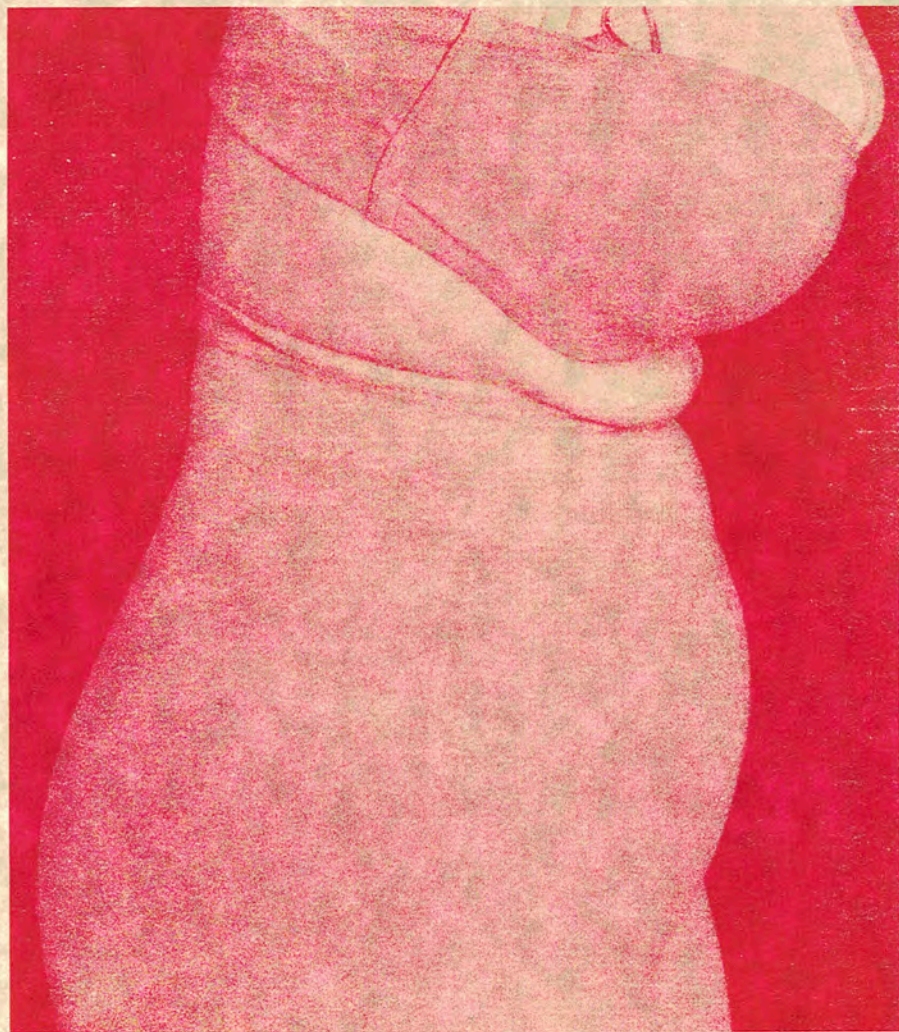


# BODY WORKS



by LIZ BARR









In the three years since *Body Works* was first published, Rihanna launched Fenty Beauty with an unprecedented 50 shades of foundation, pushing its competitors to be more inclusive of darker skin tones; Kylie Jenner became the youngest “self-made” billionaire with her “lip kits,” which help her fans recreate the look of her famously medically-enhanced lips; and Kim Kardashian has come out with a line of body foundation and a line of shapewear, or as she calls it, “solutionwear.”

Three years after writing *Body Works*, I continue to ask myself the same questions. What do I want to look like and why? What work goes into maintaining my body on a daily basis? How does that work shape my body? What privileges have I been afforded based on the way my body looks, and what privileges, if any, have I been denied? What cultural forces shape my own perception of my body? What am I willing to risk for beauty?

– Liz Barr, 2019





# Beauty &



*Janine Antoni, Loving Care, 1993*

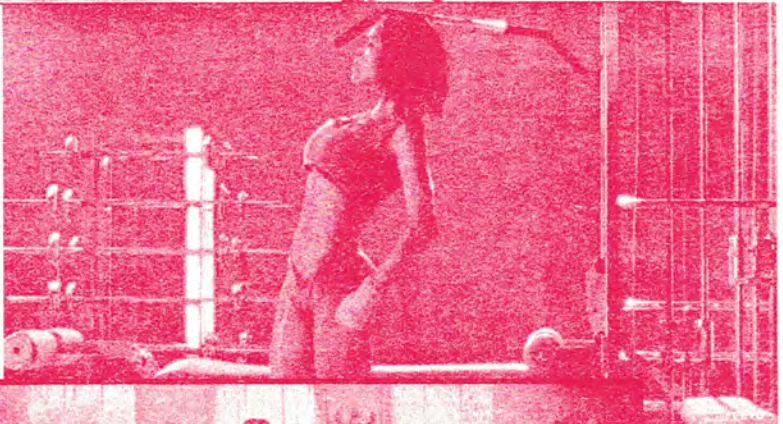
# Labor



Two No. 1 hits from 2016 were “Work” by Rihanna and “Work From Home” by Fifth Harmony, both of which feature a repetitive chanting of the word “work” as the chorus. Work is really hot right now. Work is empowering. Work means you make a lot of money, and you’ve got a hot body.



But only some kinds of work are acceptable. If pop radio and music videos tell us anything, it's that there are a few places that women are allowed to show how hard they work: in the workplace, in the bedroom, and in the gym.



Ariana Grande, "Side To Side feat. Nicki Minaj (Official Video)," 2016  
Kanye West, "Fade (Official Video)," 2016  
Nicki Minaj, "Anaconda (Official Video)," 2014



In her Real Life Mag article, “Pajama Rich,” Moira Weigel explains the athleisure trend as a result of Americans’ fetishization of labor in the workplace and at the gym. According to her, athleisure “enforce[s] a new code of the body as a constant work in progress. The ideal contemporary subject is a person who is willing to spend all her time being productive. You have to work hard to afford Barre or spin or yoga; at the same time, these efforts energize you to return to work.”

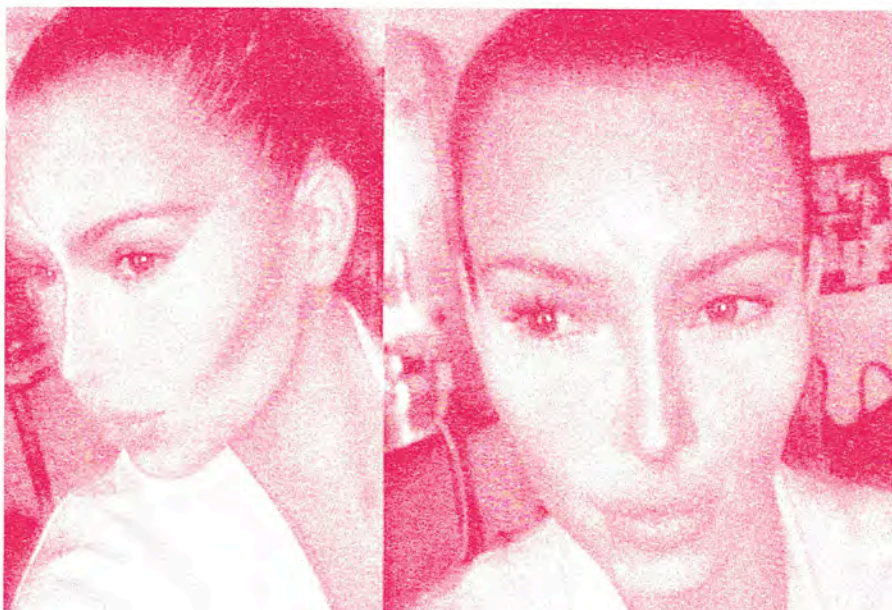


*Beyonce's athleisure line, Ivy Park, 2016*

Like working out, doing makeup requires time, technique, and discipline (and money), and yet, it is not generally upheld as an admirable or sexy part of women's daily routine.

If you wear makeup, it's supposed to be subtle and "natural" looking, like the "no-makeup makeup" trend. An essential part of doing that work is hiding the work that went into it.

Maybe this is why straight men are so freaked out by the rise of contouring, which is basically the antithesis of no-makeup makeup. Contouring, and the videos that show you how to do it, put the work on display.



*Kim K contouring selfies, 2015*



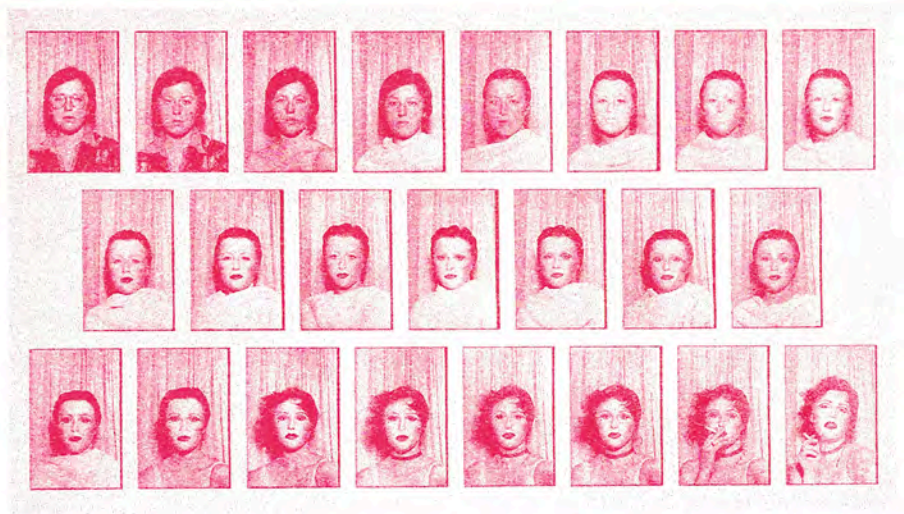


*Coco Montrese, "Girl Look How Orange You Fucking Look Girl," RuPaul's Drag Race Season 5, 2013*



*Hood By Air's NYFW Spring '16 makeup*

Though Kim Kardashian has been credited by many for dragging contouring into the mainstream, it has its roots in stage makeup and drag. It maybe be about blending, but it's not about subtlety.



*Cindy Sherman, Untitled #479, 1975*



Beauty Bloggers reveal the secrets and, importantly, the labor that go into beauty, and men don't want to see it.



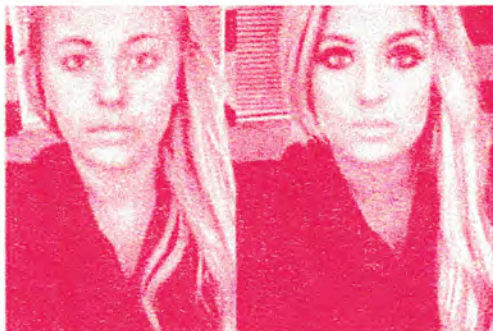
**Henny Kravitz**

@H\_MENACE

Follow

The reason why you gotta take a bitch swimming on the first date [moby.to/733r7z](https://moby.to/733r7z)

9:35 AM - 15 Feb 2015



**CAPTAIN HOOKS**

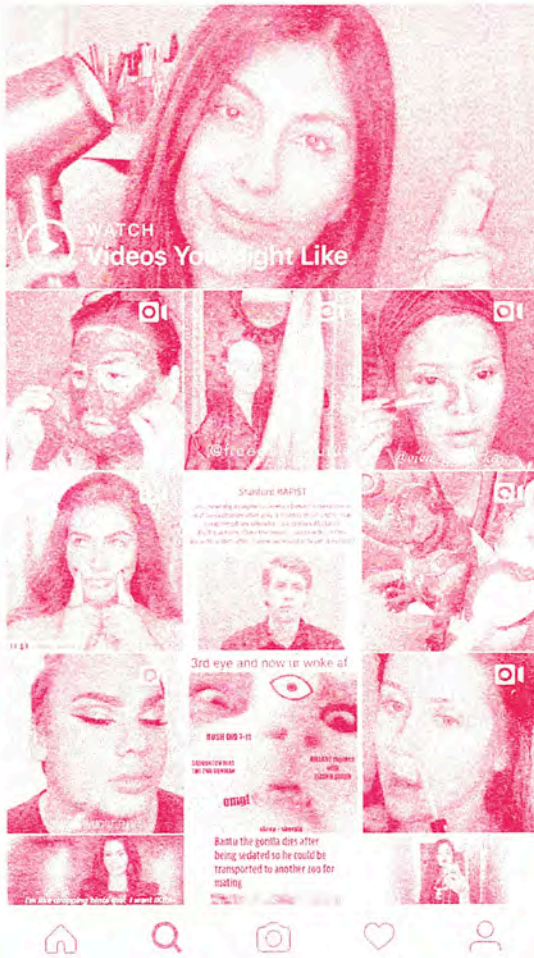
The reason why you gotta take a bitch swimming on the first date

Men commonly like to joke online about taking a girl swimming on the first date. The joke is that you might accidentally date an ugly girl without realizing it because she's good at doing her makeup. The joke is that women who wear makeup are deceptive and deserve to be exposed and humiliated.

Men think they want "low-maintenance" women who are naturally beautiful and put no effort into their appearance, but what they really want is women who put a lot of work into their appearance but are good at hiding it. Because there is nothing "low-maintenance" about bodies and nothing "natural" about beauty. Beauty is about work.

Women, on the other hand, seem to like seeing the labor that goes into beauty. Makeup tutorial videos are everywhere.

Though I personally had never sought out beauty blogs before, for a couple months over the summer, I got caught in a feedback loop with the Instagram Explore page's algorithm. It kept showing me makeup tutorials, and I kept watching them, so it kept showing me more. For awhile, it was the only thing that showed up on my Explore feed.





giam.time



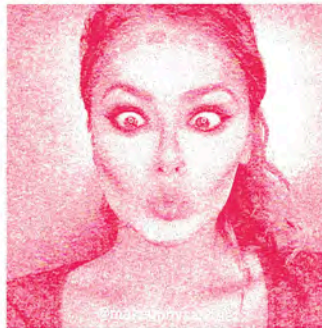
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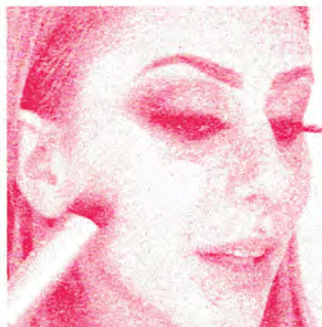
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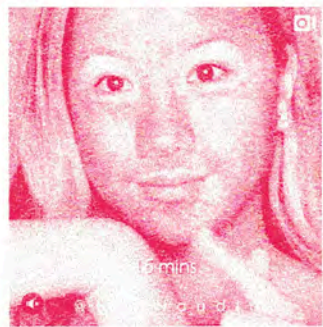
51,742 views  
hypnaughtypower @exteriorglam #Hypnaughtypower #Hypnaughtymakeup

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128,295 views  
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83,236 views  
maryhadalittleglam @nooneida Tomto Face!!! Here's a net unrcadv...

hannabeauti



24,527 views  
hannabeauti @angiaheng

makeuptutorials0x



71,420 views  
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Instagram makeup tutorials are a fascinating subgenre of beauty vlogging and a recent phenomenon, developing after Instagram's extension of its video length from 15 to 60 seconds earlier this year.

Hours-long beauty routines are condensed and sped up to an almost frenzied pace to fit into the one minute limit. With a Top 40 pop song playing in the background, the girls in the videos don't speak, but rather pantomime, indicating which flaw they are about to fix. The videos always end the same way: with the girl smiling coyly at the camera, working all her angles, and then flashing between the before and after pictures.

These formulaic videos seem to have evolved alongside another Instagram trend: satisfying videos. Satisfying videos are either a subgenre or cousin of ASMR videos, but with less emphasis on aural texture and more emphasis on visual texture. Some popular types of satisfying videos are mixing paint, decorating cookies, playing with slime or putty, and cutting into blocks of sand.

Beauty videos are also full of alluring textures and offer their own satisfying results: you can watch someone get a total makeover in 60 seconds or less. They show you all the work that goes into the transformation, but it is sped up and perfected, seeming effortless. The videos simultaneously reveal and obscure the labor of beauty.



# Beauty &



# Virtue

Beauty has long been linked with both virtue and work. According to Victorian ideals, true beauty comes from within. But you still have to work to attain that inner beauty by cultivating virtue and good character. It takes discipline.

**Good people are beautiful people.**

According to the American virtues of self-improvement and democracy, anyone can be beautiful if they put in the work. And hard work and discipline make you a good person.

**Beautiful people are good people.**



Alex Wallbaum & Aleia Murawski, "Motivational Gym Poster," 2016



So why is it that it's OK for women to put in work at the gym, but not on their faces (or worse, get work done)?

Only labor that can be masked in other pursuits—specifically the pursuits of health, wellness, and athleticism—are considered good, virtuous work. Working explicitly for beauty is considered vanity, which is a vice, which interferes with the correlation between beauty and goodness.



*LaToya Ruby Frazier, "If Everybody's Work Is Equally Important," 2010*



*Cassils, "Becoming An Image Performance Still No. 4," 2013*

Women are expected to care about and maintain their appearances without showing they care.

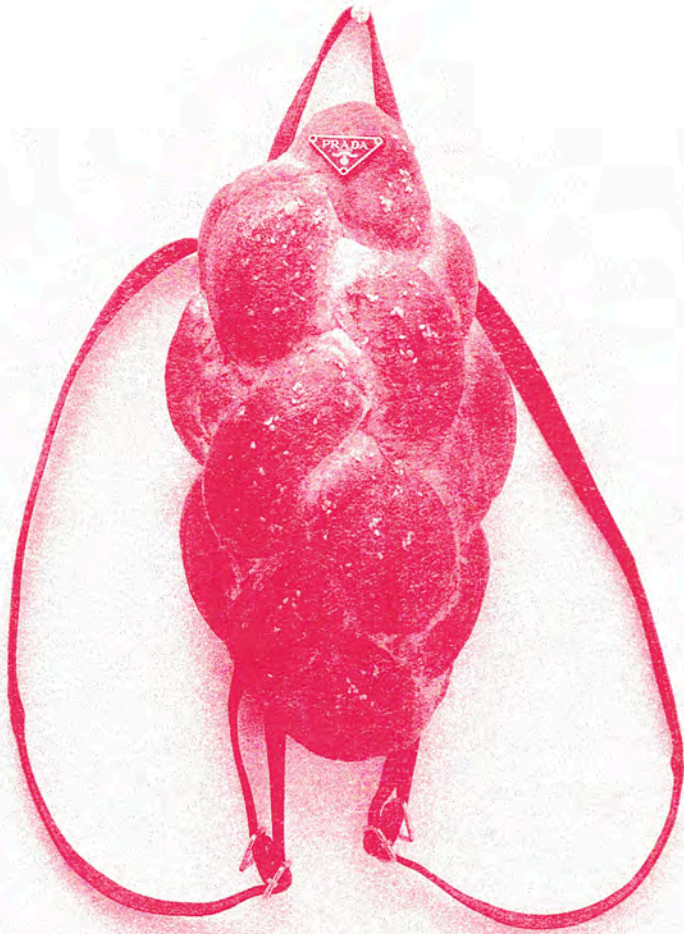
The labor that is acceptable, or even fetishized, is labor that can be attributed to more wholesome goals of self-improvement. It must pass as "natural."

What passes as natural tends to be processes that physically change the body in gradual, invisible ways – diet, exercise, skincare, vitamins. These "natural" processes also require discipline and can be chalked up to simply caring about one's health and hygiene.



In her book about the history of plastic surgery, "Venus Envy," Elizabeth Haiken describes attitudes toward beauty in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before and during the rise of the beauty industry: "Both feminist and progressive thought advocated natural beauty, and beauty literature influenced by these schools of thought was highly moralistic: the development of character, combined with living right, eating right, and even thinking right, were means by which women might achieve true beauty" (23).

Despite the power of the beauty industry, these moralistic attitudes toward natural beauty are still ingrained and are most visible in the new "wellness" industry. In her VICE article "The Unhealthy Truth Behind 'Wellness' and 'Clean Eating'," Ruby Tandoh reveals the dangerous moralism behind the "wellness" trend. "On popular wellness blogs, the gluten I've heard about is "evil", "poison", "contaminating" and "toxic". There's even a leading Australian gluten-free site called [glutenisthedevil.com](http://glutenisthedevil.com). This isn't just about nutrition, it's about morality, and when food becomes imbued with this kind of scandalizing language, the dinner table becomes a minefield."



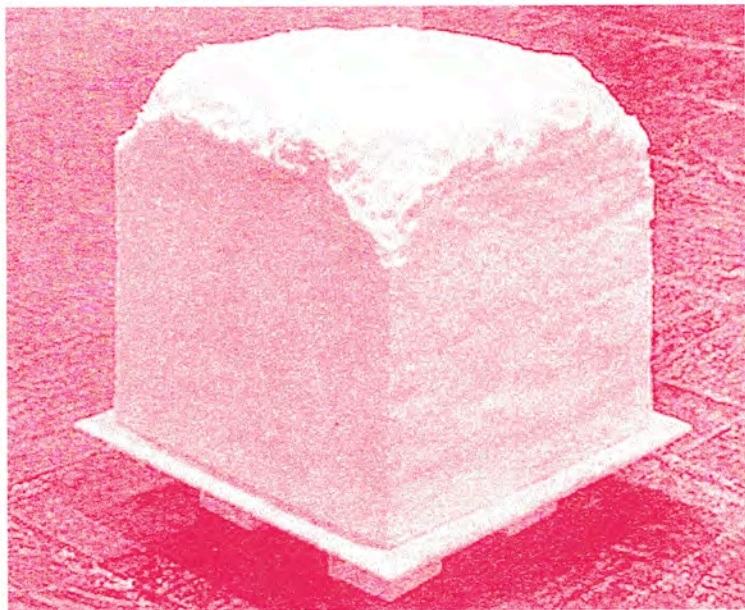
*Chloe Wise, "Ain't No Challah Back(Pack) Girl," 2015*



Tandoh also consulted with Nigella Lawson about the “purity fetish” within the wellness trend. “I despair of the term “clean eating”,” she said, ‘though I actually like the food that comes under that banner. [‘Clean eating’] necessarily implies that any other form of eating – and consequently the eater of it – is dirty or impure and thus bad, and it’s not simply a way of shaming and persecuting others, but leads to that self-shaming and self-persecution that is forcibly detrimental to true healthy eating.”

Though “wellness” markets itself as just being about physical and mental health, it comes with an implicit promise for beauty, or at least thinness. Tandoh explains, “Throughout these books – the very same ones that tell us to locate our self-worth not in how we look but in who we are and how we feel – there is a consistent, entrenched fear of fatness. When *Deliciously Ella* allays our fears that ‘things like avocados and almonds will make you fat,’ she leaves that foundational anxiety around fatness intact as a valid concern. When Madeleine Shaw boasts that her lifestyle tips can create a ‘leaner, healthier physique,’ you could be forgiven for wondering where her ‘be your own cheerleader” pep went.”

“If the only ‘good’ food within wellness is the kind that won’t make you fat, wellness doesn’t look so different to dieting.”



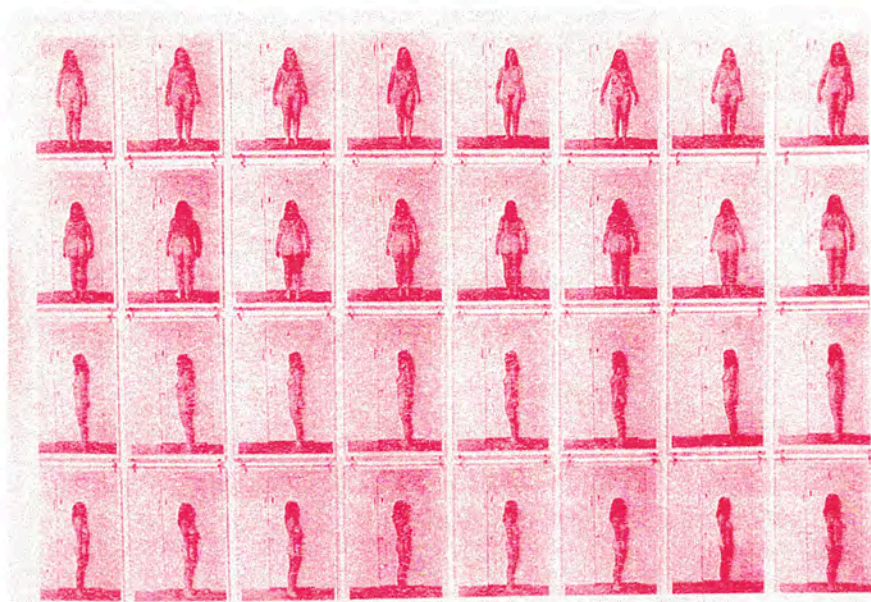
*Janine Antoni, Gnaw, 1992*



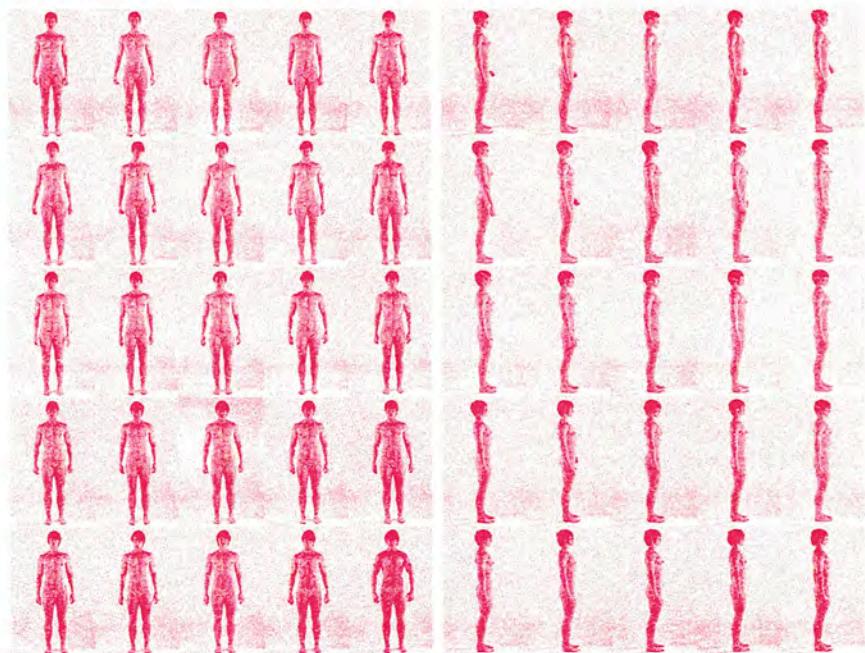
Because diet and exercise are associated with health, they aren't considered forms of body modification. Although most diets and exercise regimens are at least partially motivated by a desire to sculpt the body—generally in a way that adheres to gender norms and beauty standards—they are associated with the virtues of discipline and purity, and the changes/beauty that results from these practices are simply natural by-products.



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



*Eleanor Antin, "Carving: A Traditional Sculpture (detail)" 1973*



*Cassils, "Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture," 2011*

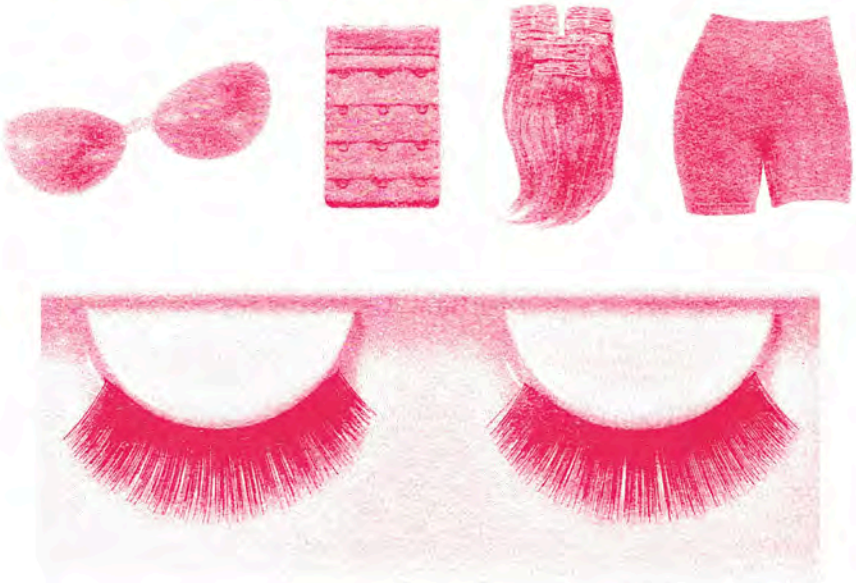


Because these processes are less visible (unless you post selfies from the gym or blog about your skincare regimine and gluten-free diet), you can also claim to be “low-maintenance.”



As Moira Weigel puts it, “spending a fortune on nutrition, facials, and skin cream so that you can boast that you ‘only wear lip gloss,’” is a form of “inconspicuous consumption.” There’s deniability.

Processes that involve more synthetic or superficial interventions on the body are considered unnatural and thus deceptive – concealer, contouring, implants, false eyelashes, hair extensions/weaves/wigs, padded/push-up bras, Spanx/waist-trainers, spray tans, etc.



These things leave traces on the body. They are attached to the body, with straps and hooks and glue, and they can be taken off or washed away, which means they're not really a part of your body.

They're fake, imitation, "false." They're prosthetics. They mean you didn't work hard enough to achieve "natural" beauty.





*Pinar Yolacan, "Like A Stone," 2011*

Plastic surgeons made their field respectable with their ability to blur the distinction between cosmetic and necessary procedures.

Plastic surgery as we know it developed after World War I in response to the severe injuries coming out of trench warfare. Reconstructive surgery was considered necessary for veterans to live normal, productive lives. Their facial injuries could prevent them from getting jobs and providing for their families and contributing to society, so the advancement of reconstructive surgery procedures suddenly became a worthy goal, rather than an unnatural and vain endeavor.



*Thomas Struth, "Study, Charité, Berlin," 2015*



Around the same time another instance of blurred lines around aesthetic and necessary surgery was happening. Syphilis was a widespread problem, and one common symptom of untreated syphilis was a depressed nose bridge, or "saddle nose."

Though the disease was common, it was also highly stigmatized, so wearing such a prominent symptom on the face could seriously hurt one's social life and employment prospects. Again, this was considered a necessary procedure, rather than cosmetic.

**YOU HAVE A BEAUTIFUL FACE**  
*But Your Nose ?*

Before                      After

In this age attention to your appearance is an absolute necessity if you expect to make the most out of life. Not only should you wish to appear as attractive as possible for your own self-satisfaction, which is alone well worth your efforts, but you will find the world in general judging you greatly. If not wholly, by your "looks," therefore it pays to "look your best" at all times. Permit no one to see you looking otherwise; it will injure your welfare. Upon the impression you constantly make rests the

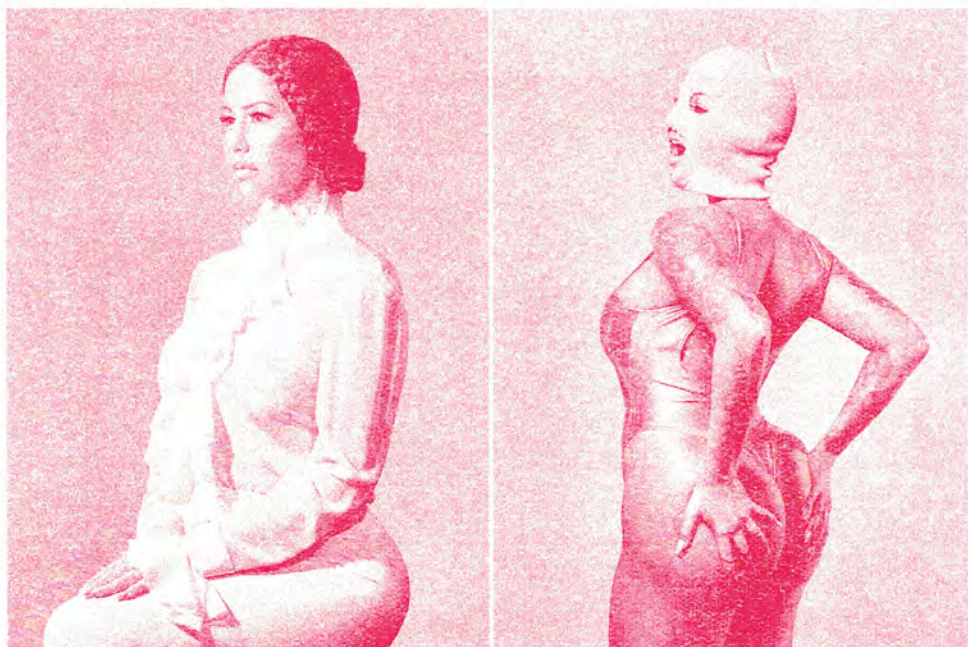
failure or success of your life. Which is to be your ultimate destiny! My nose-shaper, "Trados" (Model 22), corrects now ill-shaped noses without operation quickly, safely, and permanently is pleasant, and does not interfere with one's daily occupation, being worn at night. Write to-day for free booklet, which tells you how to correct ill-shaped noses without cost if not satisfactory.

M. TRILETY, Face Specialist,  
824 Ackerman Bldg. Binghamton, N.Y.

Another major stigma that people attempted to cure with surgery was racial signifiers.

Because of the mainstream derision of beauty rituals as vain, women often “reclaim” these rituals and aesthetics as empowering. In fact, historically, feminist movements have always had competing attitudes toward beauty and empowerment.

From one perspective, it is considered empowering to reject beauty standards which demean and oppress women. From the other perspective, it is empowering for women to find ways to feel good about themselves and to embrace their femininity and sexuality.



*Amber Rose as Susan B. Anthony and a member of Pussyriot, photographed by Charlotte Rutherford for Paper Mag, 2015*



The main difference between these ideas of empowerment is whether they refer to the collective or the individual.

Women as a whole (if that can be considered a fixed, discrete category) would be empowered if there were no dominating beauty standards, and if their worth weren't determined by their looks.

Whereas the individual woman can be "empowered" through self-actualizing, being confident, getting ahead, leaning in, practicing self-care.

## Women Now Empowered By Everything A Woman Does

### NEWS

February 19, 2013

VIII, 4, 155-157

Genre: Shopping  
Narration: Cindy Aze  
Title: *Women*



OBERLIN, OH—According to a study released Monday, women—once empowered primarily via the assertion of reproductive rights or workplace equality with men—are now empowered by virtually everything the typical woman does.



*New York women empower themselves by running dinner unaccompanied by men.*

"From what she eats for breakfast to the way she cleans her home, today's woman lives in a state of near-constant empowerment," said Barbara Klein, professor of women's studies at Oberlin College and director of the study.

"As recently as 15 years ago, a woman could only feel empowered by advancing in a male-dominated work world, asserting her own sexual wants and needs, or pushing for a stronger voice in politics. Today, a woman can empower herself through actions as seemingly inconsequential as driving her children to soccer practice or watching the Oxygen network."

Klein said that clothes shopping, once considered a mundane act with few sociopolitical implications, is now a bold feminist statement.

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It's no wonder that there are clashes between bell hooks and Beyoncé (or more accurately, Janet Mock on behalf of Beyoncé), or for women to be threatened by Alicia Keys's choice to stop wearing makeup. Since the advent of the beauty industry, it's always been a question as to whether it's more "empowering" for women to reject or embrace beauty standards.



Alicia Keys

Y'all, I'm choosing to be makeup free doesn't mean I'm anti-makeup. Do y'all?

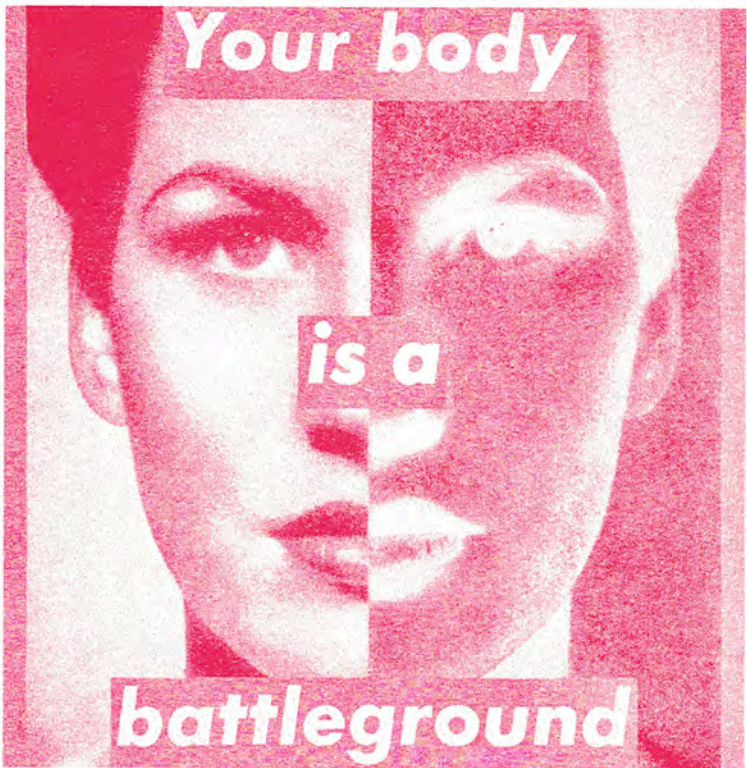
A lot of people will come down in the middle with the diplomatic answer that it's really about a woman's right to choose, the most feminist thing of them all. But it's not really so simple.



*Seth Bogart, still from "Eating Makeup," 2016*



# Beauty &



*Barbara Kruger, "Untitled (Your body is a battleground)," 1989*

# Necessity

Beauty isn't really optional.

It's not just about how you feel about yourself, but how other people treat you.

Whether or not your body meets social expectations has material consequences in your life.



Haley Morris-Cafiero, "Vitoria" from the series "Wait Watchers, 2015



This is true for everyone but to varying degrees. Beauty is not just whether or not you wear makeup. Beauty means whether or not you have the right body type, the right BMI, the right nose shape, the right curl pattern, the right skin color, the right teeth.

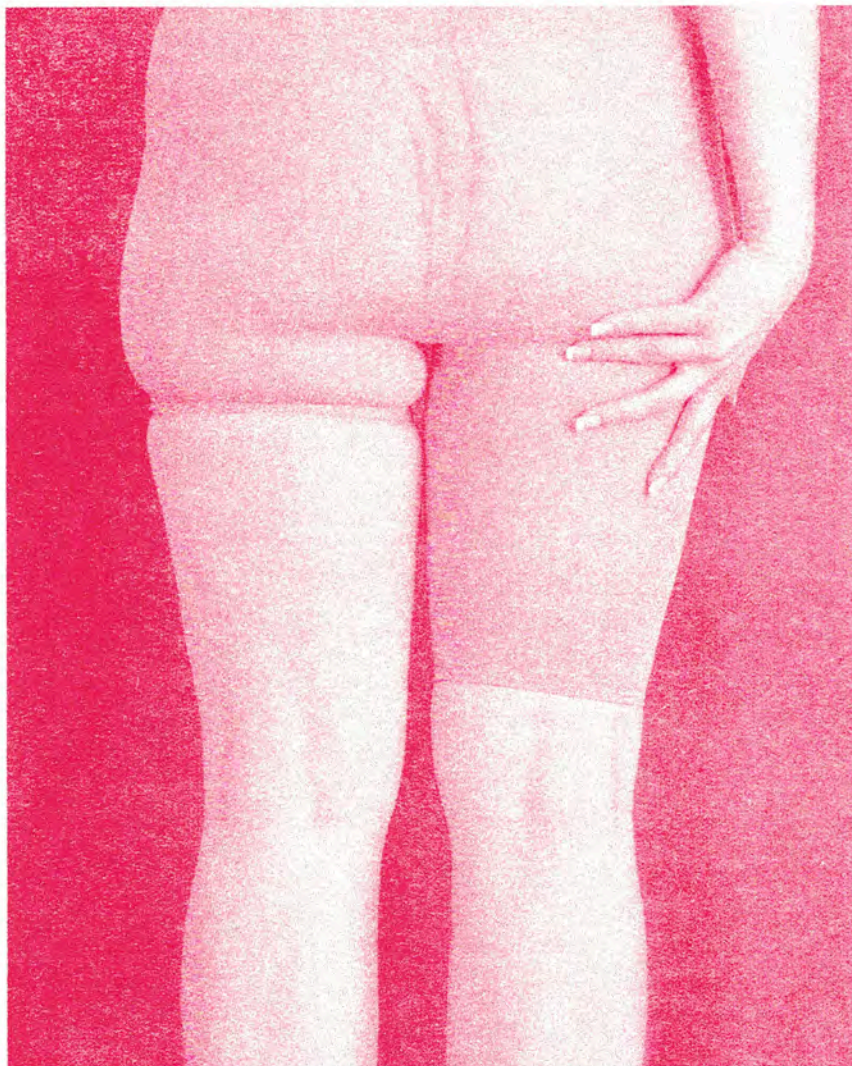


LOOKING INTO THE MIRROR, THE BLACK WOMAN ASKED,  
"MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL, WHO'S THE FINEST OF THEM ALL?"  
THE MIRROR SAYS, "SNOW WHITE, YOU BLACK BITCH,  
AND DON'T YOU FORGET IT!!!"

*Carrie Mae Weems, "Mirror, Mirror," 1987*

Depending on your race, class, sexuality, physical ability and whether or not you're cis or trans, not meeting these beauty/body standards can affect your job opportunities, social interactions, and even physical safety.

Weigel also acknowledges the split between invisible and visible efforts for beauty: “While Spanx are a secret weapon for managing intractable body parts, [Lululemons] put that effort on proud display, announcing that their wearer is eager to be seen as engaging in constant self-management — toning her ass and thighs and balancing work with ‘life.’”



*my own work: Liz Barr, “Nude No. 4,” 2016*



# Beauty &



*Kim Kardashian, nude selfie, 2016*

# Empower- ment

According to Elizabeth Haiken, “Jews, Italians, and others of Mediterranean or eastern European heritage made the ‘nose job’ a household word early in the century” (179).

Anti-Semitic prejudice was so strong that having a nose that made you look Jewish could seriously hurt job prospects and one’s social life. Italians and Armenians also commonly got nose jobs for fear of being mistaken for being Jewish, or being recognized as “foreign.”



Andy Warhol, “Before and After, 4,” 1964

“The frequency with which early twentieth-century surgeons performed the classic nose job simply confirmed what most Americans already knew: a nose that called attention to itself and marked its bearer as ‘different’ or ‘foreign’ was a distinct disadvantage” (177).



Most of the women (and some men) who got this “classic” nose job weren’t doing it to look beautiful, but rather to blend in.

Elizabeth Haiken explains, “[Patients claimed to have] no desire to deny their religion or their ethnic heritage, they asserted; they merely hoped to blend in better, to become indistinguishable and thus reap the benefits that were generally available to those not perceived as different” (186).

Living up to beauty standards isn’t always about beauty. It’s about being treated with dignity and acknowledged as an individual.

“[The oft-expressed desire for ethnic anonymity] was sparked by the knowledge that in the United States, the face, or particular features, often led others to attribute to the bearer particular personality or character traits. Facial features that might lead to the attribution of criminality, drug addiction, or disease were and continue to be of concern” (186).

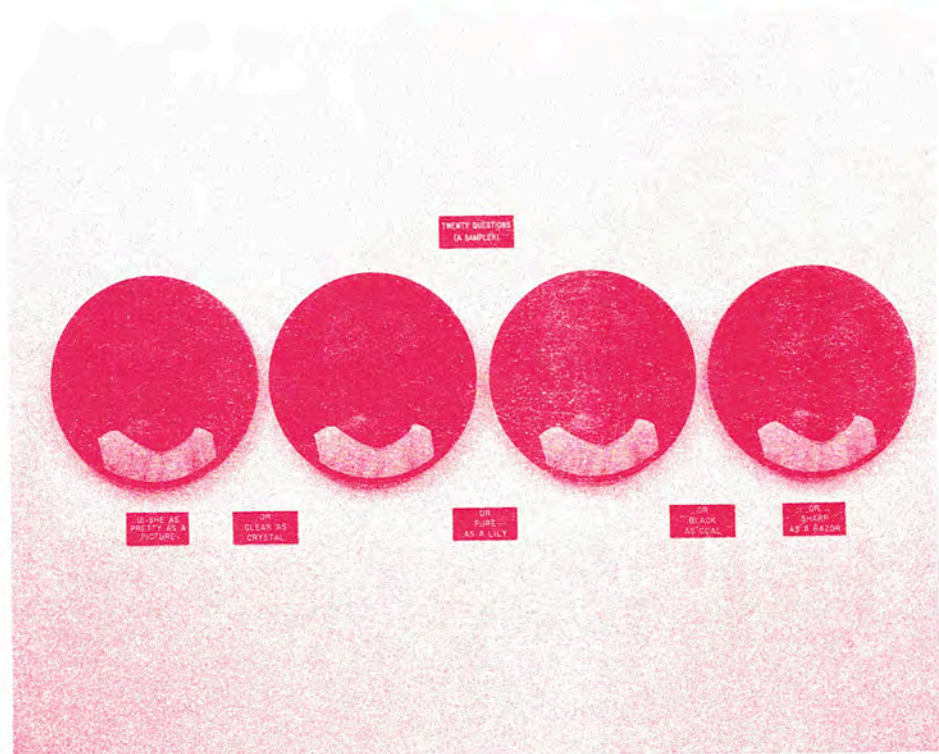
NEWS

## Azealia Banks Defends Whitening Her Skin With Skin-Bleaching Products

July 7, 2016 @ 4:20 PM By [Stephanie Webber](#)



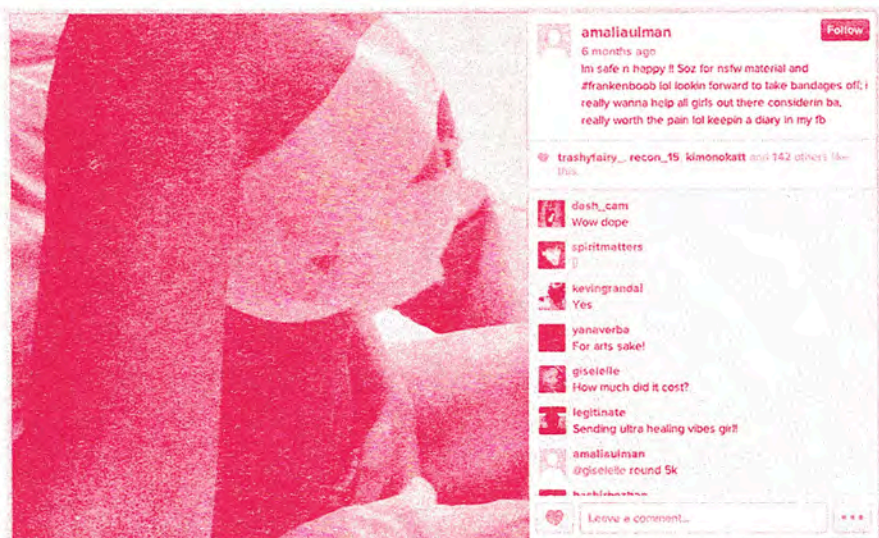
Lorna Simpson, "Stereo Styles," 1988



Lorna Simpson, "Twenty Questions (A Sampler)," 1986



# Beauty &

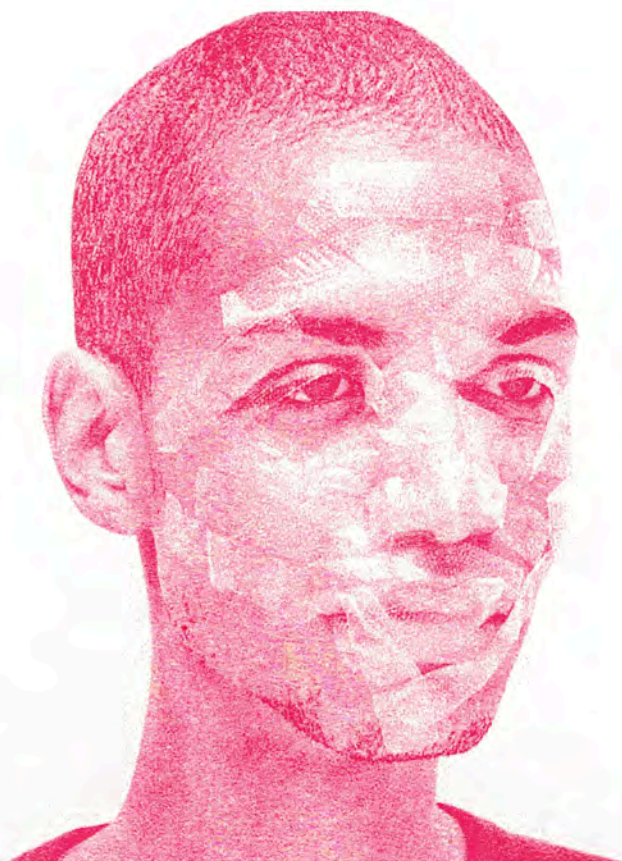


*Amalia Ulman, from "Excellences and Perfections," 2014*

# Risk

Perhaps the question about rejecting or living up to standards of beauty isn't: which is more empowering or "feminist"? But rather: which is more dangerous?

We understand the risks involved with having a body that is perceived as "other" or ugly or unworthy. But do our attempts to make our bodies acceptable make us any safer?



*Wilmer Wilson IV, "Study, Portrait with Hydrogen Peroxide Strips," 2015*



What's the worst that can happen if we modify our bodies in pursuit of beauty standards and gender norms?

Is it the momentary pain of leg hair being torn out by the roots?

Is it an immeasurable amount of time spent fixating on imperfections?

Is it an eating disorder?

Is it chemical burns?

Is it a gnawing sense of inadequacy that can never be satisfied or ignored?

Is it thoughts of suicide?

Is it dryness of the lips?

Is it cancer?

Is it temporary redness and swelling?

Is it humiliation?

Is it death?



*Ana Mendieta, "Untitled (Self-Portrait with Blood)," 1973*



*Kim Kardashian, Blood Facial, 2013*



In “Beauty and the Breast,” the chapter of her book devoted to the boob job, Elizabeth Haiken details the grisly history of trials and errors that eventually led to the current method of breast augmentation. For decades, all kinds of things were surgically implanted into women’s bodies, including paraffin wax, sponges, and industrial-grade liquid silicone.

Many of these women suffered from serious complications afterwards, despite being assured that these procedures were safe, but few of them came forward for fear of humiliation. These health risks were never taken seriously or even studied because the male-dominated medical field couldn’t take breasts, or women for that matter, seriously. Many of the early adopters of breast implants were sex workers and showgirls, which only made medical professionals less likely to take the surgery seriously.

Some women who developed cancer or needed double mastectomies because of their implants tried to sue their doctors but were almost never successful.

According to Elizabeth Haiken, “The women who revealed their infected and traumatized breasts in the glare of media attention also exposed the impossible dilemma American women have faced. The response—that women who were silly enough to get silicone injections deserved what they got—rebuked them for this trespass.” (255)

She goes on to say the reactions to women’s health problems “suggest that some Americans believe that those who would risk health for beauty forfeit the right to protections routinely afforded other Americans.” (255)



*Khloe Kardashian considering breast implants  
in S12E17 of KUWTK, 2016*



*Cindy Sherman, “Untitled #216,”  
1989*



There are known and unknown risks for most forms of body modifications, both medical and non-medical. How thoroughly these risks have been studied usually depends on who is most likely to be affected by them. (It's not surprising, for example, that there have been no extensive studies yet on whether trans women taking estrogen could eventually lead to breast cancer.)

So is it worth the risk? Is it even possible to avoid the risk at all? Can we leave our bodies unmodified?

In his essay, "Dress to Kill, Fight to Win," Dean Spade claims that there is no such thing as an unmodified body.

"When we appeal to some notion of an unmodified or undecorated body, we participate in the adoption of a false neutrality. We pretend, in those moments, that there is a natural body or fashion, a way of dressing or wearing yourself that is not a product of culture. Norms always masquerade as non-choices."

Mark Aguiar,  
"Making Looks,"  
2011

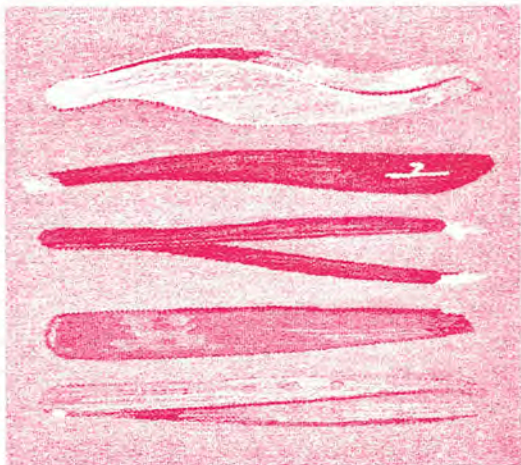


I'D RATHER TAKE MY OWN LIFE  
THAN MAKE MYSELF BEAUTIFUL

He also goes on to claim:

“All of our bodies are modified with regard to gender, whether we seek out surgery or take hormones or not. All of us engage in or have engaged in processes of gender body modification (diets, shaving, exercise regimes, clothing choices, vitamins, birth control, etc) that alter our bodies, just as we’ve all been subjected to gender related processes that altered our bodies (being fed differently because of our gender, being given or denied proper medical care because of our gender, using dangerous products that are on the market only because of their relationship to gender norms, etc). The isolating of only some of these processes for critique, while ignoring others, is a classic exercise in domination.”

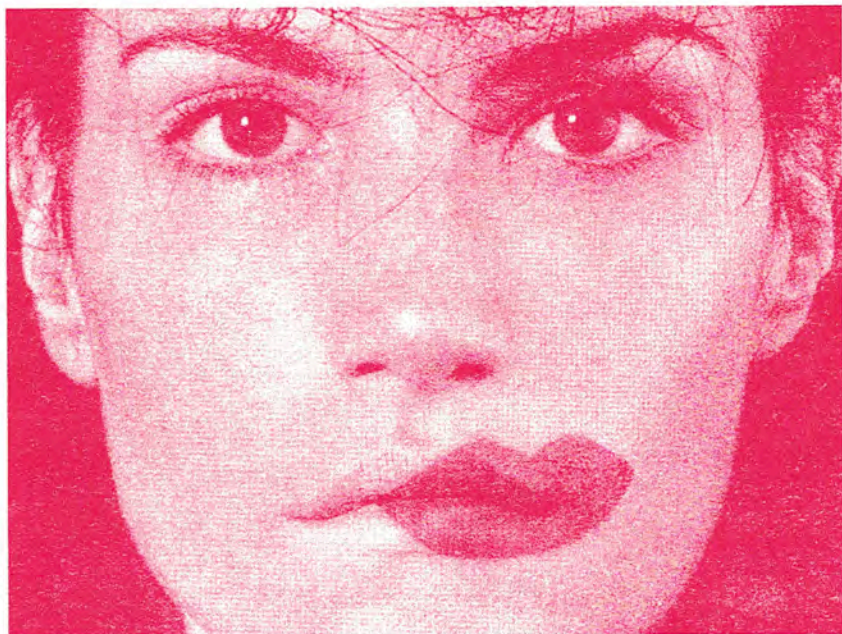
We may have choices about which ways we will modify our bodies (though as Spade points out, some of these modifications are inflicted on us), but we can’t really opt out of modifying our bodies altogether.



Erin M. Riley,  
“Tweezers 2,”  
2016



# Beauty &



*Commes des Garçons, Autumn/Winter 2004 Makeup*

# Creativity

In her book, Haiken also claims that plastic surgeons are at least partially responsible for reinforcing dominant standards of beauty.

“Almost unanimously, plastic surgeons counter that they are inspired by an abstract, artistic ideal of beauty rather than the one that is culturally defined. Throughout the twentieth century, surgeons have claimed that they are artists, veritable sculptors of the human flesh. Where once they relied on geometric measurements, they now claim to carve and mold according to their own highly developed aesthetic sensibilities” (221).

The human body has long been treated as a sculpture, particularly women’s bodies. Whether through diet and exercise, surgical implants and shaping, padding and contouring, the body is mutable. It can be sculpted by adding on or carving away. Women’s bodies are constantly being manipulated.



*Etienne Gros,  
“Les Moussees,”  
2012*



If the body can be a sculpture, then it can be a site of creativity.

There have been so many creative innovations in procedures and materials to sculpt the body. What has been less innovative, is the results of the sculpting.

As Weigel says in her exploration of athleisure, “Spandex is an anagram of “expands,” but as much as its fibers stretch, they also compress. They offer a kind of comfort, but on the condition that you submit to having your body shaped. Rather, they ask you to commit to shaping it in a certain way.”

Or as Elizabeth Haiken says, “Certain faces never come into fashion” (177).



malikas8587

FOLLOW



If we are going to put all of this labor and risk into editing our bodies, then why not have fun with it?

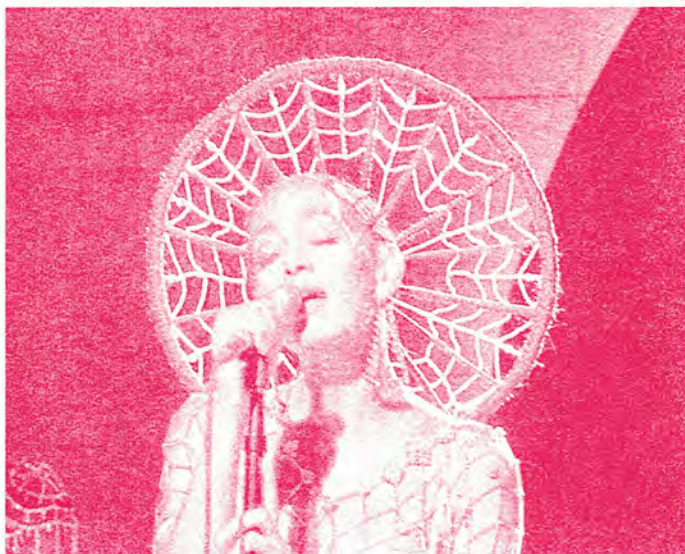


*Liz Barr, "Nude No. 6," 2016*



Dean Spade ends his essay with a proposal, or perhaps a call to action:

“So a part of this fashioning we’re doing needs to be about diversifying the set of aesthetic practices we’re open to seeing, and promoting a possibility of us all looking very very different from one another while we fight together for a new world. I want to be disturbed by what you’re wearing, I want to be shocked and undone and delighted by what you’re doing and how you’re living. And I don’t want anyone to be afraid to put on their look, their body, their clothes anymore. Resistance is what is sexy, its what looks good and is hard to look at and what sometimes requires explanation. Why would we want to do things that don’t require explanation, that are obvious, impervious to critique because no one even notices we’re doing them?”



*Shani Crowe, braids/headress designed for Solange's SNL performance, 2016*

*Commes des Garçons,  
Dress Meets Body,  
Spring 1997*



*Leigh Bowery  
photographed by  
Werner Pawlok,  
1988*







Hannah Witherspoon aka  
@insect.eyes, 2016



SSION, still from "Clown,"  
2010"



Yayoi Kusama, 1968

In a piece titled “How to Optimize Your Flesh Prison,” Jamie Lauren Keiles also rallies for a more creative approach to body modification:

“Welcome to the big, cool future where we are no longer limited to imagining ourselves as the reconciliation of predetermined labels in tension. In other words, we are living in a moment with more readily available quinoa brands than personal brands, and this must be stopped. Opt out of gender. Strive to be pretty and ugly at the same time.”

Keiles ends the piece with a concession to the risks I’ve previously mentioned:

“Projecting a coherent and awesome aesthetic vision can be thrilling, but it is tiresome work and definitely not an obligation. When we get dressed each morning, being badass and freaky are not the only considerations that come into play. Sometimes, things like personal safety, passing, group identification, and religious beliefs need to be taken into account. Make sure you give yourself permission to put these concerns ahead of any aesthetic projects when necessary. There is nothing wrong with the path of least resistance, and it is okay to wear jeans, or sweatpants, or a dumb Ann Taylor sweater set when you need to. People are racist and transphobic and otherwise violently disgusting, and acknowledging this truth to make your day easier is in no way the same as giving up or selling out.”



I'm excited by what Dean Spade describes as "aesthetic resistance" and what Jamie Lauren Keiles calls "a coherent and awesome aesthetic vision" because once I realized how much maintenance I already put into my body and gender presentation, I realized how many other possibilities there are.

Maybe not in my day-to-day life, but at least in my artistic practice, I want to conceptualize the body as an ongoing sculpture and explore the creative possibilities of body modification by abstracting mundane beauty rituals and repurposing gendered cosmetic products in unexpected ways. And I'm energized by others' work that also presents new ways of thinking about bodies and beauty.

Most of all, I find comfort in the idea of bodies being fun and strange creative projects, works in progress but not in pursuit of one unreachable ideal. We can look at our bodies in more open ways rather than along the binary metrics of masculine/feminine, good/bad, right/wrong.



Dorothea Tanning, "Nue couchée (Reclining Nude)" 1969



*Ann Moody's studio, 2016*



*Zanele Muholi, "Bester I  
(Mayotte archipelago)," 2015*



*Kim Chi photographed by Adam  
Ouahmane*



*Juliana Huxtable, "Untitled in the Rage (Nibiru  
Cataclysm)," 2015*





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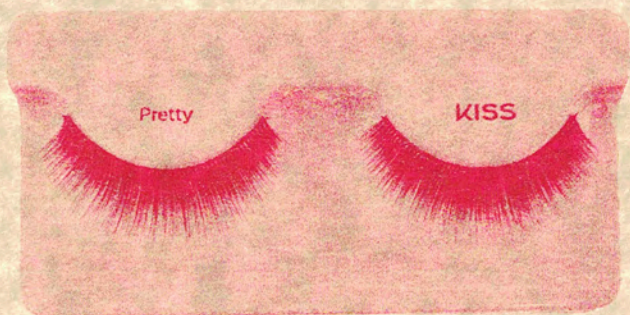
*Liz Barr, "Eyelashes," 2016*

Liz Barr is an interdisciplinary artist based in Chicago. She makes work about bodies and how we build them. Learn more about her work at [www.liz-barr.com](http://www.liz-barr.com), or follow her @lizbarrrr on Instagram.











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