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# **Untitled**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By:

Adriane Connerton

Christine Gray, Thesis Advisor, Committee Chair  
Richard Roth, Committee Member  
Gregory Volk, Committee Member

Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA  
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## Abstract

UNTITLED

By Adriane Lee Connerton, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014.

Major Director: Christine Gray  
Associate Professor of Painting and Printmaking

This text is an exploration of the ideas and work that I made in 2014.

## INTRODUCTION

As I began my second year at VCU, I started working on an ongoing project that examined both physical and digital manifestations of designer clothing that I own. This project has now manifested itself into seven videos that make up my thesis show.

Throughout the year that I have been working on these videos, a lot of my initial interests have changed. Initially, I was interested in the identities that people can construct about themselves by choosing to buy and wear status symbols. I expanded this interest into the other ways in which the individual constructs their identity and how that is evaluated by contemporary culture within the context of social media and the online marketplace.

In a culture that is focused on constructed identity and outward appearances, building our individuality is often done through our material possessions. Wearing status symbols is an immediate way of displaying certain characteristics that we want others to think we possess: culture, intelligence, and power. Although there are many different types of status symbols that are not just limited to clothing and accessories, I was drawn to clothing and accessories for mostly autobiographical reasons. After moving to New York to begin my undergraduate degree, I quickly became captivated with how you could implement specific clothing or accessories as a way to insert yourself into a certain social group. Designer clothes could be a way to reinvent yourself as an individual in a social context. At the beginning of this year I became very interested in the cultural climate of branding and logos. Websites such as DIS and K-hole, a trend-forecasting collective, were examining a post-individual existence at the intersection of art and commerce. The idea of bringing fashion into my work instantly made sense to me. Fashion is a very

temporal thing. It is marked by the four seasons, and fashion is one of the quickest ways to see the stamp of time. Like the internet, fashion is a field where images circulate removed from an original. Visuality is endlessly and easily digestible, finite only in so much as we are.

As one way of conceptually stringing the new video works together, each video featured myself wearing interacting with a designer item that I own. That designer item would then be made into a 3-d file that would be available for download on Pirate Bay. The texts *The Image Object Post-Internet* by Artie Vierkant and *Peer Pressure* by Brad Troemel examine post-internet art, how the internet is changing our roles as makers, and the definition of art itself. Besides existing as a comment on consumerism, I also wanted to insert the work into a conversation that centered on ideas of peer-to-peer file sharing. Entering these digital objects into a world where products are democratically presented and the author is of little significance brings notions of both the value of the individual and of the creator. The interest in the value of the individual in our contemporary society has always been a concern in my work. It can be traced back to the paintings that I applied with and made during my first semester. In those paintings, I thought about the distortion of figuration and anatomy as a way of expressing an anxiety that an individual might have in the process of trying to cope with the overwhelming change brought on by modern society, namely technology. As I started making more and more videos, I realized that although I was still interested in issues of consumer culture and ownership, these were no longer as important as they once were. Instead, I started making videos in which designer clothes were no longer featured. All seven of the videos still feature myself, although as my work has progressed my role often becomes secondary. I became

okay with letting go of the conceptual crutches that I thought I needed to hold the work together. Ideas of invented identity and environments, internet and celebrity culture have become the crux of the work. In a way, my work has come full circle, I started painting, I stopped painting, I started to make videos that weren't particularly related to any work that I had done previously, and I finished with presenting seven videos that in many ways very closely relate to the work that I came in with.

## STATUS SYMBOLS

I will begin the first chapter by writing about my initial interests as I started this series of video works. As I began the videos, I was most interested in ideas of commodity culture, identity of an individual as seen by the brands they associate themselves with, and examining our role as authors/owners in the context of the internet.

Each article of designer clothing or jewelry that was featured in a video is easily identifiable as a status symbol. A logo, print, identifiable style or design element that has become synonymous with the specific brand is featured. Each piece of designer clothing, accessory, or jewelry that I have selected corresponds to a different part of the body. The shoulder holds the straps of the Chanel purse, a Cartier watch wraps around the wrist, Yves Saint Laurent heels encapsulate the feet, a Burberry trench drapes over the back. When choosing the clothing that I will use, I like to think that the idiom "You wear the clothes, don't let the clothes wear you" has some influence over the selection process. Some of the luxury items that have been chosen have more prominent logos while some are subtler in terms of being associated with a particular brand. This choice allows for a tension in which the viewer has to decide where to focus their attention. Does one choose



to focus more of their attention on the designer items or myself? Competing with these designer clothes in a bid to win the viewers attention, speaks to a type of relationship in contemporary advertising, where a model or another tactic becomes the primary focus of the ad, while the product that is actually being sold is secondary or often times barely featured. This brings up confusion towards current advertisement culture in terms of not being able to tell the difference between product and accessory. Everything seems to be both product and nothing. Although I feature myself in my videos with my designer clothes, I'm not entering into a conversation about how fashion turns the body into an object. Instead, the self, the identity is what turns into the commodity.

The Bernadette Corporation is an artist collective that was founded in 1994 as “the perfect alibi for not having to fix an identity”<sup>1</sup> and whose origins began in throwing parties in New York. A lot of their focus centered on the existence of an individual as an invented mode of social-being, and how we go about expressing individuality in an all-encompassing environment of corporate culture. According to Bernadette Corporation, “Mock incorporation is quick and easy... no registration fees, simply choose a name (i.e. Booty Corporation, Bourgeois Corporation, Buns Corporation) and spend a lot of time together”<sup>2</sup>. Working in a range of media, they produced their own underground fashion line for two years and then turned to publishing, where they printed three issues of a fashion-art-music-critique magazine called *Made in USA*. In a recent interview with Annie Ochmanek for *Kaleidoscope*, Bernadette Corporation speaks collectively to their interest in fashion: “Fashion was interesting to us originally because it already

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<sup>1</sup> Giampaolo Bianconi, *Package Yourself* (2012)

<sup>2</sup> Giampaolo Bianconi, *Package Yourself* (2012)

operated across all these sectors, across all media. In the 1990s, fashion was a sort of Internet before the Internet. It was both a system and an image, and it moved very quickly. It was a high-speed connection between the street and the office tower, between New York, Paris and Hong Kong. But it wasn't efficient communication; it was full of crossed signals, misinterpretations, failed transmissions, ridiculous avant-gardisms..."<sup>3</sup> One of my favorite works by this artist collective is *The BC Corporate Story*, a seven-minute video produced in 1997. The Bernadette Corporation describes the work as "corporate propaganda for a subculture obsessed youth market".<sup>4</sup> Combining elements of video graphics with a 90's fashion aesthetic, this work presents a spoken narrative of invented corporate propaganda to boost worker morale.

The 3-d files of my designer items can be found within my own folder in the physibles section of Pirate Bay, where they are available for download. The action of choosing to only upload my files to Pirate Bay instead of to a host of websites that offer 3-d files was a purposeful one, and it was informed by the connotations and conversations that surround this site in particular. Pirate Bay's terms of usage differ from other websites that distribute 3-d models in that there are no restrictions as to copyrighted uploaded content or how media on the site can be used or distributed. Pirate Bay is as much of a symbol for peer-to-peer file sharing as it is a website. Founded in 2003 by a Swedish anti-copyright organization, Pirate Bay has been involved in numerous legal battles involving the promotion of copyright infringement. It has emerged as the leading symbol of unauthorized distribution of media and information.

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<sup>3</sup> Giampaolo Bianconi, *Package Yourself* (2012)

<sup>4</sup> Giampaolo Bianconi, *Package Yourself* (2012)

Given that these 3-d models can never be manifested into a functional replica of the original; there is never the opportunity for someone to print this file at a relative low cost, and masquerade as having just walked out of Yves Saint Laurent with a new pair of shoes. The shift from a tangible object to one that is manifested both digitally and physically does not function as a political testament for the democratization of brand goods. Nor is it particularly involved in the conversation between the authentic and replica of designer goods. Instead, it brings up the question: what do we really own? Do we really own and have control over our material possessions? The implementation of aspects of advertisement in my work (specifically how women's bodies are treated in advertising) asks if we are really in control of our most valued possession: our bodies. If we do not have full control over our own physical being and the physical objects around us, then our minds and spirit are our only autonomous possessions.

The existence of my designer goods in their original and 3-d states functions symbolically and speaks to two significant aspects of culture involving value and ownership: One is a culture of materiality that is taken to an extreme when viewed through the lens of conspicuous consumption. Conspicuous consumption is defined as the spending of money on and the acquiring of luxury goods and services to publicly display economic power. In *Spent*, psychologist Geoffrey Miller applies evolutionary psychology to the act of conspicuous consumption to reveal that just as in any primate, it is biologically favorable for humans to openly display signs of wealth, power, and ownership.

“Humans evolved in small social groups in which image and status were all-important, not only for survival, but for attracting mates, impressing friends, and rearing children. Today we ornament ourselves with goods and services more to make an impression on

other people's minds than to enjoy owning a chunk of matter- a fact that renders 'materialism' a profoundly misleading term for much of consumption. Many products are signals first and material objects second." (Miller 10) <sup>5</sup>

To a conspicuous consumer, the question of ownership is inherently fundamental. Intrinsically, consumers of conspicuous goods must be concerned about the idea of ownership. When ownership is put into question or removed, all characteristics associated with the high price of the object can become worthless. I wanted to address the paradox of acquiring status symbols in a culture in which previous notions of ownership are becoming more variable. By placing my own status symbols within the context of Pirate Bay, an environment where ownership in relation to value doesn't exist. This condition of ubiquitous ownership is a conversation that is unique in regards to the internet, and has been present since its conception.

## OWNERSHIP/AUTHORSHIP

Another aspect of culture that I would like to address through this work is a particular conversation that exists online involving the relationship between physical artworks/images and their value/dissemination online. In the past, artwork existed autonomously as artwork, and its image existed as documentation. Now value fluctuates freely between work and image. The image of one's work is seen with more frequency than the actual work, and this is often the work itself. In addition to the stabilization of value of image and artwork, any artwork or cultural information present online is fair game for any type of recontextualization, modification, or transformation. By creating a YouTube channel for my videos to exist, I'm positioning them within an environment

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that encourages borrowing, stealing; and that points to different contexts in which the videos reside. In *The Image Object Post-Internet*, artist Artie Vierkant describes a culture in which all cultural production is subject to dissemination, appropriation, and change by anyone else: “These are conditions endemic to Post-Internet society, allowing for a ubiquitous authorship which challenges notions of the ‘definitive history’ or the ‘original copy’. Just as Barthes's proclaimed that the ‘death of the author’ is in fact a celebration of the “birth of the reader” and the ‘overthrow[ing of] the myth-post-internet culture is made up of reader-authors who by necessity must regard all cultural output as an idea or work in progress, which is able to be taken up and continued by any of its viewers.” (Vierkant 7)<sup>6</sup>

In *The Accidental Audience*, Brad Troemel introduces three terms: *image fundamentalism*<sup>7</sup>, *image neoliberalism*<sup>8</sup>, and *image anarchism*<sup>9</sup>. He uses these terms to describe different sets of values that artists and art audiences place upon art's originality and environment. *Image fundamentalism* places the highest value upon art remaining in the environment from which it originated. *Image neoliberalism* sees art as being able to flow freely within any context so long as it remains art due to context or the fact that it is attributed to a maker. Troemel presents the term *image anarchism* within the context of online image dissemination environments, mainly Tumblr. Troemel is referring to the act of reblogging an image by methods that strip the image away from its author and place of origin. Purposefully not revealing the site of where one found an image or making it seem as though one found or made it themselves removes all concerns for the origins of an art

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<sup>6</sup> Artie Vierkant, *The Image Object Post-Internet* (2010)

<sup>7</sup> David Joselit, *After Art* (2013)

<sup>8</sup> David Joselit, *After Art* (2013)

<sup>9</sup> David Joselit, *After Art* (2013)

or image: “The accidental audiences...willingness to strip images of their status as property is so aggressive that it deserves a term of its own: image anarchism. Whereas image fundamentalists and image neoliberals disagree over how art becomes property, image anarchists behave as though intellectual property is not property at all. While the image neoliberal still believes in the owner as the steward of globally migratory artworks, the image anarchist reflects a generational indifference toward intellectual property, regarding it as a bureaucratically regulate construct.” (Troemel 6)<sup>10</sup> By placing my work within a gallery context and within contexts of democratized property (Pirate Bay, YouTube) my work simultaneously exists in the worlds of *image neoliberalism* and *image anarchism*.

## CONSUMPTION/PRODUCTION

In an age where information comes from a multitude of sources with different view points, almost any statement or “fact” can be debated, counterpointed, etc. It no longer seems appropriate to frame concepts in terms of black and white, good/bad, private/public, work/leisure, etc. Rather, ideas and content are mutable, flowing and oscillating beyond prior clear cut definitions and defined contexts. I like to imagine what it would be like to only be able to use dualities to categorize my work: active/passive, empowered/disempowered, body/spirit, gratification/displeasure, connection/disconnection, and producer/consumer. One duality that not only defines myself and my work but that is also a role in which at least everyone who uses the internet takes on, is that of existing simultaneously as a consumer and producer.

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<sup>10</sup> Brad Troemel, *The Accidental Audience* (2013)

*In Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: from Production to Prodosage*

Axel Bruns coins the term *produser*, that refers to a person who exists in the dual role of consumer and producer in collaborative communities:

“The concept of *produsage* is such a term: it highlights that within the communities which engage in the collaborative creation and extension of information and knowledge that we examine in this book, the role of ‘consumer’ and even that of ‘end user’ have long disappeared. And the distinctions between producers and users of content have faded into comparative insignificance. In many of the spaces we encourage here, users are already necessarily also producers of the shared knowledge base, regardless of whether they are aware of this role—they have become a new hybrid, *produser*.” (2 Bruns)<sup>11</sup>

We already play the role of the creative laborer in our daily lives; we pump our own gas at a filling station; we take at home pregnancy tests. The internet has become an important environment that fosters this role of the creative laborer. The internet allows for endless people and companies to engage in this relationship, while many people do so unconsciously. Some examples of being a producer/consumer online are: buying a product and then leaving a review, rating a handyman on Angie’s List, a Tumblr that is personally curated so as to present found images and repurpose them into a new context, internet searching and receiving directed ads, social media and file sharing.

In the collective text *Club Kids: The Social Life of Artists on Facebook*, artists Brad Troemel, Artie Vierkant, and Ben Vickers examine the negative aspects of being a *produser*:

“The social venue is a critical component- private discussion, social networks, and the browser based web each bear their own relative levels of engagement, audience, and

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<sup>11</sup> Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and beyond: from production to produsage* (2008)

influence. And for each of these, a different kind of social levy: the relations of which we currently speak, not adhering to traditional artistic forms of saleable objects, produce little to no economic advancement for the average artist while at the same time generating profit from the venue. With Facebook's revenue from ads and Facebook Credits expected to hit \$4.27 Billion this year, and with 870 million unique visitors per month, Facebook makes about 4 cents every hour we spend trolling photo albums wishing we had been at some important gathering in some distant city filled with diverse cultures and complicated intellectuals."<sup>12</sup>

Being a producer/consumer means existing in a simultaneous state of empowered and disempowered at the same time. It is the consumer who decides where to put their money and attention, which ultimately decides the success or failure of a company. Yet as a *producer*, by giving attention to a company we are also giving away precious hours of our day to fuel said company's existence. All the while, our online actions turn into information that can be used to sell us more products. The availability of the internet allows one access to practically any type of software or information. With such tools at one's disposal, it means that there is a much higher amount of created content. However, there is little market for this type of production because the competition for an audience is too high. At the same time, this means that one can consume others' creative content for free. So, the import and export of a producer/consumer becomes a cycle, where there is a constant flow of knowledge and creative capital for and by the *producer*. I view my work and myself as being part of the cannibalistic cycle of consuming and producing. In my work, designer clothes and the gaze of the viewer are eaten. Once digested, this fuel spawns the video works and the digital manifestations of the designer clothes.

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<sup>12</sup> Brad Troemel, Artie Vierkant, and Ben Vickers, *Club Kids: The Social Life of Artists on Facebook* (2014)



For example, in *Burberry Ab-lounger*, I carry out the cyclical existence of a *produser*. I showcase an expensive Burberry coat that I purchased. The Burberry print becomes the background for my video. A water effect was applied to the background to make it osculate randomly, mimicking a cyclical wave lapping. I take in the gaze of the viewer while staring back at them, acting as both object of attention and voyeur. My energy allows my rocking back and forth, while the motions of my body propel me forward for the entirety of the video. I exist as a *produser* through the consummation of a Burberry raincoat in order to produce the video work itself.

I have always had an interest in examining the figure as a symbol for a pure, fulfilled existence. The lack of inherent control that we have over our physical bodies, combined with the detachment of our minds from our bodies, has lead to an interest in the figure and the manipulation of it in my work. During the filming of much of my video work, my mental state will separate and diverge from my physical presence. I am often engaged in physically demanding activities or positions. A few examples of tests of endurance include: using a machine to rock my entire weight back and forth in *Burberry Ab-lounger*, being suspended upside down while swaying side to side in *Suspension*, and using a tube to breath while my entire body is being vac-sealed shut in a plastic bag in *Vac-Suit*. All of the videos are continuous shots, so if the pose or movements are broken the shot must begin again. I liken my state of being while shooting to having a slight out of body experience while being conscious of this occurrence. While I am being filmed I have a specific way that I want to look to the camera, and I often have to fight the reaction that I might naturally have to what I am doing. I also try to be less conscious of

physical sensations, as dwelling on how uncomfortable I am could make me break the desired pose or facial expression for the camera.

A culture that is built around questioning reality, simulations, social media, and real time communication, encourages our minds to remove themselves from their present physical dwellings and to travel wherever they can envision or imagine. Everybody daydreams, but the addition of experiencing media and images in real time removes a level of distance between the daydreamer and fantasy. With celebrity/reality TV, our culture dangles a hope that success/celebrity could happen to anyone, and so present daydreaming might be an even greater act of projecting one's fantasies. A simple example is that you're stopped at a red light on your commute home from work on a rainy evening. You open your phone to find a just-posted Instagram video of your friends laying on the beach in Tulum. While looking at the photo you could almost feel that you're there with them. The ability to closely experience others' lives in real time fosters our ability to fantasize about living in the lives of others. By displacing our own identity into another, the status of our own bodies is put into jeopardy in relation to the self. Virtual spaces, social media, Google hangouts, Facetime, etcetera all provide environments that inspire us to fantasize about how other people are existing in the same moment in which we exist. Whether that induces empathy or envy, it encourages a sense of adventure in the spirit of the present moment. As technology advances, the relationship that exists between spirit and body is changing. We have no control over our bodies but only over our minds and spirits.

Our bodies will abandon us, separate from us, and come back to us in cycles throughout life. We will get sick or injured. Then we reboot and feel better. What brings

us to close to death, life, and a more pure existence is the cycle of attachment and detachment between spirit and body. The Italian Futurism movement was one of my earliest influences, as it was interested in the separation of mind and body via modes of technology. The idea of the human-machine hybrid was introduced in the manifesti of the movement's founder, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. In a manifesto from 1910 on the coming evolution of the human race, *Extended Man and the Kingdom of the Machine*, he writes:

“We declare that in human flesh wings lie dormant. The day when it will be possible for man to externalize his will so that, like a huge invisible arm, it can extend beyond him, then his Dream and Desire, which today are merely idle words, will rule supreme over conquered Space and Time. This nonhuman, mechanical species, built for constant speed, will quite naturally be cruel, omniscient, and warlike... Even now we can predict the development of the external protrusion of the sternum, resembling a prow, which will have great significance, given that man, in the future, will become an increasingly better aviator.” (3 Marinetti)<sup>13</sup>

The various manifesti of Marinetti are markers of ideas and feelings that were held by someone who was equally parts excited and overwhelmed by the technological changes happening around them. This spirit of questioning the positive and negative effects of technology is also shared in my work. By implementing digital means in my work and choosing to place it within certain environments, I both critique and participate in technology.

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<sup>13</sup> Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Critical Writings: New Edition* (2006)

## GIF

The format of the continuous shot of myself started out as a pragmatic solution to the problem of not having people always available to help me film. The one shot format allowed me to make videos anytime without any help. As things continued to develop, I found that the format of: continual shot-short duration-loop, pointed to a lot of the ideas that I was interested in. Most immediately, this format points to the GIF, one of the internet's most famous symbols of immediate enjoyment and speedy consumption. Grumpy Cat, Jenifer Lawrence, and Hump Day made Google's 2013 annual report of the most searched GIFs. The format of the videos take root in the idea of a drawn out GIF, the slight variations that occur throughout are filmed instead of digitally manipulated repeatedly. The GIF is very connected to the still image and to painting. Similarly, from a distance, some of my videos could be mistaken for a still digital image. In *I.V. Ab-Lounger*, clear plastic tubes filled with blue liquid hang above me and run into my mouth as I lay back on an ab-lounger. As I stare into the camera two of the tubes are cut as blue liquid is released into my mouth and then spills over my face. My change in facial expression and the blue liquid are subtle enough to where if one were to view the video from far away, it might look like a still shot. The process of making the videos is very reliant upon the same formal concerns that inform the process of making a painting: color, composition, texture, and marks. Many of the choices that I made in the video *United Bamboo Massage Chair* were inspired by this idea of putting slightly different colored blacks next to each other and seeing if they camouflage one another or separate beside each other. One painting that I have always enjoyed is *Abstract Painting* by Ad

Reinhardt. *Abstract Painting* appears totally flat upon first view, but after prolonged viewing, one realizes that this painting is not just a flat field of total blackness, but is composed of a grid of nine squares that have subtle variations in color. I had bought an old black massage chair off of Craigslist, and I knew that I wanted to be massaged in it for a video. When I was doing some test filming of me in the massage chair, the movements of the chair were hardly visible. The only way that you could tell it was on was by watching my movements as it massaged me. The chair is taller than me, and when I sit in it I am surrounded by its black geometric form. I wanted to play with this idea that the chair could be massaging me and threatening to suck me into it at the same time. I chose to wear a suit made out of black straps that blended in with the chair while still revealing subtle variations of color, texture, etc. When I wore the suit made out of hundreds of black fabric straps, it appeared as if the straps were not attached to the body but being pulled back by the chair itself.

Existing as one of the oldest and greatly dispersed graphics of the internet, the GIF is symbolic of the ways in which we consume content today. I became interested in the different ways that the GIF, like much of the images and digital content that we ingest everyday, captures a viewer's attention. In *Peer Pressure*, Brad Troemel dedicates a chapter to the highly efficient GIF entitled: The GIF'S obsession with Compression. He talks about how the short duration of the GIF is just a expedient format to deliver information that can be more thoroughly contemplated: "ideally, compression does not delete information or material but conceals it within itself, marking all hidden components readily accessible should the person interacting with a compressed product

wish to unzip or re-expand its contents.” (20-21 Troemel)<sup>14</sup> The GIF can be obnoxiously mesmerizing. It requires a very short attention span due to its length of time and the fact that is vying for attention within a very wide pool of other GIFs. Rudimentary movements, colors, and text make it especially digestible and hypnotic at the same time. One can spend a very short amount of time on a GIF- comprehend, digest, and move on. Seeing as GIFs loop every 2-4 seconds, there is no time for extraneous material. To get the point across, the creator can include only the most necessary information. The GIF is the epitome of the idea of compressing information so as to keep the viewer’s short attention span. Attention is at a premium, and we must constantly struggle with ways in which we can harness it. More so, the content of the GIF (often the punch line of a joke) is delivered immediately. One doesn’t have to work or wait to be entertained; satisfaction is instant. I’m interested in presenting work in an easily digestible format, without providing a punch line or an immediate answer.

The superficiality of a GIF also creates a space for one to spend a significant amount time with it, if a viewer decides to repost or keep returning to their favorites. As a viewer I appreciate when images, videos, blogs don’t ask a lot of me. I would be pleased by a proclamation like this: *I acknowledge that you might be having a stressful day and exist in a chaotic environment in which everything seems to be clamoring for your attention. If you’d like you can sit back and relax, I ask at a minimum only ten seconds of your time. It would be presumptive to assume that you think I’m worth more. If you like what you see and you decide to remain engaged, for every moment that exceeds ten seconds, thank you.*

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<sup>14</sup> Brad Troemel, *Peer Pressure* (2011)

In *Peer Pressure*, Brad Troemel poses a question to us about the GIF: “The most crucial question for artists to ask in response to the GIF’s obsession with compression is whether the GIF is a true harbinger of conceptual efficiency or an ornamental novelty of its own lightness?” (22 Troemel)<sup>15</sup> I believe that this question highlights a paradigm which is very relevant to our culture, in which it is becoming harder to distinguish between what is superficial and what is meaningful.

## EYE CONTACT

During the filming of my videos, the combination of physical restriction and repetition requires an intense focus on my present physical state in order to complete the shot. This focus turns into a kind of trance-like state, which allows me to simultaneously be both present and absent from the present moment. I must be very focused on my physical movements at all times. Due to the fact that all of the poses are very uncomfortable, if I exist too fully in my present state, I become cognizant of how physically uncomfortable I am and might not be able to complete the shot. I started thinking about the trance-like qualities of the GIF, and how entering into a state of trance mediumship shares similar characteristics with how we view the world through the lens of the internet. A state of trance mediumship occurs when one is mentally conscious of their spirit traveling away from their present existence in order to communicate with spirits from another dimension. Trance mediumship requires the detachment from one's own physical body, which then becomes embodied by a visiting spirit, who communicates through the body of the practitioner. In *Culture, Trance, And the Mind-*

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<sup>15</sup> Brad Troemel, *Peer Pressure* (2011)

*Brain*, Richard Castillo describes trance mediumship: “Trance phenomena result from the behavior of intense focusing of attention, which is the key psychological mechanism of trance induction. Adaptive responses, including institutionalized forms of trance, are 'tuned' into neural networks in the brain.” (22 Castillo)<sup>16</sup> In my videos, I am staring directly into the lens of the camera, which I like to imagine as the viewer. In both the human and animal world, direct eye contact can be viewed as either being antagonistic or friendly. An obligatory look into Yahoo Answers offers a few thoughts in response to the question “why can’t animals look/stare into our eyes or maintain eye contact with us?”

*Animals typically consider direct eye contact an act of aggression and or a threat. If you have a domesticated animal that does that, sell it before it kills you in your sleep. :)*

*My sister’s poodle stares at her constantly; to me it’s an act of being needy or dependent on her. On the other hand my cat will look away first if I look at her.*

In whichever context eye contact occurs, there is usually the promise of future interaction between the two beings in question. The viewer could interpret my gaze as a seductive invitation to come closer. When one sees a woman together with a product, one typically thinks of the use of seduction tactics in order to promote said product. The feeling of desire (desire to be with her or to be her) must be strong enough, amongst other factors, to decide favorably to purchase the item. My eye contact could also be easily seen as an act of aggression bent on challenging the viewer. By being the orchestrator of the work in which I appear, I control each situation from my own domain. I control what is inside the video, what is happening to me, and the context in which they are seen. Regardless of the

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Castillo, *Culture, Trance, and the Mind-Brain Anthropology of Consciousness* (1995)



viewer's relationship to me, while watching the video, the viewer stares back at me and meets my eyes. Perhaps the viewer feels as if we are sharing a moment, but we are not. I'm somewhere else, looking at them and through them.

## GREEN SCREEN

Almost all of my videos implement the use of a green screen. The green screen started out as a chance for me to be as experimental as I wanted to be with minimal efforts and consequences. Instead of trying to recreate actual sets of what I was envisioning, the green screen was the easiest option in terms of time and money. Editing was much less work than building any type of set. The implementation of the green screen functioned as a tool of open possibility, allowing me to quickly experiment with multiple scenarios. A lot of the backgrounds that I use for my videos are either found images or stock footage that I then edit. Sometimes I will already know exactly what image or footage I want to use, and other times I have a more vague idea. Things will come together from a combination of reviewing footage after it's shot and then finding something online that seems to make sense with the footage. During the searching process, there is an aspect of chance that comes into play when trying to make a final decision. There's a feeling of *just one more click, one more page, and you could find your perfect match*. This element of chance speaks to the nature of the green screen. A tool used for visual trickery, the green screen is a symbol of potential and infinite possibilities. If you finish editing the video and you don't like it, go back to the internet and choose something else. The green screen can easily conjure up ideas of amateurism and the 90's. Yet it can also ask the viewer to question the significance and intent of the

decisions made. Could the videos easily be something else or must they be just as they are? Each decision is very purposeful, but at the same time could easily be changed. This idea mimics a current state in which the contexts and the curation of certain art works is more thought of and becomes more important than the actual works of art themselves.

## MYSELF AS SUBJECT

All of the videos that I made over the course of this year feature me as a subject in one way or another. The choice to implement the format of author as subject has been motivated by the celebrity and ego driven culture that influences my work. Social media, performance, and the desire to place myself in invented situations that are both staged and authentic are all themes borrowed from the culture of social media, and all play heavily in my work.

I have always been very affected by entertainment media, namely celebrity culture and reality television. Celebrities have grown to rule our cultural landscape. Revealing the most intimate details of their lives through documentaries, leaked sex tapes, and paparazzi snapped photos of daily activities of shopping or eating. Much like a public/private life of celebrity, reality TV also blurs the boundaries between what is real and fake. Celebrity, social media, and reality TV culture highlight some of our most basic desires and the repercussions that they can have upon us. Almost all of us desire to be part of a social group, to be seen as unique individuals, and to be generally praised and admired by as many people as possible. In previous times, people were born within communities and desired to establish their own individuality. Now, people are born as individuals and seek to be placed within larger communities. When one finds oneself

within an environment in which everybody is a stranger, the easiest way to quickly identify one's character traits and associated groups is through superficial image construction. Social media, the Internet, and reality TV are the perfect outlets for the fulfillment of such desires. Obscure videos gone viral and the rags-to-riches stories of celebrities carry the hope that stardom can be democratic and possible. In terms of deciding on who achieves notoriety, the internet masses are gaining the power that was once only reserved for Hollywood executives.

The ubiquity of deception in popular culture is an invitation to consider the possibility that behind the surface of appearances there are other realities. I have always been interested in the coy and ambitious tactics associated with successful social media self-promotion. However, I have always had a tentative relationship with such characteristics that I envy in others. I had just turned twenty when people around me started to use social media, and after Facebook came out I waited at least two years before I joined. During my undergrad at NYU, I was extremely wary of social media, perhaps because it was so new, and the benefits had not yet really manifested themselves. Also, this was probably quite a logical decision as well, I didn't necessarily want to be implicated or have my actions published to a site in which not enough time had passed for a code of conduct to be implemented amongst my friends. I think that my strong internal desire to be a self-promoter combined with a sense of wariness of such tactics has led me to borrow from many self-promotional image types in my work without fully immersing myself in their outlets. By using the selfie, provocative poses, revealing clothing, digital imagery, etc., I enter myself into a conversation about the motivators behind self-promotion: egoism, the need to succeed, and the desire to belong. Keeping

these works primarily within an art context provides an opportunity to act out such desires without having to leave the traces behind in those outlets.

Artist Ann Hirsch often works within the medium of reality television. Hirsch gained a significant fanbase through her YouTube channel, Scandalishious. Hirsch created the character “Caroline,” who acts as a webcam girl and has garnered 1.7 million views. Hirsch then appeared as “Annie” on the VH1 reality show *Frank the Entertainer...in a Basement Affair*, a version of the Bachelor in which the female contestants compete for the prize of having a relationship with Frank. This work acknowledges a now obvious fact of reality TV, which is that all reality TV participants are performers of some kind. However, this work also asks a question to which the answer is less obvious: when and where do our performances end? She writes about her experience of being on this show, and how within the environment of stage reality, both the contestants and production team could not distinguish reality from fiction. Cast as the sweet, innocent girl, Hirsch becomes eliminated when she breaks character and raps a sexually explicit song about Frank. In *Shaming Famewhores Part III: And the Winning Famewhore is...* Hirsch likens the experience of being on the show to operating within a jail:

“Imagine being a prisoner. In your prison, you can't trust your fellow prisoners because you don't know what crimes they have committed, or what crimes they are capable of committing. You can't trust the guards, the authority within the jail, because they have another agenda that you are not aware of, to ensure cooperation. The guards are rarely coercive; they just engineer situations in which desired outcomes may occur. The bachelor and his family functioned as privileged prisoners, enlisted by the guards to act as their hand within the jail. As a participant, I could either try to decide what was real or not, or accept that I would never know.” (Hirsch)<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Hirsh, Anne, *Shaming Famewhores Part III: And the Winning Famewhore is...*

If social media and reality TV have taught us anything, it is that each one of us can choose to be an entertainer, struggling to produce fresh, interesting content that drives our ‘like’ count higher and higher. There is also the incentive that anyone can use various channels of media to become famous. There is a quality of self-invention to the rise of many celebrities: Shawn Carter went from a crack dealer to Jay-Z, and J.K. Rowling went from a struggling single mom to a 15 billion dollar empire. With the determination of a start-up entrepreneur, many celebrities have followed the formula of developing an identity, then a brand, then an empire. In today’s YouTube culture, where everything from reality TV to an Instagram account can launch a career, it is no longer entirely unreasonable to think that fame and celebrity is within our reach. In *The Art of Self Invention: Image and Identity in Popular Visual Culture*, Joanna Finkelstein describes the beginnings of modern day identity culture in which identity is malleable:

“By the mid-twentieth century, the idea of a fixed personality based on a stable mentality became increasingly untenable and the counter idea, of identity or subjectivity being an asset to be groomed and presented to best effect, had gained acceptance. Subsequently, the idea of identity as part of a taken-for-granted social surface existed alongside the opposite view that identity is a fixed essence, harbored at our core. *Mr and Mrs Smith*, *Some Like It Hot*, *True Lies*, *Pillow Talk* and hundreds of other mainstream and popular films advocate both perspectives. Identity is continuously re-styled and invented to suit the circumstances but, at the same time, it supposedly emanates from an inner quality that universalizes the human condition.” (3 Finkelstein)<sup>18</sup>

The selfie acts as a current still-image mascot of celebrity and social media. The self-portrait photograph exists as one of the most seemingly egotistical image types. Very

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<sup>18</sup> Joanne Finkelstein, *The Art of Self Invention: Image and Identity in Popular Visual Culture* (2007)

easy to both create and share, selfies allow for control in terms of how the subject/author presents themselves. It acts as part showcase, part documentation. The placement of myself within my work is in part a response to the selfie and various other forms of self-representation (constant status updates, daily YouTube videos, managing Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram, and Vine) as a contemporary solution for placelessness in which one leaves their mark via a constantly changing and updated identity. If one wants to be optimistic, the selfie can function as a modern version of a handprint found in the caves of Chauvet some 30,000 years ago. The people who imprinted their hands upon those walls were likely hyper-aware of their own mortality. Who knows when one could fall prey to a fierce predator or numerous other outside forces? Although wild natural forces no longer leave many of our lives at stake, the selfie could be a response to a type of modern day vulnerability, knowledge of a different type of insignificance. The internet constantly reminds us of the fact that there are billions who think, act, and talk quite similarly to us. This can be both comforting and disconcerting at the same time. Self-promotion highlighted by social media, in addition to being an upward mobility tactic, is a way of leaving a temporary imprint in a vast array of data that will be clicked through, and eventually wiped away and forgotten. My work is a way of coming to terms with my own significance in a world where there are too many ways and options to leave your mark.

## CONCLUSION

As I was working towards my thesis show, I knew that it was important that all the works be seen together, playing simultaneously. I started to view my thesis show

more in terms of an overall installation, instead of thinking of each work as an individual entity. I showed seven videos, which all played simultaneously. Six monitors each played a different ordered playlist of five videos, so all the videos are playing on different monitors at different times. The monitors are placed back-to-back using three freestanding monitor displays. These displays were placed throughout the room in order to engage the whole space. Instead of limiting one video to one monitor, choosing to play the videos in succession allows for the viewer to move throughout the whole space while being able to view all of the works. The two final videos that I completed for my thesis show are projected instead of shown on monitors. The videos that I chose to show on monitors feature myself more centrally as a subject. They are almost all continual shots, and involve physical manipulation of the body in various settings. The two video projections act as their own autonomous environments and bridge the gap between the work that I made at the beginning of this year (of which the videos displayed on the monitors are an extension) and my paintings from the previous year. *Suspension* and *Burberry Dive-In* each incorporate green screen video footage of myself within larger digital environments. In *Suspension*, I was interested in trying to recreate a digital space similar to the ones that I had painted in my first semester here. I made a space that looked like a sinister empty storage room. I then had a friend help me hang myself from the school's gantry system against a green screen, and edited that footage so I was coming out of a well in the floor of this digital environment. As the camera pans around the room, the viewer is greeted by a waving animated cartoon character, and then continues around the room until it stops at the well. A video of found footage showing the use of a pressurized rubber vacuum suit is imposed onto the wall above the well. The video is synced with an

edited instrumental track of Kanye West's *Mercy*, which adds to the overall sinister quality of the video. In *Burberry Dive-In*, I created an immersive environment inspired by a video I had made in the beginning of the year wearing a Burberry outfit, rocking back and forth on a piece of exercise equipment. I wanted to elaborate on the qualities I found to be present in the first video: playful, funny, romantic. The video is synced with the song *Dive-in* by Trey Songz; the lyrics and sound effects both have an aquatic theme that I decided to carry throughout the rest of the video. A crab holding a Burberry umbrella circles around a fountain where a woman shoots water from her nipples. The original video is imposed multiple times into the walls of the Burberry room, towering over the rest of the objects. Both of these videos act as way of drawing together the various types of work that I've made while at V.C.U. I had always thought of my paintings as existing as immersive environments, interested in invention and narration. Creating these digital environments in my videos gave me a space to bring these ideas together and allow them to come to life.

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