

How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Nausea

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*An open seat, like a blank marquee, is a **vacancy** as much as an **invitation**, and anyway the downward pull of the ramp was stronger.*

An event programmer and an urban planner lurk behind every relational artist, and these practitioners' proposals to reappropriate common space were always elaborated in a strict and conscious relation to the fact of functionalized, policed space.

*It was never either/or. **It was always brief glimpses of the one within the other.**¹*

As the Utopia's of our past century have disappeared, leaving a present charged with memory alone, there is a sense that to project ourselves into the future is an impossibility. In what Mark Fisher calls *Capitalist Realism*, Enzo Traverso describes as *Left Wing Melancholia* and Andy Warhol predicted as *Disco Decor*—we find ourselves immersed in a context in which this dialectic of historical time is exhausted.

Enforced by digitisation and the ideologies of capitalism which permeate our everyday lives, there is no visible horizon of expectation as history itself appears as a landscape of ruins, a living legacy of pain.

Immersed in this context, what materials are we left with? What stories are our institutions telling us? Our attempts to realise ourselves as creatives seemed cursed before we even began, as we were rendered ironically detached from history itself. Locked into a nauseating spiral of autobiography and nostalgia that collapsed rather than expanded.

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¹ Kelsey, John. "Theanyspacewhatever": Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Artforum International, March, 2009, Vol.47(7), p.236

I often wonder if my artistic preferences will always be tinged with a nostalgia for the past. Whether that is an irreconcilable symptom of being a subject today as the future is slowly cancelled, and all we have to grasp for are fragments of the past that flow down the stream of the present. I wonder whether or not Andy Warhol knew that Studio 54 would have the legacy it does, whether he purposefully cultivated nostalgia in the Warholian mode in anticipation of it being remembered more fondly than it was ever experienced.² Whenever I see that image of the Cologne Female Painter Gang make a resurgence on Instagram, I can't deny that I am completely enamoured by them. I love such imagery as a tactic of self-preservation and mythologisation as an artist within The Spectacle's totalitarian forms, but beyond this, I think my nostalgia comes from a yearning for how they were able to act as an artist within a context where it was possible and necessary to define yourself in relation to a different kind of network than the ones we've inherited. Historically, social groups of artists constitute their artistic subjectivities through the traditional form of sociological positioning described by Pierre Bourdieu, in which the artist uses references to position herself discursively and differentially in relation to her peers.



***The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, 1991. Charline von Heyl, Michaela Eichwald, Jutta Koether, Cosima von Bonin and Isabelle Graw taken taken by Hans-Jörg Mayer**

Today, the artworld's backdrop is rather different.

"Shows adapt to the experience economy, and we are all compelled by the new productive imperative to go mobile, as a body and a practice." ³

² Thomas, Instagram Direct-Messages (sanpellishowers)

³ Kelsey, John. "Next-Level Spleen". *Artforum International*, Sep 2012, Vol.51(1), pp.412-415

The *New Artist Show* itself feels like this... my application dragged and dropped from Google Drive into the emails of ArtSpace Aotearoa personnel. I feel transmutable. As neoliberalism has displaced any survivable vestiges of community there once were, Artspace becomes the host of those savvy enough to frack their network for a CV-friendly internship training. I feel implicated in a network-based transformation of institutions into infrastructural environments which foster performative ways of production, and it's the best I can hope for.

What has formed the terrain with which I now feel bound by?

Digitality

*The iPhone5SE camera had captured me and rendered me **real** for the first time. As I was slotted away into the gallery of images in my phone, my body was no longer a nebulous zone of confusion and hatred. I could finally sigh with relief as it was sublimated into a grainy frame... I had become an image. There was nothing I could do about it, I knew since I could spell that one day I would grow up to become an image, and what an absurd and dazzling image I was. My body is finally desingularized as time... and attention is extracted from my living person.*

The 2010s were a scene of far-reaching technological mutation, which radically and permanently reorganised conditions for the production and distribution of art. As Michael Sanchez argues, the two emergent developments of: the ever-expanding accessibility of the network alongside the permeation of devices such as iPads and iPhones which contextualise art-viewing through **the scroll** provided the conditions for art's slow cancellation of the future. Such spatial and temporal shifts aided and abetted by digitisation facilitated a feedback loop that left art stuck in an eternal present.

The traditional seasonal cycle of exhibitions, fairs and biennials, interwoven with the production cycles of Print media was dislocated by the iPhone and Web-aggregator. Artist's began performing for what Steffen Mau terms: *The Evaluation Society*⁴, in which collective-attention is the most valuable currency. Rather than art undergoing a slower process of legitimation via qualitative criticism accreditable to certain critical bodies or institutions, quantitative evaluation and simple visibility via social platforms such as Instagram were preferred.⁵

The artistic outcomes of these phenomena have been recorded by the likes of Sanchez and Sabeth Buchmann, who note the proliferation of "meme-art", neo-Surrealist objects and performance art's mutation into "*the participatory (re-)production of images and their distribution*

⁴ Mau, Steffen. *The Metric Society: On the Quantification of the Social*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2017

⁵ Sanchez, Michael. "ART AND TRANSMISSION". *Artforum International*, 2013 Sum, Vol.51(10), pp.294-301

via and within (social) media⁶ (see: Anne Imhof's *Faust*, 2017) all of which conveniently bypass channels of distribution which would form a coherent critical discourse around the works, such as print media, in favour of an Instagram story.

The collusion of the screen and gallery, rewarding works which are effectively encountered within a vertical flow of images encouraged a self-generating system of rapid feedback. The unprecedented ability for the art-world to monitor itself in real-time produced a new intensity of self-observation on a systemic and individual level. The near instantaneous feedback of visual trends creates an efficient system in which all information about art is almost immediately incorporated into future work. The circulation of various aesthetic trends through bodies such as Instagram or Contemporary Art Daily arises out of a condition of constant observation and feedback.⁷ If art reflects the web formats which facilitate and produce it; it is no wonder, locked in this feedback loop, that the imagination of art moving into an alternate future feels impossible.



Viewers of Anne Imhof's *Faust*, (2017)

AutoBiography as Cognitive Deficit

As digital networks came to host the archive, circulate our information, anchor our social sphere and the currency of *attention* emerged as the barometer with which we quantified our value as

⁶ Buchmann, Sabeth. "FeedBack! Performance in the Evaluation Society." In *Platform*, Vol. 13, No. 1, On Criticism, Autumn 2019.

⁷ Sanchez, Michael: "Contemporary Art, Daily." In *Art and Subjecthood: The Return of the Human Figure in Semiocapitalism*, edited by Daniel Birnbaum, Isabelle Graw, and Nikolaus Hirsch, 52–61. Berlin: Sternberg, 2011.

artists, a conclusion was drawn that the most valuable material to work from, was our very *self*, broken down into thousands of pixels. Or atleast, it was the most lucrative.

It is high time I got started on my Memoir!

Interrogation of the self has a multitude of historical precedents in art, especially within The Spectacle's totalitarian forms: it demands the evisceration of subjectivity to engage in the terror of consumption, thus, it delights in the mythologising of a genius, an auteur or a muse ripe for new combinations whom we can idolise, desire and buy. Duchamp understood this, Warhol understood this, as did McCahon who laid himself bare in defiance.

This artistic process of self-mythos however, took on a layer in the 2010s—Auto-Fiction reigned supreme as the artworld literature *of-the-moment* and “Investigations of Identity” acted as the fertile soil with which to justify one's practice; it was impossible for us to imagine a future beyond our own destruction. All our work had a built-in defence mechanism as presenting the market with ourselves as ~a tale of a victim of social-forces~. However well-intentioned, neoliberalism did what it does best and transformed these forms into commodity fetish. *Every personal narrative can be turned into a cultural good—and isn't it the perfect institutional form? A dash of theory, a little splash of personal narrative and voila! The soup of our discontent is served!*⁸ It was a natural consequence of our ironic detachment from history itself and the constant encroaching hopelessness that the 2010s engendered in our psyches. In contemporary art and other avenues of cultural production, it wasn't as though alternate futures weren't possible, its fiction itself was an actual cognitive deficit in terms of creating work in general beyond autobiography.



Art and Protest

Art protests which proliferated throughout the 2010s in a frenzied culture war failed to speak truth to power in the way they hoped. They were stuck in the same bind of being unable to imagine a future beyond nostalgic forms of protests from the 1960s and were easily absorbed by galleries who were able to calibrate their roster to meet identitarian demands without substantially delivering on the agency such representation promised. While I was as thrilled as anyone to see Frances Hodgkins included in Auckland Art Gallery's yearly cycle, I was not the only one who left the exhibition feeling slightly cheated. The curation was conveniently able to appease demands from those wanting queer histories, while clinically framing the exhibition as

her journey toward
Abstraction... A typically
Modernist Story. AAG were able

NEWS

Almost 50 Whitney Biennial Artists Sign Letter Demanding Removal of Warren Kanders from Museum Board

Over 100 artists, including participants of the upcoming biennial, have added their signatures to an open letter released earlier this month calling for the removal of the weapons manufacturer as a vice chair.

to sit comfortably in a position in which they appear politically engaged, but not too controversial.

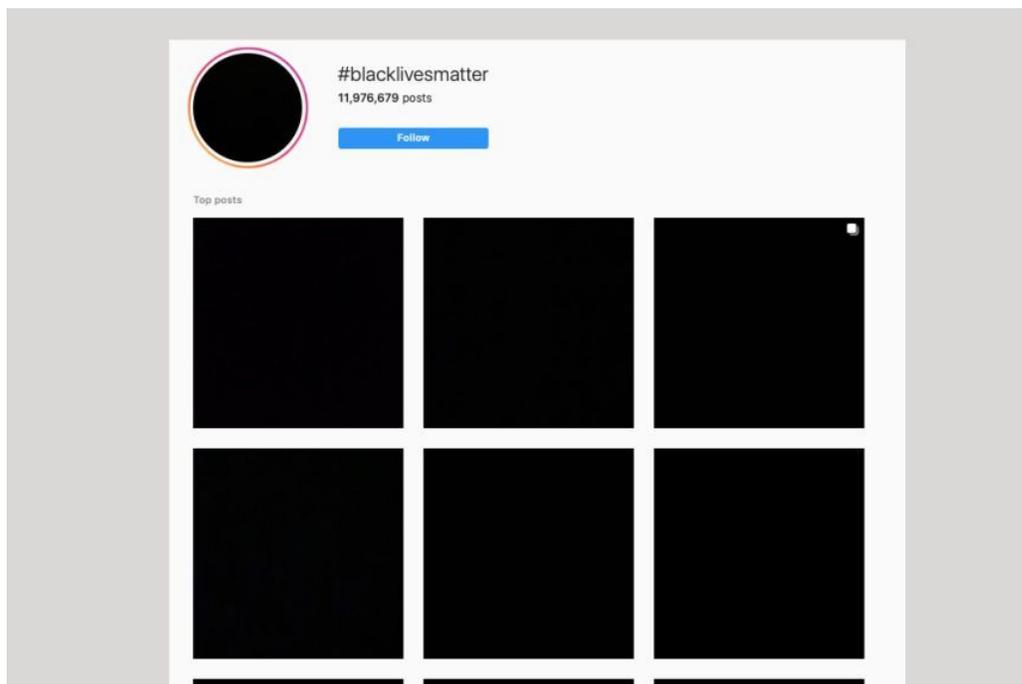
We are aware of the vulnerability produced by morally bankrupt institutions, but without an enemy we can precisely locate inside of a historical narrative, fictions are invented and abstract power maintained. The culture wars left us in a steaming puddle of anger and sadness. Each time we collectively cancelled, we retreated further inside our burning building of reflexive critique. Our tears absorbed by the neoliberal sponge and funnelled into a new marketing campaign, Amazon Asexual Activism is as insidious as it is lucrative.

Cataclysm?

Yet... there is a sense that this melancholic thud of the present has been disturbed. The Artworld in Aotearoa as a collective of individuals and institutions are perhaps at a touchstone moment to glimpse at a future of what Art can provide. COVID-19 and the worldwide revolt against institutional racism from the Black Lives Matter Movement has produced a sense that the furniture of our world with which we have grown so accustomed, to a point of cold detachment engendered by the nihilism of a neoliberal order, has been interrupted.

Has there been an announcement of the death of any cultural nostalgia, of any sentimental attachment to the past? Like Malevich's Black Square, are these black-square's on Instagram an open window through which the revolutionary spirits of radical destruction can enter the space of culture and reduce it to ashes?

I wouldn't rely on a hashtag, indifferently and algorithmically curated by Facebook's proprietary software, to deliver us from evil. And judging by the speed with which it became the fodder of a creative class unable to divorce themselves from culture-war tactics, these tools are futile in the face of brute power.



As many lives have unexpectedly ended, or been taken away from us, sadness and anger penetrate the atmosphere. These events have also been permeated with a sense of urgency; we are seeking to understand what is happening, to secure the premises, to move faster than the market, to raise one's voice and move one's feet in allyship, a flurry of action and history as time dilates and we perceive a hyperreal series of stretched moments—have any of us had time to grieve?

Processing death does not happen at any measurable speed. It is an intimate timeline, provoking, resisting, and finally incriminating the body in a physical reflection on its limits. We are left to contemplate death through our own bodily actions, sensitizing our connection with the ground we walk on, with the touch of those who buoy us with their love, with even their mere acknowledgement that we exist, which forms the boundary of our being.⁹ The fragility of our corporeal eggshell bodies has been placed into sharp focus. The stretch and stagnation of our multi-temporalities has never felt more relevant.

I am hopeful that such a moment could at least provide the backdrop for a recalibration of what possibilities art can provide. Both the pandemic and the uprisings are exemplary of how the vulnerability they produce, is an artefact of a particular mode of production... and perhaps new aesthetic possibilities aren't imaginable if we don't radically alter the political economy and institutions that produce that vulnerability.

⁹ Shorin, Toby. "We Will Show You The Way." Subpixel Space. Updated Wednesday August 5. <https://subpixel.space/>