

Alexandra Marzella

IT'S ALL IN VAIN: ART, IDENTITY AND THE DIGITAL SELF



THE CONTROVERSIAL INSTAGRAM PERFORMANCE ARTIST RED-
FINING 'ART' THROUGH AN ONTOLOGICAL DIGITAL IDENTITY



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Alexandra Marzella's Instagram account has been deleted at least sixteen times. But that has never stopped her from posting another naked selfie.

Better known as @artwerk6666, Alexandra Marzella is a 28 year-old multi-media performance artist whose work has been pushing boundaries for several years now.

Her social media feed exposes a plethora of bare, candid and unfiltered images of herself—eating food or sitting on a toilet; close-ups of her unshaved legs or acne-ridden face.

Her DIY aesthetic emanates the uncontrived sincerity that is 'do-it-yourself' through and through. And this aesthetic—this stylistic choice—is tantamount to her name and image as artist and activist.

Some label her the voice of a generation, while others disapprove of her feminist views. Yet, whether audiences like it or not, her work has created heated discussion around topics on feminism, sexuality, the body and art.

The question that lies at the crux of the polarised discussion surrounding Marzella's work—which, for the most part, deeply engages with social media—is whether or not it can be considered 'art.'

“TAKING A SELFIE WITH NO MAKE-UP AND ACNE, THAT TO ME IS MORE PROGRESSIVE THAN A LOT OF THINGS”

For Marzella, her grainy, close-up, snotty-faced selfies—or any of the candid images of her body twisted into strange positions—are no different to the self-portraits of classical artists.

“Taking a selfie with no make-up and acne, that to me is more progressive than a lot of things, and it's so simple. They are humans taking pictures of themselves and sharing them with the world, because it feels good... it's good for the soul,” Marzella says (*Alexandra Marzella's Unapologetic Nude Self-Portraits* 2007).

Adopting the title 'New-Age Narcissism,' Marzella's work deals with the idea of the self and the body within an intellectual context that is often overlooked. Her work is frequently misunderstood and labelled as being unintelligible and narcissistic—work that is purposefully provocative, ignorant and shameful; a byproduct of the technological generation of self-glorified kids.

Nevertheless—whilst it may be considered to be all in vain—it's this very focus on the self which consequently encourages audiences to consider the artistic sensibilities of an ontological digital identity. And in doing so, Marzella asks her audience to look deeper—beyond the grain and beyond the body.

BEYOND THE GRAIN, BEYOND THE BODY:

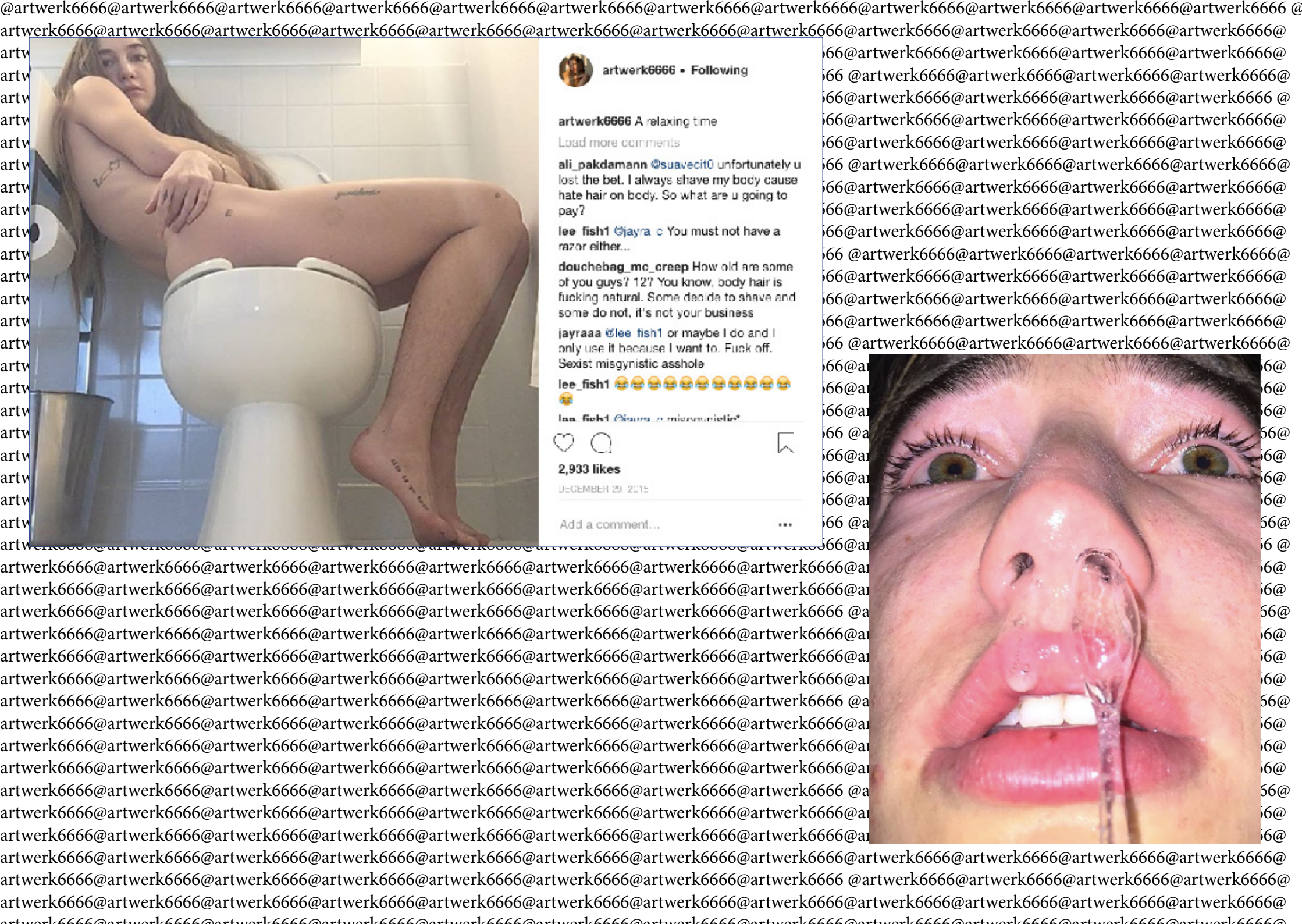
The relationship between the self and art is by no means a new-found concept or point of exploration. French philosopher Michel Foucault made an observation on this very idea; “what strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life.” He continues by asking “couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?”

Marzella, however, brings this relationship into a new, modern dimension and capacity—where everyday reality and subsequent exploration of the self, becomes the *art*. Her utilisation of Instagram as an artistic platform blends into her own development and becoming of subject and self, reflecting the very essence and nuances of her life. Henceforth, she reiterates Foucault's idea that individuals and life be considered a legitimate form of art and point of concern and analysis—whereby seeing the self as an object of enquiry ultimately aids in the (simultaneously digital and IRL) metamorphosis from subject to self. Indeed, in their small, consecutive increments, Marzella's images chronologically accumulate to constitute her very identity* and being—Marzella is her work.

*identity being “conceived of as something that one does, like a task one continues to perform throughout life” (Poletti 2013, p.217).

The very act of photographing the self becomes a vehicle through which Marzella can articulate this identity via an ontological narrative. Her self-portraits exhibit the day-to-day nuances of her life; they resemble a diary-like narrative—what she describes as a “stream-of-consciousness”—which ultimately enables audiences to understand *who* Alexandra Marzella is.

Elephant Magazine's Editor-in-Large, Charlotte Jansen, looks to the invention of the front-facing camera as an inherently important part of Marzella's work and, thereafter, the articulation of selfhood and identity. “In tandem, the front-facing camera (which also came into widespread use in 2010 with the iPhone 4) has equally changed the dynamics of picture-taking, the camera more like a diary of the evolving self-image,” (Jansen 2017, p.152) she says. Ultimately—like a mirror reflecting the self—the camera allows Marzella to become her own muse, and in



this relationship, she takes a step closer in understanding and knowing her own self and her place within society. Knowingness of the self becomes a primary ingredient in her creative process—one that needs to be considered, analysed, and enquired before it is exhibited and criticised.

There is an idea of continuation within Marzella's images—continuous growth, continuous understanding—a reflection of life itself. Anna Poletti talks of the way in which “the idea of the monolithic identity, stable and predestined, has been replaced by a perspective that sets identity as a ‘process,’ a complex and constant ongoing work that regards the individual, [her] relations, and the context [she] moves in” (Poletti 2013, p.217). The very architecture and anatomy of Instagram is an extension of this idea; it encourages an ongoing narrative in the formation of a 3x3 grid. Every consecutive image posted on one's ‘grid’ or profile, ultimately accumulates and aids in the development of an online narrative. This is the context that Marzella moves in; slowly and surely, the narrative of Instagram becomes Marzella's actuality, regarding her as individual and artist, both becoming (and reflecting) her world and place within it.

“CENTRAL TO [MARZELLA'S] WORK IS THE IDEA OF THE WOMAN AND HER PLACE IN A SOCIETY THAT IS DOMINATED BY PATRIARCHAL NORMS AND CONVENTIONS, DICTATING AND DEFINING WHO AND WHAT A WOMAN IS.”

At the heart of Marzella's self exploration is the concern of sexuality and guilt, where we ultimately see her dismantling the concept of censorship, particularly for women in association with their sexuality and sexual identity. By turning into herself for reflection, Marzella translates her introspections and thoughts into a visual commentary on wider society, thus concerning herself with the city and her community. Central to her work is the idea of the woman and her place in a society that is dominated by patriarchal norms and conventions, dictating and defining what and who a woman is. Through her Instagram images, paired alongside captions, Marzella advocates for the de-sexualisation of the female body; she dispels unrealistic beauty myths concerning the female body in terms of body hair, weight and size (unshaved legs and armpits, the display of cellulite and the advocacy for positive body image); and she deconstructs the guilt associated with a sexually free woman (eradicating taboos around female sex-workers, Marzella herself having been one), promoting the importance of taking hold of one's sexual choices.

In response to those who call out the ‘offensive’ nature of her work, Marzella talks about the ease of exposing herself, asserting that “the whole problem with the world, [is] that people think they need to keep things hidden, and that's bullshit” (*Alexandra Marzella's Unapologetic Nude Self-Portraits* 2007). She notes the way in which, through her images she's “tried to consciously move away from that hyper-sexualised way of moving because of the implications it has; that you're doing it for male attention, not just for yourself.” Moreover, when asked if her work is fundamentally an attack on violence against women, she answers; “not just women, everyone. An attack on everyone. People attacking themselves... an attack on everyone.”

It's by no means ironic that her layered images, once posted, re-ignite the very notion of “everyone attacking everyone,” provoking critique and discussion. Time and time again she's been told to “shave ya fucking legs,” and has been labeled a “disgusting image to represent feminism.” Voices on top of voices all quarrel over what's right and what's wrong for a woman in 21st Century society. Nevertheless, at the nucleus of this critical commentary, sits Marzella—having procured this polarised discussion, and continuing it with every consecutive post. Her work both *reflects and provokes* the confusion surrounding gender roles and expectations within modern society, reasserting the dual contrasts and artistic sensibilities in her dense online work.

The grainy, lo-fi nature of Marzella's candid images best reflect the essential concept of her artwork—work that is sincere and appealing, yet so layered and varied—so frequently misunderstood. Work that ignites discussion and argument, yet simultaneously reflects it. The dual nature of her work is as deceptive as it is forthright. Alexandra Marzella has ultimately paved a path in the modern art world, rebirthing the connection between the self, art and the search for truth in a digital era.

References:

Alexandra Marzella's Unapologetic Nude Self-Portraits 2007, online video series, Creators (Like Art), USA. Created/Directed by Pau Suris <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vCXYH-kQsPs&t=1s>>

Jansen, C 2017, *Girl on Girl: Art and Photography in the Age of the Female Gaze*, Laurence King Publishing Ltd, London, United Kingdom.

Poletti, A 2013, *Identity technologies : constructing the self online*, The University of Wisconsin Press, USA.



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artwerk6666 I'm hairy not scary! I laughed out loud thinking about this caption. It's October smell a pumpkin!

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