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On Instagram: An Intimate, Immediate, Conversation / Alix Beeston, Alexandra Kingston-Reese, and Cadence Kinsey

📅 February 29, 2020 (<http://asapjournal.com/on-instagram-an-intimate-immediate-conversation-alix-beeston-alexandra-kingston-reese-and-cadence-kinsey/>) 👤 Alix Beeston, Alexandra Kingston-Reese, and Cadence Kinsey (<http://asapjournal.com/author/alexandrakingstonreese/>)

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What are the formal and political commitments of artistic and scholarly experimentation on Instagram?

With the rise of affective criticism, a practice of conversation has proved to be the perfect format for us to talk affectively about such a polarizing and popular subject. With this conversation, we want to capture that same intimacy and immediacy, but challenge the idea that such conversations must always disappear or must dissolve into solo work; to contend that the meaning we create together in ephemeral ways might have its own intellectual staying power.

This conversation took place at the University of York in the spring of 2019 and the transcript has been edited for length. Thank you to the Centre for Modern Studies and the Creative Dissonance: Writing Now research strand for funding this event.

– Alexandra Kingston-Reese

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Part I: The performance of the social

Alexandra Kingston-Reese: Given that we're here in conversation, I thought we could begin with one of the few things a writer has said about the possibilities of Instagram for artistic practice. In an essay a few years ago now (<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/13/magazine/serious-play.html>), Teju Cole extolled the immediate and intimate virtues of Instagram's conversations:

"Once we've fallen in love with an artist's work, isn't one of the things we most long for to get inside that artist's head, to somehow get closer to the creative process? This is why we read interviews, it is why we look at sketchbooks, it is why we pore over contact sheets. Instagram, at its best, can replicate aspects of this directness; it can be a conversation that unfolds gradually, over weeks and months. We see how an obsession develops and not simply what it looks like once it is on the walls of a museum or between the pages of a book. One part of the thrill is knowing that it is not happening anywhere else with such intimacy or immediacy. Another is the bittersweet fact of its evanescence: Like all conversation, it happens when it happens, and when it's gone, it's gone."

Cole himself has been a prolific user of Instagram. His photographic projects *Blind Spot* and *#blackpaper* have developed out of series of photographs posted on Instagram, before lining the walls of galleries. Here he positions social media as affording artists an opportunity to create a kind of *social*, discursive art form. Almost a living art form, given we are mostly talking about writers and artists that are alive and, in many cases, contactable, active on social media, and up for a rigorous discussion about their work. What do you make of this promise of sociality and artistic practice?

Alix Beeston: I wonder whether "social" is the right word to describe what's happening on Instagram. When I look at Teju Cole's account, or when his posts pop up in my feed, I don't feel like I'm in conversation with him. It'd be nice if I was! But I think it's a much more unidirectional thing, much more about content being delivered to me via this specific platform. Isn't "social media" an intentionally obfuscating term, one that hides as much as it reveals? What Cole is describing is the pleasurable fiction of Instagram's qualities of spontaneity and of authenticity, what he calls its "bittersweet" immediacy and intimacy—but what we could more cynically call its artificial immediacy and intimacy.

AKR: It harnesses the idea of conversation, rather than opening up a space for actual dialogue... Along those lines, I don't think it's a coincidence that Cole has disabled the comment function on his Instagram posts.

AB: Right. At least to some extent this is a question of scale: how much success do you have to have in using these mediums such that you have to change the way you're using them? Someone like Cole, who has a certain amount of prominence or fame, shows up how Instagram doesn't work as a space for community in the same way as it works as a platform.

AKR: When you use a multi-functional platform like Instagram, there's no capacity for flexibility, for only opening the conversation to those you want to talk to, or those that you want to respond; you have to have an all or nothing approach. Surrender to the messiness of mass dialogue.

Cadence Kinsey: Yes, and these sites create a slippage between a community and a platform through the superficial appearance of intimacy, immediacy and directness, which are ultimately branding strategies, aren't they? Platforms such as Instagram or Facebook are so hard to subvert or disrupt, and this has consequences not only for thinking about what art is and the role of the artist but also, crucially, what opportunities there are for diverse forms of self-representation, particularly in the realm of gender.

AKR: The business of Instagram, in its current formation anyway, seems to be collected around young women.

CK: Perhaps here we could consider "Excellences & Perfections" (<http://webenact.rhizome.org/excellences-and-perfections/20141014150552/http://instagram.com/amaliaulman>), a performance by the artist Amalia Ulman that took place on Instagram over several months back in 2014. Actually, it's amazing to think that this is a work that is now five years old, because it still feels quite fresh. The project follows a three-part narrative in which the artist plays a fictional version of herself in which she has just moved to New York. She is having a great time, living her best life, but then she has a break-up from a long term relationship, starts to spiral into self-destruction (she does drugs, she works as an escort, she has breast augmentation surgery), then eventually she appears to have a break down, releases an apology video, and reinvents herself as a life goddess type character. The project ends when she finds a new relationship.

The way that the artist constructed this project was by looking at the most popular hashtags that were associated with how women represented themselves online, on Instagram, and through those hashtags created this three-part narrative to fit in with what she was already seeing on Instagram. I sometimes think of the project as a kind of test or experiment, because what the artist found was that the more she was creating images that corresponded to expectation, the more likes and shares she received.

So the project is really looking at how platforms like Instagram, but also Facebook, standardize and channel the representation of the self into increasingly narrow options, into these highly stereotyped representations. One crucial aspect of this was that Ulman didn't make it obvious that it was an artwork, a performance, until the very end. After the project was finished in the Autumn of 2014, Ulman presented a performance lecture as part of *Frieze*, in which she outs it as a work of art rather than a document of real life.

AKR: How did people react to this 'outing'?

CK: Some of her followers were very upset with her. People who had been supportive, following her in her moments of crisis, sending her positive, encouraging messages on Instagram, were angry with her that it wasn't real. But for Ulman, this was part of the project, to reveal what she calls a 'glitch' in social media: the idea that, although we all know that what we see online isn't really real, that it's all constructed to some degree or other, somehow there's still part of us that actually wants it to be real. That we're upset or disappointed when it isn't. This 'glitch' in social media is, for her, the concept of authenticity.

AB: Well, we all *act* as though it's real; we pretend we don't know it's a construction, and just continue on as if we're all friends with Teju Cole or whoever. As if my act of seeing them means they see me, know me. Actually, I wonder if the pleasures of following others on social media, especially those we don't know in person, are similar to those associated with Hollywood celebrities and other stars. The scholar Judith Brown describes stardom

(https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=G6jI98ca5UQC&printsec=frontcover&dq=judith+brown+glamour&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiY5u_nqK_iAhUjVBUIHTDmBRYQ6AEIKjAA#v=onepage&q&f-

as essentially empty, ghostly, an evacuation of personhood in the guise of personality. She says we have an "impossible desire" for celebrities, who seem almost within our reach, almost close enough to touch, but who remain separate from us. This unbridgeable distance doesn't lessen our desire for the star; it's central to why we're drawn to them.

AKR: I imagine there is a reason for the choice of terminology—'following' someone sounds more like stalking, right?

AB: Absolutely. And to follow can also very often be to imitate, to cast yourself in a mold. There's been sociological research (<https://reader.elsevier.com/reader/sd/pii/S0747563215301801?token=B2FE277F0A9B5BC7058CE35C654A4A11DAA073F98CB8B74373683C0A17C201980C4304000D2D306D58EB3694875B3C87>) into Instagram selfies that has shown that not only do they conform to the same gendered ideals and expressions as fashion magazine advertisements, but they actually do so to a greater extent than the ads. So whereas men use muscle poses to connote strength, women's selfies are coded for weakness and submissiveness in various ways. There's the use of high angles to make the subjects look demure or petite, or images that picture women lying down or in imbalanced, off-kilter poses, or the tendency for women to withdraw their gazes from the camera or to focus on the body rather than the face.

These traits are more common in Instagram selfies than they are in magazine culture, which I found quite surprising and disheartening. Selfies are created informally by such a large number of diverse people—and in the supposedly "democratic" realm of the internet. Shouldn't they have at least some capacity for non-conformist self-representation?

I think they can; my friends who are trans women often use selfies on Instagram to construct very beautiful records of their gender identities, including in the process of transition. It seems politically important to me to hold to the possibility that selfies can work as a creative and resistant kind of self-expression for individuals. Yet there's no doubt that when you aggregate these images—when they're laid out as an endless series on Instagram's elegant, minimalist grid—they come into focus as mechanisms of social control, mechanisms for the reassertion and maintenance of gendered norms. It's not a coincidence that Instagram influencers are not just young women, but also able-bodied women, slender women, mostly white women. The norms are very stable.

CK: And one of the things that Ulman is doing in "Excellences & Perfections" is knowingly playing on that. But not just in the context of social media: she's also making a point about the art world. In a way, she's almost trolling the art world, playing the role of the artist *ingenue*, and it was incredible to see how popular she became as a result

of this project. But would she have had this success if she looked differently? Arguably no. In fact, she says that she had to make “Excellences & Perfections” first in order to then do a follow up project, “Privilege,” in which she explored the fact that she’s able to be white passing, that she’s attractive, etc., and how this affects her social identity. “Excellences & Perfections” is often spoken about by itself, but in this respect it’s really part of a pair of works for her.

It’s interesting what you were saying, Alix, about this idea of self-expression, because, you know, the web we have now, to me, just seems that it’s not about self-expression. I think especially when you compare it to early feminist practices on the web in the 1990s, where it really was about imagining other possibilities for who you are and who you might be. One of the big shifts in how people portray themselves on social media is often characterized as a shift from self-expression to self-promotion.

AKR: And in the advertiser-heaven that is Instagram, those things aren’t necessarily dissimilar.

Part II: Reverse Chronologies

AB: I’m interested in how Instagram, and just photography in general, can straddle these competing impulses of both gendered objectification and a resistance to objectification—and how even those images that seem most fully involved in a patriarchal or racist order can still be seen to bear radical possibilities. A lot of new photography scholarship is looking to re-evaluate the medium in the context of our contemporary media landscape. For a long time, art historians focused on the isolated, singular photograph, partly to legitimize it as a work of art, to treat it like you would a painting or whatever. But as we’ve logged on to an internet tracked with endless streams of images, it’s become harder to ignore the inherent seriality of photography, the way that the medium has always produced and been enrolled in serialized forms like albums, collages, montages, and slideshows.

This has meant that scholars, including myself in my book *In and Out of Sight* (<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/in-and-out-of-sight-9780190690168?cc=gb&lang=en&>), have been trying to reimagine photography history from the vantage of the digital turn. I’m particularly interested in how serialized structures are constituted in absences and gaps, the spaces between images in a photographic series, say. What’s happening in those spaces? I’ve found it productive to think of them as making room for us to critique and maybe even rework the social and political norms of our society. Maybe they’re glitches, to play on Ulman: they open up the world order, allow us to rummage around in it, rearrange the furniture a little bit. Maybe they’re moments, however brief, in which the old rules don’t have to apply.

Even though I wasn’t writing about Instagram directly in my book, the whole project was formulated out of exactly this kind of serialized digital environment. So, after I finished the book, I had the idea to put together an experimental project on Instagram called *Object Women* (<https://www.instagram.com/objectwomen/>). It’s a very abbreviated history of women in photography, featuring 45 images from the George Eastman Museum (<https://www.eastman.org/https://www.eastman.org/>)’s photography collections and elsewhere. Each image is accompanied by a micro-essay, a brief critical-creative prose piece, which meditates on the images and their ethical implications, the claims they make on us as viewers.

AKR: I love the idea of the micro-essay as a new critical form, because it is so grounded in close reading and observation.

AB: I was inspired by other creative uses of text and image on Instagram, especially as longer captions have become more common over the last few years. But I hadn’t seen anyone use Instagram for dedicated art historical enquiry, and I wanted to see if I could use the platform to provide its own backstory: the history behind the vernacular and the aspirational images of women posted on the site every minute.

This meant working against what Cole recognizes as the evanescence of Instagram, its relentless acceleration away from the past through its speedy, time-stamped posts and reverse chronology. Can you use a medium that’s trying to make you forget about history precisely to think about history? That was the experiment. To see what new possibilities a serialized medium offers up for doing art history, thinking about images in different ways, both as singular artifacts and also within wider archives or assemblages.

It was really exciting to see people engage with the project as it was released over a few months. Almost 1000 people followed the account, and most of them weren’t academics. It convinced me that there are good reasons for using existing online platforms for academic work, not least since digital humanities projects are often contained

within discrete, custom websites, so they require you to know they exist, to know where to find them, and then to figure out how to navigate them. They're sequestered off, in a way. But with *Object Women* you could just click "follow" and it came to you, popping up in your feed after your friend's avocado brunch.

CK: What came out of this project in terms of that question of history, of filtering old technology through the new, and representing the archive through new media? I was wondering because it is amazing to me that the internet can have such a profound effect in the way that it complicates structures of time and history and yet this is an area that has remarkably little scholarship.

AB: That's a great question. I did a survey at the end of the project to find out what people took out of it, and a number of the respondents said that it had given them some tools to reflect critically on how images of women are used online and off. One woman had even found herself analyzing billboard advertisements as she waited for the bus or walked down the street. So the project seemed to facilitate a critical posture toward contemporary visual cultures. Which is, you know, not exactly a high priority for Instagram's shareholders!

At the same time, I do think there's potential for existing digital platforms to be used for critical purposes, namely to disrupt the myths of progress and development that still structure our visions of the past and our sense of our place in history.



Screenshot from "Object Women," 2018.

For example, there's something weird, glitchy, about scrolling down your Instagram feed and seeing Ilse Bing's evocative *Self-Portrait with Leica* (1931)—even more so if you take a couple minutes to stop and reflect on it and its relationship to modern selfies. We've been so well taught to live in the instant, to keep refreshing the feed, to keep floating along the current of reverse chronology. Most of the time, we totally forget we're even in the stream. Bing's unexpected presence halts the flow, taking us ever so briefly out of time, making us dwell in a critical space between images, which can't be easily assimilated within narratives of linear progress. In this it might move us away from these narratives and toward an acceptance of historical repetition and return, as is emphasized in work on twentieth-century Black culture in the U.S. context, or of history as a play of temporalities, as has been theorized in queer studies.

CK: In that respect, it's important to find what the possibilities of social media might be. One of the things that my research seems to continually point towards is just how difficult it is to subvert this particular technology, to work with it in an interesting, subversive or resistant mode. The technology really just does not want that; it resists it. Social media platforms are incredibly difficult to tinker with, to scramble, to disrupt. And it can feel like almost any effort at intervening can so easily be re-co-opted back into the economy of the circulation of images online.

Personally, I don't know of any artists' projects that have been able to disrupt the flow in the way we might want. A lot of the projects are very good at diagnosing a problem, but they're not so good at proposing alternatives. This is not to say that they necessarily should, but it's been interesting to see that so few artists are even trying to imagine what the poetics of these platforms might be, and it starts to lead me to the conclusion that maybe there just are none...? I've always been someone who believes there are good points about technology and there are bad points

about technology. But I must say that the more that I research into social media I actually struggle to see some of its redeeming features. It's therefore really important to try and find what those gaps, what those spaces of possibility might be.

AKR: I also am a little dubious. The advent of Twitter brought about new play with constrained writing techniques, but then again while literary experimentation can be spurred on from seemingly arbitrary constraints, aren't they simply working within the formula they're given? In terms of a poetics, I love the idea that writers can use social media platforms as a space to workshop potential literature—as a practice. Potentiality of literature was part of what drove the poetics of constraint for a group like Oulipo.

For me, this relates back to what Cole was saying about evanescence, but also the idea of being in the artist's mind while they create. I can understand this vision of closeness, of watching someone work. When poetry or a novel occupies a different chronology than on the page of a book. The being close to thought, to the process, rather than the product. It's kind of utopic. Of course, it depends on whether or not you trust that what appears in the 'studio' are actually the works in progress the artist is claiming them to be—believing the claim of authenticity, of transparency (and for the most part I do). At any rate, playing with potentiality, at the fringe of new media, is precisely the formal promise of such experimentation, if we can call it that, but it seems experimentation doesn't lead to sustained new artistic practices and forms, particularly if they head offline or move to new platforms.

But then again, many artists who use one of these social media platforms for creative work, often only do so briefly—they occupy it for a while, exploiting a short-term formal problem, before heading offline again. This movement between forms and platforms really interests me—I mean, do they get bored? Is it about audience? Is it about mastery of craft?

AB: At least in my project, I approached the format of Instagram as a creative and critical challenge, adapting my writing to its fleeting, fragmentary mode, to see what emerges out of attenuated forms of analysis as compared to more expansive and coherent styles of argumentation. At the end of the day, if you want to attempt to use these popular mediums in new and resistant ways, you don't really have any choice but to work within their very defined limits. And that carries obvious dangers. You might well end up supporting the very thing you're trying to resist, or even revel in the thing you're critiquing. As you say, Cadence, in relation to Ulman's work, you might get stuck with diagnosis rather than disruption.

AKR: Exactly. While it seems to offer mass online participation and community, it does so at the risk—and perhaps reality—of asserting that everyone is reducible into a box.

CK: And the reasons why the framework is so strong is because it's all about data capture, to sell you as the product to the advertisers, because they're the customer, not you. That's who Facebook and Instagram ultimately cares about.

Part III: Banality, badness, and critical constraints

AKR: To a certain extent, that's what Instapoetry does—buying into the strictures of Instagram as an influencer platform. Instapoets like Rupi Kaur are very popular, but everything is done at such a surface level—it's so designed, curated, but formulaic. We have this grid made up of a repeated formula, poem, then photograph of the author, poem, then author, poem, then author. So, there's also been a lot critique in scholarly circles. It doesn't really try to access the traditional kinds of experiences you might like to have while reading poetry. These poetic fragments are designed for this platform. Studies show that people don't spend longer than three seconds looking at a post, so of course you have to capture the audience with something very brief that you can glance at as you scroll through. And perhaps something that might catch your attention and invite you to stay a little longer with it.

I don't mean this as a defense of Instapoetry, but it's fascinating to me that while there has been a lot of popular criticism of Instapoetry, in *Vogue*, in *Rolling Stone*, there hasn't been much, if anything, scholarly. It's almost that this distaste at the popularity, and therefore badness, of Instapoetry is enough to stop you from writing about it—Timothy Yu has a good piece about this tension between criticism, craft, and popularity (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2019/04/instagram-poetry-and-our-poetry-worlds>). But the badness, the triviality, the popularity, the everydayness, might be the thing that is actually really interesting about it. While scholars have turned to literary play with Twitter in a somewhat serious way, they haven't done that in the same kind of way with this kind of text that emerges from Instagram. Do you think there are constraints for the critic when discussing this kind of popular engagement with social media?

what i miss most is how you loved me. but what i didn't know was how you loved me had so much to do with the person i was. it was a reflection of everything i gave to you. coming back to me. how did i not see that. how. did i sit here soaking in the idea that no one else would love me that way. when it was i that taught you. when it was i that showed you how to fill. the way i needed to be filled. how cruel i was to myself. giving you credit for my warmth simply because you had felt it. thinking it was you who gave me strength. wit. beauty. simply because you recognized it. as if i was already not these things before i met you. as if i did not remain all these once you left.

- rupi kaur



Screenshot from Rupi Kaur's Instagram page from February 1, 2019.

CK: I totally agree with you on this idea of the importance of the context and Instagram being a new way of being able to access the every day. That is important. One thing that is embedded within Ulman's work is a critique of Instagram, but that's not necessarily the case with Rupi Kaur's work. In some ways that makes it easier for an art historian like myself to work with Ulman.

AB: Still, we've got to be able to talk about this poetry and how it plays with these familiar tropes of modern femininity, and at once reject claims that Instagram is a space where you can't do anything interesting or that the poems are bad because lots of people like them. Because they're just so boring, these arguments. Any kind of popular art or literature that is taken up by a mass audience—imagined to be unthinking and naïve, and associated pejoratively with women—is taken down in this way, dismissed as trivial, banal, and not “real art.” It's snobbery. More than that, it's sexist. A distaste for the popular is a distaste for women.

You don't have to like the poems; in fact you can be very critical about the how they play into the perfect image of a perfect life, which is, of course, a dangerous neoliberal fantasy—dangerous less because it's unreal or inauthentic and more because it serves to maintain a global economic system that runs on inequity and violence, and especially to the detriment of women of color like Kaur. But it worries me, the way people react so negatively to Instapoetry, or indeed how we are tempted to withhold the title of artist to those whose practice is based on Instagram or other social media platforms.

AKR: Which is why I love *Object Women*. It's aware of this flawed rationale—the implicit, negative value judgments that are scornful of the popular—but opens it up and revels in it, rather than accepting it as valid.

AB: Thanks, Alexandra—that's exactly it. To me it was crucial that this project was embedded in a popular platform that is such a fixture in people's day-to-day experience, both inside and outside the academy, so that it was meeting people where they're at. It would be great to see more scholarly work in these kinds of spaces, figuring out their limits as well as their possibilities.

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Bios

Alix Beeston is a Lecturer in English at Cardiff University. Her first book, *In and Out of Sight: Modernist Writing and the Photographic Unseen*, was published in 2018 by Oxford University Press. She is also the author of *Object Women: A History of Women in Photography*, a digital project developed in partnership with the George Eastman Museum in Rochester, New York.

Alexandra Kingston-Reese is a Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary Literature at the University of York. Her book *Contemporary Novelists and The Aesthetics of 21st-Century American Life* is now out with Iowa University Press' New American Canon Series. She is Reviews Editor at *ASAP/J*, and her work appears in *Mosaic*, *MFS*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*.

Cadence Kinsey is Lecturer in Contemporary Art at UCL. Her research centres on the histories of art and technology, as well as live art and performance from the 1960s to today. She is interested in the relationships between the body and technology, and her work is informed by feminist science & technology studies. Cadence has published research on (and with) emerging artists in relation to the Internet and digital technology in both academic and non-academic contexts. Her first book, *Walled Gardens: Art After the Internet*, is forthcoming.

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