CRITICAL TROLLING

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July 2016

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Arts in Communication Studies

Table of Contents

Abstract

This thesis explores the political and critical implications of an emergent network phenomenon known as "trolling," particularly as elements of the form have been taken up by contemporary artists. Articulating trolling as a formally identifiable methodology rooted in an application of Poe's Law (the unknowability of an agent's intentions in obfuscated network environments), the thesis tracks trolling's politicized usage and development among security hackers, subcultural internet communities such as 4chan, and also art historical figureheads including the Dadaists, the Situationists, and Artist Placement Group. Ultimately, through analysis of works, exhibitions, and concepts rooted in the "Post-Internet" art sensibility, it is concluded that the contemporary conditions of art production are particularly suited to enabling and rewarding trollish activity, and the potential social and critical productivities of these engagements are considered with reference to Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic politics and Claire Bishop's valorization of antagonistic participatory art.

Résumé

Cette thèse explore les implications politiques et critiques d'un phénomène réseau émergeant connu sous le nom de « trolling, » et plus particulièrement la reprise d'éléments issus de sa forme par nombre d'artistes contemporains. Articulant le trolling en tant que méthodologie formelle distincte ancrée dans une application de la Loi de Poe (le caractère inconnaissable des intentions d'un agent au sein d'environnements réseau chiffrés), cette thèse retrace le développement des utilisations politiques du trolling parmi les pirates de la sécurité informatique, les sous-cultures et communautés Internet hébergées sur des sites tel que 4chan, mais aussi en faisant référence aux figures suivantes, significatives pour l'histoire récente de l'art: les dadaïstes, les Situationnistes et Artist Placement Group. Ultimement, grâce à l'analyse d'œuvres d'art, d'expositions et de concepts nés d'une sensibilité artistique « Post-Internet, » la conclusion suivante est tirée : les conditions contemporaines de la production artistique sont particulièrement canalisatrices et gratifiantes pour les activités du trolling. Les productivités sociales et critiques potentielles de ces entreprises sont ainsi considérées du point de vue de la théorie politique agonistique de Chantal Mouffe et du rôle de l'art participatif antagoniste mis en valeur par Claire Bishop.

Acknowledgements

INTRODUCTION

In 2013 artist Jon Rafman produced a video for musician Oneohtrix Point Never (OPN) and anonymously debuted it on /mu/, the music section of the popular anonymized image board and discussion forum known as 4chan.[1] The selection of this site as the work's first public stage was an unusual move, a gesture that constituted it as something more than just a music video. Under OPN's sprawling digital soundscape, Rafman presented a collection of abject furry porn, Japanese adventure game imagery, and "shitty battle station" photographs—content of the sort celebrated on 4chan, a site which must possess the largest warren of self-identifying "internet trolls" anywhere on the web. 4chan's users are controversial, to say the least. "Anons," as the site's anonymous users refer to themselves, are notorious for an often brutal political incorrectness, motivated by a particular form of trollishness defined by the unwavering pursuit of "lulz"—a deviant form of laughter premised on the confusion or outrage of a target unable or unwilling to recognize themselves as the butt of a joke.[2] Members have revelled in an 11-year-old girl and her father's furious response to her systematic doxing and cyberbullying,[3] staged a neo-Nazi rally in a popular visual chat room called Habbo Hotel,[4] hunted down makers of child and animal abuse videos for vigilante justice,[5] and applied their horde-like capabilities to principled activist engagements against the Church of Scientology[6]—to describe but a few of

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1 It should be stated upfront: Rafman, like many of the other artists and writers referenced in this paper, is someone I have worked with and also consider a friend. Many of the ideas expressed in this paper have only crossed my mind thanks to the stimulating discussions enabled by such relationships.

2 A corruption of "lol" (laughing out loud), the lulz involve a pleasure at having deceived or tricked another: "laughter at the expense or misfortune of others," as Gabriella Coleman has described it. It is akin to *Schadenfreude*. Ethnographer Whitney Phillips describes the articulation of this sensibility as the core mechanism by which the troll community rooted in 4chan defines and grooms its membership. But Phillips distinguishes these individuals—for whom trolling is an identity, as much as a methodology—as "subcultural trolls," unique from other individuals, like the hacker activist trolls studied by Coleman, or others who could be understood *to troll* or could be described *as trolls* without wittingly aligning themselves with any recognizable troll cultural tradition. Furthermore, while humour tends to be present in every troll, by no means does it need to be an exclusively sadistic humour. Activist trolls who will be considered later in this paper demonstrate a lulzy pleasure from their ability to challenge power. See: Gabriella Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous* (London and New York: Verso, 2014), 34; and Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2015), e-book, introduction.

3 Fruzsina Eördögh, "Did 4chan save Jessi Slaughter?" *The Daily Dot*, August 17, 2011, http://www.dailydot.com/culture/jessi-slaughter-youtube-star-or-victim.

4 Kevin McDonald, "From Indymedia to Anonymous: Rethinking Action and Identity in Digital Cultures," *Information, Communication and Society* 18:8 (2015): 974, doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2015.1039561.

5 Fernando Alfonso III, "After 4chan manhunt, cat-kicker slapped with animal cruelty charges," *The Daily Dot*, August 21, 2013, http://www.dailydot.com/news/walter-easley-cat-kicker-animal-cruelty.

6 Gabriella Coleman, "Anonymous: From the Lulz to Collective Action," *The New Everyday*, April 6, 2011, http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/tne/pieces/anonymous-lulz-collective-action.

their divergent exploits. The cultural logic of the chans[7] has produced (or at least heavily contributed to) both the misogynist Gamergate movement and also the hacktivist group Anonymous.

Yet rather than denigrating or praising these figures in a normative manner, Rafman's video guides its viewer through a contemplative narration mixed atop the soundtrack. "As you look at the screen," a gently digitized female voice proposes, "it is possible to believe you are gazing into eternity."[8] With visuals flitting between shock imagery of a man pointing a handgun to his anime-adorned-panty-clad head, keyboards encrusted in Cheetos dust and what appears to be years worth of cigarette butts, and video clips of humans gyrating inside of anthropomorphic fur suits, the voice continues: "You see the things that were inside you. This is the womb, the original site of the imagination. You do not move your eyes from the screen, you have become invisible." The narration carries on, offering what is both a poignant phenomenological account of how it feels to be engaged in the structurally anonymizing and depersonalizing internet collective[9] that is 4chan (dubbed "the internet hate machine" by Fox News in 2007[10]) and a proposal that such immersion might constitute a peculiarly contemporary experience of the aesthetic sublime. "You won't be distracted," says the voice, over a morphing tableau of almost (but not quite) illegible abject furry porn, "either by the reflection of yourself, or by the last glimpses of the things now being lost forever." As a climatic electronic fanfare resolves to a melancholic register, the viewer is invited to this very distractive reflection, and the whole thing comes to feel like a sort of challenge. And indeed, the video's name alone, *Still Life (Betamale),* points directly to the much-discussed insecurities of a userbase that at once revels in and reviles the possibility that they are the unfit of more generalized society, even as they bask in the privileges of their detachment.[11] As users began posting comments under the video, the response

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7   4chan, itself established by Christopher "Moot" Poole as a Westernization of a popular form of Japanese imageboard, has spawned a number of copycats boasting similar—and sometimes even more extreme—content, such as 8chan, the launchpad of the Gamergate campaign against women in video games.

8   This, and other bits of narration, come from Rafman's video, which can be viewed here: http://www.jonrafman.com/betamale.

9   "Under [such a collective] banner, individual cogitos—I think, therefore I am—was replaced by the cogitamus—we think, therefore we are... an assertion that simultaneously established the normative center of the group and provided scaffolding onto which additional subcultural material could be affixed," writes Phillips regarding this collectivization process. See: Phillips, *This is Why*, chapter 4, section "Keeping Up with the Does."

10 Gabriella Coleman, "Our Weirdness is Free: The Logic of Anonymous — Online Army, Agent of Chaos, and Seeker of Justice," *Triple Canopy*, January, 2012, https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/our_weirdness_is_free.

11 In one such masochistic example, users of the site commonly exhort each other to become "an hero" by killing themselves. While at times this is a response to a bad post, it can also be an encouragement based on a user's

at first seemed utterly predictable. "What is going on what the fuck," wrote one anon.[12] Another proclaimed joy at the thought that, based on the content, OPN himself must be a 4chan user. But the tone of response quickly shifted into a more analytical register: "It's almost like a stream of content posted to 4chan," suggested one user. "I felt it was more or less made for me," offered another. "He was right, it has just become the background of my life. Interesting."

Fig. 1: Screen capture from *Still Life (Beta Male)* by Jon Rafman and Oneohtrix Point Never.

Another anonymous user wondered, "Is he shit talking my shitty lifestyle?" And before long the discussion (parts of it, at least) moved into a determinably self-reflexive, affective register. "Yeah, I have no idea why but I almost started crying during it… I don't know, I mean I just don't know," wrote anonymous. And another: "I'm not desensitized by any of the shit they showed in there. I masturbate to girls with dicks and I don't give a fuck because that's what I like." The anons began to reflect on NEET culture (NEET stands for Not Engaged in Education or Training): a label, like beta male, that many anons adopt dually as a point of pride and piteousness. Anonymous wrote: "Actually made me feel like shit for being NEET… I think this video might help me get rid of the internet for good." And another anon seemed to agree: "I hope

statement of deliberation, in which cases it can sometimes be understood as celebrating the altruism that removing their flawed selves from the collective gene pool could be seen as enacting. See: "An Hero," *Know Your Meme*, http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/an-hero.

12 All reference to posts have been archived by Rafman. See: "4chan," Jon Rafman, http://jonrafman.com/4chan.pdf.

OPN is in this thread. That was some surreal and sobering stuff. I'm not sure what I'm going to do with myself for the rest of the day." Some users even suggested, as the thread drew to a close, that they wouldn't be coming back to 4chan again.

By holding up a mirror to this community's cultural logic from a position both external and embedded, we could understand Rafman as having effectively "trolled" the users in what could be understood as a primarily agonistic and affective—yet nonetheless critically detached—manner.[13] And by further aestheticizing and adopting the community's own vernacular to engage theoretical concerns regarding the nature of the sublime, of long art historical lineage, Rafman's development and deployment of *Still Life (Betamale)* can be seen as a microcosmic example of what I see as an increasingly common mode of art production, the exposition of which is the primary task of this paper, a method I call "critical trolling."

Rafman's troll, like many, was neat and contained—a far cry from the epic, confused "long trolls" that are designed to unfurl over the course of years, or even lifetimes (we will consider some examples later in this paper).[14] But it offers an excellent entryway through which to consider both the basic form of trolling itself and the hallmark aesthetics of contemporary art trolling more specifically. Like most trolls, Rafman's video was designed to provoke on multiple registers, and it relied on an ambiguity of intention, a privileged disinterestedness, and a sophisticated ability to aesthetically identify with the community it implied to succeed in doing so. Drawing upon a culturally niche set of visual material, Rafman was able to demonstrate to this community that he was something of an insider. But this familiarity was countered both by his attachment to a distinguished external subject position (the authorial status of OPN) and the poetical theorizing of Rafman's own narrator: the tone of which marked an egregious departure from the site's typical discourse. And it remained always unclear: was the text celebrating these users? Lamenting their subjugation into an ultimately masochistic hivemind? Suggesting that their mindset was something to be sought out? Something to be shunned? Or was it simply

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13 According to one cultural observer, "0PN and Rafman's decision to feed message board curiosities in the form of a video back to the [original] collators seems like a far more ethical, and implicative approach [than other internet culture appropriations]." See: Brandon Soderberg, "Oneohtrix Point Never Discovers the End of the Internet in 'Still Life (Betamale),'" *Noisey*, October 4, 2013, http://noisey.vice.com/en_ca/blog/oneohtrix-point-never-discovers-the-end-of-the-internet-in-still-life-betamale.
14 The term "long troll" comes to me by way of artist/brand strategist Emily Segal, and we can understand it as applying to both art works whose outcomes remain always inconclusive, and also individual "career trolls" such as Andrew "weev" Auernheimer who adopt the mantle with such perseverance that evaluations of their very identity are frustrated by a pervasively trollish interpretive pre-emption.

baiting the whole community into emotively reacting one way or another—a particularly sophisticated form of the trollish piss-taking which defines the site's default mode of sociality?

Ultimately, the stakes were low, akin to the most common form of trolling found online: a classic bait and switch, where feigned ignorance and hidden intent are cleverly deployed to incite reaction in a quick game of mis-recognition and subsequent realization. Yet it nevertheless succeeded in prompting some 4chan users to reflect on their own subject positions in relation to the site, and also provided an external art audience with material insight into that subject position—one that may, in some ways, mirror their own.

In its most basic formulation, trolling depends upon a few crucial elements: an agent interested in trolling, a bait capable of generating an interaction between that agent and an other, an unwitting participant primed to take the bait, and a secondary audience to laugh (or lulz, in trollish parlance) at the resulting confusion or frustration. Most often, this is a simple arrangement— used in the service of a cheap laugh that can be alternatively harmless or deeply traumatizing for the person baited. But Rafman's troll contained the kernel of another kind of trolling: a form of trolling which can be seen as a novel vehicle for critique, ultimately asking its audience to agonistically reflect on their own subject position, to ask themselves who they are, and what they are doing, and to demand this reflection of them in a public forum where a denial to reflect would itself constitute a telling form of response. Two additional elements are crucial in this form of trolling: first, the baited participant must ultimately come to recognize or reflect upon the conditions by which they have been trolled; and second, a secondary audience must see in the interaction not merely a joke, but also something like a lesson, or something worthy of contemplation, discussion, and perhaps even action. By emphasizing these latter components in relation to the core logics of the troll, we can come to view some of the conceptually-sophisticated participatory engagements of recent contemporary artists as a type of "critical trolling."[15] And we can understand this engagement as a form of active criticism, one that relies on a nuanced aesthetic sensibility, and draws on the peculiar indeterminacies of contemporary art to enable and sustain its functioning.

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15 It also helps that Rafman's work contains not only a methodologically demonstrative form, but also an anthropologically demonstrative one: the 4chan community into which he dipped his lurish video perhaps bears the most responsibility for both shaping trolling into the aesthetically and linguistically unified cultural sensibility that it is today and also honing trolling into both its most ethically deplorable and ethically self-righteous forms—a point we will get to later on.

A LANDSCAPE

This form of trolling is by no means unique to contemporary art. Hacker groups like Anonymous and Cult of the Dead Cow (cDc) have deployed trolling to dramatize and popularize examples of corporate and governmental neglect and malfeasance for decades. But these trollish productivities have more recently been obscured by the term's dissolution of meaning in multiple directions; many now identify trolling almost exclusively with crude and despicable forms of online harassment, misogyny, and bullying. For instance Adrian Chen, a prolific writer on the subject of trolls, opens a 2014 article with this unambiguous assessment: "We've come up with the menacing term 'troll' for someone who spreads hate and does other horrible things anonymously on the internet."[16] Many self-identifying trolls denounce and decry this understanding, claiming that they don't spread hate at all, but instead "troll in the public interest," turning a mirror on those who need a look at themselves.[17] And indeed, in its originary form, trolling implied not a cultural sensibility or particular type of content, but rather a very particular methodology—one derived from the term's namesake: a style of fishing where a lure is carefully dragged through the water, simulating the movements of a preyable fish, inviting a would-be predator to take a bite, and offering a very rude surfacing into a disorienting—but not necessarily fatal—reality should they elect to do so.[18]

Such an understanding of trolling seems to be making a comeback, particularly for its discernible tactical uptake in the lead-up to the 2016 US presidential election (*The New Yorker* even declared 2016 "The Year of the Political Troll"[19]). And trolling continues to be prevalent in hacker activism. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the 2015 actions of Phineas Fisher, who maintains an ongoing campaign to hack technology companies that market surveillance tools to human rights-abusing non-Western governments, and mock them by assuming and ventriloquizing their social media identities to spectacularly lulzy ends.[20] As this paper will

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16 Adrian Chen, "The Troll Hunters," *MIT Technology Review*, December 18, 2014,
     https://www.technologyreview.com/s/533426/the-troll-hunters.
17 Jamie Bartlett, "OG Internet Trolls are Upset their Hobby's Been Ruined," *Vice*, October 3, 2014,
     www.vice.com/en_ca/read/trolls-jamie-bartlett-289.
18 Trolling also happily refers to the disagreeable mythological Troll, but there is no doubt that the term-as-metholodology is a direct reference to fishing. Truly, the slow evolution of natural language might never produce such a delicious etymological coincidence ever again.
19 Evan Osnos, "The Year of the Political Troll," *The New Yorker*, May 19, 2016,
     www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-year-of-the-political-troll.
20 Lorenzo Franceschi-Bicchierai, "Hacker Claims Responsibility for the Hit on Hacking Team," *Motherboard*,
     July 6, 2015, http://motherboard.vice.com/read/hacker-claims-responsibility-for-the-hit-on-hacking-team.

suggest, this style of trolling's origins may be traceable to artistic strategies of antagonism and détournement pioneered by the likes of the Dadaists and the Situationist International, who used such techniques to disrupt audiences and work against the dominant cultural and political narratives of their time.

It is this actively *critical* form of trolling that interests me—particularly as it borrows from and engages a broader history of critical and participatory art practices. And so it must be said up front: while the primary goal of this thesis is to describe and contextualize a peculiarly trollish formal tendency at work in today's contemporary art production, a secondary goal—crucial to supporting this central argumentative line—will be to articulate and recuperate a notion of trolling common on the early internet, if now much obscured: the idea that trolling might be a politically neutral tool, a tool that can be put to a variety of ends, and not an exclusively mean-spirited activity premised entirely on the abuse of vulnerable individuals through anonymizing network technologies. Critical trolls distinguish themselves from many other forms of trolling in two ways: first, they carefully select the communities and cultural logics with which they engage; rather than looking for vulnerable communities that can be exploited for a cheap lulz, they instead seek to discover and exploit vulnerabilit*ies* in communities and platforms that are otherwise impervious to critique or challenge.[21] In other words, like the hacker trolls we will consider as their historical antecedents, they tend to punch up, rather than punch down—attempting to troll those already invested with a perceived surfeit of power. Second, they distinguish themselves by their stable self-identification as individuals, collectives, and artists—eschewing the anonymity most malicious trolls are reliant upon in favour of identifiability, accountability, and responsibility (ambiguous though they may be). This is not to say that even this critical trolling is exhaustively, or even primarily, beneficial. Rather, it is simply a more complex engagement than most other forms of trolling—one which functions for some as a mode of critique, a tool for cultural auditing, and potentially even social justice. Whether the desired ends follow or not is more difficult to say.

Of course, no matter how it is deployed, trolling must be understood as an ethically fraught activity. It involves a univocal subject adopting a duplicitously pedagogical—or even roundabout authoritarian—relationship with a community that is necessarily unaware, at least at first, of the

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21 As artist Brad Troemel has put it, "the best challenge to the authority of something is to find where its semantic or enforceable borders break down and to exploit those shortcomings." See: "The Jogging," *i like this art*, June 25, 2012, http://ilikethisart.net/?p=13458.

context or intentionality from which that subject speaks. Trolling, this is to say, requires the troll to occupy a privileged position. And in its unilaterality, trolling is patently undemocratic—even if it might be advanced in the service of democratic ends. "Trolls exercise what can only be described as pure privilege—they refuse to treat others as they insist on being treated. Instead, they do what they want, when they want, to whomever they want, with almost perfect impunity," writes Whitney Phillips of the particularly devoted and politically incorrect "subcultural trolls" she takes as her subject of study, and it remains equally true of trolls with high-minded intentions.[22] While other trolls, like the ones we primarily consider here, may be understood as more self-aware regarding their privilege, it nevertheless remains the case that an "obvious troll is obvious": a troll cannot succeed if it is recognized as such; some privileged duplicity is requisite; we must presume that no fish would ever knowingly bite a lure.

Nevertheless, trolling's social productivity can be great. As a form, it combines aspects of antagonistic confrontation with the ambiguities of performance and the pleasures of spectacle. It can lead (or trick) a closed subject into deliberation on a matter they might otherwise be unwilling, or even unable, to consider.[23] It lends itself to easy memorialization in the form of image objects, memes, and archives which render reactions and even conflicts into disseminable packages.[24] And in doing so, it can both catalyze immediate reactive engagement and also render the outcomes of that action as legible, shareable commodities able to fuel future discourse after the fact.[25] In so importing trolling, an artist might find a form that abides, even excels, in other

22 Phillips, *This Is Why*, chapter 1, section "Trolls According to Trolls." And this is true both as a short-term mechanistic requirement, as in the sense used above, and also at a more profoundly cultural level. As Phillips argues elsewhere [*This Is Why*, chapter 3, section "The Problem of Anonymity"], the trolling subject position aligns most readily with straight white men who already enjoy a privileged position in a broader cultural reality, and don't bear a demand to explicitly represent or own their identity in order to advance their political visibility.

23 As the editors of a cultural studies journal issue devoted to the subject have put it: "To call out a troll is thus to recognise who ought or ought not speak or be listened to. Since to describe an interlocutor as a troll is to invite a third party to put them beyond the pale, the charge is often contested. We can understand this as, at once, an artefact of agonistic politics and as an attempt to avoid it. It is reassertion of the 'table manners' of liberal civility; like any such insistence it can be a way of forestalling political demands made outside the current limits of acceptability in political contention." See: Jason Wilson, Glen Fuller, and Christian McCrea, "Troll Theory?" *The Fibreculture Journal* 22 (2013): 1, http://fibreculturejournal.org/wp-content/pdfs/FC22_FullIssue.pdf.

24 Rafman, for instance, has preserved the response to his video post into a readily-downloadable PDF. A handy historical record, and also a sort of troll itself: one of the central features of 4chan at the time was its ephemerality, the permanent deletion of all posts after a given period of time. Many memes in 4chan reference similar trollish episodes—whittled down over time by popular deployment into a sort of short hand, where the deployment of a single image can bring a year-long episode and all of its nuances to bear on a conversation.

25 I adopt the language of commodity to reflect the accelerationist, empiricist mode of discourse popular among many of the trollish artists studied here. Theirs is a world of attentional economies and cultural capital and also, of course, real capital on the art market. Nowhere is this more explicit than in the work of Simon Denny—who maintains his own trollishly ambiguous brand identity or artistic persona by eliding the roles of the artist and the managerial entrepreneur, and also their terminology. In this world, "creativity" becomes "creative disruption,"

crucial aspects of contemporary art productivity as well: commodity generation, attentional dissemination, novel formal iteration, etc. If in contemporary art "we are constantly pressed between a false openness of democracy and the reestablishment of an outdated notion of aesthetics,"[26] the critical troll rejects both commitments. They do not depend exclusively on "art" to give their activity meaning—they engage outside audiences without the intermediation of art institutional display methods. Yet they nonetheless identify as artists within the market-institutional system for pragmatic reasons: it offers an alibi (of creative freedom and artistic autonomy) for what could be understood as anti-democratic engagements; offers an active discursive-promotional apparatus; and enables access to the possibility of selling the products of these engagements in art markets. For these reasons, I suggest that the uptake of an ambiguous trolling positionality allows artists to hedge risk in any one domain by opening themselves up to multiple sites of possible valuation. Yet conversely, to receive these fringe benefits, the troll must author and take responsibility for their actions—they must maintain a territorialized node capable of accruing incoming capital and attentional economic tokens—thus quickly mitigating the most pronounced risks that come from the detached, anonymized trolls who can muck about without fear of reprisal: these art-attached trolls must be discursively accessible, attachable to criticism, and ultimately response-able. Thus the troll cannot entirely choose aesthetics over ethics.

Today, trolling often presents as a culturally-bound practice among communities of internet users like those identified in the opening narrative. Their attitude towards trolling can be understood as one of nihilistic jouissance—a commitment to discovering a form of play and pleasure compatible with the peculiar (and often agonized over) detachment inherent to their anonymous communities. These communities prize freedom of speech and anonymity above all else, and the fruits of this trollish culture increasingly paint their activities as ethically dubious; often their engagements proceed through the deployment of fascist, misogynist, and supremacist rhetorics, ultimately reproducing and disseminating them so effectively—to the extent that sincere far right organizers now routinely appropriate their rhetorical products—that any claim to

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and everything has a metric. K-Hole, too, makes this relationship explicit, by simple virtue of functioning simultaneously as an artist collective and brand consultancy.

26 This is Keti Chukhrov's simplification of a problem posed by Jacques Rancière, one that will concern us later in this essay as we engage with Claire Bishop's history of 20th century participatory art. See: Keti Chukhrov, "On the False Democracy of Contemporary Art," *e-flux*, 2014, http://e-flux.com/journal/on-the-false-democracy-of-contemporary-art.

parody or disruption can be seen as an insufficient justificatory logic.[27] But at the same time, trolling remains intelligible as a formal methodology, one detachable from the oft-nihilistic philosophy of its culture-bound application, and one increasingly seized upon by a wide range of politically / socially-motivated actors.[28] It has found purchase in party politics, activist politics, and also artist communities—where it sits easily alongside a history of provocative, "avant-garde" type engagements that take relations with audiences and institutions as a primary interest above and beyond the concerns of painters, sculptors, and other artists more interested in narrowed formal explorations of pictorial planes and materials.

These avant-garde strategies and their descendants have been crucial in reformatting both art historical frameworks and art world networks along a variety of fronts: enabling new activities to be considered as aesthetic; destabilizing hierarchizing "high" cultural notions of taste; setting the groundwork for new subject positions to be represented; destabilizing institutional hegemonies; and even questioning the role of criticism itself. However, at this point in time, the art world largely proceeds as though it has resolved—to insider satisfaction, at least—the most identifiably antagonistic aspects of these issues, offering a contemporary art world where nearly everything at least *seems* permitted, and formal renovation continues along multiple trajectories, even as an overarching sense of purpose, project, or effectiveness is strangely elusive.[29] For Peter Osborne, contemporary art is constituted by "the coming together of different times,"[30] and while this might sound idyllic in ways, it also robs historically-rooted forms of criticism, such as those based in Marxist or post-colonial theories, of much of their power. As Liam Gillick has diagnosed, this arrangement means artists must at once acknowledge their autonomy and their implication, their usefulness and their incapability. "What does the contemporary produce other than a complicit alongsidedness?" he asks.[31]

27 Jacob Siegal, "Dylann Roof, 4chan, and the New Online Racism," *The Daily Beast*, June 29, 2015, www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/06/29/dylann-roof-4chan-and-the-new-online-racism.html.
28 Surveying a range of trolling definitions, Ryan M. Milner writes that "the practice of trolling may serve public ends, creating discomfort, but also productive engagement with political adversaries and othered identities." See: Ryan M. Milner, "FCJ-156 Hacking the Social: Internet Memes, Identity Antagonism, and the Logic of Lulz," *The Fibreculture Journal* 22 (2013): 68, http://fibreculturejournal.org/wp-content/pdfs/FCJ-156Ryan%20Milner.pdf.
29 Leaving aside, of course, a number of theorists.
30 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), 27.
31 See: Liam Gillick, "Contemporary Art Does Not Accounts for that Which is Taking Place," *e-flux*, 2010, http://e-flux.com/journal/contemporary-art-does-not-account-for-that-which-is-taking-place; and Jack Gross, "Jack Gross on Ed Lehan at Reena Spauldings Fine Art, New York," *Texte zur Kunst*, July 8, 2015, https://www.textezurkunst.de/articles/gross-lehan-reena-spaulings. Jack Gross reflects on a show which

The socially-engaged contemporary artist could be understood to be in a sort of crisis, after a twentieth century which elevated participatory strategies to prominence, yet left little optimism as to their transformative potential. Potential remained potential, or, as it often seemed, attempts to deliver on this potential produced strategies for the easy co-opting of productive forces outside of the specific frame of artistic practice. The art institution proved resistant to substantive critiques of itself, yet proceeded to willfully engage with audiences outside of the art world in order to expand its territory and by extension, its market, and to outsource and privatize social mechanisms previously beholden to the state. As Johanna Drucker has described, "The negative, critical charge has diminished. It depended on rhetorical and actual strategies of opposition, both of which have faded. That rhetoric has gone formulaic. The oppositional resistance has become aligned with entrenched interests, including its own."[32] Or as artist Christopher Kulendran Thomas has put it: "Derived from Conceptual Art, which was after all almost instantly institutionalized and academicized, 'criticality' is now taught, learned, rehearsed and played out to create value—crucial in fact at the top end of the art market." According to Boris Groys, art has been characterized as a power struggle on these terms since the modernist period. "Modern art has demonstrated time and again its power by appropriating the iconoclastic gestures directed against it and by turning these gestures into new modes of art production. The modern artwork positioned itself as a paradox-object also in this deeper sense—as an image and as a critique of the image at the same time."[33] And we could see this co-optive relationship as having expanded beyond the narrow confines of art. For Terry Eagleton, processes of Western contemporary artistic production and reception serve to model and reveal new forms and subjectivities to state and market agents. "Subversive" art practices only serve to accelerate this process, ultimately functioning as productive elements in a larger neoliberal project, one that we might understand as converting gestures akin to the "creative destruction" of the anarchist avant-garde into the "creative disruption" so prized by capitalist managers and entrepreneurs.[34]

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appropriates strategies of relational aesthetics to uncertain ends. "Criticality that follows on the suggestion to "feed the art world to the art world" simply restates (with a wink or a frown) the impossibility of an outside – an approach that seems to be, like the objects of its own critique, unconditionally banal," he writes.

32 Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2006), 5.

33 Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge: Massachusetts, 2008), 9.

34 Ruben Yepes, "Aesthetics, Politics, and Art's Autonomy: A Critical Reading of Jacques Rancière," *Evental Aesthetics* 3:1 (2014): 53.

Fig. 2: The overtly corporate branding of Berlin Biennale IX promotional material.

This agonism has been foregrounded by a new generation of artists operating in, around, and in the wake of what has been called "Post-Internet" art.[35] The 2016 Berlin Biennale, curated by the DIS collective, has perhaps most explicitly solidified these anxieties—adopting a statement of intent that symptomatizes its effects, yet ultimately seems unable (or unwilling) to approach a distinctive alternative. Instead, the artists presented—including nearly all the artists considered in depth in this paper—typically adopt or even celebrate the corporate, branded, commoditized aesthetic of their lived environment, demonstrating a willingness not to reject or exit or operate outside of this environment, but rather to "close the loop" and act inside of it, to claim it for themselves, or attempt to steer its elements towards their own desired ends (or at least imagine the possibility of doing so).[36] "Welcome to the post-contemporary," announce the biennale curators, who have been pointedly exploring the dual cynicism and opportunism of this situation

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35 Which we will delve into later, but briefly, we can understand as both: *a condition of production of all artists for whom the internet has become such a vital aspect of life that any art production they engage with must reflect on its cultural and technological influence* and also *a term used to denote a particular aesthetic tendency that ultimately became a banner by which a group of works were slated for art historical importance and thus more easily moved through marketplaces.*

36 Tess Edmonson, "'The Present in Drag,' 9th Berlin Biennale," *Art Agenda*, June 4, 2016, www.art-agenda.com/reviews/"the-present-in-drag"-9th-berlin-biennale.

through their online platforms, most notably DIS Magazine, since 2011.[37] "There is nothing particularly realistic about the world today. A world in which investing in fiction is more profitable than betting on reality... The supergroup(s) of artists and collaborators that we have mobilized are not fatigued but energized by this uncertainty."[38] During the biennale DIS tweeted that: "Life without trolling is a boring serious movie,"[39] and even their curatorial aims align with the basic conditions of the troll—eschewing attempts at rational, critical diagnoses in favour of a more immanent (yet potentially equally sublimating) engagement: "Our strategy is to mobilize a set of problematics intact—as actual problems," they write in one of many such statements that continually flit by on their website.[40] The biennale was criticized by many for its aesthetic of complicity—but this "slick, sarcastic joke," as one reviewer called it, was foregrounded with such self-awareness by the curators that critiques of the biennale on such grounds felt not only obvious but also entirely circumscribed by the curators themselves in advance—yet another symptom of the problem they seek to lay bare.[41] "It's exactly what you expect," reads another of the website's flitting expressions of intent. Every aspect of the biennale self-reflexively announces and intensifies its alongsidedness in every aspect imaginable: from the almost exclusive presentation of artists DIS had worked with previously, to the display of work in unmistakably corporatized and commoditized forms, with many of the installations literally integrated in and alongside Berlin's prime routes of commerce, tourism, and management.[42] The avowed lack of a singular, explicit criticality posed, if nothing else, a challenge to criticality itself—a challenge that revealed critiques of DIS's curatorial strategies as similarly void of meaningful proposition making: the rendering of a problem.

Nevertheless, some theorists maintain optimism regarding contemporary art's potential as a more directly productive site for political engagement. Chantal Mouffe is convinced that contemporary

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37 As stated on the New York-based collective's website, "Across its various endeavors, DIS explores the tension between popular culture and institutional critique, while facilitating projects for the most public and democratic of all forums—the internet.," See: "About dis," *Dis Magazine*, http://dismagazine.com/about. ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 See: https://twitter.com/DISmagazine/status/745607918268071936

40 9th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, http://bb9.berlinbiennale.de.

41 Jason Farago, "Welcome to the LOLhouse: how Berlin's Biennale became a slick, sarcastic joke," *The Guardian*, June 13, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jun/13/berlin-biennale-exhibition-review-new-york-fashion-collective-dis-art.

42 Although I would argue some of these sites are notable for their embedded criticality—particularly the European School of Management and Technology, located in a building that once housed the Staatsrat (State Council) of the GDR. The curated works are primarily displayed in an as-yet unrenovated section of this historical site. As the curators write, "The building's socialist past is superimposed with the contemporary codes of global business; state socialist aesthetics preside over live feeds of the German stock market and state-of-the-art business education facilities for future executives." See: "9th Berlin Biennale."

artists can help to renovate Western liberal democracies, moving them away from their current monopolistic, hegemonic orders and status quos and into what she calls an "agonistic pluralism," "where the opponents are not enemies but adversaries among whom exists a conflictual consensus."[43] In this form of politics, conflict is welcomed—but not an antagonistic conflict that seeks to erase or dominate opposition. Instead, this type of conflict welcomes and even supports a plurality of divergent views, ensuring them equal weight, voice, and power with the aim that truly productive, multi-dimensional political conversation might proceed.[44] Just as a sporting event is uninteresting if the sides are unevenly matched, politics are unproductive if one position is circumscribed by another. Mouffe asserts that institutions need to be established to entrench and support these "counter-hegemonic" positions capable of balancing the dominant power structures. And she suggests that contemporary art's institutions are one such site—offering an infrastructural frame expansive enough to accommodate a variety of political procedures, enabling the elsewhere incommensurate to sit together: turning its very amorphousness, its very hollowness, from a weakness and into a strength.[45] Contemporary art, in this sense, could be seen as an alternative to the idealistic, exhaustively rationalist public sphere theorized by Jürgen Habermas: for art has long understood the value of non-rational epistemologies, of outsider positions, and has sought to understand how to value and traffic them within its discourse.[46] In this view, artists and others participating in reference to contemporary art might start to unpick the infrastructural components that allow hegemony to proceed, to unravel and challenge the

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43 Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking The World Politically* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), e-book, introduction.

44 Writes Mouffe, "Conflict on liberal democratic societies cannot and should not be eradicated, since the specificity of pluralist democracy is precisely the recognition and the legitimation of conflict. What liberal democratic politics requires is that the others are not seen as enemies to be destroyed, but as adversaries whose ideas might be fought, even fiercely, but whose right to defend those ideas is not to be questioned. To put it in another way, what is important is that conflict does not take the form of an 'antagonism' (struggle between enemies) but the form of an 'agonism' (struggle between adversaries)." "This confrontation between adversaries is what constitutes the 'agonistic struggle' that is the very condition of a vibrant democracy." See: Mouffe, *Agonistics*, Chapter 1, section "An Agonistic Model."

45 It has been convincingly argued that contemporary art foregrounds its own existence, functioning as a form of territory. "Meanwhile, what has become so important in the highly institutionalized poetics of contemporary art are the languages of self-installing, self-instituting, self-historicizing in the frame of what constructs contemporary art as territory. The context in this case is not historical, aesthetical, artistic, or even political, but is rather institutionally biased. So that the subject of art is neither the artist, nor artistic methodology of any kind, nor the matter of reality, but the very momentum of institutional affiliation with contemporary art's progressive geographies. This brings us to a strange condition." Artists cannot get passed it. But if Mouffe is correct—perhaps it is not necessary to get passed, but instead to seek to generalize it even more broadly, to grant access to its privileges and opportunities to an infinite scope. See: Chukrov, "False Democracy."

46 Of course—determining who ultimately comes to value from such importations, and where that value accrues, remains a crucial question for critical reflection and activist engagement.

production of "common sense" itself.[47] Ultimately, Mouffe seems to suggest that contemporary art can ground this process of agonistic encounter even outside of the accepted boundaries of the art world proper. "What is needed in the current situation is a widening of the field of artistic intervention, with artists working in a multiplicity of social spaces outside traditional institutions in order to oppose the program of the total social mobilization of capitalism."[48]

We could see something like critical trolling as a methodology suited to this—albeit one that must be used with great self-reflexivity. While the troll's unilateral self-appointment makes them an inherently anti-democratic figure, we could also see them as operating in an inherently agonistic way: for if the critical troll can effectively "troll up" rather than "troll down"—i.e., target those who already benefit from a dominant hegemony and its privileges, rather than exercising their own privilege to discomfit the already marginalized—or proceed in their trolling along primarily affective, response-able vectors—i.e., by declining anonymity, and remaining available to public response and meta-criticism—they can insure that their targets are not destroyed or further marginalized by their actions, but are instead able to respond to their trolls, and engage further critical and discursive consideration. In this way, we could understand the critical troll as suited to performing a function architectural theorist and historian Keller Easterling has described as "extrastatecraft." Her term describes a myriad of ways that politics are performed quietly, by the configuration of both hardened, architectural infrastructure and also the girders of discourse itself, with the true intention lying outside of the immediately intuitable. In this way, Easterling sees political actors as functioning like artists.[49] And she suggests non-state actors can engage successfully on similar terms, as in the "exaggerated compliance... central to the tactical bluffs of infrastructure deal-making," where agents actively engage and cleverly subvert prescribed forums of voice in spectacular ways that place public pressure on politically-sensitive figures.[50] "Just as many of the most powerful regimes in the world find it

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47 "If it is the result of discursive articulation, common sense can be transformed through counter-hegemonic interventions, and this is where cultural and artistic practices can play a decisive role." See: Mouffe, *Agonistics,* chapter 5, section "Agonistic Politics and Artistic Practices."
48 Ibid.
49 "Just as the powers that be in infrastructure space are usually offering persuasive stories that are decoupled from what their organizations are actually doing, performers are accustomed to the idea that action is a carrier of information that may be discrepant from the stated text. ... The action, not to be confused with movement or choreography, is the real carrier of information, meaning, and change, and it may be entirely disconnected from the text. Comfort with crafting discrepant, indeterminate action allows design to engage both the naturally occurring dislocations of meaning as well as the duplicitous politics of extrastatecraft." See: Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London and New York: Verso, 2014), e-book, chapter 2, section "Stories are Active Forms."
50 Ibid., chapter 6, section "Exaggerated Compliance

expedient to operate with proxies and doubles in infrastructure space, the most familiar forms of activism might similarly benefit from using undisclosed partners or unorthodox auxiliaries, if only to soften up the ground and offer a better chance of success," she writes.[51] As we will see, this has been a primary use of trolling in the hacker community for nearly three decades. The nascent adoption of such techniques by artists remains unproven, but full of fascinating potential. Through Easterling's logic, we can understand and evaluate the political productivity of trolls even when they do not state their intentions upfront—a classic dilemma, since ambiguity, if not outright anonymity, is essential to a troll at least until its lure finds purchase.[52]

Trolling itself by no means escapes the dilemma of contemporary art's capture as described earlier, but it does offer a different take on it. The critical troll does not see contemporary art's listlessness and indeterminacy as a weakness, but instead as an advantage. The crucial difference comes from their orientation. Unlike the relational aesthetes, the early internet artists, or the avant-gardists, the critical troll does not seek to find an "outside" or "alternative" to the existing political or art reality, nor do they actively clamor to transform the contemporary art system which grounds their activities. Rather, in keeping with the emergent logics of Post-Internet, these artists strive instead for a belonging to the system—for adopting it, supplementing it, and working through it, to any number of ends.[53] And unlike artists invested in turning their critical gaze inwards on art itself, like the institutional critics of the 20th century, the critical troll instead embraces the numerous privileges and affordances offered by contemporary art and uses them as a launching pad from which they can approach—and actively critique—communities and cultural formations *outside* of the art world proper, drawing in new audiences and also new formal methodologies in the doing. In this way, we might think of the critical troll as a new form of vanguardist: an agent functioning to expand art's domain into new "publics" of the sort Mouffe suggests contemporary art is itself emblematic of: utilizing both their brand identities

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51 Ibid., chapter 6, section ""An Expanded Activist Repertoire in Infrastructure Space."
52 Easterling sees even these expanded, dematerialized political networks in infrastructural terms—expanded networks that undergird our political realities and touch on multiple domains. "In infrastructure space, the crucial information about a political bearing is often found not in declaration but in disposition—in an immanent activity and organization," she writes. See: Ibid.
53 This tendency has even been theorized—as "normcore" by K-Hole, one of the artist collectives we will discuss in detail, and as "accelerationism" by a growing number of "Marxist" theorists who submit that the dominant neo-liberal capitalist hegemony needs to be superseded through an adoption and détournement of its own cultural logics, rather than by any antagonistic, revolutionary action. See: "Youth Mode: A Report on Freedom," K-Hole, http://khole.net/issues/youth-mode; and Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, "#ACCELERATE MANIFESTO for an Accelerationist Politics," *Critical Legal Thinking*, May 14, 2013, http://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/05/14/accelerate-manifesto-for-an-accelerationist-politics.

and the lurish art objects they create as "boundary objects,"[54] or stable points of contact through which agonistic politics can proceed in the wake of an initial disruptive, trollish gesture. The critical troll becomes a sort of unwitting diplomat or ambassador: not acting in the interests of a state and its ideology, but rather the effusive ideology of contemporary art itself, and the potentially agonistic grounding that it offers to those drawn into its discursive fold.[55]

Just as Rafman used his video to seed the contemplative, critically detached contemporary art subject-position in 4chan, we see the possibilities of this function emphasized in the activities of many artists considered below. Simon Denny merges the contemporary art logics of the artistic creator with those of the disruptive manager, using this ontological identification to translate values between each community: the functionalized aesthetic veneer of the trade show becomes a display mechanism in art contexts, while trollish relational strategies are used to deliver art world-style reflective content to tech communities. Amalia Ulman explores high-minded notions of taste and unpacks identity construction by personally adopting and performing the default aesthetics and tropes of a particular feminine identity on the social media platform Instagram. This move prompted some in the art world to temporarily exclude Ulman, even as some audiences drawn in by her presentation were set up for an ultimate, thought-provoking trollish reveal. Brad Troemel creates objects unsuited to institutional or commercial art world display or collection formats and sells them directly through a DIY Etsy shop, critiquing the art world and its relations to commodities even as he strains the limits of what communities of online shoppers are willing to recognize as a valid product. K-Hole seeks to accelerate the steadily closing loop between cultural producer and commodity marketer, co-opting the products and ideas of the art communities in which they participate and packaging them immediately in "trend reports" for the use of advertisers and marketers—perhaps without the further cultural digestion, flattening, distortion, or ultimate narrative domination introduced by professionalized intermediate "cool hunters." And the complexities of these strategies are nowhere more apparent than in the

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54 Boundary objects are said to allow coordination without consensus as they can allow an actor's local understanding to be reframed in the context of some wider collective activity. See: Charlotte P. Lee, "Between Chaos and Routine: Boundary Negotiating Artifacts in Collaboration," in *ECSCW 2005: Proceedings of the Ninth European Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work, 18-22 September 2005, Paris, France*, ed. Hans Gellersen et al (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005).
55 Writes Boris Groys: "An artist operates on the same territory as ideology. The affirmative and critical potential of art demonstrates itself, therefore, much more powerfully and productively in the context of politics than in the context of the market. At the same time, the artwork remains under the ideological regime a paradox-object. That is, every ideological vision is only a promised image—an image of what is to come." See: Groys, *Art Power*, 8. Jacques Rancière makes a similar argument in *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

activities of K-Hole member Emily Segal, who leveraged the ultimate memetic success of the collective into being hired to define the brand identity of tech start-up Genius—a task that she took as the possibility to create a brand identity as artwork. Her work at Genius explicitly elides and translates between the contemporary art community and a business community, while also deliberating on the inherent trollishness of such an engagement. All of these artists have generated a staggering amount of discourse in publications and communities outside of the art world, and all of them have taken the products of these external engagements and rendered them successfully in commercial and institutional art world displays.

Aside from this more abstract potential productivity, we can more concretely understand the artistic uptake of the troll position as offering two advantages to the artist. First, the critical troll finds themselves in a hedged position: the ambiguities of their identification and interpretation create the possibility that they might redeem value along a variety of rubrics. Their engagements are spectacular enough to ensure presentation in a variety of attention economies in and outside of the art world: from critical reflections, to clickbait articles, to serious journalism, to peer-to-peer social media sharing. And typically these trollish engagements involve the production of objects that can be trafficked through marketplaces and infrastructures of display both in and out of the art world. With visibility comes an appreciation of the gestures that drove such visibility: resulting in opportunities to engage in corporate consultancy, not to mention invitations to give paid lectures at biennales, universities, and art institutions. And of course, in some locales these artists also find themselves in a position to receive academic funding and also governmental grants. Ultimately their identification with art also allows them a sort of alibi, or safety net: for if any of these strategies used to create works able to appeal to a range of communities and sensibilities fail or are deemed one dimensional or anti-democratic, the producer can always take refuge in art's ability to accommodate inconsistency, to sensibilize activities performed in its name in accordance with its own internal valorization of strangeness and reckless discovery. Rather than adopting a univocal, critical, or political position and risk ostracization by reactionary mainstream political logics as fringe radicals or outside idealists, or being excluded from mainstream conversation, the critical troll is always locatable inside and alongside, as artist-participants in the contemporary. We could think of embracing this role as offering a pre-emptive safeguard against the disenchantment that might result from the possible failure of more directly political actions. We could also think of it as an alibi for a disenchantment already at play. But any question of the style's ultimate ethicality or political value will for now remain

interminable.

Ultimately, trolling's formal adoption comes with many questions that can be considered without reference to artistic motivations: can a troll escape from complicity with the cultural forms that they adopt and repurpose in performing their criticality? Can they be understood to activate audiences outside of the art world in meaningful ways, that might offer those audiences some of the benefits that the artist trolls themselves enjoy in reference to the contemporary art frame? Or do they merely convert these audiences, these "participants," into a resource to fuel activity that should more rightly be seen as an extension of formal exploration, rather than as a further social renovation of art's boundaries and inclusivity?[56] Is the "disruption" on offer meaningful in a broadly political way, or is it destined to "disrupt" only in the manner now deemed so valuable to corporate R&D initiatives—a "creative disruption" that offers new valuable forms to broader systems of commodification?[57] Does the inherent distancing and privilege of the trollish position prevent its criticality from ever finding root in a self-defined political community? Can art, with its myriad opportunities for value creation and identity formation, be understood as possessing the conditions for an agonistic politics that could facilitate productive conversation between political realms via a process of cultural expropriation, a sort of "soft colonialism"?[58] And can the critical troll, by interpellating publics outside of the art world from a position ripe with these values, be seen as an expansionist agent of such a process?

DEFINING THE CRITICAL TROLL

What is required to define someone as a troll? The term itself is in many ways as amorphous as the activities it involves. One of the primary difficulties stems from what has become known as Poe's Law, which states: "Without a clear indication of an author's intent, it is difficult or

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56 Peter Osborne, for instance, has suggested that contemporary art's broad embrace of conceptualism has led to a "transcategorial" status for all contemporary art objects, where even participatory and dematerialized works are understood through rubrics historically applied to painting and sculpture. See: John Rapko, review of *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, by Peter Osborne, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/44766-anywhere-or-not-at-all-philosophy-of-contemporary-art. It is interesting that this runs counter to Bishop's concern that the aesthetic judgment has been downplayed by ethical judgments. But, of course, the commodity-oriented aesthetic judgment Osborne is talking about is also not type of aesthetic judgment Bishop would like to re-invigorate.
57 Claire Bishop points to the artist as the emblematic neoliberal subject/producer—thoroughly independent in such a way that they do not require the attention of a welfare state, and yet can contribute ideas and innovations to the broader economy. See: Bishop, *Artificial Hells,* 20.
58 This depends on an ability, and willingness, to gather some ideas sketched above, and see art as simultaneously ideology, territory, and vehicle—with artists playing the role of agent or diplomat in relation to broader publics and structures via extrastatecraft.

impossible to tell the difference between an expression of sincerity and a parody of sincerity."[59] And so often when trolling is involved, intention is nowhere to be discovered—or if it is, it is typically only available to a narrow community of insiders. And can a troll be a troll if they know not that they troll?

A typography of trolling may be helpful—distinguishing, for example, its methodology from its acculturation from its use scenarios. And indeed, the discourse seems to be evolving to support such an encompass: Phillips discusses a particular strain of "subcultural trolling," while a recent book on "gendertrolling" examines particular forms of trolling used to harass and police female participants in tech communities.[60] Internet observers have specified other forms of trolling that bear particularly distinguishable characteristics, such as "concern trolling," where an individual feigns sincere interest or empathy with a subject in order to set those invested up for a sudden flip, and "grief trolling" where trolls operate on social media memorial sites, subverting the emotiveness of grieving communities to their own devious purposes. Elsewhere we learn of "sockpuppeting" trolling techniques, wherein professionalized media manipulators use trolling techniques to subvert, redirect, obfuscate, or derail public discourse and opinion at the behest of governments and corporations. The "critical trolling" dimension I seek to articulate could be understood as a methodology, or even a community—or movement—in line with these attempts at further nuancing the overarching term of "trolling" more generally.

However, to get at that, it becomes important to at least hazard something like a general definition of trolling itself, something that might suggest a rubric for determining when trolling can be reasonably said to exist, and perhaps also to what possible ends such trolling might proceed. Something like a central mechanism is identifiable across all scenarios, and so to hazard a formal definition, I will suggest this one: trolling is the act of strategically ambiguating one's position, through some form of intermediation, to elicit a response that an implied individual or community would otherwise be unlikely, unable, or unwilling to give. The act may be designed to provoke a particular response, or an entirely contingent one. It is typically configured, at

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59   The exact definition varies—but all find commonality as derivatives of Nathan Poe's original post: "Without a winking smiley or other blatant display of humor, it is uttrerly impossible to parody a Creationist in such a way that *someone* won't mistake for the genuine article [sic]." See: Nathan Poe, August 10, 2005, comment on "Big contradictions in the evolution theory," Christian Forums, August 10, 2005, http://www.christianforums.com/threads/big-contradictions-in-the-evolution-theory.1962980/page-3#post-17606580.
60   Karla Mantilla, *Gendertrolling: How Misogyny Went Viral* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015).

minimum, to deliver some form of amusement ('lulz') to a troll, their peers, or some other limited audience. This amusement may be an end-in-itself, but it is frequently instrumentalized—by a troll itself, or others in a position to shape interpretation—in accordance with higher order intentions of pedagogy, policing, publicity, or propaganda.

It is often considered that some degree of anonymity is crucial to trolling. Yet I will argue that the ambiguity of the artist position—the fact that some degree of interpretive uncertainty is prescribed and expected as an element of their vocation and ideological context—is sufficiently "obfuscatory" enough to make strong anonymity unnecessary. And this is a significant point: because it is precisely the anonymity of trolls, and the escaping of accountability it enables, that can make them such dangerous figures. "The final marker of trolling is the trolls' insistence on and celebration of anonymity. The ability to obscure one's offline identity has a number of immediate behavioural implications," as Phillips has noted.[61] Yet to have trolls who are somewhat reckless and yet also transparently accountable—that is a truly strange thing.[62]

And even regarding their social or political productivity, it seems possible to identify a core function. While trolls might defend their actions as oriented towards play, disruption, or entertainment, we can nevertheless understand them as accomplishing two things: they innovate and explore new forms of mediated engagement, "defining standards in the practical application of cutting edge technology,"[63] as one hacker-troll put it. And they regulate behaviour: deploying rhetorical devices that hail, educate, discipline, and otherwise modulate their audiences. The two are crucially related, for innovation is tightly bounded to spectacle: messages delivered by novel technological or formal means are more attention grabbing, harder to filter out, and can occasion productive puzzling over.[64] And thus, while it may be unconventional, I would argue that the political productivity evident across the full spectrum of trolling is a mechanism of governance:

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61 Phillips, *This Is Why*, chapter 1, section "Trolls According to Trolls."
62 A notable exception to this is Andrew "weev" Auernheimer, who will we consider in depth later. Auernheimer wholeheartedly adopts the politically incorrect rhetorics common to some subcultural trolling communities, and it remains an open question to what extent this adoption is a strategic one, intended to always maintain his status as a political question mark (or exclamation point)—and to what extent Auernheimer can actually be called a racist or homophobe for this intentionalist incertitude. Unusual among trolls, this question is always backdropped by Auernheimer's own stable identity—and his frequent willingness to respond to critics.
63 See: "DEFCON 19: The Art of Trolling (w speaker)," YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AHqGV5WjS4w.
64 Indeed, the imperative to innovate is often premised on this fatiguing effect. And according to the logic of the "culture industry," the artistic drive towards newness is itself analogous to the capitalist growth mechanism which drives consumption by offering novel goods. See, for instance: Ari Brandt, "How Emerging Tech Can Solve Ad Desensitization," Tech Crunch, March 13, 2016, https://techcrunch.com/2016/03/13/how-emerging-tech-can-solve-ad-desensitization.

trolling can both fuel and direct discourse; it can function as a check on existing power; it can reinstantiate existing power; it can police internal boundaries; it can function as a litmus test for membership; it can identify or create an Other; it can carve out pockets of autonomy from vague apparatuses of capture. These productivities are at work within core troll demographics. 4Chan, for instance, internally cultivates a distinctive user subjectivity through its production of niche cultural memes and terminology.[65] And this cultural sensibility is subsequently put to work by groups of users in their interactions with broader publics. Those active in the Gamergate "movement," to give but one example, use trollish strategies and cultural products to police which individuals are able to produce and participate in video games and the communities around them—typically rallying their collective membership against women game developers and those they perceive to be their allies. Effectively, trolling strategies and cultural products are used by a small community to close its membership in the absence of an ability to appeal to more authoritarian structures of power. These individuals may not explicitly understand their intentions as such, but the effects are clear: an emergent project of conserving a status quo.[66] Alternatively, the Anonymous hacktivist network has imported elements from troll culture to define and obfuscate a diffuse network of activists, who then frequently rely on trolling to challenge powerful institutions, deploying it as a "politics of spectacle."[67] In their hands, trolling becomes a populist way to inject excitement into political battles that might otherwise seem dauntingly arcane, thus enabling broader swathes of the public to identify with the action by virtue of the lulz.

And all forms of trolling, whatever we might call them, share a multifaceted ambiguity, one observable at all levels of operation: intentions are mutable, consequences are open to interpretation, and the performance itself relies on multiple layers of intermediation. It is in this regard that trolling finds its comfortable home in communities of contemporary artists weaned on network culture. As artistic political projects became frustrated during the 20th century, the

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65 Lee Knuttila, "User unknown: 4chan, anonymity and contingency," *First Monday* 16:10 (October 3, 2011), http://firstmonday.org/article/view/3665/3055.

66 And in other instances, it is very explicit: For instance, two reactionary trolling groups calling themselves the Sad and Rabid Puppies, respectively, attempt to preserve the Hugo Awards, one of Science Fiction's most eminent accolades, from works "overtly to the left." See: David Barnett, "Hugo Awards Shortlist Dominated by Rightwing Campaign," *The Guardian*, April 26, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/26/hugo-awards-shortlist-rightwing-campaign-sad-rabid-puppies.

67 Coleman quotes Stephen Duncombe on this: "Spectacle must be staged in order to dramatize the unseen and expose associations elusive to the eye." See: Gabriella Coleman, "Phreaks, Hackers, and Trolls: The Politics of Transgression and Spectacle," in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 115.

ambiguous relationship to such politics that trolling enables artists to take can be understood as a suitable mechanism to maintain engagement with similar concerns, even while ensuring that lower order artistic needs at creative and commercial levels are allowed to proceed.

While this definition of trolling may strike some as overly expansive, such an expansiveness seems to be supported by the historical origins of the term itself. And to really evaluate the significance of this trollish "turn" in contemporary art, we need to understand a bit more about trolling itself: its risks, its successes, its failures, and its possibilities. What follows may seem painstaking, or it may seem entirely cursory, depending on one's familiarity and interest with the subject. For those readers primarily interested in the art historical project presented here, and who feel particularly fluent in the history of trolling—with its variegated usages by both hackers and activists, and also assholes (and the three are not always mutually exclusive), skipping to section "Artists and Proto-Trolls of the Past" may be entirely warranted.

USENET TROLLS, HACKERS, AND PEDAGOGUES

The earliest definitions of trolling emerged on Usenet, an internet discussion format popular between the 1980s and the late 1990s. Posted in 1996, "The Troller's FAQ" appears to be the first formalized document devoted to the subject. Its opening section, "What is a Troll?" offers a succinct definition—and it is notable that it refers not to an identity, but exclusively to an act, or technique:

> troll v., n.
>
> To utter a posting on Usenet designed to attract predictable responses or flames. Derives from the phrase "trolling for newbies"; which in turn comes from mainstream "trolling";, a style of fishing in which one trails bait through a likely spot hoping for a bite. The well-constructed troll is a post that induces lots of newbies and flamers to make themselves look even more clueless than they already do, while subtly conveying to the more savvy and experienced that it is in fact a deliberate troll. If you don't fall for the joke, you get to be in on it.[68]

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68 "The Troller's FAQ,"
    https://web.archive.org/web/19980210153452/http://www.altairiv.demon.co.uk/afaq/posts/trollfaq.html#SECTI
    ON1.

The anonymous author, "trollfaq@altairiv.demon.co.uk," continues into a formal investigation of the Usenet troll, complete with a number of pointers for how the reader might themselves troll effectively.

It is interesting to note (according to referenced "testimonials" embedded directly in the FAQ) that this very document—most likely for its celebratory, instructive nature—was widely considered to itself constitute a troll: infuriating readers who saw it as a catalyst or even incitement to more trolling. And thus beyond the possibilities inventoried in the FAQ, the document succeeds in demonstrating another function of trolling: educating and reconfiguring the sensibilities of both its targets and its participants, all while prompting meta-reflection on the nature and value of trolling itself. This performative, recursively constructive, and self-reflexive function would become a vital aspect of trolling more generally—a component, I would argue, that has set the stage for it to become more than just a means to a cheap laugh: to become an effective tool for advancing political conversation, and even in some instances direct political reprogramming, in a world where enlightened conversation alone seems increasingly unsuited to the task.[69]

Other statements from the period understand the troll as primarily an agent of chaos, one who applies "category deception" to derail conversations and poison the well—seeding community suspicion and distrust—for no higher purpose than anarchistic delight itself.[70] In contrast, we can see in this FAQ the suggestion of an alternative, or perhaps supplementary, productivity. It is important to note that much Usenet trolling was directed against the "noobie": the new user. And also the "flamer": a close cousin to the troll who eschews the elegance of clever bait construction in favour of directly antagonistic ad hominem attacks.[71] In this sense, even these relatively mild

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69 We can understand trolls as eschewing—or even parodying—a liberal democratic tendency to suggest that publicity, dialogue, or discourse alone is equivalent to political action—the type of facile online engagement that Jodi Dean calls "communicative capitalism," and Darin Barney has linked to a creeping depoliticization. See: Jodi Dean, "Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics," *Cultural Politics* 1:1 (2005); and Darin Barney, "Publics without Politics: Surplus Publicity as Depoliticization," in *Publicity and the Canadian State,* ed. Kirsten Kozolanka (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 72-88.

70 "Trolls can be costly in several ways. A troll can disrupt the discussion on a newsgroup, disseminate bad advice, and damage the feeling of trust in the newsgroup community. Furthermore, in a group that has become sensitized to trolling - where the rate of deception is high - many honestly naive questions may be quickly rejected as trollings … In other groups the presence of a troll can inflict quite a bit of harm by undermining the trust of the community." See: Judith S. Donath, "Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community," in *Communities in Cyberspace*, eds. Peter Kollock and Mark Smith (London: Routledge, 1999), http://smg.media.mit.edu/people/Judith/Identity/IdentityDeception.html.

71 Flaming has its own manual which emerged in the earliest days of Usenet—in troll lore Cicero is identified as the historic pioneer of this particular methodology. See: "Flame Wars," Encyclopedia Dramatica,

instances of trolling could be seen as a form of pedagogy or governance, a bid to shape noobs into subjects deemed acceptable for online engagement—an education, or an attempt to give a flamer a taste of his own medicine to the delight of the broader community. "Within the community play-frame, all reading is writing, and all reception is creation," writes Phillips in her ethnography of 4chan-era trolls, and the insight is just as relevant to Usenet. "To recognise an in-joke is to participate in community formation, and to participate in community formation is to ensure community growth."[72] Rather than demand dry study and initiative on the part of the implied student, and dull and labourious pedagogy on the part of a wise old-timer, trolling was a way to dramatize this process of learning—facilitating a rapid, hard knocks upskilling via a vector of embarrassment, all while offering lulzy entertainment to the already initiated. While they may have poisoned the well in the doing, discouraging the utopian camaraderie so frequently and lovingly recalled by nostalgic early netizens, even this cultivation of suspicion could be understood as primarily instructive: a warning to maintain some hesitancy in the company of strangers.[73]

And this pedagogic capacity was quickly put to more narrow, explicitly political uses, as trolling became a popular style of public criticism and education among a number of early internet communities, perhaps most notably the hacker underground of the 1980s and 1990s. This culture was already accustomed to antagonistic forms of discourse, as hackers challenged each other using techniques like "doxing"—i.e., publicizing one another's private and identifying information online—to influence their behaviour or to humiliate them among their peers. Artful trolling was for hackers a form deserved of major respect; trolling could exploit, demonstrate, and publicize social vulnerabilities the same ways that infosec hackers exploited, demonstrated, and publicized technical vulnerabilities in computer software and telecommunications networks. And indeed, trolling required an almost identical skillset to "social engineering"—the use of deception and ambiguity to acquire the information and access necessary to the advancement of a more technical hack. When these skills were used for primarily comedic or disruptive purposes, the term trolling came to serve well. And these hackers trolled inwards and outwards, often taking broader publics as their students—not the noobs or non-elite "normies" so reviled by

https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Flame_wars.

72 Phillips, *This Is Why*, chapter 2, section "Lulz in Several Nutshells."

73 Of course, whether this lesson was premised on a healthy suspicion, or whether the harsh format of the lesson itself introduced the need for suspicion, is a matter of debate, harkening back to the divisive views of human nature held at least since the days of Hobbes, Rousseau, and other theorists of the originary social contract.

anons, but more often powerful corporations like Microsoft, who they desired to take to task for any number of perceived moral hazards.

Sometimes this educational mission translated into explicit pedagogy: in the late 1990s the L0pht hacker group took it upon themselves to educate the US government, genuinely concerned that its technical negligence was putting its entire citizenry at risk, and probably also motivated by their amused ability to publicly lecture the most powerful nation in the world. The event itself would come to be considered thoroughly lulzy, as the L0pht members earned an invitation to a senate hearing by convincing the government they "could shut off the internets in 30 minutes," as Encyclopedia Dramatica put it, whereupon they insisted on being presented by their handles.[74] Reading the list of names, the senator presiding over the hearing self-consciously pauses to laugh at himself, saying, "I, uh, I hope my grandkids don't ask me who my witnesses were today and I [have to] say… Space Rogue."[75] Except far from being derisively trollish, it seems clear that the event was altruistically motivated in a participatory spirit—sincerely designed to enhance the security of a nation and its publics.[76]

But other groups deployed trollish tactics in ways more ambiguous, and more directly identifiable to the narrowed definition of trolling which here guides us.[77] While many hacker and troll organizations seemed to have no mission but to disrupt and sow chaos (or, at least, professed as much),[78] early hacktivist groups like the cDc adopted the methodology in service of a more righteous modus operandi; for them trolling was the perfect tool to draw attention to corporate negligence: injecting entertainment and spectacle into dull and overly technical issues they nevertheless deemed vital to public attention.

And it is worth considering these activities at length, to demonstrate the early, "white hat" trollish potentiality that was so thoroughly obscured in the media by the scumbaggery of the subcultural trolls who would come to prominence in the following decade. For it is this form of

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74 "L0pht," Encyclopedia Dramatica, https://encyclopediadramatica.se/L0pht.
75 See: "Hackers Testifying at the United States Senate, May 19, 1998 (L0pht Heavy Industries)," YouTube, March 14, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVJldn_MmMY.
76 Indeed, Peiter, aka Mudge, would go on to work for government, heading up a DARPA research initiative. See: "Security Weekly #438 - Interview with Peiter 'Mudge' Zatko," *Security Weekly*, October 22, 2015, http://securityweekly.com/2015/10/22/security-weekly-438-interview-with-peiter-mudge-zakto.
77 It is worth noting, also, that many of these groups shared membership. Mudge, for instance, belonged to both L0pht and the cDc.
78 Andrew "weev" Auernheimer, for one—as we will see later. See: Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Cambridge, England: Polity, 2010), 6.

trolling, I will argue, that most resembles the engagements of the contemporary critical artist trolls. As mentioned above, one of the primary activities of the hacker community involves the discovery of security vulnerabilities in both technical and social systems. "Black hat" hackers exploit these vulnerabilities to personal, sometimes criminal, gain.[79] But white hat hackers go a different route: publicizing these vulnerabilities so they can be fixed, or at least, so the public can be aware of the risks they entail.[80] White hat hackers often found that merely publicizing a vulnerability was not enough to motivate a vendor to fix the problem. Some form of spectacle was needed: the public's attention needed to be drawn to the issue, drawing the pressure that might ensure that those responsible could not sit idly by. By acting on the vulnerability, and trollishly publicizing the results, action—or at least public accountability—could be more or less guaranteed.

Perhaps no group better demonstrates the early connection between hackerish public interest and trolling than the cDc, an organization founded in the underground hacker BBS networks of the 1980s. Encyclopedia Dramatica, the de facto bible of subcultural trolling activity, emphasizes this connection by suggesting that for all their serious, high-minded "this stuff is cool and all" hacker activities, "what really makes [cDc] worthy of your attention is their lulz-inducing history."[81] In the 1990s, many security researchers took exception to excessive, perpetually unaddressed vulnerabilities in Microsoft's Windows operating system. The ubiquity of the software meant that the vulnerabilities were also ubiquitous: introducing serious insecurity for the vast majority of computer users, those more interested in easily conducting their day-to-day activities than customizing their software environments into cleverly designed fortresses of impermeability. By this time, many black hat hackers had begun to shop their vulnerabilities on black markets as "exploit kits"—software bundles that easily allow operators with less technical expertise to penetrate a system with the help of a user-friendly interface. And meanwhile, many seemingly white hat security hackers had begun to profit off this arrangement in the inverse direction, developing anti-virus software to sell to users not sufficiently protected as a result of

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79 Several markets exist for selling "0-day exploits," often to states. While bolder hackers can deploy the vulnerabilities directly, hacking banks, breaking website encryption to harvest credit card numbers, and etc.
80 Rather than go to marketplaces, these hackers typically reveal the vulnerability to the offending platform, and, failing a response, post it publicly to motivate change in exchange for maintaining a good reputation, or enabling technical savvy users to discover personal work arounds for issues that affect them. This is called "full disclosure." See, by way of example, Bugtraq. "Bugtraq Mailing List," *Seclists.org,* accessed 5 July 2016. https://seclists.org/bugtraq.
81 "Cult of the Dead Cow," Encyclopedia Dramatica, https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Cult_of_the_Dead_Cow.

the sloth, negligence, or ineptitude of companies like Microsoft.

Riffing on this practice of developing third-party software, cDc developed a self-contained application called Back Orifice. And the trollish nature of this endeavour was clear from the start: a play on Microsoft's remote administration tool Back*Office*, Back *Orifice* allowed a user to easily infect any Windows machine and access it remotely with privileges that could be put to a variety of malicious ends. My first encounter with Back Orifice involved watching my CD-ROM drive open and close repeatedly, as if possessed—a prank by a computer savvy friend in 1998— but other users were not introduced to the tool with such magnanimity.

The lulzy disposition of Back Orifice extended well beyond the name: to the logo (a seemingly abstract icon that on closer inspection reveals a mound of flesh embedded with a speculum); to a series of in-jokes (the program accesses other computers by default on port 31337—a numerical pictogram for ELITE, a hacker badge of excellence); to cDc's widely-publicized press statement back-and-forth with a none-too-happy Microsoft. Right off the bat, Back Orifice was released with a trollish public statement—a "SECURITY ALERT" that positioned its author, Sir Dystic, as an "overworked sysadmin" who had developed the tool not to facilitate abuse, but simply to make his life easier (by bypassing the user entirely), all while calling out Microsoft's "Swiss cheese approach to security."[82] The pieces added up to a classic troll bait-and-switch of self-professed myopic ignorance attached to an expansive, ethically superior knowingness. Microsoft responded humorlessly,[83] seeking to minimize their responsibility for the vulnerabilities, whereupon cDc followed up with a more sober, self-styled "MORALITY ALERT," designed to simultaneously challenge Microsoft to a more substantial response and also publicly reflect, with great agonism, on the ethicality of their own actions:

> Was releasing Back Orifice to the public immoral? Microsoft would love for their customers to believe that we're the bad guys and that they—as vendors of a digital sieve—bear no responsibility whatever. But questions of morality are more often relative than absolute. So to make things easier, we'll frame our culture and actions against their's and let the public determine which one of us looks better in black.[84]

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82 "Running a Microsoft Operating System on a Network? Our Condolences," *Cult of the Dead Cow*, www.cultdeadcow.com/news/back_orifice.txt.
83 An early example of "not feeding the trolls."
84 "St. Paul, Back Door Boom Boom, and All the Tea in China," *Cult of the Dead Cow*,

Back Orifice is also a clear example of the ethical ambiguities involved even in trolls of plainly altruistic intent. It is very difficult to say whether more public good or public harm came out of the thing: it largely failed to provoke a meaningful security response from Microsoft, at least in the short term, and it is likely impossible to determine whether the event resulted in future editions of the Windows software, or other competing operating systems, enhancing their security to avoid similar debacles in the future.[85] Nevertheless, one thing is clear: the spectacle of Back Orifice drew enough attention to ensure that other elements of the hacker security community continued to engage in trollish ways. Many of these later outfits were direct outcroppings of the subcultural trolling community—a connection that is nowhere more upfront and apparent than in an offshoot of the Anonymous hacker activist group named, tellingly, lulzsec, or a security research organization called Goatse Security founded by the infamous career troll weev. (Goatse is the name for a shock image that proliferated on the early internet— and many a user has been easily trolled merely by an impulse to search for the term: I advise against doing so).

A central imperative among public-interested security researchers is "full disclosure"—the publication of bugs and vulnerabilities into the public domain so they cannot be profited from by malicious hackers or exploited by shadowy political figures, but instead patched or circumvented. Yet it has long been difficult to catalyze political will around the publication of these highly technical issues alone. Trolling became a way to dramatize these disclosures, cultivating both popular awareness and public outrage. "A smart vendor treats vulnerabilities less as a software problem, and more as a PR problem. So if we, the user community, want software vendors to patch vulnerabilities, we need to make the PR problem more acute," writes security expert Bruce Schneier.[86] For hackers, so often burdened by the elitism inherent to their craft, trolling could be seen as a form of both pedagogy and public relations—an attempt to create a public able to recognize and act on a threat that many of them would not even consider if it were not rendered through the spectacular, performative logic of the troll. Later, we will consider critical contemporary artists' use of trolling in a similar light: as a form of public security on

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www.cultdeadcow.com/news/response.txt.

85 We could certainly speculate that it contributed to the popularity of Apple's OSX operating systems—long defended by users for their security—and also probably contributed to a continued hacker preference for Free and Open Source Software alternatives like Debian and Linux, which offered more opportunity for user customization, and opened their security protocols to public scrutiny, and thus public improvement.

86 Bruce Schneier, "Schneier: Full Disclosure of Security Vulnerabilities a 'Damned Good Idea,'" *Schneier on Security*, January 2007, https://www.schneier.com/essays/archives/2007/01/schneier_full_disclo.html.

cultural matters beyond the narrow scope of computational security.

While cDc's deployment of Back Orifice seems to have been of noble intent, most hacker trolls could be thought of as falling more firmly into a "gray hat" domain: happy to reveal vulnerabilities to the public, but only in the demonstrative manner of a "proof of concept." These hackers exploit vulnerabilities publicly, to chaotic and indeterminate ends, and then point to the act in a bit to gain public attention and prompt deliberation regarding the vulnerability thus revealed.

TOWARDS A (SUB)CULTURAL SENSIBILITY

The master of this technique is Andrew "weev" Auernheimer—and he is one of the first hackers to not only troll, but to also explicitly self-identify as a troll. Indeed, for many Auernheimer is the *definitional* subcultural troll, even as he has also been recognized by some as a (somewhat) principled security hacker.[87] Founder of a number of organizations positioned at the intersection of these two worlds, including GNAA (Gay Nigger Association of America), Goatse Security,[88] and a hedgefund called TRO LLC, the idea that the fruits of security disclosure could work in the interest of both general publics and niche troll communities is underscored in Auernheimer's crowdfunding pitch for the latter company: "I have fought hard to inform you of bad actors in software and web services and want to continue doing so. Help me start TRO LLC and you'll be paid dividends in lulz for all eternity."[89] Understood in this way, we could imagine that trolling is not unethical tout court, but rather that its ethicality is largely dependent on target selection, the stakes of what could be gained, and the community that is poised to learn from the lessons and respond accordingly.[90] Auernheimer, for instance, has targeted everything from bloggers

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87 Auernheimer was also the subject of a *New York Times Magazine* article that first introduced a mainstream public, including myself, to this culture of trolling. He is quoted as admonishing a colleague who proposed to post flashing images to a board for epileptics, who justified the action by saying, "Demonstrating these kinds of exploits is usually the only way to get them fixed." Auernheimer had written: "it's hacking peoples unpatched brains. we have to draw a moral line somewhere." See: Mattathias Schwartz, "The Trolls Among Us," *The New York Times Magazine*, August 3, 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/08/03/magazine/03trolls-t.html?pagewanted=all.

88 Again, I would recommend not googling this—the name itself constitutes bait for a very simple form of shock image trolling.

89 "TRO LLC," StartJOIN, https://www.startjoin.com/trollc.

90 As another hacker troll has put it: "Ethics.. it's kind of important … [trolling] is like hacking. It's like playing. You can play with your friends, that's okay. You can play with people that you don't know where you expect people to play with you, that's okay. Like if you're on IRC, there's a certain expectation you're going to be fucked with. When you're on the DefCon network there's a certain expectation you're going to be fucked with. When you're in a WalMart… it gets a little gray. When you're at your cousins wedding… But the most important rule out there has nothing to do with ethics. It has to do with being funny. If you're going to be a dick,

("Blogging gives the illusion of participation to a bunch of retards"[91]) to corporate databases (releasing a methodology for how to "hack" the private information of AT&T customers by simply changing numbers in a web URL—an act that ultimately landed him in jail, even as civil libertarians defended his efforts, with two respected lawyers taking up the case pro bono[92]).[93] And yet even as he sometimes advocates for leftist political principles of social justice, he always maintains a radically politically incorrect, and increasingly outright racist veneer—going so far as to have a large swastika tattooed on his chest during his imprisonment between 2012 and 2014, later railing against both the African-American judge who presided over his trial, and proclaiming the involvement of Jewish conspiracies in an article published by white supremacist magazine the *Daily Stormer* following his release.[94]

While Auernheimer is increasingly condemned without reservation as his hate speech appears less and less to be a joke, his activities over the previous decade were greatly divisive among online communities—in many ways he was a living embodiment of the evaluative crisis implied by Poe's Law. And thus through Auernheimer we can understand trolling as possessive of something like an aesthetic sensibility; for individuals like Auernheimer, maintenance of a constant ambiguity, a constant uncertainty regarding intention, even among supporters, almost seems a higher order end in itself above any other. For Auernheimer, trolling is a form that must be detached from ethics and judged in accordance to its own internal logic: what enables trolling to proceed is what constitutes the good. For subcultural trolls, the lulz are often the rubric for this determination, a portal to an emancipated judgment. For these trolls, a simple rationale: "I did it for the lulz," is sufficient to justify any action.[95] All activities might be evaluated solely in regards to their ability to deliver lulz, and to secure the possibility of more lulz to come. A

you'd better be funny." See: "DEFCON 19."

91   Schwartz, "Trolls."

92   "I think the case against Auernheimer is deeply flawed, and that the principles the case raises are critically important for civil liberties online," wrote lawyer Orin Kerr in a blog post. Orin Kerr, "United States v. Auernheimer, and Why I Am Representing Auernheimer Pro Bono on Appeal Before the Third Circuit." *The Volokh Conspiracy*, March 21, 2013. http://volokh.com/2013/03/21/united-states-v-auernheimer-and-why-i-am-representing-auernheimer-pro-bono-on-appeal-before-the-third-circuit/.

93   Ben Worthen and Spencer E. Ante, "Computer Experts Face Backlash: Group's Tactic Renews Debate in the Technology Industry on aHow Security Flaws Should be Disclosed," *Wall Street Journal*, June 14, 2010, www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703885104575303032919382858.

94   Patrick Howell O'Neill, "The fall of hacker-troll Andrew 'weev' Auernheimer," *The Daily Dot*, October 2, 2014, www.dailydot.com/layer8/weev-hates-jewish-people.

95   ""I Did It For The Lulz" (IDIFTL) is a catchphrase which serves as a blanket explanation for any trolling you do or any internet drama you cause. If you are experiencing troll's remorse, saying "I did it for the lulz" three times out loud should clear your conscience, therefore cleansing your soul in all circumstances..." See: "I did it for the lulz," Encyclopedia Dramatica, https://encyclopediadramatica.se/I_did_it_for_the_lulz.

linguistic corruption of lol (laughing out loud), lulz refer to the particular type of enjoyment enabled by the contemplation of a successful troll. And indeed, lulz has much in common with something like aisthesis: an immersive aesthetic experience: Coleman describes the lulz as "a deviant style of humour and a quasi-mystical state of being."[96] It is something which can be experienced directly, or as a byproduct of the trolling of others—and its packageability meant those not immediately responsible for a troll could also derive pleasure from, or be spectacularly enticed by, the lulz derived by others. Through the lulz, these trolls "quite literally laugh themselves into existence, and sustain this existence through further laughter," writes Phillips.[97] A community has formed through this shared pursuit—what Phillips calls subcultural trolls. And they are particularly notable for their practice of self-reflexive meta-trolling: refining techniques, organizing massive actions, and documenting their own histories of trolling, all while trolling one another and, in the process, further defining a unique language based on graphical memes and heavily codified slang—what Coleman calls a "specialized and esoteric terminology."[98]

By the mid-aughts, vast swathes of users began to both collectively and individually identify as trolls in reference to these logics, forming entire communities of likeminded "career trolls" and territorializing sites with affordances particularly suited to the maintenance of these emergent identities.[99] Among the most popular were 4chan, somethingawful.com, a range of niche message boards intended to foster community around websites like bodybuilding.com, and eventually more mainstream platforms like Reddit. Many of these sites, particularly the chans, were hardwired for forgetfulness—posts were not archived, and so the memetic form of memory proliferated, perhaps out of necessity.[100] Memes functioned like the collective thoughts, or at least collective memories, of anonymous interactions. While much of this memetic imagery was playful, designed to instantiate lightly lulzy inside jokes like rickrolls and lolcats, and often in forms palatable enough to enable their popular expansion out into the broader web, others had more serious implications.

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96 Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy*, 2.
97 Phillips, *This is Why*, chapter 2, section "Lulz are Generative."
98 Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy,* 31.
99 See: Whitney Phillips, "A Brief History of Trolls," *The Daily Dot*, May 20, 2013, www.dailydot.com/via/phillips-brief-history-of-trolls.
100 Though this has changed in recent years, 4chan was originally configured so that every thread was "bumped" when a new post was made in it, moving it to the top of a pile of threads spread across 14 pages. If the thread was sufficiently demoted due to a lack of activity, it would be deleted as soon as it reached the bottom of the final, 14th page, unless archived by some external agent.

For instance, a list of the "rules of the internet" emerged as a form of "copypasta"—a text that has been continually copied and pasted into new contexts, potentially with subtle changes in each instance, its evolution (or devolution) reflecting the histories of the communities through which it has circulated. Through this function we can begin to see a very explicit way that such memetics came to function as a form of cultural encoding, an ideology even, and also a de facto centralized policy—with trolls sometimes acting as cultural ambassadors or even colonists, extending into other communities and enforcing it in the manner of police. Particularly telling for future events such as Gamergate are rules such as:

> 28. Always question a person's gender - just incase it's really a man

> 29. In the internet all girls are men and all kids are undercover FBI agents

> 30. There are no girls on the internet

> 31. TITS or GTFO [Get the Fuck Out] - the choice is yours

> 32. You must have pictures to prove your statements[101]

While these "rules" could be understood as having initially been a sort of agonistic, inward-joke riffing off the loneliness and isolation from "normal" heterosociality felt by many in the community, they would ultimately come to take on overtly misogynistic performances—deployed not to express a self-preserving disbelief about whether or not another user within the community was actually a female (or "femanon") like they purported to be, but instead as an aggressive point of dogma used to discourage women from meaningfully participating in any number of expansive, male-dominated domains like video gaming, or tech culture more generally.

Their political productivity could be understood as an intensification of the educational function of the Usenet troll, and indeed, the community's "collective" values are well enforced. On 4chan, noobs (or "newfags"—on 4chan everyone is one sort of "fag" or another—a form of lexical patrolling that ensures that the squeamish, easily offended, or politically correct do not long linger) are routinely lambasted as "the cancer" killing the site, and advised to "LURK

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101 "Rules of the Internet," *Internet Archive*,
    https://archive.org/stream/RulesOfTheInternet/RulesOfTheInternet..txt.

MOAR."[102] Yet the anonymous participants of 4chan went a step further than the trollish community pedagoguing of Usenet, or even the targeted techno-cultural callouts of the hackers. Where the Usenet troll aimed to induct newcomers into the emergent etiquette of their communities, the subcultural troll took the entire world of normies or "normalfags" as their classroom—conducting raids on Facebook memorial pages, ostensibly to mock "grief tourists" who had no connection to the deceased; hacking media polls, ostensibly to reveal the ease of technical manipulation of popular perception; and generally disrupting the status quo functioning of common decency. Phillips writes that in doing so, these trolls revealed a tacit political commitment:

> There is a through line in the trolls' targeting practices: the concept of exploitability. Trolls believe that nothing should be taken seriously, and therefore regard public displays of sentimentality, political conviction, and/or ideological rigidity as a call to trolling arms. In this way, lulz functions as a pushback against any and all forms of attachment, a highly ironic stance given how attached trolls are to the pursuit of lulz.[103]

And even more problematically, this pedagogic impulse increasingly became directed at specific communities—often distinguishable along lines of race, gender, and sexual orientation—and often took a form more closely resembling policing, and even harassment. Much of the mainstream media establishment would begin to broadly condemn anything even resembling trolling in the wake of these incidents. But trolling's use potential remained indeterminate. As Ryan Milner has put it after examining trolling's use in a variety of contexts, "The harshest test of the logic of lulz is how it is used to engage the most core of identities. If the tone of these representations is exclusionary, then there is cause for concern. However, if these identity categories intertwine in polyvocal public discourse, then perhaps there's public utility in the logic of lulz."[104] He finds that its expression through these subcultural warrens tends to facilitate "old inequalities." However, through an analysis of the use of trolling in more diverse communities, he ultimately concludes that its agonistic potential is great: "With enough voices engaging and enough of a balance between irony and earnestness, the logic of lulz could be a

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102 Ibid.
103 Phillips, *This is Why*, chapter 1, section "Trolls According to Trolls."
104 Milner, "Hacking the Social."

tool vibrantly employed."[105]

And indeed, even this subcultural logic has expanded away from narrowly politically incorrect manifestations. As the lulz offered something like a formal, aesthetic touchstone by which trolling could develop a distinctive, bounded aesthetic or aisthetic sensibility, a vast project called Encyclopedia Dramatica emerged to archive these memes and experimental engagements, contextualizing them as a sort of troll history, complete with a spurious lore. Encyclopedia Dramatica charted memetic developments within historical arcs, and acted as a supplementary memory to the memes themselves, ultimately making them legible to broader publics. It is notable for its utter lack of editorial objectivity; though it functions in a manner akin to Wikipedia, with the site theoretically editable by anyone, its trollish user base ensured that the devious and irreverent cultural logics of the community itself found their expression even in the tone of its memorialization. And while these collected cultural products were initially contained to the community, they increasingly spilled out via popular internet memes, and, eventually, whole populist movements of subcultural trolls, such as Anonymous, who would deploy their trollish methodologies in highly public acts of protest and civil disobedience.

Trolling at this time can perhaps be best understood as an act of jouissance—a form of nihilistic, agonistic delight in an activity based on its prescribed, formal terms alone, without much regard for its content, consequences, or repercussions. And yet a kernel of the idea that trolling ultimately constituted a public service was often present. Consider, for instance, Encyclopedia Dramatica's entry on Socrates, which identifies the hallowed father of Western rationalism as history's first troll. "Socrates was a famous IRL [in real life (as opposed to online)] troll of pre-internets Greece credited with inventing the first recorded trolling technique and otherwise laying the foundation of the science of lulz."[106] The suggestion derives from Socrates' development of an interrogative method to draw out and ultimately demonstratively falsify his interlocutors' logics and ultimate conclusions—a method Socrates himself defended at his trial with reference to something that resembles nothing more than the troll's collective enjoyment of lulz. "But why ever do some people enjoy spending a great deal of time with me? I have told you the whole truth, they enjoy hearing men cross-examined who think they are wise, and are not; indeed that is not unpleasant."[107] Socrates envisioned himself as "that gadfly which God has

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105 Ibid.
106 "Socrates," Encyclopedia Dramatica, https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Socrates.
107 Plato, Apology. The translation seems to be unique to Encylopedia Dramatica itself, but it fits the text. See by

attached to the state."[108]

And indeed, just as a discovery and identification with the ancient Greeks led to a renaissance in medieval Europe, we could see this period of archivization and self-mythologizing as something of a "troll Renaissance"—with activity proceeding along multiple paths, in multiple forums, all guided effectively by a blank exhortation to simply see what was possible. Whether this subcultural trolling, as opposed to something like the earlier hacker trolling that proceeded it, could at this time be thought of as a form of "agonistic" rather than "antagonistic" politics remained indeterminate.[109] But the mounting jouissant quality of this community never grew to ontologize it fully. While chaotic, formal explorations had perhaps become forefront to ethical reflections on target selection, some of the community's core figureheads, including even Auernheimer himself—prior to his incarceration and re-presentation as a white supremacist— maintained a diverse set of activities that could not exhaustively be characterized as negative. For his part, Auernheimer maintained at this time the concerns of the hacking community he had grown out of—merging the ironic, nihilistic, jouissant troll aesthetic sensibility with a continued interest in critical hacking and security research.[110] An expression he made during a 2007 presentation titled Internet Crime at the Toorcon hacker conference is perhaps indicative of the confusion inherent to these trollish subjects:

> Really when you look at the government and what's going on you have the choice of, you know, refusing to acknowledge it, sort of brainwashing yourself and just accepting it, or you can fight it and you typically go to prison. But, I've chosen to just become an absurdist, and break whatever I want, because that's really the best thing you can do. I know, I know, I'm tripping pretty hard.[111]

This frustrated political sensibility remained present even as subcultural trolling eclipsed hackerish trolling, maintaining pathways that would soon be walked by political activists, and ultimately artists; subjects whom we could understand as making good on Encyclopedia

way of comparison: "But I shall be asked, Why do people delight in continually conversing with you? I have told you already, Athenians, the whole truth about this: they like to hear the cross-examination of the pretenders to wisdom; there is amusement in this," from the Benjamin Jowett translation at: http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/apology.html
108 Ibid.
109 Milner, "Hacking the Social."
110 Schwartz, "The Trolls."
111 See: "Toorcon 2007 - Andrew Wbeelso - Mischa.mp4," YouTube, December 13, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsTGQbhuL0E.

Dramatica's maintenance that the troll, like Socrates, could function as a "gadfly on the state"—a force which annoys in the service of elucidation, evocation, self-knowledge, and critique, rather than narrow self-interest alone.

Activists, Fascists, Police, and Politicians

With trolling increasingly practiced as a distinctive internet subculture, even within this community it began to fracture into a variety of directions. While news agencies continued to pick up on salacious doings (like the co-ordinated cyberbullying of 11-year-old girls[112]) and began applying the trolling label increasingly to events more akin to directed misogyny, harassment, and hate speech than the clever baiting of peers that defined trolling in its Usenet days, the troll community nevertheless fragmented. Some self-identifying trolls drifted into engagements that increasingly resembled political activism, such as Project Chanology, a systematic protest of Scientology that arose as a reaction to the Church's attempts to remove any trace of a promotional video featuring Tom Cruise that 4chan users found particularly delightful.[113] Many 4chan trolls began to realize that the core products of trolling, the lulz, could be harvested just as well by trolling "up" as they could be by trolling "down."[114] Gabriella Coleman interviewed an Irish hacker who described his shift in thinking thusly: "I came for the lulz but stayed for the outrage."[115]

This mounting realization that the lulz could be derived without the reproduction of political incorrectness and bullying, perhaps always obvious to those hackers who first relied on trolling as a way to amplify their public interest-oriented activities, was crucial to the forking of subcultural trolling along two distinctive paths. One branch of "anonymous," as the 4chan trolling community had then become known, decided to orient all future trolling activities towards the amplification of political messages, and even the outright deployment of discursive

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112 Andy Dolan and Martin Robinson, "Schoolgirl is 'trolled to death': Parents' agony as daughter, 14, 'hangs herself' after horrific abuse from bullies on website Ask.fm," *Daily Mail*, August 5, 2013, www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2384866/Schoolgirl-Hannah-Smith-trolled-death-bullies-Ask-fm-website.html.

113 Coleman, "Hacker, Hoaxer," chapter 2.

114 And also, at times, through strange forms of feel-good trolling. Encyclopedia Dramatica fondly remembers the day when 4chan decided to make an old veteran's day, inundating his birthday party with wellwishes, gifts, and letters—effectively trolling for lulz by surprising him with an inordinate amount of niceness. Even Adrian Chen was led to a temporary moment of doubt regarding his campaign to declaim 4chan's wretchedness. See: Adrian Chen, "Is 4chan Turning Into Internet Good Guys?" *Gawker*, September 2, 2010, http://gawker.com/5629066/4chan-is-turning-into-internet-good-guys.

115 Coleman, "Lulz to Collective Action."

network power itself. These individuals came to be known as "Anonymous," and identified themselves with a distinctive range of aesthetic memetic affectations—most particularly a headless, suited figure framed by a laurel wreath, a masked likeness of the British anarchist Guy Fawkes as re-appropriated from its depiction in the movie V for Vendetta, and a penchant for highly dramatized YouTube videos. Anonymous and its offshoots moved further and further afield from the chans and the subcultural trolls who had instantiated their devious logics. And as they did so, they took on bigger and bigger political opponents in addition to the Church of Scientology. Between 2009 and 2016 Anonymous would prove crucial in advancing the cause of Occupy Wall Street, defending WikiLeaks against globalized blacklistings by states and corporations, identifying child predators operating on the deep web to authorities, exfiltrating data from governments and corporations that they believed to be acting counter to public interest, providing support throughout the revolutionary Arab Spring, hacking and shutting down accounts used by ISIS to co-ordinate military and terrorist attacks, counter trolling the subcultural trolls perpetuating Gamergate, and engaging innumerable other principled engagements rooted in diverse logics of justice.[116]

Yet even as Anonymous scored political victory after political victory, innovating a distinctive cultural sensibility that synthesized the hallmarks of subcultural trolling with activist hacker tactics, those subcultural trolls who remained on 4chan revealed themselves as a political force in their own right. While the disparate tentacles of Anonymous, variegated as they were—with no core code of operation or membership aside from anonymity itself and an imperative to "not forgive" and "not forget"—tended to demonstrate a predominately leftist sensibility of social and economic justice, the trolls *left behind*, as it were, tended towards something very different. Perhaps it was the sudden absence of their more altruistically-inclined peers, whose coherence as a distinctly separate entity—organized increasingly on Twitter and IRC rather than 4chan proper—further ensured that the conscientious among new generations of would-be trolls ended up with Anonymous, and not anonymous. Perhaps it was something even more complex. But whatever the reason, the political implications of troll culture more generally—those who remained on the chans, the subreddits, and the somethingawful.coms—soon tended towards something very awful indeed.

Tellingly, these trolls took offence to Anonymous' altruistic development. In keeping with their

116 Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy*, throughout.

politically incorrect cultural parlance, they dismissed the offshoots as a bunch of "moralfags"[117] and redoubled their efforts to troll for trollings sake—maintaining the earlier subcultural philosophy of "doing it for the lulz," and the lulz alone. Whereas Anonymous returned trolling to its earliest sense—as a method, a tool, or a "means"—ultimately refining trolling into a honed political weapon, the subcultural trolls re-asserted a commitment to trolling as an end in itself, devoid of consciously articulated political ambitions. But really, their actions amounted to an insidious form of politicization, as it became increasingly clear that their purported absence of ideology was itself stoking the fires of an extremely reactionary, far right ideology more visible and organized than any previous far right collective the internet had seen.[118] As Jacob Siegel describes, the /pol/ segment of 4chan, wherein anons competed with one another in what had initially seemed a parodic game of racist one-upmanship, was discovered by white supremacists as a readymade resource, comprised of punchy argumentation that could be funnelled directly into their own promotional campaigns, and a vitriolic, aimless troll army that could be easily recruited as "shock troopers." For these elements, the chans and affiliated subreddits presented "powerful laboratories for inseminating and spreading darker ideas," as Siegel puts it.[119] Tellingly, it was on one such white nationalist website, the *Daily Stormer,* that Auernheimer first debuted the swastika tattoo he had received in prison, and elaborated his increasingly vitriolic racist belief system.[120] Reading the interview, even those inclined to defend Auernheimer would be hard pressed to find anything to suggest that the whole thing was some meta-level troll on the white supremacists themselves. The site, like others in the emergent ultra-right web, had become an advocate of 4chan's troll community, since discovering that the Darwinian memetic broil of 4chan had made /pol/'s the most innovative hate speech on the web.

Ultimately, perhaps unwittingly, /pol/ became not only a lab but also a fixed meeting point for right-wing organizers from other corners of the web. "Eventually people showed up, on /pol/ and the racist subreddits, who never knew or cared whether there was a joke to begin with," writes Siegal. "They came for the racism and have built on that enterprise."[121] The *Daily Stormer's* editor praised trolling on his site, writing: "Trolling, as a concept, was always a form of social commentary, intended to expose the weakness and hypocrisy of our age," relays Siegel, and the

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117 A term Anonymous persisted in using to refer to themselves, as a point of pride.
118 Jacob Siegal, "Dylann Roof."
119 Ibid.
120 Andrew Auernheimer, "What I Learned from My Time in Prison," *Daily Stormer*, October 1, 2014, www.dailystormer.com/what-i-learned-from-my-time-in-prison.
121 Siegal, "Dylann Roof."

editor continues: "The fact that [/pol/'s trolling] has been refined into a hardcore right-wing system of Jew-hatred and the mockery of self-righteous feminists merely demonstrates that we now know our enemy much better than we did a decade ago."[122] Siegel suggests this rationale bears similarities to ones offered by Gabriella Coleman in defence of the social justice-oriented trolling of Anonymous. And the point seems undeniable: trolling, like art, is always-already political—whether recognized as such or not. Siegel does not go so far as to dismiss trolling outright, but he does suggest that defences of trolling, such as those offered by Coleman, might inadvertently safeguard and defend also the covert development of hate speech on troll warrens like /pol/. But Siegel fails to acknowledge that the trolls that Coleman defends do not share the sham political agnosticism of the 4chan and Reddit trolls. Siegel writes:

> Nominally, the trolls, like punk rockers, Dadaists, and countless others before them, were reveling in breaking taboos. It was never clear to what end. Were those bad words and old slanders being bandied around as a kind of satire, demystifying ingrained prejudices, or were they the sharp points at the edge of free speech, a way of insisting that no idea could be off limits? No one was quite sure, perhaps not even the trolls.[123]

It seems clear that it is precisely this supposed absence of an explicit agenda, or belief in an agenda of merely advancing the right to a positive liberty to say *whatever one wants*, that lends itself to being marshalled by other agents. When one's politics are upfront—as they are with Anonymous—the rhetoric cannot be corralled and redirected so easily towards another's cause. Siegel's characterization of trolls thus ignores a vast swathe of practitioners—and also grossly mischaracterizes others, like the Dadaists, who I will later identify as a form of "proto-trolls." For the Dadaists, like the trolls that formed Anonymous, like the hackers who trolled in the 1990s before 4chan even existed, and like many others—including, at least for a time, Auernheimer himself—a clear end may not have been *known*, but a *desired end*, beyond the lulz alone, most certainly did exist, and was often explicitly articulated. Each of these groups, frustrated as they may be about just how to achieve it, desired to bring about a more egalitarian world, free from the hegemonies of market logics and crypto-totalitarian states.

Nevertheless, the mission creep of jouissant and nihilistic forms of subcultural trolling into racist and misogynistic territory should give us pause—particularly for the covert way this

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122 Ibid.
123 Ibid.

transformation seems to have occurred. For it has become quite clear that where trolling functions as an end in itself—rather than as a means to an end as it has for Anonymous—it can be seized upon by ulterior agents, and steered in service of their motives. Instrumentalization itself is not the problem: any political activist instrumentalizes their efforts to deliver a certain goal. But typically, even in the case of the tactically duplicitous trolls in Anonymous, an overarching political agenda is apparent upfront. The mass instrumentalization of entire communities—like those anonymous trolls who believe themselves to be exercising the most trivial of positive freedoms to say or do as they please—towards militant, hateful, and violent campaigns has disturbing implications. This is an important point, for much contemporary art production also declines to associate itself with any clear political association or agenda, and yet such activity must also serve an ideology—if not one we can yet articulate or understand.[124]

AN UNBOUNDED TERMINOLOGY

It is worth stepping aside from this narrative to briefly probe the term trolling itself, and its conditions of use. Reading mainstream writers like Siegel and Adrian Chen,[125] it becomes clear that the subject of trolling is hopelessly mired by a lack of nuance. Such writers have succeeded, through their substantial reach, in convincing many that trolling is an entirely irredeemable practice.[126] But as we have gestured at above, a range of different activities are now described through the lens of trolling—and whether we agree with their agenda or not, many of these activities (political activism, political campaigning, propagandizing, security disclosure) do have explicit and narrow agendas. While different trolling forms and factions often interact and cross-

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124 Consider, for example, the ideological use to which the CIA put the formalist, politically-agnostic American modernist artists during the cold war. See: Frances Stonor Saunders, "Modern art was CIA 'weapon,'" *The Independent*, October 21, 1995, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/modern-art-was-cia-weapon-1578808.html.

125 Chen, it should be noted, has a reputation for being a very critical internet critic, indeed. He premised a piece celebrating the meme "doge" with this curmudgeonly statement: "I no longer enjoy memes. Today, I believe every popular internet meme is invented and propagated by a secret elite vanguard of advertising creatives honing their skills at manipulating the internet in order to more quickly bring about a future where all human communication, from the most mundane Tweet to the deepest artistic gesture, is in the service of Brand Awareness." Not that I necessarily disagree. See: Adrian Chen, "Doge is an Actually Good Internet Meme. Wow," *Gawker*, November 7, 2013, http://gawker.com/doge-is-an-actually-good-internet-meme-wow-1460448782.

126 This reading has been recently complexified, as other mainstream writers demonstrate an avid willingness to describe as "trolling" many of the candidate-sanctioned social media tactics at work in the lead-up to the 2016 US presidential candidate nominations, and also more general practices of trickery against demonized figures like pharmaceutical executive Martin Shkreli (himself described frequently as a troll). See: Lane Moore, "This Woman Spectacularly Trolled 'America's Most Hated Man' on Tinder," *Cosmopolitan*, October 6, 2015, www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/news/a47317/this-woman-spectacularly-trolled-americas-most-hated-man-on-tinder.

pollinate in complex ways (members of Anonymous, for instance, used politically incorrect terminology inherited from their subcultural origins, such as moralfag, even as they publicly advocated against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation), the variegated expressions of trolling cannot—should not—be painted with a single brush. As Jamie Bartlett has explored in an article devoted to trolls' self-identification, many trolls themselves reject association with the sorts of un-reflexive, antisocial trolling that Chen and Siegel describe. As Bartlett seeks to remind his readers:

> The word troll has become shorthand for more or less every nasty scumbag on the internet, and there's no denying that's exactly what many of these people are. But this accepted meaning is actually a relatively new definition of the word—an easy, evocative, catch-all term to slap into headlines about any sadistic weirdo who does something cruel via their internet connection.[127]

Bartlett relays an interview with one troll who lamented this shift in terminology: "Threatening to rape someone on Twitter isn't trolling. That's just threatening to rape someone. On Twitter."[128] This view is largely echoed by Phillips, who suggests that the media have it backwards: rather than seeing all online aggression as "trolling," we should instead see trolling as a subgenre of online aggression, she argues. Blindly "using the term as a stand-in for everything terrible online is imprecise, unhelpful, and—most importantly—tends to obscure the underlying problem of offline bigotry and aggression," she writes.[129] Yet it nevertheless seems warranted to describe some of these activities as trolling—for in many instances they do differentiate themselves significantly from their offline correlates, particularly in the cases where such bigotry is channeled not only through singular, hyper-aggressive individuals, but also in more subtle ways—i.e., through the generation of memetic cultural products, and the uses of these objects to police boundaries and advance a sense of otherness.[130]

A more helpful approach might not be to posit trolling as a mere subset of aggression, but rather to nuance our understanding of trolling itself. Karla Mantilla, for instance, recently published a book titled *Gendertrolling: How Misoygny Went Viral*, which painstakingly characterizes a

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127 Bartlett, "OG Internet Trolls."
128 Ibid.
129 Emphasis added. From Phillips, "A Brief History."
130 The structural conditions of trolling lead many unthinkingly into harassing activity due to immersion of their ego into a collective font—something akin to the banal evil cultural logic described by Hannah Arendt.

specific form of abusive, misogynist trolling ("gender trolling") from other trolling practices ("generic trolling").[131] Mantilla agrees that many forms of gender trolling are also intelligible as harassment, but it becomes clear in her accounting that many of their strategies are entirely homologous to those used by the trolls studied by Phillips. It is also worth noting that Phillips herself is careful to delineate her object of study as "subcultural" trolls—self-identifying trolls, who demonstrate a very particular cultural sensibility—a demarcation that in no way hurts her ethnography. And the term trolling continues to become more general, rolling in new meanings further and further afield from its inception point. For instance, in the run-up to the 2016 US presidential election, the mainstream media has seen fit to apply the label to a staggering array of political maneuverings which saw candidates or their campaign managers trick opponents on social media. According to certain mainstream media: Hillary Clinton is a troll;[132] Bernie Sanders has trolled;[133] and Donald Trump might just be "the best internet troll of all time."[134] And it goes without saying: all three have either hired or inspired armies of online trolls (what used to be called shills or sockpuppets) to bully and advocate on their behalves across the web.[135] Similar attempts to manipulate popular opinion online by governments in China and Russia, among others, have similarly been described as "trolling"—where they were once discussed as "psychological operations" or propaganda.[136] At times these activities may be lulzy, at times they may use spectacle to drive their message, and at times they might have no aim but to sow chaos

131 "I do not mean for this analysis of gendertrolling to be seen as a fixed phenomenon, or something that I have definitevely nailed down. That is impossible, especially due to the ever-changing patterns that continually emerge on the internet and to the demonstrated ability of misigony to adapt to new technologies, structures, and conditions. However, I believe gendertrolling is a useful concept to identify something that is increasingly happening to women online that most people are not aware of, as well as to distinguish it from generic trolling." See: Mantilla, *Gendertrolling*, introduction.

132 Chad Merda, "Meet Hillary Clinton, the Troll," *Sun Times National*, October 7, 2015, http://national.suntimes.com/national-world-news/7/72/1951170/hillary-clinton-trolls-donald-trump-kevin-mccarthy.

133 Sam Frizell, "Why Bernie Sanders is Trolling Hillary Clinton on Twitter," *Time*, January 13, 2016, http://time.com/4179568/bernie-sanders-hillary-clinton-twitter.

134 Gillian Branstetter, "Is Donald Trump the Best Internet Troll of All Time?" *The Daily Dot*, July 1, 2015, www.dailydot.com/via/donald-trump-internet-trolls.

135 Bre Payton, "Bernie Sanders' Army of Trolls are Winning the Internet," *The Federalist*, July 15, 2015, http://thefederalist.com/2015/07/15/bernie-sanders-army-of-trolls-are-winning-the-internet; Benjy Sarlin, "How an army of pro-Donald Trump trolls are taking over Reddit," *MSNBC*, April 14, 2016, www.msnbc.com/msnbc/how-donald-trumps-army-trolls-took-over-reddit; Ben Collins, "Hillary PAC Spends $1 Million to 'Correct' Commenters on Reddit and Facebook," *The Daily Beast*, April 21, 2016, www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/04/21/hillary-pac-spends-1-million-to-correct-commenters-on-reddit-and-facebook.html.

136 Adrian Chen, "The Agency," *The New York Times Magazine*, June 2, 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html; David Wertime, "Meet the Chinese Trolls Pumping Out 488 Million Fake Social Media Posts," *Foreign Policy*, May 19, 2016, http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/19/meet-the-chinese-internet-trolls-pumping-488-million-posts-harvard-stanford-ucsd-research.

and confusion—but in other regards they are all very different from the subcultural trolling described by Phillips and also the harassive trolling described by Mantilla.

Thus rather than attempting a top-down language policing to discourage such uses of the term "trolling"—a Sisyphean task, given the disagreement even among trolls themselves—it seems pragmatic to simply specify more precisely what sorts of trolls people are talking about. For their part, trolls have never had a problem with this. 4Chan lingo developed the term moralfags to describe members of anonymous interested in trolling for justice; similarly, "oldfag" and "newfag" delineated those in on the site's meta-trollish jokes from the newcomer wannabes. As mentioned previously, other trolls self-identify as white hat trolls in an analogy to hacker terminology, seeing their trollish activities as deceptive but ultimately good for the communities they engage. "White hat trolling has positive outcome [sic], it helps people to consolidate their ethical immune system, like a vaccine," writes one such practitioner.[137] And while the troll interviewed by Bartlett doesn't self-label, he could presumably fit the bill, claiming to "troll in the public interest."[138]

Suffice it to say: trolling cannot be roundly condemned or celebrated, nor should its application to an individual imply such a judgment. But the risks of trolling are real, and the negative connotations inherent to so much trolling are useful for reminding us of the form's power, and the way it can cause harm and reproduce negative cultural logics when deployed carelessly.

ARTISTS AND PROTO-TROLLS OF THE PAST

As the mainstream media has applied the term trolling to more and more disparate activities, its outright negative connotations have somewhat wavered. According to Phillips, this has resulted, at least partially, from an increased populist legibility, fuelled by a further migration of trollish memetics and lore away from culturally-specific sites like Encyclopedia Dramatica and into more mainstream, commercially-oriented, "Safe For Work" repositories like Know Your Meme.[139] Mainstream political figures have been identified as trolls, and also for-profit,

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137 "Trolling, like hacking, has hat colors. I started out as a gray hat troll and became more white-hat over time. We have nothing in common with the black hat trolls and the bullies. Online bullies are (like all bullies) horrible people, but trolling is a different thing entirely. It can be done in a way that doesn't hurt people. The first rule of a decent troll: don't fuck with peoples' IRL." See: "Internet troll study: Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, sadism," *Hacker News*, https://news.ycombinator.com/item?id=7241233.
138 Bartlett, "OG Internet Trolls."
139 "KYM thus helped democratize a space that had previously been restricted to the initiated—inadvertently

professional media manipulators. For Phillips, this has come with substantial risks:

> The notion that someone is just trolling establishes political, rhetorical, and affective
> distance between an individual and the things they do and say. The distance necessitated
> by the troll frame functions as an ethical escape hatch, looping one back to the rationale
> that if someone takes offense to an offensive statement, that's on them. When pressed,
> the so-called troll can always point towards self-reflexive performativity ("I'm not a real
> racist, I just play one on the internet"), and away from personal responsibility for the
> impact their behaviors have, regardless of what their true motivations might have been.[140]

The contemporary artist can be seen as emblematic of this tension. For their use of trollish
strategies depends upon a historical compatibility between artistic creativity and a poetic
ambiguity. Rather than using intermediary technologies to obfuscate their identities and
intentions, these artistic practitioners instead rely on the time-honoured expectation that artists be
obscurantist, and also be permitted to proceed in a style of audience engagement and object
production that might raise serious questions about intentionality and critical positioning.
Specific to the contemporary moment, the pointed trollish sensibility we can consider today
emerged in the aftermath of what some understood as a movement, and others, perhaps more
accurately, have theorized as a condition, a label that operated either way as an undeniably
effective marketing banner for rallying collectors: "Post-Internet art."[141] We will explore this
more fully in what follows, but suffice it to say that Post-Internet, as articulated in the late
aughts, can be understood to apply to: physicalized, gallery-ready artworks made by members of

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codifying what once had been an evolving repertoire of shared experience." See: Phillips, "Why We Can't Have Nice Things," chapter 8, section "Meme Factory."

140 Whitney Phillips, "Donald Trump is not a Troll," *Slate*, June 23, 2016, www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2016/06/the_problems_with_calling_donald_trump_a_troll.html.

141 As Artie Vierkant has described it, "'Post-Internet Art' is a term coined by artist Marisa Olson and developed further by writer Gene McHugh in the critical blog 'Post internet' during its activity between December 2009 and September 2010. Under McHugh's definition it concerns 'art responding to [a condition] described as "Post internet"–when the internet is less a novelty and more a banality. Perhaps ... closer to what Guthrie Lonergan described as "internet Aware"–or when the photo of the art object is more widely dispersed [&] viewed than the object itself.'" Artie Vierkant, *The Image Object Post-Internet*, pdf, http://jstchillin.org/artie/pdf/The_Image_Object_Post-Internet_us.pdf. Others identify it temporally: "Post-Internet" refers to a generation that grew up with the internet," says Susanne Pfeffer. See: Thom Bettridge, "Susanne Pfeffer: How Art's Post-Human Turn Began in Kassel," *032c* 29 (Winter 2015/2016), http://032c.com/2016/how-arts-post-human-turn-began-in-kassel. "Post-Internet art is a style. It is an aesthetic, a way of being—a look, even—furnished by a specific sensibility, and it is the widespread adoption of this that is coming to an end." See: Morgan Quaintance, "Right Shift," *Art Monthly* 387 (June 2015), www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/article/right-shift-by-morgan-quaintance-june-2015.

an internet art community that had previously eschewed, or had existed apart from, the existing commercial gallery and institutional system; a style of "internet Aware" artmaking, to use a term proposed by Guthrie Lonergan, that took many of the cultural logics at work online (including, in some instances, the memetic products of subcultural trolls) and applied them to art making activities intended to extend beyond the art world's existing borders; and a general condition applying to artists so thoroughly ontologized by their relationship to network culture that its influence needed to be acknowledged even in the works they made offline.

The vast majority of artists I discuss here have roots in, or at least strong ties to, these communities. And as a category, they can be understood to distinguish themselves from the more general artistic strategies identifiable with Post-Internet art for their specific willingness to not only adopt but also circulate within the aesthetic and discursive regimes of more general Western publics—those of tech companies, social media communities, online marketplaces, and internet start-ups, among others. While few of the artists I will discuss have publicly identified with the figure of the internet troll, many—primarily those who match the demographic of subcultural trolls themselves[142]—demonstrate a nuanced familiarity with their cultural production techniques. K-Hole has tweeted that "Good artists copy; great artists troll,"[143] and member Emily Segal has publicly considered the trollish implications of her engagements.[144] Others, such as Amalia Ulman, Simon Denny, and Brad Troemel, have also at times been identified as trolls by peers and in art criticism.[145] Troemel has posted an essay arguing that 4chan demonstrates a more advanced participatory production aesthetic than the one described in the theory-cum-movement called relational aesthetics.[146] And as described in the opening to this paper, Jon

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142 While not all 4chan users are trolls, 4chan lists its demographics as follows: Age: 18-34; Gender: ~70% male, ~30% female; Location: United States (47%), United Kingdom (8%), Canada (6%), Australia (5%), Germany (4%), France (2%), Sweden (2%), Netherlands (2%), Poland (1.5%), Brazil (1.5%); Interests: Japanese culture, anime, manga, video games, comics, technology, music, movies; Education: Majority attended or currently enrolled in college. See: "Advertise," 4chan, www.4chan.org/advertise.
143 See: https://twitter.com/kholetrends/status/603970297285324800.
144 Most notably: Emily Segal, "The Long Troll: An evening with Emily Segal" (discussion with Max Pitegoff and Calla Henkel, curated by Natasha Hoare, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, Netherlands, February 16, 2016); and "Critical Trolling" (a panel discussion I organized between myself, Loreta Lamargese, Emily Segal, and Brad Troemel at Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, March 11, 2016).
145 Jon Rafman has called Brad Troemel a troll. See: Madeline Coleman, "Jon Rafman is Just Waiting to be Trolled," *Cluster Mag*, https://web.archive.org/web/20150912115803/http://theclustermag.com/2012/06/jon-rafman-is-just-waiting-to-be-trolled; And the works of both Simon Denny and Amalia Ulman have been described as trolling; see: Mike Pepi, "Simon Denny: The Innovator's Dilemma," *LEAP*, June 30, 2015, www.leapleapleap.com/2015/06/simon-denny-the-innovators-dilemma; and Aria Dean, "Amalia Ulman - Gentle Deception," *Topical Cream*, June 1, 2015, http://topicalcream.info/editorial/amalia-ulman-gentle-deception.
146 Brad Troemel, "[IMG MGMT] What Relational Aesthetics Can Learn from 4Chan," *Art F City*, September 9, 2010, http://artfcity.com/2010/09/09/img-mgmt-what-relational-aesthetics-can-learn-from-4chan.

Rafman once trolled in the subcultural trolls' own warrens—prompting a range of sociologically fascinating, and also thoroughly lulzy, reactions by posting a video about the phenomenological experience of troll culture to a 4chan board.

Elsewhere members of this artist community demonstrate strong connections to the devious attentional trolling practiced in the hacking community. Simon Denny, for instance, has been identified as a "culture hacker" for his use of sophisticated social engineering-style techniques that have elsewhere been foundational to particularly trollish, politically-motivated hacking groups like cDc and lulzec over the past two decades.[147] In many ways, the social-minded artist who takes cultures and communities beyond art as their lab can be understood as engaged in a process of public security auditing akin to the one practiced in the hacker world. As Troemel has explained in an interview, "the best challenge to the authority of something is to find where its semantic or enforceable borders break down and to exploit those shortcomings"—a statement which could easily have come from a hacker blog, for it echoes the security hacker's mandate to discover vulnerabilities and challenge or supplant authority by exploiting those holes in order to draw particular attention to their need for repair or reconfiguration.[148] As Adrian Chen has written, trolling is a natural methodology for this: "A troll exploits social dynamics like computer hackers exploit security loopholes."[149] And really, the artistically trollish possibilities of this imperative can be seen in multiple directions, both technical and aesthetic. While the trolls we consider below are ambiguous in their critical productivity, sometimes the critical function is explicitly foregrounded, in a manner harkening back to the institutional critique artists of the late 20th century. Jennifer Chan's "Are you an art bro?" infographic uses the formal trope of the mind map to critique ongoing patriarchal power dynamics at work in the Post-Internet art community itself—encoding her argument in the type of hyper-rationalist trappings that the subjects of her critiques might find rhetorically convincing.[150] Constant Dullaart takes aim at art world inequalities by adopting the time-honoured hacker practice of botnet management: hiring 2.5 million fake Instagram accounts to equalize the attentional economy metric of "followers"

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147 See, for instance, Simon Denny, "Culture Hacking" (discussion with Heba Y.Amin, Ryan Gallagher, and Brett Scott, Royal College of Art, London, England, January 28, 2016).
148 Quoted in: Lee Knuttila, "Trolling Aesthetics: The Lulz as Creative Practice" (PhD diss., York University, 2015), 8.
149 Of course, for Chen this wasn't something positive—but artists have long been expected to discover cracks in the social fabric and bring them to our attention. See: Milner, "Hacking the Social."
150 Ann Hirsch, "Artist Profile: Jennifer Chan," *Rhizome*, December 18, 2014, http://rhizome.org/editorial/2014/dec/18/artist-profile-jennifer-chan.

between emerging artists and enshrined institutional figures like Hans Ulrich Obrist.[151] And many other examples abound.

The historical roots of this type of artistic trolling can be discovered along multiple paths. But nowhere do we find a stronger artistic precedence than in the work of the early modernist avant-garde, particularly the engagements of Dada and the Situationist International. This understanding verges on the commonsensical; according to MTV.com, Marcel Duchamp was one of "the world's greatest trolls in the days before the internet," and the site positions him as a proto-troll akin to Socrates, one who offered a model not only for trollish rhetoric, but also a more specific methodology whereby artists might manipulate networks of information, objects, and audiences to trollish, critical effect.[152] But as we will see, some art historical sleuthing reveals that these similarities may be more than merely intuitive.

The modernist avant-garde emerged from a period where art began to reflect on its own constitution.[153] In the wake of revolutions and industrialization throughout the West, private citizens increasingly found themselves with an ability to explore art in a manner previously available only to the aristocracy, institutions, and extraordinarily wealthy private patrons. Museums became accessible to the masses for the first time, and taste-making (or taste-dictating) institutions like the French salons began to lose their monopolistic ability to furnish narrow definitions of art and the proper procedures by which it could be made.[154] Suddenly, anything seemed possible—a belief that would be tested most articulately, and trollishly, by an artwork called *Fountain*—a work esteemed today as perhaps the most important work of the 20th century,[155] and one which demonstrates all the hallmarks of an effective troll.

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151 "Constant Dullaart: 100,000 Followers for Everyone!" *Dis Magazine*,
     http://dismagazine.com/dystopia/67039/constant-dullaart-100000-followers-for-everyone.
152   Aaron Goldfarb, "The World's Greatest Trolls in the Days Before the Internet," *MTV News*, November 28,
     2014, www.mtv.com/news/2007569/pre-internet-trolls.
153 Peter Bürger, "On The Problem of the Autonomy of Art in Bourgeois Culture" in *Art in Modern Culture*, edited
     by Francis Frascina and Jonathan Harris (New York: Icon Editions, 1992), 48-49.
154 Juergen Habermas has argued that the salons functioned as a sort of proto-public sphere, but some critics argue
     that they were primarily the sole domain of aristocracy. Either way: it seems clear that as debates about art
     moved away from these institutional constraints, more and more publics became welcome to participate in
     defining and debating the values inherent to art. See: Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the
     Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence
     (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991); and Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of
     the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).
155 "Duchamp's urinal tops art survey," *BBC News*, December 1, 2004,
     http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4059997.stm; David W. Galenson, "The Most Important Works of Art
     of the Twentieth Century," Working Paper (National Bureau of Economic Research, February 2006),

Submitted to New York's Society of Independent Artists in 1917, *Fountain* appeared to be nothing more than a factory-produced bathroom urinal, crudely signed by an unknown artist named "R. Mutt." At the time, such gestures were rare; while Dadaists were known to experiment with strange materials, they typically were not offered for public display alongside more traditional paintings and sculptures. Scandalized, the Society's exhibition committee refused to show the piece. Yet one of the committee members, Dada artist Marcel Duchamp, defended the work vigorously—ultimately initiating a discursive campaign to ensure that the spectacle of the work's dismissal, and the systems of taste, power, and artistic production it laid bare, would itself come to constitute the artwork's lasting legacy and ultimate success. This notion of discursivity as artwork was at the time unprecedented, and the underlying claim that anything—even a seemingly mass-produced "readymade"—could be rendered as art by the mere declamation of an artist can been seen as presaging many of the most vital developments in Western art over the next century.

And what could we make of this gesture, if not to call it a troll? In a 1967 interview, Duchamp describes how his advocacy of *Fountain* was designed to provoke—calling the scandal which ensued a "success," a process which left him "enchanted."[156] Clearly, Duchamp was experiencing something like a sense of lulz. While it has long been accepted in art history that *Fountain* was authored by Duchamp himself, an act of appropriating an industrially-produced commodity, more recent evidence suggests that the work was much more likely made by fellow New York Dada artist Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, who commonly used pipes and plumbing fixtures as sculptural stand-ins for transcendent concepts.[157] Duchamp would only explicitly claim authorship of the work decades later—after Freytag-Loringhoven passed away—and in the lead-up to the 1917 exhibition he wrote his sister telling her he had received the sculpture as a gift from a female friend. While it is difficult to determine who had the idea to submit *Fountain* for exhibition, it was nonetheless Duchamp's dual-insider position that allowed him to fully occupy the role of the troll: able to use secretive, privileged knowledge about the submitted work to provoke his peers at the society and ultimately steer the resulting discourse—the 20th century equivalent of a comments section or discussion forum—into lulzy territory for the edification of

http://www.nber.org/papers/w12058; Jonathan Jones, "The Top 10 Artworks of the 20th Century," *The Guardian*, accessed July 3, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2014/apr/30/top-10-artworks-20th-century.

156 Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues With Marcel Duchamp* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2009), 51.

157 Julian Spalding and Glyn Thompson, "Did Marcel Duchamp steal Elsa's urinal?" *The Art Newspaper*, November 3, 2014, http://old.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Did-Marcel-Duchamp-steal-Elsas-urinal/36155.

himself, his fellow Dadaists, and ultimately the receivers of art history itself.[158]

The work has continued to demonstrate a trollish productivity ever since, with many "performance artists" seeking to complete the work by urinating in it—inevitably generating further controversy, misunderstanding, anger, and, ultimately, lulz. But its true significance is in the way that, as MTV eloquently put it, Duchamp succeeded in a very particular type of troll: "as opposed to malicious online bullies, pre-internet trolls often had amazingly grand reasons for doing their thing."[159] Like the cybersecurity researchers who hit on trolling as a method for critiquing and ultimately transforming systems endemic with a wilful neglect of public interest, Freytag-Loringhoven and Duchamp's *Fountain* offered a template for how an artwork could directly challenge a system, offer entertainment in the doing, and ultimately prefigure a new system of value.

While most formal styles of artmaking, such as painting and sculpture, were treated during the Western modernist period according to procedural—perhaps dialectical—logics of innovation, development, reform, refinement, and renovation, this coincided with a more meta-conceptual inquiry into the circumstances by which art itself could be defined, signified, qualified, and interpreted. Where Western art making had previously performed its politics primarily in an implicit or tacit way—by depicting symbols important to the state or the church, for instance, or subtly embedding parody or critique into works that otherwise seemed to fit this mandate—art now came to increasingly be understood as an explicit site of politics itself. Liberation from traditions of form and content mirrored more general liberatory projects. Artists like Gustave Courbet first broke from the mould with their "genre painting," depicting subjects previously deemed unsuitable for memorialization or celebration: peasants, workers, street walkers, and the subaltern. As wars broke out to test the limits of newly refined ideas of "humanism," artists began to interrogate broadly existential themes, often coming to the conclusion that art's role was

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158 The evidence for this seems undeniable: as John Higgs has it, "On 11 April 1917 Duchamp wrote to his sister Suzanne and said that, 'One of my female friends who had adopted the pseudonym Richard Mutt sent me a porcelain urinal as a sculpture; since there was nothing indecent about it, there was no reason to reject it.' As he was already submitting the urinal under an assumed name, there does not seem to be a reason why he would lie to his sister about a 'female friend'. The strongest candidate to be this friend was Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. She was in Philadelphia at the time, and contemporary newspaper reports claimed that 'Richard Mutt' was from Philadelphia." See: John Higgs, "Was Marcel Duchamp's 'Fountain' actually created by a long-forgotten pioneering feminist?" *The Independent*, September 8, 2015, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/was-marcel-duchamps-fountain-actually-created-by-a-long-forgotten-pioneering-feminist-10491953.html.
159 Goldfarb, "World's Greatest Trolls."

primarily one of protest, and perhaps reconciliation, with the sweeping injustices of life itself.

Bold statements proliferated in sweeping manifestos, and hyperbole was the mode of the day, as the "avant-garde" modelled both new styles of representation and new modes of social engagement in even step. Yet while these engagements could be understood as satirical—as in the case of the Futurists' trumped up imperatives to destroy museums and history itself in favour of speed and machinic desire (or perhaps jouissance, as is the case with the more reckless and extremist tendencies of trolling seen today)—the results were deadly serious, just as when /pol/'s parody turned to hateful extremism. The fascist party of Italy, for instance, emerged directly from the juvenile individualist anarchism of the Futurist artists. Their war against tradition did not aim to do away with the status quo for good, but rather to clear it out of the way so an even more authoritarian system could fill the void—one premised on an underwriting ontological commitment to war itself: to a ceaseless "total war." "We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind, will fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice," proclaimed Filippo Tomasso Marinetti in a screed that could appear today as incongruously on /pol/ as in an art historical document. "We will glorify war—the world's only hygiene—militarism, patriotism...."[160]

The imposition of the Dadaists was no less ceaseless, yet rather than representing a vast antagonism with history, its failings, and those agents perceived to be barricading a more positivist move forward into futurity, it instead aimed to institute a ceaseless agonism or disposition of negation: "the Dada group was (at least in its early phase) all-negating, anti-ideological and anarchist," writes Claire Bishop.[161] As Dada developed, the group's political orientation and objectives became a site of much internal deliberation, but an imperative to disrupt the public—to any variety of ends—remained evident throughout.[162] Yet one of Dada's

160 Filippo Tomasso Marinetti, "The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism," in Charles Harrison and Paul Woods, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 147.
161 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 66.
162 Claire Bishop describes the clashing that would occur between these two styles of engagement within Dada: "Breton seemed keen to develop more subtle areas of social investigation, and to refute the chaotic anarchism that had been the hallmark of Dada to date. The new direction [he proposed] leaned instead towards more refined and meaningful forms of participatory experience. Not that this new direction was unilaterally welcomed by the group. It was a source of anxiety for Picabia, who considered Dada to have nothing to do with beliefs of any kind." Picabia, for his part, was a devoted nihilist—even offering a 1923 manifesto against morality itself, that could easily be read as an early imposition to "do it for the lulz." "There is no such thing as a moral problem; morality like modesty is one of the greatest stupidities. The asshole of morality should take the form of a chamber-pot, that's all the objectivity I ask of it," he writes. See *Artificial Hells*, 71 and Francis Picabia, "Thank you, Francis!" manifesto, January 1923. http://www.391.org/manifestos/1923-thank-you-francis-francis-picabia.html#.V021npMrJsN

biggest crises was faced when the public came to appreciate this combatativeness as an aestheticizable form in its own right, less a disruption than a source of entertainment: they "never ceased to play the Dada game."[163][164]

If early-phase Dada could be understood as being akin to the subcultural trolls of today, it is perhaps also interesting, then, to see that their tactics were refined into more narrow political tools by descendent revolutionary artists like the Situationist International (SI)—perhaps in a manner not unlike the later adoption of subcultural trolling strategies by hacktivists like Anonymous. Today identified by many historians as a political movement crucial to the events of May '68, SI was known for the tactical development of détournement, the turning of expressions of the capitalist system against itself, or more generally "the subversive appropriation of existing images to undermine their existing meaning," as Bishops has it.[165] One of the earliest documented actions, now known as the Notre-Dame Affair, saw a member of the Lettrist branch of the SI costume himself in a monk's habit and assume the rostrum during a televised Easter High Mass. There he delivered a sermon regarding the death of God. A classic troll, akin to a 4chan action that convinced Oprah Winfrey to fearfully publicize the threat of an organised, and entirely invented, group of pederasts. Less oriented towards convincing an audience to change their thinking, each of these actions could primarily be understood as an exercise in community building: creating a mythology and a collective laughter to constitute a revolutionary subject (in the case of the Lettrists) or a nihilistic libertarian subject (in the case of 4chan).

As Astrid Vicas has written, the use of détournement functioned in a manner very similar to the memetic process of signification and iteration seen in troll communities today. "Collective action generates significance by turning upon itself, taking outcomes of past interactions and setting

163 Bishop, *Artificial Hells,* 70.
164 Boris Groys writes that "all avant-garde art was made against public taste—even and especially when it was made in the name of public taste." Groys sees this style of work as prefigurative and inherently political, in the manner of propaganda—designed to socially reprogram rather than to engage in the marketplace or find success in an institutional context. "The power of an ideology is always ultimately the power of a vision. And this means by serving any political or religious ideology an artist ultimately serves art." Yet Groys' point gets more interesting—because he sees these ideologically-motivated art objects as always inherently critical as well, for they remove the ideological aspiration from a vague, abstract realm of potentiality and reify it in such a way that the project needs to be evaluated in relation to reality. Thus "Every realization of a certain project… is also a negation of this project, a termination of this project as project." We can see this as consistent with trolling's critical faculty: by prompting a response in relation to the trollish object, we learn something about the mode of relations in the troll. And if it's done in an art context, this learning is largely virutal—existing in a sort of "safe" space, bracketed from the high stakes of more direct politics. More on this later. See: Groys, *Art Power*, 7-8.
165 Bishop, *Artificial Hells,* 84.

them up for ongoing uptake by others in a process of bootstrapping that creates new patterns of organization. It is this bootstrapping process that the Lettrists-Situationists called détournement."[166] Thus, in the relationship between détournement and trolling, we could perhaps understand something like an originary memetic imperative—one that has persisted from the avant-garde, through other activist-collectivist tech developments, and ultimately remained instantiated among the hacker trolls of the 1990s, the net artists who shared their sensibility, and the critical artist trolls seen today.

While we immediately run into some problems applying the trolling label retroactively (trolling may, after all, be best understood as a distinctive product of computer networking), by at least identifying explicitly lulzy behaviour in the history of art we might nevertheless locate some clear art historical precedents to *contemporary* art strategies resemblant of trolling. And indeed, Gabriella Coleman explicitly suggests that subcultural trolling's general sensibility is identifiable in these historical art communities:

> The spirit of lulz is not particular to Anonymous, the internet, trolling, or our times. The Dadaists and Yippies shared a similarly rowdy disposition, as did the Situationists and Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers; more recently, the Yes Men have tightly fused pranksterism and activism, in one instance presenting a three-foot-long golden penis ("employee visualization appendage") at a WTO textile-industry conference as a means of controlling workers, to the applause of the management-class crowd. These transgressions serve many purposes, upending the conventions—and highlighting the absurdities—of a political system within which substantive change no longer seems possible, and generating the kind of spectacles that elicit coverage from the mainstream media.[167]

Whether the aesthetic and political sensibility shared by these groups reflects direct interchange and inspiration or a more general spirit of the times is difficult to parse out with exact certainty. But some direct connections between contemporary trollish activist technologists and the historical avant-garde seem undeniable. Dada's influence on the Situationists is well documented. And the latter group's emphasis on direct organizing and strategy would prove influential among

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166 Astrid Vicas. "Reusing Culture: The Import of Détournement," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 11, no. 2 (1998): 381-406.
167 Coleman, "Our Weirdness."

later generations of activists. While excluded from official membership in the Situationist International, New York-based activist art group Black Mask nevertheless "absorbed and employed situationist ideas loosely, as sympathetic to their existing attempt to connect cultural production to social movements."[168] This group cross-pollinated with the Yippies, even joining them to protest a Museum of Modern Art survey of Dada and Surrealism that was heavily criticized for the way it institutionalized and muted the groups' explicit politicization. As Gavin Grindon writes, "Black Mask's reception of dada and surrealism took place as part of a wider reiteration of avant-garde terms, texts and images by a milieu of other related groups such as the Chicago Surrealists, Amsterdam Provos, San Francisco Diggers, Yippies, Situationist International (and Second Situationist International), and King Mob."[169] The Yippies ultimately proved crucial in importing these sensibilities into nascent technological communities: establishing the earliest phone phreaking publication—the *YIPL/TAP* (Youth International Party Line—later renamed Technological American Party)—as a partnership between Yippie founder Abbie Hoffman and phone phreak engineer Alan Fierstein.[170]

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168 Gavin Grindon, "Poetry Written in Gasoline: Black Mask and Up Against the Wall Motherfucker," *Art History* 38:1 (2015): 17, doi: 10.1111/1467-8365.12129.
169 Ibid., 4.
170 Phil Lapsey, *Exploding the Phone* (New York: Grove Press, 2014), 257-258.

Assignment: Monitor the telephone in the suite of Senator Eugene McCarthy at the 1968 Democratic Convention. Agents reported that McCarthy had made a phone call to a "known leftist organization" offering medical help to wounded demonstrators. -Life Magazine study of Army "Intelligence"

In addition to manufacturing Princess telephones, Western Electric makes guided missiles and is a prominent member of the military- industrial complex which so frightened President Eisenhower that he warned against its "acquisition of unwarranted influence" in his farewell address. An examination of Western Electric's defense work shows that the President had ample reason for alarm. Through adept use of a technique called profit pyramiding in the defense industry, Western Electric ran up profits of 31.3 percent on its major missile contracts, while helping the Pentagon accumulate military junk that was never used. -Monopoly, by Joseph C. Goulden

Editors Note: We intend to show, through statements such as the above two, how the Bell System has become anti-human to its customers, employees, and just about everyone else. However, it should be noted that these statements are taken out of context, and do not do justice to the case. The whole story is a lot scarier that just a "profit-gobbler". Its a question of accumulation of power and securing that power. You know, great that people are being monitored, but shit, people are being slaughtered. All in the name of money. And since we give them the money, we are at fault. Stop paying and start yelling. See ya next month, phreeks.

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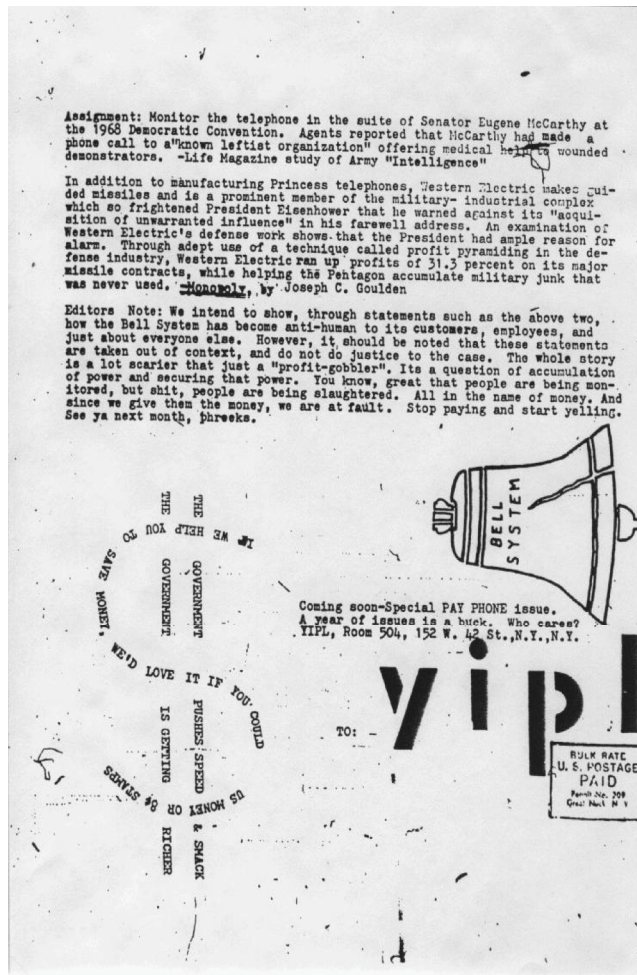PAID
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Fig. 3: Page from YIPL/TAP issue.

Loaded with messily mimeographed imagery reminiscent of Dada publications, the anti-establishment ideas and aesthetics of *YIPL/TAP* would inevitably find their way into more general hacker communities as the phreakish exhortation to explore and subvert phone networks and the hacker imperative to explore and subvert computer systems dovetailed with the eventual computerization of telecommunications networks. The legacy of this philosophy was carried into the hacker underground of the 1980s by subsequent politicized hacking/phreaking publications like *2600* and *Phrack*. These publications were widely circulated on early electronic bulletin board systems (BBSes) as text files again decorated with a similarly Dada-esque textual art, and loaded with a mixture of anti-establishment philosophy, manifestoes, and careful documentation of technological explorations. For both the phreaks and the hackers, something like détournement was their definitive modus operandi—even if the sensibility resulted more from other, more general historical factors than from the narrow lineage traced here.

The avant-garde's sensibility also percolated in another direction, along various trollish strains of participatory art practice, evident in the disposition of the institutional critique artists and also the relational aesthetes. Claire Bishop's book *Artificial Hells* captures this history with incredible lucidity. For Bishop, this evolution marks an alternate current in art history, animated by the politics of spectatorship, which ultimately moved away from an aesthetically-bottomed agonism in favour of an "ethical turn," whereby aesthetic judgments become colonized by what could be understood, following Friedrich Nietzsche, as an ethical logic of "good and evil" rather than an aesthetically evaluative logic of "good and bad."[171] And as Bishop charts it, this crisis of judgment has been preserved into the participatory practices that dominate in the present day— except, we might imagine, in the dubious, anti-democratic antagonistic strategies of some of the trollish artists we consider here. Bishop herself advocates something like "aisthesis"—an aesthetic engagement that does not narrowly demand distance, ethicality, or critical objectivity, but instead aims at a richer aesthetic appreciation involving the identification of the viewer with the experience prompted by the art work.[172] Art becomes something like a safe place, reminiscent of Mouffe's agonistic public: a virtual space where challenging—even immoral— ideas can be aired and gamed out in simulation, where an audience might be exhorted to leave aside the types of deleterious moral judgments they would bring to bear in daily life, in favour of a productive contemplation, a propositional working-through aided by discourse.[173]

We can understand these two divergent sensibilities (of participation and internal critique within the art world; and of an anti-establishment, technocratic anti-art outsiderness that may mark the fulfillment of the avant-garde's desire for art to devolve into a more general sociality, returning to the praxis of life) as laying the dialectical foundations for the critical troll. For with the rise of internet art communities these two tendencies suddenly became realigned: with net.art artists like

171 Just as Bishop castigates contemporary art criticism for seeing everything in an ethical lens, Nietzsche famously castigated the Judeo-Christian society for its movement towards morality and away from the morally-flexible categories of virtue commonplace in early Western civilizations.
172 "Without finding a more nuanced language to address the artistic status of [ethically ambiguous] work, we risk discussing these practices solely in positivist terms, that is, by focusing on demonstrable impact. One of the aims of this book, then, is to emphasize the aesthetic in the sense of aisthesis: an autonomous regime of experience that is not reducible to logic, reason or morality." See: Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 18.
173 Brian Eno captured this sentiment well in his 2015 John Peel lecture. "So one of the things about art is, it offers a safe place for you to have quite extreme and rather dangerous feelings. And the reason you can do that is because you know you can switch it off. So art has a kind of role there as a simulator. It offers you these simulated worlds—a little bit like a plane simulator, you know—the reason you have simulators for learning to fly a 747 is so that you don't crash too many 747s – you can have a crash and get out and laugh." See: "Brian Eno: 'Children learn through play, but adults play through art', BBC John Peel lecture - 2015," *Speakola*, September 27, 2015, http://speakola.com/arts/brian-eno-john-peel-lecture-2015.

0100101110101101.org (Eva and Franco Mattes) exploring hackerish creative techniques locatable outside of the art world proper, but increasingly leveraging these interests to participate in the art world's value and display systems. An early trollish example of this was the duo's release of a computer virus at the 49th Venice Biennale—a benign virus which nevertheless spread from the initial vector of the Slovenian Pavilion, on to the computers of the art world jet set elite, and from there across the globe. *Wired* magazine reports that the artists justified the piece with the security-minded logic of hacker full disclosure practices: "The only goal of a virus is to reproduce. Our goal is to familiarize people with what a computer virus is so they're not so paranoid or hysterical when the next one strikes."[174] And we can see in this the precursor of today's Post-Internet art tendency, which further expanded this willingness to re-enter the institution into a more general willingness to participate in mainstream aesthetics, network platforms, and conversations.

The dovetailing between an internet community which saw itself as somewhat outside the art world proper, while also increasingly recognizing that this outside position could be leveraged for value inside the art world, set the conditions in which the critical troll could thrive. And the form of strategic identity play and détournement invited by the logic of intermediation found online could be seen as providing the toolset and subject position which would make critical trolling a likelihood.

THE CRITICAL TROLL

Wherever it exists, the cornerstone of trolling is the exploitation of Poe's Law: the ability to mask, or at least strongly ambiguate, intention. Where the subcultural troll's deceptive identification is rooted in an ability to create pseudonymous or anonymous online identities, the contemporary art troll typically relies, instead, on an ability to obfuscate intentionality through the uptake of a brand identity, or a variegated performance of self, and the ability to strategically shape and direct the attention of the network which results. In some ways, this could be seen to extend from the artist identity itself, if we consider the artist as a trickster figure, freed from normal conventions and contextualization, and thus boasting a productivity difficult, if not

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174 Reena Jana, "Want to See Some Really Sick Art?" *Wired*, June 27, 2001, www.wired.com/2001/06/want-to-see-some-really-sick-art.

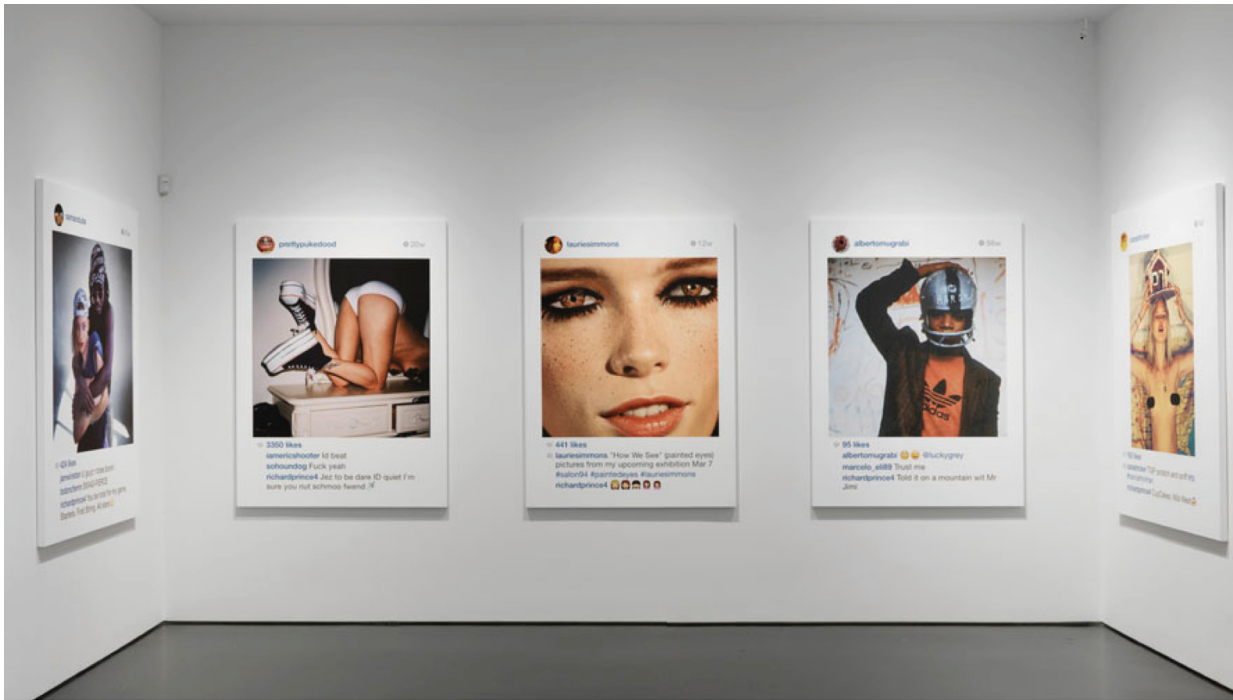impossible, to lock down with any certainty.[175]

Fig. 4: Installation view of Richard Prince's New Portraits. (Image from Gagosian Gallery, photo by Rob McKeever.)

The works of many appropriation artists, such as Richard Prince, could be understood retroactively in this way. Prince made a career out of re-photographing commercial images and presenting them as art within elite commercial outposts like Gagosian Gallery, often infuriating—and litigating—the authors of the "referenced" works in the process.[176] His continuation of this practice on Instagram has now earned him explicit condemnation as a "troll" from one contemporary critic,[177] even as the work itself has been celebrated as a "genius troll" by another.[178] In these works, Prince inserts his voice by commenting on the photographs before screen capturing them for his own use. The use of the term "troll" to describe his work hit enough of a nerve that Prince mused over it in a blog posting—completely missing (or perhaps

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175 This aligns with Artist Placement Group member John Latham's understanding of the artist as an "incidental person," as explored later in this thesis.

176 Brian Boucher, "Richard Prince Wins Major Victory in Landmark Copyright Suit," *Art in America*, April 25, 2013, www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/richard-prince-wins-major-victory-in-landmark-copyright-suit.

177 Paddy Johnson, "Richard Prince Sucks," *Artnet*, October 21, 2014, https://news.artnet.com/market/richard-prince-sucks-136358.

178 "How easy are these pictures to make? Prince scrolls or trolls Instagram feeds. For hours. He's a real wizard of his tastes; as honed to his needs as Humbert Humbert was to where Lolita was in the house," writes an admiring Jerry Saltz. See: Jerry Saltz, "Richard Prince's Instagram Paintings are Genius Trolling," *Vulture*, September 23, 2014, www.vulture.com/2014/09/richard-prince-instagram-pervert-troll-genius.html.

trollishly excising) any reference to the term's established meaning within internet culture:

> "Trolling."
>
> If you say so.
>
> I never thought about it that way. The word has been used to describe part of the process of making my new portraits. I guess so. It's not like I'm on the back of a boat throwing out chum.
>
> "We're going to need a bigger boat."[179]

Prince's trollish engagement and evasive response eschews the critical productivities that this play between self and artistically-branded self invites. And yet the criticism that has been leveraged at Prince for his refusal to critically explore this potential demonstrates something unique to trolling in the contemporary art context: for the artist to claim the commercial and attentional rewards of their activities, they must maintain their name, or brand, as a stable node. Prince's Instagram series was derided as "sexist," possessive of "thin offerings for anyone who is in possession of a brain," but unlike an anonymously operating troll, these condemnations stick to his identity, affecting his reputation (if not his market value).[180] Thus the subcultural trollish proclivity to disappear when the lulz are had and done is precluded within the art context. The accused troll must remain responsive in public—or decline a response, and accept any potential loss of reputation—or else forego their future ability to profit off their established name.

Yet even where the artist's reputation is at stake, the contemporary artist's name as "personal brand" is somewhat dislocatable from something like an "authentic" identity.[181] The contemporary artist has embraced the idea that their persona is a sort of interface—one that can itself be modulated to artistic, and possibly critical, effect. By destabilizing this identity, and challenging the contained, dividuated artistic identity, artists can reach beyond an art system of

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179 "Bird Talk," Richard Prince, www.richardprince.com/birdtalk.

180 And indeed, Prince could not really be seen as a "critical" troll; in the bigger picture Prince's works aren't posed to do much more than enable navel-gazing about art world inside baseball. While one could imagine the works fitting neatly into a hacker trollishness by opening a portal to some sort of clever engagement with the legal system, or critique of the ownership of cultural production (something akin to Richard Stallman's détournement of copyright law to guarantee free access to software), Prince has largely declined to pursue such avenues, instead maintaining his activities exclusively in relation to increasingly-rarefied art world conceptualism.

181 This language of the "brand" is dominant in contemporary art, for the way it allows an articulation and performance of the self. "The artist is a brand, and the brand supersedes the art," writes celebrity critic Jerry Saltz, as quoted in an exploration of the brand in contemporary art. See: Brian Droitcour, "Young Incorporated Artists," *Art in America*, April 1, 2014, www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/young-incorporated-artists.

simple image distribution and imply other systems of value and interpretive communities. We can see the historical precedence of this in artists who recognized that self-presentation could constitute a direct site of productivity: artists like Chris Burden, who used a series of paid-for television advertisements to contextualize his name alongside canonical artists like Pablo Picasso; or Cindy Sherman, who continually re-represents herself in her photographic self-portraiture. This became explicitly about brand identity in the 1980s and 1990s, with artist collectives like OCEAN EARTH and Bernadette Corporation using the space created by their branded intermediation to creative effect. Elsewhere, artists explored pseudonymity and detachment, establishing multi-use artistic personas like Reena Spauldings and Luther Blissett. This tendency towards pseudonymity became increasingly prevalent with the rise of the net.art community in the 1990s, as an interest in technologically-mediated creation extended naturally into the adoption of hacker handles and collective denominators by the likes of Jodi, 0100101110101101.org, and many others. However, a quick consultation of art historical records and secondary auction results suggests that while this strategy may facilitate interest within niche conversations and discourses, it has been ultimately unsuited to claiming the more sweeping, populist, and myriad artistic rewards offered to those who remain singularly identifiable with their legal denominative.

Fig. 5: Exhibition view, AIDS-3D's Absolute Vitality Inc. (Image from Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler)

The critical trolls distinguish themselves by eschewing such obfuscation: instead, they embrace what seems like transparency head-on, even as they instrumentalize their projected, seemingly authentic identity in the service of broader productive fictions. It is this dual transparency / opacity which so facilitates the contemporary artist's trollishness—a maintenance that ensures Poe's Law is always in effect. And it also guarantees that they remain stable hangars for value: as immutable entities who can accrue value across multiple sites. It is precisely this ambiguous identification that allows these artists to both simultaneously enjoy the privileges of being insiders in an elite art world, and also maintain an interminable critical detachment and interest in the outside that might allow them to deflect easy understandings, subvert attempts to gauge their intentionality, and flip the terms of their narrative on short notice—in short, to troll.

One of the earliest Post-Internet groups to do this was AIDS-3D, an artist duo composed of Daniel Keller and Nik Kosmas, active between the late 2000s and 2013. Their final project welded the ready-made acquisition of a shell company—seasoned and commodified as a ready-made tax-evading vehicle—onto a sculptural commodity, a network assemblage they called

Absolute Vitality Inc. (the name of the purchased shell company).[182] The work effectively closes the loop between the acquisition of an art object and the subsequent step taken by many collectors to move it into the shady freeport, "duty free" art havens that have been brought to public attention in writings by artist / theorist Hito Steyerl and a handful of mainstream media reports.[183] Attention to this formation gained renewed interest in the wake of 2016's Panama Papers leaks, as it became a matter of public record that art was a site not only suited to creative attempts at autonomous aesthetic explorations, but also market manipulations capable of delivering libertarian economic autonomy to collectors.[184] Prefiguring these releases by three years, AIDS-3D announced their network sculpture's intention to enable such activity upfront: "The main purpose of the corporation is to employ a multi-pronged strategy of diversified balanced growth to offer collectors a low-beta (risk), high-alpha (reward) conceptual investment vehicle unmitigated by oppressive EU tax schemes, and the fickle tastes of the art market. Aids-3d thus creates a semantic, legal and conceptual framework for an amorphous and growing mixed media sculpture."[185] Where the ambiguity lies is in the ultimate productivity of these intentions: what does it succeed in saying about the market? The collector? Or art itself? The collector becomes both a subject of the network-as-artwork, and is also explicitly implicated in a process they might otherwise partake in unreflectively, or at least secretively, at the advice of a financial advisor; as business as usual.

Yet while AIDS-3D adopts strategies from outside the art world, they were ultimately, in this case at least, playing a game of insider baseball: engaged in a form of institutional critique that was ambiguous enough to skirt the sorts of knee jerk reactions that might greet more overt critics, yet one which for its ambiguousness may ultimately have seen the effectiveness of its critique diminished. In this way, the work could be understood as a brilliant demonstration of an already-existing mechanism to a broader public—enhancing transparency in a hackerish way by

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182 "The main purpose of the corporation is to employ a multi-pronged strategy of diversified balanced growth to offer collectors a low-beta (risk), high-alpha (reward) conceptual investment vehicle unmitigated by oppressive EU tax schemes, and the fickle tastes of the art market. Aids-3d thus creates a semantic, legal and conceptual framework for an amorphous and growing mixed media sculpture." See: "Absolute Vitality Inc.," *Neuer Aachener Kunstverein*, www.neueraachenerkunstverein.de/content/2012/ausstellungen/aids-3d-dan-kellernik-kosmas/?lang=en.

183 Hito Steyerl, "Duty-Free Art," *e-flux*, March 2015, www.e-flux.com/journal/duty-free-art.

184 Eileen Kinsella, "New Delaware Freeport Offers New York Collectors an Art Tax Haven Close to Home," *Artnet*, October 16, 2015, https://news.artnet.com/market/delaware-freeport-tax-haven-341366.

185 "The main purpose of the corporation is to employ a multi-pronged strategy of diversified balanced growth to offer collectors a low-beta (risk), high-alpha (reward) conceptual investment vehicle unmitigated by oppressive EU tax schemes, and the fickle tastes of the art market. Aids-3d thus creates a semantic, legal and conceptual framework for an amorphous and growing mixed media sculpture." See: "Absolute Vitality Inc."

neatly packaging and demonstrating an existent mechanism, deploying what security researchers call a "proof of concept." But the work's mimetic nature, conceptual abstraction, and exhibitory delimitation to art's institutional display system and existing audience base meant, in many ways, that it was like preaching to the converted, or at most cultivating a pessimistic skepticism without proposing much in the way of a solution.

In this sense, we could understand the work as echoing the pitfalls faced by the institutional critique tendency which proliferated in late 20th century contemporary art. This movement was characterized by the work of artists like Andrea Fraser and Hans Haacke, who (often with a lulzy logic of spectacle) sought to demonstrate the ideologies and power structures at work in the art world to its audiences. Fraser, who is often credited with coining the term, summed up the strategy's legacy with startling concision: "Now, when we need it the most, institutional critique is dead, victim of its success or failure, swallowed up by the institution it stood against."[186] Institutional critique always had the problem of being either too radical and thus untenably self-alienating (Haacke's reproach of museum trustees saw him effectively barred from exhibiting in North America for two decades), or too easily co-optable as value-added by the very art world it sought to challenge—and thus flattened out, or added to an asset portfolio of an infinitely mutable contemporary art frame just aching to demonstrate itself as responsive, to point to its tolerance, its democratic nature, its ability to renovate. Tellingly, AIDS-3D itself succumbed to a self-perceived impotence regarding this internally-situated position. Shortly after Absolute Vitality, Inc.'s introduction into the art world, AIDS-3D disbanded, and Nik Kosmas pointed directly at this problem when later describing his decision to withdraw from artistic production:

> At some point, I had the feeling that I couldn't explain what I was doing, with conviction, to a stranger. The subjective nature of making "work" in a field where basically anything goes: critical or non-critical, aesthetic or conceptual, material or dematerialized—as long as you want to call it "art". I felt suffocated by potentials and missed having a method for evaluating options. Possibly I was also suffering from some kind of imposter complex, where I felt like anyone at any time would notice that everything we were doing made no sense. These deep-seated anxieties probably reflect the fact that art is no longer very relevant.

186 From the critique of institutions to an institution of critique, by A. Fraser in Artforum 44(1).

…

> [Absolute Vitality] was supposed to go around creating value through abstract financial art-world machinations. Anyways, I became totally disillusioned that this was interesting at all. It felt very easy and parasitic and had unclear metrics for success.[187]

The development of a more externally trollish critical methodology might be intelligible as a response to this malaise Kosmas captures so well. Importantly, where the critical troll diverges from the institutional critic more than anything else is in their willingness to turn the productive critical autonomy granted to the artist away from the art world itself, and on to communities outside of its domain. Rather than singlemindedly critiquing the established narratives and institutions of art, the critical troll examines cultural institutions both inside and outside of art, turning—or perhaps détourning—art's own permissiveness and attentional strategies away from an exclusive reliance on or obsession with art's own discursive and institutional delivery systems.

Daniel Keller, Kosmas' erstwhile partner in AIDS-3D, advanced one of the most interesting early examples of this trollish strategy. In 2013 he collaborated with artist Simon Denny to host TEDxVaduz, an officially-licensed TED event held at the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein. The project gathered a range of critical artists and theorists, including Emily Segal, who we will discuss more below, to explore issues pertaining to ecological design and global finance. As Denny and Keller later described it:

> [The project had] an aim to produce an event that would be in direct dialogue with TED, the strongest brand for spreading ideas on the planet and a format-defining benchmark for tech-economy communication forms like pitches and conference talks. TEDxVaduz was conceived as a vehicle for the reconsideration of some of the cultural implications of TED at a moment when strong voices from within the tech community like Balaji Srinivasan, Larry Page and Tim Draper are calling for different forms of separate societies run by Silicon Valley. For this outing TED is then nominally and geographically tied to a country that has the highest GDP per person in the world, is one of the few countries with more registered companies than citizens and has been referred to at times

187 "Q/A Nik Kosmas," *Spike Art* 43 (Spring 2015), www.spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/qa-nik-kosmas.
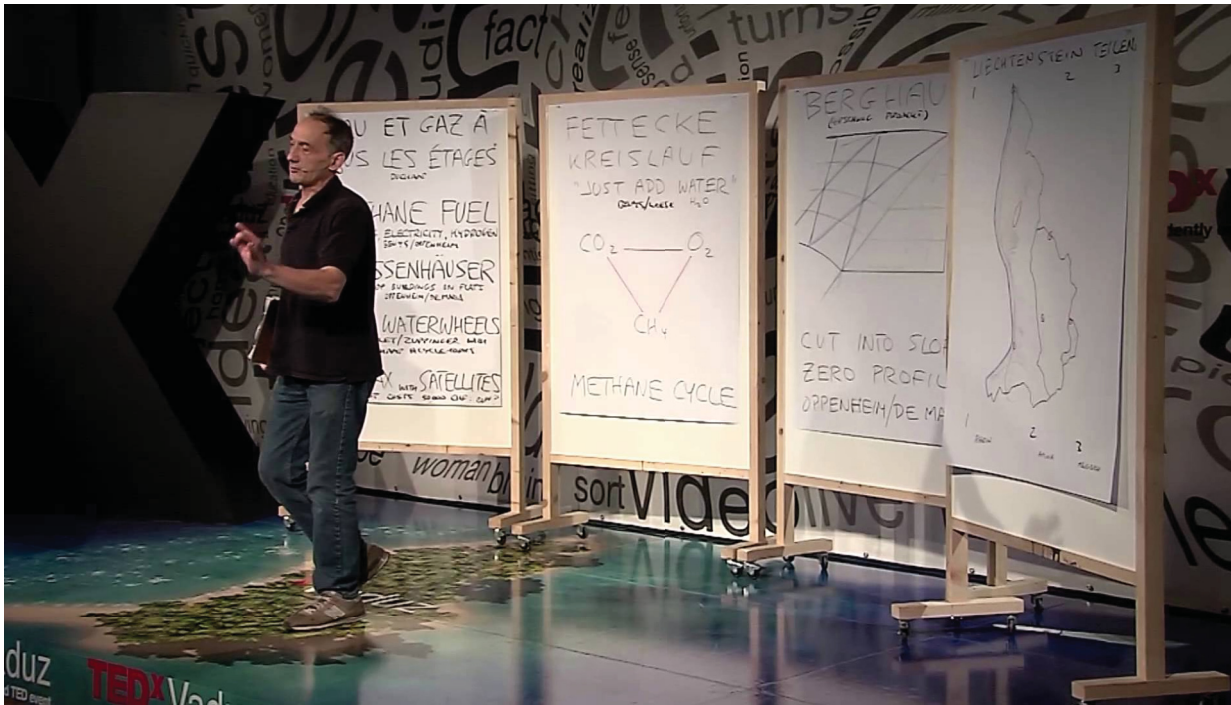
as a tax haven.[188]

While the conference was hosted in a museum, and aspects of the project were ultimately rendered into commodified sculptural form and displayed in an Italian commercial art gallery, in its initial instantiation TEDxVaduz had no overt reliance on art world distribution or display mechanisms, nor was it narrowly targeted at an art world audience. Instead, TED's own massive distribution and publicity network—scattered across websites and video sharing platforms—was détourned for the dissemination of ideas and artistic proposals related to transforming the sorts of capital-intensive processes Lichtenstein itself is known for sheltering. Perhaps most fascinatingly, artist Peter Fend used his time slot to frantically demonstrate how Lichtenstein might systematically deploy "four technologies ... based on high art" to become entirely energy-independent and ecologically sustainable.[189]

While the project ultimately did not rally the same attention as some of TED's network offerings (despite being published by the official TEDx YouTube channel, Fend's video, for instance, has just over 1,000 views at the time of writing), it nevertheless prefigured a strategy that has

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188 "TEDxVaduz—Radically Open," TEDxVaduz, http://www.tedxvaduz.com.
189 "Four technologies for Liechtenstein based on high art: Peter Fend at TEDxVaduz," YouTube,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=frmvX1VI6FE.

become crucial to the critical troll: like the Post-Internet artist, the critical troll demonstrates a readiness to adopt the aesthetic forms and dissemination platforms of non-art communities. With TEDxVaduz, in addition to a nesting under TED's own brand, this most explicitly took the form of a stage and set design that merged contemporary art aesthetics with the default aesthetics of other TED-type events. Yet unlike the Post-Internet artist, these aesthetic forms are not appropriated merely for their novelty-value or taste-negating symbolism in relation to art history. Instead, they are strategically deployed "in the wild," as it were: as shibboleths capable of commanding authority and announcing insiderness to communities outside of the art world bubble.

> A variety of theories and terms have been bandied about over the past decade to describe this and related tendencies. The internet art community of the 2000s, for instance, was fond of "default"—the idea that network and software environments should not be broken open and retooled (as had been the aesthetic strategy dominant among the earliest net artists), but could instead be adopted themselves as a form of readymade, whereupon their affordances could be creatively explored in a more general process of artistic creation. This sensibility is best conveyed by a much-disseminated html table published in a 2007 blog post by Guthrie Lonergan.[190] Conflating "hacking" aesthetics with "Net.Art 1.0" and "default" aesthetics with "??? [ultimately: internet art and Post-Internet, I would argue]," one divide is particularly telling: "[Hacking:] Empowering The People by subverting The Man's power. [Defaults:] Being and critiquing The People by using the tools made by The Man." Where net.art "addresses its own medium; it deals with the specific conditions the internet offers," as net.art theorist Tilman Baumgärtel has it,[191] internet art largely declined to address the internet as its mode of production, rather accepting it instead as its *basic condition* and using that condition to explore less recursive agendas—and ultimately advancing from that position back into art worlds outside of the internet, in the move that has come to be known as Post-Internet. Later artist collective / trend forecasting group K-Hole would propose the term "normcore" to describe a similar strategy oriented to mainstream cultural participation more generally: the adoption of subculturally default aesthetic sensibilities to enhance legibility and

190 "Hacking vrs. defaults," *Guthrie Lonergan*, January 10, 2007, http://guthguth.blogspot.ca/2007/01/hacking-defaults-hacking-nintendo.html.
191 As quoted in Knuttila, "Trolling Aesthetics."

belongingness not only in relation to software environments, but also more specific cultural communities. While normcore was not necessarily proposed as a politicized *strategy*, so much as a description of a possible orientation, or a "youth mode," observable among existent communities, communications theorists like Kate Crawford have nonetheless proposed it as such.

> OWS [Occupy Wall Street] hosted "civilians" workshops, where participants were encouraged to "dress to blend" and "look like tourists" as a way to avoid police attention. While OWS protesters were dressing like tourists to evade a specific threat, normcore is meant to be more dispersed and continuous: being permanently inconspicuous and opting for a comfortable sameness. What was a temporary tactic for Occupy has become an ongoing strategy for K-Hole.[192]

Normcore is further notable for our purposes since K-Hole themselves—and the modality of the term's proposition in particular—can be seen as exemplary of the type of critical trolling strategies the term itself enables. We will consider this further below, but first, it is further worth noting the compatibility between concepts like default and normcore and another prominent— this time explicitly politicized—theoretical touchstone referenced by a number of artists operating in the Post-Internet and critical trolling milieu: "accelerationism." In its simplest formulation, accelerationism can be understood as the exhortation to not explicitly resist abstract forces of capitalist hegemony, but instead to embrace its logics full-on—to accelerate and match its speed—but to attempt to détourne these logics, bringing to bear all of their plentiful resources and affordances to the ends of a more socially-, or at least economically-, just world.[193] While it is difficult to understand the strategies of critical trolls with reference to such grandiose aims, the homology of logics warrants consideration. And it prompts a consideration of whether such artistic practices could be understood as vested with the potential to participate in the principled, strategic forms of activist politics and economics that the accelerationists themselves advocate.

The effectiveness and potential of this ambiguous, fence-straddling positionality is most apparent in a handful of thoroughly trollish artist projects that have appeared since 2013. These projects

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192 Kate Crawford, "The Anxieties of Big Data," *The New Inquiry,* May 30, 2014, http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-anxieties-of-big-data.

193 And indeed, though an embrace of abstracting, capitalist logics are paramount to accelerationism's success, many of its theorists insist that the ultimate end—and also, more controversially, the process itself—is one Marx himself would approve of. See: Williams and Srnicek, "ACCELERATE MANIFESETO."

align in their reliance on something like Poe's Law: the ability to create a constant uncertainty as to authorial intent, and to use the resultant mis-recognition as the catalyst for an emergent creative product. As will become clear, these projects are all also unique for their embroilment in communities outside of the art world proper, and their willingness to use this externality as a later source of value within the art world itself—akin to the way subcultural trolls might "raid" a Myspace memorial page, posting antagonistic material about the deceased, and screencapping the responses of their friends and family to be later re-posted, laughed about, and ultimately instantiated as memes on troll forums like 4chan.[194] Or, to take a more activist example, the way Anonymous hacktivists might gain access to an ISIS Twitter account, change all its images to pro-LGBT banners, tweet support for gay marriage, and similarly distribute screen captures of the page for the lulzy edification not only of their own constituents, but also the distributed readership of content farms and news sites anxious to drive clicks.[195]

Brad Troemel

One of the neatest examples of this approach is apparent in the ongoing practice of artist Brad Troemel. Describing himself as an "empathetic disruptor," Troemel bears many of the features of a classic internet troll.[196] Troemel has adopted the identity of an Etsy shopkeeper, first in creating a store called BSTJ and subsequently one called UV Production House, a collaboration with artist Josh Citarella. Doing so immediately naturalizes him among a default group of web "produsers," and opens the gateway to the production and dissemination of objects that otherwise challenge (and potentially critique) the nature of the platform, the identity of its use rbase, and the conditions of web commerce more generally, while also challenging the limits of the art object itself. The objects he traffics are absurd to the max, none more emblematically so than his *DORITOSLOCOS taco MASTER LOCKED shut (Key Sold Separately),* a (as the name suggests) Doritos branded taco, padlocked shut. Retailing for $35.00, the work arrives to a buyer/collector in a vacuum-sealed bag—kept at the brink of entropy for who knows how long.[197] Within his

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194 See, for instance, "An Hero."
195 See, for instance: Riordan Lee, "Anonymous hacks ISIS's Twitter, makes it as fabulously gay as humanly possible," Techly, June 16, 2016, http://www.techly.com.au/2016/06/16/anonymous-hacks-isis-twitter-makes-it-as-fabulously-gay-as-humanly-possible.
196 Dylan Kerr, "Brad Troemel on 'the Supreme Confidence Game' and the Phenomenon of the Celebrity-Turned-Artist," *Artspace*, February 20, 2015, http://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/meet_the_artist/brad-troemel-interview-52624.
197 When I ordered a less-perishable item from Troemel's Etsy shop in 2011, the artist generously included one of the masterlocked tacos as a bonus in the same shipment. Unfortunately (or perhaps beautifully), a German

immediate circle of art world peers, the conceit of Troemel's identity adoption is clear, but for an outside audience it might be more confusing. His store's "about" section reads like a cross between an artist statement and a small entrepreneur's authentic appeal to clientele, nevertheless arriving at a bizarrely uncanny description of contemporary market-oriented art making:

> I take pride in providing some of the most significantly organic, inscrutably rare, and immeasurably valuable products on Etsy. There is often only a single example of the things I make. Sometimes I re-use the same components and try to find different combinations that may be even more locally made or ergonomic. So when one thing is purchased sometimes other auctions have to end because they all contained a common variable. When that happens there are technically 0 of those other products in existence. They're only ideas. Can you imagine how rare something is that doesn't even exist? I wish I could sell those products because they would be worth way more than the ones that do exist. I think they call that a "Catch 22".

customs agent carelessly slashed through the artwork's vaccum-sealed sheath during an inspection, and by the time it arrived at my apartment the entire shipment had devolved into something both visually and olfactorily resemblant of human vomit. Troemel declined to refund the shipment, stating that this type of experience was very much in keeping with the spirit of the project.

The description more tellingly concludes with a link to thejogging.tumblr.com, Troemel's at-the-time ongoing—but no less murky—collectivist art project. The profile picture for the Etsy profile is a close up of Troemel's face, demonically lit with an inhuman stare borne of white contact lenses. But otherwise, everything remains perfectly default and unconfigured; even Troemel's participation on Etsy is in many ways sincere (he is, after all, genuinely selling objects—and at the time of writing BSTJ has made 228 sales).[198] Yet of course, the objects put forward are radically different from those typically on offer by the site, and this ambiguity, as we will see, is precisely what enables the project's success.

Owing to its strangeness, Troemel's shop has been the subject of a vast array of clickbait articles. While many of these identify him explicitly as an artist[199]—including an incisive commentary on *Gawker* by the troll-obsessed Adrian Chen[200]—others simply describe it as a "the greatest Etsy shop ever," one full of "bizarrely beautiful creations" nowhere described as art.[201] One of the most interesting outcomes of this ambiguity is the work's inculcation deep into niche audiences. The taco described above, for instance, found its way into a post on *Holy Taco,* which seems to be a combination content aggregator / taco enthusiast website.[202] "You get this as much as I do, I'm sure," writes the author. And really, I'm not so sure.

Yet even when tech culture website *The Daily Dot* reached out to Troemel to exposit the artistic component of the shop, Troemel doubled down on his inherently productive trollish identity. "We had to ask: is this some kind of joke? In return, the artist offered us another creation—in the form of his responses. We're not ones to tamper with works of art, so we've left his answers uncut below," writes author Lauren Orsini.[203] Troemel's responses are truly strange, a seeming mashup of filter-dodging e-commerce advice spam email text with fanfic-style directorial notes and narrative asides, loaded with footnotes and hyperlinks. As the "interview" progresses, he

198 "BSTJ's Etsy Shop," Etsy, https://www.etsy.com/shop/BSTJ?ref=l2-shopheader-name.
199 Lauren Rae Orsini, "Owner of Internet's weirdest store also gives Internet's weirdest interviews," *The Daily Dot*, October 11, 2012, www.dailydot.com/culture/brad-troemel-bstj-etsy-artist-interview.
200 Adrian Chen, "Taco Locks and Other Delights from the Internet's Weirdest Etsy Store," *Gawker*, July 2, 2012, http://gawker.com/5922870/taco-locks-and-other-delights-from-the-internets-weirdest-etsy-store.
201 Rachel Freeman, "Doritos Locos Taco Padlock Highlights the Greatest Etsy Shop Ever," *Thrillist*, December 11, 2013, https://www.thrillist.com/eat/nation/weird-food-art-from-etsy-padlocked-doritos-locos-taco-and-more-thrillist-nation.
202 Ian Fortey, "5 Foods I Don't Want to Eat from Etsy," *Holy Taco*, March 21, 2013, www.holytaco.com/5-foods-i-don't-want-to-eat-from-etsy.
203 Orsini, "Internet's weirdest store."

becomes seemingly more candid, excepting the boldfaced lies:

> DD: How does your shop make a statement about Etsy and the general state of selling handmade items online?

> [Brad Troemel]: "We agreed not to talk about this, Lauren. [Daily Dot and Troemel agents speak with each other tersely. Interviewer Lauren Orsini gets out of seat and puts hands on hips defiant: "OK, have it your way. I'll be your journalistic poodle, your Nancy Drew—NO! I refuse. Mr. Troemel, I'm here to ask the tough questions and you're not getting out of this. Now I'll ask one more time, How does your shop make a statement about Etsy and the general nation state of selling handmade items online?" [Troemel sips organic whiskey on the rocks, looks up in recognition of virtue] Ha, OK, I had a feeling it would come to this. I knew you weren't going to resist a juicy little caboose of gossip like this. **The truth is I'm a paid employee of Etsy. I'm what's called a confidential brand operative. My BSTJ project has been paid for by Etsy as a viral marketing campaign.** Their intention was for Post internet artists to look more positively at their service. [Crowd erupts in cheers and hysterical shrieks of happiness. People hold up signs saying things like "Thanks for the honesty!" "I ALWAYS <3'd Etsy!" "Allegiance/Love/Force (A.L.F. For Brad)". Much prosperity befalls participants] This is my first conceptual marketing work for a company and I'm really pleased with how it's turned [slow motion] out so far."*

> ***Editor's note: An Etsy spokesperson denied this claim.** [emphasis added].

Yet Troemel also maintains a defiant identity in relation to the broader art world: these objects are free to circulate without any of the intermediaries or middling institutions of the art world. They are distributed by mail, displayed online, and sold directly out of his studio. And as described briefly above, even the collectibility of the work is trollish for its perishability. In many ways the ambiguity generated alone constitutes a sort of trollish sensibility, at least in relation to the institutional art world and its rubrics of value. As Lee Knuttila has written, "On one hand, these works take aim at formalism itself. Troemel's deployment of marketing lingo ("quite limited," "key sold separately," or "BUY IT ON ETSY NOW") undermines the false importance and ostensible artwork status conferred upon the banal objects of the everyday

featured in the works."[204]

But the productivity of the work is more interesting to consider beyond its inherent institutional criticality. Troemel has succeeded in making both himself and the concerns of his peers visible to mass audiences beyond the confines of the art world—to people who might never visit a museum. Chen's *Gawker* article alone, for instance, has 92,000 views at the time of writing, and each artwork has succeeded in generating niche discussion and dissemination relating to its particularities. Advancedaquarist.com, for instance, posted a link to UV Production House's "aquarium backpack" product, with the text: "Someone, please explain this product to us … The Etsy description is very spartan and vague, so we aren't even sure if this made-to-order product is legitimate or simply an artistic statement."[205]

Troemel's ability to circulate art into disparate audiences through the trojan horse of retail capitalism is far from revolutionary, but for the critical observer the projects demonstrate a remarkable variety of components. The work wonders at the utility of bringing obscurantist, poetic art-like experiences to casual shoppers browsing Etsy (theorized by Troemel himself as the "accidental audience"[206]). It produces media objects that are traceable through the labyrinthine networks of content farms that are currently eating up spare attentional economic resources—constituting this network itself as a sort of relational artwork. Finally, Troemel's work functions as a proof of concept for the way extra-institutional platforms can be used to traffic art and ideas through alternative economies. Its relationship to audiences is always ambiguous, but it is in no ways ethically exploitative in the manner of much subcultural trolling: while Poe's Law may be in full effect upon an initial encounter, with a little digging an interested stumbler-upon can quickly discover that Troemel's core positioning is inside the art world, and perhaps send him a message. And from there they might perhaps—maybe—find a portal, even a voice, into a discourse previously closed to them by the cold passivity of so much institutionalized art: an invitation to something like Mouffe's agonistic public. For if a locked Doritos taco can be art, and it can be sold on Etsy, what else might it be?

204 Knuttila, "Trolling Aesthetics," 183.
205 Leonard Ho, "A $500 Aquarium Backpack?!" *Advanced Aquarist*, March 4, 2016, www.advancedaquarist.com/blog/a-500-aquarium-backpack.
206 Brad Troemel, "The Accidental Audience," *The New Inquiry*, March 14, 2013, http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-accidental-audience.

Amalia Ulman

A murkier, but more pointedly critical, adoption of the troll position is observable in a 2014 work by Amalia Ulman, titled *Excellences and Perfections.* In this performance, Ulman retooled her own identity through the Instagram social media platform with such care and craftiness that it proved difficult to recognize or unpack even for the artist's immediate peers. The performance begins with the artist's (real) move to Los Angeles. In a tight narrative arc, she constructs herself to the mediated audience as a bright-eyed young woman, enamoured by the newfound sunny, super-posi world around her, and the lifestyle opportunities it seemed to present. At first showing herself shopping, enjoying brunch, hitting the gym, and buying artisinal coffee with friends, things eventually take a turn when Ulman seemingly decides to get breast augmentation, and document the experience. Her followers, including other artists, began to express concern, and eventually, things appear to get very dark indeed, with Ulman presenting a very public breakdown, including short videos of herself crying in the dark. The narrative resolves on a seemingly optimistic note, with Ulman drawing strength from a newfound love, posting photos of a mysterious new man in her bed.
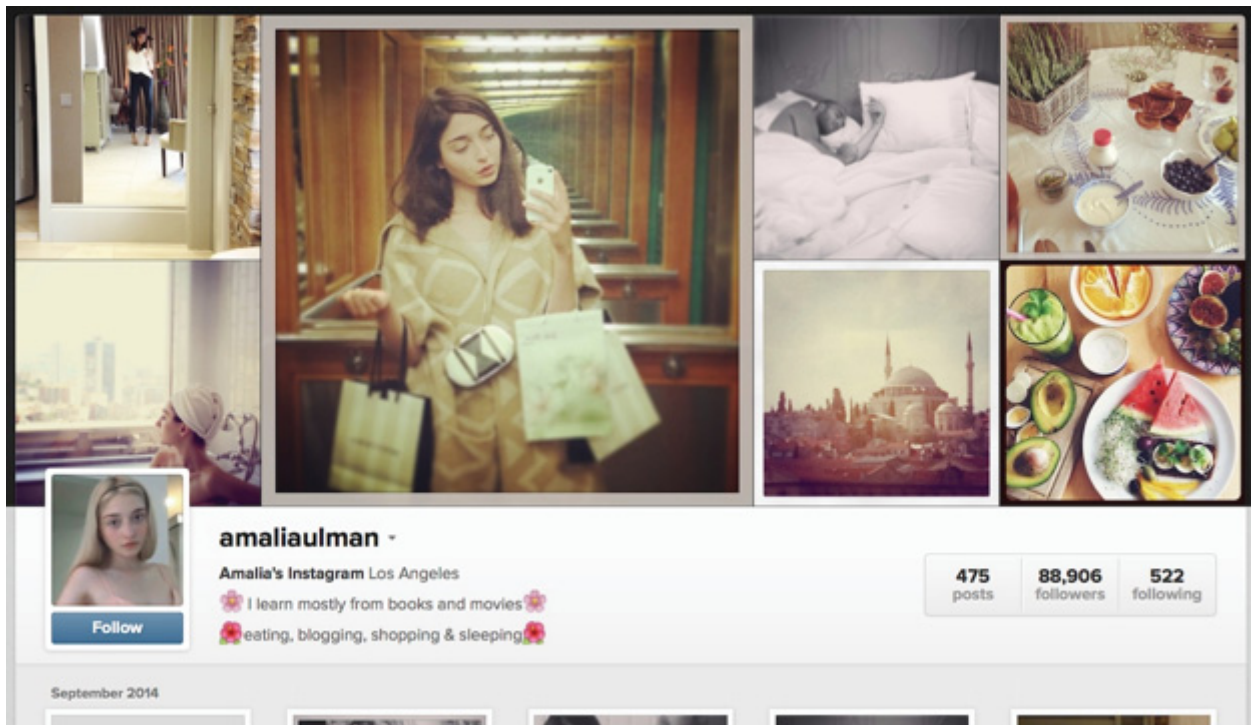

Fig. 8: Screen capture of Amalia Ulman's *Excellences and Perfections* as preserved by Rhizome.

In retrospect, it is clear that Ulman signified the beginning and conclusion of the performance with posts derived from the default language of theatricality. The first post in the series bears the words "Part 1" on a black background, while the caption reads "Excellences and Perfections"— the piece's ultimate title. And yet the intentions were nowhere explicitly announced; Ulman's performance proceeded in classic troll form, with her first adopting a covert identity within a public community, seasoning the identity as legitimate through believable activities,[207] ambiguously acting in ways designed to provoke reaction, harvesting resources from the reactions, and ultimately revealing the troll to both her peers and broader audiences, whereupon she was able to traffic the fruits of her trollish labour into a variety of attentional and commercial venues. However, due to the way in which Instagram functions, any casual observer—drawn into the performance midway by clicking on a hashtag, or seeing it appear suddenly in their feed with the markers of performance having slid by unseen in the course of a day (or even, for some, a minute) of absence—would not be primed with an awareness of this context. While the project is now lauded by art's institutional mainstream—it appeared in summary form at the Tate Modern in early 2016—Ulman's production aligned so seamlessly with the normalized use of the platform that its sincerity was questioned even by those close to her. "People started hating me," Ulman told a journalist from *The Telegraph*. "Some gallery I was showing with freaked out and was like, 'You have to stop doing this, because people don't take you seriously anymore.' Suddenly I was this dumb b—— because I was showing my ass in pictures."[208]

In Ulman's work the lulz were conspicuously absent in their usual form. Yet for a certain community they were plentiful. "Women understood the performance much faster than men," explains Ulman. "They were like, 'We get it—and it's very funny.'"[209] Ulman's work derived humour from a recognition that the work was simultaneously highly constructed and, to a certain audience, invisible. By decoding the aesthetic logic of the "default" female Instagram user, Ulman was able to adopt it for herself in a manner so effective that its authenticity was difficult

207 As Michael Connor wrote, "These images are excessive, but also believable—because they're so familiar. For many privileged users, social media is a way of selling one's lifestyle, of building one's brand. And Ulman went to great lengths to replicate the narrative conventions of these privileged feeds, from her use of captions and hashtags (#simple, #cutegasm), to the pace and timing of uploads, to the discerning inclusion of "authentic" intimate or emotional content (a photo of a lover or a moment of despair)." See: Michael Connor, "First Look: Amalia Ulman—Excellences and Perfections," *Rhizome*, October 20, 2014, http://rhizome.org/editorial/2014/oct/20/first-look-amalia-ulmanexcellences-perfections.
208 Alastair Sooke, "Is this the first Instagram masterpiece?" *The Telegraph*, January 18, 2016, www.telegraph.co.uk/photography/what-to-see/is-this-the-first-instagram-masterpiece.
209 Ibid.

to challenge. Yet precisely by being so convincing, Ulman was able to demonstrate that what we take to be a convincing display of contemporary femininity relies on a similar process of encoding, on the performance of a script that many may not even recognize that they are reading from. Those who understood the script, those who could read Ulman's images as an interpretation of that script, were able to critically appreciate it for what it was.
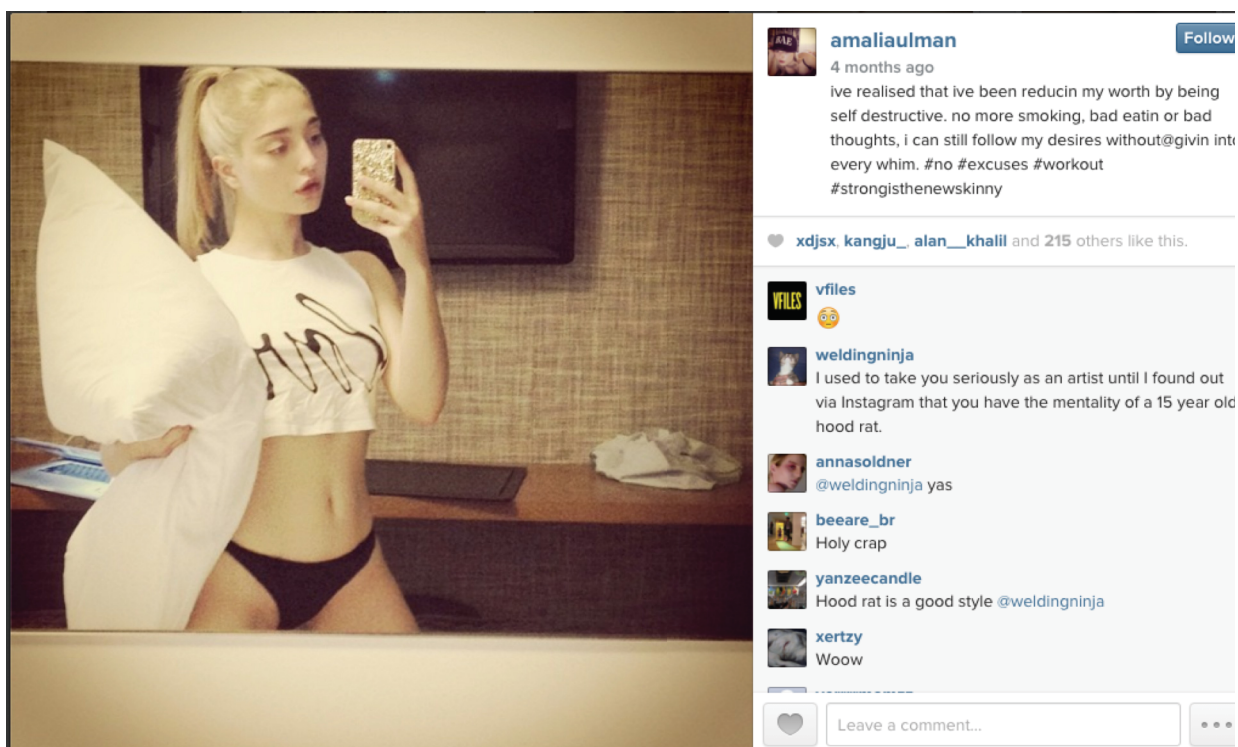

Fig. 9: Screen capture of Amalia Ulman's *Excellences and Perfections* as it appeared on Instagram.

Yet for audiences such as myself, something lulzy was going on in another direction. Throughout the duration of the performance Ulman was a frequent topic of conversation among a constellation of peers. Much debate and speculation centred around whether it was, in fact, a performance, and if it was, whether it was an interesting one, and either way, whether she had actually gotten the breast augmentation, and if she had, whether that made it more interesting or not, and so on. And all the while, a steadily mounting swathe of non-art world watchers were rolled into the project, friending Ulman through her hashtags and following along. Increasingly, it became difficult to tell which users commenting on her pictures with support or laughter were "insiders" in the project, lending it credence even as they winked at Ulman with a knowing eye, and which users represented a genuinely accidental audience—individuals drawn into it and applauding Ulman's activities unknowingly, for its agreement with their own entrenched beliefs

about what constitutes femininity, and how a young woman should perform herself on Instagram. As Ulman reiterated to *Dazed Magazine*: "most of the people who got it were women. Men were like, 'what? I don't get it, she just looks hot!'."[210]

We could imagine the work as constituting a public from the get-go, then: a group of women able to revel in the fact that "girls can troll too," writes Aria Dean, who goes on to describe the whole thing as a "gentle deception."[211] And it's hard to imagine a more fitting term. Yet only a sad type of lulz emerges from imagining default Instagram users encountering the performance—scrolling past a picture of Ulman after a decadent shopping expedition, tapping the heart button to like it, and scrolling on to another user, aesthetically homologous to Ulman's presentation, yet motivated by a sincerity itself rendered absurd when framed adjacently to Ulman's knowing stance. And it was this spirit that seemed to most motivate the project. "It's more than a satire," explained Ulman. "I wanted to prove that femininity is a construction, and not something biological or inherent to any woman. … The joke was admitting how much work goes into being a woman and how being a woman is not a natural thing. It's something you learn."[212] The word *prove* is important here—for it connects Ulman's position not to the explicit oppositional, antagonistic stance of the traditional critic, but rather to the proof of concept-based, latent critical methodology of the hacker troll. For these practitioners, criticality emerges naturally by gathering together problematic material and presenting it to the world in a packaged, easy-to-grasp-but-difficult-to-ignore form. In this sense, Ulman's performance could be seen as a contained, reactive tool—or lure—analogous to cDc's back orifice Windows hacking software bundle. And contained in such a way, Ulman's construction has succeeded in transversing a variety of online networks and communities outside of the art world, albeit for reasons very different than those observable with Troemel's Etsy objects. Where the circulation of those objects occurred while the ambiguity of the troll was still *in effect*, so to say—as an extension of their ambiguity—for its default nature Ulman's work was conspicuously invisible to most audiences for its duration. It was only when the work was concluded, and announced as artifice, that a broader community of interpreters were able to appreciate it as lulzy, or as critical, as they chose. Upon its completion, art world discursive platforms like Rhizome and institutions like the

210 Trey Taylor, "Amalia Ulman: Meme Come True," *Dazed Magazine*, Spring 2015 issue,
    http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/23700/1/amalia-ulman-meme-come-true
211 Dean, "Gentle Deception."
212 Sooke, "Instagram masterpiece."

Tate Modern set to work tabulating the project's implications, and rendering it into more-and-more easily disseminable forms.[213] The trollish novelty and formal share-ability of Ulman's piece (Instagram posts can be effortlessly embedded on other websites) ensured that it found audiences in a variety of venues unthinkable for most conceptually-sophisticated contemporary art performance works. For instance, *LAD Bible,* a UK-based site aimed at college-age males, replicated the project in a post, complete with quotations from Ulman describing the project's intentions, and invited its users to comment.[214] Perhaps tellingly, the responses were dismissive, disparaging, or headscratching, and all wholly unworthy of reproduction here. And according to Aria Dean, this response matched more general responses:

> Some followers begged her to return to the hot blond persona of Episode 2, leaving comments like "i miss you" on her posts, while others lambasted her for her trickery (a response that is hard to separate from a gendered expectation of female transparency. see: "lady in the streets but a freak in the bed"). This public upset revealed a strangely conservative attitude within and outside of the art world. There is a curious disconnect between the response to Amalia's fabricated online persona and responses to male artists like Parker Ito or Brad Troemel whose work is also partially embodied in performative online presences. With Amalia, people did not take kindly to a reminder that things are not always as they seem — or that girls can troll too.[215]

For Dean, these further responses are as much a part of the work as Ulman's own narrow presentations. Ulman's work is not inherently critical, but instead packages cultural machinations for response, ultimately offering each neatly packaged component to critical exposition. As Dean eloquently summarizes: "Her performance and theoretical work is about proving something that can then be turned into 'art.' The embedded ironic critique is not the goal as it might be in the work of some of her young counterparts, but rather an incidental which comes about due to the internally contradictory nature of the subject."[216]

Ultimately, the trollishness of Ulman's project is unmistakable, but also conceptually complex.

213 Rhizome, for its part, set to work developing methods to archive the project, in case of the eventual demise of instagram, change in its policies, or backward-incompatible technical advancements to the internet itself. See: Connor, "Excellences and Perfections."
214 "This Girl's Instagram Isn't All it Seems and Has Tricked Thousands of Followers," *The LADbible*, January 21, 2016, www.theladbible.com/articles/this-girl-s-instagram-isn-t-how-it-seems-210116.
215 Dean, "Gentle Deception."
216 Ibid.

Ulman could be understood as trolling her unwitting Instagram followers—enabling herself and others who were in on the performance to laugh at their deception. But it could also be understood as instrumentalizing them towards a broader pedagogic end: setting them up as followers primed for the ultimate revelation of identity construction that Ulman had in mind. Next there was the possibility of laughing at the complexity of cultured taste: imagining how many of those who, like the gallerist Ulman describes above, were so quick to decry her activities as "basic," would make an inevitable about face when the performative, conceptual elements of the project came to light, and it found its ultimate celebration in venues like the Tate Modern. And finally, we could imagine the project enabling a lulzing at art's rarefied value systems and reward mechanisms more generally: a laughter afforded even to those readers of *LAD Bible,* stupefied by the idea that such an activity could be rewarded with some of the highest honours of the art world.

It is difficult to say whether Ulman's work strained the discursive boundaries of contemporary art, in a manner capable of advancing something like an "agonistic public," or whether the ultimate productivity was to more narrowly enable Ulman herself a victory in relation to the novelty-obsessed forms-race which contemporary artists find themselves embroiled. But nevertheless, like Troemel, Ulman succeeded in showing that the logic of the troll is an effective strategy for drawing new audiences into contact with art objects inherently embedded with a critical reflexivity, and also for deriving attentional benefits for the artist from the spectacle of such a contact.

Simon Denny

While Ulman and Troemel's trollishness has largely emerged from their adoption of particular platforms and the default communities these platforms involve, other artists can be understood as adopting entire cultural logics to proceed in a trollish form of engagement. Simon Denny, for instance, demonstrates an acute awareness of the way even a most general ambiguity can enable a trollish productivity. For Denny, this ambiguity largely takes the form of an assumed political agnosticism, a careful refusal to align himself with any explicit program or agenda, even as he takes on highly politicized subject matter in his work. "I've been called a left-wing activist sympathizer and a sellout neoliberal on the same day in public," Denny told me in a conversation

published by *Mousse* in 2015.[217] This ambiguity is largely enabled by Denny's uptake of language and production styles not typical to the contemporary art world. Denny describes himself as a "manager" as often as he does an artist, and sees himself as a "fan" of the technological cultures he takes as subject matter.[218] Meanwhile, he insists on equating artistic creativity with "radical disruption," a buzzy term appropriated from the technocratic cultures he frequently examines.[219] The language and value systems of his subject matter become the epistemology by which he evaluates his own artistic productivity—a gesture of appropriation that never destabilizes his own identity as artist Simon Denny, but greatly obfuscates any attempts to determine his underlying intentions or values. "He's one of the few artists who's figured out a way to put these things together in a way that both celebrates the cultures that produce them, and yet by bringing them into an art context allows us to celebrate and scrutinize them differently and see them for what they are," says Peter Eeley, who curated a Denny micro-retrospective at MoMA PS1 in 2015.[220] Doing so tacitly functions as a form of institutional critique: titling the PS1 exhibition *The Innovator's Dilemma,* for instance, is less of a comment on the tech business world from where the term is borrowed (the name of a hugely influential book by Clayton Christensen) and more a diagnosis of a contemporary art world that has come to resemble that world unwittingly, and must face its own dilemma of criticality.

The identification goes both ways: not only is artistic practice identified with radical disruption, but radical disruption is also identified with artistic creation. In doing so Denny occupies an artistic position typical of his peers: closing the typical loop of mainstream cultural co-option by proactively, and willingly, embracing its own co-opting, bulldozing cultural logic. Previous generations of artists might decry such an activity as "selling out," but this reading is complicated by the fact that Denny is not only making his own work legible to these communities, but also making work *about* these communities: exposing their workings to themselves and outside audiences, and suggesting where their own value might be extracted,

217 Simon Denny and Matt Goerzen, "Critical Trolling," *Mousse Magazine* 48 (2015), http://moussemagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=1287.

218 "I am a fan of the culture of entrepreneurship. An artist is also a business. Many of the principles of work and the world that I see in this community seem very current and relevant. The values associated with entrepreneurship seem very close to me. Highly motivated people with high-risk precarious ideas mixed with efficiency and metrics. What could be more beautiful?" Simon Denny in conversation with 032C, "Artist SIMON DENNY Is Shaping Berlin's Disruptive Startup Culture," *032c.com,* January 31, 2014, http://032c.com/2014/artist-simon-denny-is-shaping-berlins-disruptive-startup-culture.

219 Simon Denny, "D is for disrupt: send us your most risky, rebellious art," *The Guardian*, December 1, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/dec/01/d-is-for-disrupt-send-us-your-most-risky-rebellious-art.

220 See: "Artist Simon Denny on 'Brilliant Ideas,'" YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfCB7dc5bQo.

redirected, and redeployed, in the same gesture.[221] This enables something like a strategic "cognitive mapping." And while we must be wary of equating publicity with politics, the ability to analyse, recognize, and visualize a territory is essential to discovering possibilities of critical action.[222]

Fig. 10: *Installation view of Simon Denny's* DLD 2012 Conference REDUX Rerun. *(Image from Petzel Gallery).*

Denny's work frequently takes as its trollish target the privileged members of technological communities, or perhaps even the cultures of technological industries in general. Projects have focused on the tech world elite of the DLD conference; TEDtalks; Berlin's start-up ecosystem; Samsung (and, by implication, Apple Computers); Kim Dotcom; and even the secretive technologically-reliant intelligence alliance known as the Five Eyes. A healthy amount of duplicity and strategic omission—or perhaps more accurately, social engineering (to borrow the hacker term)—is often involved in ensuring the modes of access necessary to proceed with this work. And Denny's more pointed trollishness comes in the way he strives to represent these

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221 "To Denny the tech sector values can almost mirror those in the art world, in terms of risk taking and finding a creative approach. And the two camps may be more closely aligned in mindset than previous capitalists and creatives," writes Nadja Sayej. See: Nadja Sayej, "Simon Denny Turned the World's Most Overused Tech Term into Art," *The Daily Good*, April 8, 2015, https://www.good.is/articles/simon-denny-turned-the-worlds-most-overused-tech-term-into-art.

222 These ideas form the bulk of a number of books, like: James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

communities not only to art audiences and general publics, but also in venues where the representations are reflected back on the communities studied. His fluency with the cultures that he engages allows him to mount exhibitions that are as legible—perhaps even more legible—to members of these cultures as they are to those in the art world; what reads as self-evident to those in the tech world appears as formal novelty in the art world; what looks bizarre to the tech community reads as traditional in the art world. In the elision, Denny is able to speak to each public on its own terms, and perhaps enable criticisms directed at each particular domain to speak to the other.

This potential is most evident in *DLD 2012 Conference REDUX,* which takes as both its subject and display venue the DLD conference that gathers members of the tech elite—from Facebook's Cheryl Sandberg to PayPal's Peter Thiel—together in Munich every year for a three day course of panel discussions and social mixers. Invited to mount an exhibition at the conference's 2013 edition, Denny meticulously reviewed every presentation from the previous edition to pull out quotes representative of the default rhetorics on display. He then slotted these quotations into 89 graphic panels, one for each presentation, designed to represent the stage sets of the 2012 conference in the skeueomorphic aesthetic vernacular that was then dominant across smartphone user interfaces and corporate websites. Mounted in chronological order on metal bars arranged like a slaughterhouse corral or airport security zone, members of a culture that rarely looks back could traverse an installation full of reminders of the last year's most egregious, profound, banal, paradoxical, and absurd quotations, pulled out and isolated from the amped up ambience of the overhyped speeches that spawned them. "I'm interested in celebrating ideas so big that you can catch a buzz off them," reads a quotation from "Techno Optimist" Jason Silva. "Access is more powerful than ownership," reads another, further along the timeline, from Airbnb co-founder Brian Chesky.

Whether these objects possess a criticality that was apparent to conference-goers, or merely latent in a way that might seem obvious to an observer such as myself, is difficult to say. Carson Salter writes, "His selection was read differently from various perspectives: conference attendees from the tech industry reportedly viewed the timeline as a celebration, where artist viewers saw an acerbic critique."[223] And certainly, this possibility points to what can be understood as both a

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223 Carson Salter, "Enterprise Artworks, the Artist-Consultant, and Contemporary Attitudes of Ambivalence" (S.M. thesis, MIT, 2013), 68.

weakness and a strength of the critical trolling positionality. Unlike the typical critic who announces their criticality upfront, and can thus be dismissed or circumscribed proactively by an oppositional entity who hasn't even considered their proposition, or the typical troll who ambiguates enough to get in the door before gloriously pulling the rug out from under the occupants (and fostering little but ill will—at least from those standing on the rug—in the doing), the critical troll often seeks an intermediary ground where the door is opened, but what happens inside respects the autonomy of the occupants to come to their own conclusion about just what it is the guest has brought to the party. In her analysis of a phenomenon very related to the trollish disposition I study here in demographic constitution, if not also in roundabout effect, Elvia Wilk charts the emergence of the "artist-in-consultance" who works closely with corporate interests, attempting to "split the difference" between art world and corporate affordances in terms of the source and outcome of their value generation. Whether embedded directly in companies as residents, positioned explicitly as consultants (as in the case of K-Hole, who we will consider next), or exhibiting within a host organization, as in Denny's DLD exhibition, Wilk suggests this artist position primarily serves the interests of the communities they seek to engender their ideas within:

> It is in any company's interest to invest what amounts to a pittance in its grand scheme to support a working artist's incisive critical projects—even outright damning ones. Ostensibly critical perspectives are typically exactly what the company is paying for. This mirrors the hiring of a management consultant, whose job it is to tell a company how naughty it's been, and simply by being there provides the remedy for the naughtiness. Both types of consultant [the management consultant and the artist consultant] are elite outsiders with special knowledge, a knowledge that must be perpetually kept under wraps in order to stay special. Thus both types of consultant spend most of their time engaged in the act of justifying their presence, honing their critical tools but never actually using them to dismantle anything. Spending so much time honing your tools that you forget what you created them for—is this not the very definition of bureaucracy?[224]

And while Wilk may well be right in a vast majority of cases, it remains worthy of considering

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224 Elvia Wilk, "The Artist-in-Consultance: Welcome to the New Management," *e-flux*, 2016, www.e-flux.com/journal/the-artist-in-consultance-welcome-to-the-new-management.

whether a mere reframing of these activities as duplicitly "trollish" rather than as sheepishly "participatory" might itself be capable of flipping their productivity. For the troll's participation can be a feigned, temporal one—ultimately destined for a reveal that seeks to dominate the eventual narrative terms of what that participation entailed, to perform a lulzy lesson regarding the community the troll ostensibly participates with. As we will see with K-Hole, the ultimate struggle to determine the perception of "who trolled who" in these seemingly participatory engagements might itself constitute a sort of critical, agonistic power struggle.

And other cases of artistic trolling are from the get-go less potentially complicit. While Denny's DLD show demonstrated a graciousness to its hosts that ultimately relied on their own willingness to engage critically for any self-criticality to be performed (akin to the old dilemma of leading a horse to water), some of his more recent engagements have displayed a less immediately civil disposition. Invited to represent his home country of New Zealand at the 2015 Venice Biennale, Denny determined that his exhibition would unpack the country's involvement in the Five Eyes Intelligence Alliance, the existence of which had come to the forefront of public conversation in the wake of Edward Snowden's 2013 leaking of sensitive US intelligence documents. Consulting with muckraking New Zealand journalist Nicky Hager—a relationship that immediately incited backlash from conservative news outlets and financial backers[225]— Denny instrumentalized the biennale as a platform to publicly map and situate New Zealand's involvement in these intelligence communities using a range of artistic and exhibitory strategies. While the simple gesture of using a state-funded exhibition to publicly air that state's dirty secrets itself constitutes a trollish gesture (not least of all for the delicate internal communications maneuvering required to ensure that the exhibition could proceed), the most trollish aspect of the project rested in Denny's instrumentalization of a former NSA graphic designer.

225 Natalie Akoorie, "Dirty Politics author in arts funding row," *NZ Herald*, October 30, 2014, www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11350261.

Fig. 11: Installation view of Simon Denny's *Secret Power* at the Marciana Library in Venice, Italy. (Image by Nick Ash).

One of the most fascinating aspects of Snowden's leaks was the visual culture it laid bare: the classified information was not presented as text alone, but came in the form of PowerPoint slides and PDF documents, populated with imagery and aesthetic decisions that led many in the design community to speculate on the broader internal culture of these intelligence worlds. When Denny's collaborator David Bennewith discovered a Twitter post suggesting that works displayed in the portfolio of a self-professed former NSA designer named David Darchicourt bore a striking similarity to content found in the slides, Denny decided to reach out to Darchicourt through various layers of intermediation, with the intent of having him produce original works for the exhibition. Framing the commission as for a "New Zealand history project,"[226] Bennewith invited Darchicourt to illustrate a touristic map of New Zealand and cartoon representations of the nation's unique tuatara lizard in his distinctive graphic style—a style unmistakably reminiscent of the cartoons featured in graphical logos for operations and tools found in Snowden's leaked documents. This imagery would be isolated and enlarged in Denny's presentation. Ultimately, just as the touristic map Darchicourt designed incongruously

226 Robert Leonard, "Simon Denny: Too Much Information," in *Simon Denny: Secret Power* (Berlin: Mousse Publishing, 2015), http://robertleonard.org/simon-denny-too-much-information.

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featured the location of New Zealand's most sensitive intelligence facilities in and among the more typical tourist haunts, Darchicourt's own identity and graphical language became an unmistakeable anchor point in Denny's broader exhibition, a touchstone by which some of the anonymous materials in the Snowden leaks were attachable to a single, scrutable human subject.[227]

While the exhibition made this link only tacitly by displaying Darchicourt's commissioned work alongside homologous imagery found in the Snowden leaks, a further trollish act of intermediation ultimately made the link explicit. In the lead-up to the exhibition, Denny reached out to the *Guardian*—an outlet that had brokered much of the original Snowden-leaked material into the public domain—and invited them to privately tour the exhibition. Recognizing the unmistakeable connection between Darchicourt's work and the NSA's graphical language, journalist Charlotte Higgins called Darchicourt for comment before the exhibition—and the true nature of his framing within it—opened to public view. Probing the connections that Denny established by way of visual proximity, Higgins discovered "that [Darchicourt] had not personally designed any of the Snowden PowerPoint slides per se, but confirmed to the Guardian that he had, for example, designed the logo used internally at the NSA for the programme Poison Nut … a cartoon squirrel recoiling in horror from a peanut emblazoned with a skull and crossbones ... featured in [Denny's] show."[228] The *Guardian* piece frames Denny as "the artist who did reverse espionage on the NSA," strongly suggesting that the work, in all its duplicity, functioned as a sort of symbolic challenge to state secrecy—even as it performed and demonstrated the ethical murkiness of unilateral action rooted in strategized informational discrepancies: a methodology shared, in this instance, by Denny's use of Darchicourt's public biography to map the NSA's private workings, and the states' legally grey uptake of private communications to map its citizens' private lives.

The exhibition was mounted in Venice's Marciana Library. Darchicourt's map of New Zealand

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227 As Denny told journalist Ryan Gallagher, "The images contain different kinds of information than the text. They give us a hand in understanding more about the culture — the office culture, let's say — behind the surveillance programs, and therefore the kinds of interests and values of the people working on them. They are an insight into the environment the programs are maintained and proliferated within," Ryan Gallagher, "Inside the Secret World of NSA Art," *The Intercept*, June 11, 2015, https://theintercept.com/2015/06/11/secret-power-nsa-darchicourt-art-denny.

228 Charlotte Higgins, "Simon Denny, the artist who did reverse espionage on the NSA," *The Guardian*, May 5, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/05/edward-snowden-nsa-art-venice-biennale-reverse-espionage.

stood just feet away from Fra Mauro's famous *Mappa Mundi,* and his illustrations of programs like Poison Nut were presided over by symbolic depictions of Venetian power on the library's walls and ceilings, painted by Renaissance masters such as Titian and Tintoretto. Thus, while the exhibition situates Darchicourt within the tradition of historic artists who have worked in the service of powerful states, the show ultimately points to the role played by optics, symbolism, and representation in facilitating the exercise of *Secret Power* (the exhibition's title). And the duplicitous, trollish methodologies evinced by all parties involved make a strong case for the way such strategic representations of self and other constitute real power. Nevertheless, the explicitly critical upshot of the exhibition is difficult to measure. Undoubtedly the exhibition, like the DLD one before it, and many of Denny's other projects, functioned as an engaging and information-rich show of cultural logics, aesthetics, and formations that can be difficult to intuit, let alone act against. And if we take seriously the idea that politics requires the ability to visualize, map, or cognate something, then we can see Denny's work as functioning tacitly in the service of a democratic or activist politics that relies on information to inform its strategic deliberations.

Fig. 7: Screen capture of a Five Eyes intelligence document leaked by Edward Snowden, featuring a confirmed David Darchicourt design.

Darchicourt, at least, seems to have been trolled into some sort of reflection regarding his online engagements, and perhaps even his relationship to his former employer. According to Ryan Gallagher from *The Intercept*:

> Darchicourt... says it was "quite a surprise" to learn about how his work was going to be used when he found out about Denny's project and its link to the Snowden revelations, but the irony of the situation was not lost on him.
>
> "I guess that was one of [Denny's] little aims," Darchicourt told *The Intercept*. "To show how he could get my information and use it without my knowledge, the way NSA does."
>
> ...
>
> "It's kind of flattering, but it's also kind of creepy," Darchicourt says, adding that he's now considering deleting some pictures from his online portfolios to prevent them from being used by anyone else in the future. "Anything that has to do with the NSA will be removed; it's old and I don't really identify with that organization anymore."[229]

Yet it remains worth asking: was the NSA itself trolled? Certainly information was made public against their express intentions—and in this sense we could understand Denny's gesture as a sort of symbolic demonstration of the ability for a single individual to stand up and take very public agency over one piece of a monumental narrative otherwise under the exclusive and firm control of one of the most powerful entities in existence. Yet answering the question of this gesture's ultimate political comeuppance is more difficult—just as difficult as it would be to say, with any certainty, whether the more substantive leaks made by Edward Snowden himself, which enabled Denny's actions, have or will ultimately play in the interests of broader political communities or the powerful forces operating at the highest levels of Western hegemonic power. If we can understand the way that an exploitation of Poe's Law can wreak havoc at a personal level in the domain of the trolls—then its application at the level of geopolitical politics is almost paralyzing for its implications and complexity. And as one leaked document, The Art of Deception slide deck, reveals, trollish strategies of identity play and persona management are at work in all levels of warfare and politics.[230] Any determination of these terms of victory or significance is sadly

229 Gallagher, "Secret World of NSA Art."
230 Glenn Greenwald, "How Covert Agents Infiltrate the Internet to Manipulate, Deceive, and Destroy Reputations," *The Intercept*, February 24, 2014, https://theintercept.com/2014/02/24/jtrig-manipulation.

beyond the scope of a paper such as this, or probably any paper, and they constitute themselves perhaps the strongest crisis of a critical project one could articulate. These are questions that have agonized activists for generations, as they struggle to determine whether the master's tools might break the master's house, or whether their uptake towards such an end might only ensure that the tools remain well-oiled—ensure that the master understands where their house is vulnerable, and where it might use a bit of reinforcement before the next real attack.

Yet it nevertheless points to the idea that trolling's productivity can ultimately be attached to its ability to shape narratives, to shape attention on a network. Whether such a narrative is a symbolic or real victory remains something to be determined in distant retrospect.

K-Hole & Emily Segal

More than any of the other "critical trolls" that this paper considers, the activities of brand-consultancy / artist collective K-Hole speaks to the sweeping complexities such a positionality might imply. K-Hole presents itself as a trend forecasting agency composed of Greg Fong, Sean Monahan, Chris Sherron, Emily Segal, and Dena Yago. At its founding, some members worked day jobs in marketing and advertising, some members identified as artists, some did both, and all participated avidly in art world communities. As business magazine *Fast Company* has it, K-Hole is an "alt-consultancy group" that "started as an art project designed to comment on the corporate world. Then, through a series of unexpected developments, it gradually turned into another player in the industry it once provoked."[231]

K-Hole's core product is a series of "trend reports," at once default to the marketing community, and also unmistakably other. They align in their compulsion to identify the new. Yet where a typical, proprietary trend forecaster might seek to identify to marketers new demographics of consumers or new categories of products, K-Hole invests itself primarily in the establishment of new concepts of a type that would at times appear more at home in academic cultural studies departments than marketing seminars[232]. Throughout their trend reports they neologize new

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231 Danielle Sacks, "That's a Total K-Hole Thing to Do," *Fast Company*, May 11, 2015, www.fastcompany.com/3045744/most-creative-people-2015/thats-a-total-k-hole-thing-to-do.

232 Also, unlike the proprietary trend forecasts offered by companies like Trend Watching, JWT Intelligence, and PSFK, these reports are released as free pdfs downloadable from their website. This encoding allows the objects to transverse easily in marketing departments across the West, but also allows K-Hole to embed ideas, concepts, and ideologies native to the contemporary art discourse that might otherwise remain domain specific. The feedback that occurs between these objects, K-Hole, the marketing departments who pay attention to them, and

terms for strategic approaches to lifestyle, consumption, and production. In this way, K-Hole could be seen as embedding the activity of critical theorists into that of marketers, always with a sensibility geared towards the generation of disseminable memes, which have the advantage of being at once propositional, and also pre-packaged as an effective vehicle for vast communication and iteration. And we could see K-Hole's garbing as an "agency" as the vector by which they apply Poe's Law: appearing legible and avid enough in their production to gain access to a broader world of trend forecasters, and yet remaining ultimately interested in using this access to plant more critical—more "disruptive"—seeds.
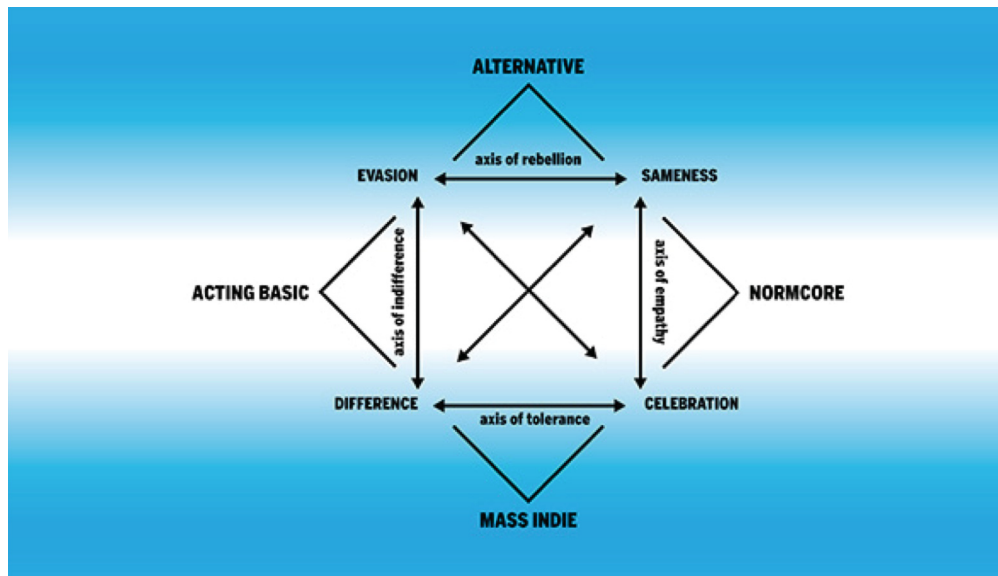
Fig. 8: Screen capture of an illustration found in K-Hole's *YOUTH MODE: a report on freedom* pdf.

Ultimately, K-Hole's fourth report, *YOUTH MODE: A Report on Freedom,* would make good on this ambition, as one of the neologisms it offered—the previously summarized "normcore"—was rapidly taken up even beyond the narrow world of marketing, appearing in diverse mainstream media outlets and disseminated widely across the internet. The report begins by laying out a dilemma as K-Hole sees it:

> The assertion of individuality is a rite of passage, but generational branding strips youth of this agency.
>
> …

broader audiences are particularly complex, enabling a sort of trolling of highly ambiguous duration and effect.

Demography is dead, yet marketers will quietly invent another generation on demand. Clients are desperate to adapt. But to what? Generational linearity is gone. An ageless youth demands emancipation.

…

Youth isn't freedom in any political sense. It's an emancipation from boredom, from prescription, from tradition…. Being in YOUTH MODE grants you the freedom to radically realign your relationship with the outside world.[233]

Interestingly, this trend report itself can understood as not only performing, but also identifying the crisis between complicit participation and detached criticality that has been lurking as subtext throughout this paper. In *YOUTH MODE,* K-Hole proposes an axis of "youth" orientations: between "acting basic," "mass indie," "alternative," and "normcore." Ultimately, while these tendencies can be narrowly understood to align with consumer preferences, their descriptions also enable them to be easily mapped onto more general political dispositions: attempts by "ageless youth" to orient themselves aesthetically, and tacitly politically, with reference to broader hegemonies of power. As K-Hole diagnoses, none of these strategies seem to offer much in the way of escape: while the imperative to be "alternative" and outside the system is ultimately isolating for its evasive approach to difference in the midst of an always-already state of capture, "mass indie" celebrates difference through the acquisition of an ultimately self-deceptive veneer, one premised on the consumption of the pre-packaged trappings of old alterneities. "Acting basic" sees individuals attempt to "confirm their status by showing how disposable the trappings of uniqueness are," but "is not a solution to Mass Indie problems because it's still based on difference. Sameness is not mastered, only approached."[234] Ultimately, the anomy of the individual is only heightened by these strategies in a world where alterity is always isolating and prescribed. Only "normcore," the report seems to suggest, presents a viable alternative, and it is notable for being the one "youth mode" that denies both cynicism and self-disillusionment. Normcore is geared towards seeing and understanding the system in its totalizing form, and rather than attempting to circumvent it, it proposes to double-down, to avidly approach it, to embrace its components and adapt oneself to them wherever possible. And to perhaps, in the doing, even effectively subvert the co-opting logics of other trend-forecasters who rely on the

233 K-Hole, "YOUTH MODE: A Report on Freedom," pdf. http://khole.net/issues/youth-mode, 1-9.
234 Ibid.

appearance of the new to fuel their ability to quickly appropriate it and repackage it back for sale as a seemingly "alternative" product, before it inevitably loses its hotness and cools into "mass-indie" status, ultimately becoming perhaps so banal that it even subsumes to a default "basic" dimension.

YOUTH MODE is difficult to parse for a number of reasons, not least of all for the constant confusion as to whether K-Hole is attempting to describe youth dispositions in relation to consumption choices, broader lifestyle choices, or the categorizing strategies of marketers themselves. Nevertheless, normcore can be understood as an attempt at closing an exploitative loop, wherein previous attempts to resist through individualism have only offered new material for the appropriation and narrative redirection of those already invested with status quo power. And it could be seen as microcosm of a broader condition. As Rory Rowan has put it:

> Normcore is not a term used to describe an existing or imagined trend, but a strategy of embracing sameness in order to address the demands of difference and the stresses it produces for the "youth of today." It is in light of this that K-Hole's articulation of normcore has some bearing on the "post-critical" moment and the nascent return to norms, reflecting a broader shift away from difference towards normativity, albeit in the sphere of pop culture as opposed to critical theory.[235]

While diagnosing the precise terms of this condition would require a broader project, we see this agonism at work in the terms of the Berlin Biennale that were sketched out earlier in this paper. Indeed we can understand the wriggling anxiety of the troll position—the pragmatic adoption of a seeming complicity or sameness by an agent who ultimately intends to subvert, disrupt, or antagonize—as a direct response to the chaffing of a garment that cannot be cast off, and yet stubbornly refuses to change its shape. What to do? K-Hole's response can be understood as analogous to the other trolls studied here: adopting a position with seeming zeal that they might seek to détourn it when given the resources that such a position affords; or more directly trying to gain a position of influence that allows them to represent and reify their own communities to marketers, rather than leaving those processes to excising and de-complexifying co-optive middlemen. And indeed, in the wake of normcore's memetic migration into the mainstream, the

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235 Rory Rowan, "SO NOW!: On Normcore," *e-flux*, 2014, www.e-flux.com/journal/so-now-on-normcore.

resources to influence these processes came to K-Hole en masse.

Normcore's adoption by the mainstream was marked by a profound simplification and flattening that can ultimately be read as a case study of the very forces of cultural digestion that K-Hole took as their subject. Its first vector into the mainstream was in a much-shared *New York Magazine* article by Fiona Duncan, which introduced it as a peculiar fashion trend the writer had seen proliferating among New York hipsters. Curiously, Duncan describes being introduced to the term by Brad Troemel, author of one of the trollish projects described above: "When I texted my friend Brad (an artist whose summer uniform consisted of Adidas barefoot trainers, mesh shorts and plain cotton tees) for his take on the latest urban camouflage, I got an immediate reply: 'lol normcore.'" Duncan goes on to describe a mode of dress that many observers later pointed out was more accurately what K-Hole had described as "acting basic," but the effects were immediate. Even as K-Hole and their supporters denounced this version of the concept,[236] the term was going viral, circulating as a hashtag around Twitter and other social media sites. Before long #normcore was used to describe both high fashion runway tendencies inspired by these forms, and also the newest campaigns by extremely basic clothing companies like the Gap.

Fig. 9: Screen capture of a Gap tweet.

K-Hole and their supporters attempted to reintroduce nuance to the term. Writer Chris Glazek

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236 Thomas Gorton, "Everyone's getting normcore wrong, say its inventors," *Dazed*, March 5, 2014, www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/19118/1/everyones-got-normcore-totally-wrong-say-its-inventors.

called Duncan out on Facebook:

> It doesn't really make sense to identify Normcore as a fashion trend—the point of
> normcore is that you could dress like a NASCAR mascot for a big race and then switch to
> raver-wear for a long druggy night at the club. It's about infinitely flexible, sunny
> appropriation... Acting Basic, a temptation to which the best of us sometimes succumb, is
> snotty and superseded—the bad old days of downtown cool. Normcore is what comes
> after: fresh, pozzy, net-native, living every day as a tourist, unbothered by the politics of
> appropriation—and probably a little naive about politics in general. It really is a profound
> and illuminating concept, but it's sad to think that during its viral moment it's been
> reinterpreted into something pedestrian and regressive.

For her part, Duncan blamed editorial back-and-forth for the elision.[237] But regardless of what
happened, a strange arrangement emerged: as a result of the term's misappropriation into the
mainstream, its built-in neologistic memetic traction, and the very fact of its interpretive gulf,
articles began popping up everywhere—not only attempting to reclaim the term's original
definition, but also to debate and analyze the implications of the phenomenon—both in its
fashion sense, and its originary sense. Normcore's memetic uptake in the fashion world was
staggering, with microgenres like "fauxcore," "avant-normcore," "florcore," proliferating
unchecked, and media outlets from *BuzzFeed* to the *New York Times* offering slideshows and
questionnaires to help readers figure out whether they themselves might be normcore.[238]
Meanwhile, K-Hole was able to use the fanfare to introduce their more critical proposition onto a
mainstream stage. Youth fashion and culture magazine *Dazed* attempted to clear the error with
an article titled "Everyone's getting normcore wrong, say its inventors," which hilariously ends
with a marketing boost: "Want to go the Acting Basic route anyway? Here's a few brands that
will help you complete the look: [list of 3 brands]."[239] *Vice Magazine* declared it the "first
brilliant meme of 2014," and devoted an article to reading K-Hole's ideas on contemporary
consumerism into normcore's fashionable mutation.[240] And ultimately the term succeeded in

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237 "The piece went through many many rounds of drafts, through several editors, each time becoming more and
   more about fashion," wrote Duncan. See: Thomas Gorton, "Everyone's getting normcore wrong, say its
   inventors," *Dazed*, May 5, 2014, http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/19118/1/everyones-got-
   normcore-totally-wrong-say-its-inventors.
238 Maggie Lange, "Sorry We're Delighted You're Still Confused About Normcore," *New York Magazine*, May 12,
   2014, http://nymag.com/thecut/2014/05/sorry-youre-still-confused-about-normcore.html.
239 Gorton, "Getting Normcore Wrong."
240 Chandler Levack, "Normcore is the First Brilliant Meme of 2014," *Vice*, March 19, 2014,

provoking critical discourse about the issues it involved, including the aforementioned exploration of normcore's homology with a broader post-political crisis,[241] the aforementioned connection between normcore and activist strategy,[242] and an exploration of normcore's more general relationship to privilege.[243]

The term's visibility had other direct outcomes, too. K-Hole was quickly profiled by business magazines like *Forbes* and *Fast Company,* earning a designation as "millenial whisperers," and a host of consulting opportunities flooded in from those interested in tapping into some new zeitgeist.[244] K-Hole member Emily Segal leveraged the success into a substantial job offer to work for Genius, an online platform that had recently pivoted away from offering annotated rap lyrics into a much more ambitious project: to act as an overlayer by which the entire content of the web could be annotated, a critical social network that travels with the user as they browse the web, inviting them to comment and leave their thoughts for other users. Segal's job at Genius was clear: she was in charge of the company's branding. And she is adamant that she took her job seriously. Yet in relation to the broader contemporary art environment, her goals were more effusive. As she described to me in a personal correspondence:

> I was trying to do this experiment, where I had this hypothesis that brands were art or are art, and by being the creative director of this brand I would be making a piece of art.
>
> I didn't want to disrupt the company Genius, but more like the landscape of startups, and the idea that if these companies are creating culture, like big parts of culture and consciousness, and having a huge aesthetic effect just by being on people's phones: that if you were able to put more interesting texture, more heterogenous texture into the world it would be good, and that I could be an agent of that.[245]

www.vice.com/en_ca/read/normcore-is-the-first-brilliant-meme-of-2014.

241 Rowan, "On Normcore."

242 Crawford.

243 "…individuals of privilege who adopt Normcore as a 'lifestyle trajectory' can utilize this elaborate theory to justify cherry picking from other "excluded" cultures with impunity." See: Kathleen French, "Much Ado About Normcore," *Medium*, March 21, 2014, https://medium.com/french-amnesty/much-ado-about-normcore-7f9d7e5be01f#.tbilm6u1x.

244 Jessica Contrera, "Brands want the creators of 'normcore' to be their 'millenial whisperers,'" *The Washington Post*, August 21, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2015/08/21/brands-want-the-creators-of-normcore-to-be-their-millennial-whisperers.

245 Emily Segal (artist), in discussion with the author, February 25, 2016.

Fig. 10: Promotional image for Simon Denny and Genius' collaborative party.
(Image from MoMA PS1).

During her time at Genius, Segal retained close connections to the art world—even arranging for the company to co-host an event at MoMA PS1 for the opening of Simon Denny's exhibition, *The Innovator's Dilemma.* However, in the midst of such engagements Segal says she became confused about the ultimate narratives that were being put forward.

> Part of the crisis around it was this question of whether it actually meant anything or means anything for me to be present in these multiple spheres at once, have these varying significances. Thinking that this was somehow cool or transgressive or meaningful, and then being like, wait, is it really? Maybe not. Maybe I just have this job. And I'm doing this art project in my head, and nobody knows.
>
> There's a reason I use the word confusion so many times. It's important. The idea that you lose the terms of the experiment during the experiment itself is very significant.
>
> You can end up knowing even less.[246]

A critical moment came when Denny submitted an image of himself tagging a Genius poster in Berlin as a potential promo pic for the MoMA PS1 collaboration. According to Segal, Genius co-

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246 Ibid.

founder Tom Lehman later hired an artist to convert the image into a painting for his own personal use. "When Founder Tom made a painting I felt like he had beaten me at my own game. I was there to make art, but he made more art art than I ever had," she said. Ultimately, Segal left Genius and is currently in the process of writing a novel about her experiences, all while periodically exhibiting and reading from excerpts of the working material at art galleries and conferences. A working through of the concept of trolling, which she defines in one of these excerpts as "a radical moral uncertainty, matched with ambition and umbralla'd by a certain sense of humor"[247] forms a crucial part of this work—and Segal is particularly interested in what she calls the "long troll," whereby the terms and ultimate conditions of even determining when trolling has occurred is called into question. "We're all trolling. We feel like we're trolling because we're artists. But they feel like they're trolling, because they're the ones actually profiting off this in the way it's intended."[248]

Ultimately, K-Hole and Segal's experiences suggest that the ambiguous uptake of trolling to artistic ends leaves the productivity of the trolling—and indeed the determination of who has been trolled, and to what ends—to broader publics. By ambiguating their position as trend forecasters, in the case of K-Hole, or as an avid brand strategist also interested in ultimately claiming that branding as a personal artwork, in the case of Segal, a determination of what their activities ultimately mean is left to a community of audience-participants able to intelligibilize it in diverse ways, as they please. And as the agonistic struggles to own the narratives at work demonstrate, this process can be understood as laying the groundwork for the emergence of one of Mouffe's agonistic publics: a community formed around an ambiguous artistic gesture, agonistically picking apart and attempting to determine who they are and who they want to be in so attempting to establish its meaning: participating in a contest whereby there are no clear winners, but only an ongoing process of seeing which participants can extract value and where. Finally, the formation of such a public is a process whereby a revelation of who is truly in power, and on what terms, might be elucidated.

FEEDING THE TROLLS?

This paper has considered multiple rubrics of value by which we might understand the

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247 Quotation comes from Segal's work *Novel Leak #2,* installed as part of Philippe Thomas with interventions by Bernadette Corporation | DIS | Emily Segal, at Project Native Informant, June 1 to July 9, 2016.
248 Emily Segal (artist), in discussion with the author, February 25, 2016.

productivity of artists' uptaking of troll-like methodologies: They can perform an expansionist function, hailing audiences outside of the limited domain of contemporary art and asking them to consider a strange object or performance and its significance; They can act as a sort of social vulnerability testing, probing the exploitability of powerful cultural formations and acting on the vulnerabilities discovered—carving out symbolic (albeit perhaps narrowly deployable) pockets of agency, modelling them for the use of others, and demonstrating the infrastructural workings of these formations in the doing (echoing what Keller Easterling has called extrastatecraft); And finally, they can facilitate a risk hedging for the artists who use them—offering them the ability to operate somewhere between sincerity and irony, with a protective knowing wink that liberates them to not only pursue methodologies that may be duplicitous, but to also potentially receive rewards for the fruits of these methodologies in multiple domains both in and outside of the art world: in media attentional economies, art institutions, art markets, corporate consulting opportunities, and more. And in exchange for these benefits, the artist must remain attached to a relatively fixed identity, thus remaining accessible and response-able in a way that might mitigate the worst risks of subcultural internet trolls, as discernible nodes around which critical discourses can gather and flow.

In these ways, we could understand the troll artist as facilitating what Chantal Mouffe has described as "agonistic politics." They use their trollish lures to draw different communities, or at least their mediated expressions, into contact with one another, helping to establish agonistic publics grounded in the troll's activity—publics which potentially span the communities they imply and more rarefied contemporary art discourses. Yet what happens next marks a large question mark. Where hacker activist trolls instrumentalize their trollish activities to draw attention to sites that require political intervention, activism, or regulation (issues like corporate neglect and malfeasance, government transparency, police misconduct, religious intolerance, and multiple forms of abuse and discrimination), other trolls seem willing to exploit social vulnerabilities wherever they are discoverable, to personally-edifying, narrowly lulzy ends—not caring if the rhetorics they employ in the doing reproduce ongoing systems of oppression, or if the communities they act within are less likely to learn some cynical lesson from their activity, and more likely to merely suffer.

The stakes for artist trolls are at once similar and different. For art's unique status as a sort of "safe place" for experimentation—its ability to deflect social responsibility by taking refuge in

the "mere" aesthetic, or the agency-deferring effects of aisthesis—transforms the activities that adopt its mantle into something already at a remove from the more immanent questions of general social reality. However, elsewhere art world participants insist that the domain can perform serious political functions. At least since the modernist avant-garde, Western artists and theorists have been convinced that artists might play crucial roles in transforming the subjectivity and political agency of their audiences, and prefiguring new modes—both collectivist and individualist—of being in the world.

One of the most widely raised objections to the milieu in which the critical troll operates is in their adoption of mainstream sensibilities and corporate aesthetics: their willingness to be "normcore," or "default." And a crucial question hinges on whether this adoption is in the service of détourning these cultural products towards more radical political ends: analogous, in some ways, to the question of whether these adoptions can be rightly seen as "accelerationist"— or indeed, whether the idea that such an acceleration might be able to match speeds with and redirect the hegemony it desires to condemn is itself even viable.[249] In this way, such positioning could be understood as akin to the old revolutionary question of vanguardism vs. entryism: whether it is better to attempt to pioneer and prefigure a new revolutionary subject or group, acting outside of existing logics, or better to join an existing entity and convert its values and membership to one's own cause from within. And yet, in relation to each there remains the question: who, exactly, is expected to convert, and to what?

While contemporary art has all the trappings of an ideology, it can be difficult to pin down exactly what values and commitments that ideology entails. For its vast permissiveness, it seems safest to suggest that at a minimum, it advocates its own existence. In doing so, it would presumably advocate conditions of sustainability for those individuals who define their activities with reference to it: artists, critics, collectors, academics, institutional workers, consultants, curators, writers, theorists, and some of its audiences. As Claire Bishop suggests, contemporary art can be understood as primarily oriented towards facilitating "participation": with this participation, in turn, being increasingly valued as a social good—as an end-in-itself—by states and markets. But this is not the type of participation that Bishop has in mind. As the editors of *The Participatory Condition,* an anthology considering the peculiar features of participatory

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249 Accelerationism has been much critiqued for the fact that it risks contributing to and advancing the very system it takes aim at. See, for instance: Simon O'Sullivan, "The Missing Subject of Accelerationism," *Mute*, September 12, 2014, www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/missing-subject-accelerationism.

rhetoric at work today, put it:

> While participation is at times equated with the possibility of inner or outer change, its transformational value is not a given. Claire Bishop contends that participatory [art] works operate as platforms through which antagonistic relations ought to unfold. Without antagonism, the participatory aesthetic loses its political potential—its capacity to generate new forms and, in so doing, question the social status quo. Antagonism is the means through which "the vicissitudes of collaborative authorship and spectatorship" and the merger of participation with cultural industries and spectacle can be defeated.[250]

For Bishop, participation entails a politicization—but for this politicization to serve general publics it needs to retain the sorts of complex, conflictual engagements that critical trolls take as their area of activity. As Mouffe suggests, art's permissiveness allows it to function as an ideal site of such agonistic politics: a relatively stable ground whereby opposing viewpoints can come into conflict free from the most bitter and dangerous aspects of conflict typical in other political domains. Yet this detached permissiveness also runs the risk that art and the activities it frames lack any real ability to affect cultural domains outside of its auspices. Art's mere existence can be seen as a distraction from, or alibi for problems perpetuated elsewhere by its key financial supporters. This can be observed in microcosm in the phenomenon described by Elvia Wilk as the "artist-in-consultance," who she suggests acts only as a sort of ethical release valve for broader problematics that remain critically unaddressed. "Ostensibly critical perspectives are typically exactly what the company is paying for. This mirrors the hiring of a management consultant, whose job it is to tell a company how naughty it's been, and simply by being there provides the remedy for the naughtiness," she writes.[251]

The trollish artists we consider here in some ways differ from these more avid adoptions and ethical participatory attempts for their wilful application of Poe's Law, or something like it. While these artists identify with the art world, they instrumentalize that positioning as their own

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250 Darin Barney, Gabriella Coleman, Christine Ross, Jonathan Sterne, and Tamar Tembeck, editors, "The Participatory Condition: An Introduction," in *The Participatory Condition,* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press), 2016, xvii.

251 Wilk, "New Management." A useful concept for thinking through this problematic is Herbert Marcuse's notion of "repressive tolerance," whereby certain divergence and protest is tolerated in order to minimize the risks of others. See: Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," in Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, jr., and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 95-137.

alibi to act in the more general world—not merely as "consultants," but also as autonomous, agential individuals and collectives, to ambiguous, perhaps even intentionally chaotic, ends. This paper has suggested that in embracing ambiguity these artists invite a criticality of their own practices that might in turn validate identifications of the artists themselves with a critical position. But of course, even such latent criticality is of a markedly different sort from the avid criticality displayed by previous generations of artists—the Dadaists, the Situationists, the internally-oriented institutional critics, and a host of creators operating without reference to an overarching banner. As Morgan Quaintance has put it:

> This is the politically ambiguous manner of address that engenders Post-Internet art's specific brand of weak, indirect criticality, where criticism of late capitalism should be inferred from an artist's participation in, mimesis or re-presentation of, its strategies and forms of alienation, objectification and commodification—as employed in different ways by May Waver, Ellison, Ed Fornieles, K-Hole, Amalia Ulman, Ryder Ripps and others. To borrow a line from Whitney Phillips's *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things,* a sharply observed book on the links between online trolling and US mainstream media, Post-Internet art 'replicates precisely the cultural logics it [allegedly] seeks to dismantle'.

Quaintance's remarks are particularly notable for the application of a Whitney Phillips quotation, which describes in its original context the subcultural internet trolls, to sweepingly describe the activities of such "Post-Internet" artists. And the question thus becomes a pointed one in regards to the artist troll: can a real, active criticality emerge from such a strategic replication and identification, even if it is attached to the privileged agency of the troll? Quaintance—in his role as a critic of art and its more general potentials—is hard on these artists. And Phillips too ultimately surmises that any criticality inherent to the subcultural trolls she studies extends from their performance of the very exploitative, spectacular logics that drive value in mainstream media ecosystems—something analogous to Theodor Adorno's culture industry—and in no way points towards a more salutary way of being in the world. Yet while it may be true that none of the artists considered here expand beyond this mimetic function to approach the more activist potentials demonstrated by the hacker trolls at work in Anonymous offshoots like lulzsec, we can still perhaps recognize value in their attempts to strain the boundaries of art, to gain access to cultural communities beyond its narrow confines, and to grapple with the meaning, significance, and possibilities that this access enables—in line with the agonistic struggle inherent to Emily

Segal's "long troll." Beyond Post-Internet artists who merely adopt the trappings of the mainstream—its Nike shoes, slick corporate display languages, and managerial logics—to discomfit the dominant critical tendencies within art itself, these artists suggest that these adoptions may enable a more substantial form of access and disruption. Wilk finds a precursor to such artistic strategies in the Artist Placement Group (APG), a mid-century organization also considered in depth by Claire Bishop.

Viewed with suspicion by art funding bodies, critics, and audiences alike since its conceptualization by Barbara Steveni in 1965, APG has been relatively understudied by art historians. But as Bishop has it, "More than any other artists' project of the 1970s, APG asks whether it is better for art to be engaged with society even if this means compromise, or to maintain ideological purity at the expense of social isolation and powerlessness."[252] And indeed, they offer a fascinating case study regarding the critical influence artists might gain by conscientiously detaching themselves from any clear political positioning, all while maintaining an explicit openness to working alongside institutions both in and outside of the art world. Where the institutional critique artists often maintained an overt politicization, drawing on leftist rhetoric and academic sociological analyses,[253] APG everywhere shied away from it. Bishop points to one particularly telling instance, encapsulated in a Marxist critic's account of meeting Steveni and her husband, APG artist John Latham:

> Latham admits to having no knowledge of Marx—"I've never read him", he says. His wife, Barbara, is even more illuminating on this point: "I am very interested in all that Russian thing… my father was a Russian. Trotsky, did you say. No, I don't know him; who is Trotsky anyway?[254]

This veneer of apoliticization was crucial to APG's operation; its mandate was to embed artists in institutions outside of the narrow confines of the art world: factories, public utilities, government offices, corporate offices, and more. Such access could be jeopardized by any such partiality. The proposition leaned heavily on Latham's theorization of the artist as an "incidental person":

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252 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 176. Of course, this ignores a third, frequent outcome: an antagonism that resulted in stunning commercial and attentional success.
253 Haacke, for instance, published a book, *Free Exchange,* with sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.
254 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 170. It is worth noting that Trotskyists are credited with having refined the concept of "entryism" gestured at earlier—throughout the 20th century adherents were known to join other groups and influence their members to the Trotskyist political position from within.

an individual unstuck from the ideological conditioning of their time, and thus freed to advance and explore unusual—and potentially valuable—ideas about any number of subjects. The partner institutions would agree upfront to fund the artists for the duration of their effective residencies, and in exchange they would potentially benefit from the ideas generated.[255] As Bishop describes, "APG could be said to have pre-empted the use of artists by management consultancies, and to have ushered in the growth of the 'creative industries' as a dialogue between art and business in the wake of heavy industry."[256] However, APG's artists also occupied a position of strange autonomy: for while their hosts could suggest tasks or problems for them to consider during their period of commission, the artists ultimately maintained the absolute right to pursue whatever task they themselves thought most pressing.[257] The results ranged widely; artists developed everything from colour coding systems, to procedurally generated sculpture, to games the workers could play to enhance their productivity. Bishop tells us that for APG, "the best placements produced, in the words of [APG artist] Ian Breakwell, 'abrasive mutual debate.'"[258] And they certainly succeeded in producing such agonism—not only in relation to the institutions which took on their artists, but also within the institutional art world of their time.

One of APG's most grandiose projects was produced by Latham himself. And it is a fascinating example of the potential for artists to troll on a grand scale—and the way a refusal to take up a legible political positioning might gain artists intimate, even collegial, access to a community they may secretively harbour aims to critique. In 1975 Latham received a placement with the Scottish Development Agency, with a mandate to think of a way to deal with the large, volcano-like upcroppings of burnt shale deposited throughout the Scottish landscape in the wake of mid-19$^\text{th}$-century industrial mining. While conservationists were increasingly recognizing that these bings had come to offer refuge for rare flora and fauna, others—including the Scottish Development Agency itself—believed them to be gargantuan eyesores.[259] Latham evaluated the

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255 According to one organization that agreed to host an APG artist, they saw the goal as placing "an artist in an organisation in the hope that his creative intelligence or imagination can spark off ideas, possibilities and actions that have not previously been perceived or considered feasible; in other words to show the feasibility of initiating what has not occurred to others to initiate. Hence the product is not an art work, but a report by the artist on new ways of looking at the chosen work areas and on the action that might result." See: Craig Richardson, "Waste to Monument: John Latham's *Niddrie Woman*," *Tate Papers* 17 (Spring 2012), www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/17/waste-to-monument-john-lathams-niddrie-woman.
256 Bishop, *Artificial Hells,* 175.
257 In this sense, we could see the "incidental person" as an early representation of both the greatest risk and potential of the neoliberal subject position: freed, seemingly, to act in regards to total self-volition, yet also excessively dependent on the continued agreement of an effuse network of support.
258 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 176.
259 Richardson, "Waste to Monument."

situation in dialogue with a vast array of local interests, and came to the independent conclusion that the bings were worth maintaining intact. In keeping with APG methodology, he delivered a "feasibility study," which ultimately suggested the bings be appropriated as a form of readymade earthwork—a conceptualization that would make them the largest examples of land art in existence. In keeping with this agenda, Latham also proposed a (lulzy?) plan to re-brand the bings in the public imagination as vital cultural monuments. Drawing on an aerial map, he proposed that as a constellation they could be visualized as the articulated body of "a modern variant of Celtic Legend, namely <u>Niddrie Woman</u> [underlining is part of the artist's designation]."[260] And ultimately, through this range of textual and pictorial justification, Latham argued that the bings must be legally protected as cultural monuments, and thus protected from subsequent interference or destruction. While it is unclear how the Scottish Development Agency immediately responded to the plans, in the wake of subsequent recommendations in following years by conservationists and historians, the bings entered into a slow process of legal protection. The results were significant: for as technology advanced, commercial interests gained renewed interest in further extracting the shale. While the particular bing Latham had designated as the Niddrie Woman's heart was eventually top-mined before the legal protection could set in, the rest of his earthwork was ultimately safeguarded under the guise of historically-significant sites.[261] Though largely ignored in surveys of earth works, land art, and also conceptual art, the fruits of Latham's feasibility study nonetheless offer a clear example of where the poetical capacities of art might allow a single artist—an incidental figure—to frustrate the intentions of powerful state and market figures, under the auspices of a transformative conceptual imaginarium.

260 Ibid.
261 "Hybrid Practices Keynote: Craig Richardson," YouTube, May 21, 2015,
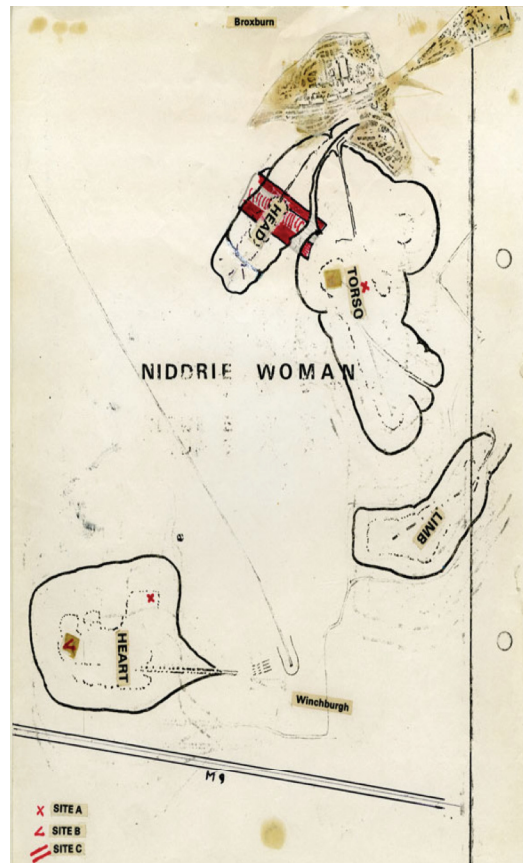   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w8BdNE9wiJs.

Fig. 11: Drawing of *Niddrie Woman* by Johnathan Latham.
(Image from Tate Modern).

Ultimately, APG constituted both a measured success in terms of art's ability to rally its trollish ambiguity to participate and steer the affairs of more general policy and culture, and also an utter failure in terms of its ability to garner recognition from either the art world or the broader public. These failures could be attributed to APG's lack of a spectacular (trollish) mechanism for self-promotion. Yet as Bishop puts it:

> The political naiveties of APG are therefore inextricable from its achievements as an artistic provocation. It is only because APG lacked an identifiable (party) political position that it could make such manoeuvres towards power, in all its ambiguous openness—and this is precisely the organisation's limitation (a joyless bureaucratic aesthetic) and its strength (believing that art can cause both business and art to re-evaluate their priorities).[262]

262 Bishop, "Artificial Hells," 175.

And indeed in 1970, on the occasion of their first major art institutional showing, APG constructed an installation of the very sort of environment APG artists encountered during placements: dry office interiors, featuring rooms where persons associated with APG could meet and discuss business without broader public access. The aesthetic was deemed dull and alienating, and Bishop tells us that in its wake "the Arts Council of Great Britain withdrew its funding for APG on the basis that it was 'more concerned with social engineering than with straight art.'"[263] Curiously, this default corporate aesthetic is precisely what has become popular in the Post-Internet milieu. And the problem of dullness can be seen as having been solved by advancing this "social engineering" potential into a spectacularized form akin to the way hackers merged their own social engineering with lulzy, trollish forms of protest. This embrace of lulzy, attentional spectacle has allowed the artists to dramatize and popularize the truly interesting and powerful work going on behind such grey aesthetic veneers. For indeed, aside from their failure to approach a media-savvy sense of spectacle, perhaps no historical artist group sits so comfortably in the ambiguous wheel house of contemporary critical trolling than APG.

For Wilks, Latham's theory of the "incidental person" (IP) remains the crucial ingredient of APG's successes, and one that this new generation of participatory, embedded artists must pay attention to. Latham wrote,

> An Incidental Person takes the stand of a third ideological position which is off the plane of their obvious collision-areas. The function is more to watch the doings and listen to the noises, and to eliminate from the output the signs of a received idea as being of the work. In doing this he represents people who would not accept their premises, time-bases, ambitions, formulations as valid, and who will occupy the scene later.[264]

As Wilks puts it:

> In other words, neither the organization at hand, nor the state, nor the APG, was the client of the Incidental Person... The IP was answerable only to the public good. I don't mean public as in the public sector (as distinguished from the private sector), or the public as a market-target group; and I don't mean good as in either charity or activism. I mean public good as [Claire] Bishop meant it, as a way of providing third-party insight to reevaluate

263 Bishop, "Artificial Hells," 175.
264 Wilk, "New Management."

value systems in both business and art.[265]

This is to say, an artist/IP might escape from their state of captured productivity when they always orientate their actions at some distant horizon—at a future community or public beyond the narrow interests of themselves, the communities they take as subject, or even the accidental audiences they draw in through their externalized spectacles. We could identify all the conditions necessary to the IP in the contemporary art troll: for their ability to hedge value across domains grants them a freedom unavailable to precarious workers or even other artists operating in reference to the narrow productive logics and schedules of contemporary art markets. And it is in how this freedom is deployed that we might truly understand the critical potential of the trollish artist.

CONCLUSION

Every freedom is attended by risk and temptation. And as Felix Stalder has written, the freedom of the artist differs pronouncedly from the freedom of the hacker in its deployment. Hackers frequently use their freedom to create software and communities that reproduce the conditions of more freedom—the possibility of access—to broader communities. This is apparent, for instance, in Richard Stallman's trollish détournement of copyright law to produce the first free software licenses.[266] Today known under the generic banner of "copyleft," such licenses use the legal protection of copyright ownership to produce a form of registrable ownership that immediately denounces its author's rights: "Instead of granting the owner the right to restrict copies, the owner of a copyright grants the users the right to copy and share programs," describes Gabriella Coleman.[267] This ensures that the software, and any derivative software, remain open and accessible to the public domain for posterity.

Stalder suggests that artists, on the other hand, historically represent an equal but opposite

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265 Ibid.
266 I use the term trollish because Stallman explicitly intended such a license to challenge and antagonize the proprietary software movement that he saw as threatening the spirit of openness and sharing that was common in the early days of the personal computer revolution. As Gabriella Coleman describes it: "Stallman approached the law much like a hacker treats technology: as a system that by virtue of being systemic and logical, is hackable… It is an instance of an ironic response to a system of powerful constraint, and one directed with unmistakable (and creative) intention—and whose irony is emphasized by its common descriptor, copyleft, signaling its relationship to the very artifact, copyright, that it seeks to displace." See: Gabriella Coleman, *Coding Freedom: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Hacking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), chapter 2, section "1984–1991: Hacking and Its Discontents."
267 Ibid.

freedom: the freedom to own the products of their authorship, a politically salient freedom in the days of early Western modernity, but one that digital distribution has nullified. Stalder writes:

> Historically, this allowed the artist to exit from a dependency on commissioning entities and to engage an audience from an equal position. It was an emancipatory act, no doubt... As long as this is only done by the few, then it isn't a problem; but if everyone tries to lay claim to this expanded form of subjectivity, then active subjects begin to constitute each other as passive objects... A paradox becomes apparent: the construction that historically established artists' radical freedom has now become an instrument of unfreedom, since it is being invoked by an increasing number of people simultaneously. In the figure of the artist, his range of action is constituted in such a way that it is revoked from everyone else, and thus from the audience as well.[268]

We could map these concerns on to those Quaintance presents regarding the Post-Internet milieu, "a field incapable of exploring anything other than narcissism, sociopathy and the commodification of self on the world wide web," as he puts it.[269] For Quaintance, these artists exercise their privileged, hedged position not in the manner of the incidental person, but instead to narrow, individualist benefit. He takes particular aim at Ulman's performance, but we could imagine the same critical logic applied to the majority of other projects considered here.

> Was *[Excellences and Perfections]* an innovative critique of objectification designed to disrupt the hegemonic order of the "male gaze" by satisfying it, or an artist fully indulging latent narcissistic tendencies using the "art project" as an alibi?
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> …
>
> In reality, Excellences & Perfections, true to the Post-Internet sensibility it sprang from, didn't dismantle anything, it just revelled in, fed off and profited from the exploitative logics of late capitalism.[270]

Quaintance suggests the fault lies with the aesthetic and formal limitations of Post-Internet itself,

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268 Felix Stalder, "Hackers as Producers. Authorship and Freedom," *Notes & Nodes,* March 23, 2015,
   http://felix.openflows.com/node/318.
269 Quaintance.
270 Ibid.

characterizing them as a "constraining style and sensibility too narrow to allow an artist the freedom to be overtly political if she or he wished." But in light of all we have considered in this paper, is this really true? I would suggest that these artists' uptake of trollish methodologies, combined with the security granted by their hedged position, offers at least the possibility that their identification with and participation in mainstream and default cultural logics could lead more to the hackerish, collectivist forms of freedom described by Stalder, rather than just the narrowly-individualist, narcissistic ones described by Quaintance.

Stalder affirms that it is possible to become "artistically active with the attitude of a hacker."[271] For him, it relies on the ability of an audience to possess the same conditions of ownership and production of a work as artists themselves. "Instead of being dependent on an unequally distributed ability to act, a situation is created in which the autonomous but reciprocally referencing activities of an 'author' and an 'audience' present the 'work' together," writes Stadler.[272] For him, hacker enterprises like WikiLeaks, premised on the logic of full disclosure, and artist projects which invite participants and audiences to negotiate the works' ultimate meaning (in an emergent, agonistic form akin to the "long troll") escape this narrow productivity. "Their own freedom is not endangered by the freedom of others, their past audience; instead, it is expanded."[273]

In the hacker world, ensuring the conditions of access can be understood as the desired end of politics itself. When access is not available, hackers are wont to demand it. In the security hacking world, power is equatable to one's ability to gain "root" access to a system—to be in a position where commands can be issued without security measures blocking their effectiveness. Hackers achieve this not only by discovering vulnerabilities in computer networks (open ports of connection and bugs in software protocols that allow them to slide in unnoticed) but also vulnerabilities in social networks (privilege-bearing individuals who can be "social engineered" to give away security codes, or provide physical access to hardware itself). What they then do when this access is granted is a political question. And we can see this as analogous to the question put to contemporary artists who themselves apply the logics of "default" and

271 Stalder.
272 Ibid.
273 Ibid.

"normcore" to gain access to a community by adopting its shibboleths.[274]

In the hacker world, the mere publication of accessed information can constitute a stunning political act. Most recently, for instance, a hacker named Phineas Fisher "owned" the Twitter account of Hacking Team, a company much derided by white hat hackers for their willingness to design and sell hacking tools to states with questionable human rights records, knowing full well that they would be used to surveil and thwart the activism of their citizens.[275] Fisher did not destroy Hacking Team outright. Instead he relied on the publicity-enhancing function of the troll to turn the question of Hacking Team's fate over to a broader public.[276] Exfiltrating the closed, proprietary code of Hacking Team's software, Fisher released it into the public domain— effectively allowing the activists whose lives are jeopardized by such software's secretive operations to understand how it could be circumvented and countered. And he did so in a lulzy way that instrumentalized the sensationalist imperatives of the mainstream media—ensuring the activities of Hacking Team would reach a broad audience able to socially condemn their activities, even if they didn't fully understand the workings of the software, or were not directly jeopardized by its use: he appropriated the identity of Hacking Team on Twitter, first changing their name to *Hacked* Team and then parroting their PR voice to issue tweets suggesting they had decided to go the full disclosure route: "Since we have nothing to hide, we're publishing all our e-mails, files, and source code [link]," said one such missive, which made its way onto a range of mainstream news reports.[277]

Fisher later explicitly condemned Hacking Team from a detached, critical, external voice. But this was not the voice that brought the company to its knees. It was Fisher's ability to function from within Hacking Team that enabled the company's setback.[278] None of the artistic trolls

274 Indeed, hackers use of "no-tech hacking" can be understood as advancing the strategies of normcore long before the term was invented. See: "DefCon 15 - T112 - No-Tech Hacking," YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5CWrzVJYLWw.

275 See: "Ethiopia: Digital Attacks Intensify," Human Rights Watch, March 9, 2015, https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/03/09/ethiopia-digital-attacks-intensify; and Morgan Marquis-Boire et al., "Police Story: Hacking Team's Government Surveillance Malware," The Citizen Lab, June 24, 2014, https://citizenlab.org/2014/06/backdoor-hacking-teams-tradecraft-android-implant.

276 J.M. Porup, "How Hacking Team Got Hacked," *Ars Technica*, April 19, 2016, http://arstechnica.com/security/2016/04/how-hacking-team-got-hacked-phineas-Fisher.

277 "Hacking Team surveillance software firm hacked," *CBC News*, July 7, 2015, www.cbc.ca/news/technology/hacking-team-surveillance-software-firm-hacked-1.3141234.

278 And for his part, Fisher would likely deride attempts to merely change the system from within, as in the artist-in-consultance position. "States have realized that trying to completely suppress dissent, trying to stamp out social movements as soon as they appear, doesn't work. It's far more effective to manage dissent, to create acceptable and ineffective channels for it, and through a variety of carrots and sticks, co-opt and push social

surveyed here have attempted such a coup. And truly, asking if they should be condemned for not doing so becomes a question of what we want from our art and artists, and what we think they ought to be doing. Is the artist expected to be an activist? Is it their job to take on world problems, to pose solutions to them, to condemn those who are perpetuating them? Some might think it is. For those who do not, who think that the artist's job is to replicate and represent the world around them in compelling ways, the critical troll's ability to wrest interesting art objects embedded with the strange conditions of their creation from these encounters could be understood as having inherent value—revealing the shapes of networks, the limits of appropriation and complicity, the boundaries where these interfaces coalesce and might begin to break down, and often producing novel, market-ready art objects in the doing.

And for those who do, we could understand the trollish artists surveyed above as offering a methodological starting point: demonstrating the way that complicity can enable more than just an "alongsidedness," to echo a description of contemporary art from the introduction. Complicity can also enable a movement into the interior of those cultural logics that exist outside of, or overlap with, the contemporary art system itself, while also offering the security—through the hedging of value—that can enable such movement. What they do with this method depends on the trolls' own political ambitions. For many, producing interesting, compelling art work may well be a valuable end in and of itself. And even where this is the case, we could understand their formal refinement as modelling, providing "proofs of concept," to artists whose criticality aligns with that of Quaintance and others in its expansiveness—artists who might be satisfied to do no less than transform the hedged position into the safety net needed to act as Latham's incidental person, or to enable innovative forms of activist politics. The methodologies the artists considered here demonstrate and refine could be understood as laying the groundwork for such activity. Even the ability of the contemporary artist to hedge the precarious risks inherent to the neoliberal subject can be seen as being suited to this endeavour—allowing the artist to configure their actions not only in a way that will guarantee the happiness of their gallerists, the interest of an institution, or their ability to leverage their attentional economic metrics into consulting jobs outside of contemporary art; but also their ability to play each of these economic domains against

movements into those channels. That's the role that most professional activists and the institutional left, albeit unconsciously, play. Their professional success, access to the media, and access to those in power to "win" cosmetic reforms are all contingent on them helping to condemn and isolate those engaging in "inappropriate" (read: effective) action, and praise those doing "good" (read: ineffective) work," writes Fisher in a missive following the doxing of Catalonian police in June 2016. See: http://pastebin.com/TY42yRau.

one another, to scattershot their activity in such a way that at least one of these domains might be able to sustain their activity—and likely more, for the novelty that such attempts typically imply—to advance them the freedom they require to act boldly in the world.

And finally, we could see a move towards this access-oriented form of trolling in a divisive artwork presented at the 9th Berlin Biennale described in this paper's opening section. Though the biennale as a whole has been condemned by many as representative of Post-Internet's "passive compliance," one project has been singled out by some critics as involving all the components of the critical trolls surveyed above, yet featuring a distinctively activist ambition.[279] Initiated by Christopher Kulendran Thomas in partnership with Annika Kuhlmann, *New Eelam* builds upon a trollish productivity long at work in Thomas' work. One project, *When Platitudes Become Form,* saw the artist appropriate (by way of purchase) regional art from his home country of Sri Lanka and reconfigure it with the aesthetic hallmarks of Post-Internet art before putting it back into art fair booths and galleries throughout contemporary art's elite Western centres. Suitably marked up for the effort, Thomas effectively—and very cynically—profited from the arrangement, with the intent to demonstrate not only the arbitrary valuation of a conformist aesthetic veneer, but also the complicity of a booming Sri Lankan globalized art market enabled, as he saw it, by the brutal suppression of the country's Tamil minority population in 2009.[280]

279 See: R.M. Vaughan, "The Berlin Biennale: An Act of Passive Compliance," *Art F City*, June 29, 2016, http://artfcity.com/2016/06/28/the-berlin-biennale-an-act-of-passive-compliance; Alexander Forbes, "DIS's Berlin Biennale Isn't a 'LOLhouse' or a Fashion Spread—It's Charting Art's Future," *Artsy*, June 22, 2016, https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-dis-s-berlin-biennale-isn-t-a-lolhouse-or-a-fashion-spread-it-s-charting-art-s-future.
280 "That war ended in 2009 in the most brutal way that I could have imagined and Sri Lanka's economy has been booming since then, fuelled by foreign investment from the international backers of that violence. These galleries and the artists that they represent have become regionally successful in that economic expansion and this new contemporary art market is one of the ways in which high society in Colombo masks the recent violence upon which its newfound prosperity is built," says Thomas in an interview. See: Charlotte Jansen, "Christopher Kulendran Thomas: When Platitudes Become Form," *Whitewall*, December 17, 2014, www.whitewallmag.com/art/christopher-kulendran-thomas-when-platitudes-become-form.

Fig. 12: Installation view of Christopher Kulendran Thomas' *New Eelam,* featuring art works and design objects curated by Annika Kuhlman. (Photograph by Timo Ohler, image from New Galerie, Paris).

New Eelam takes as its starting point the Tamil people's violently thwarted dream of founding an autonomous state (Eelam) on their territory—a vision that became pronouncedly untenable in the wake of the state-backed violence which scattered them as emigrants across the globe. Yet rather than mounting an antagonistic activist campaign aimed at drawing the attention of the global community to the situation, Thomas has instead opted to re-envision a "New" Eelam: not as a territorially-bounded nation state, but instead as a deterritorialized transnational corporation: a housing corporation, to be precise, one where "subscribers" take the place of owners or renters, earning in the process a growing equity in the overarching company. In a video which merges the formal language of state propaganda with the sleek visuals and optimism of a contemporary advertisement, we learn that *New Eelam* aims to adopt the growth models of companies like Amazon and the flexibility of startups like Airbnb—not to profit their shareholders, but instead to create an endlessly growing set of apartments that its subscribers will co-own as stakeholders in the corporation. This vision aims to offer no less than free housing to a ceaselessly expanding set of occupants. And some observers were intrigued. "Now, this proposal is full of obvious

problems," writes RM Vaughan. "The first being that, at present, only the rich will ever be able to use New Eelam's services. But what if the company grows? What if it becomes as omnipresent (and thus affordable) as other shared economy ventures?"[281] As Alexander Ross writes:

> Not one of the numerous utopian revolutions over the last 100 years, including that of the Tamil, has succeeded in permanently establishing a new order of society. So, proposes *New Eelam*, let's innovate our way to zero-scarcity instead. Does it smell ever so much like Eau de Menlo Park, a largely white and largely privileged Silicon Valley form of idealism? Absolutely. If you're prone to think that tech founders are actually evil, data-mining capitalists with altruism that only runs as deep as their Rapha cycling gear, will you also immediately recoil from this piece? 100%. But I'd also venture that's a point of view far more cynical than any piece DIS selected for their biennale. Progress has to start somewhere and grow from that point.[282]

Presented as a decorous showroom of the sort that would-be tenants of a new condo development might find tempting, *New Eelam* is notable for at least three reasons: one for the fact that Thomas' foregrounded activist ambitions have, by his avid admission, been inspired by his ebullient admiration for some of the other projects considered in this thesis;[283] two, for the way the project explicitly instrumentalizes the risk hedging function that I have identified at work in art projects that use their trollish ambiguity to straddle the lines between art, media, and commerce; and three, for its own trollish adoption not only of the slick, corporate formal language so typical of other works on offer at the biennale, but also questionable political tropes of propaganda and nationalism. Indeed, many observers dismissed Thomas' project for these surface qualities alone: "A jaw-dropping installation by Christopher Kulendran Thomas places the history of ethnic cleansing in Sri Lanka into a real estate showroom (genocide – LOL)," writes Jason Farago for the *Guardian*; "The work is set within a real-estate show room, and includes a video that offensively (...) praises "soft ethnic cleansing" in favour of creating a

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281 Vaughan, "Passive Compliance."
282 Forbes, "DIS's Berlin Biennale."
283 Particularly, Thomas sees the work of groups like Dis, K-Hole, and APG as charting new forms of collectivist intervention, rather than offering platforms for individualist acquisition. See: Christopher Kulendran Thomas, "Art and Commerce: Ecology Beyond Spectatorship," *DIS Magazine*, http://dismagazine.com/discussion/59883/art-commerce-ecology-beyond-spectatorship.

flexible subscription model for shared housing," writes Dorian Batycka for Hyperallergic.com.[284]

Whether this advancement of a startup rooted in an art project / an art project rooted in a startup will ultimately serve Thomas' seemingly sincere ambitions to create a scalable, generally accessible housing collective, or whether it will burden it with a veneer of unseriousness; whether its ambitions as a prefigurative art project will ultimately appear flat if it is attached to a neglected or failed commercial venture—these questions remain to be seen. But Thomas' project is already unique for the way it lulzily addresses head-on the critics who propose that Post-Internet-type artists' embrace of complicity is politically null: one could not imagine an artwork aiming for more. And if his calculations are correct, and a corporate business model analogous to Amazon's is suited to functioning as something like a public utility, rather than a capitalist value-extracting machine, then Thomas' project may be poised to constitute a very "long troll" indeed: steering a growth model that privileges a few into one Thomas believes can provide free housing to an ever-growing collective. So far Thomas' hedge has paid off in minor ways, managing to not only draw attention and financial support to his project by its attachment to contemporary art, but also enabling the ideas to be publicly workshopped in the art world's lively discourse without need for the proprietary secretiveness so typical to the venture capitalist domains also implied in the work.

Thomas' project is trollish in a way unlike the others: for it announces its intentionality upfront, and is seemingly sincere in its ambitions. Yet it retains an ambiguity not at the level of intention, as in a typical formulation of Poe's Law, but instead at a level of feasibility, for even Thomas himself freely admits the challenges of imagining the course this technology could take in the future. In this way, its maintenance of the safety valve of being "art" could be seen as its trollish basis: an ultimate ability to skitter not on the criteria of intention, but rather on what its ultimate productivity will or should be. And here we could intuit a different sort of risk, a more abstract form of risk: that the art component itself might constrain the ambitions of a potentially sweepingly altruistic project. But we could see—and maybe already can see—that risk's inverse: that, unlike any other avid startup imaginable, this one's very premises have been, and will be, given over to the agonistic public of existing art discourse to be picked at and prodded and critiqued and celebrated—and to see whether such an environment may even be suited to allow

284 Dorian Batycka, "The 9th Berlin Biennale: A Vast Obsolescent Pageant of Irrelevance," *Hyperallergic*, June 24, 2016, http://hyperallergic.com/306932/the-9th-berlin-biennale-a-vast-obsolescent-pageant-of-irrelevance.

such a company to move with the speed it might need to ensure its ambitions.

The greatest risk of trolling is that it might shore up the very things it seeks to subvert or identify for parody or critique: this is true of subcultural trolling, where the uptake of politically incorrect language and sensational mockery has led to a dangerous revitalization of reactionary cultural logics. It's true too of hacker trolling, where the release of information and tools to public access can engender indeterminate results, as in Back Orifice's facilitation of what hackers call "script kiddies."[285] And it's equally true of contemporary art trolling, where adoption of readymade cultural products can be seen as adding to their value and innovating on their forms, rather than enabling their critique or facilitating their dismantling.

But we have also seen examples where these techniques have been used to educate, facilitate access, and offer new understandings—prompting the establishment of agonistic publics suited to discourse and deliberation regarding the information revealed, and the validity of the techniques used to reveal it—and even hasten the downfall or condemnation of dangerous entities and cultural formations. In a world increasingly defined by intermediation and ambiguous subject positions, trolling as a methodology for social engagement seems poised for nothing but further uptake. And as its users and use scenarios become more and more diverse, the term itself, and the complexities it entails, must expand with it—taking on new nuance and enabling new imaginings about what its productivities are and could be.

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285 Individuals empowered by powerful, user-friendly tools that facilitate network intrusion without requiring any substantive technical knowledge.

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