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INSTA-GIRLHOOD: SELFIES AS AUTO-PERFORMATIVE RESPONSES TO SEXISM AND MISOGYNY

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In this essay, I attend to the affective aesthetic dimensions of feminist art projects which critically engage with the trope of the Insta-girl in an attempt to raise issues about the cultural constructions of girlhood on social media and in "real life." With the help of two case studies – Noa Jansma's *Dear Catcallers* and Amalia Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections*, I will discuss the production and consumption of a particular type of Insta-girl which appeal to audiences via modes of fetishization and abjection. Jansma's work consists of selfies she took with random men who catcalled her. The documentary character of her project supports her project's aim to record the nature, extent and frequency of catcalling she experienced. In turn, Amalia Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections* critiques the construction, circulation and consumption of the trope of the Insta-girl, a postfeminist, late-capitalist figure characterized by her "oversharing" of intimate details about her everyday life. Both artists' auto-performative responses to sexist and misogynistic tropes in social media impel audiences to question late-capitalist and neoliberal constructions of "girl-hood."

Keywords: Insta-girl, #MeToo life writing, affect, Noa Jansma, Amalia Ulman

ИНСТА-ДЕВОЈЧИНСТВО: СЕЛФИЈАТА КАКО АВТОПЕРФОРМАТИВНИ ОДГОВОРИ НА СЕКСИЗМОТ И НА МИЗОГИНИЈАТА

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Во овој есеј ги разгледувам афективните естетски димензии на феминистичките уметнички проекти што критички се осврнуваат на тропата на Инста-девојка во обид да отворат прашања за културната конструкција на „девојчинството“ на социјалните медиуми и во „вистинскиот живот“. Со помош на две студии на случај – *Dear Catcallers* на Ноа Џансма и *Excellences & Perfections* на Амалија Улман, ќе ја разгледам продукцијата и консумацијата на одреден вид Инста-девојка, која ѝ е привлечна на публиката преку начини на фетишизација и абјектизација. Делото на Џансма се состои од селфија што ги има направено со мажи што ѝ свиркале на улица. Документаристичкиот карактер ја поддржува целта на нејзиниот проект да ја сними природата, опсегот и фреквентноста на свиркањето што го доживеала. Од друга страна, *Excellences & Perfections* на Амалија Улман го критикува градењето, пуштањето во оптек и консумацијата на тропата на Инста-девојка, постфеминистичка, доцнокапиталистичка фигура што се карактеризира со преголемо споделување интимни детали за нејзиниот секојдневен живот. Автоперформативните одговори на двете уметнички на сексистичките и мизогините тропи во социјалните медими ја поттикнуваат публиката да ги преиспита доцнокапиталистичките и неолибералните конструкции на „девојчинство“.

Клучни зборови: Инста-девојка, #МеТоо пишување за животот, афект, Ноа Џансма, Амалија Улман

1 Introduction

Insta-girlhood is an interesting cultural phenomenon when it comes to questions of agency and risk, especially for women (cis, trans, white, BiPoC, differently abled, etc.). Feminist art projects on social media have successfully called attention to cultural practices and notions of identity that deliberately go against mainstream assumptions of womanhood. Often through auto-performative responses to sexist and misogynistic tropes, they impel audiences to question late-capitalist and neoliberal constructions of "girl-hood." In my essay, I look at Instagram art projects which critically engage with the trope of the so-called Insta-girl, in an attempt to raise issues about the cultural constructions of girlhood on social media and in "real life." With the help of two case studies – Amalia Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections* (2014) and Noa Jansma's *Dear Catcallers* (2017-2018), I will discuss the production, circulation, and consumption of a particular type of Insta-girl which appeals to audiences via modes of fetishization and abjection. Jansma's work consists of selfies she took with random men who catcalled her. The documentary character of her project supports her aim to record the nature, extent, and frequency of catcalling she experienced. In turn, Amalia Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections* critiques the trope of the Insta-girl, a postfeminist, late-capitalist figure characterized by her "oversharing" of intimate details about her everyday life. Both artists received strong reactions from their followers for their playful adaptations of the genre of Insta-girl life narratives. The use of pastiche in their own Insta-narratives incites comments about authenticity and, in turn, throws into relief the inherent misogyny at play when "girls'" authorial practices are called into question.

I will use Ulman's and Jansma's respective projects as case studies for my larger observation about the affective aesthetic dimensions of the Insta-girl. I argue that the type of womanhood commonly referred to as Insta-girl is perceived as desirable but repugnant at the same time. The affective economies that circulate via their posts therefore go well beyond fandom, sexual attraction, or even criticism of excessive social media use. My deliberate focus is on the aesthetic affective dimensions because I want to show that the appeal of Insta-girlhood relies not only on a certain aesthetics (poses, filters, subjects, etc.) but on the affects and intensities these aesthetic dimensions generate. My understanding of the aesthetic draws largely from recent work on the interdependencies of the aesthetic and the political. Most helpful for my project is Sianne Ngai's work on capitalism's generative impact on modern and postmodern aesthetic categories. Capitalism's pervasiveness, according to Ngai, manifests to such a degree in our practices of aesthetic judgement that the traditional aesthetic categories of the beautiful and the sublime are no longer capacious enough to account for the complex entanglements at play in aesthetic reception (2010). Instead, everyday value judgments offer more apt idioms to address the capitalist structures from which our aesthetic experiences are modeled.

Instagram, in particular, operates within these capitalist logics of consumption and commodification and often conflates agency and visibility with neoliberal self-optimization. "Insta-girl" is an identity particularly reflective of the commodification of the self on social media (cf. Maguire 2018: 179). The commercial appeal

of the Insta-girl is that of a stand-in for consumer publics and as product placement machinery. Lifestyle and fashion industries, for instance, have successfully hinged their advertising campaigns onto their customers' self-generated content and therefore profit from celebrations of inclusivity, body positivity, and queer identities. Among the world's leading fast-fashion companies, H&M's highly successful H&M x me campaign is a great example of this.

Before I begin, and since this is an interdisciplinary venue, I would like to situate my essay. As I am a literary and cultural studies scholar, my objects of study are predominantly within the field of American studies. Through my interest in queer and feminist work on affect, I have become fascinated by the ways in which social media – I have elsewhere called them quick media (cf. Friedman and Schultermandl 2016) – can circulate affect and facilitate the emergence of counterpublics through what Michael Warner has termed "circulation of discourse" (Warner 2002: 80). I approach social media as texts – including discourses and materialities – and theorize their affective potential to do something to and with readers. Situated within literary and cultural studies, my essay is interested in the cultural narratives of Insta-girlhood. Following a robust tradition in the field of life writing studies, I think of social media posts as "everyday" autobiographies (Smith and Watson 1996: 9), consisting of self-generated content (surface) as well as the algorithms (deep structure) through which these life expressions take on lives of their own. My current interest in these everyday autobiographies is not primarily in the ways in which they expand the common understanding of what autobiographies and, in turn, genre-based reconsiderations of authorship and the practices of life narration look like (cf. Whitlock and Poletti 2008; McNeill 2013; Smith and Watson 1996; and Poletti 2020). Rather, I am interested in the affective worldmaking of these cultural narratives (cf. Schultermandl et al. 2022).

In this essay, I start with a discussion of girl-shaming and the aesthetic category of "cute," so as to introduce the phenomenon of Insta-girlhood and the ways in which mainstream audiences engage with this figure. Next, I situate this notion of girl-shaming with the recent emergence of #MeToo life writing and its reception within this field of auto/biography studies. In the two case studies I offer subsequently, I critically engage with the notion of Insta-cuteness employed in Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections*, on the one hand, and the political stance of what Sara Ahmed terms the *feminist killjoy* in Jansma's *DearCatcallers* on the other. These two case studies allow me to illustrate the precarious economies of selfhood that are pervasive on Instagram and other social networking sites, which depend on a neoliberal script of clicks and trends.

2 Insta-girlhood and the affective economies of "cute"

In the opening pages to her 2018 study *Girls, Autobiography, Media: Gender and Self-Mediation in Digital Economies*, Emma Maguire critically engages with an incident of what I call girl-shaming, which – unlike so many others – did not go unnoticed, even by the mainstream media at that time (pre-#MeToo). During a televised Major League baseball game in October 2015, two male commentators (and a camera) fixate for a moment on a group of young women – girls they call

them – who are taking selfies. On live TV, the commentators ridicule the women for their seemingly incessant use of their iPhones; their lack of interest for what really matters: the baseball game; and their allegedly narcissistic documentation of mundane experiences. The commentators vocalize a well-known polemic about social media's asocial effects and couple it with a contempt for the group of women. In Maguire's critical reading of the event, the paternalistic and misogynistic undertones of the commentators' sarcastic impressions of the "girls" highlight their subjection to both fetishization and abjection. This becomes especially evident in moments when the commentators voice what they think one ought to do to such girls, namely punish them for their behavior. Maguire astutely notes a deliberate infantilization of the women through the men's comments, such as when "they call with staged desperation for an intervention, for the phones to be confiscated - a punishment normally meted out to naughty children" (1).

Such reductive comments on women's agency over their own self-representation are a form of "girl-shaming." Like with the case of slut-shaming, the aim of girl-shaming is to contest women's agency and right to self-expression. As Maguire and others have noted, girls become a foil for verbal abuse directed at them to ridicule, dismiss, disrupt, and potentially repel their authorial acts. In this light, the trolling, the verbal abuse, the bullying, etc., witnessed in examples such as the one with the commentators, render visible common discursive patterns within digital economies that regulate and chastise women's self-expression. To be sure, my argument is not about the valence of the content the group of women at the ballgame produced but the fact that the public ridiculing they experienced normalizes misogynistic discourses that impinge on women's freedom of expression, creativity, and sense of safety and, at the same time, reify stereotypes about a particular type of "girl": white, cis, sorority culture, superficial, etc.

Maguire's point about women's agential use of social media to create visibility for their lives is well taken, but I would like to complicate the notion of taking back agency which she and others have foregrounded. Girl-shaming on social media, I argue, indexes the precariousness of self-authored lives and narratives by young women. Girl-shaming bespeaks an ambivalent form of abjection in which discourses of objectification are coupled with a certain appeal to read "girls" as innocent and cute, as malleable and vulnerable objects. It therefore needs to be understood as an affective aesthetic phenomenon which, through the use of social media, circulates the intensities of misogynistic commodification.

Cute, following Sianne Ngai, can be understood as an aesthetic category that tracks the effects of capitalism on our rhetorical judgments of objects, from art to avantgarde to mundane kitsch. In Ngai's understanding, cute, as a modern aesthetic category, epitomizes a "surprisingly wide spectrum of feelings, ranging from tenderness to aggression, that we harbor toward ostensibly subordinate and unthreatening commodities" (Ngai, 2010: 949). Cuteness has affinities with docility and passivity "[s]ince cute things evoke in us a desire to protect them" (ibid, 950). Cute things, according to Ngai, are both up for consumption and in need of protection qua their particular kind of femininity. In this sense, the value judgements placed on "girls" – as in the previous example – are to be understood as judgements of "taste" and "evaluation" (ibid, 955).

Cuteness is a salient category through which Insta-girlhood can be theorized, since it aptly describes certain lifestyle items associated in large part with a carefree and pliable character. Caldeira has argued that Instagram's affective work "compels us to move beyond classically established aesthetic categories such as the beautiful or the sublime by opening spaces for more mundane categories such as the interesting or the cute" (Caldeira 2020: 7). She further suggests that a particular "*Instagrammable aesthetic*, carefully considering lifestyles, experiences, and objects in terms of their visual and aesthetic characteristics, privileging certain contexts as particularly desirable according to their ability to look good on Instagram and attract likes" can be best understood via the aesthetic category of 'cute' (ibid, original emphasis 7). This is certainly true for Instagram as a social media phenomenon. However, the paradox of the medium's dependency on these neoliberal economies of self-promotion and excessive sharing illustrates the prime characteristic of girlhood, namely its focus on the process of "becoming" or "working out how to 'do' womanhood" (Maguire 2018: 7), which "signifies both youth and femininity" (ibid, 6). Linking girlhood and cuteness therefore tracks the commodification and consumption of lives on which social media platforms depend. As Amy Shields Dobson and Anita Harris (2015: 143–144) note, "the display and circulation of hyper-sexualized white, hetero-normative youthful female bodies appear to remain a constant in visual and consumer-oriented cultures," even in a media context ostensibly invested in consuming "real" life.

So, how do feminist art projects on Instagram engage with this notion of cuteness and girl-shaming that is pervasive in social media? And how does this notion of 'cute' fit into the larger context of #MeToo life writing and its consciousness-raising efforts?

3 The #MeToo life writing of the times we're in

I want to illustrate my argument by offering a discussion of two online art projects which respond to the circulation of the Insta-girl. The first – Amalia Ulman's project *Excellences & Perfections* – gained notoriety because it appropriates the narrative of a popular Insta-girl: to gain attraction and enter into conversation with Instagram audiences. The commodified womanhood Ulman performs on her Instagram won her thousands of followers; many sympathetically or admirably related to her Insta-narrative, while others saw it as an outlet for sexist and misogynistic hate speech. Such comments proliferated once it became clear that her Insta-account was deliberately fake (probably well before she started performing the life of a typical Insta-girl) and that her audiences' responses to her posts unknowingly contributed to Ulman's well-crafted ruse. The cuteness Ulman performs is strategic – in the sense of Gayatri Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism – a sociological experiment with the audience's ability to be social on social media. In turn, Noa Jansma's *Dear Catcallers* is a collection of selfies with men who verbally harassed her. By giving her project the subtitle "It is not a compliment" and by performing a stance that Sara Ahmed has termed the "feminist killjoy" (2017: 10), Jansma takes back agency over the discourse surrounding her body, her identity, and her sense of safety in public spaces. Jansma's project has garnered very different responses,

ranging from expressions of solidarity to hate speech. Posting the images of her harassers in seemingly amicable poses has also brought her work in contact with red pill and Incel groups, who criticize her project for what they deem transgressions of the featured men's right to privacy.

Ulman's and Jansma's respective projects are part of a growing archive of #MeToo life writing that facilitates the sharing of personal stories of sexual harassment and sexualized violence as acts of protest and practices of solidarity. In the immediate context of the #MeToo movement, such projects contribute to the continuous efforts of women's rights activists across the demographics to demand an end to sexist and misogynistic treatment of women; to call attention to their vulnerability to sexualized violence and abuse in public and private spaces; to expose sexual predators and demand legal action against them; and to instigate more accountability on the part of those who witness abuse without intervening. The #MeToo movement has rightfully been criticized for its own exclusionary practices, but its circulation in mainstream media and the general public has called attention to issues that had already motivated the women's liberation movement of the 1970s. From the viral traction of the #MeToo movement to #YouOkSis and #ChalkBack, social media platforms have become a successful tool in generating visibility for women's experiences of verbal abuse and sexual harassment. They have become what Abigail de Kosnik and Keith Feldman have termed "hashtags we've been forced to remember" (2019: 1).

The accessible, collaborative, and potentially connective narratives circulating via social media cohere around a shared sense of identity and belonging (cf. Papacharissi 2015; boyd 2014). Susanna Paasonen, for instance, argues that "where the affective, somatic, and the cognitive stick and cohere, resonance helps in understanding online connections and disconnections, proximities and distances between human and non-human bodies" (2020: 51). Which kinds of affective responses they elicit can, of course, not be readily determined but depend on the ideological configurations emerging from the emotional, somatic, or visceral responses between readers, characters, and authors. The well-known example of #nastywoman, which emerged in October 2016 during the U.S. presidential election, is a case in point: On the one hand, users employ this hashtag in acts of feminist resistance and give the idiom of the NastyWoman a positively connoted subversive meaning; on the other hand, users adopt this hashtag as a misogynistic moniker designed to extend the insults initially launched at Hillary Clinton to other women in politics. As examples from January 2019 show, posts with feminist icons and pro-life ideology become conjoined via the same hashtag and therefore document the contentious debates centering on feminist politics. Figures like the NastyWoman are "sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension" (Ahmed 2014: 11) and can therefore mobilize different ideological groups; and what initially started as a feminist social media intervention against misogyny, breaking with the slurs' interpellatory violence by giving it a subversive resignification, eventually became a shorthand for the organization of diametrically opposed political projects (cf. Butler 1997). This adherence of different affective economies to the same sticky figure also documents the micro-aggressions that are part of the misogynistic repertoire of everyday sexism. They are indicative of the same large-scale systemic misogyny

against which social media feminist projects protest. As the by-now robust scholarship on #MeToo illustrates, social media feminisms track the relationship between feminist activism and the subsequent anti-feminist backlash (cf. Boyle; Fileborn and Loney-Howes).

Unlike the above-mentioned projects, *DearCatcallers* and *Excellences & Perfections* are not designed to mobilize publics or engender practices of solidarity. Rather, the individual posts rely mostly on their phatic function alone and do not actively address other victims of catcalling or recipients of hate speech on social media, nor do they link to other consciousness raising projects. In Ulman's project, the deliberate focus on the individual is befitting of the type of "Insta-girlhood" she performs. To a similar extent, Jansma's project's curation of personal accounts also places the focus on Jansma herself, thereby tacitly affirming notions of attractiveness contained within Jansma's persona as a white, cis, able-bodied woman. Both provoke strong reactions from audiences – whose comments (because of the interactive and networked nature of social media) become part of their "story." The hate speech they receive for their projects is symptomatic of the digital economies in which the Insta-girl thrives.

4 Performing strategic cuteness in excellences & perfections

Amalia Ulman's piece, *Excellences & Perfections* (2014), uses Instagram as a conceptual space for the performance of the typical Insta-girl. Her performance of a common Instagram narrative – that of the "pretty girl" who moves to the big city to become a model and who experiences a difficult rite of passage – relies so heavily on recognizable Instagram tropes that audiences immediately believed that her account was real, meaning that Ulman advanced to a popular it-girl and that her lifestyle, relationships, and beauty regime were captured in candid and authentic snaps, 175 to be precise. What audiences did not know initially is that Ulman studied the profiles of influencers and modeled her narrative, iconography, and use of angles and filters after theirs. It is no surprise, then, that she, too, became instantly successful, with over 65,000 followers.

My use of the word 'narrative' to describe Ulman's project is perhaps misleading: It is a performance in three acts, each one distinct in the use of visual iconography to create a certain performance of the life of the fictional character she becomes for the project. In the beginning, she plays the role of the innocent country girl who moved to the city. In this first act, pinks and pastels dominate the array of images, showing luxury items, expensive hotel rooms, playful femininity and a cute Insta-girl with a Lolita look. The first act culminates in Ulman's character's experience of heartbreak, the end of a boy-meets-girl story that also prompts a shift in her identity and self-expression. In Act Two, Ulman's character is depicted as much more edgy, sarcastic, and rough. The color scheme in this creates a dark and sinister atmosphere. The impeccable and airbrushed images of the first act have now been replaced by grainy, sometimes unflattering closeups. Ulman's character is now in a possibly abusive relationship with an older man – her sugar daddy who also paid for her plastic surgery but still makes her feel insecure about her body. This act culminates in a mental break-down, staged via Ulman's character's ab-

sence from Instagram for a while. When she resumes, she informs her followers that she had returned to her family and has discovered yoga and clean living. This cathartic reprise in Act Three is visualized via clean, earthy, and serene shots of her organic lifestyle.

By duping her followers, Ulman challenges their assumptions that Instagram stories depict real lives. As Emma Maguire has argued, "What the piece also does in highlighting the constructed or performative nature of social media, is trouble the idea that images like these are a simple or straightforward documentation of life, but rather that they are highly mediated versions of lives and selves that circulate and reflect meanings about gender, class, and race" (178). Ulman's performance of the stereotypical Insta-girl – and her audience's credulity – reaffirmed the practices of digital commodification prevalent on Instagram. The fact that her performance of an "authentic" slice-of-life piece, complete with plot twists and catharsis, elicited such strong reactions can be read as a testimony to her concept and craft as well as her audience's investment in mediated life narratives. Verbal responses (as opposed to the numbers of likes and emojis her posts received) range from expressions of admiration, offers of friendship, and sympathy to hate speech, disdain, and *Schadenfreude*. Throughout the range of verbal comments, no matter the affective register, there are more or less explicit sexual propositions or expressions of sexual fantasies.

It is the so convincingly executed ability to incite audiences' reactions, to adopt the aesthetics and choreography of an Insta-girl's life, and the pretense to be authentic that brought Ulman much acclaim in the art world. Before that, she had already started to gain notoriety within the art world. For instance, in 2013, the internationally renowned Serpentine Galleries in the UK mentioned her on their list of young artists to look out for. This brought her international attention, especially to her social media platforms, via which she had been most visible until that point in time. Establishing her reputation in the international art scene, as she once mentioned in an interview, also meant negotiating the expectations and risks of the art world, especially towards young female artists. Ulman also contended that, as somebody born in Argentina and raised in Spain, getting a footing into the L.A. art scene can be particularly daunting.

Ulmans' performance of Instagram cuteness draws an interesting connection between the risks of online hate speech and her risks within the artworld. Undoubtedly, these are different kinds of precarity: one financial and existential, the other ideological, but the two are obviously linked, as this lecture series has made clear. What Ulman's biography indicates is that the late-capitalist demand for excessive online presence informs the digital economies of arts, such as the Insta-girl. At the same time, by appropriating a widely accessible medium such as Instagram and mimicking the prevalent sharing (some may say oversharing) of self-generated content, the long-held question of what actually constitutes art is revisited. In the field of life writing studies, Laurie McNeill has astutely argued that social media facilitate productive spaces for self-curation, not only of oneself but of one's favorite things. Ulman intervenes into canonical spaces of contemporary art by re-inventing something so mundane as the Insta-girl as a subversive figure with a clear political message.

5 DearCatcallers and the affective aesthetics of the feminist killjoy

@DearCatcallers is an Instapage created by award-winning artist Noa Jansma to showcase the extent, range, and frequency of catcalling she received, all of which were presumably intended as compliments on her body, sexuality, and femininity. For an entire month (September 2017), she posed with her catcallers and posted the resulting selfies accompanied by verbatim quotes of the things they had allegedly said to her. The project's subtitle, "It's not a compliment," puts the various quips she received into perspective by emphasizing the malign intent of any form of public harassment. Through Twitter, #DearCatcallers went viral instantly: Over 300,000 people actively followed it; some posts, like one with three construction workers, received over 6400 likes and almost 800 comments. The project, which officially closed at the end of September 2017, lives on in many forms, including solo photo exhibitions, interviews, and Ted talk appearances. Among other accolades, it brought her the Dutch Gouden Kalf Beste Interactive in 2018.

While her project is designed to turn the public sphere into a safer space for women, the virtual world in which it circulates is anything but that. This has to do with the confrontational nature of her project, but it is also due to networked interactivity, which, according to Laurie McNeil and John David Zuern, relies on a "many-to-many structure, with a range of participants being private in public" (2015: xi). In the case of Jansma's project, what mobilizes these publics are the various affective economies bearing on the issue of sexism, women's rights, and gender discrimination at large. Jansma's project received three distinct kinds of responses: posts which partake in her outrage against everyday sexism; hate speech in the form of slut-shaming and rape threats directed at her; and posts which mildly side with the catcallers, suggesting they are being unjustly exposed on her Instapage. All three groups coalesce around shared feelings of empowerment, threat, or pity, respectively, as well as the affective economies of these communities and their spontaneous formation via social media.

Certainly, Jansma's project is borne out of feminist consciousness raising, but among the responses its interactive nature invites, it also features sexist hate speech. Such posts cite political correctness and genderism as oppressive interventions of a liberal social elite, and the proponents of such ideology use Jansma's platform to protest what they think of as anti-male discrimination. To groups that oppose equal rights initiatives, Jansma's project epitomizes the "norms of the dominant culture" (Warner 2002: 80), which they feel unfairly censors them. What was intended as a contribution to dismantle sexual harassment now circulates in forums where the verbal abuse Jansma first encountered is not only repeated but oftentimes grossly upstaged, probably precisely because she went public with the private. In her 2018 project *DearHaters*, Jansma published the conversations @DearCatcallers inspired and notes that 75% of them are hate speech. With these comments as a backdrop, Jansma's selfies with the catcallers center on her assertion of agency in the face of objectification.

In all of the posts, Jansma displays a similar demeanor: annoyed, frustrated, yet determined, focused, and confrontational. Her demeanor, especially in contrast to the bemused, arrogant, or giddy expressions of her catcallers, conjures up a feeling

of disgust: Too often the catcallers stand very close to her, at times within an arm's length or less, and while she deliberately stages the scenes, her overall expression is one of discomfort and suspicion. At the same time, her posts suggest a successful confrontation with the perpetrators of sexual harassment and a re-framing of the moment of attack on her own terms. Showcasing her own victimization lends her heroic qualities – so that the victim/hero dichotomy she embodies can become a potential ground for identifying with her audience.

Together with her control over the image (and perhaps by extension the situation), her unamused but determined gaze serves as a commentary to the laughter and ridicule most of the men in her selfies express. Jansma's refusal to partake in their humor and just laugh it off exemplifies a feminist resistance strategy that Sara Ahmed terms the "feminist killjoy" (2017: 10), a deliberate rupture with the bemusement initiated by racist or sexist comments. Being a feminist killjoy, in Ahmed's theorization of feminist resistance to hegemonic forms of oppression, means taking a stance against majority-condoned actions, in public and private spaces, during committee work and at the family dinner table. Through her non-compliance, Jansma's feminist killjoy pose underscores the gravity of misogyny and other forms of systemic violence against women.

While Ulman's project deliberately stages cuteness as a means of adapting the aesthetics of the Insta-girl, Jansma breaks with the Insta-girl trope, in order to reflect back at misogyny, by refusing to express shame, delight, or amusement in response to these forms of public harassment, masked behind jovial banter and good-natured humor. Her resistance is precisely what kills the joke – but, as most of her images of grinning catcallers imply – not the joy. In contrast, Ulman's strategic performance of an Insta-girl persona first lures audiences into a staged spectacle of girlhood, only to later disclose the ruse of authenticity.

6 Conclusion

The inherent risk of these (and I am sure other) art projects on Instagram is that they traffic in what Lauren Berlant has termed "good-life fantasies" (2011: 15) founded in a "cruel optimism" (ibid). The cruelty of these attachments lies in the fact that their promise of a good life ropes us in and strings us along, as we perpetuate the very conditions that systemically make a good life impossible. Berlant's observations about optimism's cruelty attends to "fraying fantasies" of "upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy" (ibid, 3). The affective economies of social media depend to a large degree on these cruel optimistic attachments to the things that put us down in the first place. As Berlant astutely argues: "Cruel Optimism turns toward thinking about the ordinary as an impasse shaped by crisis in which people themselves develop skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on" (ibid, 8). With Instagram and other forms of social media, the promise resides in their technical capacity to bring people into contact, a capacity we have all relied on to a large degree during the COVID-19 pandemic. And even beyond that, social media's role in mobilizing publics is uncontested – thinking of the Black Lives Matter and the #MeToo movements, among many other consciousness-raising and activist pro-

jects through which we will probably remember the times we're in. (As an aside, I am also thinking of the #IchBinHanna movement and the expressions of solidarity, collective rage, and community building we are currently witnessing in Germany).

Nevertheless, the very economy of constant self-promotion, on which the "social" in social media is predicated, reifies the very neo-liberal dynamics of competition and judgment that have shaped our perception of ourselves and the world around us. Cuteness, recalling Sianne Ngai's definition, is particularly equipped to index the excessive dependency on consumption, protection, and destruction. The tension between these affective attachments is indicative of the cruel optimistic lore that the 'cute' promises – to those who perform it and to those who label these performances within larger contexts of art's aesthetic affective potential. Cuteness is, of course, an invented category shaped by its own internal hegemonies, and a highly formulaic one, as Ulman's project has shown. To employ this category successfully, therefore, also reproduces these hegemonies or, at least, tacitly reaffirms them through continuous and uncritical circulation. The digital economies Ulman and Jansma employ further embody social media's role of what Jasbir Puar has termed "recapacitation machine" (2017: 10). Puar contends that the stunning success of the It Gets Better campaign, designed to inspire queer youth, normalizes predominantly white, liberal and male queer identities and assemblages but thereby "ultimately partakes in [the] slow death" (ibid) of other queer identities and communities for whom it does not get better. Puar suggests that the IGB's cultivation of individual resilience, rather than focusing on the systemic violence against queer and trans folks, also tacitly places blame on individuals who failed at getting better. The same pressure to out-perform one's haters is also an issue for Ulman's and Jansma's respective projects. Within the logic of misogyny, to borrow Kate Manne's book title (2017), harassment still registers a response to women's behavior in public, thinking back on the "girls" on their iPhones at the beginning of my essay. Or, in the case of sexual harassment, as long as the questions as to what she wore, said, or really wanted when she said no are posed/exist, the blame sits with the victim. The cuteness of the Insta-girl cannot exist outside of capitalist interpellation, and celebrating its agential potential is a cruel optimistic fantasy, but perhaps one which is necessary, as we navigate the many iterations of neo-liberal risks.

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