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This essay explores the enduring phenomenon of the spectacle of suffering throughout recorded history and its utilisation by artists, particularly in the online realm, as a tool for performance and simulacra. The surreal impact of this phenomenon is evident in contemporary society across mediums such as film, television and contemporary art. Throughout recorded history, societies have orchestrated spectacles of suffering, performance and self-exposure as public rituals that often mask cruelty under the guise of public entertainment. These events are rarely neutral; they reflect and reproduce prevailing ideologies, reinforcing hierarchies of power and visibility. From the Roman colosseums to TikTok livestreams, public spectatorship has persisted as a structure for both control and participation. This essay examines the evolution of spectacle across history, focusing particularly on its entanglement with economic precarity, surveillance and curated vulnerability in contemporary digital culture. Through an analysis that spans dance marathons of the Great Depression, Roman gladiatorial combat, digital platforms, like OnlyFans and Instagram, and contemporary queer performance art, I argue that the spectacle of suffering has not disappeared, it has merely transformed, becoming more intimate, algorithmically mediated and embedded within the architecture of everyday life.

Historically, endurance competitions transitioned from celebratory origins to darker exploitations of human suffering. For instance, on 18 February 1923, Olie Finnerty and Edgar Van Ollefin danced for seven hours straight in Sunderland, England. Shortly after, the same year, Alma Cummings set a record by dancing for 27 continuous hours at the Audubon Ballroom in New York. During the Great Depression, dance marathons gained popularity, providing food and shelter as entertainment for spectators while contestants, often desperate for income, endured severe physical and emotional tolls. These marathons, deemed by the church as unethical (due to the contestants' dancing being considered crass, not because of the inherently exploitative nature of the competitions), began to fall out of favour with the general populace as the revelation that they were essentially watching people suffer as a means of entertainment became explicitly clear. The practice was eventually outlawed.

Sydney Pollack's 1969 film *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* captures the tragic outcomes of endurance contests and reflects on the human condition through strangers' shared suffering encapsulated as entertainment.[1] The film tells the story of Gloria Beatty and Robert Syverton (Jane Fonda and Michael Sarrazin) who team up and try to win a dance marathon. The film ends with Robert shooting Gloria when she is unable to commit suicide after they exit the competition. When a police officer asks him why he shot her, Robert utters the phrase that gives the film its title, comparing the experience of a dance marathon (and perhaps that time in history, or the act of objectifying and commodifying one's body) to that of a racehorse.

While the practice of dance marathons was outlawed, people have since watched similar forms of spectacle as a means of spending time and look down at others' suffering. Ironically, there is a return to physically looking down too, by way of the gaze directed down at a phone screen, comparable to a spectator at the gladiatorial fights of Ancient Rome. Dance marathons mirror such earlier forms of public suffering, where combat was transformed into civic duty, entertainment and economic gain at the cost of dignity and humanity.

A gladiator (Latin: *gladiator*, 'swordsman,' from Latin *gladius*, 'sword') was an armed combatant who entertained audiences in the Roman Republic and Roman Empire in violent confrontations with other gladiators, wild animals and condemned criminals. Some gladiators were volunteers who risked their lives and their legal and social standing by appearing in the arena. Most were despised as slaves, schooled under harsh conditions, socially marginalised and segregated even in death.

Fast-forward to the twenty-first century and contemporary iterations of the spectacle persist, predominantly through screens. The long-running reality TV show *Survivor* serves as a potent example, demanding contestants undergo simulated hardship while being scrutinised on camera. Contestants endure extreme calorie restrictions and physical tribulation, their trials designed to evoke emotional investment from viewers as they consume this mediated discomfort from a distance. The show commodifies suffering, presenting vulnerability both as a liability and a commodity, cultivated to create palpable narratives and generate alliances among competitors. Contestants are stripped of basic comforts and placed in manufactured environments designed to simulate and stimulate hardship, all under the watchful eye of the camera. In the American *Survivor* series, contestants are only required to be given 200 calories a day,[2] and over the course of their time on the show often show extreme signs of deteriorating health as their bodies literally eat away. What emerges is a gamified version of survival where pain, hunger and emotional breakdowns are not only expected but essential to the narrative arc. These moments of suffering are carefully edited and broadcast to generate emotional investment but, more crucially, to entertain.

Particularly resonant is *Survivor*'s positioning of vulnerability as both a liability and a commodity. Crying too early can mark a contestant as weak, while well-timed suffering can garner sympathy and secure alliances. The show teaches us how to weaponise visibility, to show just enough of the self to be legible and palatable. During the finale, the remaining contestants must pitch themselves and their game strategy throughout the show to a jury made up of members they have personally voted off.

Another example of spectated suffering through reality TV is the show *Alone* (2015 –). It follows the self-documented daily struggles of 10 individuals as they survive in the wilderness for as long as possible using a limited amount of survival equipment. With the exception of medical check-ins, the participants are isolated from each other and all other humans (besides the camerapeople filming them). As in *Survivor*, contestants' vulnerabilities are exposed as they are left to fend for themselves in environments chosen to simulate and stimulate emotional and bodily harm.

The Hunger Games, a trilogy of young adult novels by Suzanne Collins, subsequently adapted for film, satirises the televised spectacle of suffering, presenting a dystopia country, Panem, where the brutal suffering of the marginalised is ritualised into an annual event for the entertainment of a wealthy elite, called the Capitol.[3] The Capitol watches the 'tributes' (participants) with fascination, a voyeurism masked as tradition and civic engagement. This spectacle is not only tolerated but celebrated. The more dramatic the suffering, the higher the ratings. What emerges is a society where grief, violence and death are aestheticised for mass consumption, reflecting a perverse power dynamic in which empathy is replaced by entertainment. The state manufactures this performance of pain, carefully framing the tributes' experiences with stylised broadcasts, character arcs and strategic editing – a mirror to reality TV's narrative manipulation. This ensures the suffering is palatable, commodified and devoid of its raw, political meaning while maintaining the power over the districts. In this way, the Games become a form of social control – trauma staged so that the privileged can feel both entertained and absolved. Concurrent to this narrative arc is the transformation of Katniss Everdeen, the main protagonist and narrator of *The Hunger Games*, from human (lived experience) into icon – the Mockingjay, a symbol of the resistance across the districts of Panem towards the Capitol.

Marina Abramović's famous 1974 performance artwork, *Rhythm 0*, reads today as an incisive reflection on the commodification of suffering and vulnerability.[4] Over a period of six hours, Abramović gave herself over to an audience armed with a variety of objects intended for either pleasure or pain. Her body became a vessel for

the audience, a beaker in the science lab of human behaviour. In allowing audiences to interact with and violate her body, she showed the risks of exposure transforming into pain and the fine line between engagement and exploitation when the boundaries of what is considered acceptable slip.

New Zealand writer and artist Sam Te Kani describes the rise of the phenomenon of commodification and objectification of the self in the online context as "neoslavery."[5] The term applies to "even something like OnlyFans, which hasn't necessarily come into being because of the technology that facilitates it, which it obviously does," but it is ultimately "a confluence of other factors, including an ambient universal precariousness, that forces ordinary everyday people to commodify their last asset, which is their bodies."[6] From the rise of reality TV in the twentieth century, the voyeurism directed at people in less privileged positions has continued and moved from the television screen to the phone, through online trends like the TikTok "crazes," where contemporary 'gladiators' are gazed at, judged and ridiculed for selling themselves to generate an income. 'Influencers' represent a recent manifestation of this phenomenon, and fall into two main categories: on the one hand, those who are born into privileged backgrounds or are famous for being famous, such as the Kardashians), and on the other end of the spectrum, those who are less privileged but aspire to this same fame (unburdened by talent but exploiting the nepotism inherent in our gorgeous neoliberal reality). Both kinds of influencer perform in the same way, marketing (typically bogus) products or ideals of a lifestyle, while probably behaving radically differently off camera. Often seeking class ascension, influencers have come to be polarising figures in contemporary society, either objects of desire or seen as being less than, but either way dehumanised through this process of being spectated upon, navigating a realm where their worth is tied to surface-level visibility.

The complexities of digital personae are evident in those instances in which the performance of identity is exposed and revealed to be deliberately misleading. In 2006, 'Bree' became "the first viral star," a 16-year-old girl "from a very small (undisclosed) town", who began posting on her YouTube account as 'LonelyGirl15.'[7] She amassed an online following of over 50,000 before the series was discovered to be a hoax following the 'death' of Bree at the hands of a religious cult called The Order, who supposedly sought her rare blood type for its life-giving qualities.[8] On 7 September 2006, a message was posted to Lonelygirl15.com, signed by 'The Creators,' in which they confirmed that the show was scripted and declared LonelyGirl15 "the birth of a new art form."

Similarly, Argentinian artist Amalia Ulman's *Excellences and Perfections* (2014) dissected identity through a sustained online performance, ultimately revealing the constructed nature of online personas.[9] Over the duration of the work, beginning as a relatively 'plain Jane' character inspired by 2010s Tumblr Girls, dominated by a pastel palette, 'cutesy' culture, with blonde hair and a traditional girlish aesthetic, her online persona moved into a 'bad girl' character, undergoing a series of hoaxed body modifications (including tattoos, a nose job and a boob job), who flashed stacks of money around and channelled Artic Monkeys chic as she donned leather jackets and smoked against the wall. The final metamorphosis was into a "health and wellness Goddess." These three archetypes were selected as they amass the largest online followings. At the end of the four months, her online audience was let in on the joke: they had been hoaxed and the illusion of this curated cyber persona was broken. The response she received was mixed.

In the New Zealand context, artist Natasha Matila-Smith has made bold projects involving the invention of an online persona, akin to the earthy twenty-teens where the rise of the Tumblr Girl gave way to a new form of online disclosure.[10] Matila-Smith works primarily within video, using her own body and her lived experiences as a means of 'confessing' and connecting to her audience, expressing something of herself while grappling with the nuances of online self-presentation.

The tension between fabricated identity and reality emerges when considering the impact on individuals navigating public spaces after performing curated lives online through social media apps such as Instagram and TikTok. The camera, as a tool of documentation, complicates the delineation between performance and reality, challenging both the artist and audience to discern authenticity in representation.

Cindy Sherman's photographic series *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80) exemplifies this notion, subverting self-presentation by staging image-based narratives that question authenticity and identity construction in visual culture.[11] Sherman's self-portraits, staged to resemble stills from old Hollywood movies or TV shows, challenge the viewer to consider their own performances of social roles and expectations. In Sherman's work, identity is revealed to be not a fixed or stable essence but constituted through repeated acts, performative and mediated, in line with Judith Butler's seminal text *Gender Trouble* (1990).[12] Sherman's reflection on identity resonates deeply within queer communities, particularly as spaces once deemed safe, like Tumblr, have become fraught with complexities and negative counter-narratives.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, responding to the death of his partner Ross Laycock from HIV AIDS, in his 1991 *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, poignantly contemplates absence and queer visibility through metaphor, illustrating the profound emotional layers attached to acts of public sharing that linger in liminal spaces of absence and presence. The work represents the artist's partner Ross Laycock's 'ideal' weight in candy. The audience is invited into the experience, and encouraged to take a piece of candy, acting as a literal representation of Ross' decay as his body was eaten away by the disease.

New Zealand artist Regina Gorge, in *Pebbling (a love expanding outwards)* (2025), engages with this action through the lens of an up-and-coming artist looking to locate themselves within the greater arts community on a national scale.[13] Gorge created a total of 4321 ceramic rocks for the audience to take from where they were scattered intricately across the floor and embedded in the floorboards of Invercargill's Art Attic Gallery, sprinkled across its roof, and throughout the streets of Waihōpai, as well as being sent across the country to gallery spaces with a note which read "YOU'VE BEEN PEBBLED." The idea of literally giving oneself away to an audience ripples throughout the various references of this essay, and my particular interest is in how these examples choose to give themselves over to a panopticon-like forum for surveillance.

Britney Spears serves as a contemporary example, embodying the complexities of self-disclosure. Once deemed the 'princess of pop,' the icon underwent an Icarus-style fall under the incessant watchful gaze of the media. Since the conclusion of her conservatorship, Spears has repeatedly uploaded videos of herself performing to the camera on Instagram, often scantily clad, singing, dancing, sometimes with props (including knives).[14] The debate rages on about whether this person is mentally capable after years of living in the spotlight.

In the digital age, visibility often oscillates between empowerment and entrapment. The ability to document and broadcast oneself, while liberating, leads to curated identities existing as simulacra devoid of genuine connection. Ultimately, the projects and references discussed in this article highlight intersections of performance, visibility, and identity and what it means to exist as part of the spectacle, as people navigate representation amid societal expectations. The like economy, born from social media platforms, plays a powerful role in determining what is seen, valued and rewarded. It incentivises performances of vulnerability, spectacle and beauty in the algorithm. Since the days of fighting in Ancient Rome, these roles of spectator and spectated have changed, evolving through technology to become symptoms of the capitalist spectacle.

This article, laden with examples of performance, and suffering, has sought to provide a nuanced understanding of how contemporary issues shape public perception, complicating and redefining the boundaries of visibility, representation and the inherent costs of spectacle in both art and life. Visibility is never neutral. It always involves power, cost and potential. The gaze can wound, it can also witness. As artists and audiences, the task is to look with care, to question the terms of exposure and to consider what is being shown, what is being withheld and to what end.

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1 Sydney Pollack (dir.), *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* Beverly Hills, CA: Palomar Pictures, 1969.

2 "Survivor Rulebook," accessed 30 May 2025, https://survivor.fandom.com/wiki/Survivor_Rulebook.

3 Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games.* (New York, NY: Scholastic 2008).

4 *Rhythm 0*, Marina Abramovic, six-hour endurance performance, Galleria Studio Mora, Naples, 1974.

5 Sam Te Kani and Joanna Cosgrove, "Diddy's Lasers," *Rats in the Gutter*, podcast, Spotify, 29 January 2025, https://open.spotify.com/episode/5JgwgDmFvu1Hnj2qlzXxGU.

6 Te Kani and Cosgrove, "Diddy's Lasers."

7 See Jessica Lee Rose performing as Bree Avery aka LonelyGirl15 https://www.flowjournal.org/2006/09/feature-lonelygirl15-the-pleasures-and-perils-of-participation/

8 Neil McCormick, "LonelyGirl15 Dies on Screen," *NBC News*, 17 August 2007, https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna20199343 death of lonelygirl15.

9 Amalia Ulman, *Excellences and Perfections*, Instagram, 2014.

10 Lana Lopesi, "The Inner World of Artist Natasha Matila-Smith," *Metro*, accessed 26 April 2025, https://www.metromag.co.nz/arts/the-inner-world-of-artist-natasha-matila-smith.

11 "Modern Classics: Cindy Sherman – Untitled Film Stills 1977–1980," *Artlead*, accessed 26 April 2025, https://artlead.net/journal/modern-classics-cindy-sherman-untitled-film-stills/.

12 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge 1990).

13 Wesley John Fourie, Sarah McGaughran and Regina Gorge, *all instinct like the bird in drouth got water out of the end of a jar by throwing in pebbles*, Art Attic Gallery, Invercargill, 28 March–26 April 2025.

14 Lyric Waiwiri-Smith, "Can We Talk About Britney Spears' Dancing Videos?" *Stuff*, 30 September 2023, https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/celebrities/300973770/can-we-talk-about-britney-spears-dancing-videos.