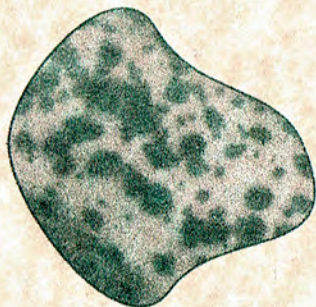
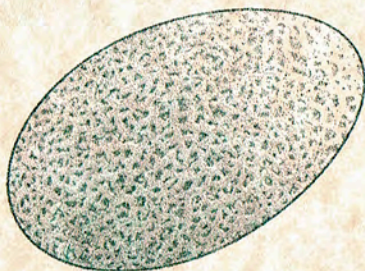
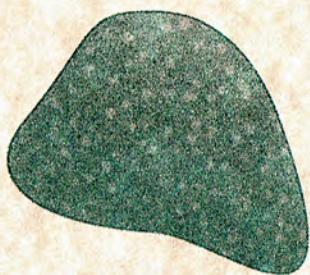




CONDITIONER



Liz Barr

# Acknowledgements

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Liz Barr is an interdisciplinary artist based in West Philadelphia. She makes work about bodies and how we build them. This is her second zine published by GenderFail. Learn more about her work at [www.liz-barr.com](http://www.liz-barr.com), or follow her @lizbarr on Instagram.







# CONDITIONER

Liz Barr



Being a woman is inherently uncanny.  
Your humanity is liminal; your body is forfeit;  
your mind is doubted as a matter of course.

— Carmen Maria Machado, interviewed for *Hazlitt*





Sarah Lucas, *NUD CYCLADIC 3*, 2010

## Section I: Shame

Often, after I buy a new piece of clothing and put it on for the first time, I look down at myself, and there's a euphoric moment where I don't recognize my body. For just a moment, I feel like a different person, and it's such a relief.

I've always had this sneaking feeling that everyone else had a much easier time being a person, being a woman, having a body. It seemed like it came naturally to everyone else, but not to me. It felt humiliating to be myself, to be in my body, and that everyone could immediately sense this about me.

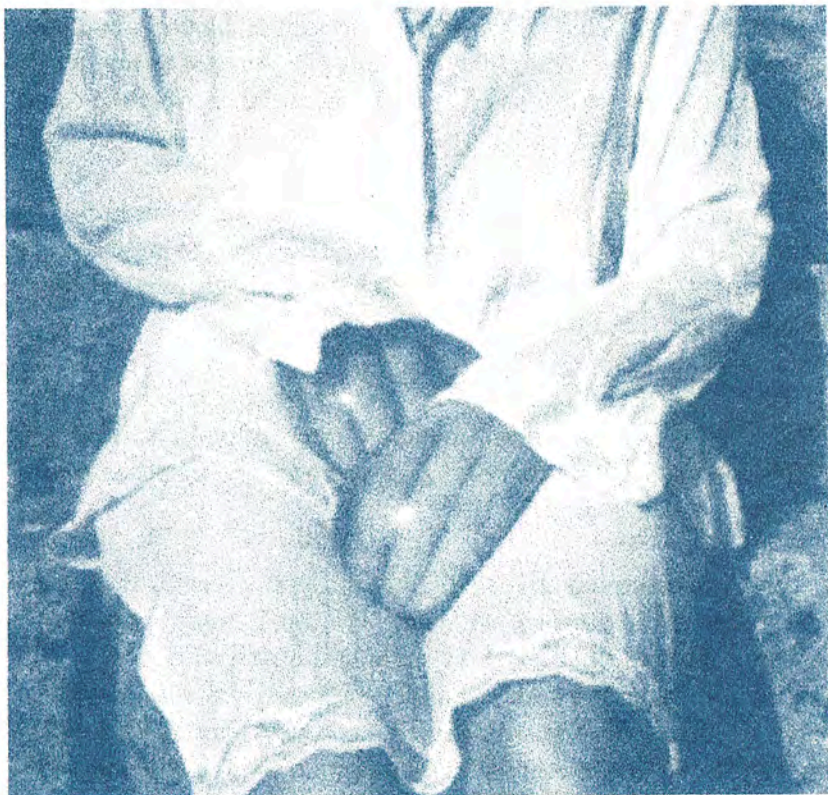
One part of this insecurity was always worrying about how I smelled: my breath, my scalp, my sweat. It seemed to me that women naturally smelled good, but since nothing came naturally to me, I was sure that I stunk.

In 2018, Calvin Klein released a new fragrance called **WOMEN**. What do women smell like<sup>1</sup>? According to Raf Simons, **WOMEN** smell like “woody floral, with notes of eucalyptus acorns and Alaskan cedarwood.”

Of course, women can't smell like eucalyptus acorns all the time. Most of the time, we smell like skin, sweat, morning breath, and other human smells. But we are taught that women aren't supposed to smell like human smells—women don't sweat: we're dewy, we glow. So when we do smell a little too human, we feel like we don't smell like women. We feel like we have to spray our pulse points with a fragrance called **WOMEN**.

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth taking a moment to note that, unlike Calvin Klein, I do not consider women to be a monolith. Though I may use the pronoun “we,” I understand that we do not all experience our bodies in the same way, and cultural pressures are not exerted on us uniformly. Femininity is enforced on women differently depending on race, class, ability, size, sexuality, assigned sex, etc. I talk about women as a sociopolitical category of people whose appearance is inordinately valued and policed in ways that affect every other part of our lives. This experience may also extend to people who do not identify as women.



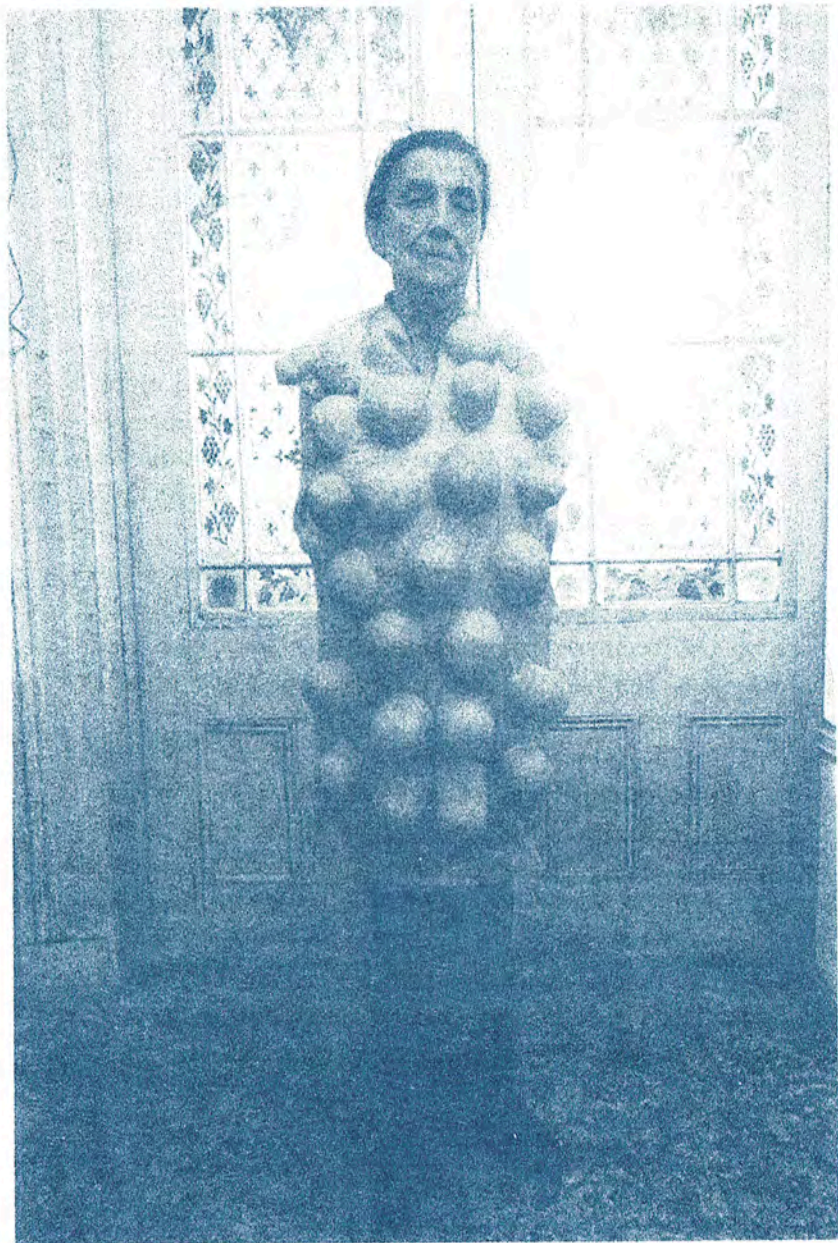
Janaina Tschape, *Anatomy Pink*, 2000

In Ottessa Moshfegh's novel, *Eileen*, the title character often expresses similar discomfort about her body, particularly her mouth, breasts, and genitals—parts of her body that disgust her, that feel most vulnerable. She also describes constant paranoia about the way her body smells, in this case, her mouth:

I truly felt that the inside of my mouth was such a private area, caverns and folds of wet parting flesh, that letting anyone see into it was just as bad as spreading my legs. [...] I kept a bottle of Listerine in my locker and swished it often, and sometimes swallowed it if I didn't think I could get to the ladies' room sink without opening my mouth to speak. I didn't want anyone to think I was susceptible to bad breath, or that there were any organic processes occurring inside my body at all. Having to breathe was an embarrassment in itself. This was the kind of girl I was (24).

Eileen is a strange character—a kind of antiheroine with self-destructive and antisocial tendencies. She is immature and obsessive and has many bizarre opinions and habits. Yet, her neuroses about her body, despite being portrayed as extreme or paranoid, feel all too relatable.

Women are taught to be ashamed of most aspects of our bodies, but in particular, the bodily processes that indicate that we are aging, “organic” beings. Bodily fluids—sweat, discharge, blood—are all too messy and human. These excretions indicate physiological processes that men don't want to think about, so any trace of those processes needs to be erased or masked. Whether or not one has any interest in pleasing men is beside the point—dominant beauty standards are rooted in men's desires.



Louise Bourgeois, *Latex Costume*, 1970

In her essay, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," Sandra Lee Bartky expresses a similar sentiment, specifically about skin: "A woman's skin must be soft, supple, hairless, and smooth; ideally, it should betray no sign of wear, experience, age, or deep thought" (31).

In general, most bodily phenomena that women are expected to monitor and keep under control are naturally occurring and benign: zits, gray hairs, body hair, cellulite, stained teeth, wrinkles, stretch marks. They may be indicators of growth and aging, or they may be functional, physiological processes. But women's bodies aren't meant to be functional—they're meant to be displayed.

Worse still, women are not made to feel that all bodies are disgusting or shameful, just our own. Other women's bodies are normal—it is only you who stinks, who oozes, who sheds. Other women easily live up to the demands of femininity. It is only you cannot seem to keep your body under control. This feeling is deeply isolating and encourages competition and bitterness between women.

Bartky explains how femininity sets women up for failure:

The disciplinary project of femininity is a 'setup': it requires such radical and extensive measures of bodily transformation that virtually every woman who gives herself to it is destined in some degree to fail. Thus, a measure of shame is added to a woman's sense that the body she inhabits is deficient: she ought to take better care of herself (34).

Beauty and skincare rituals seem like the solution to this shame, but they can actually exacerbate the problem. They make women hyper-aware of every potential flaw. In pursuit of beauty and hygiene, we are further confronted with the grotesque and absurd nature of our bodies. To wipe away all traces of unsexy bodily functions requires constant vigilance. Hairs that are shaved



Still from *Jennifer's Body*, Dir. Karyn Kusma, 2009

or plucked are already in the process of growing back. Oils and dead skin cells and plaque are ever accumulating. Skin is weathered daily by exposure to the elements. Our skincare encourages us to examine and obsess over our pores and their excretions and abscesses.

Self-awareness of one's body is not a bad thing, in-and-of itself. Some degree of body-monitoring is necessary to maintaining health and hygiene. But women are trained to monitor our bodies to the point of obsession. We are aware of every aspect of our bodies at any given moment. We know which is our "good side." We know our angles.

In his book, *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger aptly describes this phenomenon of acute self-awareness as "a woman's self being split into two." He continues:

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the surveyor and surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. [...] Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another (46).

Women must surveil ourselves constantly because we are being surveilled by others, and because the appearance of our bodies affects our success, safety, credibility, livelihood, etc. The ways women's bodies are surveilled are also compounded by intersections of identity, such as race, class, ability, and assigned sex at birth.

An example that comes to mind is a scene from Netflix's *Orange is the New Black*. A black, incarcerated character, Taystee





Stills from *Orange is the New Black*, Season 1, Episode 7, "Blood Donut," 2013

may have a chance to get released from prison early, but she needs to make her case in front of a parole board. In preparation for the hearing, she strategizes a hairstyle that will make her seem the most sympathetic and the least threatening to a white board. Sophia, the resident hairdresser, jokes that she needs to look like the black best friend from a white girl movie. They go with a sleek, but simple high bun. Taystee is granted parole.

Or an example from real life: on the first day of new Congress member orientation, conservative commentator Eddie Scarry tweeted a creepshot of Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in business casual attire with the caption “that jacket and coat don’t look like a girl who struggles.” The post was meant to discredit Ocasio-Cortez’s claim to be of a working class background. When styling herself, Ocasio-Cortez must look professional enough to be taken seriously, but apparently not so professional that it calls into question the authenticity of her identity.



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez   
@AOC

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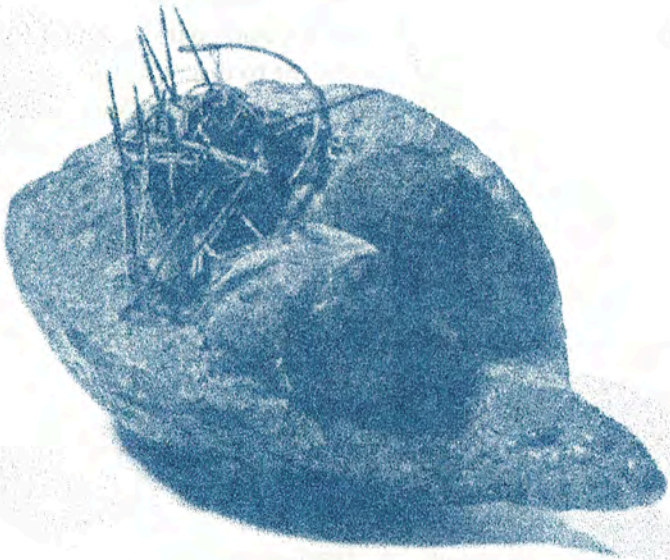
If I walked into Congress wearing a sack, they would laugh & take a picture of my backside.

If I walk in with my best sale-rack clothes, they laugh & take a picture of my backside.

Dark hates light - that's why you tune it out.

Shine bright & keep it pushing. ✨  
[twitter.com/eScarry/status ...](https://twitter.com/eScarry/status...)

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (@AOC), 15 Nov. 2018



Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Pieu*, 1970

Women's obsessive self-surveillance is learned out of necessity, and this hyper self-awareness creates a fracture in our sense of self, and alienates us from our own bodies.

The divide between our sense of self and our bodies is a deliberate tool that is used to disempower and control women. In Carolyn Gage's play *The Second Coming of Joan of Arc*, her Joan of Arc character, renamed Jeanne, describes this deliberate disempowerment as a method of torture:

So...how do you torture a woman?

Well, you can tie her up on the rack and rip her bones apart from the sockets. That's one way. Or you can tear apart her mind and her body. Now, there's two ways to do this: You can pry her body away from her mind, or you can pry her mind away from her body. Either way, it works out to the same thing—you stop the woman. She can think but not act, or she can act but not think. To pry her body away from her mind, you need to physically humiliate her. Of course, rape is the most traditional method, but it's not the only one, by any means. You can ridicule her body, or make fun of the things she does. You can make her self-conscious about her looks. You can make her strap her breasts in. You can make her embarrassed about her periods. You can make her frightened of puberty, frightened of sex, frightened of aging, frightened of eating. You can terrorize her with her own body, and then she will torture herself (25).

We are taught to fear and hate our own bodies. Our bodies become weapons that we wield against ourselves.



meatwreck, *heavy step*, 2017

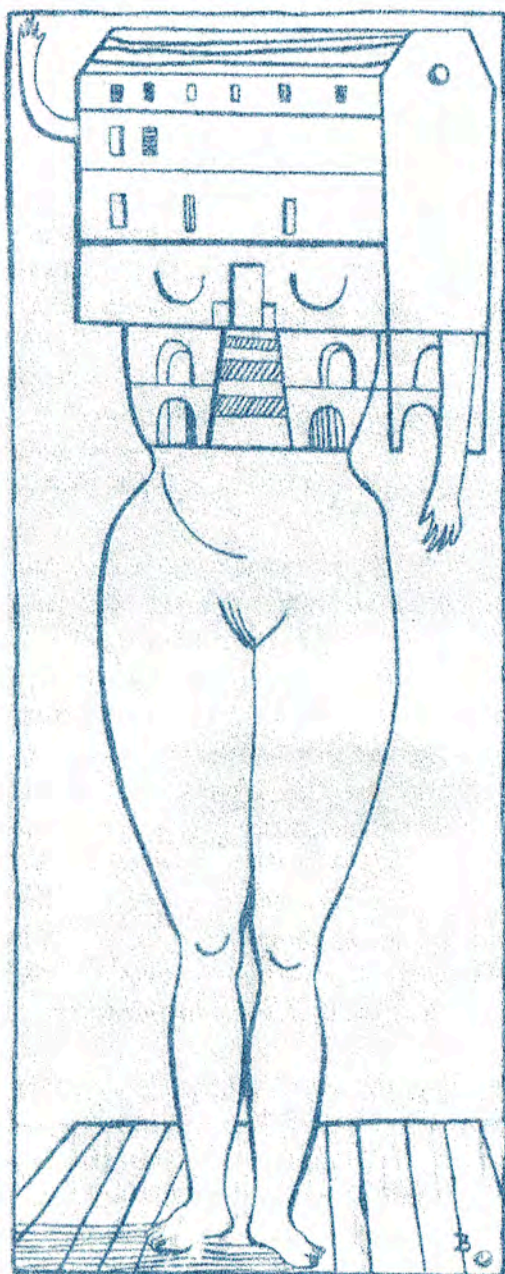
In her essay, Sandra Lee Bartky uses Foucault's theories about bodily discipline and control to frame this constant maintenance and monitoring as a disciplinary force that produces "docile bodies":

The disciplinary techniques through which the 'docile bodies' of women are constructed aim at a regulation that is perpetual and exhaustive—a regulation of the body's size and contours, its appetite, posture, gestures and general comportment in space, and the appearance of each of its visible parts (41).

What Jeanne describes as torture, Bartky describes as the Panopticon. It is a psychological and physical method of control that women internalize and impose on ourselves. Bartky goes on:

The woman who checks her makeup half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara has run, who worries that the wind or the rain may spoil her hairdo, who looks frequently to see if her stockings have bagged at the ankle or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become, just as surely as the inmate of the Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self committed to a relentless self-surveillance. [...] Since the standards of female bodily acceptability are impossible to realize fully, requiring as they do a virtual transcendence of nature, a woman may live much of her life with a pervasive feeling of bodily deficiency. Hence a tighter control of the body has gained a new kind of hold over the mind (42).

In her bestselling book from 1990, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, Naomi Wolf claims that our current beauty culture—and the feelings of shame and failure it encourages—developed to counteract the other ways American women have gained power and autonomy in the past several decades. Ritualistic diets and skincare routines have replaced organized religion; and as women were finally able to move from



Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Maison*, 1984

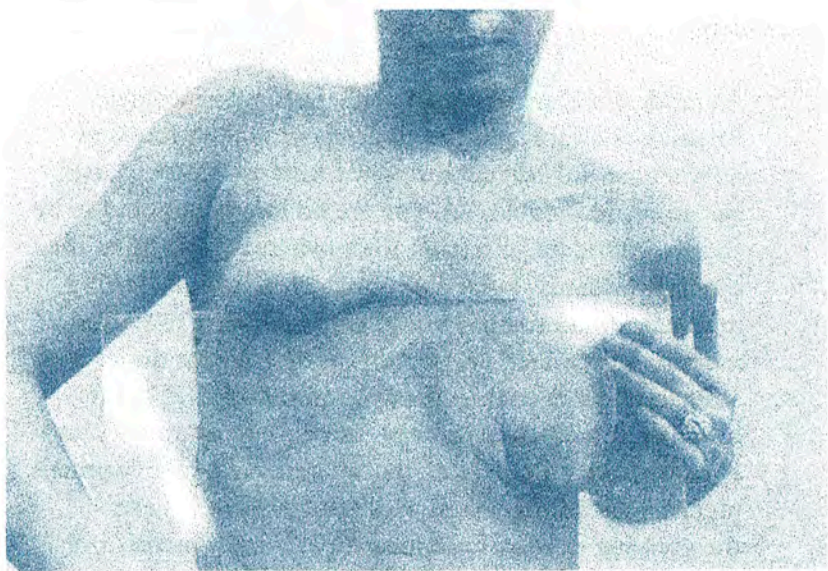
the domestic sphere to the public sphere, our appearances began being policed in new ways (11). According to Wolf, the shame and insecurity women feel about our bodies—and the time and money spent to counteract those feelings—are the result of a deliberate backlash against women's hard-won agency over our lives and bodies. While external forces of control over women's lives, like the Church and the Cult of Domesticity, used to be more prevalent, current forces of control over women are largely internalized and enforced *by* women.

Bartky also makes the argument that femininity and its bodily demands have replaced older forms of social control over women:

As modern industrial societies change and as women themselves offer resistance to patriarchy, older forms of domination are eroded. But new forms arise, spread, and become consolidated. Women are no longer required to be chaste or modest, to restrict their sphere of activity to the home, or even to realize their properly feminine destiny in maternity: normative femininity is coming more and more to be centered on woman's body—not its duties and obligations or even its capacity to bear children, but its sexuality, more precisely, its presumed heterosexuality and its appearance. There is, of course, nothing new in women's preoccupation with youth and beauty. What is new is the growing power of the image in a society increasingly oriented toward the visual media. Images of normative femininity, it might be ventured, have replaced the religiously oriented tracts of the past (42).

Women have long been taught, particularly by the Church, that our bodies are dirty, unruly things that must be purified through discipline and asceticism. While the Church may no longer lord over most American women's lives today, the desire for purity and control has been thoroughly internalized. The "fast" has been replaced by the "cleanse," but the motive is the same: the pursuit of worthiness via the denial of pleasure.





Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)*, 1972

It bears repeating: the demands of beauty and femininity are means of social and physical control of women. Because beauty and femininity are impossible to attain, women must tirelessly work to achieve them, and then we are left feeling inadequate and ashamed of our bodies and blaming ourselves for our failures. As a control mechanism, it is particularly effective because it is enforced both by others and by ourselves.



Karl Lagerfeld, Chanel SS15 runway show, 2015

## Section II: Aspiration

Our culture makes women ashamed of our bodies as a form of social control, but there's also something else at stake—money. We may feel stripped of our self-worth and alienated from our bodies, but there are plenty of companies out there who can temporarily ameliorate our self-loathing with products and services. These companies depend on women continually striving and failing to make peace with our bodies.

As Naomi Wolf demands: “Why is it never said that the really crucial function that women serve as aspiring beauties is to buy more things for the body? Somehow, somewhere, someone must have figured out that they will buy more things if they are kept in the self-hating, ever-failing, hungry, and sexually insecure state of being aspiring ‘beauties’” (66).

That the beauty industry profits off of women's insecurities and the cultural demands of femininity is not really news to anyone. Women have been making that point for at least half a century. What's more interesting are the ways in which the beauty industry adapts to cultural shifts to continue making that profit.

In her book, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture*, Kathy Peiss gives an example of the beauty industry's adaptability. In the 1970s, second-wave feminists' critiques of commercialized beauty led to many women embracing more “natural” looks, wearing less makeup or making their own cosmetics at home. In response, cosmetics companies packaged and marketed the aesthetic of feminists:

Responding selectively to elements of the feminist and countercultural critique, manufacturers ingeniously repackaged products and redefined advertising to address the increasingly politicized understanding of appearance. They embraced the natural look with organic cosmetics and invoked the ‘liberated’ woman as a beauty type (262).



top: Still from heartrayna's YouTube video, "Instagram Brow Tutorial," 2016  
bottom: Glossier promotional image for Boy Brow eyebrow pomade, 2018

Just a few years ago, the dominant beauty trend in America was contouring. This look involved several layers of powders and creams perfectly blended to carve out and highlight cheekbones. Contouring is usually accompanied by “full glam”: fake eyelashes, meticulously drawn-in eyebrows, over-lined lips, and well-blended smokey eyeshadow. Likely one reason for the rise of the contour look was the pressure on women to look camera-ready at all times, due to the ubiquity and immediacy of apps like Instagram and Snapchat, as well as the increasingly high quality of smartphone cameras. Full glam, previously reserved for red carpets and photoshoots, became an everyday look.

Already, that aesthetic feels a bit dated, and in reaction, we seem to be back in a moment of the “natural look.” The focus has shifted from the external to the internal. Women are more interested in health, science, and holistic approaches to beauty. Instead of layers of contour, we have 12-step skincare regimens, personalized vitamins, and CBD tinctures. Beauty has become less about glam and cosmetics, and more about skincare and “wellness.”

A cultural shift towards “natural” beauty may seem like progress, but it really just means a shift in the market. Instead of spending time and money on makeup, women must spend time and money on skincare and wellness practices to become beautiful “naturally”. In 2016, Alicia Keys famously swore off makeup (mostly—she seems to wear “no-makeup makeup” for her TV appearances), but *Refinery29* recently reported that the array of skincare products she regularly uses rack up to \$455 (Stalder). The “natural look” isn’t any less expensive or time-consuming. It’s just a different look.

This isn’t the first time the beauty industry has shifted to focus on skincare. Kathy Peiss explains that in the 1960s, Estee Lauder responded to second-wave feminism by introducing the more hygiene-oriented line, Clinique. “A new focus on scientific skin care as a necessary grooming practice deflected criticism that cosmetics objectified and demeaned women.” Ads for Clinique



Lenora de Barros, *Homenagem a George Segal*, 1984

focused less on glamour and sexuality, and more on routine and health. "Its 'Twice a Day' ad, likening skin care to the regular use of a toothbrush, focused exclusively on the product, not on glamorous models or sexual situations [...] Clinique became the cosmetic line of choice for many professional women and feminists" (262).

In the '60s and '70s, women were skeptical of cosmetics companies and their demeaning advertising tactics, so the companies shifted tactics to be more aligned with women's political interests.

Yet again, the beauty industry has adapted both its products and marketing strategies to align with women's current interests, desires, and fears, resulting in products that are "clean," and "promote health," while still ultimately promising youth, thinness, and beauty. There has also been an important tonal shift in advertising. The way beauty is sold to women these days is usually not through shame-mongering. Due to the rise of our current mainstream feminism, many brands now know to use the language of self-care and self-improvement. Rather than explicitly promoting shame, they promote "aspiration." But are shame and aspiration all that different?

Many blogs, vlogs, and Instagram accounts use aspirational language and imagery to advertise products, diets, and "lifestyles." These aspirational aesthetics are meant to encourage women to improve our lives and our bodies. The way aspiration is employed to peddle beauty and wellness relates to the way glamour is used in advertising (or "publicity"), according to John Berger.

In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger defines advertising as "the process of manufacturing glamour," and glamour as "the happiness of being envied" (131-132).

The spectator-buyer is meant to envy herself as she will become if she buys the product. She is meant to imagine herself transformed by the product into an object of envy





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thepouf Between working full time and running @thepouf and basically interlocking 24/7 for a living, if there's one thing I'm not doing the most at it's sleep, due to time and also probably bc I stare of various bright screens at all hours of the day and night.

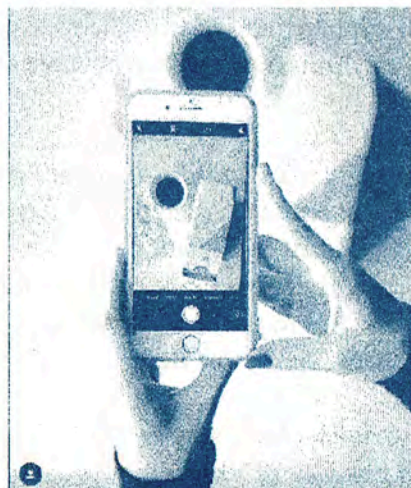
I've recently been using this new @casper glow which is not only excellent mood lighting (and also a great soft light at full brightness) but it syncs with your circadian rhythm and slowly dims to help me wind down at night. And as someone who is inherently very wound up always, and who was voted as "most likely to need to Sertens to Doc" in high school (I didn't even drink coffee then! it's been a v hiphul and crazy way to minimize it the way every night lol) @casperglow

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DECEMBER 12, 2019



**karlibobarley** • Follow  
I square Agent, Casper

karlibobarley (daily dose) I've been on a vitamin kick lately — couldn't tell you how or why that started but it is what it is (@careofvitamins has been such a fun part of this new endeavor for health & I'm so so stoked to be able to share about them) they send you a months worth of vitamins that are personalized to you & it's super duper rad (go check out their page)

View all 5 comments

- karlibobarley @denree, thanks! 🙌
- plutopillow They're amazing 🙌🙌
- karlibobarley @plutopillow 🙌🙌
- vlahjoke I need a phone please



357 likes

DECEMBER 12, 2018

Add a comment...

top: Instagram sponcon for Casper by @thepouf, 2019  
bottom: Instagram sponcon for Care/of by @karlibobarley, 2018

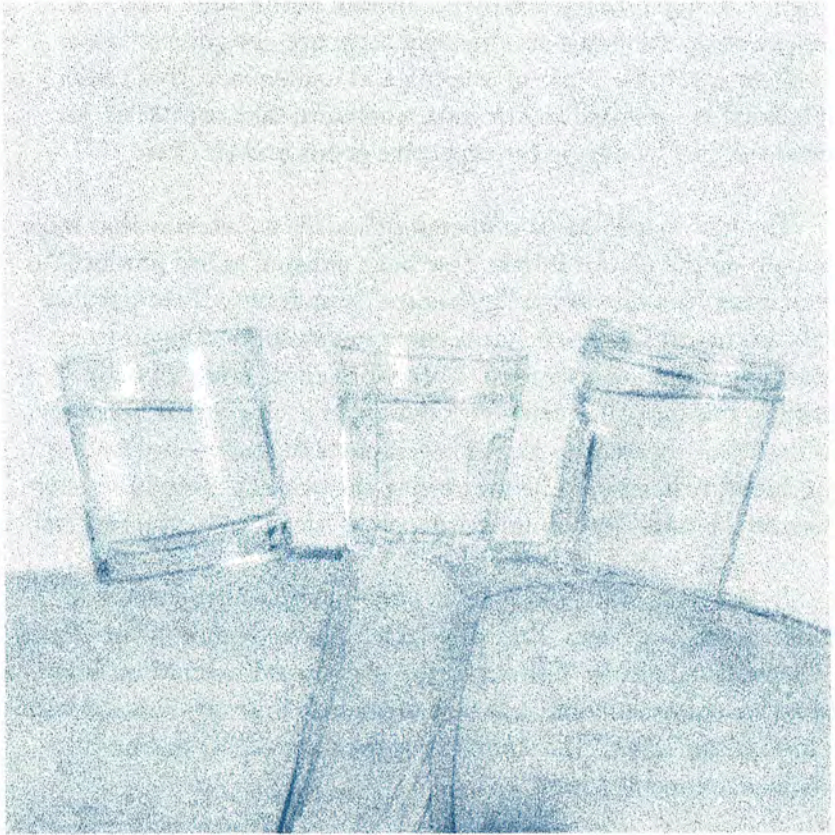
for others, an envy which will then justify her loving herself. One could put this another way: the publicity image steals her love of herself as she is, and offers it back to her for the price of the product (134).

Berger explains that glamour in advertising offers an empty promise of future happiness, while always denying present happiness. Aspirational aesthetics operate in the same way. The images on social media and lifestyle blogs are designed to create a hollow, insatiable sense of longing and inadequacy. That sense of lacking is supposed to motivate women to take control of our lives—usually by paying for expensive goods and services.

The way that Instagram operates these days, it seems that most women on the platform have now been enlisted to sell products to each other. The role of the “influencer” is undoubtedly to produce envy in their followers. It has become increasingly difficult to tell apart ads and regular content. Even when users aren’t actually being sponsored, they often tag brands in their posts in the hopes of eventually becoming so. And even posts that aren’t promoting products at all, seem to be promoting the poster’s lifestyle, or their “personal brand.” Just about every post is meant to be aspirational.

In her *New York Times* profile of Gwyneth Paltrow and her wellness empire Goop, Taffy Brodesser-Akner examines the effects of aspiration culture: “I thought about the word ‘aspiration,’ how to aspire seems so noble, but how aspiration is always infused with a kind of suffering.” This suffering is the unshakable feeling of inadequacy and lacking.

After spending a weekend at the “In Goop Health” wellness summit, Brodesser-Akner reflected: “We are doomed to aspire for the rest of our lives. Aspiration is suffering. Wellness is suffering. As soon as you level up, you grieve how infinite the possibilities are, and it all becomes too awful to live without.”



Aleia Murawksi and Alex Wallbaum, *Level*, 2015

Aspirational aesthetics and ideologies are especially prevalent in marketing wellness and skincare. Though wellness and skincare products are usually dressed up as “self-care,” at their core, they are about the endless drive for self-optimization. Self-optimization is an all-American value that extends into every aspect of our lives: health, beauty, professional success, etc. It’s about “having it all.” The desire for self-optimization is fueled by aspirational or glamorous images that inspire envy and longing.

The drive for self-optimization becomes most sensitive and risky when applied to our bodies. The whole point of beauty and optimization and glamour—the things we aspire to—is that they are unattainable, so we must endlessly strive for perfection, which requires constant self-evaluation and body-monitoring (and often the purchase of new products). So even if you do manage to achieve your ideal waistline or clear, dewy skin, you will inevitably be presented with another part of your body or lifestyle that is lacking. (And that waistline and skin texture will require constant upkeep.)

In her controversial essay on *The Outline*, titled “The skincare con,” Krithika Varagur criticizes the skincare industry for selling women these empty promises:

Perfect skin is unattainable because it doesn't exist. The idea that we should both have it and want it is a waste of our time and money. Especially for women, who are disproportionately taxed by both the ideal of perfect skin and its material pursuit.

She also ties it to the pursuit of self-optimization:

It's simple: the end product of a skin care regimen isn't perfect skin, but the regimen itself — something that, in high American style, you have to steadily escalate over time, lest you stagnate. Don't you want to *improve*?



Amanda Ross-Ho, Installation View of *STOP BATH*, 2016

Standards of beauty are always shifting, but the desire to be beautiful (or successful or “well”) is constant. Brands aim to produce that constant desire and present us with what we should aspire to next. Taffy Brodesser-Akner describes wellness as “the level of well-being you didn’t even know to ask for.” In other words: the wellness industry makes us find new reasons to be dissatisfied with (or ashamed of) our lives and bodies, and then sells us the promise of future satisfaction.

And what are they selling us? Wellness products tend to be a mashup of real science (endocrinology), pseudo-science (toxins), mysticism (crystals), and exoticism/Orientalism (Chinese herbal medicine). Wellness trends are often cherry-picked from non-Western cultures (yoga, acupuncture, Reiki), and their emphasized foreignness and antiquity lends to their sense of authenticity (*Korean* beauty regimens, *Mayan* chocolate, *ancient* grains).

This isn’t to invalidate these practices and traditions in themselves, but to point out that they have been decontextualized and commodified as luxury items to sate colonialist American appetites. This also isn’t necessarily an indictment of the women who choose to dabble in these trends. Many women are desperate to try any new thing they hear of because they have real problems that have not been addressed by other fields. And after all, these products and practices are often billed as cure-alls—the one weird trick that can solve every problem.

In her *New York Times* article “Worshipping the False Idols of Wellness,” Jen Gunter aims to expose the exploitative nature of what she calls the “wellness-industrial complex.” She argues that many women are drawn to the wellness industry because their problems are not being adequately addressed by the medical field:

Many people — women especially — have long been marginalized and dismissed by medicine, but the answer does not lie in predatory conspiracy theories, a faux religion or expensive magic. In its current form, wellness isn’t filling



in the gaps left by medicine. It's exploiting them.

The medical field does not take women's suffering seriously, so the wellness industry steps in. But mental and physical health problems that can't be solved by medicine most likely can't be solved by the wellness industry either. And in fact, the wellness industry would not have much to gain from women actually getting well and staying well, because then we wouldn't need to keep buying wellness products.

Advertising has always preyed on people's insecurities about their lives, but what feels particularly exploitative about wellness is its conflation of health, beauty, and happiness. To be truly "well" means to be thin and have clear skin, as well as to be in good physical and mental health. Health is about white teeth and smooth skin. Beauty is about the gut biome and regulated thyroid hormones. Happiness is about rose quartz and turmeric tea.

This conflation is insidious because the same sources that are giving you advice on mental health issues are also selling you skincare products, sometimes at the same time. This means that the implicit, or sometimes explicit, promise is that the (sponsored) products they are featuring will improve your mental health.

It also means that diets are increasingly getting couched in the language of health. This, of course, is nothing new, as thinness has long been associated with good health in American culture. But the difference is that now "diets" are called "cleanses" (the connotation of purity is key) or simply "lifestyles."

In her manifesto, *You Have The Right To Remain Fat*, Virgie Tovar addresses this tonal shift:

Though the word 'diet' has gone out of vogue, what remains are all the mechanisms and ideologies of dieting [...] but the language is just harder to understand. The language used to sell diet products has shifted away from shame and





Alina Szapocznikow, *Ventre-coussin*, 1968

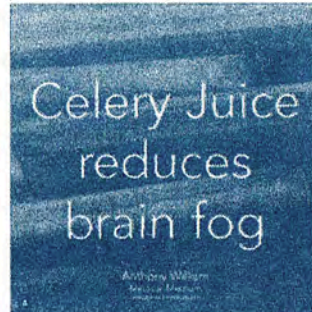
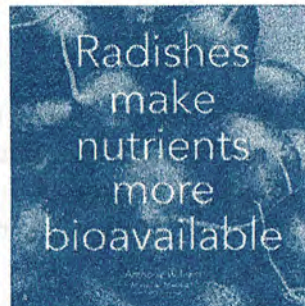
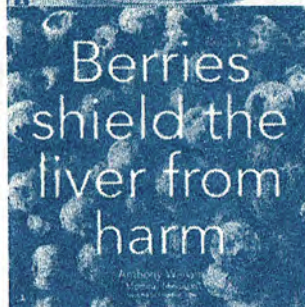
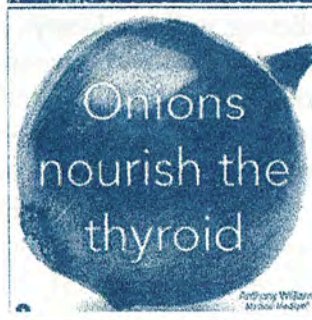
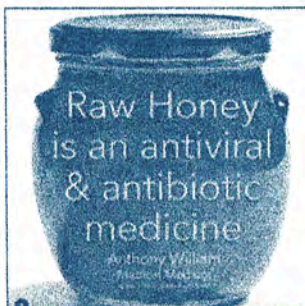
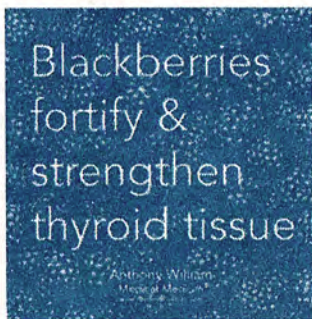
fear in favor of aspiration and optimization (24).

The diet industry has taken on the language of feminism and wellness, promoting empowerment and “health.” In addition to the enduring myth that dieting leads to thinness, the wellness industry also promises that eliminating entire food groups or simply not eating for days at a time can alleviate brain fog and prevent cancer.

But underneath all that aspirational packaging, there is still implicit shame. Like old-fashioned dieting, wellness lifestyles tend to be highly moralistic; and while they “empower” women to improve our lives, they also implicitly blame us for our failing to do so. Because our current understanding of “empowerment” is individualistic, so then is failure. As Tovar puts it, “failure is an individual problem, not a collective, cultural, or political problem. The idea is that if you don’t have something, it is because you didn’t want it badly enough, or you didn’t try hard enough” (35).

As a funny anecdote of the implicit shame hiding in the wellness industry: in June of 2018, *The Cut* reported that Goop would begin using new classifying tags on their stories to indicate whether or not they’re actually based in science (and presumably to avoid getting heat for propagating dangerous alternative theories about health and medicine). As an example, they linked to a Goop opinion piece by “medical medium,” Anthony William, about the origins of thyroid cancer, which is labeled, “Fascinating But Inexplicable.” Clicking on that tag offers a more detailed disclaimer: “These are concepts and practices that we’re deeply curious about. They typically fall outside of the realm of conventional biomedicine but really resonate with some.”

This story immediately “resonated” with me because I had just been diagnosed with thyroid cancer two weeks earlier. Thyroid cancer is often genetic, so because of my family history, I was able to get tested and catch it early. However, according to Anthony William, thyroid cancer is actually not hereditary, but rather is caused by contracting a virus and then ingesting specific “toxins.”



Instead of my condition being an unavoidable result of my genetics, it is a result of my lifestyle choices. If only I had eliminated the toxins from my body, I could have prevented myself from getting cancer. And even more dangerous a suggestion: instead of getting my cancerous thyroid removed, I could just drink more blueberry açai smoothies. A medical medium may seem like a wellness straw man, but the example exposes the logic of the wellness industry: it is within our power to optimize every aspect of our bodies and lives, and if we fail to, then we are to blame for whatever ails us.

Another integral part of the language of aspiration and self-optimization is the focus on the future—which is a bit ironic, considering one of the many things we're meant to aspire to is being "present."

Being focused on the future is not inherently a bad thing, but it becomes a problem when it produces a sense of delayed happiness. Aspiration insists that we should not be happy with what we have or who we are right now.

John Berger again:

Publicity is never a celebration of a pleasure-in-itself. Publicity is always about the future buyer. It offers him an image of himself made glamorous by the product or opportunity it is trying to sell. The image then makes him envious of himself as he might be (132).

This is part of the reason Taffy Brodesser-Akner describes aspiration and wellness as suffering. There will always be more to envy, more to desire. You must always look towards the future happiness.

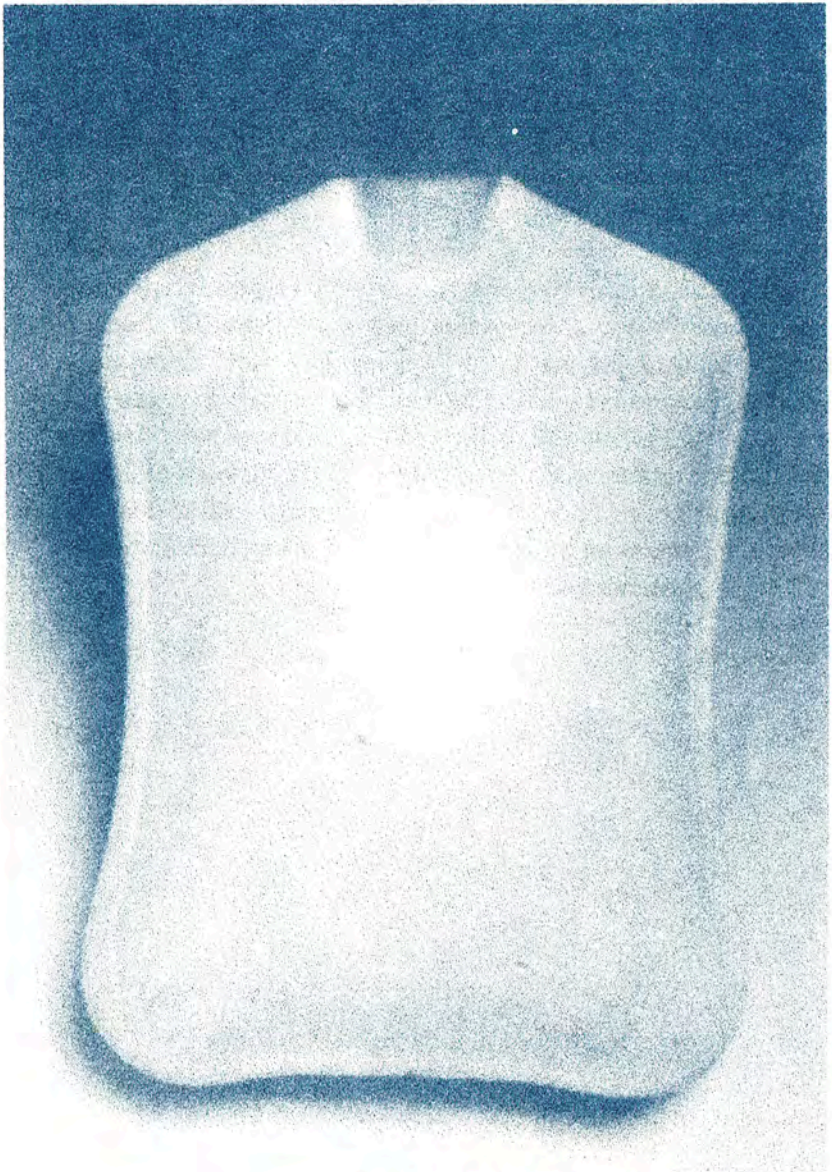


Ana Mendieta, *Untitled* from the *Silveta* series, 1973

Virgie Tovar describes this feeling in the context of diet culture and the desire to lose weight:

I believed that life would begin later. I would wear a bikini later. I would be happy later. I would wear short shorts, go on dates, feel beautiful, wear bright-pink lipstick later. I would travel the world, enjoy cupcakes, and smile with complete abandon in pictures later (when my cheeks were smaller and I didn't have a double chin). I would love myself later (109).

This is what John Berger means when he says advertisements steal our self-love and then sell it back to us. The beauty, wellness, diet, and skincare industries (or perhaps they are all the same industry) depend on, and in fact, cultivate our self-loathing in order to then swoop in and sell us the products and regimens that can solve all our problems. And until we solve all our own problems, and optimize our minds and bodies, we must continue denying our present happiness and delaying our gratification, because we feel we haven't earned it yet.



Rachel Whiteread, *Untitled (Torso)*, 1991

## Section III: Healing

So where does all this leave us? How then do we heal, self-soothe, and connect with our bodies? Can we still do face masks as self-care? Does that make us dupes? Does it make us complicit in our own degradation?

Can we just decide to love our bodies and divest from the pursuit of beauty altogether? Can we all just be ugly and delight in it? Obviously that's not so simple. We still live in a society where there are material benefits to being normatively beautiful, and there are material risks to not living up to the standards of binary gender norms.

These questions around beauty culture have been debated for decades—pretty much since cosmetics began to be mass-produced in America—and the arguments for and against participating in beauty culture have remained surprisingly consistent over the years.

As was previously referenced, in early 2018, Krithika Varagur published an inflammatory article on *The Outline*, titled “The skincare con,” which aimed to reveal the false promises, fake science, and inflated prices of the skincare industry. The piece immediately prompted a heated Twitter discourse and several rebuttal articles published within a matter of days.

In 1954, there was an uncannily analogous controversy about cosmetics in a socialist newsweekly called *Militant*. Contributor Jack Bustelo had published a satire piece called “Sagging Cosmetic Lines Try a Face Lift,” in which he lampooned the beauty industry’s absurd advertising methods based on unachievable beauty ideals. However, many readers of the publication felt that Bustelo was actually mocking women for being gullible and vain enough to buy the products. Letters to the editor poured in. The original article and the many responses were compiled by Joseph Hansen and Evelyn Reed in 1984, in a book called *Cosmetics, Fashions, and the Exploitation of Women*.





Irving Penn, *Thermal Mask*, 1997

Despite the changes in trends and technology over the past sixty years, the responses to “Sagging Cosmetic Lines” and “The skincare con” are startlingly similar. They cite the financial and cultural necessity for women to live up to beauty ideals, while also demanding the right to indulge in beauty regimens for the sake of relaxation and pleasure.

In her *Huffington Post* response, “What We’re Talking About When We Talk About Skincare,” Sady Doyle says that criticizing women for spending time and money on skincare is “sexist, not only in how it elides women’s lived reality — anyone who has tasted the brutal contempt our society has for older women would think twice before telling a woman she ‘doesn’t really need’ anti-aging products — but in how it casts female want itself as dirty, shameful, inherently self-indulgent.”

She goes on to describe her personal experience with skincare practices:

I have not magically become conventionally beautiful, because skin care doesn’t do that, and maybe, for some people, that makes it a scam. But every night, I haul myself into the bathroom and spend an hour or two in the bath, trying to do something nice for my face. It’s the hour, not the face, that matters. Women deserve some pleasure in this mean world, and getting a little too excited about washing your face is far from the worst thing you could do with your time.

Louise Manning, responding to the article in *Militant* makes similar points about women wanting pleasure and relief from the stresses of the daily grind:

Now what is it that women want, which makes it easy for the cosmetics companies to wring out of these strivings profits for themselves? They want some loveliness and beauty in their lives. They want to rise above the sweaty



Janine Antoni, *Interlace*, 1998

grind of the shop, which distorts their bodies, and breaks down their spirit with fatigue and hopelessness. The housewife wants to break away from the monotony and dull routine of trying to manage on a worker's wages. Not only is she bogged down with innumerable chores, so that she has no time to take care of herself, but she can't afford good clothes (32).

Both Jeanne Morgan in *Militant* and Cheryl Wischhover on *Racked* reference the ancient use of skincare and cosmetics in their counterarguments.

Morgan: Cosmetics are ancient, and have been used for many reasons, good and bad. They will probably be used even under socialism, by both men and women, for the pleasure of personal adornment (53).

Wischhover: A two-second search on Google Scholar turns up an *Indian Journal of Plastic Surgery* article that notes: "The ancient science of cosmetology is believed to have originated in Egypt and India, but the earliest records of cosmetic substances and their application dates back to circa 2,500 and 1,550 BC to the Indus valley civilization."

Morgan's response is most striking to me because her argument is so similar to the way women talk about beauty and skincare today:

It is quite true that the use of cosmetics today is "one of the signs of the barbarism of the time," but not as Bustelo understands it. The great use of cosmetics today is "a sign of barbarism" because it is obligatory and necessary. Because we do not always use cosmetics simply because we choose to do so. This is the barbarism, not the thing itself. [...] But I for one, want to have my cake and eat it too. I wish to improve and enjoy my physical appearance and at the same time improve and develop all the other sides of my



Nan Goldin, *Kenny Putting On Make-up, Boston, 1973*

personality. And I think women have a right to both these things (53).

She understands that the main issue is that beauty and femininity are forced upon women, but she also argues for the pleasures of engaging with beauty culture.

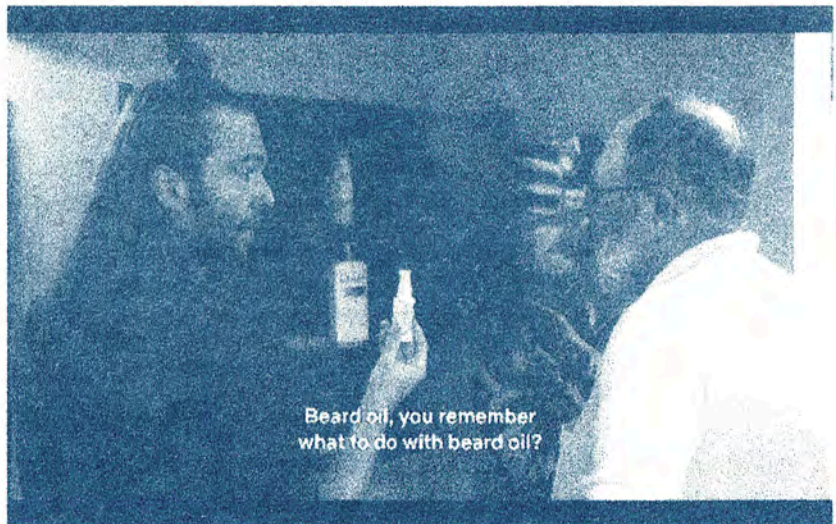
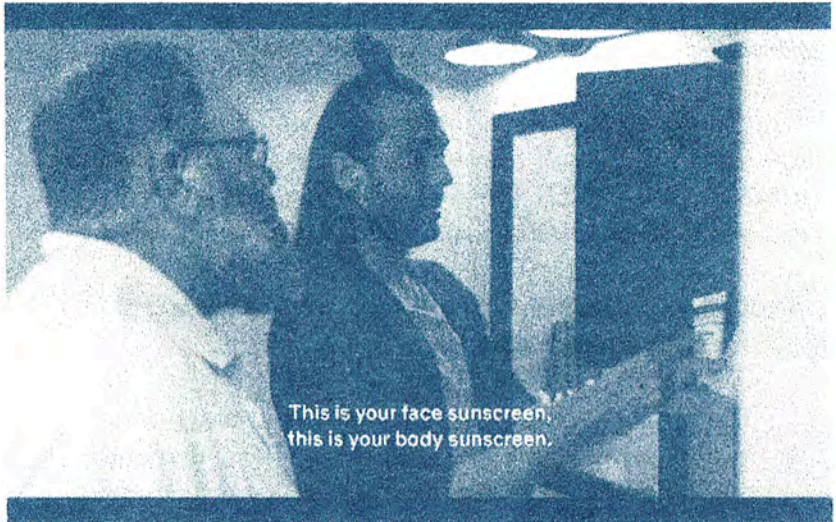
Clearly, the arguments for and against cosmetics have not changed much in the past sixty years. Women still feel the cultural imperative to be beautiful. But women then and now have argued for the right to engage with beauty culture on their own terms.

Kathy Peiss also argues that women are not desperate or gullible for buying into beauty:

Today the possibility of transformation through cosmetics is often belittled as a delusion, 'hope in a jar' that only masks the fact of women's oppression. In truth, women knew then—as they do now—precisely what they were buying. Again and again they reported their delight in beautifying—in the sensuous creams and tiny compacts, the riot of colors, the mastery of makeup skills, the touch of hands, the sharing of knowledge and advice. Indeed, the pleasures of fantasy and desire were an integral part of the product—and these included not only dreams of romance and marriage, but also the modern yearning to take part in public life (6).

Women are aware of the damaging aspects of beauty culture, but it's not solely damaging. Beauty culture can also be pleasurable, social, and comforting.

Another complicating factor is that beauty and wellbeing really are wrapped up in one another. Beauty has long been believed to be a symptom of health, and so the wellness industry is able to sell us beauty products disguised as health products. But skincare, for example, really is a blend of cosmetic and health concerns. I tell



Stills from *Queer Eye*, Season 1, Episode 1, "You Can't Fix Ugly," 2018

myself that I started wearing sunscreen every day because I want to avoid getting skin cancer. That is true, but I also want to prevent more superficial skin damage like “photoaging.” I’m worried about getting wrinkles, even though I wish I weren’t. But that doesn’t mean I should stop wearing sunscreen.

There are many other ailments of the skin that are both superficial and related to health. Acne is stigmatized and is considered ugly, but it is often very physically painful and distracting, as well. Dandruff and eczema similarly may be considered embarrassing conditions, but they also cause physical discomfort. It’s hard to disentangle our desires for health and beauty.

Are face masks actually relaxing, or do they just make you feel like you’re one step closer to living up to the demands of femininity? Maybe both.

Watching the first season of the new *Queer Eye* reboot, I was struck by the fact that most of the men being made-over had no hygiene rituals whatsoever, no sense of how to groom themselves or take care of their bodies. Of course, it’s a makeover show, so it’s to be expected that the selected subjects would be especially inept at these things. But all the same, I was fascinated because most women are taught about beauty, skincare, and hygiene from a very young age. They don’t have a choice but to internalize at least some knowledge of it.

As discussed throughout this zine, beauty culture is harmful to women, alienating us from our bodies and destroying our self-esteem. And then beauty and skincare and wellness are sold to us as methods to rebuild that self-esteem. But for men, it’s different. Men aren’t taught that their worth and dignity are contingent on their looks. So when Jonathan describes basic skincare to the men as acts of self-care, it feels less dubious. These men don’t already spend all of their time thinking about their bodies, and so for them, maybe it really can be relaxing to take a few moments to apply



In her ongoing *Lipstick* series, New York artist Stacy Greene photographs lipsticks used by friends and acquaintances. "I see an everyday, factory, 'ready-made' product turned into a surreal, biomorphic, subconscious image—a sculpture evolving from a private daily ritual taken for granted," she says. The resulting images speak for themselves.



Roberta, 1993



Ellen, 1993



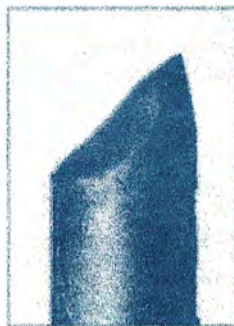
Marden, 1993



Linda, 1993



Simone, 1993



Brenda, 1991



Lisa, 1992



Beth, 1993

Stacy Greene, *Lipsticks* series, 1992

lotions and pomade to their skin and hair. (Or maybe Jonathan is just helping to expand the beauty industry's reach by selling more products to men.)

While cosmetics and skincare can't exist outside of the paradigm of oppressive beauty culture, there are other parts of beauty culture to consider. Kathy Peiss aims to bring more nuance to the conversation around American beauty culture. In particular, she notes the intimacy and social relationships that beauty rituals help create:

Over the decades, mothers and daughters have taught each other about cosmetics, cliques have formed around looks, women have shared their beauty secrets and, in the process, created intimacy. Not only tools of deception and illusion, then, these little jars tell a rich history of women's ambition, pleasure, and community (7).

Beauty rituals can be social activities that allow women opportunities for bonding and affection. Women learn about hair, skincare, and makeup from each other. Girls braid each other's hair and paint each other's nails. There can be a breathless, joyful quality to these acts of physical intimacy.

Many people argue that makeup can't be a genuine form of self-expression because the only socially acceptable styles of makeup are the ones that make women more normatively beautiful and feminine. This is generally true, and I think in most cases, makeup is not a form of individual self-expression. However, makeup, hair, and fashion are socially expressive. People use them to identify themselves as parts of social groups, to indicate their interests, status, and values. Think sorority sister blowouts, Black Panther Party afros, and early-aughts emo eyeliner. I think of my red pixie cut, dark lipstick, and Doc Martens I wore when I was into the 2010s DIY music scene. Or my current bowlcut and captive bead earring I wear in one ear, now that I've settled more into my identity as a queer woman.



Carrie Mac Weems, *Untitled (Woman and daughter with makeup)*, 1990



Liz Barr, *Meg shaving M's head*, 2018

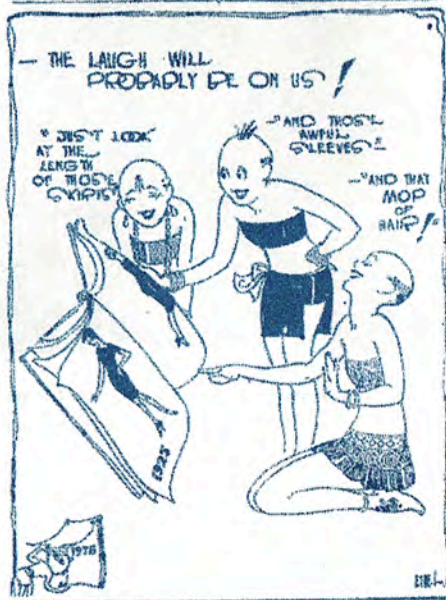


Still from *But I'm a Cheerleader*, Dir. Jamie Babbit, 1999



Still from the music video for Princess Nokia's "Brujas,"  
Dir. Princess Nokia and Asli Baykal, 2016

WHAT OUR GRANDCHILDREN  
WILL THINK OF US



Ethel Hays, "What Our Grandchildren Will Think of Us,"  
published in *The Bakersfield Californian*, October 25, 1925

Peiss also notes the way beauty looks have shifted between generations:

As was true in the 1920s and 1930s, makeup styles marked the generations, but teens in the sixties created strikingly distinct looks. Eye makeup, used relatively infrequently into the 1950s, became extraordinarily popular, and the 'big eye look' altered the balance and appearance of facial features. Thick bands of black eyeliner, glittering eye shadow, and white lipstick sharply distinguished girls from their mothers, whose taste ran to red lipstick, light mascara, and a matte complexion. Generational differences in makeup styles mirrored more radical conflicts over sexuality, social life, and politics (253).

And despite everything, I believe there is an argument to be made for skincare as self-care. While it may not be possible to separate skincare from oppressive beauty standards, skincare routines give many women the opportunity to slow down, breathe, and feel connected to their bodies. I shouldn't have to have smooth, dewy skin to feel like a worthy human being, but it still feels really good to spread oils and lotions over my body. Skincare is tactile and pleasurable, and that's worth something.

While I previously argued that aspirational language's focus on the future deprives us of present happiness, Jia Tolentino has a different take on futurity and skincare. In her 2017 *New Yorker* article, "The Year Skin Care Became a Coping Mechanism," Tolentino argues that in a cultural moment full of despair and doom, practicing a ritual that is working towards future results feels like an act of optimism: "For me, right now, [skin care] functions as part of a basic dream in which the future simply exists."

While grappling with questions about the exploitative nature of the beauty industry and the pleasures of beauty rituals, she comes to the following conclusion:





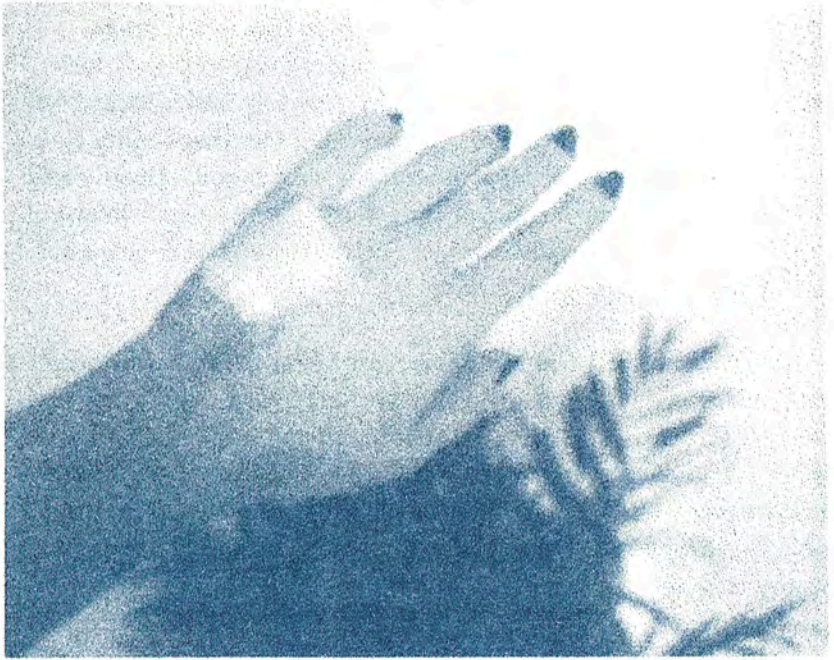
Liz Barr, iPhone photo from the hospital, 2018

Beauty is a tool that tends to serve those in power, [Arabelle Sicardi] wrote, and, at the same time, it fundamentally involves acts of witnessing the body, helping it to endure its conditions. This paradox becomes clearer to me each night, patting my face with serums while looking one-eyed at Twitter, using these apparatuses of self-loathing in an attempt to pronounce some form of love.

Beauty culture itself isn't really the problem. Neither is skincare, makeup, or activated charcoal. Like most things, beauty culture is both good and bad at the same time. Also like most things, the things that make it bad are misogyny, racism, and capitalism. There is real comfort, pleasure, and fun in beauty and skincare, but it's hard to separate those pleasures from the fact that beauty is required of women in order to be treated with dignity. Beauty and skincare products are not simply solutions to anxiety and shame as their manufacturers would have you believe. But they are also not simply tools of oppression either.

In my own life, I feel I'm always grappling with my attitudes towards beauty and my body. I like to think that I'm immune to the external forces that shape these attitudes, but I know it isn't true. I know that the way I style myself is always a compromise between how I think I want to look and how I think others want me to look. But despite the harmful aspects, I don't attempt to opt out of beauty culture altogether.

After getting diagnosed with thyroid cancer, I had to get a total thyroidectomy. In preparation for surgery, I had to remove my nail polish—my mother explained that the doctors would need to see if my fingers started turning blue from lack of oxygen. Carefully removing the nail polish the night before surgery felt like a purification ritual, like my body was being cleansed in preparation for the daunting procedure.



Liz Barr, *Post-Blood Draw*, 2018

Due to some minor complications from the surgery, I ended up hospitalized for four days. I felt outside of my body, and outside of my life. I was constantly being prodded and pricked by strangers. With liquids being pumped in and out of me, my body felt like a purely utilitarian thing—a thing that happened to be malfunctioning. When I was finally able to return home, one of the first things I did was paint my nails. Sure, beautification as an act of healing is complicated, and maybe even cliché. But that day, the ritual of giving myself a manicure felt like a reclamation of my body.

I guess I want the same things women have wanted for generations. I want my body to be allowed to be ugly without consequences. I want to not hate my body. I want to stop punishing my body. I want my body to be apolitical, and my appearance to be amoral.

But I also want to decorate my body. I want to dress it up and experiment with it. I want to get creative with my body, and I want it to be a collaboration. I want to feel like I look good, but I don't want it to matter. I want to take care of my body the best I can, and I want to have fun while I'm doing it. I want my body to feel more like a gift and less like a burden.

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