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December 4, 2013

Usership on Mouchette.org: Creating Digital Spaces of Girl Empowerment

In 1996 the domain 'mouchette.org' was claimed and a self-declared artist anonymously began to write a website for the fictional thirteen-year-old of Bresson's film, *Mouchette*.¹ The page was at first received by the early net's small public as the blog of a precocious, but troubled child. The site has been expanded to deal with themes of suicide, consumerism and the bodies of young girls. Mouchette.org, created before the establishment of Web 2.0 and the widespread commodification of Internet experience, was unique in that it thrived off interaction from spectators. A few years after the first site's creation, an anonymous individual registered mouchette.net and invited users to abuse their identity by becoming Mouchette. On the .net site anyone could make pages as Mouchette, respond to emails as Mouchette or issue public statements as Mouchette. Although the websites may have initially been individually authored they have been so shaped by a collective that it is impossible to call them the work of one artist. Mouchette.org has grown with the Internet and fostered a community of artists, suicidal teenagers and curious surfers. Users of mouchette.org and its sister sites create a vast web of changing paths that constantly alter experience. It would be impossible to address all paths or pages in this paper as each page may contain twenty or more links, loops and

¹ *Mouchette*, directed by Robert Bresson (1967; France: UGC), Film.

changing content archives. I have limited the focus of this paper to a few paths, which I found particularly helpful for discussing Mouchette's usership.

Mouchette.org and .net, the home pages of (an) anonymous artist(s) provide an example of art in which the process of collective consumption and recycling of cultural materials constitute the artwork. The artist and the spectator become inseparable in the creation of the art experience. This turns the artists/spectators into what I call 'users' of media. In order to become a user, one needs to be a producer and be aware of the opacity inherent in most Internet use and consumption. Mouchette.org illuminates the opacity of social media and marketing tactics. Users take materials out of their commercial contexts to create more empowering forms of girlhood on the Internet. Creative consumption and usership are necessarily active and participatory although not all participatory sites encourage usership. Creation and participation are inherent in all social media, but they are not always empowering for the user, they often serve commercial interests. Participation in mouchette.org has been used to recreate spectators on the web, particularly young-girls, as empowered users.

The original pages on the site relied heavily on references to the film *Mouchette*, by Robert Bresson. The film documents the brief life of a young girl in the mid-century French countryside. Mouchette, after being abused by her father, her classmates and raped by a villager, decides to kill herself. Her age, gender and class leave her powerless when confronted by abuse. She is teased by other girls for not buying pretty clothes and scolded by her family wanting to enjoy herself. Mouchette rarely speaks in the film; she silently and reluctantly follows the orders of the man who rapes her and the adults who abuse her. After finally lashing out in the only way she can, refusing to be polite, she

finds her dead mother and kills herself by slowly rolling into a river wearing her new dress. The struggles and abuse of Mouchette on the screen address themselves to the society that has violated Mouchette, but simultaneously allow catharsis for the viewer. “As we follow this young girl from rejection to violation to suicide, we become complicit as members of the society that virtually sacrifices her.”² Mouchette is a young girl, like many other girls, but her tragic story is told and directed by a man. Moreover, the director allows the story of her rape to serve as visually pleasurable entertainment for the audience. In contrast to the film, *mouchette.org* allows the exploited girl subject to construct her own space and tell her story on her own terms. Mouchette’s problems are not confined to her society, they reflect the struggles of girls today. Girls have been given more freedom in their consumption but remain oppressed in other spheres.

In the 1990s, shopping malls were identified as the new consumption driven public sphere for youths, particularly girls.³ More recently the Internet has taken the place of the shopping mall. Teen girls are now the largest producers and consumers of blogs⁴. Girls have accepted social media’s compromise of commercial forms of participation. These forms of participation are in fact only part of an “‘emancipation myth.’ ‘Woman’ is given to women to consume; youth is given to youths to consume, and in this formal narcissistic emancipation, their real liberation can be successfully

² Robert J. Hudson, “Mouchette and the Sacrificial Scene: Bresson's Cinematic Anthropology” *Anthropoetics* 15 (2009)
<http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1501/1501hudson.htm>

³ Anita Harris “Jamming Girl Culture: Young Women and Consumer Citizenship,” in *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004) 165.

⁴ Amanda Lenhart and Mary Madden, “Teen Content Creators and Consumers” (D.C: Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2005)

prevented.”⁵ Baudrillard wrote in reference to the shopping malls of the twentieth century, but these same promises are now being made on the Internet. This paper will examine some pages and interactive aspects of the site and the ways that they provide tools for empowered consumers and a space for discourse on exploitation of girls.

Mouchette.org allows girls to surface as collective creators of content for and by themselves on the Internet. On mouchette.org all users are both artists and spectators. “Mouchette.org’s “‘branching discourse’ creates a work lacking an ‘authorial center’ allowing the user to surface as the ultimate protagonist”.⁶ It is important to emphasize the consumptive behaviors of Internet user’s, they use commercial software, services and media, but my application of the term ‘user’ references the idea of produsage, a “hybrid form of simultaneous production and usage”.⁷ The term was created in response to Web 2.0 sites in which consumers create free content for companies, but has been applied retroactively to activities that shaped or altered the products of consumption. ‘User’ often has a connotation of passivity, highlighting unconscious consumption, though this is never really passive. Facebook and other social media have ingrained into users the idea that clicks only produce seen results. Casually surfing is a myth, digital engagement is always productive. Users do consume, but I want to highlight a highly conscious form of consumption, in which users take established ideas and products to create new content outside of a predetermined code. As girls become the largest users of social media they

⁵ Jean Baudrillard “The Consumer Society” in *Raw Materials for A Theory of the Young-Girl* ed. Tiqqun (Éditions Mille Et Une Nuits : 2001) 14.

⁶ Randall Packer, “Net Art as Theater of the Senses” in *Beyond Interface: net art and Art on the Net* www.walkerart.org/gallery9/beyondinterface/packer_senses.html.

⁷ Axel Bruns, “Produsage: Towards a Broader Framework for User-Led Content Creation” in *Proceedings Cultural Attitudes towards Communication and Technology* (2006): 275.

are particularly vulnerable to the myth of casually surfing on sites that are owned by others.⁸

Mouchette.org has persisted from Web 1.0 into the era of Web 2.0 where it now resides. Like the rhetoric of empowered shopping in the last century, “The politics of Web 2.0 are expressed in traditional democratic terms, emphasizing freedom of choice and the empowerment of individuals through what O’Reilly (2005) has termed the ‘architecture of participation’”.⁹ Web 2.0 thrives off greater participation of customers in commercial sites, which constitutes its supposed improvement on the ‘old’ web. Greater participation in Web 2.0 results partially from web design that allows non-skilled consumers easier access to content production tools.¹⁰ It can be argued that the Internet does not act differently now than it did in 1996; the Internet has always been participatory and controlled by corporations to some extent. With Web 2.0 however, there are also websites, “...such as... Facebook, [that] exploit user-created communities of networked relationships through targeted marketing and advanced viral marketing techniques.”¹¹ Web 2.0 has also allowed the Internet to become more of a communication medium.¹² The new forms of communication are more standardized in order to reach a larger population, but standardization makes them more easily exploitable by companies.

⁸ Maeve Duggan “The Demographics of Social Media Users – 2012” (D.C.: Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project, 2013)
<http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/Social-media-users.aspx>

⁹ Matthew Allen, “Web 2.0 an Argument Against Convergence” *First Monday* 13 (2008):
<http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2139/1946>Anderson

¹⁰ Lev Manovich “The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life: From Mass Consumption to Mass Cultural Production?” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 320.

¹¹ Dmytri Kleiner, “Web 2.0 and Capitalist Appropriation”, *P2P Foundation*
http://p2pfoundation.net/Web_2.0#Web_2.0_and_capitalist_appropriation

¹² Lev Manovich “The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life: From Mass Consumption to Mass Cultural Production?” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 320.

Web 2.0 has created an illusion of greater freedom, while companies relentlessly track, monitor and sell activity with little or no benefit to consumers.

Web 2.0 has standardized almost all forms of communication over the Internet by favoring traceable and marketable models of sociability. Companies “seek to prosper on the basis of user-created content” and the taking of personal data.¹³ Interest is increasingly expressed through modes such as Facebook’s ‘like’ button. A consumer’s ‘likes’ are often efforts to participate in a community or construct a personal brand, but they are tracked and sold to other companies¹⁴. The format of the ‘like’ button encourages a standardized, thoughtless form of communication, which is easily transformed into a commodity. A click on the thumbs up icon produced a seen effect: interest is shown on the homepage. However, a click also produces a hidden effect, data is collected about the individual and sold for the companies profit.¹⁵ ‘Likes’ and other forms of online interaction pass through social media companies whether or not this process is transparent. Clicks on mouchette.org are highlighted as important and potentially dangerous. There are never unseen effects. On mouchette.org a click can produce even a death or a rape. The user of Mouchette.org’s refusal to conform to the new standardized model of web communication allows the site to remain an empowered space on the Internet.

¹³ Teresa M. Harrison and Brea Barthel Wielding “New Media in Web 2.0: Exploring the history of engagement with the collaborative construction of media products” *New Media & Society* (2009), 11.

¹⁴ Marcus, Bernd; Machilek, Franz; Schütz, Astrid (2006). "Personality in cyberspace: Personal web sites as media for personality expressions and impressions". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90: 1014–1031.

¹⁵ Dmytri Kleiner, “Web 2.0 and Capitalist Appropriation”, *P2P Foundation*
http://p2pfoundation.net/Web_2.0#Web_2.0_and_capitalist_appropriation

Mouchette.org whether or not this was the creator's intention, became an early social media site of user produced and reused content. Web 2.0 signaled a switch from primarily text based, minimally-interactive sites to highly graphic participatory media. In the years around mouchette.org's creation, the Internet also became a home of the spectacle, a breeding ground for a "social relationship between people that is mediated by images"¹⁶ The web during the 1990s was primarily publication oriented and text based.¹⁷ An individual would access a site created by someone else and read the text provided, usually not providing feedback or engaging with the site's form. Instead of following this model, the creator of mouchette.org sent emails to and created personal pages for users of the site. Visitors were invited to respond to prompts asking questions like "What's the best way to kill yourself when you're under 13?" "What's in a name? "What does my tongue taste like?" and "Why would you like to become Mouchette?" These questions and the other participatory aspects of the site helped form the original spectators of mouchette.org into an active virtual community. This community can be seen as taking the Situationist idea of *détournement*, articulated in response to old media in the last century, to the problems of girls and social media today. The site encourages the production of new pages that take creative and commercial content from the web and alter it to create corrupted new meanings that question practices of consumption and exploitation of girls. It is important to question these practices in this way because girls in particular have been used as the model 'emancipated' consumer citizen while remaining as powerless and voiceless about abuse as ever.

¹⁶ Guy Debord *Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 12.

¹⁷ Lev Manovich "The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life: From Mass Consumption to Mass Cultural Production?" *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 320.

The “Suicide Kit” or “What is the best way to kill yourself when you’re under 13?” is now almost entirely user created. This page “...has become a meeting place for depressed teenagers, who exchange thoughts there”.¹⁸ Participatory websites potentially allow for communication between many individuals and the synthesis of new communities outside of their predictable forms. The “Suicide Kit” began as an archive of answers to one question but evolved into a forum. By disregarding the prompts given on the site and organizing themselves users turned the page into a community space for discussions of abuse. Instead of responding to “What is the best way to kill yourself when you’re under 13?” users often utilize the forum to tell their own stories or to establish a new identity. Lucy_cortina uses mouchette.org to reinvent identity and uses the forum to exhibit his or her short stories. In contrast to social media sites where formats are rigid and serve the needs of the company rather than the community, users of mouchette.org wrested power from the code and original author to create a sphere for free discourse. Using the pseudonym ‘Mouchette’ on the “Suicide Kit” gives users freedom to talk about abuse through artwork or forums without fear of bodily harm or identification. Although Mouchette and many users of the site are young girls, there are no rigid lines between gender, age, truth or fiction on the site. The site is open to anyone who identifies with the problems of abuse and exploitation, which may affect girls most, but can affect all users. Users have hacked the original form of the page to serve their own needs as a community.

¹⁸ Josephine Bosma, “Art as Experience: Meet the active audience” in *Network Art* ed. Tom Corby (Routledge, 2006), 34.



Fig. 1. Mouchette, *Suicide Kit*, 1996-2013. Website.

Users of mouchette.org take the forms of websites, commercial and user-generated content and recycle them. The type of creative consumption found on mouchette.org creates a digital form of the Situationist International's tactic of détournement. Détournement is defined as,

[T]he integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu. In this sense there can be no Situationist painting or music, but only a Situationist use of those means. In a more elementary sense, *détournement* within the old cultural spheres is a method of propaganda, a method, which reveals the wearing out and loss of importance of those spheres.¹⁹

Like the Situationists users of mouchette.org do not create new images, they create collages of film characters, commercials, sound clips and other artifacts. They take whatever commercial use or cultural value these media once held and desterilize them in conversations about suicide, rape and girlhood. Users also take the cultural form of the

¹⁹ "Definitions". *Situationist International* #1. 1958. trans. Ken Knabb (2006)

young girl's diary or blog and pervert spectator's expectations of it. Mouchette's homepage mirrors many of the personal blogs young women created in the mid 1990s to act as diaries. It is formally simple. It consists of a brief text biography, a small portrait of a girl and a hyper saturated image of a flower. The page declares, "My name is Mouchette." "I am nearly 13 years old", and "I am an artist". It takes the content and form of standard Web 1.0 and 2.0 sites and makes them into satirical and dark spaces of contemporary girlhood.

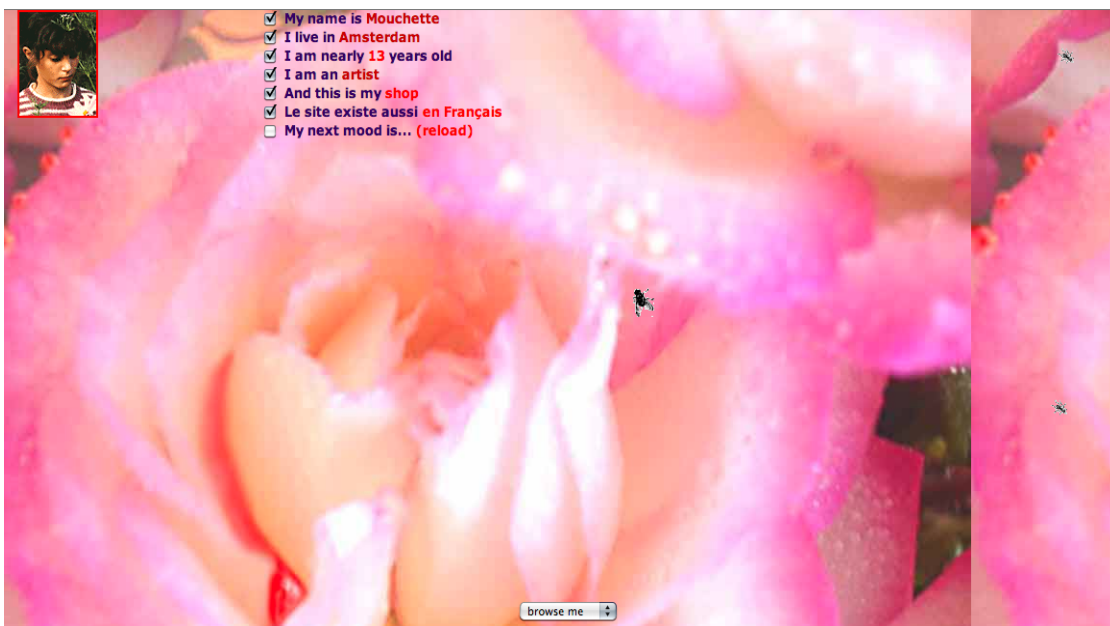


Fig. 2. Mouchette, *Homepage*, 1996-2013. Website.

Portraits of Mouchette and the floral background of her homepage shift with each refresh. Digital insects crawl around the cursor while the text remains static. Some of the avatars are of Mouchette the film character, some are of horror movie monsters, and some are of pharmaceutical labels. These avatars are the first to play with the spectator's expectations of transparency on the Internet. Clicking on any avatar takes the user to

other women's homepages. The changing portraits and the pages they link to force awareness of Mouchette's fragmented identity. Mouchette literally encompasses many different kinds of users who are united in that they identify with the character of the abused child in some way. One avatar leads to a game about a girl taking medication. Clicking on any linked image takes the user to an image of a girl vomiting over a toilet. This page takes familiar stock photos of girls and pharmaceuticals but refigures them to imply the anguish of suicide and overdoses. Another page asks the user to choose the tooth that they ripped from a girl's mouth when she was twelve years old. If the user clicks the right tooth they are taken to a page of raw meat with the name Mouchette inscribed into it. The portraits all link to different women's stories of girlhood and the user's clicks determine which tragedy will befall the girl. Spectators are made painfully aware of the powers of surfing and clicking. All clicks and links have a powerful visible effect. These first pages take innocent commercial imagery, games and hyperlinks and use them to implicate the spectator in some violence done to girls.



Fig. 4. Mouchette, *Lida*, 1996-2013. Website.

On Mouchette's homepage there are insects that crawl over the screen toward the user's cursor. Like a vanitas painting for the Internet age, the digitized perfection of the Technicolor flowers is made disturbing by the rotting insinuated by these bugs. These flowers, like images found elsewhere of Mouchette's youthful body, have been arrested in the perfection of youth, but the bugs hint at coming decay. These parasitic insects that feed on the ripe flesh of the flower remind the spectator of the character Mouchette's death and rape. On Mouchette's homepage the transience of the digital hyper-real beauty of the flower is referenced by the poor resolution of the image and the digital debris. "Vanitas... uses morbid symbolic objects (such as skulls, rotting food, fading flowers etc) in order to produce in the viewer's mind an acute awareness of the brevity of life and the inevitability of death."²⁰ Mouchette .org produces in the user's mind awareness the

²⁰ Hans J. Van Miegroet. "Vanitas." *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*. Oxford University Press, 2013.
<http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T087870>.

transience of the digital and the fragility of girlhood. The next clue to the uncanny nature of Mouchette's girlhood is the digitally degraded sound of laughter or crying. These sounds are computer generated but seem like human cries for help or girlish giggles. Like the other sounds found on the website these sounds do not clearly signify distress or pleasure. Instead, other content produced on the site changes their context and shifts their meaning from the sounds of happy girlhood to cries of abuse.

Smashing with the cursor the virtual ants on the flowers of Mouchette's homepage leads to a blank black page. As the user moves the cursor around it leaves a brief trail of images and moans (of pleasure or of pain?). The images are only a few pixels wide and the subjects are not quite distinguishable. Clicking on one of these images leads to another black page with a flashing image distorted and blown up so that vast pixels are all that are visible. Click once more and a new flashing image appears before the images that followed the cursor initially. Users who interact with the site as surfer or voyeur, by curiously clicking around the pages in a casual search for new links and information, will discover Mouchette's stories. Mouchette.org, "create[s] spaces that are "algorithmically" predetermined but situated randomly in the cosmopolitan space of the web."²¹ It at first appears as a naïve blog documenting girlhood on the Internet but subverts these expectations. Soon each click begins to implicate a passive consumer of the Internet in an act of violence. On every page the moans become louder and more disturbing. The safety of the anonymous clicks of the Internet spectator is called into doubt. The spectator is now a user, and becomes aware that all actions have an effect on the experience of the website. It forces an awareness of the click as an implication of the

²¹ Amy Elias, "Psychogeography, Détournement, Cyberspace," *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 827.

user in violence. All clicks have an effect in the digital world. A click always produces consequences whether or not they are visible to the user. “Surfing sets up a rhythm of attention and distraction”.²² Mouchette.org functions because of this rhythm, it brings it to the forefront of the user’s consciousness. Unlike commercial social media, Mouchette does not bring the user what they expect. Social media sites use Web 2.0 technology to let clicks simultaneously give the user what they expect and perform a hidden function. Mouchette.org does not have standardized paths with expected results; instead a user is always disoriented in the webpage.

Through disorientation mouchette.org breaks the comfortable position of the voyeur of the girl’s blog. The images that appear on the black screen next have a higher resolution than the previous images. The arrangements of colored pixels are now readable as images of a rape scene not squares of beige and black. They appear to be stills from security camera footage in which a man in black attacks a young naked girl. If the user tries to navigate around the page he is led to a random page. The link I clicked took me to a Technicolor flower littered with hidden images of angels, perfume bottles and masks on a page titled “oh no”. This page ended my virtual path through her attack. The images and screams are never explained, but they draw another connection to mouchette.org’s eponymous referent, the fictional 13-year-old rape victim of Bresson’s film and Bernanos’ novel. Bresson and the creator of the site of have taken the charged character of a sexually abused child and used it for their own artistic purposes. Bresson’s film is a classic piece of cinema in which the medium, “...builds the way [a woman] is to be looked at into the spectacle itself. Playing on the tension between film as controlling the

²² Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, (London: Duke University Press, 2002), 139.

dimension of time and film as controlling the dimension of space cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire”.²³ In contrast, in the website, Mouchette has full control over how she is presented to spectators. Mouchette.org revives the victimized Mouchette and gives her a voice and a medium in which to offer solace to other distressed individuals. Mouchette.org gives the abused child an agency she never possessed in the film or the novel.

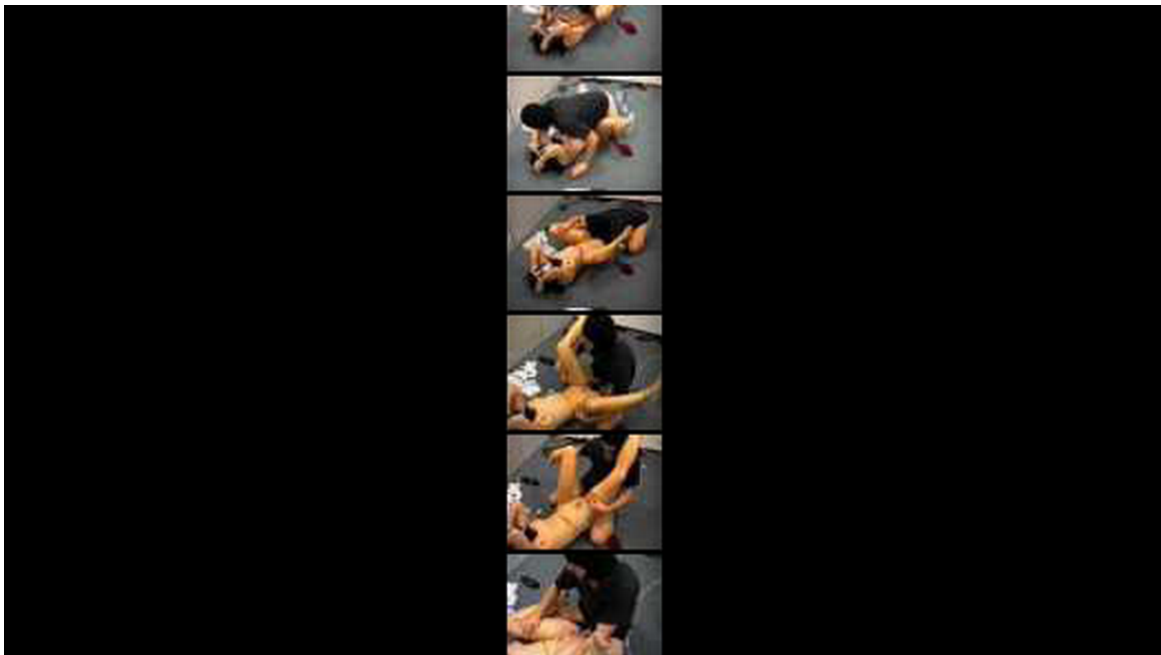


Fig. 3. Mouchette, <http://mouchette.org/squint/3s.html>, 1996-2013. Website.

A page titled “Flesh and Blood” asks users to touch and taste images of a young-girl, a Mouchette, on the screen. The bodies pictured are fragments, squares of skin pressed to glass. “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that

²³Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989)

they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.”²⁴ The images of Mouchette in “Flesh and Blood” are the abstract, young, female body that has been used by films, corporations, men and even girls on social media sites where they are taught to market themselves. These images are all coded to give pleasure to men through visual intimacy. Mouchette the “Internet nymphet” has the allure that Shaviro attributes to celebrities. She puts herself on display and invites the user to respond to her intimately, but Mouchette controls how much of herself she gives. If the spectator tries become intimate with Mouchette’s body on the screen he finds no pleasure.

Mouchette’s body parts recall portrayals of bodies on a web cam. They are displayed like a Facebook self-portrait, or a web cam feed: for the spectator. Yet, they are “...disturbed by the overt camera processes, varied web site elements, blurred or static-infused views, and [web] operators who refuse to meet the spectator's demands”.²⁵ The girl’s body, although pressed close to the screen as though it was only a thin layer of glass, is only data. It appears for one individual just as it appears for any other, but there is nothing behind glass but re-presentation of a square of stock-body-image that has no referent. The images tease, asking the user to taste, smell and lick the body on the screen. The user can participate: lick the screen or send messages to an unknown recipient, yet they are always reminded that there is no physical body that they have access to. A square of skin that promises more, but never delivers. On mouchette.org the female body is given power of representation as well as control over spectator interaction. The images are not of one real body of any girl, but all girls on mouchette.net can read the perverted

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Michele White, *The Body and the Screen: Theories of Internet Spectatorship*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 57.

or sympathetic responses from a safe distance and catalogue the ways girl's bodies are interacted with. The voyeur is staring at a few thousand pixels rearranged on the screen for every user, but a community of anonymous strangers on mouchette.net is now returning their gaze.



Fig. 6. Mouchette, *Flesh and Blood*, 1996-2013. Website.

Mouchette.org also exists in the emails and messages that circulate between users. After joining mouchette.net users can view any email ever sent to Mouchette and respond with their own pages or text. The most common forms these emails take are invitations to become more intimate and “be the first one to see something I’ve never shown to anyone else” with her signature **bisous**.²⁶ Shaviro defines intimacy as, “...what we call the

²⁶ Mouchette, e-mail message to Katie Rosenthal, September 25, 2013.

situation in which people try to probe each other's hidden depths."²⁷ The first email I received consisted of two sliding frames of rosy skin. After looking around the page the only action I was able to take was to pull the skin frames apart, exposing raw pink muscle beneath. These emails take advantage of Mouchette's allure and the user's desire to see more. By exposing herself in the body of a young girl Mouchette appeals to the spectator's scopophilia. Instead of pleasure however, the user is taken literally closer, under the skin to the disturbing interior. The user's curiosity brought out by glimpses of digital flesh and the promise of private interaction recall Freud's examples of, "the voyeuristic activities of children, their desire to see and make sure of the private and the forbidden".²⁸ There is always a desire to continue exploring the depths of Mouchette, to pry open every page. The viewer addressed by this website is either those who would exploit girls or girls who seek control over those who would exploit them. By creating a disturbing literally more intimate look at a girl, the girls writing these emails are given the opportunity to implicate voyeurs in violence.

²⁷ Steven Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect*, (Zero Books, 2010), 10.

²⁸ Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989)

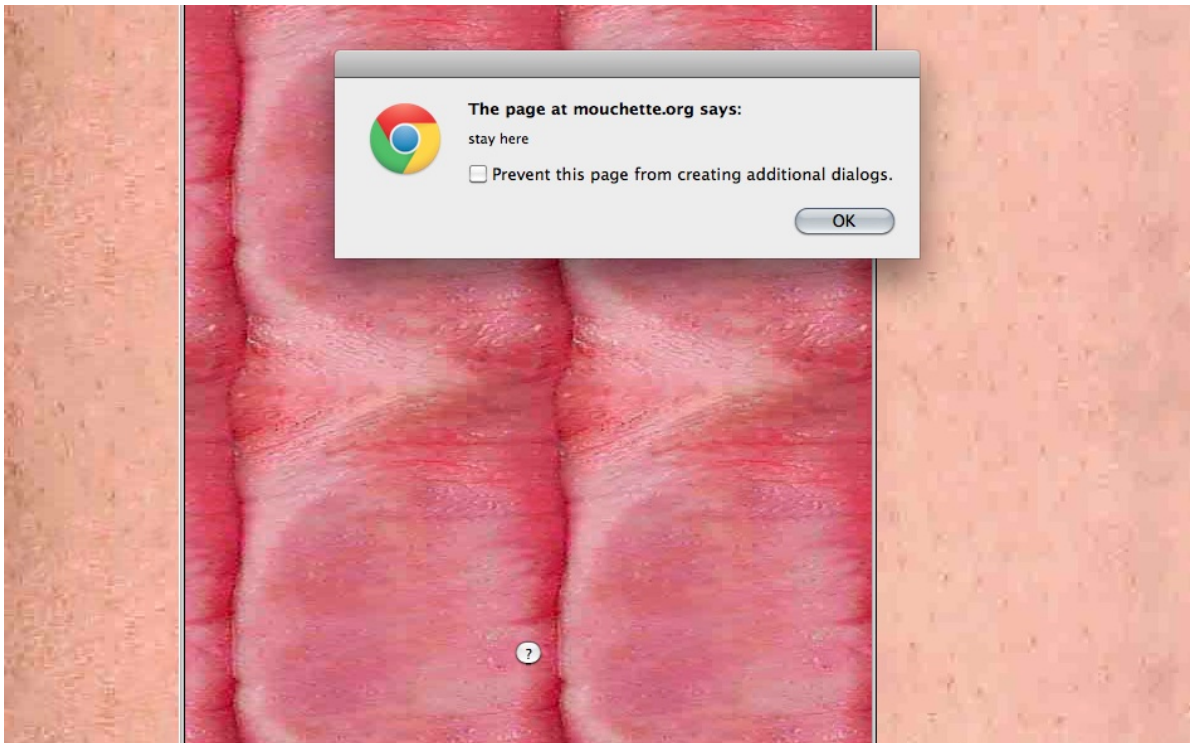


Fig. 7. Mouchette, *Email*, 2013. Website.

Mouchette's direct 'identity-sharing interface', *mouchette.net* can only be accessed by answering the question: "What's in a name?"²⁹ On the site users are given the opportunity to act as Mouchette and create new pages. By using techniques of *détournement* on these new pages users "are refiguring their citizenship in terms of production rather than consumption." Mouchette.org encourages its users to actively create their identities and communities, instead of consuming identities that are being marketed to them. A Mouchette stated in an interview "The virtual is a form of death. The body must be annihilated completely."³⁰ The digital can provide a freedom from a singular, oppressed embodied identity. "What is the self when it functions as a society?"

²⁹ Mouchette, Manthos Santorineos, "Rape, Murder and Suicide Are Easier When You Use a Keyboard Shortcut: Mouchette, an On- Line Virtual Character" *Leonardo* 38 (2005): 206.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 203

What is the self when it divides its labors among its constituent ‘alters’?”³¹ These questions are inherent in Internet communities. What makes up the identity ‘Mouchette’ is the plurality of encounters of all Mouchettes and other users. Users of some interactive websites, “...become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction”.³² In taking on the identity of Mouchette, users consume this identity and use it to create new versions of themselves and Mouchette. The blurring of reality and simulation on the Internet offers users the freedom to temporarily shed their bodies and choose the group identity of Mouchette, a safe space to seek support and creativity.

Young girls, like Mouchette the character and her collective are frequently addressed by the media and their bodies are constantly used in marketing. Girls have used mouchette.net to write .html pages that address this aspect of contemporary girlhood. One of the homepages created on mouchette.net is a photo diary, which follows a young girl from afar during her daily activities. Each photo has a title like “Mouchette looking at jewelry” or “Mouchette taking the Pepsi challenge”. The artist and the girl pictured are Mouchette, documenting consumption in everyday girlhood. They focus on the ways young girls are portrayed in society. They highlight how girls are marketed to and the status of the young girl as a product for voyeuristic consumption. Mouchette.org allows girls to write pages, which construct their own versions of how they want to be portrayed using media formats traditionally used to construct their identities for them. Stuart Ewen has said that, “the youth and their mothers will supply the social principles of consumer

³¹ Sherry Turkle, *Life on the screen: identity in the age of the Internet*, (Simon & Schuster, 1995), 259.

³² *Ibid.*, 12.

ethics to the lifestyles offered by advertising.”³³ Young women are associated with ‘social’ areas of consumption: Facebook or the mall. These spaces allow for some sort of choice by the consumer, but these are choices that do not produce anything for the shopper but a brief feeling of empowerment. Girls are taught on social media sites that their consumption patterns, the jewelry they buy or the soda they drink, are empowering them. Shoppers can “find microspheres of empowerment in the malls from the products they get there and the meanings and pleasures a person can choose.”³⁴ These young girl consumers, as can be seen in the makeup of Mouchette’s users do not always identify as girls. Adults, corporations, and media can exploit young men and women in various ways and drive them to identify with Mouchette’s problems.

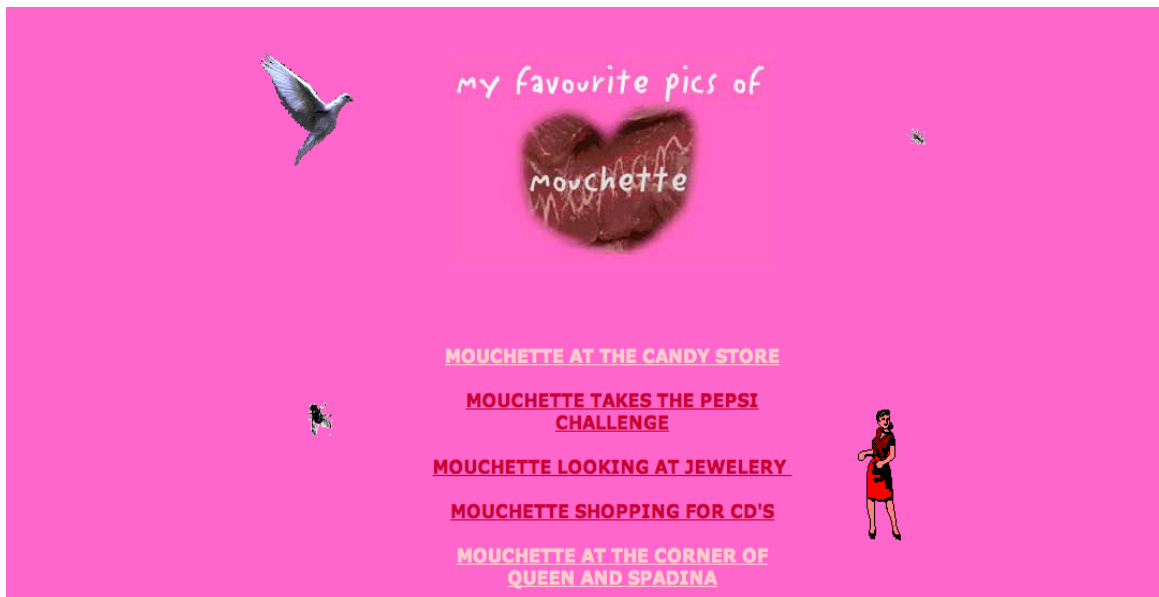


Fig. 5, Anonymous, *I Love Mouchette*, Unknown Date. Website.

³³ Stuart Ewen, “Captains of Consciousness” in *Raw Materials for A Theory of the Young- Girl* ed. Tiqqun (Éditions Mille Et Une Nuits : 2001)

³⁴ Lauren Langman, “Neon Cages: Shopping for subjectivity,” in *Lifestyle Shopping: The Subject of Consumption*, ed. Rob Shields (Routledge, 2003) 48.

Mouchette.org's authorship has been contested since the site was created. In 2001, an article on the art journal Rhizome stated,

Recently a middle-aged man came forward as Mouchette. Initially, to keep the allegedly invented web identity alive, the artist asked a 12-year-old girl to pose as Mouchette; the girl, sick with food poisoning, couldn't attend. So the artist, although he remains anonymous, thus revealed his true self -- to a confused audience unwilling to believe that Mouchette isn't real³⁵

This Mouchette was greeted with coldness and hostility. A single individual, particularly a man, claiming mouchette.org as his own creation deprives the users, who have made the site their own, of any power. In view of Mouchette's encouragement of identity and content sharing it seems as though any individual has the right to claim some authorship, but it is impossible to define exactly what authorship would mean for this type of work. Mouchette.org is built from the content of artists, ad-men and others; even a single page can have no one author. "This type of Internet art has no original, it is accessible from anywhere on the Web; it is rarely dated and it rarely restricts reproduction and duplication under copyright legislation."³⁶ Mouchette.org's users have remained loyal to the site because they are joined in creating a community or collective work without a single author. A singular individual claiming the site takes away from the legitimacy of the web pages and community that many different users have created. In some Web 2.0 sites like Facebook, "the actual content [users] contribute winds up the property of site owners. Private appropriation of community created value is a betrayal of the promise of

³⁵ RHIZOME Tue Jul 17th, 2001 8:00 a.m "Will the Real Mouchette Please Stand Up?" <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2001/jul/17/will-the-real-mouchette-please-stand-up/>

³⁶ George L. Dillon, "Net.art," in *Writing with Images: Toward a Semiotics of the Web*, 5.2, (2003) <http://courses.washington.edu/hypertext/cgi-bin/12.228.185.206/html/tablesall.html>

sharing technology and free cooperation.”³⁷ Mouchette in contrast is created and maintained in the interest of the users only. There is not one artist who could believably claim mouchette.org as his own work.

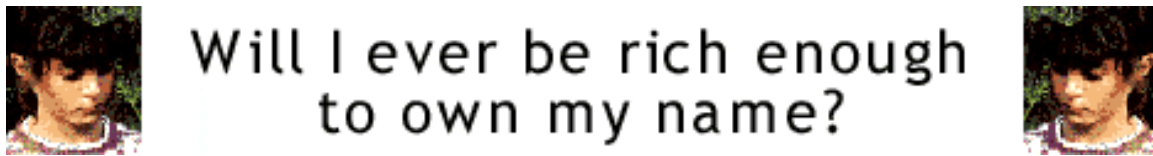


Fig. 9. Mouchette, *Mouchette.net*, 1996-2013. Website.

Mouchette.org was an early proponent of open creative consumption on the Internet. In the vein of the Situationists or Culture Jammers, users self-consciously reuse consumer media for new projects. The title of the website, Mouchette.org, repurposes Bresson’s fictional film character ‘Mouchette’ to question the position of artist or auteur and agency of the girl as consumer and media figure. Mouchette.org, particularly the quiz “Clickable Mouchette” has caused the Bresson estate to sue over copyright:

I remind you that in addition to profiting for your own notoriety from the renown of the film and the character of Mouchette as imagined by Georges Bernanos, you have distributed photos from the film through your website without authorization, and, by altering them, have perverted their nature.³⁸

The quiz also encourages users to fight against copyright laws by hosting pages on multiple servers and domains. By hosting the quiz users claimed it as their communal property and shutting down one page due to copyright laws cannot destroy the whole “Clickable Mouchette”. Users alter the character’s identity to reflect his or her own creativity, not the vision of one author or creator. They abolish any idea of private

³⁷ Dmytri Kleiner, “Web 2.0 and Capitalist Appropriation”, *P2P Foundation*
http://p2pfoundation.net/Web_2.0#Web_2.0_and_capitalist_appropriation

³⁸ <http://mouchette.org/film/sacd.gif>

cultural or artistic property by keeping artists anonymous and disregarding copyright law. Other pages on mouchette.org display photoshopped paintings and advertisements. Under a digitally altered .gif of a still life Mouchette writes “My favourite painting. Found on the net. Author unknown? I shall make it mine.” By making the painting ‘Mouchette’s’ one user is not claiming authorship or ownership, instead she is claiming it as the communal cultural product of all users, free to be manipulated and reused by all.

Mouchette is what Bourriaud has termed an art of postproduction. Bourriaud provides the example of a chat room, like those found on mouchette.org, where, “a message takes on value the moment it is repeated and commented on by someone else.” Bourriaud goes on to compare this process to the new process of contemporary art where the, “...work of art does not position itself as the termination point of the ‘creative process’ (a ‘finished product’ to be contemplated) but as a site of navigation, a portal, a generator of activities”.³⁹ The character ‘Mouchette’ and other found media on the site are given new meanings through reproduction in the context of a girl’s home page and the user’s interpretation of this new formation. All forms of content: comments, photos, html and javascript, become starting points for others to continue Mouchette’s project. Collaboration and participation give the work its fluid form. Users make sense of old media by rearranging it into personal forms that apply to contemporary issues. They take the formats of commercial websites and wrest them from the hegemonic interests of corporations; they take images that are supposed to dictate their identities and claim them as their own by altering them.

³⁹ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms The World*, (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002) 19.

The “Clickable Mouchette” quiz first appears to be film trivia, but the content of the quiz asks girls identify their problems (loneliness, hatred, silence, death, or rape) with the problems of Mouchette. Film characters, like other commodities, are used to build a sense of self in capitalist societies. Mouchette takes advantage of this process, and makes explicit the process of using commercial objects to construct identity by literally asking users to take the identity of the film character. By asking girls to fill out what they share with the explicitly abused character the quiz makes visible that girls are controlled and exploited by some powerful system, whether it be abusive men or corporations. Online quizzes targeted at young women usually ask questions like “What celebrity are you?” Mouchette’s quiz takes the film character and the format of girl quizzes, and uses them to help users find solidarity. Instead of helping girls identify with celebrities or marketed forms of girlhood the quiz allows them to point to the ways that they have been exploited.

What do we have in common?



8	9	10	11
description	hobbies	feelings	crimes
<input type="checkbox"/> same name	<input type="checkbox"/> computers	<input type="checkbox"/> loneliness	<input type="checkbox"/> suicide
<input type="checkbox"/> brown hair	<input type="checkbox"/> babies	<input type="checkbox"/> hatred	<input type="checkbox"/> mother's death
<input type="checkbox"/> same age	<input type="checkbox"/> dodgems	<input type="checkbox"/> silence	<input type="checkbox"/> father's murder

[more questions>>>](#)

Fig. 8. Mouchette, *Clickable Mouchette*, 1996-2013. Website.

The user constantly alters the identity of Mouchette and Mouchette as a work of art. There are many different passageways and possible sequences of viewing the

materials on the site. Any user can alter these paths and the meanings created through them. On their own stock images of the flowers, the girl's photos or almost anything else found on the site could be seen in advertisements or pornography. The changing sequencing of Mouchette and the combinations created by surfing give Mouchette its disconcerting and subversive forms. The digital alone is vanity. It does not exist in a stable state. Not only is Mouchette.org subject to the user's clicks and changes, like any website it is "coded language at one or multiple addresses on one or multiple servers and as each viewer arrives at that address the artwork is created and recreated on the computer".⁴⁰ Each element exists in a fluid space where the user can remix each element and sequence. The Situationists wrote in regards to *Détournement* that, "Any elements, no matter where they are taken from, can serve in making new combinations...when two objects are brought together, no matter how far apart their original contexts may be, a relationship is always formed."⁴¹ The disparate sources and styles of the work allow inventive relationships to be formed. Nothing on the site has been created by a single individual. No artifact is given one restricted meaning. In mouchette.org the original digital laughter, moans, images and text are combined with other media and conversations produced by the community to form a user created experience.

Although it exists as a type of social media, mouchette.org avoids the standardized interactions and identities marketed to Web 2.0 consumers. Instead, mouchette.org encourages users to create new identities and communities outside of corporate control. Bourriaud worried in the 90s that,

⁴⁰ Amy Davila, "Cultural Logic in Cyberspace: Web Art & Postmodernism" *Kunsttexte.de* Sektion KunstMedien 1 (2001): 1.

⁴¹ Guy Debord, Gil Wolman, "Mode d'emploi du détournement" in *Situationist International Anthology*, trans. Ken Knabb (2006)

The social bond has turned into a standardized artifact. In a world governed by the division of labor and ultra-specialization, mechanization and the law of profitability it behooves the powers that human relations should be channeled toward accordingly planned outlets, and that they should be pursued on the basis of one or two simple principles, which can be both monitored and repeated.⁴²

His discussion of communication is a prescient warning now that our interactions, in the form of data, are bought and sold as commodities. Forms of socially accepted, consumer-oriented girlhood are now marketed in even more personal ways to girls online. Sites using Web 2.0 technology often catalog personal information and activity to ascertain which products are best marketed to which users.⁴³ Control and hegemonic order are built into the identities that are marketed for girl's consumption, but marketing is now simultaneously more pervasive and more invisible. Marketing has become the instrument of social control⁴⁴. On social media, products are being marketed to girls, but more importantly particular types of girlhood are being sold to girls. These are versions of girlhood that display for men and are not inclusive of girls who suffer from depression and abuse. Mouchette.org encourages girls to construct their own versions girlhood and makes visible the usually hidden ways in which girl's identities are marketed to them.

Users of mouchette.org share a communal self-awareness that is rare in Web 2.0. Although the interactions of the community are ultimately mediated by a technology that seemingly renders them isolated, they stand apart from other interactions on social media. "The web is increasingly part of the spectacle rather than a challenge to it. Like the postmodern city, the WWW has become naturalized as a de-humanized space of commerce, work, and diversionary entertainment" The Internet can be seen as one more

⁴² Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, (Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 2002), 9.

⁴³ The data tracking system has been written about more extensively in Eli Pariser *The Filter Bubble* (2011)

⁴⁴ Giles Deleuze "Postscript on the Societies of Control" *October* 59 (1992), 6.

spectacular space distraction. Every link clicked can be reified. Choices can be made but they are choices that are standardized and controlled by corporations. Communication online is often a series of commodified exchanges between superficial communities. A common choice for communication on Web 2.0 sites is ‘be the first of your friends to like this’ product. In the late 1990s Bourriaud prophetically warned that, “...anything that cannot be marketed will inevitably vanish. Before long it will not be possible to maintain relationships between people outside these trading areas”.⁴⁵ Web 2.0 has brought with it a space of literally commodified relations. Bourriaud also called for an art to address, “inter-human experiences trying to rid themselves of the straitjacket of the ideology of mass communications”.⁴⁶ In today’s digital landscape mouchette.org appears as an escape from the heavily marketed communications on social media platforms. Mouchette.org is not bound by the commodification of communication on social media. It preceded the development of Web 2.0 and has not tried to market itself or its users like most social media platforms. Instead, it serves as a tool for users that provides a public space to create safe communities for disruptive (re)production among people often repressed in other spheres of society. It encourages art outside of the art world, sociality outside of social media and girlhood outside of consumption.

The site predates social media but used the social and interactive forms now harnessed by commercial and social media sites. Rather than encourage produsage for the profit of a company it encourages creative consumption as a form of rebellion. Consumers of social media and the Internet are producing more and more content generally. “Increasingly, even at the level of the personal website, its aesthetics are

⁴⁵ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, (Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 2002), 9.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 44.

submitting to the rhetorical and graphics-design clichés of corporate advertising.”⁴⁷

Mouchette.org continues to outwardly display itself as the naive blog of a young-girl even as its subversive content expands. Instead of using social media formats to conform with the development of the web user’s of mouchette.org protest, “...the commercialization and spectacularization of the Web.” Mouchette.org and its sister sites constitute, “poetic interventions—stoppages and delays on the information highway that force observation and contemplation. In the manner of situations, they construct a momentary stay against the tsunami of functionalist, alienating, or dehumanizing images flooding the (web surfer’s) perceptual screen.”⁴⁸ First it appears as one girl’s blog in a sea of social media but if a user tries to interact with it in predictable ways it is revealed as a space from which to critique all forms of girl exploitation. Many early net art pieces cannot respond to the problems of Web 2.0 consumer, but the fluid quality of mouchette.org has allowed it to persist and function as a believable intervention into Web 2.0 consumerism. Pages are still added by anonymous users, emails are still sent and responded to, the message boards are still active and the bank of user answers are constantly being added to.

The collective of mouchette.org chose to use forms of Internet communication, now in service of commercial sites to create empowered spaces of girlhood. The site uses participation to encourage community building and awareness of Internet consumption. Mouchette.org now looks like a space in which the commercial Internet’s primary users, young girls, can be taught to have a critical and creative relationship to social media.

⁴⁷ Amy Elias, “Psychogeography, Détournement, Cyberspace,” *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 822.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 823.

Détournement, “was a method of interpretation and reinterpretation: reordering preexisting materials in order to expose their banality or their function within a system of spectacular control and creatively reconstructing them in the service of authenticity.”⁴⁹

Mouchette.org now uses the tools of the Situationists for the social media age, pushing old cultural forms to their limits and abolishing creative property. Users of mouchette.org reclaim the public space of the Internet for their versions of girlhood. They consume films, advertisements, stock-photos and the blog format. They reorder media, pushing cultural meanings beyond parody to reinvent girl culture. They expose the exploitation of girls and reveal the truth behind the myth of passive surfing. The new communal space on mouchette.org provides a space for critical creativity and collaboration, an open source artwork. Mouchette.org reclaims the Internet as a space for users to take back the tools of media and use them to shape their own girl communities and identities.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 824.

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