Ambivalently Yours

Anonymous

How do you resist something that you feel ambivalent about? Can things be partially resisted, while still existing within the dominant system? For example, can I still be a feminist while loving the colour pink? These are the types of questions that led to the creation of Ambivalently Yours, an anonymous persona that explores ambivalence through drawings, public interventions and blog posts. (ambivalently-yours.com.) My small acts of resistance as Ambivalently Yours are meant as conversation starters, acts of compassion and examples of active-yet-ambivalent resistance. My illustrated text presents an overview of this web- and illustration-based artistic practice.

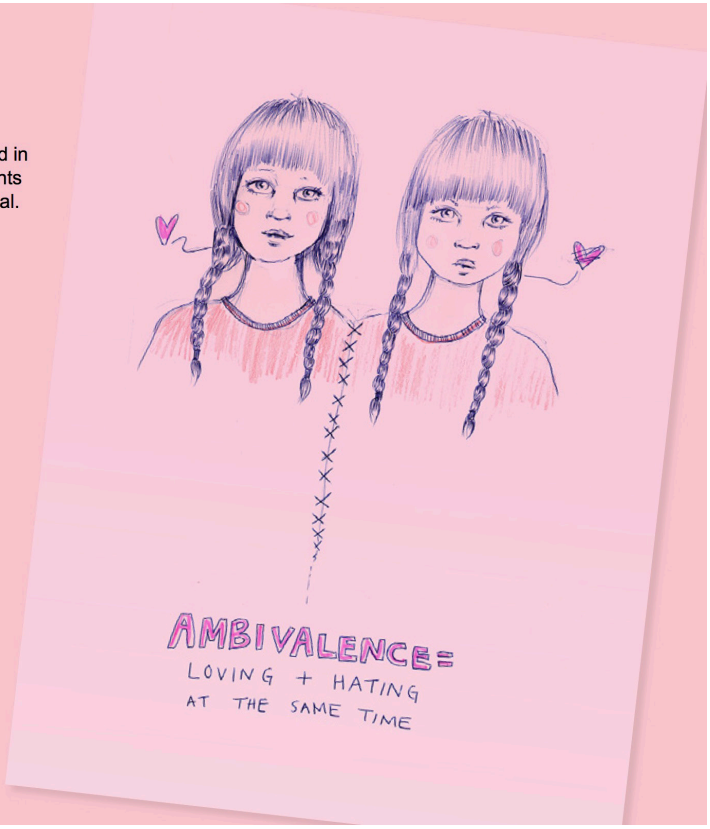
FYI

This is a story about ambivalence. Any contradictions or mixed feelings described in this illustrated text are based on true events and their inclusion is completely intentional.

This is a story about a fashion worker turned grad student, who struggled to become a feminist artist while clinging to her love of fashion, girl culture and the colour pink.

This is a story about me.

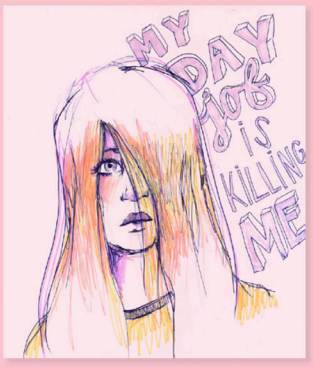
As I mentioned earlier, I used to work in fashion...



I LOVED IT

This is a fictitious rendering of how I looked when I loved working in fashion: calm, cool and trendy. Often my job was fun and creative, and the perks of free clothes and travel were great. It was also kind of cool to feel kind of cool.

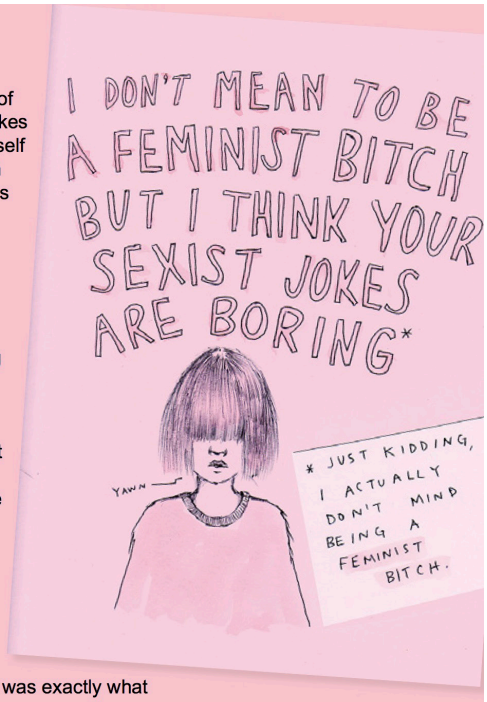
I HATED IT



This is an accurate rendering of how I looked when I was losing my mind due to the unrealistic deadlines, the competitive environment, and the materialistic and wasteful nature of the job. Oh yeah, the sexism around the office was pretty bad too.

THEN I REALLY HATED IT...

I've always thought of myself as a feminist, but an easy-going type of feminist. The kind of girl who could laugh her way through sexist jokes and degrading remarks, because I knew better and I convinced myself that I just needed to pick my battles. It wasn't until I found myself in an intensely sexist workplace that I realized that all the laughing was more of a defence mechanism than a productive way of living life.



I spent months trying to laugh off the fact that my boss would rub my shoulders and make public comments about my weight. Sexual harassment was a regular part of my work day, as it was for most of my other female co-workers. The only women who were spared from the groping were the Chinese women who worked in the fitting department. Most of them were recent immigrants working as fit technicians and making little more than minimum wage because their engineering degrees were not valid when they moved to Canada. My boss would not flirt with them, but he would joke about their broken English accents and exclude them from the design team parties because they just weren't cool enough. We liked these women but we ate at separate lunch tables and at the time our struggle seemed so different from theirs that it never occurred to us to stand up for them. Perhaps in an act of self-preservation, we were picking our battles.

Eventually however, the jokes stopped being funny. I started to become a very angry person, as did many of my co-workers. We also became very competitive and weary of one another, which was exactly what our boss had hoped for I suppose. I suddenly found myself gossiping a lot, and eating copious amounts of junk food while at work, and after gaining about ten pounds of anger weight, I decided to make a change. In an attempt to appease and perhaps understand my anger, I decided to apply to grad school and see if re-investing myself in art could help me overcome my professional frustrations.

SO I BECAME A FEMINIST, AND I LOVED IT

I hadn't taken art seriously since undergrad, five years earlier. I grew up in a home split by divorce. From an early age my upbringing was divided between a conservative, patriarchal father and a creative, independent mother. This meant that my feminist and artistic aspirations were only encouraged half of the time, which made it difficult for me to take them as seriously as I secretly wanted to. As a young professional, I tried to balance out my desire for creativity with my need for financial stability, but the latter always seemed to take centre stage. Therefore, going back to school when I already had a successful career, not only to study art but more importantly to study feminist art, was a significant act of feminist resistance within my personal and professional self.

As soon as I started school, I was hooked. I would bring my feminist books to my fashion job and read them at the lunch table in front of everyone. I loved watching my boss squirm as I became more vocal about my feminist interest. As expected, the jokes about whether I was going to keep shaving my legs began. This time though, instead of laughing, I hid behind my book and just kept reading.

My first semester's work was a time-based piece featuring a series of bright pink candy coated paintings, and a soundtrack of edited interviews with teenage girls from my community. I asked them a series of questions about their relationship with feminism to highlight the difficulties of being a young feminist today. I was convinced that this new work — part eye candy, part social practice — was a complex and relevant approach to feminist art. The labour behind it alone: twenty canvases and thousands of stills edited together, felt worthy of praise. Furthermore, I had overcome my own shy nature and talked with girls I did not know to make work that was less self-centred than anything I had done in the past.

But then...

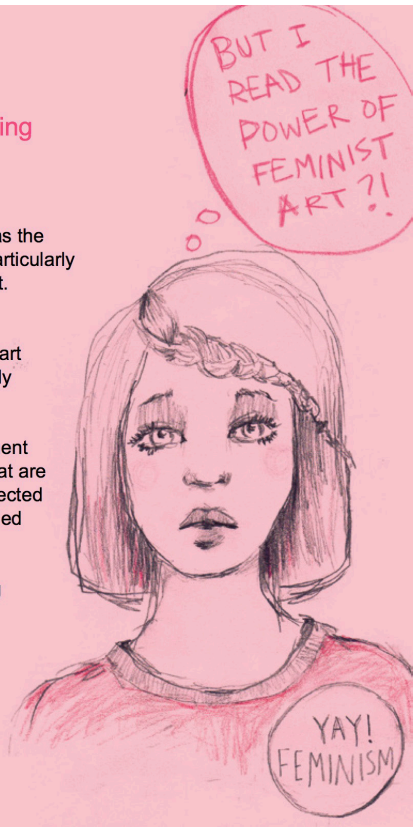
THEY HATED IT

> "The faculty and I are concerned that you are not making the distinction between being critical and reinscribing what you see in society."

At the time I had no idea what the word "reinscribe" even meant, but that was the feedback I was hearing from the faculty in response to my work. Another particularly blunt professor also told me that my art was belittling the feminist movement.

When you work on something for six months and are extremely excited and revitalized by it, hearing such comments are likely to make you want to quit art school and become a professional ice cream eater instead. I was completely crushed.

I thought it was so clear that I was being critical and trying to make a statement about the need for more inclusive feminist conversations. Conversations that are relevant to younger generations, as well as grown women who feel disconnected from feminism due to the movement's bad reputation in the mainstream. I tried using the creative skills I gained working in fashion to make art that spoke to the kinds of women I created fashion ads for, in hopes that my message about the need for gender equality would seem as appealing as the clothing trends of the season. Unfortunately, somewhere along the way my intent was getting lost under the pink and girliness of my work. Furthermore, in an attempt to give other people a voice, my own voice as an artist and a feminist was becoming more and more unclear. I really wanted to trust my teachers, and I knew that much of what they were saying was right, however there was a big part of me that wasn't ready to give up the pink.

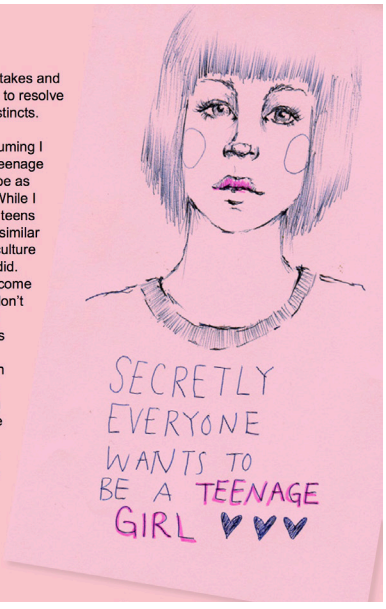


WHO ARE YOU TALKING TO?

As I stumbled through my grad school semesters, making mistakes and collecting brutal critique war wounds, I kept trying to find ways to resolve the conflict between my feminist aspirations and my artistic instincts.

My teachers kept asking me who my audience was, often assuming I was trying to make art for teenage girls, because surely only teenage girls could be naive enough to care about fashion trends and be as enthusiastic about patriarchally prescribed colours like pink. While I was definitely in touch with my inner-teenage girl, I never saw teens as my audience, not my only audience anyway. We shared a similar language and iconography, and the emotional honesty of girl culture spoke to me in a way that academic conceptual jargon never did. Yet my aim was never to say: "Hey teenagers, you need to become feminists because you are being ruled by patriarchy and you don't even know it!" In all honesty, I wondered if it was perhaps the older women around me, in their late twenties and early thirties who were struggling the most, and I would often look to teen girls as my inspiration rather than my cause. There is a certain honesty and solidarity that comes with being a teen girl, and it was this honesty and solidarity, that I had lost while attempting to become a successful professional adult. Going back in time actually helped me resist the things I had been conforming to in my adult life. Yet it frustrated me that my artistic connection to youth culture made some of my mentors assume that I was insecure, frivolous and being duped by the patriarchy.

(OMFG!!! I just like pink OK? Get over it.)



I LIKE PINK

I knew I wanted to make feminist art, and I knew I didn't want to give up my love of fashion or the colour pink, but I wasn't sure how it could all fit together, especially in an academic context.

> "The fashion-conscious feminist is made to feel doubly shamed for having twice betrayed the feminist cause: First for falling into the old patriarchal trap of mugging for the objectifying sexual gaze, then again for enjoying it. (…) Above all, it takes for granted that women who invest energy in their appearance are incapable of realizing that they are being manipulated; lambs who willingly nestle themselves in the fashion industry's rapacious jaw rather than rational, empowered individuals who choose to communicate using apparel."[1]

I did feel as though I was being shamed. As though my love of pink made me a less credible feminist artist, not only by the academic world that assumed I was being duped, but also by my fashion world who expected my interest in feminism to make me forget my love of trendy clothes and bright colours and turn me into an angry man hater. It seemed there was no way to be both. To be a feminist girlie girl, a tulle loving tomboy, a fashion forward feminist or a boy crazy patriarchy hater.

[1] Emily Raine, "The F Word," *Worn Fashion Journal* Fall /Winter 5 (2007): 37.

WTF??

To recap, I wanted it all. I wanted to wear trendy outfits and make super pink and girlie art, but I also wanted to be critical about sexist socially constructed gender roles.

But how could I actively oppose something that I was still simultaneously seduced by?

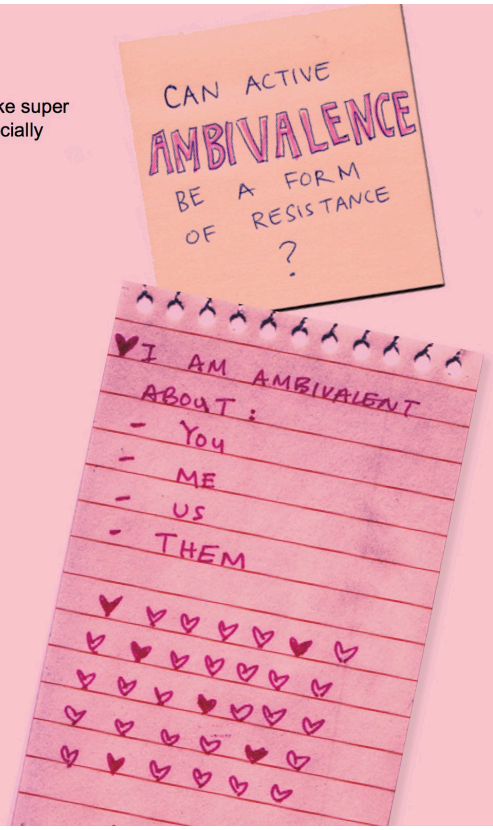
Could things be partially resisted, while co-existing within the dominant system?

Could I still be a feminist while loving the colour pink?

Finally, Ulrike Müller, a brilliant artist and writer (also my faculty adviser at the time) described my questions and contradictions as **AMBIVALENCE**. The word immediately stuck in my head. I wondered if perhaps the coexistence of both positive and negative feelings could be a motivating factor rather than an obstacle.

I began to ask myself if there could be such a thing as active ambivalence? And if so, I wondered if active ambivalence could be a form of feminist resistance?

Ulrike then encouraged me to explore my ambivalence confidently, so I did.



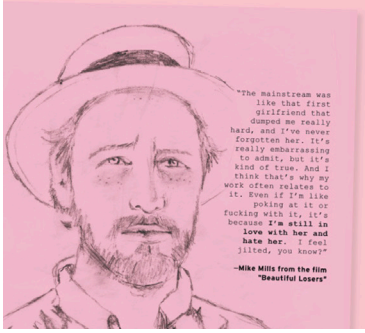
YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN?

Because of my ambivalence, I never felt I quite belonged in what I viewed as traditional feminist movements. So as any lost soul, feeling alone in a struggle, I began looking for allies. I started searching for other people who embraced their contradictions, in hopes that it would help me figure out what to do with mine. I soon found ambivalent allies amongst feminist artists, queer academics, street artists, musicians, fashion bloggers, teenage artists, Riot GRRRLS and even gallery directors.

WORD.

I looked to feminist artists from the 70s, like Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, co-founders of the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) Feminist Art Program. I admired their decision to create their own programs and venues to introduce a different type of art, where women did not have to hide the fact that they were women.

I was also inspired by a group of artists who made work that derived from the punk rock, graffiti, skateboarder scene in the early 90s. Cast aside by the high brow gallery art world, these artists also created their own venues to help share and support their artistic endeavours. Artists like Barry McGee, Margaret Kilgallen, Mike Mills, Aaron Rose and Steve Powers, who were collectively called the 'Beautiful Losers' in the 2008 film of the same name, shared a similar D-I-Y approach to art, which has since been embraced by popular culture and mass marketing strategists. Rejected and revered simultaneously by the art world and the mainstream, the 'Beautiful Losers' were the first group of artists to introduce me to the idea of existing in an in-between place of celebrated un-belonging.



Around the same time, the Riot Grrrl underground feminist movement was also expanding the boundaries of art and value, and embracing a less exclusive and more D-I-Y approach to art. These women and girls shared feminist ideas through punk music, handmade zines and political interventions, while embracing an unapologetically girlie aesthetic covered in stars and hearts.

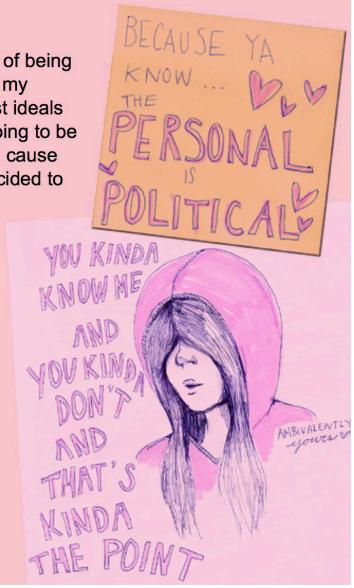
The connection between all of these people was that their acts of resistance were unexpected and untraditional. They did not preach a homogenic unified truth, but instead offered a series of questions. Unsatisfied with dominant culture, and not able to fit in with dominant resistance groups, all of the artists mentioned above created their own tailor made way of standing up for something. Studying these people helped me disconnect myself from my instinct of looking for groups to fit into, and helped me feel more content in my unbelonging.

FIRST I BECAME SOMEONE ELSE

Inspired by the work of other artists and activists, I made up a studio plan that would allow me to embrace my ambivalence and called it: **Ambivalently Yours**. Thinking back to my first semesters work, and the criticism I received from the faculty, I realized that one of the major mistakes I made was to completely take myself out of my work and discredit my own personal opinions and experiences. I decided to embrace the feminist understanding first presented by Carol Hanish in 1969 that *the personal is political*, and make work that started from my own experiences to demonstrate how my personal struggle was reflective of a larger political struggle.

While I wanted to be radical, bold and fearlessly ambivalent, I was still afraid of the consequences of being so open about my political opinions. I feared that my fashion world would feel threatened by my feminist ideals and that my artistic world would find what I was doing to be contradictory. I was also afraid that my fear would cause me to self-censor myself and dilute the work. I decided to confront my fears by creating an anonymous alter-ego that could exist somewhere between my clashing opinions. Clad in a bright pink hoodie and hiding behind a mess of tangled hair, I became Ambivalently Yours, and used this new persona as a vehicle for my ambivalent voice.

As Ambivalently Yours I started sharing my most personal and conflicted ambivalent thoughts in public and online in hopes of igniting conversations, finding empathetic opinions and sharing my experience of conflicted feminist thought.



ANONYMOUS NOTES

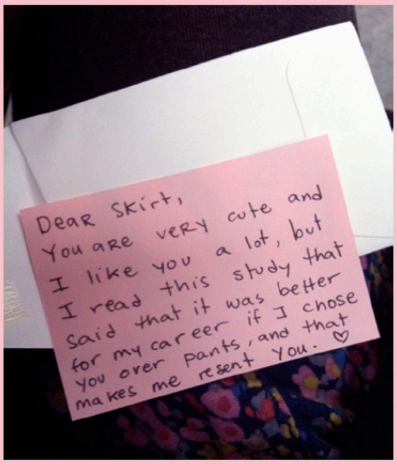
My first act of resistance as Ambivalently Yours was to write short ambivalent notes to the things I felt ambivalent about.

I would then leave the notes in places where my ambivalence occurred. My hope was that the people who found my little heart-marked envelopes would be confronted by my questions and feel inspired to reflect upon their own ambivalent feelings.

I left notes in taxi cabs, in public rest-rooms, in the pocket of a floral dress, in a bra, at an ATM, in a subway car, in library books, in Las Vegas, in a casino, in the Jersey Shore store...

The act of leaving a note in a public space for anyone to find created a rush of rebellion that felt like a reverse shop-lifting. My inner good girl was terrified every step of the way, while my burgeoning radical feminist self was loving every minute of it. This was my first step towards an active and public questioning of my own inner conflicts.

DEAR SKIRT, I LOVE YOU AND I HATE YOU...



I documented each note I wrote and left behind, then posted the images on a blog where I also wrote a short story about why and where I left it.

For example, after reading about a study that concluded women who wore skirts in professional settings were more successful than those who wore pants, I began to resent a floral skirt that I had once loved. So I wrote an ambivalent note to my skirt and left it on a subway car on my way to work.

I then posted the note on my blog, followed by a text examining the frustrations of socially imposed femininity and how it interferes with the pleasures of sartorial expression.

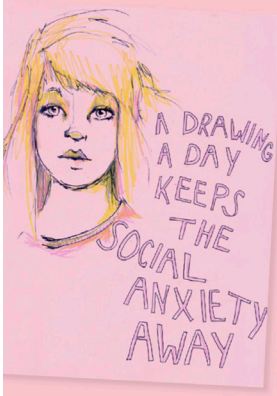
The process of writing notes and giving them away to an unknown public, allowed me to separate my pleasures from my frustrations. Once separate, the two could be re-examined more clearly than when they co-existed as a single ambivalent feeling.

British cultural theorist Angela McRobbie states that, "The energetic enthusiasm of women across the boundaries of class and ethnicity for fashion could be used to transform it into a better place of work rather than allowing it to remain a space of exploited production and guilty consumption."[2] This statement lead me to believe that by using fashion as a communication tool, rather than just portraying it as a symbol of patriarchal domination, I could allow for the pleasures of sartorial fun to help sustain the need for radical feminist action, which on its own can become incredibly draining. Thinking back to the women in my work place, with different backgrounds and struggles, the common points we shared were our love of fashion and our dislike for how our boss and the industry in general made us feel about ourselves and each other. This realization helped me bond with my co-workers. And as our friendships grew, so did our resistance against the oppression we faced in the workplace.

[2] Angela McRobbie, "Bridging the Gap: Feminism, Fashion and Consumption," *Feminist Review.* (1997): 87.

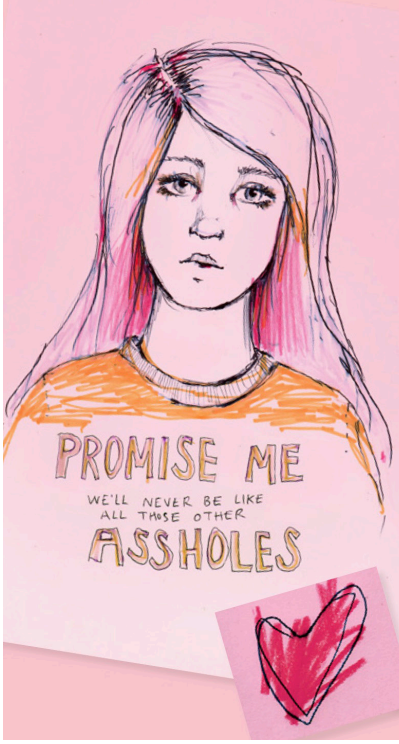
I DEFINITELY LOVE TO DRAW

Around the same time, I started a series of ambivalent drawings, which I would work on in hiding when I felt frustrated at my job. Drawing became my own subversive act of resistance against my employers, the fashion industry and the patriarchal machine. I stole computer paper and company time to draw out my frustrations and channel my anger into something tangible. I soon realized I was able to express certain thoughts and emotions more clearly through the act of drawing, than by solely using text. While these drawings were never intended to be part of Ambivalently Yours, I realized that they were a crucial part of my practice. Not only did they help set the tone to my online writing, but they helped define the voice of my newly introduced online anonymous persona.



I created a tumblr site and began posting the drawings online, giving them a platform for easy sharing, similar to the web language of memes. While traditional internet memes are a daily source of frustration for me, with their bad graphic design and often sexist and/or racist undertones, I've always been fascinated by their ability to spread virally online. There is something simple and clever about an image juxtaposed with a catchy one liner and formatted for easy sharing via social media. I decided to allow my drawings to follow that same formula but offer a more substantial message. I paired each drawing with a caption or a quote linking it back to specific text-based posts on the blogger site, which in turn linked back to specific drawings on the tumblr site. While most memes last but an internet minute, linking my images to a related text allowed web surfers to inevitably find themselves going back and forth, in-between two sites, in-between texts and drawings. This connection created a conversation between image and text, between a first reaction and a more in-depth explanation. This same process can also occur if the people who find the notes I leave in public decide to follow the internet link posted on the back and read about the motivations behind the note. Basically, I began using the marketing knowledge I learned while working in fashion to draw people into my work, while also using the artistic chops I learned in art school to share a healthy dose of feminist thought with my viewers. In other words, I began using what I love and what I hate simultaneously, to create an ambivalent resistance.

MAYBE I'M NOT THE ONLY AMBIVALENT ONE



The more I posted, the more people started messaging me, re-blogging my images and following my posts. Some people even wrote their own notes and sent me their own stories of ambivalence to be posted on the blog.

These interactions, primarily with strangers who found me online, made me appreciate the complexity of social media and web-based practices. The process of connecting with others through images and short texts was very compelling to me, and reminiscent of the Riot GRRRL zine culture of the 90s. People also started using my feminist drawings to shape their own feminist identities online. The entire process helped me understand the value of creating a space to share questions and conflicted ideas, a space where mistakes could be made, and a space that encourages honest feminist debate and action.

While the use of online anonymity began as a strategy to help me present a less censored version of myself in my work, it also simultaneously allowed for the work to be less specifically about me and more inclusive of others. Since the details of my geographic location, physical appearance, sexual preference, gender, age and class were left very vague, they did not overshadow the feminist ideas shared in my work. This meant that it didn't matter if the people who found me online and I would have eaten at the same lunch table at work or even been friends in real life. What mattered is that we shared similar feelings of ambivalence, and finding these ambivalent allies made the path to resistance a lot less lonely.

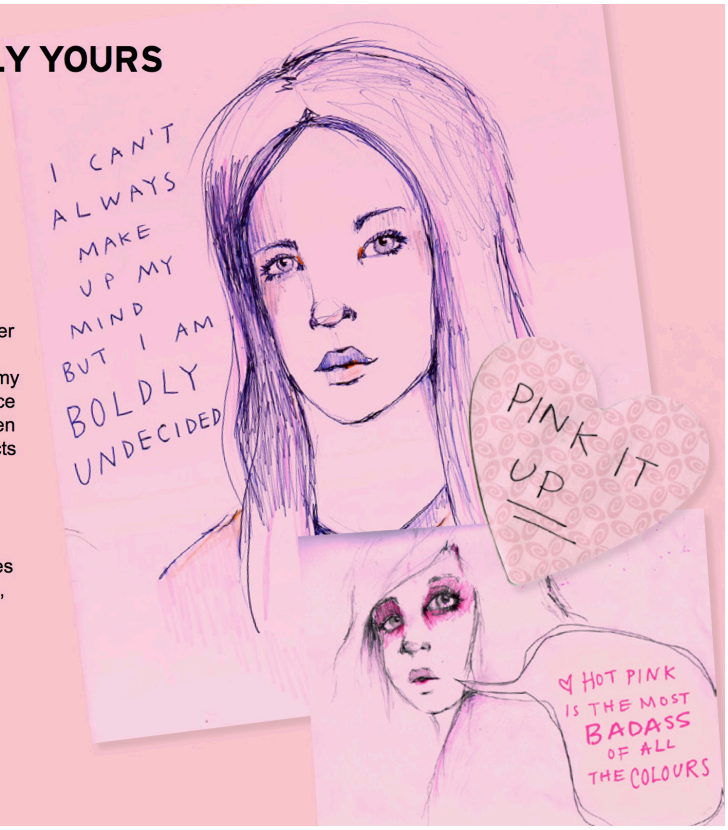
THIS IS WHAT I WAS TRYING TO SAY ALL ALONG

Part of being a feminist is about advocating for a woman's right to choose; this, however, does not have to imply that there is only one choice. Inspired by the D-I-Y modes of communication of the Riot Grrrl movement, and the feminist understanding that the personal is political, my choice is not to choose, but to celebrate the in-between through the online sharing of ambivalent illustrations, blog posts and anonymous ambivalent notes left in public spaces. My small acts of rebellion as Ambivalently Yours are meant as conversation starters, acts of compassion and examples of active yet ambivalent resistance.

I AM AMBIVALENTLY YOURS

Two years later, I still leave ambivalent notes in public places, and I still post my drawings online as often as I can. My feelings about fashion, femininity and feminism have changed throughout this whole process, but my love of pink has remained intact. My personal struggle for feminist authenticity became stronger once I gave myself permission to willingly highlight the contradictions of my convictions. Embracing my ambivalence helped me find a comfortable in-between where I can appreciate my inner conflicts instead of being consumed by them.

Perhaps the most badass type of resistance is one that not only thrives for social change but also acknowledges its flaws and leaves room for questions, rebellious fun and a whole lot of pink.



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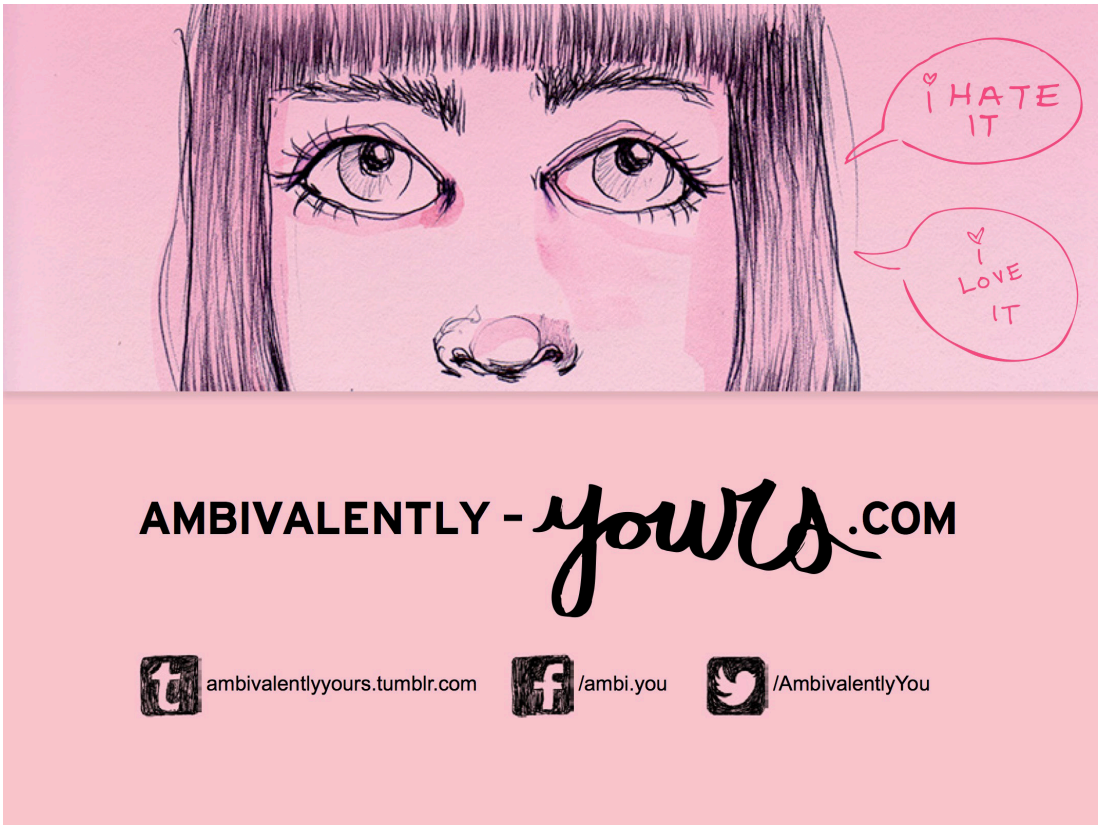
WEBSITES

Dis Magazine http://dismagazine.com/

Thredbared http://iheartthreadbared.wordpress.com/

Rookie Mag http://rookiemag.com/



AMBIVALENTLY YOURS is an anonymous web-based artist. Her work is fuelled by seven years of professional experience in Montreal's fashion industry juxtaposed with a simultaneous investment in feminist art. Both seduced and disheartened by the portrayal of femininity and feminism in Western society, the exploration of her ambivalence is central to her artistic practice. ambivalently.yours@gmail.com; ambivalently-yours.com