# A GOOD TIME TO BE A POST-INTERNET ARTIST

Sophia Halloway, Canberra

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In a world where we pass our days in isolation, increasingly attached to our devices as a source of connection, it is post-internet art that distinguishes itself from an onslaught of content. Post-internet art offers an immersive experience that cannot be replicated in virtual tours and digital showrooms. Jess Herrington is a post-internet artist and neuroscience PhD candidate at the Australian National University in Canberra who produces augmented and virtual reality works that interrogate how we perceive ourselves on and offline. Herrington's practice is primarily focused on face filters, available on her Instagram account @jess.herrington, which create an augmented reality by adding virtual objects to a subject's face. The spectator becomes the subject as Herrington blurs the lines between author and audience. Increasingly alone with ourselves, the inward-looking nature of Herrington's gaze demands our attention.

Post-internet art gets a bad rap. It is differentiated from net art, which emerged in the earliest days of the internet, as art 'since' the internet rather than art 'on' the internet. It describes a state of mind characterised by the ubiquity of internet culture. New York-based curator Brian Droitcour is critical of the term. He describes it as one invented simply for marketing, to 'lacquer art with an intellectual finish as thin as it is opaque'.[1] Suzanne Treister, a British pioneer of new media and web-based art in the 1990s, describes post-internet art as 'market-driven and apolitical',[2] lacking the critical awareness of earlier internet art.

Criticisms of post-internet art risk exacerbating existing art-world hierarchies. The internet has had a huge impact on accessibility in all forms. Artists can share their work without the usual gatekeepers of an elitist art world. Digital works can be easily 'loaned' to regional galleries that don't have the appropriate
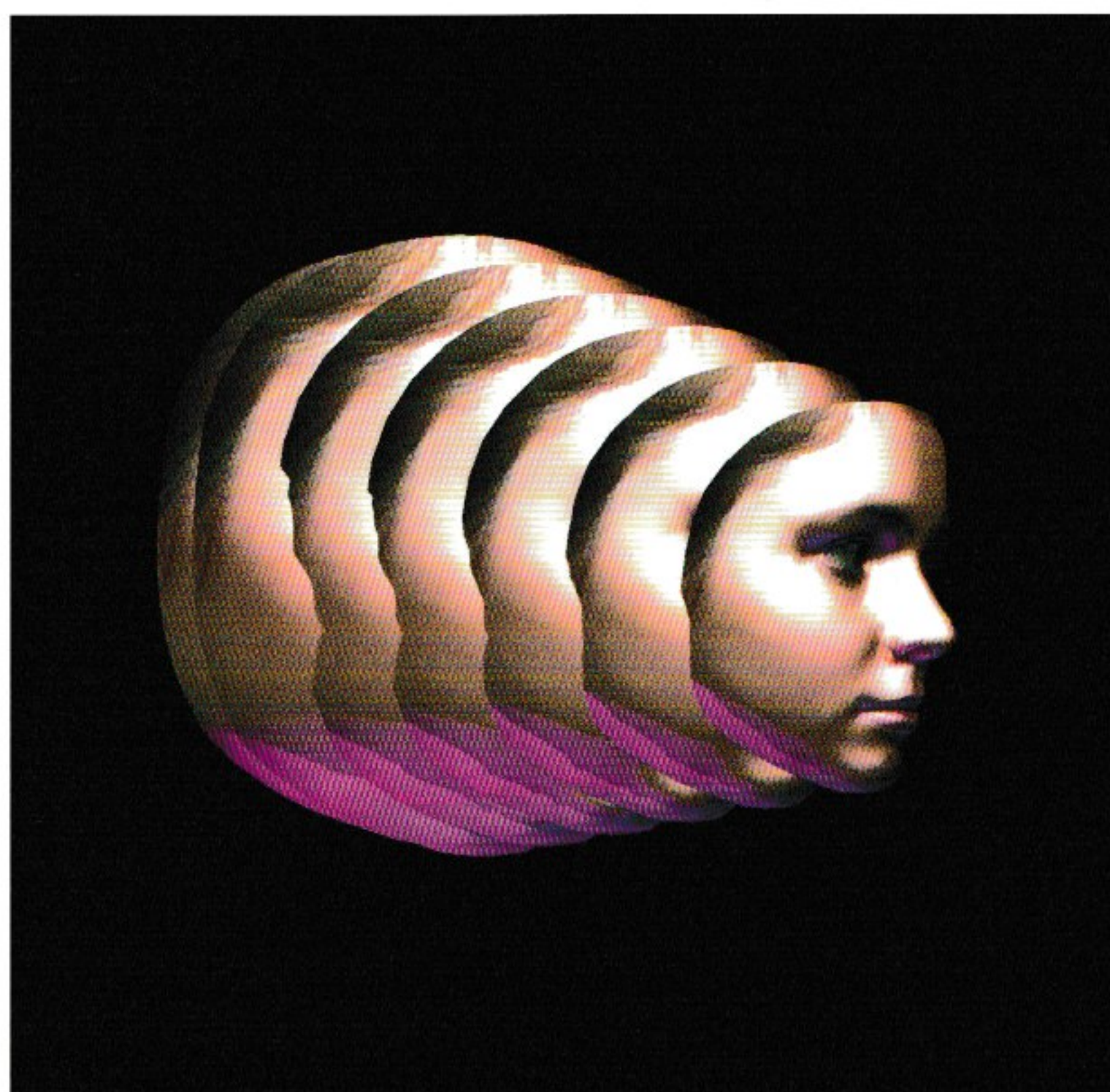
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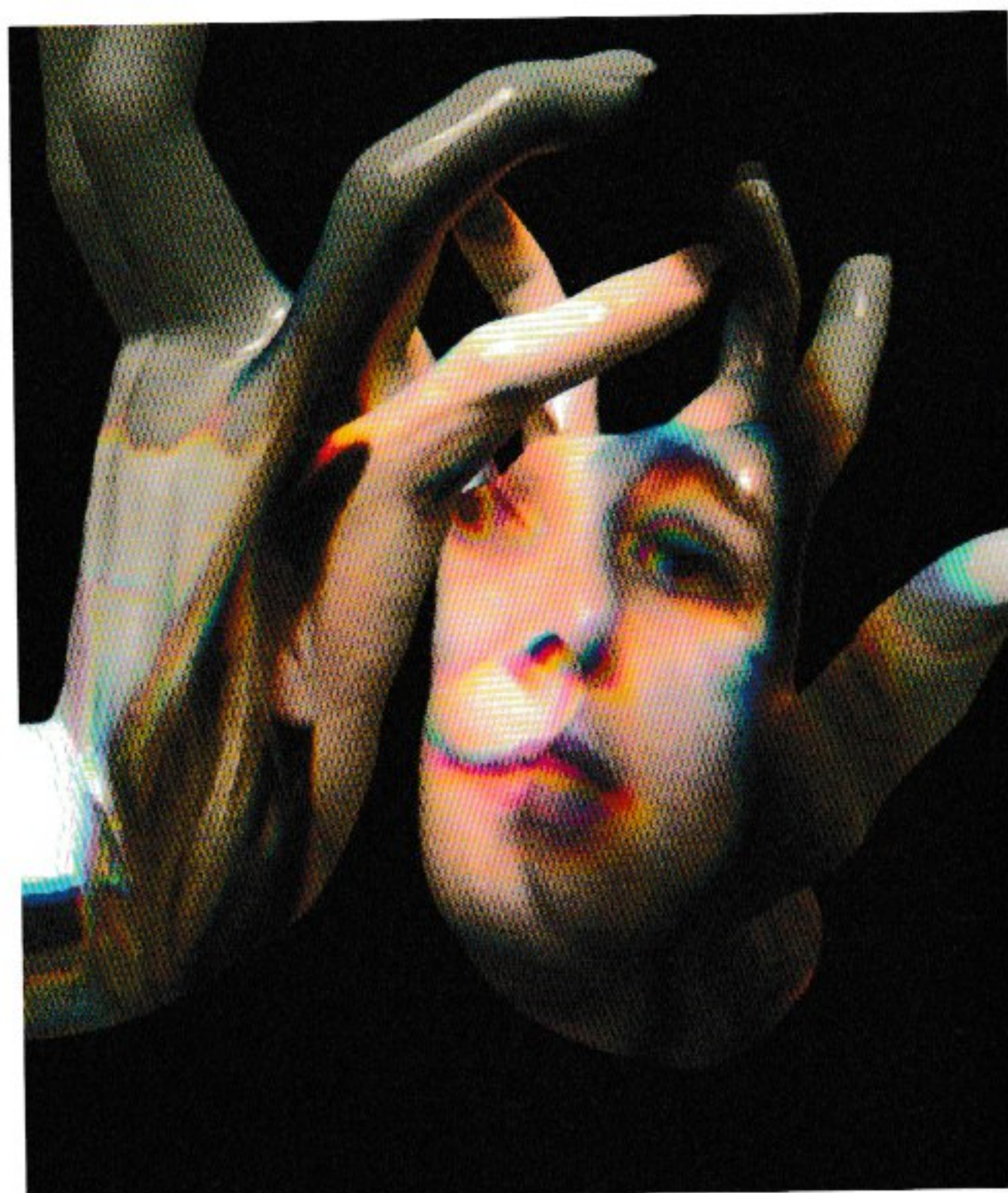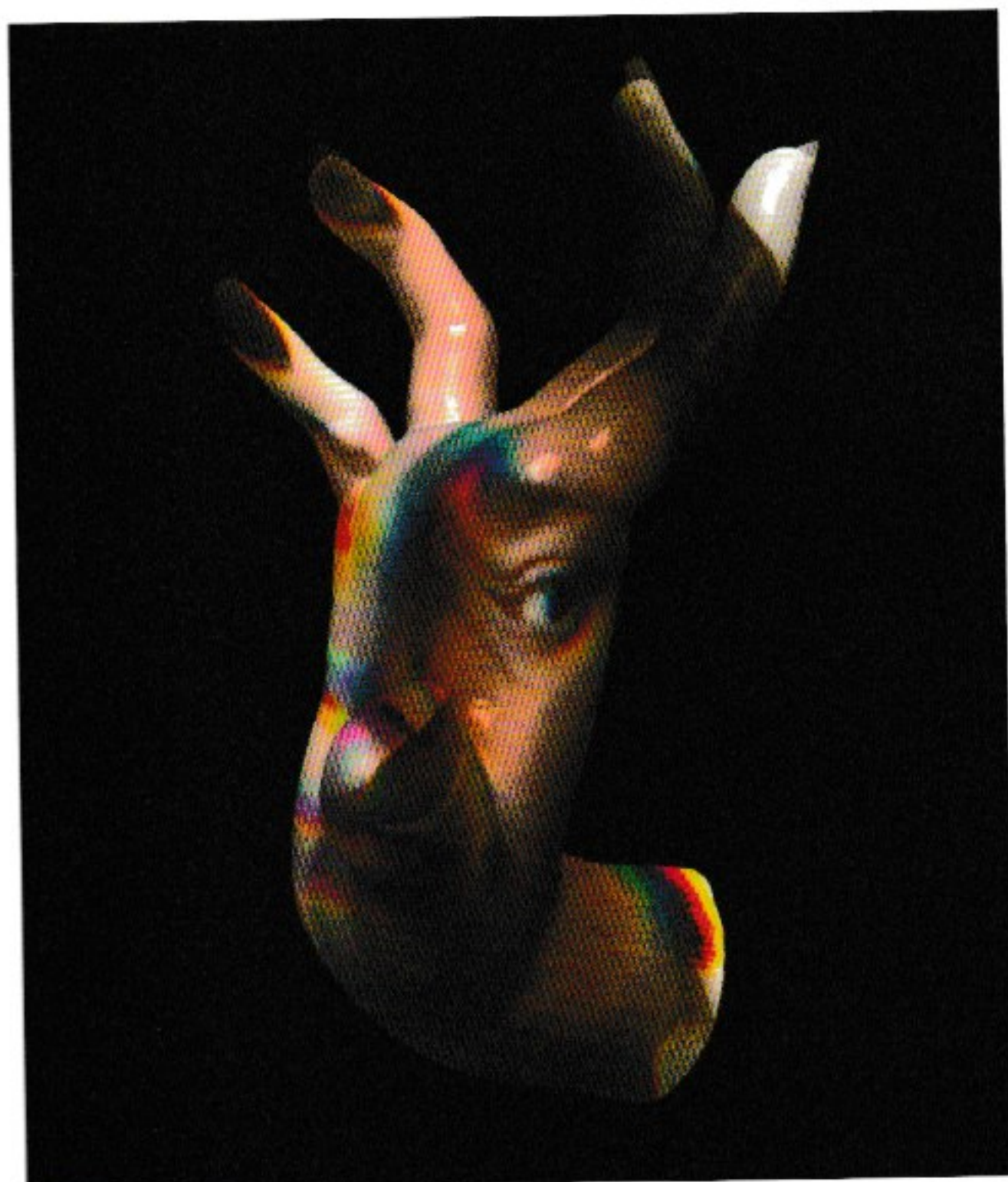to continue practising in a COVID-19 world.



conservation conditions to exhibit more traditional works. The internet has provided opportunities to reach audiences who ordinarily wouldn't walk in the front door of a gallery by finding them in their own homes and on their own devices. And in a world with COVID-19, the internet has become a lifeline to our loved ones and livelihoods.

Digital art has drastically changed Herrington's practice. 'In terms of making a living as an artist, I have only successfully been able to do so since creating digital work,' she says.[3] Social media offers a vehicle to showcase experimental work, leading to commissions, and to reach a far greater audience – to date, Herrington's face filters have been viewed over 24 million times. Herrington is not limited by geography, undertaking online residencies such as her project with Hervisions, a multidisciplinary femme-focused digital platform celebrating the intersection of art, technology and culture. Digital intervention has changed artistic practice forever, and post-internet artists are uniquely positioned to continue practising in a COVID-19 world.

Post-internet art may not be overtly political in the way of its net art predecessor, but inevitably reveals something about the ways we interact in our digital and analogue lives. Herrington comments that people often search for meaning in her work, but that 'it's not "conceptual art" in that sense. It's about engaging with and experiencing the work.' That said, Herrington's practice, which is heavily informed by her research in neuroscience, offers an intriguing perspective on visual perception. Inevitably, her face filters interrogate the perception of faces and how we represent ourselves in the internet age. They probe the individual experience of looking, at oneself and others, and offer up an alternate perspective on the gaze.

Social media has been criticised for distancing us from meaningful experiences in real life, with

the sleek black mirror of our devices being like the glassy surface of Narcissus's pool. Yet, as Herrington interrogates in her work and research, humanity's collective obsession with selfies has an important neurological underpinning. From infancy, we are attuned to faces as a means to survive. We see faces everywhere and imagine them where they don't exist.[4] We are particularly captivated by our own. Given our fascination with faces, Herrington describes them as 'a good way to hack into the brain'. Face filters, which enable us to integrate our own profiles, immediately command our attention.

Historically, theories on the gaze have necessarily focused on a gendered dynamic: the male artist gazing on his female subject (or object) and, more recently, artists looking to subvert that dynamic by changing the gender paradigm. But what are the implications when we are looking at ourselves? Face filters turn the gaze inwards in a kind of quasi-self-portraiture. The common expectation is that selfies are a form of self-commodification, presented externally in a search for recognition and acceptance

in the form of Instagram likes. In the case of face filters, the intention is not to make the subject more beautiful – in fact, Instagram purposefully bans filters which have such an effect – but instead to provide an opportunity to self-interpellate, to bring the self into being and create our own visual identity. We are the object of our own circular gaze.

1.  See Brian Droitcour, 'The perils of post-internet art', *Art in America*, 29 October 2014: *www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/the-perils-of-post-internet-art-63040/*, accessed 28 March 2020.

2.  This quote was taken from a personal statement made on Treister's website. See *www.suzannetreister.net/PostSurveillanceArt/works.html*, accessed 28 March 2020.

3.  All quotations of Jess Herrington are drawn from the writer's conversations with the artist on 15 January and 16 March 2020.

4.  This phenomenon, known as pareidolia, is the tendency to incorrectly perceive meaningful stimulus in a random visual pattern – for example, seeing faces in inanimate objects or shapes in clouds. See Elizabeth Martin (ed.), *Concise Medical Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2015, n.p.

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