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Post-Representational Presence: Disruptive Actions & Visibility Politics In New Media

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Post-Representational Presence:
Disruptive Actions & Visibility Politics In New Media

by

Christian Hendricks

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts Studio Art, Hunter College
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Thesis Sponsor:

December 15th, 2017
Date

Daniel Bozhkov
Signature

December 15th, 2017
Date

Andrea Blum
Signature

Preface

The following is the written component to a master's thesis in the fine arts. It is a research-intensive text that conventionally examines contemporary conditions of politics and representation, and analyzes the most innovative artists and visual producers working in these areas. However, the text also includes exercise modules with "challenges" for the reader, similar to a textbook. In the modules, the examples provided are works of my own. I will also include text, images, and documentation of my own work.

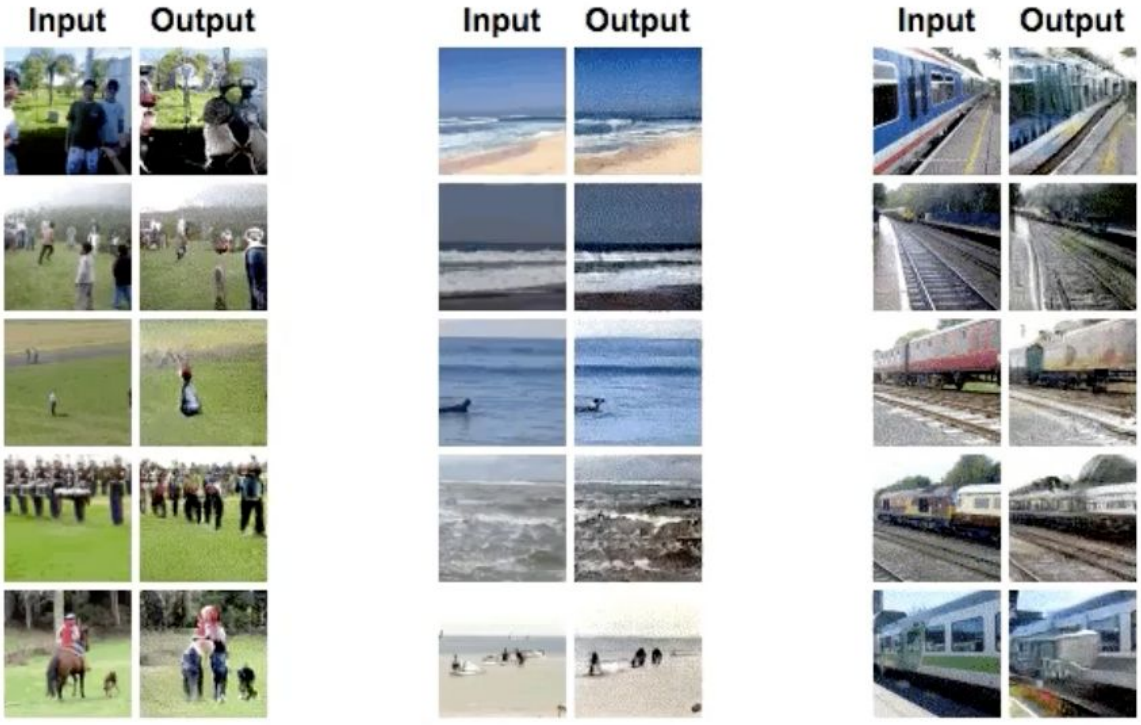
Introduction



Robert Frank's *The Americans* is a book of photographs of American society in the 1950s. Frank, a European outsider, photographed both public and private life in all corners of the United States, but the subtext of the book is that America has a race problem. By rendering hidden taboos visible, it serves as an indictment of a nation's egregious indifference towards racial inequality. The elegance and sophistication with which this complexity is visually described ranks *The Americans* among the most significant photography books of the 20th

century. This visual description process, in which there is a link between the photograph, what is depicted, and what is suggested, is the hallmark of photography's representational circuitry. It is how a *presence* can be re-*presented*. It is why photography (and its descendants, film and video) is the premiere tool for representation. This paper is not about this type of representation.

Major developments in recent decades have rewired representation altogether. The internet has complicated representations of people and their identities, while the substitution of capitalism for democracy has attenuated possibilities for political representation. As writer Hito Steyerl has noted, representation has become something closer to a speculation of what a consumer wants to see, rather than a truthful depiction of reality. Reality according to the internet is not represented so much as it is virtually fabricated and auctioned off in real time. Unlike a "real" photograph of a person, digital technologies (called "machine learning") can now instantaneously generate a lifelike depiction of someone just from the images of them that are publicly available online. This new circuitry is not representational at all–it is, as Steyerl puts it, *post-representational*. Steyerl writes: "Computational photography is therefore inherently political—not in content but in form. It is not only relational but also truly social, with countless systems and people potentially interfering with pictures before they even emerge as visible. And of course this network is not neutral. It has rules and norms hardwired into its platforms, and they represent a mix of juridical, moral, aesthetic, technological, commercial, and bluntly hidden parameters and effects. You could end up airbrushed, wanted, redirected, taxed, deleted, remodeled, or replaced in your own picture. The camera turns into a social projector rather than a recorder. It shows a superposition of what it thinks you might want to look like plus what others think you should buy or be."



Machine learning software autonomously constructing photographic composites mimicking photographs

Democratic and social representation today rely on the systems that circulate the information which legitimize them. These systems are communication networks, like the internet. These networks range from the macro (such as the telecom infrastructures and social media servers) down to the micro (such as the rapidfire languages of the internet, like viral content, memes, and hashtags). The operations of communication networks have traditionally been regulated by governments, but this is increasingly less so. In fact, as Keller Easterling has demonstrated, the definition of statehood itself is up for debate in the internet age; corporations that trade in global communications commonly operate outside of state control. This complicates matters for determining precisely where power is located, providing enormous opportunity for shrouding manipulative and dishonest activity. This is most beneficial to those who control the tools for mass and social media. Under such constrictive conditions, alternatives for effective political, social, and cultural representation seem nearly hopeless. Individuals that are both artists

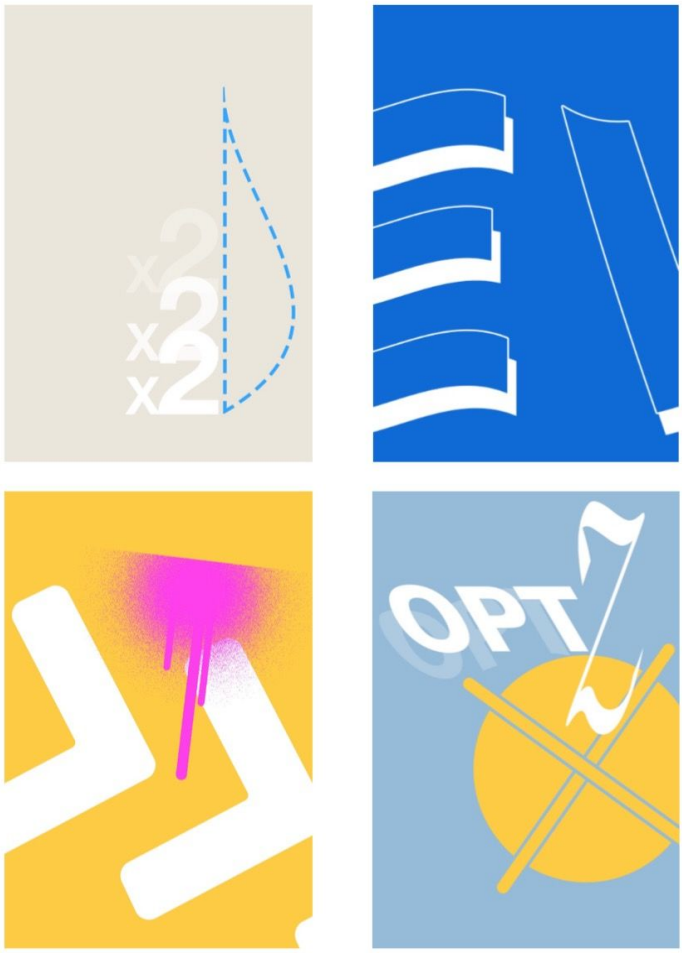
and politically engaged are doubly concerned with both visual and democratic representation. If representation itself is already compromised, how do the individuals most concerned with it contend with these conditions? Easterling provides a starting point for answering this question in her extensive research on what she labels "infrastructure space." Infrastructure space is a techno-bureaucratic hybrid space wherein corporations operate as if they were equal to or even *superior to* governments. She posits that activists that strive to achieve political visibility must develop entirely new methods:

> "Just as many of the most powerful regimes in the world find it expedient to operate with proxies and doubles in infrastructure space, the most familiar forms of activism might similarly benefit from using undisclosed partners or unorthodox auxiliaries, if only to soften up the ground and offer a better chance of success. An unorthodox auxiliary entertains techniques that are less heroic, less automatically oppositional, more effective, and sneakier—techniques like gossip, rumor, gift-giving, compliance, mimicry, comedy, remote control, meaninglessness, misdirection, distraction, hacking, or entrepreneurialism."

I follow Easterling's claim, and argue that some creative strategies as such already exist. These are what I consider to be *post-representational* strategies. Post-representational strategies differ from representational strategies (such as photojournalism) in that they do not reflect or mimic a reality – they *produce* a reality. In order to both counter and operate in tandem with extralegal or algorithmically generated realities, political artists are constructing innovative ways to enter and subvert the mechanisms of surveillance and capitalism. Often times the creators of such work enter the frame of the images themselves to engage with the subject matter, or they'll remain off-screen, but orchestrate complex circumstances to properly depict a social fact. Often relying on methods and norms of performativity, these works are hybrid products of research,

fabulation, exploration, and self-reflexivity. I examine here a selection of individuals that are working in such ways. These include artists like Walid Raad and Renzo Martens, documentary filmmakers like Joshua Oppenheimer and Robert Green, socially engaged mediamakers that evade proper categorization like Jill Magid and Nathan Fielder, as well as works that I have spent the three few years producing in my graduate studies.

For 20th century image-makers like Robert Frank, presence was simply the opposite of absence. But to constitute a radical, post-representational presence is to produce images that are simultaneously truthful and constructed, both documentarian and performative.

POST-REPRESENTATIONAL EXERCISE 1.1	
 *Four possible designs of mine for an impossible evacuation route.*	**CHALLENGE:** **Design public signage, routes and maps for impossible evacuations.**

Post-Representational Politics: From The Composite To The Proxy

To properly set the stage for unpacking these post-representational strategies, it is important to outline the emerging era of politics under which these artists operate. Politics today is no longer a classical politicking of rhetorical persuasion and widespread deliberation. What used to be a series of debates, speeches and advertisements broadcast through the one-way pipeline of television is now a series of participatory feedback loops on the internet. Political

campaigns of yore crafted messages to appeal to entire regions or nations. In their research, political strategists and data analysts would develop "composites." Composites are fictional, demographically configured individuals made from an averaged score based on survey data. They are measurement devices to gage the pulse of the public. Ideally, these composites would accurately reflect, and thus represent, a public.

In recent years, however, political data research has changed. Now, politicking is less about persuasion and deliberation towards a composite-based public than it is about altering the psychology of the individual. Hito Steyerl notes: "As humans feed affect, thought, and sociality into algorithms, algorithms feed back into what used to be called subjectivity." This transformation of subjectivity has dire consequences. Building on Foucault's conception of biopower, John Cheney-Lippold has specified and updated a new digital, data-driven category of power. Cheney-Lippold calls this algorithmically determined type of manipulation "soft biopower." In regards to the internet's new capacity for regulating the public, Cheney-Lippold writes:

> "Discipline has often become more or less unnecessary if control can be enacted through a series of guiding, determining, and persuasive mechanisms of power. Instead of constructing subjectivity exclusively through disciplinary power, with normative discourses prefiguring how we engage with and even talk about the world, a regulative approach allows for a distance between power and subject (Foucault, 2008). It configures life by tailoring its conditions of possibility. Regulation predicts our lives as users by tethering the potential for alternative futures to our previous actions as users based on consumption and research for consumption."

For over half of the global population, life today is almost completely an online affair, and life consists of consequential behavior and decision making. Decisions to buy one way or

vote another are no longer encouraged through blanket advertising to a large general public, but insidiously engineered through constructing unique realities from one user to another. Images, such as advertisements, are now uniquely designed and displayed based on data gathered from previous behavior by the user. This technology is termed "microtargetting." Google, Facebook and Amazon are the primary authorities on this technology. Whereas prior to the internet, wherein mass media communications were crafted based on generalized demographic composites, images are now uniquely designed to be the most appealing to users. This constitutes a feedback loop: behavioral data is captured, which is used to create unique online experiences, which is intended to modify behavior. This growing dataset on individuals eliminates the need for demographic composites. Instead of representative composites, there are now digital versions of citizens, complete with all of their subjective ideas that inform their decisions. These datasets aren't collective composites, but individual *proxies*. They stand in for people, yet are totally inaccessible to the people that they represent.

These techniques have already become standard in electoral politics. For example, the 2016 presidential election in the United States saw a remarkable use of this technology. On February 24th 2016, a Black Lives Matter protester confronted Hillary Clinton at a fundraiser about her 1996 speech on "super predators." A video of the confrontation surfaced and quickly went viral on social media. A Bloomberg report published on October 27th 2016 included a statement by a senior political strategist on the Trump campaign which revealed there were "voter suppression operations" underway, including a campaign exclusively targeting African American voters. The ads used in this campaign included the same "super predators" narrative that was leveraged in the staged Black Lives Matter event. Here, the political activity was identified as valuable based on its virality. A grassroots activist effort to achieve visibility was

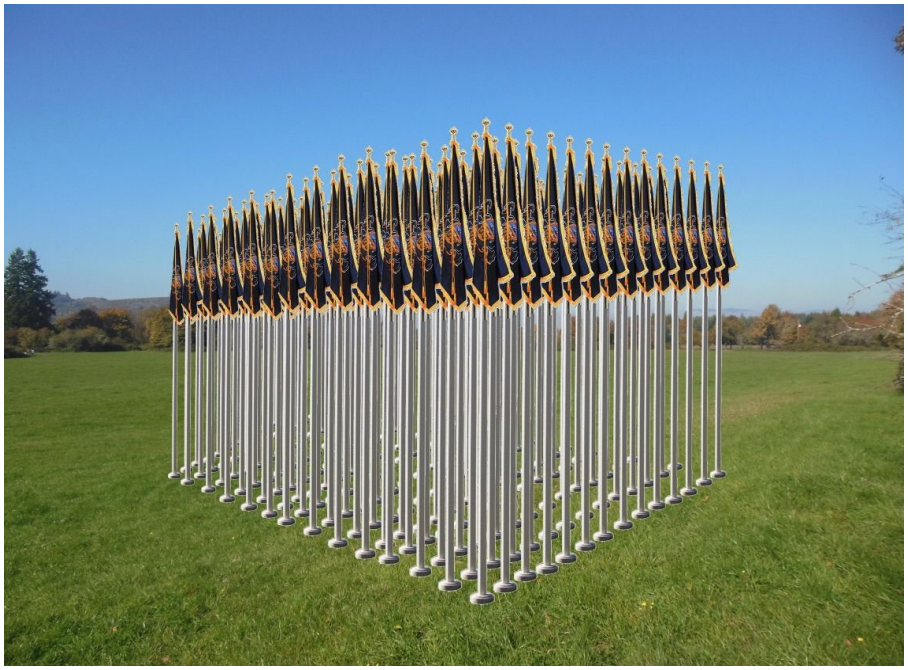
viciously transformed into suppressing the vote of the precise group it intended to speak on behalf of. This is a remarkable use of technology to undermine representational politics.

Historically, this is best viewed as a drastic sharpening of Guy Debord's suspicion of the image-based society. What Debord once labeled as "the spectacular system" may now be more accurately described as "the post-representational system."

> "The more he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires. The spectacle's estrangement from the acting subject is expressed by the fact that the individual's gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him."

Debord wrote under the assumptions of a masses or a public that collectively endured spectacle and simulation. But today's public is different; today the public experiences simulation individually. The rise of digital technologies such as microtargeting has altered the public irrevocably. This public, as it stands now, is one with the potential to shed itself of democracy and create a permanent user-based underclass that is bound to unique, engineered, private experiences that do not properly reflect the reality beyond their screens.

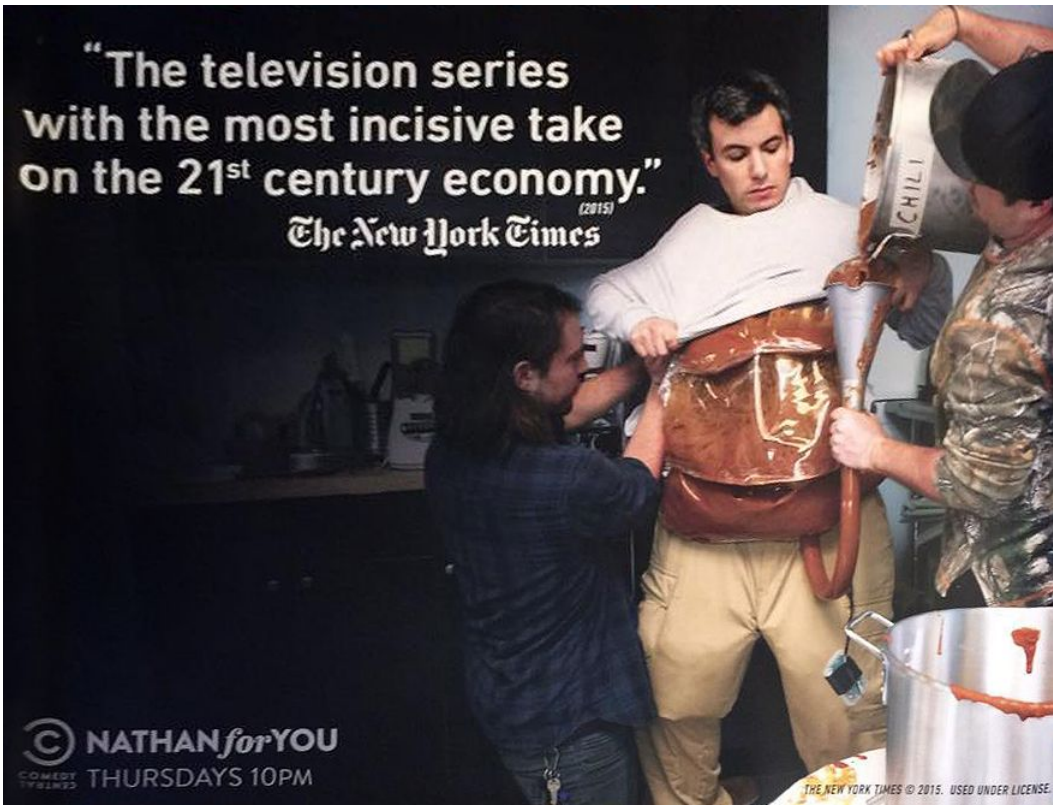
POST-REPRESENTATIONAL EXERCISE 1.2



Public Art proposal: 193 flags of Nebraska in a field in Kentucky. One flag for every country in the UN. (Collaboration with Elizabeth Kinnison)

Challenge:
Create a public artwork that confounds the geographic territory in which it resides.

A Disruptive Presence



In 2015 *ArtNews* declared that the best conceptual artist of the year wasn't an artist at all, but Nathan Fielder, the host of a Comedy Central reality show (*Nathan For You*). The show follows Fielder as he acts as a professional consultant, suggesting and executing elaborate, self-sabotaging, and absurd ideas for boosting profits of existing businesses. According to ArtNews:

> "*Nathan For You* is probably best known for its second season episode 'Dumb Starbucks,' in which Fielder, as a way to help out an ailing local coffee shop, opens up a replica of the famous chain with one major difference: every menu item has 'dumb' in front of it: dumb latte; dumb espresso; dumb frappuccino...In one episode, Fielder manages to make fun of both commercialism and the kind of art that mocks commercialism, all the while creating a viral media stir in earnest."

Through satire, the show attacks the microcosms that stilt otherwise unobserved neoliberal machinations: vicious consumerism and insidious marketing. Through something closer to pranking than it is to art, Fielder exits the backdoor of neoliberal ideology, sneaks back in the front door as a caricature of himself, thus becoming his own freely-operating proxy. This cheeky strategy is a system override that yields unexpected outcomes. It is doubly disruptive: disruptive to the conventions of reality television, and disruptive to what is being depicted – the economic environment Fielder engages with. By engaging with the public, Fielder leaves a certain amount of what unfolds up to chance. There is a precarity to everything he does on the show; this defies much of reality tv scripture that, in truth, attempts to dictate as much reality as possible. Through the humorous process of reshuffling business ideology, Fielder creates a depiction of business, but then actively subverts it at every turn.



Artist Jill Magid enters political territory through a variety of conceptual missions. In her elaborate 2004 project, *Evidence Locker,* she spent 31 days intentionally hanging around public locations in Liverpool that are under CCTV surveillance. Magid then miraculously convinces

police officers to participate in the project by directing her via cell phone to navigate throughout the city to pose in specific ways or walk with her eyes closed.

In another project, *The Proposal*, which will be released in the form of an upcoming documentary film, Magid works with the Mexican government in an effort to return a notable Mexican architect's personal archives to their homeland. In the still-ongoing project, Magid has orchestrated an elaborate proposal to exhume and convert the cremated body of Mexican architect Luis Barragán into a diamond, and offer it as a trade to the owner of Barragán's professional archives so that they can return to Mexico.

Not unlike Fielder, Magid is incorporating elements of participation in the work. Whereas Fielder works in the private sector, Magid works in the bureaucratic public sector. Both pry open the hood of the machines which they are critiquing, and re-engineer small details of their operations. Though what we witness is a documentation or a representation of their work, the activities inside the frame confound the conventions of documentary film or reality tv. It is in this notable divergence from convention that we can detect the shift from representation to post-representation.

Displaced Subjectivities

This section will focus on the representation of subjectivity and its affect in socially engaged practices of art and media. More specifically, it will track subjectivities as they shift or become displaced within new documentary practices: social practice art, immersion journalism and documentary film. This productive displacement, as is demonstrated here throughout, is catalyzed by a disruption in the conventions of these practices. These conventions are both ethical and aesthetic.

Emerging practices that disrupt conventions confound traditional forms of socially engaged work, and are the most effective for innovating art and media. Furthermore, these disruptions come in varying forms of subjective displacement. This displacement could occur in the form of: journalists who become performers, artists who resemble social workers, or documentarians who deploy strategies of theater. Social engagement in the arts is an inherently political decision – debates of ethics are never far from works that disrupt convention.

Film has been used since its earliest days as an affective political tool. Most relevant for the discussion here may be the radical socialist films that came out of Latin American revolutionary movements, or what is now called "Third Cinema." Hito Steyerl has noted that

> "The film *The Hour of the Furnaces*...has a brilliant installation specification. A banner was to be hung at every screening with text reading: 'Every spectator is either a coward or a traitor.' It was intended to break down the distinctions between filmmaker and audience, author and producer, and thus create a sphere of political action."

The motivations of these revolutionary filmmakers for inciting political mobilization through the medium of film were inspired by German marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht. Brecht believed that theater shouldn't be a passive experience where we simply empathize with the victims, but a social tool to alienate viewers to the point of taking action. In fact Brecht wrote an essay advocating for a theater in which the audience was "hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's subconscious." These are methods for subjugating not the characters we watch on screen, but the audience–us.

Brecht's ideas for implicating and mobilizing an audience were expanded by Brazilian theater director Augusto Boal. Boal's theory and practice of theater, called the Theater of The

Oppressed, was to use non-actors from the local community where they would determine narratives and characters themselves democratically. In a published book of the same name, Boal challenges the ethics of traditional (specifically, Aristotelian) theater, declaring the delineation between professional actors and passive audience as a form of classism. Boal detects this not only in theater, but also film and television: "[The Aristotelian] system is, to this day, fully utilized not only in conventional theater, but in the TV soap operas and in Western films as well: movies, theater, and television united, through a common basis in Aristotelian poetics, for repression of the people."

Judith Butler's central argument in *Gender Trouble* is founded on a philosophizing of the soul in which she discusses the concept of psychological interiority. Our interiority is inscribed on the exterior physical body. Butler writes: "In this sense, then, the soul is a surface signification that contests and displaces the inner/outer distinction itself, a figure of interior psychic space inscribed on the body as a social signification that perpetually renounces itself as such." This concept is used as a tool for building a larger argument about gender performativity, but one would be remiss to omit these observations in a discussion on the utilization of subjectivity in the arts. Specifically, Butler's notion of displacement is crucial here. Transposing Butler's displacement of inner/outer onto audience/subject, I would like to consider interiority and displacement in regards to subjectivities on-screen. The links between the psychological interior with the inscribed corporeal exterior is paralleled in the links of constructing subjective experiences in filmmaking. Just as we express our interior thoughts with language, films are put together with a language of their own that is suitable for creating an immersive sensory experience for us. This distillation of visual language creates a transformative effect upon the viewer, much like Butler's displacement of "the inner" and "the outer". It is important to note

this in the conventions of crafting subjectivity on screen, but also to turn our attention towards what these works yield, which is to say their affect.

POST-REPRESENTATIONAL EXERCISE 1.3



Tom Verni, NYPD 9th Precinct

Claire Bishop, Adam Curtis and other cultural critics have identified the use of techniques from theatre in the construction of political sovereignty. It is significant that the notion of artifice itself is a constructed counterpart to "the real" or "the natural." By acknowledging the negative emptiness of artifice, one can positively embody it in order to reveal the hidden mechanics of the allegedly "real" counterpart. Pictured here is an NYPD officer that I convinced to wear a police officer costume from a halloween store, and pose for a portrait.

CHALLENGE:
Produce a self-reflexive costume for a state official and then convince them to pose wearing it.

Challenging Ethics



Politically motivated innovations nearly always results in a debate of ethics. Renzo Martens' *Enjoy Poverty* (2013) is a documentary account of the artist's ongoing attempt to facilitate the impoverished people of the Congolese jungle in the "gentrification" of their own land. Martens' central claim is that poverty is, in fact, the country's greatest resource. From the film's website:

> "The film establishes that images of poverty are the Congo's most lucrative export, generating more revenue than traditional exports like gold, diamonds, or cocoa. However, just as with these traditional exports, those that provide the raw material: the poor being filmed, hardly benefit from it at all."

The project has and continues to come under fire for its questionable ethics, although it in fact *circumvents* many of these ethical issues once fully examined; the long-term trajectory of Martens' goal is subversion of the matrices of power that have led to this marginalization.

In this way of working, "the social" becomes a material fabric that the artist works with. The directing and arranging of the small community in the film become formal and aesthetic decisions. This of course raises further ethical questions of whether a western white man should be the artist charged with making these decisions in the African jungle–yet this same ethical quandary itself fuels the film's effectiveness. Under a linguistic lens, we can parse out certain markers used in the film. The use of the same language of economists and politicians is transposed onto a new radical and challenging theory: "poverty is your greatest resource," (Martens has famously challenged leaders of banks and relief organizations with this rhetorical tactic). Additionally, we have a recognizable *visual* language being employed here as well: the film oddly emulates the traditional ethnographic film. By co-opting stereotypical signifiers of traditional ethnographic films (e.g. a white man ventures to Africa and directs indigenous people on camera), Martens both builds upon and subverts them. Martens works with the existing language we typically use for responding to problematic images of exploitation, yet beating us to the punch, and using our own assumptions against us. Martens has designed a post-representational ethnography.

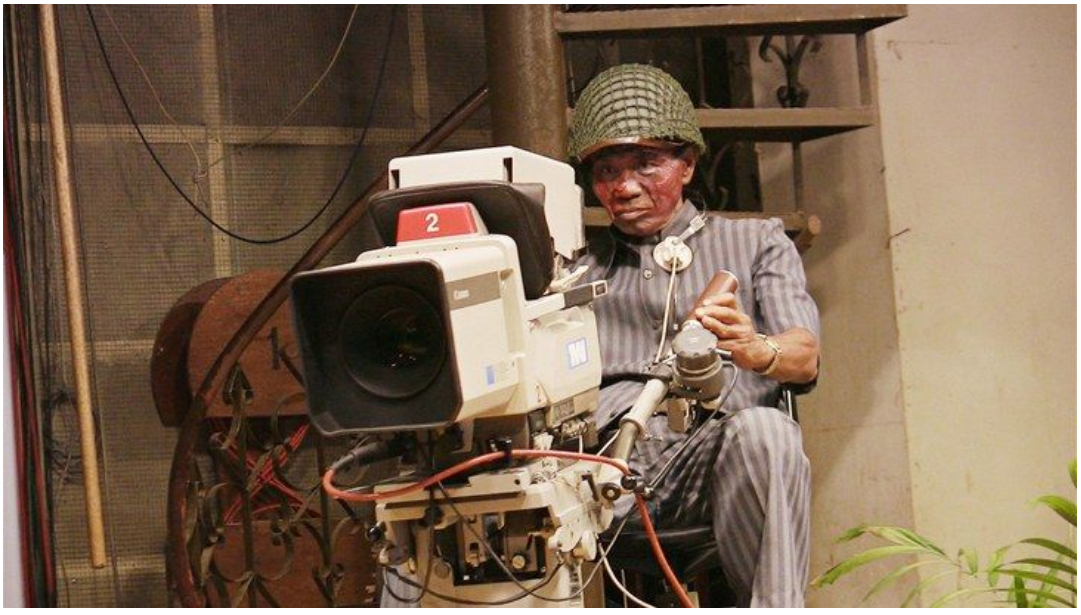


Pressing up against a different set of ethics altogether is photographer and artist Walid Raad. Raad is notorious for his creation of the archival organization The Atlas Group. The Atlas Group was an archive dedicated to the preservation of documents and artifacts from the Lebanese civil wars. Suspiciously, the Atlas Group presented many documents that appeared to be deliberately mislabeled, or photographs that were attributed to fictional persons. At first glance, many of the materials look to be benign archival material. But as one digs into the materials, it becomes clear that something has gone wrong. It is precisely this moment of realization that Raad intends to convert into a longer experience for the viewer. It is within this psychological space of suspicion, curiosity, and intrigue that Raad delivers his treatise on historical representation: nothing is exactly you think it is, and more importantly historical truth can’t be properly represented anyhow.

A New Performative Document

There exists a new sub-genre of documentary filmmaking that complicates many documentary conventions. The film in this category that has received the most attention is the 2012 film *The Act of Killing* by Joshua Oppenheimer. The director convinces the still-living leaders of the Indonesian genocide to re-enact their own crimes on camera with their own direction. The film was in fact a part of Oppenheimer's PhD dissertation, in which he writes upon the film:

> "In the case of this film project, perpetrators are lured by the apparatus of filmmaking into naming names and revealing routines of mass murder hitherto obscene to official histories, and they do so through dramatisations and re-enactments manifestly conditioned by the codes of film and television genres. This latter point reveals the complex ways in which remembrance is always already well-rehearsed, scripted and generic. Thus does the research excavate (by catalysing) perpetrators' performative use of film genres to conjure as a spectral force that which must remain obscene to the codes of genre."



The film reworks conventions of both documentary and staged fictional filmmaking to generate something totally new, and more importantly it serves a social role in demonstrating the gravity of the atrocities to the perpetrators themselves. Both subject and audience are left with a new, complicated understanding of an existing narrative.

Robert Green's film *Kate Plays Christine* (2016) does something similar, yet with different outcomes. The film follows the actor Kate Lyn Sheil around as she conducts biographical research for a reenactment. Lyn Shiel is to play the role of Christine Chubbuck, a TV anchor who committed suicide by shooting herself live on TV at a local news station. Through performed research we witness the burden of becoming someone else. Through the performed reenactment, we see through the cracks of an imperfect reenactment, and how deliberate imperfections on the part of a performer can be more revealing about who we are as an audience. It reveals the content we desire to see on screen, particularly in regards to fraught ethical topics, such as violence and female representation in entertainment.



Feminist writer Laura Mulvey has noted images of women in film have been such that it attempts to force the viewer into a heterosexual, masculine position. She notes:

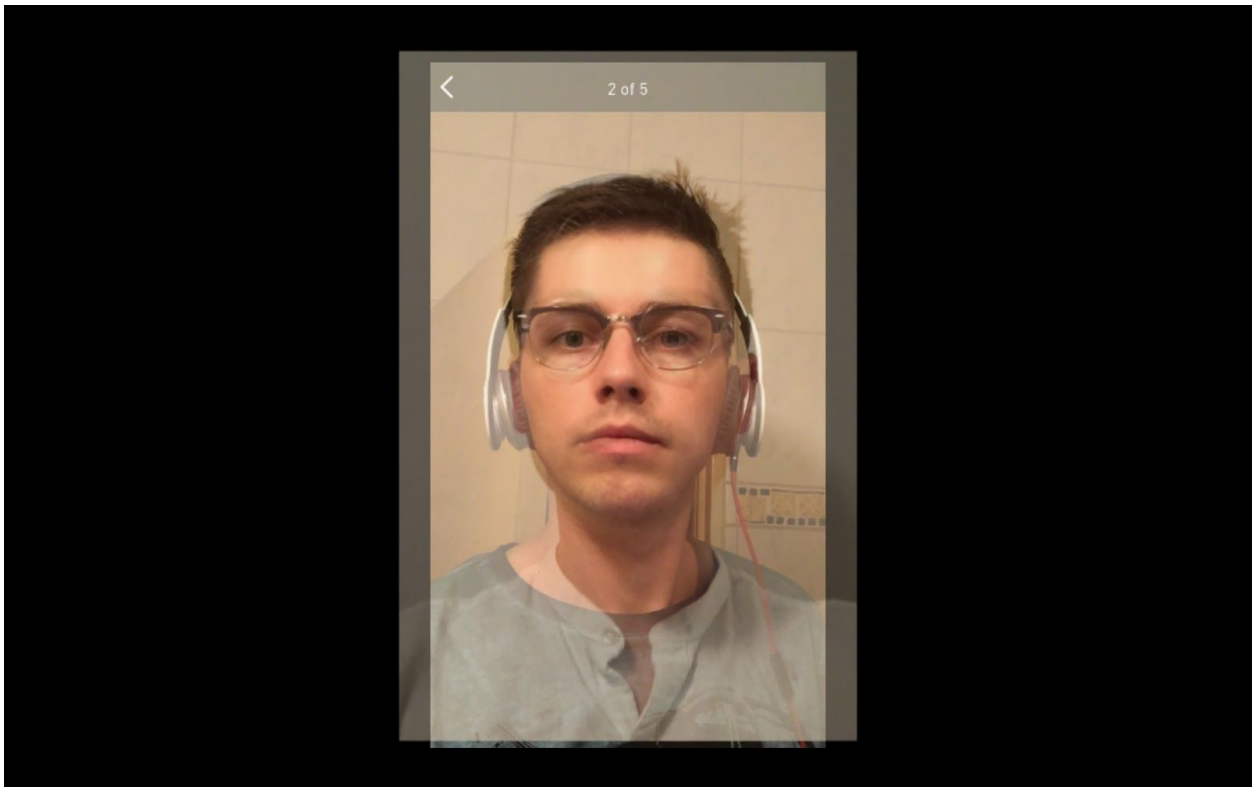
> "Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen. For instance, the device of the show-girl allows the two looks to be unified technically without any apparent break in the diegesis."

Over forty years after Mulvey wrote this, *Kate Plays Christine* is perhaps the best demonstration of this performative unification, but what is truly remarkable is the film's simultaneous and conscious use of these film tropes against themselves. The actress becomes a double agent *inside* the film, drawing us in through our own desire for spectacle. It is an abandonment of conventional social and pictographic representation, but what it yields is a new, post-representational sublime.

Constructed Non-Fiction: Two Essay Films

In my three-years developing an artistic practice in graduate school, I have explored many of these ideas of representation. In efforts to deconstruct the totemic laws that determine how we glean meaning from one thing or another, I use images and language to reshuffle meanings. Often using my own body, image, and identity as the instrument or research tool. Using conventions of documentary film, I propose unsolvable or illogical premises and then attempt to use tools of language and performance to visually explore their impossibilities.

I. Fruitless Bloodline: Ancestral Dissonance & The Homophotographic



In my essay film *Fruitless Bloodline* I consider my ancestry documents in relation to my sexual identity, using the general public as a tool for making a self-portrait: navigating through public squares in German cities and towns, I identify young men that look similar to myself, and pose with them. The script is as follows:

I’m not particularly sentimental about my ancestry. My mother was adopted, and she ultimately did find her own biological family who live in rural Illinois, and while we did travel to go meet them once, my mother hasn’t pursued any further family research.

On my father’s side, we do have a small family tree researched, so for example the earliest known relative we have is my great great uncle Johannes Hentrich. Johannes was born in 1840 in the German village of Niederorschel and he died in 1888 of stomach problems. The legitimacy of this document’s details is probably questionable, for various reasons.

Family trees, like other pieces of history and storytelling, are transcribed from oral histories, crafted, lost, re-told, re-typed, and re-remembered. In fact, in my case, the copy of my own family tree is a document that claims it was drafted on a typewriter by someone named Marjorie Jane Hentrich in 1985 “as told to her by husband Joseph and cousin John and Berta Hentrick also Norman Hendricks”, this document was then, at some point, photocopied, made it into the hands of my uncle, passed on to my cousin, photographed using his smartphone, and sent to me as a compressed JPEG through Facebook chat. This clumsy chain of copying and transferring is true of almost all the family images I’ve obtained. Fragmented images of distant relatives are found on in physical and digital archives, screenshotted, re-uploaded to ancestry websites, and given file names by family members who’ve never known the people in the photographs.

I’m so skeptical of the value placed on experiencing ancestry. Even if my family documents were entirely accurate, and I traveled to the village of Niederorschel would I feel anything? If I somehow found a possible relative still living there, what would we have in common? My singular anecdote to bond over would be uncle Johannes’ unfortunate death from stomach problems.

Maybe the search for ancestral truths should be found visually. Afterall, I am the physical, genetic product of family members that came before me; my nose that has one nostril larger than the other, my nearsightedness for which I wear glasses, my light brown hair. These are artifacts from my ancestors that I feel more comfortable relying on than a few digital photocopies. Turning my own image into a primary research source.

Homosexuality has often been viewed as anathema to bloodlines. One of the first things my mother said to me when I came out

was how sad she was that I wouldn't give her grandchildren. Homoseuxality has been portrayed as particularly scandalous in stories about royalty, as it implies a failure in the mechanics of a royal bloodline. I myself am the first and last born son of my father, putting a terminus on his branch of the family tree.

Of what consequence is my ancestry to me?

Homo, as a word, is latin for man or human; as a prefix, it's greek, meaning same. Additionally, there's a syllogistic argument that sometimes gets used in discussions about Narcissus from Greek mythology. Narcissus was a man. Narcissus was infatuated with himself. Therefore, Narcissus was gay! It then also must work in reverse, assuming that homosexuality is necessarily some form of sexual narcissism. Although flawed, this reductive logic may be helpful in fabricating my own homo ancestry.

Perhaps it's possible to create a homo-ancestry. Here in Germany, I could seek my own image, trying to locate physical sameness.

Incidentally, adopted ancestries and identities are common in queer history. Imaginative, assumed heritages of royalty and aristocracy are preferable to quotidian heteronormative families who may have rejected or disowned them. Adopting a homophotographic

I am the result of my bloodline; my physical appearance is a genetic patchwork of the heterosexual men that came before me, men who courted women, married, and reproduced, ultimately making me, a gay American man of ostensible German descent.

Pareidolia is the condition of seeing faces in inanimate objects. What's the name for the condition of seeing your own likeness in strangers?

I am the result of my bloodline; my genetic physical appearance is a patchwork of heterosexual men that came before me, who courted women, married and reproduced, ultimately making me, the queer first and last born son, ending my father's bloodline.




Currywurst



II. An Archaeology of Absence

In considering photographic representations in the context of incidents where photographic or videographic evidence is not enough to indict bad actors in law enforcement, I designed a projection-based installation that attempted to illustrate the inverse of photographic representation: photographs of the absence of crime.



As a follow-up to the installation, I made an essay that dug deeper into these ideas of absence and representation. The script is as follows:

> In 1965, artist and writer Allan Kaprow described new strategies for art in which the objective was to break down the barrier between art and life; he described one form of this as "Happenings." Happenings were planned events that avoided the conventions of art. Events more close to real events, such as "a United States Marine Corps manual on...fighting tactics, a tour of a laboratory where polyethylene kidneys are made, [or] the daily traffic jams on the Long Island Expressway." For Kaprow, these sorts of everyday real-life events were more potent than art inside the gallery or museum. In hindsight, it might be that the reason Kaprow gravitated towards events like these was simply because these were events with consequences; tactics that result in death, science that results in life, and traffic that simply results in being late to work. Because of this sense of consequence, the impact of people's lives, they appeared, more present. Bearing a more radical presence. Michel

Foucault asked "What is language, how can we find a way around it in order to make it reveal itself, in all its plenitude?" Perhaps the happenings were attempts for achieving just this, for revealing our own present reality.

But what if Kaprow was wrong? What if, to properly probe the real, and more sufficiently unmask reality for reality itself, we should be formulating not present, radical happenings, but radical absences? We should thus follow not the additive philosophies of Kaprow but the virtues of uncertainty proposed by the philosopher Donald Rumsfeld, who asserted the possibility of unknown unknowns.

“Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones.”

The hunting around in the dark in pursuit of the unknown unknown is the attempted recognition of something that may not even exist, a speculation upon something that is in fact, at least at the moment, totally absent. This means that the status of radical absence is achieved only once you’ve reversed your knownness altogether and become an unknown unknown.

Foucault also said, in reference to the student protests of 1968, the act of revolting was an act that could serve as a way to “escape from history and it’s long chain of reasons.” To escape is to render oneself absent. But how do we escape today? Both physical and digital means of escape are steeped in a new mess of obstacles like pervasive surveillance and a latent police state. Tsunami evacuation routes are `networks designed for facilitating the act of escape by directing people to higher ground. But if your urban municipality is a flattened observation deck of civic activity, higher ground is hard to find. Higher ground is only to be found in encrypted chats sent via resilient mesh networks or in whispers within clandestine activist dens.

In 1982 Broken windows theory was published. The theory claims that the appearance of disorder, such as a neighborhood of buildings with a few broken windows, produces crime. Broken Windows Theory is reliant on visual cues. It fundamentally links criminal activity to subjective visual interpretation, that is to say: simply how something looks. And in this case, how something looks to a police officer. This is seemingly

paradoxical when visual evidence such as videos of police brutality are turned on these same police officers, yet somehow fail in the courtroom.

During the same 10 year period that this theory was published, dispersed and implemented by the New York City Police Department, a photographic database was also being compiled elsewhere in a different department of the city's government. The city's department of finance commissioned a photography project that would document every property lot in the city.

When viewed archaeologically, through the context of Broken Windows policing policies, it turns out that these aren't property lot photographs at all. They're in fact criminal evidence, although they're not evidence of the presence of a crime, they are the evidence of the absence of crime. A series of places and moments devoid of criminal activity. Dangerously, this all may indicate to future archaeologists that everything not visible, and outside of the frame was total war. The property lot image database thus comprises a type of inverted war photography, demonstrating a war between oppressive policing and citizens. It was an elusive war that mysteriously avoided sufficient evidence, one that for some reason could never have been properly documented at the same time that it was happening. An impossible photojournalism.

It's possible that these future archaeologists may also be activists. Maybe what they learned from studying Donald Rumsfeld and this database of photographs was that tactics of evacuation and absence are valuable tools. Maybe their activist lineage has already begun, perhaps it started around the time of the first ever hologram protest that already took place at the time of this film, in Spain, in 2015 where the protestors were notably absent, or maybe it began when the Occupy protesters started the tactic of chaining open subway doors and posting fake transit posters for free entry to grease the mobility for faster evacuation of protests that turned violent. Or perhaps these future archaeologists got confused about the distinctions between the different strategies and purposes of evacuation.

Or maybe they just left, and embraced absence altogether.

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Thesis Exhibition Documentation



