

Silenced Violence Versus IG Likes: Are They The Same?

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It is not often that a simple caption change under a photo on Instagram leads to death threats. And yet, it is exactly what happened when an Instagrammer Essena O’Neill changed the captions on her photos. O’Neill, 18, is an Australian Instagram model, who leveraged a “contrived” sense of beauty and her great genes, to create an image of a perfect carefree coquettish blonde with an illuminating smile, graceful posture, tiny waist, – seemingly enjoying life – all while making profits from the advertisement endorsements. It is interesting that when O’Neill changed alluring captions on her photos to more accurate descriptions of what was actually happening at the time the photo was taken, her followers had an extremely negative reaction to the point of sending her death threats. One week later, she deleted most of her photos, accounts, and decided to quit social media altogether.

The questions I ask and try to answer are the following: does the withdrawal from social media indicate breaking free or brokenness; and most importantly, how do we account for the virulence behind what can be seen as such an innocuous change? To answer this, I use theories of several prominent writers that I introduce later in the text.

Photographs seem to allow direct access to a vivid reality, but they do not. American writer, filmmaker, philosopher, teacher, and political activist Susan Sontag places an importance on the narrative that comes with the photo which determines our perception of it. In her book, she writes, “A photograph cannot make a dent in public opinion unless there is an appropriate context of feeling and attitude” (Sontag, 8). The superficial, aesthetically pleasing impact the photos were making before the caption change was directly tied to the subject and the framing of that subject. If you look at Exhibit 1A, a recognition of a happy young girl living her best life wouldn’t be the least obvious interpretation of the photo. However, after reading the new narrative she posted under the same style photos in the Exhibit 1-2B, one no longer sees the reality she was experiencing in the same way. “There can be no evidence, photographic or otherwise, until the event itself has been named and characterized” (Sontag, 19). The beholder’s understanding of the photos was altered through the forcible dramaturgy imposed on him or her, who no longer sees a happy young girl, but rather a version of her imitating herself being happy.

This is where performance and performativity come into the frame. Whom do we see in the photos? Which version of her are we getting: is she fake purporting to be real or is she real purporting to be fake? Idea of an American philosopher Judith Butler, whose work has influenced political philosophy, ethics, and literary theory, holds that performance is an act of taking on a role similar to the theatrical sense of putting on a mask for the length of an act, whereas performativity is a series of effects and traits that become naturalized in the person who is appropriating them. Due to the performative repetition effect, those idiosyncrasies become a part of the person in question so much so that it starts to feel inherent. However, the type of performativity that O'Neill chose to take on, more specifically, a typical seductive blonde, is constrained in the series of social norms that she imitates, which are embedded in the frames. In layman's terms, the model is imitating herself imitating those norms because those norms readily yield access to fast likeability.

In her book *Art on My Mind*, American author, feminist, and social activist Bell Hooks says, "The place where I could see myself, beyond imposed images, was in the realm of the snapshot. I am most real to myself in snapshots" (Hooks, 56). However, according to a French philosopher linguist, and critic Roland Barthes, the contrary is true, "My profound self never coincides with my image" (Barthes, 12). The former author insists, in the snapshots, she finds an image she can love, the proof that there was a "me of me" as she puts it (Hooks, 57). The model in our exhibit would not feel the need to delete her account, where she willfully dehumanized herself to gain recognition, had she been producing a genuine representation of herself. As Butler explains, "The image that is represented signifies its admissibility into the domain of representability; that same image thus signifies the delimiting function of the frame even as, or precisely because, it does not represent it" (Butler, 953). O'Neill had the power to frame herself so it would attract the most attention; therefore, the representation of the images appeals to people who readily accept objectification of women, but the representability of the images lies within the society that makes such representation favorable.

O'Neill dehumanized herself through photography as she was the mastermind behind the frame: she decided on the poses, locations, and wardrobe. If you look at the Exhibit 2B, she says: "Nothing is candid about this. I felt a strong desire to pose with my thighs apart, boobs pushed up, and face away because obviously, my body is my most likable asset". According to Sontag, "A photograph can be treated as a narrowly selective transparency" (Sontag, 6). The photographer chooses the object they want to present and how they want to present it – that is the nature of narrowly selective transparency.

O'Neill constructed an image that would appeal to a large IG audience to gain recognition. Nonetheless, the image she chose to produce did not align with her inherent personality and a genuine style of living; while the sole purpose was to choose the photographs that would be objectified and dehumanized in order to gain followers and likes on social media.

According to Sontag, "A camera is sold as a predatory weapon. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed" (Sontag, 14). For example, if you look at the Exhibit 1B, the model mentioned having taken over one hundred similar images in order to get her stomach captured perfectly as well as admitting to forgoing food and fighting with her sister who was taking the photos. The deliberate subjection of one's own body to starvation in an attempt to make oneself look desirable on the photos is a severe offense against one's own health. In addition, she was using violence against herself by utilizing a camera to capture the self-abuse she was subjecting herself to, and the frames were a proof that this abuse happened. As Butler puts it, "The action of the camera itself is either oddly compliant, or it works as an incitement to orchestrate the scene, but also to extend the scene in time, to keep the scene going, again and again, promising a further visual consumption of the sadistic pleasure after the event (Butler, 961). Every time her follower 'liked' a picture where she was abusing herself, it was an implicit death threat. Since the audience is using pseudo-violence against her by leveraging the benefits she would get if she continues the self-abuse, it validates the frame and assures that the violence will continue.

To answer the first part of the question proposed in the beginning, it can be concluded that she was broken from the abuse she put on herself for so many years. The negativity that was thrown her way by the followers she thought cherished her not long ago, devastated her even more, which can be confirmed from the context of the short video she released where she cried about her misspent teenage years. However, the act of closing the accounts was the first step in taking control of her life, breaking free from the fake life she'd been living. The fact that the photos will no longer exist, means that there is no proof of self-imposed violence. In the 2-minute video she says that she is no longer interested in pursuing a virtual life and that she will begin living a real life, which doesn't have to be documented to be valid. It definitely sounds as though she broke free by disposing of her account. However, before she took control, she was indeed broken.

Prior to the caption change, O’Neill’s followers looked at her photos through their preconceived notions of what it means to be beautiful, without taking into consideration the ingredients the final product consisted of, such as violence. They surrendered their judgment to seeing what’s in the frame, what it represents but not its representability. “This ‘not seeing’ in the midst of seeing, this not-seeing that is the condition of seeing, has become the visual norm, and it is that norm that is a national norm, one that we read in the photographic frame as it conducts this fateful disavowal” (Butler, 966). The analysis of the situation using Butler’s lens can yield one way of explicating such malevolent reaction: the audience was stupefied by the violence in the frame which they didn’t want to admit, existed, or ignorantly enough, didn’t know existed. O’Neill made the violence in the frame visible when she changed the captions, making it explicit both in the captions and in their response to it. The numerous likes were revealed to be silenced death threats and were no longer seen as a positive act of support.

O’Neill threatened the frame and the representability that allows it to exist. She made the violence in the frame visible, and that goes against the national norm that Butler argues is a condition of seeing. The act of calling her followers out on their disability i.e., visual impairment that stems from the diminished capacity, “this not-seeing that is the condition of seeing”, exasperated them to the point where they used explicit violence to validate the frame and acquit themselves for their retroactive response to it. Nobody likes to be accused of being an abuser and/or stupid, and this is exactly what O’Neill implied in the new captions.

Taking into consideration the resources such as a readily accessible technology we have at our disposal, it is not a bad idea to understand the root of your reactions and expectations and be aware of the consequences that come with liking photos of strangers online. You never know what kind of violent acts you may be reinforcing. And just because you are blissfully ignorant, doesn’t mean there wouldn’t be aftermath. Next time you ‘like’ a photo of another girl like O’Neill who is too young to resist access to fast popularity and realize the damage she is doing to herself, you need to remember that you are performing an implicit act of violence against her. Acknowledging one’s own actions and attempting to control one’s own perceptions is the most powerful act a human can perform.

Exhibit 1A



Ms O'Niell said she would have taken more than 100 similar shots in an attempt to make her stomach look good, forgoing food and yelling at her sister in the process of achieving the 'unattainable' look

Exhibit 1B



'Nothing is candid about this...I felt the strong desire to pose with my thighs just apart #thighgap boobs pushed up #vsdoublepaddingtop and face away because obviously my body is my most likeable asset,' Ms O'Neill confessed

Exhibit 2B

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