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Who's that girl? The contrasting notions of authentic gender presentations in the work of Amanda Palmer and St. Vincent

Authenticity is one of the most highly regarded values in western popular music: A shoddy album, an ill-conceived statement or an awful live performance are often excused more readily than insincerity, hypocrisy and inconsistency. At the same time, what seems to be most appealing in pop music is the abundance of masks and costumes, the spectacular disguises and artists' ever-changing images. This ambivalence is reflected in the gendered stereotyping of music genres as explained by Norma Coates, who points out the common conflation of authenticity with masculinity (and rock music) and femininity (and pop) with artificiality. This dichotomy readily translates into the imagined identities of musicians', notions of the relation between the author and their work, and the judgement of the artistic value of a particular music piece.

And yet the artificiality ascribed to women artists may be viewed as more of an asset than a drawback. As demonstrated by Teresa de Lauretis, the oppressive mask of socially constructed femininity can be easily transformed into a masquerade: a dynamic interplay of consciously assumed costumes and gender roles which rely on the rejection of the essentialist notions of both authenticity and gender. In the end, as established by Lawrence Grossberg and Allan Moore, from the interplay of images emerge new forms of interpersonal authenticity.

In the presentation, I will examine two contrasting strategies of gender performance employed by women artists: the theatrical and ostensibly artificial persona of vaudeville-inspired singer-songwriter Amanda Palmer and the supposedly 'natural' and 'authentic' girl-next-door image of multi-instrumentalist St. Vincent (Annie Clark). The analysis of these seemingly opposing and yet surprisingly kindred gender performances will serve as a lens that will enable an insight into the means of visual and performative construction of women's identities not only in the music industry but also in everyday life.