UTS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

Art After the Internet: Reformulating Conceptions of Authorship Online

by Finn Marchant

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (Design)

under the supervision of Dr. Natalya Hughes, Dr. Cherine Fahd and Dr. Sara Oscar

University of Technology Sydney
Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building

February 2020

Certificate of original authorship

I, Finn Marchant declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in the faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

Signature: Production Note: Signature removed prior to publication. Date: 10/02/2020

Acknowledgements

Rather aptly given the topic of this research, during the time I have spent on this project I have discovered that conducting a doctoral study is far from a solitary experience (despite the ways in which it is regularly portrayed in popular media). This project has benefitted greatly from the contributions of numerous people who have generously given their expertise and time. I would like to acknowledge their contributions here and express my gratitude (as limited as that can be within the confines of this format) for their support.

First, I would like to thank my supervisors. To my friend and supervisor Dr. Natalya Hughes, without whom this research would not have been possible. Your knowledge, hard work and patience as a supervisor have helped me get through every stage of this process and I will be forever grateful for the huge contribution of time you have made to this project. To Dr. Cherine Fahd, I really appreciate you agreeing to take on the role as supervisor a bit later on in this process. Your assistance, particularly with regards to my terrible presentation skills, has been invaluable.

I would also like to express my gratitude to all of the assessors and panel chairs I've had the opportunity to meet throughout this process (especially Dr. Alexandra Crosby and Dr. Andrew Burrell). Your thoughtful and supportive feedback has helped this project for the better.

To Nicholas Aloisio-Shearer, my collaborator and friend, our conversations together have greatly helped to shape this research at all stages. Your support and friendship means a lot to me.

Thanks also to Dr. Melinda Reid for proofreading this document and for providing such detailed and critical feedback. I'd also like to thank James Miller for designing the portfolio.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Laura and David and my brother Hugh as well as my amazing group of friends for your endless support and for providing a necessary distraction from what at times became an all-encompassing project.

Table of contents

List of Figures

Abstract

For much of its history the concept of authorship has been defined by Western Romantic ideals. These ideals have shaped the ways in which viewers engage with a work of art. With the widespread use of digital technologies and online media sharing platforms to facilitate the creation, distribution, and viewing of art (and content more broadly), the potential for multifarious approaches to the process of authoring that exist outside of this singular and restrictive framework have emerged. Due to the entrenched nature of the Western Romantic understanding of authorship, people have struggled to engage with these new alternative approaches. To explore whether recent digital technologies provide tools for complicating, disrupting, and ultimately bettering our understanding of this reliance on Romantic notions of authorship, they need to be both examined and deployed strategically in art. My practice based research project takes up this task, critically examining the ways in which new technologies and media sharing platforms are being used online to reframe what artist Artie Vierkant (2010) has described as “reader-author” approaches as strategies for interrogating the concept of authorship. With artists increasingly turning to online media sharing platforms as both a subject for investigation and medium through which to present work, a discussion of how one can navigate the new possibilities for authorship offered by these platforms is vital.

Introduction to the research project and its scope

At the start of 2014 I encountered a channel on YouTube titled “Webdriver Torso,” which at the time of viewing had uploaded close to one hundred thousand videos and was continuing to add to this collection every few seconds. Initially I was struck by the sheer number of uploads and the apparent uniformity of them all, as each video typically consisted of the same formal elements. These elements included: a number of slides composed of a differing arrangement of two variably sized rectangular shapes, one blue and one red with a printed file name (“aqua.flv”) and a number relating to each slide in the bottom left corner of the frame; a sine wave tone that varied in pitch as the slides advanced; and a randomised string of characters as its title (always starting with “tmp”). At this time each of the videos were around eleven seconds in length (although there are some notable exceptions that will be addressed later in this thesis).

As I started to follow the channel over the next few months, what began to emerge as a major point of interest for me was their apparent lack of an authorial figure. Of course, existing on YouTube meant that each video was attributed to an account, and it was the same account in every instance[1]. But the actual identity of the *author* as it is conventionally conceived seemed irrelevant to the videos viewing. Instead it seemed that it was each video’s shared structural elements that allowed them to be read as a cohesive whole. In my own practice at the time, which mainly consisted of reworking old LCD panels to create a kind of content (in that it was screen based) without actually utilising any data, these issues became of central concern to me. They also became the starting point for what would eventually become this research project.

On a more personal note, this idea of structuring content not around a singular author but rather around shared structural elements appealed to me because of the anxieties I had (and to some extent continue to have) about being the sole gatekeeper governing an understanding of my practice as projected by Western Romantic formulations of authorship in an art context. In recent digital media technologies I saw an opportunity to subvert this relationship between the artist and their work by rejecting the conception of the artist as enigma or genius that has been historically intertwined with notions of authorship in art and popular culture (as evident in figure 1). Eschewing this model provided a basis for exploring

[1] “Webdriver” most likely refers to a set of automated web browsing tools known as Selenium through which the account is administered.

new approaches to making work. How this would be done, however, would largely be dictated by the latent possibilities offered by emerging digital media creation methods.

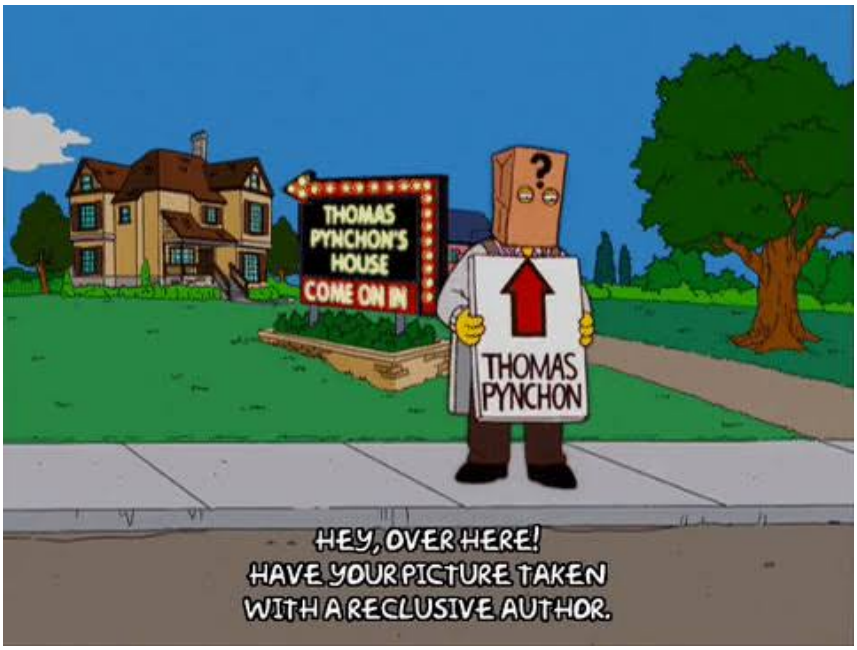


Figure 1: *The Simpsons* 2004, television program, Fox. Still from episode 323 'Diatribe of a Mad Housewife'

Late-capitalist societies have become increasingly mediated by personal computing devices. In this cultural context, we have seen previously distinct media converge into what early computer scientists Adele Goldberg and Alan Kay (1977, p. 31) described as a single 'metamedium.' Emancipated from their material constraints, the media encapsulated by Goldberg and Kay's idea of the "metamedium" are now infinitely transferable allowing for content to be in a state of constant circulation. As a result, societies that are particularly engaged online have shifted their interaction with these newly amalgamated media, favouring proliferation and speed over Romantic ideals like subjectivity and individualism that were previously attached to their tangible analogues. This shift is perhaps best demonstrated, as this thesis will later examine, in the instance of image making which has become an exercise in distribution, not laborious physical production. In this new context for media, the idea of an original or unique version or even a singular author has seemingly become a somewhat outmoded concept in the digital age where internet users now typically exist as both readers and authors simultaneously.

While Roland Barthes would have us see the author as dead (as argued in his oft cited 1967 essay, 'The Death of the Author') in the digital age, this death may not be fully realised. As

my research will demonstrate, authorship now exists in a transitory state conditioned by contemporary societies' simultaneously embracing new possibilities for our understanding of authorship through social and technological shifts while still seeking and, in many instances, longing for some sort of Romantic figuration of the author. Just nine years after his proclamation of the death of the author, Barthes (1975, p. 27) himself states 'in a way, *I desire* the author: I need his figure.' It is in the gap between the author's death and the longing for their reinstatement that my research has focused. I will be identifying how new approaches to authorship that have emerged out of technological shifts can be employed in an art practice to challenge the primacy of the Romantic author model that has dominated in art since its conception.

While the history of pre-internet authorship has been extensively attended to by historians and theorists[2], the role authorship has played in art and content generation since the widespread adoption of the internet is far less comprehensively documented. What my research provides is links between the pre- and post-internet period. By examining the ways in which authorship was established and later propagated, particularly in Western societies, I have been able to identify common approaches employed, whether knowingly or not, by both artists and content creators. It is these approaches that have served to structure both the practical and written components of my research.

Although both of these components present numerous examples of work - ranging from traditional gallery shows, like the work of Parker Ito, to less traditional platform based work, like *Mechanical Turk Poems* and my own - the scope of this project has necessarily had to be limited. As such, my discussion of *contemporary* approaches to authorship will attend to only a specific period of time bookended by the establishment of web 2.0 and the beginnings of Generation Z - defined here as the generation that succeeded Millennials starting in the mid to late nineteen nineties - forming their own engagement with content online (a shift that we are currently observing). This period is characterised by the dominance of large social media platforms and, unlike any other moment in the history of media, has seen a rapid uptake in users of these platforms generating their own content. The typical internet user of this period, as artist Artie Vierkant highlights, exists as both reader and author

---

[2] Many of which this thesis will reference directly including Elizabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979), Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), Andrew Bennett's *The Author* (2005) as well as of course Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author* (1967) and Michel Foucault's *What is an Author?* (1969).

simultaneously (Vierkant 2010). And it is predominantly this fact that has made a discussion of authorship during this period such a vital one.

Rather than proposing completely new approaches to authorship, my research project has set about identifying and testing existing and emerging approaches, adopting many of the structural qualities of content observed online which challenge notions of authorship in some way. By mobilising this strategy of testing approaches to authorship, my project will demonstrate that while many of these approaches outwardly provide very little by way of traditional Romantic authorial markers, a desire for the author in some capacity still remains for viewers. This longing for the author signals a broader trend online: while initially promising a utopian free exchange of information, the internet has actually for the most part served to reinforce and heighten already existing cultural and political issues in real life. The Romantic conception of the author has become so entrenched, in Western society at least, that to escape it seems almost impossible. Artist and writer James Bridle (2018, p. 2) argues that 'over the last century, technological acceleration has transformed our planet, our societies, and ourselves, but it has failed to transform our understanding of these things.' This project will set about trying to contribute, if only in a small way, to broadening our understanding of contemporary digital technologies, especially for contemporary art practitioners who might adopt their potentials or inherit their problems. By critically examining how emerging technologies offer practitioners differing approaches to authorship in the context of art, I hope to highlight new opportunities for artists to critically engage with their role as author and expand entrenched ideas of authorship as a concept.

Research methodology

As a culmination of my initial observations detailed above, the central question that my research project has sought to address is: how can art practice navigate the new possibilities for authorship brought forward by technological shifts in the contemporary experience of media in late capitalist societies? In pursuit of potential answers to this question, I have adopted a practice-led methodology. This methodology is outlined by Carole Gray in her text 'Inquiry Through Practice' (1996). Gray argues that 'practice-led' refers to:

> research which is initiated in practice, where questions, problems, challenges are identified and formed by the needs of the practice and practitioners; and secondly, [where] the research

> strategy is carried out through practice, using predominantly methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners in the visual arts. (Gray 1996, p. 3).

Consistent with Gray's understanding of practice-led methodology, there are two parts to my research project: a practice and a written thesis. While both of these parts have resulted in two distinct outcomes, it is through their shared insights that this project has taken shape. Research conducted as part of the practical component has served as examples in the written thesis while the exploration of context and other practices conducted as part of the written thesis has informed the methods and outcome of the practical work. However, the ways in which research has been pursued in each of these components is quite different.

The practical component of my research has been pursued through a digital ethnography of sorts. By making the act of browsing online central, my practice based work produced as part of this research has acknowledged the broader shift in the way internet users engage with content online, including a marked transition from production to formatting. In this new formulation that art historian David Joselit (2011, p. 82) describes as an 'epistemology of search,' knowledge 'is produced by discovering and/or constructing meaningful patterns—formats—from vast reserves of raw data, through, for instance, the algorithms of search engines like Google or Yahoo!' Recognising this epistemology of search, the practical component of this research has engaged with mostly existing content and methods online in order to identify commonly used strategies for displacing the traditional Romantic conception of the author figure. One such way these strategies have been encountered (also highlighted by Joselit) has been by following algorithmic suggestions on platforms like YouTube in particular. This perhaps reflects a common refrain seen in in the comments sections of videos posted to YouTube: 'the algorithm sent me here.' As I will discuss in chapters three and four, this approach has allowed me to engage with both often overlooked and strangely prominent examples of content and content creation.

These strategies have been adopted in my own practice in order to expand notions of authorship beyond the unnecessarily limiting Romantic conception of the author in art. In the context of a history of art that has, and continues to, rely heavily on this singular Romantic conception of the author as a model for establishing value in the work of art (both culturally and monetarily), this approach to making work has often been divisive. This process of adopting strategies observed online in my practice has, however, also been useful. By removing these approaches to authorship from their traditional role in the creation of content online and reconfiguring them as part of several different bodies of work (including curatorial,

collaborative and solo exhibitions) in the space of the gallery (a place of contemplation in the modernist sense) I hoped to highlight opportunities for presenting new possibilities for authoring art. The reactions of viewers to these experiments have subsequently been explored in the written part of this research.

The methodology employed in my practice at large involves adopting methods of content creation encountered online to produce new work. However, the use of each of these individual methods of content creation in my practice has resulted in distinct projects, both art based and curatorial, with unique outcomes. As a result, each of these projects has engaged with my methodology differently. To highlight these differences, the discussions of each of these projects in this written component will outline their unique methodological approach.

As well as highlighting the methodologies employed by each practical project, the written component of this research also expands upon the digital ethnographic study that I have conducted as part of my practical research. I do this by situating the cultural content examined as part of my practice within a broader contemporary and historical context. Like the practical component of my research, the context for my project is defined in terms of visual art. Since much of the content that my practice examines exists outside of the field of art, my written component links new approaches to online authorship identified during my practical research with existing approaches to authoring work employed by artists since the inception of authorship itself. These online approaches to authorship engage with technology as part of broader strategies to critique Romantic notions of authorship.

The practical component of my research was divided into a number of separate bodies of work that adopted three different approaches to authorship. Guided by the structure of the practical component, my thesis critically examines examples of art practices, history, and theory that explore similar concerns. In pursuing this structure, the written component of my research has, out of necessity, engaged with a number of different approaches to art making and art theory. I have focused primarily on the period spanning from eighteenth century Romanticism through to contemporary post-internet practices. This has meant that the sources employed in this research have been wide ranging. Sources include art history and theory texts published through more conventional academic channels to more recent examples drawn from media sharing and social media websites that rely on these platform's immediacy of distribution.

The goal of this thesis is to critically examine new approaches to authorship observed online by placing them in a historical lineage of art and culture. As such, writings that engage with the history of authorship have been central to my research. While it might seem antithetical to a project that is engaged with online media, my thesis commences with a discussion of Elizabeth Eisenstein's comprehensive history of the printing press, 'The Printing Press as an Agent of Change' (1979). I also discuss Daniel Palmer's recent reimagining of the history of photography, *Photography and Collaboration* (2017). Both recorded histories have been included as evidence that conceptions of authorship existed prior to its Romantic figuration. They are also included to demonstrate the ongoing desire of practitioners and theorists to expand notions of the author. Authorship is for the most part a Western construct and the term is deeply rooted in a particularly white, patriarchal history. Discussions of authorship, including my own, have to reckon with this lineage. While my research acknowledges the limited and the often exclusory nature of these texts, I have had to focus on tracing a restricted history of authorship, sometimes to the exclusion of contesting dominant voices and oft marginalised approaches from the broader field.[3]

Since my research engages with this bounded history in order to locate shifts in art practices in a broader context of technological developments, the writings of New Media theorists have also been central. Texts like 'The Gutenberg Galaxy' (1962) by Marshall McLuhan - which examined the effects of the printing press in the establishment of a mass media - and Gene Youngblood's 'Expanded Cinema' (1970) - that similarly explored the effects of newly emerging electronic video technologies on culture - have been turned to in my research to explore the effects of media technologies on the practices of artists. The methodologies of these texts have also served as models for my research project in that they pose the advancement of technologies as possible catalysts for cultural shifts.

My research provides a critical examination of authorship by adopting a multifaceted and distinctly contemporary methodology in both my art practice and critical writing that engages with emerging approaches to authoring content online. Given the contemporary nature of much of the content under discussion in my project, engagement with emerging online authorship practices has been seldom seen in an academic context to date. Increasingly,

---

[3] There is a long history, for example, of object making outside of the traditional Western narrative that eschews any notions of authorship altogether. Examples of this are explored in Kat Braybrooke and Tim Jordan's 2017 essay 'Genealogy, Culture and Technomyth: Decolonizing Western Information Technologies, from Open Source to the Maker Movement'. One example they give in this text is the practice of producing copyright infringing and counterfeit tech products known as "Shanzhai" that has been emerging out of consumer electronics hubs like Shenzhen in China.

new models of authorship adopted in contemporary culture online are making Romantic notions of authorship perpetuated in late capitalist societies redundant. As a result, expanding the discourse around authorship in art has become crucial. It is to this task that my research attends.

Key terms

Given the particular focus of my thesis, I have had to employ some particular terms to denote distinct designations of authorship. I will outline these terms here. First, and perhaps most obviously, it is important to address the term “author.” What is an author? For many, the answer to that question is inextricably tied to the Western history of literature as this is where the term is most commonly used now. To the fan of fiction then, the author is merely the person who wrote a book. Authorship as a concept has historically been applied to a much broader array of practices, however, and its definition is in fact varied and ever evolving. From its use in oral histories during the Middle Ages to guarantee the validity of a recorded text through to the Romantic refiguring of the term in the eighteenth century to encapsulate the purely subjective content of their work and Roland Barthes’ post-structuralist response to this, what constitutes an author has shifted over time.

The way audiences have viewed the author has changed just as much if not more over this same period. For the audience, authorship has historically been a primary way through which to engage with a text. To paraphrase Barthes (1977, p. 147), in this formulation of authorship, understanding the author is analogous to understanding their text. With the widespread adoption of the internet and, perhaps more closely, platforms on the internet that encourage sharing content, the previously hard lines drawn between author and viewer have become blurred. As a post-internet artist then, one could now exist as both author and reader simultaneously.

What is evident from these initial observations is that authorship, far from being the simple descriptor used to identify an individual who has composed a text, is in fact a complex term. The meaning of this word can change drastically depending on the context in which it is invoked. To question one’s role as author then is also very much context dependent. It can be for example a political act, a social act, or an act of institutional critique. More recently, psychoanalytic art theorists have suggested that it also become an unconscious act implicit

in modes of making online. Where applicable, this thesis will try to tease out these differences, demonstrating what is at stake in each instance. The first chapter for example is dedicated to unpacking this very specific history of authorship and the ways in which the term has been invoked since its inception.

The term “artist” in the context of this project is used to indicate creators who position their work as part of a lineage of the visual arts. “Content creator” is used to signal a more recent designation of creators working online since the inception of web 2.0 who have no such aspirations for their work to be read through the context of art. Instead these creators emphasise the ways in which their content functions as part of the rapid exchange of digital media online. With the increased opportunities for the production and dissemination of content brought forward by image sharing, video sharing, and social media platforms, the terms artist and content creator could perhaps be used interchangeably. Here, however, they are employed to signal distinct types of authorship.

Chapter outline

A central aspect of the practical research in my project has been identifying and adopting various approaches to authorship that have been observed in examples of content online. Ranging from the use of outsourcing to programming, these approaches have prompted me to create a varied range of new bodies of work that interrogate the relevance of Romantic notions of the author in the production of content today. My thesis is structured around these differing approaches to authorship with each forming the basis for a chapter. The written component also provides context for and expands upon my practice. What connects the chapters is not so much the choice of works or content discussed, but rather how the works and content represent different responses to authorship. These responses are examined to highlight how they offer new frames of reference for authorship or have prompted new approaches to the making work that I have adopted in my own practice.

While one might typically expect to encounter a discrete contextual survey first when reading a thesis of this type, that will not be the case here. The reason I have decided to forgo this commonly held structural tenet is because my project engages with the concept of authorship through very specific instances found online. As a result of this, the context for each of these approaches greatly differs. Rather than providing a distinct contextual survey

section at the beginning, this thesis will instead engage with the context of each of these approaches individually as part of their respective chapters.

To establish how these recent online based approaches to authorship have been employed by artists and practitioners to date and how they can be employed today (in the instance of my own practice which plays with these recent approaches), I will first establish how the overarching concept of authorship has been invoked since its inception. The first chapter provides this context, charting a history from the medieval “auctor” (acknowledged here as the first instance of authorship) to eighteenth century Romanticism and on to both Roland Barthes’ and Michel Foucault’s proclamations of the end of authorship altogether in the mid-twentieth century. By recounting this lineage, what becomes evident is that authorship has been perceived by some as a limiting factor in the work of art for much of its history. My examination of this history also makes clear that challenges to prevailing modes of authorship are not just a recent phenomenon of the digital age, but rather have been prevalent in the practices of artists from as early as the nineteenth century. While the Romantic conception of the author came to serve as the defining model of authorship for many, challenges to its dominance were mostly received in a way that reinforced a desire for some sort of singular authorial figure. It is this vacillation between the Romantic conception of the author and its undermining that will later come to characterise both contemporary approaches to authorship and this research project.

With the development of mechanical, electronic, and digital technologies capable of flattening all media, new possibilities for approaching authorship have emerged. These approaches to authoring content are often collaborative, defined by their varied use of appropriation and dispersion. The second chapter analyses how collaborative approaches in art practices have evolved alongside digital technologies, from the structural films of the 1960s through to the work of contemporary post-internet artists. In this chapter, I highlight how this evolution has brought about a growing unease with any categorisation of authorship.

In my practice, these ideas are explored through two distinct exhibitions which were both produced in collaboration with my peer Nicholas Aloisio-Shearer. Born out of a shared interest in ever evolving online meme culture, our collaboration has made the act of observation central, engaging with predominantly pre-existing content. This approach is evident in both of the shows produced as part of this project. The first, a curatorial show titled *Elegant Degradation* (2017), took the remit presented by this research project quite

literally, looking at the ways a group of artists, both local and international, approached their own role as author or approached the broader concept of authorship itself. The second, a collaborative show of our own work titled *Big Game Hunting* (2017), adopted the use of appropriation as seen broadly online (particularly in fanfiction communities). Playing with the physical materiality of existing digital content, we created an installation that used the gallery as a space of contemplation outside the context of the internet.

Through this investigation into the use of appropriation, collaboration, and dispersion as methods of disrupting Romantic understandings of the author in both my own practice and that of my contemporaries, it became clear that authorship is now multifarious in its applications. While this might suggest an end to the primacy of the Romantic conception of authorship, my shared practice with Aloisio-Shearer also made clear that the viewers (of both our own work and that of others) continue to fall back on the entrenched Romantic model of the author.

Where the second chapter looks at collaborative approaches to authorship, the third chapter explores how artists and content creators have re-assessed their own role in the making of work. Stemming from increasingly exploitative labour conditions in contemporary post-capitalist societies, artists have begun to question their role in this system and, by extension, their role as authors. This chapter looks at how the practice of displacing labour - the labour of actually physically producing work - has been employed in my own practice, and in the practices of other artists throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century to question the role of the author.

From Marcel Duchamp to Parker Ito, artists have variously used outsourcing essentially as a means of institutional critique. My application of outsourcing, which resulted in a show titled *nursery rhymes* (2018) has acted as an extension of this context. As I will discuss, *nursery rhymes* was an installation that incorporated content produced via commission by both my peers and users of the digital labour market Fiverr. By critically examining how the practice of outsourcing can be employed as part of the conceptual framework of an artist's practice (not simply as a means of accelerating the production of saleable work), this exhibition highlights how the results of outsourcing are often met with confusion from the viewing public. In responses to my own work and that of practitioners who have similarly explored the use of outsourcing, this confusion demonstrates that a desire from the viewer for an authorial figure still remains.

The fourth chapter extends my discussion of creative labour displacement by exploring how programming can be employed as a means to shift the role of producer typically taken up by the artist. With the rise of semi-automated systems of content generation based particularly around algorithmic production, we have seen the emergence of content that exists almost entirely outside of human interaction and, in turn, any notion of authorship (in the Romantic sense at least). These systems of content generation have been demonstrated in the instances of Google's series of YouTube videos published under the name "Webdriver Torso" and the anonymously maintained channel "Unfavorable Semicircle." This chapter will attend to these examples as well as explicating the deliberate use of this kind of content generation in my own practice with particular focus on my installation *soft ions*. *Soft ions* demonstrated the means by which such content, in its existence almost entirely outside of human interaction, again represents new possibilities for our understanding of authorship but whose reception to date has been limited by our continued desire for the author.

Through critical examinations of my practice, exhibitions, and their greater context in this thesis, I will address the gap between new conceptions of authorship afforded by recent platforms for content creation and distribution, and the Romantic figuration of the author. A discussion of how one can navigate the new possibilities for authorship offered by online platforms is vital, with artists increasingly turning to media sharing platforms online as both a subject for investigation and medium through which to present new work. In the chapters that follow, I will establish the evolving context for these discussions. After defining the Romantic conception of authorship as the enduring and culturally dominant mode of authorship, this thesis will then address alternate modes of authoring work. By critically examining examples of collaboration, outsourcing, and programming in both writing and practice, it is hoped that this project will offer new opportunities for artists to engage with their role as author.

Chapter One - Historic conceptions of the author: Establishing the existence of a counter history of authorship in opposition to the still dominant Romantic model

As noted in my introduction, the central concern of this research project is to explore how an art practice can use more complex contemporary experiences of authorship found online to expand the limiting Romantic notion of the author that still dominates the field of art. This chapter will provide a historical survey to establish the context of this topic. I will explore how the idea of authorship has transformed since its inception since what it meant to "author" a text when the term was first conceived of during the medieval period in Europe greatly differs from what it means to author something today. Rather than recounting the entire history of authorship - which spans almost nine hundred years and has been extensively attended to elsewhere[4] - this chapter will instead focus on a number of critical developments that have informed contemporary notions of the author. I do so to provide context for my argument that with the evolution of technological developments in the creation and reception of media has come opportunities to rethink and reformulate authorship.

This chapter will focus on providing a lineage of the Western construct of authorship. There are five key moments (technological and cultural) in the evolution of the author that still have a bearing on the term today: the first is the original conception of authorship in medieval scribal practices; second is the widespread attribution of text to specific individuals brought about by Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in the thirteenth century; third is Romanticism's refiguring of the term in the eighteenth century; fourth is the invention of photography in the nineteenth century and Walter Benjamin's acknowledgement of the effect of mechanical reproduction on notions of authorship in the early twentieth century; and, finally, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault's proclamations of the death of the author in the mid twentieth century, which might be understood as a coda to this lineage.

Most of these developments, as I will argue further in the second part of this chapter and through the rest of the thesis, represent unique engagements with the concept of authorship. However, it is Romanticism's redefinition of authorship - which shifted the author from a figure of confirmation to the sole arbiter of their work - that has had the most lasting influence on conceptions of the author today. For this reason it is here that this chapter will commence.

---

[4] In Andrew Bennett's 2005 book 'The Author' for example.

1.1 The Romantic conception of authorship (or the author as genius)

Even though it was certainly not the first model of authorship, the Romantic conception of the author gave rise to the individualism that carried over into Modernism and proliferated into widely held cultural understandings of the author. As a result of this, it remains the most recognised model of authorship today. Emerging in late eighteenth century Europe as a reaction against the increasingly rational influences of post Enlightenment modernity, Romanticism emphasised singular, subjective expression by placing the author at the centre of the text. Spanning the visual arts, literature and music, it was a movement that, gave rise to the cult of genius around the author and increasingly encouraged complex engagements with creators to understand the work that they produced as, in Romanticism (and beyond), the author existed outside of society, pursuing a unique vision.

What motivated the Romantics to make this shift in understanding the authoring of work? As historian Dugald Williamson (1989, p. 8) notes, 'by placing primary value on individual, original achievement, the Romantics were attempting to claim a new kind of authority for the work of art and the artist.' The new authority that Williamson hints at existed outside of any of the traditional forces which had once played a part in the authoring of work. For the Romantics, the author was not, as Andrew Bennett (2005, p. 8) suggests, 'subject to the "external" forces of history, society, the law and politics that after Marx we call "ideology"; and not subject to the kinds of "internal" forces, drives, desires, impulses, that, after Freud, we know as the "unconscious".' Instead, in Romanticism the author had become 'the major element generating both the artistic product and the criteria by which it is to be judged' (Williamson 1989, p.8).

This cultural shift meant that greater cultural emphasis was now placed on the authors themselves rather than the texts that they produced. As a result of this shift, a study of the author figure became essential in engaging with their wider body of work. Privileging the role of the artist in the conception and creation of their work led to Romantic authors of the eighteenth century being addressed as almost mythical figures, seen to possess what Jacques Derrida (as cited in Bennett 2005, p. 7) described as a kind of 'sovereign solitude.' For Derrida, this term signalled an emphasis on the internal subjectivity of an author and was something to be rejected in favour of a system of 'writing', modelled around 'relations between strata: the Mystic Pad, the psyche, society, the world' (Derrida, 1978, p. 227). Romantic authors however, were content to foreground their subjectivity, so with the

Romantic idea of the author also came the entrenchment of the Romantic idea of genius, a term which, as Bennett (2005, p. 7) notes, was itself ‘reinvented and reinvigorated in eighteenth century European culture.’ While in pre-Romantic Enlightenment, an author could have genius, it wasn’t until Romanticism that an author could in fact *be* a genius.

As authors were increasingly the sole arbiters of their work, they also inevitably became ‘a site of analysis and exploration’ (Bennett 2005, p. 3). This new approach to the author spurred wider emphasis on the importance of critics who became the gatekeepers through which one could gain a greater understanding of an artist’s work. For the critic then, as Roland Barthes (1977, p.147) notes, ‘when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained' - victory to the critic. Hence there is no surprise in the fact that, historically, the reign of the Author has also been that of the Critic.’ In this formulation of authorship, the author’s biography is mythologised as a means to engage with their work, while the critic serves to entrench the Romantic conception of the author further.

How this process of mythologising the author plays out becomes clear when analysing the practices of the Romantics themselves. While the most famous examples of Romanticism come from literature, more relevant to this research project is the means by which Romantic conceptions of authorship affected the reception of visual art. Looking broadly at Romantic paintings of the nineteenth century, landscapes invoking the sublime often serve as backgrounds for depictions of Romantic authors as solitary artists. One of the most notable paintings from this period, Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818), exemplifies this depiction of the author as a solitary figure. In Friedrich’s painting (see figure 2) we see a lone figure, back turned to the viewer, staring out across a rugged mountainous landscape. Friedrich’s painting serves as a literal visual representation of the ‘sovereign solitude’ that was later noted by Derrida (cited in Bennett 2005, p. 7).

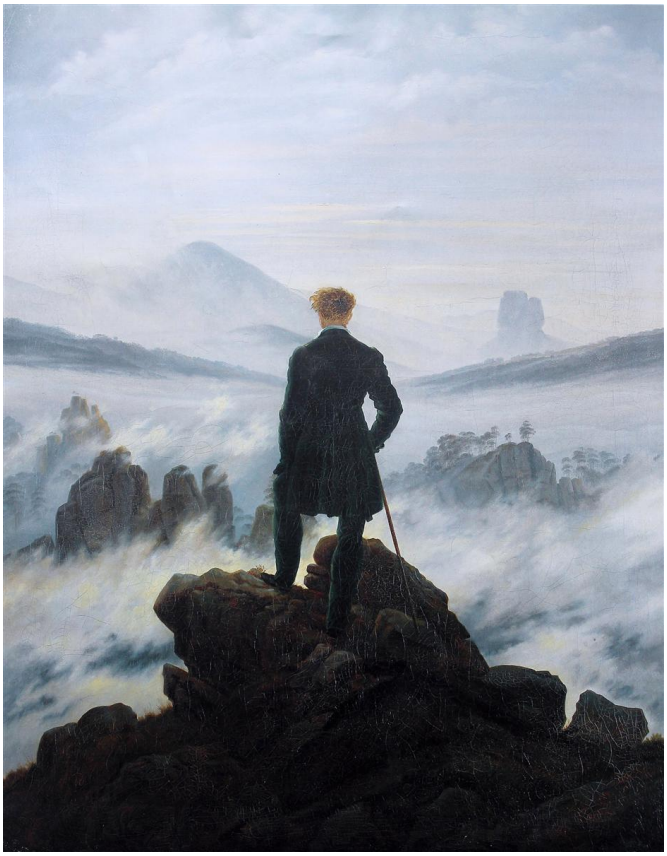


Figure 2: Friedrich, C. D. 1818, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, painting, Kunsthalle, Hamburg. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/caspar-david-friedrich/the-wanderer-above-the-sea-of-fog>

Another visual technique Romantic painters employed to claim further authority over their work was the use of expressive brush strokes. In William Turner's series of seascapes produced between 1830-1845 (see figure 3 for one such example), we see broad, impressionistic strokes depicting barely any recognisable subject matter within the frame. Through these stylistic choices, Turner's paintings illicit in their viewers a response not so much to the subject matter itself but rather the artist's unique representation of these scenes. This technique of applying paint not simply as an indexical mark, but rather as an emotive gesture, would later become stylistic of Impressionism in the nineteenth century and Expressionism and Abstract Expressionism in the twentieth century - three artistic movements that emboldened the conception of the artist as genius by drawing on the artist's personal trauma as part of the creative process.

Figure 3: Turner, W. c. 1840, *Seascape with Distant Coast*, painting, Tate London. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-seascape-with-distant-coast-n05516>

Returning to Turner, the provenance of many of his seascapes is, rather ironically, highly debated. This complicates the audience's investment in his impressionistic style as symbolic of some kind of genius. Historians Martin Butlin and Evelyn Joll have speculated that some of these works may have in fact been painted by Turner's assistant at the time, Francis Sherrell (Tate n.d.). The fact that Turner may have employed an assistant to produce some of his work hints at an approach to authoring that has existed long before Romanticism. This approach might be captured by the term "outsourcing." As I will discuss in the third chapter of this thesis, this is a deliberate strategy that has become increasingly prevalent in the activities of contemporary practitioners. Despite somewhat destabilising the Romantic conception of the author, Turner's legacy still to a great extent exists as part of the Romantic movement. As a result of this, his work continues to be assessed through the lens of the Romantic author.

In the practices of both Friedrich and Turner (notwithstanding Turner's use of assistants), it is clear that Romanticism was characterised by a solidification of the author as central to the interpretation of the work of art. By placing greater emphasis on the subjective gesture, Romantic artists (and the Romantic movement more broadly) stripped their work of their wider social, cultural, historical, political and economic context and instead became the solitary source through which the content of their work would be read. For the audience and reading public of this time, an understanding of the author's intentions had become key to an

engagement with creative work. If one conducts a broad examination of much of the critical engagement with art since Romanticism, it becomes clear that this model of authorship has become the dominant model of art criticism, continuing to exert itself upon the reception of the work of art today.[5]

But what came before this model? What histories might be overlooked if this Romantic approach is taken as the only model of authorship? And what strategies of art marking and reception are offered by practices that implicitly challenge or explicitly critique the Romantic conception of authorship? These questions will form the basis for the rest of this chapter which presents a counter history to the Romantic figuration of the author. In the paragraphs that follow, I examine the new possibilities for authorship brought forward by advances in mechanical technologies, like the printing press and the camera, as well as the ways in which avant-garde art practices used these technologies and other techniques to reject the limiting idea of the Romantic author.

1.2 Establishing a counter history of authorship prior to its Romantic conception

Identifying alternative models of authorship offered by practices both historical and contemporary is of central concern in my research. Models that differ from the Romantic understanding of authorship will be used to explore how contemporary practitioners might navigate the complex experience of authorship in online contexts. While Romanticism influences the dominant conception of authorship, history demonstrates that prior to Romanticism, more dynamic and more complex examples of authoring work existed.

One such example of this, and also one of the earliest examples of authorship, is the scribal culture of Europe which emerged around the medieval period (approximately 500-1500 AD). Reflecting on this period in their individual examinations of the effects of mass media on culture, both Elizabeth Eisenstein and Marshall McLuhan (1962, p. 108) describe the emergence of ‘scribal practices’ (which I will describe below) that became the primary means of recording. Previously, knowledge and histories were disseminated through oral accounts

---

[5] The enduring popularity of artist biographies, many of which are titled by some variation of ‘the life and work of’… is a testament to this observation. Just a few examples of this include: *The Life and Death of Andy Warhol* (1989) by Victor Bockris, *The Life and Work of John Berger* (2018) by Joshua Sperling, *Sontag: Her Life and Work* and *Max Ernst: Life and Work* (2006) by Werner Spies.

that would evolve from person to person with little concern for their original author; Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979, p. 121) notes that these accounts were generally attributed to “anon.” With the arrival of the scribe, however, it was possible to record these accounts. As Marshall McLuhan (1962, p. 108) notes, the resulting texts were still based on the recollection of their teller so the art of memory was central to scribal culture. Each manuscript then was very much shaped by the teller’s performance, rather than that of the scribe.

Though limited in reach to just a small number of individuals, these scribed texts, generally experienced as manuscripts, could now be subject to review and discussion. This process differed, however, from any model of review that we would recognise today. Firstly, there was no actual reading public (McLuhan 1962, p. 132). This was not through lack of literacy, but rather because manuscripts were generally produced and kept in small private libraries. As McLuhan (1962, p. 132) notes, this was a ‘producer-oriented’ almost DIY culture, in which ‘the manuscript book was slow to read and slow to move or be circulated.’ What McLuhan outlines here is not dissimilar to scientific writing, even in our current time, in that texts were produced for peers rather than the wider reading public. Manuscript culture was also quite distinct from the scientific academic model of publishing though in so far as manuscripts tended to lack any recognisable attribution. This was in part the result of a kind of haphazard approach to collecting and storing manuscripts where shorter texts from different authors were often compiled by librarians or readers into single books attributed to just one author (Goldschmidt, cited in McLuhan 1962, pp. 132-133).[6] It is also clear that composers of texts during the medieval period did not recognise their role as producing entirely new content, as in the modern sense of the author. Rather they regarded their role as adding to ‘that great and total body of knowledge, the *scientia de omni scibili*, which had once been the property of the ancient sages’ (Goldschmidt, cited in McLuhan 1962, p. 132).

In her expansive history of printing, Eisenstein affirms this early authorial relationship to text through the work of thirteenth century Italian philosopher Saint Bonaventura. Bonaventura (cited in Eisenstein 1979, pp. 121-122) divided the acts involved in book making into four roles: the scribe, the compiler, the commentator, and the author or “auctor” at this time. The

---

[6] This haphazard approach to compiling books is made clear by Goldschmidt (as cited in McLuhan 1962, pp. 132-133) when he states that ‘not only was the assembly of the parts of the book often a collective scribal affair, but librarians and users of books took a large hand in composition since small books which only took a few pages, could never be transmitted except in volumes of miscellaneous content. ‘These volumes comprising many pieces, which probably constituted the majority of the books in the library, were created as units not by the authors or even by the scribes but by the librarians or bookbinders (very often identical).’

auctor that Bonaventura described was not concerned with producing an original text; instead, the auctor wrote ‘both his own work and others’, but with his own work in principal place adding others' for the purpose of confirmation’ (Eisenstein 1979, p. 122). The auctor in this period was viewed as more a guarantor of the text and, in a sense, akin to any other artisan or maker of the time. As John Burrow (cited in Eisenstein 1979, p. 122) states, ‘[a] writer [at this time] is a man who 'makes books' with a pen just as a cobbler is a man who makes shoes on a last.’ What Bonaventura and subsequent commentators outline here actually comes much closer to Barthes’ (1977, p. 146) later reduction of authorship to what he terms a ‘ready-formed dictionary’ of existing text, which will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

The visual art of the middle ages also reflected this approach to authorship and attribution, characterised by artists acting as guarantors of a collective history. Much of the art created in this period was done so anonymously. The focus of artists of this time was not on the original (and thus differentiating) achievement of their individual works, but rather in the recapturing of histories and knowledge from the past. As Ernst Gombrich (1950, p. 119) notes, ‘a medieval artist of Western Europe [would not] have understood why he should invent new ways of planning a church, of designing a chalice or of representing the sacred story where the old ones served their purpose so well.’ This position is reflected in the subject matter they chose to address (which includes depictions of Christ, scenes drawn from religious stories, as well as historical events of importance at the time).

Looking at illustrated manuscripts from eighth century England and Ireland, for instance, we see a convergence of historic influences incorporating depictions of religion, history, and fantasy. One example of this is *The Lindisfarne Gospel,* which was made in Northumbria just before 700 AD (Gombrich 1950, p. 117; see figure 4). Throughout this manuscript are elaborate and intricate compositions of patterns, intertwined dragons, frame motifs, illustrations, and text drawn from Christianity. Evident here is a confluence of historic art techniques and influences from a number of different regions, including decorative elements from the Viking culture of northern Europe alongside religious motifs from European Christianity, combining history with myth.

Consistent with the observations of McLuhan, Eisenstein, and Gombrich, *The Lindisfarne Gospel* has not been attributed to a single figure. This is one of the defining characteristics of the bulk of work produced during the medieval period. Though there was an

understanding of authorship, there was still no widespread demand for sole attribution, nor was there a desire to inquire further into the individual makers.

Figure 4: Exact author unknown c. 700, *The Lindisfarne Gospel*, book, British Library, London. <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/lindisfarne-gospels>

What is instead offered here is a collaborative model of authorship preceding Romanticism that emphasises collective creation. The goal of authorship in the Medieval period was not subjective expression, as it would be in Romanticism, but rather production of a collective history.

1.3 Gutenberg's printing press and early possibilities for authorship

Like the model of collaborative authorship implied by scribal practices, the development of the printing press suggested the possibility of a collective model of authorship in which everyone could conceivably author and distribute their own text. However, as I will soon discuss, the printing press ultimately became one of the factors that facilitated Romanticism's refiguring of the author.

Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century was one of the major contributing factors that brought the medieval period of the auctor to a close. Ostensibly only an evolution of existing technologies of the time, Gutenberg's press was the culmination of a number of processes: the press, movable type, and oil based ink. With the invention of the printing press, information could suddenly be conveyed to a much wider audience. This contributed to a drastic shift in the way Western society produced and disseminated knowledge (eventually culminating The Enlightenment, wherein recorded knowledge rapidly spread across Europe). With this spread of information also came a significant refiguring of the author. The collective experience of text enabled by the printing press brought with it a prevailing individualism that would go on to shape Romanticism and our modern sense of the author.

It is important to note that Gutenberg's invention was not the first instance of print culture. For example, text had been printed in China for hundreds of years prior using paper and woodblock printing methods. As has been highlighted in the introduction to this project, the focus of this thesis is on the Western construct of authorship, however, and the importance of Gutenberg's invention to shaping the Western construct of authorship has been cited in many writings on the subject. [7]

As McLuhan (1962, p. 142) highlights, it wasn't until the next century that a truly new culture around text emerged. After Gutenberg's press came to prominence in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, many printing presses across Europe began reprinting (or printing for the first time) texts of medieval origin. In fact, 'the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' as McLuhan (1962, p. 142) notes, 'saw more of the Middle Ages than had ever been available to anybody *in* the Middle Ages.'[8] This was in part due to the fact that the reading public was still, as McLuhan (1962, p. 136) puts it, 'attuned' to these earlier forms of text in which 'the author felt little pressure to maintain a single attitude to his subject or a consistent tone to the reader' - an approach very much akin to earlier spoken word traditions. As a new culture around the printed word was establishing, it became clear that the way writers were approaching text itself was changing. Authors began to insert "points of view" into their texts, a change that was incompatible with the previous heterogeneous spoken traditions. McLuhan (1962, p. 136) notes of this period that 'the world of visual perspective is one of

---

[7] Including the aforementioned 'The Printing Press as an Agent of Change' (1979) by Elizabeth Eisenstein, 'The Gutenberg Galaxy' (1962) by Marshall McLuhan and 'The Author' (2005) by Andrew Bennett

[8] This is also demonstrative of McLuhan's tetrad as proposed in *The Global Village* (1989).

unified and homogeneous space' and that '[s]uch a world is alien to the resonating diversity of spoken words.'

By the end of the seventeenth century the bulk of the written material from the middle ages had become standardised in print (removing any variation that might have earlier been seen in manuscripts from library to library). This brought about a culture around print which set new limits on text. The driving force behind these limits was the burgeoning field of intellectual property.[9] With the potential for near infinite replicability of text enabled by the printing press, there was also the possibility that unwanted copies could be made - printing was, after all, a profit driven pursuit.

While the emergence of print culture signalled an embrace of the limitless mechanical copy, what this technological development of print meant for the conception of the author was a privileging of the individual. With their work now standardised, individual authors were able to gain great fame and notoriety from the reading public.[10] This point is explored by theorists Penny Woolley and Paul Hirst (cited in Williamson 1989, p. 9) who note that 'one of the necessary practical conditions for the emergence of the individual author with proprietorial claims on the work was the stabilising … of a version of the text made possible by … printing.' As Eisenstein (1979, p. 124) puts it more succinctly, 'the preservation of the old … launched a tradition of the new.'

This new conception of the author, defined by individualism, found its fullest expression in Romanticism. Where texts had previously been composed with the aim of rediscovering the work of ancient practitioners, in Romanticism the focus shifted to the individual author as the sole source of meaning generation. As McLuhan (1962, p. 145) states, this was a shift from a heterogeneous culture around text to a homogeneous one as typography itself fostered 'homogeneity in every phase of human sensibility.' Furthermore, it was this homogeneity that 'began to invade the arts, the sciences, industry, and politics from the sixteenth century forward' (McLuhan 1962, p. 135) resulting in the eventual conception and subsequent

---

[9] Eisentstein (1979, p. 120 footnote 239) notes that though the Statute of Anne in Britain from 1710 is perhaps the first example of copyright law, the first rights (then known as "privileges") were actually given to the printers, not to authors, as exemplified in 1469 'when a Venetian printer obtained a privilege to print and sell a given book for a given interval of time.' Also, Nesbitt (cited in Palmer 2017, p. 22) highlights that in France, 'copyright law had existed since the Revolution, with the landmark law on author's rights being enacted in 1793.'

[10] This also includes authors, like Plato for example, who were writing well before the age of printing, but whose work had been taken up and distributed by printers as classic texts during the early period of printing presses.

dominance of the singular Romantic author that can still be seen today. The shift to a homogeneous culture around text is further evidenced by the rise of famed authors, with writers like Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau gaining great notoriety in the eighteenth century. McLuhan (1962, p. 131) argues that 'manuscript culture did not foster any grand ideas in [the fame] department. Print did.' As explored in the first section of this chapter, the results of this shift to a singular perspective came to define Romanticism.

1.4 Photography and authorship: New possibilities for a refiguring of the role of the author

In the early nineteenth century - the period in which Romanticism was redefining the role of the author - the practice of photography began to emerge. Conceived of as a process through which nature could in fact author an image of itself, photography allowed for the mechanical reproduction of images with the presumption of 'no knowledge of the art of drawing' and demanded 'no special dexterity' (François Arago as quoted in Palmer 2017, p. 19).[11] The practice of photography represented a democratisation of the act of image making as it allowed for an essentially limitless reproduction of the image which, in theory, almost anyone could capture, develop, and print. In practice, however, few had access to the materials and equipment that photography initially required.

Despite the practice's initial technical limitations, photography marked a complete upheaval of the traditional hierarchy of image making. While its invention was preceded by a number of mechanical processes of image reproduction - including woodcut printing and etching (throughout the Middle Ages) and lithography (which was invented at the beginning of the nineteenth century) - it was through the practice of photography that a completely new culture around images could emerge. As Walter Benjamin (1969, p. 6) highlights in his influential text 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), 'the unique value of the "authentic" work of art has its basis in ritual' and can be seen to foster a kind of 'cult value.' This cult value was derived from what Benjamin describes as the art object's "aura": its physical existence in both time and space (including the effects each of these have had on the art object). The aura of an artwork was then closely tied to its existence as a unique object. In photography, the original photograph (represented by film or plate

[11] In 1838 Daguerre (cited in Palmer 2017, p. 20) states that 'The Daguerreotype is not merely an instrument which serves to draw Nature; on the contrary it is a chemical and physical process which gives her the power to reproduce herself.'

negatives) was de-emphasised since these items merely existed as tools through which prints would be made. It was the resulting prints or reproductions - which could potentially be limitless - that came to be of primary value. In this new hierarchy of image making, ‘the criterion of authenticity cease[d] to be applicable to artistic production’ (Benjamin 2007, p. 6). Furthermore, for Benjamin the practice of artistic production using mechanical reproduction tools became political as it was through an artwork’s capacity to be distributed and seen (or what Benjamin terms, its ‘exhibition value’) that its significance was derived.

This marked the first moment in the history of Western image making where the value of a work of art was not tied not to its representation of an author’s unique and subjective expression but rather to its ability to reach an audience. This shift is made apparent by the practice of photography as it not only allowed for the widespread distribution of images, but also the possible democratisation of the process of image making, empowering a greater number of people to participate in cultural production. This new condition presented a challenge for authorship: if anyone could create a similar image - or copy an existing one - using the same basic mechanical apparatus, how could one claim authorship (in the Romantic sense) over the resulting work?

Daniel Palmer’s recent writing on photography and collaboration is of great assistance in considering how the practice of photography might have been used to challenge conceptions of authorship at this time. Palmer (2017, p. 19) notes that the unease with photography’s ‘democratic promise’ was played out on a number of fronts, including in intellectual property law where it was questioned whether one could actually claim any authorship over the mechanically produced image. To demonstrate this unease, Palmer (2017, pp. 22-23) points to the work of theorist Bernard Edelman who highlights that in early nineteenth century France, in order to claim legal authorship of a photograph, one would first have to prove that the mechanically produced work was imbued ‘with something of the human soul.’ As Palmer’s study implies, this was a very vague definition indeed.

Pictorialist photographers sought to address this by aesthetically emulating Romantic painting of the period. These photographers attempted to imbue intentionality and most importantly, subjectivity, in their images by using photographic processes, such as platinum prints and photogravures, that were much harder to produce for the general public because of their scarcity or the technical proficiency needed to practice them, as well as techniques like soft focus to instil a sense of emotion in the image (Palmer 2017, p. 26). Through these techniques, they differentiated their work from photographs produced by the broader public,

creating images that resembled their Romantic peers (as evident in Edward Steichen's 1904 photograph *Moonrise-Manaroneck, New York* pictured in figure 5). As such, these practitioners were not interested in the medium's apparent objective qualities but rather in its capacity to create wholly subjective images. The aim was to delineate the photographic medium from being a means of merely documenting the world. Through these processes, it was hoped that photography would operate and be celebrated as a form of art just like the outputs of the Romantic painters, highlighting an acknowledgment of what had become the entrenched conception of the Romantic author within art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Like the shift from scribe to printed text, the practice of photography loosened the dominant single author model espoused by Romanticism. Also like printed text, however, this latent possibility was for the most part ignored in favour of the singular, subjective gesture.

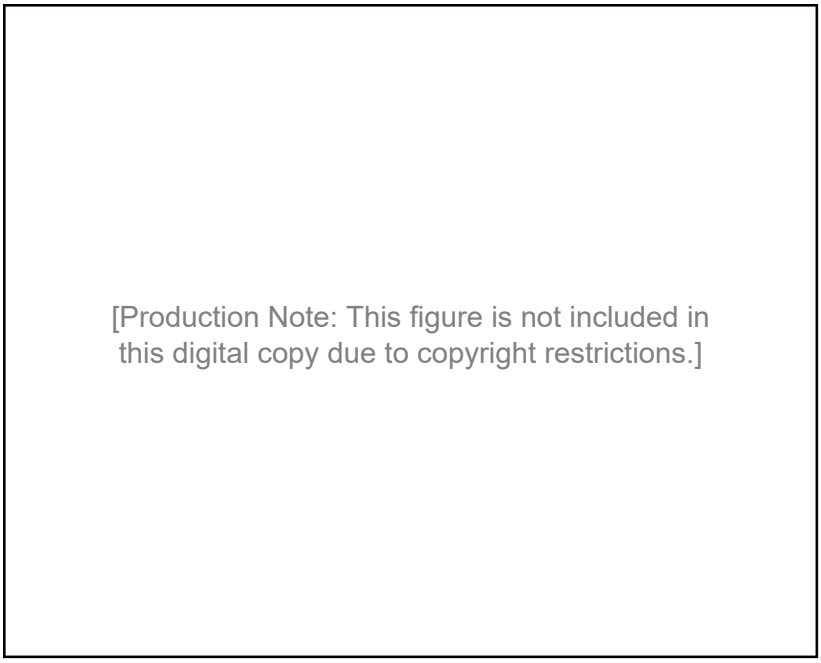


Figure 5: Steichen, E. 1904, *Moonrise-Manaroneck, New York*, photograph, The Museum of Modern Art, New York <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/51812>

1.5 Avant-garde art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: The first explicit challenge to the primacy of the Romantic conception of the author

As the described examples of printing technologies and photography suggest, the Romantic conception of the author continued to dominate from the late eighteenth century well into the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Throughout this period, however, there were writers and artists who actively and explicitly challenged this conception of authorship. We see examples of this in the modern avant-gardes where practices of authoring work were taken up that demonstrated an explicit hostility to the notion of the genius.

One of the earliest examples of this can be seen in French poet Stéphane Mallarmé's 'Crisis in Poetry' from 1895.[12] In this text, Mallarmé (cited in Karshan 2009) famously states that, 'if the poem is to be pure, the poet's voice must be stilled and the initiative taken by the words themselves, which will be set in motion as they meet unequally in collision.' What Mallarmé is proposing here is that any notion of the author should be suppressed in favour of the text itself. This refiguring of the relationship between the author and their work will later be central in Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault's dismissal of authorship altogether.

The artist Marcel Duchamp expanded Mallarmé's refiguring of the author to include the work of artists. Perhaps the most notable demonstration of this in Duchamp's practice is his use of readymades. Readymades were existing mass produced objects that could be commonly be found within one's home or surroundings. These objects were re-situated by Duchamp within a gallery space. In this act, Duchamp sought to erode his authorial figure over his work, instead becoming a kind of curator as he assembled existing objects within a new context. As curator Helen Molesworth (2003, p. 28) suggests, in executing this gesture, Duchamp defied 'two historical definitions of art: namely, that art should be unique and that it should be produced by a highly trained artist with a requisite set of learned skills.'

Fresh Widow (1920; see figure 6), made of a miniature set of French windows constructed under commission, exemplifies Duchamp's approach to these readymade objects. With just a few minor alterations to this object, including covering each pane of glass with black leather so as to block any view through these windows, Duchamp emphasised the viewer's reading of the work. When situated in a gallery (presumably) surrounded by paintings that appear as windows onto the world, the viewer is left to contemplate a material object divorced from its usual utility in a space of "viewing" (the gallery). Duchamp obscures his authorial role further with the inclusion of text inscribed at the bottom of the windowsill. This text reads, 'COPYRIGHT ROSE SELAVY 1920.' Rose Selavy (later spelt Rrose) was the

---

[12] As identified by Barthes in 'Death of the Author' (1977, p.143), 'Mallarmé was doubtless the first to see and to foresee in its full extent the necessity to substitute language itself for the person who until then had been supposed to be its owner. For him, for us too, it is language which speaks, not the author'

female alter ego Duchamp adopted that, like the title of this work, was another play on words. In French, the name is a homophone for “Eros, c’est la vie” which in English translates to “Eros is life.”[13] This sly play on words is a reflection of Duchamp’s broader practice as he often utilised a combination of objects and the written word to emphasise an active engagement from the viewer. Another example of how he did this was through the titles of his works which, like in the example of *Fresh Widow* often incorporated subtle plays on popular expressions, inviting viewers to become part of the creative process. With regard to the titles of his works, Duchamp (1975. p. 141) stated that ‘instead of describing the object… [the] title was meant to carry the mind of the spectator towards other regions more verbal.’ For Duchamp then, the viewer had become just as important as the artist.

Figure 6: Duchamp, M. 1920, *Fresh Widow*, installation, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/images/work/T/T07/T07282_10.jpg>

The Surrealists also sought to undermine the dominant Romantic model of authorship by attempting to break their various forms of practice from the control that they felt was being imposed on them by ‘aesthetic or moral concern[s]’ (Seaver & Lane 1969, p. 26). These concerns could certainly be interpreted as that legacy of Romanticism discussed above. Like Duchamp, the Surrealists employed variations of the methodology outlined by Mallarmé to

[13] Eros is the ancient Greek god of love and sex.

divorce their practices from the dominant Romantic author model. One of the ways they sought to do this was by employing readymade elements in their work, including readymade text. For instance, the group's first manifesto published by André Breton in 1924 included a poem compiled from a random assemblage of scraps of headlines cut out of newspapers. Later in this manifesto, Breton (cited in Seaver & Lane 1969, p. 26) proposed an extension of this practice through what he described as 'psychic automatism.' Psychic automatism was a process of writing (and in the wider movement of Surrealism, painting or drawing) at the same speed at which one could think. By ignoring any interlocutors and avoiding any reflection, the resulting works would resemble a kind of internal monologue or, as Breton (cited in Seaver & Lane 1969, p. 26) states, something 'akin to spoken thought.' The control the author might ordinarily have over their work is compromised here. In the construction of these programmed yet personal responses, the Surrealists disrupted general expectations of artmaking - which Barthes (1977, p.144) terms as 'the famous Surrealist "jolt"' - and split from the Romantic genius artist.

The Surrealists also widely employed photography in their work. Where the Pictorialists used the medium to emulate Romantic painting of the period, the Surrealists employed techniques unique to the photographic process to turn the resulting images inward, creating dream-like compositions. Whether this was through double exposure, solarisation, and montage (as in the case of Man Ray), or straight documentation (as in the case of Hans Bellmer's series of photos of his 'dolls), or even through the re-purposing of existing photographs that frequently cropped up in Surrealist publications like *La Révolution Surréaliste*, the resulting images rejected the notion of the author as the sole source generating meaning within them. The culmination of these techniques could be read as an outsourcing to the unconscious.

For Mallarmé, Duchamp, and the Surrealists, the Romantic model of authorship represented a system of control over creative practice which was unnecessarily limiting. What is also demonstrated by these practices is that there are potentially productive consequences of dismissing the dominant understanding of authorship. The possibilities of this dismissal will be discussed in relation to other practices, including my own, in subsequent chapters.

1.6 The death of the author

What I have sought to outline above is a counter history of authorship shaped by developments in visual media. I have also identified moments in the complex history of authorship where Romantic authorship was either challenged or further entrenched. During the modern avant-gardes, the challenge was explicit. It was not until the late 1960s, with the writings of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, that this challenge was explicitly theorised.

Because both Barthes and Foucault were writing well after many of the practices and work they examine were completed, their texts act primarily as reflections on the history of avant-garde challenges to authorship. As Thomas Karshan (2009) notes, 'Barthes, Michel Foucault and other French post-Structuralist thinkers [of] the late 1960s, were … reporting on a death that had taken place 30 years earlier.' The period in which both Barthes and Foucault were writing was a time in which there was a resurgence in interest in avant-garde ideas and a burgeoning use of digital technology in art.[14] Beyond reporting, as Karshan noted, on the death of the author then, their writings also serve as reflections of this context.

Barthes' *The Death of the Author* which was originally published in the journal Aspen in 1967, seeks to reposition the author in relation to their text. Barthes (1977, p.146) proposes we actively overlook the author through a reduction of authorship to the activities of selecting and combining from what he describes as a 'ready-formed dictionary.' Much like Duchamp's readymades and Breton's poem, the role of the author (or what Barthes' terms as the 'scriptor') becomes that of a curator. Pre-existing elements are brought together not from the artist's personal experiences, but rather from innumerable 'centres of cultures' (Ross 1997, p. 1). Importantly this 'bringing together' is not a process undertaken by the author, as Barthes notes, but by the reader. For Barthes (1977, p. 148), 'the reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost.' The death of the author is celebrated by Barthes as the birth of the reader. As Karshan (2009) notes, this framing of author and reader is evident in the poetry of Mallarmé, the work of Duchamp, and the work of the Surrealists because for these practitioners, 'art no longer inhere[d] in the will and craft of the deep-souled artist but in the multihued flow of possible thoughts that the infinity of possible viewers [could] bring to the piece.'

Foucault's lecture *What is an Author?* (1969) takes a different approach; he argues that what he terms as 'the author function' (Foucault 1991, p. 101) is the result of 'mode[s] of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society' (Foucault 1991,

---

[14] Jasia Reichardt's now famous exhibition *Cybernetic Serendipity*, for example, was held at the ICA in London in 1968.

p. 108) or, as Toni Ross (1991, p. ii) describes them, ‘historically variable discursive forms.’ Foucault contextualises this theory through different historic examples, but also, and more importantly for this thesis, identifies what he sees as the gaps that would be left by the author’s disappearance, highlighting their importance to a new conception of the author.

According to Foucault this conception of authorship would ‘function according to another mode, but still with a system of constraint - one which will no longer be the author, but which will have to be determined or, perhaps, experienced’ (Foucault 1991, p. 119). Expanding on his previous characterisation of Romantic authorship Foucault goes on to posit what this ‘system of constraint’ might look like, highlighting questions like:

> What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for [themselves]? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions? (Foucault 1991, p. 120)

Foucault (1991, p. 120) also asks: ‘What difference does it make who is speaking?’ As I will demonstrate in the chapters that follow, all of Foucault’s questions are relevant when considering the present condition of authorship where notions of dispersion, appropriation, and shared authorship have become central, especially to the work of art online. These questions also indicate - through their expansion of what authorship could mean - the limits placed on the work of art by the Romantic conception of the author.

In this chapter I have demonstrated that while the Romantic understanding of the author has dominated the discourse around authorship since its conception in eighteenth century Europe, there are alternate approaches to understanding authorship. Such alternatives were posed both by technological developments that provided latent potential, and by creative practitioners who sought to actively undermine Romanticism and its tenets. As detailed above, these alternatives to the Romantic model include the pre-Romantic collective authorship of the medieval period informed by the social role of the auctor, the de-emphasising of singular or subjective expression afforded by new technologies like the printing press and photography, and, later, the explicit dismissal of Romantic authorship by practitioners like Mallarmé and Duchamp. As I noted in my examination of these different approaches, they are representative of a kind of counter history of authorship. This counter history provides a stable ground for understanding many present day practices, especially approaches to authoring content online which use techniques like collaboration and

outsourcing that I will attend to in later chapters. As this chapter has made clear, despite their digital realisation, collaboration and outsourcing are techniques that have historical precedent in unexpected analogue practices such as medieval book making, avant-garde poetry, Dadaist readymades, and Surrealism automatism.

In the next chapter, I will discuss one of these current approaches to authorship - collaboration - and chart its progression from early electronic image making to our current digital condition. After establishing a recent selective history of collaboration in the visual arts, I will then address how collaboration has been mobilised in my own practice and the practices of other “content producers.” I will also critically examine the effects of internet based collaboration on artistic practice, particularly around placing the artwork in a constantly distributed and dispersed space.

Chapter Two - Appropriation, collaboration and dispersion: New markers of authorship from the early electronic age to web 2.0

As I suggested in the previous chapter, the Romantic conception of the author remains the primary way in which authorship is understood by both viewers and creators. But, as I also highlighted, this model has not always been wholly accepted, especially by artists. For the avant-garde modernists who explicitly challenged this model, the Romantic conception of the author imposed limitations on art practices that had to be overcome. But these “limits” were in some ways productive, prompting artists like Mallarmé, Duchamp, and Breton to explore their own role as authors through the pursuit of methods and strategies of practice that implied alternative models of authorship.

A common way these artists examined their authorship was by collapsing the categories of author and viewer, emphasising the role that a viewer would play in both the creation and reading of their work. This approach was eventually theorised and supported by Roland Barthes (1977, p. 148) and Michel Foucault’s call for a dismissal of authorship altogether which they marked as ‘the birth of the reader.’

New models of authorship and possibilities for practice that also challenge the Romantic conception have emerged out of digital technologies’ structural predisposition to consolidate all media into a single digital form, the emergence of digital image making tools, and the development of social media platforms online. As I will discuss in this chapter, it is now typical for audiences to exist as both reader and author simultaneously to the extent that appropriation and collaboration have become the primary modes of interaction online.

Post-internet practices and my own use of the internet were my first introductions to collaboration as an approach to art and content making. Growing up with emerging popular blogging platforms like Tumblr, I observed the widespread use of appropriation and collaboration to aggregate and generate content. This made appropriation-based and collaborative types of practice the primary means by which I engaged with content in my formative years. My post-internet context also meant that I had little conception of ways of digital artmaking that preceded my childhood years. One of these methods of artmaking could be seen in the practices of new media artists. These artists, though also often working collaboratively, foregrounded an engagement with technology by focusing on unique and often novel implementations of digital technologies. While being informed to an extent by

such work, my practice, and by extension the focus of this research project has instead seen digital technologies in their ubiquity as almost normalising factors of art making. Rather than engaging with digital technologies through a self-reflexive framework similar to that of the new media artists then, this research has instead looked to the expanded field of cultural production online as being central to the role of the artist working today who invokes appropriation, collaboration or dispersion as a method of examining their role as author. This focus is reflected in the choices I have made with regard to examples of practice in this chapter.

Before addressing collaborative online practices, this chapter will first critically examine how the new context for authorship centred around appropriation, collaboration and dispersion has emerged, looking initially to the developments in media creation and distribution that occurred during the twentieth and twenty-first century and then to the means by which artists have engaged with these technological developments. This history will be examined in order to identify strategies through which contemporary art practitioners can explore their own roles as authors.

First, this chapter will chart a history of the ways in which mechanical, electronic, and later digital technologies have contributed to the convergence of media. This history will highlight these shifts as part of a move toward more easily distributable content, a central aspect of the contemporary context of authorship online. From these technological developments, three approaches to content creation begin to emerge as the reigning modes through which both art and content are produced in the contemporary period: appropriation, collaboration, and dispersion.

This chapter will address each of these approaches and the various media generating technologies that have played a part in bringing them to prominence. To demonstrate the connections and breaks that this history of technological developments has produced, I will explore this material chronologically. Examples here span the second half of the twentieth century: from Gene Youngblood's techno-utopian blurring of art and life through what he termed 'expanded cinema' based around the television and the personal video camera, to later digital technologies' near seamless capacity for collaboration, appropriation, and dispersion as evident in the practices and writing of Brad Troemel, Seth Price, and Constant Dullaart in the early twenty-first century. The chapter will then look at how these new approaches to authorship have led to digital content creation that represent radically new authorial strategies. Unfortunately, as this chapter will highlight, these radical new strategies

of authorship are still limited in their reinforcement of the structural inequalities of the offline world. Finally, I will introduce my own practice through a series of collaborative and curatorial projects in which I have deliberately tested approaches to authorship that I have observed online in the context of contemporary art.

2.1 Medium specificity and the post-medium condition

To contextualise this discussion of recent technologies relative to the history of authorship documented above, it is important to first briefly establish the continued primacy of the Romantic conception of the author in the twentieth and twenty-first century. While Romanticism had long fallen out of favour as a method of artistic practice in the twentieth century, the Romantic idea of the author continued to assert itself on practices of this time.

In spite of the activities of early avant-garde modernists, a particularly pronounced instance of the author as genius model was in effect by the late modern period (defined in this research as between 1940-1960). Evidence of this can be seen in the reception of the artists of Abstract Expressionism, whose work was treated with a kind of reverence comparable only to religious art. A chapel dedicated to the work of Mark Rothko, for instance, was opened in Houston, Texas in 1971. Furthermore, Rothko's work is often seen in separate viewing rooms at any number of large art institutions. The 2017 installation of his work in the permanent collection at the Tate Modern in London is one such example of this (see figure 7). Responses to the work of artists like Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock, for example, were similar to reactions to Turner's paintings (as discussed in the previous chapter) during the nineteenth century. In both instances, the artists' tortured biographies became a site of key interest prompted by the notable physicality of the expressive brushstrokes presented in their works.

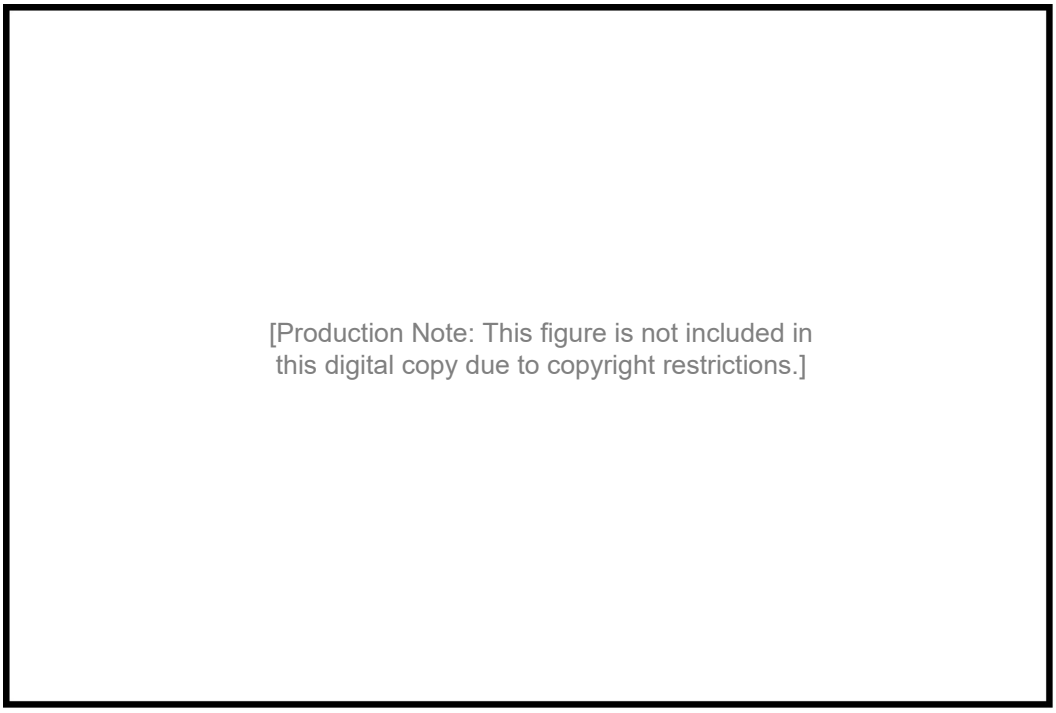


Figure 7: Rothko, M. 1958/1959, photo documentation of various paintings including *Red on Maroon* and *Black on Maroon* presented as part of the Tate Modern's Rothko Room, Tate Modern, London. <http://www.tate.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/rothko_room_tate_modern.jpg>

In Clement Greenberg's notion of medium specificity, he applied the avant-garde modernist strategy of self-reflexivity to Abstract Expressionist painting. In Greenberg's (1993, p. 85) words, medium specificity involved using the 'characteristic methods of a discipline to criticise the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.' By making this self-reflexive approach central to the success or failure of a work, Greenberg highlighted the realisation of a shift in modernism that started with Romanticism whereby the subject of work was turned inwards. In other words, in Abstract Expressionism, the author became one of the only sites through which the viewer could engage with their work.

As electronic technologies started to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s, media creation and distribution tools like portable video cameras and televisions were used more frequently in art during this period. As a result of this, the way such artists engaged with their medium differed notably from the ways outlined by Greenberg. Works that embraced the use of these media technologies could no longer be read in terms of medium specific self-reflexivity alone. Instead, in these works it was evident that there was a wider field of considerations motivating the artist and their practice. This wider field of considerations included the

structural support of the medium itself, broader cultural concerns, and, as was emerging during the modernist avant-garde period in the early twentieth century, a new acknowledgment of the viewer.

At the start of the twenty-first century, Rosalind Krauss (2000, p. 24) reflected on the electronic age and observed the expansion of "medium" in terms of a 'compound idea of the apparatus.' One way in which Krauss conceived of this was in relation to film. Initially, film - like photography or even drawing and painting - was seen as a surface through which to convey meaning. For Krauss, this meaning came not just from a singular surface, as Greenberg had theorised, but rather from all material supports experienced in concert. She argued that,

> the medium or support for film [was] neither the celluloid strip of the images, nor the camera that filmed them, nor the projector that brings them to life in motion, nor the beam of light that relays them to the screen, nor that screen itself, but all of those taken together, including the audience's position caught between the source of the light behind it and the image projected before its eyes. (Krauss 2000, pp. 24-25)

As Krauss maintained, artists who engaged with media technologies would have to work in recognition of the various material supports utilised by their work. Similarly, these artists would also have to acknowledge how the confluence of these material supports would be read by audiences when experienced as a whole, or as Krauss (2000, p. 25) notes the 'interdependence of all these things [and how they] would… be revealed as a model of how the viewer is intentionally connected to his or her world.' It is this observation of the expanded context of the work of art and its relationship to the viewer that was brought forward by media creation technologies. This change also became central in discussions of new models of authorship online. The practices of a group of filmmakers who used various media technologies to be discussed next demonstrated such a nuanced understanding of both the material supports employed in their work and the role of viewers.

Krauss' re-characterisation of the work of art in the electronic age was exemplified by the structural filmmakers of the 1960s whose practices foregrounded the mechanical medium of film in different ways. Michael Snow's 1967 film *Wavelength* (see figure 8) is indicative of one way in which this group highlighted the expanded context of the work of art through the medium of film. *Wavelength* consisted of a single, sometimes quite clunky, camera zoom from one end of a room to the other that lasts almost the entire forty five minutes of the film's

duration. Snow's work serves as a reflection on one key aspect of film: time. There are variables in the film - we see a figure stumble into the room and collapse, we see furniture being moved, we see cars driving by outside - but the steady zoom continues. As the film goes on we start to become aware that the zoom is the only constant in a scene where almost everything else changes, including the time of day and film stock (as indicated by the changing light just outside the windows and the abrupt colour shifts). Eventually the zoom ends on a small print of a photograph of waves stuck to the wall on the opposite side of the room from the camera's position. A sine wave tone that has been gradually rising in pitch throughout the film's duration reaches its peak at this moment. The camera then continues to record this photograph of waves, bringing a sense of motion to this otherwise still image as film passes behind the camera's lens. Of this moment, theorist Gene Youngblood notes

> by introducing the element of motion, specifically invisible motion like the hands of a clock, the filmmaker adds the temporal element to a composition that in all other respects appears static. Motion is the only phenomenon that allows perception of time, the motion here, like time, is wholly conceptual. (Youngblood 1970, p. 122)

Evident in Youngblood's statement and Snow's film itself is a self-reflexive approach similar to his modernist forebears. Unlike the self-reflexive painting (among other practices) from Romanticism to modernism, however, Snow plays with the conventions of this approach, foregrounding the disruption of the structural elements of film not as a means of emphasising subjectivity but rather in order to highlight the viewer's role in the work. This new context of viewing included not only itself the material supports intrinsic to the experience of film (projector, screen, room etc.) but also the audience's position in relation to these supports (in effect, their perception of these supports).

Figure 8: Snow. M. 1967, *Wavelength*, still from film, Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, Ontario. <http://moussemagazine.it/michael-snow-sharon-lockhart-andrea-picard-andrea-lissoni-2015/>

What is clear in Snow's *Wavelength* (and other art practices of this period that engaged with media creation and distribution technologies) is that technologies' latent potential to expand the conception of medium and how a work of art could be received by its viewer had become a site of analysis. For Snow, as with many other structural filmmakers, this interest was applied to examine the medium of film itself, with the audience being an integral part. As will be discussed in the next section, the importance of the viewer in the creation of the work of art would only become more apparent with television, a device which extended the prominence of the viewer's role in the work of art.

2.2 Television: Extending the importance of the viewer in art

With the advent of television and the truly electronic image that came with it, Krauss' expanded idea of the apparatus was tested. Any number of different media could suddenly converge within the ever malleable electronic screen. Krauss (2000, p. 310) acknowledges that, 'television and video seem hydra-headed, existing in endlessly diverse forms, spaces, and temporalities… [where] no single instance seems to provide a formal unity for the

whole.' After this shift, applying the Greenbergian approach of medium specificity to the electronic image was no longer viable. As Youngblood (1970, p. 41) states with regard to the arrival of the electronic image, 'one can no longer specialise in a single discipline and hope truthfully to express a clear picture of its relationships in the environment.' The effects of this expanded idea of the medium can also be seen in art more broadly during the 1960s and 1970s with writers and practitioners like Allan Kaprow calling for a blurring of art and life; for Kaprow, this was enacted through happenings and other events that, in their complete abandonment of medium, dematerialised the art object altogether. Many creators of this period shared the common goal of expanding the conception of the medium (or in Kaprow's case, a dismissal of medium altogether). This contributed to demystifying the authorial genius of the artist. When the focus of the artist is not on the individual gesture but rather on how the work of art sits in an expanded field of interactions between both the act of creating and viewing, emphasis is shifted from the artist as a site of study to a much broader range of considerations.

The latent possibilities that the electronic image brought forward for new conceptions of the author might be best exemplified by Gene Youngblood's idea of expanded cinema. Youngblood wrote a key text of the same name charting the shift in art from the mechanical to the electrical age. Youngblood (1970, p. 41) defines expanded cinema as 'expanded consciousness.' Similar to Krauss' expanded conception of the apparatus, Youngblood explains that,

> expanded cinema does not mean computer films, video phosphors, atomic light, or spherical projections. Expanded cinema isn't a movie at all: like life it's a process of becoming, man's ongoing historical drive to manifest his consciousness outside of his mind, in front of his eyes. (Youngblood 1970, p. 41).

Implicit in Youngblood's (1970, p. 78) utopian vision is an interaction with the electronic image that is looped back on itself, where 'we become aware of our individual behaviour by observing the collective behaviour as manifested in the global video sphere.' During the 1970s (and onwards), this behaviour was frequently observed in the process of television watching itself.[15] What this meant for practices that took up the latent potential for the electronic production and distribution of images to merge the act of creating and viewing was

[15] This is an idea that was often explored later in both new media art and popular culture. The opening credits of *The Simpsons,* for example, ends with a view from the television's perspective of the family sitting on the couch watching TV. Similarly, the 2004 episode of *The Sopranos* titled "The Test Dream" frequently depicted the shows protagonist, Tony Soprano, viewing himself on television.

that authors themselves could consider their role as both viewer and creator simultaneously. In this new conception of the author then, the viewer had become a major site of meaning generation in the work of art since it was in the act of viewing first and foremost that a work was formulated.

In recognition of the impact that the television as a new electronic medium was having on art and culture, a number of American public broadcasting stations ran experimental television programs throughout the 1970s. These programs provided artists with residencies to explore how television as an all-encompassing medium could be used in art. One such program was West Great Blue Hill's (commonly shortened to WGBH) *New Television Workshop* in Boston, which ran between 1974 to 1993. The participating artists - which included Bill Viola, Nam June Paik, Richard Serra, and Nancy Holt - were representative of a diverse array of practices, whose engagement with the medium of television ranged from calling to attention broadcast television's more commercial aspects to reconfiguring the device itself. Their practices are indicative of just how prevalent the television was in artists' work during this time.

Nancy Holt's 1974 video performance *Boomerang* (see figure 9), is particularly illustrative of the newfound importance of the viewer in art. In many ways*, Boomerang* epitomises Barthes' assertion of the reader as author. *Boomerang* was originally a ten minute live television performance produced during artist Richard Serra's residency at a small Texan public broadcasting station. The video is composed of a static shot of Holt seated in front of a blue studio background wearing a pair of large headphones (Olsen 2014). When Holt begins to speak, she addresses an unseen figure off-screen: 'Yes, I can hear my echo.' It is immediately apparent that we too can hear her voice echoed and slightly delayed as it plays back in her headphones. This provides a feedback loop of sorts. Throughout the rest of the ten minute performance (excluding around one minute of silence displayed as 'audio trouble' in the middle of the video - a reminder of the live aspect to the performance), Holt describes the experience of simultaneous viewing and creating: 'The words coming back seem slow. They don't seem to have the same forcefulness as when I speak them.' She then goes on to deconstruct the experience of television itself, stating 'I have a feeling that I am not where I am. I feel that this place is removed from reality. Although it is a reality already removed from the normal reality.' It is through this series of statements that Holt begins to demonstrate the complex set of interactions that the television produces, with the audio feedback acting as a model for the feedback loop of television itself. We watch Holt self-reflexively concentrating on her own being in a space through and eventually on television. In other words, we are

presented with an image of Holt as both author and viewer - active maker and passive receiver - simultaneously.

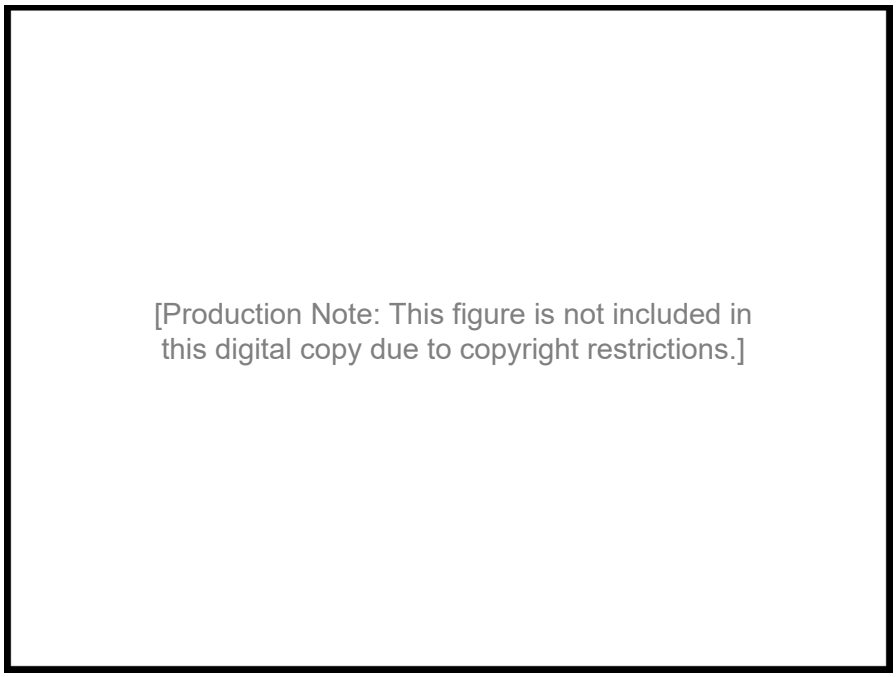


Figure 9: Holt, N. 1974, *Boomerang*, recording of live television performance, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/143808>

Youngblood's theorisation of expanded cinema and Holt's performance make evident that television - when viewed in the context of the larger set of interactions that it prompts between both viewer and creator - brought forward the potential for a new conception of the author in which the artist might occupy the roles of both creator and viewer simultaneously. This understanding of the role of the artist makes the medium of television distinct from art historical traditions like painting insofar as painting - as part of the Western modernist canon at least - has largely foregrounded the artist's subjectivity as its subject. The television hinted at the possibility of an entirely new mode of authorship: that of the reader-author. This mode was taken up by artists and theorists who engaged with the electronic image. Holt's performance makes clear that what was once an extended process of composition, publication, distribution, and reception could be condensed between the lens of the television camera and the television screen into almost instantaneous transmission and reception of content.

2.3 The personal computer and the digital convergence of media

Contemporaneous with the emergence of the television is another device that came to define both the late twentieth and early twenty-first century: the computer. This development extended the 'discursive chaos' that Krauss (2000, p. 31) had earlier attributed to television as it allowed for a situation whereby virtually all media could be experienced through a single device. With the advent of the computer, many of the previously distinct media began to merge into a single digital form.

In order to illustrate this transformation, I will consider the impacts of the computer on one media: film. The developments put in motion by the arrival of the computer brought about a condensing of film's structure into a digital file that could be slowed down, sped up, paused, cropped, and edited in any number of ways. As Boris Groys (2008, p. 74) notes, this condensing 'provide[d] evidence that a film's motion is neither real nor material, but simply an illusion that can equally well be digitally simulated.'

Michael Snow's 2003 revision of *Wavelength* exemplifies and illustrates the consequences of the digitisation of film (see figure 10). In this new iteration, the duration of *Wavelength* was shortened from its original forty five minute runtime to just fifteen minutes and fourteen seconds. This condensing was achieved by layering three different sections of the film and playing them simultaneously. What results is a rupture of the motion that had earlier been central to the work, leaving an image that concurrently shows three different points of the same timeline. Through this process - which is also hinted at in the wry comedic title of the new version, *WVLNT* (or *Wavelength for Those Who Don't Have the Time*) - Snow acknowledges the different context in which film is now experienced. Rather than the comparatively linear time-based experience of the movie theatre or gallery screening, digital video now often exists in just one of many windows on a screen, or within apps designed to promote engagement through comments and likes. The experience of video has become a disjointed one; videos are often paused, scrubbed through, and scrolled past by users traversing the near limitless amount of content online. It is this experience with which Snow's more recent work engages.

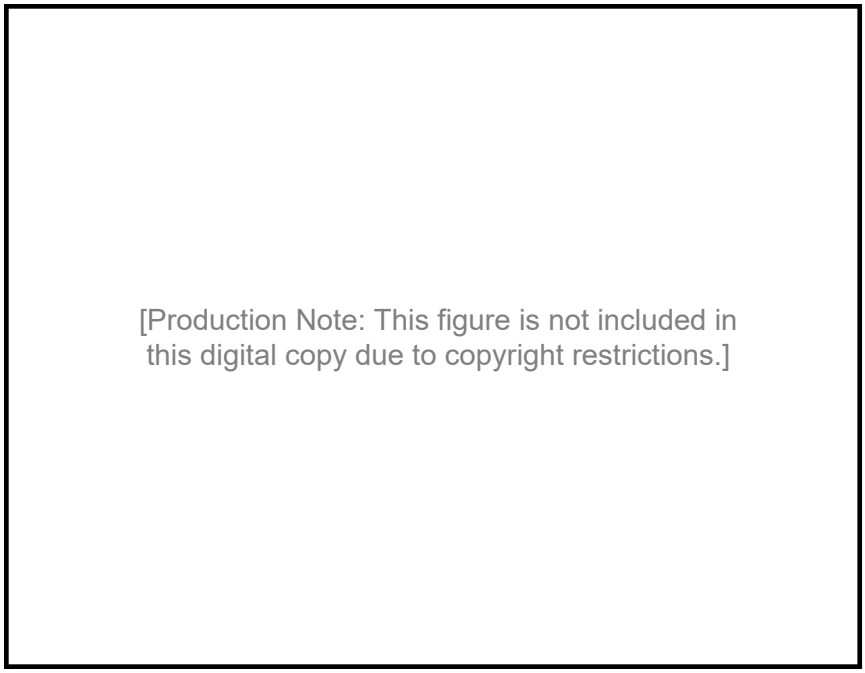


Figure 10: Snow. M. 2003, *WVLNT (or Wavelength For Those Who Don't Have the Time)*, still from film, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/120355>

As more and more media and, by extension, our experience of the world are digitised, Snow's acknowledgement of the different context in which media now sit becomes ever more prescient. The multifarious nature of personal computing devices has now, in many ways, come to characterise the contemporary experience. For authorship, this has meant that an acknowledgement of the reader (or viewer) is not just part of a greater selection of concerns for the artist, but rather one of the primary concerns. It is through the reader that digital content becomes delineated, analysed, shared or dispersed. I will now examine this new digital context for authorship with reference to American post-internet artist and writer Seth Price's essay 'Dispersion' (2002).

2.4 Dispersion: A new framework for artists to engage with content online

In 'Dispersion,' Price (2002) opens with a statement from Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers: 'the definition of artistic activity occurs, first of all, in the field of distribution.' Price uses this statement as a provocation for artists working online to focus their work primarily around dispersion, a more specific form of distribution. Price's text sees dispersion as a way for artists to critically examine mainstream culture from both inside and outside of this system, a position from which they can critique their field. Crucially for this project, what Price is

effectively outlining here is a method for navigating and embracing the contemporary experience of authorship online. By emphasising the importance of distribution, Price highlights the way in which many artists who have incorporated a discussion of the internet into their practice have navigated their role as author. His text also covers a more collaborative approach to authorship that has come to describe the prevailing contemporary mode of engagement with content online.

With much of the content posted online existing in a fragmentary state or as Price (2002) states, 'provisional [and] pointing elsewhere,' the role of the artist becomes that of a reader-author 'packaging, producing, reframing, and distributing; a mode of production analogous not to the creation of material goods, but to the production of social contexts, using existing material.' This way of working also conveniently describes much of Price's own work which exists in a constant state of flux. In his practice, Price continually revises individual projects for new exhibitions or updated publication online. An example of this can be seen in his video *Redistribution* which began in 2007 as a never-to-be-finished, constantly updated work. Based on documentation of an artist talk given by Price at the Guggenheim Museum in 2007, the work has since been edited and rearranged to incorporate new subjects and themes. The actual text of *Dispersion* is also an example of this; though it was originally published in 2002 as a downloadable PDF available on his website *Distributed History*, Price has continued to edit and re-work the essay, releasing updated versions in 2008 and 2016.

As outlined in the practice of Price, when the role of the artist becomes a constantly evolving act of appropriation, revision, and redistribution, art transforms from the individual pursuit of subjectivity put forward by Romanticism to a more collective one. Collaboration in this formulation of authorship, is less of a conscious act, and more of a by-product of engaging with the content online. Since the internet has shifted from being a mysterious implementation of technology to a central element of the contemporary experience of media (in particular with the emergence of social media platforms), such collaborative ways of working have only become more widespread.

2.5 The Jogging: Community run artist blogs and new methods of undermining Romantic notions of authorship online

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, personal computing devices had become ubiquitous in Western societies, and the networks through which these devices interacted had become a primary means of communication. In art, this meant that engagement with the internet no longer involved the self-reflexive preoccupation with technology that characterised the structural filmmakers of the mid twentieth century and continued in the practices of new media artists in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Rather, digital technologies like personal computers, smartphones, and the internet had become constants in artistic practice. Their ubiquity in and inseparability from contemporary life in Western societies also meant their ubiquity in artistic practice. Evidence of this shift can be seen in the statement of artist Marisa Olsen who coined the term post-internet. Olsen (cited in Regine 2008) states '[t]here doesn't seem to be a need to distinguish, any more, whether technology was used in making the work - after all, everything is a technology, and everyone uses technology to do everything.' In this statement Olsen signals the extent to which artists' engagement with the internet has shifted from novelty to indispensable tool. The promise of these tools to provide new understandings of what authorship constitutes will now be explored in the context of contemporary art.

One new model of authorship examined by contemporary artists in this manner can be seen in the collaborative work of Lauren Christiansen and Brad Troemel. Christiansen and Troemel ran a blog on the platform Tumblr from 2009-2010 known as The Jogging. Originating just as "surf clubs" (popular community run artist blogs, such as Nasty Nets[16]) were falling into decline, The Jogging represented a kind of microcosm of certain aspects of internet culture. It did this by using editing tools like Photoshop to collage both original documentation of objects and appropriated images and text - in much the same way meme pages on platforms like Facebook or Instagram later would - iterating new content from established formats. An example of this can be seen in a series of images from the blog's second iteration that incorporated the word 'lole' (see figure 11). In an acknowledgment of the emerging field of social media, for which content was being produced and received at this time, Christiansen and Troemel prioritised the speed at which new content was posted, making quick assemblages of found objects (generally from within their shared household) that existed only to be documented. Once these assemblages had served their purpose - becoming a digital image which was posted online - they were dismantled to create new assemblages. Troemel (2018) later noted of this process that '[these] two realisations of a dispersed audience and the idea of consistent engagement with social media [meant] that

[16] An archived version of Nasty nets can be accessed here: http://archive.rhizome.org/artbase/53981/nastynets.com/

you didn't get crushed in the wave of all the rest of the information but that you could surf at the top of the crest.' This idea of rapidly dispersing content in order to constantly remain at the top of an audience's feed is one that would go on to be one of the prevailing modes of content creation in the early twenty-first century.[17]

Figure 11: The Jogging 2014, *Fountain of Youth*, digital image file posted to Tumblr, 26 July, viewed 10 July 2016 <https://thejogging.tumblr.com/image/92947993539>

Unlike meme pages and image boards (which will be discussed later in this chapter), The Jogging notably employed traditional art citations, crediting each post with the same text one might find next to an artwork in a gallery didactic, including the title, date, materials, and artist (though names were generally replaced by a shortened hyperlink to the artist's website). The irony of employing a citational style commonly used in art history - which Troemel (2012) describes as 'a series of aesthetic accomplishments abbreviated to first and last names' - is only revealed when upon further investigation of each post where it becomes apparent that these citations only have a tenuous bearing on the images to which they refer.

[17] Arguably it is only since around 2018 with the emergence of the video sharing app Tik Tok and the continued popularity of the ephemeral photo and video sharing app Snapchat that this mode is being usurped as a younger generation of producers have begun to establish their own ways of engaging with content online.

Works variously listed as installation, sculpture, performance, readymade, and so on appear mostly to be digitally composed.

The use of appropriation and digital collage in these posts also highlights what Troemel describes as the levelling effects of photographic documentation of art. Speaking of this phenomena in 2018 during a lecture delivered at Cranbrook Academy of Art, Troemel stated that when viewing photo documentation online ‘you might see a totally photoshopped image, and then the next you might see a quasi-photoshopped image, and then the next you might see a real photograph and they're all kind of existing in concert with each other.’ When looking at content more broadly, it becomes clear that this is the nature of online reception. As artist Artie Vierkant (2010) observes of the image post internet, ‘nothing is in a fixed state.’

While Christiansen and Troemel’s work highlights a number of interesting developments for artists working online, what is especially relevant to my research project is that The Jogging’s collective work involves the deliberate and strategic problematisation of conventional methods of attribution. The Jogging points to the inappropriacy of conventional (and historical) methods of attribution in online contexts, a critique that was made more apparent as more users engaged with the content they posted. As Troemel and Christiansen have noted, content from the blog did receive some widespread attention, being shared through Tumblr’s “reblog” feature (which essentially allowed other users on Tumblr to post content from The Jogging on their own blogs). Users were also sharing The Jogging’s content outside of Tumblr’s easily traceable built-in appropriation features by screenshotting or dragging-and-dropping the image files to their own devices. These users would often then repost the images to Tumblr or other sites and platforms as if it was their own content in an attempt to gain more interest than perhaps a mere “reblog” would (Troemel 2013). What is highlighted here is an interesting predicament for content online: increased circulation often tends to strip content of its original author’s details. As Troemel (2013) puts it, ‘the more famous an art image becomes, the less its author will be attributed.’ To try to counteract this phenomenon and retain some credit, many content producers tend to watermark their creations. However, even this act has become a mostly redundant as content is often cropped, compressed and circulated so quickly that trying to track down an original creator becomes nearly impossible.

In the instance of The Jogging, it is clear that appropriation - whether through a platform’s included sharing features or via less accepted methods - is now our primary way of

engaging with content online. As artist Brandon Bauer (2011) states, ‘appropriation is now our reigning cultural condition. We cut, copy, paste, post, forward, like, tweet, and share pre-existing content continually.’ This has resulted in the realisation of what Vierkant (2010) terms the ‘reader-author,’ noting that the viewer online now typically exists as both reader, curator and content creator simultaneously.

What is suggested in both the work of The Jogging and Vierkant’s conception of the reader-author is a democratised and equitable approach to authoring content. In practice however, the recent history of the internet has shown that this reader-author centred approach to creating content has struggled to live up to this suggested promise. As I will now discuss, the promise offered by the networked computer of freely shared information outside of any traditional conception of attribution or authorship has been undermined by the convergence of late capitalism with a longing for a singular author instilled by the still dominant Romantic model of authorship. Once again, as Foucault earlier predicted, authorship functions as a ‘system of constraint’ (Foucault 1991, p. 119).

2.6 Consumer culture and the rise of the “aesthlete”

Consumerism has been an important influence on the work of art before and after the internet. Instead of the profit-driven motives (such as number of sales, critical reviews etc.) that were prevalent prior to the advent of the internet, a new fragmented concept of authorship exists in digital spaces set up to profit off of sharing and user information. The emphasis on sharing has resulted in an authorship that is predominantly reinforced by profit motives captured by metrics relating to number of followers, likes, and shares that replace the previous Romantic idea of making the creator themselves central to an engagement with the work.

For the contemporary artist working in the context of the internet, this shift toward a model of authorship that relies on social media metrics - like shares and followers - has meant there is an increasing impetus to engage with social media platforms. Even in the practice of artists working in mostly non-digital material constructions (like painting, for example), there is an increased (and sometimes quite problematic) use of documentation and social media platforms as a way of constructing an online profile. Troemel puts forward the term

“aesthlete” to accommodate such contemporary artists who engage with social media to build a personal brand.

An example of how the aesthlete approaches their role as creator can be seen in the practice of Los Angeles based artist Parker Ito. Primarily working in painting and large-scale installations, Ito’s practice negates the unimpeachable, singular expression of subjectivity espoused by Romanticism in favour of iterative work that is easily translated between both online and offline contexts. Like Troemel - who defines the aesthlete’s production in opposition to the notion of the “masterpiece” (a concept that has been historically tied to the conception of the artist as genius) - Ito sees his role as creating a constantly evolving body of work that is informed by online engagement. This rejection of the established model of art making is evident in a 2015 statement from Ito (cited in Thomson 2015) where he notes that he ‘hate[s] the idea of a masterpiece, a singular work that is brilliant.’ Instead, it is through ‘immediacy and rapid production’ as Troemel (2013) describes the production of aesthletes, that Ito’s work functions. It is important to note here that as an artist who regularly employs another approach to authorship online that has been examined in this research project - outsourcing - Ito’s work will be discussed in more detail later in this thesis. In the context of artists refiguring their role as author in response to the growing importance of engagement on social media platforms under discussion in this chapter though, it is clear that Ito, and aesthletes more broadly, value their work’s ability to exist not as a singular expression, but as an ever evolving iteration of ideas. This is an approach that is in line with the wider field of content production online.

Dutch artist Constant Dullaart has also directly responded to the merging of the importance of social capital with cultural producers online through work that is part of a broader practice of humorously subverting the way we use platforms online. Dullaart employs this humorous approach in order to highlight the changing social and capital influences in online, performative, and traditional gallery exhibitions, oftentimes with all three informing each other at once. For instance, the homepage of Dullaart’s website (as of early 2020) continually reloads when visited to create a rolling bar of unicode emojis at the top of a viewer’s web browser. This also effectively clears the visitor of their recent browsing history. Dullaart’s wide ranging practice has extended well outside the traditional remit of the arts too. While on a residency in the rapidly growing South Chinese city of Shenzhen (where much of the world’s consumer electronics are assembled), Dullaart founded a technology start-up, Dulltech. Through this start-up, Dullaart leveraged over $30,000 USD (raised on the crowd-funding platform Kickstarter) to produce media players aimed at artists and galleries.

In exchange for the production of these media players, Dullaart was able to pursue his initial goal for the residency, gaining access to original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) in order to observe the working conditions of their labourers.

Like Parker Ito, Dullaart has also observed the growing importance of social capital in the practice of artists. In an interview published in *Art News* in 2014 Dullaart stated that he 'was annoyed with [the] idea that one person would be more "liked" than another.' Dullaart's work *High Retention, Slow Delivery* (2014; see figure 12) is a response to this sentiment. In this work, the artist explores and arguably disrupts the way that some contemporary artists and arts organisations have utilised the popular photo sharing and social networking application, Instagram. Used variously by artists to share documentation of shows, works in progress, and the work of peers alongside more personal content, Instagram has also become a way for artists to constantly generate and distribute new work, and build their authorial importance through likes and follows. Dullart's intervention involved purchasing 2.5 million Instagram accounts run by bots to follow (an American-centric) selection of artists, art institutions, magazines, and critics. Dullaart's goal was to disrupt how these various cultural producers have gained (or perhaps in the case of institutions and magazines, extended) their authority, distributing followers evenly across the selected accounts. In Dullaart's (2014) words, this was an attempt to 'equalise' each account at 100,000 followers so that various organisations and individuals would appear to be of equal influence to the commodified internet.[18]

[18] It is interesting to note that at the time of writing this Instagram itself is actually trialing hiding likes from everyone except the owner of the account (Nicholson 2019).

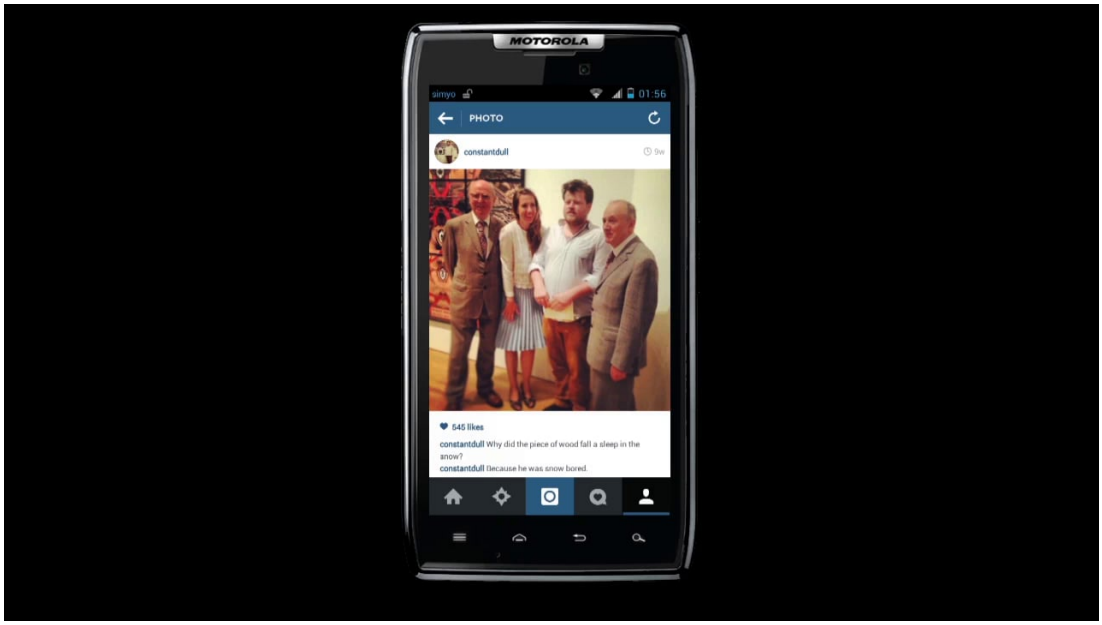


Figure 12: Dullaart, C. 2014, *High Retention, Slow Delivery*, introductory video for internet based performance, DIS Magazine, New York <http://i.vimeocdn.com/video/490468378_1280x720.jpg>

In *High Retention, Slow Delivery*, Dullaart critiques the cultural consequences of condensing the roles of the artist and viewer. When so many people can both create and view work, the authority traditionally given to the work of art or particular artists by institutions and critics has given way to 'followers.' This is not necessarily a negative issue as institutions were (and often still are) extremely exclusory - particularly when it comes to issues of race and gender. However, the way followers are accumulated and distributed on social media platforms mimics the inequity of power imbalances of the world at large. As Dullaart states in the video produced to accompany the project,

> we live in a representation of a world which we can influence in ways never imagined. Let's do so performatively. Social bank accounts raised to the same level to stimulate the utopian image of a shared responsibility for equality within a conscious user group, as a mere reminder of painful racial, financial and other social inequalities so much harder to destroy. (Dullaart, cited in Duray 2014).

Aside from serving as a critical reflection on the state of authorship online, Dullaart's work also hints at a greater system of management and content generation that functions almost entirely outside of user (our) contact: bots. Similar to Dullaart's army of followers, bots (which are essentially just automated scripts) are generally employed to manage the internet, crawling or scraping web pages to index them for services, like search engines. Conversely,

as is the case in Dullaart's work, bots can also be used for the very opposite of their intended application: disrupting the web by way of flooding certain accounts or websites with users and/or content (a phenomenon also known as spamming). A discussion of the types of content these bots are being employed to create (and the possibilities for this content to exist almost entirely outside of any discernible conception of authorship) will form part of my fourth chapter.

From the possibilities of continual dispersion brought forward by online server based distribution models, to the collaborative and appropriation based practices found on blogging and social media platforms, a vast array of approaches to authorship have emerged in the digital age. While these approaches each represent distinct engagements with the concept of the author, what they share is a desire to expand authorship beyond what this thesis sees as the unnecessarily limiting Romantic definition of the term.

2.7 Memetic production and the possible limits of collaboration, appropriation and dispersion as methods of approaching authorship

While my research project is deeply committed to potential alternative types of authorship offered by shifting modes of production online, in order to acknowledge the potentially problematic consequences of iteration as a mode of practice I will now turn to the case of memetic production. The production of memes represent a recent culmination of many of the approaches to authoring content I have already discussed and are indicative of shifting modes of production online. This is evidenced, as this chapter will highlight, by the broad number of strategies this mode of content creation offers which have been taken up by a growing number of creators who, rather than pursuing wholly original creations, look to iterate their work from existing material. While it would seem that this approach could be liberatory for artists and content creators who are uncomfortable with the widely held Romantic figuration of authors, the production of memes and their often unequitable appropriation and distribution also highlight the problematic nature of this fluid mode of authorship. The possibilities and limits of adopting a memetic approach in an art based practice will be critically examined in this section.

The emergence of memetic production aligns with the re-skilling of artists during the mid-twentieth century in response to the economic shift in the West from manufacturing to

services. During this period (which will be discussed further in the next chapter), artists no longer felt the need to adhere to the Romantic image of the artist labouring over their work. Instead they were content to engage with existing material and outsource many of the elements of production to contractors or assistants. The twenty-first century, as theorist Boris Groys has observed, is marked by a de-professionalisation of art. For Groys (2010), the twentieth century was characterised by a mainstream mass culture of 'strong signs with high visibility' where authority was determined by a select few groups and organisations. Groys (2010) writes that today,

> the unified space of mass culture is going through a process of fragmentation. We still have the stars—but they don't shine as bright as before. Today everybody writes texts and posts images. (Groys 2010)

The culture around content that Groys describes here suggests the fruition of Walter Benjamin's call to mass authorship in his lecture 'The Author as Producer' (1934). In this lecture, Benjamin states:

> what matters ... is the exemplary character of production, which is able, first, to induce other producers to produce, and, second, to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better, the more consumers it is able to turn into producers - that is, readers or spectators into collaborators. (Benjamin 1934, p. 777)

When virtually everyone is a cultural producer or collaborator, how can any one individual actually see, hear or read all of this content? And more importantly in the context of this project, what does this mean for authorship?

With the establishment of the internet as a key part of everyday life in late capitalist societies, the quandary of how one approaches the seemingly endless amount of content produced daily by hundreds of millions of reader-authors worldwide has become important. The contemporary internet user's near limitless capacity for production has brought about a situation where, as Groys (2010) notes, 'only a small circle of likeminded co-authors, acquaintances, and relatives at the very most will form the audience for any one individual's production.' This signals, as Groys continues, an inversion of

> the traditional relationship between producers and spectators as established by the mass culture of the twentieth century (…). Whereas before, a chosen few produced images and

> texts for millions of readers and spectators, millions of producers now produce texts and images for a spectator who has little to no time to read or see them. (Groys 2010)

A clear example of this mass cultural production and reception online is the recent phenomenon of memes which have become a common mode of communication and exchange between individuals and groups (in particular, amongst those of younger demographics). Memes demonstrate a conscious revelry in this new fragmented space of cultural production online and seemingly deny any pretensions towards Romantic understandings of authorship.

Initially consisting of simple text overlaid on images, memes now exist in any number of variations, ranging from text alone (as in the “copypasta” - oftentimes strange or entertaining comments taken from platforms like Youtube and re-pasted elsewhere en masse) to more complex video compositions. Central to any content functioning as a meme though is its capacity for dispersion. The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coined the term ‘meme’ in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. He notes that memes are ‘a unit of cultural transmission’ (Dawkins 2016, p. 249). With this in mind, the ability of memes to be dispersed has become one of the only commonalities in what is an otherwise diverse array of memetic content being produced that covers topics like politics, mental health, race, gender, and sexuality. What dictates this content is often the structure of the platform to which it will be posted and the audiences that reside on these platforms since users tend to search for, as Groys (2010) noted earlier, ‘likeminded co-authors.’ Typically these platforms include Twitter and Facebook with its instant messaging applications Messenger and Whatsapp, as well as its photo sharing application (and social media platform in its own right) Instagram. Memes can also be found on popular image boards like 4chan and 8chan, as well as the hugely popular news aggregation site Reddit, and the microblogging site Tumblr. More recently, memes have also being dispersed in both private and public chats on the instant messaging platform Discord and the video sharing app Tik Tok. This makes it almost impossible to examine any single piece of content as an exemplar of what might broadly be described as a meme. Instead, as will be done here, one must look at specific memes in the context from which they were created and subsequently circulated. This approach acknowledges Limor Shifman’s recent study of memes in the 2014 book *Memes in Digital Culture* in which she defines memes as ‘a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users’ (Shifman 2013, p. 41). For my

project, this type of engagement with memes will also demonstrate how they negate the traditional Romantic role of the author.

One of the clearest examples of content creators openly embracing memetic production's disavowal of Romantic notions of the author can be seen on the platform 4chan. Started in 2003 by then-15 year old Christopher Poole as an imageboard to discuss manga and anime (Japanese graphic novels and animated television series and movies), 4chan has since become synonymous with some of the more extreme subcultures online including, and perhaps most notably today, the alt-right (a nationalist movement based primarily in America) and incels (a shorthand term for involuntary celibates that refers to a community of men who espouse simplistic and hateful attitudes towards women). Aside from the confronting and morally objectionable content that these groups post, 4chan is perhaps best known for its dogged pursuit of anonymity. Users can not register to the site and decide when posting whether or not they would like to use any sort of recognisable nickname. Often they do not, referring to each other only as "anon". Due to the anonymity cultivated by 4chan users, they display little interest in traditional Romantic authorial roles, eschewing the relationship creators have historically had with their creations. Instead, 4chan has become a kind of hivemind iterating content through established formats and increasingly convoluted in-jokes. Recently, this hivemind has taken to pursuing political agendas. Interestingly, given 4chan's initial association with left wing groups, such as Anonymous and the Occupy Wall Street movement, recent online agendas have been predominantly aligned with the political right and conservativism. As Matt Goerzen notes:

> right-wing memetic production owes much of its success precisely to a strident disavowal of both authorial status and individuated property. Rather than making bids for gatekeeper positions in existing social arrangements or reward in established markets, they largely embrace anonymity and pseudonymity toward a broader war against the containers like Pepe, Richard Spencer, or Donald Trump as collective platforms instrumental in the pursuit of higher-order agendas. (Goerzen 2017)

In the pursuit of right wing agendas, these content producers tend to use the anonymity afforded by websites like 4chan to produce increasingly extreme content (posed as "free speech" when confronted with any kind of criticism).

Elsewhere, online memes still tend to be shared with little regard for their original author. As discussed in relation to The Jogging earlier in this thesis, this sharing is often conducted to

their creator's discontent. Although sharing content usually seems relatively harmless on an individual level, it starts to become problematic when large corporations, politicians, and social media influencers appropriate content to more commercial or political ends. This has been particularly evident with the creative outputs of some of the most marginalised people. Many of the most popular creators on platforms like Twitter and Facebook are people of colour. In particular, African American women often see their creations used in commercial contexts outside of their control with no credit and little or no reimbursement (St. Felix 2015). This was particularly true of creators on the now defunct social media platform Vine. Spawning countless cultural phenomena, Vine was a video sharing mobile application that allowed its users to upload short six second videos that, when viewed in the application, would loop endlessly. These limitations (which were perhaps dictated by the relatively high cost of mobile data at the time) as well as the simple video editing tools allowed users of the platform to create countless inventive videos that, like the broader culture of memes online, put an emphasis on the content's capacity for dispersion and appropriation via the platform's repost feature. Conversely, Vine also became a platform for more mundane documentation of people's more immediate lives. Often, however, the distinction between these two formats - memes and documentation - was blurred. This was particularly evident with regards to African American cultures from which words, phrases, and dances (to give just a few examples) were regularly used widely outside of their original context. American writer Doreen St. Felix highlights this fact in her 2015 article 'Black Teens are Breaking the Internet and Seeing None of the Profits.' One example St. Felix provides is that of Kayla Newman, who went by the username "Peaches Monroee" on Vine. Newman's creations have also been discussed by a number of other writers and artists including Aria Dean in her article 'Poor Meme, Rich Meme' (2016) and Jenson Leonard (also known as Cory in the Abyss on Instagram) in an interview conducted with Manuel Arturo Abreu titled 'Still I Shitpost: Cory in the Abyss on a Communism of the Visual + anti-blackness in the meme-o-sphere with Manuel Arturo Abreu' (2017).

Newman - who used the platform Vine like a diary 'commenting on the minutia and mundanity of high school life' (St. Felix 2015) - is most famous for a video she uploaded in 2014. In this video, Newman (Peaches Monroee 2014) is depicted in the passenger's seat of her mother's car admiring her own eyebrows stating: 'We in this bitch. Finna get crunk. Eyebrows on fleek. Da fuck.'[19] The video posted by Newman quickly grew in popularity, and the phrase "on fleek" briefly (and in many cases quite awkwardly) became a part of the

[19] The original video is viewable here: https://vine.co/v/MTFn7EPvtnd

contemporary vernacular. It was widely used by individuals on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook where brands - noticing its popularity and trying to cash in on its virality - also employed the term with little regard for its original context (as seen in figure 13).

Figure 13: IHOP 2014, 'Pancakes on fleek.' Twitter, 21 October, viewed 10 June 2017 <https://twitter.com/IHOP/status/524606157110120448>

Examples of co-opting of creative content for monetary gain are numerous. Newman herself highlighted in an interview with St. Felix (2015) that she had not 'gotten any endorsements or received any payment' but felt that she 'should be compensated.' This same lack of acknowledgement cannot be said of many white content creators who have achieved a similar level of notoriety. Aria Dean points out in her 2016 article 'Poor Meme, Rich Meme' that we should 'compare the nonexistent returns seen by black teens for introducing the whip to the lifetime supply of Vans shoes gifted to the Damn Daniel kid or the nearly half-million dollars worth of swag that Chewbacca Mom received for her most abject display of consumerist bliss.' Perhaps, as Danah Boyd writes in 'White Flight in Networked Publics? How Race and Class Shaped American Teen Engagement with MySpace and Facebook' (2011), these inequities online merely echo the inequities in the real world as 'the internet mirrors and magnifies everyday life, making visible many of the issues we hoped would disappear, including race and class-based social divisions in American society.'

Rather than existing as a straightforward extension of a long history of white cultural appropriation though, Dean (2016) notes that the format of memes themselves complicate such a reading, moving 'in cycles of production, appropriation, consumption, and

reappropriation that render any idea of a pre-existing authentic collective being hard to pin down' because, as Dean continues, memes 'are always already compromised by the looming presence of the corporate, the capitalist.' It is this sense of the ever looming influence of capital that has been evident in many of the examples discussed in this chapter. When Romantic notions of authorship fall away on platforms that have made monetising engagement through ad revenue and denying any notion of individuated ownership their entire business model, what is left but likes and shares?

2.8 Aggregated Authorship

One way this new online capitalist context for image sharing has played out in art making has been through what theorist Daniel Palmer (2017, p. 137) terms 'aggregated authorship.' With this term, Palmer (2017) highlights the possibilities for an approach to authorship that is collaborative by examining how contemporary photographers have incorporated the act of appropriation into their practices. While this is not necessarily a recent phenomenon, the way that artists today are employing appropriation and its related techniques greatly differs. Their approach also differs from the cultural phenomenon of memes. Where memes demonstrated the possibility of a collaborative form of appropriation through which collective ideas could be explored, aggregated authorship employs appropriation as a means of subsuming the individual creators from which it draws in order to pursue wholly subjective ideas. As I will argue, this approach, in the ways that it has been employed by artists to date, has in fact served to reinforce the artist's Romantic figuration of author, demonstrating the potential hazards of employing online methods of production in artistic practice in certain instances.

One example of aggregated authorship provided by Palmer is the recent practice of Richard Prince. Prince has famously (or perhaps infamously) appropriated mostly analogue media throughout his career in an attempt to disrupt the formulation of Romantic notions of authorship. His recent series of work titled *New Portraits* (2014 -) extended this approach into the digital realm, engaging with what is perhaps one of the largest repositories of portraits online, the social media platform Instagram.

As physical objects, these works exist as large-scale inkjet prints on canvas with each work depicting a single screenshot of an Instagram post taken from popular users footnoted by

Prince with a single, usually nonsensical (and, occasionally, alarmingly creepy) comment. In an artist statement published on his gallery, Gagosian's website, Prince marvels at the physical properties of the specific type of canvas on which works are printed:

> At first I wasn't sure how to print the portrait. I tried different surfaces, different papers. Presentation? Frame? Matte? Shadowbox? I tried them all. Finally this past spring my lab introduced me to a new canvas, one that was tightly wound, a surface with hardly any tooth. Smooth to the touch. Almost as if the canvas was photo paper. It was also brilliantly white. I don't think it could be any whiter. And . . . the way the ink jetted into the canvas was a surprise. It fused in a way that made the image slightly out of focus. Just enough. The ink was IN and ON the canvas at the same time. When I first saw the final result, I didn't really know what I was looking at. A photographic work or a work on canvas? The surprise was perfect. Perfect doesn't come along very often. (Prince 2015)

Unlike the artist, I argue that the structural qualities of Prince's works are for the most part inconsequential as, ultimately, their existence as tangible and wall based objects is enough for these works to serve their primary function for both Prince and his gallery: becoming part of the art market.

For my research project, it is the process through which Prince's works were "made" that is of primary interest. By making central the act of appropriation, Prince highlights the power of the appropriative act to subsume the original material (and its creator). In this formulation, authorship is not challenged. Instead, it is reinforced. As Nate Harrison (cited in Palmer 2017, p.165) argues, Prince actually 'reaffirmed the ground upon which the romantic author stands.' It is this fact that has made - what is already an ethically dubious series of work for many - particularly confronting for its unwilling participants. A number of the participants have actually sued or petitioned to have their images removed from Prince's shows. By taking images (and particularly images of people) from the public domain and re-authoring them as a highly curated series of prints, Prince denies the people pictured of their agency over their images. While one could argue that this is already happening *en mass* online, with images being shared and re-shared *ad-infinitum*, the fact that Prince is using this process to then sell these images for upwards of $90 000 USD each reveals the massive inequalities and highly problematic nature of the art market.

Increasingly, as Troemel (2019) notes, the success or failure of a work in the art market has come to be one of the defining metrics for many in its perceived success as art. That

Prince's works have subsequently, according to Prince himself, become extremely popular with collectors and the art market then has only further 'validated Prince as an author' (Palmer 2017, p. 165). It would seem then that as Palmer suggests, the postmodern artist online has not abandoned authorship; rather, 'their authorial techniques [have taken] different forms - challenging a legal construction of authorship that "assigns authority to originality' (Palmer 2017, p. 165).

While internet-based models for appropriation and distribution can demonstrate potentially dynamic new modes of authorship, these approaches can just as easily entrench Romantic notions of the author further. In the example of Prince, I contend that it is his surface level engagement with appropriation as a form of practice online that leads his work to do the latter. While Prince has long employed appropriation as a method in his work prior to the existence of the internet, his understanding of the context of appropriation online seems limited. Instead, he seems to be much more interested in his work's physical attributes (as evidenced in his artist statement) and how they function in the art market. By examining what I see to be a flawed work (both in its inability to question Romantic authorial roles and in its problematic use of images sourced online), I hope to highlight the potential pitfalls of adopting appropriation as observed online in artistic practice. My practice, to be discussed in the next section, has tried to navigate these possible limits in order to present a collection of work that foregrounds the expansion of notions of authorship.

2.9 Collaboration, appropriation and dispersion as strategic methods of practice

My practice has sought to explore the ways in which digital technology's aptness for methods of collaboration, appropriation and dispersion can be strategically mobilised to explicitly interrogate the role of the author. In this chapter these terms have been used to signal specific instances of authorship so it is worth restating what each has meant in the context of this project. Collaboration here has been used to describe the recent phenomenon of internet users consciously or subconsciously working together online to pursue the creation of predominantly iterative content. Appropriation, while having a long history in art, is here defined in more specific terms. In this chapter the term appropriation has been used to highlight the contemporary internet user's willingness to remix and re-edit existing content online. And finally, the term dispersion has been used to signal the

importance of how all of this content has been distributed. For Seth Price, the artist who brought this term forward as a possible model of artistic practice online, the importance of dispersion as a method of practice was in its ability to help artists to create new social contexts. In my practice, to be discussed in this section, I embrace the opportunities offered by all of the approaches to authorship outlined above. However, I also critically examine both the possibilities and limits for artists, like myself, to expand notions of authorship by adopting approaches like collaboration, appropriation and dispersion.

As I have already outlined in this chapter, working collaboratively has become a primary mode of engagement with media in the age of the reader-author. For most individuals online, collaboration is less a conscious act and more an unavoidable product of communication as social media companies gradually refine the structure of their platforms around frictionless appropriation. My practice has similarly adopted this mode of content creation as a possible alternative to the established Romantic conception of authorship. Unlike the aggregated authorship demonstrated by Richard Prince, I was not interested in negating any individual's agency in pursuit of a singular subjective expression. Instead, I have sought to mobilise the practices of collaboration and appropriation as a deliberate and freely adopted mode for experimentation and production.

In *Elegant Degradation*, a curatorial exhibition produced at Kudos Gallery in Sydney in early 2017, my co-curator, Nicholas Aloisio-Shearer, and I examined the ways in which a group of artists - excluding ourselves - were exploring their own role in an online system of widespread collaboration and appropriation. The show included Australian artists based locally and interstate as well as international artists. Our desire to survey various approaches to authorship found online also extended into our shared research methodology for the exhibition; we conducted our research through non-traditional online platforms, including YouTube and Instagram, to find artists both local and international.

Aloisio-Shearer and I produced another collaborative exhibition, *Big Game Hunting,* towards the end of 2017. This exhibition was presented at Bus Projects in Melbourne. In *Big Game Hunting,* we similarly engaged with methods of content creation online to produce new work, though this time it was our own. Acknowledging our role as collaborative authors online - simultaneously viewing, editing, and dispersing - meant that sourcing content from existing digital repositories was central. Our shared interest in fantasy video games, like *The Witcher 3* (2015), led us to thriving fan art communities that converse online on platforms like DeviantArt, on which users share creations based on existing fantasy, animated, video

game, and film characters. This method of content creation served as a model for our own art practice. Rather than taking part in the same process of appropriating existing content to explore new narrative possibilities, however, we were interested in the act of appropriation itself.

Guided by these various methodologies, the exhibitions produced as part of this research project have (as previously discussed) extended beyond my individual practice into curatorial and collaborative shows produced with my peer Aloisio-Shearer (whose solo practice is similarly engaged with digital content online). Recognising the possibilities of using approaches like collaboration and appropriation has meant that our shared practice has hinged on an engagement with dispersed content online. By adopting similar approaches in our shared practice, we have been able to examine how online approaches to authoring - implicitly and often uncritically afforded by digital technologies - might be explicitly and critically mobilised to offer new models of authorship in a contemporary art practice.

Elegant Degradation was the only curatorial show that Aloisio-Shearer and I worked on that formed part of this research project. However, this show was in fact a development that came out of a previous exhibition, *My Feet Would Hurt If They Still Existed*, that we had curated in 2015 for Alaska Projects in Sydney. Both exhibitions pointedly explored the ways in which contemporary life is mediated by digital technologies with particular focus on the disjunct between the material and the digital. In *Elegant Degradation,* it was posited that this divide served as a catalyst for a kind of (digital) anxiety. The title of the show alluded to this anxiety by referencing a tangible process in engineering in which a mechanical system can deteriorate without any outward evidence until it catastrophically fails.

In the pursuit of this type of subtle destruction, the works presented in *Elegant Degradation* were representative of multiple disciplines, including painting, video, sound, sculpture, design, and installation. The interests of the individual works spanned photographic representation, online relaxation, geopolitics, and digital representations of space. What linked these works was not so much any specific subject matter or aesthetic concerns, but rather how the artists explored the latent materiality of digital content and how this informed their approach to their role as author. With regard to my research project, I was particularly interested in the latter. Incorporating collaborative work, work by individuals, and work that utilised appropriated content in some way, the show represented a broad array of approaches.

Figure 14: Photographic documentation of *Elegant Degradation* (2017). Works pictured (left to right): Aston Creus *demesnE* (2017) and Akil Ahamat *Bubblebath{soft-spoken}{crinkling}* (2015)

For many artists in the show, this concern was explored by appropriating existing content or formats online. Akil Ahamat's *Bubblebath{soft-spoken}{crinkling}* (2015), for example, borrowed from the structure and aesthetics of ASMR videos[20] in an installation highlighting the personal narrative possibilities of the ASMR format. Similarly, Richard Phillips' large scale print work, *stage 1* (2017), explored the mediated image by appropriating contemporary conflict documentation posted online. These images were merged with a mix of 3D rendered spaces and photographic recreations. Another approach artists in the show took was foregrounding the role of the viewer when looking at art. For Aidan Koch, this was done in the context of the smartphone and social media by means that implicated the way authorship was perceived. In Koch's series of illustrations titled *Viewer* (2016), originally produced for *Flash Art* magazine, analysed the act of viewing art in the age of social media platforms. In this work, a figure, depicted across a number of panels, approaches a small vase on the ground and looks at it admiringly. The figure then pulls out their phone and

[20] ASMR or Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response in this context refers to an extremely popular genre of videos on platforms like Youtube that use a combination of sensitive microphones (oftentimes in a binaural configuration) and soft-spoken protagonists to convey positive affirmations or trigger feelings of "tingling", relaxation or sleep in viewers.

captures an image. This image is presented in the recognisable square format synonymous with Instagram in the final panel of the illustrations. Evident in all of these works is a foregrounding of the artist's role as viewer, whether indirectly (through appropriation) or more explicitly (by highlighting the act of viewing itself). For artists working in the era of the internet, the role of the viewer - both occupied by the artists themselves and the audience - has become a central concern.

Another approach to authorship that was represented in *Elegant Degradation* was an attempt to rescind the artist's role as author altogether. This strategy was evident in *Jonathan*. This work was produced by John T. Gast (a *nom de plume* used by the musician) as an accompaniment to the release of his 2016 album *Inna Babalon* posted to his YouTube account, Stonehouse.[21] Existing as a slowed down three minute video of a dog chasing a car in the hills of an unspecified Mediterranean country, Gast's work builds on a musical and visual aesthetic presented in many of the videos he posts to YouTube. Lo-fi and technically simple, these videos provide little by way of revealing much about Gast, who is often described as a mysterious artist by the music press[22] because very little is actually known about him (including his name). Gast represents an approach to authorship that has been employed by a number of musicians recently who seem to be trying to separate their biographical details from their output entirely.[23] The exchanges we had with Gast via email with regards to the show very much reflected this; Gast's preoccupation was first and foremost how his work would be credited. For Gast, then, authorship in the Romantic sense is viewed as a limiting constraint. By embracing anonymity on platforms like YouTube, Gast is able to produce work that problematises the act of ascribing an author.

In our more recent show, *Big Game Hunting* - in which, as described above, we put together an exhibition of our collaborative (non-curatorial) practice - Aloisio-Shearer and I were broadly interested in interrogating how video games might shape and reflect human emotions and affects, especially desire. We foregrounded the act of appropriation by deconstructing and re-materialising existing materials, including ambient sound as well as

---

[21] *Jonathan* can be viewed here: https://youtu.be/xKhtDmfHhDw

[22] Soe Jherwood of the online music publication Tiny Mixtapes recognises this when they state that 'It's a shame that artists like John T. Gast are, at best, gonna draw a collective shrug from the media who cover them; y'know, the let's-call-him-"shadowy"-and-"mysterious"-and-move-on approach.' (Jherwood 2015)

[23] Artists like Dean Blunt (also known as Babyfather, Ramirez, Blue Iverson), Inga Copeland (also known as copeland, Lolina), Naomi Elizabeth and Sophie are a few other notable examples of this approach in that they all continue to retain their anonymity.

object and texture files drawn from existing fantasy video games, especially *The Witcher 3* (2015) and *Dragon Age* series (2009 -). This act brought into question our authorial grasp over the works. Using *The Witcher* and *Dragon Age* games as source material to create new work, our engagement with this content mimicked the engagement of many fans with these types of fantasy games through fan art and fan fiction posted online. However, unlike such fans, we were not interested in contributing to the larger meta narratives of these fantasies (or even building our own). Rather, we were interested in investigating how we could create new assemblages from existing content to explore our role as reader-authors. The content of our works - which included depictions of various dragons and tracks of natural landscape sounds - was of less interest than the processes by which it was procured, and the ways in which it was de-contextualised and re-presented in the physical space of the gallery (as pictured in figure 15).

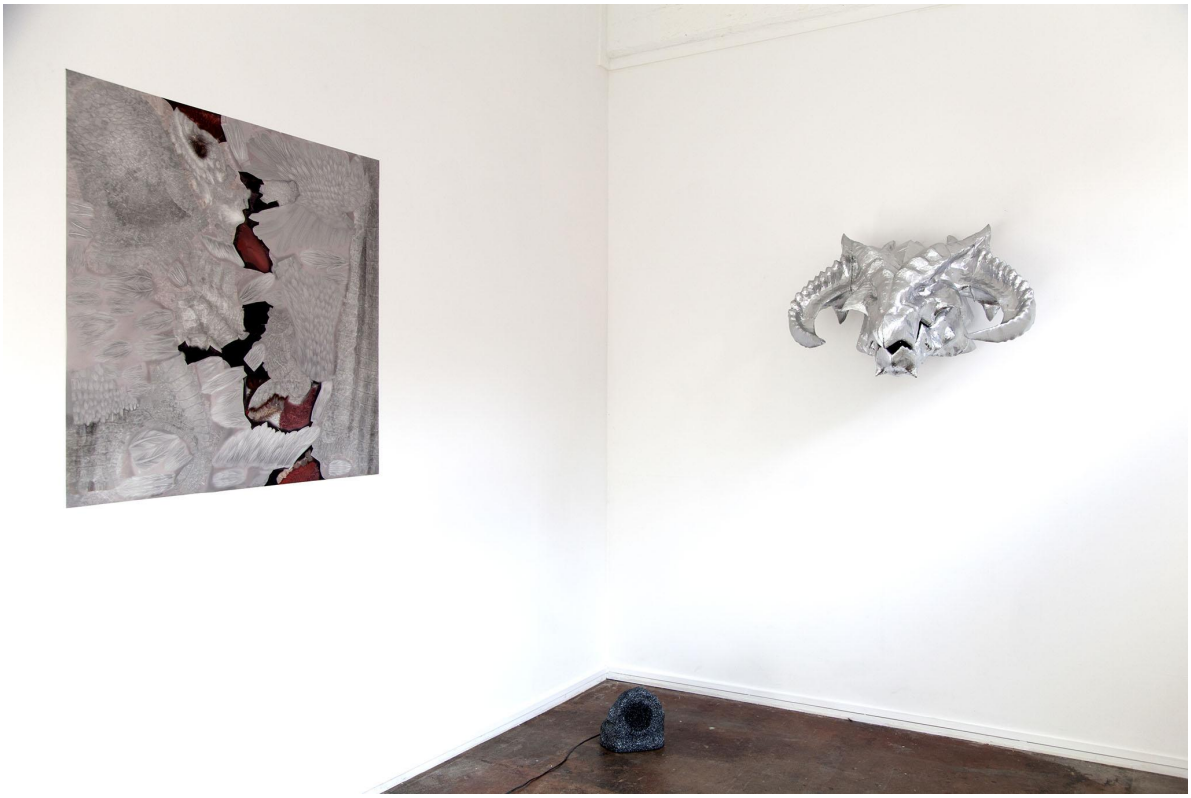


Figure 15: Photographic documentation of *Big Game Hunting* (2017)

With an interest in re-presentation in mind, Aloisio-Shearer and I tried to present the viewer with a jarring installation that played with the disjunct between the wholly spatial experience of the gallery and the purely visual surface of the screen (on which all of the appropriated content would be normally experienced). A large scale 3D printed dragon head hung on the far wall of the gallery, airbrushed with chrome effect paint. This object was tangible, but still

had a recognisably digital resolution (a result of the limited resolution of the original 3D model and the 3D printing process). A landscape ambience was extracted from the video *The Witcher 3* (2015) and was triggered as the audience moved around the space. The sounds were played through a pair of outdoor landscape speakers placed on the gallery floor that approximated the look of small rocks. A texture file depicting all the surfaces of a dragon from the video game *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) was presented as a flattened photographic print.

In experiencing every element of this show, both individually and together, the viewer's expectations of what a digital file and a tangible object can be are tested. By appropriating all of the content depicted in this show from various popular fantasy video games, the viewer's assumptions of authorship are also called into question. When presented with a collection of work where Romantic markers of authorship are unclear, the experience of viewing becomes much more complicated. Rather than trying to access the subjective expression of the individual artist, the viewer is instead left to unpack only pre-existing content assembled in a way that highlights a collaborative approach that is consistent with contemporary online authorship.

What became evident in the curatorial and artistic output I produced with Aloisio-Shearer for my research project was an experience of authorship for both artists and art audiences that is deeply rooted in online culture. From Aidan Koch's meditation on the act of viewing art filtered through Instagram to my own adoption (in collaboration with Aloisio-Shearer) of approaches employed by fan fiction communities to assemble new content, it is clear that to author something online - and, by extension, to author something tangible in a gallery space that incorporates material found online in some way - one must consider this content as a collaborative and continually dispersed project. In the work Aloisio-Shearer and I produced, both curatorial and collaborative, we have critically adopted a collaborative approach that has been observed online which foregrounds the act of appropriation. This approach highlights the varied ways authorship is invoked by artists today, incorporating both the artist's experiences not just as creators, but also as viewers.

In charting the lineage from Krauss' expanded idea of the apparatus, through to more recent engagements by artists with content and platforms online, I have explored the means by which artists of the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries have refigured their roles as authors. This reshaping of Romantic ideas around authorship has been defined by an increasing use of collaboration, dispersion, and appropriation afforded by digital media

technologies and the internet. With the emphasis these technologies place on the viewer, the role once occupied by the author as the sole arbiter of their work has in many ways receded. In its place, a new conception of the author has emerged: that of the reader-author. Unlike the homogeneous model of authorship espoused by Romanticism, the reader-author model allows for multifarious invocations of authorship incorporating collaboration, dispersion, and appropriation. These have become the primary methods through which both artists and society engage with content online.

As I also outlined in this chapter, however, in practice, collaboration, dispersion, and appropriation online are rarely equitable, reproducing many of the structural inequalities felt elsewhere, particularly in relation to race, gender and sexual orientation. This was evidenced in the field of art by the practice of Prince whose engagement with existing content through appropriation was problematic both in its blatant profiteering and antiquated invocation of authorship.

In my collaborative practice with Aloisio-Shearer, which tested these approaches to authorship in the context of art, we were not interested in consolidating our roles as authors in the same manner as Prince. Instead, we sought to examine how approaches such as collaboration, appropriation and dispersion could be employed to expand the concept of authorship to encapsulate the dual roles of the author as a creator and viewer.

By critically adopting approaches to authorship that we had observed online, it became clear to us that to author a work in the age of the reader-author, practitioners must take into account not just the author and their work, but rather the viewer, the structure of online media and platforms, in addition to broader societal and cultural concerns. As Krauss (2000, p. 25) stated with regard to the television, artists must also examine how ‘interdependence of all … things would… be revealed as a model of how the viewer is intentionally connected to his or her world.’ The next chapter will focus on the evolution of shared authorship and particularly the practice of outsourcing. I will explore how this approach has brought about new possibilities for a figuration of the author online that exists in opposition to authorship in the traditional Romantic sense.

Chapter Three - 'What difference does it make who is speaking?': Outsourcing and authorship in the twentieth and twenty-first century

As discussed in the previous chapter, the late twentieth and early twenty-first century saw the rise of collaborative, reader foregrounded approaches to authorship in art practices and culture more broadly. I argued that this was facilitated by the increasing use of digital media creation and distribution technologies. The new approaches to authorship brought forward by these technologies offered artists numerous ways of engaging with authorship that expanded the considerations of producing creative content beyond the limiting Romantic ideals of the author. However, while these approaches represent a remove from the dominant Romantic model of authorship they also bring their own limitations. While expanding the considerations of both creators and viewers to include structural and broader societal and cultural concerns, the continued co-opting of online spaces for political and commercial gain have made the inequalities of the internet clear. These issues continue to bear on any project engaging critically with authorship, no matter how experimental.

This chapter will introduce another approach to authorship offered by emerging digital technologies and taken up by artists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: outsourcing. Defined by this project as a process by which one displaces the labour of producing work to assistants and craftspeople, this approach has, on occasion, tried to address structural social inequalities by engaging with contemporary labour conditions. Outsourcing emerges from the same context as the collaborative approaches to authorship addressed in the last chapter and can similarly be seen as a response to the restrictive Romantic conception of the author and the changing culture around media technologies.

Since globalisation (particularly over the 1980s and 1990s), outsourcing has been associated with the transferring of manufacturing jobs from companies based in the global north to manufacturing companies based in the global south. In art, outsourcing has had a long and equally problematic history in artistic practice dating back as far as 16th century with Peter Paul Rubens' use of apprentices, students and assistants to aid in the creation of his paintings (Gombrich 1950 pp. 311-312). Taking its title from a question posed by Foucault in *What is an Author?* (1969), this chapter will examine how outsourcing has been used as a method of practice in both my own work and the work of others to explore new possibilities for authorship. I will do this by tracing a history from the conceptual application

of outsourcing in art in the mid-twentieth century through to more recent examples of internet and post-internet practices that have employed outsourcing to pursue institutional critique.

Avant-garde practices in the nineteenth and early twentieth century experimented with outsourcing the labour of producing art to external contractors (as in Marcel Duchamp's *Fresh Widow,* discussed in the first chapter). As the global north shifted from economies based around manufacturing to economies based on services in the mid-twentieth century, artists no longer felt it necessary to produce individual art objects by hand (Molesworth 2003, p. 18). Instead, as curator Helen Molesworth (2003, p.18) writes, artists 'explored ways of producing art that [was] analogous to other forms of labour.' This rejection of the traditional relationship between artist and their tangible work resulted in many artists leaving the physical act of making work to others. In other words, artists transitioned from craftspeople (a defining feature of the Romantic author) to self-reflexive conceptualists. As a result of this transition, artists were able to explore their own role as author, employing outsourcing as a means of disrupting Romantic assumptions of authorship.

More recently, the economic shift from manufacturing to services has expanded the increasing prevalence of contemporary labour platforms, like the online gig economy. This has produced a further re-evaluation of the artist's role as author. In this context, for artists to position themselves as workers in the capitalist global north would largely be inappropriate. This is not to say that artists shouldn't be interrogating their roles as workers in this new system of labour. Rather, to emulate the approach of their modernist forebears would be redundant because of the extent to which capitalism has become an inescapable reality for many (in the creative industries like any other). Instead, the artists and creative practitioners that I will discuss in this chapter have been adopting methods of content generation that are found online. These methods involve processes of outsourcing the acts of content creation and aggregation to platforms like Fiverr and Amazon's Mechanical Turk. These contemporary labour practices have resulted in art practices that, though indebted to the history of outsourcing in art, represent unique engagements with authorship online.

These practices have created, distributed and presented their work in ways that are distinct from traditional art practices. This distinction is perhaps best demonstrated by the means I discovered (and subsequently engaged with) the examples of outsourcing to be discussed in this chapter. Most of these examples exist as wholly online forms on platforms like YouTube and Twitter. As a result, the process of encountering these unique instances of outsourcing (as with much of the content hosted by these platforms) was strongly informed by

algorithmic suggestion (“if you like x, then you’ll love y”). My engagement with these examples of outsourcing was also shaped by this process of algorithmic suggestion, as I followed a virtually endless stream of similar and suggested content with every new piece of media I viewed. My process here - which acknowledges, values, and critically reflects on traversing platforms and deliberately accepts suggested algorithms - is reflective of my methodological approach to my research as a whole. Letting algorithmic suggestions dictate how I navigated platforms allowed me to encounter examples of both overlooked content and strangely prominent content. The varied examples of work presented in this chapter is reflective of this process.

To establish a lineage of the practice of outsourcing in art, I will begin by discussing the practices of Andy Warhol and Ed Ruscha. These two artists were both active during the mid-twentieth century late modern period in America. They also both deliberately utilised outsourcing in the production of their work. In this section of this chapter, I will establish how these artists’ methods extended the practices of the previous avant-garde, especially their rejection of the Romantic author. I will then turn to the means by which artists and media producers have been utilising the practice of outsourcing more recently. Their work will be framed by a discussion of the ever ubiquitous internet, late capitalism, and the increasing pessimism all of this has brought forward, as evident in the writings of the late theorist Mark Fisher.

I will examine three examples of approaches used by artists and content producers to navigate this new context for authorship. First, I will assess a more conventional artistic approach to outsourcing work in the practice of Los Angeles based artist, Parker Ito, a painter whose work often plays with the artist’s own role as author by using pseudonyms when crediting shows, incorporating content appropriated from online sources, and relying heavily on the labour of assistants. Second, the chapter will examine two examples of content production online that engage with contemporary labour platforms. The first of these, Mechanical Turk Poems, is a project that is run anonymously on both Twitter and Instagram. This project offers workers on Amazon’s online labour platform Mechanical Turk five US cents to write an original poem. My second example is a collection of recent videos posted on YouTube which do away with traditional Romantic notions of authorship altogether, using YouTube’s algorithm for suggesting videos as a means to structure content that is then produced by a collection of mostly anonymous individuals. All of the examples under discussion in this section represent a clear demonstration of how contemporary practitioners are employing outsourcing as a means of interrogating the role of the author in the context of

the internet. The way each of these creators do so, however, is quite distinct, and the differences between these approaches will be discussed in more detail in this section.

Finally, as a culmination of the critical examinations of outsourcing in art and the broader field of content production online conducted in the first part of this chapter, I will address work I produced in my own practice which served as both a prompt and an extension of the critical examinations of outsourcing conducted in this chapter. Titled *nursery rhymes* (2018), this work, demonstrated that by critically engaging with gig economy based outsourcing on platforms online, potentially productive modes of practice that expand notions of authorship can be identified. My work will also demonstrate the limits of adopting such methods of production, and that the inequalities that have characterised outsourcing as an approach to art making have transferred into the online space. I will argue that addressing these limits (regardless of the success or failure of the work) is important in gaining a greater understanding of how new methods of authorship online can function in an art based practice.

3.1 A brief history of outsourcing in art during the post-war period in the global north

As noted in the first chapter of this thesis, the emerging avant-garde of Europe and America in the early twentieth century rejected Romanticism's conception of the author. This was part of a wider attempt to break from what André Breton (cited in Seaver & Lane 1969, p. 26) saw as arbitrary control that was being imposed on artistic practices by 'reason' and 'aesthetic or moral concern[s].' These ideas, which were propagated by artists and writers like Marcel Duchamp, Stéphane Mallarmé, and, later, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, would only become more influential as the century progressed. As a result, the mid-to-late twentieth century was populated by an increasing number of artists questioning their role as author. Critical of the established Romantic narrative that mythologised the creator figure, many artists of this period sought to undermine their authority by expanding the field of art. One notable way they did this was through an exploration of the labour required to produce art.

Helen Molesworth's essay, 'Work Ethic' - written as an accompaniment to a show of the same name curated by Molesworth and staged at The Baltimore Museum of Art in 2003 - critically explores the desire of (mainly American) artists to re-examine their labour during

the mid-twentieth century. Influenced by the shift from manufacturing to services after World War II, Molesworth (2003, pp. 26-27) states that 'artists came to see themselves not as artists producing [in] a dreamworld but as workers in capitalist America.' What this meant for art of the time was an increasing intellectualisation of work as 'artists no longer needed to content themselves with the production of visually aesthetic objects' (Molesworth 2003, p. 28). Instead, as Molesworth (2003, p. 28) suggests, art of this time 'became a realm of ideas,' and the role of the artist was to produce these ideas (a labour that was cognitive only).

Central to this realm of ideas was the artist's consideration of the viewer and this led to what Molesworth describes as a 'reskilling' of artists, with the act of physically producing work becoming secondary to the way it conveyed meaning. For artists and writers of the 1960s, this new way of working involved a broad range of approaches to displacing and redefining their labour, as well as mobilising the audience's own efforts or responses to complete the work. Performance artists like John Cage and Yoko Ono, for example, relied heavily on audience participation for their work. John Cage's work *4'33"* (1952) is famously dictated entirely by the audience, existing only as a designation of time in which a live orchestra or performer is instructed not to play. Instead, the sounds of the audience and the space in which the performance of the piece takes place itself become the work. Similarly, in the more tangible field of object creation, artists like Donald Judd and John Baldessari were content to use assistants and professional fabricators to construct their, at times, highly technical works. What unites these largely disparate practices is their use of outsourcing in some fashion to question their own role as author. But why were so many artists of this period confronting their authorial figure?

For American artist Andy Warhol, the reason was cultural. Warhol recognised how the newly emerging image culture of post-war America, particularly around celebrities and advertising, was facilitating a 'reification of identity' (Lee 2016, p. 8) that could be used to play with authorial conventions. Perhaps best known for his screen printed works, Warhol also employed mechanically reproducible processes like photography and film throughout his practice in order to make what were often iterative series of work. Utilising these processes allowed Warhol to outsource much of the labour of actually producing work to a rolling team of assistants, granting him the ability to further diminish his role as author, in the Romantic sense at least. As Liz Kotz (cited in Palmer 2017, p. 46) suggests, Warhol adopted an almost 'machinelike personality' in an attempt to form a 'distance from conventional modes of self-expression.' Warhol (cited in Molesworth 2003, pp. 35-36) was so committed to creating this

distance that he famously stated that ‘if people wanted to know about his work they should ask his assistants.’

An example of how Warhol created this distance between his public persona and actual physical production of his work can be seen in his series of prints titled *Death and Disaster* produced between 1962 and 1967. Depicting various car crashes and suicides sourced from photographs printed in newspapers, this series was made exclusively using the mechanical process of screen printing. Of this process, Warhol (cited in Brown 2007) stated, ‘I tried doing them by hand, but I find it easier to use a screen [because this] way, I don't have to work on my subjects at all’ and that ‘one of my assistants or anyone else, for that matter, can reproduce the designs as well as I could.’ With this statement, Warhol foregrounds the relative ease through which his work could be produced or reproduced. This was a continual refrain for the artist in many of his recorded interviews.

By perpetuating a deferral of the labour producing his work to his assistants, Warhol counteracts the traditional narrative of the artist as artisan intrinsically linked to the physical production of work that is so indebted to the Romantic model of authorship. Early in his commercial career Warhol even abstained from signing his work, an enduring measure of authenticity in art, using instead his mother’s signature which may have itself been a stamp Warhol had manufactured (Buchloh 2001, p. 37; Smith 1986, p.32). It was not until he started gaining some notoriety that Warhol reluctantly began signing his work, a result of pressure from his gallerists. As Warhol (cited in Buchloh 2001, p.37) notes, ‘people just won’t buy things that are unsigned… It’s so silly. I really don’t believe in signing my work. Anyone could do the things that I am doing…’

And that they did. The American conceptual artist Elaine Sturtevant remade numerous paintings by Warhol throughout her career including *Warhol Marilyn* from 1965 which was a recreation of his famous series of screen prints of Marilyn Monroe first produced just after Monroe’s death in 1962.[24] In this near exact replication of Warhol’s work, Sturtevant complicates the viewer’s reading of authorship by inverting Warhol’s insistence that his work be read in surface level terms, as writer Patricia Lee (2016, p. 16) states, ‘what you see is

---

[24] It is interesting to note here that Warhol was also very much aware of Sturtevant’s practice and in fact, Sturtevant actually had the screen she used for her work produced by Warhol’s screen print manufacturer from Warhol’s original photo of Marilyn Monroe (Lee 2016, pp. 14-15). Sturtevant rejects the idea that Warhol actually understood her project though, stating that ‘everyone says, “so Andy really understood!” Well I don’t think so. I think he didn’t give a fuck. Which is a very big difference, isn’t it?’ (Lee 2016, p. 15)

not what you get'. Instead the viewer is confronted with their own assumptions of authorship as they try to decipher the layers of appropriation.

In the case of Warhol, it is clear that he continually sought to undermine his own status as author by redefining his role in the physical production of his work (a dynamic further emphasised by his New York studio's name, The Factory), examining the wealth of material written on his practice makes clear that Warhol actually heightened his own authorial status. Much has been written on his reclusiveness,[25] trying to gain a greater understanding of his work through an interrogation of his biographical details and this only served to solidify Warhol's desire for his work to be viewed in terms of commerce. The more he spoke of the shallowness of his work, the more desirable it was for the art market.[26] As case study, Warhol demonstrates that even as many artists repositioned their role within the process of art making to differentiate themselves from their Romantic predecessors, their audience still sought out those same entrenched Romantic markers of authorship when it came to the reception of their work. The practice's of his Conceptual peers like Sturtevant however, largely succeeded where Warhol's practice failed by highlighting how their work would be received, rather than its production.

For other artists of the mid-twentieth century, the practice of photography, which outsourced the act of image making to a mechanical device was another approach to used foreground their work's reception. As highlighted in the first chapter of this thesis, the history of photographic practice is rife with anxiety around the photographer's role as author; since its inception, the camera held the potential to disrupt Romantic assumptions of authorship because of its perceived objective qualities. This anxiety led to a generation of early photographers insisting that photography be artistically employed like other disciplines, utilising painterly techniques, for example, in order to highlight the individual photographer's unique vision. In the post-war period under discussion here, however, the true democratic promise of the photograph began to emerge with newly developed point and shoot cameras requiring little to no expertise at all. As Australian photography theorist Daniel Palmer notes in his recent book *Photography and Collaboration* (2017), artists began to respond to this

---

[25] In the opening pages of Victor Bockris' posthumous biography of Warhol, *The Life and Death of Andy Warhol* for example, Bockris writes that Warhol was 'the most "unwrapped" of public figures, as elusive as he was ubiquitous, a man of whom it could be said that he used the limelight in order to hide in it.' (Bockris 1989, p. 3)

[26] In 1967, Warhol (cited in De Duve 2012, p.28) stated, 'If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it.'

rapidly expanding field in which the photograph now sat, questioning the importance of the act of taking photographs altogether.

One key example for Palmer is the American artist Ed Ruscha. Though not exclusively a photographer - Ruscha also worked in painting, film, drawing and print - he is perhaps best known for his serial photographs of American suburbia. Ruscha had little interest in the historic anxiety around photography and its democratisation. Instead, he embraced the medium's ease-of-use and particularly its indexicality in order to create series' images that strived for objectivity rather than the individualist Romantic pursuit of subjectivity. In Ruscha's own words, his pictures were 'simply a collection of "facts" ... a collection of "readymades"' (Palmer 2017, p. 47). The reference to Duchamp here speaks to Ruscha's interest in diminishing the importance of the individual gesture that photographers had previously strived for. This new attitude towards the photograph is evident in his series *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* (1967) which, as the title would suggest, consisted of thirty-four photographs of different parking lots around Los Angeles. To make the series, Ruscha hired a professional photographer to take aerial photographs of car parks from a helicopter. This was in part to distance himself from the work, as he stated 'it is not important who took the photos' (Palmer 2017, p. 47). As Palmer (2017, p. 47) notes, here Ruscha displaces 'the traditional - or at least modernist - sense of photographic authorship based on individual vision and craftsmanship.' Instead, as Palmer (2017, p. 47) continues, 'Ruscha's [work] transferred authorial significance from the creation of individual images to a mass reproducible conceptual gesture.' Here, the photograph is employed not as a repository of individual expression, but rather for its inherent availability to mass reproduction.

By adopting a serial approach to his photographs, presenting them side by side in a sequenced book form, Ruscha also rejects Romanticism's notion of the singular defining work, as Palmer states 'the significance of the individual image is radically diminished, and the notion of the individual masterpiece makes no sense' (2017, p. 47). Instead, as images they function almost like, in Ruscha's own estimation, 'technical data like industrial photography' (Palmer 2017, p. 47). Ironically, using this format of editioned books actually serves to further establish Ruscha's role as author by limiting his work's capacity to function as a 'mass reproducible conceptual gesture' as Palmer earlier highlighted (2017, p. 47). Instead, Ruscha's work exists very much within the art world's entrenched Romantic conventions, privileging limited supply and authorial importance.

What we see in the instances of Warhol and Rushca's practices is what we see more broadly in examples of art practices of the twentieth century. While alternate approaches to making work (in this case outsourcing) have been employed that offer a latent potential to bring forward new understandings of authorship, they have largely been undermined by the still dominant Romantic conception of the author. As highlighted in this section through my analysis of Warhol and Ruscha, the undermining came from the intended audiences of these works. While Warhol and Ruscha were clearly attempting to problematise their role as authors through their quite distinct practices, in their insistence on remaining solely within an art context - which, in the post-war period (and, to an extent, even today), remained heavily invested in the Romantic model of the author as a means of establishing value (both culturally and in terms of capital) - they foregrounded their own authorial figure.

3.2 Late stage capitalism and new means of outsourcing labour in the global north

As the twentieth century came to a close, the shift to service economies that characterised the post-war period in the global north as detailed by Molesworth had become almost complete. This shift was made possible in this globalised late capitalist period by the movement of manufacturing jobs to countries where increasingly exploitative labour policies could be practiced. What replaced these manufacturing jobs was the widespread emergence of a precarious labour market in the global north administered by tech companies based around the gig and sharing economies. The rise of social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, as well as location-based dating apps like Tinder, Grindr, and Bumble, are indicative of the transferral of the reduction of the labour market to its base transactional value over to daily social interactions (particularly for younger generations who have adopted these services as both workers and consumers).

In late stage capitalism, it would seem that the use of digital technologies in work, leisure, and what lies between has become an inescapable part of contemporary life. "Capitalist realism" is a term coined by the late theorist Mark Fisher in his 2009 book of the same name.[27] This term is useful in describing our late capitalist landscape. In *Capitalist Realism,* Fisher takes up the task of exploring how accelerated capitalism, brought on by

[27] The title is based on a quote that Fisher (2009, p. 2) attributes to both Slavoj Žižek and Frederic Jameson: 'It is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism.'

neoliberalism, has affected the lives of young people in Britain. Fisher's argument is made, as with much of his other writing, through examples drawn from popular culture. One such example he gives is the speculative dystopian future envisaged by the 2006 film *Children of Men* that, as Fisher notes, seems all too possible today. In this film (based on the 1992 novel, *The Children of Men* by P.D. James) the world is on the brink of collapse as a result of decades of human infertility and antibiotic resistance. The "elite," or the only people we see throughout the film at least, have retreated to their luxury homes surrounded by artefacts of cultural significance. Public spaces have been emptied by the neoliberal order. Everything is monetised, even death; throughout the film we see numerous adverts for a government dispensed suicide kit known as "Quietus" for citizens over 60 years old. Capitalism is all that is left. And the new no longer exists.

For Fisher (2009, p. 4), the infertility that the film portrays is a metaphorical one, signifying a stagnant culture where, as he states, 'beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and the relics.' Examining Fisher's broader body of writing, particularly his work on Jacques Derrida's hauntology (a term he used to describe the longing for "lost futures" of modernity in contemporary culture[28]), makes clear his belief that this 'slow cancellation of the future' (Fisher 2014, p. 17) has actually been occurring in reality. The new (in culture at least) according to Fisher, has ceased to exist. As a result, 'the future harbors only reiteration and re-permutation (…). The focus shifts from the Next Big Thing to the last big thing - how long ago did it happen and just how big was it?' (Fisher 2009, p. 3).

While Fisher uses *Children of Men* and various other examples of popular culture to elaborate a possible cultural end point of the late capitalist neoliberal order, the conclusions he reached can also be used to inform our current conception of the author. With the emergence of the internet and the resulting "attention economy," appropriation (as I discussed in the second chapter) has become the primary mode through which many social media users now interact with content. For artists of the twenty-first century, repositioning the role of the author has become of primary concern, particularly since much of culture is increasingly experienced through the amorphous surface of the screen. While Seth Price was excited by the prospect of artists taking on this new role, repackaging and redistributing

---

[28] This idea is expanded upon in Fisher's 2014 book *Ghosts of my Life* in which he stated 'what should haunt us is not the no longer of actually existing social democracy, but the not yet of the futures that popular modernism trained us to expect, but which never materialised. These spectres - the spectres of lost futures - reproach the formal nostalgia of the capitalist realist world.' (Fisher 2014, p. 57)

existing material - ‘What a time you chose to be born!’ Price exclaimed in ‘Dispersion’ in 2002 - Fisher was much less optimistic. His type of cynicism permeates many of the practices of artists who engage with notions of labour in contemporary society while navigating the realisation of a system that Price, who was writing in 2002, was only speculating on at the time.

3.3 How artists are outsourcing the labour of artmaking as a means of problematising their role as authors in the twenty-first century

With the growing prevalence of the internet in late capitalist societies of the early twenty-first century, what constitutes labour and authorship has become of notable concern to artists and content producers. When one can so easily outsource virtually any aspect of the digital or physical labour of producing work to any number of individuals or companies across the world, where does the role of the artist as author now lie? One way experimental artists have approached this question is by adopting an updated means of outsourcing. Where outsourcing in the mid-twentieth century often meant performatively adopting a kind of worker or manufacturing line-like approach to making work (as in the practice of Andy Warhol), in the current context there is frequently no physical outcome to artistic practices. This has allowed for the adoption of the kind of outsourcing afforded by online platforms like Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. Like their post-war predecessors, the artists I will discuss in this section have approached this new kind of outsourcing from a position of critique of both the art world and the greater socio-economic factors that inform the art world. How this critique is formed and the broader role the artist should have in both the conception and production of work has now become a primary and explicit consideration for a growing number of artists working today.

Parker Ito’s practice exemplifies this adoption of new methods of making. Like Warhol, Ito employs studio assistants to aid in the production of his work. Unlike Warhol however, Ito seemingly has a much more active role in the production of the work and the ways in which his assistants are credited (or not credited as the case may be). Perhaps best known as a painter, Ito has exhibited expansive installations widely that have dealt with the newly emerging culture around the digital image. Important for this thesis is Ito’s sustained interrogation of his own role as author. Regularly critical of the notion of a singular masterwork (as I made evident in the discussion of aesthletes in the second chapter), Ito’s

practice is representative of a broader range of artists working in the late 2000s and early 2010s whose work approached the internet not as a novelty but rather as a normalised part of everyday life.[29]

The 2014 show *Maid in Heaven / En Plein Air in Hell (My Beautiful Dark Twisted Cheeto Problem)* at White Cube Gallery in London typifies Ito's approach. The title of the show - a reference to both Jeff Koons' poster *Made in Heaven* (1989) and Kanye West's 2010 album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* - is indicative of the eclectic mix of art and pop culture references that Ito's practice relies on. Occupying two different spaces within the gallery as well as a number of adjoining corridors, the show incorporated large scale paintings, sculptures, a video work, painted ceramic vases filled with flowers, chains and LED strips hung from the ceiling of the two spaces, custom printed shoes, and (for the installation photographs) live parrots roaming around the gallery.

In the largest space (as pictured in figure 16), printed collages covered all of the gallery's walls, with a mix of handwritten text, sketches, and selfies of the artist. In the middle of the space, four large paintings were hung unevenly from chains emerging out of cavities in the ceiling. Painted on both sides in a number of different styles ranging from hyper-realistic to broad impressionistic strokes, these canvases, again, appeared as if collaged, layering imagery from popular video games and animated characters (including characters from the television series, *Pokémon*), chains, flowers, flames, animals, popular iconography, images of Ito himself, and fragments of text. Just underneath each painting sat a small painted vase filled with roses, each petal a different colour. The floor of this space, usually concrete, was covered in red carpet.

---

[29] In Gene McHugh's 2011 book *Post Internet* he quotes an exchange between curator and writer Lauren Cornell and artist and writer Marissa Olson in which Olson makes this distinction clear when she states 'What I make is less art "on" the Internet than it is art "after" the Internet. It's the yield of my compulsive surfing and downloading. I create performances, songs, photos, texts, or installations directly derived from materials on the Internet or my activity there.' (McHugh 2011, p. 11)

Figure 16: Ito, P. 2014, *Maid in Heaven / En Plein Air in Hell (My Beautiful Dark and Twisted Cheeto Problem)*, viewed 10 December 2019 <http://www.parkerito.com/parkerito.com/whitecube/index.html>

The smaller second space (pictured in figure 17), with its concrete floor left bare, played host to a slightly more traditional install. Five paintings of similar content and collage style to those seen in the larger gallery space were hung on the farthest two walls of the space. Chains draped from the ceiling to the floor and back again limiting the viewer's ability to navigate the space freely. On the floor sat another two painted vases, again filled with multi-coloured roses, and a single large screen television which played Ito's video work *Wipeout XL* (2014).[30] In this video, much of the same content seen in the paintings as well footage presumably recorded by Ito or his assistants of the works being made and various clips of driving around LA are juxtaposed against seemingly random clips drawn from popular films like *Spy Kids* (2001) and surfing videos. Towards the end of the work, this juxtaposition is extended in a scene where a 3D animated character wearing a top hat and large reflective glasses mimics the movements of both Kanye West from the music video for his song *Bound 2* (2013) and Robyn from the video for *Dancing on My Own* (2010) as they play in a glossy rendered space complete with digital multi-coloured roses strewn across the floor. As previously noted, these same roses can be seen throughout the show as both real objects and within a number of the paintings.

[30] *Wipeout XL* is accessible here: https://youtu.be/AfEFCSGwSW8

Figure 17: Ito, P. 2014, *Maid in Heaven / En Plein Air in Hell (My Beautiful Dark and Twisted Cheeto Problem)*, viewed 10 December 2019 <http://www.parkerito.com/parkerito.com/whitecube/index.html>

As my description demonstrates, Ito's practice suggests an excess of seemingly incongruous points of reference. The text that accompanied the show, which recounts the surreal (and presumably fictional) story of an artist's drunken conversation with a collector at a party in Miami, provides little to aid in understanding the show. While as a viewer of this show, we are able to identify similarities between individual works, the larger theme or artist's intentions remain opaque.

A review of this show by critic Oliver Basciano published in *Art Review* quickly reveals the frustration this melange of references caused. Basciano writes:

> Aside from being immensely boring, the problem with all this is that it's Teflon-coated. There's so much layered irony, self-awareness and knowing hints to ideas of vacuity (the artist as brand, from the show title's evocation of Kanye and Koons onwards); so much celebrated meaninglessness, so much self-publicised lack of a shit given; that to critically hit it with those things just elicits a shrug. (Basciano 2014)

Ito's work, it would seem, denies any criticism in the Romantic sense. As Basciano continues,

> To play devil's advocate, the artist may just be honestly reflecting the generational and cultural environment that surrounds him (poor chap); but if he's just holding a mirror, with no commentary, with nothing at stake, just a mire of Gen-Y nihilism (and when the artist literally won't put his name behind the work), it leaves the critic stuck, art criticism stuck and this critic wanting to hit the eject button. (Basciano 2014)

What Basciano's statement points to is Ito's reversal of the Romantic relationship between the artist as author and the critic. Barthes (1977, p. 147) noted that criticism, in the Romantic paradigm, allotted 'itself the important task of discovering the author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work.' Barthes (1977, p. 147) continues that 'when the author has been found, the text is "explained" - victory to the critic.' Basciano's review makes clear that Ito, though displaying numerous self-portraits and a myriad of references unique to him, provides little substance, or "hypostases" as Barthes terms it. Without such hypostases, the critic cannot engage with the work by conventional means. Instead, like Barthes claims in his writing, the meaning a viewer can gain from this show lies in their ability to recognise the multitude of references and in turn create their own subjective reading of the work.

In highlighting Ito's self-reflexive approach, Basciano's review also makes Ito's proclivity for institutional critique clear. Ito's questioning of his role as author is an extension of this critique. Speaking on *Maid in Heaven* - which was credited to his studio assistants (including his own pseudonym, Parker Cheeto) and a Los Angeles fabricator - Ito insists,

> I try to make work that has many hands in it instead of trying to present something united. So the labour of my assistants is really present in my work and that's part of the reason why I named the White Cube show after them. I always have final say in the things I'm making, but my assistants have a very collaborative role in what I do. (Thomson 2015)

In adopting a more collaborative approach to his work, and stepping back from singular authorship through the use of numerous pseudonyms (including Deke McLelland Two, Creamy Dreamy, Parker Cheeto, and PI to name just a few), Ito constantly disrupts the viewer's assumptions about his authorial role. By Ito's (2015) account, *Maid in Heaven* was even mistaken for being a group show.

Through Ito's use of assistants and pseudonyms, as well as pop culture references and imagery, he succeeds in creating work that deliberately complicates authorial attribution. What is evident from my analysis of Basciano's response to Ito's work, and my earlier examination of Mark Fisher's postulating on hauntology, is that this approach can be divisive. In the case of Basciano, Ito's approach was clearly exclusionary as Basciano struggled to engage with the work at all outside of the bounds of the traditional artist and critic paradigm set up by Romanticism. Basciano's longing for the Romantic relationship between artist and critic is also reflected in viewer engagement with both art and content more broadly online; the more authorship is obscured online, the more the viewer seeks to find some sort of author.

While Ito provides an example of how an artist might navigate authorship by complicating the traditionally individual approach to a medium by painting via outsourcing, many contemporary artists and content creators make work that exists only in a digital form. For these practitioners, outsourcing is employed not as a means of obscuring the artist's authorial figure, as Ito did, but rather to pursue complete anonymity. One way this has been done is through the use of the rapidly growing service platforms like Fiverr and Amazon's Mechanical Turk.

While both of these platforms are large online labour marketplaces, how they operate and the kinds of work they cater to greatly differs. Fiverr is essentially an online marketplace for freelance services and is oriented towards a more creative output with people offering services ranging from animation to voice overs. Mechanical Turk, on the other hand, is generally used for gathering large data sets through surveys or to perform menial tasks that computers are yet to completely master. It's no surprise then that Amazon's CEO Jeff Bezos (Pontin 2017, para. 3) has described Mechanical Turk as 'artificial, artificial intelligence.' While Mechanical Turk workers choose which jobs they complete, workers on Fiverr generally offer very specific services that are then tailored to a purchaser's specifications.

The anonymously authored *Mechanical Turk Poems* which, as the name suggests, utilises the Mechanical Turk platform to distinct ends, is a recent example of how online platforms are being used by creative practitioners to interrogate the role of the author online. *Mechanical Turk Poems* is an ongoing collection of poems commissioned from the platform's anonymous workers by an unknown creator. Each poem is presented as simple text on single colour backgrounds which are then posted on Twitter and Instagram. In

commissioning these poems, workers are given a set of simple instructions: 'Write a short poem about your work. Do not plagiarise. The poem can be as short or as long as you would like' (Arcand 2017). They are paid fifty US cents per poem.

Like much of Amazon's workplace conditions (as well as the wider culture of labour conditions in tech companies), Mechanical Turk is an exploitative workplace with workers being paid miniscule amounts for their time - they can be paid as little as 1 US cent per job (or "gig" as they are known on the platform). Given the instruction from the *Mechanical Turk Poems'* creator, the nature of the labour the writing workers do regularly comes up in the poems that they write. A recent example of this can be seen in the poem, *Work for a few cents* / *So much time, little money* / *Need a job* (2017; pictured in figure 18).

Figure 18: Mechanical Turk Poems 2017, 'Work for a few cents | So much time, little money | Need a job.' 21 December, viewed 8 October 2016 <https://twitter.com/MTurkPoems/status/943904801342963712>

In an interview with the anonymous creator of *Mechanical Turk Poems* posted on the online publication *The Outline,* the creator describes the work as a 'sort of anthropological experiment' going on to state that 'part of the intention behind it is definitely wanting to explore what these people's lives are like and shed new light on these practices' (Arcand 2017). In engaging with the platform Mechanical Turk, even as a critique, however, an

exploitative aspect to the work is still apparent. The creator tries to navigate this by rescinding their role as author almost entirely, stating, 'it's one thing to re-contextualize an exploitative practice to shed new light on it, critically engage with it. It's another thing to engage in the practice to shed light on oneself. I would rather be doing the former' (Arcand 2017). By making the words of the anonymous Mechanical Turk workers effectively the only accessible output shaping the project (aside from of course the short interview referenced here), *Mechanical Turk Poems* succeeds in deflecting any viewer attempts to construct an author. In place of an absent author, there is only content, just as we see in Ito's work with the excess of incongruous references. Unlike Ito's practice, however, the approach employed by *Mechanical Turk Poems* is intended to foreground the words of individual workers as a means of critiquing Mechanical Turk as a whole. The work becomes less about who actually created the project and more about the structural socio-political issues that *Mechanical Turk Poems* is addressing.

What this work signals for outsourcing as a strategy of authorship in artistic practice, is that there are limits to this approach. As outsourcing is necessarily tied to often exploitative systems of labour, when it is invoked, even in critique, it replicates the inequalities of these systems regardless of the creator's intent. In the instance of *Mechanical Turk Poems,* most, if not all, of the labour of producing the work is still carried out by anonymous workers who are paid fifty US cents per poem. To some extent, this critique of the use of outsourcing extends to my own practice which has also engaged with these platforms during the creation of works that I will soon discuss. I maintain, however, that because of the widespread use of outsourcing via online platforms, like Fiverr and Mechanical Turk, this is still an area that warrants further investigation. As evident in the instance of *Mechanical Turk Poems* it is an area that requires both an acknowledgement of its ethical issues and because of this, a more sensitive and critical engagement.

3.4 New possibilities for authorship in collective algorithmically generated content

The transferal of authorship from an individual pursuit (as espoused by Romanticism) to a mass conceptual one (as seen in *Mechanical Turk Poems*) has recently been again extended with the emergence of content online that is created almost solely as a response to user interaction. While the primary goal of *Mechanical Turk Poems* was to critically

engage with the gig economy to highlight its exploitative labour conditions, here there is no clear critical engagement or even unified subject matter. Instead, this content is motivated only by the pursuit of capital accrued from monetised online content, a type of content that has become increasingly prevalent on platforms like YouTube in particular. This new context for the production of content online has resulted in the widespread adoption of formats that have an established popularity, like ASMR videos for example. The actual content that makes up these algorithmically popularised formats represents a strange amalgamation of the internet user's consciousness (or perhaps unconscious). Authorship for this type of algorithmically driven content is brought about not via any singular figure but rather through viewership leading to a situation where authorship has become collective rather than individual.

To my mind, the clearest example of this type of algorithmically determined authorship can be seen in the seemingly endless number of "child friendly" videos that have been appearing on YouTube - especially on its child-oriented service, YouTube Kids - over the last few years. Generally structured in one of just a few distinct formats (including counting videos, nursery rhyme videos and unboxing videos), this content uses relatively simple frameworks to exploit young children's susceptibility to easily recognisable characters from media conglomerates like Disney. Such figures are used in combination with trending words and hashtags to game YouTube's suggestion criteria. While much has been written previously on what impact this content may have on the unsuspecting children viewing it, I am more interested in the way that these channels essentially outsource the process of authorship itself to viewers.[31]

When authorship is collectively approached in an exchange between viewership, capital and algorithms, what does the resulting content actually end up looking like? In the case of child friendly videos on YouTube, the result is a strange and often perplexing combination of recognisable animated characters (sometimes re-skinned on to other animated models like dinosaurs, for instance, in order to skirt copyright claims), made-up nursery rhyme songs, and live action toy "unboxings" (i.e. point of view videos of disembodied hands opening newly purchased toys), all with titles comprised of random combinations of trending keywords. A popular example of this type of video is *Learn Colors Hello Kitty Dough with Ocean Tools and Cookie Molds Surprise Toys Kinder Eggs* (which had accrued more than 260 million views at the time of writing) uploaded by the channel YL Toys Collection in July of

---

[31] For examples of research into the impact of algorithmically generated content on children, see James Bridle's comprehensive 2017 article, *Something is Wrong on the Internet*, which is expanded in his 2018 book *New Dark Age.*

2018 (see figure 19).[32] As the title suggests, in this video we see a pair of hands flattening out various colours of Hello Kitty branded dough over various moulds to make cut outs of shapes and recognisable characters (like the creatures from Disney's *The Little Mermaid*) while a series of nursery rhymes are sung as the soundtrack.

While the video described above is stylistically representative of many types of child friendly YouTube videos, there are a few notable differences and these can be extrapolated into a number of distinct formats. These formats include: "learn colours" videos, "counting" videos, "surprise egg" videos, "finger family" videos, and "nursery rhyme" videos. What links these formats is their presentation of a kind of authorship that exists somewhere between being completely algorithmically dictated and incorporating decisions made by the content's anonymous creators. The videos that show live action footage of real people (as in figure 19) make this link particularly strange. In these types of videos - which often include people dressed in full body suits modelled on various popular Disney and comic book characters - we presumably see the creators as they act out increasingly strange scenarios in a manner that is akin to silent movies. Even though we can physically see actors depicted on screen, the role these individuals have played as authors is unclear. Someone has presumably constructed some sort of narrative, set up a camera, acted out all of the roles, and dealt with all of the other aspects of video production. However, unlike a usual movie (although, this distinction is increasingly becoming harder to make), all of these decisions have been prompted by the popularity (according to the number of views) gained by existing formats, content, and characters videos on YouTube.

---

[32] *Learn Colors Hello Kitty Dough with Ocean Tools and Cookie Molds Surprise Toys Kinder Eggs* is available here: https://youtu.be/5NsZ5MiXWvM

Figure 19: YL Toys Collection 2018, *Learn Colors Hello Kitty Dough with Ocean Tools and Cookie Molds Surprise Toys Kinder Eggs* 13 July, viewed 8 September 2018, <https://youtu.be/5NsZ5MiXWvM>

In determining content, views are the only metric that matters. Everything from the characters the creators of these videos have chosen to embody to the narrative they have written, has been dictated by an algorithm turned back on itself. To turn to any traditional notions of authorship like Romanticism to define any individual's role in creating this content therefore seems insufficient. The creators of algorithmically defined videos are not acting as guarantors of their content because there is no individual author speaking, or any facts to guarantee. Nor are they projecting some grand vision of subjectivity because there is no subjectivity, only iterative refinement to gain more views. Instead, this content exists outside of these formulations, occupying a space that cannot be accommodated by any definition of the author that has been explored in this thesis thus far.

For the audience (beyond the children earnestly watching), the unclear authorship of child friendly videos has been a primary point of contention. Since very little is actually known about how or why much of this content is made (beyond of course the motivation of financial gain), the discourse around these videos has again been around trying to find a singular or multiple authors in order to gain some insight into these questions.[33] Artist, Jacob Ciocci,

[33] There is, for example, an active subreddit (r/ElsaGate), a comprehensive YouTube video - 'Weird Kids' Videos and Gaming the Algorithm' - which tries to trace child friendly videos back to their original author, an article by Bridle, 'Something is wrong on the internet,' published on *Medium* and Bridle's later expansion of this article in his book titled 'New Dark Age' (2018).

recently engaged with the phenomena of these videos in a blog post on his website. In this post he notes that ‘part of the abject feeling we get when watching this stuff might come from not knowing what creative decisions were made by a person versus what decisions were made by computer programs’ (Ciocci 2017). In this obfuscation of authorial decisions that we would generally attribute to a singular figure, child friendly videos have made visible our inability to engage with algorithmically produced content without depending upon the context or framing provided by an author through which to view them.

In all of the practices discussed in this chapter - from Andy Warhol’s production line approach to making work, to the anonymous child friendly videos on YouTube that outsource the role of authorship to a broad collective - outsourcing the production of artwork has problematised the role of the artist (or content creator) as author. What this has meant for conceptions of authorship has evolved greatly since the mid-twentieth century. Post-war artists’ embrace of mass manufacturing processes like screen printing and photography - prompted by their potential to disrupt Romantic assumptions of authorship - in many cases actually brought about a heightening of the artist’s figure over their work. More recently, artists and content creators’ engagement with new possibilities for outsourcing afforded by the internet has resulted in works that seemingly deny Romantic understandings of authorship altogether. Whether as part of a critical examination of contemporary labour conditions (as conducted by *Mechanical Turk Poems*) or the pursuit of capital (as seen in the child friendly videos appearing on YouTube), these new approaches to making media offer a diminished, if not absent, authorial figure by dispersing the labour of producing work. As I have highlighted in this chapter, this has resulted in a shift in conceiving of the author from an individual pursuit to a collective one. The speed at which this shift has occurred has meant its critical and ethical implications - or the extent to which it might be complicit or critical of the culture in which it sits - are yet to be discerned. I will now move to discuss how I have used outsourcing in my practice to critically examine the artistic, cultural, and ethical implications of the shift from individual to collective authorship online.

3.5 Outsourcing as a strategic method of practice

Reflecting the practice-based methodology of my project, my practice has both informed and been informed by the research that this chapter has presented. The culmination of this

research resulted in the second body of work produced as part of my project - an exhibition titled *nursery rhymes* which was presented at Tributary Projects in Canberra in August, 2018. This body of work deliberately took up the practice of outsourcing (expanding on the material collected for this chapter). To do this I utilised the labour platform Fiverr as well as my more immediate peer group as a means to investigate how an outsourcing approach to making work could present new possibilities for authorship. With this practice based project I also sought to identify the critical implications of employing such an approach in a contemporary art practice today.

For this project, the process of outsourcing involved commissioning content from both my immediate peer group and workers on the platform Fiverr to create an installation of content dictated by YouTube's suggested algorithm. In so doing, traditional Romantic markers of authorship would be obfuscated. For this show, outsourcing was understood in the same way that this chapter has presented it: a process by which one (in the context of art in particular) displaces the labour of producing work to assistants and craftspeople or more recently, to workers on platforms like Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Outsourcing was employed in this project as a means of distancing myself from both the digital content and its tangible incarnations within the gallery space. By generating a body of work where so little of the content and aesthetic decisions were actually made by me, I hoped to create a space where the viewer of the work would be confronted (perhaps in more ways than one given the content of the show) with their own expectations of authorship.

I approached this in *nursery rhymes* by looking at how the process of outsourcing is being used online in conjunction with algorithms on platforms like YouTube to create increasingly unfamiliar and destabilising content. In the age of algorithmically produced content, the process of making and viewing media through platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube has become a strange confluence of personal agency and criteria put in place by unknown algorithms. Some content is promoted while other content has its reach narrowed in a semi-opaque exchange of capital. For a growing group of content creators, this has meant actively structuring content around these platform's overt and more subtle criteria to create media that can be monetised. Authorship for these content creators is, from the outset, a response to a chosen platform's intrinsic parameters and format of audience engagement.

Central to the work I made as part of *nursery rhymes* was direct engagement with the algorithmically dictated authorship of YouTube's child friendly section, YouTube Kids. In fact,

YouTube's suggestions algorithm led me to these videos; I noticed their strange titles and uncharacteristically large number of views in my suggested feed. As examined earlier in this chapter, these child friendly channels produce endless iterations of made up nursery rhyme, alphabet, and counting videos, employing various tropes and techniques of the wider YouTube community. This ranges from the depiction of popular animated cartoon characters to titles comprised of odd combinations of keywords and hashtags chosen to game the platform's criteria for monetisation.[34] As I have insisted, the culmination of these techniques results in videos that exist somewhere between human authorship and programmed content amounting to what artist Andrew Norman Wilson (2018) observes as an 'ethical disturbance in which the involvement of intelligent, amoral actors complicates a humanist legacy that understands the world as having been given for our needs and created in our image.' In other words, these YouTubers are creating content not directly for a human audience but rather for an algorithmic one.

It is within the gap between human authored and programmed content that the show *nursery rhymes* operated, incorporating elements composed collaboratively and via outsourced labour. My engagement with outsourcing was presented through several different screen based video works, a large scale UV printed wallpaper, and a contained sound element. By bringing together these varied techniques of content generation, the show sought to explore how what Foucault described as the 'author function' operates (or, perhaps in this case, does not) online. Furthermore, I also sought to explore how the use of these techniques in an art context could problematise my role as the author.

The video component of the show was produced through two distinct processes of content generation. One process resulted in a series of one minute animated videos. These were commissioned from users on the online labour platform Fiverr who had advertised their services to create 'nursery rhyme animation videos.'[35] The other process produced a series

---

[34] Prior to a recent YouTube crackdown, similar channels were observed posting more confronting content that perhaps broadened their reach online. The content often involved the Disney character Elsa from the movie Frozen and a series of characters from both Marvel and DC comics (like Spiderman, Batman and The Hulk) in increasingly strange situations (for example, burying each other alive).

[35] A short excerpt from the commissioned animated videos is available here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/12KrKQoDb_OG25763YbP6pyrTYvUoENAN/view?usp=sharing

of six live action videos. These were filmed by a group of my peers that approximated the format of “surprise egg” videos on YouTube.[36]

The animated videos, of which there were sixteen in total, existed as simplifications of various formats of nursery rhyme videos I had seen on YouTube. Rather than commissioning a straight copy of these existing formats though, I focused for the most part on the backgrounds. By condensing the format to its simplest background elements, I was interested in creating a space uncomplicated by the original videos’ more garish features so that viewers of the work could more easily contemplate the techniques through which these kinds of videos function.

The resulting animations acted as algorithmic “response videos” (also known as “reaction videos”), a YouTube video genre characterised by users recording themselves watching and responding to other content online. Here, however, the element of response is played out through an extended process of viewing and commission from multiple different individuals. Their presentation in the gallery mirrored the general response video structure, adopting the formal elements of this popular YouTube and live streaming genre. To emulate this format in the gallery, the back wall of the space was covered in a large UV printed wallpaper depicting a still screenshot taken from an existing nursery rhyme video on YouTube. The videos of animated backgrounds (commissioned from Fiverr users) played on a screen that was mounted in the bottom right corner of the same wall as per the response video format noted above (see figure 20).

[36] A short excerpt from the commissioned “surprise egg” live action videos is available here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_KzQUNgZUWy6v25KWlA81O93i-HtJlQh/view?usp=sharing

Figure 20: Photographic documentation of *nursery rhymes* (2018)

Beyond referencing the popular format of response videos online, the presentation of these animations in the space of the gallery also recalls the depictions of landscapes that were central to Romanticism. As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, Romantic painters like Caspar David Frederich used landscapes to convey their subjectivity. As previously argued, Frederich quite literally inserted himself into the frame of his *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818); he appears with his back turned from the viewer, facing the rugged mountainous landscape. The collection of commissioned animated landscapes produced for *nursery rhymes* exist as a kind of anti-thesis to this mode of representation and, in turn, the Romantic conception of authorship. In *nursery rhymes*, the landscape is vacant and depicted in a style dictated not by a singular expressive gesture, but instead by algorithmic suggestions prompted by millions of viewers. Rather than the unique, subjective expression that Romanticism strived for, I instead highlight the generic nature of these videos.

Like the poems produced by workers on the platform Mechanical Turk for the project *Mechanical Turk Poems*, engaging with the platform Fiverr in my own work also calls to attention what is in many respects a highly exploitative workplace. While I would argue that the platform Fiverr is slightly less exploitative in that it is the worker who sets the price for the labour they will undertake, an ethical issue still remains. To try to address this, I made clear

on the room sheet accompanying the show that these videos were produced by users on the platform Fiverr in a short introductory statement that also highlighted the problematic nature of the gig economy at large. Furthermore, none of the works in this show were for sale. This was the case for all of the other bodies of work that were produced as part of my research and eventually presented in galleries.

The other video component of the show consisted of a series of short clips filmed by a group of my peers that I also commissioned. These were produced in response to another child friendly format on YouTube: surprise egg videos. Generally, these videos are shot from first person perspective showing just the hands of a (usually) anonymous creator as they narrate the process of opening chocolate or plastic eggs and unwrapping small toys. All of the objects that are unwrapped are marketed towards children. The videos shot for *nursery rhymes* emulated this format, but stripped it of any of its recognisable commercial aspects, using only blank plastic eggs and a blank white background. Shot over a number of months, I asked each participant to view the previous videos that had been filmed so that each new video that was produced became a kind of response to the video that was filmed before it, resembling the iterative evolution of the original videos online. Each of these videos was then presented in groups of two on three different screens looping endlessly in a randomised sequence. The three screens displaying these videos were spread through the space and suspended just off the ground atop a pile of the same colourful plastic eggs that were used in the videos (as shown in figure 21).

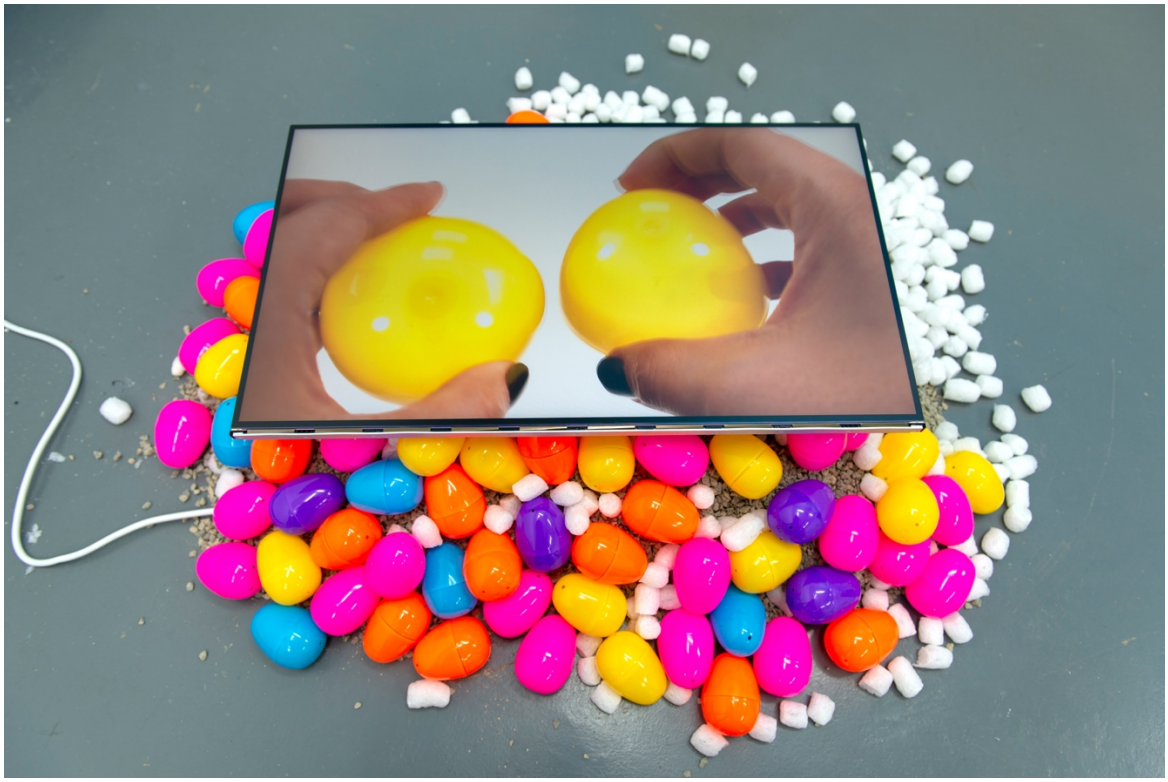


Figure 21: Photographic documentation of *nursery rhymes* (2018) showing detail of surprise egg videos

The final component of the show was a sound element which consisted of a standard Apple Macintosh Operating System Text-To-Speech (TTS) voice called “Whisper” reading out unique combinations of trending words from a number of lists compiled from YouTube data to create an endless series of new titles. Presented on a pair of headphones suspended from a central beam running through the gallery with the audio output constantly panning from right to left and back again, the experience of listening was meant to approximate that of the ever popular ASMR format online.[37]

As I have suggested, some notable aspects of child friendly videos on YouTube include their mix of algorithmically dictated content and apparent lack of any clear authorial figure. This has resulted in content that is largely incomprehensible to the audience it has found. For *nursery rhymes,* I produced the same predicament by leaving many of the decisions about the actual content of the work up to its active participants on YouTube, Fiverr, and my more immediate peer group. What resulted was a series of seemingly incongruous content

[37] An excerpt of the whispered audio is available here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/14d4k1SBrA1-qKCjZdjnHtOEZrBwoTORa/view?usp=sharing

dictated by algorithmic trends where authorship of any single element through traditional Romantic markers became diffused across a wide group of people.

For audiences viewing the resulting content in the space of the gallery I hoped to further provoke a direct confrontation between expectations of traditional Romantic authorship by making physical the elements in the original kids videos on YouTube that imply a dismantling of authorship as it has been conventionally conceived. By combining the disparate elements of these kids videos in an installation, each with their own online referent, I was interested in using the gallery's traditional modernist figuration as a space of contemplation against itself. When viewed outside of the levelling effects of the browser window (a space where authorship is effectively neutralised by nature of the fact that all content is presented as equally important), the content I commissioned in my tangible installation dictated by the structure of YouTube, presented viewers with no sense of any clear singular authorial figure. How this worked as an installation, and the broader context of YouTube videos to which the show referred, was highlighted in a short piece of writing included on the room sheet that I commissioned from art critic Adam Jasper.

The act of outsourcing the labour of actually producing art objects (and more recently digital works) has been a critical method through which artists and content creators of the twentieth and twenty-first century have engaged with their role as author. This is evidenced in the various practices that I have discussed in this chapter, from Warhol's manufacturing line approach to making work through to the thousands of commissioned texts included in *Mechanical Turk Poems* and, more recently, my own practice in my use of the platform Fiverr. Outsourcing, however, has also left some audiences and critics (as suggested by the reactions to Parker Ito's practice, in particular) failing to see the value in approaching work in such a way. Technological developments are rapidly changing how both artists and cultural consumers create, view, and distribute content. To view work through the legacy of the Western author narrative is no longer completely viable. Instead, as this chapter and its corresponding practice-based component have highlighted, a critical examination of new approaches to authoring work offered by recent technologies can be productive in identifying both the possibilities and limits in expanding notions of authorship. In the context of late capitalism, it is clear that one must now approach outsourced content in the context of broader structural concerns. To expand on Foucault's list of limits that he speculated might inform a new conception of the author, we might now also ask: how was this content created? what platform was it created for? and, how has it been circulated? Finally, it is

worth asking how the culmination of answers to these questions have provided new knowledge that may have shaped this content.

The next chapter will examine emergent forms of content generation that employ programming. These forms of content exist almost entirely outside of user creation and in some cases even interaction. As a result of this remove from human creators (a key aspect of the authorship paradigm), these examples of content represent a potential rejection of the concept of the author altogether. In what has come to characterise the reception of more dynamic modes of authorship, these new forms of programmed content generation have again provoked viewer reactions marked by persistent attempts to find (or even create) some sort of author. As I return to repeatedly in my research, it is clear from such responses that our desire for the author figure is omnipresent. The basis for the next chapter is formed by an investigation into the relationship between forms of content generation that exist almost entirely outside of user interaction (beyond passive viewership) and our continued desire to find some semblance of the author in the content we consume.

Chapter Four - Outsourcing using programming

In chapter three, I attended to the artistic methodology of outsourcing by way of assistants as well as the mass online labour forces of the gig economy. Evident in my examination of these applications of outsourcing was an underlying desire from viewers to be able to perceive a traditional Romantic author figure behind the work. My practice, which critically adopted similar modes of creation, utilises various techniques of outsourcing to expand notions of authorship and diminish the importance of the singular author figure. In this chapter, I wish to extend this discussion of outsourcing to acknowledge the means by which some artists and content creators have started to use programming as a means of outsourcing the labour of producing wholly digital content. While at the time of writing, this type of production has no widespread presence online with just few examples reaching any kind of wider audience (two of which will be discussed in this chapter), there is a clear potential for content produced in this way to exist in an authorless environment. In the instance of the recent generation of content creators to be discussed in this chapter, by passing many of the more menial decisions of content making over to a computer, they have created one such way in which the potential for new possibilities for authorship could come into existence.

Like the child friendly videos on YouTube from the last chapter, what defines these new programming-based possibilities is a near absence of authorship in the traditional Romantic sense. Freed from the constraints of what Jacques Derrida (1978, p. 226) referred to as the ‘sovereign solitude’ of the author, anonymity and shared authorship take precedence. Ironically, like we saw in reactions to the child friendly videos, anonymity has instilled heightened anxiety in viewers of this content, evidenced by a clear drive to find any trace of the author. This anxiety is emblematic of the enduring primacy of the Romantic conception of the author. This situation will form the basis for this final chapter. It will also frame my discussion of another body of work that I produced titled *soft ions* (2016) for which I adopted programming processes of content creation in an art context, resulting in a reception that was characterised by discomfort with the fact that generally held assumptions of authorship were not met.

Like most of the new approaches to authoring work exhibited by art practices discussed in the previous chapters, it is a technological shift that has enabled the approaches to authorship under discussion in this chapter. The technological shift here is outsourcing by

means of programming. Outsourcing by means of programming has been the result of increasingly sophisticated use of “bots”. In the context of this chapter, bots are essentially just instances of code used to automate tasks like viewing and creating content. To examine how authorship functions in content produced through this bot-based process of viewing and generation, I begin by exploring the ways in which two examples are each being produced and received. First, I will examine Google’s ongoing series of programmatically generated videos posted to YouTube under the account name “Webdriver Torso.” Second, I will discuss the anonymously published *Unfavourable Semicircle*, another ongoing project which has existed across multiple platforms including Twitter and YouTube.

Given the nature of the content under discussion here, which very much exists outside of an art context, both Webdriver Torso and Unfavorable Semicircle have for the most part eluded any sustained discussion in contemporary art theory. Since the goal of this research project is to examine how an art practice can navigate the contemporary experience of authorship online, and both Webdriver Torso and Unfavorable Semicircle represent a distinctly contemporary approach to authorship that foregoes any acknowledgement of the still prevalent Romantic conception of the author, a discussion of how these accounts function and how what is learnt from this can be employed in art practices is useful. By incorporating these disparate examples into my thesis, I am attempting to also broaden the discourse around authorship which, to date, has largely failed to acknowledge the drastically different digital context in which art now exists. Since these examples are more cultural objects than conventional art objects however, they have no direct art referent. As a result of this the forthcoming chapter will mark a shift away from the structure of the previous chapters (in which I contextualised recent art practices and closely analysed the approach used by the author). Instead, this chapter expands upon the structural engagement with content that was introduced in the previous chapter in relation to the nursery rhyme videos on YouTube. In this chapter, I will be examining how new examples of content have been generated by means of programming, their use value, and how this has shaped their structure. This chapter will then examine how an approach to authorship that prioritises a structural engagement with content can be employed in an art context. I will do this by reflecting on the production and reception of *soft ions.*

4.1 The possibilities of using programmatically generated content to disrupt traditional Romantic assumptions of authorship

Since online platforms now incorporate a broad range of media, they have become increasingly complex to manage. This has necessitated the use of programming to generate content as a means of testing these platforms. This situation has resulted in media that is produced and distributed almost instantaneously on a scale that is distinctly non-human.

Using programming to generate content is not a recent development. Programming has been employed throughout the history of computers to generate processual content. The use of such content has also been commonplace in the practice of artists since the computer's inception. By way of example, one could look back to the 1960s to the intricate plotter drawings of Vera Molnár, or Stan VanDerBeek's early computer generated films produced with the assistance of computer scientists from Bell Laboratories, or even writer and curator Jasia Reichardt's 1968 exhibition 'Cybernetic Serendipity' which was a milestone presentation of early computer based art practices. However, it is in the extent to which recently programmatically developed content sits in an expanded field and how this has effected its reception that is of interest to me. Since this content predominantly exists alongside user generated images and video on platforms like YouTube and Twitter, it can be viewed as part of those same sites of production and dissemination. On this basis, they are distinct from the loops of spam Hito Steyerl (2011) describes as 'digital debris' that typify bot generated content online elsewhere.

A particularly visible example of this recent type of programmed content generation is Google's Webdriver Torso account on YouTube. Started in March of 2013, this account has since uploaded an almost uninterrupted stream of hundreds of thousands of videos. Its output has started to slow recently; Webdriver Torso only posts a few times per month now, but during its first few years new videos were generally added every minute or so.

As I outlined in my introduction to this project, it was my initial experience of these videos that prompted my doctoral research. I first encountered Webdriver Torso by chance as I was browsing through YouTube and noticed a video uploaded by the BBC news channel on YouTube. The video was in my suggested feed and had a strange thumbnail comprised of

two shapes, one red and one blue on a white background.[38] This video alerted me to the existence of the channel Webdriver Torso. On further inspection, I noticed that the channel had uploaded tens of thousands of videos. Ranging from ten seconds to around twenty-five minutes in length, the videos Webdriver Torso posted generally consisted of a number of distinct slides made up of one blue and one red rectangular shape on a white background with sequentially numbered string titles printed in the bottom right corner to differentiate each slide. Every slide was also accompanied by a single frequency audio tone.

The composition of these videos greatly resembles the work of artists like Josef Albers and Piet Mondrian. This resemblance and the videos' formal structural elements could lead one to include them in a lineage of geometric abstraction if one was to engage with them from a purely aesthetic and art historical standpoint. To assess these videos as an instance of art, however, would be purely a construction. Their content is not informed by a history of pictorial representation (or abstraction). Rather, they are instead informed by their structural and procedural use value.

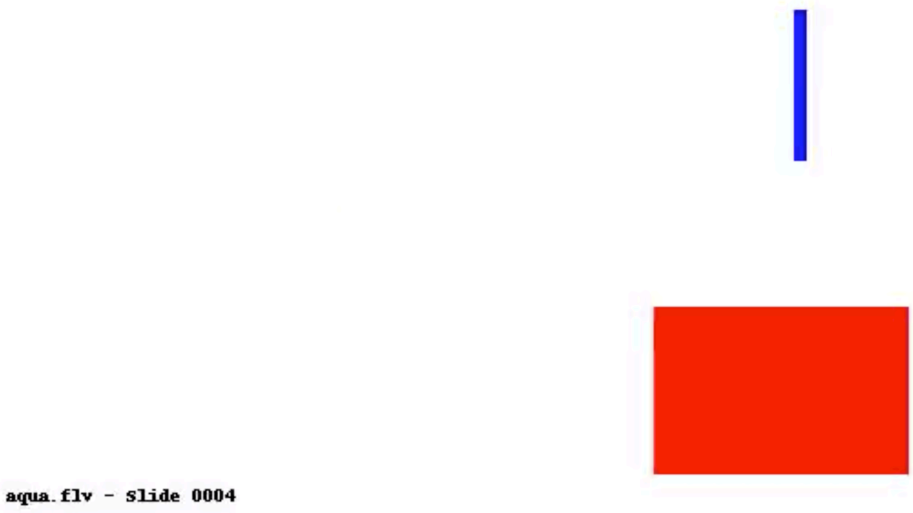


Figure 22: Webdriver Torso 2019, still from *tmplwT4T4*, August 26, viewed August 28 2019, <https://youtu.be/BTZ5KVRUy1Q>

[38] The BBC YouTube video I describe in this paragraph is available here: https://youtu.be/lQm-LbSJarQ

In 2014, the use value of these videos became clear when it emerged that Webdriver Torso was started by Google as a test of YouTube's compression quality. This is achieved by comparing the original video files against their counterparts streamed on YouTube. By keeping the compositions of the videos quite simple, differences between the original and streamed videos are made clear.

Here, both the role of the reader and author are merged into a network of servers. However, these videos are posted publicly to YouTube. Therefore, there is still an audience outside of the system of server-to-server interactions that take place while completing compression quality tests. Due to the online context of viewing, these videos operate at a significant remove from the historical or even contemporary examples of authorship explored earlier. As viewers of this kind of content, we are excluded from both the process of creation (programming) and its intended audience (bots). This creates a strange relationship with this content that is characterised by our inability to engage with it in any constructive way.[39] As Paul Virillio (1994, p.60) highlights, 'once we are definitively removed from the realm of direct or indirect observation of synthetic images created by the machine for the machine, instrumental virtual images will be for us the equivalent of what a foreigner's mental pictures already represent; an enigma.' As already explored through practices like Andy Warhol's, when viewers are presented with an elusive authorial figure, their desire to engage with the role that this author has played becomes heightened. When looking through the reactions to Webdriver Torso, this same phenomena is clear. As there is no author of Webdriver Torso (in the Romantic sense at least) to be found, however, this becomes a pointless endeavour.

A heightened desire to find some kind of author figure is evident in the reactions that Webdriver Torso has elicited. Responses to Webdriver Torso's videos are characterised by endless speculation as to the identity of the author and their reasons for creating such content. This speculation, which lasted from the time the account was opened in early 2013 until mid 2014 is evidenced by discussions on online forums that ranged from theories of contact with extra-terrestrial life forms to a government conspiracy, leading collectives from content aggregation sites (such as Reddit) to conduct exhaustive investigations. This continued until Google finally claimed responsibility for the account in June of 2014 (Trew

---

[39] While we may not be able to engage with these videos in any constructive way, they have become quite popular on Youtube. The most recent videos posted to the Webdriver Torso at the time of writing (2019) have amassed tens of thousands of views each and some of the most popular videos from the account's lifetime have hundreds of thousands of views. While one could of course speculate as to whether or not these views are actually from humans (and this would certainly be a valid argument to make), to me at least each video's active comments sections suggest these numbers are legitimate.

2014). However, this revelation only came after a number of software engineers at Google uploaded a series of videos that were clearly not generated as tests and perhaps fuelled informal online investigations further. These anomalous posts included a six second video of the Eiffel Tower with its lights sparkling at night, and a thirteen second video that at first seemed to conform to the general pattern of previous Webdriver produced videos, but later incorporated a red silhouette of Rick Astley (see figure 23) from the video of his 1987 song *Never Gonna Give You Up* (a clip that had gained some renewed popularity a few years prior as part of the now infamous “Rick Roll’d” meme). In spite of these videos, the reactions to the content Webdriver Torso posted as a whole made clear that a desire for some authorial figure remains, even when there is no author to be found.

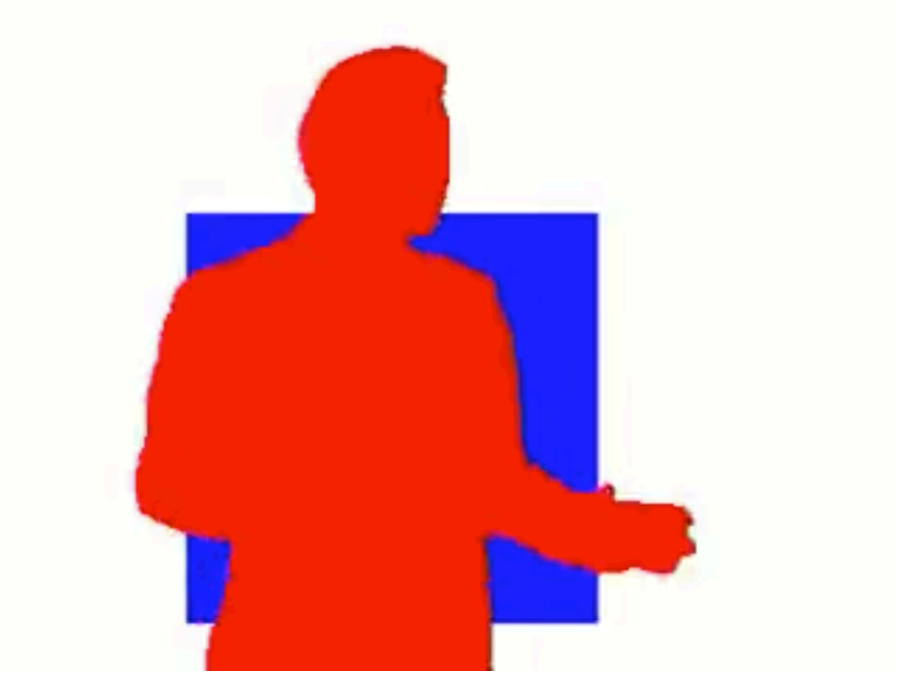


Figure 23: Webdriver Torso 2014, still from *tmprRkRL85*, June 2, viewed January 16 2016, <https://youtu.be/klqi_h9FEIc>

While Webdriver Torso is perhaps the most visible example of this new type of content, there have been numerous other instances of programmatically generated content on YouTube that have garnered similar reactions from viewers. These include an account called “channel with the highest number of videos” (which has since been removed for breaking YouTube’s terms of agreement) that posted simple videos of block colours presumably in an attempt to achieve the status after which the channel was named. Another perhaps more mysterious example of this type of content, however, comes from a channel titled Unfavorable Semicircle which I will now discuss.

Running in various forms since 2015, Unfavorable Semicircle has been posting an ongoing series of videos and text on YouTube, Twitter, and Google's (now defunct) social media platform, Google Plus. The content Unfavorable Semicircle posts has changed somewhat since it was started in 2015, but it can be divided broadly into a number of different series and standalone videos that all demonstrate slight variations from each other. Perhaps the most common unifying feature of all of the content is that, aside from a few notable exceptions, all of the videos and tweets start with the emoji symbol for Sagittarius, "♐". What comes after the emoji is where the differences start to appear. Examples of titles of some of these series include ♐*BRILL*, ♐*MOTH*, and ♐*OR*, all of which are followed in individual video titles by a string of numbers generally related to the order in the series for which it was produced.

The actual videos themselves range from around five seconds to almost eight hours in length and generally consist of a solid colour background (sometimes changing) with speckled pixels or bars appearing across the frame (see figure 24). Earlier videos also included a masculine voice announcing a letter or number, and occasionally digitally garbled music or ambient recordings. By contrast, more recent videos, if they do include any audio at all, tend to be a lot more varied, with sections of loud digital noise and long periods of silence.

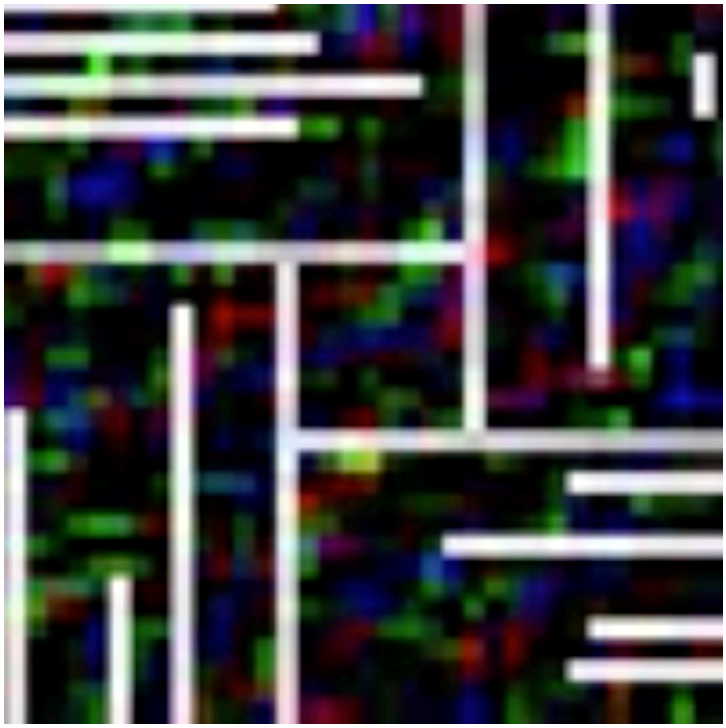


Figure 24: Unfavorable Semicircle 2015, still from ♐*DELOCK-NtbGMcq_dbo*, December 29, viewed January 8 2016. This video (along with all of the Unfavorable Semicircle content on YouTube) has since been taken down. However, it is available as part of a compilation of the ♐*DELOCK* series here <https://youtu.be/0lRiP02CbAE>

Like with the Webdriver Torso videos, the mysterious nature of Unfavorable Semicircle videos has led a dedicated community of viewers to conduct an extensive search to find hidden information and content (of which there is much) ultimately in an attempt to pinpoint an author and their intentions.[40] According to Reddit (in the thread r/unfavorablesemicircle), Discord, and a fairly comprehensive Wiki article, this community has greatly differing ideas about what these intentions might be. These ideas range from “the work of a disturbed mind” (*UnfavorableSemicircle Wiki* 2017) to a recruitment test akin to puzzles posted to the image board 4chan and Twitter between 2012 and 2014 (which were credited to an organisation known as “cicadia 3301” that is speculated to have been designed by various government intelligence agencies). Rather, conveniently, authors of the Unfavorable Semicircle Wiki page have organised some of these theories into a simple diagram (see figure 25).

[40] This community has also investigated a growing number of what are presumed to be fake copycat channels. At the time of writing, for example, the first channel that appears on YouTube when searching for “unfavorable semicircle” is not the actual Unfavorable Semicircle channel. Instead, the first channel that appears in the search posts digitally rendered scenes resembling Google’s Deep Dream AI project with generic new age music playing in the background.

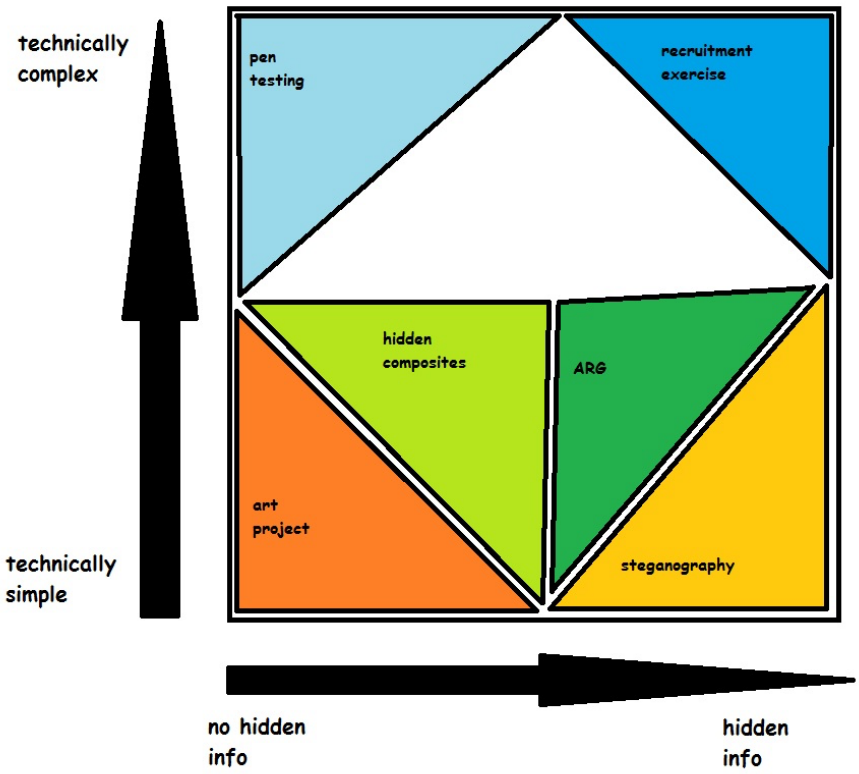


Figure 25: UnfavorableSemicircle Wiki 2017, *List of Theories*, viewed 12 November 2018, <https://www.unfavorablesemicircle.com/wiki/List_of_Theories>

Looking past the general intrigue of this constantly developing mystery, what is evident again (as it was in the responses to the Webdriver Torso videos) is an audience that is unable to interact with content beyond searching for an author. Performing a simple Google search for “unfavourable semicircle” brings up countless articles trying to solve the “mystery” of Unfavourable Semicircle by finding an author. It is clear then that this audience falls back on the established Romantic construction - if an author is found the videos will be understood - or, as Barthes (1977, p. 147) suggested with reference to art criticism, ‘when the author has been found, the text is explained.’ Like the Webdriver Torso videos, there is no author in the traditional Romantic sense to be found here. For audiences online, this “mystery” will never be solved, the text will never be explained.

While it may be tempting to place videos like those found on the Webdriver Torso and Unfavorable Semicircle channels within a narrative of subjective genius by making comparisons to experimental cinema or avant-garde new media experimentation, what is on offer in both of these examples is a more radical proposition: an end to the modern authorship paradigm which has been predicated on the mythologising of the singular author figure. When individual or collective authors are replaced by anonymous creators or

corporate organisations, this model is no longer viable. Instead, one must engage with content in the wider context from which it has been produced. As my discussion of the reactions to both Webdriver Torso and Unfavorable Semicircle have made clear, however, the audiences these videos found have been unwilling to break from the established and still prevalent Romantic conception of authorship. Nevertheless, as I will continue to assert, these examples of implementations of programming to aid in the creation of content represent unique opportunities to expand notions of authorship.

4.2 A continued desire for a figuration of the author

As I have argued in this chapter, a longing for an author has been heightened by the ways digital technologies are currently used in the production of media. This phenomenon was also made evident in the preceding chapters in the instances of artists employing varied modes of authorship that challenged traditionally held assumptions by viewers of the singular, Romantic author. These experiments with authorship have all occurred in an art world context.

This desire for a clearly defined singular author continues in online spaces. To demonstrate this fact, we might consider *Project Xanadu,* an ongoing project by American philosopher Ted Nelson. This project first conceptualised the idea of hypertext when it was founded in 1960. This project opposes the current structure of the web.[41] Appropriately taking its name from the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *Kubla Kahn* (in which Coleridge structurally reaffirms the Romantic centring of his role as singular author by recounting an opium influenced dream he once had), *Project Xanadu* was essentially proposed as a digital library for electronic publications of text rooted in the homogeneous model of attribution that has characterised the written word since the printing press. The world wide web that exists today inherently rejects this model of homogeneity. What we see instead is an internet that encourages collaborative and often anonymous engagement with content, blurring the lines between author, viewer, and distributor. *Project Xanadu* on the other hand, seeks to maintain unbroken links between content so that attribution (and in the context of this research, authorship) is always made clear. As the example of *Project Xanadu* makes evident, there is still a continued desire for some notion of Romantic authorship despite the ways in which the

[41] See the Project Xanadu website for a more in-depth exploration of Ted Nelson's ideas.

technological and social shifts examined in this thesis offer dramatically altered engagements with the idea of the author.

The conflict between a desire for authorship and the internet's structural denial of such authorship is made particularly apparent when considering the process known as "doxxing." As I have suggested earlier, the internet, for the most part, has enabled its users to browse and interact with others in relative anonymity (however, the companies that own online social platforms are privately using increasingly nuanced methods to track and build profiles on their users). Doxxing describes the practice of breaking this anonymity using publicly available information on social media as well as techniques like hacking a user's computer or phone to gain sensitive information, like their real name and residential address. This information is then generally leaked or used privately as a pretence to some sort of blackmail. From this brief description we can see that the practice of doxxing simultaneously represents a blatant disregard for, and reliance on privacy in that the people committing the doxxing rely on maintaining their own anonymity while breaking the anonymity of others' (often resulting in people being stalked or threatened). While this practice is representative of broader issues online relating to social manipulation and abuse it is also clearly indicative of a continued desire for some model of authorship. For the people committing the doxxing it is often done out of some perverse desire to be closer to the victim, to understand them in some way. While establishing an author figure in the Romantic sense is of course a much less problematic process, I contend that it can still be seen in relation to doxxing. To return Roland Barthes' earlier observation of the relationship between the Romantic artist and critic - 'when the author has been found, the text is "explained" - victory to the critic' (Barthes 1977, p. 147). In this more contemporary context, when all of the personal information of an internet user is harvested, their identity is known - victory to the hacker. The hunt to find the author of both Webdriver Torso and Unfavorable Semicircle can be seen as an extension of this practice.

Given the long history of a prominent authorial figure in the work of art (and other creative media, like literature and film), it is no surprise that reactions to the contemporary methods of content production under discussion in this chapter have been similarly characterised by attempts by viewers to resolve the mystery of its authorship. Unlike the previous methods of content production discussed in this thesis, using programming to outsource the production of media effectively allows creative practitioners to ignore this context of audiences still attempting to establish some sort of author figure. Instead, outsourcing via programming offers creators the opportunity to explore ways of working that are unencumbered by, as the

first chapter made clear, a long history of the limiting Romantic concept of authorship. This is because code, while still remaining a creative material in its own right can obfuscate any trace of an author. My practice, to be discussed in the next section of this chapter, has adopted methods of content production like programming to do just this. By examining how such processes of content making function outside of their distinctly online origins, particularly in the space of the gallery, I hoped to problematise the viewer's desire to find a singular author. Through this approach to making work, I also hoped to expand notions of authorship by diminishing the role that I played in the creation of the work.

4.3 Outsourcing using programming as a strategic method of practice

The final body of work that I will discuss that was produced as part of my research project was an exhibition titled *soft ions* which was presented at Firstdraft gallery in 2016. With this body of work, I set out to examine how outsourcing content production by means of programming could be used to strategically deploy the new possibilities for authorship evidenced in content such as Webdriver Torso and Unfavorable Semicircle. To do this I employed approaches similar to those discussed throughout this chapter to generate a continuous stream of content. Borrowing its title from one of the first short stories to be written entirely by a computer[42], the show *soft ions* critically adopted a similar mode of programmed content generation to create a collection of work that was guided by the output of a simple open source program. My intention in making a body of work in this way was to critically examine the possibilities offered by programming-based approaches to making art. In so doing, I hoped to expand the traditionally held Romantic concept of the author by producing a work that would not meet an art audience's Romantic expectations of authorship.

While much computer generated content is now created, distributed, and viewed in mostly server-to-server exchanges, some of this content (like the Webdriver Torso videos discussed earlier) exists on the fringes of user contact, blurring prior distinctions between computer and user-created content. *Soft ions* reflected this situation by bringing it into the physical space of the gallery. The show incorporated both randomly generated images produced by a modified open source program and assembled physical objects. As explored earlier in this

---

[42] *Soft Ions* was originally published in a book titled *The Policeman's Beard is Half Constructed* from 1984 which compiled the writings of a program known as Racter (short for Raconteur).

chapter, this is an approach that has often revealed the inability of viewers to interact with content produced in this manner beyond trying to find some discernible author. *Soft ions* presented viewers with this same dilemma, utilising a mix of computer generated content and physical objects produced out of similar processes like programming.

Consisting of both work online and sculptural objects within the gallery, the show operated somewhere in between these two spaces. In the physical space of the gallery, three layered UV prints on acrylic were mounted on two different walls of the space. Each print depicted a randomly selected image drawn from the programmed content (discussed in further detail below) that the show adopted. The presentation of these prints was designed to placate the viewer's expectation of artistic labour and authorship by resembling a contemporary white cube gallery exhibition of paintings. I hoped to heighten this sense of expectation of how the show would be structured by only revealing a single print from the entry to the gallery space (as evident in figure 26), in a sense using the view from the entry to the gallery as a kind of clickbait style thumbnail to the rest of the show.

Figure 26: Photographic documentation of *soft ions* (2016). View from entry to gallery space.

Once a viewer ventured further into the gallery space they encountered a range of computer and networking hardware that was juxtaposed against these prints (see figure 27). This hardware included two servers mounted on a custom metal stand and a wi-fi router, all of

which sat on the floor of the gallery space connected by a tangle of ethernet cables. The servers present in the space hosted a simple ASP.NET website[43] that utilised a modified open source command line image editing program written in the programming language C# to generate a blurred image file of randomised coloured noise every five seconds (an aesthetic choice that was largely dictated by the limiting nature of generating images through this process). The servers' loud whirring fans signalled this labour. To access this website, viewers of the work would have to connect their phone or device to the wi-fi router present in the space. Once this was done, the viewer could then open a web browser of their choice. However, all page requests made by the viewer would be redirected back to a simple webpage (where the work existed) that individually presented a new image file as it was generated (see figure 28). In its online iteration, the work potentially became every page on the internet.

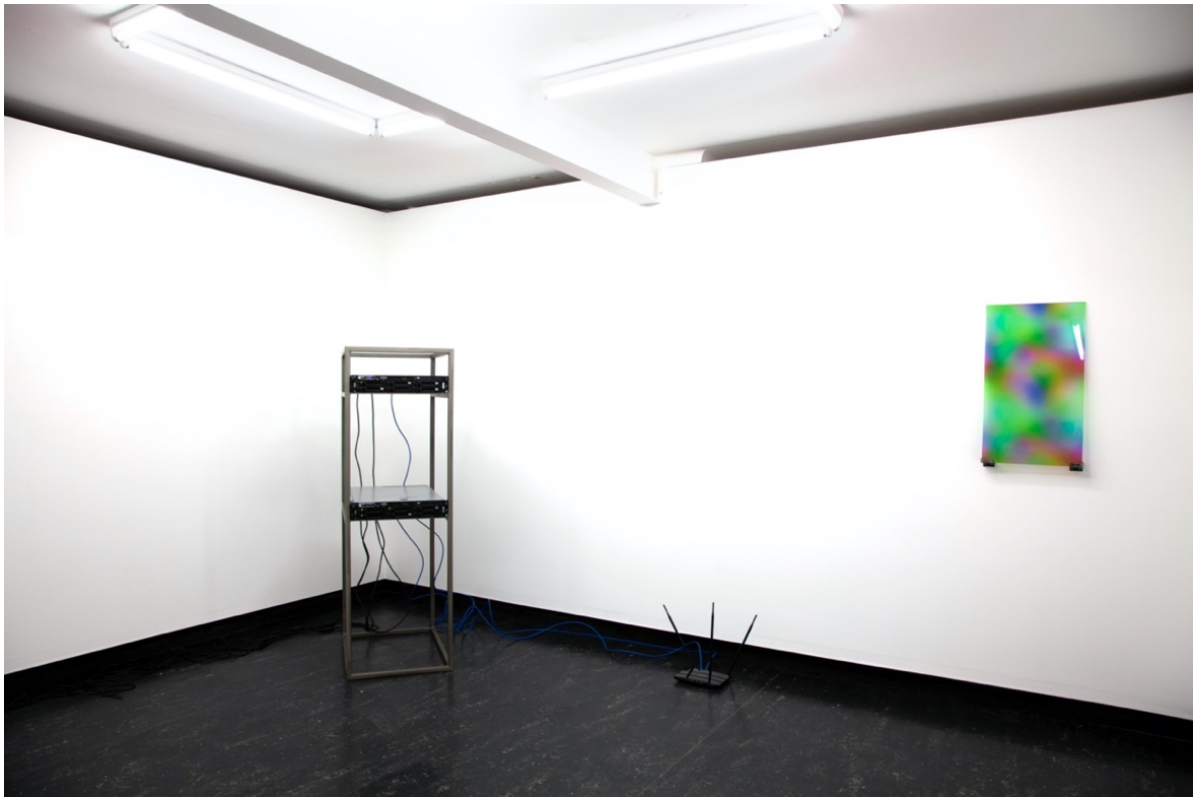


Figure 27: Photographic documentation of *soft ions* (2016).

Using open source software to produce work can raise some ethical issues in that the work relied on the software produced collaboratively by many different individuals. To try to navigate this, the statement accompanying the show made clear that open source software

[43] ASP.NET refers to an application framework developed by Microsoft that can also be used to build websites.

was used. In this statement, I also attempted to tie the utilisation of open source software to the conceptual underpinnings of the work itself in that open source software implies the potential of many authors.

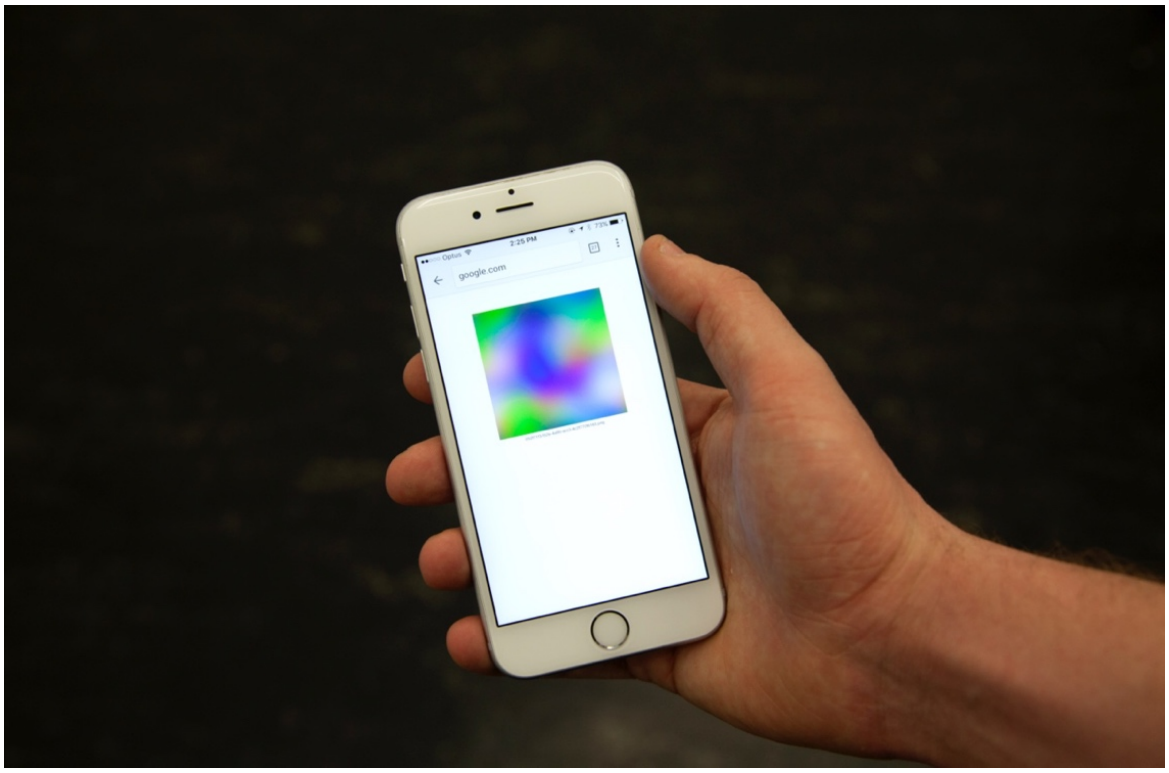


Figure 28: Photographic documentation of *soft ions* (2016). View of website.

Beyond this project's use of open source software, *soft ions* problematised for its audience the act of pinpointing a singular authorial figure by adopting both a recognisable style of gallery hang, and an entirely web based presentation of a near constant stream of new images distributed across the domains viewers attempted to visit on their phones. When speaking to attendees of the show, the results of these strategies became clear. For many, there was a general expression of discomfort, not just as a result of the content of the show itself, but also from an underlying sense that logic of the installation was not gratified by the actual content of the work. Viewers of this show, it seemed, were perplexed when presented with a collection of works with aesthetic content that was dictated not by a singular or even collective author, but rather by a program. Though invoking different approaches to authorship, this is an experience that, to a greater or lesser extent, I conveyed in all of the bodies of work that I produced as part of my research project.

Unfortunately, working within the art industry (of which galleries and museums are a part) meant that there were some authorial expectations that I was unable to subvert. To function as an emerging artist in the current contemporary landscape, one must rely on the application process that puts a heavy emphasis on an artist's authorial significance as conceived of by Romanticism. So while my goal with this body of work was to expand these limited notions of the author, to actually present this work as an exhibition, the gallery required my identity as author for promotion and attribution. This meant that although the show tried to problematise for its audience the ability to establish a singular author, this was negated by the fact that viewers of the work were always invited to judge it in relation to my name, to myself. What this signals is one of the limits of applying programming as a method of outsourcing the production of content in an art context. While working in the realm of content creation online, it is easy to thwart the establishment of Romantic notions of the author. In the field of art, this process is much harder. One impetus of my research project was marking the limits that an art industry which continues to be structured around traditional Romantic ideals imposes on the practices of artists, and it is my hope that my creative work and this paper contributes a better ground for alternate ways of valuing work that exist outside of this Romantic authorship model.

As I have made clear throughout this thesis, the Romantic author paradigm is no longer useful and is limiting in the field of art. The newly emerging field of programmed content production discussed in this chapter necessitates new means of evaluating work that are divorced from the otherwise omnipresent singular authorship model that encourages viewers to engage with the author's biographical details to understand their work. Instead, when engaging with content (and artworks in the instance of my practice) produced through processes like programming, one must look to a myriad of factors based around the author, the platform, and the viewer.

As Rosalind Krauss and Gene Youngblood insisted in their examinations of emerging electronic media technologies, such as the television, we must now look at content in an expanded field. It is not the content's actual author that is of primary importance here, nor is it the platform on which it exists, or even the viewers that this content has found. Instead, all of these things need to be taken together. For the artist working today, an acknowledgment of this post medium and post-internet context for the work of art has become essential. To author content today then, one must view their role not as a singular creator, but rather as part of a greater system of creation, distribution, and viewership made up not only of active human participants, but also vast networks of servers. The body of work I produced as part

of this chapter did just this, incorporating programmed digital content and physical objects that extended beyond the gallery in which it was presented.

Conclusion

I started exploring what would eventually become this research project late in my undergraduate degree out of an anxiety I had around my role as author in my art practice. Back then, the position of the artist as the sole gatekeeper through which the work of art could be understood seemed unnecessarily limiting to me. Surely, I felt, there must be other ways of approaching the act of authoring. In my life outside of art making, I saw the possibilities to pursue alternate means of authoring content through digital technologies and platforms for content creation. These strategies online were being taken up *en masse* by a growing number of users on platforms like YouTube, Tumblr, and 4chan. But these approaches seemed to have largely eluded the practices of artists.

The goal of this research was to reconcile the divide between online platforms and art by identifying a number of prominent new approaches to authorship online and examining how they could be incorporated into an art practice to expand the possibilities for authoring a work of art. By undertaking this process, I hoped to provide an alternative framework through which the work of art could be read, one that posed the authoring individual not as a sole site of meaning generation, but rather as part of an innumerable field of considerations including the viewer, the work itself, its structural qualities, and so on.

To pursue this, the research was divided into two distinct yet interrelated outcomes: a practice and a written thesis. While these two formats are different, they shared a methodology. Central to this methodology was the act of browsing online. Beginning both my practical and theoretical work with a stage of browsing meant that both parts of this project shared the same broad body of research. Additionally, it meant that the insights gained during the practical research informed the written thesis, and vice versa.

As my thesis has made clear, I am not the first to explore ways of reimagining how authorship can be used by artists. In chapters one through three, the practices of numerous artists from as early as the nineteenth century were examined who shared my desire to expand what authorship could mean in the context of art. From the poet Stéphane Mallarmé through to the avant-garde practices of Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, many artists have adopted different approaches to refiguring their role as author. However, positioning these approaches as part of a lineage of newly developing media technologies and examining their influence on contemporary practices (including my own) has seldom taken

place previously. By linking the approaches used by these artists with contemporary approaches to authorship that I observed online, this thesis has placed recent online practices in a broader historical lineage. This allows us to better understand the insights of these recent practices and identify the opportunities they offer for providing new instances of authorship in art making going forward.

It was important to first establish a dominant mode of authorship to highlight what defined these new approaches to authorship as alternatives. In other words, it was important to find what it was that they existed in opposition to. My research project has located this dominant model of authorship as that of the Romantic conception of the author. The Romantic understanding of the author has been, and continues to be, an enduring model through which authorship is applied.

In Romanticism, authoring something was a wholly subjective process. The Romantic artist was always placed at the centre of their work. This meant that to engage with their work, one needed to first engage with the artists themselves. For the audience then, a knowledge of the artist's biography was essential in understanding their work. As this thesis has highlighted, the artist's biography was considered to the exclusion of a myriad of other factors that impose themselves on works of art.

In my examination of art practices, my thesis has clearly demonstrated that the advent of mechanical, electronic, and later digital technologies allowed for the emergence of approaches to authorship, like Ed Ruscha's for example, that inherently rejected the Romantic model. These approaches are collaboration, outsourcing, and the use of programming to outsource the work of content production to computers. Both the practical and written components of this research have been shaped by these approaches in the broader context of the contemporary landscape of media production and sharing.

Collaboration has become an essential and, in many cases, unavoidable aspect of contemporary internet use. This recent phenomenon was presented in this thesis as a result of the digital convergence of video, image and audio based media. With the ability to seamlessly create, edit and distribute these media online came a subsequent emphasis on appropriation and dispersion as ways of engaging with content. This new landscape for production and dissemination of media resulted in the establishment of a new category of authorship that artist Artie Vierkant (2010) termed as the reader-author. In the reader-author formulation of authorship, the previously distinct roles of reader and author are merged into

one. This has occurred against a backdrop of appropriation and, by extension, collaboration becoming the primary modes of engaging with dispersed content online. While the internet seemingly brought forward the opportunity for such approaches to authorship to be undertaken, it also allowed artists, content creators, and corporations to misuse or uncritically engage with these approaches. This was particularly evident in the instance of Richard Prince's trawling of Instagram to source self-portraits which he then re-presented in the space of the gallery. Through this process, Prince made clear the possible pitfalls of adopting approaches to authorship like appropriation that can subsume the original subject's agency in pursuit of his own.

My practice explored both the possibilities and limits of a collaborative and appropriation based approach by critically adopting these roles in both a presentation of new work and a curatorial exhibition which were produced in collaboration with my peer Nicholas Aloisio-Shearer. The curatorial show *Elegant Degradation* explored the ways in which a collection of local, interstate, and international artists have navigated the post-internet context for authorship. Many of the artists incorporated the processes of collaboration, appropriation, and dispersion into their practices. Examining the ways in which these artists worked with these processes clarified that there are a myriad of factors that contemporary artists working in the age of the internet need to consider when making and presenting work. No longer conceding to the singular and wholly subjective approach espoused by Romanticism, these artists instead demonstrated a clear understanding of their role as both viewer and author, occupying these previously distinct roles simultaneously. The new collaborative work produced with Nicholas Aloisio-Shearer for *Big Game Hunting* expanded on these insights. By adopting the method of appropriation as a primary means of generating content for this exhibition, we acknowledged the expanded field in which art now sits, connecting the space of the gallery with methods of production found on online fan fiction forums like DeviantArt.

In my thesis, I argued that outsourcing, another widely used approach to authorship online that was observed in the initial browsing stage of my research, is framed by shifting labour conditions from the mid-twentieth century to the early twenty-first century brought on, in part, by emerging service platforms online. In the mid-twentieth century, artists like Andy Warhol adopted a worker-like approach to making art in recognition of widespread manufacturing occurring in what is now the global north. In the twenty-first century, however, artists and practitioners have started to employ online gig economy platforms, like Amazon's Mechanical Turk, in the creation of content. For these more recent practitioners, outsourcing the labour of actually producing work to mass online labour forces is a means to maintain

authorial anonymity. In pursuit of this anonymity, I highlighted that the problematic nature of employing outsourcing in artistic practice is that while it offers potentially new or expanded notions of the author, it also relies on the effective exploitation of workers. New approaches to making content that use outsourcing have offered a conception of the author that has shifted from an individual pursuit to a collective one, be it to develop a critical examination of contemporary labour conditions (as in *Mechanical Turk Poems*) or - the opposite goal, perhaps - to pursue capital (as in the nursery rhyme videos on YouTube).

To examine this approach in an art context, my practice adopted outsourcing to create a body of work titled *nursery rhymes*. The work was prepared by outsourcing the production of the show to workers on the platform Fiverr and also my immediate peer group. The content of the work that these groups were employed to produce was also outsourced, in this case to YouTube's suggested algorithm. The culmination of these outsourcing-based approaches to making work was an exhibition that obfuscated my role as author. Instead, authorship of *nursey rhymes* was transferred to a series of anonymous actors. Through my use of outsourcing, the exhibition highlighted the incompatibility of traditional Romantic notions of authorship with contemporary methods of content production. The process of outsourcing adopted in the creation of the works for *nursery rhymes* offered a possible expansion of authorship. When there is no clear singular author, new ways of engaging with work must be found. In the case of *nursery rhymes,* I tried to highlight the broader structural concerns, such as how the content was created, as essential points of interest for the viewer.

The final part of my research involved a critical examination of the approach to authoring content that acted as the catalyst for this project: outsourcing the process of content production to computers through the use of programming. As this thesis has demonstrated through examination of content produced out of this process, discerning the role an author or collective has played in the creation of programmatically produced content is increasingly difficult. Engaging with an author figure in this domain is also mostly irrelevant since the types of programmed media of interest to me are not designed with any sort of art historical or aesthetic reading in mind. Instead, it is the content's use value that is of importance. As a result, it is this type of content - which has been exemplified in this thesis by the YouTube accounts Webdriver Torso and Unfavorable Semicircle - that viewers find the most difficult, but potentially most engaging, to encounter.

To examine the possibilities of adopting programming as a means to outsource the production of content in an art practice, my practice critically adopted a similar process of

content making. I used a simple open source command line image editing program to generate an endless stream of new images for the duration of *soft ions*. This approach to content production was employed to demonstrate the possibilities of authoring work that exists almost completely outside of both mine and the viewer's interactions. What was again highlighted in this exhibition, however, was the problematic nature of attributing work to a singular figure. By contrasting a traditional Romantic informed gallery presentation of prints mounted to walls - to which the singular author figure has been historically tied - with a website that was constantly updated with new content by a program, my exhibition made it challenging for the audience to engage with the show through any traditional Romantic notions of authorship. *Soft ions* also highlighted the possible limits of employing such an approach in an art practice too. In presenting this work in a gallery space as an emerging artist, I was necessarily tied to Romantic markers of authorship, including the use of my name in the application process and subsequent promotional materials for the show. This meant that while the exhibition attempted to challenge audiences with their perceived assumptions of authorship, unfortunately viewers were always able to read the work in relation to my constructed figure as an author. It is hoped that, at the very least, the discord between this expectation and the alternative model offered by the work was evident.

Examining different approaches to authorship online has enabled my research at large to identify new possibilities for authorship in art. However, as observed in my discussions of *soft ions* in particular, I have also become aware of the possible limits of utilising such approaches in art making. While critically adopting reader-author approaches in the formulation of several new bodies of work, I have been guided by a desire to confront viewers in the space of the art gallery with their expectations of authorship - expectation that these kinds of spaces instil and rely on. It is hoped that in deliberately deploying strategies adopted in the avant-garde practices and online activities that I have discussed in this thesis, my practice has challenged and expanded the preconceptions of audiences who encounter contemporary art. Employing this deliberate and strategic methodology has offered art audiences new models of authoring that are current in the post-internet age, though not always evident in a contemporary art exhibition context.

To suggest that the activities of this practice have, in doing so, completely dismantled the dominant Romantic model of authorship would be nearsighted and overly hopeful. As I have noted, in almost every instance of practices with scaled back or barely attributable authorship, there is evidence of a continued desire for the Romantic figuration of the author amongst viewers, critics, and users online. This longing for authorship also extends to the

more structural elements of practising as an artist, like the application process for shows (as I made clear in the instance of *soft ions*).

The Romantic conception of authorship, in its focus on what Jacques Derrida (1978, p. 226) described as the 'sovereign solitude' of the author, is the product of a time that was dominated by a particularly white, patriarchal minority. The lasting legacy of this model of authorship is recognisable in its role in excluding the voices of members of minority identity groups and limiting the ways in which these practitioners could approach the act of presenting their work. This issue was evident in the instance of Kayla Newman (also known as Peaches Monroee on the now defunct video platform Vine) who saw the phrase that she exclaimed in a video - 'on fleek' - widely used in commercial contexts with no attribution to her content by the companies trying to participate in the new online culture of the reader-author. For Newman - and the reader-author creative practitioners examined in this thesis - the limits of the Romantic approach to authorship and the ideological framework that it aligns with - late-capitalism - endure.

As new methods of production, dissemination, and reception continue to emerge online, it remains important to critically examine these approaches and their implications. To return to the words of James Bridle (2018, p. 2) cited in the introduction to this thesis, 'over the last century, technological acceleration has transformed our planet, our societies, and ourselves, but it has failed to transform our understanding of these things.' A critical engagement with authorship is one means to transform our understanding of "these things." Given the multitude of ways practitioners and internet users participate in visual culture, it is crucial we become more comfortable and more embracing of alternative ways of valuing content. While I have identified just a few approaches that have shown potential to do just this, I hope that my research project has contributed, if only in small part, to an urgent broader discourse around authorship online and in the world at large.

Bibliography

Arcand, R. 2017, 'The Amazon poets making pennies per verse', *The Outline*, viewed 27 August 2018, <https://theoutline.com/post/2564/amazon-mechanical-turk-poetry>.

Abreu, M. A. 2017, 'Still I shitpost: Cory in the Abyss on a communism of the visual + antiblackness in the meme-o-sphere with Manuel Arturo Abreu', *AQNB*, viewed 7 July 2018, <https://www.aqnb.com/2017/12/12/still-i-shitpost-cory-in-the-abyss-on-a-communism-of-the-visual-antiblackness-in-the-meme-o-sphere-with-manuel-arturo-abreu/>.

Basciano, O. 2014, 'Maid in Heaven / En Plein Air in Hell (My Beautiful Dark and Twisted Cheeto Problem)', *Art Review*, viewed 24 May 2018, <https://artreview.com/reviews/october_2014_parker_ito/>.

Barthes, R. 1977, 'Image Music Text, trans. S. Heath, Fontana Press, Hammersmith, London.

Barthes, R. 1975, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. R. Miller, Hill and Wang, New York.

Bauer, B. 2011, 'To Open, To Collect, To Expand, To Continue: Richard Serra's Verb List, Postinternet Appropriation, and the Culture of the Use of Forms', *POOL*, viewed 9 June 2016.

Benjamin, W. 1999, 'The Author as Producer', in M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland & G. Smith (eds), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2 Part 2, 1931 - 1934*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, pp. 768-82.

Benjamin, W. 2007, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in H. Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York, pp. 217-53.

Bennett, A. 2005, *The Author*, Routledge, London.

Bockris, V. 1989, *The Life and Death of Andy Warhol*, Bantam Books, New York.

Boyd, D. 2011, 'White Flight in Networked Publics? How Race and Class Shaped American Teen Engagement with MySpace and Facebook', in L. Nakamura & P. Chow-White (eds), *Race After the Internet*, Routledge, New York, pp. 203-22.

Braybrooke, K. & Jordan, T. 2017, 'Genealogy, Culture and Technomyth: Decolonising Western Information Technologies, from Open Source to the Maker Movement', *Digital Culture & Society*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 25-45.

Breton, A. 1969, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. R. Seaver & trans. H. Lane, The University of Michigan Press, Michigan, viewed 21 November 2016, <http://www.ubu.com/papers/breton_surrealism_manifesto.html>.

Bridle, J. 2018, *New Dark Age*, Verso, London.

Bridle, J. 2017, 'Something is wrong on the internet', *Medium,* viewed 24 January 2018, <https://medium.com/@jamesbridle/something-is-wrong-on-the-internet-c39c471271d2>.

Brown, C. 2007, 'Warhol - how I got it wrong', *The Telegraph*, 20 July, viewed 18 October 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3641449/Warhol-how-I-got-it-wrong.html>.

Buchloh, B. H. D. 2011, 'Andy Warhol's One-Dimensional Art: 1956-1966', in A. Michelson (ed.), *Andy Warhol (October Files)*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, pp. 1-46.

Ciocci, J. 2017, *Appetite For Destruction*, viewed 1 January 2018, <http://jacobciocci.org/2017/11/appetite-for-destruction/>.

Dawkins, R. 2016, *The Selfish Gene*, 4th edn, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Dean, A. 2016, 'Poor Meme, Rich Meme', *Real Life*, viewed 26 July 2016, <http://reallifemag.com/poor-meme-rich-meme/>.

Derrida, J. 1978, Writing and Difference, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Duchamp, M. 1975, 'The Creative Act', in M. Sanouillet & E. Peterson (eds),*The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, Thames and Hudson, London, pp. 138-41.

Dullaart, C. 2014, *Constant Dullaart: 100,000 Followers for Everyone!*, DIS Magazine, viewed 4 September 2016, <http://dismagazine.com/dystopia/67039/constant-dullaart-100000-followers-for-everyone/>.

Dullaart, C. 2014, 'High Retention, Slow Delivery', *Vimeo*, viewed 20 April 2017, <https://vimeo.com/107035478>.

Duray, D. 2014, 'New Project Boosts Instagram Followers for Art World Accounts', *ARTnews*, viewed 15 November 2018, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/new-dis-project-boosts-instagram-followers-for-art-world-accounts-2-2874/>.

de Duve, T. 2012, *Sewn in the Sweatshops of Marx: Beuys, Warhol, Klein, Duchamp*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Eisenstein, E. 1979, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Felix, D. St. 2015, 'Black Teens Are Breaking the Internet and Seeing None of the Profits', *The FADER*, viewed 5 May 2017, <http://www.thefader.com/2015/12/03/on-fleek-peaches-monroee-meechie-viral-vines>.

Fisher, M. 2009, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Zero Books, Hampshire.

Fisher, M. 2014, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, Zero Books, Hampshire.

Flusser, V. 2011, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Foucault, M. 1991, 'What is an Author?', in P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, Penguin, London, pp. 101-20.

Gaboury, J. 2010, 'Immaterial Incoherence', *Rhizome*, viewed 15 August 2017, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2010/may/05/immaterial-incoherence/>.

Goerzen, M. 2017, ‘Notes Toward the Memes of Production’, *Texte Zur Kunst*, The New Left, no. 106. pp. 86-107.

Gombrich, E.H. 1950, *The Story of Art*, 13th edn, Phaidon, London.

Gray, C. 1998, ‘Inquiry through Practice: developing appropriate research strategies’, *No Guru, No Method? Discussions on Art and Design Research*, University of Art & Design, UIAH, Helsinki, pp. 82-95, viewed 10 August 2016, <http://carolegray.net/assets/inquiry-through-practice.pdf>.

Greenberg, C. 1993, ‘Modernist Painting’, in J. O’Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism / Volume 4, Modernism with a Vengeance 1957-1969*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 85-93.

Groys, B. 2010, ‘The Weak Universalism’, *e-flux*, no. 15, viewed 15 April 2018, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/15/61294/the-weak-universalism/>.

Ito, P. 2014, *Wipeout XL (Miami)*, viewed 9 December 2018, <https://youtu.be/AfEFCSGwSW8>.

Ito, P. & Krauss, C. 2015, ‘Parker Ito talks about his LA exhibition “A Lil Taste of Cheeto in the Night”’, *Art Forum*, viewed 4 March 2018, <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/parker-ito-talks-about-his-la-exhibition-a-lil-taste-of-cheeto-in-the-night-50913>.

Jherwood, S. 2015, ‘John T. Gast (Dean Blunt/Inga Copeland collaborator) had a miserable winter, and Planet Mu are releasing the Excerpts’, *Tiny Mixtapes*, viewed 10 January 2020, <https://www.tinymixtapes.com/news/john-t-gast-announces-debut-lp-excerpts-on-planet-mu>

Joselit, D. 2011, ‘What to Do with Pictures’, *October*, vol. 138, pp. 81-94.

Kaprow, A. 1993, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, J. Kelley (ed.), University of California Press, Berkeley.

Karshan, T. 2009, ‘Deaths of the Authors,’ *Frieze,* viewed 21 July 2017, <https://frieze.com/article/deaths-authors> .

Kay, A. & Goldberg, A. 1977, 'Personal Dynamic Media', *Computer*, no. 10, pp. 31-41.

Kittler, F. 2010, *Optical Media*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Krauss, R. 2000, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, Thames and Hudson, London.

Lee, P. 2016, *Sturtevant: Warhol Marilyn*, Afterall Books, London.

McHugh, G. 2011, *Post Internet*, LINK Editions, Brescia.

McLuhan, M. 1962, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto.

McLuhan, M. 1994, *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man*, The MIT Press, Cambridge.

Poems, M.T. 2017, 'Work for a few cents So much time, little money Need a job', *@MTurkPoems*, Tweet, viewed 1 May 2018, <https://twitter.com/MTurkPoems/status/943904801342963712>.

Molesworth, H. 2003, *Work Ethic*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania.

Nagle, A. 2017, *Kill All Normies: The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the alt-right and Trump*, Zero Books, Hampshire.

Nelson, T. n.d., 'Project Xanadu', *Project Xanadu*, viewed 28 October 2018, <http://xanadu.com/>.

Monroee, P. 2014, '😂😂😉', *Vine*, viewed 21 June 2015, <https://vine.co/v/MTFn7EPvtnd/>.

Nicholson, R. 2019, 'Instagram hiding its likes is no bad thing, but people will find a way round it', *The Guardian*, 2 May, viewed 5 February 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/02/instagram-likes-culture-validation>.

Olsen, M. 2014, 'booomerrranganggboobooomerranrang: Nancy Holt's networked video', *Rhizome*, viewed 14 October 2016, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2014/mar/03/nancy-holt/>.

Paglia, C. 1992, *Sex, Art, and American Culture*, Vintage Books, New York.

Palmer, D. 2017, *Photography and Collaboration: From Conceptual Art to Crowdsourcing*, Bloomsbury Academic, London.

Pontin, J. 2007, 'Artificial Intelligence, With Help From the Humans', *New York Times*, 25 March, viewed 8 November 2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/25/business/yourmoney/25Stream.html?smid=tw-share>.

Price, S. 2016, *Dispersion*, viewed 18 July 2019, <http://www.distributedhistory.com/Dispersion2016.pdf>.

Prince, R. 2015, *Richard Prince: New Portraits*, media release, 9 June, Gagosian Gallery, London, viewed 18 September 2019, <https://gagosian.com/media/exhibitions/2015/richard-prince-new-portraits/Gagosian_Richard_Prince_New_Portraits_2015_Press_Release.pdf>.

Racter 1984, *The Policeman's Beard is Half Constructed*, Warner Books, New York.

Regine 2008, 'Interview with Marisa Olson', *We Make Money Not Art*, viewed 1 November 2016, <http://we-make-money-not-art.com/how_does_one_become_marisa/>.

Ross, T. 1997, 'Fables of Authorship : Four Studies of Agency, Intentionality, and the "Subject" in Modernist Art and Philosophy', PhD thesis, University of Sydney, Sydney.

Shifman, L. 2013, *Memes in Digital Culture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge.

Smith, P.S. 1986, *Andy Warhol's Art and Films*, UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor.

Steyerl, H. 2011, 'Digital Debris: Spam and Scam', *October*, no. 138, pp. 70-80.

Steyerl, H. 2012, *The Wretched of the Screen*, Sternberg Press, Berlin.

Tate n.d., *Joseph Mallord William Turner Seascape with Distant Coast*, viewed 18 July 2018, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-seascape-with-distant-coast-n05516>

Thomson, J. 2015, 'Image: Object: Product.', *Vault*, no. 10, pp. 110-2.

Townsend, A. 2011, *The Future of Open Fabrication*, viewed 11 July 2018, <https://www.slideshare.net/Coolhuntingbarcelona/sr-1390-future-of-open-fabfinalsm>.

Trew, J. 2014, 'Google and the accidental mystery of Webdriver Torso', *Endgadget*, 6 June, viewed 8 October 2017, <https://www.engadget.com/2014/06/06/this-is-the-truth-behind-webdriver-torso/>.

Troemel, B. 2012, 'Art After Social Media', *Art Papers Magazine*, viewed 17 September 2016, <https://lexiethrash.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/smad-blog-art-after-social-media.pdf>.

Troemel, B. 2013, 'Athletic Aesthetics', *The New Inquiry*, viewed 15 September 2015, <https://thenewinquiry.com/athletic-aesthetics/>.

Troemel, B. 2018, *Cranbrook Talk*, viewed 15 April 2018, <https://youtu.be/FaD4YWSxli0>.

Troemel, B. 2013, 'The Accidental Audience', *The New Inquiry*, viewed 28 August 2017, <https://thenewinquiry.com/the-accidental-audience/>.

Troemel, B. 2019, *The Shit I Wish Someone Told Me Before I Entered The Art World*, viewed 5 November 2019, <https://youtu.be/SnMXevtQ05I>.

List of Theories - UnfavorableSemicircle 2017, viewed 10 January 2019, <https://www.unfavorablesemicircle.com/wiki/List_of_Theories>.

Vierkant, A. 2010, 'The Image Object Post-Internet', *jstchillin.org*, viewed 24 March 2015, <http://jstchillin.org/artie/pdf/The_Image_Object_Post-Internet_us.pdf>.

Virilio, P. 1994, *The Vision Machine*, British Film Institute, London.

Williamson, D. 1989, *Authorship and Criticism*, Local Consumption Publications, Sydney.

Wilson, A.N. 2018, *Screening | Andrew Norman Wilson: The Order of Ought | Swiss Institute*, viewed 15 March 2019, <https://www.swissinstitute.net/event/screening-andrew-norman-wilsonthe-order-of-ought/>.

Woodmansee, M. 1984, 'The Genius and the Copyright: Economic and Legal Conditions of the Emergence of the "Author"', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 425-48.

Youngblood, G. 1970, *Expanded Cinema*, P. Dutton & Co. Inc., New York.

Art After the Internet:

Reformulating Conceptions of Authorship Online

Finn Marchant

Contents

‘Elegant Degradation’

Aidan Koch, Akil Ahamat, Aston Creus, Claire Finneran and Alex Kiers, Grace Blake and L/HT/T/TT, Jannah Quill, Rachael Archibald, Richard Phillips and Stonehouse

Curated with Nicholas Aloisio-Shearer, Kudos Gallery, Sydney 2017

‘Elegant Degradation’ explores the ways in which contemporary life is mediated by digital technologies focusing, in particular, on the disjunct between the material and the digital. In this exhibition it is posited that this divide serves as a catalyst for a kind of (digital) anxiety. The title, ‘Elegant Degradation’, alludes to this anxiety, referencing a tangible process in engineering whereby a mechanical system without any outward evidence deteriorates to the point where it will catastrophically fail. One of the results of this anxiety that the show put forward was an increase in artists examining their own role as author. Incorporating collaborative work, work by individuals, and work that utilised appropriated content in some way, ‘Elegant Degradation’ represents a broad array of approaches.

01 Stonehouse, ‘Jonathan’, 2016, Single channel video, 3min 4sec, drith.co.uk

02

03

Aston Creus, ‘demesnE’, 2017, Pine needles, cast iron fireplace grate, jailbroken Kindles, looped digital scene from modified version of Tiger Woods PGA Tour 08, dimensions variable

04

05

Akil Ahamat, ‘Bubblebath{soft-spoken}{crinkling}’, 2015, Towel, concrete, styrofoam, slippers, single channel video, 68 sec. Dimensions variable

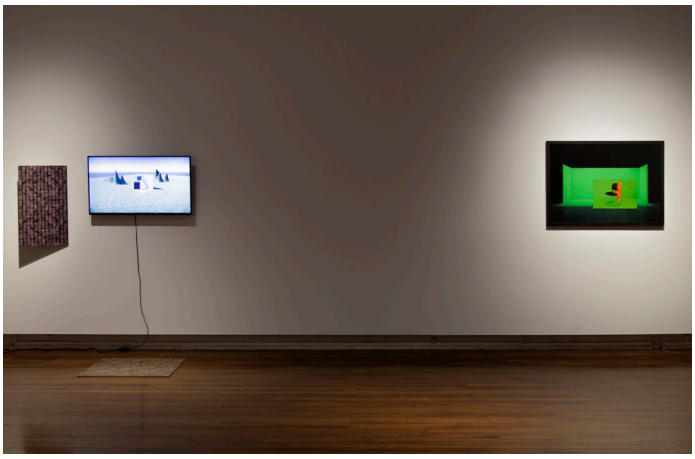
06

07

08

09

Grace Blake and L/HT/T/TT, ‘Lex Imperium; Expansion, Expropriation, Establishment’, 2017, Mixed media, dimensions variable

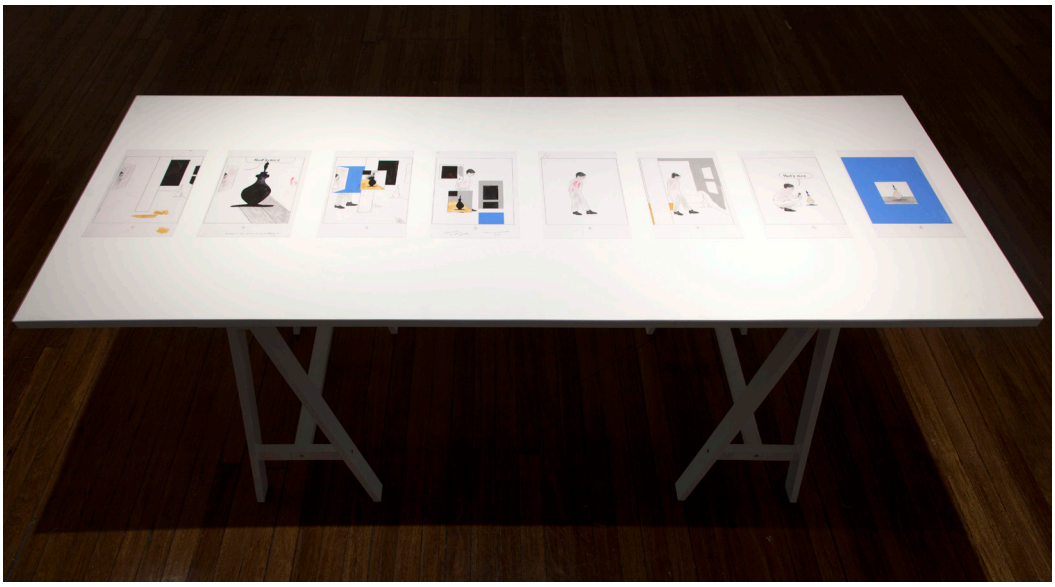


10 Installation view. Pictured (left to right): Jannah Quill, ‘I’ll meet you here’, 2017, 3D engine, latex print, voice recording, dimensions variable, Richard Phillips, ‘Stage (i)’, 2017, UV print on acrylic, digital print, 74 x 104cm

11 Richard Phillips, ‘Stage (i)’, 2017, UV print on acrylic, digital print, 74 x 104cm

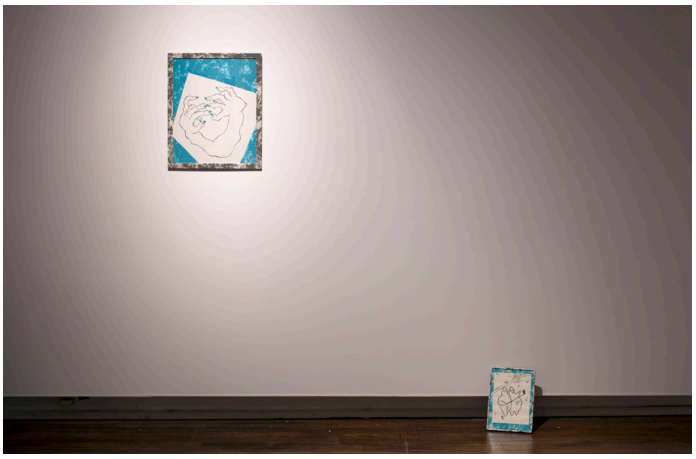
12

Installation view. Pictured (foreground to background): Aidan Koch, ‘Viewer’, 2016, Graphite, pastel and gouache, dimensions variable, Alex Kiers and Claire Finneran, ‘ASMRnDnB’, Cockatoo Island, 2016, single channel video,
2 min, 52 sec, Made with help from Underbelly Arts Sydney, Waverly Studios, Firstdraft Gallery



13 Aidan Koch, ‘Viewer’, 2016, Graphite, pastel and gouache, dimensions variable

14 Alex Kiers and Claire Finneran, ‘ASMRnDnB’, Cockatoo Island, 2016, single channel video, 2 min, 52 sec, Made with help from Underbelly Arts Sydney, Waverly Studios, Firstdraft Gallery

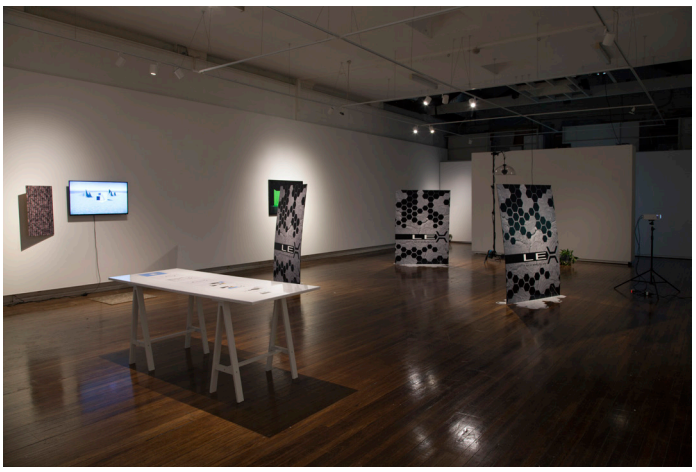


15

Installation view. Pictured (left to right): Claire Finneran, ‘Nail Artist’, 2015, Enamel, ink, false fingernails, glue, plexiglass, 53 x 44cm, Claire Finneran, ‘After Gary Larson (Cellfie)’, 2015, Enamel, ink, 32 x 21cm

16

Rachael Archibald, ‘interior spiritual naturalism (view #1)’, 2017, Digital print on silk chiffon, wooden frame, video animation, 4 min 50 sec, 91 x 54cm



17 Installation view

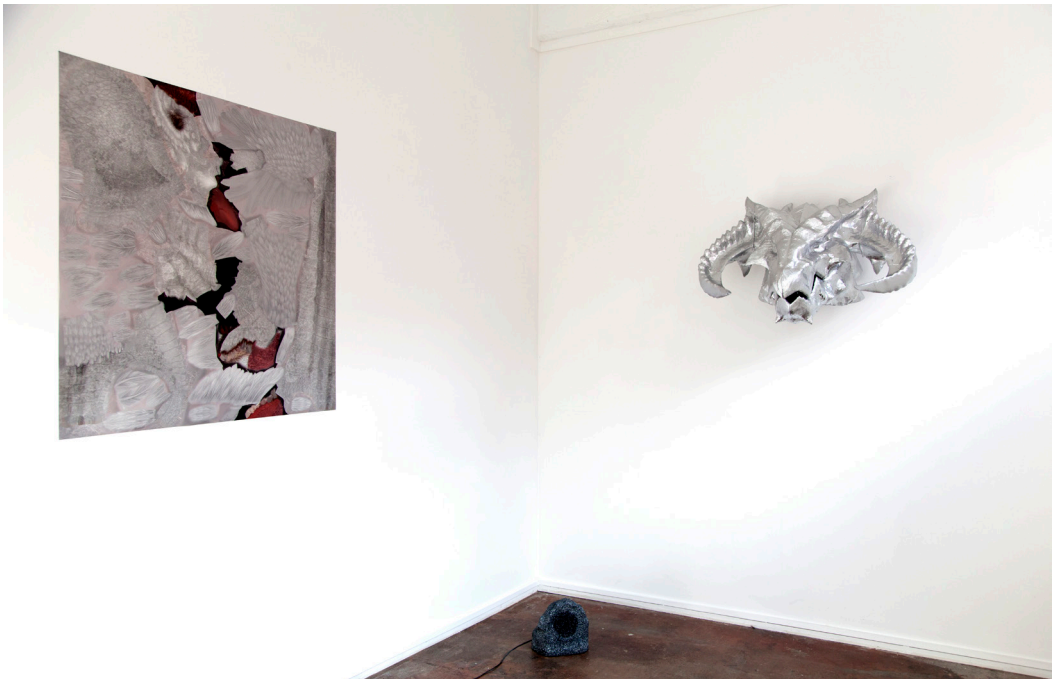
‘Big Game Hunting’

with Nicholas Aloisio-Shearer Bus Projects, Melbourne 2017

‘Big Game Hunting’ examines the disjuncture between the material and the digital and how this separation has engendered an anxiety of the digital. Through the deconstruction and materialisation of fantasy role-playing video games Big Game Hunting interrogates how video games might shape and reflect human emotion, affect and desire. By foregrounding the act of appropriation through deconstructing and re-materialising existing material in the space of the gallery, the show also brought into question our authorial figure over the works.

Additional materials available at

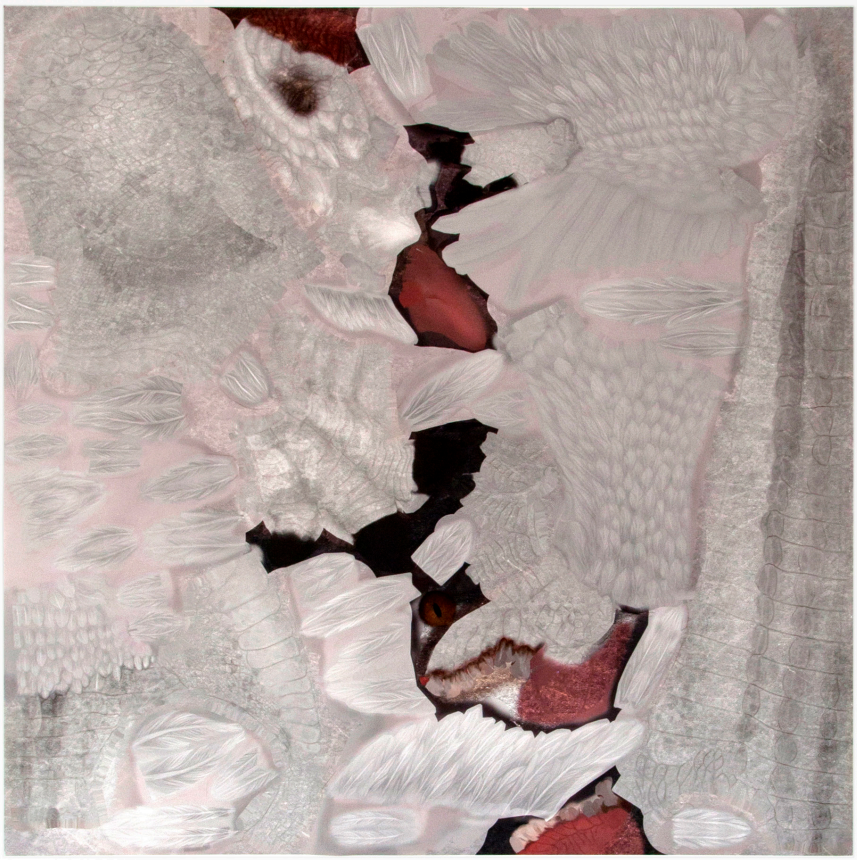
https://drive.google.com/open?id=1eVqETBbHR1TuBafLnSxVXN99tXnM7R00



01 Installation view

02 Installation view

03 Installation view



04 ‘c_dps_phoenix_d’, 2017, inkjet print, 100 x 100 cm

05

‘Wind’s Howling’, 2017, tumbled granite pieces, granite landscape speakers, videotrigger software, webcam

06

‘cdr_highdragon_ancient_all_d’, 2017, 3D printed PLA plastic, virtual chrome paint

‘nursery rhymes’

Tributary Projects, Canberra 2018

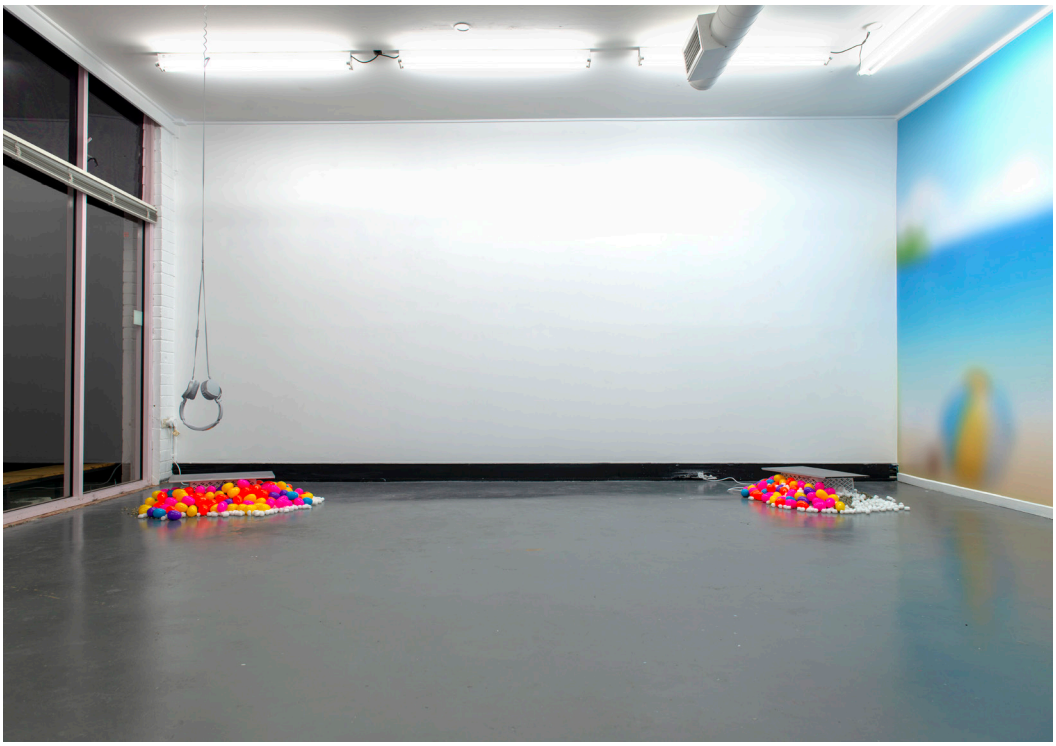
In the age of algorithmically produced content, the process of making and viewing media through online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Youtube has become a strange confluence of personal agency and criteria put in place by unknown algorithms. Taking its title from a tag loosely given to the seemingly endless number of strange “child friendly” videos that have been appearing on Youtube over the last couple of years, ‘nursery rhymes’ explores how the methods of production used to make these videos can be employed in an art context (where the creation of work is still largely seen in legacy of what Michel Foucault describes as “the author function”) as a means to question the role of the author more broadly. Incorporating elements composed collaboratively, algorithmically, and via the burgeoning (and at times quite exploitative) gig economy, ‘nursery rhymes’ seeks to assemble a collection of both screen based video and sound work where authorship of any single element through traditional markers becomes diffuse. Instead, the show exists as a convergence of seemingly incongruous content dictated by algorithmic trends in which both literally and figuratively many hands were involved.

Additional materials available at

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1M1uhs7TzqkK8p-8M6xRoXZczIxYjVuB-

01 Installation view

02 Installation view



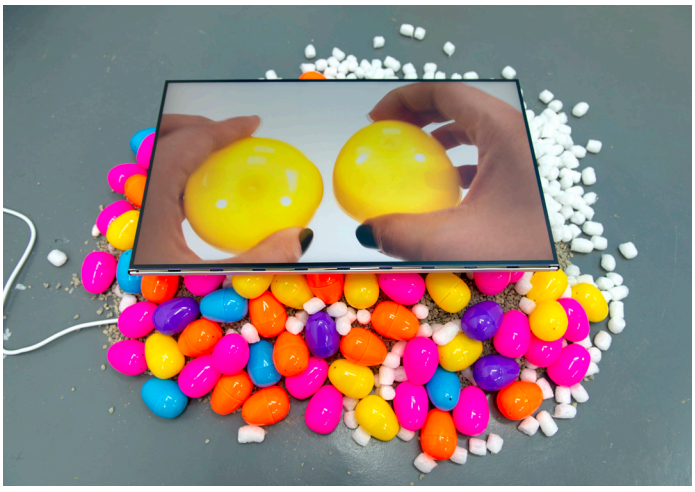
03 Installation view

04 Installation view

05 Installation view

06 Installation view

07 Installation view (detail)
Headphones and computer.
Dimensions vary. Audio of text
to speech voice (whisper) endlessly
reading newly compiled variations
of a list of words



08 Installation view (detail)
Display, plastic eggs, biofill and media player.
Dimensions vary. 6 videos of varying length played
in randomised sequence

09

Still from animated video.
One of sixteen one minute animated clips commissioned from users of the platform Fiverr played in a random sequence

10

Still from animated video.
One of sixteen one minute animated clips commissioned from users of the platform Fiverr played in a random sequence

11 Still from video.
One of sixty videos of varying length commissioned from my peers.

12 Still from video.
One of sixty videos of varying length commissioned from my peers.

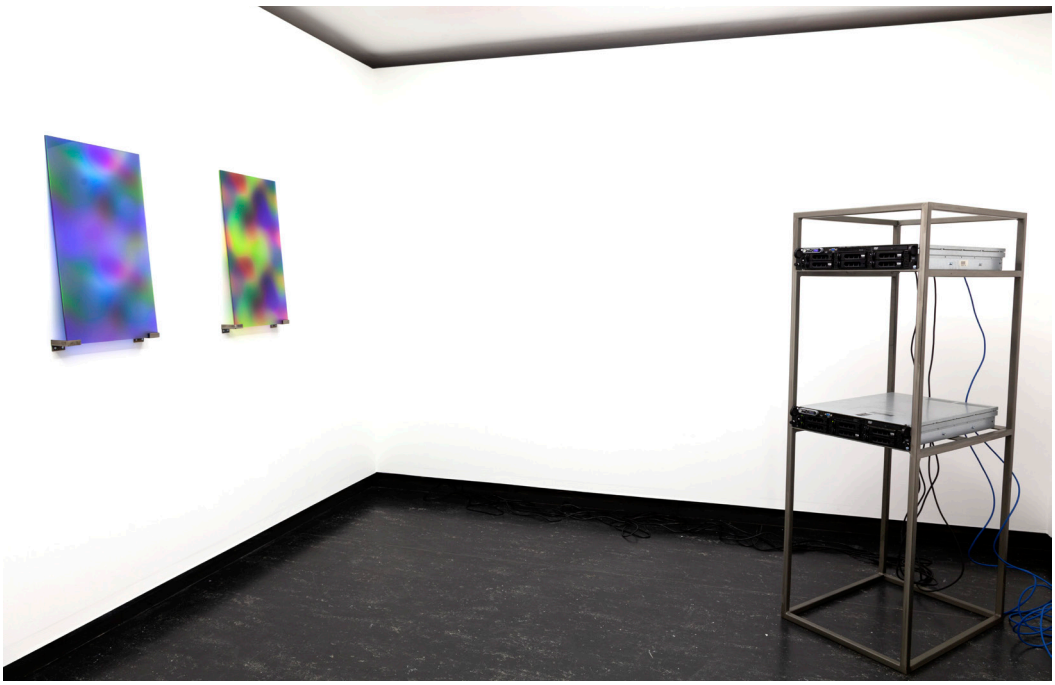
‘soft ions’

Firstdraft Gallery, Sydney 2016

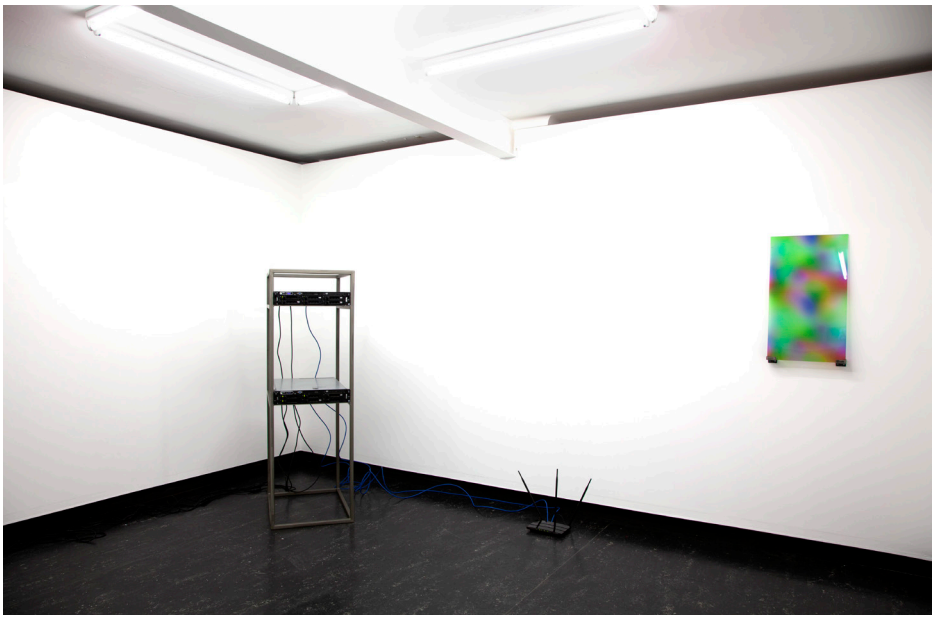
Borrowing its title from one of the first short stories to be written entirely by a computer, ‘soft ions’ adopts this mode of content creation to explore the changing role of authorship as a result of the internet. With much of computer generated content now existing on the fringes of user contact - created, distributed and viewed in mostly server to server exchanges - prior distinctions between computer and user-created content have become increasingly blurred. The works in the exhibition reflect on this context, incorporating both images generated by modified open source code and assembled physical objects. Through iterative process, works are reduced to a simple set of randomised formal concerns in an attempt to de-centralise the role of author within this exhibition.

Additional materials available at

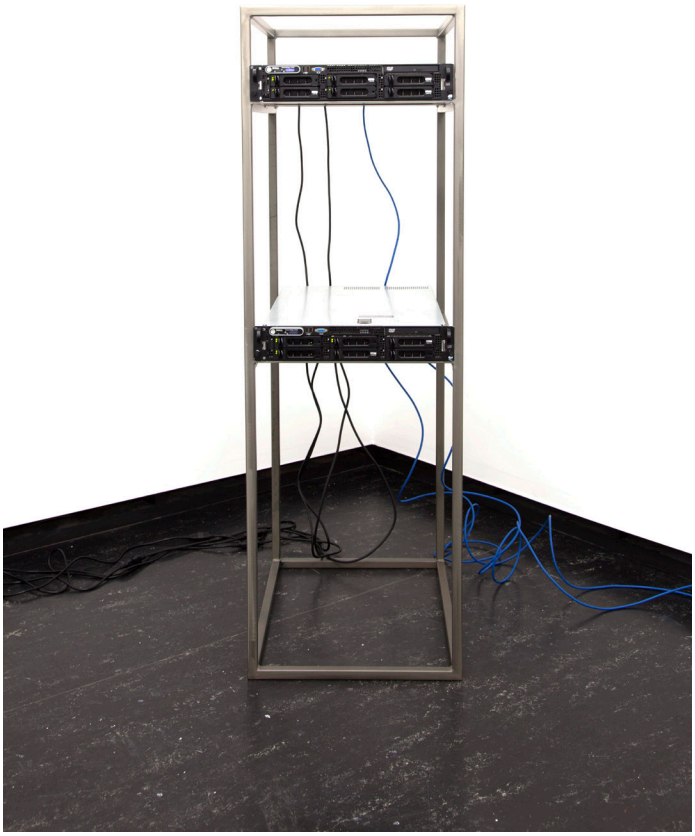
https://drive.google.com/open?id=1WtUBrtRteLtISMad0KL2DS1HhKXmNOw6



01 Installation view



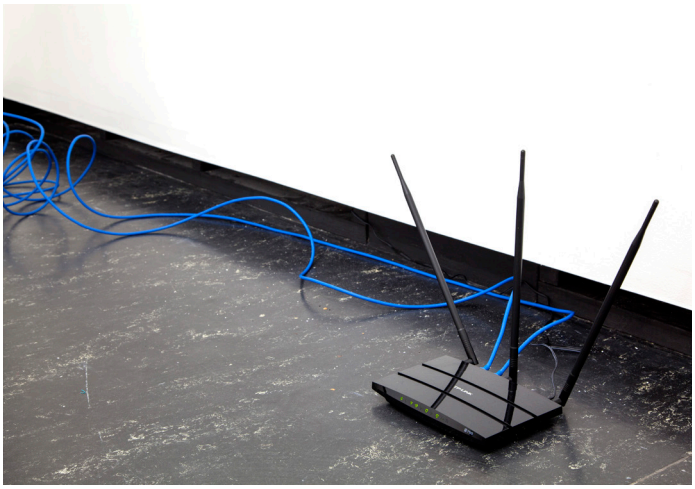
02 Installation view



03 ‘Untitled’, 2016
servers, steel, wireless router, cables
dimensions vary

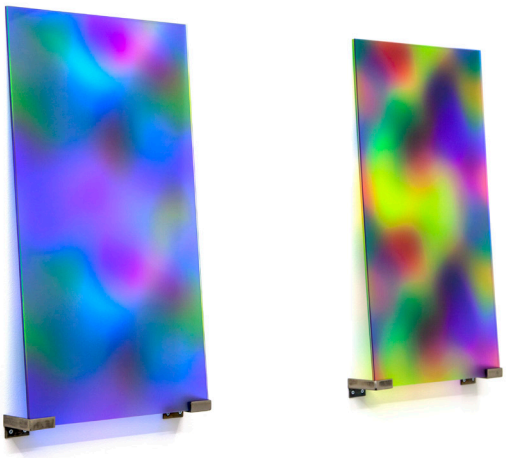
04

Untitled' (detail), 2016
servers, steel, wireless router, cables
dimensions vary



05

'Untitled' (detail), 2016
servers, steel, wireless router, cables
dimensions vary

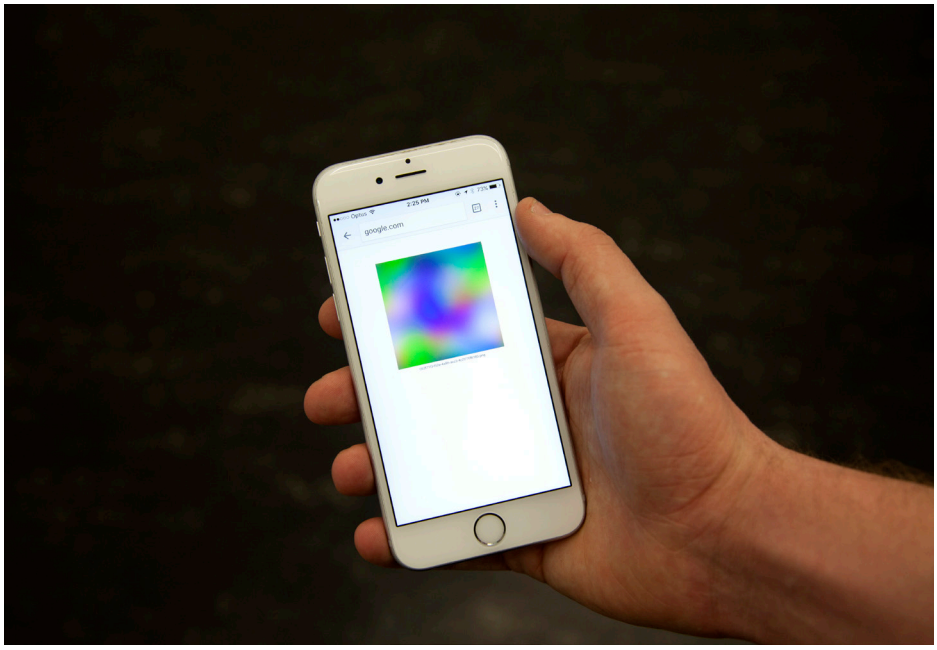


06

'Untitled', 2016
UV prints on acrylic, steel 40x71 cm

07

‘Untitled’, 2016
UV print on acrylic, steel
40x71 cm



08

‘soft-ions.info’, 2016 website