and values of the society they live—and do not actually make work that challenges or opposes norms unless contemporary society is already calling for it. However, with civil rights movements in the fifties and sixties in the US followed by a burst of activity from the women’s movement, followed by movements in conceptual art and the rise of the media—there has certainly been greater need, greater involvement, and greater opportunity for artists to make work that speaks up against unfair societal norms.
NUDE VS NAKED

Historically, nudity, or the nude, in reference to the genre of art, served as the acceptable form of nakedness. Being nude, or the nude, represented beauty, idealization, it was the body “clothed in art”. To be naked was to be defenseless. To be naked was to be an object for sexual desire, erotic, or pornographic. The nude was an aesthetic pleasure of which was higher than sexuality, and was to be enjoyed by those capable of appreciating its aesthetic beauty. For the remainder of this essay, however, the nude represents a form of art that has contributed to the role of women as an object for sexual pleasure, one that was carried from art and into the world of our current media, in television and advertising. Today, to be naked is to reclaim the body as belonging to one’s self. To reclaim the body as an entire form, not to be appreciated solely for its most desirable parts. As John Berger says in his award-winning series “Ways of Seeing” “To be naked is to be oneself.”

There is no denying that the nude is an important genre of art history, one which has been utilized by artists for centuries to create triumphant paintings and sculptures. As a genre that also focuses its attentions on depictions of women,

there are considerations to be made in its use to regulate and control women’s bodies. We cannot deny that the main objective in painting an idealized nude image is for more than the educational or aesthetic value of the work, but for the visual pleasure of the viewer, and specifically, the pleasure of the heterosexual male. In “Ways of Seeing” Berger contends that, with few exceptions, most historical nudes are created to be on display for the male gaze, and the women painted lack any personality or voice. They are created with complete indifference of who they are, and their nudity, instead, is a sign of their submission to the male gaze, their faces a “calculated charm to the man she knows is looking at her.” Tracing the genre through art history we find that the nude has changed little through time. Historically, the nude has included passively posed women, patiently lounging as they look outward to meet the gaze of their male audience. Their hairless bodies have pale creamy skin and the women are silently composed and contained. Within the compositions, they are surrounded by lush fabrics, thick pillows, or if they happen to be outside, dancing perhaps, their nude bodies are surrounded by lush landscapes with thick green trees and flowers. From Ancient Greek sculpture to Titian and Renoir we find these same attributes in each of the works. Every aspect is carefully composed to invoke consumption of the earth or man-made commodities, and the female contributes to it as another object to be gazed upon or purchased. In many ways then, the idealized nudes housed within the protection of art represent women as the ideal commodity. A symbol of high culture, no expense spared.
Titian’s *Venus and the Lute Players*, is a near perfect example of these descriptions, and a clearly classical compositional reference of many of today’s advertisements. In this painting, Venus lounges passively, staring into the distance, surrounded by thick curtains and soft pillows. A male lute player, fully dressed, gazes at her as he serenades her with his music. Recalling Erving Goffman’s descriptions of gender display, Titian’s Venus meets the categories of body display, feminine touch, and licensed withdrawal resulting in the perfect display object. These same characteristics can be found in the work of Peter Paul Rubens and Renoir. Looking at their works *The Three Graces* and *The
Large Bather, in line with Berger’s remarks in “Ways of Seeing” the women depicted not only share similar body types, but nearly identical facial expressions. In Ruben’s Graces, the women share coy glances and knowing grins alluding to their knowledge of being watched and seen. Framed by a hanging bouquet above and a sturdy tree to their left, the graces are framed in a picturesque landscape meant to perfectly capture them as objects for consumption and fantasy. Renoir’s Large Bathers, share the Graces’ knowing looks as they share their bodies for the sights of audiences. Though two of the bathers sit in contrast to the standing positions of The Three Graces, in many ways the positions of their bodies are the same. Each has been specifically posed so that we are offered a different vantage point of the body of the woman. One woman’s pose emphasizes her back, another her chest, while one is twisted. With their similar body compositions and shared expressions, the only descriptive difference between them seems to be the color of their hair. And as we will notice in both works—we find a blonde, a brunette and a red-head, something to appeal to all interests. Recalling the advertisements from the previous chapter, specifically the Victoria Secret and Dolce & Gabbana ads, we can see where trends from art history have carried on into the modern age. Like Titian’s Venus, the model in the Dolce ad lays passive staring out past the frames of her page, and similar to the women in Ruben’s Three Graces and Renoir’s Bathers, the Victoria Secret models all share a nearly identical body type and skin color. With their coy smiles and pouty eyes, once again the only differing factor between them is their hair color.
Figure ten: Peter Paul Rubens, *The Three Graces*, 1636-1638
In her book “The Female Nude” Linda Nead describes the nude as “the ever-recurring subject” and notes its history as being a “relentless and ever-increasing attempt to put the female body on show.” 39 I am in perfect agreement, and agree further as she begins her discussion on the nude as being both a tradition of “exclusion as much as inclusion.” 40 As with advertising, the idealized images we see within the historical genre of the nude depict an idealized and impossible body which speaks to the ways society wishes to be viewed. Society desires that all female bodies are thin and pale skinned, and that anyone who

39 Linda Nead, The Female Nude, 60.
40 Linda Nead, The Female Nude, 60.
differs from this representation is omitted from television, advertising, or a painting. With this careful editing, a sculpted mirage is created, one that audiences are led to believe is a factual viewing of reality. Consider that, before photography, lifestyle magazines and advertisers relied on hand drawn or painted images to advertise their products and services. This lineage represents arts crossover into the world of consumption and media, for these original drawings and paintings were a representational of the way proper individuals should behave in society.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, portrayals of the ideal women have appeared in various forms of media, beginning with the rise in popularity of magazines in the late 1800’s. A series by artist Alice Barber Stephens titled *The American Woman* appeared in multiple issues of the *Ladies’ Home Journal* from January-November of 1897. The series, commissioned by the *Ladies’ Home Journal*—a popular magazine with both the rising middle class of women at the time, as well as lower and working-class individuals—were meant to portray the “New Woman,” a modern woman with traditional Victorian ideals, who had made a success of herself in the workplace, but also maintained her home and raised her children. Stephen’s images depicted this new woman in various domestic scenes, sewing, reading from the bible, caring for children, and illustrated not only how this new woman should behave, but what a proper home should look like as well. Several of the images that depict women in the household contain pianos and framed art on the walls, implying the importance of teaching women musical skills and art appreciation. As the keepers of the home it was also the
female’s job to provide entertainment and education. Alongside the images, articles directed toward woman varied from bible studies, advice for mothers on parenting, to how to provide and plan culturally relevant and entertaining evenings the whole family can participate in.\(^{41}\) As time passed, later images would further suggest that women should conform to certain looks and styles in order to fit in with society. Published first in 1890, Charles Dana Gibson’s “Gibson Girl” created the first “True American Girl,”\(^{42}\) an ideal for women across the country to strive to replicate. Tall and delicate, mysterious and unsmiling, the Gibson Girl was always dressed well and excelled at everything she did. Appearing in dozens of magazines at the time, she became a staple in American society for nearly two decades, defining what every woman should aspire to. More than just a status symbol for the upper class however, the Gibson Girl became one of the first illustrations to represent stereotypes of women across the country, used as a prop for promoting the importance of continuing the strength of the upper white class.\(^{43}\) While over time the ideal woman has morphed and changed (the Gibson Girl was followed for example by the Vamp and the Flapper), we can see how the media have continually created styles of being for individuals to replicate, and the power they hold in enforcing and

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\(^{43}\) As Carolyn Kitch tells us, this early obsession with depicting White women as the ideal beauty standard reflected the fears of eugenicists and President Theodore Roosevelt’s public worry about “race suicide” or the fear that immigrants and people of color would soon outnumber whites. Carolyn Kitch, *The Girl on the Magazine Cover*, 40.
upholding these norms, by essentially saturating audiences with images. As the media have grown in popularity and consumption has increased, the strength of the media to create trends has as well.

Lastly, it should be noted, that it is not the genre of the idealized nude specifically that I am criticizing, but its contribution to the oppression of women. Historical context is important here, because throughout the history of the Western Art world, while male artists were painting idealized nude forms, women within society had few rights, and very limited body autonomy. Further, women artists were barred from life drawing classes, as it was unacceptable for them to draw nude bodies. While it was perfectly acceptable for them to be the subject, their participation in viewing was banned. This exclusion, in part, greatly contributes to the problems contained within their idealization—through art and later in the media. Women have for centuries been excluded from contributing to the culture within which they exist, while simultaneously being told to look and behave a certain way.44

Understanding the historical context of the nude allows us to better understand the challenges artists face when creating work that challenge stereotypes on a social level. Women artists must consider the implications that appearing or working with naked bodies has before they can attempt to create

44 Linda Nochlin, “Why have there been no great Women Artists” in Women, Art and Power and Other Essays (Westview Press, 1988) pp.147-158
work that uses naked bodies in a method that does not objectify or center them in pre-standing systems.

Figure twelve: Alice Barber Stevens, The Beauty of Motherhood, In Ladies Home Journal, November 1897
Figure thirteen: Charles Dana Gibson, *Gibson Girl*, illustration, 1898.
Eleanor Antin’s work “Carving: A Traditional Sculpture” carefully considers the implications of the idealized nude in art history while also commenting on society’s desire for females to have impeccably thin bodies. “Carving” consists of gridded black and white photographs that were taken of the artist’s body daily as she followed a strict dieting regime. Meant to reference the way a sculptor would carve away at a piece of marble to create an ideal female form the audience is able to see a thinner Antin slowly emerge from the carving of her diet. While Antin was attempting to replicate the carved idealism of ancient Greek sculpture, the staunch black and white photos, her duplicated stance and expressionlessness, all create a feeling of experimental observation with the work; as if her body is being used in a test study and daily images are necessary for the research. Considering Eleanor Antin’s parents were Polish Jews who immigrated to the U.S. in 1935, just prior to the onset of World War II, her piece “Carving” also begins to take on heavier metaphors, meticulous methods of body study, and daily thinning. As both an installation and performance artist, Eleanor Antin deals frequently with concepts of identity, often creating alternate personas she then performs in her work. Similar to Laura Aguilar, Antin is the daughter of immigrant parents and has always felt like an outsider—both because of her
religion and sex. As another part of her practice, Antin has created numerous alternate personalities and personas, including her most famous Eleanor Antinova, a black ballerina that Eleanor created in an attempt to identify with, and understand what it means to be black. Unable to find a replication of herself in the mirrors of society, Antin creates personas to attempt to further understand hers as well as others’ places in her culture. Her performances reflect history and contemporary society, and offer audiences insight into the many ways we are able to change and reflect who we aspire to be.

More so than our own aspirations of self, Antin’s work reflects the demands of society for women’s bodies to be thinner and thinner. In contemporary society, it is more likely that Antin’s work resonates with the digital thinning we see exhibited in magazines or print advertising than traditional sculpture. Despite knowing that these bodies are unreal, we have seen the evidence suggesting women’s attempts to replicate what they see anyway.

Through time, her work has evolved to become a representation of the thinning of women and the creation of the impossibly thin body. This unreal body Antin strives to replicate holds as a symbol for the population struggling with disordered eating. Yet, while standing as a representation of society’s ideal thin body, her pose and stance are a stark contrast to the stereotypical images of women in the media. There is no feminine touch, absent minded gazing, or passive body position.
Figure fourteen: Eleanor Antin, detail of 'CARVING: A Traditional Sculpture'
Instead, her clean posture with shoulders back creates a powerful and revealing stance for the viewer. Its boldness directly asks the audience to contemplate the health of the model on view. To question the normalcy of thinness.

In an effort to challenge standards of beauty both in the disappearance of personal flaws as well as the norm that women are only beautiful while young, artist Melanie Manchot takes nude photographs of her mother in nature. Her images are reminiscent of classical paintings of nymphs and goddesses smiling and bathing in natural areas, but here we see the smiling and laughing face of her mother, bearing all in complete inhibition. Her works challenge the idea that there is an ideal body or form that can represent nude women both in art and media, and confronts issues of ageism within society. Her photograph “The London Eye” provides an empowering, almost god like stance for the mother. With the camera positioned from below, her mother’s figure is not only central to the photograph, but positions her gaze out above us. As if looking up to a larger than life sculpture, the portrait of Manchot’s mother creates a dignified and omniscient presence, her mother’s body reflects the strength and dignity one may normally attribute to a male form.

Unlike the passively posed and coy faced images of the traditional nudes, the images of Manchot’s mother are charged with character and intensity. An obvious personality bursts from her smile in With Blue Clouds and Laughter while The London Eye presents the face of a serious and caring mother. Her face is one of concern and dignity as she looks out above us.
Figures fifteen (top) and sixteen (bottom):


Some photos from the series of images Manchot took of her mother titled “Liminal Portraits,” were also published as large-scale posters, both in the U.S. and United Kingdom, and were posted on billboards on the sides of houses, roads, and buildings. “Look at you Loving Me,” posted on the side of a road, consists of an all black background with the full body of her mother posing on the right hand side. The pose is traditional and frequently seen in magazines for advertisements or in life drawing. Unlike the traditional nudes of Renoir or Titian, however, the full black background is void of any decorative element. There is no accompanying floating bouquet or lush landscape to frame the body of her mother. The larger than life full body shots also strongly differ from Manchot’s previous work where her mother was posed against various landscapes. The full black backgrounds of these images relate more to traditional advertising and design, minus the heavily altered bodies we are used to. Accompanied by the text, bold and in red, “Look at you Loving Me”, the image has a dare you to look away feel. The large- scale body of her mother addresses issues of ageism and idealism so often seen in traditional magazine ads. Because the image is lacking decoration, the viewer is forced to confront the size and power of the body depicted. One which has the strength to infiltrate our society and feel more like a norm than exception. Similar to the other photographs of her mother, these nude images showcase the character of the woman depicted, a trait lacking in traditional nudes and contemporary advertising.
Returning to Michel Foucault, in his “History of Sexuality,” (1976) Foucault describes the regulation of the body in terms of its gendered sex, and how power is used and maintained by gendering and controlling its actions. Essentially, Foucault contends that the biological category of sex, and the gendered terms that come with it (masculine vs feminine) is a societal effort to control the movements and range of the body, and control the ways people behave in society. As stated in the previous chapter, the media act as a power regulator in

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line with Foucault’s theories. Their control over the ideal body regulates the way women behave and the way they are treated by men. For the media, gender remains a black and white binary, where men must conform to certain stereotypes and norms and females the opposite. There is little room for fluidity. In the above examples, both Manchot and Antin are using naked bodies to challenge the idealized forms and figures most commonly present in the media. The physical changes Antin demonstrates in her work address the dangers of the idealized images in advertising by showing the necessary extremes to attain them and the lengths women are going through to reach these standards. Manchot and Aguilar use their bodies (or bodies of others) as alternative forms of representation. They are claiming comfort and beauty for themselves and not relying on the media to dictate the shapes of their bodies. In essence, they are reclaiming their nakedness as honest representations of their bodies. Exhibiting it so that they can claim autonomy and freedom over their bodies socially and privately. The artists here are rejecting society’s requirements to maintain and adhere to strict regimes and creating new regulations for themselves.

It is not the intention of the artists that they create work that offers an exchange for audiences, or in other words to suggest that one specific body type is better than any other. These artists seek to demonstrate that the idealized forms shown in the media are not realistic, that there are other forms that more naturally exist in nature and around them. Artists performing their bodies are doing so without disguises, and exhibiting true nakedness, not reflecting the culture’s ideal nude. A final artist I would like to discuss, before moving on to
artists whose activist practice relies on traditional protest forms or performance, is Marilyn Mintor. Mintor, who has been working in New York since the beginning of the 1970’s, came to fame in the mid 2000’s and is known for her edgy paintings whose source material is everything from pornography to high fashion and glamour magazines. A popular female artist, whose traveling retrospective Pretty/Dirty was recently on view at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Mintor is in many ways a walking contradiction. The artist has done photography for the Tom Ford brand and worked with figure Pamela Anderson, while also suggesting that her layered paintings are critiques of the high fashion and beauty industries. This contradiction, however, is perhaps what makes her paintings so successful. Hyper realistic, Mintor creates her paintings by painstakingly layering sheer layers of paint over shiny aluminum, resulting in large, glamorous, and sexy paintings that border the nude/naked dichotomy. Are they celebrating women’s sexuality or contributing to the objectification of bodies? The process behind Mintor’s work is also incredibly fascinating. To create her pieces, Mintor selects specific elements from multiple photos to create an ideal image. Just like a photographer clipping and altering a model to look perfectly stunning in Photoshop, Mintor picks and chooses which photo will represent the various proponents of her paintings—creating her own idealized images. This picking and choosing directly confronts how easy it is to make “make-believe” seem real. With heavy focus on the female body, from creation to fruition, Mintor’s paintings are wrapping their sparkling glamour around issues of conformity, body idealization, and sexualization and objectification. Their power lies in the fact that
they are confronting the notion that women’s bodies may be sexualized but not sexual. She painstakingly paints beauty, confronting our obsessions with the beauty industry.

Figure eighteen: Marilyn Mintor, *Fatter Lip*, 2016, Enamel on Metal, 45” x 36”
In *Fatter Lip*, Mintor has created a large scale close up image of a woman’s lips that appear to be either a reflection in a steamy mirror, or appearing behind fogged and moist glass. Despite the blur and haziness of the image, there is no mistaking the pink lips and shiny white teeth. The pristine painting resembles a photographic ad for a beauty company, the large water droplets adding to the hyper-realistic illusion. There is an unmistakable beauty in the image and the audience cannot help but imagine a beautiful woman posing for the portrait. As an image, there is nothing shocking about its underlying sexual appeal but the understanding that it is a painting adds to the images depth. The amount of time and required layers of thin paint to create the work act as a metaphor for the commitment of women who painstakingly groom and press themselves on a daily basis. Our commitment to societal standards of beauty, is reflected in each of the soft pink layers.

Mintor’s *Barbed Wire (Pamela Anderson)*, reflects these same traits while adding an element of play. Surrounded by bubbles, a context for Anderson’s portrait is offered by the layers of soap running down her arm. Focusing on half of Anderson’s face, our eyes are first captured by her lush and glistening pink lips, and are then moved around the work by the numerous floating soap bubbles. Similar to *Fatter Lip*, the painting feels like a blown-up advertisement, one we would be more likely to come across in a fashion magazine than museum wall. This reflection of the beauty and high fashion industries so common in her work is also a challenge against them. In the cropped detail of *Barbed Wire*, we
are presented with an illusion of beauty common in advertising. Mintor’s detailed crafting of her compositions, specific placement of bubbles, enhancement of the lips and soap on the body are all elements to be found in a Photoshopped advert. The crafting of our inner self is guided by the advertisements and images we see daily, but as Mintor alludes, the images we use to guide whom we should be are as unreal as the clipped and enhanced images she paints. Just like the historical nudes of the past, and the advertisements of today, the women in Mintor’s pieces are every woman and no woman. Though they are ripe with intensity and sexuality, the individuals lack personality and identity. They play into the rules of advertising that expect all women to look the same. To continuously be sexually available. Mintor’s blown up adverts are a testimony to the glorification we place on those we consider ideal and beautiful, while failing to accept or acknowledge the inherent falsity of the images. Larger than life, Mintor’s paintings are a mirror for society. They reflect our cultural obsessions back at us, forcing us to question how we see ourselves, and how we see ourselves within society and its focus on ideal bodies. The *Pretty/Dirty* retrospective pairs her earliest pornographic paintings, highly graphic, runny, and pixelated images, with her new works that focus more completely on the fashion and glamour world. This creates a perfect dichotomy of private pleasure with public objectification, exhibiting and announcing that women can control their own bodies and do with them what they please.
Figure nineteen: Marilyn Mintor, *Barbed Wire (Pamela Anderson)*, 2008, enamel on metal, 60" x 96"
Figure twenty: Marilyn Mintor, Porn Grid 3, 1989, enamel on metal, 24” x 30”
ARTIST ACTIVISTS: IN THE FIELD

One of the most well-known of feminist artist activists, perhaps because they have been around so long, perhaps because they work anonymously and in costume, are the group the Guerilla Girls. Established in New York in 1985, the Guerilla Girls came about at a time when the feminist movement of the seventies had all but died, and Nancy Reagan had made domestic life great again. Their activism started with their first propaganda poster campaign, where the girls strategically placed political posters attacking the art world around SoHo and the East Village, the hub of high art at the time. The posters were published on the streets nightly, and contained factual statistics representing the lack of representation of women and artists of color in the art world. The Guerilla Girls attacked galleries, museums, art critics and dealers. As the Guerilla Girls gained fame and appeared in their gorilla masks in popular magazines and on TV, they also faced backlash from the art world, and were called Nazi’s and “the art

police.”

Over the next five years, the girls would continue to publish and post posters, eventually broadening their mission to post about local community issues and global social justice issues. They also began touring and speaking across the globe, hosting performative speeches that raised and discussed issues of feminism and gender. As the nineties progressed, the girls began working on other performative works and today boast an active and successful career hosting multiple exhibitions, workshops, and talks every year. In 2013-2014, a retrospective of their activist campaigns and posters was featured at the cultural center AlhondigaBilbao in Spain. While the girls deny that their posters are art, and the focus of all that they do is political, they also frequently attest to the fact that they are all women artists. There are essential artistic qualities to all the work that they do—from the design of the posters to the design of their newest merchandise in their online shop, to the performative aspect of the videos they create and talks they host. It is the artistic background of the Guerilla Girls that make the work they do powerful, and allows it to reach and engage with numerous audiences. While the Guerilla Girls are an obvious artist activist group, it is necessary to also mention their contributions that fall in line with the topics of this paper. While their activism initially focused on the sexism and racism solely within the art world, they have long since expanded their views to also cover issues of sexism, racism, and corruption in politics and pop culture. From 2000-

2002, the Guerilla Girls attacked the film industry with statistical posters detailing Hollywood’s obsession with thinness, while also showing the clear sexism that exists in relation to the absence of female directors, and absence of female’s and minority’s winning Oscars. One such method of protest was the design of anti-Hollywood stickers, that were available for free download. The stickers came with the instructions that they should be Xeroxed on to adhesive paper and pasted all over town, but especially in movie theater bathrooms. Through this method of street style activism, the Guerilla Girls are able to greatly expand their reach by employing the services of any who want to participate. This level of engagement not only increases awareness about current Hollywood conditions, but empowers the public to take action. The activation of the public as an active force, quiets negative suggestions that this kind of behavior cannot be helped or changed.

In combination with the stickers the Guerilla Girls created a billboard sharing similar statistics. In many ways, the Guerilla Girls are like their own advertising agency. They print posters and utilize billboards but instead of selling a product they are advertising for social justice. Audiences are accustomed to viewing suggestive billboards—they are nearly inescapable with their suggestions of where to eat, what to drink, what events are coming up. Utilizing their scale and presence not only reaches a large audience, but attacks an industry with a strong reliance on advertising to promote their products.
Figure twenty-one: Guerilla Girls, Anti Hollywood Stickers, 2001
Figure twenty-two: Guerilla Girls, Anti-Hollywood Stickers, 2001
Figure twenty-three: Guerilla Girls, Billboard, The Anatomically Correct Oscar, 2002
The use of the gorilla mask for the Guerilla Girls is also an important component to consider when discussing the groups’ work. Chosen as a key tool to hide their identities so that the meaning of their work takes full precedence, the mask still serves as a recognizing factor in their work, and has come to symbolize their entire movement. By wearing the masks it becomes impossible to place the girls within society. They become classless entities dressed in black. Faceless, their bodies almost become nonhuman, eliminating the possibility of objectification and forcing attention on the entire spectacle as performance. The Guerilla Girls have stated that they wear the masks to hide their identities specifically so that full attention is placed on the work they create, and not on who they are as artists or individuals. Unfortunately, however, I think the Gorilla masks lend an additional hand in promoting their work as well. By making the girls both anonymous and less than human, we are unable to judge their appearances on any level. Imagine if the girls were considered conventionally attractive or unattractive. Suddenly the focus of their activism would become: “hot girls protest discrimination” or if unattractive, “angry feminists yell at museums because they cannot get husbands.” The anonymity offered by the Guerilla Girls masks makes it possible for them to do their work in the first place. When wearing the masks, the girls are given a higher level of respect, attention, and power. While this anonymity has allowed them to continue their activist work and progress to where they are today, it speaks greatly to the continued need for
women to make alterations to their selves in order to achieve success in a patriarchal society.

Before the Gorilla girls made their debut, Suzanne Lacy had been working as an arts activist since the early 1970’s. Her transition into art began in 1969 at California State University in Fresno, where and when Judy Chicago established the first feminist art program. Before her leap into the arts, Lacy was trained in pre-med with a focus in psychosomatic illness, and originally attended Cal Arts as a student in social design. The combination of Lacy’s experiences however are what make her so successful as a performance artist.

Lacy, in collaboration with Leslie Leibowitz, best captures the use of traditional activist protest in combination with her performance art practice. Performed in 1977, *In Mourning and In Rage*, was a direct response to the media treatment of the deaths of local women where the media concentrated more on the lifestyles of the victims than the psychopathy of the killer. The performance consisted of a motorcade of 60 women including participants from the Woman’s Building, the Rape Hotline Alliance and City Council, following a hearse to city hall in Los Angeles, California, out of which emerged nine tall women robed in black, and a tenth robed in red. Each performer spoke of a different type of violence against women that had occurred in Los Angeles and nationally. Their proclamation was then followed by a chorus of “In memory of our sisters, we fight

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51 Jeff Kelley, “The Body Politics of Suzanne Lacy” 224
back.” The woman in red spoke last, and was robed as a symbol for self-defense. While the robes and chanting created a performative and visual ritual of grief and rage, the crowd that gathered had more in common with a traditional protest—reflected in the call and answer chanting, and decision to gather at city hall. It is precisely this combination that makes the performance so successful. While we know the entire performance was crafted and scripted, the elements that relate it to activist assembly have a more opportunistic feel. Perhaps because the performance took place on short notice, or because it relied on volunteers to make up the chorus, the general assembly and call to action empowers the voices of all who attend and erases the line between art piece and audience. Covered by major news sources in LA and nationally, Lacy’s performance succeeded in its mission to address concerns of violence against women, while speaking out against the media’s negative portrayal of recent victims. The point of her actions being to empower women and remind them they are not alone. During this time, an interesting occurrence in magazine ads—especially high fashion magazines was to depict women alone, alienating them with the guise of “empowered, independent, working women.” At the same that fashion magazines are alienating women, female victims of violent crimes are being accused of bringing it on themselves. This was a key element of concern within the piece and a key reason having media present was important. For the
piece, the media were notified in advance so that they would be present when the activist performers arrived.

Figure twenty-four: Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, *In Mourning and In Rage*, performance, 1977.

While Lacy's and the other performer's bodies were important components in the art piece, the bodies of those standing by and those who came to join in the protest on the courthouse steps also became activated and essential bodies within the performance. The reliance on audience participation transforms it into a public/private performance with each individual's identity both an important aspect and working part in the cumulative work. In many ways, the spectacle of the performance regulates the bodies: the audience is silenced as they witness
the protest, and those participating are temporarily raised to a higher status as they transform into a united front. The full head to toe coverings the women were wearing should also be noted as an important aspect of the performance. The black veils were to remind the audience of the deaths and violence that had occurred, but also work to anonymize the performers. This anonymity allows the performers to become and to represent everywoman, to sympathize with every woman around the world, and to remind viewers that violence against women does not have a face. In the same vein that advertisers use face-ism to deny women an identity and focus on their bodies, the media attempts to suggest that certain women who look or act a certain way or belong to certain class are deserving of or should expect to face violence. There is no person who looks the type to be a victim. There is no person who dresses in a way that asks for it. Victims are everywhere and everyone. This dressing particularly challenged the media’s questions of the activities and intentions of the victims during this time—and continues to challenge the media’s role in propagating stereotypes that female victims of assault are asking for it because of their clothing or life choices.

The activist artists in this section use their skills and tools as artists to activate dialogue and engage the public in actively critiquing and speaking out in an effort to create social change. They inform and engage with publics to inspire and create dialogue that, at least, offers opportunity for reconsidering societal norms that may be unfair to minorities and women, and at its most effective, inspire audiences to participate and protest themselves. While their processes vary greatly from the artists in the previous section, we can see the merits in
each in effecting social change. Artists who choose to take the streets for their work are gifted with opportunity of reaching various audiences who may not frequently travel into museums or arts institutions. They are able to vocally address individuals, and create dialogue and conversation in real time, while simultaneously creating a spectacle worthy for the news media to pick up on. In the examples above, the performers use and disguising of the body affords them an unhindered sense of body autonomy. They are able to move freely and anonymously, and without contributing to a dialogue of bodily objectification. Instead they send a message of power, of breaking out of the framed and contained notions of how a female body should publicly behave, and creating new spaces and messages instead.

Artists who continue to make work in traditional veins must no longer rely solely on art institutions to exhibit their work—as they can do this for themselves. The resources available for artists to market themselves are greater than ever before, which affords those participating in creating artist/activist work the opportunity to reach far greater audiences, and inspire greater change.
CONCLUSION:

In her essay “Time Capsule” Lucy R. Lippard discusses the role of artist activists since the 1960’s and ends her essay with the question: “Is art the right place?” She briefly addresses the role of television in the article, commenting that, because of its strength, no visual artist stands a chance in coming up against it.\(^5\)\(^2\) Perhaps, as an individual, Lippard is correct in suggesting that no visual artist could possibly come up against the strength of the media. Recently however, more and more arts institutions are deliberately organizing and curating exhibitions whose purpose is to comment on the current social structure, to comment on societal norms, or to comment on current activist movements. The institutions are empowering and challenging artists to create work that relates to social change, while also giving them a venue to exhibit it. Paired with the additional resources many arts institutions have to promote, market, and share their actions with various publics, these exhibits and the artists’ work are getting more attention than ever.

The International Center for Photography (ICP), for example, recently closed the exhibition *Perpetual Revolution: The Image and Social Change*, claiming that social movements are evolving and spreading faster thanks to digital media imagery. Representing social movements such as Black Lives Matter, Climate Change, gender fluidity, and others, the exhibition focused on the constant barrage of images we face daily and the impact they have in motivating us to act politically. Since its inception, the ICP has always been committed to exhibiting photographic work that reflected the social and political climate of the time. What makes this show unique however is that the work exhibited stems mostly from what can be captured on our smartphones: Instagram pics, Twitter quotes, and smartphone videos abound.

What the ICP’s exhibit suggests is with current social media platforms as popular as they now are, they are making it possible for any individual to reach a massive world-wide audience. Thus the limits for artists to share their work are endless. Our current climate heavily relies on images for entertainment and news about everything from politics to new running shoes. As creators of visual imagery artists can harness the power of traditional and social media and contribute greatly to world-wide dialogue. It is this understanding of the power of imagery of which this thesis sits and suggests that artists can contribute to social change and challenge unfair societal norms that objectify and marginalize particular members of society. While this thesis has concentrated on the media’s objectification of women and women’s bodies and the artists who counter them, it is clear that artists can create work that benefits all levels of society and various
forms of social justice issues. It is also clear that working together or with institutions, artists are capable of spreading the work they create farther and in a greater narrative.
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CURRICULUM VITAE

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EDUCATION

MA/MPA 2017 | University of Louisville
   Thesis: Challenging the Self: An examination of the media’s role in creating idealized bodies and the artists that challenge them.

BFA 2012 | Shepherd University
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PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2015-Present Gallery Manager, Zephyr Gallery, Louisville, KY
2016-2017 Administrative Coordinator, IDEAS xLAB, Louisville, KY
2014-Present Visual Associate, Madewell, Louisville, KY
2014-2015 Graduate Assistant (Chris Fulton, Professor of Art History) University of Louisville, Louisville, KY
2012-2014 Co-Founder, Exhibit, and Events Manager, Slant Factory Art Space, Charles Town, WV

INTERNSHIPS

Fall 2015 Non Profit Intern, Conrad Caldwell House Museum, Louisville, KY
Summer 2015 Gallery Intern, Tim Faulkner Gallery, Louisville, KY
Fall 2013 Gallery Intern, Transformer Art Space, Washington, D.C.

RECENT EXHIBITIONS

May 2017: Co-Cordinator: Rainbows and Roses Art Exhibit + Event to raise money for an LGBTQ+ Community Center in Louisville, KY. Play and Butchertown Grocery, Louisville, KY
July, 2017: Curator: Objects and Others: Perspectives on Gender and Sexuality, Schneider Hall Galleries, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY
August-December 2017: Co-Curator, Meet Your Neighbors, Feminist and LGBTQ+ Perspectives, 1619 Flux, Louisville, KY
May-July 2015: Co-Curator, The Beauty of a Block: Women Printmakers of the WPA Era, University of Louisville Hite Art Institute, Louisville, KY
March-April 2015: Co-Curator, Larry and Ladonna was Here, KMAC Museum Louisville, KY

GRANTS/FELLOWSHIPS/AWARDS

2017 Outstanding Graduate Student, University of Louisville, Hite Art Institute
2017 Kentucky Foundation for Women Art Meets Activism Grant Recipient
2016 University of Louisville Hite Art Institute Graduate Student Travel Grant
2012 Jefferson County Arts and Humanities Alliance Grant Recipient, Charles Town, WV

PUBLICATIONS

June 2016 Ritual and Place, Review of Catherine Richards and Ahn Tran’s Plait in The Hite Aegis Review

2015 “Cultural Identity and Artistic Imagination” In The Beauty of a Block: Women Printmakers of the WPA Era. University of Louisville Hite Art Institute, 2015

CONFERENCES

2015 South Eastern Museums Conference Spotlight on Student Research Jacksonville, Florida

PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

2016-2017 President: AEGIS Graduate Student Group Hite Art Institute University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

June 2016 Co-Founder The Hite Aegis Review, Graduate student group online art forum for critical arts writing

2015 Jury Panel, Madison Art Club Regional Fall Exhibition