MOLLY SODA: FROM MY BEDROOM TO YOURS

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ANNKA KULTYS GALLERY

FROM MY BEDROOM TO YOURS

INTRODUCTION

Annka Kultys Gallery is delighted to be able to publish this catalogue on the occasion of Molly Soda's inaugural solo exhibition, *From My Bedroom to Yours,* at the gallery's London premises. Soda is an exceptional young talent whose work has to date been found predominantly on the internet. As the Los Angeles based curator and writer, Alex White, observes in her contribution to the catalogue, the art lover's first encounter with Soda's work will more than likely not have occurred in a traditional gallery, museum setting or established art context. *From My Bedroom to Yours* alters that dynamic and introduces the gallery–going public in London to the artist for the very first time.

The three essays in the catalogue reflect the global reach of Soda's work. From L.A., White's *Like, Comment, Share : Molly Soda as Digital Image, examines inter alia* how Soda develops many of the complexities surrounding the digital image : the perceived freedom from repression, the erosion of distance between the image and reality, the simultaneous offer of control over production with the accompanying exposure to public censure, even cyber–bullying. The London based curator, Aric Miller, who is also a close friend of the artist, offers his personal impressions of Soda and her work from his uniquely privileged viewpoint in his contribution, *Meeting Molly Soda*. Finally, in *Self(ie)xposure,* New York resident art writer Molly Messersmith employs the modern phenomenon of self–representation via the 'selfie' and self–made videos as a prism to explore within Soda's work motifs such as the artist's vulnerability, cyber–feminism, hyper–emotionality and image–trafficking.

Yet a common sense from all contributors, be it in Miller's observation that the Internet Molly and the Real Life Molly cannot be separated or White's that Soda emotionally connects with her viewers through her shared feelings, and perhaps what is most striking about Soda's work, is its authenticity. While the

artist undoubtedly toys with the perception of her image, such as through her use of the tween–Tumblr aesthetic, for example, this of itself should not be viewed as mitigating the *bona fides* of her work; it was Shakespeare after all who noted all the world's a stage and all its men and women merely players. For it is this honesty that generates Soda's legions of social media followers and internet fans, that allows her work to resonate with its viewers, that lends the political dimension to her art. In Soda's own words "That's activism in itself — just putting yourself out there as a woman — being totally unashamed of who you are and what you're about."

We would like to give our thanks to the gallery staff for their efforts and dedication to realising this exhibition. We would also like to thank all the contributors to this catalogue, particularly Gina Morelli and all the authors for their wonderful essays, and in particular, Molly Messersmith, Aric Miller and Alex White. Finally, yet most importantly, our thanks go to Molly Soda, who braved the distance between Detroit and London, sharing her ideas with the utmost professionalism and enthusiasm, and who has enabled the exhibition to become the undoubted success it deserves to be.

John Brennan & Annka Kultys

LIKE, COMMENT, SHARE:
MOLLY SODA
AS DIGITAL IMAGE

BY ALEX WHITE, NOVEMBER 2015

The first encounter with American artist Molly Soda's work may not occur in a traditional gallery or museum setting — it may not even occur within a typical art context at all. Rather her works can be found shared on Facebook, or reposted on Tumblr, or discovered on Twitter, for example. Through the use of Instagram selfies, gifs, YouTube videos, zines and tweets, Soda has generated a significant online following across various social media platforms.

Her images are raw, rejecting conventional beauty norms, whilst still maintaining a tween–Tumblr aesthetic, employing kitsch elements and lowbrow internet culture. As part of a generation of young artists using digital media to create works of art, a generation including leading exponents such as Petra Collins and Vivian Fu, Soda's work explores not only issues of female identity, but also the contemporary relationship we have with images and how they are disseminated and treated online.

In Jacques Rancière's influential text, *The Future of the Image* (2007), he discusses two notions of the image's relationship with reality. First, that "there is no longer … only images," and secondly, that "there are no more images but only a reality incessantly representing itself to itself."

Ultimately, notwithstanding the initial impression that the two positions appear in direct opposition, they essentially suggest the same thing. Rancière argues, "if there is now nothing but images, there is nothing other than the image. And if there is nothing other than the image, the very notion of the image becomes devoid of content."

Now, more than ever, we exist as images through our online presence. Molly Soda's website notes that while she "is currently based out of Detroit," nevertheless "you can always find her on the Internet." Thus the image is no

longer an attempt to represent reality ; it is reality. And this is what gives Molly Soda's imagery its accessibility, free from repression. Alone in her bedroom, Soda has total mastery of her own image.

In her YouTube video, *2 all the gurls in the world* (2015), Soda dances around, removing articles of clothing and showing off her body hair, all the while returning the camera's gaze. The piece explicitly recognises its audience, 'all the girls in the world.' Soda exudes confidence, self-determination and power over her own feminist image. The new media artist Hito Steyerl has identified a will-to-image feminist impulse not unlike Soda's, noting in *The Wretched of the Screen* (2012) :

> The feminist movement, until quite recently… worked towards autonomy and full subjecthood. But as the struggle to become a subject became mired in its own contradictions, a different possibility emerged… A desire to become this thing — in this case an image — is the upshot of struggle over representation.

Molly Soda perfectly embodies Steyerl's alternative possibility. She is her own image. Referring to her connection with other women online, Soda notes, "that's activism in itself — just existing and putting yourself out there as a woman — being totally unashamed of who you are and what you're about." As in life, the image exists within a system of hierarchies. Gifs, jpegs, selfies and videos produced on a mobile phone or laptop, are all examples of what Steyerl calls 'poor images.' Steyerl notes "The poor image has been uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and reedited […] It transforms quality into accessibility." Digital images can be instantly distributed on a global scale, enabling active mass-engagement and participation with images anywhere with wifi connection. This is both the poor image's strength and its weakness. While activist imagery is given a worldwide platform, so is hate speech. Putting oneself on display can be a means for support, but it can also create opportunities for cyber-bullying. In this sense, the image is totally vulnerable. As Steyerl reflects, "[poor images] express all the contradictions of the contemporary crowd : its opportunism, narcissism, desire for autonomy and creation, its inability to focus or make up its mind, its constant readiness for transgression and simultaneous submission." The choice of working in the digital realm reveals the discrepancies of contemporary reality in a way that other mediums are simply unable to achieve.

Molly Soda's work captures the past, present and future all at once, in what the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze refers to as a 'time image.' In his writings on cinema, Deleuze plays with the concept of a 'time image,' an image that views time as a constant two-way mirror, in which one side is "launched towards the future, while the other falls into the past." Cinema studies academic David N. Rodowick has described the time image as an image that fluctuates between actual and virtual, confusing mental and physical time.

In Soda's NewHive video *Our Song* (2015), Soda speaks to the viewer directly. "I'm so glad you're here," she begins, "You're just a little bit closer to me this time." Over the next fifteen minutes, she fluctuates from happy to be talking to us, to begging us to be physically present. Reminiscent of a Skype conversation, the video explores how relationships can exist in two different spaces at the same time. In the case of *Our Song,* however, we cannot respond to her. When Soda begs, "I just want to feel you," she demonstrates both the convenience the internet provides us to be connected at all times, and the physical and temporal limitations of relationships existing outside the present. While *Our Song* records Soda in the past, she addresses her future viewers, and they experience her in their present. Two different time-continuums exist simultaneously — that of Molly Soda's present, which slips further and further into the past, and that of each viewer's present, which continues into the future as the video gains more views.

In a post-internet society, the internet has become fully embedded into our everyday reality. Molly Soda's work — existing entirely in an online format — is self-reflexive by nature, exposing the inherent flaws within social media and our online presence, which is not only her artistic medium, but also more and more a direct extension of ourselves.

In Soda's NewHive work *It's so crazy that you live in a computer now* (2015), she employs a Matryoshka doll effect. An image of Soda dancing plays on a computer within a computer, and is continuously repeated. This piece in itself references patterns of image circulation, an important trope in her works. *It's so crazy that you live in a computer now* should be seen as a testament to our refracted reality, and our enhanced level of engagement with images — our ability to produce and consume them.

We can play, pause, stop, repeat, open new tabs, play two videos at the same time, play the same video in two different windows at the same time, like, comment, share on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, and so on, from anywhere in the world, at any time. In both her feminist approach, and her clever referenciality, Soda emotionally connects with her viewers through shared feelings of loneliness, silliness, love, lust, boredom, amongst others by putting herself on display and making her private, public: from her bedroom to yours.

MOLLY SODA
Witch and Famous, 2015
http://newhive.com/mollysoda/wit-
ch-and-famous
NewHive page and .gifs
Dimensions variable
2 AP + Edition of 3
MSod001.15

MOLLY SODA
Is it alright if I don't answer the phone to-
day?, 2015
http://newhive.com/mollysoda/livehere
NewHive page
Dimensions variable
2 AP + Edition of 3
MSod☉☉2.15

MOLLY SODA
He, 2015
http://newhive.com/mollysoda/he
NewHive page and YouTube Video, 5:18 min
Dimensions variable
2 AP + Edition of 3
MSod003.15

MOLLY SODA

I will never be soft enough for you, 2015
http://newhive.com/mollysoda/i-will-ne-
ver-be-soft-enough-for-you?q=%40mol-
lysoda%20%23soft
NewHive collection (includes YouTube videos)
Dimensions variable
2 AP + Edition of 3
MSod004.15

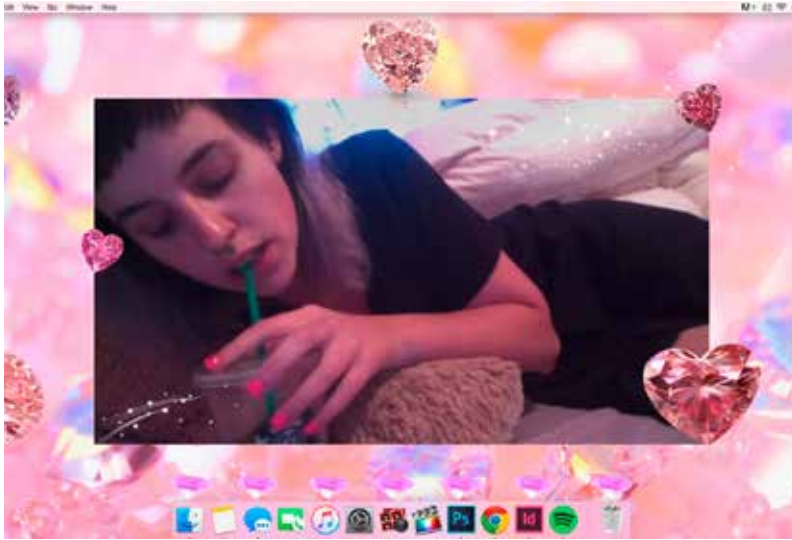MOLLY SODA

It's so crazy that you live in a computer now, 2015

http://newhive.com/mollysoda/inacomputer

NewHive page and YouTube video, 0:31 min

Dimensions variable

2 AP + Edition of 3

MSod005.15

MOLLY SODA
Our Song, 2015
http://newhive.com/mollysoda/our-song
NewHive Page and YouTube video, 15:11min
Dimensions variable
2 AP + Edition of 3
MSod⊙⊙6.15

MOLLY SODA
2 all the girls in the world, 2015
https://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=wMKT5gK9–RE
Video, 2:29 min
Dimensions variable
2 AP + Edition of 3
MSod007.15

MOLLY SODA
be with u :(, 2015
https://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=QULXBw9yID0
Video, 1:17 min
Dimensions variable
2 AP + Edition of 3
MSod008.15

MOLLY SODA
did you feel them?, 2015
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-J4mSOBJccw
Video, 2:21 min
Dimensions variable
2 AP + Edition of 3
MSod009.15

MOLLY SODA
:(4 u, 2015
https://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=38HQOztBSms
Video, 0:44 min
Dimensions variable
2 AP + Edition of 3
MSod010.15

MEETING MOLLY SODA

BY ARIC MILLER, NOVEMBER 2015

I first met Molly Soda sometime in early 2013, through my ex-girlfriend who knew her from New York University, where they had attended college. I was living in Detroit, and she was visiting there from Chicago to attend a monster truck rally. Not too soon after, we became friends and she eventually moved to Detroit and we later became flat mates. It was in this home that much of the work in this exhibition was produced.

That October, Molly and I traveled the rainy ten hour drive from our home in Detroit to New York City to attend *Paddles On!,* billed as the 'first digital art auction,' at Phillips and curated by Lindsay Howard in conjunction with Tumblr. There, Molly sold her piece, *Inbox Full,* an 8 hour video in which she answers each of her Tumblr questions one by one. In the private booth overlooking the auction floor, each time a work of art would sell, everyone would cheer and toast to champagne. It felt as though all the artists there, most of whom had never sold a work, had made it. Fittingly, we were both excited by the whole scene.

Molly first began to gain notoriety through her heavy use of Tumblr, where she has over forty thousand followers. She posts much of what she produces on this platform, which allows anyone free and unfettered access to her work, including the ability to download, re-post or even re-work her creations. This interaction reflects Molly's own work, which is itself often times comprised of many elements 'found' on the web via google image searches. More recently, she began producing a large portfolio of work for NewHive, an online creative content creation platform, which allows users to build simple websites and drag and drop elements such as .gifs, videos, images and text.

Molly relies heavily on materials commonplace in contemporary life. In this case, a computer, a camera, Photoshop and found images. Think of an internet-age reimagining of the Arte Povera movement of Italian artists who used everyday objects and found materials to produce their work. Her work is produced in the most ordinary of places, her home.

As such, From My Bedroom to Yours is a fitting name for Molly's first solo exhibition. Her bedroom doubles as her studio, along with other places in her

house such as the couch, the porch or even the bathroom. It is in this domestic setting where Molly produces her never ending stream of gifs, videos, selfies and web pages. The fusing of her bedroom with her artistic practice is so effective because of the intimate nature of both. Her work frequently invites us into the most private aspects of her life, such as her romantic aspirations, or lack thereof. The fact her work is produced in the same location as her subject matter provides a layer of authenticity that might not exist if it was produced in a traditional studio. Moreover, many of her fans/viewers are connecting via the internet from their own bedrooms.

In *I Will Never Be Soft Enough For You* (2015), we see a series of NewHive webpages in which Molly brings her webcam with her through different places in her home. The front yard, as she hides behind plants in a long white dress. Her bed, as she lays down eating a muffin. Her room, as she slowly pushes her underwear down, or dances on the bed. The front porch, as she dries off, smoking a cigarette, looking out at a torrential downpour. All of the different vantage points show Molly in various states of trying to look 'soft,' but end up making her look rather lonely, such as the final page in which she hides her face under an acid-wash denim jacket while looking out on the front porch. As she explains "I spend a lot of time alone [...] this is my version of softness."

'Melancholy' may be a more apt description of Molly's work than 'cute' or 'soft' or 'girly,' despite the initial 'girly' aesthetic that tells us otherwise. As mentioned, Molly is not afraid to spill her feelings onto the web and into her work, and those feelings are not always happy. She is often expressing frustration with her life, her friends, her image, or even just a general feeling of boredom or laziness. Other times, she is letting us know what she is excited about, or what she thinks is wrong in the world. She is not afraid to express her social and political views.

Whatever her concern, Molly is fearless in bringing it to the attention of the world through her work. As she has explained in countless interviews, the Internet Molly and the Real Life Molly cannot be separated.

MOLLY SODA
i spend my time on you too much, 2015
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EY-
Zg7lAgJ_k
Video, 2:17 min
Dimensions variable
2 AP + Edition of 3
MSod⊙11.15

MOLLY SODA
i touched you on the arm, 2015
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0p–
PeZP–kL0U
Video, 1:15 min
Dimensions variable
2 AP + Edition of 3
MSod012.15

MOLLY SODA
i tried with you, 2015
https://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=jZOv5q376×U
Video, 1:37 min
Dimensions variable
2 AP + Edition of 3
MSod⊙13.15

MOLLY SODA
been so long since i've seen the ocean, 2015
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-
m54OmrbQP4o
Video, 4:50 min
Dimensions variable
2 AP + Edition of 3
MSod015.15

MOLLY SODA
maybe when i die, 2015
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kr-
2vORdXFTY
Video, 4:04 min
Dimensions variable
2 AP + Edition of 3
MSod016.15

MOLLY SODA
so tired, 2015
https://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=30e9Mnc08Yc
Video, 1:51 min
Dimensions variable
2 AP + Edition of 3
MSod017.15

MOLLY SODA
they tasted alright to me, 2015
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qEr-
lWfkufxØ
Video, 3:43 min
Dimensions variable
2 AP + Edition of 3
MSodØ18.15

MOLLY SODA
thinking about u, 2015
https://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=ESZW6GBDmRM
Video, 2:06 min
Dimensions variable
2 AP + Edition of 3
MSod019.15

MOLLY SODA
i will go down w dis ship, 2015
https://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=StYl1DY9ntw
Video, 3:53 min
Dimensions variable
2 AP + Edition of 3
MSod014.15

MOLLY SODA
wrong wrong wrong, 2015
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sS-
GU4PQembs
Video, 2:19 min
Dimensions variable
2 AP + Edition of 3
MSod020.15

SELF(IE)XPOSURE

BY MOLLY MESSERSMITH, NOVEMBER 2015

Twenty years before the selfie trend emerged in the mid–2000s, Jean Baudrillard described with eerie accuracy the phenomenon of digital self-portraiture. "It is not: I exist, I am here! But rather I am visible, I am an image — Look! Look! This is not even narcissism, merely an extraversion without depth, a sort of self–promoting ingenuousness whereby everyone becomes the manager of their own appearance" he wrote in *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena.*

This appearance is rapidly increasing in significance because of its growing role in social media. The digital rendering of one's face, whether raw or edited image, becomes an avatar and digital body to inhabit. One that is both representative and fabricated, allowing a fissure between figure and consciousness. This particular manifestation of your persona is now visible and engaged with the public at a speed that cannot be reached in physical form. A single picture can circulate and be seen by millions instantaneously. This is the tremendous scale at which Molly Soda's work has been seen, circulated, and has impacted her audiences.

Despite early cyberfeminist optimism, including Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto,* for a social sphere where bodies were not inherited and could be modified to a unique or trans status apart from predisposed norms, the selfie is an incredibly simplistic pattern. Molly Soda's practice encompasses a series of self–recorded videos and images that replicate this pattern to highlight discrepancies between on and offline existence. Soda's work *It's so crazy that you live in a computer now* (2015) is a visual play on the rough aesthetics of this transformation and the very literal crash and rips between early graphics and the human figure that has now been streamlined into indistinguishable hyper–simplistic design. More generally, Soda's work performs and documents the failing intention of social media to serve as an honest representation by placing her body against a sea of identical selfie iterations. In turn her videos expose many of the aversions and perversions we have developed towards the organic female body through social media.

Such intense aversion and perversion of raw emotion, in reference to the antiquated concept of female hysteria, is an undertone to works like *Our Song* and many of her YouTube works. Most notably, the act of photographing one's tears in her video *Crying Over U* (2015), echoes the past artistic practice of Bas Jan Ader and forms part of a contemporary dialogue with artists of today, such as the video artist Laurel Nakadate, the photographer Emily Knecht and the video and performance artist Ann Hirsh. The act of crying, while in itself rejecting the commercial and cultural pressure to be perpetually lighthearted and desirable, is primarily a performance of the hyper-emotional sentiments that are expressed online. Allowed the protection from physical reaction to their displays, many people find the internet and social media a safe space to express intense emotional displays. This includes hate, depression, shock and sadness that would elicit vocal or physical confrontation in a physical space.

In the digital world these actions and words become a stream of consciousness that blends into other avatars as feeds compile. Tweets become but a text on twitter, videos but an image on YouTube and yet simultaneously they are immortalized. Archived into the abyss of digital content. Soda's website and practice all exist in this manner, as her artistic production only further imitates the context of its creation. Soda's *Our Song*, like many of her videos, is a passionate monologue, but when viewed in secession the words and expressions become monotonous, inseparable from the plethora of similar videos online. The intensity that Molly Soda expresses for her love interest in *Our Song*, the vulnerability and pleading, represents a direct conversation with the celebrity of the American pop artist Taylor Swift. The title of the Soda's video matches exactly the title of Swift's first popular hit, "Our Song." Swift's media image for being 'boy crazy' and her lyrics dramatizing young relationships make clear Soda's title alludes to the larger expectations for young women to still play the role of a figure driven by lust rather than ambition.

The naiveté and the 'pop princess' symbols that Molly Soda incorporates into *Our Song* as framing is equally as directed in critique. The adornments of the spinning pink diamonds and the saturation of pink as an aesthetic represent both the girly pre-pubescent body and the wealth of money and commodity fetish. This commercial seduction targets girls with the sexualized pink of 'female' production. The pink of female flesh. In Soda's video she aligns and interjects this superficial border into the intimate space of her bedroom using her sheets and the eroticized fur of her teddy bear. Fur and hair are repeating motifs of Soda's pieces. In *Is it Alright if I don't Answer My Phone Today?* Soda uses skunk fur to cover her face while writhing on her bed, while her repeated depictions of pubic and armpit hair to disrupt expectations of beauty norms in social media has been massively influential.

In defiance of the limited aesthetic scope of female self-depiction on social media and the digital self-recorded image, Molly Soda forces viewers to observe and consider unedited bodies. Her use of hair is a particular affronting contrast to the smooth 'flawless' skin we are provided in all advertising, cosmetic or otherwise. The near repetition of popular media image tropes (i.e., the navel or the side of the breast and a turned face) with the interjection of the usually removed hair is a space where the viewer cannot escape the juxtaposition between edited and organic.

Soda's intense attraction to the subject of *Our Song* is equally disconcerting because of the unknown being to whom she is directing her dialogue. Her eye contact into the camera, an act critical of the selfie as a pattern, is also intended to engage with each viewer as the recipient of her affections. This is the crucial differentiation with digital and physical communication, particularly sexual. The 'camgirl' is projecting a sentiment, considering a single person maybe, but reaching numerous individual viewers in their own context. This dynamic opens Soda's videos up to academic critique, sexual fantasies and young idolaters who can identify with the persona Soda portrays. It creates both an enigmatic video-art piece, but also a vulnerable position for Soda, the living subject, who is consumed by anonymous eyes. Thus Soda's videos capture a powerful surrender by the artist to represent the masses that inhabit this position daily and reveal their most personal thoughts or naked bodies to unknown viewers every day. Instead of pervasive contemporary media practice of the 'Nude Selfie Leak,' a forced extraction and publication of intimate self-portraits of celebrities intended for a select few without control, Soda released her own nude selfies as an act of solidarity and protest. The decision to 'leak' her selfies took back control over the context of interaction, but only to a limited extent. The most haunting revelation of Soda's videos is that even with the control and confidence of release, there remain myriad directions for her artwork to evolve. To be re-sampled or misread or shared, edited, or even deleted.

And this is the decision that Soda leaves us with. We can avoid the social sphere of social media and internet avatars. We can watch her and see the overlays and graphics as aesthetic marks of a new-media artwork. Or we can engage in social media and voluntarily beware of the availability of our data. Recognizing this data represents, through numbers, words, images or videos, our physical selves. When released into the internet, regardless of the platform or the site that it is initially hosted on, this data can be circulated as a floating image. Via Google searches, porn uploads, re-postings, re-bloggings, emails, texts, and tweets it can be edited into any iteration the next person deems fit. Suddenly Soda's body, or our body, is imaged, and becomes a digital file circulated out of context and without control.

Detached from physical ramifications this does not appear immediately dangerous. However to a generation that was raised with social media, and with the next generation raised with image and video capabilities and expectant of selfie proliferation, bodies are no longer limited to one corporeal space. The image, whether a clothed headshot or a nude body, is often circulated from birth without a second thought. A stranger to that body sees it as but a two dimensional fabricated digital image, no different than a screenshot of text, a drawn cartoon or a green screen. To us, Molly Soda's pink border and Molly Soda the body on the bed are all coming across as a flat plane that we can evaluate with 'likes,' mute when we want to watch without her voice, stop, replay, screenshot, or make it all a solid pink blur of heart shaped gems. As a viewer we begin to evaluate her videos with a like or remove her from her designed context with a 'share,' and suddenly we are the ones trafficking the body; her body.

Design:
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Essays:
Molly Messermith, New York
Aric Miller, London & Detroit
Alex White, Los Angeles

Edition: 100