Performative identity in networked spaces: Resisting the logic of late capitalism in the digital age

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ABSTRACT

The technological developments of the twenty-first century, most significantly the commercialization and widespread use of the Internet and its interactive technologies, reinforce the logic of late capitalism and consumerism; yet, it is also because of these developments that the logic of consumer capitalism is being challenged and resisted. Inherent in network culture is the capacity for one to fracture identity into a multitude of roles, forming a conception of the self that I argue is “schizophrenic.” In most instances, the schizophrenic self is merely a result of the digital age and perpetuates the logic of late capitalism; however, artists, myself included, embody the schizophrenic self, performing and broadcasting conceptual personae on various media platforms as a method of critique, of the world we live in and of which we are products.
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PREFACE

This project—as well as the smaller elements that contributed to my thinking about this project—has been on my mind for two years now. I realize this is a short amount of time, not only in the grand scheme of things, but also in terms of projects. This process has been humbling in many ways, especially as I realize the unwavering dedication necessary to complete feats far greater than this.

Necessarily, I had to frame this project as something that would be manageable to pursue as an undergraduate. There were too many books left out or altogether unread, thoughts left scrawled on the pages of my notebook, and ideas that have yet to form. Reflecting on the work I have done thus far, I am certain there is more work to be done; work that I eagerly look forward to. While completing this project marks the end of my undergraduate work, it is also a commencement. I can only hope that my future holds similar opportunities to those I have already been afforded.
POSTMODERNISM, LATE CAPITALISM, AND SCHIZOPHRENIA

‘Postmodernism’ is a convenient yet confusing term. The confusion arises because there is no universally accepted definition of ‘postmodernism.’ It does not refer to a specific style of art, and there is no agreement about the precise historical period to which it is relevant, nor whether it concerns the state of art alone or a wider socio-historical condition. Some dispute whether it is a legitimate notion at all, while others who do accept it cannot agree if it is a positive or a negative thing. But for all these problems, there is one countervailing benefit to its employment: it does point to the fact that something changed in art in the last third of the twentieth century, something perhaps as fundamental as the change that modernism itself represented.

—Jason Gaiger, Frameworks for Modern Art

Postmodernism: does it exist at all and, if so, what does it mean? Is it a concept or a practice, a matter of local style or a whole new period or economic phase? What are its forms, effects, place? How are we to mark its advent? Are we truly beyond the modern, truly in (say) a postindustrial age?

—Hal Foster, The Anti-Aesthetic

Generally speaking, postmodernism emerged in the last third of the twentieth century as a critique of modern cultural and social systems, or in other words, as a critical reaction to modernism. The very essence of postmodernism is multifarious and contradictory, as it is informed by a variety of sometimes conflicting theoretical approaches, such as Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, and semiotics.¹

While there are a number of postmodern theoretical positions I will address throughout this text, the heart of the matter lies in one particular assessment, posited by Frederic Jameson in his seminal work Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991). He sees the emergence of postmodernism as being closely related to the emergence of late, consumer, or multinational capitalism. Furthermore, postmodernism is the expression of this social and economic system. Before the publication of his text, several chapters or parts of chapters appeared in previous publications or were given in the form of lectures. One such example is the essay “Postmodernism

¹ This is quite fitting, though, considering postmodernism, in general, can be associated with difference, plurality, uncertainty, etcetera.
and Consumer Society,” originally presented as a lecture at the Whitney Museum in the fall of 1982. Jameson concludes with a question about the critical value of newer art:

There is some agreement that the older modernism functioned against its society in ways which are variously described as critical, negative, contestatory, subversive, oppositional and the like. Can anything of the sort be affirmed about postmodernism and its social moment? We have seen there is a way in which postmodernism replicates or reproduces—the logic of consumer capitalism; the more significant question is whether there is also a way in which it resists that logic. But that is a question we must leave open.²

Jameson was writing on the subject of postmodernism and its relation to late capitalism in the midst of its emergence. In the wake of modernism, postmodernism was in its nascent stages, leaving those who cared about its implications wondering what it might achieve. It is always easier looking back, drawing conclusions when all the pieces have fallen into place, even if those conclusions are not accurate. Modernism could be defined because it was in the past; it was deemed successful because it achieved its goal, “function[ing] against its society in ways which are variously described as critical, negative, contestatory, subversive, [and] oppositional.” According to Jameson, postmodernism emerged in conjunction with but also as a result of late capitalism, and moreover, postmodernism reinforces the logic of consumer capitalism. At its present moment, it had only achieved that: reinforcing consumerism. In order to be successful, it too had to function against its society and be subversive, like modernism was in its moment of contemporaneity, albeit in a different way. As I understand Jameson’s concluding remarks, he is asking if there can be a way in which postmodernism resists the logic of consumer capitalism. He left this question open for a reason.

Of course, I will return to Jameson’s theoretical treatment of postmodernism in greater depth, explaining and analyzing his terminology that I have so far only briefly mentioned, but I focus on this conclusion so that I may begin. Responding to his open ended conclusion, I argue that the technological developments of the twenty-first century, most significantly the commercialization and widespread use of the Internet and the network culture of Web 2.0, especially social networking

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² Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 144.
sites such as Facebook, reinforce consumer capitalism, and in some ways, have come to virtually embody commodity capitalism; however, it is also because of these developments that the logic of consumer capitalism is being challenged and resisted. This resistance is achieved by working within the capitalist system (for how does one ever truly escape?), using the system and its manifestations in varying media to subvert itself.

Arguably, there are a number of ways this can be accomplished, ranging from appropriation, remixing, and hactivism, but my analysis is concerned with one specific instance of resistance: the representation and performance of the self. Digital network culture has provided different outlets for one to represent oneself. Even using the most basic forms of digital media, like sending an e-mail or an SMS text, one takes on a different persona, as words are typed and edited, becoming virtual text rather than physically spoken words. In the era of Web 2.0, facilitated by information sharing and participatory user-generated content, the self becomes simultaneously fractured, multiple, fluid, and perpetually present, spread across a number of media outlets. While banal use of the Internet and its affiliated networking technologies replicates, reproduces, and reinforces the logic of late capitalism, the capacity to resist its logic is inherent in network culture because it allows one to fracture its identity into a multitude of roles, forming a conception of self that I argue is “schizophrenic.”

I choose to describe the self in digital network culture as schizophrenic for several reasons. Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard have both used the term descriptively, “detail[ing] the postmodern moment as a new ‘schizophrenic’ mode of space and time.” Their use of the term is informed by a Lacanian understanding, based off a psychoanalytical framework informed by Freud. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s use of schizophrenic differs from Jameson and Baudrillard because their work challenges traditional Freudian psychoanalysis, confronting the shortcomings of

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3 Foster, introduction to *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ix.
its practice. Rather than focusing on how the schizophrenic subject is bereft of normalcy, unable to be oedipalized, Deleuze and Guattari embrace the schizophrenic, hailing him/her/it as capable of overcoming the constraints of structures imposed by society. Their use of the term is not descriptive, but instead schizophrenia is used as a model, an example of how to resist the structures enforced by society and oedipalized life. So, while all four intellectuals would agree that the schizophrenic condition is a result of being anti-oedipal, they differ in their heuristic use of the term.

Jameson dubs John Cage, John Ashbery, Phillipe Sollers, Robert Wilson, Ishmael Reed, Michael Snow, Andy Warhol, and Samuel Beckett significant postmodern artists with schizophrenic tendencies, but this word choice is meant “as description rather than diagnosis.” Furthermore, the point is not “some culture-and-personality diagnosis of our society and its art.” These two preemptive responses to possible criticism of his use of the term are also useful to my own argument. I by no means seek to diagnose people, society, or art in any way; rather, I am interested in the theoretical use of the term and its applicability to our moment of contemporaneity.

I will present two major case studies: the first, an example of my own work, *My (real) fake Facebook* (2011), and secondly, an analysis of the artistic practice of Ryan Trecartin. *My (real) fake Facebook* explores how this particular social networking site replicates, reproduces, and reinforces the logic of late capitalism; yet, by working within the structure of the site, I argue that I was capable of resisting this logic through performing my self. Trecartin’s artistic practice is similar to my own endeavor to some extent, but far more complex and far-reaching. Working within various structures and institutional frameworks, Trecartin subverts the systems he participates in, performing and broadcasting his identities throughout the network. Performing himself, he is both self-critical and critiques the structures that have shaped the spaces he (we) inhabits, both physically and virtually.

Certainly, there are other new media artists working within the familiar media of Web 2.0, subverting

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5 Ibid.
its logic and using its inherent qualities to create conceptual schizophrenic personae as a method of critical engagement. However, for all intents and purposes for this project, my discussion will primarily focus on the two aforementioned examples, while the work of other artists will function as supporting evidence.

These methods are effective because they disrupt the very thing in which they participate, as artists critique the late capitalist system, its logic, and themselves in the process of performing conceptual personae within the structures they critique. They are able to espouse commentary because their work is readily accessible online, on Vimeo, YouTube, and UbuWeb, and via Twitter streams, for people to see and respond to. Because the setting is so ordinary, sometimes users do not necessarily know how to react: Is this just another Facebook profile? Another video some kid made? But this initiates thinking and conversations for a wider range of people, as work is accessible online, as well as in galleries and museums. Although audiences in these distinct settings will certainly be equipped with different vocabularies, approaching and understanding the work accordingly, the availability of work online challenges the authority of the institution. The esoteric avant-garde has been replaced with the mainstream media avant-pop.

Considering the work of theorists and their use of schizophrenia, either as descriptive term or model, to describe the postmodern moment, I lay the groundwork for the discussion that follows with brief explanatory and analytical glosses. While I agree with Baudrillard and Jameson’s descriptions of the postmodern moment, the work I present challenges postmodern notions, namely that we are in a passive moment of consumption, reinforcing the logic of consumer capitalism. Instead, this work illustrates how this logic can be resisted, how the schizophrenic model can be embodied because of network technologies, and how the performance of the self is evidence of this schizophrenic mentality and its effectiveness. Postmodernity as a historical, periodizing concept, as it is associated with late capitalism, finance capitalism, and globalization, is certainly still relevant and
useful in terms of understanding our present moment. Yet postmodernism, as aesthetic production, is perhaps an inadequate label and framework for the work of the artists that will be discussed. As these artists work with(in) the structures that reinforce the logic of late capitalism, they perform its logic, using the system against itself, actively challenging consumer capitalism rather than reinforcing it, succumbing.

Photographer, theorist, and critic Allan Sekula asks: “How do we invent our lives out of a limited range of possibilities, and how are our lives invented for us by those in power?” To some extent, our lives have been decided for us, as we are products of vast structures beyond our control. Even our identities, our selves, are confronted with a format they must conform to. In the era of late capitalism, mass culture presents false freedom through endless novelty, entertainment, and spectacle; the illusion of choice in the information age; the ecstasy of communication fueled by constant connectivity. How do we resist the structures that are enforced upon us? How do we think beyond the logic of our time? We must recognize and understand the system so that we can use it against itself. We must invent our lives for ourselves.

Jean Baudrillard

The philosophy of Baudrillard, most significantly his writings on the simulacrum and hyperreality, has become essential for critically analyzing contemporary society, culture, and thought. His earlier works on economically based theory informed his thinking as he shifted his focus to developing ideas about social relations and mass communication.

By the mid-1970s, Baudrillard posited distinctions between premodern, modern, and postmodern societies, articulating their differences with his conception of simulacra. Accordingly,

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6 Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain*, 56.
there are three orders of simulacra associated with these periods. The first order is associated with the premodern period, where the image is known to be an artificial representation of the real; the image is an illusion, functioning as a placeholder for the real. The modern era of the Industrial Revolution is associated with the second order, where the distinction between image and reality becomes less evident because of the proliferation of mass production. Objects are copied in mass quantities, becoming commodities, all of which imitate the real from which they were copied. The third order of the simulacra is associated with the postmodern period, where representation precedes reality, the simulacra precedes the original. There is no longer any distinction between representation and reality; there is only the simulacrum. Baudrillard argues that the lack of distinction between representation and reality that defines the postmodern era is caused by five contemporary phenomena: mass media, exchange value, multinational capitalism, urbanization, and language and ideology. While Baudrillard associates these with the postmodern, they could also be associated with late capitalism.

During the modern era, the gap between sign and referent is sustained, but Baudrillard, as well as Guy Debord, described how this system was being replaced by a society of spectacle. Of this emerging society, Baudrillard writes:

[T]oday the scene and mirror no longer exist; instead, there is a screen and network. In place of the reflexive transcendence of mirror and scene, there is a nonreflecting surface, an immanent surface where operations unfold—the smooth operational surface of communication.”

Baudrillard (and Debord) posit that “the core defining feature of postmodernism is precisely the collapse of the gap between signifier and signified into a frenzy of simulation in which the slippage of the signifier precludes any fixing of meaning.” Accordingly, the “precession of simulacra” can also be understood as a defining feature of postmodernism, since it is caused by the cultural modes

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8 Jones, Self/ Image, 18.
of representation that “simulate reality,” such a television and the mass media. Taking the technological developments that have since occurred into consideration, “an even more radical model of signification (or its disappearance as we know it) has emerged.”

These simulations are hyperreal, generated “by models of a real without origin or reality.” In this postmodern world, individuals flee the “desert of the real,” seeking the intense ecstasies of the hyperreal, more real than real itself. Baudrillard’s “ecstasy of communication,” although considered a departure from the simulacra and hyperreal, could perhaps be better understood as an extension of his thinking as technology developed into the late twentieth century. With the coming of communication and information technologies, the contemporary subject is in even closer proximity to instantaneous images and information. As such, the subject “becomes a pure screen, a pure absorption and resorption surface of the influent networks.” An individual in the postmodern world becomes merely an entity informed and constructed by media, technological experience, and the hyperreal.

A later investigation is articulated in his seminal essay, “Disneyworld Company” (1996):

[W]e are no longer in a society of spectacle, which itself has become a spectacular concept. It is no longer the contagion of spectacle that alters reality, but rather the contagion of virtuality that erases the spectacle. Disneyland still belonged to the order of the spectacle and of folklore, with its effects of entertainment [distraction] and distanciation [distance]. Disney World and its tentacular extension is a generalized metastasis, a cloning of the world and of our mental universe, not in the imaginary but in a viral and virtual mode. We are no longer alienated and passive spectators but interactive extras [figurants interactifs]; we are the meek lyophilized members of this huge “reality show.” It is no longer a spectacular logic of alienation but a spectral logic of disincarnation; no longer a fantastic logic of diversion, but a corpuscular logic of transfusion and transubstantiation of all our cells; an enterprise of radical deterrence of the world from the inside and no longer from outside, similar to the quasi-nostalgic universe of capitalistic reality today. Being an extra [figuran] in virtual reality is no longer being an actor or a spectator. It is to be out of the scene [hors-scene], to be obscene.

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9 Ibid.
10 Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation, 1.
11 Baudrillard, The Ecstasy of Communication, 27.
12 Baudrillard, “Disneyworld Company.”
Baudrillard discusses postmodernism in terms of systems of signification, delineating between a modern and postmodern system. He uses the body to further explain their difference, attributing the “human scale” to the modern, where the modern subject is marked by interiority and the self defined objects and representations. With postmodernism, this is no longer plausible because the referent is lost, and hence the body is lost. Because of this, the body is essentially useless, “since today everything is concentrated in the brain and in genetic codes, which alone sum up the operational definition of being.”

To some degree, Baudrillard is literally referencing the body, but more significantly, the body functions as a trope to explain the shift from modern to postmodern. In the modern era, the world was of “human scale,” meaning humans were active agents engaging in the process of modernization. Yet postmodernism is fueled by the series of connections transmitted through networks and the information shared across these networks through codes. The self is no longer conceived in relation to a body, instead functioning “as a terminal of multiple networks.”

No longer an actor or a spectator, agency is nullified. The postmodern self, Baudrillard claims, is not afflicted with modern pathologies, like hysteria and paranoia in the Freudian sense; instead, it exists in a state of terror proper to the schizophrenic: too great a proximity of everything, the unclean promiscuity of everything which touches, invests and penetrates without resistance, with no halo of private protection, not even his own body, to protect him anymore. The schizo is bereft of every scene, open to everything in spite of himself, living in the greatest confusion…What characterizes him is less the loss of the real, the light years of estrangement from the real, the pathos of distance and radical separation, as is commonly said: but very much the contrary, the absolute proximity, the total instantaneity of things, the feeling of no defense, no retreat. It is the end of interiority and intimacy, the overexposure and transparence of the world which traverses him without obstacle. He can no longer produce the limits of his own being, can no longer play nor stage himself, can no longer produce himself as mirror. He is now only a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence.

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14 Ibid, 148.
15 Ibid, 153.
He continues:

Something has changed, and the Faustian, Promethean (perhaps Oedipal) period of production and consumption gives way to the “proteinic” era of networks, to the narcissistic and protean era of connections, contact, contiguity, feedback and generalized interface that goes with the universe of communication. With the television image—the television being the ultimate and perfect object for this new era—our own body and the whole surrounding universe become a control screen.16

His description of the schizophrenic seems even more applicable today, with the Internet and its affiliated networking technologies being the “ultimate and perfect object” for our moment of contemporaneity. There is, quite literally, a screen and a network. Everything is always close, immediate, instantaneous; we live in the ecstasy of communication.

Frederic Jameson

As I have already briefly mentioned, Frederic Jameson argues that there is a correlation between postmodernism and late capitalism, and that postmodernism reinforces it logic. Late capitalism, as described by Ernest Mandel in his work of the same name, is the third period of the capitalist mode of production, the first being freely competitive capitalism (1700-1850), and secondly monopoly capitalism (1850-1940).17 Mandel suggests that by the end of World War II, the technological developments necessary for the third stage of capitalism were available, but Jameson argues that there were also cultural preconditions “found…in the enormous social and psychological transformations of the 1960s.”18 Although the two happen across different spans of time and develop at different rates, they “conspire to produce a totality.”19 Jameson makes this distinction because he is interested in both the cultural and economic, specifically how they inform and perpetuate one another. Since late capitalism describes a new economic phase with different modes of production, which consequently transforms the overall way of life, it describes a new social phase.

16 Ibid, 146.
17 Mandel, Late Capitalism.
18 Jameson, Postmodernism, xx.
19 Even though there is no “late capitalism in general.” Jameson, Postmodernism, xx.
as well. These cultural changes, Jameson argues, are expressed in the postmodern; therefore, postmodernism is the dominant cultural logic of late capitalism.

*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* is an expansive theoretical critique of postmodernism, too vast to analyze in detail for my purposes. Rather, I will focus on Jameson’s position that postmodernism expresses the logic of late capitalism, and the two features he uses to illustrate his point: pastiche and schizophrenia. Focusing on these two features, Jameson expresses one major theme:

[N]amely the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve.

In order to understand this theme, let us return to the two features, beginning with pastiche. By this, Jameson does not mean parody, although it is similar in the sense that both pastiche and parody involve mimicry. However, while parody utilizes the uniqueness of certain styles, seizing their idiosyncrasies to produce something that mocks the original, pastiche is a neutral form of mimicry, copied only for the sake of copying. Jameson explains pastiche as a parody “without ulterior motive, without satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic,” or, in fewer words, pastiche is “blank parody.” Fundamentally, pastiche has replaced parody, which Jameson argues indicates the postmodern condition.

The point of his argument is to elucidate the shift that has taken place, from modernism to postmodernism. Modernism was predicated on individualism, “the invention of a personal, private style, as unmistakable as you fingerprint, as incomparable as your own body,” meaning that the modernist aesthetic was linked to “the conception of a unique self and private identity, a unique

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20 Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 143-144.
21 Ibid, 131.
personality and individuality.”²² Contrastingly, postmodernism questions all of this, taking a stance on the opposite end of the spectrum, exploring the possibility that individualism is a thing of the past or that it may have never existed. The first of these positions claims that the individual once existed, but in the age of corporate capitalism that older bourgeois subject no longer exists. Then, there is the poststructuralist position, adding, “not only is the bourgeois individual subject a thing of the past, it is also a myth; it never really existed in the first place...this construct...sought to persuade people that they ‘had’ individual subjects and possessed this unique personal identity.”²³ So, while this might be true, what does this mean for the arts, or aesthetic production? The argument goes, that if modernism was based on the individual (which also includes personal, private, unique), but now the individual does not exist or never existed in the first place, then it is impossible to make anything individual, and that is why pastiche is postmodern, because nothing is new, original, inventive, innovative, a true reflection of one’s own time.

Let us linger on the word “time,” for this is what links these two seemingly disparate features of postmodernism together. While still describing pastiche and how it is reflexive of the postmodern condition, Jameson writes:

[It is] as though, for some reason, we were unable today to focus our own present, as though we have become incapable of achieving representations of our own current experience. But if that is so, then it is a terrible indictment of consumer capitalism itself—or at the very least, an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history.²⁴

This description could just as easily be used to explain the schizophrenia Jameson explains next. So, it then becomes clear that pastiche is directly correlated to the other feature of postmodernism Jameson posits, which is “its peculiar way with time,” or schizophrenia.

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²² Ibid.
²³ Ibid, 132.
²⁴ Ibid, 135.
Jameson’s descriptive use of schizophrenia is informed by his understanding of Lacanian psychoanalytical theories. Working in a Freudian tradition, Lacan transcodes the Oedipus complex into language, “describing the Oedipal rivalry in terms not so much of the biological individual who is your rival for the mother’s attention, but rather what he calls the Name-of-the-Father, paternal authority now considered as a linguistic function.” Language becomes central to the complex because Lacan considers schizophrenia essentially as a language disorder, describing it as a breakdown in the signifying chain. With this breakdown, the schizophrenic only experiences pure material signifiers; distinct, yet unrelated. For Lacan, experiencing temporality is a result of language because language has a past, present, and future – one of its functions is to define lived experience in relation to time. But the schizophrenic cannot articulate in this way, so there is no understanding of temporal continuity. Therefore, the schizophrenic experiences a series of pure and unrelated presents in time, living in a perpetual present. “In other words,” Jameson writes,

schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence. The schizophrenic thus does not know personal identity in our sense, since our feeling of identity depends on our sense of the persistence of the “I” and the “me” over time.

Because of this, Jameson argues, the schizophrenic has more intense experiences “at any given present of the world than we do, since our own present is always part of some larger set of projects.” “We,” as in oedipalized people, are constantly engaged with the world and its temporality, whereas the schizophrenic only receives the world and experiences that reception as a fragment, unrelated to a larger temporal sequence. Without an understanding of temporality, the schizophrenic is unable to do anything that requires a certain amount of time, and therefore he or

26 Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 137.
27 Ibid.
she does nothing.\footnote{Ibid.} Living in the perpetual present, slipping between the real and unreality, the world is all at once familiar and foreign, tangible and immaterial, euphoric and terrifying.

**Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari**

In the 1970s, philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari collaboratively wrote *L'Anti-Œdipe (Anti-Oedipus)* (1972) and its sequel, *Mille Plateaux (A Thousand Plateaus)* (1980), both of which analyze the relationship between capitalism and schizophrenia. For my purposes, I will primarily focus on the earlier text, for it introduced the critical practice of schizoanalysis, central to my analysis of contemporary culture.\footnote{This is done for the sake of clarity, because schizoanalysis as a concept and practice continues to develop, acquiring new meanings, as Deleuze and Guattari continue to work collaboratively, and individually in the work of Guattari.}

Combining elements of the work of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, along with a number of other influential thinkers, Deleuze and Guattari develop a political analysis of desire as it is repressed or expressed in Western culture. In brief, the book is divided into four sections: 1) “The Desiring-Machines,” which outlines Deleuze and Guattari’s “materialist psychiatry,” introducing their concepts of “desiring-production,” “desiring-machine” and the “body without organs”; 2) “Psychoanalysis and Familialism: The Holy Family,” a critique of Freudian psychoanalysis, primarily its theory of the Oedipus complex; 3) “Savages, Barbarians, Civilized Men,” libidinalizing Marx; and 4) Introduction to Schizoanalysis, the (somewhat) self-explanatory section title.

Fundamentally, the work is about power, hierarchy, and authority, attacking structures of any kind. Although they critique the Oedipus complex, especially its centrality in Western thinking and psychology, anti-Oedipus primarily functions as trope, signifying all of the examples of “micro-fascism” that society accepts through uncritical participation in the structures of power upheld by capitalist society. Or, as Michel Foucault writes in his preface to the text, “[O]ne might say that *Anti-
Oedipus is an Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life.” While power structures are central to their analysis, it is the patterning of desire that is their primary concern, as they seek to develop a method for viewing how the patterning of desire informs what is conventionally understood as personality, which is treated as a human attribute. To do so, they begin with a parodying critique of psychoanalysis, expanding it into a whole worldview based on the productive powers of desire.

The key term of the work is “desiring-production,” an unorthodox synthesis of Marx and Freud: desire, coming from Lacan’s désir, following Freud’s Wunsch, and the aim of traditional psychoanalysis being to uncover one’s desire, which is only possible if that desire is articulated through speech; production, coming from Marx’s analysis of the capitalist process of production. Typically, “political economy (the flows of capital and interest) and the economy of the libido (the flows of desire)” are treated as two separate economies. Yet Deleuze and Guattari propose one economy – “the economy of flows” – where “the flows and productions of desire will simply be viewed as the unconscious of the social productions.” Therefore, the investments of one economy are inseparable from the other economy and they are motivated by one another. They favor neither Freud nor Marx, instead encompassing the two into a Nietzschean framework, calling desiring-production a “universal primary process,” connecting seemingly separate realms. “Desiring-production is thus not anthropocentric; it is the very heart of the world.” All processes are processes of desiring-production.

Their notion of desiring-production develops in opposition to the traditional logic of desire, which “mak[es] us choose between production and acquisition.” This line of thought – first set forth by Plato and later upheld by Freud and Lacan – conceives desire in relation to acquisition (desire

30 Foucault, preface to Anti-Oedipus, xiii.
31 Seem, introduction to Anti-Oedipus, xviii.
32 Ibid.
33 Protevi, Political Affect, 91.
34 Deleuze and Guattari, Anti-Oedipus, 25.
equates to seeking to acquire), causing desire to be associated with lack: “a lack of an object, a lack of the real object.” This dominant understanding, with its emphasis on lack, assigns it to the realm of “the Negative,” along with “law, limit, castration, [and] lacuna…which Western thought has so long held sacred as a form of power and access to reality.” While the traditional conception of desire is dependent upon an “essence of lack” and produces “the fantasized object” – “explained perfectly by psychoanalysis” – Deleuze and Guattari argue that desire is positive and that as a process of production produces reality. Furthermore, their conception of desire does not lack anything. Rather, it is

the subject that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject; there is no fixed subject unless there is repression. Desire and its object are one and the same thing: the machine, as a machine of a machine. Desire is a machine, and the object of desire is another machine connected to it.

Therefore, the problem is within the subject and its psychological repression. This repression is a result of oedipalized living, where the subject, the ego, the self, is affirmed, preserved, and rationalized by the infrastructure of society. Deleuze and Guattari link this psychological repression with social oppression, because in effect, it makes the masses desire their own repression. Ultimately, desire produces its own fulfillment: “[I]n the subject who desires, desire can be made to desire its own repression.”

Schizophrenia is employed to analyze the condition of the contemporary subject according to their conception of desire, as opposed to the traditional conception of desire with which they disagree. Since psychoanalysis perfectly explains the desire of producing fantasies, they develop an approach to explain desiring-production as it produces reality, oppositional to psychoanalysis in

35 Ibid.
36 Foucault, preface to Anti-Oedipus, xiii.
37 Deleuze and Guattari, Anti-Oedipus, 26.
40 Ibid, 105.
every way: “schizoanalysis.” Since oedipalized living causes psychological repression, which in effect produces social oppression, they seek to question this social oppression as expressed in the organization of society.

In order to analyze desire, schizophrenia is heuristically employed to understand the Oedipal patterning of desire, or rather, how the schizophrenic does not conform to this patterning. “Oedipus is belief injected into the unconscious, it is what gives us faith as it robs us of power, it is what teaches us to desire our own repression,”⁴¹ but the schizophrenic is subject-less, ego-less, self-less, hence capable of elucidating how one can resist the power that subjugates them, the power that makes its subjects (objects) believe that they are in fact free. Schizoanalysis, employing schizophrenia as a process, is a “political and social psychoanalysis” that seeks to “undo the expressive Oedipal unconscious, which is always artificial, repressive and repressed, and mediated by the family, to gain access to the immediate productive unconscious.”⁴² Its goal is to enable the flows of desiring-production, to overcome the egos, to realize desires societal structures teach us to repress.

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⁴¹ Seem, introduction to *Anti-Oedipus*, xx.
⁴² Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 300.
THE MULTIFARIOUSLY PARADOXICAL CULTURE INDUSTRY

Both [high art and industrially produced consumer art] bear the stigmata of capitalism, both contain elements of change (but never, of course, the middle term between Schoenberg and the American film). Both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which, however, they do not add up.

—Theodor W. Adorno, letter to Walter Benjamin, 3 March 1936

In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), one of the core texts of critical theory to come out of the Frankfurt School, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer analyze the relationship between (advancing and intensifying) late capitalism and mass culture, suggesting that the capitalist mode of production had extended itself into leisure time. As such, the activities of leisure time facilitated by the popular mass media, including radio, films, and television, followed the rules of production and leisure was as administered and regulated an activity as work itself:

> Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work. It is sought after as an escape from the mechanized work process, and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again. But at the same time mechanization has such power over a man…[or woman’s] leisure and happiness, and so profoundly determines the manufacture of amusement goods, that his [or her] experiences are inevitably after-images of the work process itself.43

To describe this phenomenon, Adorno and Horkheimer coined the paradoxical term “Culture Industry” in the fourth chapter of their text, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment As Mass Deception.”44

According to Marx, the capitalist mode of production in effect divides society into two broad groups: the ruling class, or bourgeoisie, and the working class, or proletariat. The bourgeoisie own the means of production, gaining profit from the work of the proletariat, while the proletarians sell their labor to the bourgeoisie to earn a profit. Arguably, since the working class is responsible for creating all of the wealth in a given capitalist society through their labor, the proletariat could seize control of their own means of production, overturning the power of the bourgeoisie. Marx

43 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 137.
44 “Culture is a paradoxical commodity.” Ibid, 131.
views the proletariat and bourgeoisie as occupying conflicting positions, hence class struggle, since the goals of the two groups are divergent; accordingly, the two groups will inevitably reach conflict(s). This suggests that capitalism contains revolutionary potential, as the proletariat can challenge and overcome the bourgeoisie by taking control of their own means of production, which would result in the emergence of a truly free society.

In the era of emerging late capitalism, Adorno and Horkheimer found this classical Marxian view to be problematic. Mass culture becomes an extension of the means of production, therefore functioning as a superstructure to Marx’s primary economic base. In other words, the forces and relations of production (base) determine the “culture industry” (superstructure), and in turn, the superstructure influences the base; however, the influence of the base on the superstructure is greater.\textsuperscript{45} Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that this negates the revolutionary potential inherent in the class struggle, because as everything becomes a commodity there is no escape from the capitalist mode of production: “The products of a ‘culture industry’ held no such promise of emancipation, because mass culture forsakes real freedom in the pursuit of endless novelty and entertainment.”\textsuperscript{46}

Since Adorno and Horkheimer deem the revolutionary potential of classical Marxism impossible because of the domination of the mode of production found in the culture industry, they seek an alternative method of emancipation that will enable a truly free society. They argue that “the most demanding, difficult, avant-garde artworks of their time” hold the “emancipatory potential envisaged by Marx’s political economy” because of their “pure purposelessness.”\textsuperscript{47} While they acknowledge that these works are commodities subject to the logic of exchange, their pure purposelessness renders them different than other commodities since they “never have any recourse

\textsuperscript{45} Marx, \textit{A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy}.  
\textsuperscript{46} Cummings and Lewandowska, “A Shadow of Marx,” 408.  
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, 408-409.
to utility and therefore fall outside of Marx’s ethical distinction between objects.” As such, their status as commodities of pure purposelessness “offers a means of contesting, denying even, the utility and instrumentality that reigns in mass cultural production and entertainment.” However, this is problematic because Marx’s political economy suggests that the revolutionary potential of capitalism comes from the working class seizing control of their own means of production, overturning the power of the bourgeoisie. Yet avant-garde art is esoteric to the working class, and it is their separation that maintains the status of the modernist work of art. One is left wondering how, or if, avant-garde art can truly sustain the promise of freedom for the working class, as Adorno and Horkheimer propose.

Avant-garde, or modernist works functioned against society since their status of “purposeless” commodities defied the utility of other commodities. Despite its supposed success, as asserted by Jameson, a critique of the modernist project was that it was out of touch with reality. It sought to retreat from reality, to rebuild a “better” world. With the emergence of late capitalism, it became evident to some that searching for utopia elsewhere would not suffice, for the pursuit was not critically engaged with the changing political economy that impacted the social relations of everyday life. For some, modernism had become an easy way out of an inescapable world.

The Situationist International, dérive, and détournement

There was no need to run away, to search for a promised land. It was here, somewhere very close at hand. We only had to invent it.

—Lev Kassil, The Black Book and Schwambrania

48 Ibid.
49 Ibid, 409.
50 As Clement Greenberg claims in his seminal essay, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939), avant-garde art arose as a cultural critique within the bourgeoisie of consumer society and mass culture, maintaining aesthetic integrity and critical engagement, whereas kitsch was the product of this culture, a result of industrialization and urbanization, merely produced to be consumed by the working class. Arguably, the revolutionary potential of modernism’s critical engagement could not be realized because of its esotericism. Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1, 5-22.
Man must be everyday, or he will not be at all.

—Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Volume I

A schizophrenic out for a walk is a better model than a neurotic lying on the analyst’s couch.

—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*

Ivan Chtcheglov’s text “Formulaire pour un urbanisme nouveau” (“Formulary for a New Urbanism”), written in October 1953 and published in June 1958 in the first issue of *Internationale Situationniste*, proposed an approach to the city against the modernist approach championed by Le Corbusier. While they would have both agreed on the city as a landscape capable of evoking senses and emotions, a space that everyone could experience aesthetically, their proposed programs were very different. Le Corbusier envisioned a clean, orderly city with architectural forms based on the geometry of the temple. To achieve his vision, cities would have to be completely transformed, erased. But Chtcheglov envisioned working within the space that already existed, both temporally and physically. In this sense, his view opposed the views of the old avant-garde’s like the Dadaists, who sought to develop a new sort of consciousness that involved a return to elemental expressions or the primitive; or the Surrealists, who sought “derangement of all the senses,” and put faith in the world of dreams.  

What James Clifford calls a “Surrealist ethnography” links ethnographic activity with the artistic avant-garde of Surrealism, suggesting a practice of defamiliarization in order to realize the potential within already familiar objects and spaces. Referencing this and Chtcheglov’s approach,

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52 Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism.”
McKenzie Wark calls the practice taken up by the Situationists, Situationist ethnography:

> It emerges out of Debord’s close study of Saint-Germain delinquents. It adopts their habits, their *ethnos*, and turns it into method. The Letterist International are ethnographers of their own difference, cartographers of an attitude of life. This life did not lie outside the modern, Western one, but inside, in the fissures of its cities. It did not yearn for a *primitive* life before history, but rather for one that was to come after it.\(^{53}\)

The Situationist International (SI) was an internationalist European, though primarily French, group of artists and intellectuals intent on forming a movement of revolutionary force that worked within the constructs of everyday life in order to challenge hegemonies of commodified lived experience. Through this, they sought to engage in class struggle by reclaiming individual autonomy from the spectacle. Two practices to do so, *dérive* and *détournement*, were first developed by the aforementioned Letterist International (LI), though theoretically refined by the SI.

> The dérive, which literally means “drift,” is a practice of wandering about the city, going on an unplanned journey through the space of the urban landscape.\(^{54}\) Engaging in this practice challenged the conventional, or rather, commodified divisions of space and time, as the journey is predicated on one’s own sense of space and time as opposed to those upheld by capitalism. In other words, through the dérive, one can find one’s own uses of space and time beyond their intended, or rather, enforced functions. Wandering improvisationally leads to unexpected encounters and unintended result: “The dérive is the experimental mapping of a situation, the trace of the probabilities of realizing a desire.”\(^{55}\)

> The dérive is central to *psychogéographie* (psychogeography), developed by Chtcheglov and defined by Guy Debord “as the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical

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\(^{53}\) Wark, *The Beach Beneath The Street*, 22.

\(^{54}\) “Its Latin root ‘derivare’ means to draw off a stream, to divert a flow. Its English descendants include the word ‘derive’ and also “river.” Its whole field of meaning is aquatic, conjuring up flows, channels, eddies, currents, and also drifting, sailing or tacking against the wind. It suggests a space and time of liquid movement, sometimes predictable but sometimes turbulent. The word dérive condenses a whole attitude of life, the sort one might acquire in the backwaters of Saint-Germain-des-Prés.” Ibid.

\(^{55}\) Ibid, 57.
environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.” It is a practice of experiencing the city objectively and subjectively, accepting its complexities and moving with its flows. Unlike the Surrealists, who wandered the city searching for the uncanny to prompt reveries, bringing Freud’s psychoanalysis to the streets, the practice of psychogéographie took the city for what it was, creating a practice of play and strategy within the city that sought to challenge conventions of commodified space and time. Therefore, the city becomes a place to make discoveries about space and time outside the division of labor.

Chtcheglov viewed the practice of the dérive as “a technique,” that was “almost...therapeutic.” However, this kind of therapy was completely different than its predecessor, psychoanalysis, because “it did not sever language from the continuum of practices in which it is embedded.” Chtcheglov writes, “The dérive (with its flow of acts, its gestures, its promenades, its encounters) was to the totality exactly what psychoanalysis (in the best sense) is to language.” From this statement, it becomes clear that Chtcheglov’s conception of the dérive and Deleuze and Guattari’s schizoanalysis are similar in that they are both a form of analysis, responding to and opposing Freudian psychoanalysis. Although Deleuze and Guattari make no reference to Chtcheglov, the practice of the dérive, “with its flows of acts, its gestures, its promenades, its encounters,” is like Deleuze and Guattari’s nomad thought, thinking that operates outside the conceptual structures enforced by and maintained by the established order. Nomad thought is that of the schizophrenic, “out for a walk” rather than on the “analyst’s couch.” Furthermore, both dérive and schizoanalysis embrace desire, as they consider desire to be true and capable of producing reality, yet desire it suppressed by the capitalist mode of production and its extension into everyday life.

57 Wark, The Beach Beneath The Street, 26.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
Like dérive, détournement also sought to work within preexisting structures in order to subvert them, essentially turning capitalism against itself, but its focus was on existing media.

Debord and Gil J. Wolman defined two main categories of détourned elements — minor détournements and deceptive détournements:

Minor détournement is the détournement of an element which has no importance in itself and which thus draws all its meaning from the new context in which it has been placed. For example, a press clipping, a neutral phrase, a commonplace photograph. Deceptive détournement, also termed premonitory-proposition détournement, is in contrast the détournement of an intrinsically significant element, which derives a different scope from the new context.60

A work of deceptive détournement might place political text or a work of art, for example, in a new context, so it is the context that the already well-known material is situated in that enables new readings or meanings to be made.61 Recontextualizing pre-existing elements, détournement not only sought to devalue the original material and meaning associated with the material, but give new meaning that subverted the original content. Furthermore, while Debord stresses the importance of critical content in détourned works, they must also be self-critical in form: “It is a communication which, recognizing the limitations of the specialized sphere of established communication, ‘is now going to contain its own critique.’”62

In addition to these practices, the SI published journals and pamphlets, made paintings and films, held exhibitions, conferences, events, lectures, and organized boycotts, all with the intent of disrupting the habitual order of things, the forces of production, the way in which capitalism seeped into everyday lived experience: “Through diverse practice, and by all means necessary, they hoped to act as catalysts within Marx’s revolutionary process, encouraging vandalism, strikes, and sabotage as

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61 Debord and Wolman explain that extensive détourned works are those that are usually composed of one or more series of minor and deceptive détournements. Ibid.
a way of disrupting the forces of production, and the commodity realm of ‘spectacle.’”\textsuperscript{63} Giving revolutionary attention to the practices of everyday life, the SI sought to resist commodified life by reinventing life with the material at hand, working within the system yet on their own terms.

**Situationist tactics today**

When the SI officially dissolved in 1972, any traces of the avant-garde were already long gone. While new artistic movements and practices filled the void, the critical engagement of the Situationists lingered on, as their praxis of everyday life and critique of advanced capitalism continued to be pertinent, as well as becoming meaningful in new ways as late capitalism, consumer culture, and the omnipresent mass media continues to intensify.

In *The Beach Beneath The Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International* (2011), McKenzie Wark (somewhat facetiously) writes, “Every kid with a BitTorrent client is an unconscious Situationist in the making.”\textsuperscript{64} According to this logic, anyone with a Facebook profile is a “schizophrenic” new media artist in the making. While both of these statements are true in principle, having a BitTorrent client or a Facebook profile is not enough, in terms of subverting the logic of late capitalism; rather, it is the practice one employs through these media that can ultimately be effective. Discussing his own approach to remix, or postproduction culture, Mark Amerika explains his practice as being “akin to a philosophical investigation of what it means to be creative, that we are all born-remixers, and as such we are continually sampling from the datum that surrounds us and innovating new forms of aesthetic viability.”\textsuperscript{65} Even if we are not consciously remixing, we are living samples, comprised of content accumulated, filtered, and (re)contextualized. However, Amerika acknowledges this explanation can result in a problematic understanding: if everyone is a

\textsuperscript{63} Cummings and Lewandowska, “A Shadow of Marx,” 411.

\textsuperscript{64} Wark, *The Beach Beneath The Street*, 42.

\textsuperscript{65} UNREALTIME, 20.
remix artist and everything is a remix, the practice is reduced to something too simplistic, losing its power as a method of intervening in the mainstream meaning-making process.\textsuperscript{66} What differentiates all of us as born-remixers, a result of living in digital network culture with \textit{Source Material Everywhere}, and remix practitioners is \textit{how one} accesses the data and \textit{how one} manipulates, postproduces, or \textit{remixes} data.\textsuperscript{67} Because remix is inherent in today’s digital network culture, it can become easily commodified and marketable, applied to everything and sold to everyone. The self-aware remix artist resists this capitalist logic of commodification, sampling and postproducing data in order to subvert its mainstream meaning, which is what makes their practice effective. This logic can be applied to remixological practices that are a result of living in the digital age, including the two aforementioned examples. Illegally downloading through a BitTorrent client does not make someone a Situationist, nor does having a Facebook profile make someone a “schizophrenic” new media artist with conceptual personae. In actuality, typical Internet usage, specifically using a BitTorrent client or Facebook in this instance, is not critically engaged; instead, it reinforces capitalist logic, as both are consumption driven activities. It is when these practices become self-aware – aware of the capitalist system in which the practice is situated and aware of how the self functions within this system – that they can be used as a means to resist hegemonic capitalist logic.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{67} As born-remixers, we continually sample from the data that surrounds us in order to innovate. Amerika calls this data \textit{Source Material Everywhere} – “it’s literally and metaphorically in the air, ready for downloading.” Ibid.
FACEBOOK, OR, THE VIRTUAL EMBODIMENT OF CONSUMER CAPITALISM

My interest in Facebook is not entirely explicable. In part, I feel like Walter Benjamin, drawn to the arcades of Paris, making them the focal point of his analysis of modernity, an idea that came to him from reading the surrealist novel *Le Paysan de Paris (Paris Peasant)* (1926) by Louis Aragon, “which begins with an image of the arcades ‘when the pickaxe menaces them.’”68 Jae Emerling writes of this experience, including an excerpt of Benjamin’s letter to Adorno, in which he tries to explain their appeal, followed by a close reading:

Benjamin’s reading of *Paris Peasant* divulges an image of the arcades as “true sanctuaries of a cult of the ephemeral,” an image that compels him to invest years of study. As an instance of “profane illumination,” Benjamin suggests that the arcades presented themselves to him; *they chose him*. At the moment of reading, with his heart racing, excited and anxious, he was instantaneously consigned to studying and explicating the arcades as the “origin” of commodity capitalism for the next thirteen years of his life.69

Similarly, my own investment in this area of study has seemingly chosen me. It began with stumbling across Guy Debord’s *La société du spectacle (The Society of the Spectacle)* (1967), prompting me to study the relationship between images and capitalism. Through this, I drew a comparison between Marx’s theory of the fetishism of commodities and the images uploaded on social networking sites, such as Facebook. Viewing a photograph of someone online has become a form of interaction, replacing physical social interaction to some extent with virtual social interaction. It is not my intention to privilege one means of interaction over the other, because both are valid in my opinion, but it is significant to address because the image itself becomes an object, a representation, and therefore is consumed like a commodity. Consequently, the self as displayed through representation becomes a commodity.

I was intent on exploring this further, but I was concerned that my interest in Facebook would be considered inconsequential, or perhaps something that might not be taken seriously. Still, I

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69 Ibid.
was compelled to study the site, drawing another comparison between Benjamin and myself. Although his letter to Adorno was received with skepticism, he pursued. And just as Benjamin “was instantaneously consigned to study and explicating the arcades as the ‘origin of commodity capitalism,’” I too felt instantaneously consigned to Facebook, so that I could study and explicate the site as the embodiment of commodity capitalism, making it the centerpiece for my analysis of contemporary culture.

I began a more in depth analysis of the site through practice-based research, deactivating my then Facebook account, which I had from approximately March 2007 – March 2011, in order to make a new Facebook, My real (fake) Facebook. For the month of April 2011, I sought to portray a version of myself that was more “accurate” than my previous account. Accurate is a problematic word, since it is impossible to discern what accurate is, and even if one could, the self is in constant flux as a result of time and/or context. With my use of the word, I meant altering my self as little as possible in order to represent my self as lived in every day life as opposed to the edited self generally depicted on Facebook profiles, my own previous account included. Rather than updating my status to share news of “cool” happenings in my life and posting pictures of myself at concerts, parties, on vacation, or whatever other activities that might be deemed as “interesting,” I instead posted status updates and photographs that captured all of my daily activities on my profile (2.0). Documenting the banality of everyday life and posting every picture taken throughout the day (good, bad, unflattering, embarrassing, etcetera), I attempted to represent my self in full, as un-edited, un-fictionalized, and un-performative as possible. Essentially, I was interested in the way users edit themselves to appear on their profiles, molding their identities to fit within the parameters of the site and constructing ideal selves for other users to view, and the relationship this type of editing has to capitalism. Just as the digital representation has taken on the qualities of a commodity, so too has the profile become an advertisement to sell that commodity. In other words, the profile functions as an
advertisement for the self. Working within the structure of the site and against expectations, I sought to elucidate the relationship between Facebook and capitalism. I will revisit some of the ideas explored in this essay, expand upon some, discredit others, and introduce more recent findings.

In reevaluating this project, I will argue that “typical” day-to-day Facebook use is a result of and reinforces consumer capitalism in two distinct ways. First, it is a virtual manifestation of structures in the physical world, namely the economic system of late capitalism; and secondly, the self is translated into a virtual space where it can be edited according to the user, but rather than individualize, this process reinforces how the self has been molded by the socioeconomic system of which it is a product. Both reinforce the logic of late capitalism, prompting users to maintain a virtual world that is not as separate from the physical world as it might seem. In popular discourse, many describe activities as transpiring in the “real” world, while activities online are designated to the virtual world. However, I make the distinction that there is a physical world and a virtual, both very “real” indeed. The two inform one another, seep into one another, and where one begins and the other ends is not discernable. The structure of Facebook and the interactions that take place via the interface are informed by the physical world, and the virtual manifestation and interactions inform and augment the physical. Interactions in both worlds, blended as they are, replicate, reproduce, and reinforce the logic of consumer society, as Jameson argues. Only when this cycle is recognized and its inherent qualities are used as a means of subversion can it begin to be broken — resisted.
Me, myself, and Facebook

As one of the most popular social networking sites in the English-speaking world, Facebook is an undeniable part of contemporary culture.\(^{70}\) Launched in February 2004, the site had 100 million active users in nine months.\(^{71}\) Membership hit 800 million in 2011, and will reach 1 billion in 2012, with the biggest growth occurring in Asia and the developing world.\(^{72}\) Although plenty of other social networking sites are in use, depending on user preference and availability in one’s country, Facebook is particularly relevant for my own discussion for several reasons, most being personal. I live in the United States and English is my first language; accordingly, Facebook is my social network of choice, or at least my demographics’ social network of choice. Furthermore, Facebook has been instrumental in the social media revolution, even though it surely was not the first social network of its kind and its popularity has precedents. I use myself to explain this point.

Born into the age of MTV and the commercialization of the Internet, I could be defined as a member of Generation Y and a digital native. Certainly, these categories are broad, vary according to region and socioeconomic background, and as such, are not definitive; yet characteristics used to define these nomenclatures are applicable. Growing up during the nineties and early 2000s, technologies grew with me, reshaping my life despite my naïve oblivion. I remember getting my first e-mail address when I was eight, kd8keroppi@aol.com, which allowed me to log onto America Online, browse their content, send e-mails (to who?), and use AOL Instant Messenger (AIM). By third grade, I was regularly instant messaging my friends when I got home from school and on the weekends. Several years later, I went into chatrooms for the first time, for no reason other than curiosity. I remember the anxiety of logging in, virtually stepping in to a room of strangers,

\(^{70}\) This assessment is based off the site’s popularity in English-speaking countries, including the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

\(^{71}\) “An ‘active user’ is defined by Facebook as a user who has visited the website in the last 30 days.”

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook#cite_note-totalactiveusers-29

interrogating you, asking for your age, sex, and location (a/s/l). I usually lied, attempting to hide my true identity since I had heard of the perils of sharing information on the web. Although I did not do this often, when I did, I tried to keep it private. I thought if my parents found me, they would question my motives. I questioned my motives. I signed up for MySpace when I was approximately fourteen; the site launched in August 2003. I created a profile, displaying my picture, information such as sex, age, location, and filled in the “About me” and “Who I’d like to meet” sections, along with other general information, favorite books, favorite bands, etcetera. Facebook, launched in February 2004, had many similar features, but one could only sign up for the site with a university e-mail address. This changed in 2007, and shortly thereafter, I joined, urged to by my older sister (she already had an account since she was in college) and my peers who wanted to join since we were heading off to college soon enough. When I joined Facebook, I kept my MySpace account, as many of my peers did; but in approximately one year’s time, there was an exodus of sorts from MySpace to Facebook. Users, myself included, deleted their MySpace accounts, becoming singularly loyal to Facebook.

I should also mention here that contemporaneous to the emergence of MySpace and Facebook, cellphones became an integral part of daily life. My peers had phones in middle school, which I coveted, but I could not have my own until I had my driver’s license and could pay the bill. Needless to say, with the increase in connectivity brought about by these various technologies, each subsequent development augmenting virtual proximity, I suddenly found myself constantly connected. It was almost as if I did not have a choice. Connectivity happened and became the norm so quickly, what came before it seemed like it never existed.

It might be obvious to state that Facebook’s success is a result of its time, launching as Web 2.0 burgeoned, partly thanks to technological sophistication with JavaScript and broadband. However, the issue is more complex than this simple explanation for several reasons. First, as
described above, there were several preceding developments that did not have the same success rate as Facebook, in terms of users. Secondly, with the emergence of Web 2.0, other social networks and user-generated content sites launched and grew rapidly, but none to the same extent as Facebook. So, the more complex explanation for Facebook’s success might be deduced by asking: What is it about Facebook that makes it so appealing, or as some users describe, addictive? And perhaps even more complicated, how do we intervene, breaking this addiction?

These are problematic questions. As Sherry Turkle concludes in *Alone Together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other* (2011), fighting an addiction means completely cutting the addictive substance out of the addict’s life. However, we know that this solution is highly unlikely, considering the Internet, cell phones, and other twenty-first century interactive technologies are here to stay (at least until new technologies develop). Turkle asserts that we are at a crucial moment of opportunity, where we must ask: Do these technologies serve our human purposes? What are these purposes? We must reassess our relationship with these technologies, which will hopefully enable us to realize how it is these technologies function in our lives. Ultimately, we must become aware of what it is we are engaging in, and in turn, the cycle we are perpetuating in the process.

**Why some people “Like” Facebook**

To start, let us return to the point about the Myspace to Facebook exodus that took place beginning in 2006. In her article, “White Flight in Networked Publics: How Race and Class Shaped American Teen Engagement with MySpace and Facebook,” Microsoft researcher Danah Boyd argues that race and social class were significant factors in this shift. She makes this claim based on five years of research, from 2004-2009, which took place in seventeen states and a range of ethnically diverse communities. White and Asian teens from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were the groups likely to make the switch from MySpace to Facebook, while black, Latino, and working class teens
continued to use MySpace, what Boyd deems the “digital ghetto.” Conceived by students at Harvard University, Facebook was originally only available to Harvard students, which was later expanded to include other colleges in the Boston area, Ivy League institutions, and Stanford University. Accessibility was then granted to other universities and colleges, basically to anyone with an .edu e-mail address, before opening to high school aged students, and lastly, to anyone age thirteen and older. Considering Facebook’s origin, it becomes clear why white and Asian teens from higher socioeconomic backgrounds made the switch, while blacks, Latinos, and working class teens did not: the two sites reinforced notions of privilege upheld in the physical world, segregating individuals based on their likelihood of attending college or university level institutions.

However, accessibility was not the sole factor for the switch; the sites contrasting appearances are also very telling. MySpace, with bright orange section titles and the possibility of altering one’s profile with different colored backgrounds, images, and .gif animations, is described as being “more ghetto” by one participant in Boyd’s study. Facebook on the other hand, maintains uniformity across user profiles, as there is no option to edit the colors or layout. This enforced conformity along with its sterile, minimalist design can be seen as something akin to the “conscientious restraint [that] has been one marker of bourgeois fashion.”

While I could go on about the other insightful findings Boyd presents in her study, including the way the media propagated the “ghetto”-ness associated with MySpace, my main objective of presenting this information is to elucidate how aspects of the physical world are translated into the virtual world. By this, I mean that the site is not merely a reflection of the physical, but rather it is a virtual construction that maintains and reinforces the structures that are already in place. Through

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74 For example, although the homepage of Facebook welcomes all potential users age thirteen and up, there are a number of factors that impact which users join the site. Signing up for MySpace or Facebook is no simply a consumer choice, as maybe choosing between Coca-Cola and Pepsi might be; rather, the preference reflects the reproduction, replication, and reinforcement of existing social categories determined by race, ethnicity and socioeconomic background.
my investigation, I will illustrate how the site does this in terms of the capitalist mode of production and consumer culture, and to some degree, I will argue that this is why the site has been so successful among certain users. Even though my own project concerning Facebook and Boyd’s investigation are on the whole very different, their goals are similar. Essentially, we are both interested in exploring the ways in which structures in the physical world are maintained and reinforced in the virtual. While the evidence for her argument comes from sociological data gathered by conducting interviews and observing, my own evidence is based on analysis of the capitalist mode of production and the way this economic system shapes society and human relations, while also drawing on personal experience and practice-based research.

Capitalism 101: Objectification, alienation, and the fetishism of commodities

Our products would be so many mirrors in which we saw reflected our essential nature.

—Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto

Capitalism is a complex system, not limited to one historical moment or a definitive set of characteristics. Yet broadly understood, it is a socioeconomic system where social relations are based on commodities for exchange. This system can be classified by private ownership of the means of production, the manufacture of goods or services to be sold for profit, accumulation of capital, competitive markets, engagement in markets of exchange, and wage labor. Most relevant to my discussion is the relationship between private ownership of the means of production and (the exploitation of) wage labor.

75 The evidence presented by Boyd supports my own switch from MySpace to Facebook. As a white, “middle-class” individual expected to attend college after graduating from high school, I certainly fit the mold. Including this information, I hope to convey that although the Facebook homepage claims the site is “free and always will be” for users thirteen and older, this does not eradicate issues of class and privilege. Furthermore, my choice to use Facebook for my own practice-based research and case study is solely a reflection of my own background. I in no way intend to imply that Facebook is better than other sites or more worthy of study.
Those who own the means of production, the bourgeoisie, buy the labor power of those who do not own the means of production, the proletariat, to manufacture goods or services to be sold for profit. In having private ownership of the means of production, the bourgeoisie also owns the workers’ labor that manufactures products, and the products themselves. The sale of these products will pay for wages, or the price of labor power, which covers the cost of everything that goes into the manufacture of products; but the main objective is to attain surplus value, enabling the accumulation of capital. This process is fueled by the sale of products, which would not be possible without the labor of the proletariat. Because the proletariat’s labor manufactures the product, the worker becomes inextricably linked to the product produced. Thus, the worker’s labor is capital, as well as the product. To some extent, this means that the laborer is equally as valuable as the product, but more significantly, that the laborer is valued as an object. As such, the worker becomes assimilated to the product, resulting in objectification and alienation.

According to Marx, objectification is the materialization of human activity into an existing form, and alienation is the process whereby people become separated from aspects of their human nature, or Gattungswesen (species-being). While objectification is characteristic of (all) human labor, alienation is a systematic result of capitalism. However, objectification is related to capitalism when human labor becomes objectified, as described above. Additionally, the concept of objectification is related to capitalism because the workers’ labor manufactures products in which they can no longer recognize their own character, since the owner of the means of production administers their work. As the bourgeoisie controls the proletarians’ production, their work is no longer individual or contributing to a communal system; instead, it is administered, privately owned, and is a privatized asset. Hence alienation occurs, because workers are no longer connected to the product of their labor and the bourgeoisie considers them mere tools in the mode of production.
To further understand Marx’s theory of alienation, one must consider the four ways in which alienation occurs: 1) Alienation of the worker from the work he produces, from the product of his labor; 2) Alienation of the worker from working, from the act of producing itself; 3) Alienation of the worker from himself as producer, or species-being; and 4) Alienation of the worker from other workers, or producers. As a result, the social character of a person’s labor is no longer evident in the marketplace. Instead, the products of one’s labor interact in the marketplace, replacing human interaction. Consequently, commodities are instilled with social characteristics. This is different from the general concept of objectification, in which human activity is evident in an object, because this process, the fetishism of commodities, is concerned with social relations. Explained in Section 4 of Chapter 1 of *Das Kapital, Kritik der politischen Ökonomie (Capital: Critique of Political Economy)* (1867), the fetishism of commodities is the notion that commodities possess human properties and that social relations are expressed as, interceded by, and transformed into objectified relationships between these commodities. Ultimately, objects come to represent human life; authentic social interaction is replaced with representation.

**Every Detail Counts.**

A tremendous business machine now exists to satisfy human desires.

> —Charles W. Mears, *Salesmanship for the New Era*

As industrialized labor burgeoned during the period of monopoly capitalism, factory work became a viable employment option for many individuals. Accordingly, people moved from rural, preindustrial cities to urban centers to find work in the factory system. These workers were often in opposition to the discipline of their newfound factory jobs, so production was not optimally efficacious. Frederick W. Taylor, a mechanical engineer of the era, sought to improve industrial efficiency. To do so, Taylor developed a theory of management, scientific management theory or
Taylorism, which analyzed and synthesized workflows in order to increase efficiency, and therefore, productivity. His theory of management is exemplary of the way in which workers are objectified and alienated as a result of the capitalist mode of production.

Fundamental to Taylor’s managerial strategy was the systematic observation of human behavior in the workplace, which would then allow him to formulate methods to standardize worker behavior in order to control the workforce most efficaciously. It would be the management’s task to conceptualize the overall job and monitor workers, while the workers were seen as the tools to carry out jobs, pawns within the production process. Taylorism aimed to remove brainwork from the factory workers’ duties, leaving that aspect of production to the managerial departments. Taylor’s managerial strategy can be summarized in three principles: 1) Dissociation of the labor process from the skills of the workers; 2) Separation of conception from execution; and 3) Use of this monopoly of knowledge to control each step of the labor process and its mode of execution.\(^7\) In short, regulating human behavior and inhibiting thoughtful activity would result in optimal efficiency.

Increased productivity in the factory system gave rise to jobs that specialized in selling the commodities that factory work produced, such as retail, service, and clerical occupations. For the sake of clarity, these jobs can be grouped into the general category of “salesperson.” While the factory worker is valued for their labor in manufacturing the product to be sold, the salesperson is valued for their ability to sell the product. Both are valued for their relationship to the object, either by manufacture or sale, since the object is the means to gain capital. They are considered tools in the mode of production. Therefore, it can be deduced that the salesperson is objectified and alienated as well, albeit in a different context.

The regulation of worker behavior carried over into the realm of sales, as standardizing behavior was done as a means to increase productivity, in this case selling products in the most

\(^7\) Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 112-21.
effective manner. Unlike factory jobs, these jobs depended on human relations between salesperson and potential buyer to sell products; as such, personal behavior and appearance of the salesperson were regulated as these factors could potentially impact the sale of a product. To successfully sell a product, the salesperson had to understand every fragment of their identity in order to realize how a customer might perceive their appearance and demeanor, which in turn would influence sales. A passage from Charles W. Mears’ *Salesmanship for the New Era* (1929) encourages the sort of self-scrutiny necessary to be a successful salesperson:

Every Detail Counts.—The salesman is on display. Everything about him may count; he cannot tell what small detail about himself the prospect may notice – hence the salesman must consciously go over himself and check up…Look yourself over daily or oftener.77

Looking at oneself as if through the eyes of another was becoming a job requirement as this new field of labor continued to expand into the middle of the twentieth century. Referring to Mears’ passage, Stuart Ewen writes, “Anything about one’s *intrinsic self*, it was argued, might intervene in the achievement of a desired goal (sales), so it was essential to cultivate an *extrinsic self* to hold up constantly, to avoid the possibility of spontaneous rejection.”78 The extrinsic self was a mass produced personality and appearance that would appeal to the consumer—a “marketable self” that could conceal “those aspects of character that might get in the way of sales.”79 However, to appeal to the consumer’s emotions, the salesperson could not only present their cultivated extrinsic self, but rather, this molded identity needed to appear genuine, believable to customers.

The salesperson became a critical component of the capitalist mode of production, not only serving as an “advance agent” for manufacturing companies, but also as “prosperity’s ambassador,” a “counselor who points out directions for our enjoyment of life.”80 The material abundance produced by growing industry introduced a new way of life in the U.S., where wealth and goods

77 Mears, *Salesmanship for the New Era*, 52-60.
78 Ewen, *All Consuming Images*, 83.
79 Ibid.
were available, albeit to varying degrees, to more people. Material goods were associated with pleasure and leisure, or the “enjoyment of life,” and the salesperson functioned as the ambassador of this enjoyment, providing goods and services to customers that would give them pleasure. As such, pleasure became associated with consumption; human desire could be satiated by the business machine.

“Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life”

Although Adorno and Horkheimer’s cultural theory has been criticized for its resolute defense of modernist art and its critique of mass culture as a product of the “culture industry,” its critical analysis of culture is still applicable today, perhaps in ways they could not anticipate, and perhaps more so than its critics are able to admit. In the era postmodernity, or late capitalism, the capitalist mode of production has seeped into nearly every aspect of everyday life, deepening and spreading as the capitalist mode of production intensifies with neoliberal policies and globalization. Moreover, as technologies have increasingly developed throughout the twenty and twenty-first centuries, media has become inextricable from everyday life, promulgating the capitalist mode of production in unprecedented ways. Facebook is an exemplary product of the culture industry in the digital age, for its design and the interactions that take place via the site maintain elements of the capitalist mode of production, reinforcing the economic system of late capitalism and consumer culture.

The self as represented on a Facebook profile is one that is uploaded, modified, and edited according to the parameters of the site. Information about and images of oneself must fit into the predetermined categorical boxes presented in the layout, including space for work information, schools attended, hometown, current city, basic info (such as religious and political views, birthday, etcetera), contact info, a general “About (user name)” section, as well as a main profile picture with corresponding album, and albums for other pictures.
While the layout and categories for one to fill out have slightly changed since 2004, the most recent installment is the Timeline, documenting status updates, wall posts, and uploaded pictures in a chronological order, starting with the most recent at the top. As one scrolls down, items are grouped into years, with a sidebar one can click to reach a certain year expediently, as opposed to endless scrolling. Most striking, perhaps, is the fact that the beginning of one’s Timeline does not begin when one joined Facebook; rather, it is marked with one’s birth, according to the birth date entered by the user. Personal information is accessed by clicking on the box below one’s profile picture, leading to a new page. Here, one finds categories including “Work and Education,” “Living,” “Family,” “History by Year,” “About (user name),” “Basic Info,” “Contact Info,” and “Favorite Quotations.” Subcategories within these fields provide further structure. All of these categories were a part of previous designs, except for “History by Year,” which reinforces the Timeline layout of the main profile page.81

Facebook users edit their profiles and interact with other users in a way that is determined by the structure of the site, molding their identity to conform to this structure. But identities are also molded by the individual, as users choose what information to disclose, what pictures they upload, the way they interact with other users, and who can see what information. Because of this, content varies with every profile, but the integrity of the layout is maintained. Even though individuality can be expressed to some degree, conformity prevails as a result of the design. As mentioned in Boyd’s study, this conformity is attractive to Facebook users (read: white or Asian, middle to upper-middle class, according to Boyd’s findings); they identify with the site, its simplistic design and layout, its normalized regulations and expectations. There is room to express one’s individuality through information and pictures posted, but each profile essentially looks the same.

81 There are numerous other developments that have taken place throughout the past eight years, including the addition of the News Feed, “Like” button, Subscribe button, the ability to designate certain users to user-specific lists, and Facebook chat, to name a few. However, describing these developments in detail is not necessary to provide a basic understanding of the site’s overall layout and structure.
After signing up and filling out profile information, users find and add friends. These are generally people they know in the physical world, including friends, family, work associates, acquaintances, etcetera. Adding other users as friends enables one to see information that might otherwise be private, although this is completely dependent upon individual privacy settings, and interact with other users in a number of ways, such as posting comments or pictures on walls, commenting or liking status updates, photos, or wall posts, sending private messages (similar to e-mailing but mediated by Facebook), or messaging instantaneously using Facebook chat. Of these interactions, the ones that are public (like writing on another user’s wall or liking a photo, not privately sent messages) are listed in a main News Feed, which is on every user’s homepage, yet is unique to each user as it is dependent on the actions of those they are friends with. Although every action by every user is not listed in the News Feed, the actions of the people one interacts with most or the actions that have received the most attention (as in many people have “Liked” a photo or commented on status) are generally listed in the News Feed.

Interactions on Facebook are social in nature, as they require two or more individuals, but users can also have interactions with other users even when they are not necessarily corresponding with another user. In other words, viewing is also a form of interaction enabled by the site. By looking at a user’s profile, one is able to learn about that individual, depending on the information they disclose, wall posts by the individual or friends, postings on other users’ walls, and uploaded photos. This form of interaction is paradoxical, because a user is still engaging with another user by viewing their digital representation, yet the interaction is one-sided. The presence of another individual is no longer necessary for interaction, as representations suffice.

While posting, chatting, messaging, and commenting mostly involve typing and sharing text-based information, the primary activity that takes place on Facebook is viewing. As a social networking site, users post information with the intent of sharing it with other users; everything is
meant to be seen by other users. Consequently, there is an editing process that takes place, both conscious and subconscious, as users have the ability to control what other users see about them, in terms of what they post and accessibility to posted information. Essentially, the profile is a conglomeration of edited information and images that come to stand for the individual, a digital representation that signifies the self.

One might assume that the prospect of anonymity Internet usage enables would encourage users to experiment with their identities, role-play, and/or say whatever they wanted. Although this happens to some extent, most users try to be as much like “themselves” as possible, bringing their personal background with them when they connect.\(^\text{82}\) This is especially true on a site like Facebook. Since the layout and design are regulated, maintaining uniformity and conformity, experimentation and self-expression are restricted, perhaps even implicitly censured, as the self has to fit within the parameters of the site. Furthermore, Facebook profiles bind users to their identities in the physical world by having their names as their user names and images of themselves posted on their profiles. While these two features are inherent in the format of the site, one must also take into consideration the offline implications of maintaining physical identity in this virtual space. Facebook is used by many as a way of interacting with friends, family, and acquaintances. Whether users are communicating with close friends whom they see every day, those who live far way, family, friends from study abroad, and so forth, Facebook is a tool for managing social relations. The site enables users to augment offline relationships with virtual interactions and maintain relationships with a vast amount of people simply by looking at information and images, and sometimes posting, chatting, commenting, or liking. People want to be “themselves” because virtual interactions on the site are inextricable to the physical self.

\(^{82}\) For one example, see Weisbuch, et al., “On being liked on the web and in the ‘real world.’”
The structure of the site and the virtual interactions that take place via the interface are very rigid, determined by the layout and design, which enforces users to represent themselves and interact with other users in a specified way. Yet this is not a distinct virtual culture, separated from the physical world; instead, it is informed and constructed by the structures in the physical world, namely the economic system of late capitalism and consumer culture. Facebook is the virtual embodiment of consumer capitalism, reinforcing its logic despite its innocent façade:

**Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life.**

**Sign Up**
**It’s free and always will be.**

Enticing. No wonder everyone is hooked. However, once I understood the relationship between images and capitalism, namely the image as an object, a representation, and therefore consumed like a commodity, I began to critically engage with and investigate the site. Viewing other users profiles is a form of interaction, albeit paradoxical, as users can interact with other users by viewing their digital representations; their physical presence or reciprocal responses are not needed for interaction to occur. This interaction is like Marxist theory of the fetishism of commodities, because authentic social interaction has been replaced with its representation. The profile, the representation, has come to possess human properties and social relations are now expressed as, interceded by, and transformed into objectified relationships between these representations. Subsequently, as the self is objectified through this consumptive viewing, I began to understand the site as a giant advertising campaign, selling the one and only, YOU! In a culture obsessed with individuality, uniqueness, and celebrities, as well as the accumulation of consumer goods, signifying prestige to others through ownership, no wonder Facebook is successful. Furthermore, as technologies develop, an increasing amount of time is spent in front of screens; less time is spent engaging in physical social interaction.
The representation of the self is objectified, consumed like a commodity, while the profile is the advertisement for that commodity. Facebook perpetuates the selling of products, prompting users to post and share, view and consume. The desire to “connect and share with the people in your life,” to be intimate and build relationships, is satiated by the tremendous business machine of Facebook. Even though it’s free, meaning there is no monetary charge for joining and using the site, there is always a cost. (This is capitalism after all.) What do we pay with in exchange? Information? Time? Our selves?

Despite the desire to share and connect, users only share certain information, a result of the uniform structure and the knowledge that other users will see everything posted. The enforced structure and subsequent way of acting is reminiscent of Taylorism, which sought to standardize worker behavior and inhibit individual thought so that production would operate most efficaciously. As the regulation of worker behavior and thinking became more stringent when the worker became a public figure as the salesperson, the self is even more scrutinized today, regulated by the individual in the age of information sharing and broadcasting identity. In the era of late capitalism, consuming material goods is still associated with pleasure and leisure, but more prevalent even is the consumption of immaterial goods, their virtual representations signifying much more than pixels on a screen.

Figure 1. Kerry Doran. *My real (fake) Facebook* (2011).

Like the salesperson who is always on display, so too is the Facebook user, as the self is always in the public’s eye, present online, available to anyone who logs in. Never knowing what
another will scrutinize, one begins to see *self as other*; consequently, Facebook users edit the “self” with the information shared on the profile. Ewen’s analysis of the extrinsic self, cultivated by the salesperson in order to achieve desired goals (sales), is similar to editing oneself on Facebook. Users cultivate their extrinsic selves, editing their identities, their representations, in order to add friends and maintain Facebook relationships. One creates a “marketable self,” concealing aspects of the character that might intervene in sales, or in the context of Facebook, sharing information to create a representation that is ideal in order to add friends. Editing oneself to this extreme, users create highly fictionalized and performative identities. Of course, inherent in any editing process is fictionalization, performance. As Susan Sontag writes,

> To edit your life is to save it, for fiction, for yourself. Being identified with your life as others see it may mean that you come eventually to see it that way, too. This can only be a hindrance to memory (an, presumably, to invention)…Memory is inventive. Memory is a performance.  

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On Facebook, users simultaneously edit and archive themselves, made ever more present with the addition of the Timeline. Everything is perpetually present, constantly changing with each update, edit, post, and so forth, but the archive accumulates. As users write their narratives, these narratives in turn write them. The edited is fictionalized, performed, archived; yet this falsified representation meant for others inevitably becomes the truth, or rather, what is remembered.

*Figure 2-3. Kerry Doran. My real (fake) Facebook (2011).*

Undoubtedly, users have the desire to connect and share, but more powerful is the desire to present an ideal self for others to view, to consume. Or perhaps one is not more powerful than the other, but rather they are interrelated. As users want to connect, share, add friends, they edit themselves accordingly; identity is molded and manipulated to appeal to other users and to avoid rejection. This sort of self-scrutiny is largely subconscious as users conform to the structure of the site, but it is also a conscious process, as users pick and choose what information to post, always aware that others will see. How much users edit, and moreover, what editing is conscious and subconscious, is not only highly variable with each user, but also indiscernible. What is certain, though, is the fact that users mold their identities as a result of the structure of the site and present a version of themselves contingent on their knowledge that other users will see what they post.

**My real (fake) Facebook**

In attempt to subvert the virtual manifestations of consumer capitalism and its logic, I deactivated my previous account and created a new one with the intent of representing myself as accurately as possible. As I briefly mentioned previously, accurate is a problematic word, and my explanation above suggests that representing oneself accurately is quite impossible. Nonetheless, I used my first account as a starting point, working against my typical Facebook self, my Facebook persona if you will, in order to construct a new identity, a conceptual persona as the antithesis of my Facebook persona and the logic of the site.⁸⁴

My first Facebook account was highly edited. I am tempted to reactivate this account (which simply entails reentering my password) to see what I used to look like for the purposes of this project. However, since I do not want to reactivate the account, I will discuss it in general terms.

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⁸⁴ Although other users influenced the way I conceptualized my project, I was ultimately my own best case study. In this way, my project scrutinized my self more than it scrutinized others, of which it has been criticized. I used the process of self-critique as a lens, which enabled me to espouse critical commentary about the site.
I remember how troubled I was about what information to enter when I first joined the site in 2007, how I did not have a profile picture for the first few months because I did not think I had a picture of myself that could be a profile picture, how my friends constantly posted on my wall during this time demanding that I upload a picture. Then when I went to college, my profile was in constant flux. Sometimes I had a lot of information listed so that my new friends could see what great taste in music I had, whereas when I got older, I had as little information as possible listed. My profile picture changed every now and then, always something that I thought was flattering but not over the top. I untagged photographs my friends posted that I thought were unflattering. I posted on my friends’ walls, mostly people I saw on a regular basis, but also some acquaintances and friends from high school. I hardly updated my status, but when I did, it was usually about a concert I was going to or a vacation. The pictures I posted were of the same things. I was not the type to post pictures of every party I went to or activity I did with my friends. I used to go on Facebook a minimum of once a day, but almost always more. I looked at my profile more than any other profile. (“Look yourself over daily or oftener.”) I was constantly checking up on myself, thinking about how other users would see me, either friends who were already added or potential friends. I never remember thinking that I wanted to have a lot of Facebook friends, but I remember being proud when I realized how many I had. When I met new people, I waited until they requested me, or I would wait several days to request them. If someone posted on my wall, I would wait a certain amount of time before responding. Everything was highly orchestrated, dependent on the desire to connect with people but not seeming too eager or too involved with Facebook. I was not alone in my actions, but rather these seem to be the norm as I discuss Facebook with my friends.

85 I feel as though reactivating the account will only perpetuate the cycle I used to be a part of, defeating the purpose of My real (fake) Facebook. However, I must confess, I simply do not want to reactivate my old account. Since it has been over a year, I am nervous to look back at how I used to be. Normally, profiles change in a rate similar to the user, with wall posts, pictures, etcetera, but my old account is frozen in time. The representation would be me but it would not represent me.
and/or observe how they use the site. Everyone knows that everyone else is looking, always or almost always connected, but no one wants to admit it.

I deactivated this account and made a new one, starting with nothing. In an attempt to make my self as transparent as possible, I posted as much as I could about my daily life on my profile, filling in the information boxes on my profile when I first created the account, updating my status throughout the day on my computer or using Facebook mobile on my BlackBerry, and creating an album at the end of each day, which included every photograph I took or other people took with my point-and-shoot camera in the course of that day. I did not use any privacy settings so all of this information would be public, enabling any user to see the information posted on my profile. Not only did I start with nothing, but I also did not have any friends. Although I did not request any friends, I accepted anyone who requested me. Since typical Facebook usage commodifies the self and the profile functions as an advertisement for the self, I sought to resist this logic by making my self an uncommodified commodity, an uncultivated, or unmarketable self.

Sharing content that is usually edited by typical users, like posting status updates about the banality of my everyday activities or my thoughts and uploading every picture taken throughout a given day, no matter how blurry, crooked, or unflattering, was one part of the process, but my lack of interaction or unorthodox interactions also went against norms and expectations. Users generally post information so that other users will see, and at best, respond to their posts. Editing oneself is done in such a way to make the self appealing, desirable to other users. Essentially, users edit themselves to make each other desirable to each other. My profile, however, was most likely undesirable to other users. I constantly updated my status, uploaded at least twenty images every day, and hardly interacted with other users. As I mentioned before, I did not request anyone but accepted anyone who requested me. I extended this logic to all of my interactions, so I did not post, comment, or like anything other users posted, unless they posted directly on my wall or messaged
me. All of these non-actions were part of the process of uncommodifying myself, as my Facebook presence did not fulfill the pleasures associated with the consumption commodities.

Despite these efforts, I knew that I could never portray an accurate version of myself. I was aware that my project was impossible, as I was still representing a fictionalized and performative identity. Like any Facebook user, my representation was determined by the structure of the site. Moreover, everything I posted was editorial even though I concerted every effort to un-edit my self. Deciding when to update my status, what it would say, what I took pictures of, or what I did not take pictures of, all became part of the editing process that can never be fully eliminated. No matter how much I posted or photographed, all of my thoughts, actions, and everything I saw during a given day could never be documented in full, and once posted on the site would be subject to the format. Although I tried to represent myself honestly, genuinely, and accurately, these efforts were performative, yet in a different way, which could be described as untheatrical performance.

My heretical use of the site elicited responses from several Facebook users, most of whom I was friends with on my previous account. They messaged me, asking why I deleted them or if I deactivated my previous account. I responded to everyone, explaining that I deactivated my previous account, made a new one for a project, would not request anyone, but would accept their friendship if they sent a request. Subsequently, all of these individuals requested me. Some people were close friends, one a family member, and some acquaintances. Although I assumed my previous Facebook self’s absence would go unnoticed, these individuals not only noticed, but also contacted me to clarify.
Tovah Orero
Yo Kerry!!
Why did you de-friend me on facebook? What happened?

Sincerely,
Tovah

Kerry Doran
Hi! I didn't delete you!! I deactivated my facebook and made a new one for an art project. No hard feelings at all 😔 I'm just working on a project for this digital art class.

Donald Fodness
Hey Kerry,
It looks like you are doing some facebook experiment in the name of art or something, or I pissed you off along with the many millions of friends you did have on this site, now I see you only have 7. I don't need to be your facebook buddy, but just want to make sure I did not do something to upset you. I think you are a really cool person, from what I do know of you.
Sincerely.
Don

Kerry Doran
Hi Don! I am most definitely doing a facebook experiment in the name of art (for the sake of art rather than art for art's sake). I deactivated the other one (so I did not de-friend/delete anyone) but I made this new account for a project. Part of the project is not requesting anyone. All of my information is available to everyone, but if people want to be my friend, they can request me and I will accept everyone. More to come about the progress of the project as a whole in my 'about me' section, but the project is still in the works. I think you're a cool person too and have no reason to delete you. If you're interested in this whole thing, add me!

Kerry

Ashley Levine
... were not facebook friends? wtf mate?
Other users noticed my absence, as some people asked about my project or asked why I deleted them when we saw each other over, or called me to ask why I deleted them. However, considering I had over 1200 friends on my previous account, the majority of people never brought it up, and even fewer contacted me. Maybe they simply did not notice, or maybe they did not want to seem too involved with Facebook; there is no way to know or find out. It hardly matters though, because what it most compelling, evidenced in these few messages, is the fact that human qualities and social relations are instilled in the representation. The absence of a representation signifies far more than it might appear.

A note on following

One must follow in order to be followed, photograph in order to be photographed, wear a mask to be unmasked, appear in order to disappear, guess one’s intentions in order to have your own guessed.

—Jean Baudrillard, *Suite vénitienne* (*Please follow me*)

Sophie Calle occasionally followed strangers in the streets of Paris, not because she was particularly curious about them, but solely for the pleasure of following. She documented their movements in writing and photographs taken without their knowledge until she lost sight of them. On one occasion, at the end of January 1980, she followed a man for only a few minutes, losing sight of him in a crowd. Later that night, “by chance, he was introduced to [her] at an opening. During the course of [their] conversation, he told [her] he was planning an imminent trip to Venice.”86 The next morning, she left for Venice, only knowing his first name and last initial, Henri B., and the memory of his face, but that was enough.

Outfitted in a blonde wig, equipped with a notebook and camera, Calle walked throughout the city, unable to find Henri B. for several days. Asking for him at hotels in the area and talking with friends, she gathered clues about his whereabouts, and eventually found him. She then followed his moves throughout the city and took pictures when she could. After several days, she became “careless” and he saw her, inevitably recognizing her as they had met before. He approached her. They spoke. After their encounter, Calle continued to look for Henri B., hoping to catch another glimpse. With no luck after several days, she deduced his probable departure time and took the train she thought he would be on. Her guess was right, and upon arrival at Gare de Lyon, she snapped one last photo of Henri B. as he left the station.

In April 1981, Sophie Calle asked her mother to go to a detective agency and hire them to follow her. Complying, a detective began tracing her daily activities, providing terse, documentary

86 *Sophie Calle: M’as-tu vue*, 85.
reports and photographic evidence of her reported whereabouts. Simultaneously, Calle documented her daily activities, recording her whereabouts and her imminent knowledge of the detective. In *The Shadow*, Calle reverses the role of the observer and the observed, aware of the observer’s presence, documenting him observing her.

Calle’s following pieces have striking similarities to the activities of users on social networking sites. On Facebook, users browse content generated by other users, clicking on posts and through images, sometimes leading them to profiles of friends, acquaintances, or strangers. Even if one does not have particular interest in the person, one may have the proclivity to look through posts and images, solely for the pleasure of looking — *following*. Essentially, this is the very activity the site promotes. The site thrives on the reciprocal nature of Calle’s activities elucidated by Baudrillard. Looking at another user’s profile means someone may be looking at yours; if you take pictures of your friends to post in albums, they’ll take pictures of you and make albums; you’ll tag each other; you post on users’ walls so they comment, like, or write back on your wall; you post status updates for others to see and respond to. If one does not partake in these activities, it is likely that their profile will become stagnant, very much like *My real (fake) Facebook* was and even more so now. Since I hardly engaged with other users, why would they engage with me?

The photographic aspect of my Facebook project echoes the photographs taken by Calle following Henri B., or the detective following Calle, the main difference with the latter case being that Calle’s face is never revealed in the images from *The Shadow*. I documented my quotidian activities, using a self-timer when I was alone or asking others to photograph me at random during our time together. Both methods were an attempt to forget the camera’s presence so that I could be

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87 Subscribing to another Twitter user’s “tweets” is known as following and subscribers are known as followers. Certainly, Calle’s works relate to acts of following and follower, but *Following Piece* (1969) by Vito Acconci also comes to mind. Someone else (or maybe Acconci, although this could not be verified) must have thought so as well, since Acconci has a Twitter account, @VitoAcconci, his bio and only tweet reading: *Vito Acconci is now following you on Twitter.*
documented as I was, rather than posing. Through these images, I sought to mimic how users follow one another online, observing one another but also being observed. Having a Facebook profile, there is always the possibility that another user is following you.

Kerry Doran When I’m walking alone late at night (only hearing my thoughts, footsteps, and breathing), anyone could be watching.
April 26, 2011 at 9:30 pm

Kerry Doran Do you want me to notice you? Is that why you’re here? Is that why we’re all here?
April 26, 2011 at 4:06 pm


On Facebook, roles are in constant flux and simultaneously inhabited: the follower is also the followed, the observed is the also observer. We login to look and to have others look back. Every action has an intention; there are expectations.

PERFORMATIVE IDENTITY IN NETWORKED SPACES

In most modern instances, interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone. Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, comfortable.

—Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*

I love the idea of technology and culture moving faster than the understanding of those mediums by people. It’s like the jumper being jumped before the onset of “jump” – and the whole world is doing that…

—Ryan Trecartin

Thinking back to the first time I encountered the work of Ryan Trecartin, I was nervous. Nervous in the sense that I was viewing something unlike anything else I had ever seen before. Nervous because I was sitting in a classroom with my peers, the lights off, the screen illuminating our faces, unsure what everyone else was thinking. (What were they thinking?) Nervous as in, “Am I supposed to be laughing right now? Why is no one else laughing?” Nervous for not knowing how to react or what to feel.

Since none of us had ever seen works by Trecartin, our viewing was preceded with a brief introduction: He received his BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2004, and a year later, a friend of his showed a work posted on Trecartin’s Friendster page to artist Sue de Beer. Amazed with what she had seen, de Beer relayed the work to a curator at the New Museum. By 2006, Trecartin’s work was exhibited in the Whitney Biennial, the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Guggenheim Museum, and Saatchi Gallery. Then, in 2007, his feature film length *I-Be Area* debuted at the Elizabeth Dee Gallery. In 2009, his work was included in the New Museum’s landmark

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88 Kennedy, “His Nonlinear Reality, and Welcome to It.”
triennial, “The Generational: Younger Than Jesus.” After hearing all of this, I knew his quick rise to fame and the critical acclaim was no fluke. However, I still needed to figure out why for myself.

We watched K-CoreaINC.K (section a) (2009), exhibited in “Younger Than Jesus.” If the New Museum liked this, it had to be good, right? I was not so sure. And neither were my classmates. Nearly thirty-five minutes had passed, the lights were switched on, I looked around, and the expressions I saw were a mixture of blank, confused, shocked, and uncomfortable, if that makes sense. I guess I liked what I had seen, but I knew I needed to watch it again. It was not even remotely possible to absorb, let alone notice, everything that was going on. My peers, however, were quick to dismiss the work, stifled by its style and content. Its low-end aesthetic quality is reminiscent of YouTube videos, except highly edited, with flashes of HTML color and words, scenes within scenes (within scenes within scenes), and unorthodox shots, ranging from zooming in and out quickly, high angle, low angle, and turbulent continuous shots, as if someone were holding a camcorder. And if this weren’t already bizarre, the content one is bombarded with is perhaps even more of a sumptuous overload. The actors, Trecartin included, are men and women mostly dressed as women outfitted in what one might consider “normal” attire, yet upon closer inspection, some characters appear to be wearing outdated business casual, while other, less prominent characters wear almost-matching light-wash flared jeans and white button-up blouses, sometimes over black camisoles. Nearly all of the characters wear blonde wigs, their faces framed with tawdry, glossy locks, matched by white face paint evenly applied on their visage to hide their natural complexion. They speak in “high-pitched Chipmunkese or bottom-feeding growls,” gesticulating with BlackBerry in hand, in a vernacular informed by text messaging, reality television, and media jargon.

89 His most recent exhibition, “Ryan Trecartin: Any Ever” at MoMA PS1 ran from June 19, 2011-September 3, 2011, after the date of this in-class viewing session.
90 Later exhibited as one of seven films comprising Any Ever.
91 Roberta Smith, “Like Living, Only More So.”
Since I cannot provide a sound bite (although that would be cool), here are a few examples of the text-based elements that appear throughout the work, similar to the dialogue, at least in terms of the words used:

**Dear HeyK, Please Don’t Accept your Progressaphobias in work flow by Brand Washing My Global Blanky with SAME PAGE.**

I really need a case of atmosphere

Are you finding Position? It’s such a Hunt.

*iMean*

**LEt’s HAve a Meeting**

The characters speak in a similar manner, using words that do not seem quite right, or making their own unheard of combinations. The text, though, conveys important information that their speech cannot, namely the particular way of organizing letters and words that is a result of digital culture. “iMean” is the most recognizable reference, its lower-case “i” mimicking the names of Apple products (iPod, iPhone, iMac, iPad, iTouch, etcetera). “LEt’s HAve a Meeting” is perhaps a reference to the mistake of capitalizing more than the first letter of a word, a result of holding down the caps lock button a split second too long while typing.

Although I have provided some stylistic and content-based analysis thus far, I should be clear before I proceed: it is not my goal to “interpret” Ryan Trecartin. As Sontag notes, if I were to reduce his work to its style and content, and then interpret that, I would be taming his work, making it manageable and comfortable. However, this is precisely what should be avoided because it is the chaos and the discomfort the work provokes that makes it successful. The chaos one feels is due to
the fact that Trecartin is working with familiar content and media in an unfamiliar way, eliciting discomfort in viewers perhaps because it seems eerily familiar and distant all at once. His work cannot, or rather, should not be interpreted because it is Trecartin who is interpreting “us.”

Trecartin’s “‘movies’ (the artist’s preferred term)” have been described as making “you lose your grip on your reality.” However, I argue the opposite; indeed, his movies make us more aware of our reality. Not only is he working within a context and dealing with content most of his viewers are familiar with, but the overwhelming, mesmerizing, fast-paced, can’t-listen-to-and-look-at-the-same-time-and-actually-think style mimics the way viewers lose themselves in the digital spaces of everyday life. We are always losing grip on reality, as we are constantly present and absent, alone and together, connected and distant, texting, updating, tweeting, liking, commenting, listening, watching, snapping, clicking, typing, tagging, copying, pasting, sharing, streaming, posting, e-mailing… Everything is a succession of instants, living in the perpetual present.

I choose to focus on the work of Ryan Trecartin because he is exemplary of the schizophrenic self in the digital age, using the Internet and all of its interactive elements to perform and broadcast conceptual personae, which enables him to espouse critical commentary, subvert the very system that he works within, and therefore, resist the logic of late capitalism. While Baudrillard and Jameson employ the term schizophrenic descriptively, labeling postmodernism as such, Trecartin’s work goes beyond their descriptive use of the term, embracing elements of schizophrenia as a means to challenge dominant ideology, as Deleuze and Guattari propose. This is significant because Baudrillard and Jameson argue that schizophrenia can be used to describe postmodernism, and they see postmodernism as reinforcing the logic of late capitalism; furthermore, Jameson questions if there is also a way to resist that logic. I agree that the qualities of schizophrenia described by Baudrillard and Jameson do in fact reinforce the logic of late capitalism, perhaps even

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92 Norden, “When the Rainbow is An Option,” 11.
more so today than when they wrote their texts because of the advancements in technology and
digital networking. However, it is because of these technological developments that resistance is
possible, as network technologies enable users like Trecartin to fracture and multiply identity,
creating a multifarious self, constructing conceptual identities that inform one another, constantly
shifting with the flux of the network. The self is central to the method, as performing and
broadcasting these performative and conceptual identities is a self-critical process, but also espouses
commentary about the digital spaces these performative identities are molded by and inhabit.

“Hey! My name’s Ryan! I’m a video kid. Digital.”

Ryan Trecartin is arguably one of the most famous artists today, evidenced in his widespread success
in the art world and the prevalence of his work online. His work is sold in prestigious galleries and is
exhibited in major museums internationally, but can also be found on his Vimeo channel, YouTube,
UbuWeb, and countless project specific websites created by Trecartin, or the site itself is the work,
as is the case with his Twitter stream. Making his work available beyond the institutional framework
of the white cube of the gallery or museum, he enables a broader and presumably more diverse
audience to access and be exposed to his work. Exhibiting his work in these two distinct
environments, both valid and neither more privileged than the other, enables two entirely different
viewing experiences, and arguably, two versions of the same work. He seems to effortlessly inhabit
the physical and virtual world, not as separate entities, but as merging ones.

Trecartin’s artistic practice is exemplary of this liminality, present in both the physical and
the virtual, indiscernible where one ends and the other begins. This precarious state of being is
expressed in his works, conveying the anxiety of living multiple lives in the perpetual present. Yet
this description may be too limiting, because his work is much more than an expression of what it is
like to live life on and through the Web. Lauren Cornell, executive director of Rhizome
(rhizome.org) perhaps says it best: “[H]e really captures how the logic of it is becoming embedded in
our lives.”94 Elaborating, Rhizome contributor Kevin McGarry writes:

Ryan Trecartin has established a singular video practice that in form and in function
advances understandings of post-millennial technology, narrative and identity, and also
propels these matters as expressive mediums. His work depicts worlds where consumer
culture is amplified to absurd or nihilistic proportions and characters circuitously strive to
find agency and meaning in their lives. The combination of assaultive, nearly impenetrable
avant-garde logics and equally outlandish, virtuoso uses of color, form, drama and montage
produces a sublime, stream-of-consciousness effect that feels bewilderingly true to life.95

His ability to make works that feel “bewilderingly true to life” is related to Cornell’s comment.
Because he is able to capture what life is like as lived and mediated via the Internet, and moreover,
how this logic is “becoming embedded in our lives,” his videos have the potential to resonate deeply
with viewers. For example, in the comments section for “I-Be Area” on YouTube, one viewer with
the user name Scandibilly wrote, “That one hour, 48 minutes was the closest I’d come to someone

94 Kennedy, “His Nonlinear Reality, and Welcome to It.”
95 “Ryan Trecartin,” Electronic Arts Intermix.
who could understand me. Thank you! Thank you! I understand!”

Engaging with and making work about what it means to live in the twenty-first century, Trecartin has “developed a new aesthetic structure that helps to reorder one’s perception and understanding of the contemporary world.”

He is making art about our moment of contemporaneity, which is both nerve-wracking and exciting.

Watching his movies is like watching a reality show on crack (or maybe Adderall).

Seriously. Turn on E! or MTV right now and you’ll probably see (and hear) what I mean. The characters in his films, Trecartin included, speak in a similar manner as the people, or rather the “characters,” we are familiar with from reality TV shows on networks such as these. They appear to be themselves, but they are performing a persona – a side of themselves perhaps, or maybe someone made up for the sake of the show. Explaining this sort of experimentation with identity that his characters take to the extreme, Trecartin says, “It’s kind of like a weird in-between performing; between faking a different persona for reality TV and traditional acting.”

And this performance doesn’t have to be a reflection of one’s self, it can even be a performance of identity that “doesn’t have to actually be your identity.”

Unlike people on reality TV, though, Trecartin’s characters “talk about themselves not as people but as ideas or companies” in a vernacular informed by buzzwords from the media, names of corporations, corporate lingo, slogans from advertisements, and technology jargon and abbreviations. However, the way in which characters perform their identities and speak about themselves is not as bizarre as it seems, considering the source material that is influencing their performance.

96 Kennedy, “His Nonlinear Reality, and Welcome to It.”
98 “Adderall is a brand name of amphetamine salts-based medication used for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and narcolepsy.” Considering the hyperactive attention deficit culture that Trecartin’s work responds to and hyperbolizes, Adderall seems particularly appropriate. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adderall
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
Trecartin’s movies elicit intense emotional responses in viewers that are on complete opposite ends of the spectrum. Some people react like Scandibilly, while others are left feeling uneasy, or “icky,” and some feel both extremes at once. These reactions, while they are in total contrast to one another, elucidate what is perhaps most striking about Trecartin’s work, namely that the worlds and characters in Trecartin’s movies are just a little too familiar, except more intense and hysterical. Massimiliano Gioni, director of special exhibitions at the New Museum, often uses the term “hysterical realism,” a term borrowed from James Wood, to explain the work of Trecartin and other young artists. “[I]n their art…the hysteria is raised to…absurd heights, a reflection of the world they have inherited, drowning in information and images.”

In a number of interviews, Trecartin discusses how people younger than him, (read: people born in the nineties) understand his work most intuitively. These people, myself included, grew up with the Web, cell phones, and reality television; in fact, it’s hard to remember a world without them. Trecartin, born in 1981, probably remembers life without these technologies, but was young enough to learn how to use them quickly and embrace them when they became a part of every day life. Arguably, with memories of the not-so-distant past, Trecartin can step outside our moment of contemporaneity, realizing intricacies or absurdities that people born in the nineties might accept as commonplace. To them, the worlds and characters Trecartin seeks to create in his movies are practically normal. For example, on one occasion Trecartin hired “several teenage actresses for his new video. He tried to explain the ideas for their surreal characters by simplifying them, but it wasn’t working, so he just explained it the way he would have to himself. And they were like, ‘Oh, yeah, O.K.’” In an interview with James Franco, Trecartin further explains why this might be so: “I feel like people who have grown up with reality TV, which I guess are people born in the 90s, are much

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102 Ibid.
103 Gioni quoted in Kennedy, “His Nonlinear Reality, and Welcome to It.”
104 Kennedy, “His Nonlinear Reality, and Welcome to It;” Trecartin and Franco, “All-American Golden Boy.”
105 Kennedy, “His Nonlinear Reality, and Welcome to It.”
more comfortable embarrassing themselves.”

Sharing and editing information about ourselves online and watching people be “themselves” on reality shows, we are used to performing, even if we are not entirely aware that we are performing all the time.

The link between performance and identity is central to Trecartin’s work. His conception of the self, what I call performative identity, speaks to a deeper cultural transformation that we are in the midst of, promulgated by the Internet and its interactive technologies. Trecartin:

I think the internet [sic]—and all of its interactive elements—has been latent inside of us, like it’s a natural extension of who we are. I think we’re slowly moving to a point where we will visually manifest at the speed of creative thought, where as we’re saying an idea we are also changing our body and changing our scenery and all these different extensions of language. We could reach a point where personality defines you more than your gender, sexuality, or career because nothing is fixed – it’s all a choice. And so accents, how we present ourselves and locate ourselves in these different spaces becomes really important. All these different things come together with interactivity through technology. There is the potential to unlock new realities that are already inside of us.

One of the most radical transformations that the Internet and its interactive technologies could instigate, and that has already occurred to some degree, is the ability to manipulate one’s identity: “We could reach a point where personality defines you more than your gender, sexuality, or career because nothing is fixed – it’s all a choice.” Looking at a social networking site like Facebook, it is evident that we have not quite reached this envisioned place. Yet with my own project, I worked within the framework of the site, using my identity as the method for working against the enforced and reinforcing structure. This is precisely the kind of work Trecartin is doing, but in a much more complex way, and on a broader, more expansive scale. He explores the Web as a catalyst for users to define themselves according to their personality and be more than one fixed person, what he terms “personality trannies.”

While all of the characters in Trecartin’s are tranny-esque with their extravagant costumes, hair, and make-up, Trecartin and other male actors in his movies often dress

107 Ibid.
108 Kennedy, “His Nonlinear Reality, and Welcome to It.”
as women. But dressing up is more than putting on a costume. In Trecartin’s movies, characters can try on different sexualities, personalities, *identities*, so that the self can rein free. As such, individuals have the power to decide how to define themselves instead of being defined and confined according to static, hegemonic categories. Singular identity is institutional, while having multiple identities is contestatory, in opposition to the institution. Having a plurality of identities speaks to Trecartin’s “aspirational faith in the potential of uninhibited self-expression, both individual and collective, as an active agent against the mounting materialism of everyday life.” Ultimately, it is through self-definition that one can resist.

**Editing, fictionalizing, and performing the self**

In the visual arts, using the self as subject matter, as a performative device, and as a lens for exploring identity, is hardly a new phenomenon and is certainly not unique to the digital age. Self-portraits are obvious examples of this, for they are not merely renditions of the artist, but rather demonstrations of the self as artist, as artists often portrayed themselves in their studio, at work, with a palette in hand, etcetera. And there was surely an editing process involved, as artists sought to represent their image in the manner they saw fit.

With the invention of photography, artists continued the practice of self-portraiture, but a performative representation of the self became more prevalent, perhaps attributable to the contested validity of the image captured by the camera. Most often referenced in critical scholarly work

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109 Smith, “Like Living, Only More So.”

110 While there are countless examples of self-portraits demonstrating the editing of self, one striking instance is of two self-portraits by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, dating from 1804 and c. 1850-1860, both depicting Ingres as a young man in his mid-twenties. Ingres painted a canvas in 1804, exhibiting it at the Salon of 1806, where it was severely criticized. A copy of this image survives, painted by Ingres’ fiancée at the time, musician Marie-Anne-Julie Forestier. Approaching old age, Ingres returned to the subject matter, rendering his young likeness after Raphael’s self-portrait (c. 1515). (At the time, this image was thought to depict Raphael; however, we now know that it almost certainly does not.) One can only assume that Ingres was concerned with the image of himself that would last beyond his own life, revising and representing his own image after Raphael, his artistic inspiration and obsession. Alhadeff, “Ingres as Raphael Reincarnated: A Pathological Obsession;” Tinterow and Conisbee, ed. *Portraits By Ingres: Image of an Epoch.*
concerning photography and polemics of representation is Hippolyte Bayard’s *Self Portrait as a Drowned Man* (1840), in which Bayard poses as a drowned man, limply seated on a bench and propped up against a wall, his hands tied and already dark from the decay of death. Bayard appears dead to the viewer, the representation seems so real; yet, it cannot possibly be true since Bayard himself fabricated the self-portrait. Furthermore, he could not be in both places at once, behind and in front the camera. Amelia Jones astutely asserts,

> With this complex image, Bayard gets at something fundamental about the body in relation to the image, something that, indeed, provided the major impetus to the development of photographic technologies: the desire for the image to render up the body and *thereby the self* in its fullness and truth.\(^{111}\)

In other words, photographic technologies held the promise of capturing one’s likeness, and therefore some authenticity about one’s self.\(^ {112}\)

As photography developed into the twentieth century, becoming the medium of modernity, “an event of modernism,”\(^ {113}\) Claude Cahun with Marcel Moore and Marcel Duchamp experimented with the medium as a vehicle for performing their identities. Claude Cahun, collaborating with her stepsister and partner Marcel Moore, sought to make images that would “destabilize the notion of ‘self’ that the portrait genre has historically upheld—and, more constructively, to provide an arena of experimentation within which the photographer and the subject could improvise alternate scenarios of social, sexual, and artistic practice.”\(^ {114}\) In doing so, they asserted their female and homosexual identities, challenging hegemonies of patriarchy and heteronormativity through their self-expression and representation.\(^ {115}\) Marcel Duchamp also experimented with identity, performing his alter ego

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\(^{112}\) For further discussion and analysis, see Batchen, *Burning with Desire*; Emerling, *Photography: History and Theory*; Jones, *Self/Image*; Ritchin, *In Our Own Image*.
\(^{114}\) Latimer, “Acting Out: Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore.”
\(^{115}\) For a critical analysis on the representation of the self and body in Cahun’s work, see Jones, *Self/Image*; Krauss, *Bachelors*; Monahan, “Radical Transformations.”
Rrose Sélavy, a proper name and a French sentence: Éros, c’est la vie (Eros, that’s life). In a series of photographic self-portraits taken by Man Ray in 1921, Duchamp appears as Rrose Sélavy, dressed in drag, “announc[ing] a self that is split, doubled, along the axis of sexual identity.” For these artists, photography enabled, even promoted, experimenting with identities, as they performed aspects of their selves that could only be embodied in front of the lens.

In the contemporary period, the process of using the self and performing identity has become central to the artistic practice of countless artists across a variety of media. Perhaps the most iconic and groundbreaking series that set the precedent for this sort of work are Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980). In these photographic portraits, Sherman is the model, dressed in a variety of roles and posing in a range of settings, mimicking archetypal representations of females in the media. Performance is a central aspect of these works, as the images resemble films, both in their style and portrayal of Sherman as a character/actress. Yet Sherman claims she never thought she was acting: “When I became involved with close-ups I needed more information in the expression. I couldn’t depend on background or atmosphere. I wanted the story to come from the face. Somehow the acting just happened.” Growing up in the age of television and media culture, Sherman embodied and performed representations that had become prosaic. Rather than making pop culture images her subject or using pop culture as raw material, her approach was innovative in that pop culture was her “whole artistic vocabulary, ready-made.” Contemporaneous to Sherman, artists “such as Adrian Piper, Barbara Kruger, Kenneth Anger and Lorna Simpson subverted identities by

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116 “…a statement inscribing life within a circle of eroticism which Duchamp has elsewhere characterized as ‘vicious.’” Krauss, “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America,” 72.
118 Sussler, “Cindy Sherman.”
119 Galassi, “The Complete *Untitled Film Stills*: Cindy Sherman.”
moulding [sic] and contorting physical images of the self, while using the language of the mainstream media – all before YouTube existed.”

Artists like Trecartin, and others including Petra Cortright, Jeremy Bailey, Ryder Ripps, Kalup Linzy, Hennesey Youngman, Alex Bag, Anne Hirsch, and Michael Magnan, utilize media platforms (YouTube, Twitter, Vimeo) to broadcast themselves in ways unimaginable before the era of Web 2.0. Like artists of previous eras, they use their identities as subject matter and perform versions of themselves, but technologies have profoundly impacted their conception of self and their performance of identity/identities. Just as the camera and photographic representation was vital for Cahun, Moore, and Duchamp as they grappled with identity in the age of modernity, and artists like Sherman, Piper, Kruger, Anger, and Simpson revitalized the medium in the midst of media and pop culture, so too are artists today employing the technology that has shaped their identities and conception of self as a vehicle to experiment and express their identities.

The Internet and its interactive technologies of Web 2.0 has, and continues to shape our conception of the self, as we are distributed throughout the network, using different sites for different means, taking on different personae in the process. And these personae do not exist in isolation, but rather inform one another, as we e-mail, tweet, share, like, post, copy, paste, and update. Identity, as such, is perpetually present, and continuously archived as the next (present) status update or tweet takes it place. The self is in constant flux, ephemeral and archived, as we write our digital narrative as it simultaneously writes us. These artists embrace the qualities inherent in network culture, performing versions of themselves as conceptual personae, commenting and critiquing themselves and the space around them in the process. Their commentary serves as counter-presence/dialogue to banal Internet usage, as they perform hyperbolized and satirized versions of the self in the digital age, which they broadcast on a number of media platforms. Their

120 Kholeif, “Performing the Self,” 11.
performances and visual works do not reinforce the logic of late capitalism and consumer culture; rather, they perform its logic, using their identities as their material for the production of work and method of critique.

Petra Cortright is one of these artists, filming videos with webcams and posting them on YouTube; bedazzling her website with animated .gifs galore; writing using mostly lowercase letters, BUT CAPS WHEN ITZ RLY DRAMATIC OR IMPoRTANT, or sum timez mixing the 2, oh yeah, and definitely can’t 4get about abbrevs like lol & OM(F)G, emoticons :) & tpyos in artist statements, written interviews, on her website, as well as on her Twitter account @petcortright (woof woof). She takes the idiosyncrasies of the Internet to the extreme, performing a version of herself that is both self-critical and critical of the very culture she participates in. Essentially, her performative identity is constructed by over exaggerating her identity as an Internet artist, which enables her to critique Internet culture as a whole.

One of her most (in)famous pieces is VVESCAM (2007), which features Cortright looking completely bored to death, staring at the screen, clicking through an array of stock graphics and effects from her webcam. These images and animations begin slowly, becoming more syncopated and aligned with the trance music playing in the background as the video goes on. Originally posted to YouTube in 2007, VVESCAM has since been removed: This video has been removed as a violation of YouTube’s policy against spams, scams, and commercially deceptive content. Although the content of the video itself is not offensive per se, the 733 keywords and tags in the video’s description, “ranging from ‘tits, vagina, sex, nude, boobs’ to ‘san francisco, diego, jose, puto, taco bell, border patrol, mcdonalds, KFC, kentucky fried chicken, trans fat,’” were probably
more the reason the video was flagged, reviewed, and thus removed.\textsuperscript{121} Or maybe the content itself was offensive.

\textit{VVEBCAM} is (was) just like any other YouTube video, but it was not. And Cortright is just like any other YouTuber, but she is not. And that is exactly the point. Cortright stares at the screen, her eyes flickering back and forth, the images, music, clicks increasing in pace and frequency as her gaze remains blank. No matter what she does, she is bored. It does not matter that the world is at her (our) fingertips. Nothing ever happens and everything is always boring.\textsuperscript{122}

\@petcortright’s Twitter stream speaks to these discontents, felt by many in the digital age who find themselves interacting with screens more than people, or anything else for that matter. Tweeting about online shopping, overwhelming amounts of e-mails, how bored she is, places she is travelling, and whatever else crosses her mind, she is discussing her own lived experience yet in a

\textsuperscript{121} Fino-Radin, “YouTube Censors Petra Cortright, But 'VVEBCAM' Lives on in the Rhizome ArtBase.”

\textsuperscript{122} Ryan Trecartin: “Am I overexisting or am I over existing? That's my inside joke.”
hyperbolized, even satirical manner. This is her form of critique – of the world we live in and of which we have become products, herself included.

But seriously, why does this matter? Or rather, “who fucking cares” as one commenter wrote in response to an article written about Cortright’s VVEBCAM being removed from YouTube, to which Cortright responded: “sorry if I may speak in YouTube…obviously a lot of ppl care, thats why they written about it..? u fuckin peasant. why u mad bro? takin the time to comment…suck my dick :P” I cannot help but laugh reading this comment, as Cortright writes out the shift from “normal” typing to “speaking in YouTube.” This is a blatant example of her performative identity, as she uses the very language and culture that motivated this user’s rude, vulgar, and ignorant comment as her method of critique.

Famous new media artist from Toronto, Jeremy Bailey is just that, more or less. For the past decade, Bailey has been making works about the relationships between humans and technology, specifically how the body is mediated by technology. To do so, he uses his own body, a camera, and software, as his recorded gestures and performances are dictated by coded computer-generated graphics that follow his body movement. Interested in the way technology controls us, “Bailey takes

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his video a step further than performance for the camera. He is also performing with the computer. In fact, it’s more like Bailey provokes the machine and its reaction becomes the performance.”

Moreover, as Bailey is the subject of his videos and often speaks to viewers, he takes on a persona that is a hyperbolized aspect of his identity: geeky artistic software developer. Although this is not too far from the truth, by intensifying, satirizing, and then performing this aspect of his identity he draws attention to it. His dorky appearance and humorous dialogue that implicates the viewer is in part meant to be funny, but it is also Bailey’s method for acknowledging and critiquing his identity as an affluent white male with access to technology and capital. Commenting on his privileged position, Bailey asserts that it “isn’t fair, in fact it’s wrong. I’m not the only person in this position, but I am earnestly trying to destroy this position of privilege and ruin it for others.” And it is his performative identity that enables him to do so.

“Famous New Media Artist Jeremy Bailey” scrolls horizontally across the screen and techno music plays as Bailey, outfitted in glasses, a white long-sleeve shirt, and denim cut-offs, robotically gestures according to coded computer-generated imagery in Explore The Future of Creativity (2012). Concentrating on an off-camera screen, presumably looking at the codes that determine his movements, and his subsequent gestures, Bailey is isolated, even though he is recording himself with the intent to broadcast himself. And not just via one media platform, but (it seems like) as many as he can. The video can be found on YouTube, embedded in interviews, on his website jeremybailey.net, and his Justin.tv channel, “The Jeremy Bailey New Media Institute.” Posting this video, and most of his videos for that matter, on multiple sites, Bailey distributes his persona throughout the network, establishing his presence and authority as the “Famous New Media Artist.”

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124 Trethewey, “Famous New Media Artist Jeremy Bailey Finds Facts Funnier Than Fiction.”
125 Ibid.
While Bailey speaks about himself confidently, evidenced in the phrase that is essentially inextricable to his name as well as the name of his Justin.tv channel, it is more accurate to describe his tone as confidently self-deprecating.\textsuperscript{126} He says things like, “My name, of course, is Jeremy Bailey,” implying that the viewer probably knows who he is (he is a famous new media artist after all) or, “I’m a new media artist. I’m designing the future.” Although these kinds of remarks are overtly arrogant, their absurdity is implicit, nuanced in Bailey’s delivery as he speaks to the camera and viewers, to no one and everyone. Despite the tacit sarcasm of his remarks, Bailey is endearing; in fact, it is hard not to like him. Discussing how people are good performing (since we do it all the time now), Trecartin states, “Irony and sincerity co-exist and people are really good at arranging intentions and speaking on multiple levels.”\textsuperscript{127} Although this is evident in Trecartin’s movies, Bailey’s confidently self-deprecating dialogue also comes to mind. The work is all about performance, as Bailey performs his “Famous New Media Artist” persona for and with the camera. Bailey: “I like to

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Jeremy Bailey. \textit{Explore the Future of Creativity} (2012).}
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\textsuperscript{126} “Jeremy Bailey,” \textit{Rhizome}.
\textsuperscript{127} Trecartin and Franco, “All-American Golden Boy,” 141.
say that we’re constantly performing, and we’re always aware of our public image…You’ve got Twitter, you’ve got Facebook…We’re all trying to figure out these interfaces and trying to find our reflection in them.”

The screen and the network are certainly definitive features of our moment of contemporaneity, but the mirror is not entirely subsumed as a result of their presence; at least when the viewer is critically engaged and self-aware. Maybe soon, our essential nature will be reflected back again.

**Schizophrenic conceptual personae**

Baudrillard and Jameson’s description of the postmodern moment as schizophrenic is still relevant today, perhaps even more so as the Internet and its interactive technologies has made all those who participate in network culture schizophrenic, to some extent. Individuals in the digital age have numerous identities, contingent on their activities in digital networked spaces, and live in the perpetual present, where the past is relentlessly replaced with constant updates. Although these schizophrenic qualities of network culture perpetuate the logic of late capitalism, the capacity to resist its logic is also thanks to these same qualities. So, while the schizophrenic self is a result of the digital age and perpetuates the logic of late capitalism, it can be turned against itself in order to critique the structures it is a result of.

The Internet and all of its interactive technologies being “latent inside of us” and being “a natural extension of who we are” resonates with Baudrillard’s conception of the postmodern, where the body does not define the self, but rather the self is defined by networks and the information transmitted via these networks, so the self functions as a “terminal of multiple networks.” We are able to manifest at the speed of “creative thought,” our identities capable of changing as instantaneously as information is shared. However, implicit in Baudrillard’s argument is his own

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128 Dabkowski, “Meet Toronto-based new media artist Jeremy Bailey.”
wariness of this transformation, that the transition from the modern to the postmodern is a negative shift, as he argues individuals are further separated from signification, yearning for the ecstasies of communication and the hyperreal. The self becomes a “schizo,” a “pure screen…for all the networks of influence.” The Internet and connectivity epitomize the ecstasy of communication, as information and images are always close, accessible, instantaneous.

Jameson also speaks in terms of the “human scale,” noting the lack of the human presence in the postmodern, his particular example being the installation piece, and even broader, the contemporary art museum of which the installation piece is constituent to the whole institution. Furthermore, installations, Jameson argues, are postmodern in their temporal and spatial qualities, being made for the now (temporal) and the fact that no singular object is the objet d’art, since an installation is a collection of objects that gain significance due to their relation with one another (spatial). The installation is not a work or style, but rather a strategy for producing an event, which is consumed by the viewer. “What we consume is the idea of the work” as it is a “mixture of theory and singularity,” or, a unique event.\footnote{129} This is related to technological consumption in the postmodern, where we not only use technology, but we consume it; indeed, “we consume the very form of communication and its content.”\footnote{130} As such, information, interaction, and consumption define the self.

Rather than dismiss this construction of the self as negative, or claim that it is a positive transformation, Trecartin takes a neutral stance, exploring how he conceives the self as a construction of networking technologies, presenting his interpretation in his movies. For him, it is worth exploring because “…a lot of the time terrifying aspects of our culture are really a symptom of something very positive that may be happening underneath.”\footnote{131} His word choice in this statement

\footnote{129} Jameson, “The Aesthetics of Singularity.”
\footnote{130} Ibid.
\footnote{131} Ibid.
is especially interesting, since Jameson also uses “symptom” to describe the transformations we see taking place as a result of late capitalism, noting that expressions are also symptoms. Acutely aware and highly perceptive, Trecartin is able to identify the powerful potential within the symptoms, making work that is diagnostic of the times, yet without the compulsion to cure.
CONCLUSION: A postmodernism of resistance, or something else?

A postmodernism of resistance, then, arises as a counter-practice not only to the official culture of modernism but also to the ‘false normativity’ of a reactionary postmodernism. In opposition (but not only in opposition), a resistant postmodernism is concerned with a critical deconstruction of tradition, not an instrumental pastiche of pop- or pseudo-historical forms, with a critique of origins, not a return to them. In short, it seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations.

—Hal Foster, The Anti-Aesthetic

In my final week of writing, I looked over all of my essays, blog entries, notes, photographs, and screenshots that contributed to the conceptualization of this project. Reflecting on the interdisciplinarity of these documents, the Gesamtkunstwerk inevitably came to mind, and this was not the first time. I copied and pasted the word into the search field on my Finder, and sure enough, several documents had contents matching the search.

On October 6, 2011, I wrote:

What if the Gesamtkunstwerk is the essence of the digital age?
The digital age is not the Gesamtkunstwerk; rather, the digital age holds the potential for the Gesamtkunstwerk.

My jaw dropped. Only a few hours before, I read this:

Ryan Trecartin fills the gap between art and life. This gap has become progressively narrower since Robert Rauschenberg first inspired artists to work within it. Trecartin had brought a new level of complexity to the question of when life becomes art and art becomes life. He has created a contemporary Gesamtkunstwerk that encompasses the viewer, the performers, and his compelling mix of art and popular culture. Could Ryan Trecartin be the first twenty-first century artist? He is one of the first artists whose work looks and feels like life today.132

Without a doubt, Trecartin’s movies look and feel like life today. By responding to and exploring the symptoms of contemporary culture, Trecartin illuminates idiosyncrasies and absurdities we have become too accustomed to, making us more aware of ourselves as participants, as perpetuators. Yet by using his identity as the subject matter, performing himself as his method of critique, his critically

engaged movies are not critical of the viewer as an individual, but rather of the systems that have led to the consumptive, always connected culture of today. Indeed, his films are celebratory of the Internet and its affiliated interactive technologies, as he uses these technologies as media and outlets for self-expression. As such, he demonstrates the revolutionary potential of digital media, capable of freeing individuals from vast structures of power beyond their control, and even from the confines of their bodies. Instead of consuming technology, information, representations, and communication, and letting consumption define the self, Trecartin asserts his agency through self-definition, enabled by the schizophrenic qualities of network culture. As quickly as the Internet has developed and become a part of every day life, sometimes it is hard to imagine how many possibilities still lay ahead. Although his movies capture what life looks and feels like today, they also offer a glimpse of a not so far off future.

Performative identities are certainly not unique to or a result of the digital age, but the work of artists like Trecartin, Cortright, and Bailey, among others, is unprecedented, as they use their selves as both their method and their medium. The self is not merely the subject, but it is also the site of critique. Yet, while performative identities allow artists to critique the very systems in which they participate, the work is not defiantly oppositional to our moment of contemporaneity. Instead, these artists embrace the schizophrenic qualities inherent in network culture, using the system to subvert itself in order to perform its logic. Moreover, by making their works readily available online, these artists blur the binary between the physical and the virtual, high art and mass culture, material and immaterial, adding another critical dimension to their works. Ultimately, these artists have made the contemporary Gesamtkunstwerk.

The Internet and all of its interactive technologies have enabled this sort of artistic practice to come to fruition and burgeon. Upon concluding, I have come to realize that these artists have practices of resistance that are not entirely resistant, instead working with contemporary media
culture rather than against it. When these artists perform their identities, they share both theatrical and untheatrical versions of themselves, so that audiences perhaps see their own image reflected back, realizing the logic that is embedded in the era of late capitalism in the digital age.
BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED


