

Eler, Alicia and Durbin, Kate. «The Teen-Girl Tumblr Aesthetic», Hyperallergic. (1 March 2013): <http://hyperallergic.com/66038/the-teen-girl-tumblr-aesthetic/>

The Teen-Girl Tumblr Aesthetic*

by [Alicia Eler and Kate Durbin](#) on March 1, 2013



Frida Kahlo with sparkling eyebrows (via [champagnemanagement.tumblr.com](#), h/t [womensobjects.tumblr.com](#))

Editor's note: This is the fifth in a series of commissioned essays for [The World's First Tumblr Art Symposium](#) on Saturday, March 9, 2013.

Twenty-one-year-old Elisa Lam [made national news](#) when her body was uncovered in a water tank on the roof of the infamous Cecil Hotel, near Skid Row in Los Angeles. Not long before that, she was just a barely-no-longer-adolescent girl visiting the United States from Canada, exploring the city of angels whilst on spring break. In the Internet land of immediate responses, reactions, and reprimands via text chatter, reblogs, deleted comments, likes, and unlikes, hearts, and de-hearted emotional Tumblr affirmations, Elisa Lam's 19-year-old friend Jialin [began Tumblr blogging](#) about her friend's death. Was she a bad friend? How could this have happened to Elisa?

"She's a real person. Stop it. The autopsy results were inconclusive. I have anger issues," she writes on the portion of her tumblelog tagged "[Elisa Lam](#)." She poured her emotions out through Tumblr, the simple instant blogging platform founded by young entrepreneur David Karp in 2007 for exactly

that purpose. Forbes dubbed it [Karp's \\$800 million art project](#), and it does indeed exist for personal expression: "Tumblr experience can be boiled down to people expressing themselves publicly. Like those other two networks, Tumblr is organized in the form of streams of posts," writes Jeff Bercovici. And like most art projects, money wasn't the first thing on Karp's mind when he started it.

Yet as Elisa Lam lay floating in a hotel water tank, decomposing without the preservative assistance of the formaldehyde in Damien Hirst's "[The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living](#)," guests at the hotel drank her fluids. Like the Tumblr teen-girl aesthetic that is currently making its way through the veins and channels of culture, Lam is everywhere, seeping into the pores of the Internet's most hidden corners. The media sensation that her death became, along with the teen-girl online social universe she embodied, has metastasized.

Elisa Lam herself had a Tumblr. Elisa's best friend is blogging in reaction to Elisa's death on Tumblr, from moment to moment, documenting her feelings in real time. Through these inroads, we get a brief look into the minds of the honest, intelligent teenage girls who are experiencing surfeits of emotion, yet are not nervous at all.

In the case of Elisa Lam's body, the online/real life (IRL) overlap becomes fraught. Critique around James Bridle's coinage of the [New Aesthetic](#) revolves around the loss of the physicality of the art object. But in the case of the teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic, the art "object" extends to the bodies of girls both on and offline; the fetish is not contained in a static image. Even the images themselves are constantly moving and perpetuating themselves on Tumblr, breathing and existing in time and space as a living body.

The teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic differentiates itself from the prevalent nostalgia-induced reimagining of the archetypal lusty teenage dream. Rip-offs of that aesthetic are familiar staples of bubble-gum-pop culture. They hijack the notion of adolescence, attempting to reinstall it into adults who have already experienced it — the heightened emotions, the epic breakups, the popularity contests, the self-actualizing, the loss of virginity, the sugar-sweet feeling of falling in love again for the first time. American pop culture idealizes the adolescent experience, recreating it through nostalgia, hypersexualized female bodies and fleeting, sugary feelings.



Will Cotton, "Cotton Candy Katy," (2010) (Image from Willcotton.com)

Katy Perry's "[California Gurls](#)" video, directed by art-world celebrity Will Cotton, who is best known for his paintings of women and candy. He made the leap from art-world big shot to pop-star character through indulging in the teenage dream. His imagining of Katy Perry floating in a pink cotton candy cloud is the essence of the teenage dream — for adults, that is.

In [an interview](#) with The Daily Beast, Cotton says that Katy was just the pop star he had imagined working with:

The reason I chose Katy and nobody else — I had torn pictures of her out of magazines, because she was just the kind of character that I wanted to paint. She's very over-the-top, she's very sugary, saccharine. As sweet as can be. By painting the ["Teenage Dream" single] cover and working on [the "California Gurls" video], it disseminated this imagery in a way that the art world just never can.



Elle Fanning (via teenidols4you.com)

Cotton's reach extended far beyond just the art world and American pop culture, however. His imagery spread across the Internet, to South America and Europe. Teenagers and pre-teens, who are familiar with developing part of their **sense of self** through **the mirror of social networks**, began emailing Cotton about his Katy Perry paintings and pop art. Though it's not something he says he's ever wanted, it surely has gained him recognition beyond what even advertising could do — not to mention a ton more Facebook friends.

"It's a totally different scale. The video had 100 million hits on YouTube. That's just way beyond art-world scale. And now, I can get an email from a 12-year-old girl in Brazil who knows my imagery because of the Katy Perry album cover and video," Cotton told The Daily Beast.

For his next exploration into the teenage dream, Cotton went straight to the source, rendering actress Elle Fanning in a **candy-inspired editorial** for New York Magazine. The younger sister of Dakota Fanning, the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Candyland princess Elle is only 15 years old. Hers is a younger, more closely threaded connection to the teenage girl aesthetic as created by people who are no longer in their adolescence.

Yet Cotton's project is closer to Rineke Djekstra's **portraits of adolescent girls** attempting to pose in a sexy way, awkwardly beautiful in her vulnerability, or **Tracey Emin**, a grown woman expressing herself through confessional text, site-specific installation and a raw, adolescent voice. These artists create adult renderings of the adolescent girl sensibility.



Left, Rineke Dijkstra. “Kolobrzeg, Poland, July 26, 1992.” Chromogenic print, 117 x 94 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris. © Rineke Dijkstra, [via](#)), and right, Tracey Emin, “Hellter Fucking Skelter” (2001) (image courtesy White Cube, London, [via](#))

These are grown-ups, so to speak, channeling or connecting in some way with a constructed idea of the teenage girl aesthetic and adolescence. The teen girl Tumblr aesthetic of [Marie Calloway](#), [Molly Soda](#), Elisa Lam and [her best friend](#), [Emma Orlow of The Do Not Enter Diaries](#), [PlasticPony](#), and [Onlinebabe](#) is something entirely different: immediate, hyper-embodied, raw and vulnerable. The stakes are higher, too. As in the case of Lam and her friend, they are a matter of IRL life and death, with Lam’s friend reporting Lam’s Tumblr posts to the cops as they searched for answers to the riddle of her disappearance.

* * *

The field of [Tumblr art](#) is relatively new, and most of the projects that the art world has championed in this vein thus far take their cue from [digital art](#), [GIFs](#), [glitch art](#), and [net art](#). The [New Aesthetic](#), as defined and championed by [James Bridle](#), [Bruce Sterling](#) and debated on The Creators Project, is a far cry from the teen girl tumblr aesthetic.

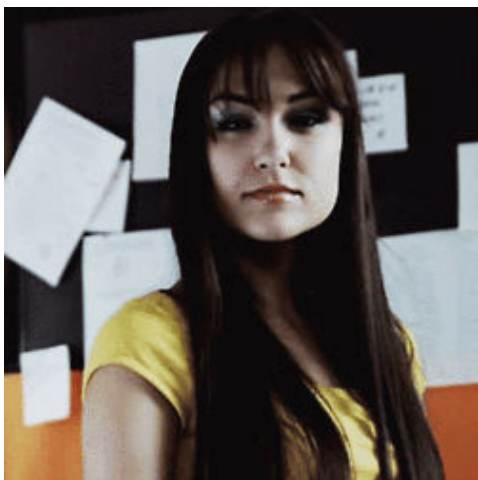
In Kyle Chayka’s response piece — an essay titled “[The New Aesthetic: Going Native](#)” — he

questioned how it could have taken aesthetes so long to recognize the New Aesthetic's pervasive nature:

NA is part meme, part techno-ethnography and part Tumblr serendipity. Its art is juxtaposition: If we put this next to that and this other thing, surely a new understanding will emerge.

Julia Kaganskiy [writes](#) that, surely, this essay does help articulate the idea of blurring the 'digital' and the 'real,' something that we Internet migrators are aware of but perhaps haven't properly discussed. A few months after these seminal posts on The Creators Project, an [Art F City article](#) chronicles the healthy, ongoing debate around the New Aesthetic, discussing how it has thus far been presented as a mostly robotic, architectural, futuristic sphere consisting "of images, mainly of satellite photos and colorful design objects which look like they've been run through a computer (have obvious pixels), alongside emerging trends which humanize robots."

If bodies do appear in the new aesthetic artworks (at least those presented at art conferences or in art magazines) they usually are remote bodies, as in these cases of humanized robots or architecture. [The majority](#) of examples are, mysteriously, free of direct references to lived bodies, and in particular absent of women's bodies. The female nude seems to have vanished from the new aesthetic. But this is not an accurate representation of the content on Tumblr, which is generally presented as synonymous with the new aesthetic. Instead, Tumblr is [so thick with nudes](#) as to cause problems for the site in its attempt to gain advertisers. Nudity on Tumblr ranges from well-curated porn to art historical nudes turned into GIFs, or, in the case of the teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic, those same things (porn and art historical GIFs) scrawled with notepad comments and jokes, decorated with glitter and cakes.



The teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic is bloated with more bodies than a porn video warehouse — the girls' own bodies, and the bodies of other girls, from celebrities like Kim Kardashian to former porn star Sasha Grey to other Tumblr girls and the above-mentioned art history nudes. Kate Durbin, a co-author of this essay, has created the projects "[Girls, Online](#)" and "[Women as Objects](#)," which curate teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic images in Blogspot and Tumblr spaces. The collected artifacts reference the objectification that women and girls experience daily, both on and offline, but in a cheeky manner that nods toward the radical self-objectification that the girls practice on their own Tumblr blogs.

In the case of these teen girls, their own bodies are canvases upon which they interface with the world, an audience with a gaze that is constantly watching and appraising. Like Cotton's images of Katy Perry, there is still plenty of nostalgia present in the teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic — for example, references to [Japanese kawaii culture](#) and '90s nostalgia — but there is a darker edge, an undermining of the heterosexual male gaze, as well as an ever-present extreme vulnerability. It's important to note too that it's not possible to experience the complex effect of the teen-girl Tumblr

aesthetic fully without actually scrolling through Tumblr, taking in the images as they slip over each other in the moving stream, intersecting with other girls' images and aesthetic worlds. In isolation they are static — less alive than Elisa Lam's body decomposing in a water tank.

Ben Valentine has pointed out that a problem Tumblr poses for artists has to do with the anonymity of the individual art piece, since so many images get reblogged, yet the wide audiences they attract rarely return to the original source of the image. This makes it difficult for Tumblr artists to succeed in the art world. When it comes to the teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic, this critique of anonymity is beside the point. The teen girls, while they are no less artists in their creation of profound and innovative content, seem ambivalent in regards to the importance of an original source (perhaps their bodies are the source; they are certainly the filter), and have little interest in gaining a name in any larger art world.

When **Molly Soda**, a Tumblr-famous teen girl whose work has been discussed in **Rhizome** and is featured prominently on "**Women as Objects**," was asked by the authors of this piece what she thought of the art world, she replied, "I'm pretty sure you don't have to answer this question after you've graduated from art school... right? ;)"

Plasticpony, another "Women as Objects" participant, said in response to the same question, "I like art. But I'm not in the 'art world.' I don't have a direct connection with it and I don't know how it is. I have a vague idea of what it might be like..."

It's helpful to discuss the issue of anonymity Valentine brings up, however, because in the case of Elisa Lam's friend and the teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic in general, Tumblr has become a space to create a personal aesthetic against anonymity. In **Lam's friend's case**, she is battling against the voices on the real-life school bus as well as the peanut gallery of internet comment boards that tried to hijack her friend's body as it lay in the water tank:

ANNKA KULTYS GALLERY

Now vehemently defending Elisa from stupid ass trolls online ... reddit needs to know that she is not a fucking junkie. she isn't. wasn't. she was a kind, intelligent girl, who did not do drugs. you got that, internet world? ... i heard high school kids on the skytrain talking about her since it was on the front page. i want to punch them all ... she's a real person. stop it ... the autopsy was inconclusive.

In the psychic moving stream of Tumblr, teen girls build and perform their individual aesthetics, which are not anonymous, even if individual images are not interacted with in the same reverent (or highly art-critical) way with which one might encounter a Monet in a museum. The teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic is less about an individual image that might be dissected and praised or excellence in a specific medium, and more about, as Lena Dunham articulated in [a recent interview](#) with Miranda July in Interview magazine discussing her generation of artists, "articulating a point of view."

In the case of teen girls, the expressions of their points of view include visual art, altered self-portraits, and writing that is personal and vulnerable. [Francesca Woodman](#), the young artist whose intimate self-portraits of her body fusing with her environment would have thrived on Tumblr (feeling unappreciated by the art world, she committed suicide at the age of 22, though her work posthumously came into high regard). Her work appears on Tumblr constantly, echoing on the blogs of teen girls.



It's perhaps best to let these teen girls speak for themselves about what makes Tumblr such a unique platform for their self-expression. Plasticpony says:

People often ask me 'What's Tumblr? Why are you so obsessed with it?' and they mistake it for a social network. A social network, like Facebook, exists only for the purpose to connect you with other people. People that you probably already know in real life, and people that you might want to know. If you think about it, it's limiting. There are some things you can do, and some you can't do. Tumblr is a totally different thing. In most cases it's used as a blog. But it can also become your website. It can be a project. You can become famous through it and it can change you. I know for sure that it changed me. It helped me in deciding to be strong and dye my hair, it helped my taste in fashion, art, photography change and evolve, it made me interested in feminism and social rights. I have more interests and a more peculiar taste now. I feel that in some way my life would be different without Tumblr.

And you can post almost everything you want on Tumblr. I'm not saying that nobody is going to judge you, but it's A LOT more forgiving than every other website I can think of, and of course, real life. When I'm on Tumblr, I feel that I can do what I want and be who I want to be without the fear of the stigma that I would otherwise certainly experience.

If someone can take a look at my Tumblr and say 'I like it,' I feel happy. Because looking at my blog is very similar to looking directly inside my brain. If I can be accepted on Tumblr, maybe I can also accept myself.

The confessional poet [Sylvia Plath](#) would have thrived on Tumblr, too. She actually does thrive and live there now, with lines from her diary and her poems frequently blogged by teen girls, sometimes in hand-scrawled notes, other times in '90s style notepad art.

[Marie Calloway](#), a young writer who could be seen as a LiveJournal-era version of Plath, had this say about Tumblr:

To me something feels very intimate about Tumblr which is strange considering that it has less privacy controls than other blogging platforms (e.g. there's no "friends only" option like there was on live journal.) i am vaguely connected to the literary world in nyc, which i find to have a lot intelligent and interesting people in it, but it is also very aggressive and sexist at times. for instance i went to two parties around christmas time for different big literary publications and it was a lot of middle aged men buying drinks for girls in their 20's and aggressively hitting on them. i felt uncomfortable. i think Tumblr provides girls with a community to interact in a female oriented space. i find it important because working in spaces with men i feel like there's a lot of compromises that have to be made and a lot of uncomfortable and toxic feelings.

The tension Calloway mentions regarding real-world dangers that haunt young women should be noted. It is very possible that these same dangers are what took the life of Elisa Lam.

If a project like "Women as Objects" is a catalogue of the teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic, then it is a catalogue of the future, a future that is freer, where the lines between online and IRL are less rigid. Plasticpony, when asked what she wanted the world to know about Tumblr, said: "I would like the world to know what it feels like to be able to do whatever you want freely and to let everyone else do whatever they want." In discussing the New Aesthetic project, the professor and artist Carla Gannis [writes](#), "A movement cannot merely catalogue what currently exists, it is defined by the future(s) it envisions."

ANNKA KULTYS GALLERY

In the case of Elisa Lam, a young woman who was described as friendly and kind to everyone she met IRL, a young woman whose living, moving Tumblr stream was filled with images of a life of adventure and joy, a young woman whose body ended up static in a sealed-off water tank, this vision of the future cannot come soon enough.

Hyperallergic would like to thank [Pernod Absinthe](#) for their support of the World's First Tumblr Art Symposium essay series.

**The authors would like to clarify that the teen girl tumblr aesthetic is just that, an aesthetic movement. While the majority of its practitioners are "literal" teen girls, not everyone who is working in this vein is a born a [ciswoman](#), or is currently between the ages of twelve and nineteen. We realize this may seem like a contradiction to some, as the core of the aesthetic seems to center around vulnerability and telling ones own narrative (as opposed to the projection of an idyllic youth onto an "other"). But "teenagehood" is a social construct, an idea, which exists in the cultural consciousness. It has never been mostly literal. The teen girl tumblr aesthetic is also an idea, an attempt to articulate an exciting cultural movement that has emerged recently on the Internet, where one's identity is more fluid.*