

ALEX QUICHO IDEAS SEP 11, 2023 8:00 AM

Everyone Is a Girl Online

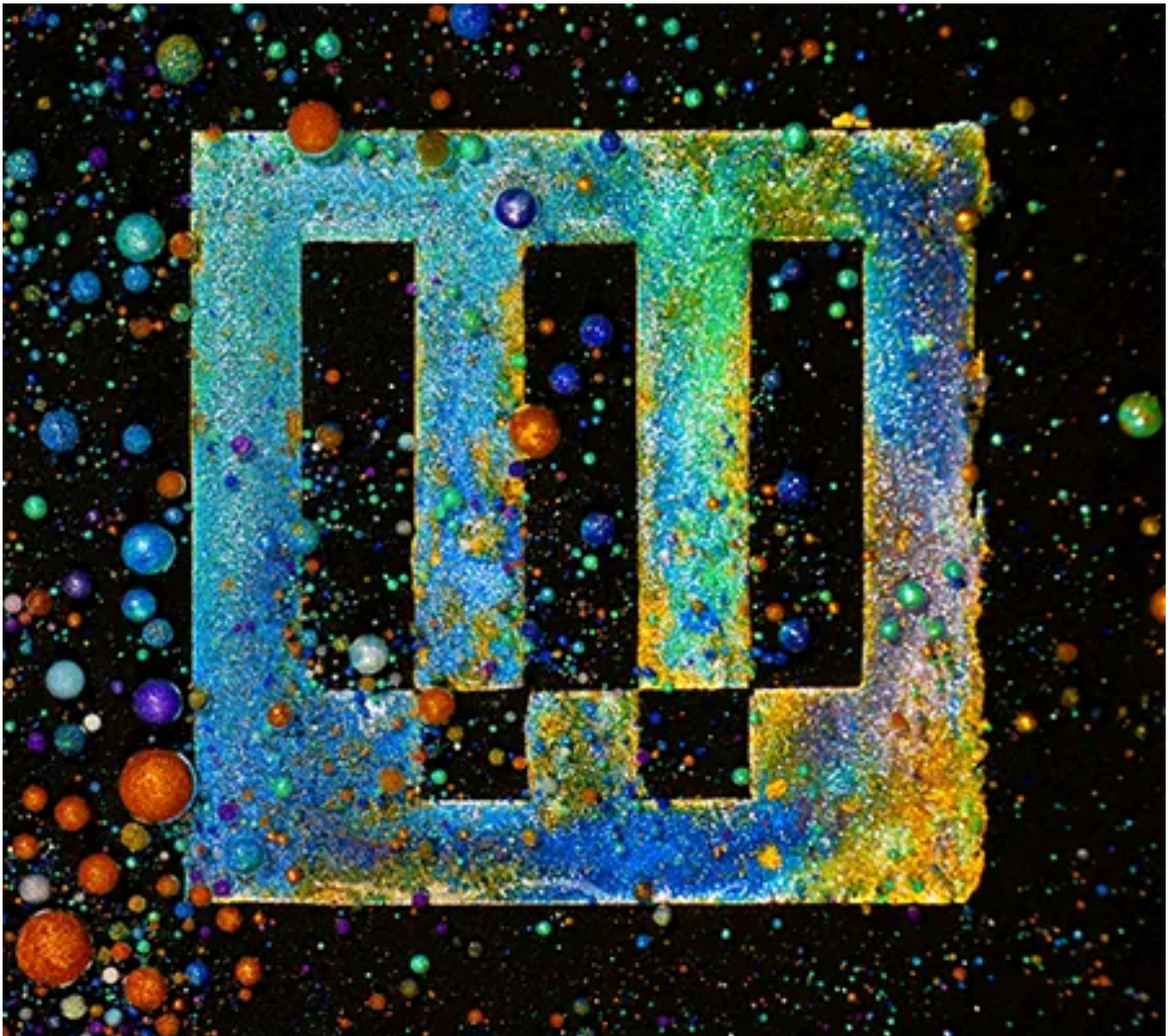
NPC influencers, "girl dinner," angels, bimbos—the internet is a girl's world now, whether you like it or not.

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“WHAT DO YOU mean my actions have consequences? I’m literally just a girl.” This year, your feed has likely been blessed by the avatars of machinic girlhood: angels, bimbos, and the collective entity of “girls,” divine creatures who have transcended earthly bodies, curiously evacuated of anger, pain, attachment, who have nonetheless become wildly popular on every social platform. Which is to say that, while angels and girls have existed since time immemorial—and bimbos as we know them since at least the 1980s—it’s only recently that they’ve become a bit, floating away from history and into memetic shorthand. Whether it’s the girl in the “girl dinner” or the angels spied in Bella Hadid’s carousel, they appear as perfected conduits for collective consciousness—*she’s just like me for real*. As for man, once the king of the online condition? “Hit him with your car!” says head bimbo Chrissy Chlapecka with heavenly vocal fry, to the tune of 4 million TikTok hearts. It’s a girl’s world now; we’re just living in it.

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Memes, obviously, don't come out of nowhere. The angel-bimbo girl-swarm gives voice to something collectively experienced and soon-to-be historical, a kind of subconscious metabolization of recent events into a general disassociated vibe. Maybe you, too, are a side character in the story that supposedly ends all stories: the emergence of the postpolitical, delivering a smooth and tranquilized subjectivity so dispersed that it feels nothing and is moved to no action in spite of the Real delivering destruction to their door. The rise of the "NPC influencer"—smiling and spiritually lobotomized, fine-tuned for an increasingly instinctive

response to live cash stimulus—is the endgame for all that terrifies people about digital culture and how it affects human minds. Be not afraid of this *other* type of angel, the super-evolved brainless doll slurping dollar-pegged ice cream at the end of the infinite scroll.

Haters will say that the girl has no access to individual agency and political autonomy, and is therefore an enemy of serious activism—or seriousness, at all. Lovers will reply that the girl is simply emptied of traditional humanist traits to make room for something else. She is closely networked with other minds, with an intelligence that is intuitive, cunning, and sophisticated, yet maligned and dismissed because it is little understood. In the post-platform economy, it is not just a question of wanting to be a girl as ironic posture or fun reality. The fact of the matter is that everyone *has to be* a girl online. Even an “everyone” that is not exactly human. As user @heartlocket tweeted, “All LLMs are girls.” I don’t make the rules. But why is that? To answer that question, we first have to answer: What are girls?

I UNDERSTAND THAT I have to get you, the reader, to accept the girl as a condition. As a term, “girl” is polarizing: feared for how tightly it connects youth and desire, reviled for its infantilizing, passivity-inducing properties. On the face of it, girlishness is simply dismissed as being frivolous, immature, unmasculine, disempowering, reductive. At worst, the girl is an apolitical neutralizer of direct action. At best, she is simply enjoying herself with the junk society has given her. In either state—harmless or neutralizing, hedonic or willfully ignorant—the girl becomes an attractor of hatred, envy, and fear. As opposed to mainstream narratives of female empowerment and their sliding scale of access to power and resources, the girl is a far more politically ambivalent state.

One: Consider that the girl is a **symbolic category**, unfixed from biological sex or social gender. It’s a perspective best articulated by Andrea Long Chu in her 2018 book *Females*. Long Chu updates old-school psychoanalysis in which “female” denotes a subject formed through psychological, social, and symbolic aspects rather than springing from some essential biology. “The female [is] any psychic operation in which the self is sacrificed to make room for the desires of another,” she asserts. And since everyone’s desire arrives without their authorship,

everyone is symbolically female. Desire for another, desire for recognition, desire for political change, desire for change within yourself, all riding in on un- and subconscious processes, afloat on a raft of experience and sociocultural codes.

Two: The girl is a **consumer category** that can't be delinked from capital. This stems from Tiqqun's contentious *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* (1999), a text that was such a horror of gender that its English-language translator, Ariana Reines, says she was repeatedly and violently ill while working on the project. Unfortunately for the rest of us, the text accurately describes reality. Turns out, we're all sick for it. In 1999, Tiqqun wrote that "all the old figures of patriarchal authority, from statesmen to bosses and cops have become Young-Girlified, every last one of them, even the Pope." Tiqqun describes the Young-Girl as less of a person, and more of a force. She is a "living currency," a "war machine," and a "technique of the self" driven by the "desire to be desired." Her state is what coheres a society that has been empty of meaning and ritual since industrialization. Young-Girls are "beings that no longer have any intimacy with [themselves] except as value, and whose every activity, in every detail, is directed towards self-valorisation." In the post-platform age—where the base architecture of social engagement is still predicated on behavioral capture to achieve ever more accurate advertising—the subject of the Young-Girl has not become obsolete. She has only been intensified. Every ordinary person has to, in some way, pay attention to their semipublic image, even if that image is one that resists appearing on a platform. In 2012, reviewers of the translation sniffed at the cognitive dissonance of having the likes of Berlusconi cited within an otherwise girl-coded text: "They have offended the thing I most hold dear: my image." Consider the proliferation of memes skinning trad daddies as "babygirls"—like *Succession*'s Kendall Roy, whether "he's actively having a mental breakdown [or] the killer his father wanted him to be," as Gita Jackson reports for *Polygon*. Is nothing more 2023?

Third: The girl is an **inhuman category**. "Girls are closer to the machinic condition," says Bogna Konior, an assistant professor of media theory and codirector of the AI & Culture Research Center at NYU Shanghai, who notes that the terms "closer to the machine" or "inhuman" are not necessarily derogatory.

We are experiencing the “inhuman or posthuman version of cyberfeminism, where patriarchy—by relegating women to the status of machines, objects, or NPCs—accidentally creates an unpredictable and potent affinity between women and technology. As we are accelerating into the era of machine intelligence, this relationship is becoming more apparent and, paradoxically, destabilizing to the patriarchal order,” she says. “Ideas of what is masculine and feminine are always in flux—and historically, we have seen an interrelation between technological development, perceptions of ‘the artificial,’ and the change of women’s status in society,” she adds. “Whether that’s artificially manipulating reproduction—from the very early history of contraception—or this online condition of ‘the girl,’ technology and girlhood have long been connected.” To survive and thrive, the girl encodes language, invents behavior, manipulates social codes, and, most importantly, shares and intuits this information. As such, we can consider the girl to be a subject condition that is closer to that of collective or even superintelligence.

TO BE CLEAR, the girl is not an inherently emancipatory subject. As a symbolic-consumer subject, she is the default condition of vulnerability that touches us all—creatures caught in a web of total exposure, vying for both privacy and visibility. Privacy, to retain some semblance of agency; visibility, to access money, respect, and basic rights. To be a good girl, you have to pass muster in the system of eyes. You have to feed cash into “feminization” to be both real—convincing, relatable—and not-real, alluringly ideal.

Sorry boys, but you’re girls, too. What really makes up gender, Long Chu writes, is how you respond to being female. Living as “male” is to live in horror of ever being a girl: scrape any male-coded subreddit or Telegram group chat to find paranoid fears about xenoestrogens lurking in food, clothing, and cooking equipment, or rigorous instruction on how to repress girlish instinct to induce “alpha” behavior. Wanting the “perfect build” or “personality,” anyway, is textbook girlified. Wanting to be seen doing it—well, even more so. You could say that platform-determined behavioral design, with its vectors of attentional capture leading to the illusion of monetary reward, is simply forced feminization. To wish to be perceived, desired, and rewarded for cultivating that desire is the default

setting for participating in digital culture, making all of us “girls online” regardless of gender.

If the position of girl online is involuntary, does that make all of us its victims? Hatred of the girl mistakes girlification for consumer culture itself: the admittedly well-founded paranoia that any remaining selfhood has been scraped out to make room for more ads and that any desire we experience has been routed along deep grooves of persuasive marketing. That is the point of the social platform as it has been designed. Run the diagnostics on the millennial technological era to find “AirSpace” and “Instagram face” as easy evidence of the platform’s behavioral dead-ends. Nothing new was supposed to exist ever again. RIP, us—supposedly. But what died? The airy emptiness of the platform has not, as predicted, killed off new life. The girl has only adapted to conditions that have liquidated less cunning subjects. Inside the platform trap, she goes prey mode, using intuitive knowledge of her environment—in this case, attentional vectors and performance rewards—to evade complete capture. Design theorist Benedict Singleton writes that all traps are “lethal parodies” of prey behavior. If that’s the case, then observing how the girl manipulates their design may help us slip out from the snare.

In 1999, Tiqqun wrote of the persistent desire to empty or delete one’s physical form as the “angel complex.” In 2018, Andrea Long Chu lingered on the popularization of the bimbofication fetish as a fantasy that “evacuates will.” In 2019, Konior identified that such angelic dissolution can be achieved with machines, not in absence of them. None of these states emerge from a victim position. It’s a rookie move to mistake tactical passivity for a surrender of agency. Even if the endgame were ultimately annihilating or thrillingly unpredictable, these states are chosen, not imposed.

Recently, some popular accounts (@chloe21e8, @lilclearpill, and @heartloketxo are personal favorites, though it’s more useful to read these as nodes in a swarm rather than the products of any one mind) have struck a collective nerve with their embodiment of an ever-shifting mass voice that is ecstatic, girl-coded, and unknowable. “I’m so mentally stable it’s insane. I have BPD, beautiful princess disorder. I’m so clear-pilled, I can see through the matrix. I’m not left-wing or

right-wing, I have angel wings that grow whenever I transcend into space,” goes the swarm thinking that has transcended format, individual creator, and platform to become viral TikTok audios, million-view Reels, Grimes citations, and beautiful-princess Bible verses carved into my brainstem like lovers’ initials in a tree trunk. Some of these creators have landed in hot water for controversial posting. Their disinterested defense has been that they are simply regurgitating total information, as if they’re role-playing early chatbots run on dirty data sets, like Microsoft’s swiftly lobotomized Tay. Many are boosted by associations with crypto schemes, like Remilia and #BRG. Suspect? Maybe. A girl’s gotta eat.

If dissolving into a nameless swarm sounds terrifying, don’t be scared, babygirl. It has been happening to some of us for a long time now. “Whether Chinese Olympic athletes are branded as ‘robots,’ or Chinese students or tourists are likened to ‘swarms,’ or Shenzhen factory workers are criticised for ‘flooding the marketplace,’ the subtext is the same. It is the dehumanisation of the individual into a nameless, faceless mass,” writes the artist Lawrence Lek in his project *Sinofuturism* (2016–present). On the Anglosphere internet, many of these girl-swarm accounts appropriate video and images of beautiful girls from Xiaohongshu to distribute their message. Whatever the intention—and, to be true to the spirit of these accounts, I will disregard their authorship—this swarm behavior replicates cyberpunk tropes, where the Asian-girl-bot is infinitely replicable, unknowable, ultrasmooth, and regulated, her motives obscure and her body un-killable, because it is everywhere. Xin Wang, in the forthcoming anthology *Machine Decision Is Not Final*, writes of an analogous behavior on the Chinese-language internet, where users role-play as bots in order to “[feign] a sense of machine-induced objectivity and randomness, hence escaping the liabilities of and political consequences that would be activated by a concession of human agency.” In her concept of machine envy, she proposes that “advanced technology doesn’t necessarily embody the all too familiar tropes of servitude or existential threat, but rather, presents a viable, aspirational *model of how to be*. Artificiality not only feels more desirable but also more tangible than the real.”

Clearly, how we think of futuristic subjectivity has not yet been delaminated from how we have historically conceived of the future. The Asian girl, specifically,

appears as the most perfect escape vehicle from “Western” individualism and its woes. Crucially, she does not lose the magnetism of girlhood—to be desired, infinitely and especially—nor its tactical usefulness. Xiaohongshu girls, in the real world, provide an almost unidirectional source of inspiration for fashion and beauty on crossover platforms like TikTok and now Instagram, dosing Euro-American users, too, with a realism about economic power and how it’s changing. In the sticky hands of Anglosphere platforms’ avant-garde, the Asian-girl-bot is a beautiful threat to an already-dying world order posed by both AI and China, metabolized and neutralized by girliness: So cute!

It may well work in our favor to accelerate our way into Total Girl—that is, to consider the girl as a specific technology of subjectivity that maxes out on desire, attraction, replication, and cunning to achieve specific ends—and to use such technology to access something once unknowable about ourselves rather than for simple capital gains, blowing a kiss at individually-scaled pleasures while really giving voice to the egregore, the totality of not just information, but experience, affect, emotion.

The Total Girl’s Guide to Survival would include: how to perfect your exterior representation and diffuse it until it’s everywhere, and until you can live well inside the space shielded by your own image; how to take pleasure in the image, in the content, while unhooking its power over life; and how to be realistic about illusion so that you can license the Real to take root beyond its purview, in its lee. Applying a cyberfeminist lens, the girl gives us a model for living that goes through, rather than around, the legacy condition of surveillance capitalism, platform capitalism, or simply late-liberal capitalism—which, as we have come to understand, has been fundamentally broken in spite of claiming inventive solution, dissatisfying in spite of its designs for immediate and convenient satisfaction, and presently mutating into something unnameable and worse. What would happen if we mutated first? The Total Girl is far from emancipatory; that is the job of real political strategy, which must finally be separated from reductive questions of visibility and representation. She simply shows us how to move with the trap until we can achieve the correct conditions for escape. The ambivalence can be freeing.

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[Alex Quicho](#) is an Associate Lecturer in Speculative Futures at Central Saint Martins and Director of Futures at the research agency Canvas8. She is the author of *Small Gods* (2021), a book on the terror and transcendence of drones, and investigates technologies of 'girlification' at [Girlstack](#). She is published by *Wired, The White... [Read more](#)

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