INTERJECTING INTO INHERITED NARRATIVES

The Politics of Contemporary Music Making

and Creative Practice

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~ Abstract ~

This practice-led PhD attempts to engage with emerging discussions taking place within contemporary cultural discourse, and pays attention to the internet as a constructive discursive arena. The critical lens through which the research approaches these discussions is one broadly concerned with the lineages of modernism, postmodernism and potential post-postmodernisms (although it is tentative and critical in its understanding of these terms).

The practical portion of the submission comprises a portfolio of work created during the research period – increasingly concerned with shared language, repetition, creative efficiency and shifts in contemporary popular music – and culminates in the music and video works of the mild-pop endeavor *Competition*. The written portion of the submission discusses the political implications of creative practice and looks to situate historical and contemporary modes of production within their wider cultural contexts. In doing so, it considers a modernist perspective that can feel pervasive within an inherited discourse of music and art making, the problematic aspects of conceptual poetry, whiteness and (a lack of) self-awareness and/or critique, the phenomenology of a loss of self-evidence, social media and new forms of communication, the use of irony, 'senses of the end', the cultural value of contradiction and emerging discussions of metamodernism (amongst other things).

Finally, in honouring the form of practice-led research, the submission is positioned in such a way that hopes to collapse certain hierarchies within the dualism of practice and theory – the practice will seek to *explain* the writing as much as the writing will seek to *explain* the practice, they are to be experienced as one and the same.

I hope the words don't get in the way of what I mean

Kanye

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❍

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~ *Introduction* ~

❍ *if everybody's a musician and everybody's making mediocre music, eventually the world is just covered with mediocrity* ❍ *we may well be on the verge of a new dark age in cultural terms … where the creative world is destroyed and where all we have is cacophony and self-opinion, where we have a crisis of democratised culture* ❍ *there's too much technology available* ❍ [1]

Positioning itself in opposition to the scepticism of the collected quotes above, this practice-led PhD hopes to frame the contemporary cultural moment less as a dark age for creativity than a decentralising of cultural production – its practice and its criticism, its aesthetics and its politics. The initial impulse guiding the research is a relatively broad one: how might one respond to contemporary cultural discourse(s) when thinking about creative practice in the internet age? As the focus of the work (inevitably) narrows, a central concern comes to be about the ways individuals in the present engage with the past; and, from the outset, I would want to differentiate the submission's interest in "the present" from what Sadie Plant has called '[…] the petrified ahistoricism of the spectacle'. [2] As I hope to demonstrate, then, it seems to me that a commitment to contemporary discourse(s) also requires an attentiveness to the past, a (re)consideration of the ways in which collective histories have been constructed and cultural narratives have been established and/or inherited. In this regard, the submission explores a sense of *responsibility* to the present which resists problematic cultural discourses and attempts to honour the (complicated) reality of contemporary experience. [3]

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[1] Collected quotes from: Moby in David Dworsky, Victor Köhler, *PressPausePlay* (Sweden: House of Radon, 2011, 80 mins), 28:37; Andrew Keen in ibid, 29:05; Elton John quoted at Mike Masnick, 'Elton John Wants The Internet Shut Down For Five Years... For The Sake Of The Music', *Techdirt*, 2007. https://www.techdirt.com/articles/20070802/011353.shtml (28th August, 2017).

[2] Sadie Plant, 'The Situationist International: A Case of Spectacular Neglect' in Stuart Home (ed), *What Is Situationism: A Reader* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1996), 153 to 172 (168). 'The spectacle', here, refers to Guy Debord's use of the term to describe modernist capitalist society, one's mediated experiences within it and the realities of a culture governed by the logic of commodity exchange. See: Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983). And also: Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[3] Related to this observation, and worth acknowledging prior to outlining the thesis' chapters: although the practice submitted here is predominantly music-based, the scope of the research looks beyond music making to think about creative practice in the broadest sense.

The written portion of the submission begins with a prologue. A case study of sorts, the section focusses on Kenneth Goldsmith, uncreative writing and conceptual poetry. Goldsmith seems to offer a particularly extreme response to the "question" of making art in the internet age: in the face of a 'thicket of information', the poet advocates a practice of *not* creating at all, arguing 'the world is full of texts […] I do not wish to add anymore'.[4] Thinking about the **bold**ness of Goldsmith's position, and considering the political implications of creative practice more broadly, this opening section scrutinises the blind spots of a white euro-centric (modernist) approach to cultural production that can often feel pervasive within (inherited) discourses of music and art making, and hopes to present the shortcomings of any critical position or creative discipline which displays a (misguided) assurance in the universality of (its own) experience. Positioned as a prologue, this discussion and the tensions it uncovers hope to underpin (and/or haunt) the thesis' subsequent chapters.

Chapter one begins by considering the friction between modernism's imperative to *erase the traces!* and the contemporary reality of the internet and its archive. Echoing the prologue in observing the outdatedness of a modernist perspective, the chapter goes on to think about alternative markers of value and ways of engaging with contemporary cultural discourse and production. Delving into social media and the internet, this section pays attention to (critical) conversations as they are taking place online, and thinks about the significance of emerging forms of communication and moments of shared*ness*. The chapter also acknowledges the slippery politics of online interactions and hopes to find its way through this environment to frame paradox and contradiction as constitutive to contemporary experience. And as well, it is worth noting (in relation to the wider concerns of the submission) that the internet – as both encyclopaedic resource and inexhaustible archive – feels crucial to the ongoing re-assessment of narratives of the past in the present.

The thesis' second chapter finds, within emerging discourse(s) of *metamodernism*, a useful language (or set of discursive tools) with which to begin working through experiences of contemporary contradiction and paradox. The chapter begins with a necessary discussion of postmodernism and Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' before exploring a metamodern sensibility in relation to a discernible shift in cultural production that seems to have taken place around the early 2000s. With a historical perspective, intuitively aware of both modern and postmodern rhetoric, metamodernism might be understood as a contemporary mode of engagement which negotiates and/or oscillates between those two positions – as such, it feels a fitting point of discussion within a submission that (again) hopes to explore critical ways of responding to the past from within the present.

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[4] Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 1.

Finally, chapter three is solely dedicated to situating creative practice – specifically my own work and the non-written portion of the submission – within the critical perspectives established in the preceding chapters of the thesis. And yet, I want to note: my intention with the submission (as a whole) is to tentatively begin collapsing hierarchies between practice and theory – to gesture towards a space in which the practice might *explain* the writing as much as the writing *explains* the practice, and where the *meaning* of the research (again, as a whole) is encountered somewhere between its two component parts.

Delineated into writing and practice, and then into individual chapters and/or projects, yet inevitably (and welcomingly) intersecting and interweaving, this submission might be understood to document my re-thinking and re-imagining of creative practice as it has evolved over the last few years.

Prior to beginning the thesis proper, I would like to make a handful of (gentle) disclaimers. Firstly, the literary world of *auto-theory* has felt instructive in creating spaces for a personal approach to criticism and critical writing. Rooted in queer theory and feminist writing, auto-theory might be understood as a writing practice which inserts a writer's personal experience into the arena of criticism, using the self as 'an ethnographic source' – as the writer Maggie Nelson has suggested. [5] KC Clements observes that '[auto-theory] takes emotion as its own unique and valid site of knowledge. it honors the ways in which the "multiple and shifting" contexts of real life can unravel even our seemingly strongest theories.' [6] In Nelson's book *The Argonauts*, the writer's (memoir-like) accounts of pregnancy – occurring alongside the bodily transformations of her genderqueer partner injecting testosterone and undergoing top surgery – merge and give way to observations and re-assessments of critical theory; of Sedgwick, Wittgenstein, Freud, Butler, Deleuze, Irigaray or Lacan. [7] The writer describes the book as '[her] re-visitation of about twenty years of thinking about gender and sexuality', and interviewer Michael Silverblatt suggests that, in the book, 'theory is being put to the test against life experience' – this latter observation perhaps a working definition of auto-theory itself. [8] As well, I think about the second half of Chris Kraus' *I Love Dick* which is presented as a collection of personal essays and/or pieces of art criticism that, in and of themselves, represent a discernible narrative arc for the book's narrator. [9] And yet, while the thesis is **not** a work of auto-theory, I have allowed myself to think about it *as if* it were – an understanding of criticism's

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[5] Maggie Nelson understands the writer Beatriz Preciado's use of *autotheory* as '[…] probably stemming from feminism in the '70s, [as] a kind of shorthand for theoretical inquiry that uses the self as some kind of ethnography, an ethnographic source.' Jennifer Doerr, 'Making Space Around The Beloved', *The Brooklyn Quarterly*, 2015. http://brooklynquarterly.org/making-space-around-the-beloved/ (9th August, 2017).

[6] KC Clements, 'the academy, autotheory, and the argonauts', *aminotfemme*, 2016. https://aminotfemme.wordpress.com/2016/04/22/the-academy-autotheory-and-the-argonauts/ (9th August, 2017).

[7] Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (London: Melville House, 2015).

[8] 'Maggie Nelson: The Argonauts' *KCRW Bookworm* (2015), 8:43, 9:30 respectively. (10th August, 2017). And as noted, this submission might be understood as a document of my own 're-visitation' of creative practice (to use Nelson's words).

[9] Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2013).

ability to 'test' theory against lived experience, of the self as 'ethnographic source' and of 'emotion as its own unique and valid site of knowledge', each proving influential in allowing experience and intuition to shape the research and its working practices.

(Gentle) disclaimer two: in terms of the submission's commitment to contemporaneity, I think a lot about Kanye and his insistence, 'I only listen to people who are younger than me'. [10] Beyond displaying an eagerness to work with younger generations, I would suggest this statement also represents a certain attentiveness to the world *as it exists* and a willingness to reassess one's place within it. It implies a readiness to rethink pre-established framework(s) of value, and an approach to contemporary conversations which moves beyond the unhelpful stubbornness of any old vs. new dichotomies. And – for an artist routinely portrayed as narcissistic – it also suggests a disposition which might (ultimately) accept, *maybe I don't know best*. My understanding of Kanye's statement, then, is as much about a scepticism towards inherited narratives as it is about an openness to the ideas of younger generations. As such, 'I only listen to people who are younger than me' feels woven into the fabric of the submission in a lot of ways. For example: in paying attention to criticism as it exists online (on Twitter, on podcasts, or on YouTube), the thesis hopes to actively acknowledge the wealth of critical insights emerging within spaces traditionally not recognised as "academic" and provided by individuals nominally outside of the institution of academia and its framework(s) of value.

Lastly, foreshadowing discussions of smallness, discomfort and contradiction which appear later in the writing, I would like to end this introduction with a(nother) quote from Maggie Nelson. In the introduction to her essay collection *The Art of Cruelty*, Nelson cites Roland Barthes – 'What I am looking for . . . is an introduction to living, a guide to life (ethical project): I want to live according to nuance' – before going on to write,

[*The Art of Cruelty*] does not shrink from expressing strong opinions, from "taking sides," when it feels the need to do so. But at the end of the day, its greater aspiration is Barthes's: to live according to nuance. By definition, there is no master sketch for what such a thing might look like. It can only be an experiment. [11]

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[10] Herbert Lui (ed), *The World According to Kanye* (2015), 211. Ezra Koenig also quotes the phrase in a podcast with Ayesha Siddiqi: 'Vol. 1: No Joke', *Pushing Hoops with Sticks* (2015), 56:33. (3rd August, 2017).

[11] Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2011), 13, 14 respectively. Throughout the thesis extended quotes will appear as they do here. The shade of pink is the same colour used in the *competition* video included as part of the practice-based component of the submission; hoping to begin (subtly) making connections and collapsing the distance between the writing and the practice.

As I hope will become clear, this framing of one's approach to criticism – as well as Barthes' commitment to *nuance* – resonates with the discursive position I hope to retain over the course of this thesis (and the submission as a whole).

❍

~ Prologue ~

Thinking about the narratives of KENNIE G AND HIS CREW

In contemporary poetry, online interactions and the visual language(s) of the internet quickly established themselves as fertile ground for writing practices – *flarf* reimagined Google search results as raw poetic material, and *alt-lit* and/or *internet poetry* communities seized upon new forms of communication within web 2.0 to publish poetry online; using 'guerilla tactics on the internet' through screenshots, image macros, Twitter accounts or Wiki entries. [1] The writer Charles Walley ends a 2015 essay by observing, 'We are almost in a future where to talk about poetry "influenced by the digital age" is as redundant as talking about poetry 'influenced by print.'' [2] The discourse surrounding contemporary poetry, then, might be understood to be ahead of other disciplines when it comes to thinking about art that engages with the internet.

With this in mind, I want to begin by focusing on Kenneth Goldsmith and his practice of uncreative writing. Thinking through aspects of Goldsmith's work has proved formative to my critical perspectives during the PhD and I hope to use him as something of a case study here to discuss the political implications of creative practice. The definition of politics that I find most useful here (as ever) is this one, from the opening lyrics of 'Half of Two Times Two (Newer Version)' by Barr:

And it's political
And politics is not necessarily just guerilla fighters, prime ministers
And who cheated in the primaries
It's also who am I in relation to you
Who are we in the way we can see ourselves
In relation to the other kids
The ones in the magazines, and the ones who miss out on stuff [3]

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[1] Internet Poetry, 'Doctrine', *Internet Poetry*, 2011. http://internetpoetry.tumblr.com/doctrine. (18th August, 2017).
[2] Charles Walley, 'I Love Roses When They're Past Their Best, ed. Harry Burke', *post-internet poetry*, 2014. http://postinternetpoetry.tumblr.com/post/92070261421/i-love-roses-when-theyre-past-their-best-ed. (3rd August, 2017).
[3] Barr, 'Half of Two Times Two (Newer Version)', *Summary* (Upset The Rhythm, 2007).

Building upon this personal approach to politics, in writing about Goldsmith and his work I hope to articulate the importance of a self-reflective approach to one's own critical perspectives in practice and criticism. While at first glance Goldsmith offers a novel response to art making in the internet age, by delving into the politics of his position one might get a better sense of the realities of contemporary cultural discourse(s). And by picking apart themes in Goldsmith's work I hope to arrive at a tension that will guide the rest of the thesis: how might one begin to unbind themselves from the cultural discourses and narratives they inherit, as opposed to replicating historically established power dynamics albeit in a new form?

❍

Kenneth Goldsmith, conceptual poetry and uncreative writing

Kenneth Goldsmith is a conceptual poet, and he is at once engaging and totally problematic. As a conceptual poet, he is part of a discipline which acknowledges that the books they create do not need to be read, in a traditional sense.[4] A work such as Goldsmith's *Day* – in which he transcribes a copy of the *New York Times* word for word – is a prime example of the practice and, of the piece, Goldsmith writes,

> On Friday, September 1, 2001, I began retyping the day's *New York Times*, word for word, letter for letter, from the upper left hand corner to the lower right hand corner, page by page. […] Every place where there was an alphanumeric word or letter, I retyped it: advertising, movie timetables, the numbers of a license plate on a car ad, the classifieds, and so forth. The stock quotes alone ran for more than two hundred pages.[5]

For a reader, then, this is a very different literary experience; concerned not with narrative, emotion, drama, character or subtext. Instead the work seems to be concerned with asking questions of literature and/or poetry itself. A work such as *Day* might make one think about the literary value of everyday language, it might force one to consider the physical labour of writing or the movable (sculptural) nature of words and language as objects. It might also make one aware of unspoken rules for writing that shape one's expectations and experiences, now that one has seen those guiding principles treated with such irreverence. And it might become apparent that such thoughts are able

[4] In an interview with the poets.org website, Goldsmith claimed: 'The best thing about conceptual poetry is that it doesn't need to be read'. Kenneth Goldsmith, 'Against Expression: Kenneth Goldsmith in Conversation', *poets.org*, 2011. https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/against-expression-kenneth-goldsmith-conversation. (31st August, 2017).
[5] Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 118; Kenneth Goldsmith, *Day* (USA: The Figures, 2003).

to surface out of the void, as it were, as a direct result of the omission of characters, plot and drama. Conceptual poetry, then, perhaps repositions (and/or loosens up) one's understanding of more traditional reading experiences. And indeed Goldsmith has suggested that, within conceptual poetry, writers '[…] move from assuming a readership to embracing a *thinkership*.' [6]

Goldsmith lays out his approach to this practice in the book *Uncreative Writing*. His argument is that by embracing the very things that (traditional) creativity has historically frowned upon – plagiarism, copy-and-pasting, insincerity, in-authenticity – writers might inject and reinvest the creative process with a sense of urgency. Alongside making this point, in interviews, Goldsmith has been known to proclaim: 'I am in love with creativity, I just don't like what it's become'. [7] *Uncreative Writing* contends that writers can make profound statements by tapping into the potential of pre-existing language; for example, by reframing language from non-poetic spaces and presenting it as poetry, repositioning an audience's reading and transforming their understanding of the text. One example cited in *Uncreative Writing* is Claude Closky's 'My Refrigerator': a piece in which the writer and artist takes the advertising copy of his household refrigerator, substitutes the 'you' or 'yours' in the original text for 'me' or 'my', and (re)presents it as poetry.

My Refrigerator

The usable volume of my refrigerator is far superior to conventional capacities, and allows me to store my fresh and frozen products. The meat compartment with adjustable temperature and the crisper with humidity control assure me a perfect preservation of my food. Furthermore, the fan-cooling makes and dispenses my ice to me as well as fresh water. Moreover, my refrigerator is equipped with an antibacterial coating that helps me maintain it. [8]

Here, however, Goldsmith would argue Closky has been too active (too *creative*) in his substitutions of 'you' and 'yours'. In his own work, Goldsmith vows never to add or replace a single word, such is his conviction in the power of simply 'moving information'. [9] Indeed, Goldsmith teaches uncreative writing as a university module in which students are *required* to plagiarise and are punished for demonstrating traces of (traditional) creativity. His contention, then, is that it quickly becomes apparent that one cannot help but be creative – the things one chooses to steal, how one does so and all the choices one makes along the way are each inherently personal and creative. Goldsmith details the many "creative" decisions he was required to make in the process of creating

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[6] Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*, 100.
[7] Louisiana Channel, 'Kenneth Goldsmith Interview: Assume No Readership', 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAJRQJGc7DU, 11:20. (3rd August, 2017).
[8] Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*, 90.
[9] Marjorie Perloff coined the phrase *moving information* to, as Goldsmith describes, 'signify both the act of pushing language around as well as the act of being emotionally moved by that process'. *Uncreative Writing*, 1.

Day – '[…] what to do with the font, font sizes, and formatting?' '[…] where do I go when I reach the end of a column and it says "continued on page 26"?' 'What paper stock will the book be printed on?' 'What will the cover look like?' – citing these as the moments that might 'distinguish my writing from yours'. [10] This last phrase comes from the opening paragraph of *Uncreative Writing*, which reads:

In 1969 the conceptual artist Douglas Huebler wrote, 'The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more.' I've come to embrace Huebler's idea, though it might be retooled as 'The world is full of texts, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more.' It seems an appropriate response to a new condition in writing: faced with an unprecedented amount of available text, the problem is not needing to write more of it; instead, we must learn to negotiate the vast quantity that exists. How I make my way through this thicket of information—how I manage it, parse it, organize and distribute it—is what distinguishes my writing from yours.[11]

Goldsmith writes with a flair that can be engaging and, in the passage above, the description of 'an unprecedented amount of available text' or a 'thicket of information' (of course) resonates with anyone who has spent time on: The Internet. And yet, in spending time online, one also finds responses to Goldsmith that are more skeptical.

Punching up, punching down

Harry Burke, editor of the poetry collection *I Love Roses When They're Past Their Best*, quotes poet Sophie Collins discussing a Goldsmith-ian approach to writing in an interview with *The Quietus*,

[…] the notion of excess language as a kind of ~fascinating textual junkspace~, indeed, the notion of the existence of any 'waste language' at all only functions for those individuals occupying positions of relative privilege within a hegemonic discourse— those whose demographics have had the opportunity to publicly record their thoughts. [12]

It is worth acknowledging, then, the social context from which these dismissals of traditional writing practices emerge. Kenneth Goldsmith is a white cisgender man, a baby boomer who is embedded in the traditions of 20th century European-American avant-garde art, who graduated in 1984 and operated in the art world for over 25 years before publishing *Uncreative Writing* in 2011. He has travelled the world giving readings and workshops as a professional artist, has performed his

[10] ibid, 118 to 120.
[11] ibid, 1.
[12] Sam Riviere, 'I Love Roses When They're Past Their Best: Harry Burke Interviewed', *The Quietus*, 2014. http://thequietus.com/articles/15408-i-love-roses-when-theyre-past-their-best-harry-burke-interview. (3rd August, 2017).

poetry at The White House for Barack and Michelle Obama, he lectures at the University of Pennsylvania and is the author of multiple books of poetry and criticism. It may be a little crude to lay this out here, but this cultural status is an active element of discussions in which his uncreative rhetoric engages a wide cultural discourse, affecting and informing the approaches of others. It is worth considering, then, that while "Kenneth Goldsmith" may not feel the need to produce texts, what about those not in his economically secure and historically privileged position? This is the point to which Sophie Collins seemingly alludes in the quote above. It is important to recognise that the claims of conceptual poetry are tied up in a socio-cultural demographic for whom historically one's books have always been read, one's voice has always been heard and one's text, language and experiences have always been documented; a demographic for whom certain opportunities have always existed.

As mentioned, one does not have to look too far to find critiques of conceptual poetry. The Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo is an anonymous critical voice established explicitly to attack the politics of white-centric poetic practices, and it is telling that they zeroed in on Goldsmith (and fellow conceptualists such as Vanessa Place) with a sense of urgency. In addressing the levels of privilege which inform Goldsmith's position, maybe they put it best,

KENNIE G AND HIS CREW CIRCULATE THE IDEA THAT WE DON'T NEED TO WRITE OR READ (CUZ WHITE CISHET MALE NARRATIVES HAVE EXHAUSTED ITSELF, SCREW ALL NARRATIVES THAT RESIST AND DREAM OTHERWISE), ALSO SCREW CITATIONS (PATCH FUCKEN WORK!) EVERYTHING BELONGS TO THE WHITE MALE ACADEMIC AND THEIR ANOINTIES INCLUDING IDENTITIES DON'T YOU DARE SUGGEST OTHERWISE [13]

Indeed. The Mongrel Coalition, elsewhere, refer to conceptual poetry as 'discoursed-out' which feels very fitting, and also as 'appropriation-ready'. [14] And the tactics of appropriation encouraged by conceptual poetry and uncreative writing are entangled with (and emblematic of) similar issues of privilege. The strength of appropriative art often lies in its inventive mangling of traditional power dynamics – for example, taking a record originally recorded by The Shadows and uncovering in it a latent potential to make people dance and create communities in the South Bronx. [15]

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[13] The Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo, 'THE MONGREL COALITION AGAINST GRINGPO RESPONDS TO THE LINKS BETWEEN CONCEPTUAL ART AND CONCEPTUAL POETRY', *Montevidayo*, 2015. http://montevidayo.com/2015/01/the-mongrel-coalition-against-gringpo-responds-to-the-links-between-conceptual-art-and-conceptual-poetry/. (3rd August, 2017).

[14] Molly McArdle, '"I Arrived at the Revolution Via Poetry": An Interview with the Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo', *Brooklyn*, 2015. http://www.bkmag.com/2015/07/22/i-arrived-at-the-revolution-via-poetry-an-interview-with-the-mongrel-coalition-against-gringpo/. (3rd August, 2017).

[15] I am here alluding to early hip hop and its use of the Incredible Bongo Band's cover of The Shadows' 'Apache', I will discuss this further in a moment. Incredible Bongo Band, 'Apache', *Bongo Rock* (MGM Records, 1973).

Appropriative art practices, then, feel inherently political and are often most effective when these gestures (in terms of politics) "punch up" as opposed to "punching down" – a notion which has to do with the direction of power in a given situation. For instance, thinking about the beginnings of hip-hop (covertly) referred to above: with federal funding cut to cities across the U.S., young people in New York's South Bronx appropriated consumer technologies – records and turntables – and repurposed them as instruments. [16] DJs would host parties for their communities in local neighborhoods, (illegally) rerouting electricity from streetlamps to run their sound systems; literally taking power from the city. As a historically disempowered community subverted the authority of economic policy as well as the dominant entertainment culture, and reinventing the potential of their surroundings in the process, this seems an explicit example of an appropriative art practice that punched **up** at those in positions of power. In contrast, thinking about an artist such as Richard Prince, one might observe examples of appropriative art in which things are less clear. Prince's career has been built upon the re-photographing of images – notably his *Cowboys* series, appropriating the images of advertising campaigns for Marlboro cigarettes. [17] The Met Museum describes one work in this series as '[…] a high point of the artist's ongoing deconstruction of an American archetype […]', and a critical narrative evolves around the work's critique of the tobacco industry, the mythology of American masculinity and the ubiquity of advertising and its imagery. [18] This reading, however, feels dependent upon Prince's position as a low-status figure rallying against (or, punching up at) the big corporations of tobacco and/or advertising. Such an interpretation might be complicated if one considers Prince's reputation as 'one of the most revered artists of his generation', particularly when a piece from his *Cowboys* series is sold for over $1 million, (re)contextualizing the work (and Prince himself) within the high-status institution of the art world. [19]

And before returning to Goldsmith, it should be noted that punching up or down is not limited to appropriative art, the notion applies to any social situation built upon a set of power relations (so, any social situation). I think a lot about the Kanye performance at Glastonbury in 2015, which provided a fascinating clusterfuck of power dynamics that might be worth attempting to untangle in relation to this discussion. In the lead up to the festival, a petition was created that urged festival

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[16] Accounts of this cultural moment can be observed in documentaries such as: *Hip-Hop Evolution* TV mini-series, 'Ep 1: The Foundation' (Netflix, 2016, 48 mins).

[17] Available to view, with accompanying essay, in: Rosetta Brooks, 'Spiritual America: No Holds Barred' in Lisa Philips (ed), *Richard Prince* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 85 to 103.

[18] 'Untitled (cowboy)', *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, (unknown date). http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2000.272/. (3rd August, 2017).

[19] Prince is described as 'one of the most revered artists of his generation' in: Randy Kennedy, 'Richard Prince, Protesting Trump, Returns Art Payment', *The New York Times*, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/12/arts/design/richard-prince-protesting-trump-returns-art-payment.html. (3rd August, 2017).

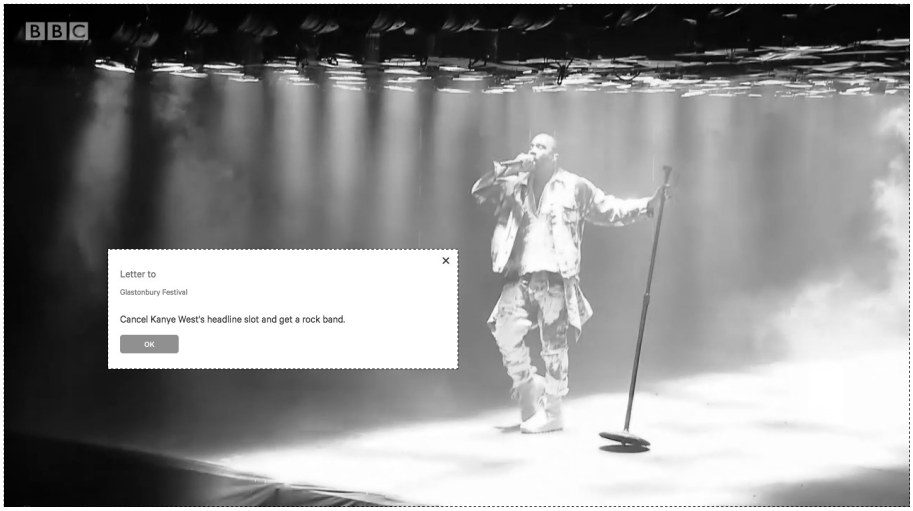

Fig. 0.1 Kanye West performing at Glastonbury 2015, and (inset) letter accompanying change.org petition

organisers to 'Cancel Kanye West's headline slot and get a rock band instead'. [20] The set went ahead, but the petition received over 100,000 signatures. In the minds of those objectors, Kanye's wealth and celebrity may afford him a certain cultural status, and his position as festival headliner evokes a weighted binary (artist > audience) placing him in a position of power. And yet, if one thinks in terms of race, what might have previously been understood as acts of punching up at West through his wealth and celebrity is perhaps transformed into the uncomfortable punching down of a black artist by a predominantly white majority. An especially uncomfortable moment occurred during the performance when a British comedian invaded the stage, mock-rapping and halting the set just as it was building momentum. [21] The comedian (of course) thought it was a funny gesture but outside of the obvious lack of respect (which is itself telling), in the context of race and power, he (and those other objectors) comes off as naive and/or conservative at best, and explicitly racist at worst. The failure to acknowledge race, then, seems indicative of a *colour-blind* rhetoric which, in the act of treating everyone equally as "people", unfortunately '[...] makes it all too easy for white liberals to deny the existence of white power and privilege in their perception of a common humanity […]', as professor John Fiske has noted. [22]

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[20] Neil Lonsdale, 'Cancel Kanye West's headline slot and get a rock band', *Change*.org, 2015. https://www.change.org/p/glastonbury-festival-cancel-kanye-west-s-headline-slot-and-get-a-rock-band. (3rd August, 2017).

[21] The stage invasion is reported at: Josh Halliday, 'I disrupted Kanye West's Glastonbury set for Taylor Swift, says Lee Nelson', *Guardian*, 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jun/28/kanye-west-glastonbury-gig-interrupted-lee-nelson-stage-invasion. (8th August, 2017). Here I think about this tweet: Steven Andrais, 'white people will forget slavery before they forget that Kanye interrupted Taylor Swift.', *Twitter*, 2013. https://twitter.com/StevenAndrais/status/383476543340548096. (3rd August, 2017).

[22] John Fiske, *Media matters: Everyday culture and political change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) 48.

Here we might return to the Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo and further understand the wider cultural urgency of their insistence on foregrounding race in their critique of conceptual poetry. The term *gringpo* is itself a gesture that connects conceptual poetry (via its portmanteau, *conpo*) with the colonial connotations of the word *gringo* – a word first used to describe U.S. soldiers who invaded Mexico in the mid 19th century, claiming its territory and resources, which later established itself in Mexico (and other Spanish/Portuguese-speaking countries) as a term to describe foreign people, most commonly white Americans. Now, this feels uncomfortably close to racism in the context of what Marie Thompson has called 'the "common sense" of liberalism' which – embedded in the logic of its own colour-blind rhetoric – equates any mention of difference with purposeful acts of racism. [23] The distinction to be made (I think) is that the term is used in this instance by the disempowered to name their oppressor, refusing to let historical (and present day) acts of racially motivated oppression be written out of history. The use of racialised language, then, is one thing for the historically oppressed and another for the oppressors. Similarly, in self-identifying as *mongrels*, the Mongrel Coalition enact, what Dean Kritikos calls, 'a tongue-in-cheek performance of Nativism/primitivism' that inverts the term's derogatory assertion of top-down power, forcing one to reckon with difficult questions regarding racialised language and its historicised narratives. [24] And, in an act of fittingly irreverent appropriation, the Mongrel Coalition unflinchingly redefine the word itself: '*mongrel*: a cannibal bent on eating the ice-wormy hearts of gringpos under the post-mercury retrograde full moon'. [25] I feel it is worth noting also that within the four constituent words of its name, the Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo engender a critical space that scrutinises the inherent politics of language and usage, and that refuses to allow the erasure of race from cultural discourse.

Kenneth Goldsmith has typically shied away from discussions of privilege and the political implications of his practice (as the subsequent sections of this chapter will seek to demonstrate). And while he acknowledges appropriation in *Uncreative Writing*, his focus tends to be on intellectualizing work by the likes of Duchamp or Warhol, or on using the subject as a lens through which to critique the traditional "creative" values of poetry and literature he sees as restrictive to the future of writing. It is telling, though, that he is unable (or perhaps unwilling) to spend any considerable time on the potentially problematic aspects of an appropriative art practice, not least

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[23] Marie Thompson, 'The Discomfort of Space', *Society and Space*, 2017. http://societyandspace.org/2017/02/14/the-discomfort-of-safety/. (3rd August, 2017). Also: Patricia Hill Collins offers the following definition of 'rhetoric of color-blindness' in the glossary of her book, *Black Feminist Thought*: 'a view of the world that resists talking of race because to do so is believed to perpetuate racism'. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 300.

[24] Dean Kritikos, 'The Mongrel Coalition and MascPo: Interrupting White Supremacy while Maintaining Masculine Hegemony', *Lehigh Valley Vanguard*, 2015. https://www.lehighvalleyvanguard.org/single-post/2015/07/04/The-Mongrel-Coalition-and-MascPo-Interrupting-White-Supremacy-while-Maintaining-Masculine-Hegemony. (3rd August, 2017).

[25] Molly McArdle, '"I Arrived at the Revolution Via Poetry": An Interview with the Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo', *Brooklyn*, 2015.

his own. And that is (I think) one of the lasting impressions one has from reading (or listening to) Goldsmith: for all the wry jokes and punch lines, one is ultimately faced with a steady stream of affirmations of 'KENNIE G AND HIS CREW', with no real self-reflection or critical interrogation of the practice of conceptual poetry nor uncreative writing itself. The disciplines are presented as finished and perfected, impenetrable, unreflective and cut off from the world around them. And in the face of completely just criticisms, particularly regarding questions of race that Goldsmith and others choose to ignore, this all becomes a little uneasy.

The Body of Michael Brown

The various criticisms of Goldsmith seemed to come to a head in a poetry reading in March 2015. As part of a weekend long arts conference, Goldsmith took to the stage at Brown University to read a new conceptual poem of his titled 'The Body of Michael Brown'. [26] The content of the poem was a transcription of Michael Brown's autopsy report. Brown was the unarmed black teenager shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri in August of 2014. This incident led to months of protest and civil unrest across the U.S., it also proved a pivotal moment in the rise in visibility of #BlackLivesMatter – a social movement committed to addressing systematic issues of racism in America and creating platforms for discussion(s) in increasingly visible public spheres.

Goldsmith's piece rightly copped a lot of criticism. Poet Kima Jones wrote on Twitter, 'Forget it bc Kenneth Goldsmith did a thing...made a thing...for a crowd..out of a black boy's dead body...he performed...and was paid well.' [27] And echoing this sentiment in longer form, the writer P.E. Garcia observes,

> Simply put, for Kenneth Goldsmith to stand on stage, and not be aware that his body–his white male body, a body that is a symbol loaded with a history of oppression, of literal dominance and ownership of black bodies–is a part of the performance, then he has failed to notice something drastically important about the "contextualization" of this work. […] If, as he says, we are to look at this as conceptual art–if we are to believe the audience is in charge of this interpretation–then Goldsmith should accept the context of his performance. He should accept the pain his audience felt. He should accept that we might look at him and only see another white man holding the corpse of a black child saying, "Look at what I've made." [28]

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[26] Priscilla Frank, 'What Happened When A White Male Poet Read Michael Brown's Autopsy As Poetry', *HuffPost*, 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/17/kenneth-goldsmith-michael-brown_n_6880996.html. (3rd August, 2017).

[27] Kima Jones, 'Forget it bc […]', *Twitter*, 2015. https://twitter.com/kima_jones/status/577172575903571968. (3rd August, 2017).

[28] P.E. Garcia, 'The Body of Kenneth Goldsmith', *Queen Mob's Tea House*, 2015. http://queenmobs.com/2015/03/the-body-of-kenneth-goldsmith/. (3rd August, 2017).

The political implications of this act of appropriation seem clear: the autopsy report of a black man shot by a police officer is not Goldsmith's text to use. And it is very difficult to make a case otherwise. In the days following the reading, Goldsmith responded with a Facebook post claiming the piece was 'in the tradition of [his] previous book Seven American Deaths and Disasters' (Fig. 0.2). In this book, Goldsmith transcribed the real-time news coverage of seven national tragedies – the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy and John Lennon, the Challenger Space Shuttle explosion, the Columbine massacre, 9/11 and the death of Michael Jackson. [29] Describing the idea behind the book, Goldsmith has said,

I wanted to hear, what are the words we use to describe something we never thought we'd have to describe in the moment. Radio and television is very canned most of the time, but here people were really improvising, flying by the seat of their pants, trying to find the words to describe what was happening before them. [30]

The ethics of such a work is, as so often is the case with Goldsmith, debatable. However, this quote demonstrates a level of artistic rigor. There is a logic to the work and, as a piece of poetry, it might be understood to uncover something of the human experience – in its examining of responses to tragedy, or in capturing the struggle with language as a clunky mediator in articulating experience in the (often chaotic) world in which one exists. 'The Body of Michael Brown' does not, it seems to me, display the same level of consideration, and as such connecting these two works does not sit quite right. The autopsy report of Michael Brown is a formal medical document and by design does not represent a sense of immediacy or humanity, it does not hold within it the latent potential of language used amidst the unfolding events surrounding the assassination of the president. Writer and editor Lincoln Michel called out this seemingly sloppy contention by Goldsmith, putting it this way on Twitter: 'Kenneth Goldsmith's explanation for his gross Michael Brown "poem" was basically, "Hey, I've exploited other tragedies before!"' [31] Goldsmith's allusion to *Seven American Deaths*… in actuality, then, serves to undermine his position. And one might observe that, even within the context of conceptual poetry and uncreative writing, 'The Body of Michael Brown' is a lazy piece.

And when, elsewhere in his Facebook post, Goldsmith emphasizes 'I simply read [the autopsy report] without additional commentary or editoriliazing', he again fast-tracks his own unravelling. Although there is no transcript or documentation of the reading, accounts from those in attendance on the night suggest that Goldsmith, in fact, did not (re)present the text unaltered. The artist Faith

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[29] Kenneth Goldsmith, *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* (Brooklyn: powerhouse Books, 2013).
[30] 'Kenneth Goldsmith Interview: Assume No Readership', 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAJRQJGc7DU, 3:36.
[31] Lincoln Michel, 'Kenneth Goldsmith's explanation […]', *Twitter*, 2015. https://twitter.com/TheLincoln/status/577469679477878784. (3rd August, 2017).

Kenneth Goldsmith
Gestern um 12:15 ·

The Body of Michael Brown

In the tradition of my previous book Seven American Deaths and Disasters, I took a publicly available document from an American tragedy that was witnessed first-hand (in this case by the doctor performing the autopsy) and simply read it. Like Seven American Deaths and Disasters, I did not editorialize; I simply read it without commentary or additional editorializing. Many of you have heard me read from Seven American Deaths and Disasters. This reading was identical in tone and intention. This, in fact, could have been the eighth American death and disaster. The document I read from is powerful. My reading of it was powerful. How could it be otherwise? Such is my long-standing practice of conceptual writing: like Seven American Deaths and Disasters, the document speaks for itself in ways that an interpretation cannot. It is a horrific American document, but then again it was a horrific American death.

I altered the text for poetic effect; I translated into plain English many obscure medical terms that would have stopped the flow of the text; I narrativized it in ways that made the text less didactic and more literary. I indeed stated at the beginning of my reading that this was a poem called "The Body of Michael Brown"; I never stated, "I am going to read the autopsy report of Michael Brown." But then again, this is what I did in Seven Deaths and Disasters. I always massage dry texts to transform them into literature, for that it what they are when I read them. That said, I didn't add or alter a single word or sentiment that did not preexist in the original text, for to do so would be go against my nearly three decades' practice of conceptual writing, one that states that a writer need not write any new texts but rather reframe those that already exist in the world to greater effect than any subjective interpretation could lend. Perhaps people feel uncomfortable with my uncreative writing, but for me, this is the writing that is able to tell the truth in the strongest and clearest way possible.

Ecce homo. Behold the man.

Fig. 0.2 Kenneth Goldsmith Facebook post

Holland recounts,

> It appeared that Goldsmith had just read the autopsy report in its entirety but the last line was, 'The remaining male genitalia system is unremarkable.' This was striking to me, and another audience member questioned why the performance ended on that […] Later I looked at the autopsy report online and realized that he had rearranged the material; in the original, reports of the Cranial Cavity, Spinal Cord, and Special Studies/Specimens Obtained follow. I remember distinctly that Cranial Cavity was read (particularly because of the line 'The weight of the unfixed brain is 1350 gm') as was Special Studies/Specimens Obtained somewhere earlier in the reading. [32]

Other accounts corroborate the work's closing reference to Brown's genitalia, but I cite this account in particular as it highlights Goldsmith's active restructuring of the text; the editorializing he claims not to have done. [33] Holland's observation that descriptions of the cranial cavity appeared earlier in Goldsmith's piece than in the original text preempts any potential suggestion that Goldsmith simply chose to conclude his reading at this point, and instead implies his purposeful (un)creative choices. I find it troubling to even speculate on Goldsmith's intention in any meaningful way here (though he does allude to 'alter[ing] the text for poetic effect', 'narrativiz[ing] it' and 'massag[ing] dry texts to transform them into literature' in his Facebook post). It seems important to state plainly, however, that such a gesture demonstrates a grave disregard for the seriousness of the subject matter, the trauma inflicted on those involved and (perhaps most importantly) the memory of Michael Brown.

Whether a flawed piece or not, 'The Body of Michael Brown' feels testimony to a fundamentally flawed practice that is increasingly difficult to justify or humor in favor of its ~playful subversions. It begs the question: at what point does one's art become more important than the feelings of a family who have lost their son, and the huge section of the population for whom the death Michael Brown serves as a reminder of their fragility within a reigning culture of white supremacy? 'The Body of Michael Brown' goes further than any other work in highlighting the shortcomings and glaring inconsistencies of a practice built upon a 'thinkership' that is disturbingly unreflective and uncritical of itself, its politics and its own internal logic. Within uncreative writing *thinking* about language, the role of the writer-artist and/or creativity itself is encouraged and worthwhile. The practice is not, however, able to accommodate a *thinking* that turns in on itself to consider its

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[32] Jillian Steinhauer, 'Kenneth Goldsmith Remixes Michael Brown Autopsy Report as Poetry', *Hyperallergic*, 2015. https://hyperallergic.com/190954/kenneth-goldsmith-remixes-michael-brown-autopsy-report-as-poetry/ (1st March, 2018).

[33] Other mentions of the work's ending can be found at: Priscilla Frank, 'What Happened When A White Male Poet Read Michael Brown's Autopsy As Poetry' (referenced previously); CAConrad, 'Kenneth Goldsmith Says He Is an Outlaw', *Poetry Foundation*, 2015. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/06/kenneth-goldsmith-says-he-is-an-outlaw (1st March, 2018); Brian Droitcour, 'Reading and Rumor: The Problem with Kenneth Goldsmith', *Art in America*, 2015. https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/reading-and-rumor-the-problem-with-kenneth-goldsmith/. (1st March, 2018).

relation to race, nor a *thinking* that recognises histories of oppression and the role that literature, art and criticism play in their continued presence today.

Whiteness and exnomination

To make sense of this continued refusal (or inability) by conceptual poets to acknowledge race and the politics of their work, it is worth turning to critical understandings of *whiteness* (as explored by scholars such as Sara Ahmed) and also the notion of *exnomination*. Exnomination is a word credited to Roland Barthes, literally meaning 'outside of naming'. [34] Barthes uses the term in 'Myth Today' when describing the different ways *bourgeoisie* (as a concept) operates in relation to 'economic', 'political' and 'ideological' discourses,

[…] as an economic fact, the bourgeoisie is *named* without any difficulty: capitalism is openly professed. As a political fact, the bourgeoisie has some difficulty in acknowledging itself: there is no 'bourgeois' parties in the Chamber. As an ideological fact, it completely disappears: the bourgeoisie has obliterated its name in passing from reality to representation, from economic man to mental man. It comes to an agreement with the facts, but does not compromise about values, it makes its status undergo a real *ex-nominating* operation: the bourgeoisie is defined as *the social class which does not want to be named*. [35]

The implication here is that, in *not* referring to itself, the bourgeoisie and its values are (insidiously) able to become naturalised and accepted as an ideological societal norm. And this phenomenon has been echoed by writers and critics when pointing to a similar process of un-naming that occurs regarding the centrality of white-centric socio-cultural discourse in the West. Again, the implication is that societal standards become ideologically informed by a white perspective which mediates all subsequent human experience; whiteness becomes the standard from which all disparate meanings diverge, and "difference" and "otherness" are constructed and understood primarily in relation to *white*. In the book *Media Matters*, cultural critic John Fiske makes plain the connection between whiteness and exnomination, writing:

[whiteness] is not an essential racial category that contains a set of fixed meanings, but a strategic deployment of power. […] This space of whiteness contains a limited but varied set of normalizing positions from which that which is not white can be made into the abnormal; by such means whiteness constitutes itself as a universal set of norms by which to make sense of the world. […] Exnomination is the means by which whiteness avoids being named and thus keeps itself out of the field of interrogation and therefore off the agenda for change. [...] One practice of exnomination is

[34] As noted in: Alan McKee, *Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide* (London: Sage Publications, 2003) 106.
[35] Roland Barthes, 'Myth Today', in *Mythologies* (London: Vintage Books, 2009), 131 to 187 (163-4).

the avoidance of self-recognition and self-definition. Defining, for whites, is a process that is always directed outward upon multiple 'others' but never inward upon the definer. [36]

One example of this process lays in a term like "identity politics", the perversity of which Sara Ahmed shrewdly draws attention to on Twitter, writing: 'Whiteness: the identity politics that describes everything that is not white as identity politics'. [37] Ahmed is a scholar who has focused extensively on the study of whiteness, and in the article 'A Phenomenology of Whiteness' she observes: 'Whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it, or those who get so used to its inhabitance that they learn not to see it, even when they are not it.' [38] This passage feels instructive to one's understanding of conceptual poetry, uncreative writing and Kenneth Goldsmith; and I again think about a tweet from Ahmed: 'Whiteness: the effort not to notice what is happening right in front of you'. [39] It is important to recognise, then, that the people best placed to critique whiteness are those for whom whiteness is not invisible. For people of colour, the discussion of whiteness is not an academic or intellectual exercise, but instead a social phenomenon based in real life experience and felt on a day-to-day basis. In a conversation between writer and editor Ayesha Siddiqi and comedian Aamer Rahman, the pair can be seen to build on Ahmed's observation, as they discuss the lived reality of whiteness as two people who (to use Ahmed's terminology again) do not inhabit it. At one point in the conversation, speaking of her own coming to terms with experiences of racism in adolescence, Siddiqi asserts that, '[…] to be able to name something for what it is is an act of power over it'. [40] As in the discussion of exnomination, the act of identifying whiteness makes it visible as a (constructed) ideological position and is the first step in taking away its power; a power (partly) contained within its un-named anonymity. Siddiqi and Rahman are able to do this repeatedly throughout the conversation, for example:

Ayesha Siddiqi: It's funny, people of colour talking about their own experiences automatically puts… because whiteness goes so unnamed, to name it puts people on edge. We're not used it.

Aamer Rahman: Absolutely, absolutely. Because just simply using the word 'white' just freaks people out, because they're not used to being named - they're used to naming everyone else. But that's… yeah, like you said, that's what whiteness is, the invisible centering and concentration of a certain set of experiences and privileges as what is normal. And the further you move away from that, or the less you identify with that, the more you're a foreign entity. [41]

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[36] John Fiske, *Media matters: Everyday culture and political change*, 42.
[37] Sara Ahmed, 'Whiteness: the identity […]', *Twitter*, 2016. https://twitter.com/SaraNAhmed/status/765481603468517376. (3rd August, 2017).
[38] Sara Ahmed, 'A Phenomenology of Whiteness', *Feminist Theory*, 8/2 (August 2007), 149 to 168 (157).
[39] Sara Ahmed, 'Whiteness: the effort […]', *Twitter*, 2016. https://twitter.com/SaraNAhmed/status/765486159636074496. (3rd August, 2017).
[40] 'Vol. 2: You're Not Crazy', *Pushing Hoops with Sticks* (2015), 15:12. (3rd August, 2017).
[41] ibid, 9:02.

Ayesha Siddiqi: […] as a writer, you get asked to cover assignments in a way in which implies 'you are especially qualified to talk about race because race is something that doesn't exist in whiteness, it only exists in the otherized' – and that's what otherization is - and so it's this bizarre invisibility. I mean, that's what upholds white supremacy is keeping it unnamed and invisible. [42]

Again, it seems that when thinking about whiteness it is important to defer to people who understand and experience its reality every day, and in doing so the consensus that emerges across different conversations can often feel as powerful as any one quote. I think also that when Siddiqi uses the term 'white supremacy' here, one is made aware of its reality as a description for an entire culture which places (so-called) white values above everything else. Within liberal discourse white supremacy is often sensationalised and attributed to "niche" fascist groups (Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis etc.), rather than framed as the prevailing principle of Western culture, with its colonial and imperialist history. [43]

While the experience of whiteness might be best expressed by the people excluded from it, its perpetuation falls to those on the inside. In a blog on her website, Ahmed delivers the assertion: 'Racism is reproduced by how racism is not noticed by those who are not at a receiving end.' [44] And here Ahmed begins to connect the phenomenon of whiteness (and exnomination) with an active reproduction of racism. Similarly, *A Phenomenology of Whiteness* proposes,

The institutionalization of whiteness involves work: the institution comes to have a body as an effect of this work. It is important that we do not reify institutions, by presuming they are simply given and that they decide what we do. Rather, institutions become given, as an effect of the repetition of decisions made over time, which shapes the surface of institutional spaces. [45]

At this point, I think again about Goldsmith and his role in perpetuating a fundamentally skewed reality. It seems to me that – from his position of (relative) power within the institution of writing and art making – he accepts the universality of his individual experience, which itself seems an implicit consequence of a (un-named) whiteness that, as Rahman stated, 'center[s] and concentrat[es …] a certain set of experiences and privileges as what is normal'. Yet Goldsmith is not a passive subject within an overarching ideology of whiteness, at some point he ultimately becomes active in

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[42] ibid, 8:00.

[43] The artist Jesse Darling makes a similar point to this on Twitter: JD, 'I guess the issue here is w framing 'white supremacy' as milennarian/peopled, rather than the structuring theological basis of modernity', *Twitter*, 2017. https://twitter.com/dzeij_dii/status/821396039953514497. (3rd August, 2017).

[44] Sara Ahmed, 'Evidence', *feministkilljoys*, 2016. https://feministkilljoys.com/2016/07/12/evidence/. (3rd August, 2017).

[45] Sara Ahmed, A Phenomenology of Whiteness, 157.

its reproduction – 'the institutionalization of whiteness involves work'. The continued inability (or refusal) to acknowledge the problematic aspects of his practice, ultimately, becomes a purposeful act of exnomination; one complicit in upholding and actively perpetuating white supremacist cultural discourse.

#PIFR 2015 (an annotated transcription)

Cathy Park Hong discusses Goldsmith's brand of conceptual poetry in her essay 'Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde', writing,

The avant-garde's "delusion of whiteness" is the specious belief that renouncing subject and voice is anti-authoritarian, when in fact such wholesale pronouncements are clueless that the disenfranchised need such bourgeois niceties like voice to alter conditions forged in history. [46]

The reality of this claim – as well as the reality of avant-garde/conceptual poetry's whiteness and exnomination – I want to suggest, is played out in a panel discussion that took place at the Poetry International Festival in Rotterdam 2015. [47] The panel followed a presentation on uncreative writing by Kenneth Goldsmith and novelist, poet and essayist (and son of Jacques Derrida) Pierre Alféri, both of who were then joined by poet Mia You and festival programmer Jan Baeke for subsequent discussion. In an exchange I wish to focus on, You presses Goldsmith and Alféri on the anonymity she feels is encouraged by uncreative writing, and the way in which this subtly serves to erase identity. You's use of *anonymity* is not far from invisibility or un-naming in the context of exnomination and whiteness, yet without using either term the poet identifies and articulates the same phenomenon which acts to remove questions of race or privilege from the field of interrogation. I want to include a transcript of the exchange here, into which I will interject to consider the conversation's relation to the themes discussed thus far, as well as the earlier quote from Cathy Park Hong.

Mia You: I want to ask both of you why it is that you value anonymity so much in your poetic practices

Kenneth Goldsmith: [interrupting] I don't, believe me I am full of ego

Mia You: [awkward laughter] Ok well that might actually lead to the fact… the fact is that, for me,

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[46] Cathy Park Hong, 'Delusions of White in the Avant-Garde', *Lana Turner Journal*, 2014. http://www.lanaturnerjournal.com/7/delusions-of-whiteness-in-the-avant-garde. (3rd August, 2017). The use of the word 'specious' – meaning: superficially plausible, but actually wrong –here is beautifully fitting.
[47] Poetry International, '#PIFR: KENNETH GOLDSMITH: THE ART OF UNCREATIVE WRITING', 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Q2_45qWE8w. (3rd August, 2017).

to value anonymity is quite difficult when there are also, of course, those who feel as if their identities or their expression has not yet been articulated, they have not had the chance to be an author. And so then to advocate that they should go back into a sort of anonymous collective voice is… I mean, I don't necessarily feel like I want to be anonymous with Kenneth Goldsmith, you know. Or to be anonymous with you either [gesturing towards Alféri] to be honest. And so why is there this valuing of anonymity and is that a universal value that you think we should have or is it for only certain select groups of people who may have had the privilege of feeling as if they are authors already? [48]

Despite Goldsmith's swift interjection, it is quickly apparent that You is using the term anonymity to frame the question of privilege that haunts the practice of uncreative writing. You is doing here what many critics and interviewers fail to do, pushing the would-be ambassadors of conceptual poetry and uncreative writing on the problematic aspects of the practice.

Pierre Alféri: Perhaps, yes. Perhaps, you're right, that's a prejudice. But first of all, there is a big difference between being anonymous under the power of a brand or a company, and being anonymous in a horizontal organization with no center and no central control.

'Perhaps, yes. Perhaps, you're right, that's a prejudice', this seems to be the sum total of consideration Alféri gives You's question before quickly going on to (effectively) change the subject. In seemingly proposing the idea that poetry is a 'horizontal organization with no center and no central control', Alféri appears to undermine and miss the point of You's question. This one (evasive) statement seems symptomatic of a whiteness in conceptualism which makes ~objective statements from what is (in reality) a fundamentally subjective perspective. You's question seems to propose that poetry is in fact *not* without a center, as there are 'those who feel as if their identities or their expression has not yet been articulated, they have not had the chance to be an author'. What Alféri is perhaps unable to recognise, then, is that the center may well be whiteness. He goes on,

I didn't mean that everyone should become anonymous under my proper name or Kenneth's proper name of course, although that would be useful, could use a few hands [joking]. But no, I mean anonymity in the sense that if we are sincere with the idea that originality in terms of self-expression… to characterize a little: we all know there is a kind of international poetic style, as there was in architecture before, that blends general philosophical statements with little arbitrary anecdotes and non sequitur ways of thinking that make it just a little dream-like with little jokes and little cute sentimental, personal allusions, that creates an almost ideal type of what a poem, a personal lyrical poem, should be. And this authorship is only a convention really because everyone

[48] ibid, 1:03:56. The following transcriptions follow on from this point so I will refrain from footnoting each passage.

is as empty as everyone else and no one has anything to say so that this kind of illusionary originality and personality, I think, has to be cast away and forgotten about. And anonymity in this sense is just recognizing that I don't have anything to say that is more relevant than anything else and we are just working on the same language that we inherited, just as I said before, and trying to reroute some of the stock phrases and stereotypes that we were given. I'm just thinking of anonymity as awareness and recognition of the absurdity and frivolity of the claim to original genius and a particular depth of thought that the romantic poets had.

There are (again) a number of fundamentally subjective claims presented as objective truth here – 'everyone is as empty as everyone else and no one has anything to say' – which, as before, seem to say more about Alféri's perspective than about poetry itself. His argument here could, in fact, be put alongside the claims of Cathy Park Hong to substantiate her position: one might see in Alféri's comments a failure to acknowledge that 'the disenfranchised need such bourgeois niceties like voice to alter conditions forged in history.' The closing reference to 'the romantic poets' by Alféri, too, seems telling. It might well capture the way in which uncreative writing sees itself as "punching up" at the historical institution of traditional poetry. And yet, Alféri and others seems simultaneously unable to recognise that, in doing so, their proclamations effectively shut down the experiences of those in historically less powerful positions. That conceptual writing might still be preoccupied with romantic poetry also reinforces a passage elsewhere in 'Delusions of Whiteness…' in which Hong argues, 'Conceptual writing is, for all its declarations, pathetically outdated and formulaic in its analog need to bark back incessantly at the original.' [49] Back in the panel discussion, Goldsmith follows Alféri,

Kenneth Goldsmith: And let's not forget, the great hacking collective called 'Anonymous' that have taken down despots and corporations constantly, now [emphasizing] I'm not sure that's so privileged. Anonymous. You know, who knows. The documentary which on them is actually very very good, shows a diverse group of… the people who did speak on camera, shows a very diverse group of people from… you know, a million backgrounds and different places coming together as a [emphasizing] swarm to take a nefarious machinery down. And, you know, so that's used by people for, in my opinion, very good political work.

Here Goldsmith does not appear his usual smooth and charming self and his statements are uncharacteristically disjointed, he seems thrown and a little agitated. It feels troubling, and kind of absurd (actually) to see both men evade You's question, diverting the conversation explicitly away from themselves and towards abstract notions of political rhetoric. Goldsmith's mentioning of the Anonymous hacking collective seems particularly silly, and his pointed 'I'm not sure that's so

[49] Cathy Park Hong, 'Delusions of White in the Avant-Garde'.

privileged' is confrontational and especially uncomfortable – it does not sit well, displaying a disconcerting arrogance and boldness in the face of a constant refusal to discuss his own privilege. It makes sense to quickly turn to bell hooks, whose observations about the moment white liberals are forced to consider their own whiteness is recalled by Goldsmith's response here,

Often their rage erupts because they believe that all ways of looking that highlight difference subvert the liberal belief in a universal subjectivity (we are all just people) that they think will make racism disappear. They have a deep emotional investment in the myth of 'sameness', even as their actions reflect the primacy of whiteness as a sign informing who they are and how they think. [50]

Indeed. Back in the panel discussion, Goldsmith's emphasizing of the word 'swarm' is also (obviously) a real face-palm moment. Taken as a whole, it would be tempting to propose that Goldsmith's comments here demonstrate a fairly limited understanding of "politics" or "political action". His responses seem to suggest that political work is a discipline unto itself, concerned with taking down big corporations etc. And, of course, it is that. But, as outlined at the beginning of this chapter, politics is also the way power moves between people, and the way individuals relate to one another throughout day-to-day interactions in the world. In turning the discussion of privilege to hacking collectives and corporate interest, Goldsmith would seem to struggle with the latter notion of political action – and this is perhaps telling of his inability to recognise his own shortcomings and his evasion of the subject when questioned. Of course, the ability to *not* talk about politics in terms of lived personal experience is (itself) an archetypal example of whiteness in action. [51]

Sub-section: The Body of Michael Brown (KG responds)

In the closing moments of the panel discussion, Mia You questions Goldsmith on 'The Body of Michael Brown' and he admits, somewhat surprisingly, that it was a 'flawed' and 'failed' work. Below is You's response to Goldsmith's mentioning of the hacking collective Anonymous, which she (impressively) fashions into a question regarding 'The Body of Michael Brown', followed by Goldsmith's response.

Mia You: I think for those who want to function as part of this collective and do that kind of work it's quite valuable, but I also worry that the theorization of that, and also the advocating of that, can also lead to an abstraction of human beings in a way that is actually quite violent, and actually

[50] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 167.
[51] Here, I am reminded of an essay by the poet Claudia Rankine and critic Beth Loffreda in which the pair parody (clichéd) responses of a white writer when questioned about the race implications in their work; one example they give is, 'If I cared about politics, I would write a manifesto—what I'm trying to do is make art.' Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda, 'On Whiteness And The Racial Imaginary', *Literary Hub*, 2015. http://lithub.com/on-whiteness-and-the-racial-imaginary/. (3rd August, 2017).

undermines the ways in which poetry can cause us to become more empathetic beings or beings that are willing to be confronted with an author who is also an other that we will then have to negotiate and interact with. And I think that might be one of the reasons why one of your most recent pieces, from a few months ago, you performed 'The Body of Michael Brown' at Brown university in which you read out loud the autopsy report of Michael Brown who was an African American man who was shot by a policeman in Ferguson, and the cause of a lot of political uprising in America - social protest in America. And of course you've received a great deal of criticism about that, and it does seem that the refusal of a sort of particularity that leads to empathy, and the desire to abstract what it means to be human, might be the trap the this particular work fell into.

Kenneth Goldsmith: Absolutely, absolutely. I made a flawed work. I made a lot of mistakes, I had a lot of blind spots in my machine. And I'm talking about constructing, it was a very poorly constructed machine. Although the text into which I was dumping into that machine I believe was potent and very powerful text. It was the apparatus that I miscalculated, and it ended up really blowing up in a very rather violent way. You know, it's hot, you think conceptualism is cool but if you make mistakes, the way I made mistakes with that piece, this can be very very dangerous, it can be very hurtful, it really can cause problems, as much as a well-constructed machine and a well-considered machine can be perfect and liberating. Yeah, so you know, that was… I'm a poet, I make failed works, many of works don't come off, many of our works don't come off. How many times have any of us in this room done a reading and you go 'um I wish I hadn't had done that' or 'that didn't go off well'. We tried out things that are experiments, experiments don't always work. We try things and they don't work, we bring out works in progress and we fail terribly. That was a failed artwork of mine, indeed.

[Jan Baeke states that we are out time, end of discussion] [52]

While Goldsmith undoubtedly shows more remorse and compassion for those affected by his actions than he has publicly elsewhere (his only response, as far as I am aware, is still his unapologetic Facebook post in the days after the reading), his faith in the practice of uncreative writing ultimately seems unaltered. He holds his hands up and takes the blame, to his credit (I guess), but in doing so he makes the issue his individual laziness in this one instance. He admits that conceptualism is 'hot' and 'can be very very dangerous', and yet the second half of that sentence suggests this incident has done little to shake his wider conviction in the logic of the practice. And indeed, in restating the power and potency of the original text, Goldsmith reiterates his continued belief in the value of appropriating (as a white man in a position of power) the autopsy report of young black man murdered by a police officer for his own poetic material. One uncomfortable thing

[52] Poetry International, '#PIFR: KENNETH GOLDSMITH: THE ART OF UNCREATIVE WRITING'. This passage begins at 1:08:28.

about all of this, then, is the way Goldsmith (in his unshaken-ness) appears to write off the entire thing as an unfortunate consequence that comes with the territory of being a poet, his manner implying *this is what happens to those of us operating at the vanguard of the art form*. [53] Goldsmith's statements here ultimately do not do enough to outweigh the problems his practice proposes, and I am left (again) identifying with Cathy Park Hong, who in a 2015 essay for *New Republic* asserts: '[…] Conceptual Poetry is already dead […]'. [54]

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KG and Cage-E [55]

There is one last thing I want to squeeze out of Goldsmith. I think back to Cathy Park Hong who asserts that 'Conceptual writing is, for all its declarations, pathetically outdated and formulaic […]', and I am reminded of Goldsmith's claim, 'I am in love with creativity, I just don't like what it's become'. [56] Goldsmith's assertion might be understood to demonstrate a certain conservatism regarding creativity (and what it *should* be), and I want to suggest that the "creativity" to which Goldsmith is committed is stubbornly preoccupied with innovation above all else. Put another way, I want to consider the subtle ways in which Goldsmith's decision to "stop creating" is (counter intuitively) bound up in a trajectory of modernist ("make it new") art making. I wish to frame this in relation to John Cage, whose work (decades earlier) similarly demonstrated particular acts of *not* creating.

In 1952 Cage famously premiered a new work in which he directed pianist David Tudor to walk on stage, sit down at a piano and, then, *not* play for 4 minutes and 33 seconds. [57] Cage's intention was to

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[53] And, as well, I feel a little suspicious that beneath the surface of this "apology" lurks a certain sense of pride – a sense that, while this piece proved unsuccessful, he should in some way be respected for taking the risk. I would like to think not, but I am unnerved the more I think about phrases like 'I'm a poet, I make failed works […]' or 'We tried out things that are experiments, experiments don't always work'. As well, in an interview cited previously Goldsmith states: 'I don't write for a market, there is no market for what I do. There is only ideas. And so, you know, I'm obliged as a poet to be as experimental as possible because I have nothing to gain from playing it safe.' Louisiana Channel, 'Kenneth Goldsmith Interview: Assume No Readership'. 7:16.

[54] Cathy Park Hong, 'There's a New Movement in American Poetry and It's Not Kenneth Goldsmith', *New Republic*, 2015. https://newrepublic.com/article/122985/new-movement-american-poetry-not-kenneth-goldsmith. (3rd August, 2017).

[55] Thank you to Gustav Thomas for pointing out the phonetic parallel between the names of Goldsmith and John Cage, and its eerie hinting towards a telling synchronicity that makes it a fitting title for a section which discusses the similarities of the two artists.

[56] Louisiana Channel, 'Kenneth Goldsmith Interview: Assume No Readership', 11:20.

[57] A 2013 performance of the work (with introduction) can be viewed at: BBC, '4'33" by John Cage - John Cage Live at the Barbican - BBC Four Collections', 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yoAbXwr3qkg. (8th August, 2017).

turn the (sonic) focus away from the sounds taking place on stage, and towards the underappreciated sounds of the environment, those already present in and around the concert hall. Throughout *Uncreative Writing* (the book), Goldsmith makes numerous references to Cage, at one point (clumsily) paraphrasing the composer's words and applying them to his own practice, writing: 'John Cage said that music is all around us if only we had ears to hear it. I would extend that to say that, particularly in New York, poetry is all around us, if only we had the eyes to see it and the ears to hear it.' [58]

If Cage does indeed lay some of the groundwork for Goldsmith, it is fitting that critiques of the former's work often address similar concerns to the critiques of Goldsmith. The historian and theorist Douglas Kahn, for example, observes, 'When [Cage] hears music everywhere, other phenomena go unheard. When he celebrates noise, he also promulgates noise abatement. When he speaks of silence, he also speaks of silencing.' [59] And in terms of this *silencing*, one might turn to professor and improviser George Lewis and his discussion of Cage in the essay 'Improvised Music After 1950'. [60] For Lewis, although the work of John Cage represented a shift towards a "real-time" music-making which critiqued traditional aspects of Western music and notated composition, the composer could be situated within a lineage of (what Lewis calls) a 'Eurological' perspective. In somewhat simplistic terms: a Eurological perspective feels aligned to modernist discourse and can be characterised by a desire to move beyond history and tradition (to "make it new" or "blow up the past"), and is distinct from an Afrological perspective which represents an intuitive bond with history and tradition, a signifyin(g) onto what has gone before. [61] In his essay, Lewis writes:

> In terms of social location, composers such as Cage […] located their work as an integral part of a sociomusical art world that explicitly bonded with the intellectual and musical traditions of Europe. The members of this art world, while critiquing aspects of contemporary European culture, were explicitly concerned with continuing to develop this "Western" tradition on the American continent. [62]

The music of Cage, then, was typically framed in terms of his own distinct interest in indeterminism and chance procedures. Lewis, however, draws attention to the notable absence of the word

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[58] Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*, 53 – other references to Cage appear on pages 82, 115, 129, 134, 135, 170, 194.

[59] Douglas Kahn, 'John Cage: Silence and Silencing', *Musical Quarterly*, 81/4 (December 1997), 556 to 598 (557).

[60] George E. Lewis, 'Improvised Music After 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives', *Black Music Research Journal*, 16/1, (Spring 1996), 91 to 122.

[61] For Lewis, the 'Eurological' and 'Afrological' are two distinct value systems, each providing divergent means of understanding histories of experience and expression. And I think there is sense a synonymy between identifying these distinct categories and naming whiteness; understanding a Eurological perspective, for example, as simply *one particular* value system is to subvert its role in centralizing experience and discourse, and is an act of taking away its power.

[62] George E. Lewis, 'Improvised Music After 1950', 98.

improvisation from an ensuing discussion of (so-called) "real-time" composition, and goes on to scrutinise the political implications of such an omission. Lewis' quotes the composer Anthony Braxton: 'Both aleatory [chance] and indeterminism are words which have been coined ... to bypass the word improvisation and as such the influence of non-white sensibility'. [63] And indeed, Lewis observes that Cage's practice of indeterminism '[…] arrives some eight to ten years after the innovations of bebop'. [64] Discussing the role of improvisation within bebop, Lewis writes:

> Already active in the 1940s, a group of radical young black American improvisers […] posed potent challenges to Western notions of structure, form, communication, and expression. These improvisers, while cognizant of Western musical tradition, located and centered their modes of musical expression within a stream emanating largely from African and African-American cultural and social history. [65]

The work of bebop improvisers, then, was seemingly committed to undermining restrictive traditions of Western (Eurological) music in a similar vein to Cage and yet, the contributions of bebop musicians to the practice of "real-time" composition were overlooked in the music's surrounding discourse(s). At this point Cage becomes important as, throughout his career, the composer was keenly disparaging of Afrological musical forms. In his essay *History of Experimental Music in the United States*, Cage makes a distinction between jazz and (what he calls) serious music, writing: 'Jazz per se derives from serious music. And when serious music derives from it, the situation becomes rather silly'. [66] Given the essay's title it seems fair to assume, taking the cultural authority ascribed to Cage into account, that *History of Experimental Music*… function(ed/s) as something of a blueprint for emerging American music(s). And in these moments, the (political) reality of history as exclusive and consciously curated – as opposed to naturally emergent – seems all too clear. As well, the doubleness of Cage's silence/*silencing* feels suddenly apparent.

In reading Lewis' extended critique, one senses that Cage's distaste for music(s) rooted in Afrological traditions goes beyond aesthetic preference and is entangled with the composer's deeper commitment to innovation (over traces of individual experience and/or a bond with tradition). Towards the end of his essay, Lewis cites a passage from Cage: 'What I would like to find is an improvisation that is not descriptive of the performer, but is descriptive of what happens, and which is characterised by an absence of intention'. [67] This 'absense of intention' might be the crux of

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[63] ibid, 99.
[64] ibid.
[65] ibid, 92.
[66] John Cage, *Silence* (USA: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 72. On the same page, the composer also (patronizingly) refers to the music as 'hot jazz'.
[67] John Cage as quoted in George E. Lewis, 'Improvised Music after 1950', 118.

Cage's practice and, at this point, one might sense the parallels with conceptual poetry's 'renouncing [of] subject and voice' as observed by Cathy Park Hong; as well as the prevalence of 'anonymity' rightly scrutinised by Mia You. Douglas Kahn has written that Cage's 'best-known campaign, of course, was against self-expression' and this aligns with the arguments of George Lewis' essay, yet it also offers us a(nother) link back to Kenneth Goldsmith. [68] The rhetoric of uncreative writing can accurately be described as 'against expression', and indeed *Against Expression* is the title given to an anthology of conceptual poetry co-edited by Kenneth Goldsmith and published in 2011. [69]

As noted previously, there is a certain conservatism beneath the surface of Goldsmith's work and, by looking at the precedent of Cage decades earlier, the practice of uncreative writing (while seemingly radical at first) might begin to feel increasingly 'outdated and formulaic', as Hong suggests. The critique of Cage in this section – in which the composer's inability to separate himself from a tradition of Eurological (in essence, modernist) art making that prioritises innovation over all else, prevents him from recognising the value of alternative modes of creative practice – also applies to Goldsmith. And as with 'KENNIE G', Cage's shortcomings in this regard are readily situated within a (omnipresent) culture of whiteness, disturbingly adept in *un-naming* its own basic subjectivity. To bring this section to a close I want to quote a passage from Charlie Bramley. In the context of Lewis' critiques of Cage, Bramley is explicit in suggesting the ways in which Eurological narratives of music and art making are historically tied up in whiteness and exnomination; and (again) this statement feels equally applicable to Goldsmith:

I would suggest that to 'blow up the past', is a particularly self-indulgent rhetoric from a Euro-American perspective which has a past to hide, the legacy of slavery, colonialism and fascism. To conceive of the avant-garde and of modernism through these terms is to engage in an exnomination, which paints it as white Euro-American only, while simultaneously pretending the situation is 'just the way it is' objectively. To include Afrological free jazz for instance of mostly black African-Americans in this would mean dealing with the traditions you've just negated, the past you've just blown up! [70]

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[68] Douglas Kahn, 'John Cage: Silence and Silencing', 559.
[69] Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (eds.), *Against Expression* (USA: Northwestern University Press, 2011).
[70] Charlie Bramley, *Too important to be left to the musicians: un- musical activism and improvised fiction* (Newcastle University, PhD Thesis, 2016), 93.

The universal is a fantasy (*Conclusion*)

With regards to Goldsmith, it feels possible to say finally: the conception of uncreative writing – while seemingly responding to emerging cultural discourse(s) – might ultimately be a way of, subtly but surely, imposing an old model onto a new situation; as opposed to allowing the possibilities of a new situation to radically redefine the model itself. Confronted with 'a thicket of information' which potentially destabilises traditional (Euro-centric) creativity, it seems uncreative writing makes one last commitment to innovation by vowing to be *un*original, to not create at all. In framing the composer John Cage as a precursor to Goldsmith, my intention was not to paint the latter as "derivative" – as to engage that conversation feels unhelpfully entangled with the flawed logic of creativity = innovation itself – but rather, to highlight uncreative writing's *un*critical and *un*reflective reproduction of historically problematic cultural discourses.

At this point I return to the prologue's introduction, and the question of how one might begin to unbind themselves from inherited cultural narratives without replicating their same oppressive power dynamics. The shortcomings of uncreative writing highlight tensions which will ultimately need to be factored in to emerging creative practices seeking to answer that question, and having (hopefully) laid out some of the missteps to be avoided here, the rest of the thesis will look towards an alternative approach. At this stage it might be worth noting, framing the subsequent discussion a little, that I am interested in (tentatively) redefining the seeming Euro-centricity of the term "creativity", as well as the terms of the conversation surrounding it. I am interested in thinking about a contemporary creativity that might offer responses to the present born out of an engaged understanding of the past; one which might distinguish itself from that of previous generations by intuitively moving away from "innovation", instead exploring (and/or tapping into) certain moments of shared experience and collectivity as they exist now. The notion of framing these moments as instructive to creative practice, then, follows the model of an Afrological perspective and is also shaped by emerging forms of art making and communication taking place online – in this vein, the following chapter will look at the socio-cultural implications of the internet, its archive and the politics of a potential *shared*ness.

As noted previously, then, this prologue has treated Goldsmith as something of a case study regarding the politics of creative practice. I have wanted to consider the ways in which art making is inherently fraught and never disconnected from histories of oppression, thinking as well about its surrounding critical discourse(s); the way in which cultural narratives take shape and frameworks of value become established and/or perpetuated. It should also be noted: the critical perspective of this prologue is indebted to black feminist thought, and its insistence on intersectionality. By drawing attention to the ways in which various forms of oppression interact and make themselves felt in different social situations, writers such as Angela Davis, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill

Collins helped establish an approach to feminism that constantly interrogated and (re)assessed its own internal power relations. [71] As such, intersectional feminism offers a valuable example of a politically engaged approach to culture that is fluid and evolving, which resists the fixity of hegemonic discourse by constantly turning critique in on itself. And like a cubist approach to critical discourse, intersectionality might be understood as the commitment to represent multiple perspectives as they contribute to discourses of oppression – to show all the sides. [72] From this perspective, when thinking about Goldsmith, one thing that becomes apparent is the fundamental flaw of any critical position or creative discipline that displays a (misguided) assurance in the universality of (its own) experience. In this regard, I also think about poet Claudia Rankine and critic Beth Loffreda who, in their essay 'On Whiteness and the Racial Imaginary', write,

> If we continue to think of the 'universal' as better-than, as the pinnacle, we will always discount writing that doesn't look universal because it accounts for race or some other demeaned category. The universal is a fantasy. But we are captive, still, to a sensibility that champions the universal while simultaneously defining the universal, still, as white. [73]

This passage feels in-line with the critiques I have been driving at, and 'the universal is a fantasy' might even be the overriding sentiment of this chapter. Finally, then, it seems to me that Goldsmith and uncreative writing might be understood to represent a meeting point between a historically privileged Eurological approach to creative practice and the contemporary reality of the internet and its archive – and this tension provides the starting point for the next chapter.

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[71] Angela Davis, *Woman, Race, & Class* (New York: Vintage, 1983); Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 140 (1989), 139 to 167; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (cited previously).

[72] And cubism is itself indebted to African art, but that is perhaps another discussion.

[73] Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda, 'On Whiteness and the Racial Imaginary'.

~ Chapter 1 ~

Erase the traces! vs. the internet and its archive

The prologue outlined problematic aspects of uncreative writer Kenneth Goldsmith and a modernist perspective that can feel pervasive within an inherited discourse of music and art making. The section acted as a prolonged consideration of the political implications of creative practice; a discussion of whiteness becoming important in illustrating the effect a lack of self-awareness/critique has within the relation to "politics" as understood as the way one interacts with others – as 'who am I in relation to you / who are we in the way we can see ourselves / in relation to the other kids'.[1] In response, this chapter is (in many ways) about the work it takes to begin reimagining the space for creative practice – actively shifting the goal posts, as it were – and looking for alternative perspectives that can offer new starting points and/or markers of value with regard to the practice and discussion of music, art, politics and criticism.

I will focus on emerging forms of communication developing online, and on social media in particular. Through a discussion of the internet and its archive – its relation to time, identity and earlier modes of communication – what emerges (and what I am interested in thinking about) are instances of political activity, engagement and/or resistance that seem to operate less explicitly, on smaller scales and in increasingly intuitive manners online. The poet and novelist Ben Lerner and his book *10:04* prove particularly helpful in articulating the (radical) potential of these moments, offering alternative ways to conceive of discourses around art and experience. And, in response to the lack of self-reflection and self-critique demonstrated by Goldsmith (as discussed throughout the prologue), I hope to articulate the way in which a level of self-awareness (political and otherwise) becomes increasingly *felt* online.

By calling on my own experience of social media, the essays of writer Rob Horning and the online magazines/resources *Real Life* and *The New Inquiry*, I aim to discuss the increasingly subtle and nuanced ways that shared experience might be communicated online. Yet, in a final section that focuses on memes, I will also consider the historical precedents (and inherent politics) of any

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[1] Barr, 'Half of Two Times Two (Newer Version)', *Summary* (Upset The Rhythm, 2007).

potential *shared*ness. In writing about social media, then, I hope to capture and/or grasp the *climate* of the moment (at least to some extent) in such a way that is not explicitly *about* creative practice, but which implicitly feeds into the critical positions and ways of thinking/working of contemporary artists and music makers.

I also want to acknowledge that (from early on) the critical perspective of this research has been guided by an observation regarding Brecht's phrase 'erase the traces!' – as synonymous with a modernist imperative – against a contemporary reality that is invariably bound by online environments in which things are inherently *traceable*. This contradictory tension forms the basis for this chapter, and is also its starting point.

❍

The loss of self-evidence

On the first page of the book *Militant Modernism*, Owen Hatherley writes,

> Erase the traces. Destroy, in order to create. Build a new world on the ruins of the old. This, it is often thought, is the Modernist imperative […] Although there have always been several strains in Modernism, one of the most dominant has always been based on the demand, made by Bertolt Brecht in his 1926 *Handbook for City-dwellers* to '*erase the traces!*' [2]

'Erase the traces' is used repeatedly in the first poem of the *Handbook for City-dwellers* – that is, depending on the translation one reads. The phrase Brecht uses is the German 'verwisch die spuren', and while this has been translated into English to mean 'erase the traces', it has (as well) been translated to 'cover your tracks'; Google translate offers 'blur the trails'; and throughout a book of collected essays on Brecht – itself titled *"Verwisch die Spuren!"* – the phrase is referred to in different instances as 'removal of traces', 'eliminating the traces' and 'obliterate one's traces'. [3] Translation is, of course, a nuanced discipline (art form, really) and as such I am less interested in the "truth" of the phrase than in the existence of its multiple meanings. Similarly, the significance of the phrase as a modernist catchphrase is arguably compromised by looking at its usage within the

[2] Owen Hatherley, *Militant Modernism* (London: Zero Books, 2009) 3.
[3] 'Erase the traces' is used in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (eds), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938-1940* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 232. 'Cover your tracks' is used in Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht* (London: Verso, 1998) 59 to 60; and in Robert Gillett and Godela Weiss-Sussex (eds), *"Verwisch die Spuren!" Bertolt Brecht's Work and Legacy* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 'removal of traces' on 161, 'eliminating the traces' on 271 and 'obliterate one's traces' on 273.

Brecht poem itself, where its most literal reading seems to be of an individual concealing their identity. Looking at the opening two stanzas:

Part from your buddies at the station
In the morning go into town with your coat buttoned up
Find yourself a room, and when your buddy knocks–
Don't open, O don't open the door
But
Erase the traces!

If you meet your parents in the city of Hamburg or somewhere else
Pass them like a stranger, turn a corner, don't acknowledge them
Pull the hat they gave you down over your face
Don't show, O don't show your face
But
Erase the traces! [4]

For the architect and historian Detlef Mertins, this poem 'provides a vivid image of a keen desire to escape bourgeois subjectivity'. [5] Walter Benjamin, looking at the poem from the vantage point of Germany in 1939, describes the work in relation to Brecht's 'crypto-emigration' within the Weimar Republic and observes that 'the [*Handbook for City-dwellers*] contains object lessons in exile and living outside the law', interpreting *erase the traces* (boldly) as 'A rule for those who are illegal.' [6] The poem might equally fit into discussions of an emerging 20th century genre of *city poetry*; for example, Benjamin (again) observes that 'Brecht is probably the first major lyric poet to say anything meaningful about city people.' [7] I am interested, then, in thinking about the way 'erase the traces' becomes divorced from the context of its original usage and finds itself in the position of modernist promulgation, as Hatherley contends in the first sentence(s) of his book. While it is entirely common for such a thing to happen, it seems to me that, in tracing this messy genealogy, a critical tension (or at least potential tension) arises.

Speaking of my own experience exploring Brecht's phrase and its genealogy as I have laid out above, then: I would argue a discursive space might emerge in which the phrase and the ideological position (modernism) become distanced from each other. Having come to the phrase via its

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[4] As translated in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938-1940*, 232.
[5] Detlef Mertins, 'The Enticing and Threatening Face of Prehistory: Walter Benjamin and the Utopia of Glass' in Beatrice Hanssen (ed), *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (London: Continuum, 2006), 225 to 239 (236).
[6] *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938-1940* – quoted phrases are from 232, 236 and 232 respectively. Things get complicated again here, as 'Handbook for City-dwellers' is, in this book, translated as *Reader for Those Who Live in Cities* – hence my use of square brackets in the first half of the sentence.
[7] ibid, 233.

modernist context, one is forced to consider that the two things are not, or have not necessarily always been, interchangeable. From this position, one might be drawn to (re)consider the potential constructed-ness of a modernist cultural narrative, having (I think) glimpsed a crack in the shell of "modernism" as an institution. I acknowledge the subjectivity of this reading, but it seems important nonetheless: for it is in these moments that "history" which was once prescriptive and fixed becomes tentative and unstable, and might be reimagined as pliable, readily shaped and/or up for grabs. I think about Michel Foucault describing a book by French writer Jean Daniel – *L'ère des ruptures* – as '[…] a quest for those subtler, more secret, and more decisive moments when things begin to lose their self-evidence.' [8] The idea of things losing their self-evidence is important here, but that this passage from Foucault pairs the phenomenon with moments of subtly also feels fitting. As a subject loses its self-evidence it also loses its (discursive) pedestal, and that which was once formative and/or set in stone is suddenly forced to bear scrutiny. In that moment, then, a whole framework of value and experience threatens to be turned on its head. In the example above, modernism and its cultural authority/influence were (at least for me) destabilised, throwing into question a monolithic presence that, in music and art, has often assumed its own self-evident status. Uncovering the fragility of modernism, then, creates a space for alternative modes of engagement which might guide creative practice and discourse.

There is a section in the Ben Lerner novel *10:04* in which the narrator encounters a collection of 'totaled art' – an assortment of artworks, damaged in one form or another, which (with the agreement of the artist/owner, appraiser and insurer) have been formally declared of no economic value. [9] In the book, the narrator's friends acquire a small collection of these artworks with the intention of hosting an exhibition/critical discussion to consider their aesthetic and philosophical significance. For the narrator, what is most thrilling is not holding 'pieces of a shattered Jeff Koons balloon dog sculpture', but instead encountering artworks that are, seemingly, undamaged. [10] For example: Lerner's narrator describes the phenomenon of holding a Cartier-Bresson print, the only deficiency (its accompanying paperwork informed him) was that the piece was missing a panel; what he held in his hands was an incomplete artwork, two (otherwise uncompromised) panels of what was originally a three-panel print. The novel recounts the experience,

[The Cartier-Bresson print] had transitioned from being a repository of immense financial value to being declared of zero value without undergoing what was to me any perceptible material transformation—it was the same, only totally different. […] I felt a fullness indistinguishable from being emptied as I held a work from which the exchange value had been extracted, an object that

[8] Michel Foucault, 'For an Ethic of Discomfort' in James D. Faubion (ed), *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954 – 1984* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 443 to 448 (447).
[9] Ben Lerner, *10:04* (London: Granta, 2014), 129 to 134.
[10] ibid, 131.

was otherwise unchanged. It was as if I could register in my hands a subtle but momentous transfer of weight: the twenty-one grams of the market's soul had fled; it was no longer a commodity fetish; it was art before or after capital. […] An art commodity that had been exorcised (and survived the exorcism) of the fetishism of the market was to me a utopian readymade—an object for or from a future where there was some other regime of value than the tyranny of price. [11]

Without saying the word Lerner's narrator describes a loss of self-evidence, the moment in which the print and the structure of value which surrounds it are destabilised and/or transformed. This fiction interpolates the novelist's (real life) experience of Elka Krajewska's *Salvage Art Institute*, about which (real life) Ben Lerner wrote an article for *Harper's Magazine*. [12] In an interview with curator and writer Paul Holdengräber, Lerner is asked about his (and by extension his narrator's) experience of these artworks,

Holdengräber: Was it the vulnerability of the object, was it the fact that in some way it had been…

Lerner: No, it was the durability of the object and the vulnerability of the framework of value within [which] the object existed. This feeling of flickering, like suddenly all the apparatus that normally attends how you handle… […] The whole phenomenology of the encounter, instead of the museum form, which I really value in a lot of ways… it felt like you were momentarily in a different organization of social forces. The object was the same and every single thing around it had changed.

Holdengräber: So it didn't have to do with the precariousness of the object or the fragility of the object?

Lerner: It had to do with the precariousness of the system that assigns value to the object – the objects themselves seemed very tough. [13]

Lerner articulates the moment in which one glimpses the vulnerability and/or precariousness of a (previously self-evident) framework of value, and he does so in such a way that seems to capture a radical potential (and critical discursive space) waiting to establish itself in its wake. And it is fair to say I was attempting to echo his sentiment and/or capture something of the same urgency in my description of modernism and its potential frailty earlier. As mentioned, the subtle nature of 'these moments when things begin to lose their self-evidence' (as Foucault puts it) also feels important. The type of discursive repositioning described by Lerner reshapes the potential for alternative

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[11] ibid, 133-4.
[12] Ben Lerner, 'Damage Control', *Harper's Magazine*, 2013. https://harpers.org/archive/2013/12/damage-control/. (3rd August, 2017).
[13] 'Ben Lerner – 10:04', *The New York Public Library Podcast* (2014), 45:45. (3rd August, 2017).

understandings of discourse and art making in the future, yet it nonetheless remains an act of slightness. Indeed, *10:04* begins with an epigraph containing a fable-like story, as told by the Hassidim, discussing 'the world to come' in which 'Everything will be as it is now, just a little different'; [14] this idea becomes a central theme in the novel, and also feels noticeable within the previously quoted passages. [15] I would want to note, also, that the idea that 'the world to come will be as it is now, just a little different' astutely pairs a sense of smallness with a transformation of the world as one understands it. And for Lerner, this idea provides a way to conceive of a literature or politics of the future in such a way that might inform (or reshape) one's perspective of the present. Again, in the interview with Holdengräber,

> One thing that really matters about [the epigraph] for me is its emphasis on the idea that redemption (whatever that is) isn't imminent with an 'i', it's not coming in the future; its immanent with an 'a, it's inside the materials of the present. […] It's not like Milton having to translate what the plain of the divine looks like into these fallen terms, it's the idea that the material circumstances of our lives already contain the glimmer of some possible redemption, whether or not it ever arrives. [16]

This passage has felt increasingly important to me as the research has progressed and it is an idea I will return to again. Elsewhere in the interview, Lerner also discusses this imminent/immanent distinction as relating to left leaning politics, within which he recognises a kind of resignation to the fact that '[…] all that we can do is wait for a revolution at some point in the future that's gonna change the order of experience'; a perspective informed by, what he calls, 'brilliant (but also very depressing)' thinkers on politics and literature who have historically emphasised capitalism as a totality, and who reiterate that 'every one of our relationships is totally saturated with the logic of abstract exchange' – referring here (I imagine) to writers such as Frederic Jameson. [17] Lerner goes on to state that, in thinking of the quote from the Hassidim, one might remember: 'there's a way to attend to the world as it exists, despite being totally… fucked up… there's a way to attend to the material world with a kind of sensitivity that also mines possibilities of alterity.' [18] And if

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[14] Ben Lerner, *10:04*, opening epigraph: 'The Hassidim tell a story about the world to come that says everything there will be just as it is here. Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too it will sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this world, those too we will wear there. Everything will be as it is now, just a little different.'

[15] Indeed, Lerner acknowledges that it was in thinking about the Salvage Art Institute that he was reminded of this story: 'It was thinking about the salvage art institute that that quote about the Hassidim came to me, because you can feel… you can measure, in a kind of tactile way, this total change in, almost like, the ontology of the object even though it's the exact same object. You feel suddenly like you've stepped outside of the dominant modes of value of the day and its thrilling. And that's something that art I think often aspires to do but often fails to do because it is of course so readily commodified. But… you know, this book is a commodity, art works are commodities – I think the key is that they're not exhausted by the commodity form, that they have something that exceeds it.' 'Ben Lerner – 10:04', *The New York Public Library Podcast*, 43:40.

[16] ibid, 33:40.

[17] ibid, the passage containing each quote begins at 34:35.

[18] ibid, 35:55.

Fig. 1.1 Image from Ben Lerner's *10:04*

redemption (or revolution) is held within 'the materials of the present' and 'the material circumstances of our lives' – as stated in the previously quoted passage – this in many ways anticipates the moment of an object's loss of self-evidence. Cultural artefacts (whatever they may be) await their meanings to be transformed, their glimmers of possibility currently obscured within their self-evidence; but then, in the moment of bearing scrutiny, such materials are liable to become something other than they once were. The narrator of *10:04* witnesses the Cartier-Bresson print transform to suggest a radical alternative to the current order of experience, and yet the print itself remains (physically) unchanged. This is a crucial point, which I admittedly did not get straight away. Lerner emphasises the object's material sameness in order to draw attention to the *power* of the fictions we (broadly, as a culture) tell ourselves about the world and its objects. And one of the reasons this example becomes important, within the context of this thesis, is as a reminder of the way certain discourses surrounding objects (in the broadest sense) become systems of value which actively shape the reality of one's experience. Yet equally important, in the situation to which Lerner draws attention, is the way pre-existing value systems are shown to be fragile, susceptible to critique and reordering via the creation of alternative fictions. To borrow a line from elsewhere in the novel, in holding the Cartier-Bresson print in his hands, *10:04*'s narrator feels 'the fiction of the world rearrang[e] itself around [him]'. [19] It might be useful to consider, then, that while the *Salvage Art Institute* is real, it could just as well not be. Were the 'Institute of Totaled Art' – as it is called in the novel – a work of fiction, the "truth" it uncovers would (largely) be the same…

[19] Ben Lerner, *10:04*, 109.

In the interview with Holdengräber, Lerner speaks again about the epigraph and touches on the role of fiction in uncovering possibilities beyond 'the world as it exists'. Lerner's observations resonate with the critical position I am seeking to establish across the submission as a whole, and he (again) returns to a sense of smallness:

For me [the epigraph is] also a metaphor, in [*10:04*], for fiction and blurring the line between fact and fiction, that fiction is most powerful to me not when it depicts an entirely alternative universe […] it is most powerful to me when it depicts a world just like this one only a little different. Because then you get attuned to how small adjustments in a body sensorium or maybe small adjustments in the experience of a day can put you in touch with resources of wonder and imagination that… I don't think that that's directly political, but I do believe those are the resources humans would have to draw on to be able to imagine an alternative future. [20]

<u>The internet and its archive</u>

What I am laying out in this discussion thus far, then, might lean towards a kind of abstract exercise regarding the nature of language. However, the loss of a subject's self-evidence is also one way to conceive of the arguments I presented in the thesis' prologue – an observing of Kenneth Goldsmith, whiteness, John Cage and Euro-centric art making each losing their self-evident cultural authority (at least in the mind of this writer). And yet, for all the abstracted exercises, perhaps the most discernible loss of self-evidence for modernism's 'erase the traces!' imperative – and the one that is most readily felt in the present day – occurs when considered amidst the archiving function of the internet. The use of Brecht's phrase, today, maybe seems an unfortunate misstep placing the modernist perspective (which it has come to speak on behalf of) in opposition to a contemporary cultural reality. Rather than 'liv[ing] without memory', as Duchamp once desired, the internet has produced an archive environment in which history is readily available; and for those online, a portal to the past is accessible in the present. [21] And, as I want to discuss here, this phenomenon also informs one's contemporary relationship to time and temporality. As the critics Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund, in their book *The Contemporary Condition*, write: 'Our present is a present, we claim, characterised by contemporaneity in the sense that it is a present constituted by the bringing together of a multitude of different temporalities on different scales […]'; and 'Something has happened in our relation to time, how we exist in time, and the ways in which our conception of time relates to our conception of art.' [22]

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[20] 'Ben Lerner - 10:04', *The New York Public Library Podcast*, 36:21.
[21] Goldsmith cites Duchamp's desire to 'live without memory' in *Uncreative Writing*. Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 7.
[22] Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund, *The Contemporary Condition: Introductory Thoughts on Contemporaneity & Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 9, 13 respectively.

Thinking about "the archive", then: one might understand the archiving function of the internet to operate on two fronts – what might be (crudely) labelled the *encyclopedic* archive and the *personal* archive. The *encyclopedic* archive can be observed, for example, via a site like Wikipedia (as go-to online resource) which permits easy access to the history of art, politics, philosophy, scientific discoveries and/or natural disasters; making searchable the biographies of dictators, actors, athletes, artists and/or cartoon characters; providing a tool for academic research, earnest curiosity and/or idle time wasting. Wikipedia's collaborative openly editable model ensures it is always updating and evolving, and the ability to link between entries allows users to become online flâneurs drifting through time and history (and away from any given point of origin) with each click or finger tap. Streaming services such as Spotify can be interpreted as providing a similar platform for music listeners, offering a comprehensive (and expanding) collection of music from the past – the historicised, the forgotten and the yet to be discovered – next to music from the present, to be experienced side by side in one playlist. And YouTube picks up slack around Spotify and/or Wikipedia by offering an endlessly searchable well of content that is both radically contemporary and comprehensively historical. And this is just to mention three websites.

The *personal* archive, on the other hand, comes to the fore in the context of social media. While the real-time immediacy of updates in "the feed" is central to the use of social web, each post a user makes is simultaneously collected and compiled as part of a public "profile" to be viewed (or scrolled) after the fact. [23] Here, activity that was once *real-time* is dutifully logged, and experienced by friends and followers as having happened in the past from what would have been the future – a Facebook live video finds its place within the videos album of a user's profile, and your boyfriend's live-tweeting of *Question Time* is stumbled upon days later. The pervasiveness of social media may make the following observation seem silly (speaking to its position of self-evidence), but it is worth acknowledging that a Facebook profile is, ultimately, an archive of information on an individual and their past experiences. And the nature of the medium means that one's profile/archive is constantly accumulating data – each event attended, each page liked, each friend request accepted and each photo taken (and/or tagged in) is recorded and displayed. The same principle is true of Twitter and Instagram, albeit in a slightly more streamlined fashion. And old Myspace profiles or Tumblr blogs for which users no longer remember their passwords live on beyond their last login, the (often intimate) personal details which they contain still floating in the ether, filling server space and teeming in their potential to be (re)discovered. That Snapchat differentiated itself from its social media competitors by embracing a particular notion of ephemerality is perhaps telling of the centrality of "the archive" in web 2.0; of course, this is a model that has (predictably) been integrated into Instagram, and more recently Facebook.

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[23] The distinction between "the feed" and "the profile" is observed in: Rob Horning, 'Me Meme', *The New Inquiry*, 2014. https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/me-meme/. (3rd August, 2017).

Within the (social media) context of the personal archive, then, there is an embedded presence of the past, as well as a sense in which one's previous experience (no longer ephemeral and/or forgotten) becomes a text to engage with. And moreover, one's past activity can also be mobilised (often by the platforms, *not* the users themselves) with the potential to step out of joint and reappear in the present. Facebook's "memories" function delves into a user's personal archive and notifies them of posts shared on that date in the past, confronting users with their former selves in such a way that (depending on the day) might be kind of funny, relatively mundane or deeply traumatic. If a person signed up to Facebook in 2010, say, a random moment from the last seven years of their (online) life is liable to turn up in their timeline as a "memory" to be reckoned with. In presenting a user with images, status updates or friendships (without their permission) Facebook exerts a certain level of power, demonstrating the platform's active mobilizing of the past – more specifically, the mobilizing of the personal archives and past experiences of its users. This phenomenon seems to play out a little different on Twitter, where it is common for people to retweet themselves; as well as quote and/or reply to things they have tweeted previously. Here, the sense of mobilizing the past is not imposed by an algorithm but is consciously enacted by users. Responding to an old tweet might (only) be for humour – in which case both the time passed and a sense of knowing and/or performed ~arrogance is often crucial to the joke – but when such acts are understood as second nature, as they are within the language of Twitter, a particular relationship with time is on display too. The musicologist Elizabeth Newton offers this insight regarding the act of retweeting oneself,

More than just self-aggrandizement, retweeting one's own tweets makes public the processes of reconsideration and reflection that were, before social media, largely invisible. To retweet oneself is to say, "I gave it some thought, and I meant what I said." [24]

What seems to be important here is the way in which the original tweet is read (or re-read) in relation to the amount of time passed, and the way time itself comes to acquire an active semantic (meaning making) character – as mentioned, this can be equally true for the silly Twitter joke. For Newton, this phenomenon 'makes public the process of reconsideration and reflection' that took place in the interim period, and which is then read and understood to substantiate the initial claim. This passage, I think, does a good job in highlighting the subtle layers of meaning embedded into iterations of one 140-character tweet. And (again) the ability to engage with the past feels woven into the fabric of online interactions. Looking at a specific example: writer and editor Ayesha Siddiqi retweets herself with what seems like increasing regularity, often using time itself as a means to illustrate the ongoing oppression experienced by marginalised communities in the U.S. and beyond. For example: a few days ago (at the time of writing), having (I think) searched her own archive for each mention of *America*, Siddiqi shared a bunch of her own tweets from the last five

[24] Elizabeth Newton, 'Fierce Attachments', *Real Life*, 2016. http://reallifemag.com/fierce-attachments/. (3rd August, 2017).

years or so. Here are four examples:

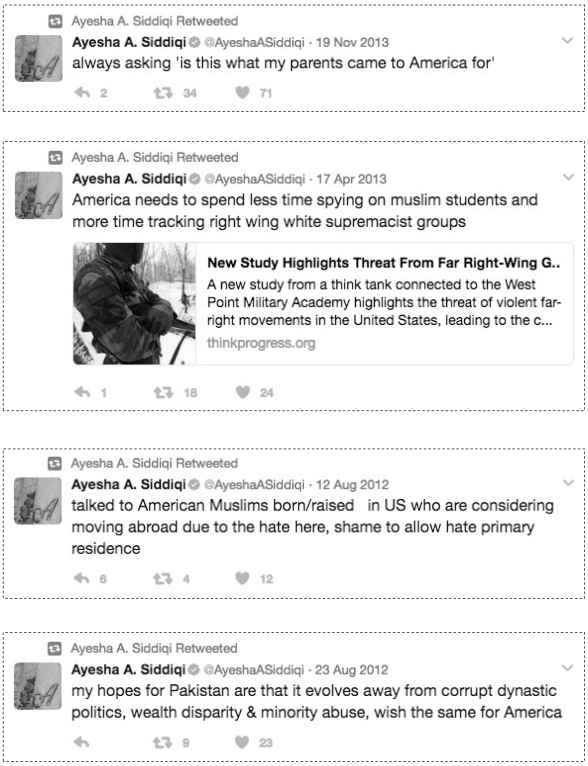

Fig. 1.2 Selected tweets by Ayesha Siddiqi

In 2017, these tweets are not ~eerie premonitions from the past but rather a voice of immigrant experience in America that has been (repeatedly) ignored. It is possible (I think) to get a sense of Siddiqi's intentions by looking to another tweet in which she wrote: 'rt'ing myself more like 'where were you' than 'I told you so' tho prolly only comes off as the latter'. [25] In embodying Newton's observation – that retweeting oneself is a (re)assertion of conviction in an initial statement over self-aggrandisement – but also going further, Siddiqi's acts of re-sharing make a reader consider the *weight* of time passed and simultaneously suggest the culpability of a media class (and others) that fails to represent voices from muslim communities in mainstream political discourse. [26] The (re)tweets also offer a poignant interruption to the narrative that things are (only now) *getting* really

[25] Ayesha A. Siddiqi, 'rt'ing myself more […]', *Twitter*, 2016. https://twitter.com/AyeshaASiddiqi/status/796589082302291968. (3rd August, 2017).

[26] The lack of representation of voices from marginalised communities within mainstream media (both historically and during the 2016 election) is a subject Siddiqi is outspoken on. And possibly most directly addressed in a handful of tweets posted on the day Trump's victory was announced: Ayesha A. Siddiqi, 'instead of being shocked and baffled just give me Chris Hayes job I'll help get you through it', *Twitter*, 2016. https://twitter.com/AyeshaASiddiqi/status/796210579799089152; Ayesha A. Siddiqi, 'actually don't want a pundits job, just the extinction of that as a class', Twitter, 2016. https://twitter.com/AyeshaASiddiqi/status/796221125113974785. (both: 3rd August, 2017).

bad. Indeed, on the day Donald Trump's presidential victory was announced, Siddiqi tweeted, 'I called the election last year bc I'm muslim, Trump won bc fear of muslims is the single experience left to be common to people in this age'; and 'you all didn't notice bc you don't care about the rising anti muslim sentiment, its not palpable to you. It has been for us'. [27] These two tweets feel like a direct assertion of a sentiment that is expressed (albeit less directly) in the (re)tweets cited above; as such, they seem helpful to consider in order to think about the layers of meaning that are forged and created in the act of (re)sharing.

Of course, the primary function of the retweet is to share the work of others. And (again) as old tweets are catalogued and searchable, the retweet button can become a powerful tool in dislodging tweets from their place in history. Following Trump's victory in the presidential election, a number of tweets made by the president-elect were pulled from the depths of Twitter's archive and began (re)circulating in the timeline. These tweets, originally posted in November 2012 after Barack Obama was re-elected for a second presidential term, declared, 'Our country is now in serious and unprecedented trouble…like never before'; and 'The electoral college is a disaster for a democracy.' [28] Read within the context of a 2016 timeline, the meaning of these tweets was transformed. The irony of the first is self-explanatory; the second makes sense given that Trump won the election, despite losing the public vote, thanks to his victory in the electoral college. Although ultimately little more than an absurd reminder of an absurd situation – a thing to retweet for those in lieu of anything else to say – these (re)tweets nevertheless represented a notable example of the mechanism of social media, the thoroughness of its archive and the phenomenon of the past's eternal return online.

What I am hoping to show with the above examples is that, for an individual living in the contemporary moment, to "live without memory" or to "blow up the past" struggles to align with an online environment in which the past and present exist on top of each other. The notion of 'erasing the traces' seems increasingly difficult given the inevitability of the archive, which (again) not only functions in terms of the web cataloguing history but also in relation to the ongoing documenting and recuperating of information on web users themselves. If it is not too on the nose given the title of this chapter, I turn to a line from the writer Rob Horning who observes: 'Now in the Internet era […] everything is traceable […]'. [29]

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[27] Ayesha A. Siddiqi, 'I called the […]', *Twitter*, 2016. https://twitter.com/AyeshaASiddiqi/status/796364923181797380; Ayesha A. Siddiqi, 'you all didn't […]', *Twitter*, 2016. https://twitter.com/AyeshaASiddiqi/status/796366291900645376. (both: 3rd August, 2017).
[28] Donald Trump, 'Our country is […]', *Twitter*, 2012. https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/266037143628038144; Donald Trump, 'The electoral college […]', https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/266038556504494082. (both: 3rd August, 2017).
[29] Rob Horning, 'Safe in Our Archives', *The New Inquiry*, 2013. https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/safe-in-our-archives/. (3rd August, 2017).

Not wanting to leave it there: it is also not simply the presence of the archive that seems to make the contemporary moment distinct. As noted at the beginning of this section, there is also a particular relation to time and temporality. What is perhaps *more* distinct to the contemporary moment, then, is one's routine interaction with the archive, and the mobilizing of a past no longer confined to static historical record. As I hope to have shown, disparate histories are liable to exist in the same moment, side by side within the same app, on the same screen. And as well, the authority (self-evidence) of chronologic time itself can feel undermined within the timelines of social media; with posts no longer displayed in the (real time) order in which they occurred, but rather in relation to an invisible and predetermined algorithmic formula. [30] As such, "time" is increasingly collapsed and reconstructed. And in this sense, *temporality* perhaps becomes a more useful word; *time* (arguably) signals an objectivity which is increasingly undermined. At this point, it feels useful to (re)consider Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund's suggestion that 'our present is a present characterised by contemporaneity'. With this in mind, then, the contemporary present might be approached in terms of an ability to experience multiple temporalities *contemporaneously*, and this would surely align with online experience as I have been discussing it.

Identity in (and through) the archive

In 2013, *Mute* magazine published Yuk Hui's 'Archivist Manifesto'; its very publication implying the prevalence of "the archive" within contemporary experience. [31] In the piece, Hui writes, 'We are archivists, since we have to be. We don't have choice. This decision is already made, or determined by the contemporary technological condition.' [32] If the role of a traditional archivist is to assess, organise, maintain and reinterpret information from the past, it is fair to say that online activity shares (at least some of) its practices. I am interested in thinking about web/social media users as archivists and the implication the previously discussed relationship with the past has on the construction of identities in the present, when the task of the online (personal) archivist is to assess, organise, maintain and reinterpret information on their own experiences. Rob Horning has written extensively about social media's relation to traditional notions of authenticity and conceptions of the self, and his writing (on which I am about to lean heavily) has been helpful to me during the research. It was Horning to whom I referred earlier in this chapter when discussing the distinction between the social media "feed" and "profile"; returning to the tension of that distinction, then, Horning writes,

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[30] This feels not too dissimilar from the fictional future proposed in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, in which the sanctity of time itself is co-opted and subsidised by the market economy and calendar years are renamed in accordance to their corporate sponsor: 'Year of Whopper' etc. David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (London: Abacus, 2007).

[31] Yuk Hui, 'Archivist Manifesto', *Metamute*, 2013. http://www.metamute.org/editorial/lab/archivist-manifesto. (3rd August, 2017).

[32] ibid.

Users generally behave as though social media are safe spaces to reveal the self as an imperfect work in progress, but these media typically compile a permanent archive of our "becoming," which negates its provisional nature. As much as the self *feels* uncontainable, yet it is contained. It becomes the user's problem to manage the tension between the static profile and the real-time experience of being a self in dynamic social-media feeds. How do users balance the freewheeling pursuit of immediacy, attention and salience within the network with the threat that it will all go on their permanent record? [33]

And, extending this idea further, Horning begins a later essay by posing the question: 'What happens when what is archived no longer seems to qualify as part of what is authentic about you?' [34] In a sense, these are the existential questions of the present. Yet, in attempting to answer these questions, I think it is worth thinking about the absorption of the intricacies of social media's practices as a language in which its users are increasingly fluent. In tracing Horning's observations, I want to think about the way this fundamental tension might today be assimilated intuitively into online interactions, and consider the way users might be implicitly answering these questions for themselves. I also am interested in how this fits into the shifting cultural landscape beyond the social media screen. Horning has written, 'The untenability of old notions of authenticity becomes more apparent the more one is entrenched in mediated social networks that archive data about a user.' [35] And similarly,

The tension between the archive and the feed puts pressure on "authenticity," which lingers on as a compass for the self. If one believes a unique "true self" exists, then the archive is always inauthenticating it, exposing contradictions, disproving its spontaneity, and undermining its supposed originality. [36]

At this point I think it is worth clarifying that I don't (really) know what "authenticity" means. I (obviously) accept it as denoting a particular set of ideas and conversations, but I would certainly struggle to offer a satisfactory definition; I might suggest something about the abstract sense, or projection, of an object's "realness" but that doesn't seem adequate. As such it is not a word that I usually find useful, except in its ability to mean anything and nothing all at once. But within Horning's many essays on and around the subject, I find the following passage to make the most sense: 'The idea of authenticity expresses something that never was — uncomplicated, self-evident

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[33] Rob Horning, 'Me Meme'.
[34] Rob Horning, 'Signs of ephemerality', *The New Inquiry*, 2015. https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/signs-of-ephemerality/. (3rd August, 2017).
[35] ibid.
[36] Rob Horning, 'Me Meme'

feelings, identities, experiences — as something that is understood as always already having been lost, in order to promise that we are on the cusp of reclaiming it'. [37]

I want to suggest that the passages quoted from Horning might in fact contain clues towards answering their own questions. A distinction between the archive and the feed (or, the past and present self) indeed puts pressure on "authenticity". But in that moment of contention – like a loss of self-evidence – a fissure of possibility might present itself, a space through which one might conceive of identity as unbound from, as Horning writes, 'old notions of authenticity'. And I think this contention can be beared out by scrolling one's timeline(s) too, as it seems online identities operate increasingly with a nuanced or detached (or even contradictory) approach to "authenticity" or "true self". Layers of falseness are, of course, invited into even the most earnest attempts to present a "true self" online; the creation of one's first social media profile is, in a lot of ways, a contemporary mirror stage (I'm sorry) – and like the baby looking in the mirror for the first time, there is (in that moment) a felt sense of the construction of a self that is other. [38] The conscious exaggeration of inauthentic selves or personas, then, is perhaps one way of sidestepping (or negotiating) social media's pressures of self-sharing which can often feel intrusive and/or burden-like.

On Twitter, one trend that might be understood in this regard is the "me" tweet (Fig. 1.3). These posts seem to signal a performance of a self, a character (or persona) that is both you and not you. [39] They demonstrate a capability to joke at one's own expense while also (maybe) channeling a hint of truth. And, in approaching identity without being overly precious, they seem to represent a playful acknowledgement of (and/or response to) the heightened sense of self that is produced by social media platforms. As well, these gestures of willingly reifying "the self" might be even read as small acts of ownership and/or resistance: asserting control over the vulnerability of one's identity amid its methodical digital recuperation, undermining the archival mechanisms of the medium. Like literature that employs extended writing techniques to make readers aware of "the book" and the physical sensation of reading, the slippery nature of identity might be foregrounded and made felt via performances of the self on social media. Without underestimating the self-consciousness social media can create, then, platforms like Twitter might also offer opportunities for users to own their

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[37] Rob Horning, 'Mass Authentic', *The New Inquiry*, 2016. https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/mass-authentic/. (3rd August, 2017).

[38] The 'mirror stage' is a term associated with psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and searching online I found this short but effective summary: '[…] Lacan proposes that human infants pass through a stage in which an external image of the body (reflected in a mirror, or represented to the infant through the mother or primary caregiver) produces a psychic response that gives rise to the mental representation of an "I".' John David Zuern, 'Lacan: The Mirror Stage', *CriticaLink*, 1998. http://www.english.hawaii.edu/criticalink/lacan/index.html. (1st September, 2017).

[39] I think part of the "joke" exists within the gap between the irl self and the self that is archived. And the ambiguity of where the "me" in question sits within those two poles might provide a dramatic (or comedic) tension… there are, of course, few things worse than a person who explains jokes and I am sorry.

Fig. 1.3 Examples of "me" tweets

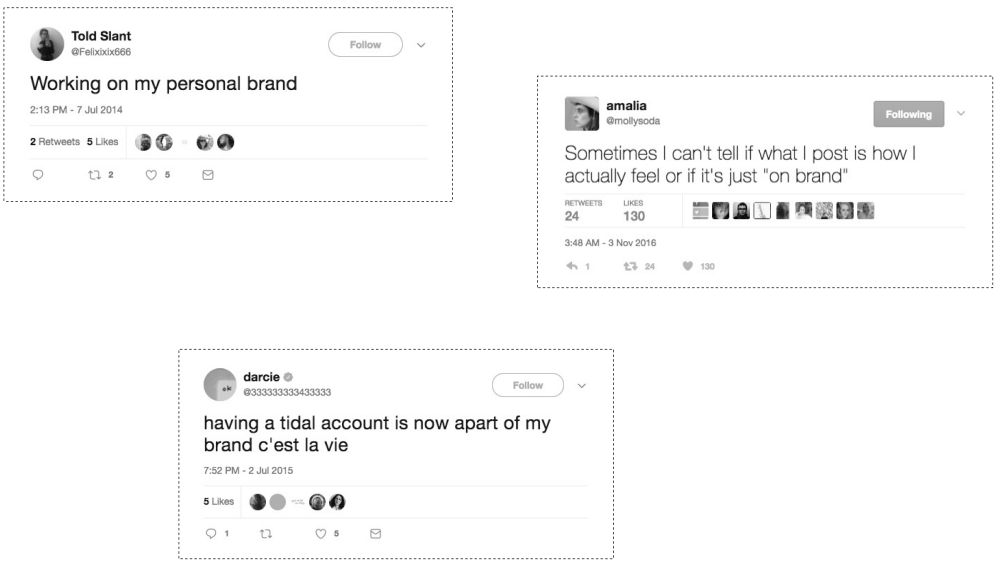

Fig. 1.4 Examples of "personal brand" tweets

vulnerability. Rob Horning approaches this in the fittingly titled essay 'Social media as masochism', and there is something (I think) about finding ways to mine strength from a situation that might harm you. Horning writes,

> […] the humiliation potentially inherent in sharing can evoke a sharp psychic pain of vulnerability that overwhelms itself. Sharing also figures as a gesture of seizing control of the moment in which pain and humiliation will be administered, and the anxiety can also be diverted to a "fantasy" version of the self that is being elaborated in online platforms and thereby disavowed. (The online self, the avatar, is vulnerable, not me — even if that avatar bears my real name and I occasionally identify with it fully and proudly.) [40]

In a related example, it is common to see/hear people refer to their "personal brand" while discussing their activity online; this is usually understood to mean a loose set of rules or parameters that might guide the way one expresses or visualises themselves on-or-offline (Fig. 1.4). A personal brand is an avowal that seems to acknowledge the way content shared on social media is interwoven with the construction of one's online identity, as well as a gesture that can be both calculated and playful. [41] This conflation of *professional* language with *recreational* social media use is (of course) an ironic "joke" that openly situates the self in close proximity to products and commodities, in such a way that would traditionally be unthinkable in regard to 'old notions of authenticity'; but, as well, it seems to be a subtle acknowledgement of the unfortunate reality of that sentiment. Within a gig economy – a term that refers to contemporary working conditions, which (in lieu of traditional employment) require people to negotiate multiple short term or commission based employments – there is a collapsing distinction between free-time and labour. Individuals might feel they are (at least to some extent) always working, regularly on the lookout for new opportunities and therefore consistently presenting a veneer of employability. In this sense, social media no longer functions merely as "recreational" and the reality of presentations of self-as commodity, or self-as-entrepreneur, often feel inescapable. [42] There is a quote from artist and writer Hito Steyerl that I think about often, and which seems to capture this dynamic and articulate the pressures it can impose: 'If the factory is everywhere, then there is no longer a gate by which to leave it— there is no way to escape relentless productivity.' [43]

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[40] Rob Horning, 'Social media as masochism', *The New Inquiry*, 2016. https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/social-media-as-masochism/. (3rd August, 2017).

[41] I asked the artist Grace Denton how she would describe an online brand and she replied: 'a set of rules or parameters for the way in which you express or visualise yourself online? … maybe … and it's kind of ironically referring to marketing speak.'

[42] What *employability* looks like can vary and may not be about a traditional professionalism, with *amateur* bloggers or Twitter users often becoming *industry experts* – I am thinking here of something like The Needle Drop: Anthony Fantano, *The Needle Drop*, 2015. http://www.theneedledrop.com/. (3rd August, 2017).

[43] Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 110.

Pressures of 'relentless productivity', and its manifestation on social media, might be understood within the socio-economic paradigm of neoliberalism. Since (at least) the late 1980s, neoliberalism has been the dominant form of government enacted in the West. Professor David Harvey describes neoliberalism as '[…] a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms […]'. [44] And similarly, professor Aihwa Ong writes that neoliberalism is the mode of '[…] government of free individuals who are then induced to self-manage according to market principles of discipline, efficiency, and competitiveness.' [45] While often positioned as progressive, the neoliberal idea of giving individuals the autonomy to 'self-manage' typically (and insidiously) produces a situation in which those in positions of power – governments, corporations, employers etc. – are able to neglect the needs of individuals. In a culture guided by the market logic of 'discipline, efficiency, and competitiveness', individuals are reimagined as 'market actors' (as political theorist Wendy Brown notes) and left to take care of themselves. [46] For instance, the 'right to buy' housing act, implemented by the Conservative government in the UK during the 1980s, seems like a defining neoliberal moment. [47] Under the auspices of autonomy and empowerment, an ideological position was (subtly) established in which the notion of council housing became demonised and replaced by an aspirational logic of the market – for example, with rhetoric that proposed ownership as a 'very basic right'. [48] In effect, the expectation of the government to provide housing (and social care) diminished as the conversation turned to the way "power" had been transferred to the public, who in turn were now understood as owners of property and active 'market actors'.

As mentioned, I am interested in thinking about the way (seemingly innocuous) social media use interacts with the cultural landscape beyond the screen. And indeed the internet, and social media in particular with its atomised individuality and its deference to a quantifiable "market" economy of friends, followers, likes, shares, favs and retweets, can feel very neoliberal. Online rhetoric that promotes one's freedom to make connections via a decentralised cultural network can feed a recognizable aspirational logic, but as well has a flipside in which anyone struggling to keep up can feel increasingly isolated. And the (emotional) labour required to "excel" online is rarely mentioned alongside the fruits of which that labour produces. [49] Rob Horning directly discusses the effects of a

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[44] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.
[45] Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 4.
[46] Elias Isquith, 'Neoliberalism poisons everything: How free market mania threatens education — and democracy', *Salon*, 2015. http://www.salon.com/2015/06/15/democracy_cannot_survive_why_the_neoliberal_revolution_has_freedom_on_the_ropes/. (3rd August, 2017).
[47] Andy Beckett, 'The right to buy: the housing crisis that Thatcher built', *The Guardian*, 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/aug/26/right-to-buy-margaret-thatcher-david-cameron-housing-crisis. (8th August, 2017).
[48] ibid.
[49] I think about this a lot too in relation to the way the rhetoric of do-it-yourself culture (particularly in the internet age) can at times instill a similar condition which infers: "the only thing stopping a person from "doing it" is themselves" – conveniently overlooking a host of determining factors which continue to influence the way creative

neoliberal reality on individuals within social media in the essay 'Mass Authentic', writing,

> […] to cope with a fully marketized society saturated with competition at every level, we become malleable selves perpetually trying to expand our human capital and make our identity productive. […] Neoliberalism's fusion with authenticity has found its full flowering in social media, where enormous quantities of labor are volunteered and harnessed, and self-presentation is foregrounded as entrepreneurial human capital development. [50]

Returning to the notion of one's "personal brand": while perhaps not an explicit response, to wryly acknowledge a brand does feel like a subtle reaction to the impositions faced by the contemporary (neoliberal) subject. On some level, recognizing one's "brand" seems to be a deadpanned acknowledgement of the inability 'to escape relentless productivity' within social media, given its entangled with – and (in many ways) its perpetuation of – a neoliberal cultural logic that prioritises the currency of human capital. I think again about the willing reification of "the self" discussed previously in this regard too. Of course, admitting one's personal brand does little to fix the situation, and there is surely a case of one having their cake and eating it too. But, circling back around to the way layers of meaning are produced and understood online, I wonder if such utterances might be understood in terms of a certain candidness (despite their cloak of ~irony) that begins to build a connective language of shared experience with others in the same position; within what Ben Lerner calls 'the materials of the present' (social media and its "inauthenticity", in this instance) one might uncover potentials for new forms of communication. In the examples previously discussed (me tweets and one's personal brand), meaning seems to be communicated and understood at the point of reception by a reader who might intuitively identify a similar impulse, of wanting to participate in social media without altogether ignoring their compromised position within it. And it is in these small moments of connection and *shared*ness that the individualism of neoliberalism might be undermined, albeit subtly and fleetingly. These small acts of resistance, then, seem to demonstrate that users are not wholly unaware of the politics of the networks they frequent. Of course, those politics do need to be reckoned with and – I plan to return to this later in this chapter, but – it is worth remembering that social media platforms are corporations, and any activity which takes place within them is ultimately subsumed to their (corporate) interests. Rob Horning writes,

> […] [social media] users believe they are consumers but are in fact are [sic] the product, a packaged and labeled audience being sold to marketers, the real "users" of ad-supported social media. Or worse, users are both the product *and* the labor making the product, all for the benefit of the social-

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industries operate, and allowing the pressure to fall on (or be internalised within) the individual artist and/or music maker. As such, for those who feel on the outside, the whole process can seem as mysterious as ever (if not more so).

[50] Rob Horning, 'Mass Authentic'.

media companies — the owners of the current means of identity production. This means we are not merely deluded but also exploited when we think of ourselves as "consuming" social media. [51]

One thing that seems to confuse things, making this assessment difficult to adequately respond to (despite its absolute plausibility), is the reality of ongoing social media use. In a way, the thing I am tracing at this stage of the thesis – the way individuals participate in social media, in spite of its flaws – does not stop at this realization, it goes elsewhere. And (as noted previously) I am interested primarily in thinking about the (perhaps paradoxical) way in which these conflicts seem to be responded to within online activity itself. My position here, then, feels aligned to that of media theorist Geert Lovink who, in an essay for *e-flux*, observes: 'Contradictory consciousness-management has superseded social anxiety about Bad Faith. This has long been the thesis of Slavoj Žižek. Let's work on this thesis and take seriously the cynical statement "They know what they do, but they do it anyway" and apply this to social media.' [52] With this in mind, one last example: in an essay titled 'Signs of ephemerality' Horning writes,

By housing so much personal data, networks […] make it plain that all the archived information about us feed directly into our efforts to capitalize on our sociality—to turn our social connections and everyday personal behavior into marketable assets. This makes any behavior that gets archived get perceived as self-interested and thus contrived and inauthentic — we are only doing it to gain advantage, not because it is "who we really are." Ephemerality emerges as an alternative to neoliberal human-capital building, to the construction of identity as something that is wholly marketized. [53]

The idea of ephemerality starkly diverges from the permanence of the archive, and – while at one time, as Horning notes, '[…] ephemerality was unremarkable, as virtually everything about our everyday lives was ephemeral […]' – today it is a (somewhat) novel concept. [54] Moments of fleeting transience seem incompatible with the pervading logic of the internet as I have been discussing it; but Horning, in offering ephemerality as 'an alternative to neoliberal human-capital building', is interested in thinking about how such moments might be communicated online. Later in the piece he writes, 'Ephemerality now needs to [be] *signified*, in the face of its threatened disappearance. Thus, what is taken as ephemeral may have nothing to do with actual ephemerality, actual disappearance.' [55] Within social media, then, ephemerality (for Horning) becomes interpreted in terms of a kind of semiotics of '"disinterestedness"':

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[51] ibid.
[52] Geert Lovink, 'On the Social Media Ideology', *e-flux*, 2016. http://www.e-flux.com/journal/75/67166/on-the-social-media-ideology/. (3rd August, 2017).
[53] Rob Horning, 'Signs of ephemerality'.
[54] ibid.
[55] ibid.

If something about your self-representation in a situation conveys the spirit of ephemerality — of obsolescence, of a future going-out-of-fashion, of disposability, of irreverence or unseriousness, etc [— it] may allow the person signifying the ephemerality to feel "in the moment" and others to attribute "disinterestedness" to what they are doing, making the person seem as though they are "being real." [56]

This quote resonates with my own experience of social media, and I certainly recognise a sense of disinterestedness, aloofness or performed indifference as fairly ubiquitous within my timelines. This feigning of indifference does not seem to be explainable in terms of simple cynicism, for it is common for someone to adopt this tone when discussing something of significance which they are (clearly) committed to – the release of an album, new job, academic success etc. One subtle way this disinterestedness seems to manifest itself is in the use of lower case letters (exclusively) when typing, or an aestheticised irreverence to grammar. The writer Laur M. Jackson observes a 'jadedness' in emergent online language as distinct from previous iterations of netspeak, and writes: 'There is an aestheticised edge, a jadedness that wasn't there before. Questions have periods. Statements have question marks. […] When punctuation and you-versus-u is no longer a matter of labor saving, there opens up opportunity for new meanings and inflection.' [57] It is the 'new meanings and inflection' that I am driving at here; and while there is (of course) something paradoxical about using social media to signal one's disinterestedness towards social media, it is (in a lot of ways) precisely those paradoxes that I am interested in. One way to interpret the performance of indifference online (I think) is in terms of an irreverence to the archive, to that which will be recuperated and come to represent "you". In this case, thinking again about the archive's entanglement with the logic of neoliberalism (as described by Horning), a performed indifference might equally signal one's resistance to the 'relentless productivity' of human-capital building. And while the use of social media to communicate this point is (admittedly) paradoxical, I think the user is often mindful of the paradox and as such lets its tension provide another layer of meaning: a signaling of the feeling of futility regarding the inevitable recuperation of one's experience as digital representation online. So, rather than devaluing the sentiment, communicating one's irreverence through the medium of social media (in fact) might provide a way of further articulating one's experience of "the self" within the paradox of social media itself. Horning writes,

Deploying ephemerality as a sign is a way of signaling a lack of investment in one's signaling choices; it attempts to convey you're more important than any such superficial indicators, that something essential but unsignified about the self is pointed to (or even defined) by the foregrounded ephemera. But the very use of signs of ephemerality suggests an investment in the procedures of signaling the self, even as the signal is "I'm not so deeply invested in what I am

[56] ibid.
[57] Laur M. Jackson, 'E•MO•JIS', *Real Life*, 2016. http://reallifemag.com/e-mo-jis/. (3rd August, 2017).

signaling right now." [58]

The last sentence here seems crucial to me: while it may not seem particularly radical to some, the ability to communicate "I'm not so deeply invested in what I am signaling right now" is meaningful in relation to interactions within platforms explicitly built around mediated experience – mining ways to penetrate that landscape (at least some degree) seems powerful. Of course, the signaled ephemerality required to do this might be performed and/or inauthentic but again, rather than discounting the interjection, this (to me) simply encourages alternative ways to think about performed or inauthentic gestures, as well as paradoxes or contradictions themselves. In *The Art of Cruelty*, Maggie Nelson writes, '[…] even when art produces the sensation of having presented something "as it really is," it does so by means of focus and artifice—or, rather, by a complicated procedure one could describe as using artifice to strip artifice of artifice.' [59] I enjoy the poetry and playfulness of that phrase and 'using artifice to strip artifice of artifice' seems relevant not just to this example, but to each of the examples I have considered in this section; bringing together the way in which the "inauthenticity" of social media is negotiated (and embodied) in order to produce something beyond itself.

It is fascinating how the signaling of ephemerality manages to communicate a sense of the very thing it omits. What seems important is that the prerequisite upon which this communication is built, and upon which those signs become signified, is a level of identification with the impulse behind its use from an audience online. The intricacies of what is signaled or implied through a semiotics of ephemerality are understood (and appear to resonate) through a seemingly intuitive sense of "getting it" by others who might feel in the same boat. On display again, then, seems to be a sense of shared understanding forming the basis for communication and connectivity. And the way in which this *shared*ness reappears, and is tapped into in with increasing sophistication, suggests that its possibilities as a language might be exponential. For example, a recent tweet stated: 'when you accidentally type a capital letter at the beginning of a sentence [with a stock image of man, sat in front of a desktop computer, with head in hands captioned: oh no my aloof and uninterested yet woke and humorous aesthetic]' (Fig. 1.5). [60] As mentioned, typing in all lower-case letters is one subtle way of implying indifference (and indeed might be a part of a user's "personal brand"). This tweet manages to fold that particular 'sign of ephemerality' in on itself; and that it received (at the time of writing) 100,000 favs and 45,000 retweets speaks to the meaning it communicated and/or signified and the shared experience(s) into which it tapped.

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[58] Rob Horning, 'Signs of ephemerality'.
[59] Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (New York : W.W. Norton & Co., 2011), 96.
[60] Patrick W Charlton, 'when you accidentally […]', *Twitter*, 2017. https://twitter.com/PatrickCharlto5/status/846179708765130763. (3rd August, 2017).

Fig. 1.5 Patrick W Charlton on Twitter

The double-bind

In discussing emergent and mutating forms of communication as it exists online without (necessarily) making a case for any of these things as innately *good* or *bad*, I have been interested in thinking about the subtle layers of meaning present within moments of (online) connectivity; approaching this phenomenon as valuable in and of itself. [61] This perspective is (in part) a conscious response to conservative criticisms of social media's narcissism as well as liberal misgivings about its futility, and as such I am attempting to navigate a discussion that does not pass judgement nor fall into that largely unhelpful binary. In this sense, I think a lot about a short lecture given by Ayesha Siddiqi at the 2015 conference *Superscript: Arts Journalism and Criticism in a Digital Age*. [62] In the lecture, Siddiqi observes the way angst around social media is often expressed by (as she puts it) 'people that the rest of the world has been pretty kind to', going on to say:

[61] Having written this passage, I realised that I am echoing the sentiments of online platform, *Real Life* – whose *about* section states: 'By publishing writers who may not think of themselves as tech writers but are acutely aware of how they use and are used by their devices, we hope to make room for a wider, better understanding of the web as something neither good nor bad, neither net negative nor net positive, but human in all the weirdness and complexity of that word.' Nathan Jurgenson, 'About Real Life', *Real Life*, 2016. http://reallifemag.com/dispatches/editors-letter. (3rd August, 2017).

[62] Walker Art Centre, 'Superscript 2015: Ayesha Siddiqi', 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzi3n826zb8. (3rd August, 2017).

[…] the people that have almost the greatest investment in these spaces, and spend a great deal of time on them, are people that the rest of the world isn't that friendly to. And it was initially a space to escape the daily hostilities and aggressions and, of course, for people of color, people who aren't straight, queer, gay, LGBTQ communities, these are really vital developments. Our ability to produce and establish community, our ability to connect, the way it's been facilitated for the social web, has in fact changed many lives. [63]

When discussing the possibilities of shared experience online, then, it feels important to acknowledge that the most pertinent (and valuable) example one has is often the use of social media by historically marginalised communities. In the lecture, Siddiqi cites the way communities emerged on Tumblr (and other blog platforms) around shared experiences of mental health. As a person with a Tumblr account for several years, I observed this phenomenon too; it felt (to me) both powerful and eye-opening to witness first-hand accounts of real people dealing openly with mental health, but with also a wide range of lived experiences that are typically overlooked in mainstream discourse. [64] As Siddiqi asserts, these online communities can be life-giving, making visible sites of shared experience that have typically been less public. In a conversation between Siddiqi and comedian Aamer Rahman (cited a lot in the thesis' prologue), the pair discuss the critical importance of these spaces,

Ayesha Siddiqi: So much of what people want to criticise the internet for is, for me, some of the most encouraging and optimistic developments for society. The ability…

Aamer Rahman: What you said before about having a space where people around the world can actually share experiences and, um… I mean… I think it's two things: 1) it's great, just again, for people to validate each other, like 'oh this happened to me too'. And then also [2)] it really demystifies racism as well because sometimes when you're on the receiving end it seems so… I mean, not to downplay how huge racism is, but when you start to see how predictable it is around the world... And some of the hashtags people generate, and some of the comedy that's done on the internet to really mock the fact that racism is such an old… it's just such an old tool that reproduces itself, and is so predictable at times. I think that's something amazing.

Ayesha Siddiqi: Right. I mean the work to be done is exposing the patterns.

Aamer Rahman: Right.

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[63] ibid, 4:23.

[64] I also encountered discussions of cultural theory removed from its (sometimes) clinical iterations within academic institutions, and it would not be overstating the point to say that a large part of my critical perspectives have been learned and/or signposted from encountering discussions on Tumblr, and later Twitter.

Ayesha Siddiqi: Because racism has looked the same for centuries. It's not anything new that we're commenting on, it's exposing the fact that these… exist repetitively again and again… towards us. And, you know, the ability to recognise those experiences for what they are, and also the ability of Twitter and Tumblr as platforms that quite literally quantify that validation, that immediately invoke your membership in a crowd, is incredibly strengthening for community...

Aamer Rahman: Absolutely. [65]

In discussing social media, then, I am hesitant to overlook the significance of these moments; cautious of being drawn into a totalizing narrative regarding social media narcissism and the political ennui of (so-called) generation-me. And yet, the politics of these online networks do need to be reckoned with. The public-ness of social media platforms means their *positives* can simultaneously become problematised. Later in the *Superscript* lecture, Siddiqi discusses how the visibility connected to one's social capital within these platforms often results in the same forms of abuse one might have gone online to avoid in the first place – trans/non-binary people, communities of colour and other marginalised groups which 'the rest of the world isn't that friendly to' become both more visible *and* more vulnerable. As such, Siddiqi is at pains to reiterate that social media platforms are not 'bastions of democracy', but instead corporate spaces prone to replicating the same oppressions and hostilities that have historically taken place (and continue to take place) in the real world. [66] While plainly demonstrating her appreciation for aspects of these platforms, then, the primary concern of Siddiqi's lecture is to reiterate the reality of these platforms as corporations. As noted previously, one way to think about social media users is as an unpaid labour force, generating content and (economic) value for the big corporations of Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr etc. – again, social media activity is always subsumed by corporate interest. With clinical urgency, Siddiqi warns 'we're increasingly mistaking visibility for power'; shrewdly interrupting any critical position drawn towards a potential utopianism of online culture. [67] Siddiqi observes that in participating in social media – again as a result of the public-ness of online communication – users are,

[…] at ever increasing rates, teaching corporations to be more efficient at advertising to us […] inviting them to take even more detailed… essentially, you know… snapshots of the ways in which people are making their community and mimic those patterns in order to better advertise to us. [68]

The double bind of online activity, then, feels inescapable. The contrasting positions laid out here each feel true and, when thinking about the social web, to discuss one and not the other feels

[65] 'Vol. 2: You're Not Crazy', *Pushing Hoops with Sticks* (2015), 31:27. (3rd August, 2017).
[66] Walker Art Centre, 'Superscript 2015: Ayesha Siddiqi', 16:30.
[67] ibid, 3:49.
[68] ibid, 14:50.

disingenuous. At this stage of the thesis I think it is important (actually) to draw attention to the reality of these two conclusive yet opposing diagnoses; rather than immediately seeking to reconcile their oppositions, I am interested in letting the reality of their uneasy coexistence sink in, leaving space for their contradictions to be fully encountered and/or felt (at least for now). With the preceding discussions in mind, it feels not simple nor straightforward to disregard online activity on account of its proximity to capital and/or corporate interest; this unsettling phenomenon seems to haunt social media use (as I hope to have shown). By leaving this double bind acknowledged but unresolved, the remaining sections of this chapter might be understood to exist without the stable footing of the online activity and communication they attempt to discuss – this (I guess) is a subtle attempt on my part to allow a sense of contemporary uncertainty to infiltrate one's experience of the text itself.

The politics of sharedness

When it comes to sharedness online, it would be remiss not to mention memes (Fig. 1.6). It can be quite difficult to define what a meme actually *is*. The term was coined by biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976 to refer to 'an idea, behaviour or style that spreads from person to person within a culture'; in Dawkins' case, within the context of evolutionary natural selection. [69] In an essay for online platform *aqnb*, the artist and poet Manuel Arturo Abreu cites Dawkins' claim that 'memes are to culture what genes are to biology', before going on to specify,

> […] the term 'meme' has a more specific use in the context of digital culture: it refers to humorous online images — generally with text — combining one or more references to current events, cultural styles, or even older memes before them. [70]

This is still kind of vague, but while memes might be (necessarily) tricky to pin down – manifesting themselves in different forms online – they are often meeting points of experience, and as such feel symptomatic of a communicative online language. One thing that does seem specific to memes is that they are often created with the intent of being reimagined and (re)shared. The artist and writer Aria Dean, in her essay 'Poor Meme, Rich Meme', suggests, '[…] the meme finds its home only in this circulation — its true content is the many bumps and bruises that have occurred along the way. It is a copy without an original — a copy of a copy of a copy, and so forth.' [71] It should be

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[69] As described in: Olivia Solon, 'Richard Dawkins on the internet's hijacking of the word 'meme'', *WIRED UK*, 2013. http://www.wired.co.uk/article/richard-dawkins-memes. (3rd August, 2017).

[70] Manuel Arturo Abreu, 'Dead or alive: post-Zuxit meme art + the end of weird Facebook with Gangster Popeye', *aqnb*, 2017. http://www.aqnb.com/2017/03/20/gangster-popeye/. (3rd August, 2017).

[71] Aria Dean, 'Poor Meme, Rich Meme', *Real Life*, 2016. http://reallifemag.com/poor-meme-rich-meme/. (3rd August, 2017). I think (again) here about the notion of a sense of sharedness that is exponential: a meme's meaning accumulate with each new iteration, memes are combined and recycled, and new memes emerge from a (seemingly) endless collective imagination – all perhaps contributing to an ever-escalating sense of exponentiality.

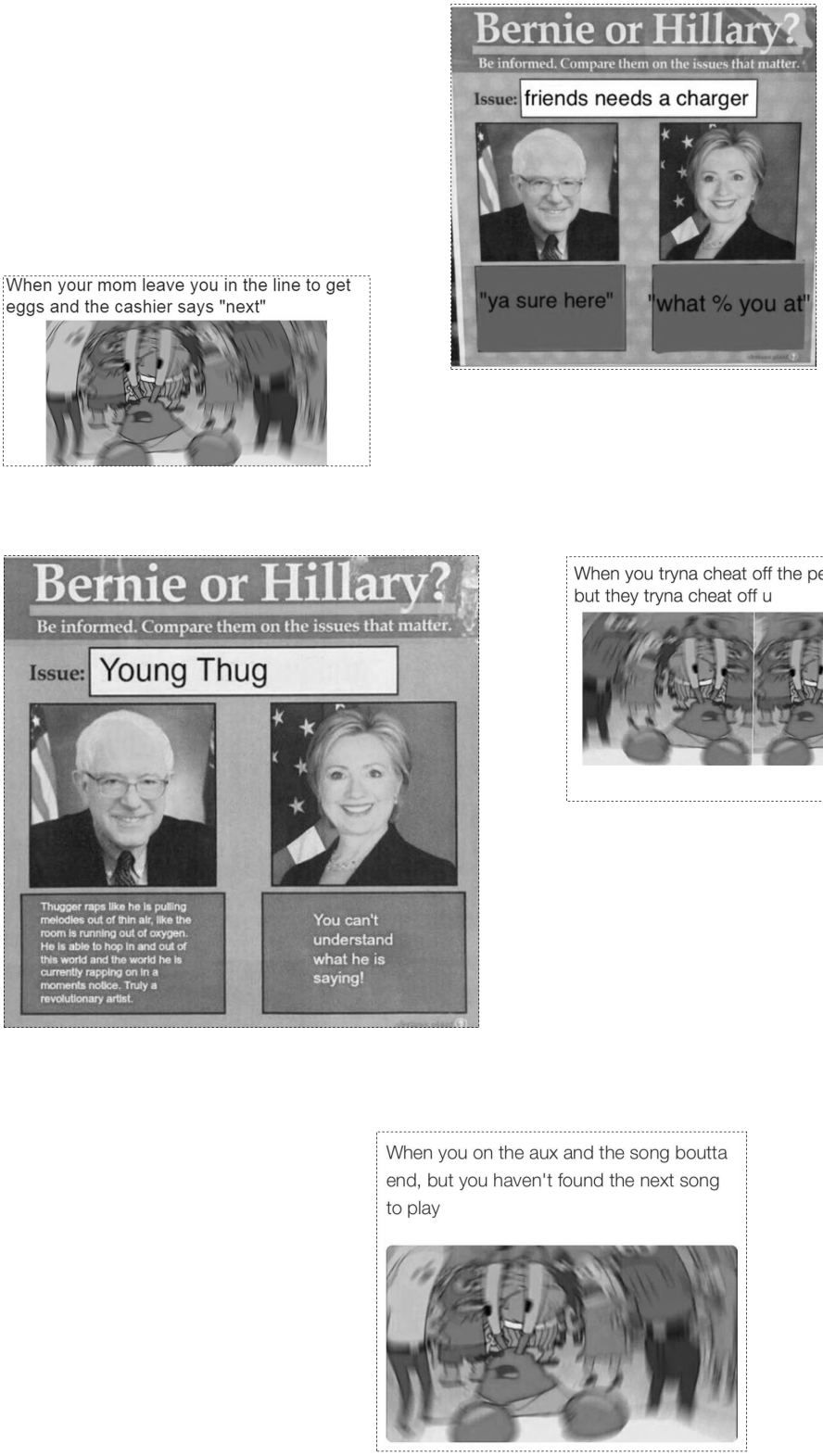

Fig. 1.6 Examples of memes and their reimagining(s)

acknowledged that many popular memes originate from within black communities on social media; and, as such, when speaking of memes, it is important to speak about blackness. The writer Laur M. Jackson proposes 'blackness as the living tissue of memes', and Aria Dean (having cited Jackson's words) similarly suggests that memes constitute 'a black collective being.' [72] Dean also writes: '[…] we might say that, at this point in time, the most concrete location we can find for this collective being of blackness is the digital, on social media platforms in the form of viral content — perhaps most importantly, memes.' [73] Recognizing the centrality of blackness to online meme culture, then, is important when, as Jackson observes elsewhere, memes often operate as 'the metonym for internet culture at large'. [74] And indeed, for Jackson, a meme's blackness has to do with more than just its content.

One thing important to note: it is a worthwhile reminder for someone (like me) observing black communities from the outside that blackness is not a monolithic cultural experience, and it is important not to reduce it as such (particularly, in the face of historical media representation that can do just that). Blackness is made up of a multitude of diverse ethnicities and experiences and, indeed, online content from one person does not necessarily immediately resonate with another. It is a thin line to walk when making this point however, and I would not want it to be misconstrued. There are countless experiences specific to individuals of the African diaspora living within a white supremacist culture that continues to denigrate their existence, experiences which will be understood intrinsically across many cultural traditions – and as Ayesha Siddiqi observed, the internet and social media as a site for sharing such experiences has proved invaluable.

In an essay titled 'The Blackness of Meme Movement', Jackson writes,

Memes not only contain components of Black language, gravitate towards a Black way of speaking, *but in their survival* latch onto Black cultural modes of improvisation to move through space and subsist in an ultra-competitive visual-verbal environment. Simply said: the way memes change, adapt, fold into themselves, make old like new… their movement looks very very Black. [75]

Expanding on this passage a little, the 'modes of improvisation' which memes latch onto can be understood as historically embedded within African diasporic experience, as a result of having been **kidnapped** and forced to adapt to (and find survival strategies within) a culture built around their

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[72] Laur M. Jackson, 'The Blackness of Meme Movement', *Model View Culture*, 2016. https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/the-blackness-of-meme-movement. (3rd August, 2017). Aria Dean, 'Poor Meme, Rich Meme'.
[73] Aria Dean, 'Poor Meme, Rich Meme'.
[74] Lauren Michelle Jackson, 'Meme merge', *In Media Res*, 2016. http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2016/09/05/meme-merge. (3rd August, 2017).
[75] Laur M. Jackson, 'The Blackness of Meme Movement'.

oppression. Of course, improvisation is a cornerstone to many African diasporic musics, yet the deeper implication here (I think) concerns an intuitive fluidity and adaptability to new environments that is woven into African diasporic consciousness. And it is in this regard that, as Jackson observes, the *movement* of memes begins to look 'very very Black'. Again, tracing a similar path, Aria Dean evokes Afrofuturist discourse when considering the way black culture thrives online:

Not only is blackness broadly attracted to the internet, technology, and the future at large […] but the internet is a prime condition for black culture to thrive. What makes for this condition? Some, like Kodwo Eshun and John Akomfrah, say that the African diaspora prefigures digital networks in its effects on bodies and subjectivities. We, as black people, are no strangers to the alienation of a mediated selfhood. We have much experience with mass surveillance, a condition that the white avant-garde would have us believe is a recent development in state control. The diaspora is "a precursor to the post-industrial drive toward fluxes and deterritorialization," as British Afrofuturists claim, meaning that blackness was always ahead of its time, always already a networked culture and always already dematerialized, thanks to the Middle Passage. [76]

Now, it is important to include this quote, as it exposes the shortcomings of some of my previous assertions in this chapter: my argument has been guilty of inferring that a heightened level of self-awareness is particular to the social media age, and this is (ultimately) a very white cishet male outlook. This observation from Dean requires me to step outside of my particular set of privileges, and reckon with my own blind spot. It is vital to be aware that any "emerging" discourse surrounding "temporality" and/or "mediated identities" is prefigured and internalized within the experience of African diasporic communities. In many ways, what I am/have been speaking to is the condition of a wider (*whiter*) discourse which is, only now, catching up with the African diaspora. In an essay that discusses potential similarities between Afrofuturism and the world of *hauntology*, the writer Mark Fisher frames the conversation like this:

Put bluntly, we might say that postmodernity and hauntology [and in the context of this chapter I suggest the internet, its archive and social media] confront "white" culture with the kind of temporal disjunction that has been constitutive of the Afrodiasporic experience since Africans were first abducted by slavers and projected from their own lifeworld into the abstract space-time of Capital. Far from being archaic relics of the past, slaves were thus already in the future. [77]

Rebuilding an argument from here, then, it is worth acknowledging that a fundamental problem with colour-blind white supremacist cultural discourse is the way it (insidiously) erases the

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[76] Aria Dean, 'Poor Meme, Rich Meme'.
[77] Mark Fisher, 'The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology', *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture*, 5/2 (2013), 42 to 55, (46).

experiences and cultural labour of marginalised communities, and co-opts culturally-specific modes of communication. And within the online sharing economy of social media, this phenomenon can feel accelerated. One might think about the way African American Vernacular English (AAVE) – a vocabulary used within African diasporic communities – begins to travel beyond its original context and enter non-black spaces online, within which it may be understood as (or reduced to) mere "internet slang". In a sense, this might be evidence of Jackson's reading of memes as 'the metonym for internet culture at large', only at work in reverse: if memes are synonymous with internet culture, and black culture synonymous with memes, there is a tricky moment in which black vernaculars are severed from their original context, and deferred to a deracialised vocabulary of "the internet". And indeed, Jackson herself has observed the way black vernaculars often attain a cultural currency not dissimilar to memes themselves: '[…] Black language itself works as a sort of metastasized meme, seized by non-Black entities and replicated (not so clumsily, anymore) to gain access to a kind of mass appealing Cool.' [78]

Fig. 1.7 Brandon Wardell on Twitter

In Jackson's original piece, the line '(not so clumsily, anymore)' links to a tweet by the comedian Brandon Wardell, which read: 'when u get ur whip game proper* [/] *ur friend andy let u borrow his jetta for a day [with a selfie of Wardell behind the wheel of a car]' (Fig. 1.7). While the tweet is kind of ambiguous, Wardell seems to reference black vernacular language with a level of self-awareness that is neither mocking the vocabulary nor naively claiming it as his own. The joke (I

[78] Laur M. Jackson, 'The Blackness of Meme Movement'.

think) lies in the publicly performed act of co-option which acknowledges the problematic nature of appropriated language, making Wardell himself the punchline of the joke while simultaneously elevating him above it – so 'not so clumsily anymore' feels fitting. The power dynamic, then, of a young white comedian "explaining" black vernacular language is a little uncomfortable. But as well, one thing this draws attention to is that, co-opted and centered within white experience, the use of black vernacular language tends to signify a level of "intelligence" or "worldliness" emboldening one's cultural capital. And indeed, whenever AAVE is appropriated in this way there is a subtle but discernible sense of *choosing* to slip into another dialect. Crucially however, the culture of whiteness which makes this possible has also historically punished African diasporic communities for their use of the exact same language. In its original context, AAVE is routinely regarded as "incorrect" English and is ideologically weaponised to signify historically derogatory stereotypes of blackness (i.e. unintelligence or primitiveness). And this is representative of what Manuel Arturo Abreu, in their essay 'Online Imagined Black English', describes as '[…] a twoness at play in white America's treatment of Black English […]'. [79] In the same essay, Abreu considers the historical discourses of black vernacular language as stigmatised within (white) institutions, observing,

> […] indexical meanings take on different significance based on who is speaking, as well as on context: for example, in institutional contexts, Black English faces heavy stigma, while in other contexts, [its] warmth, authenticity, and seductive danger may be communicative and pragmatic boons. In this sense, the same stereotyped indexical meanings that white supremacist culture imposes on Black English endow it with covert prestige in non-institutional contexts. [80]

The final sentence feels particularly powerful, illustrating a complex scenario in which the ongoing denigration and otherizing of 'Black English' is directly correlative to its cultural currency as 'a kind of mass appealing Cool' – to quote Jackson – in non-institutional (and non-black) contexts. And indeed, the double bind of this 'twoness' articulated by Abreu and faced by members of the African diaspora, speaks to a structural discrepancy within the inner-workings of privilege itself which, for the writer Ijeoma Oluo, is at the heart of any conversation of cultural appropriation.

> Cultural appropriation isn't just the misuse of a group's art and culture — anybody can do that; it's just called shitty art. Cultural appropriation is the misuse of a group's art and culture by someone with the power to redefine that art and, in the process, divorce it from the people who originally created it. […] What elevates the shitty white artist above both the shitty artist of color and the talented artist of color is not the artist's act of making art itself; it's the system of privilege and

[79] Manuel Arturo Abreu, 'Online Imagined Black English', *Arachne*, 2015. http://arachne.cc/issues/01/online-imagined_manuel-arturo-abreu.html. (3rd August, 2017).
[80] ibid.

oppression that values the work of a shitty white artist over talented artists of color. [81]

I turn to this quote because it feels particularly prescient in situating individual acts of appropriated language within a larger system of privilege which allows them to flourish. Oluo's words seem useful, as well, in considering the way in which 'shitty art' – as a *safe* (read: deracialised) version of culture – eliminates the political potency of cultural labour within marginalised social groups; distancing production from its original context, and undermining its ability to confront a wider (again, *whiter*) audience with anything that will (genuinely) threaten a prevailingly homogenous worldview. I think again about Brandon Wardell's "playful" annotation of black vernacular language, but I am also reminded of the meme-ification of the phrase 'on fleek' – as coined in a Vine post by PEACHES MONROEE (real name Kayla Newman). [82] In the post, Newman sits in the front seat of a car, admiring her eyebrows and speaking to camera: 'We in this bitch. Finna get crunk. Eyebrows on fleek. Da fuq.' [83] The post has received over 53 million plays and, as the writer Doreen St. Felix puts it, 'on fleek' has 'ascend[ed] to near-officialized language'. [84] What began as a spontaneous moment of linguistic ingenuity by a black teenager eventually found its way to corporate Twitter accounts as fairly transparent attempts to signal their relevance (Fig. 1.8).
The ascension of Newman's phrase, then, is emblematic of a historical lineage in which, as Aria Dean puts it, 'black people innovate only to see their forms snaked away, value siphoned off by white hands' – prefigured in the musical cultures of jazz, rock 'n' roll, house and hip-hop. [85] Doreen St. Felix discusses the circulation of 'on fleek' in the essay, 'Black Teens Are Breaking The Internet And Seeing None Of The Profits' – its title getting to the heart of the matter and further substantiating the (grim) reality of social media's mechanisms in which the users running the platforms do not own that which they create. [86] And indeed, this particular example of appropriation seems an especially explicit illustration of the corporate interest of social media, tying back to a previously cited quote from Ayesha Siddiqi in which she observed the way corporations 'mimic patterns [of communication and community building] in order to better advertise to us', and similarly Jackson has written of the 'corporate parasitism' which consistently looks to 'inhabit the language of [its] consumers'. [87]

Like the co-option of black (cultural) labour, the politics of appropriated language are deeply

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[81] Ijeoma Oluo, 'When We Talk About Cultural Appropriation, We're Missing The Point', *The Establishment*, 2016. https://theestablishment.co/when-we-talk-about-cultural-appropriation-were-missing-the-point-abe853ff3376. (3rd August, 2017).
[82] PEACHES MONROEE, *Vine*, 2014. https://vine.co/v/MTFn7EPvtnd/. (3rd August, 2017).
[83] ibid.
[84] Doreen St. Felix, 'Black Teens Are Breaking The Internet And Seeing None Of The Profits', *The Fader*, 2015. http://www.thefader.com/2015/12/03/on-fleek-peaches-monroee-meechie-viral-vines (3rd August, 2017).
[85] Aria Dean, 'Poor Meme, Rich Meme'.
[86] Doreen St. Felix, 'Black Teens Are Breaking The Internet And Seeing None Of The Profits'.
[87] Laur M. Jackson, 'E•MO•JIS'.

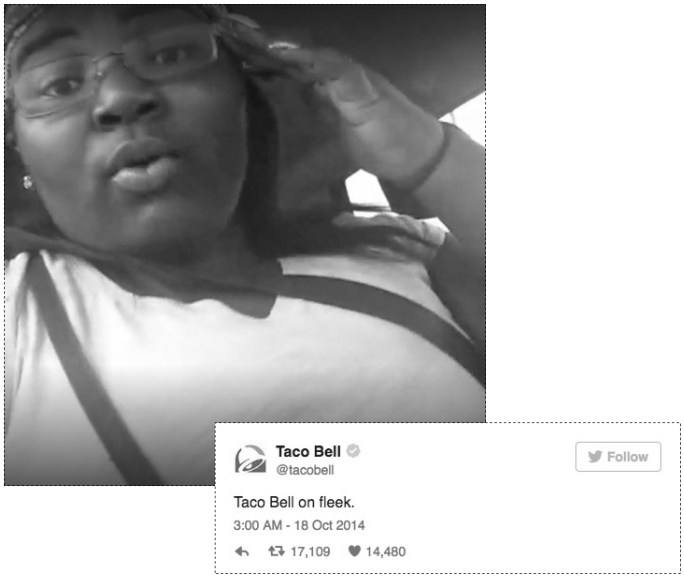

Fig. 1.8 Screenshot of PEACHES MONREE Vine post and Taco Bell on Twitter

ingrained in a wider culture of whiteness (and/or non-blackness) which predates the internet and social media. But nevertheless, one feels aware of a new iteration of a habitual convention taking shape online, in which black vernacular language (which underpins so much online activity) is problematically reduced to "internet language". Of course, there is a level of inevitability to the way language evolves, and the efficiency of many AAVE based phrases means that they continue to fill gaps in standard English's (often rigid) vocabulary. However, this is not meant as a concession, and the crucial points in the discussion (I think) have to do with the politics of the appropriative act, the accelerated deracializing of language and the potential quickening of co-optive practices within a sharing economy online. And yet… the irreverence with which this co-option continues to take place (both on and offline) does prompt consideration. While I have made a case for the critical necessity of the past within discourses of the present, the flattening of "real" individuals into representation online – at times consciously enacted/exaggerated by users in response to an overbearing archive – might equally produce a parallel situation in which history is evaporated, a condition in which everything exists within (and is deferred to) the internet and an ahistorical ever-present. [88] However. While I can appreciate a situation in which this assessment could make sense, I would argue (with everything previously discussed in this section in mind) that any cultural position that overlooks history is deeply (deeply) flawed.

[88] This interpretation recalls Sadie Plant's observation of '[…] the petrified ahistoricism of the spectacle'. Sadie Plant, 'The Situationist International: A Case of Spectacular Neglect' in Stuart Home (ed), *What Is Situationism: A Reader* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1996), 153 to 172 (168). This assessment perhaps speaks, as well, to discourses of postmodernism and *the end of history* to which I will turn in the following chapter.

❍

Getting intimate with discomfort (Conclusion)

There is a Hito Steyerl lecture available online in which she begins with an apology: '[…] this is going to be partly complicated, mainly because I have difficulties understanding what I'm talking about. But I really want you to understand my incomprehension very viscerally.' [89] And I feel a lot like that here. In trying to (viscerally) capture and express the contradictory nature of the present and recognise the paradox of online activity as a (pressing) contemporary concern, I have been influenced by the candidness of Steyerl's position, and have hoped to create space for a certain feeling of uncertainty or impossibility within the text itself.

When considering the radical connectivity of social media against the reality of its corporate interests, it can be difficult to reconcile one with the other. However, it feels important to gesture towards a space in which reconciliation is not *necessarily* expected, and in which the paradox can be (fully) encountered; where two conflicting experiences can both be true. I would want to suggest that to do so is not to call for a disavowal of complicated issues, but rather a sense of fluidity that might allow for new approaches to difficult subjects. Maggie Nelson writes that '[…] true moral complexity is rarely found in simple reversals. More often it is found by wading into the swamp, getting intimate with discomfort, and developing an appetite for nuance.' [90] It might not be too ridiculous to say: the internet is a swamp and, in the context of this chapter, I have attempted to get intimate with its discomfort. There is something, then, about stripping "discomfort" of its negative connotation. Marie Thompson does something similar, in an essay on safe(r) spaces aptly titled 'The Discomfort of Safety', by asserting: 'At their best, safer spaces practices *make life difficult*: they require us to attend to often unarticulated power dynamics and hierarchies that exist "in here" as well as "out there"'. [91] This act of repositioning the "difficulty" of self-critique (I think) feeds into the basic logic of this thesis; and while, as Thompson observes, 'This is not easy work to do. And it is never over […]', this critical accountability is preferable to the rigid lack of self-reflection discussed in the thesis' prologue in relation to Kenneth Goldsmith and uncreative writing. [92]

Before going on to the next chapter, it might be worth recapping what has been discussed here: I

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[89] Fundació Tàpies, 'Conference by Hito Steyerl | Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona', 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRAAOvcBXrU, 12:34. (3rd August, 2017).
[90] Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*, 13.
[91] Marie Thompson, 'The Discomfort of Safety', *Society and Space*, 2017. http://societyandspace.org/2017/02/14/the-discomfort-of-safety/. (3rd August, 2017).
[92] ibid.

began by thinking about, what was ultimately, a phenomenology of the loss of self-evidence, considering Brecht's phrase 'erase the traces!' against the *traceability* of online environments. I looked at specific themes in the work of Ben Lerner, who feels particularly important in the context of this thesis in his subtle interrogating and reframing of historical cultural narratives. The idea of a radical smallness, also pulled from Lerner, then became a formative lens through which I approached emerging discussions of online activity. And thinking about the way "time" is destabilised online, the way the past is increasingly assimilated into present day experience, it has felt important to consider aspects of social media activity that (I think) can be understood as fractured responses to the phenomenon of the archived self. And which, equally, seem to demonstrate intuitive acts of provision over the recuperation of one's "true" identity. As noted, in writing about social media, I have been interested in acknowledging the reality of its contradictions, and have resisted reconciling certain oppositional dynamics in an attempt to write from *within* the confusion of the present itself (at least to some extent). And in a final section, thinking about the way issues of race function online, I considered the politics of any potential sharedness; considering the problematic aspects of a sharing economy online with specific attention paid to the cultural labour of black communities. And going forward, with the groundwork laid in a conversation of contemporary contradictions, the following chapter will follow this same discursive thread by thinking about emerging discourses of metamodernism, having firstly delved into aspects of postmodernism which seem relevant to the discussion.

~ Chapter 2 ~

Contradiction is the form of the contemporary

It feels important to acknowledge that, as inherited narratives lose their self-evidence, those histories (like the past online) do not disappear. The writer and activist David Graeber, in his essay 'The Twilight of Vanguardism', writes that, '[…] it seems much easier to renounce [a] principle than to shake the accompanying habits of thought'.[1] And this feels true here, as what the loss of self-evidence – and the undermining of inherited narratives – perhaps most readily produces is an awareness of multiple (opposing) perspectives in one contemporary moment.

By paying attention to paradox, the previous chapter sought to explore this phenomenon in relation to online activity: within social media there is an unavoidable reality of "individualism" that, in terms of traditional political discourse, is tied up in the competitive aspirational politics of neoliberalism and opposed to, for example, a communist perspective that calls for 'individualism [to] be submerged for the good of the state', as Ian Svenonius observes.[2] Yet discrediting instances of individualism from a leftist position no longer seems so straightforward. It is conceivable that social media – with its possibilities for connectivity and community building – represents a paradigm shift destabilizing the political resonance of individualism, and perhaps suggesting that language (the word, *individual*) has already evolved and mutated into something else, semantically and/or politically. While there is truth in that sentiment, the reality of these platforms as big corporate entities and the histories of individualism are inescapable, and the mechanics of their usage is appropriately problematic. More and more, it seems the presence and conflicting reality of both positions is imposingly felt. So, while traditional discourses and political perspectives might be increasingly undermined by new technology and the connections it engenders, from within the rubble of a (now) decentralised and/or destabilised position it can be genuinely tough to discern between glimpses of alterity within an imposing system of relations and instances that represent

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[1] David Graeber, 'The Twilight of Vanguardism', *The Anarchist Library*, 2003, https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/david-graeber-the-twilight-of-vanguardism.pdf. (4th August, 2017).

[2] Ian Svenonius, *Censorship Now!!* (New York: Akashic Books, 2015), 100. Elsewhere in the same book, Svenonius frames the 1950/60s dance craze 'The Twist' as a radical cultural shift that realigned a social value system (by no longer requiring dancers to have partners), embedding a sense of "the individual". 28 to 41. And social media might be understood to do the same.

wider co-options of individual agency by a pervading overarching ideology. Rob Horning is prescient in articulating this feeling; in a short essay on his blog he writes, 'Individuals bear the burden of making the contradictions in ideology and lived life cohere.' [3] Indeed, this phenomenon can (undoubtedly) seem a pressure or a burden, and as such it feels important to acknowledge and reckon with as an underlying factor in one's contemporary experience of the world and its cultural materials. Because as Hito Steyerl has asserted: 'contradiction is the form of the contemporary.' [4]

This chapter will consider where to go from this assertion, and will turn to emerging discussions of metamodernism (which will also require an attempt to pin down some illusive characteristics of postmodernism and 'the end of history').

❍

Senses of the end

Metamodernism is a term suggested by cultural theorists Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen which seeks to capture an emerging 'structure of feeling', one that is no longer readily explained by the discourses (and cultural logics) of modernism or postmodernism. [5] From a historical vantage point that has experienced (and is well-versed in) the rhetoric of both positions, van den Akker and Vermeulen conceive of metamodernism in relation to an *oscillation* between the utopian sincerity of modernism and the cynicism and irony of postmodernism; a sense of fluidity which they posit can be observed increasingly in the products of contemporary popular culture. As such, metamodernism approaches the contemporary condition of conflicting narratives and contradictory consciousness through the lens of discussions surrounding potential post-postmodernism(s).

In articulating metamodernism as a 'structure of feeling', van den Akker and Vermeulen borrow a phrase from cultural critic Raymond Williams. Williams' use of the phrase seeks to articulate 'the culture of a period' and 'the meanings and values which are lived in works and relationships'; and yet the critics argues: '[…] it is as firm and definite as 'structure' suggests, yet it operates in the most

[3] Rob Horning, 'Self-narration as passivity', *Internal exile*, 2016. http://robhorningreallife.tumblr.com/post/147258435050/self-narration-as-passivity. (4th August, 2017).
[4] MOCA, 'What is Contemporary? A Conversation with Hito Steyerl', 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNW1PP-034Q, 26:10. (4th August, 2017).
[5] Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 'Notes on metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, Vol 2, (2010).

delicate and least tangible parts of our activity.' [6] For Williams, it is through an analysis of the arts that one is best able to glimpse the structure of feeling of a given period; yet he also acknowledges, recognising the fleetingness of pinning down a sense of collective lived experience, '[…] we shall not suppose that we can ever do more than make an approach, an approximation […]'. [7] Structure of feeling, then, seems a helpful term in considering emerging forms of discourse which by their very nature might be slippery and contradictory – not least because the phrase itself internalises a paradox of rigidity and intangibility, of the definitive and the abstract.

Before going any further in this discussion, it is important to delve into postmodernism. The word postmodernism is used – or has been used, particularly in the 1990s – fairly ubiquitously, to the point where it can be understood to mean (fittingly, perhaps, as we will see) everything and nothing at the same time. In her book *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon writes, 'Few words are more used and abused in discussions of contemporary culture […]'. [8] And Vermeulen (in an entry for *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*) has highlighted the disparate uses of the word in different contexts, as well as the contentions over its historical origins and emergence, going so far as arguing: 'Even the spelling causes confusion, with some disciplines writing the term with a capital P, whereas others use a hyphen separating the 'post' from 'modernism'.' [9] What *can* be said, then, is that postmodernism is a cultural logic born in response to modernism, and which (broadly speaking) emerged in the 1960s and flourished in the arts and popular culture of the West between the 1970s and 1990s. For postmodernists, the optimism of modernism – in its seeking to create new forms of art making and culture that would adequately represent the modern world – fell foul to its own misplaced commitment to progress and universality; overlooking and/or dismissing individual experiences and the inherent disorder of the universe in favour of utopian abstractions. There was a sense in modernism of an emancipation that would arrive from the creation a new (better) world, but what if that world failed to materialise?

In challenging what became known as modernist "grand narratives" (or metanarratives), postmodernism paid attention to smaller localised narratives and the complexities of experience, reinterpreting "truth" not as universal but as slippery and only ever relative to the shifting contexts which may or may not surround a subject. [10] By design, the logic of postmodernism resists definition and while not (exactly) a form of cultural production, it is perhaps more readily understood as a critical (ideological) position that informs, or can be embodied within, different art forms and/or

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[6] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (England: Penguin Book, 1965), 319, 64 respectively.
[7] ibid, 66.
[8] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York/London: Routledge, 2002), 1
[9] As cited at: Timotheus Vermeulen, 'Pomo/Post', *Timotheus Vermeulen*, 2017. http://timotheusvermeulen.com/post/159187213541/pomopost. (4th August, 2017).
[10] Jean-François Lyotard writes, 'Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.' Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) xxiv.

disciplines. The writer Christopher Butlers pairs postmodernism with 'the rise of theory', and argues: 'The postmodernist period is one of the extraordinary dominance of the work of academics over that of artists.' [11] The concept of deconstruction, proposed by poststructuralist thinker Jacques Derrida, became something of a guiding principle in the postmodern process of undermining the authority of metanarratives (as well as the notion of authority itself). While adverse to prescribing an easy definition, of deconstruction Derrida has said, '[…] one of the gestures of deconstruction is to not naturalise what isn't natural– to not assume that what is conditioned by history, institutions, or society is natural.' [12] And analogously, Hutcheon suggests, '[…] it seems reasonable to say that the postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalise some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us.' [13]

In the context of an art world increasingly influenced by postmodern discourse, then, a performance such as Carolee Schneeman's *Interior Scroll* provided radical visibility for experiences that existed outside of naturalised maleness. [14] The turn to performance in art during the postmodern period, as well, signalling a deconstruction of universality. Where modernist artists had challenged representation with abstraction, performance art (re)presented the body (and the self) as crucial to the interpretation of art and experience. In terms of postmodern discourse, performance localises engagement and meaning away from grand narratives and towards smaller and more specific experiences and contexts – one enters the work through the body. As deconstructive practices began to explore work that was (at times) purposefully 'depthless' and irreverent, aesheticising style over substance, a(nother) discernible characteristic of postmodern artmaking might be understood as a tendency to undermine the notion of art objects themselves as 'naturally' meaningful. [15] I think here about the work of Jeff Koons who recasts and exaggerates kitschy ephemera as sculptural monuments in gallery spaces, foreshadowed somewhat by Pop Art's collapsing of *high* and *low* culture (Fig.2.1). [16] And here, a more widely caricatured image of postmodernism perhaps starts to form: the sense(s) of irony and irreverence, as well as the critique of art via the creation of art itself (art *about* art). Throughout her book, Linda Hutcheon shrewdly refers to 'the double coding of postmodernism's complicitous critique'; [17] and similarly writes,

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[11] Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 7.
[12] Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering, *Derrida* (USA: Jane Doe Films, 2002, 84 mins), 14:40.
[13] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 2.
[14] A description and image of Schneemann's performance is available in: Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism A Very Short Introduction*, 97/8.
[15] Fredric Jameson identifies 'a new depthlessness' as a constitutive feature of the postmodern. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 6.
[16] For example, in the artist's 1988 *Banality* series as displayed in: Scott Rothkopf, *Jeff Koons: A Retrospective* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2014), 101 to 117.
[17] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 148.

[Postmodernism] is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said. The effect is to highlight, or 'highlight,' and to subvert, or 'subvert,' and the mode is therefore a 'knowing' and an ironic – or even 'ironic' – one. Postmodernism's distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale 'nudging' commitment to doubleness, or duplicity. [18]

This 'doubleness' exists in the work of Koons, and might be equally identified in the films of Jean-Luc Godard, which in their playful intertextuality drew attention to the (constructed) language of post-war cinema; [19] or in the pointed parodies of Cindy Sherman's *Film Stills* which mined and re-presented cinematic stereotypes of female characters. [20] The ironic ('ironic') critiques enacted within postmodernism can, as well, be understood within the rise of Anglo-American post war consumer culture and its pervading market logic. [21] An individual's proximity to (and complicity within) a system of relations relying on the production of cultural objects/commodities, in a sense, might be seen to accelerate and heighten the detached scepticism already present within the postmodern perspective. Butler observes, 'The aim, post Derrida, Foucault, and Barthes – whose ideas in variously garbled forms swarm over the pronouncements of artists since the 1970s – was to prevent the consumer-as-subject from feeling 'at home' in the world […]'. [22] Butler's observation

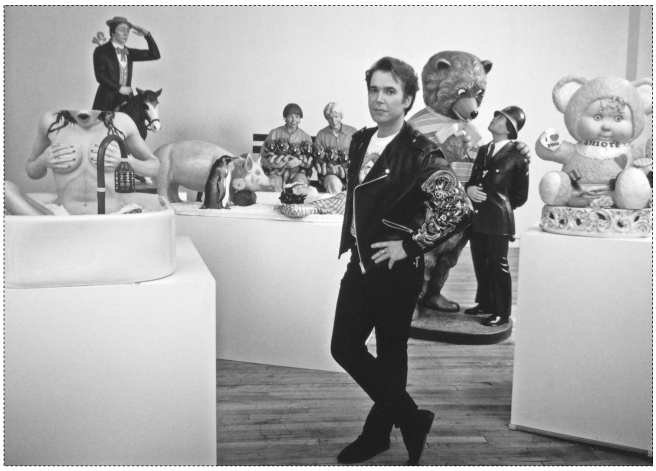

Fig. 2.1 Jeff Koons, *Banality* series

[18] ibid, 1.
[19] See for example: Jean-Luc Godard, *Breathless* (France: UGC, 1960, 87 mins); Jean-Luc Godard, *Bande à part* (France: Colombia Pictures, 1964, 97 mins).
[20] Cindy Sherman, *Cindy Sherman: The Complete Untitled Film Stills* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2003).
[21] Jameson even suggests, '[…] the cultural forms of postmodernism may be said to be the first specifically North American global style.' *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, xx.
[22] Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism A Very Short Introduction*, 66.

speaks to the world of a novel like Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, which confronts its reader with the *surfaces* of consumerism and the frailty of masculinity – and their inherent violence – through extended descriptions of products, restaurants, clothing, women and/or business cards, all delivered with a detached and cynical (postmodern) mode of address. [23]

Scott Montgomery walks over to our booth wearing a double-breasted navy blue blazer with mock-tortoiseshell buttons, a prewashed wrinkled-cotton striped dress shirt with red accent stitching, a red, white and blue fireworks-print silk tie by Hugo Boss and plum washed-wool trousers with a quadruple-pleated front and slashed pockets by Lazo. He's holding a glass of champagne and hands it to the girl he's with—definite model type, thin, okay tits, no ass, high heels—and she's wearing a wool-crepe skirt and a wool and cashmere velour jacket and draped over her arm is a wool and cashmere velour coat, all by Louis Dell'OliO. High-heeled shoes by Susan Bennis Warren Edwards. Sunglasses by Alain Mikli. Pressed-leather bag from Hermès. [24]

Thinking further about the socio-political discourses surrounding the postmodern: it feels important to note that as postmodernism was establishing itself in the wider cultural consciousness (of the West) in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the political reality of capitalism (and the inevitability of the market) was ostensibly validated by the fall of the Berlin Wall; which signalled the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War and the "triumph" of Western liberal democracy over communism. (Where there was once political difference, there was now homogeneity). For political scientist Francis Fukuyama, the dissolution of the Soviet Union evoked his infamous claim for 'the end of history',

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. [25]

Fukuyama's (bold) contention responded to a Marxist premonition that communism would (one day) rise and displace the model of capital. Fukuyama instead framed the end of the Cold War as a global agreement that civilisation had reached its final form, that capitalism was **the** way to organise global society and that the merits of "secondary" ideologies or histories were now moot – as he would clarify in his 1992 book, '[…] all of the really big questions had been settled.' [26] Reflecting

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[23] Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London: Picador, 2015).
[24] ibid, 40.
[25] Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, No. 16 (Summer, 1989), 3 to 18, (4).
[26] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), xii. The full quote is, I think, useful in clarifying Fukuyama's intention in coining the phrase: '[The end of history] did not mean that the natural cycle of birth, life, and death would end, that important events would no longer happen, or that newspapers

the neoliberal consolidation of a market economy at the time (and particularly the Thatcherism *there is no alternative*), this pervading sense of end*ness* would be characteristic of the postmodern. [27] And indeed, writing in advance of Fukuyama's end of history (in 1984), Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson observed,

> The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end […] (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the "crisis" of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.); taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism. [28]

In the work of Jameson, the political-economic concerns of Fukuyama are folded into discussions of cultural production – see (the title of) his book, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. [29] Although seemingly analogous, there is a distinction to be made between Fukuyama and Jameson: where the tone of the former feels triumphant with regard to 'senses of the end', the latter feels uneasy. As Mark Fisher puts it in *Capitalist Realism*, 'Fukuyama's position is in some ways a mirror image of Fredric Jameson's' – a mirror image, of course, being two things that seem to be the same, only with their lefts and rights inverted. [30] Contributing to Jameson's unease, then, is what the critic sees as the inability of postmodernism to distance its *critique* from the thing it is critiquing. In a chapter outlining his 'constitutive features of postmodernism', Jameson concludes,

> No theory of cultural politics current on the Left today has been able to do without one notion or another of a certain minimal aesthetic distance, of the possibility of the positioning of the cultural act outside the massive Being of capital, from which to assault this last. What the burden of our preceding demonstration suggests, however, is that distance in general (including "critical distance" in particular) has very precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism. [31]

While the deconstructive tendency of postmodern discourse and cultural production might be understood as a means of agitating and subverting the material conditions of one's socio-political environment, Jameson struggles to get beyond its ultimate complicity in that environment. In this regard, I think about Ellis' *American Psycho* which – in its construction of a fiction *about* (and *within*) Wall Street vacuity that seeks to *critique* Wall Street vacuity – might be indicative of a

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reporting them would cease to be published. It meant, rather, that there would be no further progress in the development of underlying principles and institutions, because all of the really big questions had been settled.'

[27] This sense of *no alternative* can be observed in a shift in politics throughout the 1990s, the cleaving to the centre and the rise of New Labour and the third way.

[28] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1.

[29] ibid.

[30] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (London: Zero Books, 2009), 80.

[31] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* 48. Pre-establishing his argument, Jameson's use of the phrase 'constitutive features of postmodernism' appears on page 6.

critical distance as it has been 'abolished'. And in relation to Fukuyama's end of history, postmodernism's interest in art *about* art or film *about* film, its gestures of critique which replicate the form of the thing it is critiquing, might feel like a resignation of sorts – to the stasis of the world (and its cultural materials) as it is now/was then, with 'all of the really big questions […] settled.' And indeed, looking back to the work of Godard in the 1960s, Jameson describes the director's film as, '[…] resolutely postmodernist in that they conceive of themselves as sheer text, as a process of production of representations that have no truth content, are, in this sense, sheer surface or superficiality'. [32]

At this stage, it might be worth returning to Linda Hutcheon whose postmodernism diverges from that of Jameson. Hutcheon can be understood to challenge a (negative) reading of postmodernism's 'superficiality', and in *The Politics of Postmodernism* the writer suggests: 'Postmodern art cannot but be political, at least in the sense that its representations – its images and stories – are anything but neutral, however 'aestheticised' they may appear to be in their parodic self-reflexivity.' [33] In this context, then, a reworking of aesthetic surfaces (postmodernism's representation *about* representation) might also be an exploration of the histories, meanings and politics of those 'images and stories' – how they have been told and by whom.

In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon considers the relation of postmodernism to the art practices of feminism(s). [34] In the work of Barbara Kruger, Silvia Kolbowski, Cindy Sherman and Alexis Hunter (amongst others), the writer observes subversive uses of irony and parody which draw attention to and/or confront narratives of power around historical representations of women and the implications of the male gaze. [35] For example: of Barbara Kruger, Hutcheon writes, '[the artist] chooses to appropriate mass-media images and use their formal complicity with capitalist and patriarchal representational strategies to foreground conflictual elements through ironic contradictions.' [36] I am reminded of a work like *Untitled (your gaze hits the side of my face)*, yet I also think about the way Kruger chooses to distribute her work, seeming to (purposefully) complicate the works' relationship to power and critique – in exhibitions and art environments, but also in newspapers, on billboards and wrapped around city buses; on tote bags, T shirts, mugs and (even) umbrellas (Fig. 2.2). [37] And indeed, discussing the work of both Kruger and Kolbowski, Hutcheon observes, 'To work it must be complicitous with the values it challenges: we have to feel the seduction in order to question it and then to theorize the site of that contradiction'. [38] As noted

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[32] Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 102.
[33] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 3.
[34] ibid, particularly in the chapter 'Postmodernism and Feminisms', 137 to 164.
[35] ibid.
[36] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of* Postmodernism, 102. And the Kruger piece is shown in the exhibition catalogue: Barbara Kruger, *Barbara Kruger* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999), 101.
[37] The disparate methods of distribution are displayed throughout: Barbara Kruger, *Barbara Kruger*.
[38] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 150.

Fig. 2.2 Barbara Kruger umbrella

earlier in the chapter, this paradoxical notion of postmodernism's 'complicitous critique' runs throughout Hutcheon's book and this is a point at which the writer diverges from the arguments of a critic like Jameson. Maintaining both complicity *and* critique, Hutcheon rejects Jameson's conflation of postmodernism with late capitalism, writing '[her] exhortation to keep the two separate is conditioned by [a] desire to show that critique is as important as complicity in the response of cultural postmodernism to the philosophical and socio-economic realities of postmodernity […]'. [39] In holding on to the criticality of postmodern*ism* alongside (and in spite of) its complicity within the socio-economic reality of postmodern*ity* – while surely confusing things – Hutcheon is able to (I think) pay attention to moments of individual agency within prevailing structures of power and consider the way artists might strategically *use* postmodern modes of production without (necessarily) attaching themselves to a politics of postmodern*ity*. [40] Without ignoring the reality of Jameson's observations, Hutcheon draws attention to the problematic aspects of his position. Within *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* there is perhaps a tendency towards flattening postmodern discourse into a single (grand) narrative or theory, abstracting criticality away from individual experience, and overlooking nuances within the relationship between cultural production and power. And speaking explicitly to this point, Hutcheon observes – within the varied critical interpretations of postmodernism – a camp of 'radically antagonistic' detractors who '[tend] to see only the complicity and never the critique', [41] going on to write,

> […] the often unconscious ethnocentrism and phallocentrism (not to mention heterocentrism) of many in this camp lead to a devaluing or ignoring of the 'marginalized' challenges (aesthetic and political) of the 'ex-centric,' those relegated to the fringes of the dominant culture – the women, blacks, gays, Native Peoples, and others who have made us aware of the politics of all – not just postmodern – representations. [42]

Indeed. So (again) while not necessarily contesting the principal diagnosis of postmodernism's complicity with the logic of capital, Hutcheon draws attention to the problematic aspects of Jameson's outright conflating of the two. With regard to this discussion, I think a lot about a quote from the author Lewis Hyde in which he writes, 'Irony has only emergency use. Carried over time, it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage'. [43] While this passage ultimately feels aligned to the perspective of Jameson (the impossibility of critical distance from within the

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[39] ibid.

[40] Indeed, Hutcheon acknowledges the reticence of feminist theorists and artists towards '[…] the incorporation of their work into postmodernism for fear of recuperation and the attendant de-fusing of their own political agendas.' ibid, 2.

[41] ibid, 16.

[42] ibid, 17.

[43] Lewis Hyde, as quoted in: David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram' in Bonnie Nadell, Karen Green and Michael Pietsch (eds), *The David Foster Wallace Reader* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2014), 656 to 707 (695).

‘cage’ of ironic critique), in reading the quote, it is also important to consider communities and social demographics who may continue to feel in a state of ‘emergency’, those for whom representation has (historically) *not* been a given. Bringing this discussion to a close, it might be possible to say: while engendering modes of production which are decidedly deconstructive and disruptive, the *politics* of postmodernism are unavoidably ambiguous. In accepting both its complicity *and* its critique, Hutcheon’s analysis is not unaware of this fact. As such the writer opts to frame postmodernism in relation to a quote from film theorist Anne Friedberg, one which seems to appropriately summarise the evasiveness of the discussion: ‘it was conservative politics, it was subversive politics, it was the return of tradition, it was the final revolt of tradition, it was the unmooring of patriarchy, it was the reassertion of patriarchy’. [44] And finally, the writer David Foster Wallace has observed, ‘Sarcasm, parody, absurdism and irony are great ways to strip off stuff’s mask and show the unpleasant reality behind it’ – this feels true of postmodern modes of production as I have been discussing them; and yet, while valuing those deconstructive impulses, Wallace continues, ‘The problem is that once the rules of art are debunked, and once the unpleasant realities the irony diagnoses are revealed and diagnosed, “then” what do we do?’ [45] This question might be understood to form a starting point of sorts for van den Akker and Vermeulen’s conception of the metamodern to which I will now turn.

For a while now I’ve at least had a sense that whatever it is I am living is not something that is entirely resolved by the usual categories I have inherited… [46]

In the epilogue to the second edition of *The Politics of Postmodernism* (published in 2002) Linda Hutcheon is fairly candid in writing, ‘Let’s just say: it’s over.’ [47] Hutcheon cites the role of postcolonial and queer theory as crucial in shifting critical perspectives beyond the limitations of postmodern discourse, and discussing the former, she writes,

[…] it is hard to achieve activist ends (with firm moral values) in a postmodern world where such values are not permitted to be grounded […]: in short, you cannot sit on the postmodern fence and be ethical in postcolonial terms. If postmodernism is not morally bankrupt, it is certainly severely ethically limited […]. It is simply not enough to focus on ex-centricity, marginality and difference as part of a demystifying process; or at least one should not stop there. [48]

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[44] ibid, 13.
[45] Larry McCaffery, ‘A Conversation with David Foster Wallace By Larry McCaffery’, *Dalkey Archive Press*, [unknown date]. https://www.dalkeyarchive.com/a-conversation-with-david-foster-wallace-by-larry-mccaffery/. (4th August, 2017).
[46] The title of this section is a quote from the writer Adam Thirlwell in keynote presentation, available online at: Stedelijk Museum, ‘Symposia: Metamodernism - The return of history - Blok4 - 25-09-2014’, 2014. https://vimeo.com/110121977, 6:00. (4th August, 2017).
[47] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 166.
[48] ibid, 174.

Equally, the faltering of third way/centrist politics, the financial and housing crises, the increase in diagnosed mental health conditions, the growing reality of global warming and the paradigmatic shifts of internet and mobile technology might all be understood to undermine a discursive position atop 'the postmodern fence' – these contributing factors might, as well, represent the peculiar socio-political condition of living *after* the end of history. Yet, with echoes of David Gruber's assertion that it is 'easier to renounce [a] principle than to shake the accompanying habits of thought', an editorial on van den Akker and Vermeulen's *Notes on Metamodernism* webzine acknowledges that '[…] to speak of [postmodernism's] death is to also speak of its afterlife'; and in the final paragraph of her epilogue, Hutcheon writes, 'The postmodern moment has passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on – as do those of modernism – in our contemporary twenty-first century world.' [49] The question as to whether postmodernism is "over", then, is perhaps a misleading one – and yet, it *is* over. As van den Akker and Vermeulen have argued, since at least the early 2000s, there has been a discernible cultural shift in which people seemingly start to question and confront the evasiveness of postmodernism's ironic address and begin to tentatively look forward. What the discourse of metamodernism zeroes in on, then, is a contemporary structure of feeling that understands the necessity of deconstruction but which intuitively attempts to go beyond 'senses of the end', tempering its ingrained cynicism with an optimism of which it is equally suspicious – a sense of going forward while reckoning with the past, carrying on in spite of oneself and/or better knowledge. A metamodern sensibility seemingly attempts to acknowledge the contradictory nature of lived experience within neoliberal capitalism but nevertheless mine glimpses of alterity within it (or perhaps even conceive of experience outside of it…) As noted, there is an echoing of David Foster Wallace's *after irony, then what?* impulse and – in the original essay outlining their conception of metamodernism, speaking of the art forms they feel embody this new feeling – van den Akker and Vermeulen write, '[…] these practices set out to fulfil a mission or task they know they will not, can never, and should never accomplish: the unification of two opposed poles.' [50]

The meta- prefix of metamodernism, then, is connected to this sense of a double-bind. In a video for *Frieze*, van den Akker and Vermeulen connect the meta- of metamodernism with Plato's use of the term 'metaxis' (which literally translates to *between*) in relation to the figure of Eros, the Greek god of love. [51] Vermeulen observes, 'Eros as a half-god, for Plato, is a difficult figure, because he is both mortal and immortal. And so, in order to somehow deal with this impossibility, he creates the notion of the metaxis which is the movement in-between, a both/neither if you will'. [52] A sense of fluid movement in-between the conflicting perspectives of modernism and postmodernism – the

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[49] 'What is metamodernism?', *Notes on Metamodernism*, 2010. http://www.metamodernism.com/2010/07/15/what-is-metamodernism/. (4th August, 2017); Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 181.
[50] Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 'Notes on metamodernism'.
[51] Frieze, 'What is metamodernism?', 2015. https://vimeo.com/113901626, 3:33. (4th August, 2017).
[52] ibid, 3:42.

discursive strategies and ideological critiques of which Hutcheon acknowledges 'continue to live on […] in our contemporary twenty-first century world' – as well as a willingness to situate oneself within the uncertainty of their middle ground, might be seen to define a metamodern structure of feeling. Of course, *meta* is a word commonly associated with postmodern self-referentiality and the impulse to create art *about* art or film *about* film; however an(other) editorial on the *Notes on Metamodernism* webzine clarifies that meta-, in this instance, '[…] does NOT refer solely to reflectivity, although, inevitably, it does (and, since it passes through and surpasses the postmodern, cannot but) invoke it.' [53] Appropriately slippery then, a helpful metaphor (suggested by van den Akker and Vermeulen) might be that of a swinging pendulum: rather than conceiving of metamodernism in terms of *strategic* movement between two positions of the modern and postmodern, the image of a pendulum might offer a sense of intuitive motion (or oscillation) between '[…] 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles.' [54] As the *Notes on Metamodernism* webzine clarifies, 'Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings towards fanaticism, gravity pulls it back towards irony; the moment its irony sways towards apathy, gravity pulls it back towards enthusiasm.' [55] This abstract notion (I think) begins to make sense when considered in relation to a generation for whom the language(s) of modernism and postmodernism are inherited, and who intuitively sense the value and limitations of their respective ideologies and aesthetics as well as understanding the useful discursive leftovers of both. And in framing metamodernism in terms of a generational shift, it is worth briefly returning to Raymond Williams discussing structure(s) of feeling:

> […] the new generation responds in its own ways to the unique world it is inheriting, taking up many continuities, that can be traced, and reproducing many aspects of the organization, which can be separately described, yet feeling its whole life in certain ways differently, and shaping its creative response into a new structure of feeling. [56]

To get a better sense of a metamodern structure of feeling, it will be helpful to situate its expression within contemporary creative practice. And in this regard, I think a lot about the writing, film, artworks and performance of Miranda July, all of which seem to exist beyond the remit of postmodernism. In 2013's art project *We Think Alone*, July scoured the personal inboxes and sent folders of her (famous) friends' email accounts, passages from which were compiled into themes – i.e. an email about money, an email that gives advice, an email that mentions Barack Obama – and were then sent out in weekly emails to those who signed up to a mailing list (Fig. 2.3). [57] A mobile

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[53] 'What meta means and does not mean', *Notes on Metamodernism*, 2010. http://www.metamodernism.com/2010/10/14/what-meta-means-and-does-not-mean/. (4th August, 2017).
[54] Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 'Notes on metamodernism'.
[55] 'What is metamodernism?', *Notes on Metamodernism*.
[56] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 65.
[57] Miranda July, 'We Think Alone A project by Miranda July', *We Think Alone*, 2013. http://wethinkalone.com/. (4th August, 2017).

app called *Somebody*, created in 2014, purposefully sought to undermine the proficiency of technology in bringing people together. [58] Users would upload a message and specify an intended recipient, but rather than being transmitted digitally through the ether, "somebody" (another user on the app) would deliver the message in person, finding the recipient via GPS; July has said that, 'Through forcing people to communicate a virtual message in an analogue way, it aims for meaningful inefficiency.' [59] Both *We Think Alone* and *Somebody* implicitly draw attention to the nature of one's reliance on technology, its mediating power over one's interactions and the intimacy of personal information stored within. Yet neither feel like traditional (postmodern) critiques. Both projects attempt to engage the meanings held within the mediations, mining (and re-presenting) the way one uses technology to find *within it* opportunities for art making and (perhaps more importantly) new forms of connection. July's approach does not disregard technology but uses the technology as a means to go beyond the limits of technology itself. And here I also think about LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner's *#followmyheart* project in which the heartbeat of one of the artists (LaBeouf) was live streamed for four full days, via a heart monitor, to the project's website. [60] The project's hashtag title – a feature consistent across the artists' collaborations – functioned as a means by which public engagement was facilitated and encouraged. And as with July, there seems to be a sense of confronting and engaging technology (but also intimacy and vulnerability) in order to explore alternatives to fragmented digital experience. Discussing the piece, LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner stress: 'We were interested in how, by transmitting this on the web, on that most public of platforms, the experience could nonetheless be imbued with a sense of deeply personal, one-to-one closeness and connection, using technology to collapse the distances between us.' [61]

Thinking more about July, connectivity (and its complications) feels like a recurring theme within her work. Her fiction often depicts atomised characters earnestly seeking connection; yet, in representing those same characters through a subtly ironised mode of address, July seems to ask readers to feel both distant and involved, uncomfortable with the characters' naivety while simultaneously identifying with the humanness of their attempts. [62] Emma Sullivan has highlighted the way, 'July engenders identification with her narrators and then complicates the attachment.' [63] Towards the end of an essay on July, Sullivan draws attention to an image of Escher's famous staircase within the characters' apartment of the 2011 film, *The Future*, which July herself has

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[58] Miranda July, *Somebody*, 2014 to 2015. http://somebodyapp.com/. (4th August, 2017).
[59] Ann Friedman, 'Modern Multi-tasking', *The Gentlewoman*, no. 11 (Spring and Summer 2015), 90 to 93 (93).
[60] LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner, *#FOLLOWMYHEART*, 2015. http://follow-my-heart.net/. (4th August, 2017).
[61] As quoted in: Aimee Cliff, 'What we learned from following Shia LaBeouf's heart', *Dazed*, 2015. http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/24173/1/what-we-learned-from-following-shia-labeouf-s-heart. (4th August, 2017).
[62] For example, throughout: Miranda July, *No One Belongs Here More Than You* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2008).
[63] Emma Sullivan, 'Miranda July: Interrupting the Conventions of the Personal', *Notes on Metamodernism*, 2014. http://www.metamodernism.com/2014/11/24/miranda-july-interrupting-the-conventions-of-the-personal/. (4th August, 2017).

Miranda July 02/09/2013
An email you decided not to send. We Thi... Inbox - craigxpollard
---------- Forwarded message ---------- From: Etgar Keret To: z Subject: Nostalgia Date: 15:30 6/11/2012 Hey z., Sitting home...

Miranda July 26/08/2013
An email about what you're working on. W... Inbox - craigxpollard
---------- Forwarded message ---------- From: Rodarte Date: Sunday, April 01, 2012 2:39 PM Subject: cheesecloth To: S Hi, W...

Miranda July 19/08/2013
An email with art in it. We Think Alone, We... Inbox - craigxpollard
-----Forwarded Message----- From: Kirsten Dunst To: I Sent: Sun, Feb 10, 2013 11:29 pm Subject: Hi I bought this Elizabeth P...

Miranda July 12/08/2013
An email that includes a dream you had. W... Inbox - craigxpollard
---------- Forwarded message ---------- From: Kirsten Dunst To: s Sent: Wed, Jun 30, 2010 4:52 pm Subject: Re: Melancholia...

Miranda July 05/08/2013
An email to your mom. We Think Alone, W... Inbox - craigxpollard
---------- Forwarded message ---------- From: Sheila Heti Date: Fri, May 13, 2011 at 6:18 PM Subject: Re: Mothers' day To:...

Miranda July 29/07/2013
An email about something you want. We T... Inbox - craigxpollard
---------- Forwarded message ---------- From: danh vo Date: June 18, 2009 12:16:37 PM GMT+02:00 Subject: Re: nice install...

Miranda July 22/07/2013
A business email. We Think Alone, Week 4 Inbox - craigxpollard
---------- Forwarded message ---------- From: Deborah Morales (for Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) Date: March 7, 2012 1:48:41...

Miranda July 15/07/2013
An email that mentions Barack Obama. W... Inbox - craigxpollard
---------- Forwarded message ---------- From: danh vo Date: May 10, 2012 1:06:07 AM GMT+08:00 Subject: danh vo the faile...

Miranda July 08/07/2013
An email that gives advice. We Think Alon... Inbox - craigxpollard
---------- Forwarded message ---------- From: Catherine Opie Date: March 12, 2008 10:17:10 AM PDT Subject: tutoring an stuf...

Fig. 2.3 *We Think Alone* emails

described as: 'my own joke with myself about what I was trying to do – to be almost kitschily surreal and yet also really mean it.' [64] Expanding on this, Sullivan writes,

> The image [of Esher's staircase] – which suggests an aspiration for art as capable of re-ordering and re-imagining the world – has become kitsch, tired, and in using it, July seeks to capture both the original aspiration and the subsequent registration of apathy and defeat. [65]

July's two feature films – *Me and You and Everyone We Know* and *The Future* – can be loosely contextualised within a wider trend of American independent cinema since around the early 2000s, to which van den Akker and Vermeulen have also turned as representative of a metamodern structure of feeling. [66] The films of Wes Anderson, for example, feel both detachedly ironic *and* earnestly sentimental; their exaggerated visual aesthetic and deadpan dialogue flatten the cinematic worlds they create, placing slapstick comedy alongside incestuous relationships, and childlike

[64] (As quoted in) ibid.
[65] ibid.
[66] Miranda July, *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (USA: IFC Films, 2005, 91 mins); Miranda July, *The Future* (Germany: GNK Productions, 2011, 91 mins).

naivety alongside a fatigued sense of loneliness – all (seemingly) to be experienced with the same viewer-ly distance, all filtered through the same (relatively detached) directorial address. [67] As argued by James MacDowell in his essay 'Notes on Quirky', degrees of this sensibility in American cinema might exist on a sliding scale that ranges from Jared Hess' *Napoleon Dynamite* to Noah Baumbach's *The Squid and the Whale*, with Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums* sitting somewhere at the centre. [68] There is, as well, the genre of low budget *mumblecore* films that commit to realism and candid storytelling while engaging the simulacrum of "cinema" – and even the relatively mundane observation that these films, nominally billed as comedies, are not only played for laughs but can simultaneously feel bleak and/or heart-rending perhaps offers one way in to grasping a metamodern sensibility.

In popular music, Lana Del Rey and her (ambiguous) Americana feels worthy of attention in relation to a contemporary metamodern structure of feeling. [69] Indeed, in an essay titled 'Ms. America', Ayesha Siddiqi describes the artist's work as '[…] an act beyond irony, an attempt to reinvigorate belief by celebrating cultural exhaustion through affective emptiness.' [70] Situated *after* postmodernism, with the 'natural-ness' of American mythologies deconstructed, Del Rey might reinvest the *surfaces* of Americana with a detached version of sentimentality and/or patriotism which makes sense for a generation of Americans who have a complicated (post-war on terror) relationship with their home country. [71] For Siddiqi,

An American generation starved for an unfraught image of home can be sated by a pop star whose references are too stale to offend sung in an affect too flat to risk moving us. We know to take it as a product, not a symbol. The cowboys of yesteryear charged with "taming the frontier" are now just white men in hats with guns. And Lana will sing about them pretending they're the most interesting men in the world. [72]

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[67] For example: Wes Anderson, *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (USA: Touchstone Pictures, 2004, 119 mins).
[68] James MacDowell, 'Notes on Quirky', *MOVIE: A Journal of Film Criticism*, Vol. 1 (August 2010). http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/film/movie/contents/notes_on_quirky.pdf. (4th August, 2017).
[69] Lana Del Rey, 'America', *Born To Die – The Paradise Edition* (Interscope, 2012).
[70] Ayesha Siddiqi, 'Ms. America', *The New Inquiry*, 2014. https://thenewinquiry.com/ms-america-2/. (7th August, 2017).
[71] As Siddiqi begins her essay: 'For those who came of age during the war on terror, for whom adolescence was announced by 9/11 and for whom failed wars, a massive recession, and a total surveillance apparatus were the paranoid gifts of our adulthood, Lana Del Rey gives us a patriotism we can act out. Hers isn't a love song to America; it's a how-to manual.' ibid.
[72] ibid. It is important to acknowledge, however, that this sense of Americana is complicated and potentially becomes something different post-Donald Trump, and indeed Lana Del Rey herself has asserted: 'I'm not going to have the American flag waving while I'm singing "Born to Die." It's not going to happen. […] I think it would be inappropriate to be in France with an American flag. It would feel weird to me now—it didn't feel weird in 2013.' Alex Frank, 'Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness: A Conversation With Lana Del Rey', *Pitchfork*, 2017. https://pitchfork.com/features/interview/life-liberty-and-the-pursuit-of-happiness-a-conversation-with-lana-del-rey/. (7th August, 2017).

Fig. 2.4 Lana Del Rey

In terms of musical composition, I think about a group like Animal Collective and their approach to song-writing on 'Who Could Win a Rabbit?' [73] The song is built around a traditional three-chord structure – the semantic language of which was, in many ways, mobilised, (re)presented and parodied (in the mode of the postmodern) with punk bands like The Misfits or The Ramones. [74] Animal Collective, though, seem to reference this compositional tradition while using it as a jumping off point to go elsewhere – by disrupting the rhythmic structure of its arrangement, the group reinvest this (well-worn) compositional habit with a sense of urgency. And this (I think) manages to uncover creative territories beyond the limitations of parody or pastiche (and 'senses of the end'), in doing so Animal Collective perhaps display a sense of optimism as opposed to (postmodern) cynicism. And indeed, when discussing Animal Collective with the artist and musician Grace Denton, she recalled a friend labelling the group's music as *joyous*, remembering her initial discomfort, later feeling struck by how radical a gesture it felt to express enthusiasm at that time. And returning to David Foster Wallace: in his 1990 essay on postmodern irony, fiction and American television, the writer speculated,

The next real literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching […] Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even

[73] Animal Collective, 'Who Could Win a Rabbit?', *Sung Tongs* (Fat Cat Records, 2003).
[74] For example: The Misfits, 'Last Caress', *Beware* (Plan 9 Records, 1980); The Ramones, 'Judy Is a Punk', *The Ramones* (Sire, 1976).

started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point. Maybe that's why they'll be the next real rebels. [75]

The gesture of going forward in the face of better knowledge (or potential ridicule) feels embedded within a metamodern structure of feeling as I have been describing it – and the act of 'eschw[ing] self-consciousness' seems present within Animal Collective's joyfulness, as well as Miranda July's attempt to be 'kitschily surreal and also really mean it'. Other examples in popular music are the radical positivity of Lil B The BasedGod, the (at times) childlike enthusiasm of Architecture in Helsinki, or the (often) confrontational intimacy of Xiu Xiu. [76] I also think about the exaggerated artificiality and emotional vulnerability of Kanye's *808s & Heartbreak*, as well as the notable shifts in popular music making (and hip-hop music in particular) which followed its release – in hindsight, the album seems to have helped create space for artists like Drake, Future or Young Thug; and (close to a decade later) Lil Uzi Vert's 'XO TOUR Llif3' feels readily traceable to the sounds developed on *808s*. [77]

In the previous chapter of this thesis, I discussed social media activity as (at times) being simultaneously ironic and not ironic, and as displaying a willingness to use the language of the internet to access alternative forms of communication which nevertheless acknowledge the inevitability of mediation online. Without repeating that argument here, it should suffice to say there is a resonance with the metamodern as I have been discussing it; a likeness with Miranda July's *We Think Alone* and *Somebody* projects, as well as LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner's *#followmyheart*, which similarly seem to use technology as a means to go beyond the limits of technology itself. And whilst there are parallels with the 'complicitous critique' of postmodernism – inhabiting and/or perpetuating modes of production one intends to undermine – what (I think) separates social media and other online activity (including the art works cited here) from a postmodern cultural logic is the implicit potential for connectivity and community building, as well as a foundational principle of collective participation. In a sense, the ability to move beyond the limitations of the (performative) *gestures* of postmodernism. As noted in the opening of this section, the internet and social media (and the paradigm shifts they represent) seems to provide a point at which the postmodern and the metamodern (or whichever cultural dominant is ultimately deemed to

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[75] David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram' in *The David Foster Wallace Reader*, 707.

[76] Noisey, 'Lil B, Believe in Earth: A Very Rare and Based Visual Experience', 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=prekbB1HOLQ. (7th August, 2017); Architecture in Helsinki, 'It'5!', *In Case We Die* (Moshi Moshi, 2005); Xiu Xiu, 'Fabulous Muscles (Mama Black Widow version)', *Fabulous Muscles* (5 Rue Christine, 2004).

[77] Kanye West, *808s & Heartbreak* (Roc-A-Fella, 2008). For example: Drake, 'Marvin's Room', *Take Care* (Cash Money, 2011); Future, 'Honest', *Honest* (Epic, 2014); Young Thug, 'Best Friend', *Slime Season* (self-released, 2015); Lil Uzi Vert, 'XO TOUR Llif3', *Luv Is Rage 1.5* (Atlantic, 2017) – in an interview with HOT97, Lil Uzi Vert admitted '[*808s*] changed my life'. HOT 97, 'Lil Uzi Vert Talks Hating Interviews, Starting To Rap For Attention + Drops Bars!', 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bq6IsU390E0&, 3:34. (10th August, 2017).

succeed it) diverge – in essence, a discernible shift from passive *reception* to widespread *production* of culture.

In this vein, the writing practices of alt-lit and internet poetry communities might be viewed through the lens of metamodernism. This participatory nature of the internet (accelerated by the social media shift of web 2.0) was seized upon as a site for creating and distributing poetic practice, with screen-based interactions influencing the writing practices of a generation of "digital natives" who came of age online. The *Internet Poetry* Tumblr, founded by Steve Roggenbuck in 2011, is filled with browser screenshots, image macros and photo-shopped jpegs; its archive cataloguing a (visual) language of the internet and the act of finding (or inserting) poetry *within* it. [78] Intuitively ironised by their position within a complex world of online representations, alt lit and internet poetry writers seem to commit to an earnestness that viscerally jars against any (postmodern) wariness of naivety. The brazen authorial voice of Steve Roggenbuck, who presents his poetry in the form of video-blogs on YouTube – [shouting] 'you assholes look, this earth is fucking cute' – or the intimate tweet-like poetry of Mira Gonzalez – 'i watched you fall asleep on my bed and wished you were a specific person' – might equally represent an 'eschew[ing] of self-consciousness' of which Wallace speculated. [79]

Having touched on the (exaggerated) earnestness of Steve Roggenbuck, one is also reminded of the performativity of Samuel T Herring – front-person of the band Future Islands, whose 2014 performance on *Late Show with David Letterman* feels particularly relevant to a discussion of metamodernism. [80] It feels safe to say that both Herring's vocal performance and physicality feel affected (*performed*). Beyond that, I would suggest this affectation engages (and is indebted to) an established language of popular music – to Tom Waits, to The Temptations, to Kate Bush, to Danzig, to Morrissey. [81] The performance feels like a patchwork quilt signalling and/or piecing together aesthetics from the past, and Herring's gestures seem consciously shaped; with their (potential) methodical-ness perhaps suggesting a space between the emotion and the performer, or the performance of the emotion. It could be argued, then, the performance feels (very) postmodern.

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[78] 'INTERNET POETRY', *Internet Poetry*, 2011 to present. http://internetpoetry.co.uk/. (4th August, 2017).

[79] Steve Roggenbuck, 'life is right now (2015) THIS IS A SPECIAL VIDEO PLEASE VIEW THIS WITH A PLANT OR ANIMALS', 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ENZ2zRB-0AI, 1:37. (4th August, 2017); Mira Gonzalez, 'I Can Read A Novel', *Shabby Doll House*, 2012. http://www.shabbydollhouse.com/i-can-read-a-novel (4th August, 2017). And regarding 'tweet-like poetry', Gonzalez published a book of collected tweets with writer Tao Lin: Tao Lin and Mira Gonzalez, *Selected Tweets* (USA: Short Flight/Long Drive Books, 2015).

[80] The performance is available to watch online here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GK4lD3Uf8_o (4th August, 2017). In the following passages, I will be expanding on ideas I initially discussed in a previous essay: Craig Pollard, 'That Future Islands Performance', *Notes on Metamodernism*, 2014. http://www.metamodernism.com/2014/11/13/that-future-islands-performance/. (4th August, 2017) – one way to view this thesis is as developing the ideas touched on in this essay. And, it is also interesting to look back in relation to my perspective on Kenneth Goldsmith (pre- 'The Body of Michael Brown'), in putting the piece together I remember feeling uneasy about citing him but still finding his arguments useful at the time.

[81] As well, to recognisable performance tropes – to "the front-person", to "the performer in black".

Fig. 2.5 Steve Roggenbuck, 'life is right now […]' still and Future Islands performing on Letterman

And yet it is also earnest and impassioned, at times confrontationally so. In its foregrounded *performance* of sincerity, I would suggest it might simultaneously evoke traits of sincerity in the process. It may not be coming out raw or unmediated, but nor does it (really) claim to be doing so. The performance feels affect*ed*, but also affect*ive*. As a brief aside: in an essay for online publication *Pool*, the painter and writer Sofia Leiby at one point reminds her reader, 'What is sincere is not opposite to what is ironic […]'. [82] And indeed, Herring's performance might be representative of emerging cultural acts whose aesthetic, political and/or affective meanings are less easily framed as sincere or ironic; a potential metamodern structure of feeling and a contemporary mode of engagement which is intuitively less tied to those distinct categories of experience.

As a *post* postmodern audience, who 'know to take it as a product' (as Siddiqi puts it in a previous quote), the talk-show setting of Future Islands' performance also seems noteworthy. There is an inherent superficiality to this (whole) situation and an audience intuitively understands that this performance arrives from nothing, that moments earlier the band were standing quietly waiting for a cue to begin, and that the (relatively) indifferent studio audience is seated some distance away, separated by a slew of cameras, cranes and crew members; the critical viewer might too be attuned to the industry mechanisms which orchestrate the situation, the barefaced album promotion and the

[82] Sofia Leiby, 'I am Such a Failure: Poetry On, Around, and About the Internet', *Pool*, 2011. http://pooool.info/i-am-such-a-failure-poetry-on-around-and-about-the-internet/. (4th August, 2017).

backed-up schedule of acts who will fill this same slot night after night. And yet, with all of this in mind, one must *also* acknowledge that Herring commits nevertheless; knowingly placing himself in a vulnerable position and (again) willingly 'eschew[ing] self-consciousness'. I would suggest, then, that Herring and Future Islands tap into an innate tension within a wider cultural consciousness (of artists and audiences alike) – between affective performance, on one hand, and lingering postmodern detachment, on the other – and find in that paradox an engaging creative dynamic to explore in their work. In the same way that Herring might signal Tom Waits in his vocal performance – and the same way Animal Collective reference a three-chord song structure before exceeding its limitations to take it elsewhere – Future Islands seemingly adopt a postmodern mode of interacting with language(s) of the past, but follow the logical extension of its premise to engage language(s) of the postmodern itself. The post-deconstruction notion of performance as inherently inauthentic becomes an aesthetic trope itself to signal and explore. Jameson writes, 'Modernist styles thereby become postmodernist codes'; and in turn, those postmodern codes become metamodern materials. [83]

One is reminded of the scene in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* in which a master of ceremonies, on stage at the film's *Club Silencio*, tells the theatre audience: there is no band – 'No hay banda!' – the sounds they are about to hear are pre-recorded and everything they are about to see is an illusion. [84] The sound of a trumpet is heard as a trumpet player is brought on stage, only for the performer to remove the instrument from his mouth while its sound carries on; the announcer reiterating 'it is all recorded'. There is artificial thunder and lightning before the show's main event – Rebekah Del Rio – sings (but actuality mimes) a Spanish language version of Roy Orbison's 'Crying'; she does this so passionately and convincingly that *Mulholland Drive*'s protagonists in the audience are moved to tears. And then, she collapses mid-song and is carried from the stage, while her disembodied voice continues to sing. As with the performer and the trumpet, the illusion that was reiterated and foregrounded is broken, but the audience has been drawn in nonetheless. In unambiguously drawing attention to own its implicit constructed-ness, but then producing something genuinely affective, one might see a parallel with Herring and Future Islands' performance on Letterman. It seems to me these gestures represent alternatives to postmodern modes of production that (crucially) lie beyond simple reversals, and this seems to be a commitment (intuitively) shared by each of the examples cited previously. Just as Miranda July does not disregard technology but uses technology as a means to go beyond the limits of technology itself, there is a sense of knowingly engaging postmodern detachment in order to gesture beyond the limitations of postmodern detachment itself – but (again crucially) without simply returning to

[83] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 17.
[84] David Lynch, *Mulholland Drive*, (France: Les Films Alain Sarde, 2001, 147 mins). The scene I am about to describe takes place between 1:40:44 and 1:47:56.

modernist modes of production which postmodernism (appropriately) deconstructed. Or, to borrow the words of the writer Maggie Nelson, a sense of 'using artifice to strip artifice of artifice'. [85]

Perceiving depth and (or within) capitalist realism

In the essay 'The New "Depthiness"', Timotheus Vermeulen contrasts a lyric from the band Radiohead with a line from the television show *Girls*, presenting their divergence as telling of a shift in cultural production. [86] In the song 'There, There', Thom Yorke sings 'just because you feel it, doesn't mean it's there', and (11 years later) one of the characters in *Girls* inverts the sentiment to claim, 'just because it's fake, doesn't mean I don't feel it.' [87] Vermeulen's essay considers what Jameson described as 'the new depthlessness' of postmodernism, in response to modernist sense(s) of depth, and goes on to suggest 'the new depthiness' as a potential third (contemporary) category. In carving out his argument, Vermeulen borrows a (as he admits) kitschy metaphor of *diving* and *surfing* from the Italian novelist Alessandro Baricco to distinguish between the two 'experiential registers' of depth and depthlessness. [88] In essence: a diver '[…] looks for meaning in the depths of the ocean. He delves into the water, sinking deeper and deeper […]', whereas a surfer '[…] looks for meaning on the surface, more precisely in the series of waves that form the surface […]'. [89] The diver can be seen to represent a modernist, in Vermeulen's words, 'modality of engagement' that (like M.C. Escher's staircase) gestures towards the inherent profundity, power and meaningfulness of art; with the surfer representing that of postmodernism and its preoccupation with surfaces, shallowness and superficiality. [90] Vermeulen goes on to argue: '[…] in the past decade, a third modality has taken hold of the artistic imagination: that of the snorkeler. Bear with me.' [91] Again, acknowledging the folly of the metaphor but carrying on anyway, the snorkeler is not only concerned with the surface of the water, they are *in* the water looking below. And if they choose to dive, they only go as far as the air in their lungs will allow, at which point they return to the surface. This image can be paired with a contemporary metamodern sensibility which, while not addressed directly in the essay, is surely closely associated. In Vermeulen's words,

> […] for the snorkeler, depth both exists, positively, in theory, and does not exist, in practice, since he does not, and cannot, reach it. When I refer to the "new depthiness," I am thinking of a snorkeler intuiting depth, imagining it—perceiving it without encountering it. [92]

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[85] Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2011), 96.
[86] Timotheus Vermeulen, 'The New "Depthiness"', *e-flux*, 2017. http://www.e-flux.com/journal/61/61000/the-new-depthiness/. (4th August, 2017).
[87] (As quoted in) ibid.
[88] ibid.
[89] ibid.
[90] ibid.
[91] ibid.
[92] ibid.

I would like to think that the parallels with metamodernism, as I have been discussing it, are clear here. Switching gears a little, then: the perceiving of a depth one can never fully encounter (also) feels allegorical to 'glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities' experienced within what Mark Fisher calls capitalist realism. [93] Capitalist realism is a phrase Fisher uses, in his book of the same name, to express the sense '[…] that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.' [94] Building upon Jameson's reading of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism (as the writer admits), the book's chapters prove bleakly convincing in their discussion of the insidious levels of control exerted by capital over all aspects of contemporary experience. And yet, as mentioned, in the book's final pages Fisher suggests it is in moments of smallness that alternatives to the (pervasive) sense that "there is no alternative" might be uncovered:

> The very oppressive pervasiveness of capitalist realism means that even glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities can have a disproportionately great effect. The tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again. [95]

This passage means a lot to me in the wider context of this thesis and it also echoes the work of writer Ben Lerner and the epigraph to his novel *10:04* as discussed in chapter 1 of the thesis. [96] While Fisher's argument is tied to Jameson's postmodernism, it is also entangled with Fukuyama's end of history – 'a situation in which nothing can happen', for example, adequately describing an end of history sensibility. And yet revisiting Fukuyama's original thesis, there a range of assertions which feel hastily rendered, worryingly reductive and/or plainly problematic. As evidence of the "triumph" of liberal democracy, Fukuyama argued, '[…] the class issue has actually been successfully resolved in the West', and suggested also that, '[…] the root causes of economic inequality do not have to do with the underlying legal and social structure of our society, which remains fundamentally egalitarian and moderately redistributionist […]'. [97] Today, these statements are readily undermined by reading any (even moderately impartial) news website and, as cities across the UK provide food banks for their residents most cruelly affected by political austerity, it seems kind of absurd to imagine 'the class issue' was resolved in 1989.

But nevertheless, Fukuyama *did* capture something – particularly (I think) in terms of governmental politics, and a consolidation and consensus of *centrism* in the West throughout the 1980s and 1990s (perhaps best displayed in the UK with Tony Blair and New Labour). Yet as touched on, the last

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[93] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 81.
[94] ibid, 2. Fisher attributes the quoted phrase to both Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson.
[95] ibid, 81.
[96] Ben Lerner, *10:04* (London: Granta, 2014),
[97] Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', 9 (both quotes).

decade or so has acted to undermine the *end*-ness of that political moment, representing (essentially) a crisis for the third way mode of government, as various political parties have enacted distinct retreats from the centre ground. As van den Akker and Vermeulen observe in a 2014 video interview with *Frieze*,

Especially after [the banking crisis of] 2008, politically, we are getting a complete disintegration. And what we see is where [politicians] used to shake hands in the middle – Tony Blair with the Tories but also with Gaddafi and whomever – they would be in the centre, but now they are taking their hand back. So Wilders in Holland, or The Tea Party in the U.S. or the AfD in Germany; they are taking back their hand and entrenching themselves ever further in some kind of corner. [98]

It is important to note at this stage: while I have concentrated on the implications of metamodernism in terms of cultural production (which admittedly has had an heir of cautious optimism), the political reality of rising conservatism and nationalist sentiments are equally constitutive of a metamodern structure of feeling, and a paradigm shift beyond postmodernism and the end of history more broadly. The quoted passage from van den Akker and Vermeulen identified a changing attitude in relation to democratic politics, and today one can (of course) update their list of examples to include the UK's decision to leave the European Union, Donald Trump's U.S. presidential election campaign/victory and the rise of alt-right fascism; the latter (worryingly) refuting another of Fukuyama's assertions, that '[fascism] had completely lost its appeal'. [99] The diminishing relevance of a politics of the centre has, it should also be said, produced leftist candidates like Bernie Sanders in the U.S. and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, who both gained momentum with socialist informed policies and an emphasis on younger generations. And at the time of writing, following the gains of Corbyn in the UK's 2017 general election, political commentator Owen Jones today published an article with the title, 'New Labour is dead'. [100] This (of course) is an intricate discussion which would (and will) take multiple books to comprehensively examine but it is important to address here, at the very least to point towards the political climate within which the creative practice and cultural acts I have discussed are/have been taking place.

In thinking about Mark Fisher, then, I want to consider how capitalist realism (as it continues to exist) relates to the well-being of the individuals living within it. In the book, Fisher refers to the work of psychologist Oliver James, at one point citing James' discussion of 'the entrepreneurial fantasy society' which perpetuates a myth that '[…] access to the top is open to anyone willing to work hard enough, regardless of their familial, ethnic or social background – if you do not succeed,

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[98] Frieze, 'What is metamodernism?', 3:05.
[99] Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', 9,
[100] Owen Jones, 'New Labour is dead. Jeremy Corbyn's shadow cabinet must stay as it is', *The Guardian*, 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jun/13/new-labour-dead-jeremy-corbyn-shadow-cabinet-socialist-labour. (4th August, 2017).

there is only one person to blame.' [101] This assessment seems to (astutely) capture the way in which neoliberalism and its competitive market logic becomes internalised within a cultural consciousness. Fisher writes of the 'psychological conflict' often felt by those within the workplace of post-Fordism, which is to say the modern working environment. [102] And, in an online piece for *The Occupied Times*, the writer similarly speaks of neoliberalism's double-bind; specifically, in terms of 'the long-term unemployed in UK', Fisher argues, '[…] a population that has all its life been sent the message that it is good for nothing is simultaneously told that it can do anything it wants to do'. [103] Each of these passages, then, describe a process of neoliberalization which shrewdly imposes accountability upon individuals, while social structures and political decision making assume ephemerality and evaporate in the face of scrutiny. For Fisher, this connects with the widespread de-politicization of mental illness; and in addressing this de-politicization, the writer observes that 'It goes without saying that all mental illnesses are neurologically *instantiated*, but this says nothing about their *causation*.' [104] In Fisher's words, then, a public discourse which focuses on the 'chemico-biologization' of mental illness instead of its social propagation, '[…] reinforces Capital's drive towards atomistic individualization (you are sick because of your brain chemistry).' [105] And indeed, having referenced radical theorists of the 1960s and 1970s who (re)positioned mental illness as a political discussion – as in the explorations of schizophrenia by Deleuze and Guattari) – *Capitalist Realism* goes on to plainly lay out Fisher's position,

> […] it is necessary to reframe the growing problem of stress (and distress) in capitalist societies. Instead of treating it as incumbent on individuals to resolve their own psychological distress, instead, that is, of accepting the vast *privatization of stress* that has taken place over the last thirty years, we need to ask: how has it become acceptable that so many people, and especially so many young people, are ill? The 'mental health plague' in capitalist societies would suggest that, instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is inherently dysfunctional, and that the cost of it appearing to work is very high. [106]

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[101] Oliver James, as quoted in Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 36.

[102] ibid, 34. The term post-Fordism indicates the shift towards specialization and instability in the industrial work force, as distinct from the career longevity of production-line "work your way up" employment (characterised by the automotive factories of Henry Ford). Or, as Fisher puts it: 'The slogan which sums up the new [post-Fordism] conditions is 'no long term'. Where formerly workers could acquire a single set of skills and expect to progress upwards through a rigid organizational hierarchy, now they are required to periodically re-skill as they move from institution to institution, from role to role. As the organization of work is decentralised, with lateral networks replacing pyramidal hierarchies, a premium is put on 'flexibility'.

[103] Mark Fisher, 'Good for Nothing', *The Occupied Times*, 2014. https://theoccupiedtimes.org/?p=12841. (4th August, 2017).

[104] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 37.

[105] ibid.

[106] ibid, 19. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2003); Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2003).

Again this 'mental health plague' might be one of the emerging realities which signals a shift beyond the postmodern and the end of history – it is increasingly difficult to sit on (what Linda Hutcheon describes as) 'the postmodern fence' when swathes of the population are in distress. The point I want to make, then, is that while the position of this thesis *may* be open to criticism of a certain resignation to the reality of capital and power, I am in a sense less interested in proposing clear-cut "alternatives" to neoliberal capitalism and more inclined to concentrate on 'glimmers of alternative[s]' as they exist within it; treating the small moments in which individuals might find strength or support amidst the harmful neoliberal logic of capital as important in and of themselves. With the preceding discussions of this chapter in mind, I would tentatively suggest that the discursive proposition of a metamodern structure of feeling might become important in two (closely related but slightly divergent) respects: 1) as an analytic lens through which to view social, political and cultural phenomenon occupying discursive territories beyond the logic of postmodernism and the end of history, and 2) as a timely and valuable reminder that contemporary social pressures and paradoxes can often be situated within a structure of feeling bigger than any one individual, that the contradictions of ideology and lived experience (within neoliberalism) might be understood as a widely felt contemporary condition as opposed to individual deficiency. A metamodern structure of feeling seems to be characterised by perpetually offering glimmers and glimpses, of perceiving depth and articulating *senses* of a beyond (whether or not that depth is wholly encounterable and/or attainable); and by conceiving of metamodernism as a mode of production/reception that does not ignore difficult realities in favour of utopian abstractions – but that is able to simultaneously acknowledge and gesture *through* contradictory positions – one is perhaps able to reframe the terms of their own experience, and hint at survival strategies (or even just ways to get through the day) within capitalist realism. In attempting to carve out this critical position I would want to acknowledge Audre Lorde who, in the epilogue to her essay collection *A Burst of Light*, writes: 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.' [107]

<u>Beyoncé as a site of collectivity</u>

In terms of the perspective I am suggesting here – finding moments of respite and reassurance within what Jameson called 'the massive Being of capital' – I think about contemporary engagement with mainstream entertainment. And, in particular, I think about a string of tweets by the political philosopher and popular music scholar Robin James reflecting on reactions to the (surprise) release of Beyoncé's 'Formation' video; [108] put together they read,

[107] Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light* (London; Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1988), 131. I am cautious in my citing of Lorde here, and definitely do not want to be the bro co-opting work that is meaningful to queer woman of colour.
[108] Beyoncé, 'Formation', 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDZJPJV__bQ. (4th August, 2017).

do the 'beyonce is still a capitalist' gripes discount the *political* character of black women's pleasure in response to Formation? Like, I'm just thinking of the overwhelming outpouring of sheer glee on Saturday and Sunday...that was a Thing. Or, why not view that huge and intense response as a political thing? [109]

James draws attention to 'glimmers' of alternative possibilities and suggests a reimagining (or at least a questioning) of what constitutes political activity. As is often the case, this "critical" gesture – to engage in (traditionally) top-down mainstream culture and locate the meaningful experience within it – feels intuitive in spaces not traditionally recognised as political and/or academic; in this instance, in communities for whom Beyoncé is a site of collectivity. Indeed, what Beyoncé signifies in terms of visibility and representation to black women (and particularly black women from the southern states of the U.S.) destabilises predictable criticisms of the artist's politics as undermined by her proximity to capital. It might (even) begin to invert that criticism, as it feels important to recognise (and problematic to discount) the way such a prominent figure – a black woman, no less – innately speaks to, and connects with, a section of society who have been historically marginalised and overlooked. It should be noted too that the politics of 'Formation' are not only implied at the point of reception. With the song and its video (as well as its subsequent visual album *Lemonade*), Beyoncé actively uses her platform to speak directly to African diasporic communities and histories of black female experience. [110] As well as containing an assemblage of powerful images of black womanhood, set in New Orleans post-hurricane Katrina, the 'Formation' video also includes explicitly politicised imagery addressing structural racism and police brutality in the U.S. – Beyoncé perched atop a sunken police car, a young boy dancing before a row of armed police officers (who then raise their hands in surrender), and perhaps most explicitly, as the camera pans across writing on a wall which plainly reads: 'stop shooting us' (Fig. 2.6).

One reason to consider 'Formation' at this point, then, is to (at the very least) observe an instance of (radical) political activity that is nominally compromised by its proximity to capitalist modes of production, but which also feels increasingly difficult to disregard simply on those terms. And this tension exists beyond the work of Beyoncé, as a political consciousness in relation to race – especially in the context of #BlackLivesMatter and continued violence from police officers towards black communities – seems increasingly present within the discourses of mainstream popular culture. [111] Staying within popular music: one might think about Kanye addressing systematic racism in lyrics and interviews (perhaps most explicitly on, and around the release of, *Yeezus*), Solange

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[109] Robin James, 'do the 'beyonce […]', *Twitter*, 2016. https://twitter.com/doctaj/status/697487643899252736; Robin James, 'Like, I'm just […]', *Twitter*, 2016. https://twitter.com/doctaj/status/697487841614569472; Robin James, ''Or, why not […]', *Twitter*, 2016. https://twitter.com/doctaj/status/697488291629834241. (all: 4th August, 2017).
[110] Beyoncé, *Lemonade* (USA: Good Company, 2016, 66 mins).
[111] Not that the violence itself is anything new, but its discussion seems to increasingly be taking place in public spaces.

Fig. 2.6 Beyoncé, 'Formation'

celebrating blackness throughout *A Seat at the Table*, or the work of Vince Staples who routinely explores the implications of a racism that has been internalised in young black men – 'Fight between my conscience, and the skin that's on my body / Man, I need to fight the power, but I need that new Ferrari'. [112]

In Robin James' recognising 'the *political* character of black women's pleasure in response to Formation', there is a sense (I think) of cautiously starting to unbind political discourse from Jameson's 'massive Being of capital', and (re)considering the political reality of pleasure, representation, community and lived experience. Crucially, in my mind, this does not ignore or negate the act of discussing the violence and logic of capital, but instead allows a parallel space for consideration of valuable critiques, alternatives or moments of strength and resistance as they are experienced by individuals and communities. In this sense, disregarding the political value of an artist like Beyoncé can feel a little perverse; as I think online editor Maddie Holden shrewdly articulated when she tweeted, 'of all the capitalist institutions and icons that need to crumble to the ground, a weird number of you think beyonce needs to be first'. [113] As before, the idea of a criticism which moves beyond simple reversals, sidestepping the reassertion of a flawed dichotomy, feels important here. In not simply disregarding the work of an artist like Beyoncé on account of its proximity to capital, I would (cautiously) suggest there is a sense of gesturing *through* the

[112] Kanye West, *Yeezus* (Def Jam, 2013); BBC Radio 1, 'Kanye West. Zane Lowe. Full Interview', 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DR_yTQ0SYVA. (4th August, 2017).; Solange, *A Seat at the Table* (Saint/Columbia Records, 2016); Vince Staples, 'Lift Me Up', *Summertime '06* (Def Jam, 2015).
[113] maddie holden, 'of all the […]', *Twitter*, 2016. https://twitter.com/winningprotocol/status/753859356916084736 (4th August, 2017).

limitations and oppressiveness of capital in order to engage with the meaningful moments within; to *perceive* depth within the totalising market logic of commercial music and entertainment (whether or not that depth is attainable).

Finally, the 'glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities' offered by Mark Fisher, as noted, feel reminiscent of the writer Ben Lerner who similarly talks of 'glimmers' of potential as they exist in the present. And here I would like to *re*-quote a passage cited elsewhere in the thesis, from the author's interview with Paul Holdengräber at the New York Public Library, in which Lerner argues:

The first thinkers about politics and literature that really mattered to me were brilliant but also very depressing, because the emphasis was on capitalism as a totality, domination as a totality – every one of our relationships is totally saturated with the logic of abstract exchange, it's totally saturated with a commercialised and militarised language and all that we can kind of do, right, is wait for a revolution at some point in the future that's gonna change the order of experience. And there are a lot of writers now who I think are emphasising really simple things that are really important things. Right, like: well maybe if you believe in a communitarian politics, you should remember that when you break bread with a friend, that that has the glimmer of revolutionary potential in it. Like, now. [114]

Not unlike Robin James, I would argue that Lerner articulates an intuitive desire to (re)assess one's relationship to the nature of political, cultural or aesthetic discourses as they have been inherited; and in reimagining discursive possibilities in response to a contemporary socio-political moment, I think one might begin to sense '[…] the fiction of the world rearranging itself around her' (to again re-quote a phrase from Lerner). [115] This intuitive desire to reimagine (or rearrange) what Lerner calls 'the order of experience' feels common to each of the works and/or discussions cited in the latter half of this chapter – and, as I hope to have made the case, these might all be understood as constitutive of an emerging metamodern structure of feeling. To this end, in closing, I would suggest a metamodern sensibility is one that says*: capitalism may be central to all human relations but it is also superfluous, that moments of shared experience and feelings of connection online are prone to co-option but are life giving nonetheless, and that commercial mainstream entertainment is unimportant but that does not mean it is not important*.

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[114] 'Ben Lerner - 10:04', *The New York Public Library Podcast*, (2014), 34:39. (3rd August, 2017).
[115] Ben Lerner, *10:04*, 109.

Beyond the dialectic? (*Conclusion*)

Thinking about the title of this chapter – while it feels fitting for the discussions housed within – I should acknowledge that the experience of contradiction is not, in and of itself, distinct to the contemporary moment. The expression of contradictory experience is historically embedded within the logic of dialectic critique, from (at least) Hegel, through Marx, and beyond. And yet, when Hito Steyerl claims, 'contradiction is the form of the contemporary', she goes on to say state that,

> [within the notion of contradiction] there is of course a tension that can, you know, catalyze things. That used to be called dialectic, but suddenly that word doesn't work in that way anymore […] one of the reasons why it doesn't work, is that it departs from the idea that there is two opposites, but nowadays there is at least five, no? [116]

As Steyerl suggests, then, dialectic critique is destabilised without the fixity of two oppositional positions. Thinking about the preceding discussions of this chapter, while metamodernism might be understood to emerge from a dialectical critique of the modern and postmodern, its resulting structure of feeling and modes of cultural production do not seem to achieve a traditional synthesis. Without trying to be cute: the synthesis at which metamodernism arrives seems to be one that resists synthesis itself, wary of the implications of any potential resolution and intuitively situating itself in the between-ness of the double-bind. And in no longer providing firm ground, this might be the contemporary context to which Steyerl is referring when she frames *dialectic* as no longer working. In this regard, then, the analogy of the swinging pendulum proposed by van den Akker and Vermeulen might become particularly important: its free movement between numerous poles (perhaps) feeling more suitable in articulating the increasingly nuanced context of a metamodern sensibility as well as Steyerl's observation of multiple opposites; and this image, of the swinging pendulum, too might help to capture (or make a case for) the contemporary contradictory condition as one distinct from that of earlier generations.

Throughout this chapter, then – by delving into postmodernism but then also looking at emerging discourses which seemingly exist beyond the remit of its categories – I hope to have plotted a path that firstly, acknowledges a discernible shift in contemporary structure(s) of feeling; and secondly, also (re)considers the notion that modes of production are inevitably and irrevocably drained of cultural value by the totalising logics of the market, capital and power. And towards the end of the chapter, I argued for the consideration of a metamodern perspective alongside the very real personal burdens imposed by neoliberal capitalism, suggesting that (metamodern) glimmers of alternative

[116] MOCA, 'What is Contemporary? A Conversation with Hito Steyerl', 26:40.

political, aesthetic and/or discursive possibilities – as they are encountered *within* capital – might become important sites of resistance and/or survival.

A final example of the metamodern sensibility – as offered by Timotheus Vermeulen in the previously cited video with *Frieze* – is Guido van der Werve's short film, *Nummer acht, everything is going to be alright*. [117] Created on location atop the frozen sea south of the Arctic circle, the film features a lone figure calmly walking in front of a giant "ice breaker" ship which is coming up behind him, 'literally breaking the ground on which he is walking' (as Vermeulen states). [118] The stark imagery of the work confounds a viewer with its (seeming) impossibility and, as the figure continues forward, its affective character is at once ominous *and* optimistic (Fig. 2.7). Vermeulen contrasts the sensibility of van der Werve's film with a traditionally postmodern interpretation of the same premise, stating,

I could imagine a postmodern work that has the same premise, a man walking on ice and an ice breaker coming up behind him breaking the ice under his feet. […] And I could imagine Tarantino or Todd Solondz – *everything will be alright* – we see it and the person dies and that's sort of how it ends. We have the joke, wonderful. But here the guy keeps on walking, seemingly unperturbed by this beast of a machine. And for me this moment, of going on in spite of perhaps better knowledge that you will arrive somewhere, at that horizon of the camera; that for me is a very interesting motif, it is a very interesting figure that expresses the metamodern sensibility. [119]

That Vermeulen mentions Todd Solondz is uncanny: in 2016, the director released the film *Wiener-Dog* – the premise of which is eerily similar to the scenario parodically suggested by Vermeulen here (albeit stretched over 90 minutes). [120] The film follows the journey of a stray Dachshund as it is passed between various owners, the audience getting a glimpse into the life of each owner through the eyes of the routinely neglected pupper. The titular wiener-dog inevitably becomes the point of attachment and investment for the audience, and yet the film ends abruptly as the dog is killed by a truck (with the shot held as its body is then repeatedly ran over by other vehicles too). As Vermeulen noted of the hypothetical film about which he speculated, unaware it would come to production, this gesture feels characteristic of Solondz' scathingly dark comedic position as established in films like *Welcome to the Dollhouse* and *Happiness*, both of which emerge in the context of postmodern detachedness and the malaise of the end of history in the 1990s. [121] This more

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[117] Guido van der Werve, *Nummer acht, everything is going to be alright* (2007, 10 mins). View an excerpt here: 'Guido van der Werve' [excerpt], 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5366DD9JauU. (4th August, 2017).
[118] Frieze, 'What is Metamodernism?', 7:00.
[119] ibid.
[120] Todd Solondz, *Wiener-Dog*, (USA: Annapurna Pictures, Killer Films, 2016, 90 mins).
[121] Todd Solondz, *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (USA: Suburban Pictures, 1995, 88 mins); Todd Solondz, *Happiness*, (USA: Good Machine, Killer Films, 1998, 134 mins).

Fig. 2.7 Guido van der Werve, *Nummer acht, everything is going to be alright*

recent instance of Solondz' trademark humour, then, helps reiterate an important point at this conclusion-ary stage of the chapter: to discuss a metamodern structure of feeling, as I have been doing, is not to suggest that a postmodern sensibility, or postmodern modes of production, have evaporated from the culture entirely. However, they no longer seem to be (what Jameson once called) the cultural dominant, as I hope the examples cited previously have helped draw attention to. The ending of *Wiener-Dog*, then, feels more like an anomaly against the sensibility of contemporary cultural production; its disconcerting out-of-time-ness (as well as its odd predictability), ultimately, drawing attention to a discernible cultural shift that has occurred in the last 15 years or so.

A metamodern absurd (*Conclusion part 2*)

Finally, I want to end by making the point that – in a contemporary (metamodern) moment – Albert Camus' notion of *the absurd* seems to be reinvigorated. In short: Camus observed the basic human need to create value and meaning within a universe which is fundamentally meaningless. And the inability to reconcile, what Camus calls, 'these two certainties', inevitably situates all human experience within the realm of the absurd. [122] In the opening line of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus famously wrote: 'There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.' [123] And yet, going on to investigate this problem, the essay arrives at the realisation that, nevertheless, 'the

[122] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 49. Camus writes: '[…] these two certainties—my appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle—I also know that I cannot reconcile them.'
[123] ibid, 1.

point is to live'. [124] For Camus, to commit suicide as a result of life's meaninglessness would be to escape the (absurd) reality into which one is born; but equally, to take a leap of faith – conceiving of one's actions and/or experiences as innately meaningful – would be a self-deception, committing the same mistake. In response, the absurd perspective fundamentally accepts that life has no inherent meaning, but encourages one to live *as if* it does… while (crucially) remembering it does not. This paradoxical commitment, for the absurdists, was/is the only way to live in response to the impossibility of the imposed human condition. As Camus writes,

> Negating one of the terms of the opposition on which [one] lives amounts to escaping it. To abolish conscious revolt is to elude the problem. The theme of permanent revolution is thus carried into individual experience. Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it. [125]

I think it is possible to see here, then – in the absurdist acceptance of the in-between, of going on spite of better knowledge (gesturing towards a meaning that is admittedly unknowable and un-encounterable), and of indifference to achieving a synthesis of opposing perspectives – a foreshadowing of a metamodern structure of feeling, of perceiving a depth that is known to be unreachable. And as such, framed alongside Camus and the absurd, I also think of an essay published on van den Akker and Vermeulen's *Notes on Metamodernism* webzine in which the pair describe the metamodern as a 'moment of radical doubt'. [126] Conspicuously similar yet conceived close to 70 years apart, metamodernism and Camus' absurd both display an approach to contradictory experience that seems to fall outside of the usefulness of traditional dialectical critique, as well as suggesting modes of production (and living) that destabilise rigid discursive binaries and totalizing cultural logics. And as such, I would argue, the discourses of each might be understood to not simply disavow important discussions surrounding the oppositional poles which their approaches negate, but instead might uncover a sense of fluidity which allows for alternative approaches to stagnant conversations.

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[124] ibid, 63.
[125] ibid, 52.
[126] Timotheus Vermeulen & Robin van den Akker, 'Misunderstandings and clarifications', *Notes on Metamodernism*, 2015. http://www.metamodernism.com/2015/06/03/misunderstandings-and-clarifications/. (4th August, 2017).

~ Chapter 3 ~

Considering creative practice

In the preceding chapters I hope to have outlined the discourses and tensions I have found relevant to the contemporary cultural moment surrounding this submission. With those critical positions established, this final chapter seeks to act as a conclusion of sorts: bringing together the thesis' previous discussions through a consideration of creative practice (and my own work in particular), pointing more overtly to connections between emerging cultural discourse(s) and the practice of music/art making. While the chapter serves as a commentary on the non-written portion of my submission, my intention with the research (as a whole) is to tentatively begin collapsing hierarchies between practice and theory, with the practice seeking to *explain* the writing as much as the writing seeks to *explain* the practice. The idea is that the two component parts of the submission are experienced as one and the same, together gesturing towards a critical space somewhere between their (opposing) poles. And, as such, it is worth noting that the commentaries of my own work within this chapter are likely to address discourses beyond the world of practice itself.

Returning briefly to the thesis' prologue: uncreative writer Kenneth Goldsmith seemed to offer a particularly extreme response to the culture of art making *after* the internet, however in working through the political implications of Goldsmith's position, the limitations of his practice became unavoidable. In place of Goldsmith's boldness, the subsequent chapters of the thesis have opted to explore nuance and contradictory tension within contemporary cultural discourse(s). Considering a mode of production which might be aligned to the perspectives of the thesis' later chapters, then, I think a lot about a pair of tweets by music maker Tom Krell (who performs under the name How To Dress Well); put together they read,

it's crazy writing songs in these times bc there's still care & sex & thighs & then also like neoliberalism & blatant domination & violence. i guess it's important 2 try 2 honor the full range of contemporary reality & write from the schizophrenia of the present but idk [1]

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[1] tk ☯, 'it's crazy writing […]', *Twitter*, 2015. https://twitter.com/HowToDressWell/status/669227103494148096; tk ☯, 'i guess it's […]', *Twitter*, 2015. https://twitter.com/HowToDressWell/status/669227341646696448. (both: 3rd August, 2017).

I understand Krell's words as a recognition of contradictory experience in the present; of the innate *beauty* of the world ('care & sex & thighs') but also its unavoidable *ugliness* ('neoliberalism & blatant domination & violence'). And while observing a sense of confusion and the challenges it poses for contemporary artists, Krell articulates a desire to go on and create things nevertheless, suggesting it is important to reckon with 'the full range of contemporary reality' within the work itself. In capturing a seemingly fluid interaction between critical discourse and music making, as well as a cautious optimism tempered by its own (radical) uncertainty, this sentiment feels close to the creative perspective I have been gesturing towards in the writing so far. It feels aligned with a metamodern structure of feeling as I have discussed it, as well as Hito Steyerl's attempt to viscerally convey a feeling of incomprehension (as mentioned in the conclusion of chapter one). And, I would also argue that Krell's proposition might hint at a critical/creative space that moves beyond the flawed politics of Goldsmith's uncreative writing, its reflective approach to the confusion of the present diverging from the self-assuredness (repeatedly) displayed by Goldsmith. In this sense, these quoted tweets might be useful to keep in mind as this chapter progresses.

In the following pages, I will discuss my own work – the music and video work of Competition, the minimal-punk band Rice Milk, a collaborative short-film and zine titled *Both things are true*, the ongoing writing endeavour *Make it look like they did it* and the tape label-come-zine imprint *Good Food*. I will discuss these projects in relation to a handful of themes which provide the chapters' sections: creative efficiency, repetition, sampling, shared language and writing + practice.

❍

A note: in the last few years I think I realised that continuing to create work and perform in public (even if I wasn't exactly sure why) was a powerful gesture in and of itself – re: facing the uncertainty of the present – and one which made me feel connected to the people around me

Creative efficiency

In considering contemporary cultural discourses, one dynamic I am drawn to is the (relatively) recent shift in the landscape of popular music making towards a sense of sparseness in composition and production; for example, Drake 2015's mixtape *If You're Reading This It's Too Late*.[2] Somewhat distinct from the artist's previous releases, the mixtape seems to strip (pop) music making down to its component parts; a restrained approach to beat-making allowing freestyle-like

[2] Drake, *If You're Reading This It's Too Late* (Cash Money, 2015).

vocals to dictate song structures and provide formal variation through subtle shifts in phrasing and intonation (flow and cadence) while the beat remains mostly unchanged.[3] The minimal-ness of *If You're Reading This…* feels indebted to modern Atlanta-centric trap music, yet a sense of creative resourcefulness has informed the practice(s) of hip-hop since the culture's inception.[4] The music of Hackney-based artist Dean Blunt is another point of reference, frequently embodying an economic (yet urgent) approach to composition and musical material.[5] With full pieces constructed around a single sample or rhythmic gesture, Blunt's recordings often undercut and reimagine formal conventions/expectations of song-writing (where ideas are traditionally crafted and fine-tuned, developed and enhanced over extended periods of time). On an album like 2013's *The Redeemer*, Blunt's compositional sparseness begins to blur with the work's emotional and/or dramatic content, providing a suitably exposed environment to foreground the album's intimate and vulnerable vocal performances – 'so call me when your heart is empty, so happy we can still be friends'.[6]

Fig. 3.1 Drake, *If You're Reading This…* and Dean Blunt, *The Redeemer*

During the research period, then, I have been interested in developing a music practice which thinks about efficiency as creative tension and compositional strategy – but also, as political gesture. While citing a (mainstream) artist like Drake as a reference point in this regard might seem counter-intuitive, I am interested in how the character of the music itself might undermine the (excessive)

[3] I am thinking here of a song like 'No Tellin''. ibid.

[4] I discussed the origins of hip-hop in the thesis's prologue: young people in the South Bronx would appropriate breaks from old vinyl records and hijack city electricity to host block parties in their communities. I also return to this discussion later in this chapter as I think about the practice of sampling.

[5] From early work in the duo Hype Williams, to albums under his own name to more recent releases with Babyfather – Hype Williams, *Find Out What Happens When People Stop Being Polite And Start Gettin Reel* (De Stijl, 2010); Dean Blunt, *The Redeemer* (Hippos in Tanks, 2013); Babyfather, *419* (self-released, 2016).

[6] Dean Blunt, 'The Pedigree', *The Redeemer*.

logic of the industry which contains it. I turn (again) to Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*, which at one point argues, 'Nothing contradicts capitalism's constitutive imperative towards growth more than the concept of rationing goods and resources.' [7] This quote helps to articulate the subversive value of resourcefulness and, by exploring creative constraint, I am hoping to (subtly) weave a politic of resistance into the fabric of the work itself. In terms of the practice included in this submission: a politics of creative efficiency informs my approach to the sample-based music of Competition, as well as the minimal-punk duo Rice Milk. [8] Both projects attempt to strip away music making habits which might have been inherited and/or absorbed into one's cultural consciousness, yet always with the intention of making work that is engaging (firstly) and which interacts with the musical contexts and histories it inhabits. Competition might be understood to delve into the language of popular music making to uncover moments of intimacy, or points of engagement, within its own relatively limited means; and, working within the (self-imposed) constraint of the "minimal-punk band", Rice Milk explores the use(s) of its three principal materials: drum kit, electric guitar and human voice.

It seems to me that exploring efficiency forces one to generate discrete strategies that might sustain a piece of creative work in lieu of the conventions which have been stripped away. The following sections of the chapter will attempt to explore a handful of techniques and/or discourses I have found useful when working in Competition and Rice Milk. [9] The ensuing discussions, then, might be understood as deriving from (and supplement to) a larger interest in practices of efficiency.

Repetition

In an interview with the poet Andrea Brady, when asked about his relationship to memory, Ben Lerner states,

I think, formally, certainly like part of how I understand pacing […] and repetition, in poetry and in prose, is to produce, technically, things in the work that function as memory – so that you reencounter language with a difference and the difference has to do with your memory of a previous encounter. So that, on the plain of form, you start to form memory. And then the way you can, like, link that up with meditations about time on the plain of content becomes part of the work. [10]

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[7] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (London: Zero Books, 2009), 80.

[8] Competition is a "solo project" and Rice Milk is collaboration between me (guitar and voice) and Andrew Lowther (drums).

[9] And, as well, without being too crude: I would want to suggest that the *efficiency* I am gesturing towards here might also be understood as analogous to the sense(s) of smallness I have hoped to articulate in the previous chapters of the thesis.

[10] 'No Art and the Hatred of Poetry: Ben Lerner and Andrea Brady', *London Review Bookshop Podcast* (2016), 53:24. (3rd August, 2017).

I listened to this interview having already created the work included in this submission, but nevertheless the passage feels useful in articulating my approach to repetition. And, in this regard, the Competition *clean eating* tape might be a useful place to start. [11]

Firstly, it is worth stating that (excluding the very first track) each song on *clean eating* is built upon looped samples and repeated vocal phrases. Yet, within this framework of repeated patterns, repetition is also used to create compositional form and structure. The song 'competition' is built around a single drum pattern, four piano chords and a sampled melody (each of which loop throughout). While the piece has a relatively static instrumental accompaniment, a sense of movement is implied within the unevenness of the sampled melody's five-bar phrase (meaning, its five variations of the initial four-bar melody). As the repeated pattern loops in fives, playing against the other instruments and the musical convention of four-ness, the repetition is (in a sense) disguised and, as a result, the piece (hopefully) never feels *too* fixed. [12] The subtly of the piece's instrumental accompaniment is paired with lyrics that explore memory and past-experience(s), which themselves return intermittently throughout the piece to form *memories* within the logic of the work itself. And here, the use of memory and repetition **eerily** mirror Ben Lerner's sentiments, as quoted above. To use Lerner's phrasing, the intentional blurring of 'form' and 'content' is intended to (hopefully) '[become] part of the work'. As well, the song's lyrics are generally stated in pairs – 'we played in London and you came, we played in London and you came' – but as this pattern is established it is also destabilised, with subtle variations interrupting its repetitions throughout. One of the song's recurring lyrics provides a chorus (of sorts), with a purposeful repetition of the word *watch* – 'I had set my watch to yours, I watched my watch drift out of time' – although there is no conventional structure governing the number of repetitions which might constitute this "chorus". Similarly, certain lyric groupings return to suggest verse-like sections, hinting at a sense of structure while also resisting a feeling of rigidity. The sensation of push and pull between form and fluidity, then, is woven throughout the piece and hopes to gesture towards a (gently) destabilised listening experience – and this sensibility might also be understood to underlie *clean eating* as a whole. As with the unevenness of the song's sampled melody, and the blurring of 'form' and 'content', I am hoping to find subtle variations and points of engagement within a repetitive practice of efficiency.

Also, the *clean eating* tape is constructed in such a way that – across its 30-minute running time – senses of memory and/or structure might begin to emerge from within its implied sparseness: the drum loop of 'competition' reappears in 'bridge', which itself shares the harmonic material of

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[11] Competition, *clean eating* (self-released, 2016); a physical copy of the tape (from a second run released this year) is included in this submission, and a digital version of the release is included on accompanying USB.

[12] The sense of movement in the work is also subtly helped along by a delay effect applied to the track's instrumental, which is subtly manipulated throughout (this is consistent across the whole tape).

‘plinth’ (for example). With varying degrees of subtly, then, I am interested in creating internal logic(s), with self-contained moments of engagement, within the work itself – and in this regard, the music making process can feel novelistic to me in a lot of ways.

In discussing repetition, I want to briefly note Pierre Schaeffer’s *sillon fermé* (locked-groove) experiments. Working with pre-recorded sound and developing the practice of *musique concrète* in the 1940s, Schaeffer devised a number of compositional techniques which sought to detach sounds from their familiar musical environments, ‘halt[ing] the flow of signification’ – as writer Brian Kane puts it. [13] Simplifying to the extreme, the locked-groove experiment highlighted the ways in which short musical phrases – when repeated over and over – take on alternative characteristics, become *something else* and sustain themselves simply through their repetitions. This notion is woven into the fabric of my practice, and emboldens the (at times) stark repetitiveness of the work submitted here; it might be seen as a foundational principle to my creative position and as such feels important to acknowledge within this section.

In Rice Milk, although a different musical context with a different set of aesthetic reference points, many of the same dynamics are present. And yet, the *development* of a practice of efficiency (and its compositional strategies) can perhaps be observed more readily across the Rice Milk discography. Although the first set of recordings (*Rice Milk*, 2013) displays what feels like fairly intuitive musical choices, release number two (*Be A Mensch*, 2013) is perhaps the first conscious attempt to explore a practice of creative constraint and limited musical material – with songs like ‘nnnv’ and ‘two chords’ maybe feeling most successful in their efforts. [14] However, this approach feels most fully realised on the tape, *Weird Year* (2015). [15] The tape’s opening track, ‘take my weight’, commits to a single (one-bar) guitar and drum motif throughout; and the following song, ‘sand’, features a lone looped guitar pattern. ‘nye’ establishes and explores a single rhythmic figure, and while the drum part is consistent throughout, variations in the guitar and vocals offer subtle interruptions into its repetition to provide a sense of structural arrangement. Closing song ‘magpie’ is composed using a handful of repeating patterns – spread across the constituent drum, guitar and vocal parts – which interweave and overlap throughout the song. And as with *clean eating*, senses of structure might begin to develop within the tape’s limited materials. In describing the work here, I feel aware of the practice sounding overly methodical and/or detached, as such I would want to

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[13] Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 26. As well: *music concrete* was a radical form of composition committed to pre-recorded (concrete) sounds as opposed to the abstractions of traditional notation and instrumentation – as such, Schaeffer has been labelled the ‘grandfather of sampling’. Jonathan Patrick, ‘A guide to Pierre Schaeffer, the godfather of sampling’, *Fact*, 2016. http://www.factmag.com/2016/02/23/pierre-schaeffer-guide/. (3rd September 2017).

[14] In the submission, the two releases are brought together on one cassette: Rice Milk, *The first two EPs* (self-released, 2017), with a digital copy also included on the accompanying USB. These recordings were first released as follows: Rice Milk, *Rice Milk* (self-released, 2013); Rice Milk, *Be A Mensch* (ASDFG, 2013).

[15] Rice Milk, *Weird Year* (Good Food: tapes & zines, 2015). Again, tape (another 2017 second run) and digital versions included in the submission.

clarify that these choices are typically made intuitively through the two of us playing together in the practice room.

Within Rice Milk, there is (I think) also a sense of playing with certain tropes from the world of guitar-centric punk music. With a pretty wide definition of "punk", then, Rice Milk engage a tradition of groups like Beat Happening, Young Marble Giants, Wire or Talking Heads, as well as more recent acts like Deerhoof, Sauna Youth or Frankie Cosmos – all of whom are reference points for the band. [16] However, in playing with certain signifiers of these musical discourses, I also tend to think about Rice Milk in terms of the *materiality* of "punk" or "guitar music" (or whatever). As I understand it: materiality has to do with stretching the limits of a discipline, while maintaining a reverence to the discipline itself – improvisation might be seen to explore the materiality of jazz, pushing the limits of the discipline without attempting to transcend it. [17] In a similar sense, then, I approach Rice Milk in terms of exploring the elastic limits of what punk music might sound like today, while always being recognisable as punk nevertheless. And in attempting to subvert some of the tropes of that cultural discourse (those we, as a band, are perhaps less comfortable with), or by incorporating influences from outside its sometimes-rigid genre boundaries, this practice also feels (to me) committed to, what Tom Krell calls, 'the full range of contemporary reality'. And as well, my instinct is to feel unsure about the possibility of disregarding genre altogether, but I am interested (as I have said in other contexts) in gesturing through genre signifiers to hopefully engender and/or uncover alternative conversations and connections.

Sampling

Within this submission, the practice of sampling is primarily displayed in the work of Competition, but it is worthy of its own section here all the same. Embodying the notion of uncovering revolutionary potential in the materials of the present – as discussed by Ben Lerner and referenced previously in the thesis – the practice feels important (particularly in relation to creative efficiency). As noted, resourcefulness is at the heart of hip-hop and its use of sampling might be the best example. In early 1970s New York, with areas of the city in a state of decay – 'I mean, when they say the Bronx was burning, the Bronx was burning' – young people developed a music practice

[16] Beat Happening, *Dreamy* (Sub Pop, 1991); Young Marble Giants, *Colossal Youth* (Rough Trade, 1980). Wire, *Pink Flag* (Harvest Records, 1977); Talking Heads, *Remain in Light* (Sire, 1980); Deerhoof, *Apple O'* (Kill Rock Stars, 2003); Sauna Youth, *Distractions* (Upset The Rhythm, 2015); Frankie Cosmos, *Zentropy* (Double Double Whammy, 2014).

[17] The artist Steff Jamieson once described the language-based photographic practice of Blaithin Mac Donnell to me in terms of materiality: in exploring images through text or spoken performance, Mac Donnell might be understood to delve into the materiality of photography, attempting to capture the *affect* of a visual/physical encounter, yet framing itself as photography all the same. Mac Donnell's work is collected at: Blaithin Mac Donnell, *Blaithin Mac Donnell* [artist's website], 2017. http://cargocollective.com/blaithinmacdonnell/. (3rd September, 2017).

which repurposed turntables as musical instruments and vinyl records as creative material.[18] DJs such as Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash began hosting parties in their neighborhoods, creating sets around the drum breaks of particular records – this practice, of intervening into and reimagining sections of pre-existing music, signals a starting point for sampling.[19] And as hip-hop music transitioned from live experience to recorded object, many of those early breaks – the (by now) iconic passages from The Incredible Bongo Band's 'Apache' or James Brown's 'Funky Drummer' – have been reverently (re)sampled across generations.[20] More recently, I think a lot about Lil Wayne's 'Let The Beat Build' in which a few seconds of Eddie Kendrick's' 'Day by Day' provides the entire harmonic accompaniment for Wayne's vocal.[21] And returning to the work of Dean Blunt, tracks like 'Lush' and '100' – from 2014's *Black Metal* – are further examples of entire compositions born of short sampled phrases.[22] Indeed, in a (rare) interview with NPR's *Microphone Check*, Blunt acknowledges an affiliation with the 'resourcefulness' of hip-hop.[23]

Staying within hip-hop: the artist MF DOOM crafts cinematic worlds by weaving together narrative devices and the cultural/aesthetic signifiers of his sample sources, treating a sample's extra-musical elements as creative material to incorporate into the experience of the work itself.[24] DOOM's discography sees him switch between multiple characters (MF DOOM, King Geedorah, Viktor Vaughn) to create his own super-villain origin story, alongside beats which often sample from superhero and sci-fi films (both their soundtracks and their dialogue).[25] The closing track on King Geedorah' *Take Me to Your Leader* album borrows from the soundtrack of 1970s Japanese animated television show *Science Ninja Team Gatchaman*, and samples dialogue from the 1965 film *Invasion of Astro-Monster*.[26] Sampling, then, can also be a subtle way of weaving layers of meaning into one's work, and thinking in terms of creative strategies which might sustain a practice of efficiency, this has felt particularly important. For example: 'clouds' on the Competition *clean*

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[18] *Hip-Hop Evolution* TV mini-series, 'Ep 1: The Foundation' (Netflix, 2016, 48 mins), 4:50. This episode also serves as a reference for my subsequent description of hip hop.
[19] Kool Herc originated the (groundbreaking) practice of playing copies of the same record on both turntables, looping back and forth between the same section of the music.
[20] Incredible Bongo Band, 'Apache', *Bongo Rock* (MGM Records, 1973), sample appears at 0:00; James Brown, 'Funky Drummer', *Funky Drummer* (King, 1970), sample appears around 5:34. And as a glimpse of the cross generational use of these samples: Sugarhill Gang, 'Apache', *8th Wonder* (Sugar Hill, 1982) and Jay-Z and Kanye West, 'That's My Bitch', *Watch the Throne* (Roc-a-fella, 2011) both sample 'Apache'; Public Enemy, 'Rebel Without a Pause', *It Takes A Nation of Millions To Hold Us Back* (Def Jam, 1987) and Nicki Minaj, 'Save Me', *Pink Friday* (Cash Money, 2010) both sample 'Funky Drummer'.
[21] Lil Wayne, 'Let The Beat Build', *Tha Carter III* (Cash Money, 2008); Eddie Kendrick, 'Day by Day', *People… Hold On* (Tamla, 1972).
[22] Dean Blunt, 'Lush' and '100', *Black Metal* (Rough Trade, 2014).
[23] 'Dean Blunt: Every Day Is A Lifetime', *Microphone Check* (2016), 37:14. (3rd August, 2017).
[24] Perhaps again echoing a blurring of 'form' and 'content'.
[25] MF DOOM, *Operation: Doomsday* (Fondle 'Em, 1999); King Geedorah, *Take Me to Your Leader* (Big Dada, 2003); Viktor Vaughn, *Vaudeville Villain* (Sound-Ink, 2003).
[26] King Geedorah, 'The Fine Print', *Take Me to Your Leader*.

eating tape samples a short passage of Bileo's 'You Can Win' – which while sounding good (I think), also provides a subtle way to begin binding the work together within the larger context of *competition*. [27] The 'clouds' sample is also slowed/pitched down, signalling an aesthetic popularised by the influential *chopped and screwed* sub-genre of Southern hip-hop, as pioneered by DJ Screw in the 1990s. [28] Refigured in this way, samples seemingly accrue extra musical qualities and begin to infer a distance from their original context while remaining otherwise unchanged – this maybe brings to mind the epigraph of Lerner's *10:04* – 'Everything will be as it is now, just a little different'. [29] Other reference points in this regard are Delroy Edwards' *Slowed Down Funk* mixtapes, the 'chopped and slopped' reworking of the *Moonlight* soundtrack as well as The Caretaker's haunted reimaginings of ballroom recordings from the past. [30]

Returning to the sampling practice(s) of the work submitted here: *clean eating*'s introduction track is sampled from the Agnes Varda film, *Jane B. par Agnès V.*, a dramatised documentary, or 'imaginary bio-pic' (as the film's trailer describes it), of the actress Jane Birkin. [31] One of the film's central themes is the slipperiness of representing a (real) self – 'even when you show it all, you reveal very little' says Birkin at one point during the film – and as such this sample felt like a fitting introduction to the tape (Fig. 3.2). In my mind, *clean eating* functions as an admittedly flawed biography of sorts, attempting (struggling) to effectively express a sense one's memory or experience (or one's memories of experience) – i.e. a level of specificity in its lyrics which simultaneously feels ambiguous. [32] Also, multiple tracks on the tape are created with samples of my own voice – the melody line throughout 'competition' is actually a (played) vocal sample, and the songs 'plinth' and 'bridge' (excluding drums) are made up entirely of vocal sounds. In choosing to work with (and manipulate) musical material in this way, I feel attached to the *functionality* of sampling practice; of treating sound as a sculptural object, beyond (or before) any conceptual or thematic possibility or association it engenders. And, as well, sampling my own voice is an effort to sidestep – or at least be aware of – the symbolic import of "recognisable" instruments; the aesthetic and/or cultural signifiers that come with the *sound* of a violin or trumpet (for example), and the implications these might have on the experience of the work.

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[27] Bileo, 'You Can Win' (MTU/Watt City Records, 1979). Available online here: 'Bileo - You Can Win', 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZoAATtUmvUs. (3rd August, 2017). The sample can be heard in its original context between 1:12 and 1:15.

[28] For example: DJ Screw, 'Swangin' and Bangin'', *Diary of the Originator, Chapter 137: Blue 22* (Screw Tapes, 1999).

[29] Ben Lerner, *10:04* (London: Granta, 2014), epigraph.

[30] Delroy Edwards, *Slowed Down Funk Vol. 1* (2014); Barry Jenkins and The Chopstars, *Purple Moonlight* (2017); The Caretaker, *An empty bliss beyond this World* (History Always Favours the Winners, 2011).

[31] Agnes Varda, *Jane B. par Agnès V.* (France: Ciné Tamaris, 1988, 97 mins). Cinelicious Pics, 'JANE B. PAR AGNÈS V. - OFFICIAL TRAILER', 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nATEW42x75I, 0:16. (4th September, 2017).

[32] For example: Competition, 'clean eating', *clean eating*.

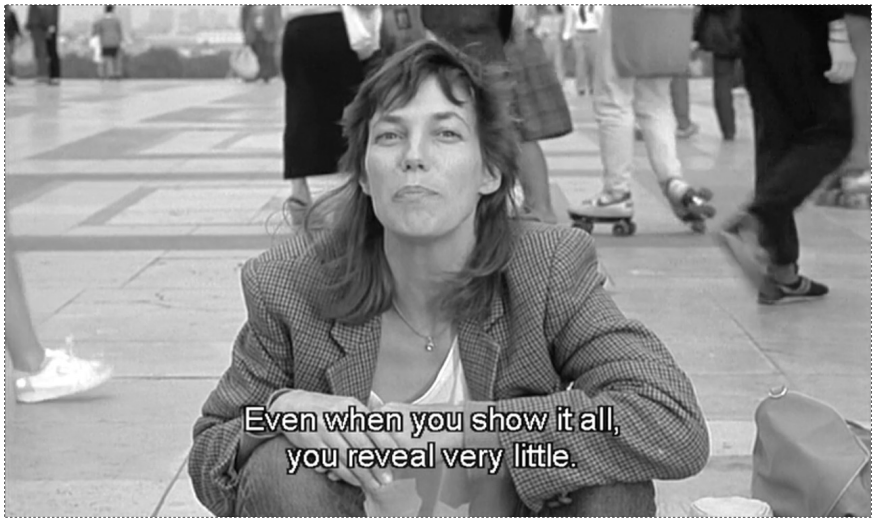

Fig. 3.2 Still from Agnes Varda's *Jane B. par Agnès V.*

At this point, it feels important to bring the discussion back around to Kenneth Goldsmith. I am aware of the potential parallels between sampling (as an appropriative art practice) and the uncreative writing of Goldsmith that I have derided previously. To begin clarifying my position, then, I think again about professor George Lewis' conception of the 'Afrological'; a cultural perspective which intuitively binds itself to history by an interaction with the traditions of previous generations. [33] As such, sampling seems to demonstrate an unambiguous means of engaging with the past. And (I think) it might be here, in the attitude of the appropriative act towards the past, that a distinction between sampling (as I have been discussing it) and the practice of Goldsmith (from which I would want to distance myself) can be made. I would want to distinguish between sampling practices which enter a dialogue with their materials (and their history), and Goldsmith's uncreative writing which seemingly seeks to sever text from its original context, doing little else to engage its meaning(s), and assert a sense of ownership in the process. In this sense, when Goldsmith approaches the autopsy report of Michael Brown as raw text, he fails to acknowledge the cultural significance of his materials. And I would suggest this is distinct from the appropriative acts referred to in this section: when African American hip-hop artists sample jazz, funk and soul records, building new work upon it, they situate their practice within an ongoing lineage of black American music; or, when artists look beyond their own histories, as MF DOOM samples sci-fi films and Dean Blunt samples touchstones of indie-rock, they nevertheless represent an ongoing

[33] George E. Lewis, 'Improvised Music After 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives', *Black Music Research Journal*, 16/1, (Spring 1996), 91 to 122.

dialogue between creative practice and the cultural products of the world around it. [34] It might be apparent in my phrasing here, but the ongoing-ness of a cultural conversation feels valuable within sample-based acts of appropriation. In contrast, it seems to me, that in its *pure* appropriation which refuses to engage conversations beyond the (un)creative act itself, uncreative writing feels very *finished*.

I want to note (again) that the difficulty of Goldsmith's position feels unavoidably tied up in the misguidedness of his absolutism and his contempt towards practices that do not align with his own principles (*uncreative writing or die*). Yet today, creative practice is surely able to be formless, floating between multiple disciplines and creative approaches. Dean Blunt, in his interview with NPR, draws attention to a similarly outdated attitude within influential voices of "independent music", calling out Steve Albini because '[…] he's got that bullshit white rockist nonsense of shitting on sampling' – noting as well that, '[sampling] shouldn't even be talked of as anything more than just how someone plays a guitar as an instrument.' [35] So, thinking (again) about 'honor[ing] the full range of contemporary reality', it seems important to reckon with this tension as a music maker active in the present moment. And while I wholly agree with Dean Blunt, as a white European I am a little cautious of arguing that sampling be understood as a musical practice interchangeable with that of any other instrument, as its history and the resourcefulness it embodies speaks to an innate blackness that would be problematic to overlook. That said, in this discussion, I think it is also important to recognise the reality that popular music *is* black music – and to situate oneself as, say, a guitar player within a lineage of rock n' roll, (again) as a white European, is equally to perpetuate a history of oppression, violence and cultural colonisation. As discussed in the prologue of this thesis, then, the politics of music making and creative practice are always present, and an ongoing recognition and continued reassessment of this reality should be examined within one's working practices (particularly for those of us in a historical position of power).

Admittedly, I am attempting to walk a thin line here: sampling seems crucial to consider in relation to a contemporary cultural reality and its modes of production, yet it is also a site of nuanced political discourse with historical significance. Following earlier discussions in the thesis, then, I am attempting to actively engage in the slipperiness of the discussion, maintaining the critical value of these two potentially opposing positions. As before there is a sense of gesturing forward while constantly reckoning with the past, and accepting a perspective of between-ness. In this sense, one project included in this submission – *Make it look like they did it* – hopes to embody the ongoing-ness of the conversation surrounding sampling. Taking the form of an online blog and Twitter feed,

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[34] Blunt's songs 'Lush' and '100' (cited previously) sample Big Star 'For You' and The Pastels' 'Over My Shoulder' respectively. Big Star, 'For You', *Third* (Ardent, 1978); The Pastels, 'Over My Shoulder', *Truckload of Trouble* (Paperhouse, 1994).

[35] 'Dean Blunt: Every Day Is A Lifetime', *Microphone Check*, 37:28.

the project documents an (informal) back-and-forth between myself (as Competition) and Gustav Thomas, focussing on our approaches to the practice and politics of sampling. I will leave this point here, as I will return to this discussion in a later section of this chapter.

Shared language

In this section, I want to address the four video pieces included in the submission. Three "music videos" for the Competition songs 'bridge', 'clouds' and 'competition', and a short-film (and zine) made in collaboration with the artist Grace Denton titled *Both things are true*. [36]

Beginning with the former: while functioning as traditional music videos, the pieces also attempt to use the imagery and visual language of the internet and technology as ways of thinking about shared experience. As such they might be understood to interact with chapter one of the thesis which, in considering emerging forms of communication taking place online, gravitated towards a discussion of *shared*ness. And with a welcome sense of fluidity, the discursive position of the writing in that chapter has felt both instructive to and informed by the practice of making these videos.

While two of the three videos were completed prior to encountering his writing, I again find Ben Lerner useful in helping articulate my interest in *shared*ness as creative dynamic. There is a section in *10:04* in which, as a reader, you are dropped (without introduction) into a literary panel discussion about "the moment when you decided to become a writer". [37] As a speaker on the panel, the novel's narrator traces the origin of his interest in writing back to Ronald Reagan's presidential address following the Challenger space shuttle disaster in 1986, framing the experience (at age 7) as his first encounter with language, prosody and poetic measure as powerful ways of connecting communities and making sense of the world (or, as the novel puts it, 'integrat[ing] a terrible event and its image back into a framework of meaning'). [38] The narrator observes, '[…] I felt simultaneously comforted and stirred by the rhythm and knew that all across America those rhythms were working in millions of other bodies too.' [39] Yet the book makes no claims for the speech as important poetry in and of itself – nor is it approving of the speaker, who the narrator considers a 'mass murderer' – but instead it reflects on this nationally broadcast monologue as an example of 'bad forms of collectivity that can serve as figures of its real possibility'. [40] Elaborating on his narrator's perspective, then, Lerner has said,

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[36] Competition, *bridge* (2015, 6 mins); Competition, *clouds* (2015, 3 mins); Competition, *competition* (2017, 9 mins); Grace Denton and Competition, *Both things are true* (2016, 6 mins). The videos are all included on the submission's accompanying USB. A physical copy of the *Both things are true* zine is submitted also.
[37] Ben Lerner, *10:04*, 109 to 116.
[38] ibid, 112.
[39] ibid
[40] ibid, 116.

[The narrator of *10:04*] desires to be an artist who is going to look at all these fallen forms of collectivity, all the bad ways we're connected – like bundled debt, like housing crises, or pollutants in the water – and he's going to try to extract from those a kind of figure for the possibility of some other kind of collectivity, a feeling of interconnectedness that even if its generated from these debased forms still has a glimmer of revolutionary potential. [41]

Reflecting on 'the bad ways we're connected', and expanding a list of 'fallen forms' of collective experience, I think about iPhones and MacBooks, social media accounts and algorithmic Google searches; cornerstones of contemporary experience which are inevitably entangled with the interest of capital. The videos included here – by leaning on the familiar visual language(s) of pre-installed MacBook programs, internet browsers and/or Snapchat filters (amongst other things) – attempt to tentatively explore alternative forms of collectivity which might be generated from *within* communication and experience as it is fractured and mediated by power and technology.

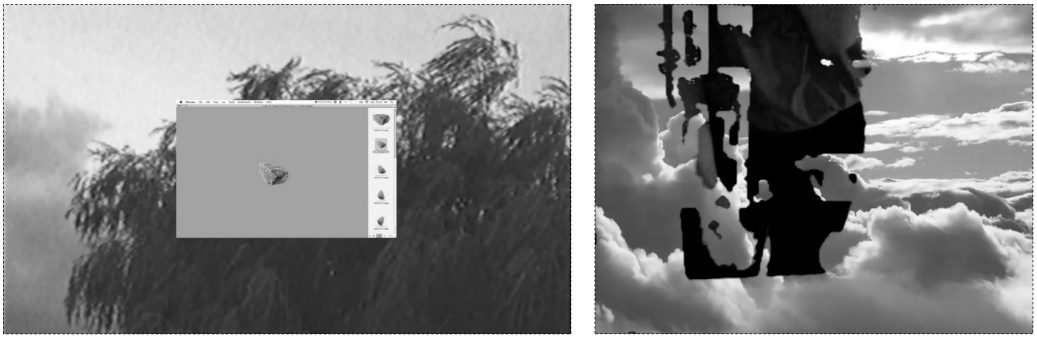

Fig. 3.3 *bridge* and *clouds* stills

bridge features a (looped) screen recording of a Preview window – Apple's default image viewing program (Fig. 3.3). Multiple images of the same rock are loaded, each rotated to different degrees, and the recording shows the images as they are scrolled through; giving the impression that the rock is spinning – or, as the video goes on, falling (perhaps). In depicting a tactile animation of a digital image of a natural substance within a digital program, the video begins to blur "the real" and "the virtual". The looping Preview window is placed atop footage of trees moving in the wind (digitally rendered to be VHS-like), representing a juxtaposition of sorts… but at the same time, not really. Similarly, the *clouds* video uses a familiar pre-set background from Apple's Photo Booth program (Fig. 3.3). Initially the video was my "demo" of the song, recorded shortly after I found the sample, having already written the lyrics. Yet in later making the file public, I was starting to think about its

[41] 'Ben Lerner – 10:04', *The New York Public Library Podcast*, (2014). 37:19. (3rd August, 2017).

familiarity as a creative dynamic, and as a site of connection with an audience. One thing I considered was where an artist is placed (or places themselves) in relation to an audience: as opposed to providing something "new" from above or outside an audience and their frame(s) of reference, attempting instead to tap into a world of shared meanings which might already exist within. [42] Part of what I am exploring – not dissimilar to sampling practices – is a latent creative potential within the technologies themselves, thinking about the ways in which their usage might be interrupted or reimagined; depicting the routine act of scrolling images in Preview as a glimpse of something bigger, for example. Also: I think these acts of reframing habitual activities might subtly begin to shift one's understanding of the objects and technologies with which many of us have intimate connections. I think again about Ben Lerner (I'm sorry) and his epigraph to *10:04* – 'everything will be as it is now, only a little different'. [43]

While these two videos might feel particularly *small* or efficient, there is a politics and ethics to their point(s) of encounter. There is a possibility they may seem arduous, perverse and/or difficult to a viewer; that their commitment to simplicity or repetition fails to sustain itself across their running times. I am mindful of this tension and should acknowledge that I have no interest in isolating or alienating a viewer, nor do I romanticise any (typically modernist) antagonism towards an audience. [44] Instead, I am hoping to allow space for a multi-layered and/or evolving reading of the videos as they progress, where the works' simplicity might draw viewers in rather than shut them out. Earlier in this chapter I described subtle musical strategies deployed in order to differ the point at which a practice of efficiency ultimately breaks, however these video pieces are perhaps starker in their undecorated simplicity. Encouraged by the previously cited case of Future Islands' performance on Letterman, the intention here is to tap into a sense of collective understanding between artist and audience where the gesture to place a video in such a position, (consciously) risking its being dismissed on account of its credulity – *yes, this is the entire video* – is transparent and becomes an active part of the work; that this might feel (radically) small, vulnerable or engaging in and of itself, and that the simplicity of such a gesture – its gentle subversion and the uncovering of a space for creative intervention within 'the materials of the present' – might feel powerful (especially, perhaps, against the "information overload" of online culture).

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[42] As well, Photo Booth (in its amateurish immediacy) seems to signify a sense of intimacy and/or urgency – and it also felt valuable to situate a piece of work in that environment.

[43] Ben Lerner, *10:04*, opening epigraph.

[44] In citing a typically modernist antagonism towards an audience I am channelling a(nother) observation of Lerner, as expressed (again) in his conversation with Holdengräber: 'For me, a poet growing up with a kind of Modernist poetics, there was always this idea that you couldn't have… that contemporary reception was always just horribly compromised by the market. And one definition of modernism, for like Colin McCabe, was that modernism displaces its readers into the future. Right, you're supposed to produce these difficult works that survive recuperation by the market, but then one day in this imagined future there's going to be someone smart enough and pure enough to read your book. And so, a lot of modernist literature is very contemptuous; not all of it, but a lot of it is very contemptuous of the reader in the present and I wanted to move away from… I wanted to kind of purge myself of those tendencies and imagine a relation to a reader that was more open to see if that would work.' Ben Lerner – 10:04', *The New York Public Library Podcast*, (2014). 22:17. (2nd March, 2018).

Ideas within *bridge* and *clouds* continue in the video for the song 'competition', which is perhaps the most conscious (and prolonged) exploration of the themes discussed thus far. Additionally, the video also considers forms of intimacy as they might emerge from within the cracks and mediations of contemporary communication; whether that be in the form of a body rendered through multiple screens, song lyrics narrated via TextEdit or experience and identity recounted through photographs, screenshots and/or saved pop culture images. And returning to a(nother) recurring idea within the thesis, this video (in a sense) attempts to gesture *through* the simulacrum and constructed-ness of a self's digital representation to consider what intimacy or vulnerability might look like using the tools and language of the technological present. I think here about the contemporary music maker Holly Herndon who, when addressing scepticism towards the laptop as musical instrument, has said:

A lot of people complain about it being less engaging, less natural, less emotional, but my laptop mediates so much of my life: my Skype, my bank account, my emails, my relationships […] It's actually a hyper-emotional instrument; it has more emotional content than a violin could ever dream of. [45]

Herndon is an artist who similarly engages the aesthetics (and politics) of modern technology and its visual language, and her music videos feel particularly relevant and informative to me here. [46] And this quote, highlighting the levels of intimacy innately present within one's use of technology, is something I have internalised in many ways and which guides (and encourages) the critical approach to technology and mediation I am exploring in this submission.

In making the *competition* video, I also thought a lot about the traditional cubist commitment to "show all the sides", and particularly the way that sentiment – in relation to contemporary senses of fragmentation – perhaps feels increasingly relevant today (Fig. 3.4). [47] In the video, this idea finds literal expression in three piecemeal representations of me and my face shown throughout – the wide shot of the digital camera, the Photo Booth window and the iPhone screen within it – which together act as a flattened real-time cubist sculpture of sorts. But as well, to show all the sides might

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[45] Ben Beaumont-Thomas, 'Holly Herndon: the queen of tech-topia', *The Guardian*, 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/apr/26/holly-herndon-platform-interview-queen-of-tech-topia-electronic-music-paradise-politics. (3rd August, 2017).

[46] For example: Holly Herndon, 'Chorus', 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHujh3yA3BE. (3rd August, 2017).

[47] 'Show all the sides' is a phrase I have always associated with cubism; I expected to find multiple examples of its usage by others to cite here, yet my searches online have wielded few results. Nevertheless, thinking about an art form which flattens multiple perspectives and/or fragments of a subject into a single image, the phrase (I think) is fitting. For example: Georges Braque, *Violin and Sheet-music on a Table (Petit Oiseau)*, 1913 – available to view in Douglas Cooper, *The essential Cubism, 1907-1920: Braque, Picasso & their friends* (London: Tate, 1983), 91; Henri Laurens, *Head of a Boxer*, 1952 – available to view in Jennifer Mundy, *Cubism and its legacy: the gift of Gustav and Elly Kahnweiler* (London: Tate, 2004), 65; or David Hockney's *Cubist Studies, Paris*, 1974 – available to view in Marco Livingstone, *David Hockney* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 168.

Fig. 3.4 *competition* still and Henri Laurens, *Head of a Boxer*

also align with the broader critical perspective I have been discussing throughout the thesis. I alluded to this in the conclusion of the thesis' prologue, but (again) the notion feels relatable to the position of intersectional feminism and the ongoing suspicion of "the universal" which has been influential to the research as a whole.

The channelling of a cubist perspective discussed in relation to *competition* is also recognisable within the fourth video work of the submission. *Both things are true* is a short-film and photo-zine I made (as Competition) in collaboration with the artist Grace Denton. The footage for the film was captured simultaneously on two cameras from two perspectives and, in the edited video, the shots are (mostly) grouped in their pairs (Fig. 3.5). Often appearing sequentially, the first image is given space to establish itself before the second is displayed, shifting one's perception of the (aesthetic) encounter – variations of this dramatic device are explored throughout the film in its cutting and composition. In its combination of real world intervention and studio simulation ("the real" and "the virtual") and its piecemeal representations of something bigger, the film references themes from the *bridge* and *competition* videos discussed previously. Yet this piece is less interested in the visual language of the internet and technology, and is more actively hoping to articulate a critical idea in

aesthetic terms. Created during the research period and inevitably in dialogue with the perspective of this thesis, the film hoped to subtly agitate the rigidity of oppositional cultural discourse(s) and, at the time, felt tied to both mine and Grace's figuring out of thoughts around metamodernism and the politics of contemporary experience. And as well, the double-ness of the project's presentation – 'as a film + a zine, as a projection on a wall + an upload on vimeo, as a handmade object + a .pdf' (as it is written on the zine's front cover) – is also a concerted attempt to embody a sense of discursive fluidity within the form of the work. Of all the works mentioned in this section, then, *Both things are true* feels the most overt attempt to create a piece *about* an idea.

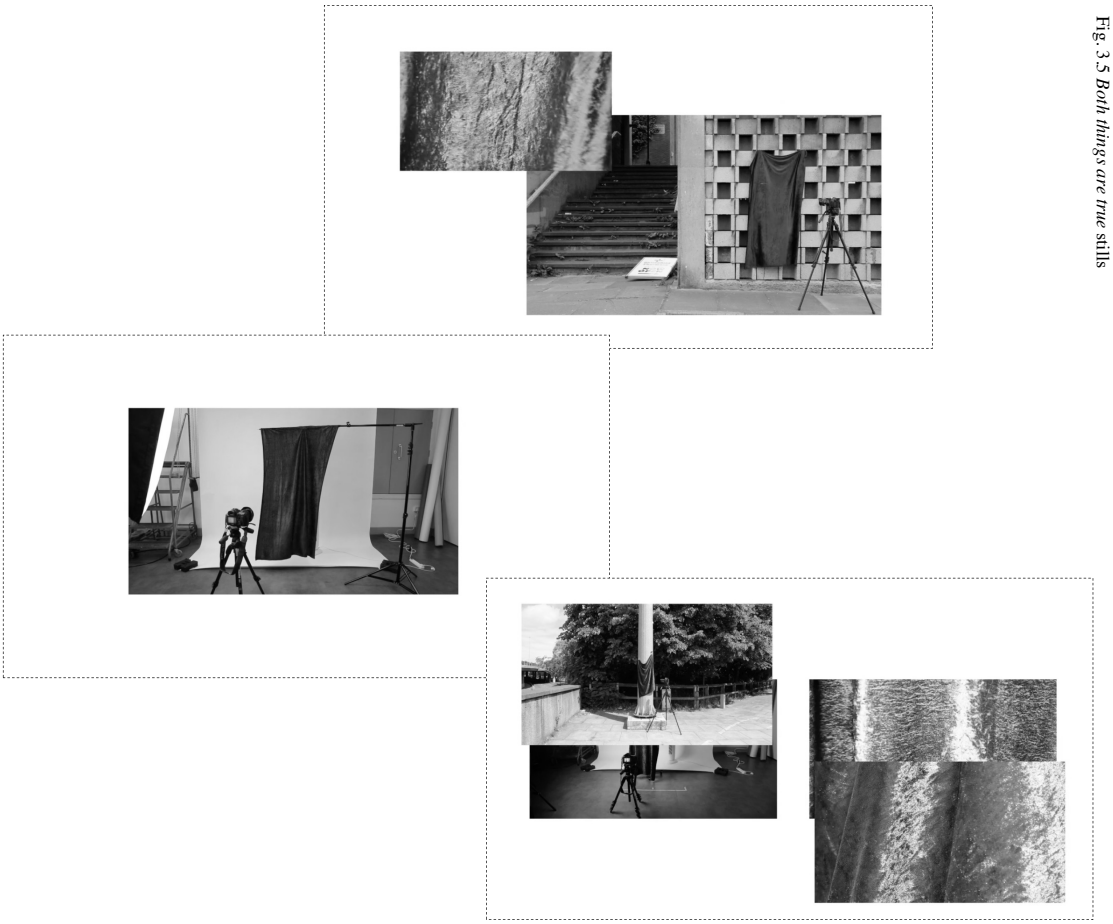

Fig. 3.5 *Both things are true* stills

The videos discussed here might be understood to take cues from the films of Hito Steyerl, as well as the video works of artists like Nicole Miller or Molly Soda – indeed, each of these people feel informative in the different ways they engage the politics of contemporary experience, internet

aesthetics and/or the visual language of technology. [48] In terms of the submission's three "music videos", the previously discussed worlds of alt lit and internet poetry have also provided reference points regarding the potential reframing of one's habitual use of technology and its recognizable visual language(s). [49] And thinking about sharedness as creative dynamic, I want to suggest that the familiarity of these encounters might establish a mutual point of engagement with an audience. Bringing this discussion back to contemporary pop music, then, I think about Frank Ocean and his *Boys Don't Cry* zine, which – at one point within its 366 pages – features screenshots of the artist's internet browser history. [50] This (perhaps) feels more heightened in its vulnerability than any example given thus far, but in terms of creative practice tapping into a visual language which evokes recognisable collective experiences, the sentiment seems to be the same. And, for me, that hints of this creative logic find their way into the work of an artist like Frank Ocean feels important.

Before moving on, it should be noted that a certain ambiguity surrounding the *space* of these videos might lend a potential slipperiness to their subsequent reading(s). For example, although not exactly paradigmatic of traditional music videos, the first three works discussed in this chapter do primarily function on those terms (in that they accompany, and to some extent exist to promote, Competition songs). And yet, the videos also inhabit spaces beyond those typically associated with "the music video" – they have additionally been shown in gallery settings and have provided visual accompaniment to live Competition sets. [51] As well, the reality of these videos as digital files hosted online grants them a certain mutability, a blankness (of sorts) which allows them to be encountered without any pre-emptive framing as, say, "music videos". I am interested in this fluidity of presentation, and the alternate modes of engagement which might be uncovered by blurring the *space* of the work. And yet, one must simultaneously recognise the reality of pre-established spaces of encounter and the active role they play in informing (or transforming) a viewer's reading of a given work. [52] Indeed, certain spaces subtly impose their own contract regarding how one attends to video-based work, and the focus of an audience (and, as such, the *value* of the work) is liable to vary in different environments. Simplifying a little, then: when a work is encountered as a music video it seems fair to say that audio would typically be understood to take precedence over visuals;

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[48] Hito Steyerl, *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013, 16 mins); Nicole Miller, *Jump to the Crescendo* (unknown year, 9 mins); Molly Soda, *Let's Get Out Of This Place* (2017, 4 mins).

[49] For example: this post by Tumblr user, irl-tho from 2016: http://internetpoetry.co.uk/post/136896118812. (3rd August, 2017).

[50] Frank Ocean, *Boys Don't Cry* (self-published, 2016), 116 to 117. Image available online at: Steven J. Horowitz, 'One of the […]', *Twitter*, 2016. https://twitter.com/speriod/status/767448735060295680. (3rd August, 2017).

[51] For example: *competition* was screened as part of 'Something Good', a night of video works at OUTPOST Offsite (Norwich) curated by Grace Denton on 21st October, 2017; and *bridge* has been used multiple times to accompany live performances, most recently at the 'feeling yr thoughts' night at TOPH (Gateshead) on 7th February, 2018.

[52] The importance of a piece's different contexts was recognised within *Both things are true*, on the zine's front cover which addresses a double-ness of presentation and an awareness of the work's multiple points of encounter – '[to be experienced as] a projection on a wall + an upload on vimeo […]'. However, this (in hindsight) perhaps feels like an initial point of inquiry, touching on a dynamic to be taken forward and realised more thoroughly beyond this submission.

as a piece of video art encountered alongside a programme of other films in a gallery, the visual may come to the fore (as well as the work's affective presence in a physical space); and encountered as a visual accompaniment to live performance – stripped of original audio, projected large scale and looped for the length of a set – the work's aesthetic (I think) is heightened and the video is able to become abstracted and meditative, adding a(nother) point of engagement for an audience, one which is both consistent and evolving. [53] In terms of a work's moment of encounter online, a specific mode of engagement might be trickier to pin down. I would like to suggest, however, that particular hosting platforms – just like different real-world environments – bring with them certain associations which subtly guide one's viewing experience. There is a reason, for example, that the videos included in this submission are uploaded to Vimeo as opposed to YouTube: artists' video works are commonly archived on Vimeo accounts, and galleries (as well as other cultural institutions) often curate their Vimeo profiles alongside specific exhibitions or events; speaking from experience, I will visit certain Vimeo accounts (having not been able to attend an event) and watch video works, performances or discussions as if I were there. [54] In making this observation, then, I am suggesting Vimeo – at least to some extent – functions as a distinct space online; one which signals, inhabits and encourages a gallery experience, with its distinct mode of encounter and engagement. And this (what I would argue is an) overlooked yet subtly understood online language is perhaps one means through which to begin "containing" the free-flowing and disembodied nature of content online.

Writing + practice

In the chapter so far, I have hoped to demonstrate a practice in which critical insights are interwoven with creative decision making. Across the submission, it has been my intention that the writing and the practice exist in dialogue with one another, and that the *meaning* of the research (as a whole) is encountered somewhere between the two.

In the context of practice-led research, I have been interested in developing a creative/critical approach that attempts to explore (and collapse) the notion of writing and music making as two distinct positions. It feels important to me that the creative work be able to express the arguments of the thesis, that the politics and criticality of the practice are present *within* the practice itself (and not an annotation or afterthought) – the previous sections of this chapter, then, hopefully suggest ways in which this might be the case. Yet it is also important that the creative work maintain its aesthetic

[53] Static in that it is a looped video, the same thing over and over; evolving not only in terms of Pierre Schaeffer's *sillon fermé* but in that the repeated video is reframed and reimagined with each new song in the set.
[54] Vimeo's potential for higher quality video and (arguably most importantly) no advertising and limited branding perhaps makes the platform favourable for artists and cultural institutions. Whereas, in contrast, YouTube's possibilities for monetizing one's content through the platform's revenue sharing system has likely proved pivotal in its attraction for corporate entities and entrepreneurial vloggers (a context from which Vimeo users are perhaps eager to differentiate themselves).

value, as engaging and/or enjoyable art that people might turn out to see on a week night when the weather is bad. And in a lot of ways, negotiating a position that sustains the urgency of these two perspectives is the ultimate goal of the work. However, I equally think about the (cultural) space of critical writing, and in this section I want to discuss two projects – *Make it look like they did it* and *Good Food: tapes & zines* – directly in relation to the act of collapsing distinctions between writing and practice. And while the discussion up until this point has perhaps focussed on making creative practice more critical, I now want to think about making critical writing more practical.

Make it look like they did it is an online blog and Twitter feed documenting an ongoing conversation between myself (as Competition) and Gustav Thomas (Dr William Edmondes) in which we discuss the practice and politics of sampling. [55] The conversation itself seeks to further explore discursive territory laid out in the sampling section of this chapter; yet in its online presentation, the project begins to reimagine the space of critical writing. I think the gesture of 'making critical writing more practical', then, is also about finding ways to make writing feel engaging and accessible outside of its original (often academic) context. And, in taking a discussion from within a thesis and placing it on Twitter, *Make it look like they did it* is a conscious attempt to situate critical writing outside of academic frameworks. [56] The project's presentation online also allows the conversation to be emerging unfinished, and the informal language used in each post might sidestep the conventional disembodied tone of a lot of critical writing, hopefully preserving a sense of intimacy and/or personality within the text itself. I want to note at this point that the writing of Chris Kraus is (to me) informative to a reimaging of the space (and experience) of critical writing; throughout her books a reader encounters passages of art criticism, philosophy or political theory as framed within the covers of a personal novel, with its first-person subjectivity and relaxed mode of address. [57] And in this sense, I also think about The White Pube: two 'art critic baby gods' whose writing about art – published on their website, as well as Twitter and Instagram – is both accessible, poetic and unapologetically subjective, seeking to 'bring the immediate human response into part of the art experience' and actively undermining the neutrality of traditional art criticism in the process. [58]

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[55] *Make it look like they did it* is displayed within the submission's printed catalogue (which also depicts each of the projects included in this submission and discussed in this chapter).

[56] I would want to note too: the act of placing research outside of academic frameworks is (implicitly) taking place when I (or any other practice-led researcher) release music or perform live. And as such, this is another way in which practice-based thinking guides one's approach to writing and writing-based research.

[57] For example: Chris Kraus, *Aliens & Anorexia* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2013).

[58] Simran Randhawa, 'The White Pube: resuscitating art criticism', *gal-dem*, 2017. http://www.gal-dem.com/the-white-pube/. (3rd August, 2017). In the same interview, TWP also state: 'When you think of an art critic, and the people who are in the arena of criticism, it's not working class women, nor is it brown women. Literally, it is just white (essentially, politically white). Representation is scarce at best. Criticism is unilateral and boring and institutional, and we started The White Pube because we couldn't find anything we actually wanted to read. Art criticism assumes an OTT language, one that is academic, neutral. Where a critic gets their authority from is their supposed neutrality, but that in itself is problematic, and bound to their perfect identity.'

Good Food: tapes & zines is a small label and zine imprint that I started in 2015, releasing tapes of experimental pop music and publishing essays on contemporary popular music. [59] Built upon a belief that the practices of writing and music making are invariably connected, the project is entangled with (and has been instructive to) the argument of this section. As is written on the "about" page of the *Good Food* website:

Both practices [writing and music making] are born of an intuitive response to some form of established discourse (be that trends within music itself, popular culture, philosophy, critical theory etc.), and both demonstrate the same critical impulse to manipulate aspects of those discourses, to interject into them, and to create new and worthwhile creative positions. [60]

And, even just by placing music and writing side-by-side on the website and/or online store, the instinct with *Good Food* has been to (not so) subtly suggest that the two disciplines are two halves of the same process, two means of articulating a single shared impulse. I think here, of Maggie Nelson who observes, 'Whatever argument [her book *The Argonauts*] has is to do with an insistence that the topics in it stand under the same roof.' [61] One way of understanding the practice(s) of critical writing and music/art making, then, might simply be in terms of "framing ideas" – I step outside of my own work and think of the way a video like *competition* becomes a visual essay exploring the same ideas (of gesturing *through* mediated communication and experience) that the thesis' chapters seeks to articulate in language; together they feel like alternative ways of framing the same idea. And with regard to collapsing the distance between creative practice and critical writing, this feels a point at which the two disciplines fold in on themselves.

In terms of practice-led research: *Good Food* represents (to me) a situation in which creative practice, really does, *lead* the research. As before, the project thinks a lot about the space of critical writing, and ways of making academic research feel accessible and engaging in the "real-world". Having found its feet a little, to launch its tenth release – a zine on black metal by Gustav Thomas – *Good Food* organised a night at NewBridge Books in Newcastle city centre (Fig. 3.6). [62] At the event, Gustav gave a lecture expanding on the content of his essay and put together a playlist which played throughout the building, we screened the Finnish black metal documentary *The Eternal*

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[59] As well, from 5th November 2015 to 28th January 2016, *Good Food* also hosted a weekly radio show on Newcastle's *Culture Lab Radio*. The label-come-zine imprint-come-radio show is presented here within the submission's accompanying printed catalogue.

[60] 'About', *Good Food: tapes & zines* (2015). http://goodfoodtapesandzines.co.uk/about. (3rd August, 2017).

[61] 'Maggie Nelson & Wayne Koestenbaum on Clarity & Cruelty', *The New York Public Library Podcast* (2016), 53:15. (10th August, 2017).

[62] Gustav Thomas, *The Eternal Flame of Darkness: Black Metal, Gnosticism and the Body* (Newcastle: Good Food tapes & zines, 2015).

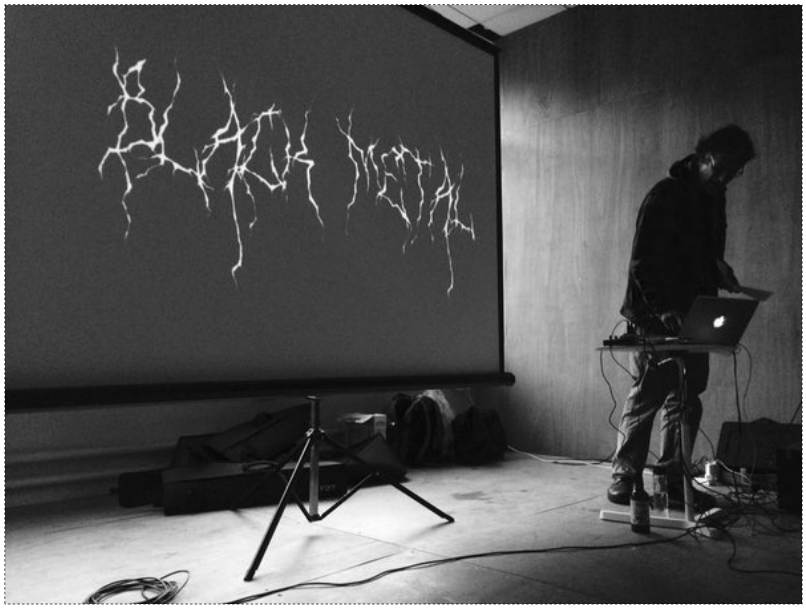

Fig. 3.6 Gustav Thomas, NewBridge Books, Newcastle

Flame of Gehenna and copies of the zine were available to buy. [63] For me, the night represented academic research as communicated through the frameworks of DIY music and art; taking ideas developed in an academic context (Gustav's essay began life as a taught lecture for one of his university modules) and exhibiting them publically, as informed by accumulative experiences of playing and/or hosting gigs and events. The black metal night felt important too because people (really) turned up; we had to move the event from the storefront of the bookshop to a larger space in the building (and, even then, people were stood outside the door) and we sold out of the zine itself. Now, I mention this as it seems an unambiguous example of "impact" as it is often discussed in academic research environments. And thinking about critical writing and (academic) research as led by creative practice, I am inclined to return to the gesture of tapping into frameworks of shared meanings (as they exist in the world), yet finding in them glimmers of possibility for alternative forms of communication and collectivity – in this case: the practices of DIY music and art making communities as they are valuable to academic research. In this sense, (again) there is a welcome fluidity with which ideas inhabit and inform both the creative and critical perspectives of this submission. The experience of hosting this event under the *Good Food* name, and the sense of discursive fluency it helped establish, has felt central to my very understanding of the notion of research itself going forward.

[63] A video recording of Gustav's lecture is available to view online at: Craig Pollard, 'Black Metal, Gnosticism & the Body - a talk by Gustav Thomas', 2015. https://vimeo.com/142604332. (15th August, 2017); Sami Kettunen, *The Eternal Flame of Gehenna* (Finland: 2011, 51 mins).

A note on cassette tapes and hand-bound zines: while the use of these materials might seem in opposition to the thesis' interest in contemporary reality and/or technologies of the present, they (to my mind) are simply another example of resourcefulness, of engaging with the past and the cultural narratives one inherits, of finding (revolutionary) potential(s) in the world as it exists.

❍

The present is tense (*Conclusion*)

I would like to think the preceding chapters speak for themselves, and as such I am mindful of being too heavy handed here. But. As this is the final section of the thesis' final chapter, it does feel important to reiterate some of the writing's primary concerns (while also maintaining a sense of lightness).

In criticism and creative practice (if there is a distinction), my feeling is that it is important to engage with culture as it surrounds you – and, as innocuous as it sounds, this might be a defining statement for the thesis. Indeed, this is why the cited tweets by Tom Krell – in their commitment to 'honor the full range of contemporary reality' – feel so important as a lens through which to view, not only the practice discussed in this chapter, but the thesis as a whole. In the opening chapters, a sensitivity (and *responsibility*) to the present might be understood to have, in turn, guided: in the prologue, the critique of Kenneth Goldsmith and the politics of inherited (and/or outdated) artmaking discourse(s); in chapter one, the attention paid to shifts in language and connectivity taking place on the internet and through social media; and in chapter two, the interest in emerging cultural and political gestures beyond postmodern irreverence and the end of history and towards a potential metamodern structure of feeling. Having brought these discourses together, this final chapter has hoped to articulate the way in which those tensions find expression in the creative work I have produced during the research period, and also suggest how they might overlap with the contemporary music and art discourses I am attempting to engage and find a place within – whether that be a music practice which responds to the reality of popular music post-*If You're Reading This Its Too Late*, video works which actively reckon with technological mediations of the self and the (perhaps) unarticulated points of connection within it, or writing projects which attempt to reimagine the space of critical writing and look for ways to present "academic" research, accessibly, outside of the academy.

However, as I hope to have made clear: a responsibility to the present also requires an attentiveness to the past. As suggested in the thesis' introduction and hopefully demonstrated throughout the

writing, to reckon with 'the full range of contemporary reality' is equally to (re)consider the cultural narratives one inherits, and to (re)evaluate their *usefulness* today. The thesis' introduction cited Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, which the author has described as '[her] re-visitation of about twenty years of thinking about gender and sexuality', and the ways in which the book 'put[s theory] to the test against life experience'. [64] This thesis has attempted to approach "theory" – with a sense of critical urgency, as energised by Nelson – in terms of its (in)ability to articulate lived experience, as opposed to an academic discourse speaking to (and about) itself. I have also hoped to suggest the ways in which "theory" is woven into the fabric of creative practice and other day to day experiences outside of academia. The submission attempts to interrupt the assumed self-evidence of certain critical perspectives and cultural narratives that feel pervasive within music and art making (in practice and criticism), *testing* them against a contemporary structure of feeling; the submission's written and practice-based components (together) hoping to articulate alternative points of engagement and emerging modes of production as they occur within an ever-shifting socio-political landscape of the present. And (again) as referred to back in the thesis' introduction, the submission might be understood to ultimately serve as a 're-visitation' of my own creative practice, as an interjection into inherited narratives of "creativity" itself.

[64] 'Maggie Nelson: The Argonauts' *KCRW Bookworm* (2015), 8:43, 9:30 respectively. (10th August, 2017).

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