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' Artists explore why we act the way we do online ' Man Repeller, (February 2017)

<http://www.manrepeller.com/2017/02/molly-soda-art.html>

Artists Explore Why We Act the Way We Do Online



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Hannah Keegan | FEBRUARY 16, 2017

Have you ever met someone and instantly wondered what their Instagram is like? Like many other millennials, I'm acutely aware that how I present myself on social media informs people's perceptions of me. This unavoidable and problematic schism between our online personas and real lives is a topic increasingly of interest to young artists.

That group includes 27-year-old internet personality and artist Molly Soda, who has made a career out of her virtual existence. From break-out Tumblr fame in the late noughties to a sizable Instagram following today, Soda's online persona is central to her work and life, though the glittering GIFs that she used to post to her Tumblr have been exchanged for galleries filled with her work, DJ sets and college talks.

As I scroll through her Instagram messages, I can't help but wonder what she thinks of her fans. "Hello very creative work, has anyone ever told you that you look like Krysten Ritter?" one reads. "I wish I could smell you," and, "I drew you subconsciously," reads another. They're invasive enough to make your skin crawl. A result of internet oversharing? Maybe, but Soda believes the internet is merely exacerbating voyeuristic tendencies that have *always* existed.



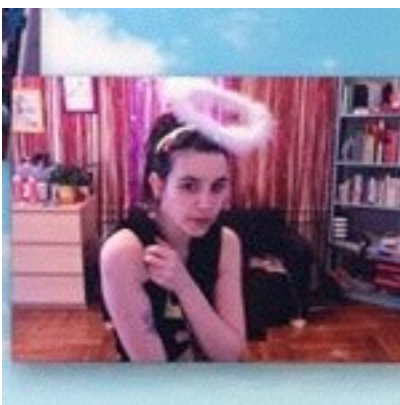
Her work highlights our complex, and sometimes suffocating, relationship with our devices. A recent exhibition, ‘Comfort Zone’ (at London’s Annka Kultys Gallery), glowed with a headachy-pink light; the room was filled with the relentless hum of notifications and videos playing on loop — one of which was an 18-hour film of Soda’s webcam footage which ran on a MacBook surrounded by half-eaten strawberries, spilled nail polish and broken CDs.

The chaotic mix of Soda’s digital world is unsettling; even more so is the sense of familiarity that sets in after viewing curated glimpses of her ‘real’ life. “It’s still not authentic,” she tells me over a Skype call from her New York apartment where she’s chatting in a silky, red bathrobe. I’m reminded that fake intimacy seems inescapable in the internet age

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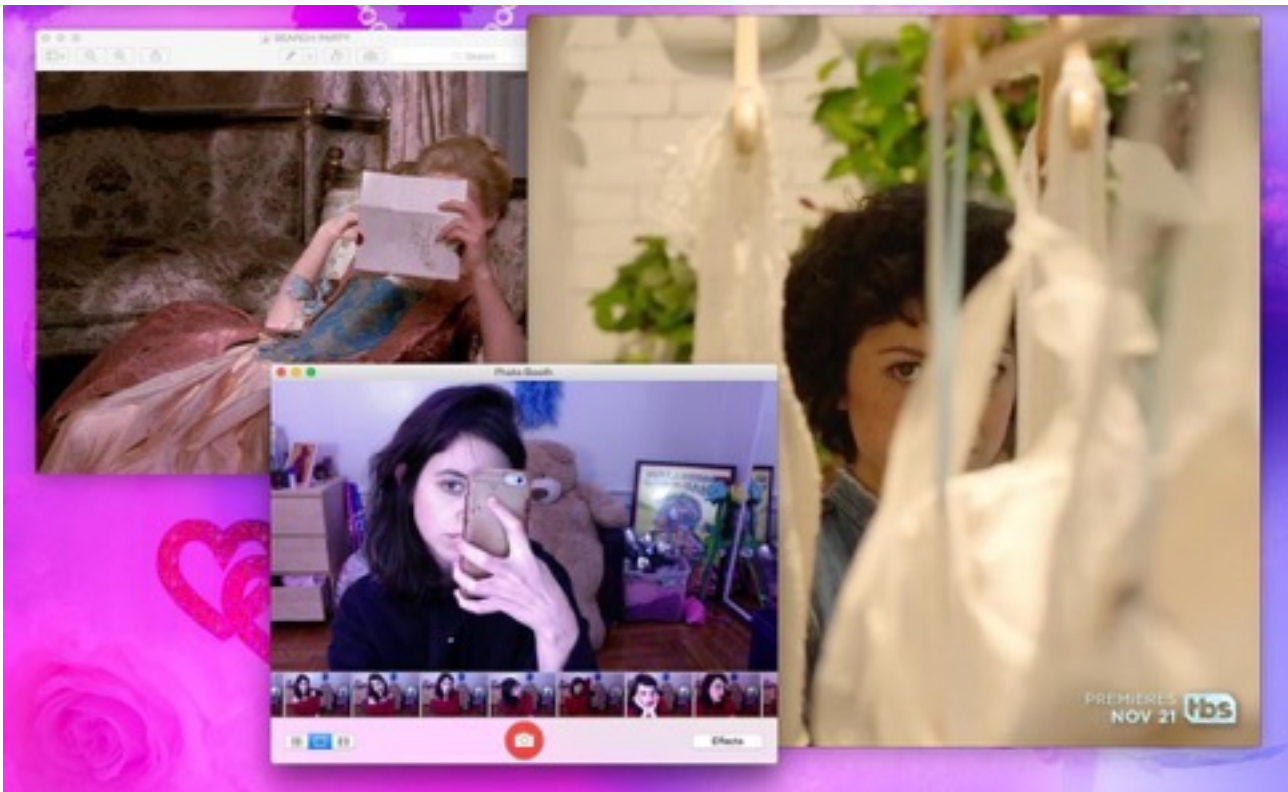
where boundaries can be broken with the switch of a webcam. “People *want* to divulge private information, because we go online to seek comfort and sameness,” she responds. While it’s true that seeing parts of ourselves reflected back to us on the internet can be comforting, we don’t always realize that we’re jeopardizing our long-term emotional well-being to feel involved.

“Our notions of privacy are growing to be a lot different,” Soda explains. “There are no safe spaces, the term ‘safety’ is a fake thing we tell ourselves to get through whatever we need to get through.” She elaborates, “We have these false ideas... safety blankets, safety nets.” When we constantly narrate our lives online, safety becomes much more complex than simply being in the ‘safe’ space of your own home. “I mean yeah *sure* no one can physically harm me... but my phone is still turned on,” she adds. We worry how about how we’re being perceived on social media, but as we give more of ourselves away online we’re also deeply complicit in the game.



bloatedandalone4evr1993

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Sometimes, it's our own comparison making that does the most harm. How many times have you felt deflated after an evening of Insta stalking? 28-year-old conceptual artist Amalia Ulman delved into millennials' willingness to accept crafted images in her 2015 project, 'Excellences & Perfections,' for which she created a fake Instagram account. For four months, she posed and pouted for 72k followers, sharing post-boob-job and spending-spree pics before revealing it was an experiment examining online performances of femininity. As she told *Dazed*, "Most of the people who got it were women. Men were like, 'What?... She just looks hot!'"

This rise in surface-level assessment is something that psychotherapist Dr. Aaron Balick, author of *The Psychodynamics of Social Networking*, calls a loss of 'authentic

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recognition.’ “The trouble is that ‘authentic recognition’ is a complex process that involves being able to see the *whole* complexity of a person – not just the bits that person thinks you want to see,” Balick tells me. “We seem to have exchanged validation for recognition – which means low complexity fixes instead of high complexity interpersonal nourishment,” he elaborates.

In our drive for validation, we show portions of our lives that we think will be accepted and admired. Yes, this makes us inhibited (and somewhat jaded), but according to Soda, no more so than someone purposefully abstaining from the digital sphere. “We’re all projecting a certain image of ourselves...but it’s no more authentic than someone who never posts online and is *like* a cat avatar,” she says. The online visuals we create are always saying something about how we would like to be perceived. A sparse profile? Aloofly unavailable. All over Instagram? Loud and showy. “We’re all just creating whatever visual *we want* for ourselves,” Soda adds. Even if that is a cat avatar.

Photo by Molly Soda via @bloatedandalone4evr1993.