Northumbria University, Newcastle.
Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory. UoA 32.

Northumbria University
NEWCASTLE

FRONT

A commissioned piece of critical practice exploring the risks to mental health within social media.

CONTENTS

SUMMARY

Front is a commissioned piece of critical practice (by competition) developed as part of the Scottish Government, New Media Scotland Alt-W and NHS 24's *Project Ginsberg* with a goal to start a conversation around young persons mental health and wellbeing.

Leishman's contribution was focused on female experiences within social media. Narrative, parody and multimodality were used as a creative new approach to highlight for the user the pressing contemporary issues of social media privacy, voyeurism and public image. *Front* uses a faux-*Facebook* interface that innovatively mimics the immersive, interaction rich promise of social media whilst reminding users of what is often freely given up. Through its unique adaptation of Ovid's Daphne and Apollo narrative it places the risk of soliciting unwanted attention/desires into a deeper cultural context.

Front used a mixed method approach; secondary research on social media/visual culture and primary research reviewing online selfie practices with both helping to inform the practice itself.

This research has been effectively shared through a month-long exhibition: Alt-W showcase, Edinburgh Art Festival 2014, Evolution House (Aug 1st - Sat 30 Aug). Visitor number: 2964. It was also peer selected for the group exhibition "Interventions: Engaging the Body Politic." in US, Bergen, Norway. This exhibition was part of the Electronic Literature Organization 2015 conference Aug 4th – 7th. Visitor number: 505. To help further dissemination Leishman gave the interview "The Metamorphoses Of Front As A Narrative Told Through Social Media Interface: A Conversation With Donna Leishman"

which is published in full in the book *Digital Imaginary the Emerging Shapes of Literary, Cinematic, and Database Art*, Bloomsbury (Nov 2019) ISBN: 9781501347566.

Lastly *Front* is also distributed online through www.6amhoover.com whereby individuals, educators and third parties can continue to use it to discuss privacy, safety and wellbeing within social media.
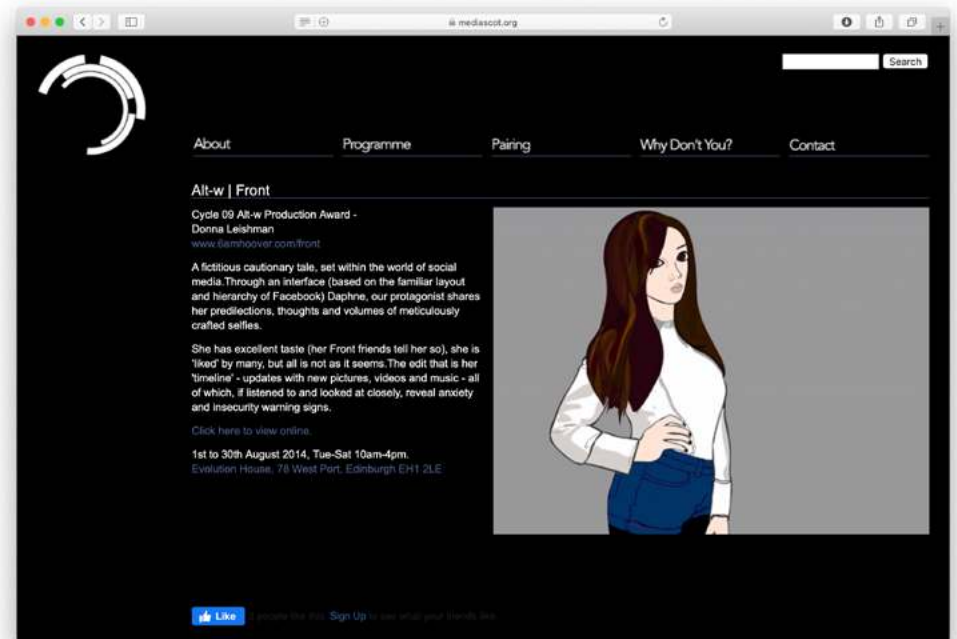
Alt-W / New Media Scotland's archive
page for the project.
https://www.mediascot.org/alt-w/donnaleishman/front

INTRODUCTION

Front was developed during 2013, building on Leishman's previous research into 'disinhibited desire,' changes in female representation and online behaviours. The Alt-W Cycle 9 funding scheme's remit - to start conversations about young persons mental health - allowed a focused exploration of the particular risks to mental health through social media and selfie culture. Leishman's proposal to the Scottish Government /New Media Scotland was to develop a piece of multimodal critical practice that would be embedded in the texts and platforms of contemporary social media (*Twitter* and *SoundCloud* as well as a faux-*Facebook*) and through these structures a mediated and cautionary adaptation of Ovid's Daphne and Apollo to speak about privacy and unwanted attention.
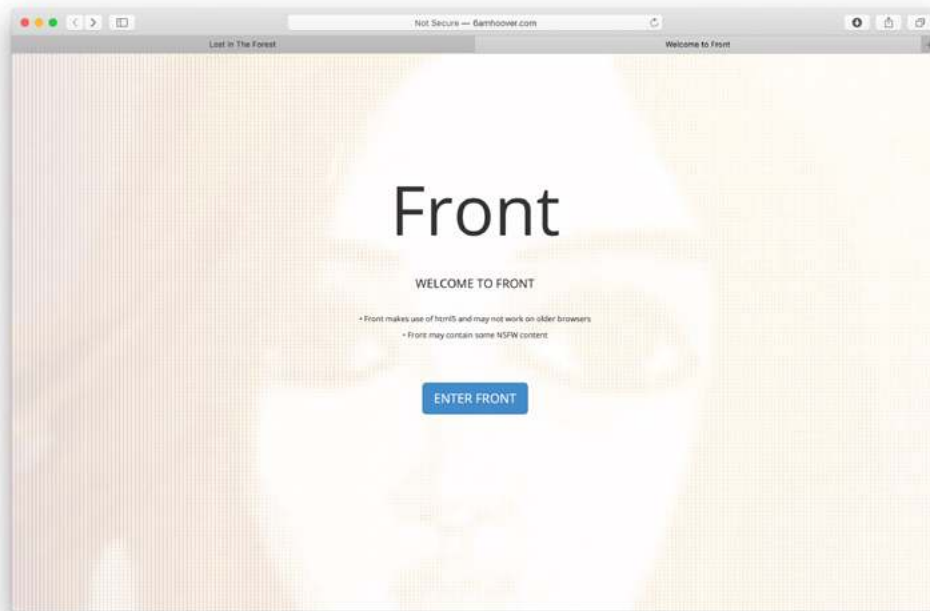
"In Front, Leishman carves out a dystopian meditation on the dynamics of social media, the question of agency, and the power of social surveillance on identity."

Davin Heckman (2016).

Click to access a walkthrough of the project:
https://vimeo.com/user118962085

TIMELINE

2013 - 2014

Commissioned. *Front* is awarded funding. Research, development and production period.

Formative Research. "Without Sin: Freedom and Taboo in Digital Media." MIT Press/Leonardo Electronic Almanac, pp.16-26. ISBN 978-1-906897-26-0

Article(s)
The Royal Academy, July 2014. *https://www.royalacademy.org. uk/article/highlights-from-the-edinburgh-art*

The List, August 2014. *https://edinburghfestival.list. co.uk/article/63924-new-me-dia-scotland-alt-w/*

2014 AUG

Launched. *Front* is launched online available and freely accessible online via *www.6amhoover.com/Front.*

Installation (website, digital projection, visual print) as part of the New Media Scotland: Alt-W showcase exhibition in 2014 for the Edinburgh Art Festival. *https://www. mediascot.org/alt-w/eaf2014*

Article in The New Scientist about selfies and monoculture includes *Front*. Kat Austen, 11th August 2014 *https://www.newscientist.com/ articledn26038-sea-of-self-ies-social-medias-monocul-ture-threat/*

2015 AUG

Paper presentation. "The Challenge of Visuality for Electronic Literature". In: ELO 2015: *The End(s) of Electronic Literature*, Panel: The Medium, 5-7 August 2015, University of Bergen

Exhibition. Front was then peer selected to be included in a group exhibition "Interventions: Engaging the Body Politic." Venue: USF Verftet, Bergen, Norway.

2016

Academic Review. Heckman, Davin. "Impossible Interventions." Hyperrhiz: New Media Cultures, no. 14, 2016. doi:10.20415/hyp/014.c02

Article. "Extinguish My Eyes And I See You Still". The Drouth - Strip Comix Edition. ISSN 1474-6190

2017

Conference paper/ presentation. "Narcissist Reconfigured". In: *Illustrating Identity-Ies*, 9-10 Nov 2017, Université De Lorraine.

2019

Public Talk. Creative Informatics Lab 2 on "Place Space and Experience", which is Funded by the Creative Industries Clusters / SFC Programme, UK.

Conference paper/ presentation. "Perceptual Fail: Female Power, Mobile Technologies and Images of Self", in ELO2019: Electronic Literature Organization Conference & Media Arts Festival.

Digital Imaginary on the Emerging Shapes of Literary, Cinematic, and Database Art published by Bloomsbury (Nov 2019). Editor Roderick Coover. *Front* discussed in two chapters; "Commentary: What Holds Electronic Literature Together?" and "The Metamorphoses Of Front As A Narrative Told Through Social Media Interface: A Conversation With Donna Leishman".

RESEARCH CHALLENGE

Front was commissioned as part of The Scottish Government, New Media Scotland Alt-W and NHS 24's *Project Ginsberg* which was a multi-discipline project looking for creative and innovative ways to engage with young persons mental health in Scotland.

My work within this project had two intersecting aims.
Aim 1: To creatively and innovatively remind *Front's* users of where the power structures lie in social media, and what (in terms of privacy) is often freely given up. Parody is used to illustrate problematic user behaviors and a bespoke interface was designed to mimic yet frustrate the immersive, interaction rich promise of social media.

Aim 2: *Front* was also designed to comment on female experience(s) within social media; with the goal of offering cautions for reflection/ discussion – specifically of female agency and the power of female idealization as restaged within selfie culture. This aim was achieved through the allegorical treatment of Ovid's Greek Myth *Metamorphoses* (800 AD) specifically the problematic relationship of Daphne and her unwanted suitor Apollo. The visual language of *Front* was also designed to suggest that the photographic language in selfie culture is not documentary/ indexical in nature and more aligned to an art directed self-made illustration of how we want others to see ourselves.
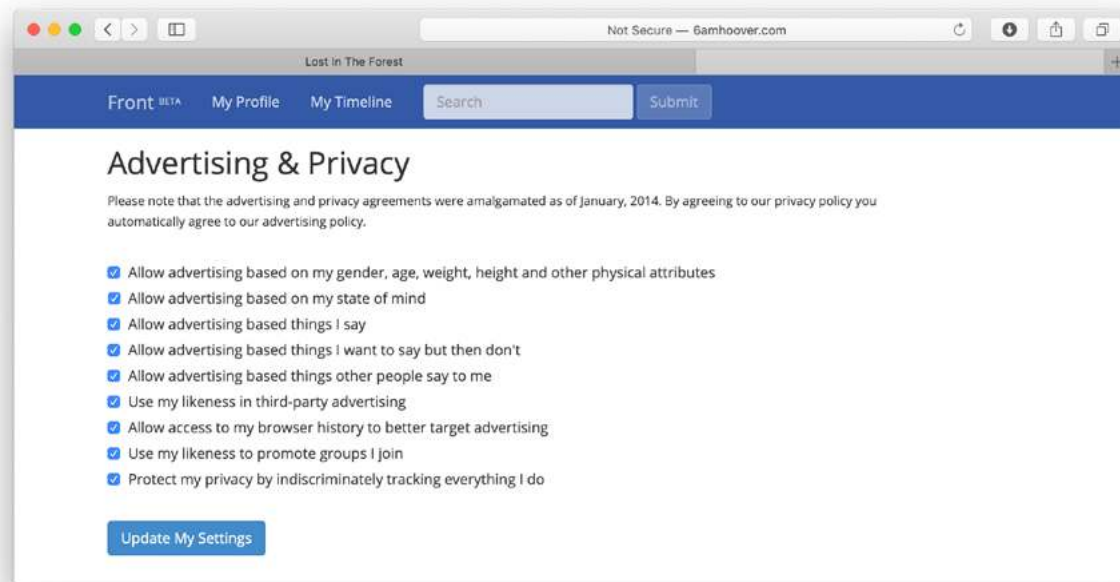
Front's playful privacy disclaimer no.2.

CONTEXT

Front as part of *Project Ginsberg* addressed the question of how to promote or have a discussion around what constitutes good mental health within social media and issues around privacy. This became the main context/remit for *Front*.

Researchers Leishman 2019b, Dobson 2015, Korsmeyer 2004, Pollock 2003 posit that 'public images' (i.e. an image made for public non domestic / private viewing) can confirm or constitute beauty ideals as well as influence (via imitation) behaviour and mannerisms, and as such the viewer's belief in the veracity of the representative image also becomes intrinsically political, manipulating the associated narratives and fostering prejudice. Daphne is our lead protagonist - the user is invited to explore her identity as manifested through her shared social media networks. *Front* mimics *Facebook* whilst also intentionally weaving in other social media platforms to achieve this.

The ubiquity of assistive selfie filters, and the hashtag # culture of sharing these desired representations onto the social network frontloads for this project a question around the mental health impacts - specifically the intersection with narcissism and self-esteem. Barry et al (2017) point out that there are a variety of speculative voices about the impact but relatively few at scale empirical works to test hypothesis. Voices range from cautioning negative impacts (Walker 2013, Holland & Tiggeman 2016, Stuart 2019) whereas others argue that social media selfies can through self-exploration actually boost self-esteem (Rutledge, 2013). Barry's findings based on 128 participants indicated that relations of problematic increases in narcissism and lowering of self-esteem with

the posting of selfies were not significant, they also flagged that their sample was drawn from college aged adults and point out that more diverse sampling is required - considering class, race and age ranges. Holland & Tiggeman also recommend that more longitudinal and experimental studies are needed.

Front was also developed at pivotal time when the Google vs. González (2014) case on an individuals' "Right to be Forgotten" was being debated by the EU's Court of Justice. *Front* emulates the familiar structures of social media / *Facebook*. Early in the project users are presented with a sequence of privacy disclaimers that seek to make explicit the user rights that are easily and often given away in the rush to access the social media environments.

In summary, the work's thematic explorations of selfie culture and social media 'realities' speak to a range of issues - voyeurism, identity, sexuality, body image, gender and contemporary performances of femininity. As such *Front* is relevant practice to a diverse range of research communities: sociology (Illouz 2007, Turkle 2011, Harper, 2012,) psychology (Barry et al., 2017), feminism (Butler, 1988, Evans et al 2010, Albury 2015), communication / media theory (Frosh 2015, Kleim et al., 2019,) and digital culture (Murray 2015, Routh 2016, Rettberg 2016,). Additionally, the formal aesthetic mediating mechanisms or 'approaches' used in *Front* (narrative, multimodality) are also relevant to digital/electronic literature (Ryan 2010, Coover 2019,) and adaptation studies (Lessard 2017, Leitch et al 2017).

"Human relationships are rich and they're messy and they're demanding. And we clean them up with technology. Texting, email, posting, all of these things let us present the self, as we want to be. We get to edit, and that means we get to delete, and that means we get to retouch, the face, the voice, the flesh, the body - not too little, not too much, just right."

Sherry Turkle (2011).
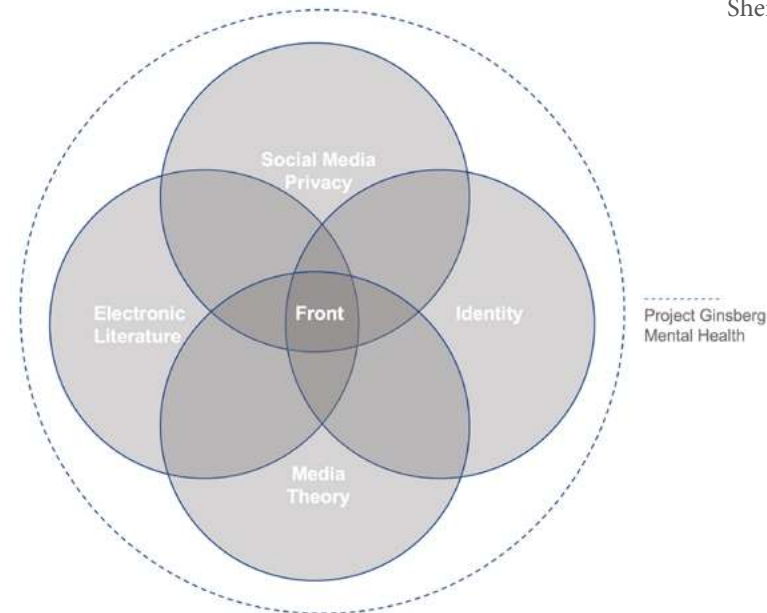
METHODS AND PROCESSES

Secondary research was used to explore the debates across disciplines on body image, digital culture and selfies culture.

Primary research was used to explore the language of selfies within open/publicly accessible social media accounts. This work was also contrasted by a contextual review of historical precedents in female self portraiture through visual culture more broadly as they relate to selfies, as discussed in Leishman (2017, 2019b).

By practice. Technological research and development with James Olsen to develop the platform framework for the practice.
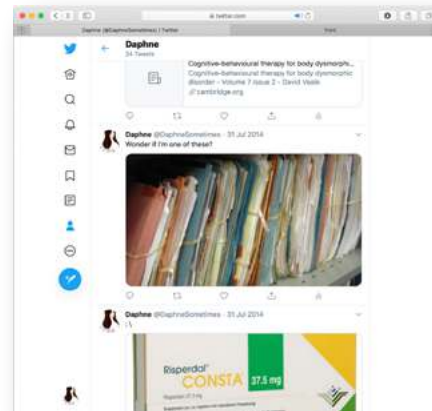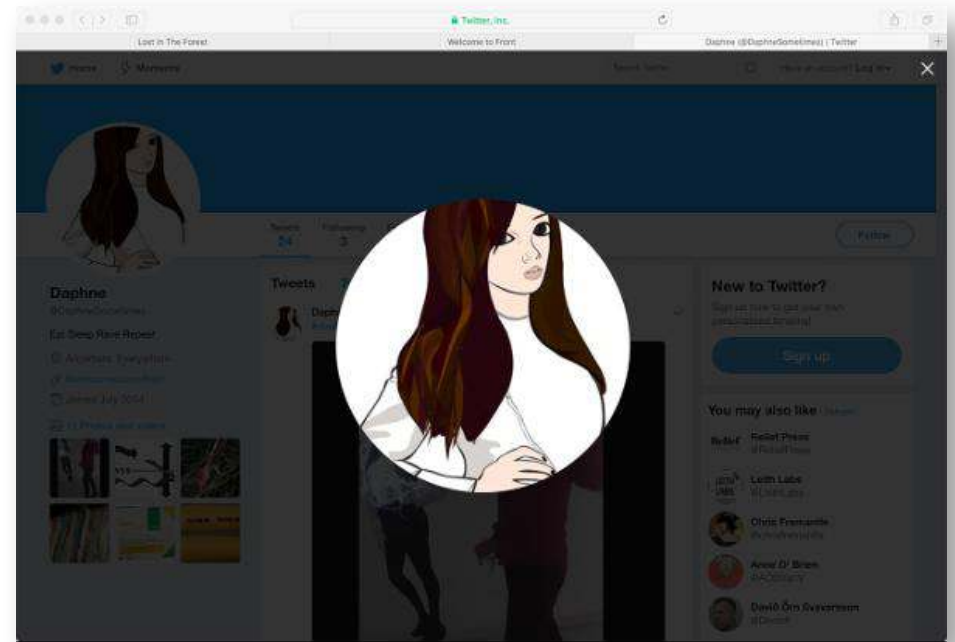
Formative Research Stage. Reflecting on themes of self, identity and changes in representation within social media, developing a growing interest in the phenomena or practice of selfies. Harnessing this in conjunction with the notion of transformation and its link to glamour (Postrel 2017) and selfie culture. This was then combined with the allegorical potential within Ovid's narrative poem *Metamorphoses* and his story of Daphne and Apollo which details infatuation and female resistance to an unwanted suitor.
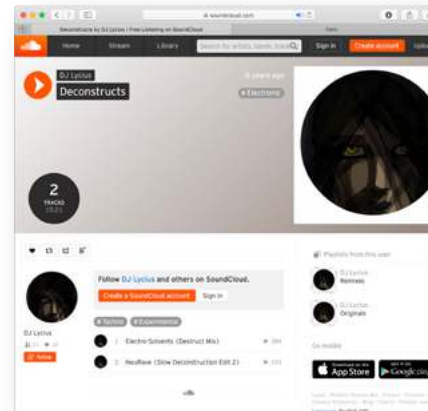

Above: sample images from the authors conference paper "Narcissist Reconfigured" (2017), *Illustrating Identity-Ies* conference, Université De Lorraine.

Research & Development. Once commissioned, I set up the production collaboration with Jim Olsen (Alberta, Canada) to develop and create the programming core, the technological platform and interface design. Later in this process I invited DJ Nord (Steve Gibson, UK) to take on the fictive role of DJ Lycius and develop his profile on *Soundcloud*. All content - the illustrations, copy, narrative direction was developed by Leishman, the coding and interaction implementation by Olsen. Sound design composed by DJ Nord in collaboration with Leishman who briefed in the aesthetic tone and lyrical content. Beta testing was done in team by Leishman and Olsen.
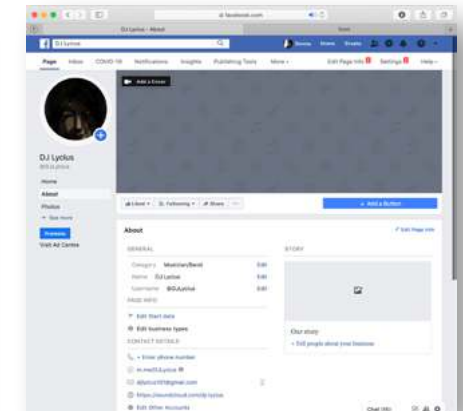
Staging / Exhibition Design. New Media Scotland suggested that the launch of this work be both online and in exhibition installation format as part of the Edinburgh Arts Festival 2014. Leishman undertook the additional exhibition design to enhance the themes within *Front* itself.

https://twitter.com/DaphneSometimes

https://soundcloud.com/dj-lycius/sets

https://www.facebook.com/DJLycius/

DISSEMINATION

This research has been effectively shared through a month -
long exhibition: Alt-W showcase, Edinburgh Art Festival 2014,
Evolution House (Aug 1st - Sat 30 Aug). Visitor number: 2964.
It was also peer selected in the group exhibition *Interventions:
Engaging the Body Politic*. in US, Bergen, Norway. This exhibition
was part of the Electronic Literature Organization 2015 conference
Aug 4th – 7th (Pure ID: 25790906). Visitor number: 505.
To help further dissemination Leishman gave the interview
"The Metamorphoses Of Front As A Narrative Told Through
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which is published in full in the book *Digital Imaginary the
Emerging Shapes of Literary, Cinematic, and Database Art*,
Bloomsbury (Nov 2019) ISBN: 9781501347566. Lastly *Front*
is also distributed and freely available online through
http://6amhoover.com whereby by individuals, educators
and third parties can continue to use it to discuss privacy,
safety and wellbeing within social media.

Google Analytics show the number of users to date on 6amhoover
as:1304 and sessions: 1543 between Aug 2014 to Sept 2018 when
Analytics was running. Data indicates a larger impact online from
2015-16 just after the work had been launched and a decline in 2017.
http://6amhoover.com/imgs/analytics.jpg

Showcase exhibition for the
Edinburgh Arts Festival.

Front has realized its objectives to illuminate and help provide a critical context to start a conversation on the complexities around the influence of social media as it pertains to female identity, highlighting the fictions we come to tell through our role as producers and users/ social media viewers and has been disseminated in a variety of ways through exhibitions, online practice, supporting conference papers, texts and public talks (see project time line).

As a contribution *Front* functions as a resolved piece of practice that, through parody and allegorical approaches holds a critical mirror up to the social media practices of contemporary life. It highlights the common practice of forgoing our privacy rights and data gathering within social media. This issue has amplified in terms of visibility since *Front's* launch in 2014. Users are commonly requested to give their General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) consent, this should better protect our data from being harnessed for purposes we do not wish, however arguably the real *Facebook* has concerned itself with gaining 'proper' consent (not reducing) its data gathering activities – this consent is still easily or almost freely given as users still rush for FOMO / the fear of missing out on the connectivity that social media offers (McGinnis, 2004).


AUTUMN 2016

ISSUE 56

THE DROUTH

STRIP

The Drouth Issue 56 - front cover and article: "Extinguish My Eyes And I See You Still".

Regarding selfies and visual culture: *Front* highlights for expanded user reflection and discussion the issues around the language of standard, normalized aesthetics of the selfie, raising the notion that idealised often self-sexualised bodies are not (for some users) mentally healthy projections of self. *Front* through its adaptation of the Daphne and Apollo narrative places the relationship/ risk of unwanted attention/ desires into a deeper cultural context and questions is/if social media 'viewing' is a passive act. *Front* can be used by individuals, educators, third parties working with groups to strengthen awareness privacy and safety within social media and in turn protect mental health.

Regarding contribution to the field of Electronic Literature: *Front* builds on previous research projects from the author that have been concerned with female experience and agency, however *Front* extends this approach by designing the multimodal narrative to be told across and through social media platforms whilst using adaptation to also frame the contemporary social issues that have emerged from the rise of selfies making the work deeply mediated.
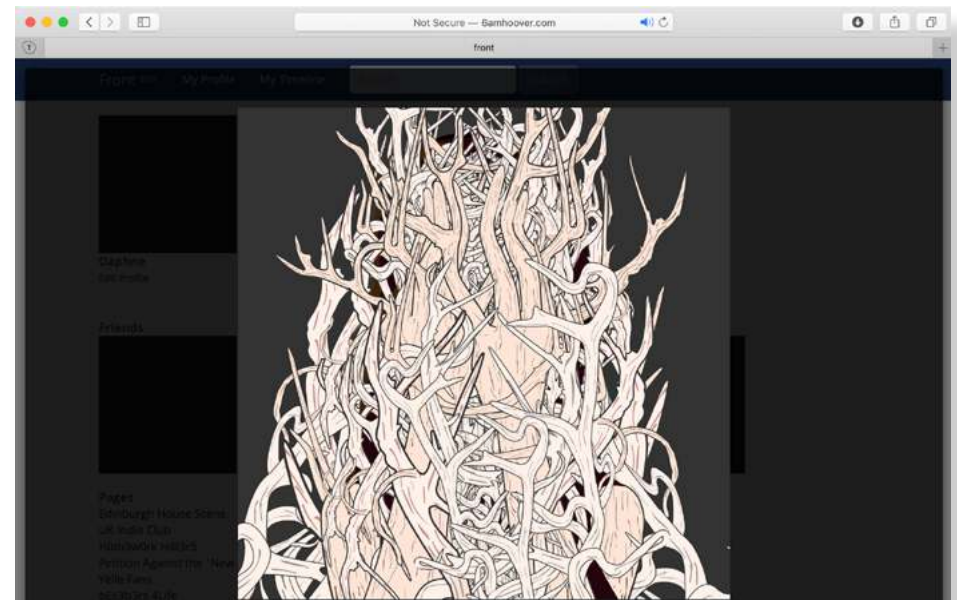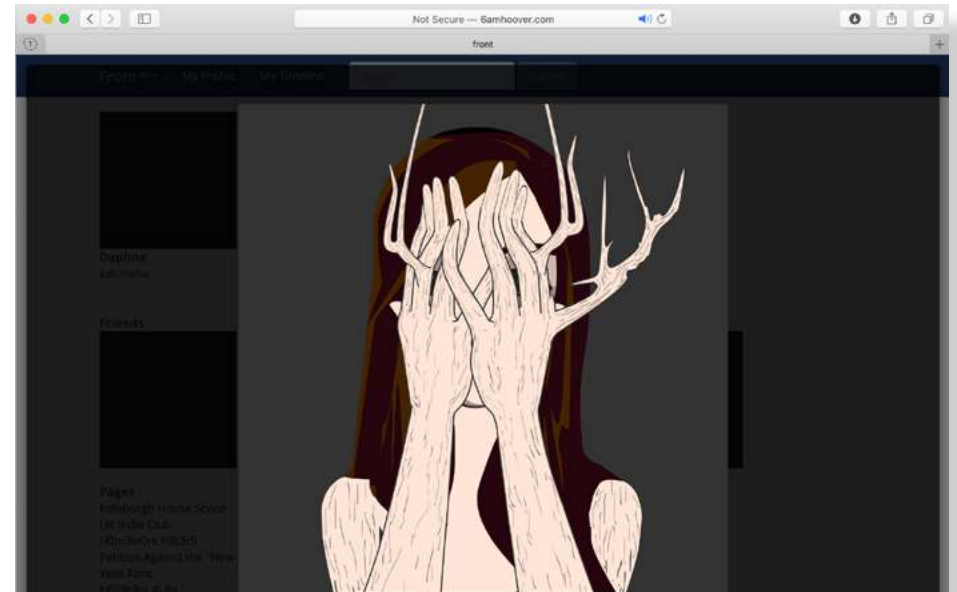
Above: Daphne's transformation scene in Front.

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