

Rosenbohm, Randon 'Alone With Molly Soda', Mask, (28 February 2017)

www.maskmagazine.com/the-lonely-issue/style/molly-soda

mask



Photos by Randon Rosenbohm

The internet is an art gallery you can visit whenever you want.

Alone with Molly Soda

FREE ARTICLE

Molly Soda is like Cindy Sherman, if Cindy Sherman didn't dress up as anyone but herself. And unlike Cindy, Molly Soda doesn't capture specific moments in history, but positions her self-portraiture in the expanding web of the internet. Cindy Sherman has never made a zine, either. And not all of Molly's art is self-portraiture, so maybe they're actually pretty different and I shouldn't make the mistake of comparing two totally different artists just because they're women who photograph themselves...

I shouldn't need to: Molly Soda is an internet idol all by herself. Her Wikipedia page says she is responsible for the proliferation of seapunk. If you haven't seen her picture, maybe you've seen teens who still fashion themselves after some of her prolific Tumblr posts from the early aughts. I saw one in Times Square just the other day: colorful hair, septum ring, Tumblr swagger.

I first formally encountered Molly Soda's work through her ten-hour-long video *Inbox Full* in which she dictates every absurd message in her Tumblr inbox. Everybody online can relate to getting anonymous hate mail (Facebook's Honesty Box app ruined my already weak self-esteem in high school), but seeing someone

who has gotten way more anonymous hate mail made me feel less alone. Her transparent self-presentation is refreshing amongst tediously-curated online personalities. I can't unsee her influence, in fashion and digital art. Other artists have used Molly as a muse, or put her in their music videos, or written songs about her. Across all social media platforms, I bet Molly has enough followers to elect her into public office.

The first time I met her a few years ago in my friend's kitchen I was too shy and nervous to actually talk to her. Honestly I was star-struck. Then we were reintroduced in a better context, at Coney Island before singing karaoke. We were mutual followers for a bit. When she moved to New York, I asked if she'd talk with me for Mask.

When I made it into her apartment she asked me if I wanted some tea. I sipped my iced coffee and (knowing from her posts that she likes sweets) offered the open bag of wafer cookies my cab driver gave me. I was all dressed up and groomed to interview one of my favorite contemporary artists, my giant Unif platform boots clunking around her new sunny bedroom in Bay Ridge, which appears to always be decorated for Valentine's day with red tinsel and heart lights. She told me she was looking forward to stocking up on more Valentine's decorations later in the day, the adorable holiday aesthetic somehow perfectly matching that of her art. I sat across from her while she shared her couch with a tremendously oversized teddy bear.



Your recent gallery exhibition in London featured some of your webcam videos in a girly bedroom setting. How would you say “loneliness” plays into your art practice?

Being alone is the only way that I can make the work that I make, because a lot of it is about the things that we do when we're alone, the way we sort of perform loneliness for other people, and what it means to put it on the internet. There's something that happens when you turn a camera on: you're no longer alone. Even if you are alone, you're self-conscious. You're aware that you *might* post it, or someone *might* see it, or you start being aware of how you look, or whatever it is. I don't think you're ever truly going to be able to capture that feeling, but I'm trying to get as close to it as I can.

payline

Yeah, there's always an implied audience whenever you take a picture or record.

No one takes pictures for themselves. Or maybe they do. I don't think I do. I have a lot of pictures, and I feel like every single video and picture that I take, even if I don't post it, is with the intention of having an audience.

Being a net artist means your art is typically viewed by people in a solitary setting, rather than in a gallery space. Does that influence the way that you make art?

Yeah, absolutely. I think my work is best viewed by yourself in your room, or wherever you feel comfortable. I like that people can choose to interact with it however they want. They can access all of my work online, as opposed to going to a gallery where there's a curated narrative. That is good in its own way, but I like the randomness of interacting with people's content online. I like mimicking what I do when I'm online in a YouTube hole, or endlessly clicking and discovering connections between all these clicks. There's all sorts of stuff that you don't even realize you're mindlessly doing. I think it's really hard to put web-based work in a gallery, and it isn't always good. One of the strengths of online art, especially the work that I make, is that people can interact with it at their own volition. There's something very discomfoting about a gallery space, no matter how much they try and make it immersive.



Have you had success displaying net art in a gallery? How have you made it work?

I've tried to make it so that a lot is going on in one space at once, understanding that people probably aren't going to watch everything. That way it's more like the experience of having multiple tabs open than it is like watching one video. I have so much work online and it's so scattered and spread out spanning so many years, so sometimes I try to force more of a structure to some of the work.

I think there are positive aspects of having stuff in a gallery space. But when you have it in a gallery, you're telling people how to consume your work, and when it's out there on the internet, you're just giving people tools, and however they want to view it is fine.

Does the internet make us more lonely, or does it bring us closer together?

I grew up using the internet from a really early age. I grew up feeling misunderstood, just like everyone else. The internet was a place where I sought out, I don't know, like-minded people, or things that I thought I could connect to that I wasn't feeling like I could connect to IRL. In that sense I've felt really full of interconnectedness since I was very young, which is why I probably have a very positive relationship to the internet.

But, because of that, I sometimes seclude myself for long periods of time, because I can always find people online, and sometimes that's enough for me. A lot of my loneliness is not an act, but it's also a thing I'm playing with it. I don't ever feel so debilitatingly lonely that I can't do things, you know. I can choose to step out of it if I want to.

Not to bring astrology into it, but I was just reading this thing about Aquarius that was like, "Aquarius are really self-sufficient, they're actually fake-lonely." I just keep thinking "fake-lonely."

I think the way that the internet is structured now makes it harder for people to actually say how they feel. The more visibility you have, the less you can just sound off however you want, which is why I see so many people with private accounts, or burner accounts. Basically, accounts where you can shitpost, but the internet was built on shitposting, you know? And now it's like you have to have this cultivated persona. Whatever that means to you. Whatever that means to other people.



Why do you love karaoke so much? Has it creatively influenced you? I mean, you do have a lot of karaoke imagery in your work.

I love karaoke. As a child, I would always stand on tables and perform for my family members. I was always singing, but I'm not a musical person. I can't make music, I have no desire to make music, and I don't really have a desire to learn how to sing. But there's something about karaoke that I find really special because it sort of evens everyone out. Everyone gets a chance to be in the spotlight or perform if they want to, and everyone's supporting each other. No one is ever mean at karaoke. People want you to do a good job, because they're also there to be entertained to a certain degree. So everyone's clapping, everyone's singing.

The best is when you do a song, and everyone in the room is singing. I just really like it because I think it creates a nice sense of community among strangers. For me it's one thing that's allowed me to still maintain a sort of active nightlife without having a drink. I think it does make people feel more confident. There's something so nice about it.

Also I just think that songs and lyrics are funny and corny. A lot of my work is about growing up, so many of the songs that I incorporate into my work are songs that were really influential to me at a certain time in my life. Music is something that you enjoy privately as well. I *love* videos of people singing on YouTube. Like, so much. I think have a YouTube playlist (I don't know what to do with this playlist) of like 158 videos of people singing "Stay" by Rihanna alone in their rooms. I love the act of being alone in your room and making public that moment of you singing along to a song.

I also made a video to Mazzy Star "Fade Into You," in which I compiled different videos of people singing that song, so it's like a choir, but all off-key and weird. Songs mean so much to you, and you can't imagine that it would mean anything or the same thing to anyone else. So everyone's always having these discrete, private moments with songs. You feel like it's written for you. I almost feel protective of certain songs.

It's your song.

Yeah! I used to do karaoke every week in Detroit, at least once a week, and there were times when someone came on stage and did one of "my songs," and everyone in the room would look at me.

We're always trying to see ourselves in whatever it is that we're looking at, because we're always trying to figure ourselves out. I don't know if you ever did this when you were growing up, where you're watching a movie with your friends, and each one of you decides which character you are in that movie. We're always trying to do that, or at least I feel like I gravitate towards those things.

What's the rest of your year looking like?

Right now, I'm working on a solo show that is opening in April in Los Angeles at this place called @leiminspace. It's a show about my teen interactions with the internet. So, I've been archiving all of my old selfies, all of my old LiveJournal and Xanga entries. I also have all my old diaries. The show will be a sort of graveyard homage to the internet at that time. R.I.P. MySpace, R.I.P. AIM. I know that everyone has such common relationships to the internet of that time. I would say that maybe the bulk of people who look at my work are in my age range. I've just been hoarding all this information, and I think it could work in a show. I just want to get it out of my system. It's still proving to be difficult because, you know, you don't want to post a bunch of stuff that only pertains to you, you have to find a way to connect it back to other people.