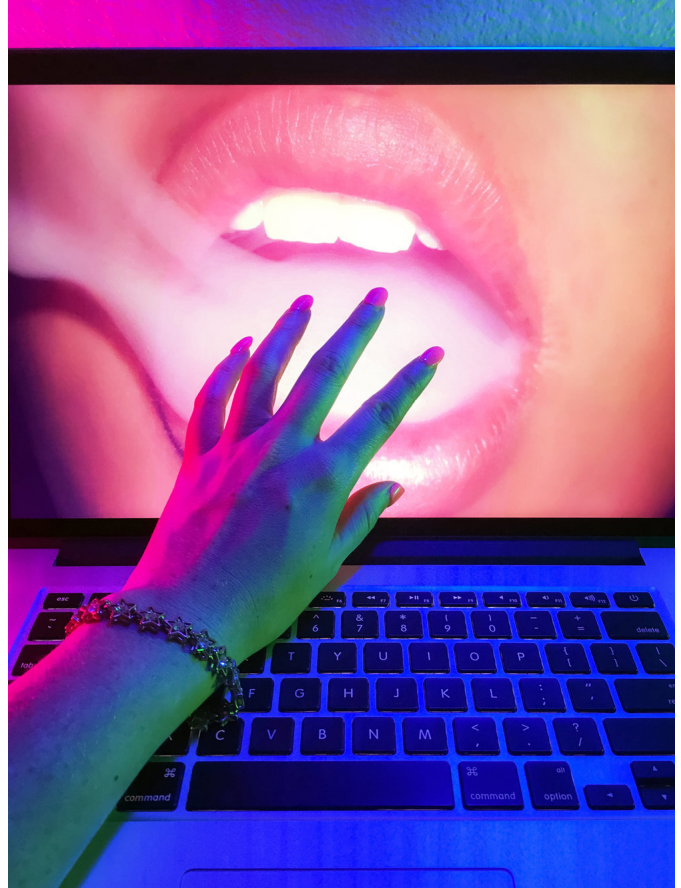


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<http://www.plastikmagazine.com/feature/#/signepierce/>

INTERVIEW: SIGNE PIERCE



Getting Real with Signe Pierce

Signe Pierce first burst onto the scene with the release of her 2014 short film *American Reflexx*; a performance art piece featuring Pierce herself, wearing a mask and barely anything else, wandering the streets of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, waiting for something to happen. Little did she know that all hell would break loose as walkers by started attacking her both verbally and physically because of her hyper sexualized demeanor. The video went viral and toured galleries around the world, garnering acclaim for shedding light on the overall intolerance that lurks right below the surface of American society. Since then, Pierce has been relentlessly expressing herself on any medium she can find, branding herself a 'Reality Artist' and using her body, mind and soul as a platform to incite much needed self-reflection and self-questioning from her viewers.

“Art is no longer trapped within the confines of gallery walls... it’s anywhere with a wifi connection.”

What is a ‘Reality Artist’?

To me it’s a way of describing artists who see no distinction between their lives and their practice. The separation of an artist’s work and an artist’s life is rapidly disappearing. We use our phones and computers to capture our lives in media, and can instantly export and broadcast that content on the Internet. We are all the stars of our own realityshow.

‘Reality Artist’ is a term I coined that started out as a joke, but ended up being a way to better describe my approach to the work I’m currently making. Multimedia artist, photographer and performance artist are labels typically thrown onto me, but I don’t really feel that they accurately describe the full scope of what I’m doing. I’m a photographer, a writer, an actor, a set decorator, a light technician, a location scout, a director and often all at the same time. I use my world, my mind, and my body as a medium, and once that media is uploaded, the work can be consumed by anyone who sees it. When you take the mediums/medias associated with art and combine it with the everyday performativity of reality stars, you get “Reality Art”. Art is no longer trapped within the confines of gallery walls... it’s anywhere with a wifi connection.

How real can art be real, and yet still be called art?

I think part of the paradox/joke calling it “Reality Art” is that one of the central questions that my work posits is: “What is real?” What constitutes ‘reality’ in the age of digital simulacrum? It is an enigma inside an enigma; and the questions of “what is real?” and “what is art?” are central to the practice of using reality as a medium.

Social media seems to be turning us all into performance artists. Everyone seems to be showcasing his or her life, or a version of it, online for all to see. And yet surveillance (ie. the NSA scandal) is still a very controversial subject. What’s your take on this Catch 22?

It is indeed a Catch 22. I think that this current era of rapidly developing technology and new media (aka singularity) is normalizing so quickly that we haven’t even been able to ask ourselves some of the necessary questions that we should be regarding what all of this means for our safety and identity protection. Regardless of the fact that technological advancements are incredible, we need to be critical and wary of how they’re impacting our personal safety and privacy.

There have been so many wonderful new innovations in the past 15 years and I rely heavily on new media to make my art but also just to live my life and run my business. The concept of “the cloud”, for example, has always been weird to me. Tech companies sell us the idea that our data is safe being stored “in the cloud”. But like, I have no idea who else is floating on my cloud! If some third-party

person, or say, an employee of “the Cloud’s” host site (Google, Apple, Dropbox, etc.) were to have access to my photos or text messages, how would I ever know? I wouldn’t. It’s not in my control, and that relinquishing of privacy is something I’ve been increasingly exploring in my work.

You’ve often said that you draw inspiration from scripted reality television such as Keeping up with the Kardashians and Real Housewives. If you were to award anyone for best-scripted reality show performance, who would it be and why?

I’d probably give the award to the ringmasters behind the scenes, Kris Jenner and Andy Cohen. Both of them have exhibited ingenuity in the way that they’ve turned other people’s lives into multi-million dollar platforms. Reality TV existed before them, but these people have taken an entrepreneurial approach in terms of how it’s constructed and manufactured.

Ever thought of creating your very own reality TV show? If so, what would it be like?

We’re all getting closer to having our own reality shows, especially with Snapchat and Instagram Stories / Instagram Live becoming more and more prevalent. I could foresee myself formulating my work into a more proper “reality TV” context over time, but I also kind of feel like I’m already starring in one just by existing online every day.

Can you take us through what happened right after you finished American Reflexxx? What was your immediate reaction?

When Alli Coates (the director of Reflexxx) and I got back into our car after the horrific hour spent walking down the Myrtle Beach boardwalk, we both screamed on and off for about five minutes. Screams of terror, screams of anxiety, but mostly screams of joy because we knew that we had just captured something really unique and provocative. We had no idea that the crowd was going to behave so aggressively, but the entire purpose of the performance was less about me in the mask, and more about how people were going to treat me in the mask. Luckily we lived to tell, and we got some important footage out of it.

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Watching American Reflexxx was a really disturbing experience, and yet after the US elections, the events that occurred in that piece seem much more expected. What’s your take on the US elections and the current social climate in America?

I often catch myself watching/reading the news with one hand over one of my eyes. It seems to be a subconscious reaction to the horrific information I’m being presented with. I’m disgusted with everything that’s happening right now—not just in America, but in the world at large. I realize that civil unrest in America has been brewing and bubbling for a long time. We’ve been leaning on neoliberalism like a crutch to keep us from falling into the snake pit of actual reality, but on November 9th things got really, really, aggressively real.

I am truly heartbroken about Donald Trump’s presidency. I am not one to let fear get to me, but I genuinely fear what he is capable of doing to our planet with his senseless tyranny, greed, inexperience, and thoughtlessness. He does not care about anyone but himself, and he is lying to all of America by telling us otherwise. He is not my president, and he never will be. A resistance movement is brewing, and we are going to fight back against this gluttonous corruption.

Tolerance and acceptance is often linked to political correctness as opposed to basic humanity. Is there something counter-intuitive about accepting people's differences?

I've never really understood why it's so difficult for some people to approach life with a tolerable, open mind, but I think that the dissonance mostly comes down to politics, history and religion that's taken place throughout the course of human existence. There are so many layers that cloud our perception of history and it's left us with a distorted, and often out of touch, value system for which to approach modern civility. I feel like the world-at-large needs to have a really serious conversation about human decency and about how we treat other people, especially as we go deeper into the Internet where people feel like they can say or do anything without feeling the repercussions.

Your work is particularly effective when it comes to denouncing the male gaze while still being feminine and sexual. What's your secret?

The male gaze is inevitable... it is an inherent aspect of our animal instincts and attractions, and I don't necessarily begrudge men for having honest reactions (although it's exhausting and often dehumanizing). I think shaming people for how they truly feel leads to perversion, which leads to deeply harmful behavior, so when addressing behavioral/social issues, we want to make sure we're not alienating our targets. If I'm trying to educate and teach an embittered straight guy about respect and consent, one of the quickest ways to lose his attention is to say the F-word (feminism). I've come to find that subversion is the most impactful and subtly stylish tactic when addressing political differences.

Despite the fact that we are all animals at our core, we need to look beyond our carnal desires. The actions/reactions that happen under the influence of testosterone deeply and psychologically impact women every second of every day. This is what I try to get across when ensnaring the male gaze—“Oh, I caught your eye, did I? Well now that I have your attention, let's talk about objectification. Let's talk about consent, and my personal agency as a human being”. “Objectifying you while you're objectifying me” has long been a mantra of mine when describing this type of work.

Mainstream media is only now seeing the importance of having women create women-centric content. But is it enough?

Right now it seems like the mainstream is catching onto the wave of having women and minorities authoring their own narratives, which is great. I just fear that the men in boardrooms are green-lighting these projects because they view it as a trend or a marketing technique, and not because they think it's important for us to tell our own stories.

We're going to have to continue to fight for proper, intersectional representation in the mainstream media that goes beyond any sort of "call for diversity" or seeking to hit a target demographic. We need to be able to tell our own stories from our lived perspectives. Our authorship is not a trend, it is a necessity, and we're going to have to continue to carve out our place in a white, male-dominated mainstream marketplace.

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Pop culture seems more complacent than ever these days. In your opinion, who are the pop artists out there that are still trying to push the envelope, and why?

Complacent is a pretty good word for it, you're right. Not much is happening that I would consider interesting in pop culture. I typically would look to Kanye or Gaga as my pop provocateur guideposts, but Kanye's on some Trump goon shit that I have no patience to even entertain, and Gaga's doing her singer-songwriter thing, which is understandable after years of wearing all of those uncomfortable shoes in the name of performance art.

I feel like the names of comedians keep coming to mind when I think about who's pushing the envelope and trying to get people to think in new ways. Eric Andre is, at his core, a total performance artist. He's brilliant because he's managed to package what he does into the more accessible world of comedy, which can be seen and felt by millions of people. The day after the election I think I watched his show for, like, three hours straight because I needed to laugh to keep from dying.

Also, Young Thug comes to mind for his total nonchalance about gender norms and general "no fucks" vibe. Wearing a couture gown on the cover of his album was an extremely dope move, especially in the context of the historically misogynistic rap game. We need fearless people out there who advocate for and uplift the powers of the divine feminine.

All artists seem to have a hidden desire to go mainstream. Is mainstream media something that you might consider one day?

I'm pretty transparent about the fact that I consider myself to be a pop artist. I'm not afraid of the mainstream, but it's really important for me to maintain integrity in regards to why it is that I do what I do. I wouldn't want to "go mainstream" for the sake of being famous or netting enough money to buy a beach house. Rather, I would want to go mainstream so that I can get my work and ideas onto the peripheries of a larger audience. I want my work to succeed within the bubble of the "fine art world", but ideally it can reach beyond the bubble and can be felt by more than just those who actively seek it.

What's next for Signe Pierce?

Traveling a lot! I'm going to Los Angeles tomorrow to concentrate on making new work and to oversee some video projects (some of which are considerably "mainstream", haha). I'm doing my first solo show at Nathalie Hagland Galerie in Vienna, Austria in March and a show at Annka Kultys Gallery in London over the summer.