Interview

The Metamorphoses of *Front* as a Narrative Told through Social Media Interface: A Conversation with Donna Leishman

Front *is an exciting departure for Donna Leishman. Best known for allegorical, often wordless, Flash-based narratives, in* Front *she tells a contemporary and text-based story.* Front *unfolds using a faux-Facebook page along with Twitter, SoundCloud, and other apps. Like many of her other works,* Front *continues a concern with female experience and agency as well as elements of fairy tale and myth but does so in a very different way. Through its pointed concern with our immersion and investment in social media, it speaks to the creation of virtual identities and personas as well as to concealed narratives of need, longing, or trauma. The work envisions narrative possibilities for these platforms.*

QUESTION: What is Front *and how did it come about?*
DONNA LEISHMAN (DL): Well, *Front* was a very particular commission. It answered a call for media artists to respond to a Scottish government project called "Project Ginsberg," which was attempting to use digital media to help the nation's mental health, so not naturally somewhere I'd go for financial resources to make a narrative work. But a lot of my critical work was looking at social identity—the problems associated with visual culture, kinds of social media, in short the current context that we face right now. I had a lot of somewhat disparate ideas under my belt and issues I was seeing from my own social media experience, and I thought that I could develop a narrative piece to highlight some of them. Another interesting aspect to this commission was who would be the audience for this? "Project Ginsberg" could be for everybody in Scotland, which in terms of narrative development is a horrible brief. Mark Daniel (New Media Scotland) and I were looking for narrower audiences. I knew I wanted to

pitch this to young adults so I could explore a very particular kind of language and a very particular kind of world.

Front is set up as a Facebook parody. It's a front, which has to ape the kind of functionality and interface of social media but also has to function as a cautionary tale. In some ways that's exactly like most of my other work: cautionary tales, fairy tales, characters who may tell or relay a message that's either healthy or unhealthy. *Front* is here and now, and Facebook is social media. It's, for me, a departure because I had to work with a programmer (the excellent Jim Olson) to deliver the work in scalable HTML 5, and think about how to use that technology to structure the story.

Q: How is it structured and who is Daphne?

DL: Now, Daphne. Instead of a free form Facebook timeline, I thought there needs to be a story and one of the things I don't do is write stories from scratch. I'm not a kind of author who sets out the plot or the characters. My business is reframing and working with existing stories. I knew I was looking for a story which had a female protagonist as that is another kind of trope of mine. And, it had to be someone who is visually literate and/or obsessed by her image in
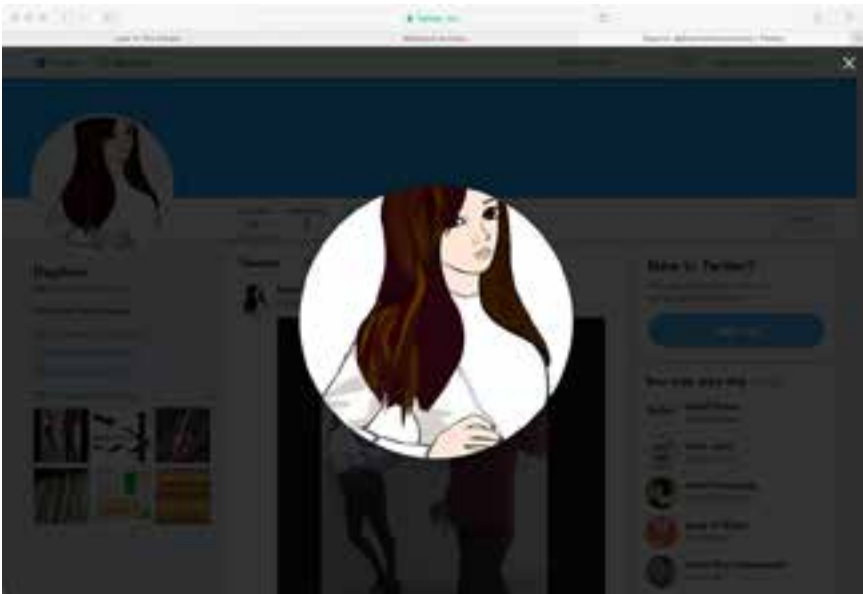
Figure 10.1 Daphne's Facebook persona in *Front* by Donna Leishman.

terms of how she projects herself and presents herself. Daphne is from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. She is an object of virtue—Apollo's must-have girl, which again is a reasonably familiar story format for people who like classic literature if not commonly well-known. So, for me this was quite a nice tension: to use Facebook and a very old story as an analogy between objectifying a female and the body, so Daphne is Daphne.

Q: Facebook is a place of transformation and literary analogy …
DL: Yes, and there a few other little unknowns. DJ Lycius is Daphne's favorite man; this DJ is featured in *Metamorphoses* as a king who has transformed into a wolf for eating or cannibalizing his family.

Q: He has developed quite a presence… .
DL: Yes, DJ Lycius is on Soundcloud, and he is really popular in Europe. People think he's real.

Q: Where did the music come in? Did you compose Lycius?
DL: I commissioned DJ Nord (Steve Gibson) to become DJ Lycius for me and to develop sets of music that would work throughout the project to change tone and timbre. I wanted it to be sonically young, something kind of cool, obviously for the young audience, but also kind of suggestive of Daphne's mental state, because, and I am not above admitting that I do this, a lot of people put how they feel obliquely through their music choices or lyrics on Facebook and all their close friends would "read" that lyric. Someone says "alright, she's playing *The Cure*, then mmm, you know" … So there are all kinds of signs about how we're mentally doing that aren't explicit; so I wanted Daphne to do that, and I could control that by controlling the music.

Q: Yes, the ways the experience unfolds, we find ourselves grasping her personality and mental state through different parts of Front—*through these oblique suggestions like the music and side references as well as by direct statements. So, there's a balance between the kinds of explorations the reader may do. I can wander around. I can look at her friends. I might eventually get to her Twitter feed and things like that, or engage with the chat window.*
DL: Yes, the chat is an intrusion in some ways. That was one of the interesting by-products of working with Jim who said, "you can't do some of the things you want to do." And, as a compromise we ended up having parts in a scripted linear structure. For example, Jim put it to me that "if you want chat to happen

at any point in someone's interaction, if you want it to be an open, time-based structure, then there are headaches to scripting that, but what we can do is trigger it at a certain point, and then it will happen at a set point." And I thought, "wow." So even though there's much more programming behind that project compared to other ones, it's in some ways more linear and more prescribed than any of my other pieces. But I was hoping to make the viewer ill-at-ease. If you see someone's chat window impossibly start up in something you are interacting with—well, it should be confusing, a disruptive tactic similar to *Front's* very first page when ghost-Daphne logs in. Hopefully you're going to feel that you're watching something out of time or something that's not quite right, or perhaps even question if Daphne isn't somewhere else in another room typing. Depending on your own literacy as a digital media user, you'll either understand this part of the project or you might just be really confused. So, the chats are kind of key to the narrative flow. And the language is slightly different, too. It's more time-based, whereas the texts in the feeds are kind of residual remains of something that you'll scroll and piece things together. Both are practices of Facebook or social media, and both demand different interpretations. I'd be interested in what viewers feel about of that.
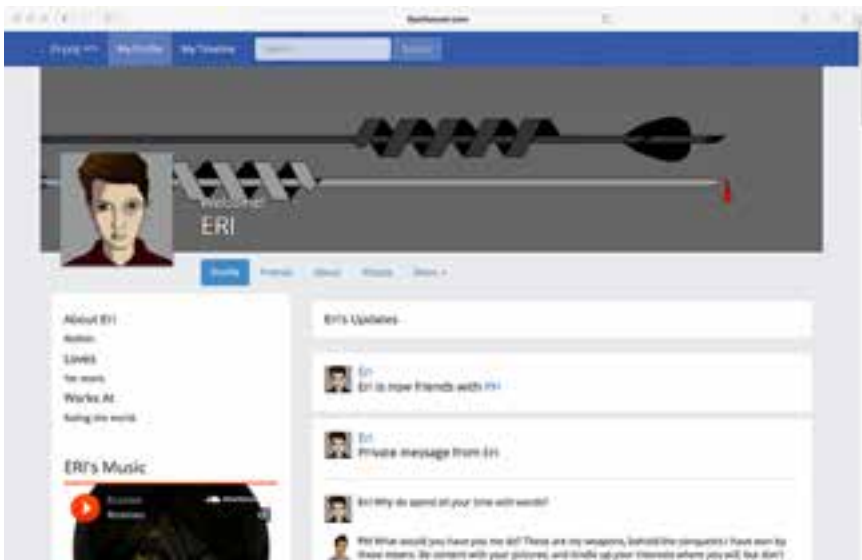
Figure 10.2 *Front* uses various social media mechanisms to establish Daphne's social community.

Q: I'm fascinated by the tension that you describe between the sense that there's part of it that I can just explore and wander in and then this other very linear aspect, which ends up with the transformation. How would it be different without the chat window if we were just left to explore and see, you know, who's there, what traces there are?

DL: The transformation in the original Daphne and Apollo story has her cry out to her deity father (the river god, Ladon) to save her from Apollo. She'd rather be transformed by her father than be caught by Apollo's (I guess Cupid's) lust. I also believe a conclusion, in this narrative context, is something important to give to this young audience in terms of playing with identity or playing with sexuality or image-based exposure. It isn't just a present tense loop. One can't do that endlessly. There is a "real" possibility of a next step, a kind of conclusion that would follow. Males or females will feel something and may want to act on that. These aren't passive viewing relationships. Well, her transformation has that kind of beginning, middle, and end—an end needs to happen at some point in the project. As the writer, I wanted to reverse engineer an exploration that, I would hope, is interesting and gives you a fuller sense of who she is or a very light sense—you could just read her really quickly, look at her pictures, scan the tone of her posts, and then you get to the end. Each gives you a different sense of who she is, whether you're more sympathetic or not, or whether you think she's familiar. At *Front's* original launch—a public opening in Edinburgh, quite a lot of people remarked that how Daphne poses and the whole "selfie world" referred to in the project felt familiar. Interestingly, these comments were from older users. It was the parents or grandparents saying that's the kind of visual, verbal language that was going on with their grandkids or their own kids, that Daphne was a kind of character they might know.

Q: The work, then, is also about time: how new media structures in general and databases structures in particular express conditions of time and the relation of time to human life in differing ways. Timelines, chat spaces, old posts, new entries all participate in a production of time and linger in strange ways as time goes on, or even, sometimes, after the author has passed away. Indeed, there is an odd kind of nostalgia in visiting the Facebook site of a person who has died but their Facebook profile remains.

DL: Yes, there's also the the nostalgia in reading or reviewing Facebook feeds. These images are traces of ourselves to revisit, to remind ourselves of who we once were, perhaps suggesting that we are not as comfortable with the present

tense. Nostalgia is also very much pushed at us. Facebook will show you two years ago, "here's what you did, would you like to share that with people?" to make everyone kind of recursive; it's like a loop back. *Front* is structured similarly. I'm interested in exploring Daphne's world, more her past. One could have endless vignettes of who she is or write a whole other franchise, the pre-history of Daphne.

Q: So, you would imagine expanding it?

DL: Yes, it's definitely set up to do that. It's set up to be added on really quite easily. I can kind of repopulate and build into these timelines. I think with Daphne, I would expand her in terms of the visual material. At the moment she has fairly static imagery, but they can be small loops. They can move. One of the original briefs was to have the sound and the lyrical content erode and decay as her mental health changes; it's there but it's fairly loose schematically, and it could be done more explicitly.

Q: And the tweets? She seems to live in the real world, at least from the tweets, and there's a lot of them.

DL: The initial proposal was just *Front*, this parody of Facebook, and then I thought, well, I'm showing my age, Facebook is kind of a questionable source for some young, hip people. They'll be tweeting or having all sorts of other accounts, multiple accounts for multiple dimensions of themselves, and she should really be on Twitter. I just felt it would be interesting to move to a more photographic set of references or a more vulnerable Daphne. So, in *Front* she's a fairly provocative, seems to be confident girl. In Twitter, there's a kind of mental health problem being put out "there." It's much more declared; there are more oblique references such as perhaps being hospitalized. There are also live mental health support links that people can access. Then the curator said well, how about we hashtag and have people encounter Daphne. They can fall upon Daphne's installations as she works out in the gallery context. All that can kind of mash in. People can see it's fiction, but at the same time, the issues are very real and pressing.

Q: Have people hashtagged in?

DL: Yes, they've started to do that a bit. But that aspect has not been pushed massively, partly because of having babies and my responsibilities as a full time academic. But *Front* could be placed into a much bigger installation that does ask people to co-create her in Twitter or entwine her feed with their own stories. I'm also very keen to try and take this out to the audience, to young adults to see

how they relate to my Facebook parody/Ovid's version of a boy meets girl story. Daphne could be compelled to do Tumblr or Snapchat.

Q: This suggests there are new and very different triggers in these media you are exploring which mirror other aspects of your storytelling. I am thinking of how you construct narratives in your earlier works in such a way that it allows for animated discoveries of things that are hidden. It seems that Facebook and Twitter are both parallel, but they have significant differences—the animated discoveries take on new forms.

DL: I guess what unites the works is my use of digital surprise or uncovering; this very simple idea that a close read (or look) will reward you with something is a device or tactic I play with in every project. I also think closely considering context (or history) is important in my projects, so when I lecture and teach design students about context and theory, one of my big interests is asking them upfront if there is, in today's re-blogged world, any value in "original" context and, if not, what does this do to narrative interpretation and reader assumptions? Even my early *Red Riding Hood* project is about trying to upturn some assumptions, very simply. I'm not alone as a female artist in wanting
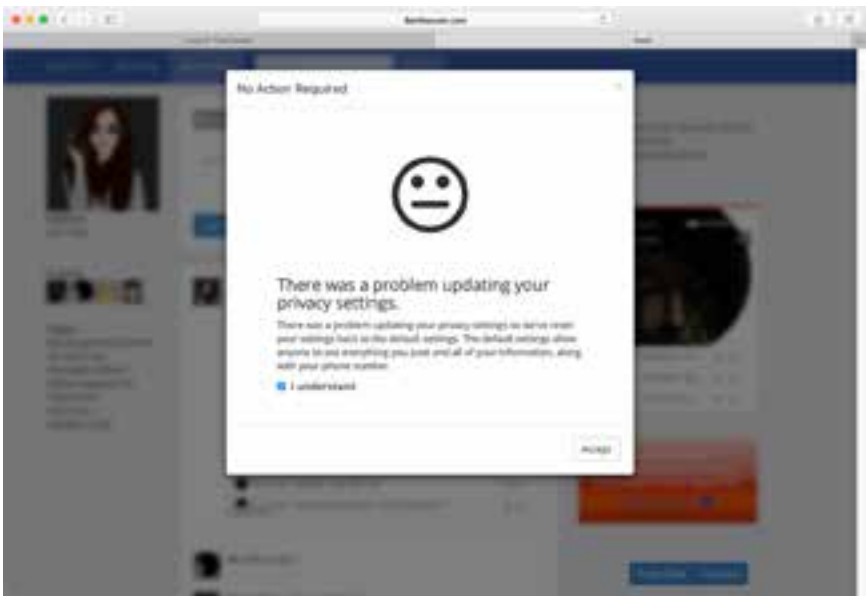
Figure 10.3 *Front* mimics social media including through its faux security walls and dead ends.

to do that, but I think the tools and techniques are shifting and perhaps my participating in social media now just makes me see the new equivalents and dangers. Like a fairy tale, it's the new forest, you know, like social media is like the new forest, which has safe paths, has formational paths in it, some of which are good for you, and some are dangerous ones.

Q: So, then you return, in this example, to fairy tales, and of course, we have Ovid here and these are very old stories, thousands of years old. Why use them? How could they be useful?

DL: I think, for me, there's this mutability between old and familiar. I mean, I thought Ovid is familiar enough—perhaps I'm pushing it, but someone, if they were interested, could easily dig out the beginners guide to *Metamorphoses*. They could think about other thematic versions based on this; they could easily find information, feel kind of rewarded, and think about why I was doing that.

Q: I get the sense that you see it as a kind of analysis and approach that is enduring. The stories are very succinct, and then you do have these transformations.

DL: Yes, and they're curious. A lot of it is very curious and fantastical, yet with easy acceptance of these codes or styles of characters that were constructed thousands of years ago. If published "now" they may not resonate at all, but Ovid and the like have set narratives on time-based journeys, which through the years have been interpreted and presented by different authors and artists.

Q: Let me ask maybe a stupid question, but why not just do it on Facebook? It sounds like an inordinate challenge designing Front *as a faux Facebook instead of using Facebook itself.*

DL: The commission curator proposed the same solution, basically, "Daphne could just have a Facebook page, couldn't she?" And, I was like "hmmm, she could." But some of the things I want to do will contravene perhaps Facebook's rules and regulations, and it would be shut down or it could change or fall out of their system. In short my creation would be overly limited. I also suggested that they could also see this as a parody that is a criticism and not be happy with it. There are a few media artists that have used and hacked Facebook in certain ways, who have had projects embargoed or banned. That would be kind of interesting for me to face, but … and then the curator (kindly considering the goals of Project Ginsberg) nipped the intentional Facebook provocation in the bud, "Okay, yes let's not say yes to something that's going to be litigious or constraining in that way." So, that and then knowing that I wanted to have that

kind of end point where she transforms and she protects herself—I couldn't code or control that on Facebook. Very simply I can't set a time-based event in Facebook. It would have to be much more displaced, open, you just find it by traveling through her Facebook world.

Q: That's a significant thing, I believe, about our interactions with Facebook, certainly as artists but I think in general … you know, so much of the control we have is ceded to the structure that Mark Zuckerburg gives us.
DL: Yes, and tinkers with and then uses for us.

Q: These themes of nostalgia, myth, longing, loss, and acts of searching for meaning among enigmatic signifiers run through most of your works, as well as a strong interest in female persona and identity. While the formats you have chosen may propel these stories in different directions, the visual choices, which are both playful and dark, also seem to echo these enduring themes and provide a continuity, even as the format seems to propel such themes in different directions. The visual character you use also echoes these themes and offers some degree of continuity.
DL: I suppose the projects, some of them, are more closely aligned to myself as an identity or character. You know, I've had a few heated discussions about whether I
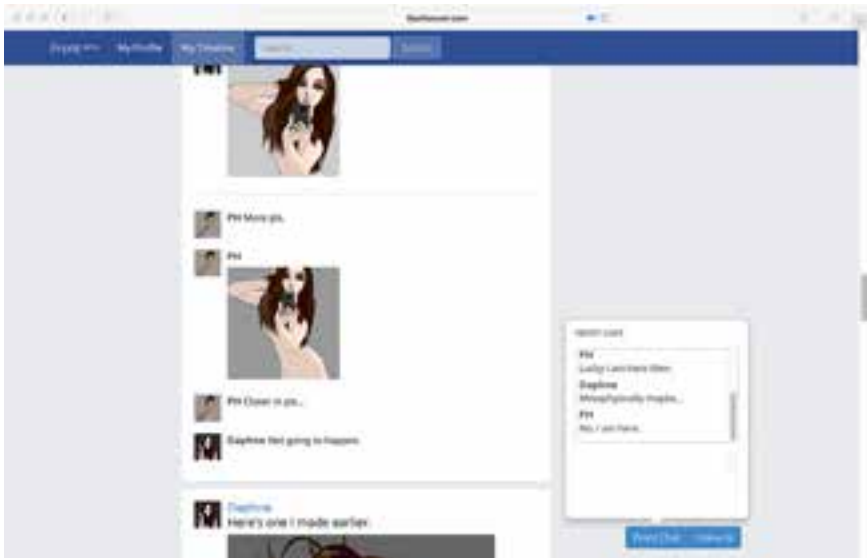
Figure 10.4 *Front* uses a variety of social media platforms including chat windows, and it combines text, imagery, and sound.

should put myself directly into them. Some people say, "Visually you seem familiar, as in you draw yourself literally." And I'm like, "I have never done that intentionally." I'm happy with the whole business of subconsciously inserting my experience into my works, but I think how that occurs in each work is different. Some projects are personal experiments. Some are commissioned, which changes the strength of my personal aesthetic quite significantly. I think that general tone, that slightly kind of downbeat tone, or whether it's out-and-out melancholia in everything I've done, is perhaps there because—you'll have to excuse this next part as I haven't really thought this through—female characterization has had so much problematic and/or dangerous characterization that I feel that whilst my characters aren't victims of, or perpetrating, mainstream female identities, and they're maybe not repressed, they are still and brooding, weighed down by gender politics. In Scotland you could say, "Still waters run deep." Here's just this massive ocean of problematic characterizations. I think people are attracted to that kind of content (melancholia) in the world. Not everybody is a shiny, happy person. So, it works both ways.

Q: Yet, there's sometimes, a real sweetness in these characters that look downright dead, and chopped up and garbed up, and in this case, connected with hospital beds and medicines that look like bombs and such …
DL: Yes, there's something in that I've not yet reflected on—and I don't normally work photographically– but I was quite interested in whom am I referencing, what do I pick when I don't draw it. Because it's totally different for me to pose Daphne's photographic twitter world—for example her hospital is a very famous Finnish, early modernist hospital that's now a design museum. It's not a real hospital, but in her feed there's real hospital food, and those massive pills like bombs are very much real for many. So it's bringing out something in me, collecting these photographic works and perhaps short video pieces as a new method because, as you say, I more often draw illustrations and animations. That's my safe territory.

Q: There's a real difference there, real photos of real things—real mushy peas and real people—next to your work.
DL: And, then, there's a diagram of the arrow, you know, we all know the metaphor … shot by Cupid.

Q: I'd like to talk about a different kind of loss, the one of technology. At the time of this conversation, your website 6amhoover *wasn't working on my cell phone and so many of your earlier works are in Flash, and you've written on the Flash community and on HTML 5. How do you approach this issue?*

DL: I think there's a whole set of technical insights I could really enjoy playing with. The kind of near end or death of Flash as a default plug-in and uncertainty around what Flash will be, and if or when it becomes obsolete is something I am really comfortable with, even if that's the end of my projects. I have no need to document them or re-pose them in some way so people can access them. It was a very particular kind of philosophy when I first made them. I thought if they have links and something technological happens, then that's how it was meant to be. So, curiously, I have no anxieties about people not picking them up on a phone or a tablet.

Q: Do you think this should be a job for a certain kind of archivist who might say, "Donna, can we archive your work?"
DL: They could, but I don't have pretentions to think that they will.

Q: Are there any questions that you wish people would ask and they never do?
DL: I mean, I'm interested in, I mean from your perspective, how I fit as a member of electronic literature. It's something that I never quite escape. I sometimes think I'm an interloper. I sometimes think I'm one of them by virtue of having a piece created at the turn of the millennium, a kind of old maid.

Q: That is very funny. In almost all interviews in this book, the sense "how do I fit?" within literary and artistic categories has come up in one way or another. Perhaps what has brought all the artists in this book together are not only their interests in interactive, nonlinear and database-driven work but also participation in a creatively diverse and interdisciplinary community. As we don't know yet what narrative might look like, expressed through emerging forms, I think we can start by saying yes, these are all creators of something we might call electronic literature—it's like we've taken a small subset and said okay, let's say these seven artists are electronic literature artists, then what? What is it they're doing? And how do the ways their works get interpreted in this context relate to how they are being read, viewed or used in other contexts and communities in which these artists or writers also participate. You've written on, and within, the Flash community, for example, right?
DL: Yes, but they were also very, in a way, post-conceptual. They didn't have the same kind of intellectual references. They were experimenters. They're a moving community who had a kind of identity that had an impact. It was very particular but that really moved. Love or hate it, I still feel there's a very particular kind of literary theory, kind of heart to a lot of this community, both a kind of sophistication and lack of it about different ways to express themselves.

Q: Among the facets of your work that have always fascinated me are your structures of storytelling. It is as if you're looking for a model of how things connect, the hidden, animated discovery of routes and paths. Your works move towards a spatial form of storytelling and then into socially constructed forms of storytelling. You're following what seems to be a sequence of transformations and how one gets from a semantic or iconic idea into its subsequent tropes, performances, and so forth. For me, that seems to be a common language, I guess, but I don't know if it will keep being so. That's curious actually: what is language in your work? Because a lot of it has no words. So, how do you actually get story?

DL: My stories are made with my own kind of language, my own grammar. This is true in *Deviant: The Possession of Christian Shaw, Red Riding Hood*, and *The Bloody Chamber*. They're still but there's animation, and there are things to find. There are ways to interact. So there's a kind of language in how you approach it. I haven't considered whether that carries with me into *Front*. It does in one way, a bit of scrolling and there are kind of quiet micro-movements, and then you get little layers—you know things come up in contrast, meanings become slightly sharper, as rewards. But, it's not as fixed. It's not as Flash-dependent. It's visually designed in the way that I was interested in.

Q: There's more writing in Front *than in any of your works. It's actually an adoption of the English language.*

DL: Yes, which had to happen. I mean, I—we really—I almost drew the Facebook interface and drew the letter forms and almost did it in pencil and had to make a visual kind of simulation by hand.

Q: Is that how you usually go about developing projects, by drawing them first?

DL: It is, and I did sort of do that again, reminding people that the text of *Front* is visual … I then thought about the women hours it would take to do that, given the project's complexity already, and thought, nope, I'm just going to have to deal with writing. So, I spent hours and hours and hours on lots of teenagers' feeds looking at their jargon and lexicons, looking at how they break down things to try and become part, you know textually, of their world.
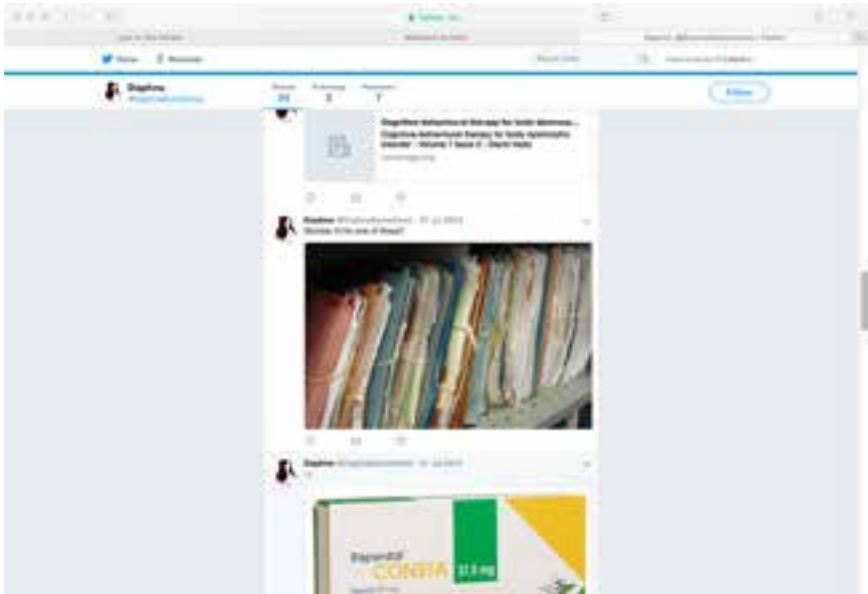
Figure 10.5 Beneath the surface of social media exchanges are narratives of longing, transformation, and illness.

Q: And that's interesting because you had a extensive research process, so this also is quite different from your other projects, perhaps.

DL: Yes, I also had to assimilate and look at a scary amount of selfies. And it's shocking how many people have open access to that world that boys and girls are using now, how familiar it is, how posed it is. But, that's another research project on its own.