Cybersociology A to Z

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Cybersociology A to Z

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Visual Art

by
Katherine Ellison Butler
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

My prints explore the prevalence of the Internet in contemporary culture and how online communication has affected maturation and an individual’s growing perception and representation of self. By combining commonly used Internet jargon and a traditional alphabet flashcard motif, I have created an Alphabet Series that allows me to draw comparison between online and offline spaces, as well as to describe the way in which the Internet as a social tool has changed communication mutually across the digital and actual realms. Using the most popular social media websites for North American adolescents as a reference, I have explored the way new media tools have changed the newest generation’s concept of space, time, and community. The prints that compose the series vacillate between conveying the use of the Internet for basic communicative needs and representing the side of the online realm that is bent on garnering attention through any means necessary. The protagonist of the series, a young, female avatar, undergoes a loss of innocence as the series progresses, underlying the real-world consequences of online harassment in an easily noticeable way. As the Alphabet Series illustrates, interactions in the virtual realm do have meaning and consequence: they are a reflection, not only of all of us as individuals, but as a society. This needs to be taken into account, not only in our actions online, but in the way we continue to approach communication in the virtual realm.
DEDICATION

I dedicate my graduate research to my family without whose unyielding support I would not have been able to pursue my dreams. Their encouragement, love, and understanding have been instrumental in all of my successes.
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I would like to thank the professors and my fellow graduate students for their feedback, knowledge, and encouraging words as we have made this journey together. I would like to especially thank Sydney Cross, Kathleen Thum, and Christina Hung for their invaluable guidance while serving as my thesis committee. Thank you Syd for your confidence in pushing me to always strive for better, Kathleen for your helpful feedback and good humor, and Christina for your loving but critical eye. I have learned so much from our time together.

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I would like to extend a special thanks to Alyssa Reiser Prince, David Armistead, and David Gerhard. It has been a joy to watch all of you grow alongside me over our years together. Your willingness to offer help in the way of feedback or a much-needed laugh has helped me in forging this difficult path.
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In my work, I am exploring the prevalence of the Internet in contemporary culture and how online communication has affected maturation and an individual's growing perception and representation of self. While the Internet can ideally allow for one to create an identity unencumbered by the social expectations of a physical body, often the demands of the attention-driven virtual realm subvert any attempt at a representation of a totally autonomous self. This is especially problematic for identity-building adolescents who are participating in a structure that suggests they market themselves to an ultimately uncaring, anonymous audience. To portray this complexity, I am utilizing the aesthetic of the Internet: a system that values participation over production—where originality is shirked and empathy and engagement are exchanged for distraction and visibility. Throughout my pieces, avatars vie for attention: willing to steal, harass, vandalize and manipulate in order to gain visibility, the ultimate online cultural currency. These actions would not be so nefarious if they were solely virtual occurrences, however with younger generations receiving much of their social interaction through the Internet and its many social networking websites, the loss of empathy and demands for the commodification of self can evoke emotional distress and actual-world consequences.

While conceptualizing my pieces, I felt the need for the expansion of a visual vocabulary through which to evoke the real-world consequences of the cyber realm that would not be limited to actual digital imagery. Social media is often described—not as a media that is used in conjunction with existing social relations and practices—but as a new social space with distinct relations and practices of its own (Slater, 533). Words like “virtual” and “cyberspace,” while
helpful in describing new media, are problematic because they presuppose a distinction between offline and online realms (533). The virtual is not a simulation but a coherent social space that is capable of reproducing established means of actual world communication (Slater, 536). While users of social media may be spatially dispersed, they do share a context (the specific website they are using), rules (whether spoken or not), and often a history of communication. Consequently, they are able to treat their interactions as real and as having actual consequence and value (536). Depending solely on images of laptops, cursors, memes or other digital images to evoke the cyber realm in my pieces would allow for viewers to form a mental separation between virtual and actual forms of communication—to view the online and offline as mutually exclusive social realms, rather than domains that inform and contextualize one another.

Language—both visual and verbal—became important to me early on for its function as a communicative tool for describing space and culture. By combining commonly used Internet jargon and a traditional alphabet flashcard motif, I created an Alphabet Series that allowed me to draw comparison between online and offline spaces, as well as to describe the way in which the Internet as a social tool has changed communication mutually across the digital and actual realms. This Alphabet Series is not meant to function solely as a learning tool for burgeoning online users. Rather, it describes the online environment in order to highlight how new media has influenced the manifestation of identity and community for the current generation.

The Internet is a vast, disparate space occupied by individuals of various ages, genders, languages, cultures, and locations looking to satisfy a plethora of needs. A single alphabet could never encompass the scope of this diversity, so I narrowed my focus to the online social
networks of North American adolescents, specifically the functions and communities of five of the most popular social media websites: Facebook, Reddit, Tumblr, Twitter, and Youtube. While social media has affected communication and the conceptualization of self across all age groups, the current generation, known as Generation Z, is of most interest to me because it is characterized by individuals that have had lifelong access to the Internet and other communication technologies. Their idea of space, time, and community, while contextualizing itself in the social systems of previous generations, has evolved with the media tools they have been afforded. For Generation Z, the offline/online rift is not a point of contention. It simply does not exist.

Being online does not require an active, real-time participation: it is similar to human memory in that it is simply a record of actions, but one that is saved in an external platform rather than a person’s mind. This permanence of online participation yields vulnerability: if a mistake is made online, if content is released that can be portrayed in a negative light, that mistake is not easily forgotten. With children receiving much of their social interaction within the virtual realm, lacking the guidance of traditional, real-world social protections, mistakes are bound to be made. This is not to say that the Internet is an innately evil technology, just that it reflects society but compounds its complexity with new social rules. To convey this, my pieces serve as a cautionary tale: they explore the complexities of a space through which multiple age groups and maturity levels interact beneath the shroud of anonymity, where acceptance and visibility not only requires an adherence to meme culture and rejection of original content, but demands the commodification of self.
CHAPTER TWO
CREATING AN AVATAR

Beginning the Alphabet Series, I decided to pick terms according to their popularity on the Internet at the time, rather than adhering to the order of A-Z. Accordingly, the first piece of the Alphabet Series illustrated the letter “F” through the print Feels (Fig. 1), a shorthand word for strong emotional responses to online content. During the conception of Feels, I looked to Kiki Smith and her use of the Biblical Creation account as an archetypal story of humanity’s passage from innocence to experience. In Feels, the figure reaches for a stack of interchangeable heads with various stock expressions that mimic the use of emoticons online. The movable heads become the forbidden fruit that transmits emergence of self, but simultaneously is the source of sexualization, danger, and ultimately death. Affixing the heads with Velcro and allowing them to be interchanged by the viewer harkens the vulnerable state of an adolescent, while the fragmentation of parts represents the reassembling of self to achieve a physical and spiritual whole.

While making Feels, I decided it would be important to emphasize the innocence of the figure in order to starkly portray the transformation she undergoes due to extended online exposure. In order to understand the transformative process of maturation and how it has changed from previous generations, I began to read “The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls” by Joan Jacobs Brumberg (Brumberg). The book is a collection of diary entries by adolescent girls dating from the 19th and 20th century. It draws comparison with modern society: with both the increased rate of physical maturation, not accompanied by a parallel
increased rate of mental maturation, and the dangers of having access to unlimited information with virtually no adult supervision (Brumberg).

Along with conveying the complexities of maturation faced by the adolescents of Generation Z, the character through which I have illustrated the Alphabet Series expresses the existence of the anonymous, fixed identity. Anonymity is a defining aspect of online identity. While an individual can create a fixed identity through a pseudonym or avatar, it is intrinsically detached from the ways offline presences are held stable and accountable (Slater, 536). This is not to say that the anonymous self is a disembodiment, just that it is a reflection of the user seemingly untethered by any meaningful consequences of the actions of the anonymous self. Since Internet users are not held accountable for their actions, some use the shroud of anonymity to damaging means: perpetuating negative stereotypes, defaming, or bullying others. However, anonymity can still be a useful communicative tool, allowing for correspondence liberated from the tethers of race, age, gender, or other physical attributes.

The character through which I have illustrated the Alphabet Series expresses this complexity of the anonymous, fixed identity. She represents my own experiences as an adolescent and the dichotomy in my life formed from being raised in a sheltered, private Christian school while simultaneously inhabiting the unfiltered online world. However, she does not simulate my physical appearance, but instead represents an amalgamation of my past, interests, and research: her clothing represents the uniform I wore in school, but is also, along with her hairy legs and braided hair, meant to underlie an innocence that stands starkly in contrast to her actions and expressions.
While establishing my avatar protagonist, I began to question the stylization of my figure and how to best implement her expressions as a reflection of social media structures. I looked to the work of Jenny Schmid and her humorous exploration of gender and politics through single-frame satirical comics. Schmid uses her interest in contemporary comics, feminist non-fiction, and rock music as an access point to deal with social commentary in a more ironic and palatable way. As someone whose early art influences were comic books and cartoons, the idea of not only being honest to but drawing upon the influences of my youth was appealing to me. The grandiosity of character that I had been so attracted to in comics, musicals, and cartoons made sense in the context of the virtual environment where subtlety in interaction is not achievable. In fact, quotes, videos and images from popular culture are utilized online as a catalyst through which to express emotion and tone in the absence of any physical or verbal indicator. To emphasize this use of media, I progressively exaggerated the gestures of the figure throughout the Alphabet Series and rendered her in bright, stylized colors common to advertisements and cartoons aimed at kids. By borrowing the illustrative dialect formed by the popular media of my youth, I began to consider the gradual artificiality of the online persona and the way in which individuals become caricatures of their former selves.

Continuing to explore the capabilities of the series and the protagonist through which it is narrated, I began to consider the bias in deciphering gender on the Internet: certain websites are associated with certain genders: for example, Tumblr, an image-based blogging website, is often associated with teenage girls, whereas Reddit, a text-based bookmarking website, is thought to be the haven for young adult males. Not only that, but aspects of online terminology are often attributed with one sex or the other: hackers and trolls are typically thought to be
males, while the use of emoticons usually infer the individual is female. To support this thinking, I did briefly include a male figure in OTL (Fig. 2), Lurk (Fig. 3), and Hack (Fig. 4) of the early Alphabet Series. However, as my focus narrowed to cover primarily concerns for females, his presence was ultimately shirked.

The assumed gender default of online users is male, and dictates for asserting a female identity are especially problematic. The popular forum 4chan—an anarchic website that spawns the majority of the memetic imagery online—declared in their ubiquitous “Rules of the Internet” that there are “no girls on the Internet” (Penny). While the Internet gave women a space to share their experiences without limits, it also promoted a new venue for sexism that made misogyny routine and sexual harassment easy (Penny). Phrases such as “tits or gtfo (get the fuck out)” promote this cybersexism by suggesting that femaleness exists online solely as a means to exploit sexual desires for attention, rather than as an origin for a unique and valid social perspective.
CHAPTER THREE

CYBERBULLYING

As the Alphabet Series progressed, I made intermittent prints addressing news events and my personal experiences online. I found myself particularly invested in cyberbullying because it combined many of the concepts I had been spending so much time with: my fear of adolescence in a space that offers no social protection, of maturation in a realm that demands that one market themselves to their peers, and the potential actual world repercussions of communication through the virtual realm.

The first of these intermittent prints, Down the Rabbit Hole (Fig. 5), references the well-known cyberbullying of Amanda Todd. Her suicide conveyed the tangible repercussions of online communication I had been struggling to define. Lacking the social protections typically offered to adolescents in the actual world, Todd’s bullying escalated beyond the boundaries of the physical and—while she sought after a digital audience for retreat—her interactions online only served to compound her mistreatment. The harassment was occurring online and was consequently difficult to control and not treated seriously, ultimately leading to her suicide. In Down the Rabbit Hole, I further utilized cartoons to portray the effect of the Internet on our everyday social lives. I specifically looked at Tex Avery cartoons and the ultimately inconsequential outcome of interaction between characters. In Road Runner cartoons, the Road Runner can charge through a painted landscape while the Coyote meets a brick wall, the Road Runner can zip over the edge of a cliff to the next mountain while the Coyote tumbles to the ground. However, while their treatment is different, the Coyote is never harmed, and the intended result is humor. This illusion of interaction without consequence mirrors the online
realm through a structure I call Looney Tunes physics. The virtual realm is composed through a constant cycle of rejection and acceptance, and whichever you receive is less dependent on the individual but rather a fickle set of ever-changing standards. When rejection does occur, the emotional well being of the individual is less important than the potential laughs and memetic iconography that can be spawned from their failure.

In *Down the Rabbit Hole*, the protagonist is entering into the unknown. She moves uncontrollably through the space, spurred by the projection of her descent. The silhouetted figures and disjointed portals represent the multiple facets of Internet participation and the trace one leaves by moving through them. Just because one deletes personal content from their respective online accounts, does not mean that content is permanently erased. Unlike human memories that are dulled by the passing of time, the Internet is capable of sustaining a permanent record of activity. For some, whether by luck or a carefully monitored online presence, this is never a problem. For others, it is. The format of the print is interchangeable to express this instability. The protagonist of my work either enters the online realm as a socially deprived individual, illustrated through her black and white coloring, and is transformed by her passing through it, or she enters the online realm as a active user and ultimately meets her demise through her participation. The ethics of the online realm are ambiguous in both instances, and the harsh, neon colors through which the print is rendered are meant to harken a sense of paranoia for this transitory space.

*Me & Myselfie* (Fig. 6) was another piece influenced by the circumstances surrounding Amanda Todd. The catalyst for her cyberbullying was a nude photo she took of herself and shared with a supposedly trustworthy person online. The “selfie,” a self-portrait taken with the
intention of being shared online, interested me as a ubiquitous way of conveying female identity in the virtual realm. *Me and Myselfie*, directly references the selfie aesthetic and the struggle females face when representing a physical identity online.

All social media websites have modes through which to enforce behaviors through positive feedback: Facebook has likes, Reddit has upvotes, Tumblr has reblogs, etc. While media has always molded expression and opinions, the Internet provides perceptible evaluation in real-time, and consequently, establishes a power structure that produces citizens who willingly participate in self-regulating behavior (Sturken, 17). While online users do have agency, the inundation of images and ideas—whether media generated or not—and perpetuation of these images and ideas through memes, remakes, or reblogs, establish a normalizing gaze that Internet users turn on themselves (Sturken, 18).

Pictures of girls have become one of the greatest online commodities and many women participate in self-branding and self-promotion in order to gain visibility. This participation requires a careful monitoring of their online presence in order to appear as a “good woman:” one that is demure but sexy, experienced but innocent. This dichotomy is mirrored in the standard selfie pose: taken above the head and angled down in order to make the appearance more childlike by emphasizing the photographer’s head and eye size, but simultaneously revealing the cleavage and positioning the subject in the vulnerable perspective of the male gaze (Penny).

While I had previously avoided the inclusion of actual meme iconography in my prints, *Me and Myselfie* is inundated with them, mimicking the gradual departure from steadfast individuality to meme compliance that many experience online. In this print, the identity is
transformed into a brand through which to amass the crucial online currency of attention; acceptance and visibility are gained not only through adherence to meme culture and rejection of original content but also through the commodification of self. The figure’s body strains against the confines of her clothing as she struggles to conform to the predetermined acceptable portrayal of female identity. The agency of the figure is ambiguous in this print, while the arm extends past the picture frame in a style indicative of a selfie-style portrait, the brightly colored meme imagery stands in contrast to the soft, neutral wash of her skin and background. The vivid blue drips on her cheek serve as visual representation of the deterioration of her identity and represent the sexualization of the virtual female presence.
CHAPTER FOUR
CULTURAL CAPITAL AND THE ATTENTION ECONOMY

The Alphabet Series took a stylistic turn after making these intermittent prints. The cautionary tale aspect that I had been hoping to achieve isn’t present in the earlier series pieces. Conveying the evolution of language required for communication in the digital realm is important for contextualizing the work, but it does not demonstrate the way these new verbal cues have changed the authority and representation of self. For example, the first print of the Alphabet Series, Feels, is more restrained than the later prints of the Alphabet Series in both the gesture of the avatar and the use of color and text. While the term “feels” was conceived from online communicative needs, the muted colors, rounded edges, and square placard of the print are rooted in the traditional format of the alphabet flashcard motif. Beginning the Alphabet Series with an aesthetic rooted so heavily in subdued, traditional fashion allowed for a stark contrast to be made between the effect of prolonged Internet exposure represented in the later series. Pieces like Feels, GPOY (Fig. 7), OTL, and Noob (Fig. 8) are instrumental for describing the Internet in a non-judgmental, didactic fashion, however they do not properly convey the more problematic elements of online interaction.

To remedy this, I began to pick more subversive terms as the series progressed—to place my avatarized identity in vulnerable, sexualized poses and threatening environments. This shift represents a more balanced view of what the Internet realm embodies: while it has its more vitriolic, problematic aspects, it also fills simple, communicative needs. I compare this dichotomy to the simultaneous but divergent worlds seen in media such as the films The Wizard of Oz or Pleasantville: the earlier half of the series—indicating the terms satisfying basic needs of
expression online—is rendered with largely muted hues and subdued demeanor in a style indicative of the 50s, but as the series progresses and explores the more malicious aspects of online interaction, the colors become more vivid and acidic, the avatars more exaggerated and expressive, and the clothing more current and ostentatious.

For example, in *Welcome to the Internet* (Fig. 9), the print portrays the Internet as a crowded, over-stimulated environment driven by absurd references gleaned from other time periods and media forms. Here, the avatar rides a unicorn/cat hybrid while sporting attire indicative of the 60s. Mirroring how the attention economy of the Internet functions, the choices for the print are all made to excite the viewer, but are lacking in any real meaning outside of garnering attention.

Ryan Trecartin was instrumental in determining the direction of the Alphabet Series in its later stages. His surreal, over-stimulated videos highlight the absurdity of our maniacally paced, fabricated “reality” obsessed culture (Swenson). Sexually ambiguous, garish figures chirp in high-pitched nonsense languages, performing meaningless tasks for the entertainment of an implicated audience (Swenson). Trecartin’s videos make the viewer uncomfortable: when watching, it is with the knowledge that these destructive, mentally decaying activities are being performed for our pleasure. If not for the attention such grandiosity can garner, these at best pointless and at worst degenerative forms of media would not exist.

I liked the idea of interspersing the prints conveying the use of the Internet for basic communicative needs with those representing the side of the online realm that’s bent on garnering attention through any means necessary. Intermingling these two factions not only mimics the non-linear, multi-layered structure of the Internet, but also allows the viewer to be
 lulled into a false sense of security, before introducing an image like Pedobear (Fig. 10) where
the avatar is visibly vulnerable and fearful in the shadow of an apparently real but unseeable
threat. Similar to Me and My Selfie, Pedobear references the Internet not only through
vocabulary, but also through memetic iconography. Pedobear, an image originating on
Japanese message boards, is a smiling, seemingly innocuous cartoon bear that is used to
reference and often trivialize pedophilia. Its existence underlies my concerns for adolescent
females vying for visibility as they explore the complexities of a space through which multiple
age groups and maturity levels interact. The real-world consequences of harassment—whether
sexual, mental, or otherwise—are often discounted when having occurred online: because the
outright effect of one’s actions is not viewable, it is easy to ignore. The progression of the
Alphabet series and the transformation of the avatar protagonist from innocence to a warped,
shallow, even inhuman being underlie this consequence in an easily noticeable way.

The later series pieces Anon (Fig. 11), Rule 34 (Fig. 12) and /b/ (Fig. 13) similarly
investigate a manipulation of identity for sexual gratification. Prints like YOLO (Fig. 14), Cats (Fig.
15), and Welcome to the Internet also address the loss of personal identity but as an outcome of
compliance to emergent online trends. The figures in these prints mimic the contemporary
hipster trend: hipsters recognize that every culture has a cultural capital—the social worth of a
particular object, style of dress, manner of speech, etc. to a specific class or subculture of people
(Brown). They recognize that amassing cultural capital whether through study, inheritance or
purchase is a way of attaining status within a specific sub-culture (Brown). However, because
they are adopting the affects of cultures from which they do not belong rather than gaining their
representation from a lived experience, their choices are seen as performative and met with
contempt (Brown). Representing identity online through the use of appropriated meme imagery mimics this action of cashing in on built-in cultural capital for attention. Rather than reveal the identity by asserting effort towards earning status, it is obscured by a shallow bid to amass recognition.
CHAPTER FIVE
THE INTERNET AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PHYSICAL ART OBJECT

Appropriation is rampant online, media from the past and present are utilized for meme imagery to communicate personal experiences in the absence of a shared physical location. The Internet provides a space for visibility, and gifs and image macros enable important news events to be easily shared and discussed. I rendered the entirety of the series in silkscreen because, while stylistically it allowed for the bright, flat images indicative of the graphic media found online, I also felt it paralleled the consumerism and sharing function of the Internet through the ability to make editions which is inherent to Printmaking. Silkscreen is also one of the more accessible Printmaking processes: it is used for fine art but also t-shirts, posters, packaging, and other commercial needs. The Internet operates this way, too. It is a space that is used for commodity and consumerism, but also engagement with people, communities and ideas.

It is important for my prints to be physical objects that exist in the gallery; because the pieces borrow from the visual forms they are critiquing, if taken out of context they can be seen as glorifying commodification of self, rather than condemning it. Hanging the prints also allows for utilizing the space for additional meaning. In Troll (Fig. 16), for example, the act of trolling is when someone is intentionally provocative with the purpose of causing disruption. Rather than conceptualize a representative scenario within a single image, having the troll rip herself from the print to wreak havoc elsewhere in the series allows for an understanding of the aggressiveness the act of trolling embodies. Having the avatar positioned above the emoticon-based cross-eyed frowning face personifies the anxiety, drama, and even emotional distress trolling can cause.
In my thesis installation, other figures also escape from the confines of their frames, mimicking a convergence of online and offline realms. I appreciate installation as an art form that is helpful in sustaining the importance of the physical art object: images are easily accessible online, but often Internet users are online for distraction rather than engagement. They typically won’t spend the same amount of time viewing and considering a piece on the Internet as they would in the gallery. Having elements of the Alphabet Series extend the boundary of their frames offers an experience that can’t be had online and gives a purpose for it to exist beyond the virtual realm.
CHAPTER SIX

EMPATHY IN THE ONLINE REALM

Throughout the creation of all the work, I have acknowledged the Internet as a space that is composed of communities that foster meaningful interactions. While access to individuals and ideas outside our immediate physical location is advantageous in many ways, actions taken online need to be treated with the same accountability that one would have in the actual realm. As the Alphabet series illustrates, language informs how we think of others and ourselves. Referring to the actual world as being “real,” creates an image of the Internet as a fantasyland comprised of characters that fade out of existence once the computer is shut down. However, online users are complete and dynamic individuals that are deserving of the empathy one would grant to others in their physical location. Whether or not one chooses to recognize it, interactions in the virtual realm do have meaning and consequence: they are a reflection, not only of all of us as individuals, but as a society. We need to take this into account, not only in our actions online, but in the way we approach communication in the virtual realm.
Fig. 1: Feels

Silkscreen. 15” x 11”, 2012
Fig. 2: OTL

Silkscreen. 15” x 11”, 2012
Fig. 3: Lurk

Silkscreen. 15” x 11”, 2012
Fig. 4: Hack

Silkscreen. 15” x 11”, 2013
Fig. 5: *Down the Rabbit Hole*

Silkscreen. 22” x 10”, 2013
Fig. 6: Me and Myselfie

Silkscreen and collage. 27” x 20”, 2013
Fig. 7: GPOY

Silkscreen. 15” x 11”, 2012
Fig. 8: Noob

Silkscreen. 15” x 11”, 2012
Fig. 9: Welcome to the Internet

Silkscreen. 15” x 11”, 2013
Fig. 10: Pedobear

Silkscreen. 15” x 11”, 2013
Fig. 11: Anon

Silkscreen. 15” x 11”, 2013
Fig. 12: Rule 34

Silkscreen. 15” x 11”, 2013
Fig. 13: /b/

Silkscreen. 15” x 11”, 2013
Fig. 14: YOLO

Silkscreen. 15” x 11”, 2013
Fig. 15: Cats

Silkscreen. 15” x 11”, 2013
Fig. 16: Troll

Silkscreen. 8" x 4", 2013
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