

Self-Portrait in an Infinite Scroll Grid Mirror

As Sarah Snyder does it: again and again, outside or inside, in an outfit in a square that unfurls into a carousel and then back into a grid. Sarah, a model, is caught in a series of states of unboxing herself. This happens digitally, in discrete islands of time (ski resort, beach, black SUV); what comes in-between, she doesn't show, though, technically, we see, in the whitespace that both subdivides and connects her portrait, all we need to know. Instagram is designed to simulate a wall of Polaroids, but really it suggests a volume flattened into a single surface, meant, like origami paper, to be folded along lines of perforation (these one must invent and project oneself) and reconstructed into a whole. The points (data: time, location) that would have to be translated into dimensions are too many for such a shape to be realized physically, though a folded paper fortune-teller comes to mind, as do rolls of wrapping paper, hands or houses of cards, the pamphlets on hotel room nightstands: breakfast in bed. Unlike the mirror Parmigianino had specially constructed to paint his reflection (as Ashbery writes), this structure is not of Sarah's design. She lives inside of it like a hotel or an airplane, making use only of its most basic and anonymous properties. Picture an airplane stretching along a never-ending strip of rainbow, going nowhere, in which every window is reflecting Sarah.

Hotels—on April 21, 2021, she is in six photos of a room in one of many: rose-tinted sunglasses; a cream-colored carpet patterned with intersecting gold circles (one infinite Venn diagram); tightly pleated window curtains, closed, striped in cream and a darker gold; black remotes; some silver orbs as ornament; circular lampshades and marble-top tables bordered by crocodile leather of the same cream color. Her full-body spandex is printed with overlapping ellipses that wax and wane in a gradient of blues and blurry grays, like phases of the moon appearing, very fast and all at once, on a rattlesnake. From two different angles, she crouches on the carpet like a large cat wearing a diamond wristwatch; from two others, she seems to rotate like a Chinese vase of flowers. The fifth photo is of feet and a hand. Accessories, Bottega: bubblegum pink. In the sixth, Sarah has disappeared completely. Her clothes and their wrappings have been left on the table.

In the background there is a brochure that says *Wynn*, like a signature flowing on a check. This is the logo of a hotel-casino in Vegas, one of the few on the Strip without a theme. Steve Wynn conceived of this resort as a departure from the others (the Mirage, Treasure Island) he, by 2001, had owned and operated, as "a place that does not lend itself to verbalization. When you start to describe"—indeed, the architecture does not imagine a proper noun, like Venice or Excalibur; rather, it is like punctuation, a comma or parenthesis extruded sixty stories from the desert sand and soaked in bronze glass. An artificial mountain obscures much of the mirrored surface, creating a sense of mystery. The name of the resort was initially to be *Le Rêve*, after a Picasso, owned by Wynn, depicting his young mistress, the "golden muse" who is also the model for a similar painting hung somewhere in the back of Sarah's six-figure slideshow, *Woman with a Book*, Picasso's homage to Ingres, painter of women inside surfaces who, Baudelaire wrote: "adores color, like a fashionable milliner"; is "morbidly preoccupied with style"; makes his models into "paper-patterns, inflated in a soft, lifeless manner"; causes, with his satins and screens, a mixture of "uneasiness, boredom, and fear." M. Ingres, Baudelaire worries, lacking Imagination, can only repeat the data that is given. "No more imagination: no more movement." In Macau there is another *Wynn*. Its theme (per Wikipedia): "Life imitating art." There will soon be a *Wynn*. Marjan.

stage!" Sarah's structure unfolds also in my phone, in a rental car in Nevada by a mountain range on a dirt road called Cash St. I'm looking at photos I took of myself on vacation in Death Valley, deep in white fog: I do look dead. When I look at Sarah I think she is looking in a mirror. I have always wanted to look like a mirror; we all know what mirrors look like; they are everywhere; they are silver. Like a Picasso, Sarah is a woman "with" features, things, discretized, rearranged—yellow hair, hat, purse—only she has all of them, all at once. Sarah smiles that Venice, Paris, and Excalibur should all be on one Strip even though they are all the same. She smiles that one should sit at slot machines if one likes to see them play. She levels mountains and valleys into the topology that is her portrait: a never-ending striptease. Her soft, heavy limbs curve calligraphically down the grid that is their skeleton (or perhaps they are balloon-like, floating up it: an infinite scroll knows no direction but accumulation), repeating her self into a surface that is more realistic than a portrait, even by Ingres: a pattern. She has no theme, only postures. "I just play the hand that I was dealt," she has said. "Everything was already written, I'm just living it." Sarah senses that words are really just names, shapes to be traced, designs with specificity if not meaning: a gymnast, her body will execute them perfectly. "FENDI," her sunglasses whisper, "Glimmer! Wynn." Sarah's eyes say even less. They do not say much at all except "Sarah Fucking Snyder."

When I read John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," alone in a rented white pickup truck, I wanted to copy it. When I wrote about Sarah Snyder "after Ashbery" the next day, I was on an airplane. Several days earlier I had freaked out and booked a ticket to Vegas and the first result for "Airbnb Death Valley," which turned out to be in a Nevada exurb called Pahrump just over the border from California. This is an essay about copies and citation, so to describe my weekend there I'll quote Lisa Carver's *Pahrump Report*: "It feels like a bowl of endless time." Ashbery's poem (1975) is itself a copy/description of Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1524), a painting depicting a distortion, a kind of fisheye lens skate-video effect reminiscent, psychologically, of that bubble-like Valley. His themes: surfaces; the soul; and the space between them, which can be an image. The poem is also about Death—but, as Ashbery writes, "more on that later." The background of Parmigianino's painting is the opposite of a hotel, airplane, or Death Valley: a studio or study, space for living and thinking that, Ashbery imagines, shapes the subjectivity that is trying to bubble to the surface of *Self-Portrait*.

Sarah, however, has no subjectivity! And I loved my Airbnb because it was not a place I'd be able to live or think; it was a sunlight-flooded box in a dirt lot surrounded by a chain-link fence surrounded by mountains. Outside, the sky was flat and empty; so were the roads, except some horses; so was my mind. Upon moving to Pahrump, Carver wrote: "None of us can predict what forbidden desire will rear its head in total isolation. I was about to find out." But what I found out wasn't a forbidden desire; it was nothing. Nothing seemed forbidden, except the neighbors' dirt lot, which was identical to mine. Nothing was desirable, except staying in my own lot. Forever. For forever seemed like it had already come. At the end of the street, the asphalt ended; from there, I just walked out into the desert. The dispensary weed in Nevada was dirt cheap, so cheap that I got confused and took so many edibles that I almost died. Watching the moonlight plus the fluorescence from the trailer park play over the silver polka dots on the window curtains. I concentrated on my



breathing, trying to stay awake. The walls were made of honey-colored wood in which concentric knots and whorls repeated infinitely; I knew I would fall asleep (and die) because it was nighttime, and there was the pattern above me, coming closer, ever softer and more infinite, looking like the fake-wood on a seventies TV set. I'd ingested fake THC probably synthesized at the nearby nuclear test sites and I was already in the type of place you go to die anyways. So it all made sense—I faded to black.

Then I woke up. I had to drive back to Vegas. There, I stayed alone in the Luxor, a pyramid-shaped hotel covered with black glass on the outside and permeated by horrible carpets, nicotine, and sparkly slot-machine sounds on the inside. It was like the afterlife—unsurprising, as it was modeled on a tomb.

Girls and Guns

As Richard Kern has them do it: in the bathtub or in bed, in cotton camis instead of shell-like spandex, with their own accessories instead of ones they have been airdropped to advertise, and often with their phones. Kern Girls, in other words, are *real*: the opposite of Sarah. Then again, aren't all photos of hot girls are the same? Sarah, too, owns a phone—and the fact that Kern's girls have different faces, different favorite songs to which they dance very naturally, only makes them more identical. This is why they're so appealing. Our pleasure is in their repetition. And in their themes, which play out in patterns: in the series *Medicated*, Kern shoots girls naked showing us their pills; in *Contact High*, they're naked too, smoking weed. In *Cellphones*, they're spreadeagled underneath their phonescreens, a selfie beaming up at Kern's camera from straight between their breasts. If you look down their eyes, they might be saying "hi!" "hey" or ":)"—then again, maybe that's just their tits. In *Guns*, the eyes say nothing at all. Except maybe "Guns." *Guns* is my favorite theme because there is nothing natural about a model in cute cotton panties holding one. The photo only makes the girl look more like what she really is—a Girl—and the gun more like what it is—a Gun. In this sense, though they are unrealistic, the photos are real.

The original Gun might be a photo of Richard Kern himself in which he is holding a revolver. Kern did the music video for Sonic Youth's *Death Valley '69* (1984), which was actually not shot in Death Valley. But here, he is for real in Death Valley. In the realistically 2D backdrop of the desert, dirt scrolls up to a strip of mountains below a white sky and behind the silhouette of Kern's American jeans and cut-off T-shirt. The shadow of the barrel falls accurately across his hollow jaw. The revolver is the same color as his eyes (dark), because the photo is black and white, making it all very natural. At the time the photo was taken, Kern was doing "Cinema of Transgression," a movement with a manifesto that says things like "Any film which doesn't shock isn't worth looking at" and "There will be blood, shame, pain and ecstasy, the likes of which no one has yet imagined." Indeed, like an Ingres, these films had nothing to do with Imagination and everything to do with special effects (*Surface*). Sometimes the sex was real; sometimes the blood was fake; the difference only made them more identical. What can be less realistic and more real than *Oddballs dancing, leering at camera, guy shaving a nontraditional part of his body and man ripping his own throat out, woman stabbing herself to death* (an online description of *Submit to Me*, 1985)? An interviewer for *Videowave* wondered: did Kern *really* shoot up on stage that one time? He did, "with fake drugs." When things happened back then for the camera, for real or for fake, it was shocking. Now, nothing is forbidden and everything is merely realistic. Kern's dark eyes drop back deep in his silver face, implying something like history—a backstory, maybe, too transgressive for words? No... "I am not making a statement," Kern says flatly on *Videowave*. "It's pure entertainment." *Shooting* is of course like *shooting*. His eyes aren't saying "Guns" because they don't have to; they are just doing it.

Trying to fall asleep in the Luxor against the bouncy coin sounds being simulated outside my room, I started *Remainder*, Tom McCarthy's novel about a man who, following a terrible accident, becomes obsessed with "reenacting"



near-death experiences in order to feel “real—to become fluent, natural.”

One month later, I too would again “almost die,” in the ER. Like in my Airbnb, I was concentrating on breathing. This time, most breaths felt like being knifed in my ribcage. There was “blood and pain the likes of which [I’d] never imagined.” Stars would burst in my vision. I pictured the white eyes of a horse rolling backwards right before you take mercy and shoot it. The ultrasounds of my torso were blurry—from lots of blood, as it would turn out, which obscured the image—but finally it was discovered that I had been pregnant at the time of my trip through Death Valley, and still was now. Except it was “ectopic,” a rare case where the embryo grows in a bubble outside of the uterus and then, always, bursts. I consented via signature to the risk of being operated on—Death!—which wasn’t actually a risk in the Vegas sense, since I would definitely die, soon, if I didn’t. Then, the “operating theater” was flat and white. Because I was on my back looking up, it seemed shallow, but potentially expanding infinitely around my bed. My yellow lace thong from Urban Outfitters was removed and put in a skull-stickered bag because there was blood coming all the way up the crotch like a waterline. Although the drunken appearance of the anesthesiologist and his Monica-Lewinsky-looking assistant made me certain that I was about to die, I felt amazingly lucid, calm, and at peace. I remembered *Remainder*. Soon, I’d be a simple surface. The doctors would inflate my organs in order to see them better. The thing now was to play the hand I was dealt. I knew I’d execute my role perfectly; after all, I’d rehearsed it.

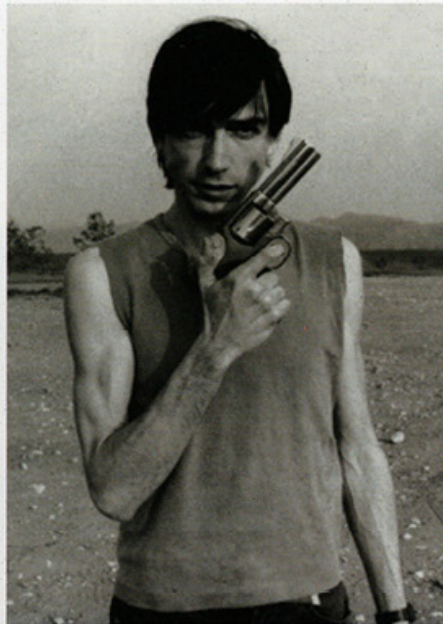
I didn’t die, of course. Lying awake at night I now often picture a big white truck driving through sand, or a small silver pinball silently running downwards through a series of corners in a corkboard maze that is covered in a sheet of plexiglass like a cross-section, hovering over a mirror of water at the bottom, brushing lightly over its surface, sending a ripple, and then, somehow, through the operation of various flippers or levers, being propelled all the way back up. The ball when it rolls out onto the surface does not know the twists and turns that it took, unlike the cameras that were surgically inserted into my stomach.

One month later, I took another trip, to an Airbnb on a rural back road near Rhinecliff, NY, in order to be photographed by Richard Kern. This Airbnb was a wood house painted black from the outside and stuffed with deer heads, novelty shot glasses, and fake Warhols on the inside. Kern wore a camo-print baseball hat and a black hoodie. I’d be wearing a pink string bikini and skin-colored band-aids over the stitches from my surgery, both of which I’d soon take off, and a shotgun.

Richard Kern Heaven Reenactment

In my memory of the photos we took in Rhinecliff, my eyes are looking into Kern’s camera and watching the Airbnb unfold around me like wrapping paper: curtains; Home Sweet Home coffee cups; whorls of wood of the same cream color. Things already look like an exact reproduction of the photo they are right now becoming. And the obvious fake-ness of this faux-rustic Home only heightens for me the reality of what I am doing—taking my top off—as the scene decomposes into a sensation of surfaces: thin mesh underwear; hard wood banister; big black flatscreen, reflecting me topless, on my hands and knees on a sheepskin rug from IKEA. I see myself smiling. It’s not forbidden or transgressive to take my top off anymore. Thankfully, I have no interest in meaningful statements anyways, so taking my top off feels even better (pure entertainment). “Since there is no afterlife,” as the Cinema of Transgression manifesto goes, “the only heaven is ... having fun.”

When I am led outside to reenact Richard Kern in Death Valley (excepttopless), pressing the revolver (except



fake) against my cheek, I remember who that photo reminds me of: a friend/ex, now dead, who liked both girls and guns, and whom I thought of often while driving through Death Valley because my rental car was the same model as the truck he once owned. My love of reflecting all things (and men) like a mirror is probably why I was so sure I was going to die. Of course, I was right; I totally will. I shiver, but that’s just from the cold. This Airbnb comes with snow on the ground and a river nearby. And I remember, now, how, upon feeling the pain being replaced with something oddly-familiarly-fake, (fentanyl), I had, in those last seconds, not been calm at all; already fading under, I had started thrashing on the table; I was looking up into this awful bright light and trying to rip the oxygen mask off my face. But my arm didn’t work. It was like being mummified alive. There are many perfectly meaningless, fake, and futureless forms of reproduction, like a baby that cannot develop, that are nevertheless quite dangerous. Which is why even fake guns are cool. The Polaroids we are using for this shoot are also cool, because they are no longer being produced. Back in the Airbnb, we wait for the image of our reenactment to develop.

Blinking up into Richard Kern’s camera from a blue-checked polyester bedspread, his boots on either side of my stitched-up stomach, really stoned from the weed I really just smoked for the purpose of shooting me smoking weed, spread out on my back under the lights and the circular silver reflectors erected around my bed, I see the operating theater arch above me and feel the desert expand below me. It is like a bowl of endless time. A white star bursts in my vision!—and I have an acute sense of chronological collapse, of themes, patterns, and figures being folded together into a single moment (an image). *Death Valley '69* is recorded in '84, one year after my boyfriend is born, which is, interestingly or not, thirty years after Richard Kern and thirteen years before I am, and, in between then, my dad. In 2013, “Girls and Guns” is just a Tumblr I follow that belongs to Petra Collins. Her photos are clearly inspired by Kern, for whom she once did casting. *girlsandguns* is probably where I first saw one of Kern’s Guns; since then, I have always wanted to copy him, too. In 2023, in the afterlife, I do.

Turns out heaven (or hell) is like a hotel; I now know that all words are really just shapes to be traced and that thankfully my body can still execute them perfectly—and, thankfully, moreover, I am in a pink bikini bralette. Spread on the present of the blue-and-white bed, I feel the photograph pool around me. Without meaning, it is still developing, with me inside. So I sink down into it. Like Sarah like Ashbery. “Everything was already written, I’m just living it.”

