Digital Feminisms and the Impasse:
Time, Disappearance, and Delay in Neoliberalism

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Introduction: "Cyborgian Goddesses?"

In a 2012 essay on intersectionality and assemblage theory, Jasbir Puar thinks through the future trajectories of feminist concepts of identity and affect in the digital age by staging a playful negotiation between the feminist figures of the goddess and the cyborg. By way of conclusion, she asks the (rhetorical) question, "But why disaggregate the two when there surely must be cyborgian goddesses in our midst?" (63). For us, the image of the cyborgian goddess brings to mind animé super-heroines and Lara Croft-style video game characters. These hybrid figures—part robot, part fairy, and part pagan deity—can defy all binaries and laws of the virtual and the material world, while also moving swiftly between such worlds and binaries. Cyborgian goddesses can be anything and everything, but they can also dissolve into blurry pixelated nothingness. They imply flesh and machinery while always remaining digital fantasies. They can move with incredible speed through virtual spaces around the globe, and thus act beyond the constraints of time.

We begin with the image of the cyborgian goddess here not because it represents an affirmative vision for the future or a feminist utopia. Rather, this image raises uncomfortable questions about the status of feminism today. Caught in a circuit where subversive gestures are appropriated by consumerist marketing strategies, where digital heterotopias give way to the constraints of physical and material presence, and where future-oriented visions of new gender arrangements collide with archaic conceptions of the feminine, feminism finds itself at an impasse. In this context, the image of the cyborgian goddess gives body to the very bind that is the starting point for this essay: how are feminist politics possible in this contemporary moment, a moment defined by the intersection of the digital and the material, when dreams of feminist utopias and neoliberal forms of marketization and consumerism coexist?

The increased use of digital media has altered, influenced, and shaped feminism in the twenty-first century by giving rise to changed modes of communication and engagement with feminist ideas, different configurations of participation and access to feminist movements, and new forms of protest. Bringing together diverse constituencies, digital feminisms tend to depart from an

equality- or rights-based framework for pursuing justice through conventional state or legal channels, creating instead a space to experiment with emergent political forms. Arising from the interface of digital platforms, artist projects, performances, and embodied protests, digital feminisms constitute a multivalent and contested site for negotiations with the present, simultaneously offering visible resistance, pleasurable cooperation, contentious action, and immediate and endless opportunities for commodification.

As shown by the rise of hashtag activism, digital platforms can help to demonstrate the interplay of individual stories and collective narratives, revealing the pervasive, structural nature of sexist and racist violence. In feminist performances and actions, digital media are employed to make visible the global scale of gender- and race-based oppression, to link protest movements across national borders, and to explore the relationships among embodied experience, aesthetic representation, and the politics of recognition. Feminist scholars likewise engage with digital platforms in ways that have transformed feminist theoretical and activist projects and academic communities, enabling new modes of collaboration and opening up different fields of inquiry.[1]

Building on our previous work on digital feminisms and contemporary protest actions staged by Pussy Riot, Femen, Slutwalk, Muslimah Pride, and others, this essay considers the way feminist activism takes shape in the context of time-based feminist performance art (see Baer; Smith-Prei and Stehle).[2] Specifically, we investigate how the formal and aesthetic interventions into digital culture of Noah Sow, Chicks on Speed, and Hito Steyerl articulate political resistance within feminist impasses and neoliberal circularities. Our analysis focuses on how these artists engage digital platforms to make visible otherwise imperceptible aspects of the present, including consumerism, wellness, imperial warfare as crisis ordinariness, and modes of digital hypervisibility, perception, and representation. Not only do these works uncover, grapple with, and potentially dissolve the bind of feminism, but they also work against the imperceptibility of neoliberalism as second nature or common sense.

Critics of digital media have described the way the digital is implicated in changing modes of visibility and perception that have been shaped by neoliberal capitalism, with its endless commodification of all aspects of life. The art historian Jonathan Crary, for example, describes how it is possible, and indeed desirable, to work, shop, and buy around the clock through digital interfaces in the new 24/7 economy. However, somewhat paradoxically, amidst the constant illumination of our 24/7 world, Crary finds a marked "disintegration of human abilities to see, especially of an ability to join visual discriminations with social and ethical valuations. With an infinite cafeteria of solicitation and attraction perpetually available, 24/7 disables vision through processes of homogenization, redundancy, and acceleration" (33). As Crary argues, "[m]ost images are now

produced and circulated in the service of maximizing the amount of time spent in habitual forms of individual self-management and self-regulation" (47). For Crary, the result is nothing less than the remaking of attention into repetitive, preordained actions and responses. In this account, sleep appears as the only realm of contemporary experience in which we can abandon ourselves to unproductive time; it is also the only moment in which we turn ourselves over to the care of others, briefly surrendering our strategic individualism.[3]

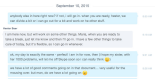
In contrast to such accounts, we explore the way that digital feminisms work with neoliberal circularities—cycles of resistance and consumption, meaning making and undoing, action and reaction—to recalibrate time, perception, and visibility. Considering how emergent aesthetic modes operate within the paradoxical context of the contemporary political moment, we tell a different story about how feminist action, creative work, and political engagement interact to define our sense of immediacy and the present. Crucial to this story is an emphasis on time as it manifests itself in digital feminist negotiations of pasts, presents, and futures. Most accounts relate the histories of feminist movements through the metaphor of waves, which arrive sequentially and supersede what came before. Such accounts link feminism to narratives of historical progress and future-oriented temporalities. By contrast, we consider the temporal and historical entanglements of contemporary feminisms, which play with location, visibility, and disappearance to create new spaces for feminist connection and solidarity.

One: Digital Feminisms and Neoliberal Circularities

While digital feminisms contest increasing inequality and the precarious status of oppressed groups in advanced capitalism, they are also intertwined with entrepreneurial discourses of individualism and self-optimization. As such, they represent a crucial site for considering the gendering of neoliberalism, which constructs women as its ideal subjects. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff have argued that "it is *women* who are called on to self-manage, to self-discipline. To a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen" (7). In neoliberalism, in other words, women are required to engage not only in labor dictated by the market and consumerism, but also in labor directed at the self. Such self-optimization—of the body, of fashion, of appearance, but also in regard to social roles—takes place in a paradoxical space defined by prescriptive normativity, on the one hand, and the ideology of free choice, on the other. This circuit of labor/self-labor also has implications for activism. Digital protests articulate projects of resistance that expose normativity and critique ideologies of free choice; the formal and aesthetic language of these

critiques is, in turn, often co-opted by neoliberal modes of commodification, privatization, and individualization.

The neoliberal co-optation of contemporary feminist activism can be seen, for example, in the appropriation and commodification of Pussy Riot's aesthetic for a range of advertisements, as well as in the shift of media attention away from the anonymous collective actions of the group and towards the private lives and charismatic personalities of its individual members, especially Nadya Tolokonnikova. In a slightly different way, this tendency was also at work in the decision by the initiator of the campaign #YesAllWomen to stop posting under that hashtag because "I am not for it being monetized and co-opted" (@gildedspine, Twitter posting, August 13, 2014). These examples illustrate the bind faced by feminist politics today, when the signs and symbols of protest are commodified and antihierarchical modes of collective action are replaced with notions of individual empowerment.



It is this bind that German "artist, musician, author, playwright, producer, scholar and activist" Noah Sow ("Bio") addresses in her multimedia project "Wall of Wellness." This project includes an art and storytelling installation and a "conceptual photofilm," "Acts of Wellness," which premiered at the arts festival "48h Neukölln" in Berlin in the summer of 2014; this exhibition featured a space in which activists were invited to network and to display their own artistic work. The project also involves a website, published in December 2014, featuring "Acts of Wellness" along with a downloadable wellness song and poem (in German and English versions). On the website, Sow describes the film as follows:

> 4 women* with 4 disposable cameras each commit an act of wellness
> In the format 'photofilm', multiple properties of time and temporality interweave: the past, conserved in the still image, the present, the moment of watching and perceiving, the future, the viewer's focus on the narration and next image of the ongoing film. "Act of Wellness" renegotiates temporality, but does so as a collective experience of Women* of Color: **being** arranged in historiography, arranging oneself in a presence in which our lives are heavily affected by the effects of historical violence, and, through breaking historical patterns, shaping our personal and collective future.
> Form:
> Kalimba-Interludes are playing variations inspired by "I'm every woman".
> No photo editing, no staging, no script. (Sow)

In image and voice, the film presents the accounts of the four women—Neo, Victoria, OlgaLiby, and Salem—who document their experience committing acts of wellness as acts of resistance to a white, neoliberal culture of luxury, which

otherwise dominates and dictates the commodified wellness industry. The film combines still photographs from the women's disposable cameras with a voice-over, which narrates their answers to a series of interview questions. The images we see display private, individual experiences of taking time out for acts of wellness, images that show fractured bodies or body parts, at times too close, too dark, or too fuzzy to discern, non-contextualized, or highly "ordinary" in their embeddedness in the everyday: legs on a bed, an empty table set for company, shots of a television set, or blurry lights of the city at night (see Fig. 1). While the film is divided into four "chapters" that document each woman's story, indicated by a title card displaying her name on the screen, all four stories are narrated by the same voice-over (presumably Sow's own voice), which provides a strangely unitary viewing experience. Though at times this voice-over seems to evacuate the specificity of these personal narratives, it also serves to stitch together the women's individual stories, and, when paired with the reference to the Chaka Khan song popularized by Whitney Houston from which the musical interludes are inspired, the video's construction gestures toward the collective experience of Women of Color referenced in Sow's artist statement and thus toward a sense of belonging and community.

Figure 1. "Acts of Wellness," Noah Sow, 2014

"Acts of Wellness" begins with a two-minute introduction that frames the women's stories by highlighting the culture of utility around the body and the invisibility of people of color in spaces devoted to wellness. Citing bell hooks's statement that "choosing wellness is an act of political resistance" that promotes self-recovery from structural violence for black women, the narrator explains,

“Wellness ist das Radikalste, was wir tun können. Die Verweigerung, uns kaputt zu machen. Die Hingabe an uns selbst, statt an den Feind. Der konsequente Entzug von Aufmerksamkeit und Interesse, selbst wenn es nur für eine Stunde ist” ‘wellness is the most radical thing we can do. The refusal to let ourselves be broken. Indulging ourselves instead of the enemy. The concerted withdrawal of attention and interest, even if it’s just for one hour.’[4] To visualize the inequity (and absurdity) of the culture of self-care, we see screenshots of image searches for the terms “wellness” and “relaxation” that depict white people practicing yoga on beaches and relaxing at spas as well as humorous images of animals in prone positions, underscoring the narrator’s description of how black women have been excluded from spaces and practices of wellness, except in the invisible role of service providers (Fig. 2).

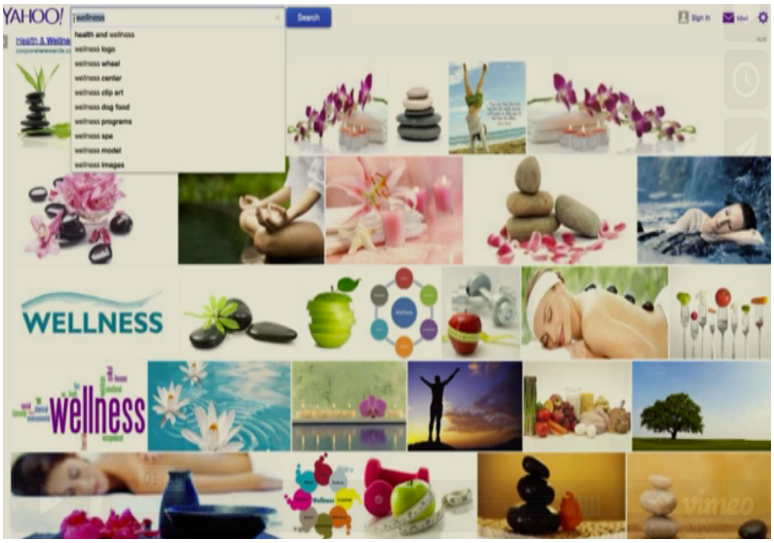


Figure 2. “Acts of Wellness,” Noah Sow, 2014

Visibility, then, becomes a focus of the film. Specifically, “Acts of Wellness” aims to make wellness visible as a neoliberal construct of self-care that is predicated on racial exclusion. When the film reproduces images of white consumerist wellness culture, it also shows practices that are deployed to increase productivity in the fast-paced corporate world and images that conform to hegemonic beauty standards. If wellness is crucial to the construction of white neoliberal femininities, a central component of the responsibilization, optimization, and commodification of the self, then Sow’s film turns the tables on this concept. “Acts of Wellness” resignifies rather banal aspects of everyday life as acts that, far from interpellating women of color into neoliberal regimes of normativity, instead articulate resistance to the hegemony of 24/7: “Ist Wellness Luxus? Wenn ich 16 Stunden pro Tag arbeiten muss, ist es Science Fiction” ‘Is

wellness luxury? When I have to work sixteen hours a day, it's science fiction.' The film responds to the constant (and often precarious) labor required of black women in Germany, Europe, and around the world by engaging them in an experiment of not being productive, at least in the terms set by the global economy. Instead, this experiment recalibrates expectations surrounding labor, time, and wellness in aesthetic terms, involving the women in a different mode of production—the process of storytelling, photography, and filmmaking—which leads to new ways of seeing. As the voice-over explains, "Ist Wellness die Anwesenheit von etwas? Nein, Elemente die immer da sind werden durch Wellness erst wahrgenommen oder intensiver erfasst. Die Wahrnehmung und Auswirkung sind neu, nicht die Dinge selbst" 'is wellness the presence of something? No, elements that have always been there are suddenly perceptible through wellness, or are registered more intensively. It is not the things themselves that are new, but their perception and impact.'

The film's politicization of the concept of wellness is mirrored by its formal construction. For the viewer, wellness is resignified not only through the women's stories, but also through the difficulty in discerning many of the images on screen, which underscores the act of seeing as one of labor, requiring the viewer to fill in the blanks and strain to make sense of the images. Notably, while "Acts of Wellness" is a digital video, it draws on the tools of analog photography. Extreme close-ups of exposed strips of film accentuate the juxtaposition of the analog and digital, actual and virtual. The women use cheap disposable cameras to foreground bodily experiences and the material aspects of their lives. The grainy and fuzzy representations they produce evade consumerist and voyeuristic images of the female body. Thus, the film places on display the process of its own formal construction and search for usable images, while also foregrounding spectatorship as a process.

Crucial to digital feminisms is this emphasis on process: actions and performances put the messy process of their own creation on display, for which the digital component proves indispensable (see Smith-Prei and Stehle). We read these process-based qualities of feminist activism and protest as a provisional and contingent way of creating the possibility of a collectivity again, a collectivity that is envisioned and produced through the digital but also immediately available to co-optation and commodification as a result. Process-based works emphasize the search for new paradigms, symbols, and languages; at the same time, they make visible the circularities produced in and by contemporary social and economic realities (see also Baer). By emphasizing process, digital feminisms challenge the bind or impasse in which feminism finds itself; it is out of this bind that the aesthetic possibilities they improvise emerge. In "Acts of Wellness," Noah Sow works with and through such aesthetic possibilities and tries to suggest ways to

act in and against this bind. These emergent aesthetics speak to the urgency of feminist politics in the digital sphere.

Our conception of aesthetics draws on the work of Lauren Berlant, who writes in *Cruel Optimism* that "aesthetics is not only the place where we rehabituate our sensorium by taking in new material and becoming more refined in relation to it. But it provides metrics for understanding how we pace and space our encounters with things, how we manage the too closeness of the world and also the desire to have an impact on it that has some relation to its impact on us" (12). Through aesthetic experimentation with different formats, including digital platforms, Sow's Wellness project places on display the process of searching for alternatives to neoliberal capitalism by reimagining how aspects of feminism, antiracism, and antiimperialism can be envisioned and thought through as possibilities. In the appropriation of the act of wellness in a digitally disseminated video collage of multiple stories, image genres, and references, "Wellness" searches for spaces of aesthetic impact on the very material lives of women of color. Aesthetic engagement, here, is not an act of abstraction but a clear politicization of everyday life.

"Acts of Wellness" creates a complex set of engagements with neoliberal time, individualism, and visibility. It portrays women who describe their lives as hectic and exhausting and encourages them to "take" time for an act of wellness. While promoting a sense of collectivity, the video focuses only on individuals, who are, in most cases, alone, practicing self-care in private spaces. Resistance, in "Acts of Wellness," is thus a complicated process that involves circular negotiations within and against the demands of 24/7 culture, with its emphasis on privatization and its dismantling of provisions for caregiving. At the same time, "Acts of Wellness" urges women to create a set of images that critique visual regimes; these regimes exclude women of color but at the same time commodify their bodies either by exploiting their labor or by creating images in the service of consumerism.

In this way, the Wellness project forges a connection to the aesthetic and political project of Women of Color feminism, which emphasized a messy use of vernacular forms to find a new language for making visible intersectional positionalities. In *Queering Ethnicity*, Fatima El-Tayeb emphasizes the importance of vernacular forms such as spoken word poetry, and later hip hop, as subversive tools that created new discursive spaces for representing the intersectional positionalities of feminists of color. As El-Tayeb demonstrates, these tools were adopted by women of color feminists in the 1970s because they were associated "with qualities disvalued within the Western intellectual tradition—emotion, intuition, collectivity, nonlinearity, the oral" (47), and they also proved crucial for the self-representations of Afro-Germans in the key texts *Farbe bekennen. Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte* (1986;

Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out, 1991) and *Talking Home. Frauen of Color in Deutschland* ('Women of Color in Germany,' 1999). Noah Sow's installations, including the Wellness project, connect to this history by adopting a similar openness of form and content in their use of the digital.

By attaching their experimentations with aesthetic form in a digital mode to trajectories of feminist, antiracist, and postcolonial critique, Sow and other digital feminist artists engage in neither nostalgia for a revolutionary past nor a purely futural orientation; rather, like the feminist and queer artists that Elizabeth Freeman examines in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* they mine the past for "archaic or futuristic debris as signs that things have been and could be otherwise" in order to "put[] the past into meaningful and transformative relation with the present" (xvi). They do so by employing temporalities of delay, deferral, and disappearance that disrupt or queer any kind of linear or totalizing narrative. As we suggest, these disruptions not only defy neoliberal timelines, but they also, crucially, provide a way of thinking about feminism that departs from stories of generational conflict, so-called post-feminism, and feminist waves.

Two: Temporal Narratives and Digital Feminist Entanglements at an Impasse

In her description of "Acts of Wellness," Sow highlights how time and temporality interweave in the experience of seeing the film; past, present, and future come together in the photo-material, its digitization, and the viewer's experience, in anticipation of watching and during the act of viewing. The moment produced in the viewing of the film, therefore, replicates the stoppage of time that the act of wellness demands. The viewer, too, is offered an aesthetic space of resistance through digital storytelling practices, a video form that is temporally based and always also marked by individually driven realism. By clicking play on a computer screen or mobile device, the viewer is momentarily pulled into a timeline that interrupts her own through the slow cycle of still images, while being forced to recognize the labor/self-labor circuit at work on her own body. In a sense, the pressing of play represents a tacit agreement to enter the impasse.[5]

In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant utilizes the term "genre" as a conceptual framework for capturing the sense of the present. Genres "mark the unfolding activity of the contemporary moment" (4) and describe "the activity of being reflexive about a contemporary historicity as one lives it" (5). According to Berlant, the "impasse" describes that genre which "track[s] the sense of the present," (4) a present that is temporally stretched out but that is aesthetically understood as being in process. She explains: "Usually an 'impasse' designates a time of dithering from which someone or some situation cannot move forward" (4). By contrast, Berlant adapts her understanding of impasse to signify

> a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things, maintain one's sea legs, and coordinate the standard melodramatic crises with those processes that have not yet found their genre of event. (4)

The impasse, like the bind in which feminism finds itself in neoliberalism described above, is a place of stoppage and recalibration. Berlant notes further of the impasse that it may indeed be a desired state, a type of "holding pattern" that allows for the management of the destruction of "traditional infrastructures for reproducing life," in public and private (5). The acts of wellness seen in the film, as well as the experience of viewing "Acts of Wellness" itself, reproduce just such holding patterns, even while they also allow for political possibilities that are opened up by the aesthetic reach of both the acts and "Acts."

The work of the Munich-based performance art and electronic music collective Chicks on Speed, founded in 1997, similarly engages with the impasse as a genre of the present in which new aesthetic and political forms may emerge. Chicks on Speed creates diverse projects and performances that combine pop, fashion, and new media; describing themselves as "multi-disciplinary workers in the field of culture" (chicksonspeed.com), core members Melissa Logan and Alex Murray-Leslie draw on and intervene in feminist and queer theory, activism, and culture in their wide-ranging artistic practice. Their 2014 project "Artstravaganza" includes live performances and exhibitions, an album, video clips, and an app project. Developed during a two-year residency (2011–2013) at the Zentrum für Kultur und Medientechnologie 'Center for Art and Media' in Karlsruhe and at ArtSpace Sydney, "Artstravaganza" presents "Chicks on Speed's innovative perspective on the current impressive collision between analog and digital worlds . . . where sloganeering leads us through to time rippling via a stop in their self-made Utopia and the strobe light stays on" (chicksonspeed.com). Part of "Artstravaganza," Chicks on Speed's aesthetically multivalent work "Utopia" makes visible this ripple in time through a layering of audiovisuals that conjure feminist and queer pasts, presents, and futures.

"Utopia" includes a single with multiple remixes, live performances, and two different music videos published on YouTube and other video file sharing sites. One of these videos, shot at ArtSpace Sydney, stars Chicks on Speed and the Lycra Ladies: dressed in brightly-colored leotards and tights, they dance, leap, crawl, play, and lie down together inside a white gallery space decorated with a boom box and bright paintings (Fig. 3). At several points in the video, stop-motion photography is used to picture the women falling to the floor and rolling

down a large staircase. In the other video, for the Lambada-Meinhof Band Remix of "Utopia," Chicks on Speed and a group of women dressed in gold and spangled outfits dance joyfully in a large circle on a desert tundra drenched in sunlight (Fig. 4). The entire video plays in slow motion, which contrasts with the fast-paced audio track and highlights the physical movements of the dancers; at times, brightly colored filters change the color scale of the images. Both videos emphasize the interplay of analog and digital worlds, showing material bodies engaged in joyful, collective pursuits, and foregrounding digital video technologies through stop- and slow-motion photography and audio remixes.

Figure 3. "Utopia," Chicks on Speed 2014, ArtSpace Sydney

Figure 4. "Utopia," Chicks on Speed 2014, Lambada-Meinhof Band Remix

On a symbolic level, the two videos place Chicks on Speed within histories of feminist and queer art. Performance artist Yoko Ono is featured on both tracks, and her appearance is highlighted in the Lambada-Meinhof Band remix version, when we hear her voice at the beginning, providing an epigraph to the articulation of collective resistance developed in "Utopia": "And so we know, if we get together conceptually, unite and focus on what we want, we'll get it. One of the things is peace, because we don't want a violent world." The videos also feature references to gender-bending glam rock of the 1970s as well as to 1980s and 1990s electroclash and queer-core feminist music movements. Further citations in costuming and performance point to politicized activist groups from the Guerilla Girls to Riot Grrrls to Pussy Riot, as well as to feminist wiccan rituals and to the die-ins performed by AIDS activists Act-Up. These references circle back to histories of feminist and queer artistic and political protest in establishing an image of how utopias signify today while maintaining the standard assessment of utopia as also always encapsulating a vision for the future that is grounded in the present moment (see Jameson).

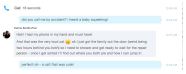
For instance, by playing on Bauhaus as both a collective art movement and a commodified home improvement store, the song suggests that utopia is a relic of the past. Chicks on Speed chant: "The glory days are over/people living on tv . . . Utopia's in the mall . . . the dream is just a hoax." But the song also describes utopia as a condition of the present: "We're fast forwarded . . . propelled . . . bridges go to anywhere we want them to . . . we're moving into Utopia . . . we've moved into Utopia." In interviews, Chicks on Speed discuss this kind of past- and presentness, or historical present, of utopia in terms of the ubiquity of luxury in neoliberal capitalism, but also as a vision that is not totally exhausted. In a *Huffington Post* interview, Melissa Logan explains:

> [Utopia] is a many layered phenomena which we believe to be closely connected to freedom, lack of it, or working towards new freedoms. We recommend observing the clash of diverse Utopian ideas and the contradictions of personal gain, survival, and comfort. Where does luxury begin and decadence take over—or an incapability or laziness to dream of something different than luxury. Now luxury is just a matter of credit card debt. I think this is great progress; the immaterial nature of the world now, the air B&B culture, share culture. (Lynn)

Utopias create an impasse, a clash, and a contradiction. Here, Chicks on Speed describe the neoliberal models of consumer debt culture and the drive towards a good life that is simply a drive towards personal gain, but they also posit visions of immateriality and share culture, pointing to a way in which we could "dream of something different."

In an interview with Sophie Jung of the German magazine *Art*, Logan and Murray-Leslie connect utopia more directly to aesthetic and political resistance, particularly in relation to the possibilities offered by the digital age. Responding to the question as to why we need utopia, Logan says: "Man braucht Utopien, um etwas bewegen zu können. Man braucht Visionen, um Veränderungen zu denken" 'We need Utopias in order to be able to move something. We need visions in order to imagine change.' These visions, Logan continues, are grounded in the digital: "Es gibt ja verschiedene Utopien, das Internet zum Beispiel. Man kann damit Räume und Werkzeuge schaffen. Eines davon ist die Cyberperformance, mit der man von verschiedenen Orten auf der Welt gemeinsam live performen kann" 'Of course, there are different Utopias, for instance the Internet. One can create spaces and tools with it. One of these is the cyberperformance, through which one can perform live together from different locations around the world.' Murray-Leslie counters this assessment of utopia with a more concrete definition, following Richard Buckminster, claiming that a utopia should be visual and aesthetic and that even those utopias that do not come to pass still exist "um den Horizont zu öffnen" 'in order to open horizons.'

The two "Utopia" videos published online exhibit and visualize some version of utopia via feminist aesthetic work and a public, collective experience of joy, of tumbling and stumbling together. By layering multiple visions of utopia—as a relic, as a chimera of neoliberal capitalism, as an archaic vision of the future, as a provisional or situated condition of the present—"Utopia" engages both visually and sonically in the search for a way to capture contemporary experience. Through constant and cascading movement, undulating landscapes of built architecture or desert tundra, multiple content-based references to movements in art and politics of the past, and the use of form to highlight the intersection of the analog and the digital, "Utopia" places on display the process of making an impact on the world.



Crucial to the "Artstravaganza" project is a set of digital apps that invite viewers and listeners to engage directly with the album and live performances. By engaging the viewer/listener not just as a consumer of audiovisuals but also as a participant in the production process, Chicks on Speed employ these apps to realize the idea of the "prosumer" (defined as a person who simultaneously produces and consumes media content) on a conceptual and theoretical but also on an activist level. Chicks on Speed not only visualize collective experience in their videos, but they also make collectivity into a foundational principle of the aesthetic form and experience of "Artstravaganza," thereby exemplifying digital feminism's process-oriented approach. The emphasis on search and process that underpins "Artstravaganza" can be understood as an example of emergent aesthetics.

"Emergent aesthetics," as Berlant defines the concept in *Cruel Optimism*, are new aesthetic forms that "register a shift in how the older state-liberal-capitalist fantasies shape adjustments to the structural pressures of crisis and loss that are wearing out the power of the good life's traditional fantasy bribe without wearing out the need for a good life" (7). These emergent aesthetics arise within the genre of the impasse described at the outset of this section. On her research blog, Berlant explains her understanding of the term genre further: "A genre is a loose affectively-invested zone of expectations about the narrative shape a situation will take. A situation becomes-genre, finds its genres of event" (2). Here, as well as in the quotations above, emphasis is placed on process-based words such as situation or event. The videos of Chicks on Speed's "Utopia" performances visualize the process of utopias creating impasse; similar to how Sow's digital storytelling practices archive the manner in which the four women vigilantly documented their experience with acts of wellness, here Chicks on Speed employ a genre akin to a collection; in the song as well as the visuals (particularly in the art museum video), they assemble or collate together bodies, feminist imagery, and histories to suggest—like the cyborgian goddess—a feminist reality and feminist utopia that are simultaneously non-compatible and identical, historical and ahistorical, backward-looking and future-viewing. Unlike the pointed narrative arc of Sow's video that relies on digital post-production in its very construction, however, the "Utopia" videos are located within a performance space that is simultaneously present and enigmatic. The visual emphasis on assembling and performance therefore suggests that the content of these videos will never be processed in the sense of finding completion, and instead will always be in process. The performance stays with the impasse and the moment of aesthetic emergence; the video itself does not create a clearly political space but its politics can be found in the dissonances, disturbances, and awkwardness it displays (Smith-Prei and Stehle). For example, in the "Utopia" video located in the art museum, the bride-like figure who stumbles across the stage in leotards and bright-pink legwarmers references the melodramatic mode (as in "the lost and lonely bride" or "the runaway bride") as she awkwardly dances onto the stage by herself only to merge in with the collective of performance to stumble, dance, and tumble with them, all performers attempting to "maintain [their] sea-legs" in the impasse (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 4).

Thus, as the "Utopia" videos suggest, the affective experience of the present is one of process, continual recalibration, and situation. The person experiencing the impasse will continue to find ways of living on in what is seen as a situational crisis, redefining their action, habitus, or relations in order to keep going (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 4) while pointing to and revising "an unresolved situation" (199). The event-based or process-based mode of temporal experience in the "Utopia" videos corresponds to Berlant's description of the impasse as "a

space of time lived without a narrative genre" (199), which we take to mean that it is a genre without narrative progression, here telling a story instead through visual and aesthetic cues, to return to Murray-Leslie's definition of utopia offered above. In the "unbound temporality of the stretch of time" the impasse "marks a delay that demands activity. The activity can produce impacts and events, but one does not know where they are leading" (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 199). This lack of assurance as to the end-point or intention of the activity, or to use our word here process, is not necessarily a negative experience. "[T]here are situations where managing the presence of a problem/event that dissolves the old sureties and forces improvisation and reflection on life-without-guarantees is a pleasure and a plus, not a loss" (200). Chicks on Speed's work becomes, as Berlant says of Agnes Varda's *The Gleaners and I*, a "problematic, exuberant example of happy life-without-guarantees in the impasse, as do the lateral pleasures of aesthetic interpretation itself" (200). "Utopia" is an example of an aesthetic response to impasse that produces pleasurable forms of improvisation and reflection on life-without-guarantees. The refusal to follow political direction, or to create a sense of what progress means, queers normative notions of political action, time, and progress. The political here arises in the emergent aesthetics of the impasse-genre; it is presented without a clear notion of a way out, motion forward, or direction. The political, too, like the aesthetic process by which it receives form, continues to become.

Three: Visibility, Disappearance, and Delay

The process of becoming and of coming into politics, as our discussion illustrates, is not a linear one. Instead of a clear timeline that could be described as a fast-paced, constantly on the move, goal-oriented notion of neoliberal "success," the political interventions of Noah Sow and Chicks on Speed develop multi-layered notions of pasts and presents that mine, dig up, and make buried things re-appear. Moreover, they engage the hyper-visibilities of commercial and digital forms in neoliberalism in ways that, far from diminishing our ability to see (as critics like Crary would argue) actually sharpen our perception of the present. Allowing otherwise imperceptible aspects of the present to become visible through play with notions of invisibility, deferral, and delay, the aesthetic project of German video artist, theorist, and documentary filmmaker Hito Steyerl actively engages with the global condition of neoliberalism, with perception and the digital, and with the (im)possibility of political activism today. In her documentaries *Die Leere Mitte* (*The Empty Center*, 1998) and *November* (2004), she works with notions of time and visibility as they pertain to urban transformation and to the history of activism respectively. As Steyerl's films uncover layers of history, they create genres that work with or in the impasse by

acknowledging the perceived impossibility of political action in the current moment while also seeking aesthetic avenues not only to describe this impossibility but also to rewrite it as emergence.

One such example is Steyerl's digital video project "HOW NOT TO BE SEEN: A F**king Didactic Educational .MOV file" (2013), which is framed as an instructional video offering methods for making oneself invisible in an age of ubiquitous exposure and surveillance. The video's five lessons present different strategies to avoid being seen, which are intoned by an automated male voice in an absurd British accent and demonstrated by faceless actors, by simulated figures, or by Steyerl herself. Many of these strategies are tongue-in-cheek, including living in a gated community, being a superhero, being female and over 50, or shrinking down to the size of a pixel.[6] Yet others are much more blatantly sinister, such as living in a militarized zone, being undocumented or poor, or being disappeared as an enemy of the state. While this is a very playful and at times even funny work, it is also presented with a sense of political urgency.

The video's lessons are interlaced with footage from a decommissioned resolution target in the California desert, which was used by the U.S. Air Force during the Cold War era to calibrate aerial photographs and videos.[7] Taken out of service in 2006 due to the obsolescence of analog photography, the target functions here as a staging ground for considering changed notions of visibility and perception in the digital age. In the course of the video, this target quite literally becomes a stage on which digital and physical bodies collide and perform the merging of virtual and material worlds (Figs. 5 and 6). The lessons are interspersed with animated images from what appears to be a virtual architectural model for a luxury apartment or resort enclave. Simulated figures move through the parks and shopping arcades of the enclave, as they are transformed via digital manipulation in ways that echo the instructions of the voice-over. At times, they appear as women wearing burkas, later as ninjas, and still later they shed the burkas to reveal androgynous silhouettes underneath.

Figure 5. “HOW NOT TO BE SEEN,” Hito Steyerl, 2013

Figure 6. “HOW NOT TO BE SEEN,” Hito Steyerl, 2013

This simulated enclave of luxury draws attention to the non-places of neoliberal capitalism as sites of invisibility. As the voice-over explains, one can become invisible simply by entering the generic space of an airport, factory, or museum. Likewise, the desert landscape and the allusions to airfields and war surveillance technology, together with the references to Burka-wearing women, evoke images of the endless wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and more generally, of colonization and spatial appropriation. A female voice conjures the image of invisible drones and of the unfathomable transactions of global corporations and finance when she asserts “today, most important things want to remain invisible. Love is invisible. War is invisible. Capital is invisible.” The insertion of love as a term into this sequence of imperceptible qualities of the present points to the way

that neoliberalism is reshaping not only time, money, and labor, but also forms of intimacy and structures of caregiving. All three notions—love, war, and money—are bound up with the material world, with emotional, violent, and material effects on the lives and safety of people.

At the outset of "HOW NOT TO BE SEEN," the male voice-over claims that "resolution determines visibility. Whatever is not captured by resolution is invisible." The phrase, "resolution determines visibility," recurs at intervals throughout the film, calling viewers' attention to variations in image quality, both within the video itself and in a wider mediascape. In Steyerl's video, we see low-resolution images of the desert landscape, blurry screenshots, pixelated faces, and old television recordings juxtaposed with sharply focused digital simulations and high-resolution video capture. This dimension of "HOW NOT TO BE SEEN" recalls the digital storytelling of Sow and the prosumer apps of Chick on Speed in the way it places the aesthetic process of constructing images on display and engages the viewer in considering how these images work. The emphasis on image quality also draws on Steyerl's larger theoretical project, as articulated in her essay "In Defense of the Poor Image." Steyerl describes poor images as

> the contemporary Wretched of the Screen, the debris of audiovisual production, the trash that washes up on the digital economies' shores. They testify to the violent dislocation, transferrals, and displacement of images—their acceleration and circulation within the vicious cycles of audiovisual capitalism. Poor images are dragged around the globe as commodities or their effigies, as gifts or as bounty. They spread pleasure or death threats, conspiracy theories or bootlegs, resistance or stultification. Poor images show the rare, the obvious, and the unbelievable—that is, if we can still manage to decipher it.

Here, Steyerl directly relates images and bodies; the digital and the material world collide and become inseparable in her reading of the poor images. The essay is multidimensional in that it talks about cinema (and art in general) in the time of the "poor image" (with a clear nod to Walter Benjamin), but also about the political dimensions of poverty, circulation, and migration. The poor image, then, is both an image with low resolution and an image without means or money, a homeless and nameless image. Steyerl thus makes a strong statement against a division of the world into real and digital, physical and pixelated realms. Her conceptual framework argues against such binaries and for reading in and with poor images, which is what defines our realities.

> The poor image is no longer about the real thing—the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm

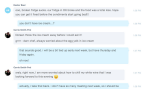
> circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities. It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation. In short: it is about reality.

In the context of our discussion, this kind of "reality," as defiance and appropriation, and as conformism and exploitation, describes the impasse; in her focus on aesthetic forms, on the image, on visibility and disappearance, as well as on using digital tools to mess with the reality of the digital world, Steyerl's works embody genres of impasse. It is within such image-realities that we imagine the space where the cyborgian goddess mentioned at the outset of this essay roams, sometimes conspicuous with the landscape, sometimes hidden from view.

In "HOW NOT TO BE SEEN," visibility and invisibility are contingent and contentious issues. Steyerl illustrates the diminished ability to see and to develop social and ethical evaluation in the context of visual discriminations that Crary describes as one condition of the 24/7 regime. By creating pixelated allusions to iconic images of, for example, the drone wars, only to contrast and merge them with hyper-real imagery of vacation resorts, the artist connects ostensibly disjunctive images in a way that forces viewers to confront their ability to see what they might have chosen to ignore, or to render invisible, in apprehending the present. Thematizing this bind, the tension between hyper-visibility and ignorance towards a politically infused ability to see is a centerpiece of this work. While Steyerl's "instructions" on how not to be seen are intrinsically linked to concepts of time, disappearance, and delay, they are also characterized by immediacy and speed and by resolution and pixelation, key dimensions of the digital.

The interface of visibility and invisibility, material and digital, is manifested in "lesson five" of "HOW NOT TO BE SEEN": "How to become invisible by merging into a world made of pictures." The male voice-over announces: "There are 54 ways to merge into a world made of images," and he starts to list them: "To hide, to remove, to go off screen, to disappear."[8] As the voice-over provides ideas for different ways to "merge," Steyerl herself moves across the analog resolution target in the desert, crossing in front of a green screen that is suspended across the concrete lot like the screen at a drive-in movie theater. As the voice-over intones the word "disappearance," the figure of the artist slowly disappears. The camera pans across the cracked surface of the decommissioned resolution target, as ever so slowly, ghostly projected images of burka-clad women appear, whirling across the target. The voice-over proclaims, "rogue pixels hide in the cracks of old standards of resolution. They throw off the cloak of representation," suggesting that it is precisely in the futuristic cracks of a sloughed-off past, in the layering of histories, that alternatives to the present may be imagined.

An inter-title appears on the screen: “HAPPINESS. A word full of Love/full of Hope/full of Contentment/full of Life,” and at the same moment the 1973 soul hit “When Will I See You Again” by The Three Degrees begins to play. On the screen in the desert, we see the luxury resort enclave projected, where three women, modeled after the performers from The Three Degrees, slowly sway back and forth as they dance to the song. The video cuts back and forth between the vacation resort image and three figures, who, veiled in what look like burkas, dance in the desert landscape. One of the figures takes off the cloth, appearing to literally “throw off the cloak of representation,” but the figure under the burka-like cloth has emerged as the silhouette of a male body, dressed from head to toe in a green spandex suit, the kind of suit worn by actors to create digital effects in front of a green screen. The image of the singers on screen then merges with the real background of the desert, as white birds fly from one image into the other; now the dancers are projected onto the desert background instead of the vacation resort, framed by the actual metal frame of the movie screen that has been rolled up. The scene switches to an original video recording of The Three Degrees performing the song, a low-resolution poor image. Exposing the layers of representation and visibility at stake in “HOW NOT TO BE SEEN,” camera equipment, a crane, and crew members appear on the resolution target, while, in a gesture to process, titles appear that give humorous directorial directions: “Camera crew gets tied up by invisible people, seen from above”; “U.S. Air Force drops glitter from stealth helicopter”; “Shoot this for real and fly away with drone!”; and “Happy pixels hop off into low resolution, gif loop!” The song concludes with the lines “Is this the beginning, or is this the end? When will I see you again?”



In its ambivalent and uncomfortable affective charges, the aesthetic attempt to resignify by playing through scenarios of visibility and invisibility in the interface of the digital and the material world put to visual language the manner in which Berlant describes the impasse of the present. Reporting about an interview he conducted with Steyerl, Michael Connor summarizes her statement that “this desire to disappear . . . is a highly ambivalent concept: it is something to be desired, that gives relief from the constant imaging that we are all subject to. But it is also something to be feared, evoking the spectre of mass political abduction.” In many ways, Steyerl’s work “takes a radical step of . . . exposing and challenging the terms by which recognitions are granted, and the visual politics at work in constructing those terms” (Weber 3). Similar to what Beverly Weber describes as the strategies of journalist and feminist activist Kübray Gümüsay, Steyerl “confronts the relationship of her work to the public by challenging a particular form of visibility and by resignifying the limits of the political” (3). In that sense, Steyerl’s work acknowledges the impoverishment of vision in the over-determined and hyper-visual digital world of the 24/7 regime,

while also creating new ways of seeing and new forms of signifying visibilities as and in the political. In the case of Steyerl's work, this means negotiating invisibility, temporal delays, layering of (hi)stories, and acts of disappearance. The questions the video asks, then, are urgent and political: who or what can disappear, who wants what to disappear and why, who or what has to disappear, and who or what will remain visible and for what purpose?

This line of questioning links Steyerl's video with other instances of feminist art and action that present searches for different forms of seeing and for ways of seeing differently. In contemporary forms of feminist activism that always also include digital means of dissemination, such as Pussy Riot protests or FEMEN actions, visibility becomes contentious and hyper-visibilities are rewritten as disruption. The dissemination of Pussy Riot or FEMEN images in and across various, official and unofficial, media outlets in the wake of their protest actions, for example, is as much a symptom of neoliberal consumption and circulation in the digital age as it is part of their disruptive power. The simultaneous acts of defiance and appropriation, conformism and exploitation that Steyerl describes define the space of these political interventions. While such activisms might not consciously play through the theoretical implications of new political realities, Steyerl's work, Chicks on Speed's "Utopia," and Noah Sow's approach to "Wellness" most certainly offer active interventions vis-à-vis such realities. In all three of the examples we discuss in this essay, moments of disappearance, delay, and deferral are acts that take place within the impasse that defines them, but they are also acts that dissolve the sense that this impasse presents nothing but a bind. Beyond messing within and with the concept of the bind, they suggest forms of solidarity and action, of connection and collaboration.

Conclusion: Digital Feminisms, Collaboration, and Connection/Solidarity

Our attempt to conserve the process of collaboration is a fib. We selected just a few of the many comment bubbles we generated while writing this essay and inserted them back into the document after we had discussed, addressed, and deleted them. The process of collaboration is a temporal process that can be traced and collected, but not easily captured and certainly not frozen onto a single screen. During our writing process, we had various digital channels of communication to exchange ideas, coordinate writing, complain about distractions, and discuss delays. Our process of writing thus also offers a perspective on speed in the 24/7 regime: while, in many ways, the work of three minds outpaced our individual thinking, the process itself was slower than we anticipated. The rapid changes as three of us write, edit each other's words, delete paragraphs, and change arguments are disorienting at times and such disorientation is, of course, utterly unproductive in the most specific sense of

labor market productivity now central to academic assessment structures. Essentially, we found ourselves producing while also working within an impasse, a feminist bind to which we, too, attempted our own aesthetic reorientation. In the face of neoliberalism and the neoliberal academy, we tried joyfully to embrace these moments of unproductive disorientation and turn them on their heads, shaping them into what counts as something productive for us, as academics: an article. Further, since moments of utter confusion are part of almost any such process of academic writing, we could much more easily confront this confusion because we were in it together; different forms of collaboration and community offer ways to work within the impasse.

What we describe as our circular collective research process mirrors the strategies that the artists we discussed here employ. With "Acts of Wellness," Noah Sow created a collaborative photo film building on practices of digital storytelling to approach the racism, 24/7 productivity, and beauty culture of neoliberalism by redeploying the notion of self-care. Chicks on Speed's multimedia project "Artstravaganza" works with utopia as a complex process, as impasse but also as way out through queer becoming, which builds a collaborative process of production and reception into its aesthetic through prosumer apps. Hito Steyerl's "HOW NOT TO BE SEEN" plays with poor images in its negotiations of visibility/invisibility as describing the neoliberal realities of endless war, extreme inequality, and hypervisibility while simultaneously drafting new forms of living in and manipulating these realities. Together their works uncover the rapid change and wide reach of the globally connected, commercialized digital world as a neoliberal trap, but they also posit that digital world as a platform for resistance, joy, and provisional action. Our collaborative work also hopes to uncover that change as it resonates in the academy and in collective research processes that can be adopted by feminist scholars.[9]

In these processes, we—like the artists we discuss—produce our own iterations of the cyborgian goddess. Our cyborgian goddess is a mess; she sweeps in as a contentious, disruptive figure. In our digital collaborations—the artists we discuss and we, as a research collective—embrace this cyborgian goddess. We create ways to connect process and collaboration to how feminism or feminist utopias (such as the concept of the cyborgian goddess as assemblage) create the impasse and then revisit it, engage with it, tinker with it, and thereby model ways for affirmative becomings and emergences from within the impasse. However, we are of course repeatedly reminded that this impasse is itself not an insular space, a sort of neoliberal utopia within which we can safely connect and commune. Consistent bodily threats to feminist academics, often instigated and echoed in the mediatized or digital sphere, remind us of the fear that also lurks at the base of this joy.[10] The cyborgian goddess, then, has to (and will) also confront this fear and vulnerability; but since she is a cyborg and a goddess, she turns fear into

willfulness (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*) by continuing to hack and manipulate digital and non-digital spaces, not as acts of revenge, but as an ongoing insistence on the right to occupy space (Ahmed, "Feminist Hurt") even if or precisely because this is a space of impasse.

Notes

1. For example, see the work of FemTechNet, a feminist collaborative group out of The New School for Social Research in New York that has as an explicit agenda the building of networks of pedagogy transnationally on digital principles. Two of its co-founding members, T. L. Cowan and Jasmin Rault, also co-authored a collaborative essay with Dayna McLeod on which the form of this essay is modeled.

2. Our collaboration on this project began in 2014 in the form of a digital lecture series, viewable at: http://www.artsrn.ualberta.ca/feminism/?page_id=41

3. Recent feminist activism, however, has of course shown sleep itself to be a site of violence against women, as for example the mattress performance by Emma Sulkowicz "Carry That Weight" on the Columbia University campus.

4. All translations from the German our own unless otherwise noted.

5. "Digital Storytelling" uses the capabilities of digital media in many forms (moving images, so-called micromovies, still images strung together digitally, voice-over tracks, music, animation) to tell life-stories and experiences of everyday people. Most prominently, digital storytelling is always told from the point of view of the subject, is driven by that subject, and therefore its images and words are entirely individual.

6. The title for this work is taken from a Monty Python comedy sketch in which ordinary British citizens camouflage themselves in natural landscapes, as a droll male voice exhorts them to stand up and be seen. When they do, they are immediately shot or firebombed; those who don't follow orders are rooted out and killed as well. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zekiZYSVdeQ. Steyerl's video echoes both the humor of the Monty Python sketch and the way it exposes the violence of everyday life.

7. See also Connor.

8. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbOmXEnluzg

9. We are thinking here not only of our projects and collaboration, but also of initiatives such as FemTechNet, Ada Journal, and the feminist slow scholarship movement and its ideas about both open access and email.

10. See most recently the response to the online threats made to feminist and gender studies faculty at the University of Toronto. See the blog post "Vulnerabilities" by Lily Cho at the Canadian feminist blogging collective *Hook and Eye.* http://www.hookandeye.ca/2015/09/vulnerabilities.html

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