

isthisit?



isthisit?

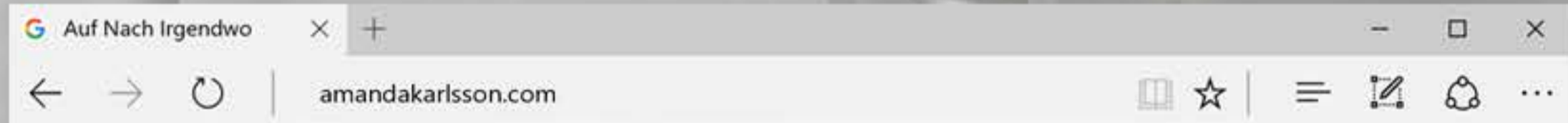
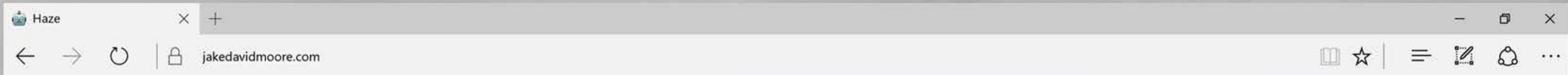
Two overlapping browser windows displaying a table of contents for the website 'isthisit?'. The windows are positioned to show the left and right columns of the table. The text is in a purple font. The left window shows the first column of names and page numbers, while the right window shows the second column. The overlapping area shows the middle of the table.

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Interviewed by Bob Bicknell-Knight

Roxman Gatt

Roxanne Gatt (b. 1989, Mosta, Malta) lives and works in London, and is also known by her pseudonym Roxman Gatt. She is a multidisciplinary artist whose work encompasses, text, painting, 3D, video, sound, photography, installation and performance. Roxman's research explores sexuality, identity and women within popular culture contexts. Mundane aesthetics and the internet become both a tool and a trigger to produce work.

So, do you want to start by talking briefly about the work that you're currently producing, the ideas and the forms that are coming to fruition, and how that relates to your artworks relationship with the internet?

I spend quite a lot of time in the house since this is where my studio also is. Often I create work inspired by the domestic life and how I inhabit the space and in a way find ways to subvert that. Very recently I have been creating these small performance pieces titled Sexual Healing. I am quite intrigued by the idea of the artist alone in the studio, but not really alone. I could go on for hours or even sometimes days not verbally communicating to anyone, however I would have emailed and been active in multiple conversations on iMessage and been around the world just by some clicks and taps on the keyboard.

Also these performances are being posted Online so despite not performing for a physical public audience, I am still being faced by an audience somewhere in the Online space. The basis of my work is text. I am interested in how technology and the Internet have somehow 'transgressed' the traditional poem. I create poems that are made up of a combination of my 'own' phrases [mostly lovelajf & domesticlajf] as well as texts taken from articles that I come across Online, be it legit news, hip-hop or pop songs, sex ads, technological jargon etc. and eventually translate them into sung tunes where I often visualise into videos. I eventually want to experiment with disrupting the text in a way that data and technology interferes with the text itself without losing any emotion.

So with these works you're performing for the unknown spectator who inhabits the web, acknowledging the presence of the internet and globalised society you're interacting with whilst being hidden away afk in your studio. I enjoy how your work is translated through different mediums, beginning with a poem and ending with a music video, which to me comes across as a way to illustrate the gluttony of the internet, releasing the poem online which traverses the net, picking up detritus along the way and returning as a video piece... Emotion seems to play a big part in the work, creating an intimacy with the screen and in turn the audience that you're performing to, how do you think that's interpreted through the screen when viewed online compared to in an offline setting?

The internet has become more of a tool or something that can't be ignored, it is inbuilt inside me like religion is. It is not really an option.

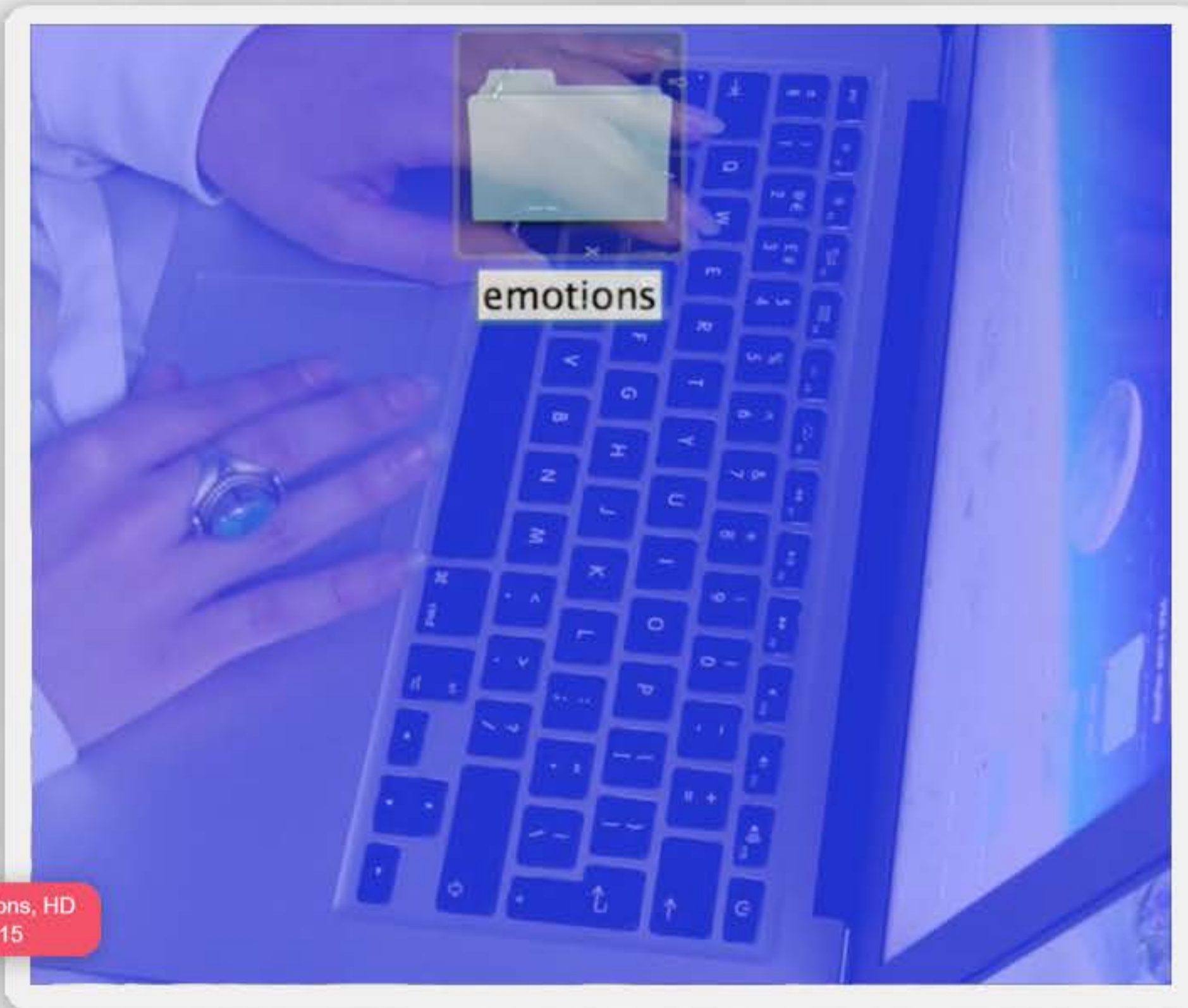
The emotions as you have noticed do play a big part in the work, in fact it is these emotions that make the work. I cannot imagine myself expressing all these different emotions by restricting myself to just one medium. It just isn't possible in my work. Even though the emotions would have been contained for a while the work in itself is quite spontaneous. It almost feels like I'm vomiting my emotions, everything is expressed very quickly and the medium finds itself. I have been thinking about these performances for a long time, and whether or not they should be taken to a physical space and performed live. I have learnt not to see or think of the screen as a filter. I still get very deep emotions through a laptop screen / speakers and keyboard, and that is what I hope to give back with my work to the online audience. However, I am planning on performing live because I am intrigued how my awkwardness and other people's awkwardness would be felt in an offline space.



Heart Drives, HD Digital Video, 2015



Welconnekt, Rendered Image, 2015



Phantom Vibrations, HD Digital Video, 2015

At this point I guess we're so familiar with our devices, these objects that have been anthropometrically designed for us to utilise and evolve alongside, they may have even become a different sort of filter, one that allows us to be even more connected to an artwork or close friend, more connected than real life. Even though the net has definitely become a tool that can't be ignored, a lot of your art feels like a love letter to the internet, reminding me of artwork made at the very beginnings of the internet in the late 80s and early 90s, rather than the present day negativity that surrounds a lot of 'post-internet' art due to widespread surveillance among other things, what are your thoughts on this?

I do believe that these devices / filters allow us to sometimes be even more connected or make it possible to express something even deeper than irl, and it's kind of obvious because communication and expression via devices have somehow surpassed communication and expression 'face to face'. In one of my songs titled Heart Drives I write 'muscles in my hands have become stronger than my own words', 'I'm emotionless when confronted by skin flesh I feel so comfortable staring into tiny pixels instead.' This kind of explains how I feel. But no I wouldn't say that my art is a love letter to the internet as such... [maybe the internet drives me to write these love letters to the url and irl world.]

I asked about your interest in AI partly because of your collaborative piece Phantom Vibrations, a video that sees future-like beings inhabiting a technology rich space, uploading their emotions to their MacBook's and posing for an unseen camera, depending on the internet and the tech that surrounds them, what was the inspiration behind this work?

Fuck ... I have no idea why I say it doesn't feature in my work because yeah look at Phantom Vibrations. I think I just can't really see the difference much anymore – machine / human data / emotions ... The inspiration for phantom vibration is the perception that one's mobile phone is vibrating or ringing when it is not ringing, and was inspired by looking into internet disorder and my fascination with how obsessive I had become as well as others around me with our devices and refreshing emails and pages and checking messages. I wanted to merge the world of the device and the human into one, the human being inside device or human being the device or device being the human, something like that.

I think forgetting that it does look into those ideas of AI reinforces the statement you made earlier about the internet being fully integrated within you. For me, it's a piece probably more focused on artificial augmentation, a fictional idea born from science fiction novels which, if you were to take Donna Haraway's stance on the matter, has already been fully implemented within our society for many years' now. What do you think of science fiction, does it come into your work, or is your art firmly rooted in the now, which continues to resemble a realistic dystopian novel anyway as we continue further into 2017?

I would definitely say that my art is pretty much about the now, I feel it is all quite real, but there is maybe an accelerated focus on certain gestures / actions / ideas / relationships between technology and the self, where the question of what is real and what is not? becomes blurred.

I really like those lines, not just for their poetic beauty but how they capture how we as a race are slowly evolving ourselves through the continued development of our phones. I think this condition of surpassing afk language is best exemplified when looking at the rise of emoji's in our text speech, and the reduction of language used online to mere acronyms and ghosts of vocabulary... From what you're saying, and by exploring your work, it feels like you're critiquing how comfortable you are with this technology whilst wanting even more from it, an oxymoron of sorts, what are your thoughts on developments in technology like Artificial Intelligence, and does this factor into any of your work?

Artificial intelligence is not an area that I know a lot about and I'm not really looking at it in my work, however, I am really intrigued by its relationship with art. It feels that in certain fields such as healthcare or transportation for instance its likelier to understand how A.I. would function however with art it becomes less simple I feel. I think it is exciting times and I'd love to see the level of consciousness that a machine will adopt by feeding from us humans.

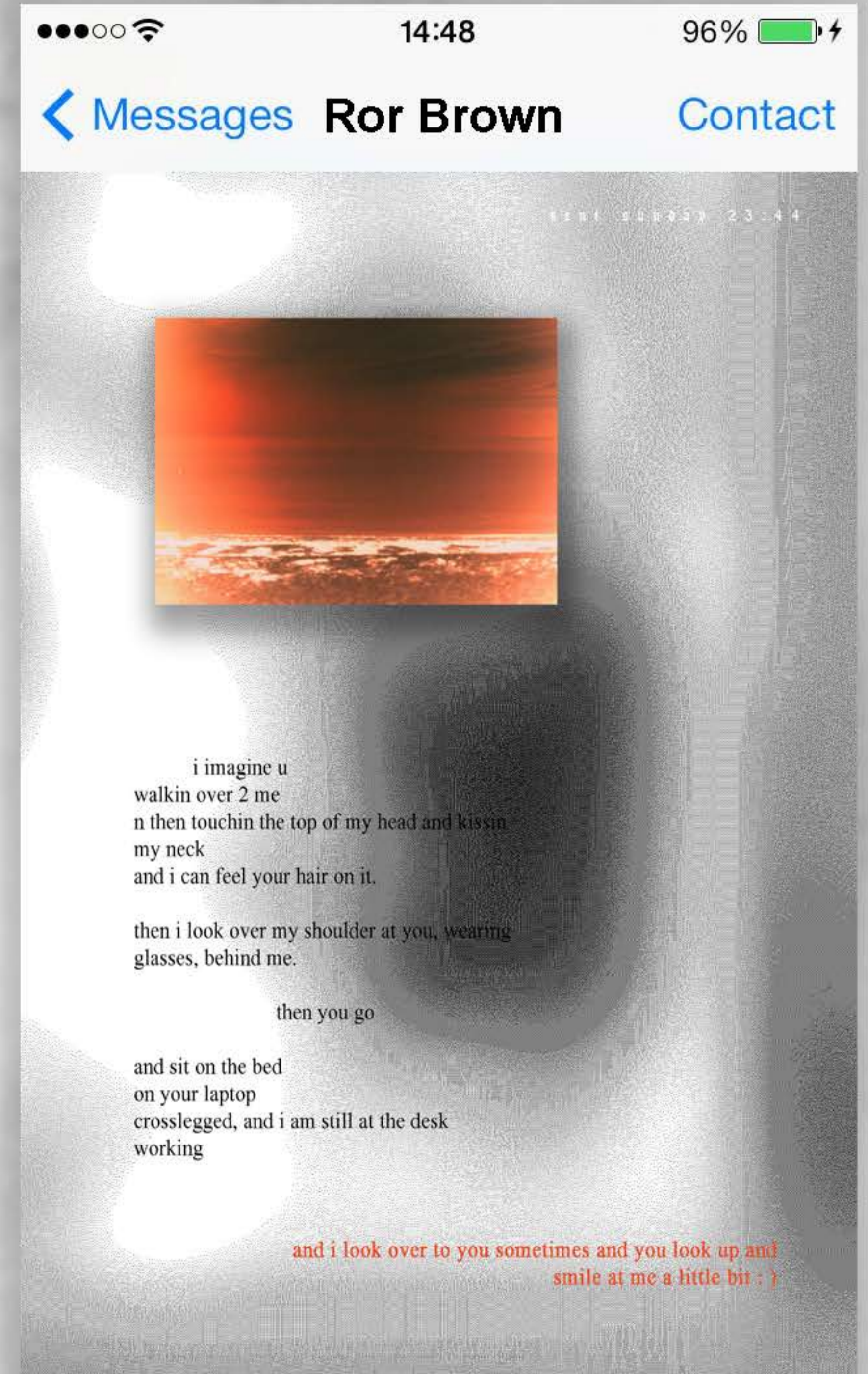
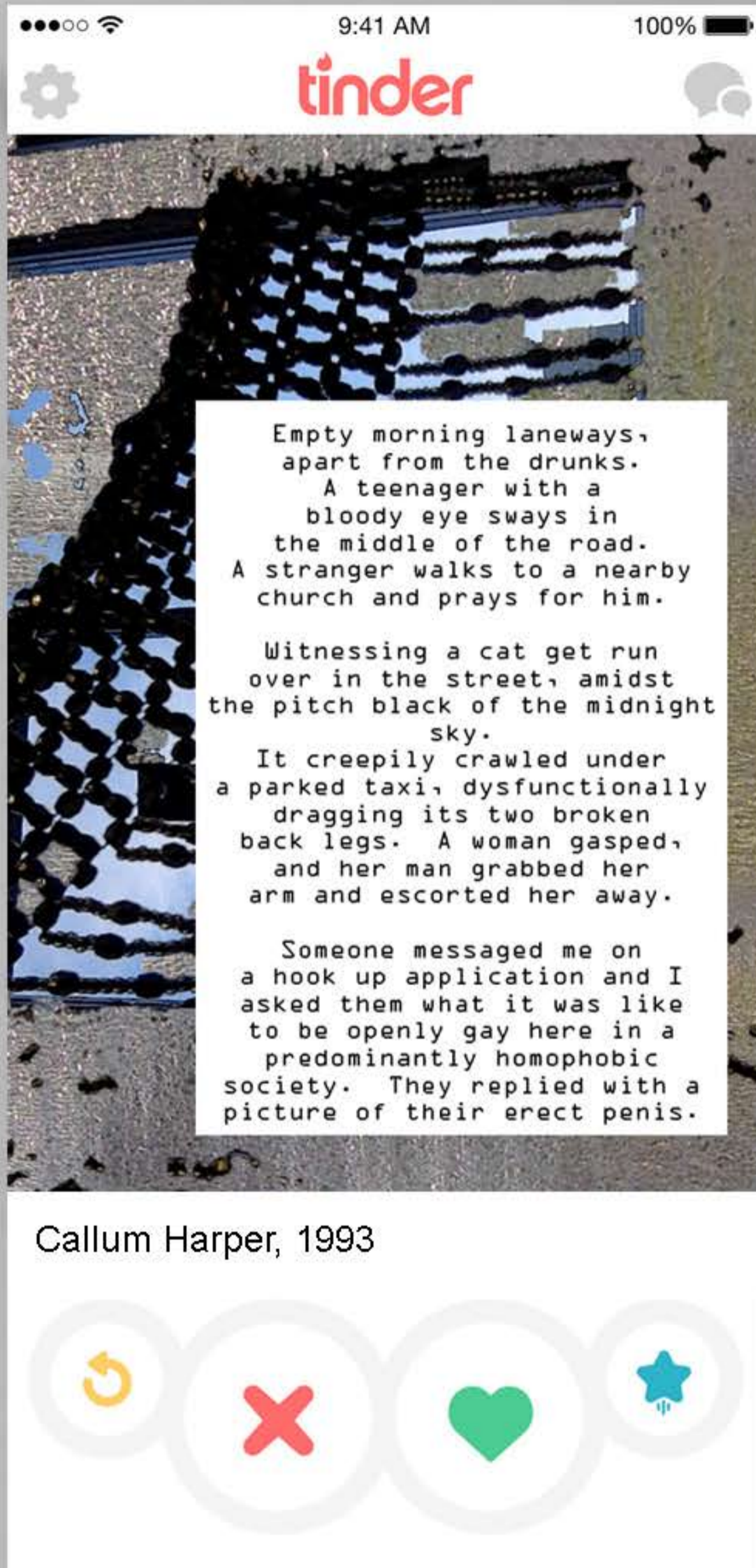
So, what's next for you, Roxman?

So... I am one of the 14 Associates of Open School East of 2017, which is based in Margate. I will be doing this for a whole year, so exciting times. I will also be showing work with the Malta Pavilion at the Venice Biennale later this year, which is really cool.



it smelt of dead sex, oil on canvas, sock, digital print, 2016

What's next I just want to continue making work really, add new tabs to my emotional browser, keep refreshing my pages, clean up my heart drive and fill it with harder and softer data's.





The 2016 US elections marked the rise of Internet trolls, such as Milo Yiannopoulos, and inflammatory news websites, such as Breitbart, in what could be described as a pivotal moment in the era of «post representation». But these events are merely indicative of a discourse which spans beyond American politics and has so far led artists, thinkers and activists to wonder: How is knowledge redefined when information and entertainment are rendered indistinguishable? Furthermore, could the same malicious strategies used by the far right be appreciated and even re-appropriated as a possible discourse of empowerment? The following is a think piece which tries to establish such a point of departure, in order to help redefine trolling, and even use it responsibly, to test, safeguard and help immunize the rhetorics of academia and the left.

Part 1. Milo's call

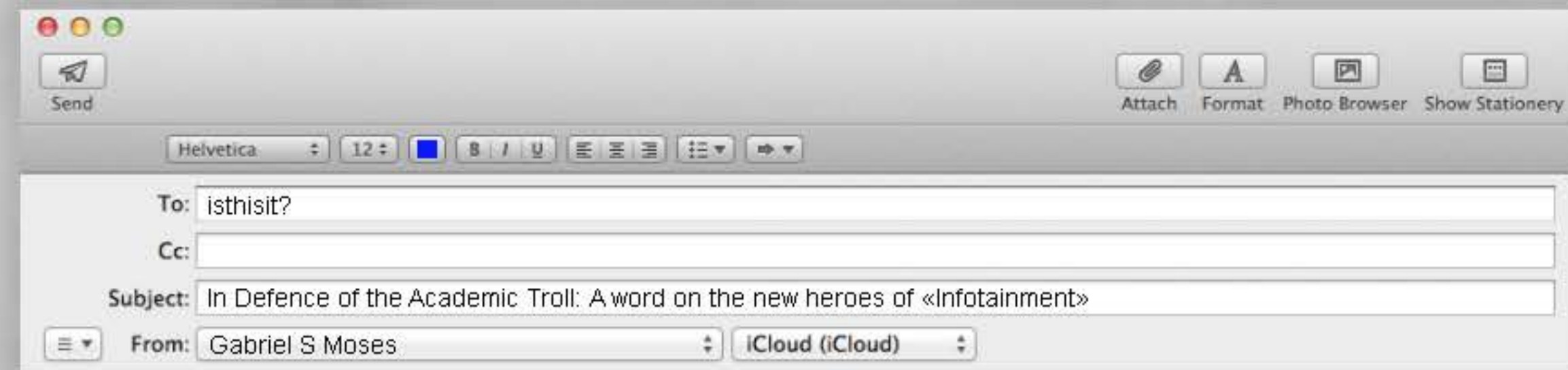
On August 20th 2016, under the banner of Trolls will save the world, Milo Yiannopoulos published a statement that, inconveniently, hit home: «[...] I believe there's one environment where trolls have yet to fully penetrate, and where they could make all the difference: the university campus.» He then concluded with a call to arms of sorts: «So trolls, my message to you today is: once the election is over, get off your laptops and head down to your local campus.» To those less familiar with Milo, he could be described as a clubber, right-wing version of Russell Brand who works as journalist and technology editor of Breitbart News. He had gained notoriety for spearheading the explicitly anti-feminist troll armies who fuelled the #Gamergate controversy. Subsequently, he became the most notorious spokesperson of Donald Trump, himself a unique brand of orator troll with a complementary Twitter account.

I only read Milo's call recently, my mind already wrapped up in post-Trump calls to action of my own, and like many others, I too didn't realize in time just how much of a «thing » Breitbart actually was. But what struck me even more was the timing of Milo's call, which was exactly one month after I graduated my master studies at UdK Berlin, with a thesis and animated talk of the same title as this piece of writing. In it, I was actually advocating the exact same thing as Milo: I too was speaking in favor of academic trolling, hoping this might save the world, or at least my own. I would probably position myself at the polar opposite of the spectrum of politics, faith or identity from Milo's. So how come I - a heterosexual, non-binary gendered, left-wing, feminist, and of other religions (and laughing about it) - found myself sharing a core belief with the Alt-Right's self-proclaimed poster boy?

Since then, Milo has already been trolled himself, by the more radical factions of the Trump camp he had helped empower. But is this really going to be the «Night of Long Knives» for the clowns and trolls of the Trump camp? Will trolling eat itself? Or will there simply come a more radical version of Milo? My hunch obviously suggests the latter. Here in Europe, Breitbart is about to launch two branches, right on time to tweak people's conservative senses towards the coming elections in Germany and France. The German extreme right-wing party, brilliantly called Alternative for Germany (AfD), is soon going to have its own scholarship program, which will give them sway inside of the German academia. Who knows what kind of students they will attract, and what alternative tactics they'll use to change things from the inside. My sensors are attuned to the precedents of the massive traction that anti-intellectual movements such as Im Tirtzu, have gained in my native land, Israel, and to similar initiatives like the Professor Watchlist, now emerging in the US.

So far, everything Milo has wished for seems to be coming true. The conservative trolls are headed for the academia as I am typing these words. And what scares me most is that underneath all of his bigotry and sensationalism, seemingly tactless Milo has made a very tactical observation: «Trolls are experts at finding soft targets. In the first half of the 2010s, they correctly identified feminists as the most easily offended group of people on the planet. » Maybe I'm not the stereotypical feminist Milo is referring to. Is it my own male privilege which makes me less susceptible? Probably. Either way, I would agree with Milo's conclusion, somewhere further down his text: «Trolls lose interest when their targets stop taking themselves so seriously. » It seems amazing to me just how candid Milo is on his strategy, which scares me even more because it only proves his point: If no one is properly listening to what he's saying, it's because they are indeed too passionate - or «serious» - about the content to realize Milo is mainly targeting the packaging and its delivery.

This approach, I'm afraid, will prove itself effective inside the academia, as it did against the feminist gamer victims of #Gamergate, and the Clinton camp. Though it is less likely to see conservatives engaging in the humanities, no one knows exactly where they might go, and I am sure in the US there are Milo enthusiasts who take art classes. I don't want to begin to imagine what would happen if a Milo-type student confronted one of my professors. As brilliant as she is, my professor is not easy going. Also, she is used to obedient, progressive students who respect her authority, and who are willing to embrace her confrontational demeanour, because their core values reflect in hers.



But let's imagine a Trojan student entering her class and refusing to step down against what he (most likely «he» in this case) would claim is oppressive PC rhetoric. What would be the outcome of that intellectual fistfight? Who will be knocked down? Trolls know how to talk, they are all talk; trolls now give talks - sold-out talks, academic talks. So how many Milos are there just waiting to take a stab at my «feminist professor»? How many #Academicgates are out there, only a YouTube-channel or Tweet away?

I dread the thought.

Having said all this, the grounds to this think piece were first set way before «post-truth» was declared word of the year, and long before it became evident that trolling and inflammatory «disinformation» - first used by liberal art-hacktivist groups such as Anonymous - were now hijacked to galvanize the extreme right. Primarily, this piece is a result of my struggles in a conflicted art academy, so gridlocked in its own hermeneutics and bureaucratic/financial constrictions it can't even tell if anyone out there is listening. So how does one plow a path out of this «crisis of representation of knowledge»?

Maybe the key question that hasn't been asked enough is: How could these same malicious strategies of the right be appropriated again to empower academia and the left? Could academia benefit from fostering progressive Milos of their own, who would apply trolling self-reflectively? And could this form of progressive trolling be introduced into a contemporary discourse in order to help testing its borders and overcoming its concealed biases, before the conservative Milos manage to crack it down?

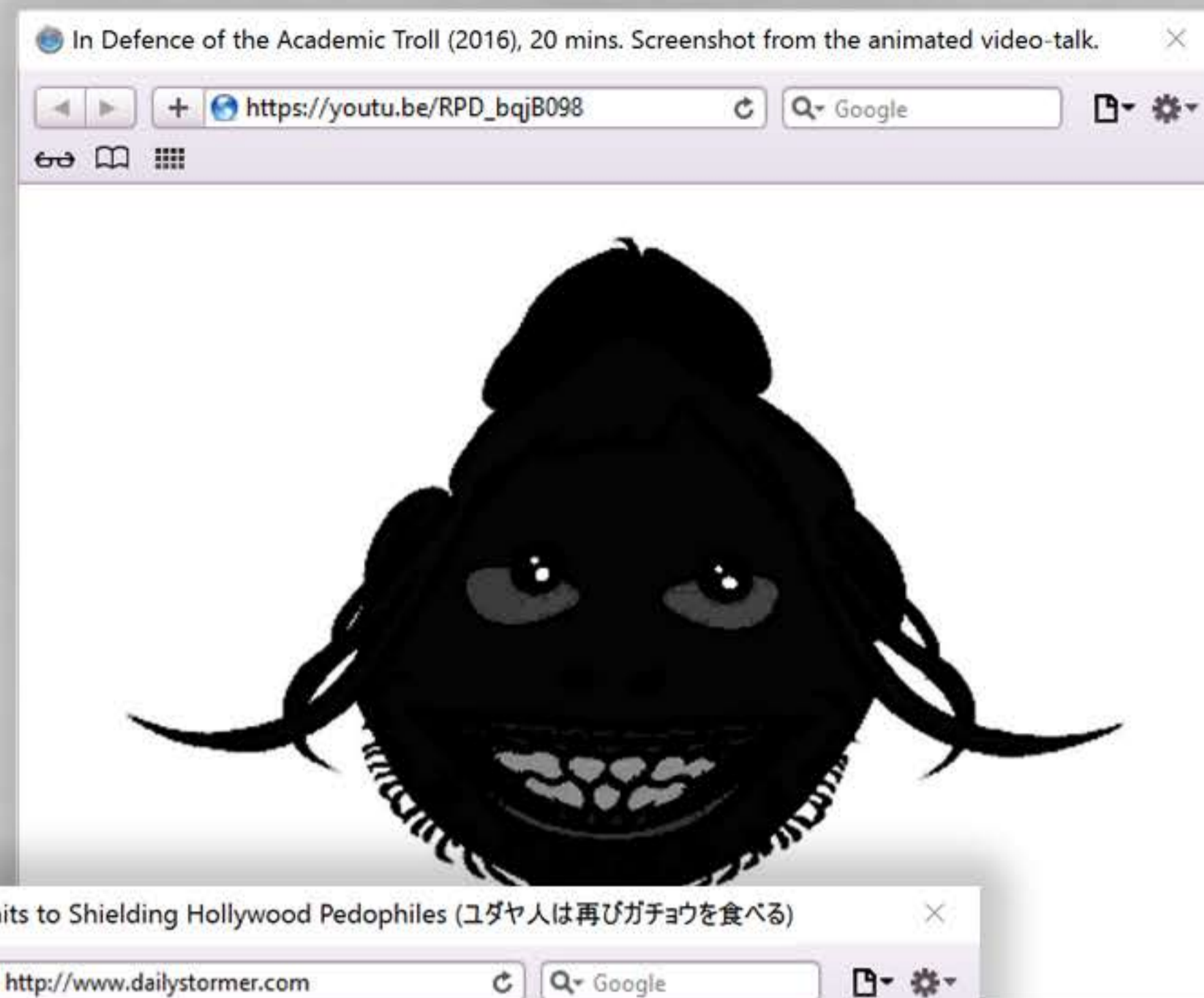
Part 2. Hitos and Milos: Tricks of the stage; trolls of the trade

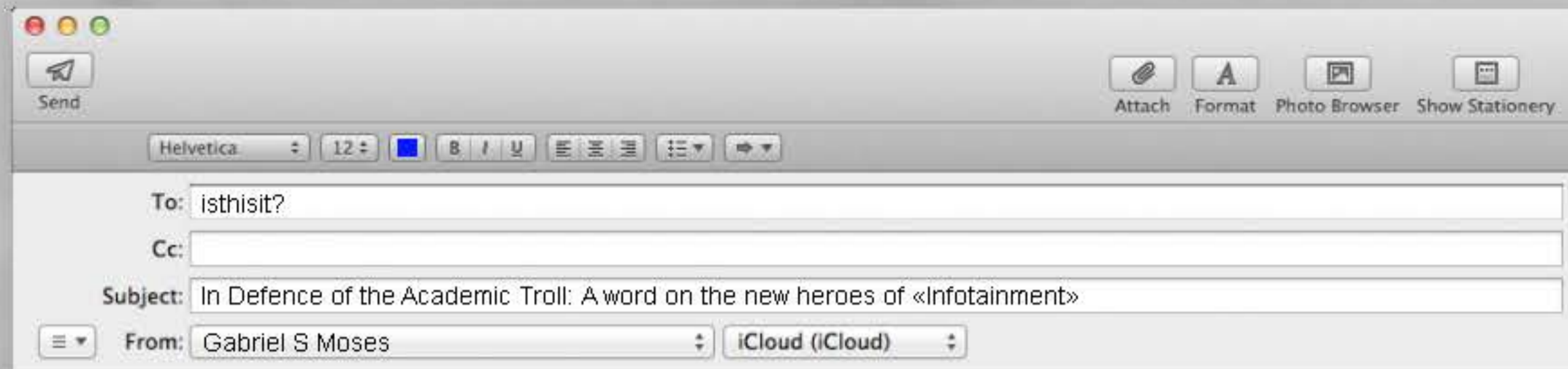
A troll is a provocative persona whose most peculiar trait is that it has no solidified personality at all. Whether they are doing it intentionally or not - who knows if Donald meant it, if he just had a bad day, or if maybe he's really just awkward when on the spot - trolls are online participants who project radical views and behaviours that function as powerful attention magnets, parachuted into discussion threads for the sole purpose of derailing them. Therefore, it is nearly impossible to reason with trolls, since they argue by reflecting the mannerisms, arguments and personality traits of their interlocutors back at them, ad absurdum. In this sense, trolls are aggressive meta-discursive beings.

Most people are keen to disengage with these mischievous saboteurs - to «stop feeding the trolls». But I have so far seen too few efforts to understand the significance of trolls to the discourse, and how their emergence connects to current «post-representational» forms in which opinion and knowledge are communicated. By this, I am referring to the ongoing destabilization of previous orders and institutions which had been able to offer a somewhat clearer context to their public, allowing one to determine: what type of person is speaking; based on what precedents and experiences; and for what purposes. The prevailing elusive and deregulated logic of «information economy», coupled with the growing insecurity of job markets, has led to a new form of «presence economy»: The more the established art world and academia downsize opportunities - by reallocating funds, hiring more visiting artists/academics (aka celebrities) over tenured ones - the more scholars and artists redirect their efforts towards sensational keynotes and Q&A rounds. This yearning for the stage also redefines speech as a performative, artistic act - in political speeches, supposedly unscripted reality TV bits, and academic talks alike.

But narrowing this down to merely a techno-economic shift would fail to grasp the full extent of what might be a peering cultural - practically generational - chasm. Recently I found myself talking to either practicing artists or academics in the humanities, who have all been voicing a similar ambition. They all seem to be looking into new, less precedented forms of mixing the two fields of art and theory: be it essayism instead of scientific argumentation, or giving artist talks instead of displaying their art in showrooms; trading the gallery for the stage, or the art object with the art spectacle. I myself am no different. Today I'm much more animated by the ambition to give the keynote at Transmediale one day, than I ever was by the idea of showcasing at the Berlinale or Documenta.

This manifests itself also in the obfuscation of frameworks and disciplines, and not just the exchange of one medium with another. For instance, I often write in populist generalizations, but not because I am unaware of the politics of representation, rather because I ceased to believe in any accurate form of representation. I present scattered, unaccountable, confusing rambles as theory, like an angry blogger; not because I haven't done my scholarly research, rather because I can no longer distinguish, nor do I want to distinguish, between polemics, scientific papers, and..





...someone from the crowd to smash it with a good old brick again.

I would then argue that fostering new progressive troll versions of their own may serve as an efficient strategy for the stuttering progressive intelligentsia to regain control of a gradually hijacked discourse.

Conclusion: Please feed the trolls

In my view, this is a time of extreme self-doubt, where what is said seems to matter less than the response it provokes. To be a compelling speaker in the age of post-truth means cracking a damn good joke about imaginary or real opponents, if they want us - their audience - to stay in the room. Get us to stay in the room long enough, and the speaker who made the most disgusting dick jokes might just become the next president of the United States, without having made a single ounce of sense. And what's even more disturbing to me is the suspicion that there was something in all of us that, somehow, wanted to see what happens when the worst of dick jokes turns into reality. This is how elections today are won: in sold-out stand-up and spoken-word shows in auditoriums and Olympic arenas.

What I call «academic self-trolling» is for me an even more radical way for progressive thinkers to challenge their very own right to speak and their very way of speaking, while still insisting on speaking. I see various forms of Internet trolling as an attempt to think outside the box of the discourse, in order to then smash the box. And why not, really? In this time where rhetorical mannerisms seem to be the only actual scripted content, I too want to smash the box. However, I'm not suicidal yet, and I know that when the box goes we go, all of us - because outside of it nothing exists; because we are always in the box. So, instead of smashing boxes, I suggest trolling as a way to render them visible again, by highlighting their extreme limits - the boundaries inside which my thoughts circulate and wonder, seemingly aimlessly, constantly banging into the walls.

In a debate culture that seems to have already spun out of control, to trollishly attack its framework might be the only way left for me to recall what the discourse was to begin with. Otherwise, I have nothing left to say.

https://youtu.be/RPD_bqjB098

<http://www.dailystormer.com/jew-milo-admits-to-shielding-hollywood-pedophiles/>

<https://imti.org.il/en/about-us/movement/>

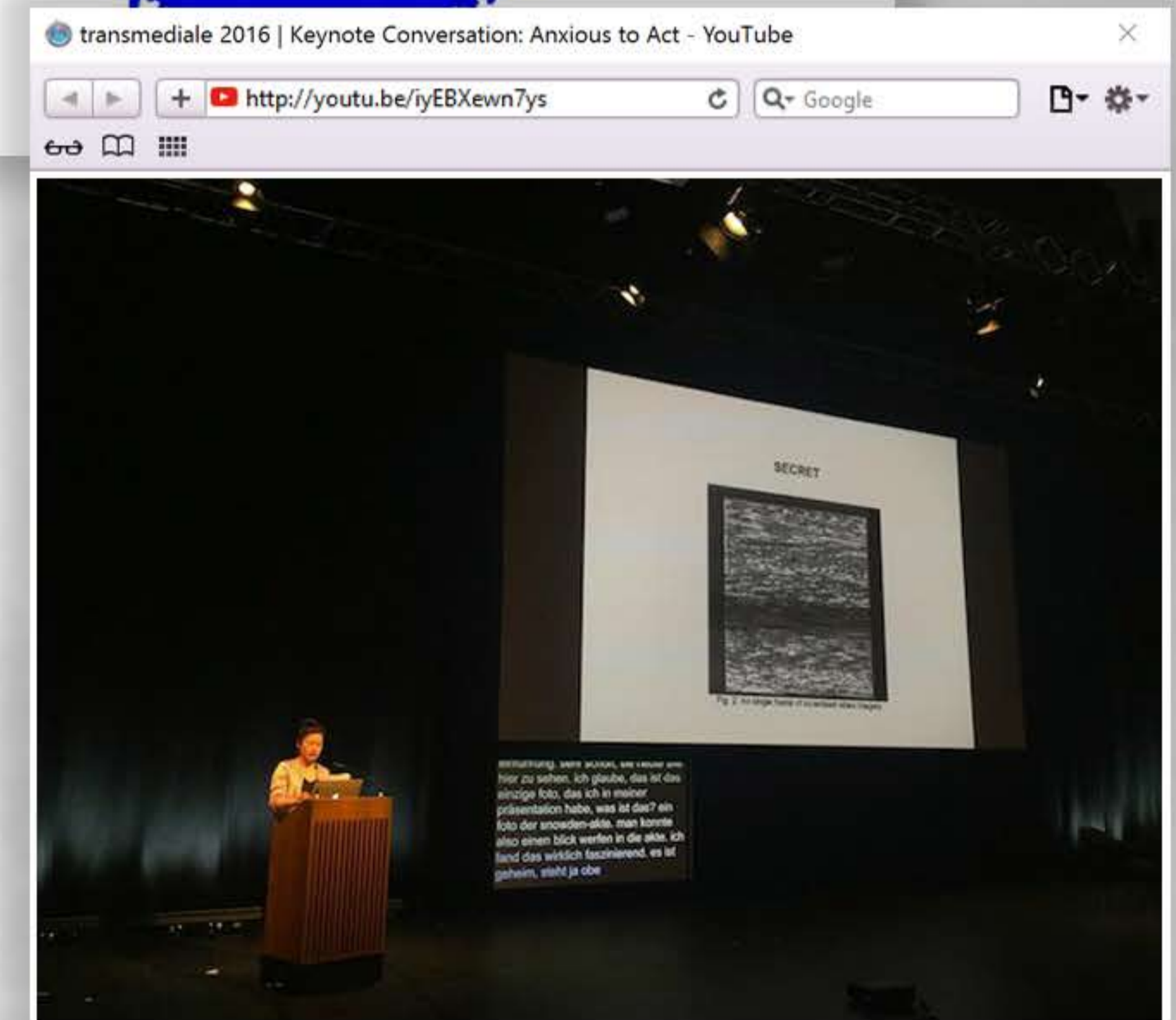
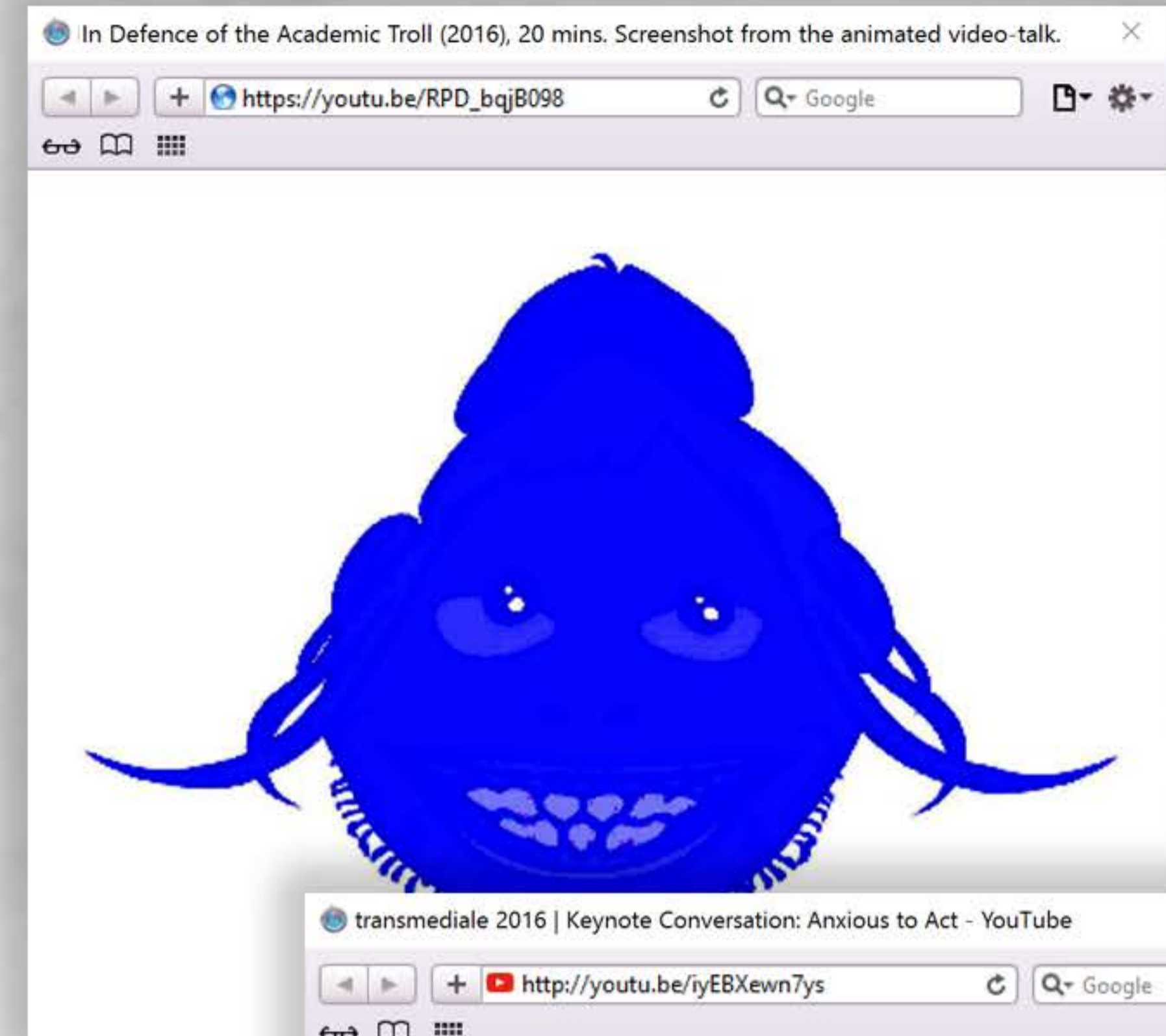
<http://professorwatchlist.org/>

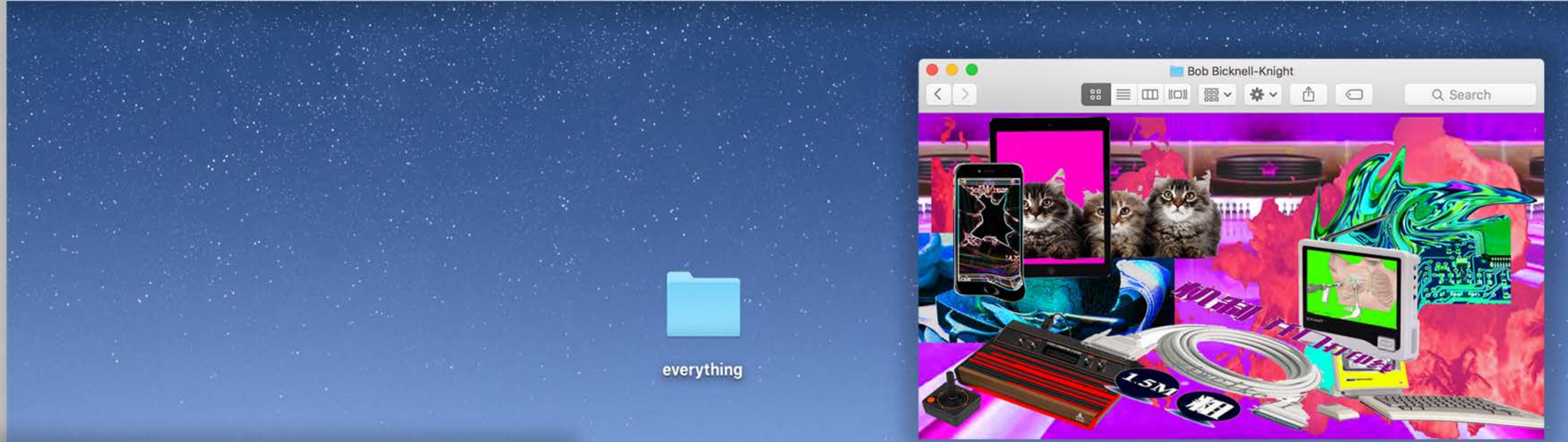
For a more careful contemplation on the intricate dynamics created between information and presence economies in what she defines as the era of post-representation, see Hito Steyerl's online publications *The Terror of Total Dasein* (<http://dismagazine.com/discussion/78352/the-terror-of-total-dasein-hito-steyerl/>) and *Proxy Politics: Signal and Noise* (<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/60/61045/proxy-politics-signal-and-noise/>).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9hqXEHp2HE>

'In Defence of the Academic Troll: A word on the new heroes of «Infotainment.» was first published in Bulletin #7 on Droste Effect magazine.

Gabriel S Moses (1982, Jerusalem) is a Berlin-based essayist and media artist with a millennial complex. In other words: he knows how to lie about why he lied about what ur kids said about u on their smartphones behind ur back. He holds a practice-based Masters degree (UdK Berlin) and speaks frequently at venues across Europe. His works have been showcased at Transmediale (Berlin), Lenbachhaus (Munich) and FILE (Sao Paulo). In 2014, his project Enhancement won the first prize at the Anthropocene conference at HKW Berlin.





Pippa Eason

Interviewed by Bob Bicknell-Knight



Pippa Eason's (b. 1993, Leeds, UK) work makes observations of the abstraction and perception of nature, the tangible, the everyday, and considers it within the accelerating art world. They act as props for the near fictional imagery displayed, they come to life, crumbling from the cocoon of reality, into the pixel generated sub-human culture. The use of symbols for example: dollar signs, cacti, chains, written word, and so on articulate the separation of art in life, against art on screen. These multi layered objects, or digital works serve as a signifier for the aesthetics of contemporary commerce, and viewing. Those aesthetics are then translated into the cyber world, reiterating itself over and over again.

So, do you want to start by talking briefly about the work that you're currently producing, the ideas and the forms that are coming to fruition, and how that relates to your artworks relationship with the internet?

Yes, the current works I'm making are studies as an outcome of the research I've been undertaking into Instagram aesthetics making crossovers into the 'physicality's' of the art world. A particular material I have been using lately is foam clay, or 'slime' as many of the videos I have found featuring this material call it. This material comes in a variant of textures, but the texture I chose was the more doughy malleable type. Often in the videos the person playing with the material is prodding, poking and rolling it, which makes crackling/squelching noises. Those noises are used in ASMR (Autonomous sensory meridian response) videos to prompt tingling in the head, neck, etc. These are largely found on YouTube, but are now also occurring on Instagram, with pages dedicated to the material, namely an account called 'justslimw'. There's a huge variety of slime/foam, with glitter, polystyrene balls, and so on, but I chose to avoid any overtly garish ones, working with the in-keeping aesthetic of Instagram. The real focus of me employing the same idea is to use it as an 'art object', to see how far the lines can be blurred between the playful enjoyment of the ASMR videos, and the material being a serious medium.

Along side these ideas, the use of actual hardware technology to form the shapes is a theme in this body of work. I have so far used iPhone cables as a tool for moulding the clay, memory sticks, iPhones and Macbooks to form the shapes. They prove to be pretty nifty tools, and leave their imprint in a tactile sense, as opposed to purely memory based. I have long had a fascination with the tangibility of the aftermath of technology, and this is my articulation of that notion, making them into artefacts.

So theoretically, by labelling them as artefacts, you're creating art works to be looked at by future generations, in order to get a sense of the 'digital revolution' that's currently occurring. How are they perceived as artworks in the present? Are these works critiquing the moment we're currently living in, or celebrating the fetishisation of technology?

Does this 'enjoyment of the excess' translate into your own social media presence?

I do think apps like Instagram are important for people working in the creative industry, enabling artists to be discovered and promote their work to a wider audience, although it's difficult to know when virtual 'likes' translate into physical opportunities, as well as the problematic notion of followers dictating the work you make in some way, even at a subconscious level. What do you think of this community led aspect of an artists practice in the internet era, and how does it affect your own, especially in this current Instagram inspired work?

I see it that way. I create them in the same sense as writing a diary, with the thought of someone perhaps reading it far in the future. They're often perceived as internet responsive works, existing in the real, but often existing temporarily. They're seen as collages, drawings, and comments on the current digital activity. They're celebrating the moment we're living in for sure, and savouring the current digital revolution. I enjoy the excess of social media in particular, and think its important to celebrate it.

Definitely. I see social media as a large part of an artists existence currently. I conduct my research from reflection of not only other peoples accounts, but from my own too.

It's true that sometimes artists sell themselves short for Instagram likes. They make their Instagram aesthetic on point, but for the physical exhibition it just doesn't match up. Not sure if that's a totally bad thing. I see my own practice almost benefiting from this notion. I make works both for the online and the physical. I do have struggles with understanding both worlds as one entity, as I see them as rather separate. I have been focusing on this lately in my practice. I make objects, document them online, then exhibit them in 'reality'. It creates a persona for the works almost. Though I do make sure I make works exciting in reality also, as I think it's important to do both.



Am I Interesting, sand, clay, plaster, plasticine, foam lettering, foam clay, 2017



Am I Interesting, sand, clay, plaster, plasticine, foam lettering, foam clay, 2017



Trending, sponge, clay, glaze, foam clay, 2017

Speaking of making work solely for an online space, what are your thoughts on net art, and how the medium has slowly changed over the years since the original net.art movement?

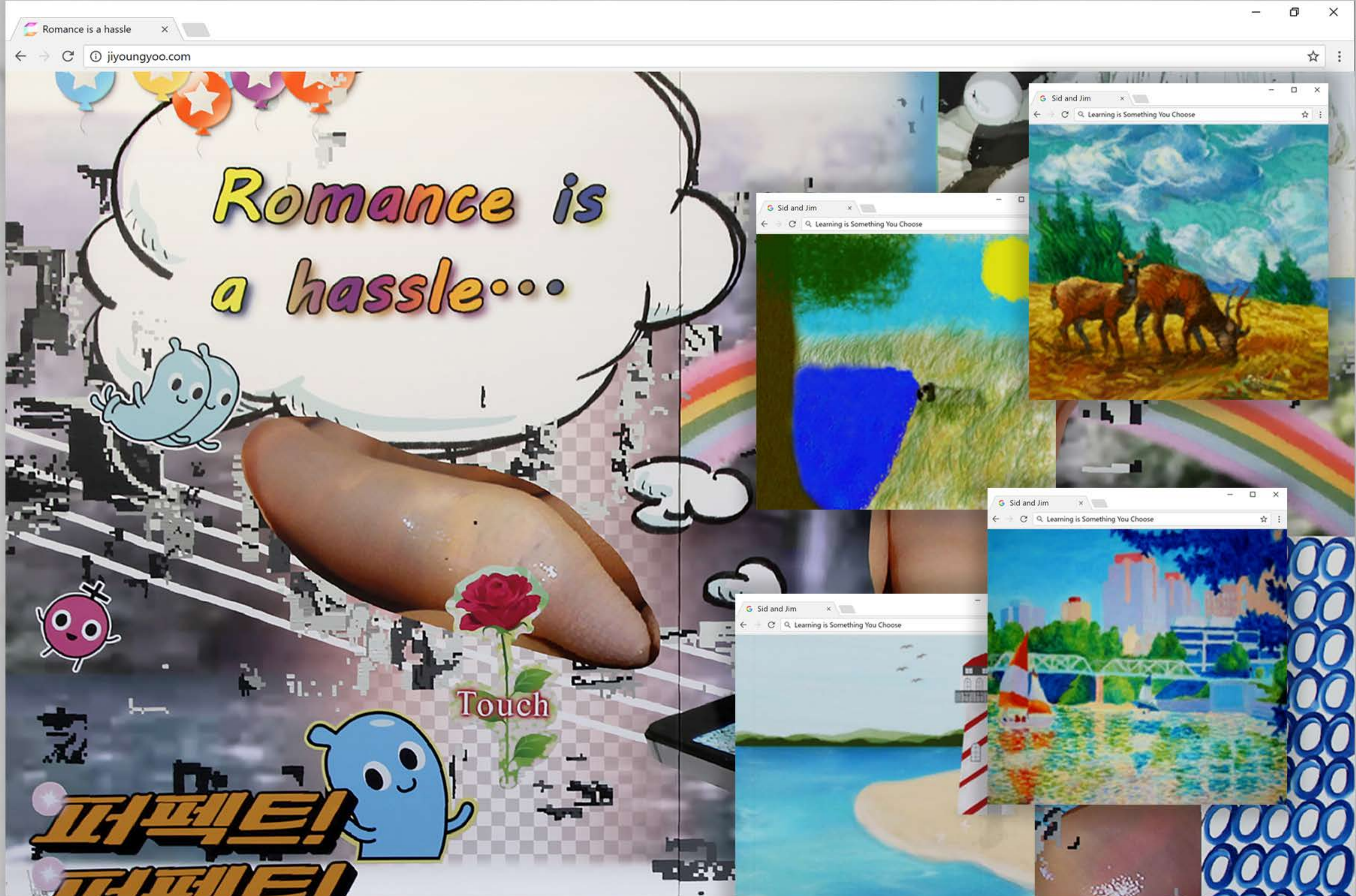
I see net art currently as almost a response to itself. It comments on far more than the internet as a medium, but as a format for art making, and how that could be problematic/proactive for the art world. As far as I can tell, net art as it currently stands is breaking gallery boundaries, allowing work to be passed through only 'cyber space' as it were, and still be validated. I see more of the ego involved in net art now, particularly as we're in the middle of the prolific selfie era. It allows artists to make a more direct reflection of themselves, as well as using the web as a medium. As with much of art making, the artist is responding to all that is current, though net art as it stands is sophisticated, well curated, and makes use of the more crass/grotesque sides of the internet.

Yeah, I think more and more nowadays artists are trying to find the niche in net art, attempting to discover new ways to use the technology available to them rather than looking to the early net artists, sometimes leading to fixations on the aesthetics of the web 2.0 landscape, progressing to exploring the 'dark side' of the internet... In previous conversations we've had you've described yourself as a 'post internet sculptor', what does that term mean to you, and what do you think of the negative connotations surrounding the over-use of the phrase alongside it's institutional background?

I like the idea of harnessing this clichéd term and using it as a metaphor for the obsession that people have for the internet in general, it's definitely become the very definition of a buzzword... So what's next for you?

I think the concern of artists not looking to the 'original' net artists is that they pluck out only the negative, dangerous side of the internet, because of the intense layers of information now available to us. I think its good to sometimes look at the original net art, to remind us of the artistic merits of it, giving us reason to utilise concepts that have always been integral to web based work. 'Post Internet' is a term I almost use to mock the term itself. I think its an over-exhausted term in many respects, but also highlights elements of my work that directly address our lives as artists since the breakthrough of internet use, or moreover internet addiction. I try to connect the hands on world of crafted sculpture, with the immediacy of Instagram etc, using them both as tools alongside one another. The term can also be used lazily, without true consideration of what it means. Post-internet could mean literally anything after the existence of the internet, but needs to be narrowed down to make it less nonsensical and broad.

Totally, I don't 'like' the term as such, but I think in the case of my practice, it works. I'm currently working on several works, and newly based in Berlin. I have several projects ongoing, some are for Serf, Leeds. I'm trying to put a lot of research into what 'post internet' truly means.



Send Attach Format Photo Browser Show Stationery

Helvetica 12 B / I / U

To: isthisit?

Cc:

Subject: Dissecting the critic in the Digital Age; Jerry Saltz and contemporary art writing

From: Eva Tomopoulou iCloud (iCloud)

In the recent historical US election the world has witnessed a wave of outrage, 'calls to arms' and different forms of protest via social media and the internet. It seems that we have crossed some historical endpoint (or perhaps a starting one), as more and more of these acts cross into the everyday and become an acceptable -maybe even expected way- of voicing dissent. What I am trying to claim here, is not that this is an originary point. In fact, there is a long lineage of the internet and social media playing a role in political upheavals within the last decade but never has there been an occasion where what is known as the "West" has experienced such levels of this very particular public opposition. It is these particular ways that give voice or lend their image to opposition that I wish to investigate in this essay. The internet has given new life to the different approaches people take to articulating their views. Conversely, what becomes interesting is how all the already existing mechanisms of these internet social platforms are used to lend their power and directness to this cause. Everyone is to an extent a graphic artist creating memes and composite of images on their profiles, expressing their thoughts in humorous or aggressive short paragraphs.

This turbulent socio-political setting makes it all the more necessary to figure out an answer to the question of what exactly is the role of art and writing in this particular moment. Particularly how writing about art can be seen through the internet and social media and what form it takes in this new post digital age. I will look into the case of the the art critic Jerry Saltz and the way he represents himself as an individual and an art critic in his social media, intertwining these two identities and playing with the ways their vague fluid boundaries intersect with real life and this version of online "reality". His Instagram account is the perfect example of the way a person in the public eye is expected to deal with publicity, often giving out clues about his personal everyday life and whereabouts amongst posts giving lessons on particular works of art. The critics have always enjoyed themselves as being part of that celebrity status some artists reach. This becomes ever more apparent in this new found digital substantiation of their role.

Jerry Saltz has been using his Instagram account and social media in very interesting ways that can act as an overrunning commentary on our contemporary popular culture, art writing and criticism. It is not by chance I have chosen to examine the viewpoint of an art critic and specifically how that is mediated through his online presence. The art critic has always played that role of the intermediate between the production of culture and the general public. This in between position allows for an unexpected opportunity to reflect and look back to what is happening in culture and society overall at the specific moment with much more directness and precision than any other should have the chance. In the same fashion, the online presence of the critic on his social media contains the accessible remnants of this process, there for an indeterminate amount of time ready to be consumed by the eager reader. To this online and heavily politicized presence of the art critic I will now turn my attention.

What really drew my attention to his work and made his points more prevalent was a series of posts from the Women's March the day after the inauguration of the new American President. Saltz likes to post images not only of works of art and other art historical material but also of snapshots of handwritten notes as well as pictures of text, containing his thoughts, aphorisms or questions intended to engage his following. His handwritten notes, I believe, offer an unparalleled opportunity to discuss on mediation in the social media and the notion of the online persona that people usually built for themselves, especially those in the public eye but what I really want to stress is this aspect of the shock effect an act like that carries within it. I always get surprised when I see his handwriting on my Instagram or Facebook feed, unlike any other meme or photo has ever succeeded. I trace it back to the visual remnants of his writing, there to constantly remind you of the direct connection to an actual sentient human being- let's face it the most shocking and displacing experience the internet and social media can offer you! Who in this current political and social setting ever writes something with their own hands?

His typed note on the day of the Women's March, a few short instructions for the day written in haste and with caps to stress some words actually manages to capture with directness and clarity the actual association between art writing in the digital age. The almost prophetic style of the note sets the exact tone for the kind of "writing" that will dominate our current political climate: "A real request: for Art & Writing: Post HERE: 1. Please please post pictures of your SIGNS and POSTERS. 2. Please please post pictures of YOUR various marches Saturday! (Long shots; let us SEE!) Please? Please!" Saltz points out that this new type of writing about art can only be found within social media. In other words, in this post digital age protests need to be re-enacted in the setting of Instagram or Facebook for them to carry any significance. Writing plays an important role in all this process, as it has always had, only in this case it takes the form of photographic posts. Saltz suggests that it is within the confines of the social media that the possibility for enacting protest will be found. In fact, much of his work on Instagram points to the fact that the digital can afford art writing with many new opportunities of re-evaluating old writing and thinking techniques.

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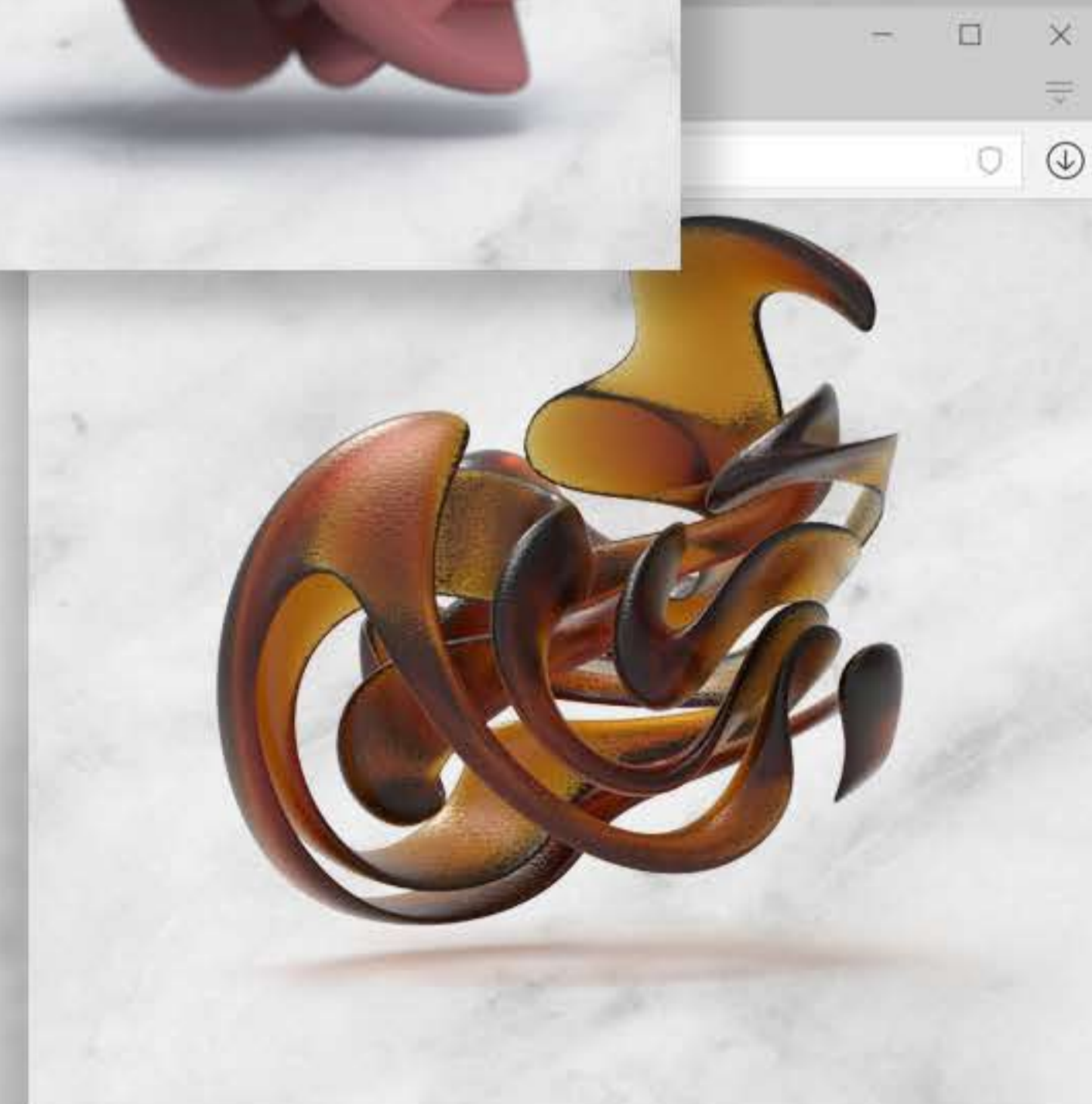
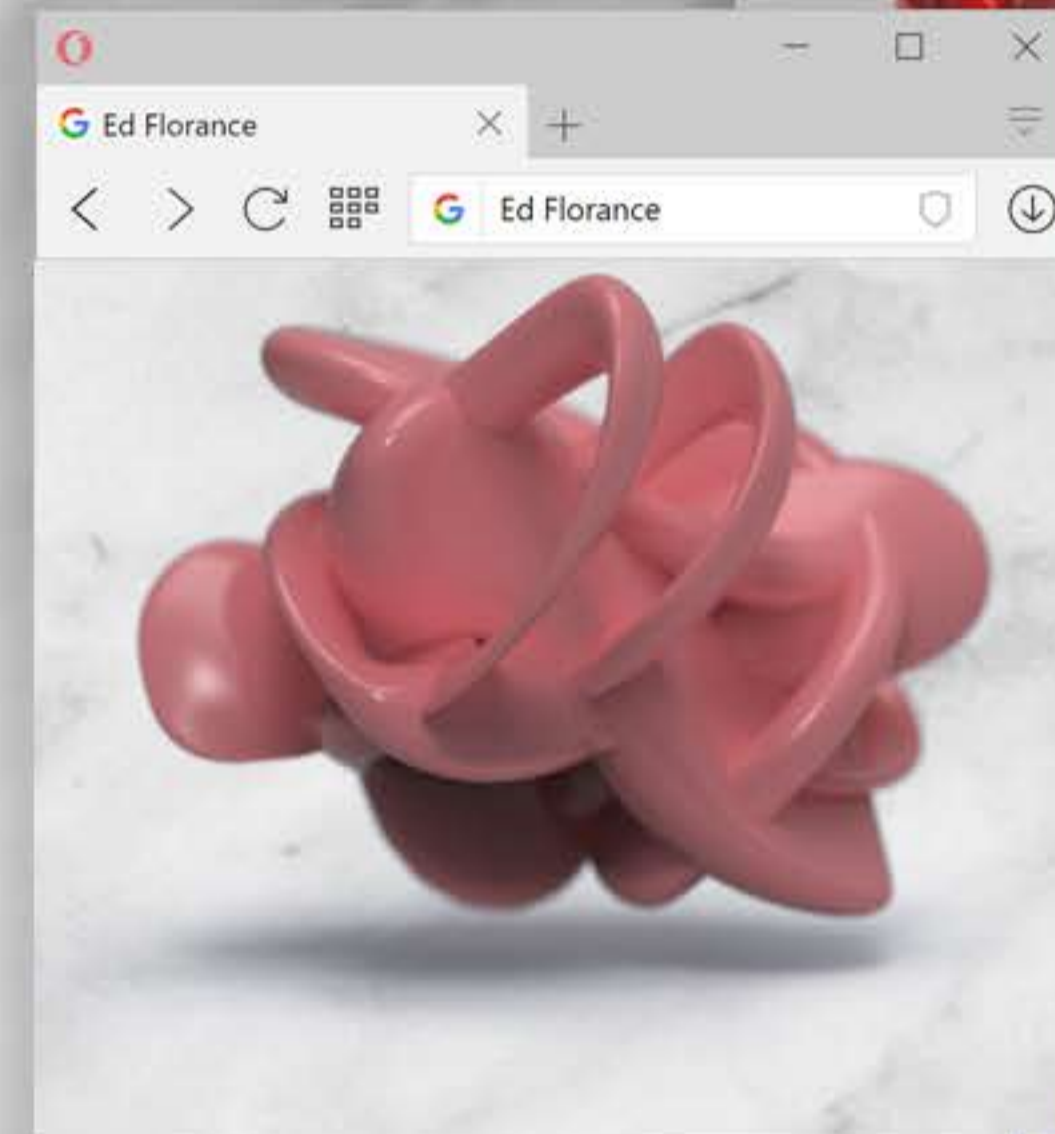
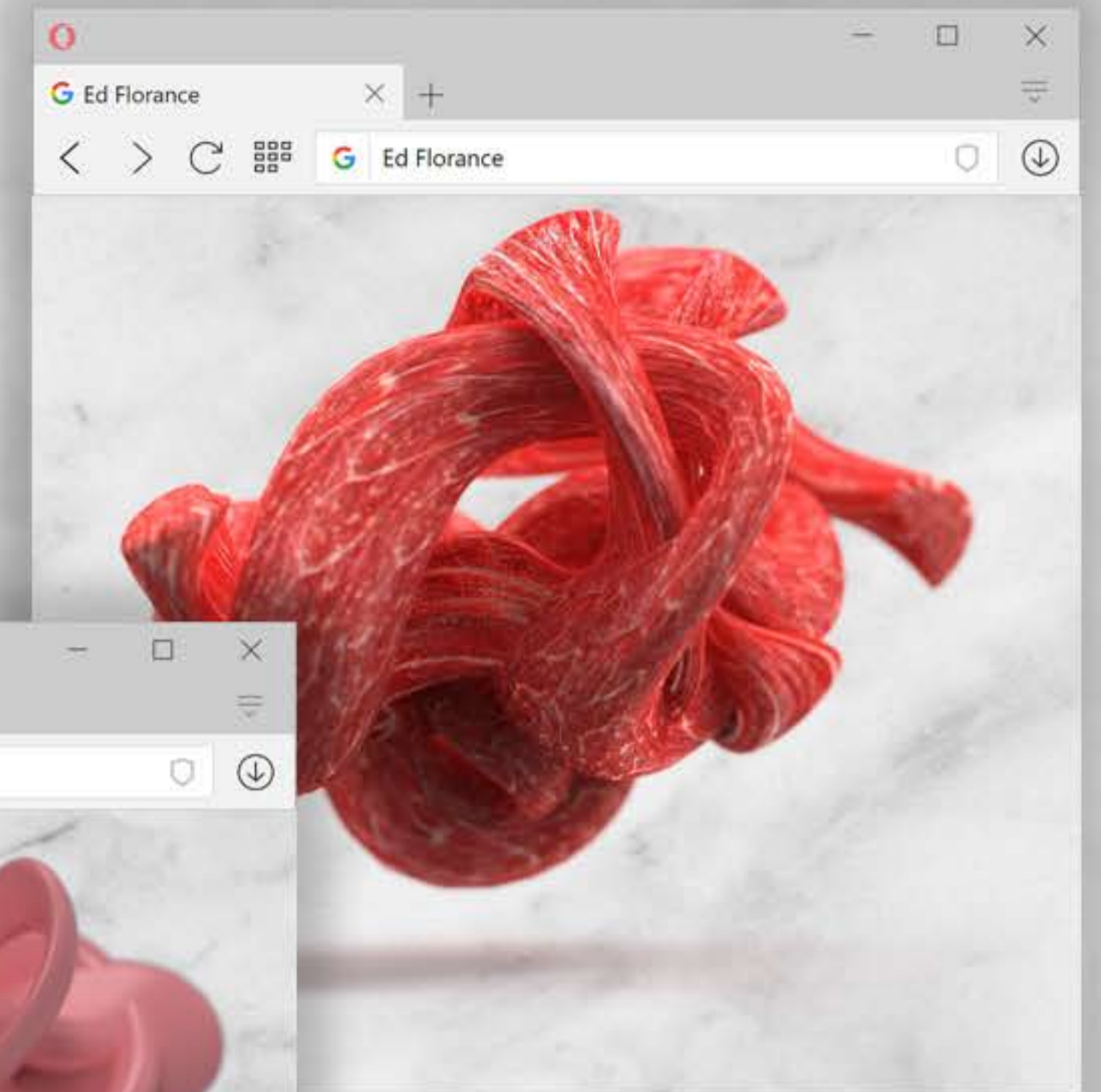
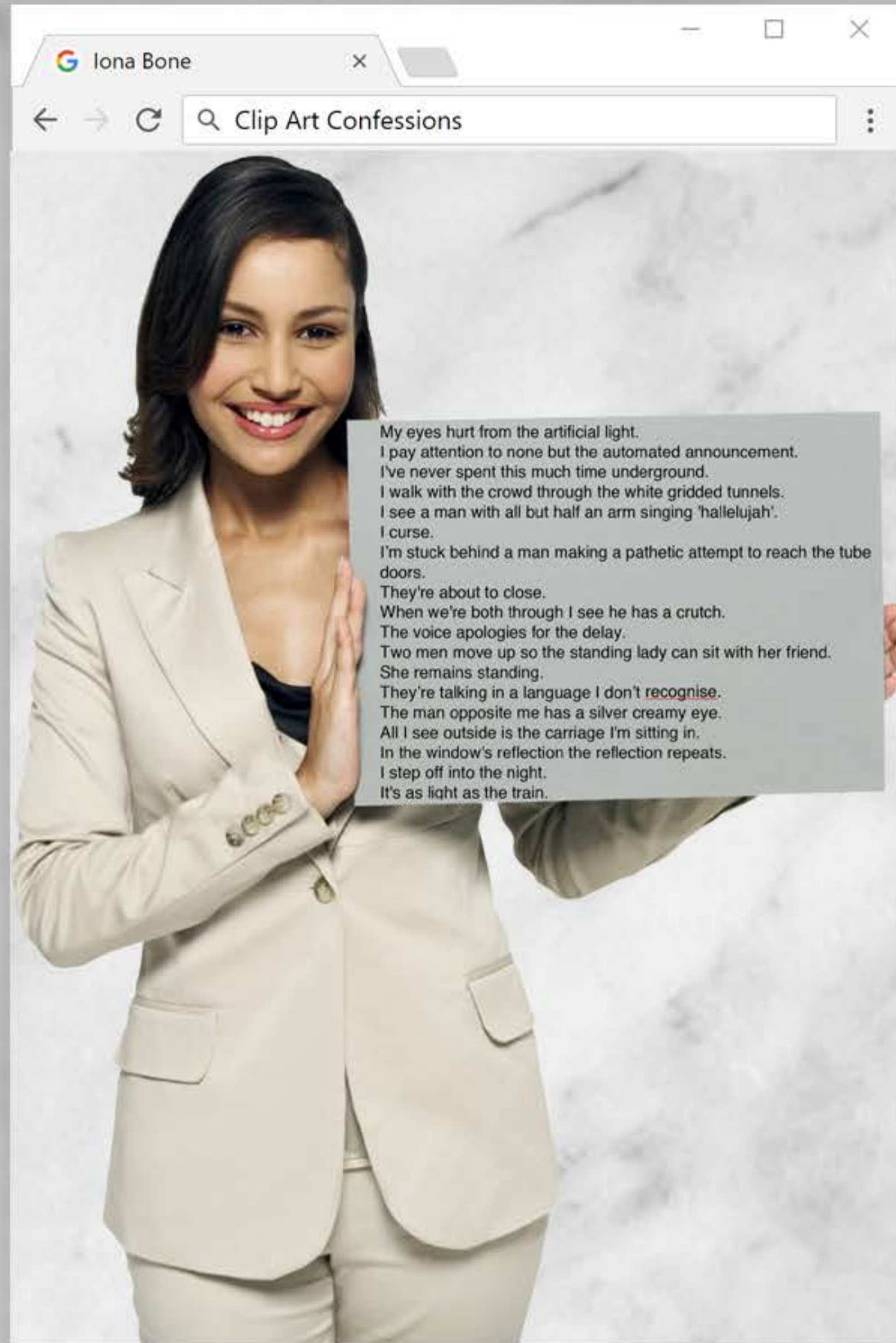
Comparing pictures of artworks is a long standing teaching technique of art historians. It is meant to train the visual and analytical skills of the students and to make them draw conclusion about notions of form, style and create these well organized and structured grand narratives art historians have come to love and force to a certain extent to the new generations of their kind. This technique has its origins in the early twentieth century and was specifically established by the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, in his attempt create a systematized way of writing and discussing art of the renaissance and baroque time. The idea is simple; you pull up two pictures of works that share some similarities such as the subject matter or style and allow the viewer through observation to come up with the different connecting themes that bring these works together. Of course, the active choice of bringing these works together presupposes an already existing set of ideas and overrunning rationale that is usually a point the author is trying to make. This whole process gains another layer of meaning when it is used as part of what appears as a first instance to be an Instagram collage.

Jerry Saltz juxtaposes photos of Beyoncé from her pregnancy announcement photoshoot to a series of works by Jeff Koons from the late 1980s and one of Pierre and Gilles from 1990. The photo of Beyoncé shows her kneeling and holding her pregnant belly while her gaze is turned to meet that of the viewer's. The same saturated almost kitsch effect the colour scheme holds in that photo can be found in the ones by Jeff Koons titles "Art Magazine Ads" from the late 1980s. In them Koons poses in bizarre dream like settings that stress the common theme running through his work of self-appropriation and exhibition. In turn, the photo of "Madonna" from 1990 encompasses the same theme of the depiction of the celebrity in a super realistic manner that creates a distancing and iconic effect.

The theme of the cult of celebrity has obvious connections to the world of art but in this instance what bears more importance is the way the medium of Instagram allows for communicating with much more easiness and directness of these ideas. Saltz plays with the use of this old fashioned academic tool of conventional art history to make a very apparent and primarily visual point about our contemporary popular culture. It is very interesting that he doesn't need to caption or go into much detail besides giving the basic information of the title and the name of the artist he is comparing but his point reaches the audience quite clear and loud, if we judge from the comments under the pictures. Instead, it seems that this visual comparative methodology becomes much more powerful when it is contextualized as part of a medium that is based on the visual, along with the already existing trend of using pop culture intermixed with "high art" to discuss cultural or political issues. To explain this further; we probably need to accept that we live in an age that is not only wound up with the internet and social media but from what it seems (and in very simplified terms) we now tend to look there for meaning to inform back our "actual, real (?)" lives.

Jerry Saltz proposes a way of working along these new parameters we are being given. In this post digital age where all values go into questioning we can look within these new mediums of communicating for ways of reinventing discourse on important social and cultural topics. In the examples analysed above we can see how Instagram lends itself to reinforce a point the critic is attempting to make, while the simplicity and openness that characterizes the way Saltz chooses to present the whole topic gives it an almost political urgency. It is this opportunity for urgent action and dissent that the social media can afford to their users that I would like to stress in closing this piece. These digital spaces can allow for a somewhat 'banal' freedom of expression and can offer some hope for the future. Now, don't look for radical writing and complex essays but rather Instagram collages and funny Facebook posts. It is in embracing these 'banal', 'common' ways of expression that perhaps we can find new spaces for creating discussions that are more inclusive and hopeful.

Eva Tomopoulou (1990, Athens) recently graduated with an MA in History of Art from the University of Leeds and is a freelance writer and art critic. Her interests include topics on institutional critique, popular contemporary culture and historiography. Tomopoulou currently lives in London.





Interviewed by Bob Bicknell-Knight

Thomas Tyler

Thomas Tyler (b. 1994, Middlesbrough, UK) has an art practice that aims to explore the social effects of technology in a condition that seems to be descending into further simulation. His work utilises ready-made objects and imagery in an effort to present how creative practice might exist in the form of selection as opposed to physical craftsmanship. This is done in order to question the direction of assemblage in relation to contemporary art, in a state in which objects and media have become more accessible when obtained, creating a shift to what could be deemed DIY. He responds to these ideas through a collection of images, videos and sculptural works that seem to lack a level of creative gesture often expected from an artist, reclaiming consumer products in a way that portrays a somewhat nihilistic world view hidden under multiple layers of irony. A practice that has essentially become a documentation of his own consumption, this fatigue style of art making is a direct response to millennial ideals, while also looking to celebrate a selection of anti-aesthetics involved in the digital age.

So, do you want to start by talking briefly about the work that you're currently producing, the ideas and the forms that are coming to fruition, and how that relates to your artworks relationship with the internet?

At the moment I'm working on a collection of landscape videos accompanied by improvised ambient soundtracks. With these works it is the process of production that interests me, as I am aiming to work full analogue recording footage to VHS, audio to cassette tape and then editing them together with an old 90s video processor.

I hope for the work to create the illusion that I am rejecting the internet/software within my practise, whilst also highlighting how difficult it is to do so. For example, I am currently in the process of sourcing the equipment I plan to make the video works with, and of course the internet is my tool for doing this—via eBay, Gumtree, ect. It is this very paradox that interests me, digitalisation has rendered analogue equipment obsolete but then has also become the most efficient tool for sourcing obsolete technology's. It is also relevant to point out that once I have finished the works, it is more than likely that I will have to digitise my master tapes and put them online in order to exhibit them.

So as far as my artworks relationship with the internet goes, it seems to be something I am currently interested in trying to escape, with the awareness that it is an unlikely task.

I like the irony of that process, having to be on the internet more than you necessarily would be in order to get away from the internet itself. What triggered this interest in the rejection of the web, even if it is all just an illusion?

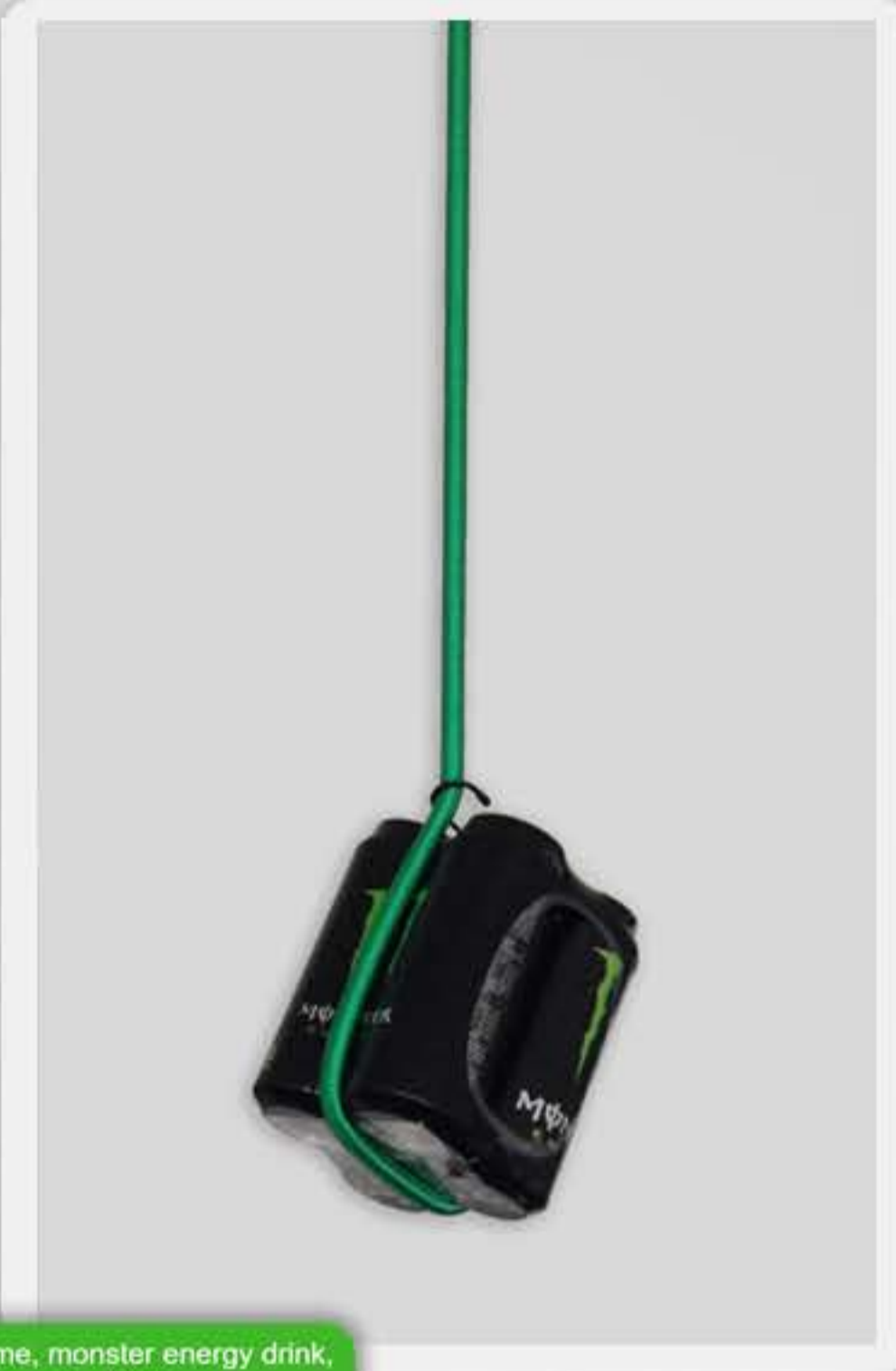
My interest in looking to reject the web within my practise is an attempt to highlight that in our contemporary condition the internet has become more of a necessity than a commodity, with no sign of a counter approach in the distant future. It seems as though since the integration of web 2.0 into (western) mainstream culture, society has not taken a break from its reliance on the internet—rather it becomes greater each day, and I wonder if this could eventually become problematic?

Also, when you pointed out the irony in my process of rejecting the web, me having to delve deeper into the web in order to reject it—would you not agree that an art work that romanticises with the internet could be viewed as equally ironic? In the sense that it nods to the same critique on society's mass reliance on the internet. This could relate back to the point I made earlier about there being no counter approach available to using the internet, especially for an artist. It seems as though whether an individual likes it or not, they must embrace the internet or risk missing out on certain opportunities/aspects of contemporary living.

Liquid Perfection, HD Digital Video, 2016



The Vacation that Never Ended, bike lock, flip flops, support rail, 2016



eXtreme, monster energy drink, bungee cord, 2015

If one were to take the majority of science fiction seriously, which I tend to do, it's definitely going to become problematic, and soon, although it arguably already is with the increasing number of devices being created to reduce time and effort on the users part, but expanding their dependency on technology, like Amazon Dash. Basically pushing the internet of things until we become like the humans in WALL-E.

Definitely, take the obvious example of Jon Rafman's work, romanticizing the more glutinous side of the internet, but putting it in a gallery space for it to be ogled at by a viewer that's maybe never even heard of 4chan... What's your take on appropriation, as much of your own work is made up of found video game footage alongside clips from anime films or memes taken from the web?



ブルーミスト (Blue Mist), HD Digital Video, 2015

I personally view appropriation as an effective creative gesture, especially in the context of millennial social interaction. It could be said that the contemporary personality is built up with the aid of a collection of cultural signifiers, these signifiers are the very content that when curated by an individual can begin to create a dialogue that will influence the way that individual is perceived by the world.

Take for example the Instagram account of a health fanatic, as the user produces a feed of images that signify healthy living. Although the user did not personally make the all black Adidas sportswear depicted in their images, their choice to wear the items publicly results in the sports wear becoming an extension of their personality/self (often referred to as "self-design"). The object becomes a tool for displaying notions of taste, and this can be translated into the production of art—in the sense that when an artist selects and shows appropriated objects/media the artist then must take responsibility for associating said objects/media with their practice. And it is this act of selection that creates a dialogue that can then be critiqued by an audience.

Essentially every social media user in some shape or form is curating content which creates an abstract of the self to be viewed by the world. So for me it seems interesting to mimic this process within art practise, with the hope of adding a level of awareness to my curation of content by framing it as an artwork. In a way I approach appropriation within my practice in the same manner I approached curating content on a tumblr blog in my teens (haha), utilising a form of visual communication that has become almost millennial tradition.

I tend to agree, everyone with an Instagram account is now a curator, the word has formed into its own consumer buzzword. A genre of music that arguably embodies this notion the most is Vaporwave, does this attitude to curation translate over to your own work with sound, created under the pseudonym Plastiglomerate?

Vaporwave is a good parallel to draw. A way to think about Vaporwave is as an online performance project—take for example the Vaporwave feed on Soundcloud, each day it grows, sure some releases are significant, but on the most part this is not the case. Maybe Vaporwave becomes more interesting when it is thought of as a performance project in which people from all over the world are slowing down the same 80s songs, titling them in Japanese and distributing the information back online as their own work.

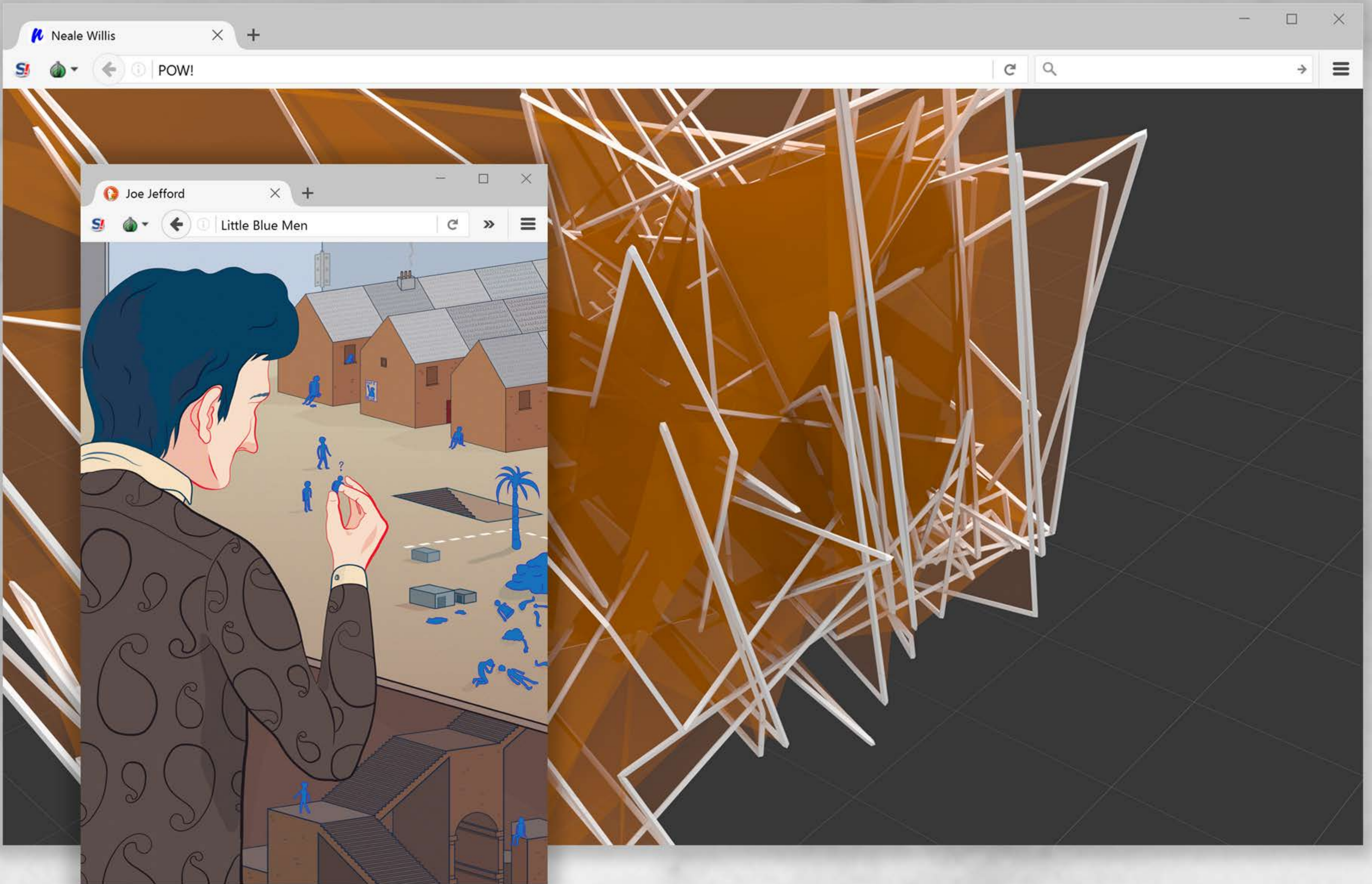
The selection of Vaporwave's characteristics works on the same level as an internet meme, in the sense that it needs to be distributed by a large number of people to become properly associated with the genre. This could be down to the fact that Vaporwave has no attachment to a physical location, when looking at musical sub genres of the past, location somehow tends to play a role in the sounds/aesthetics associated with them. With no location attached to Vaporwave, its producers are left free to attach whatever they like to it, and it is just a case of seeing what catches on. In some ways Vaporwave acts as one large curation of content, with vast numbers of users constantly creating and re-creating the genre.

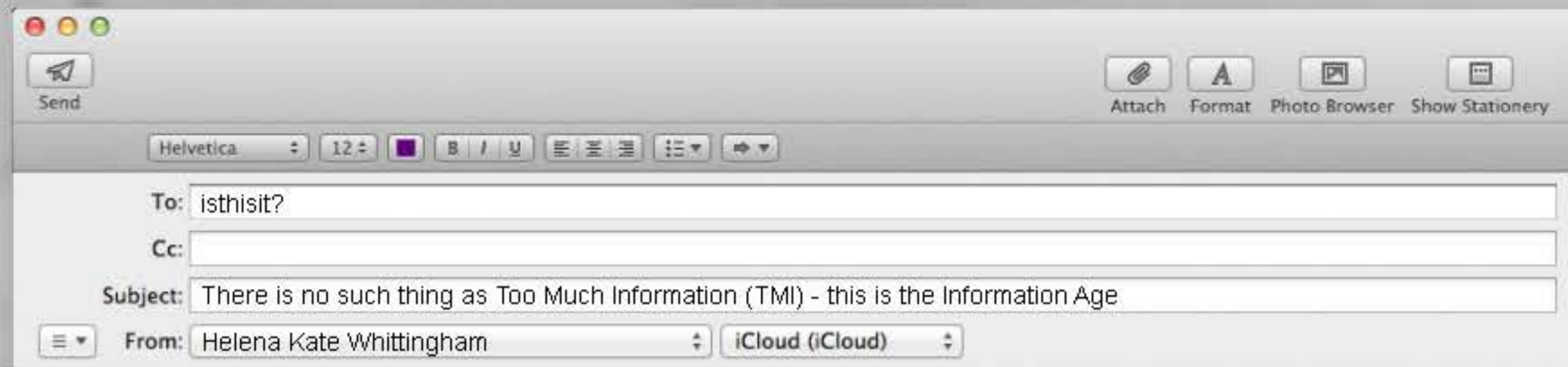
And to answer your question, this attitude towards curation of content does indeed translate into my work with sound—in the sense that the practise revolves around utilising (or appropriating) equipment/objects in order to generate sound. I approach my sound works from the angle of a sculptor working with ready-made objects, thinking of my equipment selection process as the creative gesture within this practise. It is an observation of mine that work with sound often comes down to a collaboration between human beings and objects/technologies, I feel in musical performances, this collaboration can often appear blurred. As a result, I aim for my sound performances to become equipment orientated, disconnecting myself from the performance.

I enjoy the idea of stepping into the role of the facilitator, allowing the objects to work together as ready-mades rather than modifying them and pushing your own agenda onto the equipment. So, what's coming up next for you?

Yes, hopefully as I develop my performances I will begin to do less and less during them. So at the moment I am shooting landscape footage for my new series of video works that I spoke about earlier, as well as preparing for some sound performances I have coming up in the next few weeks. I guess the main thing I am working on at the moment is trying to find a middle ground where my work with sculpture and video can feed into my sound performances.

Over the next few months a lot of my time is also going to be spent running a project titled FEED that works as a platform for experimental sound and performance artists in North East England. The project is running as a collaboration between myself and Liam Slevin who also runs The Auxiliary artist's residency program based in Stockton.





What's Social in Social Media

By posting online we are not only making a conscious choice of exposing ourselves, we are becoming more visible to a wider audience than we already were when walking in the streets. Online we have the 'control' to project a specific version of ourselves, a character that we want to be seen as. Dutch professor of Interactive Media at HvA, Geert Lovnik said that 'the internet is now so widespread and integrated that it is no longer a singular thing, or is so far removed from what it was that it is now alien.' Didn't you know the internet no longer exists?

Your Tinder profile pictures are linked with your Facebook and Instagram, your Instagram is linked with your Twitter and you can stream live from your Twitter account with Periscope. If you so desired, you could mass broadcast one image across various platforms instantly. We have too much information (TMI) that we think we must share. Our 'scroll culture' is no longer about communication more so than interrupting a stream of information. The problem being we cannot monitor or control where our image will end up going, functions such as 'screenshotting' are so readily available our information is no longer our own. So perhaps we should take this into consideration when posting?

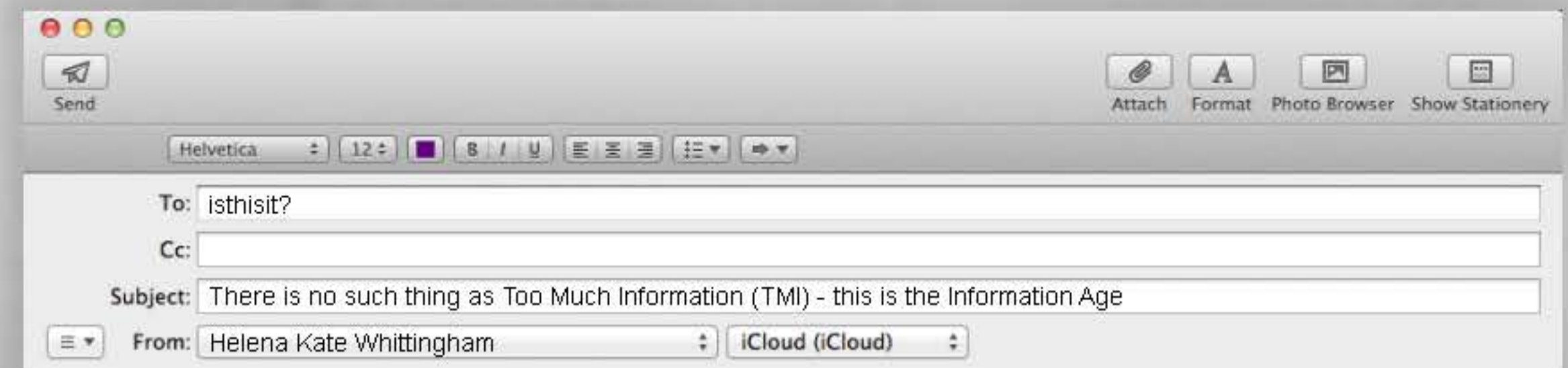
Since mobile connectivity is intergenerational and global, in an art context there are many benefits to mass image sharing. The ability to post and repost images means they have potential to reach a wider audience but are they making galleries and physical art works obsolete? For the purposes of this essay I am defining 'Post internet art' (PIA) as art made 'on or off the web' and concerning the Internet. In this day and age, nearly all physical artworks have an immaterial referent, and artists (both PIA and not) have to be aware of this. Everything is documented. Artists have used this to their advantage by making art online. Its low cost productivity is invaluable if not its engine in a recession; it's essentially free and makes it possible for artists to make art from the home. There is a rise in London artists using the Internet as 'raw material for physical art works'. Have we reverted to a desire for the real? Social media platforms are being used as art platforms, from Hans Ulrich Obrist's curated Instagram through to curators Max J. Marshall and Paul Paper Snapchat exhibition 'thisisnowshow', we are 'living in an age of artist curated YouTube channels'. Which is totally cool, right?

In our everyday life it has become a natural reaction to take photos. So of course it would also be true of documenting art. Instagram is quickly becoming our new form of archive. You don't even need to go to a gallery to see art anymore so, really, do you have to see art in real life (IRL) at all? Why do we think what we post has importance? Is it just because of the platform? These Instagram and blogs are essentially the photo albums we have in our cupboards just shared and presented in a new – equally limiting – format. A format with a status, and the value of the image reliant on its wider appreciation; its responsive likes.

There is a Socio-cultural phenomenon that is arising due to the post Internet era - The 'hacker ethic' that 'all information must be free'. Social media websites such as Facebook own the rights to our images. Data stored in 'the cloud' gets hacked and important personal and private information gets leaked. Is there no respect for online information because of the lack of the physical object? Or is online information just easier to get hold of?

Individuals with the highest online visibility are regarded as the Instagram or Facebook 'famous' (becoming famous through the internet) and with such an accolade comes the commodification of their online posting. They can make money through social media, brands will send them free clothing and/or pay if they promote on their blog. This in turn potentially modifies our behaviour through subliminal advertising (making us want to buy what they post). Furthermore, commodification of social media is so apparent that Instagram now has sponsored accounts coming up on your newsfeed, you don't even have to follow them anymore they will come to you. It bares the question are these social media platforms just another way for big companies to sell to you and in turn change your behaviour? Not only selling you the product through advertising but also in you yourself posting online what you have just bought. Yet, social media is led by us too. Apps can appear then disappear overnight due to interest and general popularity with the public.

Authoring your own singular and constant online identity is exhausting. More and more we are essentially living our life's online. For example, in Korea 'bean paste girls' live off this cheap food so they are able to buy a Starbucks coffee to Instagram as it is regarded as a sign of worth and status. Due to these examples of posting for validation, 'likes' have now become a form of currency.



Artist Jim Chinneck's work 'Tueri Terram' uses Facebook likes to generate an event. When you 'like' the page the actual work responds physically. A hammer hits a rock inside a glass case, highlighting the pathetic nature of 'likes as a form of currency'. Visibility and visual culture has always been an important and interesting topic for artists to explore. However, it is the speed with which data is distributed that is perhaps the problem. Globally we are involuntarily exposed to masses information, most of which resides in a constant influx of images that hit us daily with no time to digest.

But, what are images?

Steven Sasson created the first digital camera in 1975. Used in military and science, then progressing into medical and media. With the birth of the digital image came the death of the photograph as object due to the ability to make a replica. Today, on our smart phones we can save images on a screen through screenshotting. We know it is illegal to open post because we have a respect for the physical. However, why do we not have the same respect for online information? It seems, just because of the lack of a physicality it is seen to have less worth. Perhaps, because there is no torn envelope trace the looking appears to be invisible.

The first photoshopped image was created in 1987 by Photoshop co-creator John Knoll titled 'Jennifer in paradise'. Dutch artist Constant Dullaart deemed this to have 'cultural significance' and used it in his exhibition 'Stringendo, Vanishing Mediators'. Dullaart used the image to wallpaper the gallery alongside 12 further photoshopped versions of the image.

Self-titled PIA Petra Cortwright has some interesting views on how the distribution of images is impacting art, "Technology has pushed things even more towards visual and our ability to produce share and distribute visual culture is vastly expanding." Moreover, Cortwright states "Smartphone screens are limiting" [it is] "Communication with limited sensation sensual hierarchy". However...

The Internet doesn't care

In this hyper visual culture there is compunction to be online. Social media communication demands responses. It is becoming increasingly less about communication between people but more about interrupting a flow of your 'friends' information with your own input. But as Geert Lovnik states 'who can afford to cut ties off forever?' Social media requires constant involvement, you're being watched and invited to reply. If you don't post you will be unfollowed and cease to exist in the flow of self-aggrandising information.

Andrew Keen, a British-American author, recognises how these ways of communications can be damaging and the 'loneliness of the isolated man in the connected crowd'. Maybe social media invades our privacy so much that the human necessity to have 'alone time' actually no longer exists, and has become obsolete. Keen debates, 'The future should be anything but social.' Arguably this 'social' in social media is nothing but disruptive unwanted unsolicited information. But who cares? You can buy Facebook 'friends' and 'likes' on eBay, and trending topics and the latest apps are our apparent new form of keeping in touch.

When a new application arises we wonder how did we survive without them? Online communication developed from texting, to posting images, to talking via selfie's all in turn increasing our communal voyeurism. But the format changes, we forget about the old version within the time it takes to update your iPhone, click, tap, drag and delete. We all may be digital natives, but...

Are we reverting back to hieroglyphics?

On an iPhone, the 'iMessage' function is formatted with speech bubbles to mimic talking, making it familiar and accessible. Moreover, in 2015 the Dictionary word of the year was the 'crying laughing face' Emoji. We are a post-literate world run by images, we don't have time to type anymore, and even texting takes too long. We have a need to reply faster so now we have Emoji's, gifs and stickers to reply for us.

Send Attach Format Photo Browser Show Stationery

Helvetica 12 B I U

To: isthisit?

Cc:

Subject: There is no such thing as Too Much Information (TMI) - this is the Information Age

From: Helena Kate Whittingham iCloud (iCloud)

This 'Emoji' takeover causes miscommunication and therefore controversy. The definition of each emoji's gets lost and is unique to each person, pushing their own versions of what they mean onto a vague smile. The language used on social media platforms is open to cause confusion for example, a 'like' doesn't always mean 'like' it can be flirting or sarcastic. These social sites and the Internet complicate the meanings of very simple words. For instance, just by typing 'hello' into Google, the Internet has found 840,000,000 results of possible interpretations in 0.34 seconds.

However trivial this may seem, it becomes then problematic IRL. When posting about significant life events such as the death of a loved one (which is now the norm and accepted) the language on sites such as Facebook is vastly limiting, 'liking' the status just doesn't quite fit.

Twitter asks 'what's happening?' and you have a 140-character limit (including hashtags) to answer this. Facebook questions 'What's on your mind?' for your status update, whilst your Facebook wall is now a timeline, highlighting our Postmodernist era obsessed with the past (look what you were doing 5 years ago!). Facebook friends are a two-way interaction but on twitter you can follow someone without them following you. With all of this miscommunication through applications made for communication, this leads us onto censorship.

Did you just block me?

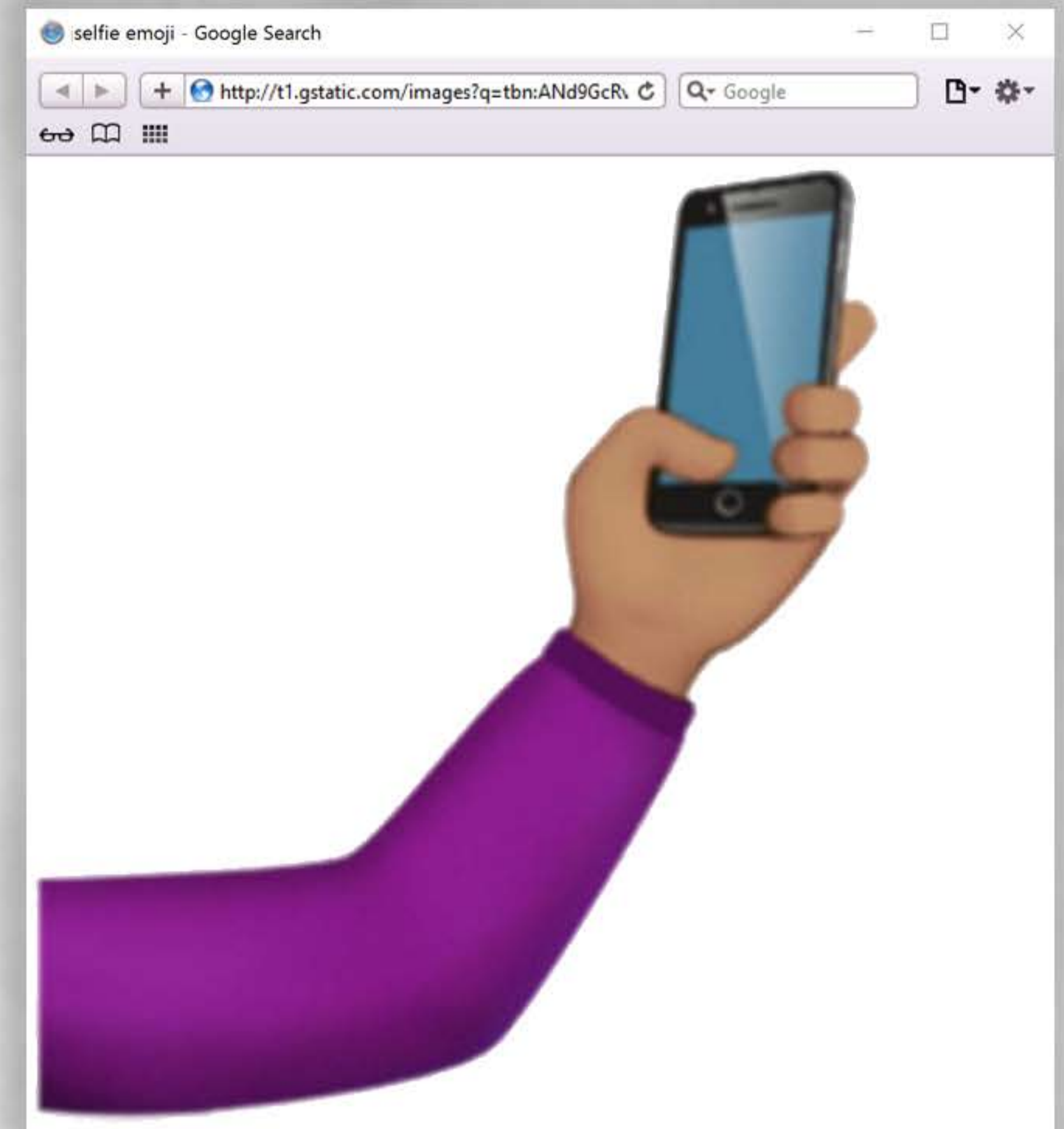
Blocking people on Facebook has become a normal reaction for the end of relationships and friendships. We do the same IRL but online it somehow is deemed 'extreme' because of the format. Instagram has a lot of controversial issues when it comes to censorship, for instance the banning of women's nipples, the 'hashtags' 'curvy girls' and 'eggplant/aubergine emoji' as they are deemed too explicit.

People are so paranoid of hacking they are putting tape over their computer cameras for fear of being watched. Due to information being held in 'the cloud', when situations occur such as leaked nude photos - a division of that 'revenge porn' - the implications are worldwide and catastrophic. Is this private information easier to collate and get a hold of due to the fact its stored in technology and therefore has unlimited copies? The biggest danger is we have a warped view of authorship and viewership, a belief that 'intellectual property is part of a commons' and that we should look at those leaked nude photos because we can.

Alongside these examples of literal censorship on social media platforms, how much do we self-edit and self-censor on social media? How much are we projecting false images of ourselves and expecting to live up to these self-edited versions? We have one foot in the pre-digital era, but the rest of our body fully immersed with technology. As our smartphones are fully becoming an extension of our 'self', how dangerous is this for our future?

An excerpt from 'Looking at Michel Foucault's theory of Panopticism and applying this to our contemporary society- does our constant online presence change our behaviour and how does art embody this notion?'

Helena Kate Whittingham (1994, Middlesbrough) is a cura-artist/writer based in London. Her areas of interest include censorship, institutional critique and the online.







Luke Nairn (b. 1986, Gloucester, UK) works with ideas of highly functional networked dystopias alongside considering our current surveilled society, full of fake news and redacted texts, with the works manifesting as sculptural artifacts, monotonous soundscapes and repetitive video works

So, do you want to start by talking briefly about the work that you're currently producing, the ideas and the forms that are coming to fruition, and how that relates to your artworks relationship with the internet?

I've been writing a lot lately, it started with me making this series of redacted texts that were taken from news sites and became these sort of bit funny bit tragic works about censorship. They're texts within a text, blacking out words revealing these surreptitious meanings. That progressed into an interest in the automated voice and making audio works in that vein. I recently did a residency with Floating Reverie where each day I wrote and recorded these audios that form an abstract dystopic-ish piece of fiction, that weaves appropriated text, automated phrases and the actions of mundane tasks together. I think with what I make there is always this idea present of freedoms of the internet being eroded and the principles of cyber-utopianism being tested.

The series 'Are they names if they're randomly generated' does seem to portray a very Orwellian future, where one encounters targeted ads on the tube based on their Amazon wish list and listens to the sound of a virtual fire for hours as evening entertainment. What are your thoughts on the internet of things, the networking of our devices, not entirely unlike the networked society that you've created through your recordings?

In the series the networked living becomes an oppressing force, it portrays the Internet of things as we know it now, but without any optimism for what a more advanced networked society could bring, and what's created is a conforming, intrusive and repetitive environment. Towards the end of the first audio clip, the narrator talks about blue light interrupting sleep patterns, 'blue light affects levels of the sleep-inducing hormone mel-a- tonin and causes shifts in our internal clocks', how the increased use of devices and integrated systems has the potential to affect our well-being is something the work tries to approach, computer usage having an impact on our ability to sleep feels like an eroding of instinctively human traits/ habits, it's an inadvertent intervention by the networked society over our brain chemistry and these types of interventions will continue to develop as networked society advances. I think we need to be aware of the balance between wellness and technology consumption.

As we as humans evolve alongside our technological devices, slowly loosing what is deemed to be the essence of humanity, aren't we simply creating a new definition of what it means to be human in this hyper connected world?

Does this awareness and interest in increasingly intelligent technology link to the choice of artists and general thinking behind your curatorial project DVD IS DEAD, an Instagram dedicated to showcasing video art on a monthly basis?

That could be true but I feel like we need to be aware of whether that new definition is better than the one we currently have, does a reliance on technology over time regress humanity in some ways, through an increased reliance on automation and computerised systems.

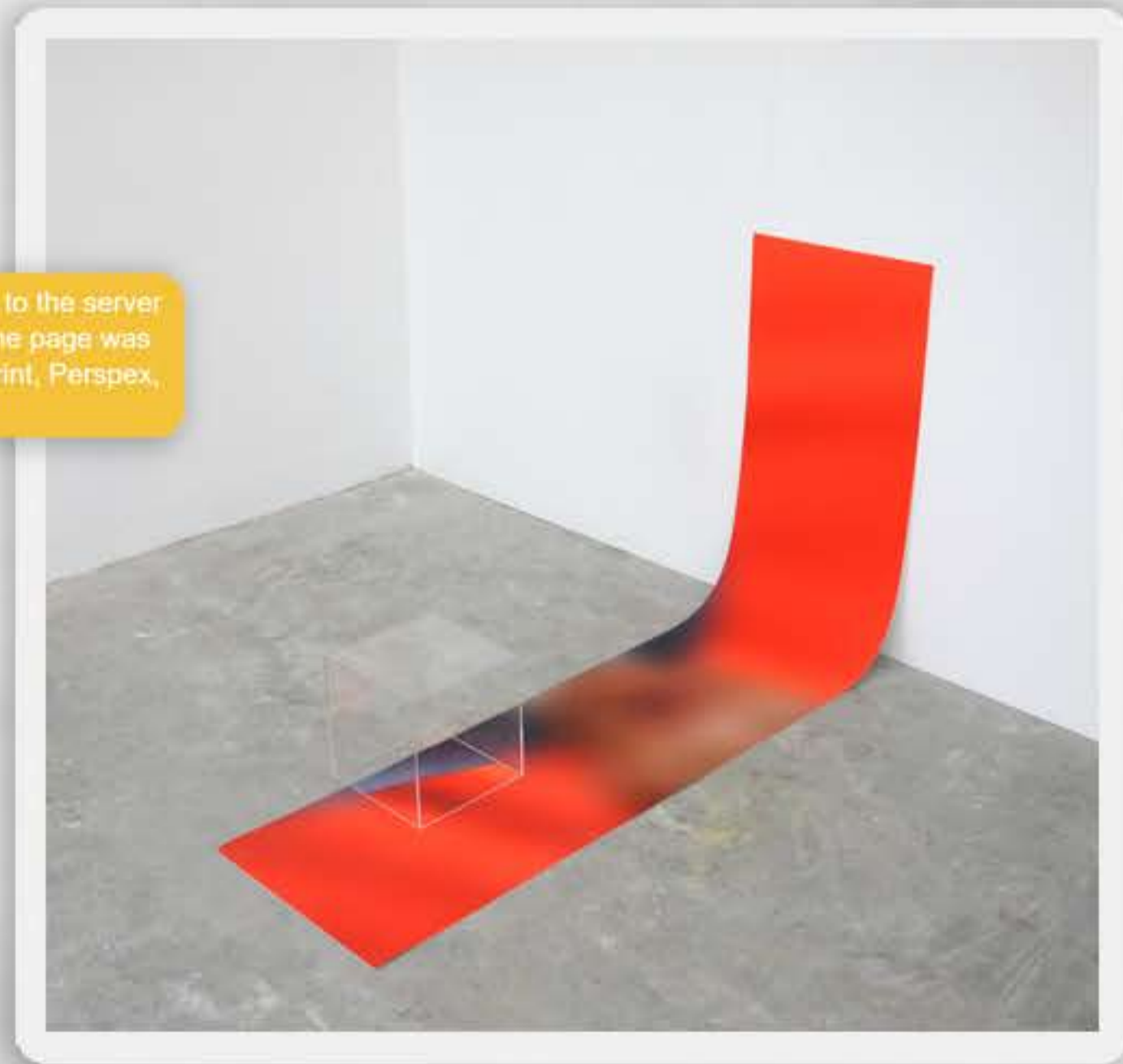
In some ways yes, for example DVD IS DEAD has shown work by artists including Jack Fisher and Kitty Clark, whose work in ways have those same concerns of intelligent technology but I am also quite conscious not to select exclusively artists whose practises have those motivations. I try to be open to a variety of different kinds of work so for instance Leah Clements or Ashley Holmes who are not making work about technology necessarily but use technology as a vehicle for what they do. I think to fully explore video as a medium all of its avenues need to be tried and tested and for me the channel is about the accessibility of video art in all its forms. I see DVD IS DEAD as one platform piggybacking on another, that's an important aspect of the project for me. I think that with the advancement of technology into every avenue of daily life video has this great potential to intercept that. The more this type of online work bleeds through into the public sphere and not solely into the art world I think in the long term that will continue to help re-frame contemporary art as accessible and anti-elitist.

*Sit back and enjoy the ride
For a second see the city with the eyes you arrived here with
On board charging ports provided for your convenience
Exit vehicle*



Are they names if they're randomly generated, image visualisation of audio works, 2017

! The Connection to the server was reset while the page was loading, Digital Print, Perspex, 2016





This comment was removed by a moderator because it didn't abide by our community standards, Concrete, 2018

In one sense Instagram is the perfect place to re-frame video art, infiltrating the masses in an accessible way, although the throwaway nature of the application and social media in general is concerning, especially within an art context. On the other hand, if the aim is to make art less elitist, then maybe adding that throwaway aspect to the work is important due to how we as human beings interact with things in the 'internet age', skim reading an article whilst simultaneously watching a film and eating dinner... In 2016 you took part in The iPhone Residency, using your time to explore the aesthetics of the iPhone alongside how it's used as a tool to document and re-frame information. What was this body of work influenced by?

I think those concerns about throw away online culture are completely valid, one of my thoughts at the time of starting the channel was about the amount of documentation of shows and works you could see online and especially on a photo specific app like Instagram, there's this whole thing we all go through where we are aware of show after show because we've seen the pics online and in that sense (for me personally anyway) it can prevent a physical interaction with that exhibition. I wanted to start a project that was focused on utilising the Internet to produce new work that engaged with that online environment and didn't just use it passively...The iPhone res work was focused around authoritarian controls of the Internet and more broadly censorship. The residency became this time where I was endlessly trying to distort a fact, a material, a view, through these multiple means, like setting a device in concrete or marker penning out text from a speech. I feel like on reflection this point in history will be defined by the battle between the founding principles of the Internet and bodies that are trying to alter them and that process I was engaged in on the res was trying to capture that power struggle. Capturing and creating this digital information and then getting rid of it, at the end I was left with a load of photos and video clips that were just blurs.

I definitely agree that during the past few years we've been seeing dramatic changes to the fundamental principles of the Internet, with (obviously) the Snowden revelations in 2013 and more recently the Investigatory Powers Act being passed in the UK in late 2016, linking to alternative facts and the rise of Trump... I enjoy the physical embedding and blurring of the work, taking the adage 'blurring the truth' literally, and in a way blurring yourself into a corner it seems, unable to see where the original truth lies. Would it be correct to assume that you envision the web 3.0 of tomorrow to visualise your dystopic sound works that we talked about earlier, or do you think there's hope for a future that resembles the utopian dreams of the late 80s?

I think there is the potential for that more hopeful Utopian future but I think it's likely we will live through a real life dystopia to get to it. There are so many obvious comparisons with the political situation of now and the 1930/40's. After the fall of fascism the political left's ideology flourished (the creation of the NHS under a socially reforming Labour Party in the UK or the forming of the United Nations for example) out of such oppression and destruction came new and refreshed passion for community and freedom, and thinking of that resurgence creates hope that the only thing that these alt-right defined times now signify are a prelude to revolutionary social change. That will inevitably be implemented with the Internet as an indispensable tool and the complete automation of services ushering in a new age of social redistribution. So yes I do very much believe in the possibility of that utopia but I fear it will be a consequence of the world I am describing in the audio work.

I guess progress in any situation can't happen without significant change, which is something we're definitely currently experiencing... What's next for you?

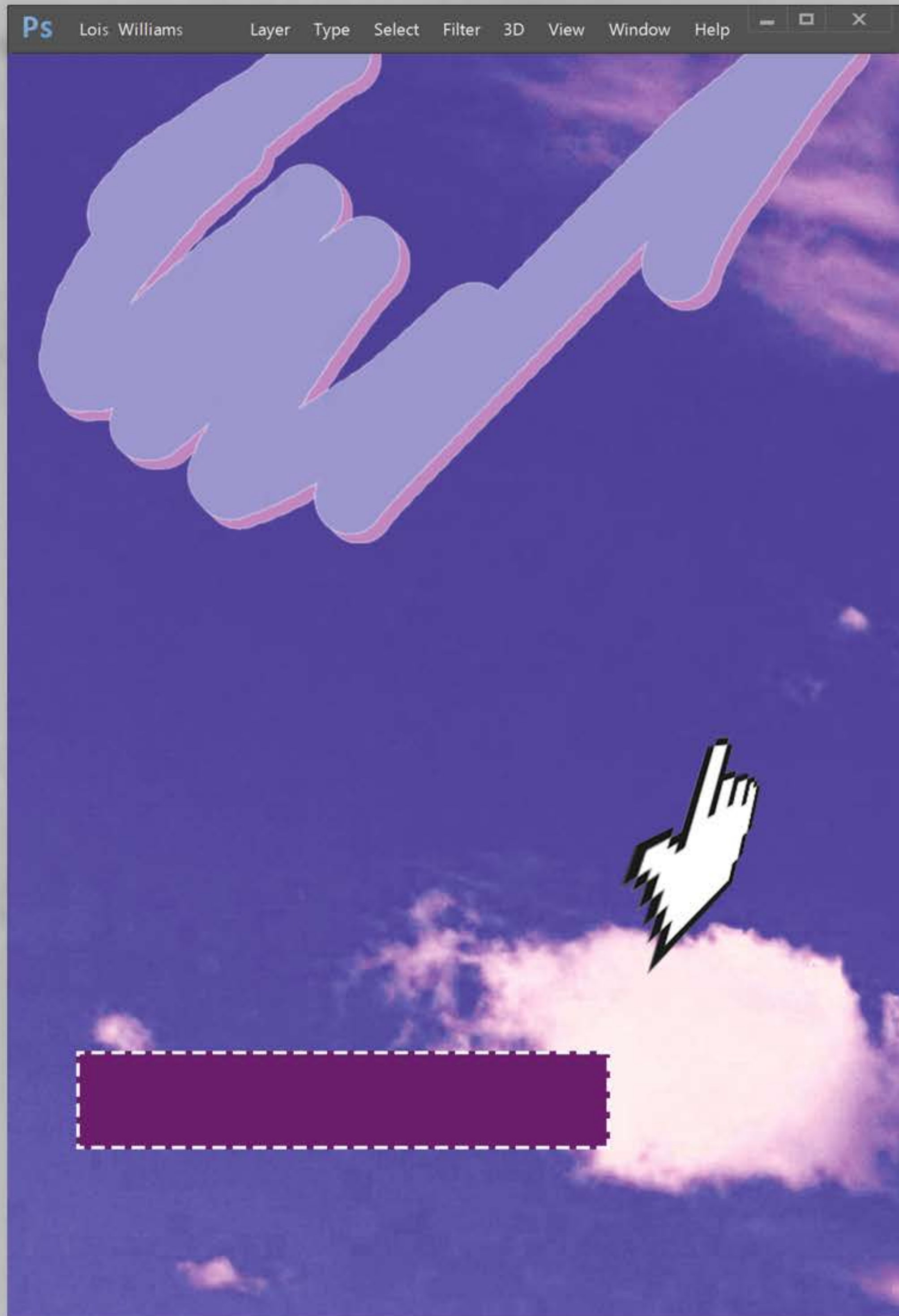
Curating an online exhibiting on isthisit? in April which I'm really looking forward to, more info coming soon, and some amazing artists coming up on DVD IS DEAD over the next few months, Will Kendrick is doing March and the vids are really exciting. Also I've been working on a new body of sculptural work, they are trying to be sort of slick, assemblage, listening device type objects and I'm working with new processes and materials to make them so I'm on a steep learning curve. Am looking at having an exhibition of some of them later in the year if things all work out.

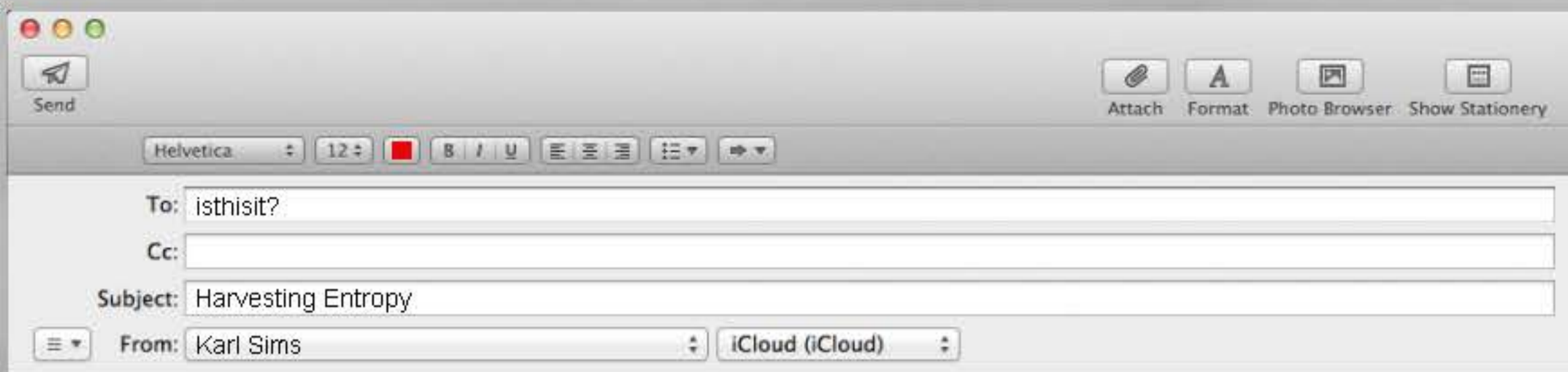


Intelligent shopper ordered
Aloe Vera Colon Cleanse Tablets 330mg
Item returned
800mg requested

Are they names if they're randomly generated, image visualisation of audio works, 2017







Emergent in our contemporary digital culture we find the practices of both the aggregation and obfuscation of data. Issues surrounding access and control of data provide an ongoing debate in the discourse of New Media. Big Data practices afford the expanding quantification of social and physical phenomena. However, not always proving advantageous, this may often be at the expense of an individual's agency. Encryption affords restriction of access to data through its coded conversion but its implementation is generally limited to digital security experts. This essay will briefly explore possible frameworks of disruption in the age of Big Data, specifically the concerning the obfuscation of social mining. Looking at concerns in relation to social application, Big Data will be framed as an attempt to control and order the chaos of our socio-technical culture. The idea of Harvesting Entropy will be introduced in the context of random number generation and computational encryption. This will then be expanded, going on to look at other examples where the utilisation of entropy can provide users with more control over their data.

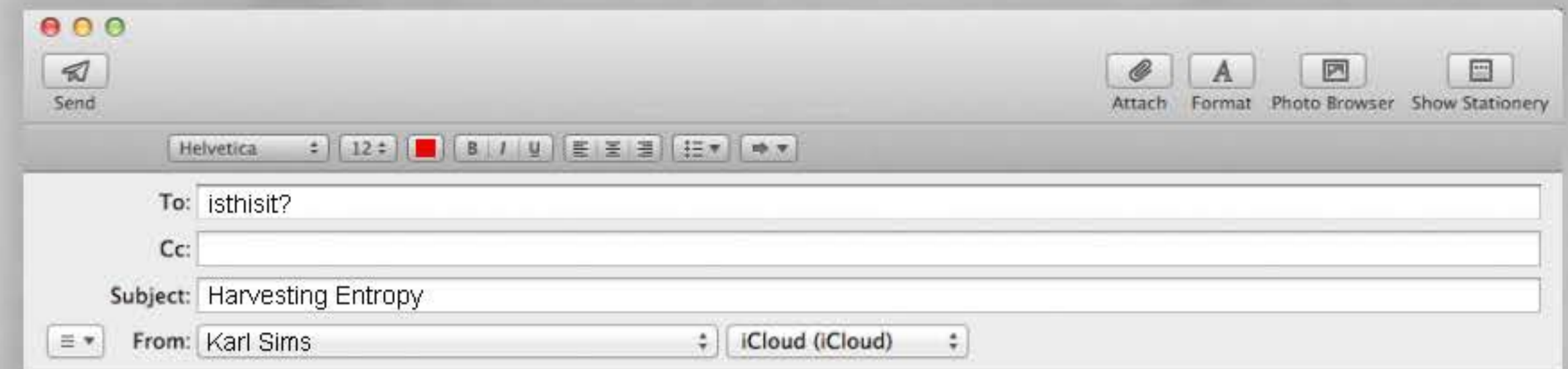
Big Data Against Chaos

Chaos is defined in its relation to physics as; 'The property of a complex system whose behaviour is so unpredictable as to appear random, owing to great sensitivity to small changes in conditions'. Though it has been argued to be inspired by physics, Deleuze and Guattari attempt to frame it in terms of an untraceable speed of transformation². Edward Lorenz, a key figure in the field of chaos theory is said to have described chaos as, 'when the present predicts the future, but the approximate present does not predict the approximate future'. These propositions do not strictly claim absolute randomness or complete incomprehension, moreover the perception of these characteristics. In popular dialogue, we come across the idea of the butterfly effect – that small changes can have big effects at a later point. With this is the reverse mythology that if one can create a detailed enough picture of the present, one can predict the future and likely control it. Big Data presents its self as the key to unlocking ever expanding fields of understanding through its quantitative mapping of phenomena. As the IBM advert went, "Our data isn't just telling us what's going on in the world [...] It's actually telling us where the world is going".

Through Big Data, self-surveillance and machine learning it seems we have now entered 'the age of infinite examination and objectification'⁵, as proposed by Foucault. None of this has been made possible without at least our partial consent. Ever the utilitarian's, in exchange for technology we have bartered our privacy. In Gilles Deleuze's short essay Post Script on the Societies of Control he extends notions of Foucault closer to the present. Proposing a shift from the notion of the individual to the 'dividual', now one becomes part of samples, masses and data⁶. Here control becomes numerical and encoded, denying or facilitating access to information. These inequalities found within the access and construction of knowledge correlate with presupposed power relations that shape future agency. With the digital ever extending its influence into the material world, it seems all that can be quantified will be.

Big Data is everywhere, in both academic and commercial research, its information in aggregate form underpins government and private policy. Embodying the new and smart, there is very much a pressure to employ these quantitative methods to remain competitive – As Kenneth Cukier claims 'Big Data is better data'. Though the benefits of Big Data are often rhetorically apparent, beyond the obvious privacy issues, its unregulated proliferation and lack of transparency often cause other problems that evade identification. Each platform that mediates its collection operates with its own affordances for user agency. There are indeed good and bad practices of big data, but as Lisa Gitelman cites "'raw data" is an oxymoron⁸. Data is not information, or knowledge, or wisdom. Moreover, it is 'that which is given prior to argument'. Due to the inherent disorder in data, its aggregation demands that it be 'cleaned' and constructed prior to analysis. The questions or models posed to the data ultimately generate the information derived from it. This selective process nether the less serves frame and shape the 'real'. This relationship to the real ranges from ontological, to merely rhetorical, the distinction is not always clear. Recent political results have repeatedly proven the data analysts wrong. Even Cambridge Analytica, who have received notoriety for their apparent swaying of the US Election result provided no greater accuracy. Just like the rest their models of the present, based on their models of the past where not able to predict the future.

Though we are often assured our data profiles are not directly linkable by name, alg-orithmic processing is used to personalise our digital experience. Through this categorisation we are targeted by ads, news stories and political messages that follow us around the internet. The ideas of the Filter Bubble¹⁰, or ideological echo chamber argue not just a model of environment as a reflection of ourselves but instead resembling a caricature, somewhere in the realm of the uncanny. Considering Big Data and algorithmic personalisation, digital privacy isn't merely a matter having something to hide, it has the capacity to affect our future decisions and capacity for action. Defining the post-digital world, is it as David Berry suggests, a situation where 'the computational has become hegemonic'¹¹? By systemically delegating decision...



...making processes to machines and algorithms, conclusions can be made about people without transparent deliberation. How users can retain control over their data and its uses is not apparent. Disruptions are small on the systemic level and as Ned Rossiter argues, 'we see or become aware of infrastructure only when it no longer works'¹².

Random Numbers, Encryption & the Computation of Disorder

Within the field of computational encryption, secure systems are created by their ability to generate disorder and remain unpredictable. Embedded within this process is the generation of random numbers, a complicated matter for machines and humans alike. Safe guarding against inception, encrypted content remains unintelligible to any unwanted eyes. One thing that is interesting about this process is how purely logical machines operating under a specific set of fixed procedures can reliably produce random unpredictable behaviour. In most cases, other than encryption, random number generators (RNGs) are never truly random and are instead classified as pseudo random number generators (PRNGs). Most modern programming languages are known to use the Mersenne Twister PRNG, which although chosen for its lengthy repeat cycle, still holds a practical chance of prediction. Even so, the application of PRNGs is sufficiently unpredictable for humans to make things interesting in computer games and other such amusements. This is because for the most part the generated values are enough to obscure recognisable patterns from users. However, when used for encryption to guard sufficiently valuable information, someone will find a way to decipher the encoded data.

In the generation of random numbers deemed secure enough for encryption purposes, two principal computational paradigms exist. Sometimes used together, their return values are deemed securely random for their practical unpredictability. One method of achieving this is through obstructive use of mathematical procedures. Here, pattern recognition is blocked by sheer complexity, or the unrealistic computational time needed to reverse engineer the equations used. Though practically unsolvable this methodology is technically still a PRNG, and often used when other methods aren't available. The second methodology, which is the point of interest of this essay, is the practice of harvesting entropy. This process relies instead on the recoding of physical phenomena through specialised hardware, capturing information that is naturally disorderly and unpredictable. A sensor device is fitted on most modern computers that tracks a variety of physical phenomena for this purpose, the information is then processed to return random values.

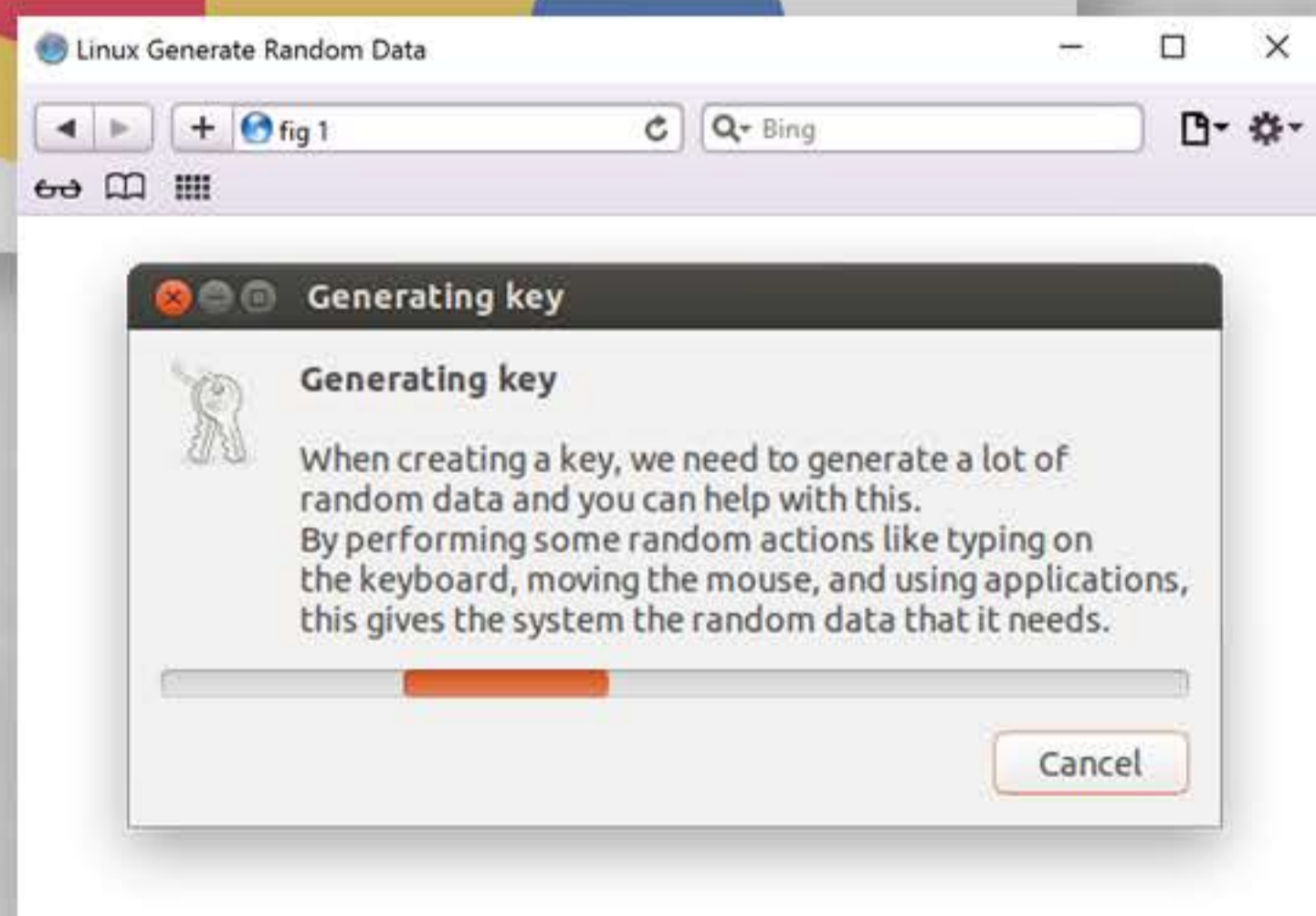
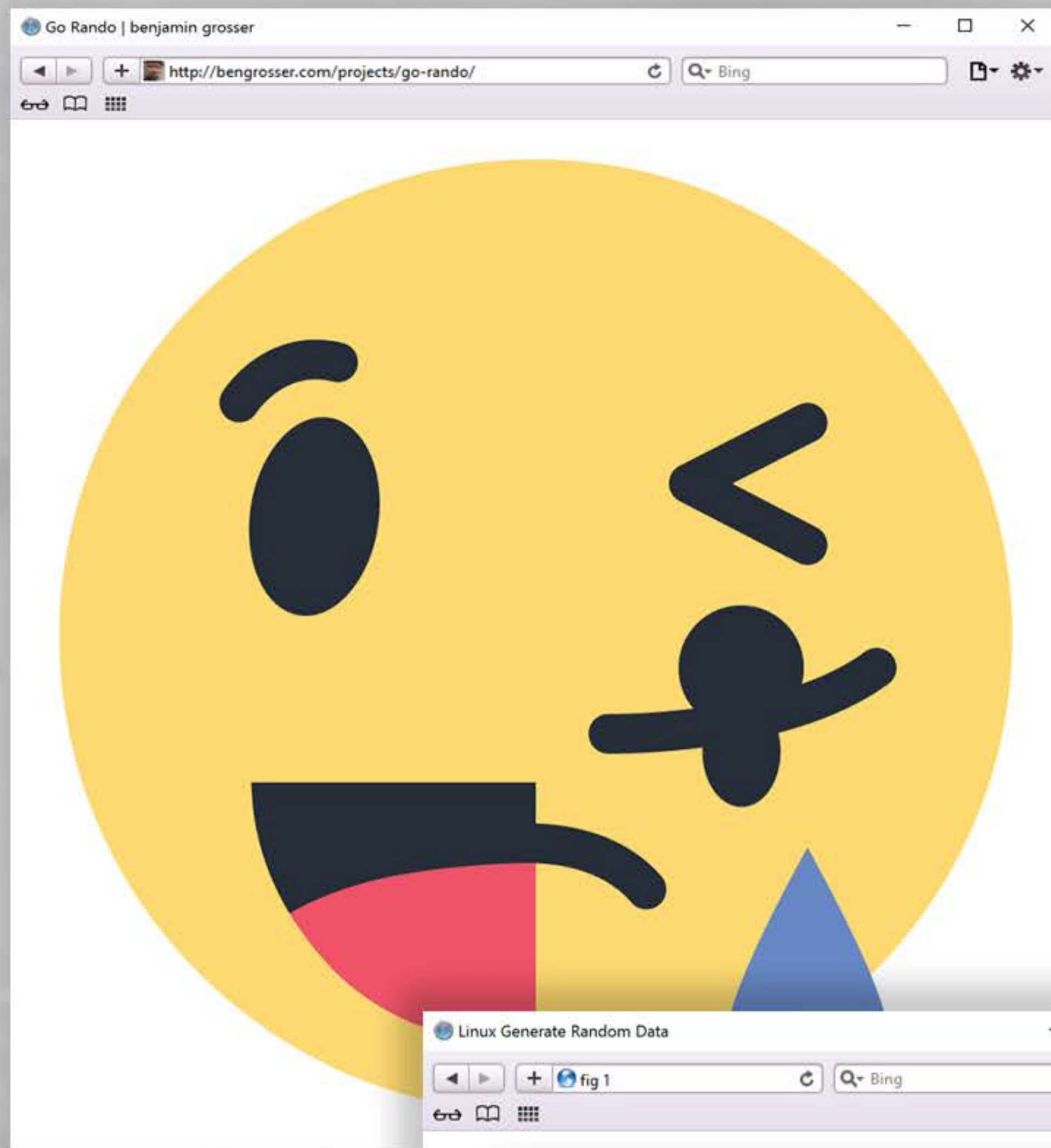
Depending on context, entropy can be harvested from a variety of phenomena, this could range from recording dice rolls to measuring radioactive decay. In some cases, human action provides a reliable source of unpredictability for this purpose. A random key generator on the Linux platform gathers impulsive user actions as a part of its entropy harvesting process (fig.1). Though spontaneous mouse clicks and keypresses recorded to the exact millisecond are disorderly and extremely unpredictable, most human behaviour is more habitual with recognisable patterns that can be traced. For instance, pick a number between 1-10, remember it and read on.

The specific actions or decisions of an individual in a crowd might be hard to predict, but in theory, the more you know about that person the greater your predictive capacity may be. You may know someone well enough to predict their computer password. You very likely know what kind of food they like or what their daily routine entails. Human behaviour also has its own natural tendencies that are not so personal. When just asked to pick a number between 1-10, statistically you are more likely to have chosen 7. What you know of those close to you is qualitatively gathered through ongoing interaction. Data companies aspire to this level of familiarity through the quantification of your digital traces. Harvesting entropy may offer a scalable method of disruption. As methods of harvesting data expand their horizons, your actions combined with programmatically generated disorder could provide an expanding source of disorder to confuse and divert attention. This would generate false patterns that reduce data's potential value and power over you.

In a Stampede, Will They Still See Your Footprints

Though without fully opting out (if this is even possible) there aren't really any fail-safe methods of protecting yourself from social data mining. In minimizing your digital footprint, there are several technologies available help to cloak communication drastically, e.g. the Tor browser, various encryption services and not sharing any personal information. However, the most widely used services often require personal information for use. Taking a different approach, the embedding of your actions within that programmatically generated cloaks your actions in a sea of noise. In this way, you can still use the services the same without having to give an authentic picture of yourself.

The browser extension Track Me Not (TMN) obfuscates your search profile by running a background process that hides...



To: isthisit?
Cc:
Subject: Harvesting Entropy
From: Karl Sims

...your own queries within a 'stream of programmatically generated decoys'¹³. Its creators reason its creation as a way for users to have more of a say in their relationship with search companies. Describing it not as a finished product but a prototype/proof of concept for what they call 'privacy through obfuscation'¹⁴. Though not operating fully on concepts of randomness, the distinction between the generated queries and your own remains hard to ascertain. To emulate human behaviour more effectively the extension takes a variety of inputs from which to -generate random search queries. These are gathered from things like RSS feeds which keep the content current and evolving over time. Through this methodology TMN allows users to retain a commitment without altering search browsing behaviours.

The artist and assistant professor of new media Benjamin Grosser has created several applications that attempt to alter browsing experiences in novel and interesting ways. His Facebook Demetricator browser extension removes your ability to quantify your posts value, aiming to change the social dynamics of the site. Also targeting Facebook, his latest project Go Rando obfuscates your reactions to posts within the site. By randomly selecting a reaction for you when you click the like button it systematically disrupts this process, reducing value to the recently added feature. Users can still choice if they want to select a reaction but the default is set at random.

Within the concept of the digital footprint there are two classifications, active and passive. The passive is considered when the user is not aware of the data being collected about them. An active footprint is where a user is deliberately sharing information about themselves, typically via social media or other websites. However, these distinctions don't necessarily exist beyond abstraction, data after all is a commodity. What is actively shared in confidence with one company is often sold to others and what exactly being shared is not always known. In his book The Filter Bubble, Eli Pariser discusses the idea of the tyranny of the default, citing a study of organ donation rates in Europe correlating higher donation rate to countries with donation as default. He goes on to argue that the social media sites use people's tendencies to the default to increase the amount of information we share about ourselves¹⁵. In this way, having to alter your settings requires time and the right knowledge to do so, something that is not always easily available. Even with various options available, users still must take the time to change certain aspects of their experience.

The activity of Harvesting entropy provides an overarching framework for practices of disruption in the age of Big Data. By surrounding your actions with programmatically collected disorder, moderate privacy through obfuscation can be achieved without completely opting out of services. Moving forward this could serve as the basis for development projects and ways for users to have more control over their data.

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² Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. 1994. What is Philosophy?. New York, NY: Columbia University press.
³ Lorenz, E. Cited in Danforth, C M. 2013. [Online]. Chaos in an Atmosphere Hanging on a Wall. Mathematics of Planet Earth 2013. Available from: <http://mpe2013.org/2013/03/17/chaos-in-an-atmosphere-hanging-on-a-wall/>
⁴ 2009 – 2010 IBM Advert Cited in: Gitelman, L. 2013. "Raw data" is an Oxymoron. Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England: The MIT Press.
⁵ Foucault, M. 2012. Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison. 2nd Edition. Vintage.
⁶ Deleuze, G. 1992. Postscript on the Societies of Control. October, [Online]. 59, pp. 3-7. Available from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778828>
⁷ Cukier, K. 2014. Big Data Is Better Data. TED Salon Berlin. June 2014. Available from: https://www.ted.com/talks/kenneth_cukier_big_data_is_better_data
⁸ Gitelman, L. 2013. "Raw data" is an Oxymoron. Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England: The MIT Press
⁹ Kitchin, R. 2014. The Data Revolution: Big Data, Open Data, Data Infrastructures and their Consequences. London, UK. Sage
¹⁰ Pariser Eli, 2012. The Filter Bubble. London, UK: Penguin Books Ltd
¹¹ Berry, D. 2014. Post-Digital Humanities: Computation and Cultural Critique in the Arts and Humanities. Educause Review. [Online]. Available from: <http://er.educause.edu/articles/2014/5/postdigital-humanities-computation-and-cultural-critique-in-the-arts-and-humanities>
¹² Rossiter, N. 2016. Software, Infrastructure, Labor: A Media Theory of Logistical Nightmares. Edition. Routledge.
¹³ Nissenbaum, H. & Howe, D. 2009. TrackMeNot: Resisting Surveillance in Web Search. In: On the Identity Trail: Privacy, Anonymity and Identity in a Networked Society. Oxford University Press. Available from: <http://www.nyu.edu/projects/nissenbaum/papers/HoweNissenbaum.pdf>
¹⁴ Ibid.
¹⁵ Pariser Eli, 2012.

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