

PAPER

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**CAN
KIM KARDASHIAN WEST
BE CONSIDERED A
PERFORMANCE
ARTIST?**

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200 Word Summary

This essay examines the techniques of performance artists including Lauren Holstein, Vito Acconci, Tehching Hsieh, Signe Pierce, Barbara Smith and Cindy Sherman in comparison with reality television star, Kim Kardashian West. In using social media as a platform for performance, it allows the user to reach a potential of audience of millions. Platforms such as Instagram have gained popularity due to their apparent transparency despite the ability to fabricate every aspect. Authenticity is a key concern for performance artists and social media users alike. Kardashian West employs the methods of performance artists in order to explore understandings of femininity, the female sexual body, the role of objects in performance and the objectifying gaze. She shows how effective modes of performance are through her use of transformation, interaction and spectacle. I will examine to what extent Instagram can be used for 'live' performance in adherence with Peggy Phelan's criteria of disappearance. Kardashian West's Instagram has paved the way for digital performances such as that of Amalia Ulman's, whose *'Excellences and Perfections'* performance gained critical acclaim as "the first Instagram Masterpiece" (Sooke, 2016). I will conclude that, in accordance with my outlined criteria of performance art, Kardashian West can indeed be considered a performance artist.

Social media's popularity enables its users to become famous with the right branding and content. For women, this is often sexual. These platforms have gained popularity due to their apparent transparency; yet every inch can be deliberately designed. Social media users have the tools to construct images and narratives through programs such as Photoshop. This performance of the self which platforms such as Instagram have allowed, provides 'followers' with a direct insight into the user's life. The desire to observe and understand another's reality, mainly celebrities, through television shows and social media has long been a source of entertainment. Social media content is generated by the users thus creating a demand for the first-person narrative. This aspect emphasises the individual experience as an object of desire and the curation of this content underlines the increased authorship we all have over our own image. With this, each photo can be observed, liked, commented, shared. Social media platforms provide the user with an archive of images which allows the user to review past images, making them aware they are spectators and not just participants of their own lives.

Television personality Kim Kardashian West has used social media to its maximum potential in order to increase her fame, popularity and wealth exponentially. As the most googled person in 2015 (Mccluskey, 2015), Kardashian West owes some of her success to the use of similar techniques to that of performance artists such as Lauren Holstein, Vito Acconci, Tehching Hsieh, Signe Pierce, Barbara Smith and Cindy Sherman. Kardashian West's amalgamation of these artistic references have evidently influenced the contemporary online performances of Amelia Ulman. All of these artists explore spectacle, ephemera, artifice and documentation to investigate themes of performed femininity, labour, public space and autonomy in the digital age.

In order to discuss Kardashian West as a performance artist I will define 'performance art' as works that:

1. directly engage with social reality and the politics of identity (Tate, 2018)
2. are presented to or in front of an audience.
3. operate as "a technique of self-experience... an activity in which he [the artist] attempts to explore himself and his environment by means of intervening in a given situation." (Battock and Nickas, 1984)

In this essay I will compare Kim Kardashian West's Instagram feed to iconic performance pieces in order to discuss how her Instagram works as a performance piece in its own right.

Kim Kardashian, Superstar

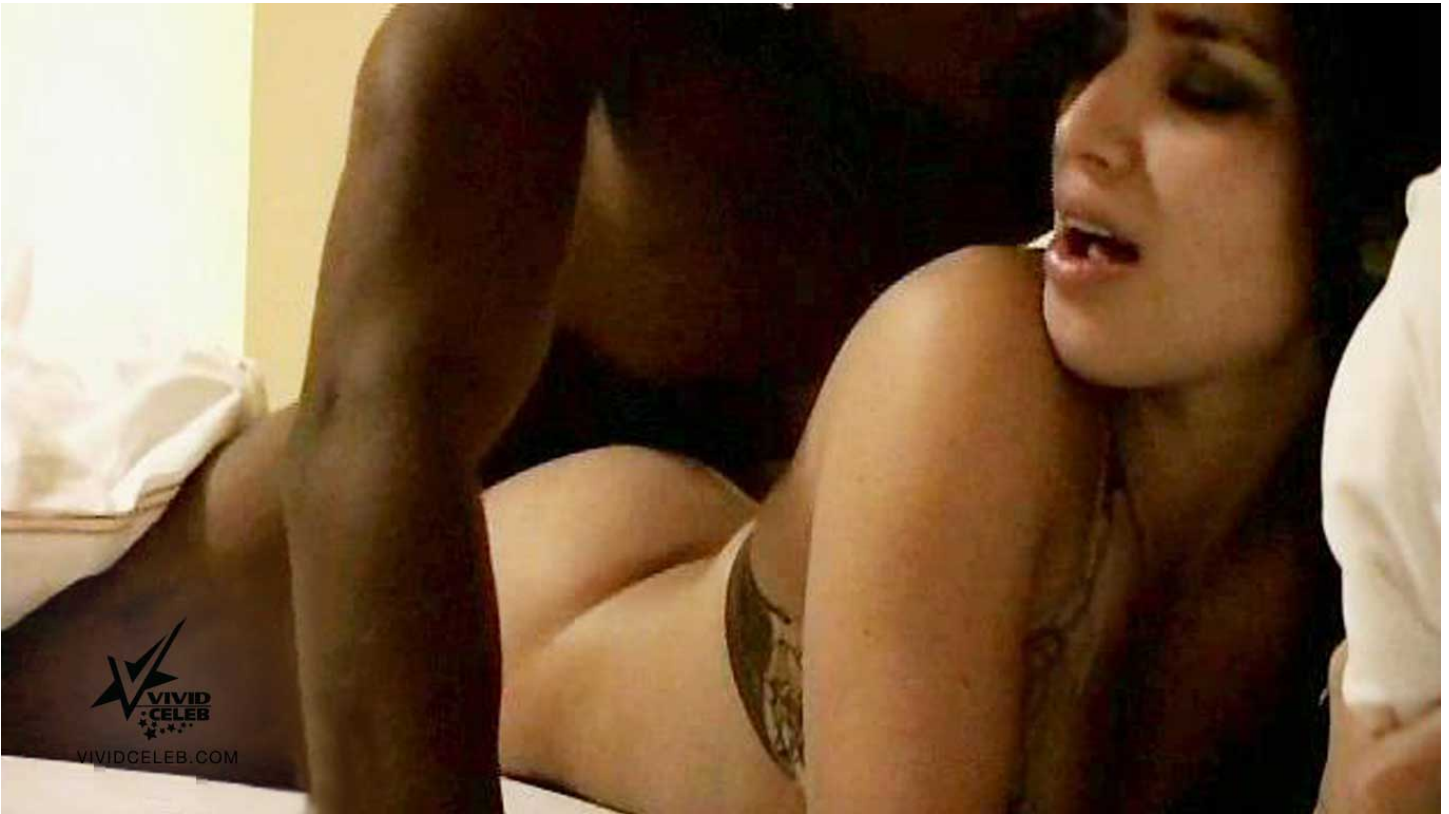


Figure 1: '*Kim Kardashian Superstar*', courtesy of Vivid Entertainment
(Kardashian West, 2007)

In 2007, Kim Kardashian West (formerly Kim Kardashian) and her then-boyfriend Ray-J's sex tape was leaked to the media. Unable to prevent this from being leaked, Kardashian West agreed to sell the footage to Vivid entertainment for \$5 million (Marcus, 2017). The sex tape titled '*Kim Kardashian, Superstar*', has become the most watched porn video in history, with over 196 million views (Pornhub, 2019).

Prior to this tape, Kardashian West was gaining fame through her father, attorney to OJ Simpson, Robert Kardashian. Kardashian West was attaining further recognition through being a celebrity stylist and also by being best friends with then it-girl Paris Hilton. This tape propelled her to more prominent fame and is a prime example of sexual expression. Linda Montano describes this sexual expression as "the key to personal identity and the primary means of bonding with others" (Montano, 2000, p38).

In episode 14 of season 15, Kardashian West confesses to being high on ecstasy during this performance (Kardashian, 2018). Four years after the release of the tape, however, Kardashian West's mother, Kris Jenner, offered a different account of circumstances in her book:

"she never did drugs, never even drank, never did anything that could prove embarrassing to her. I know for her to do something like that, completely sober, had to be an honest mistake" (Mirror 2011).

These contrasting statements reflect, I believe, performance artist Vernita Nemec's quote:

"Art gives you a shelter in which to confess and examine yourself and universalize feelings... Be honest if you need to and, if not, lie. Be honest and say you were lying, or lie and tell them you were being honest. It's your art." (Montano, 2000, p113)

If Kardashian West were to frame her sex tape as performance art, rather than a result of drug use, I believe, she would be less likely to receive such an extensive amount of criticism and perhaps it would be further understood as a cultural teaching on how women who perform sex are reduced to the singular role of 'whore' (De Villiers, 2017, p172). In contrast, Kardashian West's co-star Ray J received much less backlash, his ex-girlfriend Karrine Steffans even commenting:

"Ray J did not get the riches, but he also did not get called whore and slut and a piece of s-t and trash. Kim gets called all of those things on a daily basis 10 years later" (Coleman, 2017).

In Gordecki's documentary films about sex work, confessional interviews are utilised. He employs this confessional style interview method in order "to use sex work as an allegory for capitalist exploitation" (De Villiers, 2017, p89). The Kardashians apply this method of confessional interviews in their show *'Keeping Up with the Kardashian's'* (KUWTK) to create a sense of intimacy with the viewer. Each scene cuts to a talking-heads type interview where the family gives the viewer an insight into what they were thinking or feeling during a situation. We may be inclined to understand this technique as an allegory for capitalist exploitation but instead, the Kardashians exploit this for their own gain by using the television show as a platform to advertise their various merchandise.

In an interview by performance artist Linda Montano, fellow artist Lanalyne Green explains as a result of her works she can "feel a sense of mastery in the world, more autonomy, and less dependence on male approval." I believe Kardashian West's sex tape predetermined the tropes and techniques she has

continued to capitalize on in order to maintain autonomy over her sexual freedom and of her self-presentation. This autonomy allows Kardashian West to create a body of work, that takes the form of her constructed Instagram persona that frees her of the stigma from her 2007 leaked sex tape.

Cake Cake Cake

In the 1990's, audiences became hugely interested in the private lives of others. The advent of programs such as Big Brother allowed private space to move into the public realm and mundane activities such as eating came to the forefront of the public's interests. Kardashian West's television show *'Keeping up with the Kardashians'* and her Instagram monopolises these banal activities as entertainment. Gender studies researcher Alice Maguire explains that pushing private space into the public realm is "one way to contest patriarchal norms governing women's behaviours and identities" (Maguire, 2018) as, historically, women have been confined to the domestic sphere.

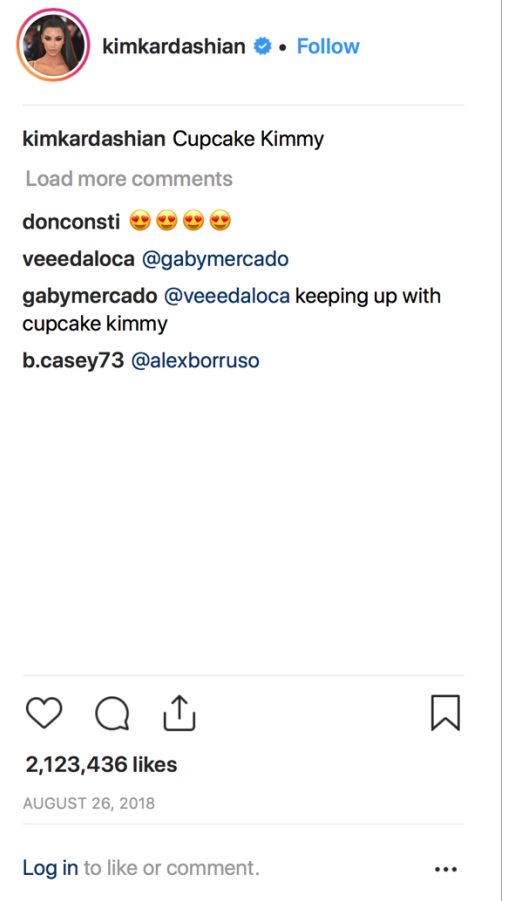


Figure 2: 'Cupcake Kimmy'
(Kardashian West, 2018)
Instagram Screenshot

In this apparently candid photograph, Kardashian West kneels in front of a coffee table wearing a bra. Her hair is scraped into a high ponytail as she eats a small cupcake. The casual posture and clothes reassure us of her contentment. This post, which reflects the popularity of staged banality, garnered a total of 2.1million likes.

In a comparable cupcake themed performance, Lauren Barri Holstein creates a theatre-based routine in *'How to Become a Cupcake'* (Holstein, 2014). In the duration of the performance, a fellow performer enters the stage announcing she will be speaking on behalf of Holstein but then professes she has nothing to say. Backstreet Boys *'I want it that way'* starts to play and the performers, who are wearing tutus, begin to sing in karaoke. Following this, a food fight ensues. The crux of the performance seems to be when Holstein puts a Twister ice lolly in her vagina and begins melting it with a hair dryer.

Holstein deals with ideas of the spectacle by creating a performance which is both gripping and boring. Each scene has the shock factor, but seems to go on for too long. In an interview with *'Reading As A Woman'*, Holstein states that she hopes this obscenity will disrupt fetishised images of the female body (Gorman, 2017).



Figure 3: *'How to Become a Cupcake'*

(Holstein, 2014)

Vimeo Video Screenshot

Kardashian West's Instagram post also deals with notions of the spectacle. The viewer gets instant gratification from looking at her beautiful face and body which can be understood as a portrayal of

'hotness', as defined by Alice Levy as "fuckable and salable" (Levy, 2005). This image, however, becomes boring very quickly as there is nothing else to see. The emphasis on performed femininity becomes more apparent from her caption, '*Cupcake Kimmy*'. This overtly sexual character is one she frequently toys in her Instagram feed through a selection of poses and attire as exemplified by '*Cupcake Kimmy*'.

Kardashian West arguably plays with ideas of domestication in this image, recalling the image of a housewife, baking for the family. Yet, because of our culture's access to the private lives of celebrities, the viewer approaching this Instagram post already knows Kardashian West is independently wealthy and is not tied to domesticity in the same way a 1950s house wife would be. In order to disrupt the social norm of housewife, this Instagram post asserts her sexual confidence and independence, as she is the consumer of the baked goods.

Ubiquity



Figure 4: 'Seedbed'

(Acconci, 1972)

Super 8 film transferred to video (colour, silent)

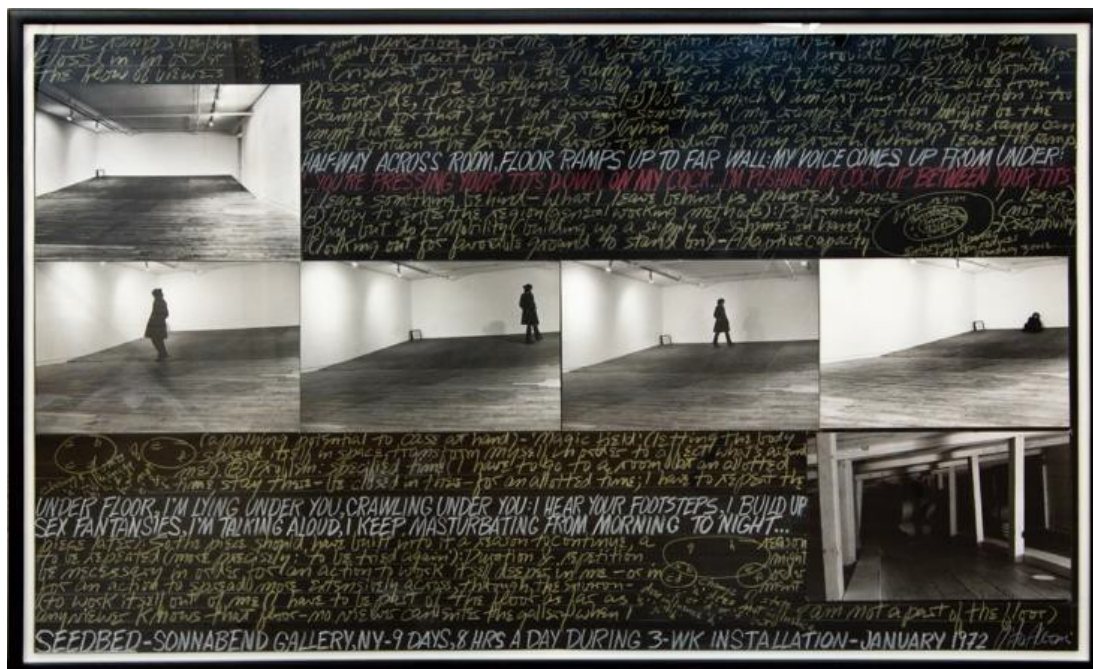


Figure 5: 'Seedbed' Accompanying Text

(Acconci, 1972)

Pastel pencil handwritten text, black and white photographs, mounted on board

88 x 141 x 4.5 cm (framed)

In video artist Acconci's performance, '*Seedbed*', audiences would arrive to the gallery to hear spoken sexual fantasies playing from the speakers. They would later find out it was Acconci who was masturbating under the gallery floorboards, projecting his fantasies into the gallery via a microphone. Acconci created a text piece to accompany this performance detailing: 'Under floor, I'm lying under you crawling under you: I hear your footsteps, I build up sex fantasies, I'm talking aloud, I keep masturbating from morning to night'.

This text outlines Acconci's goal to establish an intimate connection with the viewer without being visibly present in the room; the artist is omnipresent within the space. He achieves this through having his voice projected into the gallery space. Acconci uses the audience participation of their footsteps as part of the performance: he finds sexual pleasure from the idea of, but also the of being physically walked over. Similarly, Kardashian West similarly creates an intimate connection with her viewers by being ever visibly present on the internet. The 'like' and 'comment' functions on Instagram allow the audience to continually connect with Kardashian West but she intensifies this connection by asking her audience questions. In her captions by choosing questions that relate to her appearance, for example: '*hmmm what should I wear tonight?*' and '*dark hair for the new year?*', the audience is given the illusion that they are participating in her immediate life.



Figure 5: *'Hmmm what should i wear tonight?'*
 (Kardashian West, 2018)
 Instagram Screenshot



Figure 6: *'Dark hair for the new year?'*
 (Kardashian West, 2017)
 Instagram Screenshot

Kardashian West maintains her autonomy in a patriarchal system by posting her own pictures – she is in control of how her image is mediated and consumed as a commodity by her audience. Her 120 million-strong following has created Kardashian West into an omnipresent figure online. Kardashian West's questions illuminate the fact she is very aware of her audience, and engages overtly with what it means to the object of another's gaze.

Social media has created a space where the person narrative has become the object of desire as it is this narrative that generates the content of Instagram. Acconci and Kardashian West differ in that Acconci's audience are his sexual fantasies, and Kardashian West is the object of the audience's sexual fantasies.



Figure 7: 'Seedbed'

(Acconci - 1972)

Gelatin silver print

20.1cm x 29.7cm



Figure 8: 'The Devil Works Hard...' Fashion Nova's (left) budget version of Kardashian West's (right) dress.

(Daily Mail, 2018)

The detritus as a result of Acconci's performance is his semen. Kardashian West has no obvious physical result of her Instagram posts. However, Kardashian West's ephemera, I would argue, is her influence. Her style is so marketable it allows her to create fragrance and make-up lines. This was exemplified at Kardashian West's sister's 21st birthday party. Hours after photos were posted online, clothing line Fashion Nova had released identical budget versions of the sister's outfits (Zoellner, 2018).

Whereas Acconci's performance was deemed as 'unsettling' despite his attempt to connect with his audience, Kardashian West is extremely successful in depicting herself as desirable and adhering to Western society's beauty ideals. Kardashian West's posts are often semi-nude or sexually suggestive poses which presents her as someone who embraces her sexual freedom, both performatively and in 'real' life.

The architecture of Acconci's exhibition space meant he was positioned under a ramp – this put him in a position of psychological dominance: "Already with *Seedbed*, I was part of the floor; a viewer who entered that room stepped into my power field—they came into my house" (Acconci, 2005). Kardashian West also achieves a position of psychological dominance due to her celebrity status. She is in the position of power as the author of the posts. Kardashian West provides the content and asks the questions but it is ultimately the viewers decision to interact with her.

Have you Clocked in?

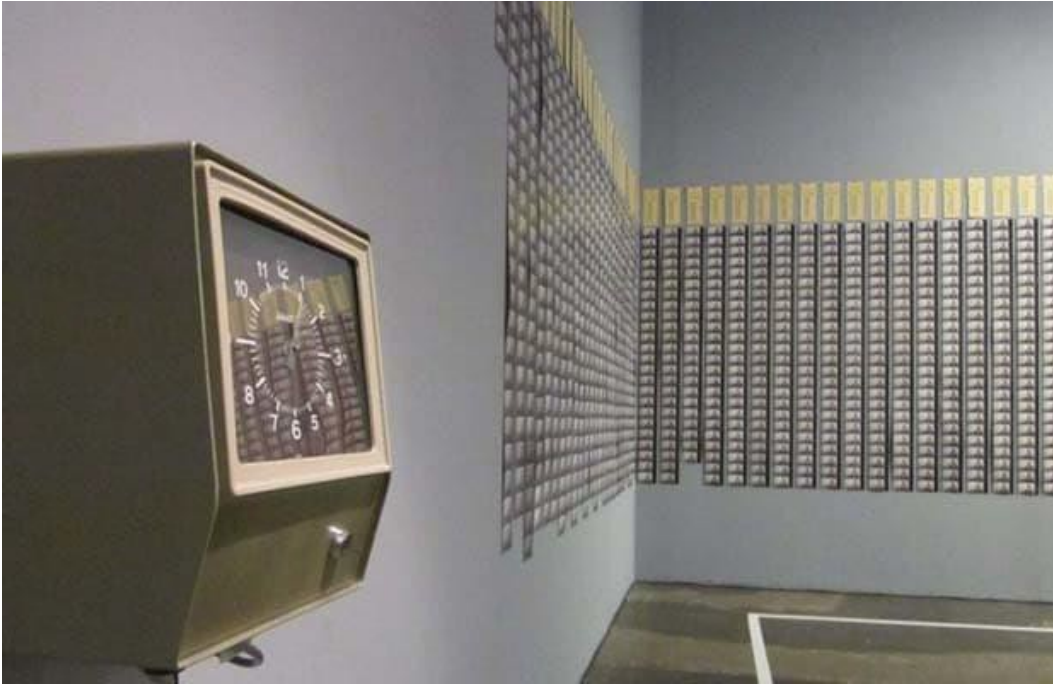


Figure 9: 'One Year Performance (Time Clock Piece)'

(Tehching Hsieh, 1980-81)

Vimeo video still

In Hsieh's 'One Year Performance (Time Clock Piece)', he punched a time clock and would take a self-portrait on a 16mm in his studio every hour on the hour for a year. Through the photographs the viewer is able to see the physical transformations, such as hair growth, Hsieh goes through. This is exhibited as a frame-per-second film projected on the wall, and the portraits were hung on the wall vertically by day in order to systematically observe the passing of time.

Similarly, Kardashian West's Instagram feed provides us with her own constructed reality of her life through curated posts. The viewer can see that she applies different filters to create an aesthetically pleasing and coherent feed of images. Kardashian West posts (almost) every day which could be interpreted as an online clocking in: I am here, I am online. Her Instagram feed documents her transitions through fashion trends, marriage and pregnancies in a way equally as successfully as Hsieh's 'Time Clock Piece' does.

Hsieh's four One Year Performances attempt to merge the artist's life and art -they are all-consuming. In undertaking them, he created a formal plan with certain rules for each performance. In signing up for Instagram, you arguably sign a comparable contract to document our life.

At the start of each performance Hsieh shaved his head so his hair growth would serve as proof of his performative endurance. Similarly, Kardashian West also uses her hair to mark the passage of time, as well as displaying an evolution in personal style and the documentation of her pregnancies provide proof of her physical transitions. Kardashian West has claimed she relies on a degree of authenticity to help the cohesion of her feed:

"I could never see me hiring someone. For me, it wouldn't seem authentic. Because it's all about me, I couldn't imagine trying to find someone to do that for me." (Kardashian West, 2016)

In considering Kardashian West as a performance artist in comparison with Hsieh, the viewer is made further aware of her deliberate construction of self, which is not always as instant and authentic as she portrays. The viewer can observe inconsistencies within her Instagram timeline due to backdated photos with entirely different hairstyles.

Another interesting discrepancy between Hsieh's 'Time Clock Piece' and Kardashian West's Instagram, is the lack of personal details: his works are not concerned with the documentation of personal and emotional experience as Kardashian West's are. This limited autobiography allows us to understand Hsieh's work as a commentary on labour in a capitalist society as the time clock provides a distinction between 'work' and 'life'.

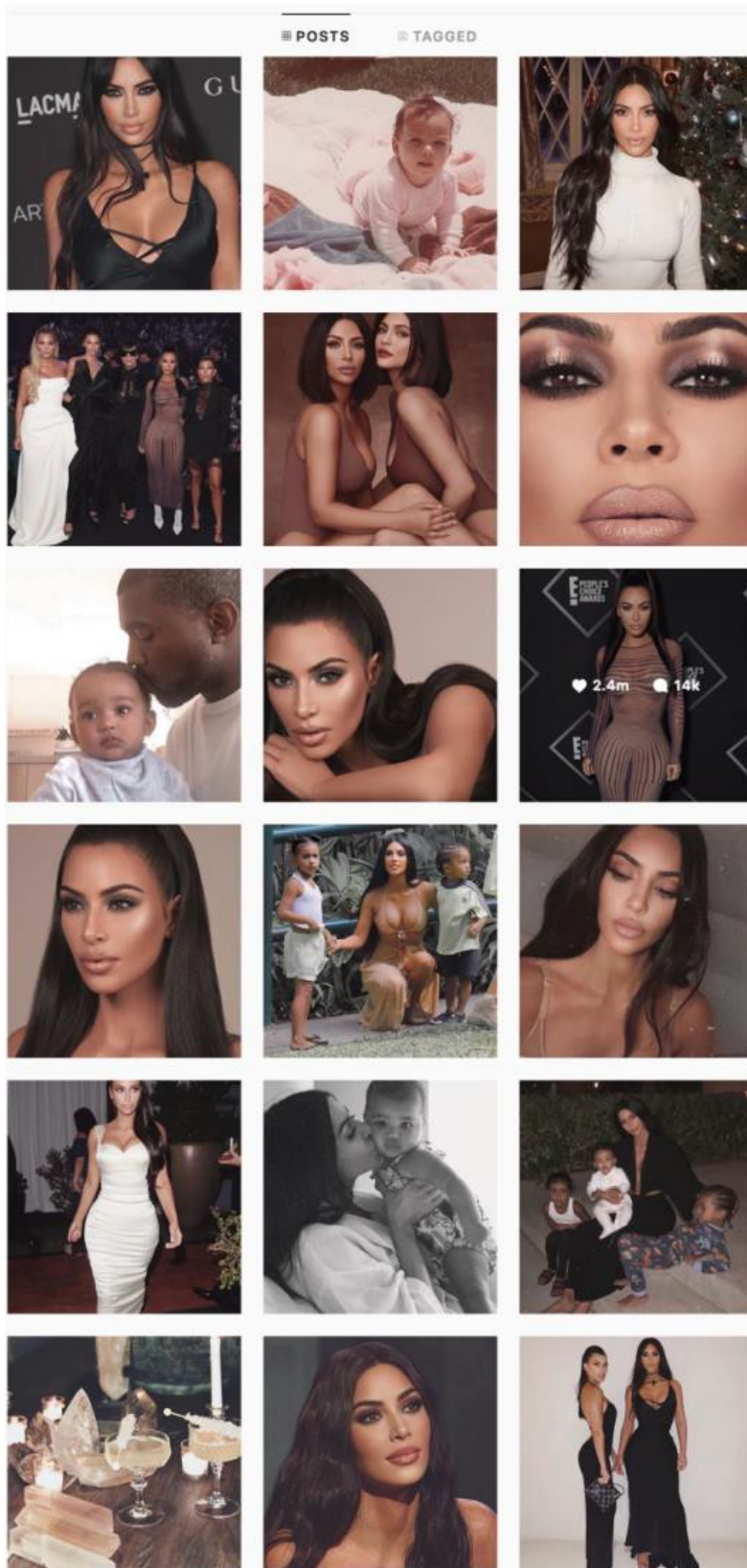


Figure 11: *Kardashian West Instagram Feed*

(Kardashian West, 2018)

Instagram screengrab

Hsieh's demand on himself to clock on every hour on the hour prevented him for doing any activity for more than 59 minutes, creating a commentary on labour in America. In an alternative practice of labour, there is a considerable demand on Kardashian West to document every aspect of her life. Performance artist Leah Schrager comments that this demand on Instagram models, as Kardashian West could be described, "represents a new, independent, digital form of feminized labour and performance" (Schrager, 2016). This demand blurs the line of work and life for Kardashian West as she has to be continually conscious that she should be documenting her experiences. Whereas Hsieh's performance resulted in no physical or monetary gain for himself, only the obligation to repeat the action of clocking in for one year, Kardashian West is paid a significant fee to endorse products on her Instagram feed. Her platform provides her free promotion for her own beauty range, which in turn, achieves more monetary gain. Kardashian West has been successful in turning this performance of documentation in to a thriving business model.

No Nudes



Figure 10 '*American Reflexxx*'
(Signe Pierce and Alli Coates, 2015)
YouTube Video

'*American Reflexxx*' documents artist Signe Pierce as she walks down a street in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Director Alli Coates and Pierce agreed not to communicate during this social experiment. Pierce wears a short blue dress, high heels and a reflective face mask. She stops to pose occasionally. The 14-minute video starts and ends with an extremely slowed down version of Robin Thicke's '*Blurred Lines*' – a song which received a lot of media attention due its questionable lyrics about supposed 'Blurred Lines' of consent and it becomes evident that this is precisely why Pierce and Coates selected the song. There is a distinct lack of consent in this performance. The people Pierce encounters have no fear in questioning her gender, shouting abuse, touching her and taking her picture. The film escalates to a mob and she is seriously assaulted. We never see Pierce's face, only the reflection of her audience or attackers which ensures it is an illuminating performance that reveals how people will behave when facing the unknown and what mob mentality can do. This performance is also reflective of attitudes

towards the female body, especially a sexual female body, as an object or spectacle which is highlighted in scenes where members of the public take photos with her without her consent.

The performance was presented on social media site YouTube. As of January 2019, it has received almost 2 million views and over 2000 comments. These comments continue the performance as they reveal the continued horror felt when watching the video. The video inspires empathy from a wider audience, an emotion scarcely apparent from the people Pierce encounter:



Mark Johnson 2 years ago

I can only imagine how she felt during the entire thing, and what kind of sad expression was hidden behind that mask.

👍 120 🗨️ REPLY

View reply ▾



Figure 11 '*American Reflexxx*'

(Signe Pierce and Alli Coates, 2015)

YouTube Video Comment Section Screenshot

The audience also mention how although this performance could be reflective of America as whole, because it is believed that in other less conservative locations, this performance would not have received the same reaction.



Caila 2 years ago (edited)

I was born in Myrtle beach, and I was raised there. These people are like animals that go to the Boulevard. I barely knew any smart people. I suffered as a girl there and I was sexually assaulted, and molested, cat called, stalked. The level of patriarchy there is astounding. A lot of people who love living there are like this. I'm glad I got out long ago. It's actually scary how

👍 49 🗨️ REPLY

View reply ▾



peppermint23 2 years ago

if she were in NYC people would be like "huh" and keep walking

👍 43 🗨️ REPLY

View 2 replies ▾



Figure 12 '*American Reflexxx*'

(Signe Pierce and Alli Coates, 2015)

YouTube Video Comment Section Screenshot 2

Kardashian West arguably receives comparable treatment as a celebrity figure on Instagram. Due to her extremely large following, individuals are able to feel ‘anonymous’ under the assumption that Kardashian West will not reply to their comments. Like the ‘*American Reflexx*’ mob, these commenters are fearless in questioning her morals, parenting and influence. I believe this image works in the same way as Pierce’s mask: it holds a mirror up to society and their inherent beliefs.



Figure 13: 'When you're like I have nothing to wear LOL'
(Kardashian West, 2016)
Instagram post screengrab

hollywood17_5 You have that to be the most self-centered person that gladly advertise it. You give off the impression that you think you are better than everybody else. You do look great and have a great body but you make a lot of younger woman feel very insecure about themselves and they are all of the time having to compete with your perfection do you ever think about that????

teenaswaze No self respecting wife or mother would post themselves this way. We get that you are gorgeous. But why leave nothing to the imagination? I feel like im from the 1920s compared to so many women nowadays that look up to you.

reckerdebrafunke @[mrs.bjost](#). give me a break..her kids will hate seeing their Moms body all over the internet..she may fool some of u but this photo is not her "working" as she will tell her kids when they ask...

MARCH 7, 2016

Figure 16: Selected comments from
'When you're like I have nothing to wear LOL'
(Kardashian West, 2016)
Instagram post screengrab.

Kardashian West stands nude in a bathroom. Instagram provides the square frame, and the mirror provides another within this. The colour palette of the bathroom, her bleach blonde hair and body are within the 'nude' beige range. Kardashian West gazes into her iPhone, her image reflected to her through her mobile, and in the mirror. Her face portrays no emotion, it is the picture of apparent passivity. In historical paintings, women have a neutral expression to suggest being relaxed or even

bored. Commonly these nude women are reclining, as shown in Manet's '*Olympia*' and '*Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe*'. These even caused controversy at the time due to their direct eye contact with viewer.

Kardashian West, however, subverts this passivity: she stands confidently in the mirror and is the author of this image. She captures herself in an activity, taking a self-portrait, rather than being the object of someone else's desire and this subverts the normative role of a woman depicted in art.



Figure 17: '*Olympia*'

(Manet, 1863)

Oil on canvas

130 x 190cm

Musée d'Orsay



Figure 18: '*Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe*'

(Manet, 1863)

Oil on canvas

208 x 264.5 cm

Musée d'Orsay

'*When you're like I have nothing to wear LOL*' directly addresses social medias no-nudity policy. A key problem with social media is displays of female sexuality through nudity are removed, forcing the author to self-censor with the likes of emojis or in Kardashian West's case, black panels. This censorship exclusion only maintains the stereotype that women should find their own sexuality shameful.

Discovering ways to perform displays of nudity without getting content removed is part of the art form itself as Instagram maintains the power to remove content and even freeze accounts if deemed against the community guidelines. This image is hugely critiqued for Kardashian West being nude, however, it is self-censored for the purpose of Instagram.

Liveness



Figure 19: '*Feed Me*'
(Smith, 1973)

Californian performance artist Barbara Smith was most prevalent during the 1960s and 1970s. Perhaps her most famous and notable live performance was 'Feed Me'. In this particular performance, Smith sat naked in a room with only one visitor permitted to enter the room at any given time. There were no conditions placed on this performance only the instruction "Feed Me" which was played on a loop through speakers. Around Smith were various objects – oils, perfume, food, wine and marijuana.

This performance was an endeavor to be in control of the terms of her encounters with men, especially sexual encounters. Smith describes herself as naked rather than nude during this performance as a way to ascertain her control

as initiator: "Naked means I've removed all my clothes and I have a different stance" (Klein, 1999). A key aspect of performance art, particularly live performance art is that it is temporary and as theorist Peggy Phelan argues, "performance's being... becomes itself through disappearance" (Phelan, 1993), thus living only through the memories of the audience rather than in documentation. Social media platform Snapchat allows the user to upload fleeting moments – only existing to the receiver for 1-10 seconds or for 24 hours. Instagram recently introduced a similar function, along with the ability to go

'live'. This has allowed social media to become more of a performance platform as it adheres to the criteria that the work must become itself through disappearance.

In the same way Smith becomes vulnerable through nakedness, Kardashian West becomes vulnerable in her live streams – she opens herself to the criticism of a potential 124 million. Instead of allowing a single person into an intimate interaction, however, Kardashian West invites her entire following to join her in performing Instagram 'liveness'. By holding an Instagram live stream, Kardashian West can ask questions and opinions of her audience and the audience can respond in real time through emoji reactions and comments. Instagram Live becomes less of a performance in which viewers spectate, but actually participate. In Smith's 'Feed Me' performance, instructions to her visitors are kept to a minimum, whereas Kardashian West's Live performances rely almost exclusively on the dialogue between performer and audience.

Contour, Conceal, Bake, Brighten

There is a history of make-up in performance. This is particularly evident within feminist performance. An iconic example of this is Cindy Sherman. Sherman who uses make-up, wigs and costumes to become anonymous characters. They are caught in action: reaching for a book, lying on a bed, picking up some eggs or standing hunched in a suit. In creating her series 'Untitled Film Stills', Sherman "felt that the characters were questioning something – perhaps being forced into a certain role" (Sherman, 1991). In the series Sherman takes on roles such as housewife, virgin, beach babe, temptress and movie star to name but a few.



Figure 20: 'Untitled #122'

(Sherman, 1983)

Chromogenic Colour Print

89.54 x 53.98cm



Figure 21: 'LACMA event wearing Gucci By Tom Ford'

(Kardashian West, 2017)

Instagram post screengrab

On the 21st of June 2017, Kardashian West launched her beauty line 'KKWBEAUTY'. With this came a host of tutorials from Kardashian West and her make-up artist, Mario Dedivanovic, on how to create West's signature look. This brand was centered around the trend of 'contouring', where cream products are used to sculpt and define features of the face. Kardashian West herself describes this process as a 'transformation' (Kardashian West, 2017) Following this, in December 2018 Vogue posted the video: 'Watch Kim Kardashian West's Guide to Viral Holiday Glam'. Here she details the products she uses and

exactly what she does to complete her transformation. She uses [*La Mer's Soft Fluid Long Wear Foundation*](#) to cover red areas, her [*KKW Beauty Crème Contour*](#) to define her cheekbones, jaw, nose and forehead and her own [*KKW Beauty Brightening Powder*](#) to hide her dark under-eye circles. This concept of bodily transformation is also evident in Sherman's work discussing the role of women in western society. Kardashian West similarly uses make up to assert her role in society and additionally, her role in popular culture by forming her own trends.

Art critic Dorothea von Hantelmann argues performative art can include objects as they

"can encourage the viewer to take on an active, performative relationship with the object"
(Hantelmann, 2002).

If we can understand objects as performative, selling KKW beauty products allows Kardashian West's performance of identity to be continued through her audience's use of them.



Figure 22: *'The 10 improbable fashion and beauty trends Kim Kardashian actually made popular'*
(Kardashian West, 2017)
Snapchat screengrab



Figure 23: *'Kim Kardashian's Guide to Viral Holiday Glam'*
(Kardashian West and Vogue, 2018)
YouTube Video Screengrab

Kardashian West uses this style of make-up to enable her to play the different roles she has created for herself: Business Mogul, Seductress, Wife, Mother. Make-up and clothes can affect our interpretation of

a person. This make up is applied with calculated precision. We are given the exact recipe in order to embody the roles Kardashian West takes on. This helps enforce Kardashian West herself as a 'relatable' character. In her essay '*The "Eternal Return", Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment*', theorist Amelia Jones discusses if

"self-portraits are brought to life through my engagement of them... they become as much about me as they are about each subject depicted" (Jones, 2002).

In Kardashian West's and Sherman's photography we project our ideas and experiences onto an image that only imply a story. Sherman felt this was integral to the success of her *Untitled Film Stills* series. A similarity between these artists is the use of photography as their primary medium. Sherman elucidates: "one reason I was interested in photography was to get away from the preciousness of the art object". We can understand Kardashian West as also disregarding said preciousness through the volume of digital media she disseminates primarily through her Instagram, but also through other social media outlets and her television show. Instead Kardashian West emphasises the use of her KKW Beauty range as the focus of her photographs.



Figure 24: *Bts from my @KKWbeauty Classic Blossom shoot: Shop the collection now at KKWbeauty.com* (Kardashian West, 2018)
Instagram post screengrab.



Figure 25: '*Untitled Film Still #15*' (Sherman, 1978)
Gelatin silver print
24 x 19.1cm

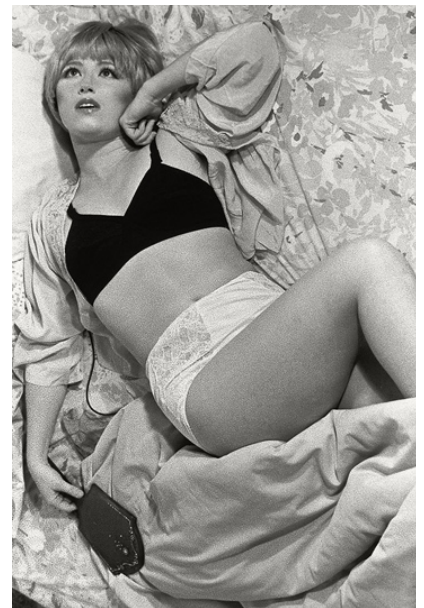


Figure 26: '*Untitled Film Still #6*' (Sherman, 1978)
Gelatin silver print
24 x 19.1cm

One of Sherman's goals was for the locations to be unidentifiable (Sherman, 1991) and corresponding with her characters. The majority of Kardashian West's images have this similarity to Sherman's; they could be taken anywhere. Whereas Sherman uses little to no lighting to add to their mystery, Kardashian West's are so well-lit they seem to enhance the sense of artifice.



Figure 27: 'Untitled Film Still #13'
(Sherman, 1978)
Gelatin silver print
24 x 19.1cm



Figure 28: 'Last year's Met #VivienneWestwood'
(Kardashian West, 2018)
Instagram post screengrab.

A key difference between Kardashian West and Sherman is Kardashian West titles her images with anecdotes such as:

"I don't think you really understand how hard it is to take a good family pic. This was all we got before all three kids started crying. I think I cried too" (Kardashian West, 2018)

These anecdotes limit the assumptions the viewer can project onto the image. This kind of caption, however, allows the viewer to access more insight to Kardashian West's family life, reinforcing the idea that the first-person narrative of an individual has become an object of desire. It demonstrates Kardashian West identifying herself as 'mother' in this image and ultimately allows her audience to relate to her if they share the role of mother or parent.



Figure 29: *'I don't think you really understand how hard it is to take a good family pic. This was all we got before all three kids started crying. I think I cried too'*
(Kardashian West, 2018)
Instagram post screengrab.



Figure 30: *'Untitled Film Still #84'*
(Sherman, 1978)
Gelatin silver print
19.1 x 24cm

Sherman works with imagery of the 1950s role of a housewife, adhering to its minimal make up, natural look. Kardashian West too, works to create a representation of an idyllic 1950s style family –in that she is a young mother of a two-parent family. By subverting this overall 50s appearance is that Kardashian West ensures that she is presented to the world as the dominant 'bread winner' in the West household, even tweeting:



Figure 31: *'Sorry I'm late to the party guys I was busy cashing my 80 million video game check & transferring 53 million into our joint account'*
(Kardashian West, 2016)
Twitter screengrab.

in a response to the backlash from her “*when you’re like I have nothing to wear LOL*” Instagram post. \$53 million is in reference to the supposed amount her husband, Kanye West was in debt (Kardashian West, 2016).

In embodying such a wide range of characters, Kardashian West creates a commentary that she is dissatisfied with the role the media often reduces her to – a girl who made a sex tape – and has become successful in most areas of her life and has significantly surpassing her male counterparts in successes such as monetary gain.

Instagirl

Artists use photography and video to create visual fictions that highlight the discrepancies of social media. Theorist Peter Hill describes this exchange of visual information and the audience's ability to decipher its authenticity as 'super fictions' (Hill, 2000). In 2014, Amalia Ulman scripted a 5-month online performance/ super fiction called '*Excellences and Perfections*'. This performance explored the online nuances and signifiers of being female. The performance takes the form of three episodes which reflect the typical ways young women choose to present or perform themselves online. Ulman uses specific performative features and signifiers to grow her following throughout the performance. In this performance we can see how Ulman has been directly influenced by Kardashian West's performance of identity. They both portray a range of female characters, Ulman even copying exact poses and similar outfits to Kardashian West.



Figure 32: 'Nails yay or nay 🌸🌸'

(Ulman, 2014)

Instagram post screengrab.



Figure 33: 'Be Silly 😜'

(Kardashian West, 2012)

Instagram post screengrab.

In the initial stage of her online performance, Amalia Ulman poses makeup-less covering an eye with her hand. Her nails are painted and decorated with small pink butterflies. This close-up gives us no context of her surroundings. The selfie of Ulman is taken from above giving us the illusion of huge eyes. This combined with the bright pastel palette and her fresh face creates an appearance of

innocence. As @carlitoselmagooo comments, this image fits in with the ‘Kawaii’ (cute) aesthetic which is popular within Japanese popular culture.

In a similar way to Kardashian West, Ulman uses her captions to ask her audience questions. Using Instagram captions to ask questions is a successful way to gain more followers and encourage comment and like interactions on a user’s page (Kilroy, 2013). Ulman employs this technique throughout her *‘Excellences and Perfections’* performance. This is also a strategy used by the average user to reach out and make a human connection.

On the July 8th 2014, Ulman posted a mirror selfie in a bathroom cabinet, wearing a revealing bodysuit. From the upturned glass on a napkin and the hairdryer in the foreground it is implied Ulman is in a hotel. The colour palette has evolved to a black and gold theme in this section of the performance. She is no longer bare-faced but now wears red lipstick and eyeliner. This seems to be a signifier for innocence lost as a result of her apparent breakup. This image is very reminiscent of a signature Kim Kardashian bum selfie or better known as a ‘belfie’ (Iquani and Schroeder, 2016).



Figure 34: *‘#got #em #cakes dun care bout all ur negativity #itsjustdifferent less nervous today.... countdown’*
(Ulman, 2014)
Instagram post screengrab.

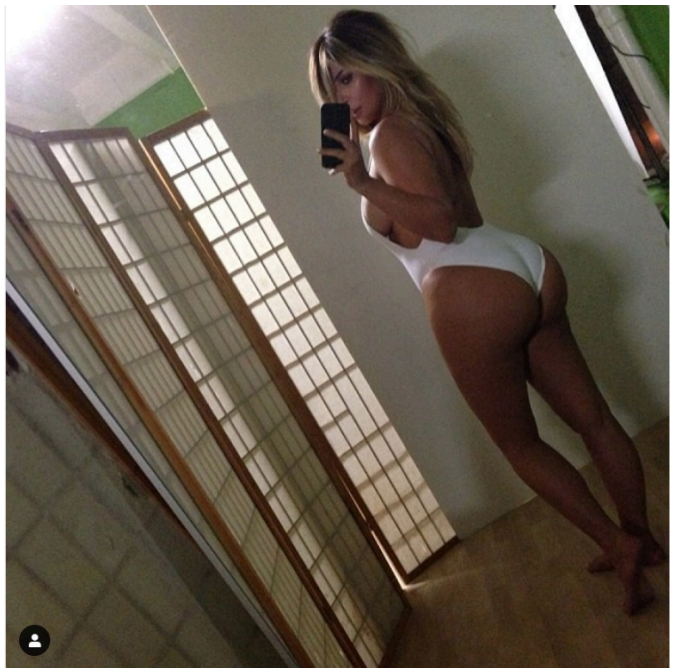


Figure 35: *‘#NoFilter’*
(Kardashian West, 2013)
Instagram post screengrab.

This display of sexuality, by females has received much negative backlash. In an interview with the Telegraph in 2016 Ulman explained, “Suddenly I was this dumb bitch because I was showing my ass in pictures.” (Sooke, 2016). This display made galleries think of her as a less credible artist, however, it is this kind of reaction that makes Ulman’s performance so successful.

The performance evolves and Ulman reaches her recovery episode. Her posts become self-care oriented. In the following example Ulman is pictured sitting in a yoga pose wearing a crop top. The colour palette becomes more neutral and reflects her current peaceful state of mind. The neutral décor is also a signifier of another hotel. The difference lies in the activity – instead of taking semi-nude mirror selfies, Ulman sits apparently meditating. I think Ulman is trying to question how different are these images really. Both display her partially nude body, both in a hotel, both are taken by herself.

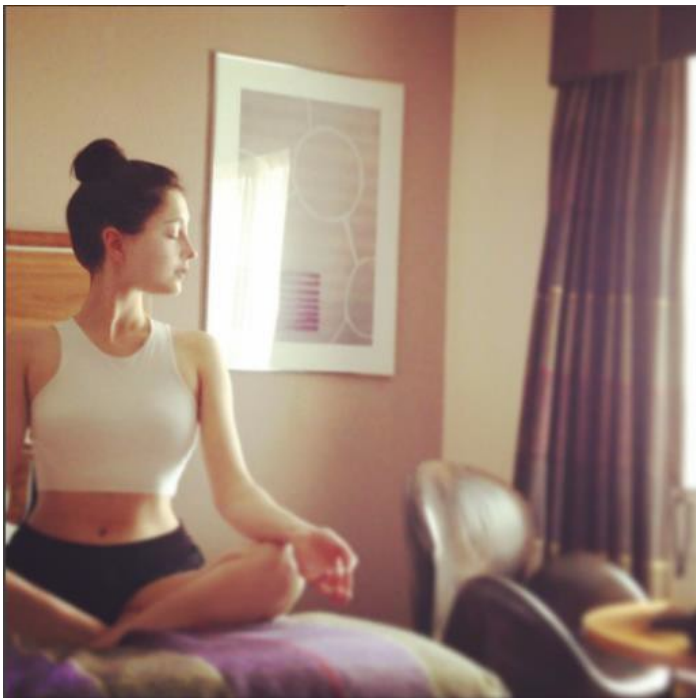


Figure 36: ‘Meditating before a long day of work’
#thankful #gratitude #grateful #namaste #healthy’
 (Ulman, 2014)

Instagram post screengrab.

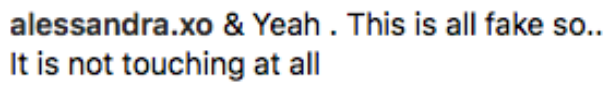


Figure 37: ‘Horsing Around’
 (Kardashian West, 2012)
 Instagram post screengrab.

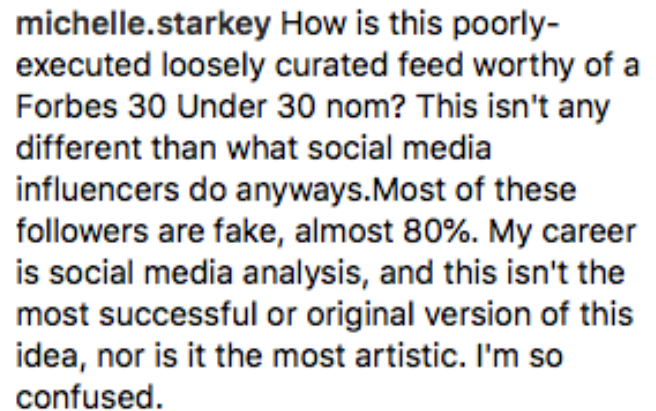
The trope of hashtags plays a part in how the images are received. Ulman uses *#thankful*, *#gratitude*, *#grateful*, *#namaste*, *#healthy*. These all play into how the image is viewed. In comparison, the image above (July 8th 2014) claims: *#got #em #cakes*. Ulman uses hashtags in almost every post for the

duration of the performance giving us further insight into her character's state of mind. I believe it is revealing that something as simple as a hashtag can influence the viewer perception of a person online.

Ulman's performance received much critical acclaim but only after it was revealed it was a performance. The Telegraph headlined its article about the work 'Is this the first Instagram masterpiece?' (Sooke, 2016). After this reveal, the comments on Ulman's posts change from genuine concern about Ulman to critiques on the performance itself:



alessandra.xo & Yeah . This is all fake so..
It is not touching at all



michelle.starkey How is this poorly-executed loosely curated feed worthy of a Forbes 30 Under 30 nom? This isn't any different than what social media influencers do anyways. Most of these followers are fake, almost 80%. My career is social media analysis, and this isn't the most successful or original version of this idea, nor is it the most artistic. I'm so confused.

Figure 38: *Untitled Video of Ulman crying*

(Ulman, August 2014)

Instagram post comments screengrab 1.

Figure 38: *Untitled*

(Ulman, September 2014)

Instagram post comments screengrab 2.

In her book 'Girls, Autobiography, Media', Emma Maguire explains:

"Self-presentation always engages modes of construction, crafting and mediation" (Maguire, 2018).

Ulman and Kardashian West's Instagram performances show how staged these apparent 'candid' moments really are. Not only do they present the performed selves, they are developing the understanding of performed femininity, particularly online. Both women use make up or lack thereof, to recreate different archetypes of femininity. The success of both performances lies in the audience's reaction to each stereotype. The formal revelation of authenticity, or lack thereof, in Ulman's performance altered the perception of the performance drastically, changing the reaction from empathetic to disparaging. As Kardashian West does not formally regard her Instagram feed as a performance, she receives less critiques about authenticity and more concerning her performed sexuality.

Conclusion

I would argue Kardashian West is successful in adhering to the aforementioned criteria of being a performance artist: she is successful engages with social reality as her content can all be found online. Her primary social media platform is Instagram, which as of July 2018, was America's second most popular mobile social networking app (Verto Analytics, 2019). Kardashian West uses her celebrity status and the following that comes with this to use spectacle as a way to disrupt fetishised images of the female body. In doing so, the comments she receives on her posts highlight a wide audience's attitude towards a sexual female body. Instagram has provided a platform for her to both embrace and explore her sexual freedom.

Kardashian West fulfils another criterion of performance art: she engages with the politics of identity through the roles she constructs and performs. Her exploration of different characters has allowed her and other artists, namely Amelia Ulman, to develop an understanding of performed femininity online. Kardashian West's autonomy over her own image allows her to subvert the apparent passivity of nude women found in historical paintings. Her use of self-censorship allows her to create a dialogue with her audience about Instagram's no nudity policy.

In presenting her work online, Kardashian West is able to drive her private life into the public realm. With this she has created an omnipresent persona online. Kardashian West expertly documents her personal experiences which allows the viewer to understand that the lines of work and life can become blurred as a celebrity because there is a demand for the first-person narrative online. Kardashian West's successfully brands herself as a commodity; influencing the choices of her audience over fashion and make up. Her KKW beauty line earned her \$14.4 million in sales in under five minutes (Strugatz, 2017). In capturing herself in highly staged scenarios within a decidedly curated feed, Kardashian West performs the observation of time by documenting her pregnancies and other physical transitions. The volume of content that Kardashian West creates for her social media platforms reveals she does not regard the images themselves with the preciousness associated with the traditional art object, but instead are a tool to promote presence and her merchandise.

Documenting these personal experiences allows Kardashian West to create an intimate connection her audience, and engage in what it means to be the object of another's gaze by asking direct questions. This dialogue has allowed her to examine the role of women within domestic and social circles.

Kardashian West can maintain control of encounters with her audience through the settings of this Instagram, especially when going 'Live'. This 'Live' feature allows Kardashian's West's performances for the camera to adhere to Phelan's essential criteria for performance art.

Kardashian West's Instagram feed addresses the concerns of performance artist's work ranging from the 1970's to the present day. She has created a formula for a successful Instagrammer, demonstrating the acknowledgement and understanding of the ritual and performativity required to maintain fame in this digital age. This ability to capitalise on the documentation of self has allowed Kardashian West to build an empire from her merchandise. Instagram allows her to continue this online performance and continue to explore themes of performed femininity, the sexual female body, the role of women and the control of her image.

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