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As told to Sasha Geffen, 2633 words.

Tags: Art, Design, Inspiration, Beginnings, Adversity, Identity, Anxiety.



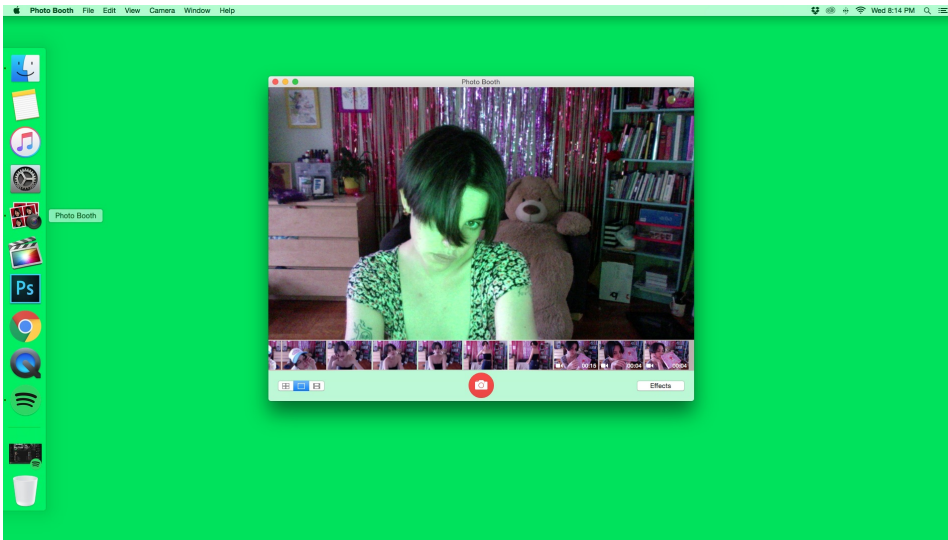
Molly Soda on making art from your online history

Your recent music video for Blanket's "I Wish All Roses Were Microphones" documents the private ritual of being nervous about something—a dance party—and trying to study up for it by yourself. What do you find productive about examining that private, anxious space?

The internet is funny because we think everyone's being vulnerable. We're supposed to be intimate online, but obviously we're curating ourselves, whether we're conscious of it or not. We're creating these mood boards of our lives. I think what's interesting is not what we're presenting, but what we're doing behind the screen, what our actions are. A screen recording of what someone does on their computer or on their phone in a day is like a diary entry at this point. We don't consider it. It's a weird mindless task, even though we're super affected by what we're clicking on. It is directly doing something to us.

How do you stay online without letting it overwhelm you?

It overwhelms me all the time. I literally feel terrible all the time. I simply have to stop scrolling. I can't scroll anymore. You really can't control what you see. You can mute everyone on your feed, but it's like putting a band-aid over the problem. I've tried to step away and surf the web the way that I like to surf the web, actively engage with things that are less personal, less involving people I know. What was really fun in the beginning of the internet, for me as a teenager, was that I didn't know anyone and I was coming to it totally blank. I was excited to explore. That anonymity can feel good because you don't feel so much weight there.



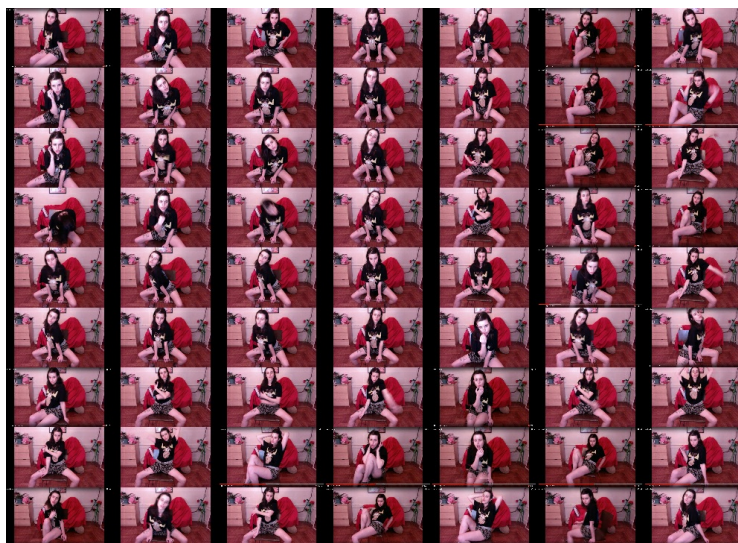
A lot of your work draws upon that era of the early internet. What's important to you about preserving those aesthetics?

That time was so important not only for our personal development but also for the development of the internet. There's so many threads from Myspace to Instagram. It's a shame that we are only now thinking about preserving certain things. There's a lot of great people doing a lot of great preservation work, but it's too late for certain things. It feels really bad to feel like part of you is just gone. A lot of people are probably like, "Good riddance, I burned my diaries and I don't need any pictures of my scene

phase." But I think all of that is important to have. There's a lot of interesting information there that should be considered. I think about Myspace all the time because it was the first concept I had of internet popularity: strangers and meeting people IRL and ideas of authenticity. If you took a Myspace-angle photo, you were fake. The top 8 was this big, messed-up thing that I think we still subconsciously play into in a lot of ways. But everything from Myspace is just gone. Old Myspace will never exist again. All of that information has just been purged. So what do we do with that?

I keep thinking about how femme the early internet was. Now it's more dangerous for women to be online, even though women created so much of what the internet is, culturally. Does the idea of a lost feminine internet drive your preservation impulse?

Absolutely. I think about the aesthetics of the internet changing a lot, too. We have a lot less control over our profiles now. With Livejournal, Myspace, and Xanga, people were teaching themselves how to code, learning how to make things. I don't see that as much anymore. Maybe teens are still doing that to a certain degree. But I think the aesthetics really got smashed. There are no more glitter graphics, only reaction gifs. It's really streamlined and white and blue, with no music. It's a little strange.



How do you hold the ghosts of your past selves? Seeing everyone's nostalgia for AIM, when it shut down, was complicated for me. Obviously there's nostalgia for a naive internet, but I was also reckoning with having been a really miserable teenager at the time I was using AIM. Those aesthetics are so bound up in my unhappiness. How do you reconcile your preservation drive with who you were when these aesthetics were ubiquitous?

It's easy to forget how unhappy we were. I've archived all of my Livejournal and Xanga and all that stuff I kept through college. When we look back on stuff like that, we're like, "Oh, that was so great, that was so fun, isn't that cute? Isn't that so retro?" But then when we actually get to the details, we're embarrassed. I read that stuff now and I'm like, "Wow, I was a terror. I would never want anyone to see that I wrote this." There is this idea that your old self is coming back to haunt you, which I think is why we focus on aesthetic more than the actual details of our teen selves. It's like remembering a bad relationship, or remembering things about yourself that are still true and that you wish weren't true.

A lot of your work engages directly with that shame instead of smoothing it over and focusing on the aesthetics.

Definitely. I'm really interested in why you feel embarrassed about something, why something is shameful to you. How to pull that out of yourself, how to deal with it. In a lot of ways, it comes from a sense of self-protection or control, "If I embarrass myself, it's different than if someone embarrasses me. I'm willingly exposing myself so I can't get hurt." I'm also thinking about the psychology of why something's embarrassing and what makes something a guilty pleasure, or what makes you want to hide something. What's the impulse behind that? You can see it a lot on Instagram, the way we interact with each other online. A lot of my work deals with the reactions that people give me: secondhand embarrassment they might be feeling or shame attached to something they see.



Your work can be very vulnerable, and you've said before that you try to respond to everyone who reaches out to you. Is it difficult to communicate with strangers who treat you as though you're very close?

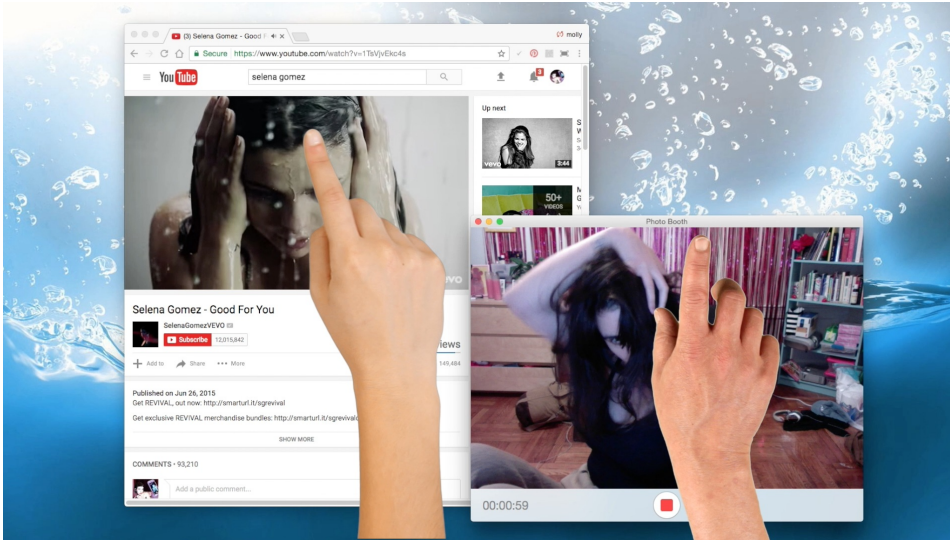
Yeah. I understand where it comes from. We're all projecting onto each other. Everyone is functioning in different ways for one another. I think it's normal and I understand why people do it, so I'm not put off by it, but I also think that no one is who they seem. It's kind of a shitty thing to say, because I don't want to say I'm deceiving everyone and I'm actually a bad person. No one's good or bad. Everyone's just complicated, and they're showing parts of themselves, but you don't really know anyone in this way. Digital communication speeds up feelings of closeness, even just texting with someone that you met once. I find that this is a common thing that happens with a lot of people, and something that would happen to me a lot growing up. I would meet people and build these really complex relationships with them via a phone or messenger, but then when it came down to it, even though we had shared all this information, we still didn't really know each other. I think the internet accelerates feelings of intimacy. There's a lot of value in that, but it also isn't going to encompass everything.

In your work, do you play with persona or deliberately exaggerate different aspects of your personality?

A little bit, but I'm never giving false information. If anything, I'm inflating certain parts, especially when I'm dressing up or wearing a lot of makeup. I generally don't leave my house like that. I generally don't interact with the world in that way. There's never been a time where Molly Soda was not me. When I was younger, I did more character-based work. It left a bad taste in my mouth because I always felt like there's a fine line between playing a character and making fun of a certain type of person. I never want that to be read into anything I do. I don't want to mock anyone.

You recently posted a remake of Liam Kyle Sullivan's "Shoes" video. Ten years after that video went viral, in retrospect, there's something a little weird about a straight man performing a teen girl drag character. It was a little relieving to see you reverse that drag, lip syncing to a man mimicking a teenage girl. Was that your intent when you put that video together?

No, actually. I was working on a show about the Myspace era, and I was thinking about the viral videos I really liked. I rewatched "Shoes" and I realized that so many people had recreated it, all teen girls in 2007 or 2008. I was actually inspired by them. When I'm watching YouTube, I'm watching cover videos and makeup videos and anything that a teen or young adult woman is doing in her room by herself or with her friends. I just love recreating other people's work. It's more fun for me than the original version. It's just really playful. It's something I always did at sleepovers. Me and my friends would make music videos to "Crazy In Love." We would film ourselves dancing. This was right at the beginning of YouTube, but none of it ever went online.



Amateur, spontaneous recreations are always going to be interesting because they invert the power dynamic of the original media.

I'm just way more interested in things that people do without the intention of it being anything. There's this depersonalization that happens the bigger you get online. The more people pay attention to you, the more you have to start answering for yourself or protecting yourself. That has been the basic mode of communication for almost everyone now because of the way that Instagram and Twitter work. We think about ourselves as a product. That's why it's really fun to see a teen doing something in 2008, but seeing a teen livestreaming on Musical.ly now and telling you to click "like" on all their things feels really fucked up.

Why does it feel fucked up?

It's kind of beautiful because they're literally telling you flat-out what they want. "Give me hearts." I downloaded Musical.ly for a while. It's exclusively teens, and there's a livestream function, and every night I would sit and stare at these teens that I didn't know. They would be moving around and lip-syncing a little bit, but usually they'd just be like, "Let's see if we can get to 4 million likes!" I'd sit there tapping the heart for them. I don't even know what they get. I don't know what the incentive is. Or watching YouTube beauty videos where everyone has their line: "Like, comment, subscribe, click this, click here." It feels really wild. All that language is so good because it's almost like it doesn't mean anything. I think it means money, in a lot of ways. I think what it boils down to is "I want money."

Sometimes it's literal money, like with monetized YouTube channels, and sometimes it's just social currency.

Do you know what rating communities are? There was a weird pre-scene aesthetic on Livejournal in 2005 or 2004. You would apply to be part of a rating community, and you would look at other people's applications. It was like, do you look cool? Are you hot? You would have to say your favorite band. You'd have to post like six pictures of yourself. Some of them would rip you apart.

I remember those. I looked at them, but I never applied. They intimidated me.

The first time I ever applied to one, I got laughed at because I didn't know what I was doing. They were making fun of my eyebrows. Maybe this is where Molly Soda started – it was one of the first times I became aware of what I looked like for the internet. That I could control that, that I needed to photograph myself in a certain way, or I needed to change something about myself. It was like, "Oh, I have to take better pictures for my rating community application. It's not that I'm ugly, it's that I need to dress better and to have better hair and to like better bands." Which is a terrible thing, but that's what I thought.



You realized you could control how you were seen. At what point did that become something positive and self-directed instead of an attempt to impress people?

Sadly, I still feel the need to impress people.

Well, that's what Instagram is. The psychology behind rating communities still acts on the internet now.

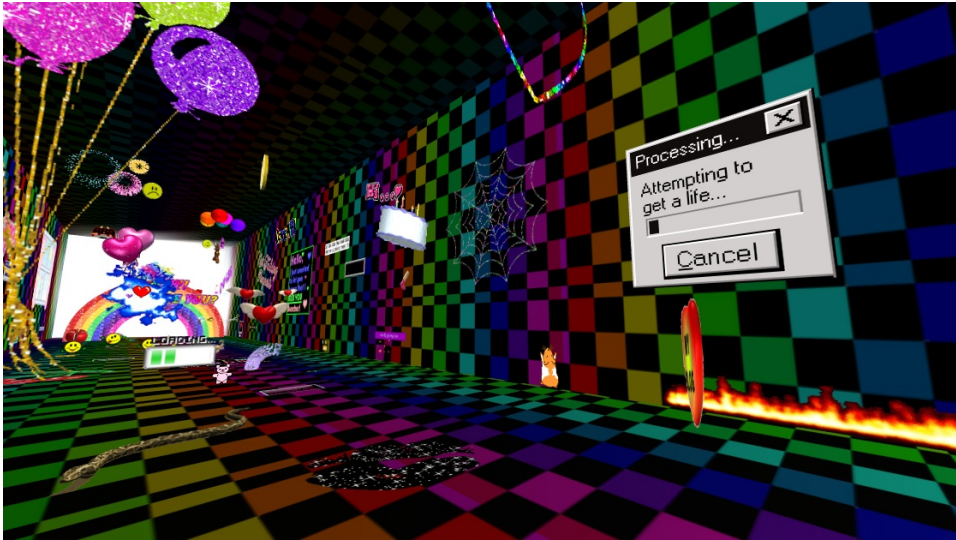
No one really acknowledges it in this way. They're just like, Instagram makes me feel bad! And I'm like, OK, but why? What's going on here? What are we doing to alienate each other through our screens? That shouldn't be what's happening.

Social platforms encourage you to do more of what gets the most likes. It's not always the healthiest.

It's the Pavlovian bell. We are all looking for the food bowl with the bell. I feel bound up in the internet for basic survival sometimes. That doesn't necessarily feel good. The internet's not controlled by good people.

Do you feel there's a difference between the work you do for galleries or commissions and the work you post on social media for yourself?

It all bleeds together to a certain degree, but I don't feel like I'm working when I'm looking at Instagram or Twitter. It's more when I'm archiving things, or curating things, or when I'm staring at a screen editing a video. Then I really feel like I'm engaged. But other times, I'll stumble across something so beautiful and so perfect that I never would have found had I not Googled, "Are spiders good luck?" Everything is work. Or it's not work, because everything I do is fun for the most part. It's confusing to me. You're like, OK, I'm going to sit down and make art. Sometimes, it's like, how do you do that? Some days it's harder, and other days you're just scrolling through Tumblr and you see a picture and you're like, this is the most amazing, weirdest thing I've ever seen and you go off on a crazy tangent and are really inspired. It all bleeds into itself.



Molly Soda recommends:

GifCities. This is a great place to source .gifs, Internet Archive provides such an amazing service that really aids me in my own practice.

My favorite part of twitter is the sheer amount of unusual bot accounts you can stumble upon and follow, this one is my current favorite.

In another life i would be an entomologist, i've been obsessed with insects from a very young age, this IG account blows my mind.

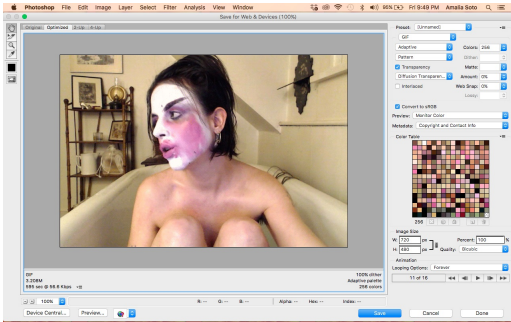
Liz Barr, "Body Works." Liz makes some of my favorite zines, this one is my favorite.

This article about Glossier by Rina Nkulu is one of the best things I've read in a long time. It takes a critical look at Instagram, authenticity and "real" women and beautifully articulates a lot of feelings I'd been sitting with.

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Vocation
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Fact



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