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The Transcendence of Displacement: precarious inquiries into the popular and the banal.

An exegesis presented with exhibition as fulfillment of the requirements for thesis:

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## Abstract

This dissertation investigates, through a body of interdisciplinary artwork, the discrepant relationships between the time-based and the static image. It examines how these two distinct states of the image interrogate time/image devices found on virtual platforms of participation and how it might be possible to exchange this dynamic with a contemporary art register. The five artworks operate as idiosyncratic inquiries into heightening a precarious and affective relationship with the viewer/spectator and each artwork's conception and response to popular imagery and subsequent iconography. By using this content to make perception-altering visual forms this content navigates a trajectory that challenges the primitive operation of nostalgia and perpetual objecthood. By bringing together seemingly unrelated discourses such as the Gothic, Shock and Queer aesthetics the artworks in this study attempt to call into doubt and subvert the postmodern traditions of appropriation and banality with immersive environments.

This project has explored a lexicon of different mediums including video, cinematic readymades, photography and installation. This engagement with varying disciplines highlights an attempt to speculate how society adheres to a collective unconscious that is mediated through popular content, which simultaneously occupies the binary of virtual and physical space. An emphasis is placed on the space between this binary and creates a dialogue that extracts and exploits encoded formulas circulating in popular culture. By creating a series of dialogues between time-based and static imagery, physical and virtual spaces and fragmented signifiers of holistic narratives, this project aims to subvert the reality that chronicles iconic imagery and attempts to liquidate signatures of time by converging time-based and static mediums.

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## Introduction

My MFA research outlines how imagery in popular culture reached a point in postmodernism where it began to fold back upon itself, where artists began to decode popular imagery and pay close attention to this imagery's encoded histories and iconography. I consider this project to unpack popular content further and further, transfusing it with an array of sources and contexts, styles and environments to chronicle its potential of exposing absurdities and calculated formulas operating in contemporary society. This imagery both entertains and shocks us and I aim to subvert a globalized society by exposing examinations of truth about this society and the collective unconsciousness that underpins it. My MFA project aims to critique the historical lineage of popular culture and how it operates in present time with attempts at transfusing and converging the image through time-based and static states. During this study I have incorporated not only my interest in popular culture that circulates in physical space by way of films and print media but also with blog networks that occupy a virtual space on the internet. This approach towards the popular image has devised two main questions I will discuss in this document. They are,

Can the same potent and dynamic subversion of the image be exchanged and occur in physical spaces for art as it does on blog networks?

Can this attempt to converge time-based and static states of the image interrogate stylised disguises of popular formula and even liquidate signatures of time that encode this imagery?

The first chapter positions theorist Jean Baudrillard and artist Andy Warhol as two major figures who have a compelling historical lineage with popular culture. In this discussion I will look at Baudrillard's theory on the simulacra and the conspiracy of art and Warhol's methodology of using formulas to create art. This chapter is used as an introduction of concepts, contexts and methodologies that drive this project.

I will then examine contemporary pop artist Cory Arcangel's practice of using out-moded technologies and materials. In this chapter I will introduce the idea of how out-moded or 'retro' forms can critically engage and comment on contemporary culture. In this chapter I will also discuss how my work aims to overcome and destabilize a viewer's sense of nostalgia that is often associated with out-moded popular imagery and how I do this by using artistic strategies of entertainment and astonishment.

In the third chapter I will discuss how the .gif device serves my methodology for manipulating the time-based and static image. In this chapter I will discuss artist Paul Sharit's methodologies of manipulating imagery and outline the .Gif's historical link to experimental film practices of the 1960s and 1970s. I will also argue how I implant the .gif in the physical platform of an art space and how this contributes to my aim of converging virtual and physical platforms for mediation of popular imagery.

To conclude this section of the document I will introduce the contemporary theory of 'super-hybridity'. I will discuss how I consider this theory to critically examine the recent history and repercussions of vast cross-flows of popular content in a digitalized and globalized society and critical areas of discussion emerging from this. This chapter critically underpins how I converge virtual and blogged material into a high art context, what my work gains from this, and how the theory helped me work through my proposed thesis inquiries.

The second part of this document introduces the Gothic as a stylistic and critical module. In this chapter I examine the Gothic's history in popular culture and its links to the entertainment industries and commodity culture. I will examine the photographs featured in artist Mike Kelley's *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction* project, and how I consider a Gothic methodology and style to influence this project. It is important to mention here that I will not be discussing the abject and the uncanny, which are integral to the Gothic, as modalities that influence my work.

I will then discuss how this project critically engages with cinematic and photographic image-based readymades. I will discuss how the readymade operates in my work and link it to how I use the Gothic as a stylistic and critical module. I will discuss how I use readymade forms to

amalgamate cinematic fiction with reality and how this indexes my artistic methodology for creating my photographic works. I will then critically examine artist Richard Prince's work *Spiritual America* and *Spiritual America 4* and how it critically engages photography with, through a process of dissimulation and reconstruction, the zeitgeist. It is important to note here that the zeitgeist is used in this project as a way of interrogating the formulas of popular culture and how I aim to interrogate a 'spirit of time' through manipulations of the time-based and static image.

The third part of this document seeks to analyze and critically respond to the Queer aspect of my work. I will use specific examples of appropriated Camp and Queer content in my work and how this outlines a stylistic and cultural impact on the work I make. It will also discuss Queer as an anesthetic of astonishment deeply ingrained in popular culture and how it can transport the viewer to another time and place.

The final part of this document is a chapter that discusses the final installation of my work. I will outline why I have exhibited my works in a precarious and dimly lit environment in which the viewer must participate with through navigation. I will use this chapter to highlight the critical and stylistic contexts this project taps into and how this installation affects the viewers over all encounter and perception of the work.

## We Remain Fugitives of the Conspiracy

*“What was left was an endless recycling of arts own demise, deconstruction and self-reference replacing a more secret kind of alterity, or the reinvention of more inflexible rules. Andy Warhol managed to complete this anorexic cycle by replacing art with mechanical reproduction, by the same token returning banality to its irremediable enigma. Anything that came after that was bound to merely re-trivialize banality, eagerly affixing finality to end an already gone out of sight. Going nowhere, art came to nothing – and everything – simply staying there, grinding its teeth, losing its bite, and then losing the point of it all. It is now floating in some kind of vapid, all-consuming euphoria traversed by painful spurts or lucidity, sleep-walking in its sleep, not yet dead, hardly alive, but still thriving”.<sup>1</sup>*

Two major figures of contemporary art in the late twentieth Century, whose artwork and theory still have radical influence on today's postmodern condition and discourse, are artist Andy Warhol and theorist Jean Baudrillard. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss these two figures and how they have had a prominent influence on my practice and how I am currently using their philosophies and theory in my MFA body of work.

I first became interested in Baudrillard as a theorist with his 1981 publication *Simulacra and Simulation*. Baudrillard – with great accuracy – pinpointed and attributed simulation as a postmodern sensibility and related it to society and art after the rise of appropriation art in the 1970's. One of his radical examples of the simulacra was Walt Disney's *Disneyland*. Baudrillard assimilated the model of the American nation and the fragmentation of its culture with the hyper-real artifice that is *Disneyland*. Baudrillard postulated the idea that imagery and art is hidden in the artifice and acts as a type of genetic code responsible for its generation. Baudrillard reinforced Deleuze's prior theory of the simulacra and heightened our awareness of how the simulacra holds truth. Baudrillard argued that the simulacra converges and transforms reality with artifice and the idea that the copy of a thing holds more truth and is more real in comparison with its 'original'. (Baudrillard, 2005, p.14).

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<sup>1</sup> P20-21 The passage concludes Sylvère Lotringer's introduction to *The conspiracy of Art*, an edited book of Jean Baudrillard's writing's accompanying his 1996 essay of

In *The Conspiracy of Art* his focus shifted towards the act of art making itself. Baudrillard's contemporary Lotringer states "*Art doesn't come from a natural impulse, but from a calculated artifice*" (Baudrillard, 2005, p.18). After his simulacra theory, Baudrillard informed us of a conspiracy of art at a time when public art galleries were as big as shopping malls and the international art market fluctuated accordingly with global economy. For me, Baudrillard's scandalous claim, declaring that "*art had no more reason to exist*" (Baudrillard, 2005, p.9) gives ammunition to contemporary artists to begin to interrogate this crisis of art, which is to realize that one must begin to recover radical illusion.

*These banal objects, technological objects, virtual objects, are the new strange attractors, the new objects beyond aesthetics, transaesthetics, these fetish-objects with no signification, no illusion, no aura, no value that are the mirror of our radical disillusionment of the world. Ironically pure objects, like Warhol's images.*" (Baudrillard, 2005, p.194)

As an artist with an interest in popular and sub-cultures, I have always been interested in Warhol's interdisciplinary practice and was attracted to Baudrillard's radical take on an artist's means of creation, and how this plays into a conspiracy. It is an idea that Warhol himself may have agreed with. Many artists since the 1960's have long identified with the philosophies of Andy Warhol. Artists and theorists, including Baudrillard, have been lured by his incredibly profound and seemingly effortless contribution to postmodern art and society. Warhol, as an artist, greatly desired to become a machine with his groundbreaking methodology of replacing art making with the mechanical reproduction of the silkscreen (Baudrillard, 1994, p.84). The values of Warholian ideas remain as society continues to like and adhere to formulas. We still want to know the meanings of the shared and popular things that orientate and drive the speed and entanglement of our lives. It was Warhol who crucially reformulated art and reached the masses by redeeming societies garbage, which was latent and banal imagery and objects in late Modernism. Even now when we look at Warhol's works we still feel a maximum redemption of loss material. We see this by how he adorned a proliferated image of Marilyn Monroe with gold pigment; by doing this he not only raised her status as an icon but also used this as a strategy to insert meaning back into the infinite circulation of material depicting her image. As Baudrillard affirms, "*He is someone who, with utter cynicism and agnosticism, brought about a manipulation, a transfusion of the image into reality, into the absent referent of star-making banality*". (Baudrillard, 2005, p.44)

Baudrillard's conspiracy has posed a huge challenge for contemporary artists to resurrect authentic illusion cryogenically frozen at the core of art's hypnotized tomb. New theories (that I will discuss later in this document) seek to accept the disillusionment of the artifice and pay a greater attention to how the plethora of artifice, in what Baudrillard argues an artificial world, is mediated and converges from different platforms of participation and spectatorship, reception and creation. I have developed these emerging theories and concepts into my own practice that is preoccupied with altering acts of perception in order to possibly resurrect authentic illusion. Albeit through artifice, I attempt to question just what is the radical illusion that art has always had the potential to bestow upon its audience? In many ways Baudrillard failed to realize that Warhol did put *something* back into art. That *something* does perhaps contribute to Baudrillard's conspiracy, however, the idiosyncrasy and viscera of Warhol's work does remain as the most identifiable aesthetics ever conceived.

In many ways my work both challenges and reinforces Baudrillard's writing on the conspiracy of art because of how my transdisciplinary practice operates to align and converge formula upon formula and the disillusionment of the image. The notion of a conspiracy of art dawned upon us at a time when we began looking back at modernism, being frightened or bored with what we saw. Postmodern hyper-reality, evident in popular imagery, has reached a point of implosion and now re-establishes and circulates in more specialized ways. This reflects advancing technologies and the fragmentation and hybridization of a globalized society. Given our current disposition, I like to think of my practice as functioning like a manifestation of the collective unconsciousness of our time. Amalgamating content re-animates a synthesis that's extremely particular yet establishes an entry point to cacophonies of new associations teamed with old nuances. My work seeks to tap into what I call the mystical enigma of the great over-arching system of dominant culture. I'm interested in unveiling how popular content alters when we consider the trickle down/bubble up affect that happens at the parallax of high and low culture.

## Cory Arcangel, Dara Birnbaum and Nostalgia.

*“And culture runs in technological time, while the art contexts runs in whatever warp time it runs in. When you implant technological time with art time, people don’t know what is nostalgic and what isn’t.” – Cory Arcangel (Artforum, 2009, p.94)*

While the Warholian factory years happened half a century ago, new generations of artists have continually sought new avenues into the superficial fantasies of popular culture that are increasingly resulting in an emphasis on the parallax of art and entertainment. These new practices emulate from the lineages of 1960s pop and 1970s appropriation forged by Warhol and contextualized by the re-photographic practices of artists such as Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince. Many contemporary artists engaging with Pop adhere to Baudrillard’s ideology of the simulacrum and through an act of Duchampian game-play strategically seek to ‘crack the code’, so to speak, of popular culture. A key example of one these artists is Cory Arcangel whose practice and work I will examine in this chapter. The purpose of this chapter is to critically analyze the relationship between the primitive instinct of nostalgia and how it links in with contemporary pop practices, including my own. Since appropriated imagery and semiotics form the content present in my work I’m interested in nostalgia as an obstacle to overcome and how my work can operate by destabilizing the viewers nostalgic gaze they may have with popular imagery.

New York based artist Cory Arcangel’s practice employs banal and out-moded entertainment technologies that he hacks and alters to amplify gaps and shifts in time in relation to popular culture. His work often uses time-based imagery to examine and extend the school of thought that iconography emerges through a formalist device of repetition and how this allows certain, perhaps unseen, meanings to surface from their original reception. In his work *Japanese Driving Game*, 2004, Arcangel hacked a version of the Nintendo F1 Racer game and left out various graphical information like cars etc but kept an endless road, the only moving feature in the work. Arcangel intentionally appropriated the specificity of the graphics to index and reflect the parallax between the rails of art and popular culture. The viewer looks out to see if the two sides of the road meet on the horizon, which they never do. (Artforum, 2009, p.95).

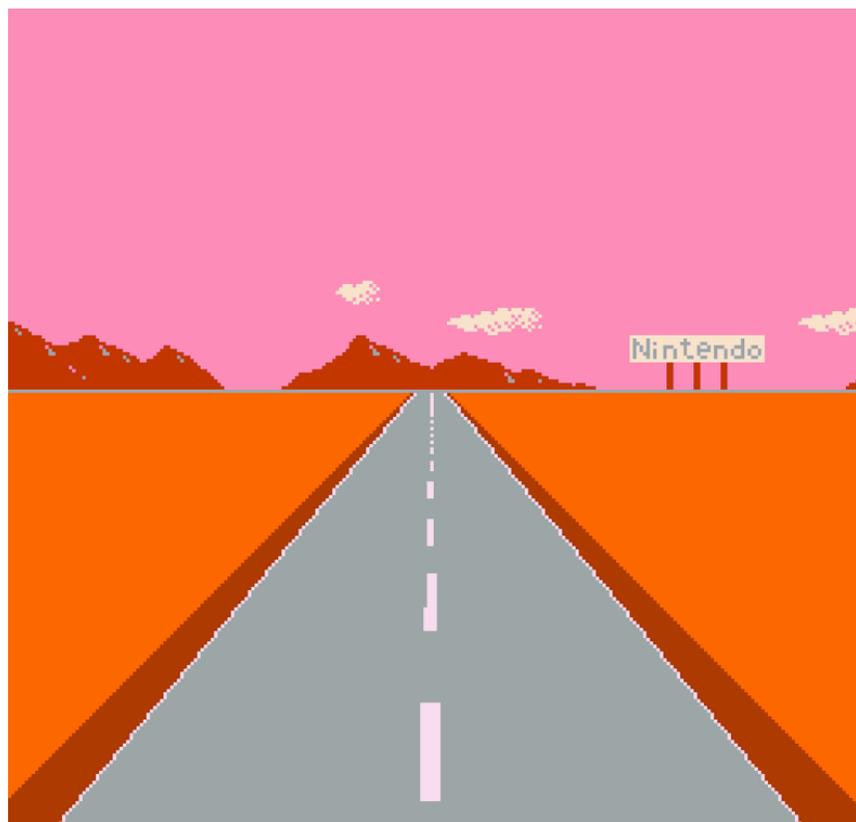


Fig. 1

The sense of hopelessness and endlessness present in the work talks directly back to Baudrillard's conspiracy that links art to the hyper-real and as an activity going nowhere, fast. Arcangel's use of out-moded leisure orientated technology and their associated time signatures brings forth the debate about the use of retro cultural forms as critical tools to engage with contemporary culture. The 2009 March issue of Artforum featured

an article where Arcangel and pioneering video artist Dara Birnbaum compared notes on art and in particular the affects of widespread appropriation of outmoded applications. Arcangel started that

*“The nostalgia question is difficult to elude because technological time is so fast. If I have a first generation I-pod, it’s just a few years old, but people laugh at it now. If, on the other hand, I’m wearing a polo sweater from twenty years ago, nobody laughs at all. And culture runs in technological time, while the art context runs in whatever warp time it runs in. When you implant technological time, people don’t know what is nostalgic and what isn’t.”* – Cory Arcangel (Artforum, 2009, p.197)

Birnbaum also argued

*“I, too, see things that are laid aside – almost like they have obsolescence, when, in fact, they don’t. There is a reason they existed, and they can be reactivated. The work doesn’t have to be seen as nostalgic, but can be understood as a fertile gesture of reframing things laid aside by society.”* – Dara Birnbaum (Artforum, 2009, p.197)

Both artists observe that a flame of nostalgia has the potential to ignite and fixate an overpowering emotion for the viewer when they are confronted with out-moded readymade objects or appropriated imagery. I welcome this response in my work as it incites a bond and taps into a collective conscience solicited by groups of individuals. However it is important to note that nostalgia is used as a relational device in my work, which is different from the work owning a nostalgic command over the viewer. The artists also discuss the discrepancy between art and time and deposit the idea that art and culture run in different time frames, critiquing and engaging with one another without having to be predicated on nostalgia.



Fig. 2

As much as I encourage a viewer's response to my work through a nostalgic gaze I also have an issue with it as a modality in art. I was struck with the issue of overcoming and penetrating nostalgia when I was formulating my work *Starfield2010*. The work involves a readymade hung on a wall with a time-based image (projected from the opposing wall) onto the surface of the readymade. The readymade is an image of the 1980's pop duo *Wham!* which is printed onto board and embedded in a wooden frame. The projected time-based image onto the readymade is of a screensaver called *Starfield* that first appeared on Windows95. This work critically engages with nostalgia as a primitive modality in art and attempts to destabilize its operation with the viewer. I have listed the two key ways for how work does this.

1. The two types of seemingly unrelated forms collaborate with each other to reveal something beyond their ordinary perception. In the work, nostalgia doesn't necessarily act as a pathway directly to the past; instead its operation goes under a re-modification by two

types of out-moded and what can be considered 'nostalgic forms'. This tension between two forms of nostalgia and the readymade itself create new pathways of understanding the sum of the work's parts i.e. the methodology of converging the time-based and the static and what affect this has on the imagery's context. The charge created by the time-based and the static, the out-moded and what can be considered 'retro' forms aims to destabilize this imagery's inhabitation of nostalgia for the viewer. By doing this, my intention is for a sense of entertainment and astonishment to be established, the viewer is left to consider this imagery with a fresh perspective as a spectator who witnesses it forming a quasi life and mind of it's own. By attempting to destabilize nostalgia, a new web of associations for the viewer is created for them to unfold.

2. I was attracted to the *Starfield* screensaver in how it contributes to poetic suggestions the work has with lost time and infinity. The screensaver footage alluded to the idea of the viewer traveling through space and time and indexically linked the device of the screensaver as a proxy-setting for lost time i.e. a screensaver is activated when a user 'clocks out' with a computer which marks a loss of time between the two. The constellation of stars that recede from the *Wham!* image help index its infinite circulation in popular culture. This infinity accessed by the screensaver also liquefies the time signatures that form the *Wham!* readymade and rupture its historical signpost of the 1980's. This not only alludes to this imagery's perpetual significance as a cultural end-point but also as a form that will always re-surface in popular culture.

*Starfield2010* critically engages with contemporary culture by presenting nostalgic and retro forms to a contemporary audience who are left to shift and modify the forms prior meanings by how the imagery is presented to them. The work does this by subjecting the viewer as a spectator of historical forms in popular culture that now collaborate together and re-formulate their own meanings. The viewer's nostalgia gaze is destabilized by how the imagery operates on it's own accord, revealing a life of it's own, and postulates the idea that culture perhaps mystically operates and resurfaces over time to reveal truths under-pinning contemporary society.

## The .gif device

A key research interest in this thesis is how to align the time-based, moving image with the static image to critically reformulate popular content. By doing this, it is my aim for this manipulated content to engage with and comment on contemporary society. This has resulted in me employing out-moded yet culturally relevant applications that remain in use, which is similar to Cory Arcangel's practice. As part of my investigation I became particularly interested in the .gif device. [G]if's (Graphics Interchangeable Format) are compressed, formatted files that circulate on the internet, prolifically on blog networks. They commonly feature either a duo of images or a series of multiple images that interchange in one frame, formed by one .gif file. They can also feature small animation clips or small snippets of film and video that loop continuously.

In the work *[Untitled]JonBenetRamsey.Untitled .gif series, 2010* the displacement of an images content is subverted by the .gif device. I do this by flashing a negative (and what can be considered a dual image) of JonBenet, thereby positing what might be seen as a demonic counter-version of the sanitized almost saccharine original. The counterfeit copy hints at the sinister and underlying circumstances of JonBenet's history of being allegedly killed by her Father. Crucially it amplifies the perverse perfection depicted by the original image and extends the narrative in highly specific ways. The brutal fluctuation and altered repetition of the two depictions of JonBenet violently ricochet off one another creating a schizophrenic ambience that destabilizes the viewer's act of perception. The work is similar to video artist Paul Sharit's brilliant contribution to the structural film movement with his 1968 work *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* (Hugo, 1996). Sharit's work diverged from the mathematical transformation formulas used by artists of the structural film movement. It used audio and visual effects to elicit an emotional and psychological response from the viewer. In *[Untitled]JonBenetRamsey.Untitled .gif series, 2010* the .gif format ruptures the disguise of the seemingly picture perfect JonBenet and reveals a hyper-real and less idealized historical depiction of her. I became interested in how the .gif can deploy the use of what Barthes called the *punctum* in the way it manipulates the viewers response and possibly deflects this back at the

image, piercing its asserted perfection with a simulated, perhaps more historically accurate, emotive depiction.<sup>2</sup> This idea coincides with a hypothesis that the emotional response contemporary culture has with an image's *punctum* generates a shared collective unconscious; this idea is plausible given the image's circulation and infamy and how contemporary society has deposited JonBenet as a cult figure.

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<sup>2</sup> For Barthes, the *punctum* breaks the *stadium* of photography "it somehow marks what, as we have seen, already tends to become manifest as a mark but remains, in its tendency towards becoming a sign, latent within the limitation or purely denotative reference". I was interested in how time and the autonomy of photography form the *punctum* "for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole ... that accident which pricks me" (camera 27). Barthes links subject matters in photographs with time with and the idea that death occurs through the photograph, that when you have taken a photograph – independent of its subject being alive or dead – death has already occurred. Thus, the *punctum* is linked and translated with Greek ideas concerning *trauma* and *hysteria*. Trauma is the oldest name for both the *punctum*'s natural cause and the blindness of its latency. Barthes was interested in photography in how it linked the natural history of death with photography's automatic transmission of it. This coincides with how in photography history becomes hysteria "Hysterical: the photographic picture is constituted only if (...) we look at it- and in order to look at it, we must be (and consequently are) excluded from it". (Barthes, 1981, pp. 264-265)<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 3

As mentioned with an example of Paul Sharit's work, the 1960-70s practices of experimental and structural film inform the .gif as a device that destabilizes the viewer's act of perception with an image's content. My work *Infinite Regress* (Fig.3) uses and exploits the durational qualities of the .gif format to re-formulate content by looping the cinematic readymade of Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*. I chose specific tracking shots that reoccur three times in the film's editing and placed this imagery back to back to create a new scenario. These tracking shots, now

manipulated by a looping .gif, depict the character Danny Torrence infinitely navigating labyrinths of sinister hallways where horrific events have unfolded in the film's plot. The work's title indexes how an infinite regress (a philosophical proposition) occurs in optics by the act of perception and how it can surface within the .gif format. An infinite regress happens when you face two mirrors that are parallel to each other, creating an infinite series of receding images, in other words, indexing how a looping .gif operates with visual content. I chose Kubrick's masterpiece of psychological horror with intent to pinpoint the latency between popular culture and how its formulas encode not only celebrated and iconic imagery but also unsettling truths about contemporary society. It is here where I would argue that the postmodern conditions of shock, horror and paranoia are powerful instincts in relation to the act of discovery and generate emotions that the human condition has a strong fascination with. Like Danny's idle and precarious meandering, art and entertainment participate with the parallax of popular culture and contemporary society in a similar fashion. Art's purpose is to underpin and reveal truth about contemporary culture. It does this through mediums of entertainment like film, yet the art that reflects this society continues to fetishize and re-inject fear and doubt into this reflection. The redundancies of Danny's actions highlight the absurdities of art in relation to popular and contemporary culture. He searches for nothing in particular, only to be confronted by horrific occurrences that I have intentionally edited out of *Infinite Regress*. This strategy reflects art having become a conspiracy, Baudrillard's idea that nothing new is established in contemporary art and how art only contributes to the hyper-real. By making work that outlines this for the viewer they are left to contemplate the banality of the conspiracy encoded in art and how my work detects this. I'm not so concerned with creating original content for the viewer but I want to reveal and amplify that there is a conspiracy in postmodern art and I consider my work to be strategies that highlight and reveal this. When we consider this argument in relation to Baudrillard's idea that art comes from artifice, from a calculated and pre-existing formula of simulation, we begin to speculate about art's relevancy and the assumption of it uncovering unfounded truths about society. For me, art is still as relevant as ever, however, when we place it next to the canon of popular culture we begin to interrogate its operation of revealing truth. We must consider Baudrillard's way of thought that artifice of an artifice reveals truth, that through reiteration and repetition things begin to rise to the surface. Perhaps 'cracking the code' of popular culture is to acknowledge the artifice that reflects it as a stepping stone to the truth that already occurs in the hyper-realness of popular culture.

## Super-hybridity

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the repercussions of popular content becoming altered and subverted on blog networks and how this can engage with an art context. I will un-pack how my transdisciplinary operates in conjunction with popular content I displace from virtual to physical platforms. I will argue that, through this methodology, a super-hybrid dynamic is deposited in my work. I will define the super-hybrid in relation to my work and contrast it with 'hybridity' theories that surfaced in the 1990's. I will then argue that the super-hybrid dynamic in my work contributes to this projects aim of destabilizing popular imagery's associations with time and how my work seeks to liquefy perceptions of time.

My methodology for converging two platforms of mediation where popular imagery circulates led me to an article featured in the 2010 September issue of *Frieze* magazine discussing 'super-hybridity'. The article documents a round table discussion led by *Frieze* co-editor Jörg Heiser along with filmmaker Hito Steyrel, musician Ronald Jones, writer Sukhdev Sandhu, artist Seth Price and philosopher Nina Power, who make-up the panel discussion. Heiser opens the discussion mentioning how in recent times practitioners from diverse backgrounds – as evident in the make-up of the panel – have

*“dramatically increased the number of cultural contexts they tap into when producing work as well as the pace at which they do so – the younger, the faster, it seems. This phenomenon could be termed ‘super-hybridity’ and is obviously to do with the dynamics of globalization, digital technologies, the internet and capitalism.”*(Frieze, 2010, p.96)

Hito Steyrel further articulates the super-hybridity experience as

*“immersion, entanglement, affectivity, sudden rupture and repeated breakdown. In the realm of digital circulation it's no longer about anybody being represented by something else – a culturally inflected image, for example – but about an embodied, dynamic continuum of bodies,*

*sounds, images, actions, an audiovisual politics of intensity. These relations are aesthetic since they have to do with the senses, and they are political since they govern or channel feelings, perception and thus possible reactions.*" (Frieze, 2010, p.97)

At face value super-hybridity could be seen as another extension of postmodernism, yet another coil that adds a Baudrillard-esque vantage point to the eternal demise for the future of art. Filmmaker Hito Steyrel contrasts the super-hybrid discussion with the mention of 'hybridity' theories that surfaced in the 1990s when artists attempted to dissect and isolate a postmodern discourse twenty years after its conception "*The 1990s, she tells us, were about decoding and understanding these relations but now it's more about how to be immersed without drowning*". (Frieze, 2010, p.97) For me, Steyrel directly alludes to the vice of blog that became increasingly popular and idiosyncratic at this time, perhaps as a way to accumulate as much imagery and content as possible in order to collectively deconstruct it. This argument coincides with a proliferation of relations between cultural contexts in society at this time and the content and imagery beginning to flourish virtually on the Internet. Heiser also contrasts 'super-hybridity' and 'hybridity' developed by theorists such as Homi K. Bhaba since the 1990s. For these theorists, hybridity began to surface in the 1990s as a rejection of westernised and racist ideas of a cultural purity. Theories of hybridity articulated that cultural mixing was not just a chance-like occurrence but an intricate process connecting peoples lives involving stigmatisations and neglect, involving congregations that created new aesthetic forms for a globalized culture of tolerance and understanding. (Frieze, 2010, p.98)

I would argue that the rise of the Internet, as a context, and as a reciprocal globalized network, is one of the main signposts that marks a difference between the hybrid and the super-hybrid, the 1990s and the present day. When we consider the content that is shared and created in today's Internet culture we see that the shift in form and aesthetic that began in the 1990s has now reached almost infinite capacities of relations and understandings. It was a process that began in the early days of blogging when cyberspace was discovered by a global society; the notion of virtual identity was only just beginning to shed its skin of science fiction fantasy. Today, we see how Internet culture has now transfused with the physical world to the same capacity that society adheres to dominant media. Internet culture now has a critical index and vantage point into society in how it can underpin and examine dominant media and entertainment by opposing it through user-interrogation. In many ways content created on the Internet, for the Internet, exploits the dogma of worldwide news media, of the American entertainment industry and of a globalized popular culture. By creating globalized populations of individuals that advance subcultural methodologies of acceptance and

subversive values, an uncovering and exploitation of mediated truths disguised by dominant media is revealed. This doesn't necessarily mean we identify diverse culture through a new regime of aesthetic interest, but rather, super-hybridity accelerates and amalgamates sources and context. *"[T]o an extent that they become atomized and transformed into the seed of the next idea. The emphasis is less on a certain style, or look, than on a method".* (Frieze, 2010, p.96)

What my method of converging the blog with the physical platform of an art space does is enable the dynamic flow of content occurring on blogs to be critiqued and reflected upon with the displacement of an art context. My interest in super-hybridity rests upon its ethos of interrogating and amalgamating different contexts and sources in order to examine a globalized culture of immersion and entanglement. I found the method and theory behind super-hybridity to critically address my transdisciplinary art making process and how this amplified key aims for this project. For one, my approach to art making doesn't ground itself in tradition. Rather, it operates as a conceptually driven, transdisciplinary practice that amalgamates sources and context with work that splinters off into idiosyncratic inquiries of the concept's that drive my art-making process. This results in work that has the qualities of being disjointed and undemocratic and helps draw out the temperament of alerted and subverted content that circulates on blogs. My transdisciplinary practice outlines a collapse that occurs for this content via the transfer from virtual to physical platforms of mediation. My work offers idiosyncratic inquiries into a super-hybrid methodology and outlines how popular imagery, on a virtual format, can be transcended into artificial simulations of everyday reality. I encourage uncertain outcomes to arise for popular imagery by how the viewer is left to re-evaluate this content and shift their response towards nostalgic or emotively charged imagery. This methodology of the super-hybrid arises from, what Hito Steyerl explains as an "ethics of ripping"

*"So what could an ethics of ripping be? An ethics not in terms of imposing new truth regimes or disciplinary forms of behavior and thinking, but an immersion into this stream of endless recombination. Of participating in its energies without completely surrendering to them. Or similarly an ethics of withdrawal, of holding your breath in the face of a continuing onslaught of intensity and injustice."* (Frieze, 2010, p.101)

What popular culture has always done is displace signatures of time (retro, or otherwise) by transplanting them into the everyday reality of the artifice. I consider time to be the most prevalent ingredient in the make-up of popular formulas. This is because popular culture cannibalistically

resurges and 'rips' stylistic signatures of time into order to create artifice that appeals to a consumer driven and globalized society. Super hybridity, in a sense, interrogates and critically engages with a hyper-realised society and deposits interesting trajectories into globalized operations, and I would argue, the formulas of popular culture. We can consider the act of 'ripping' to be mixing, merging, dislocating and recombining stuff through copying and appropriating. The panel frames this as a productive activity as it provides new artistic and methodological solutions, with the potential to also create uncomfortable problems rather than solutions. Aligning a super-hybrid methodology with my work emphasizes how I interrogate formulas of popular culture and positions the blog, which I transcend with an art context, as a place where unsettling findings are exposed and left to deviate. Super-hybridity also destabilizes time by how it immerses content into a dynamic of perpetual recombination. One of my main aims for this thesis is for my work to identify stylistic signatures of time operating as disguises for the artifice. That the conspiracy behind the artifice is through simulated perceptions of the old and familiar to disguise the new and the re-circulated.

## The Gothic

*"Gothic is about the denial of death and the insistence on the surface – on the mask rather than the face, the veil rather than what lies beneath, the disguise rather than the disguised."* (Spooner, 2006, p.27)

This chapter discusses the Gothic as a critical module for this project in how it underpins and exposes unsettling truths about postmodern times and society. It seeks to unpack the Gothic's stylistic and ambient qualities present in my MFA body of work and its proliferation within a popular context. In the first part of the chapter I will describe a hypothetical viewer's response to the work *[Untitled]JonBenetRamsay.Untitled.gif series.2010* to set a tone for how I use the Gothic in my work. This leads to a discussion between the critical writers Gilda Williams and Catherine Spooner who I use to define the Gothic in contemporary art. Here, an examination of the Gothic's history, its operations with technology and postmodernism and how it underpins consumer society and entertainment cultures will be defined for further analysis. I will examine American artist Mike Kelley, whose work entails a Gothic style of production and sensibility of crossbreeding the past with the present.

I will then further respond to Spooner's writing around the Gothic, commodity and entertainment as exposing and rupturing existing forms of popular culture.

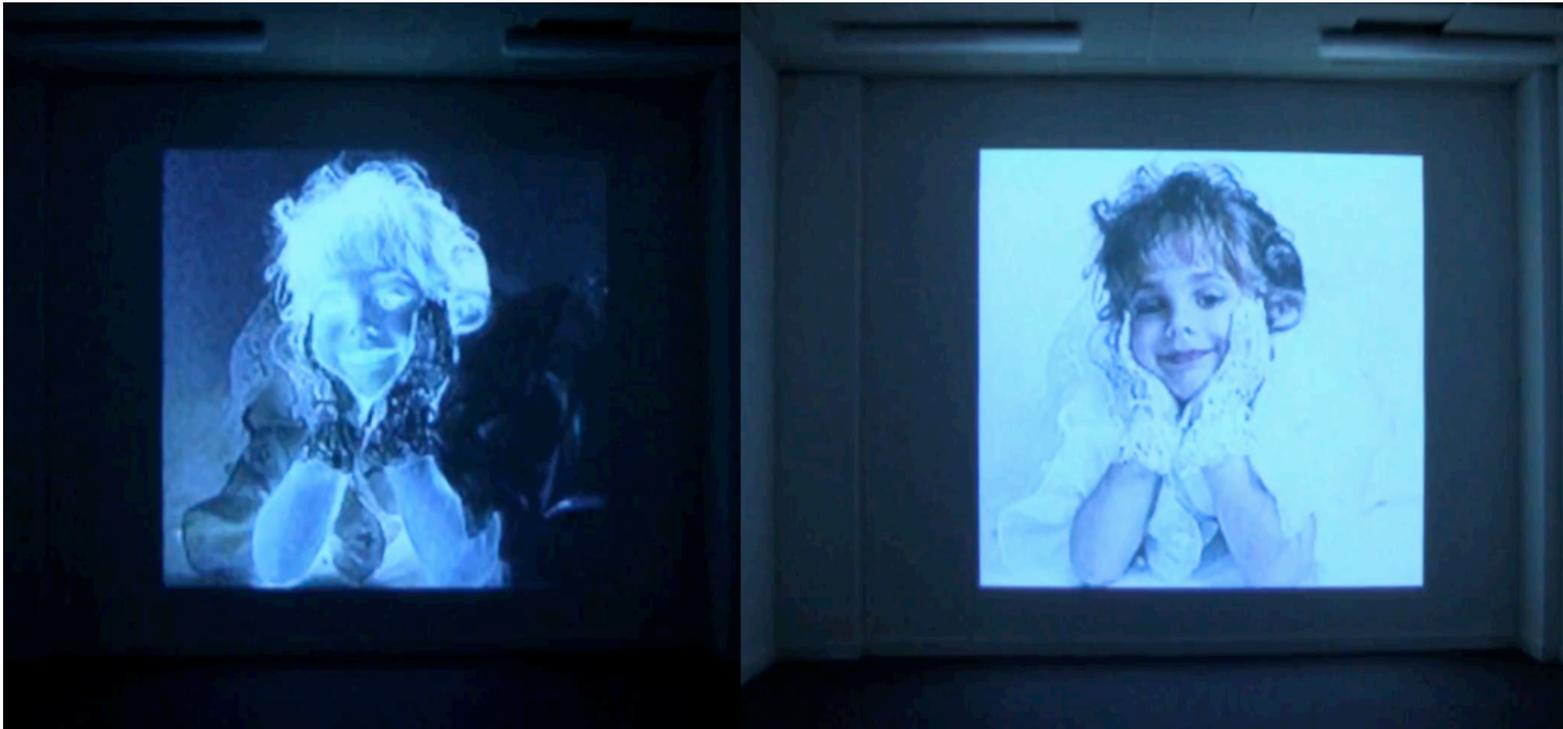


Fig.4

An image of JonBenet Ramsay flickers ominously on a wall. A childhood star, a beauty queen, our vague recollection of her is established and the viewer is forced to confront or re-evaluate her notorious mythology. As the viewer's encounter deepens they begin to recall the subjects infamy briefed by threads of popular memory and urban legend. JonBenet was six years old when she was found dead in her

basement. Lurid tabloids exploited the story and stated she had allegedly being killed by her Father in a horrifying and sadistic act of family murder, or so the story goes. Amidst the images flickering, the viewer deciphers JonBenet resting her tilted head adoringly upon fanned palms, posing glibly under the command of a staged smile. As the flickering becomes more jarring; the viewer begins to perceive two distinctive states of the same image. One is saturated in soft light and has undergone intensive retouching, being sanitized to perfection. The other is an inversion of the same image which pierces it's original with a disturbing and polarizing counterfeit. The sanitized and 'original' JPEG image of JonBenet has been deeply ingrained within popular psyche since the 1990's . If you google image search JonBenet's name, this image will appear. It's presence and perverse perfection has become a perpetual object within mass culture and the space the viewer has encountered to nauseating affect. The constant barrage of flickering skews the images historical time-line, scrambling together past and present perceptions upheld by the viewer's first experience with the work only moments ago. In this work, the opposing ends of JonBenet's position in popular psyche (her horrific real-life circumstances and the immortal veil of her legacy) depict one image in a state of constant flux. The oscillating light that falls upon the walls enclosing the space only amplify the repercussions of the sinister acts JonBenet experienced. The residue of her presence creates an atmosphere of haunting that translates the trauma of the images history.

Gilda Williams introduces Gothic: Documents of Contemporary Art with a sense of intrepidation. As we begin to empathize with her task of tying the Gothic down for analysis, it appears that her prose seeks to distinguish a body of mist and fog cloaking the Gothic and attempts to penetrate through this and examine it as a critical module for contemporary visual art. William's peers back through the Gothic's historical discourses affirming its roots in the Gothic novelists of the Eighteenth Century and heralding The East Germanic Goth Tribes who first invaded the Roman Empire in the Third Century. Catherine Spooner in her book Contemporary Gothic reinforces William's argument by citing one of the first Gothic novelists and Author of The Castle of Otranto Horace Walpole in her discussion.

*"Gothic has from the beginning been a very knowing and self-aware genre – it was artificially constructed by a camp antiquarian, Horace Walpole, and parodies appeared almost as soon as the first novels – but post-Freud, Marx and feminism, it has gained a sexual and political self-consciousness unavailable to the earliest Gothic novelists."* (Spooner, 2006, p.23)

Williams goes on to explain that Groups of contemporary artists are now invested in challenging the dominant canons of art practice established in the sixties using the Gothic to subvert the art world's institutionalization of these canons. The advances between technology and art during the sixties are particularly interesting in how the Gothic manifests itself in contemporary art criticism. The Gothic's swift ability to tinge and supplant outmoded or long standing dominance of technologies reinforces its operation of undercutting postmodernism. This coincides with how the Gothic breeds together the past and present and as a module forms a critical language around art that deals with death, the macabre, disembodied voices and fragmented narratives. It's aesthetic and style obtains an atmospheric quality and denies the logic of being clearly defined. It's currency in high and low areas of popular culture, it manifests as an adopted lineage in contemporary art and culture. Williams articulates the Gothic and its historical discourse with critical observations that serve contemporary art contexts.

*"Always present in the Gothic is this: two things that should have remained apart – for example, madness and science; the living and the dead; technology and the human body; the pagan and the Christian; innocence and corruption; the suburban and the rural – are all brought together, with terrifying consequences. The Gothic often involves the unraveling of a hideous mystery".* (Williams, 1995, p.14)

Catherine Spooner explains that critics consider these mysteries that define the Gothic as a language and critical module forming nothing more than a marginal genre that simply highlights societies anxiety and paranoia in a postmodern age. While an adopted lineage in the arts, the Gothic's influence on, and presence within popular and consumer culture is anything but subsidiary. Spooner gives the examples of contemporary American novelists Stephen King and Anne Rice – known for popular horror novels and vampire chronicles. They are of a large category of writers who pander to cultural anxieties, and employ a Gothic style of story telling emphasizing a consumer demand for a Gothic formula of entertainment.

Mike Kelley and the Gothic

*"Perhaps Gothic is, as they have argued, about the return of the repressed, or the combined pressures of history and constrictive geography, or the privileging of the surface over depth, or anachronistic survivals of the past into the present".* (Spooner, 2006, p.155)

In the quote above, Spooner's definition of the Gothic is evident in the formula that artist Mike Kelley uses to create the photographic series Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction. The Gothic underpins Kelley's photographic series by examining how he gives in to his past burdens and experiences of trauma. This work indulges in, and to an extent glamorises his personal misery. It is then executed as work that has a feel of being art-directed. It is dramatic and excessive. I consider his manipulation of Barthe's *punctum* to be so profound that its impact distorts photographs sourced from his high school yearbooks with their subsequent photographic reconstructions. To purposefully destabilize his traumatic experiences further, Kelley selects images from his high school yearbooks that inhabit a sense of ambiguity around random types of generic activity. Many of them have artsy, cultish or sexually persuasive undertones. Panoramas of these scenarios have being provoked from their original sources of grainy yearbook images and reconstructed in full coloured photographs. In Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction Kelley uses the photograph to transmit composition, subject, and style.



Fig.5

Kelley – similar to how I look for iconography that chronicles popular culture – acts as a detective who engineers and restores the closest possible visual and performative fit within the framework of captured, lost and restored time. This occurs in how Kelley repositions these scenarios through a *mise en scène* of terrifying precision and regressive articulation. The historical lineage of the photographs throws into doubt the re-photographic practices that emerged in the seventies and invents new avenues for these practices to deviate in. What these photographs access is an idiosyncratic conditioning of the Gothic, Kelley self referentially re-deposits and contaminates his past psychological trauma into contemporary reconstructed photographs. Signifiers of time have undergone a brutal process of sanitization; the reconstructed photograph mocks its predecessor as it erases its origins. The preciousness of its *zeitgeist* is exterminated by an uncanny and stylised artifice. By scrambling together past and present images, a subversion of simulation occurs. The manipulation of the image between two distinct time zones, the depicted past and the present day, rests on the idea that formulas can be extracted and reinserted into the image conspiring against the image's original accessibility to truth.

### Gothic Sells Commodity Smells

My work uses the Gothic as a critical module that interrogates commodity and entertainment in popular culture. The Gothic, along with how I employ a super-hybrid methodology, aims to interrogate formulas of this content and reveal the absurdities of our consumer and entertainment cultures and the postmodern lifestyle of consumption, artifice and hyper-reality. My methodology for doing this is analyzing how content is presented to us in the physical world and how virtual platforms, such as blogs, critique and manipulate the disguised formula of content. I consider the virtual and physical platforms I aim to converge in this project to be two things that should have remained apart for the sake of popular culture keeping intact its disguised and conspired formulas, to prevent the unraveling of its hideous mysteries (Williams, 1995, p.14). I have previously argued in this document that society still likes and adheres to popular formulas, however, what I'm more interested in is how a Gothic sensibility underpins these formulas.

George Romero's depiction of brain dead zombies staggering vacantly through a shopping-mall in his 1979 film *Dawn of the Dead* can be considered a direct and intentional link to the consumer's mindless consumption of commodity. Karl Marx's description of the capital as a vampire that drains life from the workers who labour to produce it couldn't be more accurate when describing the Gothic's links with

commodity (Spooner, 2006, p.205). The Gothic shows us that Vampires and Cyborgs, the undead and the human machine are not so far-off concepts as the fiction that cloaks the Gothic might suggest. These figures share the same logic; to consume, which has led to the Gothic underpinning not only consumer and entertainment cultures but also a postmodern lifestyle of consumption. Outlining this concept is author Robert Latham in his book *Consuming Youth: Vampires, Cyborgs and the Culture of Consumption*.

*“The vampire cyborg is such a potent figure that contemporary youth culture has virtually come to understand itself, albeit unconsciously, in its terms; popular vampire and cyborg texts effectively materialize the basic framework of Marx’s dialectical critique of capitalist automation, now exported from the public site of the factory into the private domain of consumption and ‘lifestyle’”. (Latham, 2002, p.25)*

Lifestyle, youth culture, and the intersection between dominant and subculture offer perfect incubators for the Gothic to thrive in and in postmodern society the Gothic underpins these social contexts. In the early 1980’s the campy sex appeal of Elvira, a fictional character who still hosts *Movie Macabre*, a weekly horror movie presentation on Los Angeles TV station KHJ fast became an icon for the emerging Goth subculture. While showcasing B-grade horror films and enthraling the underground, Elvira obtained her valley girl-esque speech and quirky quick-witted personality, most appealing to an additional mainstream American market.



Fig. 6

Throughout her thirty year reign on television Elvira, the quintessential 'Mistress of the Dark' has endorsed everything from computer games starring herself to pinball machines, extra-durable costume lycra to American presidential candidates. What Elvira has come to represent in a popular Gothic context is the intersection between subcultural and mainstream audiences and subsequent consumers and also the compelling anagram between sex and death. Gothic has ascertained a lifestyle through its marketability that consumers participate in with either enduring commitment or by impulsive or occasional indulgences. What is most interesting around the Gothic commodity is in how it characteristically exposes a commonplace haunting linking differing sociological distinctions. The Gothic exposes the dominant bourgeoisie and reveals it's

obsessions with sex and death and western consumers who, as a consumer whole, are possessed to buy. The Gothic is a way of associating consumer's appetite for consumption. The culture it breeds becomes part of a Gothic zeitgeist for postmodernism

## The Readymade

The photographs that contribute to the repertoire of works forming my MFA project use theory based around the readymade, Gestalt psychology and the act of photographic dissimulation. This research critically examines how I use the medium of photography to create and alter particular forms of sensory perception for the viewer. Orbiting methodologies indicative to this examination include converging virtual and physical platforms of mediation to transcend popular imagery and to further articulate my practice's stylistic methodology of the Gothic. I will begin this chapter by analysing my research methodology for the two photographic works based on the popular films *Donnie Darko* and *The silence of the Lambs* to form what can be considered as iconic and transgressive ensembles of readymades. I will then elaborate on the Gothic stylistic elements of the photographs and how the characters actions and the props used in the films index my operations as an artist to encapsulate and isolate time for the purposes of examination. I will then conclude this chapter by comparing artist Richard Prince's *Spiritual America* and *Spiritual America 4* with my own work and will argue how I consider his process of dissimulation in this work to accurately depict a zeitgeist of the 1980's. I will then argue how I have dissimulated the readymades depicted in my photographic works and how this contributes to my attempt of depicting popular zeitgeists for the decades the films were made in.



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

Richard Kelly's *Donnie Darko* (2001) and Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) are films I chose to base the photographic works (of the same name) on for this project. The photographs aim to critically examine the film's transgressive discourses in popular culture and how the works participate with my methodology of altering the viewers associated perceptions of them. I chose the films because they deviate in cult followings, and after researching how users participated with imagery from these films on blogs I noticed the characters in these films are associated with Queer identity. The character Jame Gumb aka Buffalo Bill offers an unsettling insight into a Queer identity as he is positioned as psychopathic recluse who uses his female victims overweight bodies to make gender altering costumes out of. A Queer audience has also established a desired and romantic following for the heterosexual character Donnie Darko. This particular following positions this character under a Queer gaze and as an archetypal yet unattainable outlet for Queer identity.

By photographically simulating specific and banal objects extracted from each film an ensemble of assisted readymades is established that when viewed together create an altered and abstracted perception of the films I chose to depict. These photographs act as visual passageways that not only index the transgressive elements posed by the films, via the readymades, but also in a broader sense articulate a zeitgeist that is specific to the decades the films were made in. It is my aim for the photographs to work in two ways when the viewer first comes into contact with them. One way is for the viewer to instantaneously recognise the objects and associate them as an ensemble that indexes one of the popular films. This could also happen on a more unconscious level, leaving the viewer in a dubious state of recognising but not necessarily identifying these ensembles. A psychological and perception orientated approach that underpins my methodology for creating these photographs and the readymades they depict led me to research Gestalt psychology. Gestalt psychology is a way of understanding how, through the act of perception, the brain and mind assume shapes. In his article *Visual Art, Archaeology and Gestalt* Robert Wenger aligns the Gestalt with the seemingly unrelated activity of archaeological excavation. He argues that both this activity and the visual arts have much in common with the Gestalt, defining both as processes of image formation. He describes Gestalt in these terms

*"A Gestalt whole is a configuration or arrangement in which singular things as well as combinations of things can assume shapes. Apprehending the visual order or disorder present in these configurations is a matter of perceiving and interpreting the relationships between the parts and between the parts and the whole. As a result, a Gestalt configuration is an idea or experience that is so unified as a whole that its attributes cannot be ascertained from a simple summation or examination of the parts in isolation. The fundamental Gestalt idea that a whole is different*

*from the sum of its parts is a holistic theory that can be applied not only to the visual arts and archaeology, but to any physical, psychological or symbolic configuration.” (Wenger, 1997, p.36)*

What intrigued me most about Wenger’s writing about Gestalt is how it linked in with how I researched and ‘excavated’, so to speak, the objects that were to inform the viewer’s perceptive response to the photographs. I wanted the photographs to accurately reflect how popular culture had pre-mediated iconography for these films, isolated from their original and holistic figuration of the films themselves. My methodology for doing this was by using Google image search as a vice that represented a snapshot that underpinned the circulation of this iconic imagery. Google image search accurately gradients and displays it’s image search results by ranking links and plug-ins that Internet uses tap into, from the most to the least frequent.

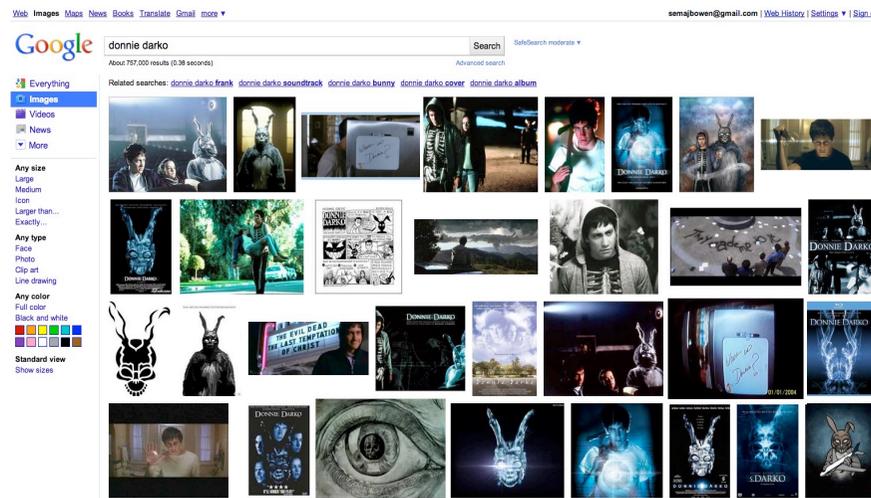


Fig.9

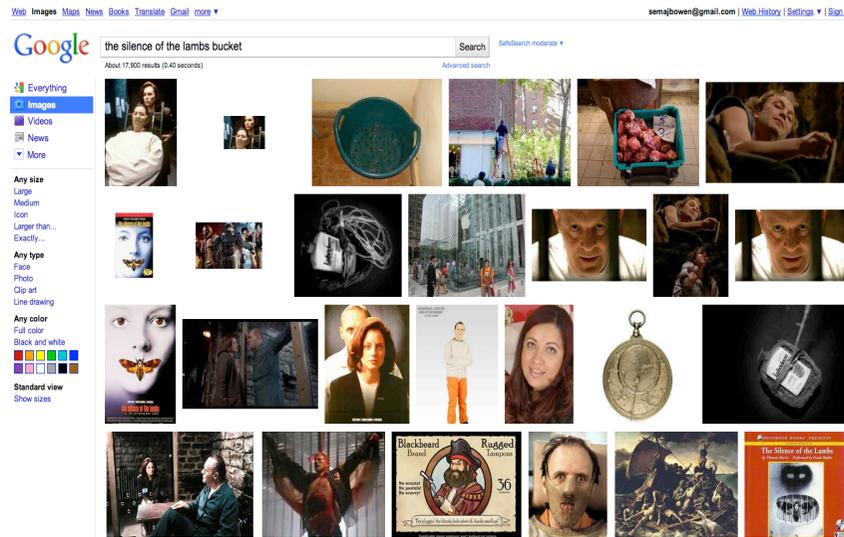


Fig.10

These screenshots of Google image search became readymade transcripts that I would use to appropriate and isolate the most dominant iconography on for the photographs. What these transcripts provided me with was an actual account of how a popular audience had pre-mediated the more sinister and transgressive objects and narratives featured in the films more often than, say, the sanitized or more appropriate imagery that the films were marketed. This methodology amplifies the notion that virtual platforms offer a user-interaction that results in a more transgressive and holistic depiction of a popular audiences perception with transgressive content that is disguised by it's popular artifice. Thus, the photographs lean more towards a process of dissimulation. Different from the act of simulation, dissimulation is a form of deception, a conspiracy, a form that conceals truth i.e. camouflage is a perfect example of dissimulation. The photographic ensembles of readymades seem to unassumingly index the popular films they are extracted from for the viewer. What they actually index though is an accumulative and transgressive depiction of society that depicts appropriated and popular icons featured in films and articulated by banal readymades.

These photographic works translate the information Google image search provided me through the stylistic module of the Gothic in how they present fragmented narratives that index horrific and psychologically unstable characters and plots existing within the popular films. The objects shaping our perceptions remain still and close, they are readily available globally in consumer culture yet also remain fictionalised and distanced, depicting an artificial whole, disguised by their own tangible realities. These ensembles are presented in a sanitized way, they are readymades placed in a photographic studio against a withered-blue backdrop, an aesthetic usually associated with sterile environments such as surgical clinics. This stylistic device outlines my attempt to amplify these readymades as exposing societies attraction to and participation with transgressive fantasies exhibited in hyper-real popular culture. Through an act of asserting yet rupturing the act of dissimulation, these transgressive icons now expose themselves against the backdrop of a sanitized society. These ensembles of readymades displace the purity of form inherent with the readymade and the banal to reveal societies preoccupation with transgressive content made for, yet dissimulated by, popular culture.

These photographic works also critically examine my methodology as an artist by indexing strategies to encapsulate time. This comes from my aim of depicting the popular zeitgeists these films tap into predicated on the decades they were made in. The ensemble of readymades crafted together in *The Silence of the Lambs* was a contraption made by the character Catherine Martin as a strategy to capture and hold ransom Jame Gumb's aka "Buffalo Bill" dog Precious while she was trapped in his lair. Catherine Martin's strategy for capturing Precious is representational of my strategy as an artist to encapsulate time through the photograph. This indexical link I share as an artist with strategies employed by characters is also evident in the *Donnie Darko* photograph. *Eye*, 1946 by M.C. Escher is featured in the film as a poster in Donnie's bedroom. Escher's perception-altering explorations of infinity offer a visual passageway for the viewer to consider the homage I make to Escher's illustration in my work alongside the film in represents. This particular artwork/film prop/readymade also mobilizes a virtual gaze given its indexicality with the film on the virtual platform of Google image search and how this converges its accessibility not only to art as an artwork but as a readymade to the infinite spiraling-out of popular culture (Friedberg, 1994, p.25).

The critical device of shock has long been used in pop practices, so too has the cannibalised, recycled and simulated use of photography. Similar to Duchamp's strategies of self-multiplication (Joselit, 1998, p.5), artist Richard Prince, with his work *Spiritual America* oscillates himself between artist and conspirator, Martyr for American consumer society and con man. A photograph of a ten-year-old Brooke Shields, slicked in oil and naked, suggestively posing with her arms stretched across a banister and shot from a low angle that suggested her as a

sex goddess is still an explosively controversial work for contemporary audiences. In 1983 Prince appropriated this very photograph, previously shot by photographer Gary Grossman and exhibited it with the title *Spiritual America* in a secret gallery with an admission charge in down town Manhattan (Brooks, 2003, p.52). As part of the 2009 Tate Modern show *Pop Life: Art in a Material World* Prince was asked to exhibit this work once more which resulted in a police order to remove the photograph from the exhibition due to it's pornographic depiction of a child. What replaced it for the Tate show was a 2005 reconstruction of the work entitled *Spiritual American 4*, shot by Sante D'Orazio and directed by Prince, of Shields, now as an adult. Dissimulated from the 1983 photograph the 2005 photograph is obviously less controversial given that its subject is now a woman who is (scantly) clothed. However, Prince's decision to dissimulate the photograph means that composition, stylistic devices and overall sultry temperament that articulated the 1983 photograph were transposed into the 2005 photograph.



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

What interested me most about Prince's *Spiritual America* and *Spiritual America 4* is how there is something really compelling going on between Grossman's photograph of Shields, which Prince appropriated as a photographic readymade, and the subsequent 2005 reconstruction of this readymade. I found the dissimulated 2005 reconstruction a perfect example of an attempt, perhaps inadvertently of Prince, to articulate a zeitgeist of the 1980's. Down to the details of golden lighting and the out-moded use of stylistic fog to evoke a mysterious, goddess-like

environment, every thing about the 2005 photograph reeks of a 1980's 'commercially mystical' aesthetic. The goddess and 'spiritual' elements of the photograph and how the photograph was specifically reconstructed from these elements suggests Prince as transposing, through an act of dissimulation, the zeitgeist of the 1980's into another decade. The discrepancies of the 1983 photographs zeitgeist and the 2005 reconstructed zeitgeist draws out truth about contemporary society; The 1983 photograph can no longer be shown in public, its transgressive content now must be sanitized for popular audiences. The 2005 photograph now acts as a conspirator against the 1983 photograph's compelling and transgressive potency as an uncanny and hyper-real dissimulation.

My main draw card to this work of Prince is his perhaps inadvertent articulation of a specific era's zeitgeist. This was one of my main aims for the photographs, to transpose and transcend the assumed purity inherent of readymade and banal forms by amplifying their transgressive undertones featured in popular culture. The readymades, when viewed as an ensemble, depict not only the film they represent but also a zeitgeist of the decades they were made in a perpetual cycle of real and representation, appropriation and everyday reality. The act of dissimulation, gestalt and transgressive content for both Prince and my work is a crucial component in attempting to photographically transpose zeitgeist of another time and place. Prince's work and my own both frame photography as a shell without a living centre and coincide with Barthe's observation of photography's loathing of history (Friedberg, 1994, p.28).

## Queer

*"The future is queerness's domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there."* (Esteban, 2009, p.1)

This chapter seeks to unfold the Queer aspects of my work and how I consider Queer and Camp aesthetics to be a nexus that draws together other modalities I have used in this project. In this discussion I will use Susan Sontag, Mike Kelley and José Esteban's writing to

elaborate on Camp and Queer sensibilities of my work. I will also incorporate links between how I use the stylistic modalities of Gothic and Queer and how these two use the value of spectatorship which leads to an art of astonishment.

The works [Untitled]JonBenetRamsay.Untitled .gif series.2010 and *Starfield2010* share a relationship in how they manipulate the image between time-based and static states and also in how they chronicle and incorporate Camp and Queer archetypes. In her 1964 essay, Notes on "Camp", Susan Sontag brought the term 'Camp' into academic usage. She defined its distinct sensibility and used it to critically engage with contemporary society in a light-hearted and meticulously analytical way. Her note-form essay offers spectacular inquiries into all things camp. One note states

*"21. So, again, Camp rests on innocence. That means Camp discloses innocence, but also, when it can, corrupts it. Objects, being objects, don't change when they are singled out by the Camp vision."*(Sontag, 2005, p. 307)

Surely then, JonBenet Ramsey is a powerful and compelling Camp figurehead. The image I chose to use of her is a depiction of perverse perfection, a corrupted innocence. It is an archetype of Camp and the injustice it can outline. It also depicts how this Camp sensibility is deeply ingrained and associated within popular culture and psyche. This archetype of Camp becomes more engaged with the formulae of popular imagery and the secrets it encodes when we consider the archetypal depiction of *Wham!* band members George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley. For me, this image has an undeniable and formulaic connection with archetypal depictions of the Madonna and Child. I've become interested in the Camp-ness of this image and its played-down controversial depiction of a homosexual and heterosexual male depicted via a classic and biblical archetype. During his *Wham!* fame George Michael was a closeted homosexual. The over-cooked plushness and sanitized style of Camp in this specific readymade was perhaps an attempt to disguise his secret from popular culture. It is also interesting to consider how we now see this retro-form as a comical depiction of a gay and straight man that appear earnestly staunch and extremely self-aware. In her essay, Sontag also touches on the flux of Camp and time.

*“Of course, the canon of Camp can change. Time has a great deal to do with it. Time may enhance what seems simply dogged or lacking in fantasy now because we are too close to it, because it resembles too closely our own everyday fantasies, the fantastic nature of which we don’t perceive. We are better able to enjoy a fantasy as fantasy when it is not our own.”* (Sontag, 2005, p. 308)

What both these works do, along with their depictions of perverse perfection and self-aware earnestness is subvert era-specific time signatures through the vice of a Camp sentimentality. They both highlight how Camp conceals controversial narrative and truths within out-moded imagery and also positions Camp as a proxy-setting for fantasy, that a Camp and Queer aesthetic reveals and arises as a fantastical manifestation in banal artifice only after time has tinged it as being out-moded. When we consider Camp’s inherent grasp on these works, we see how it simultaneously acts as a stylistic and critical modality. It sheds new light on and interrogates retro forms of popular culture and breeds new associations of these forms.

In his book *Cruising Utopia: The then and there of queer futurity* José Esteban argues that Queer is not yet here, that it only exists as an ideality, a utopia *“that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future”*(Esteban, 2009, p.3). He argues that the future is the domain where Queer has always resided, that it is a rejection of the here and now with the promise of new worlds. In the future *“[t]he aesthetic, especially the Queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity”* (Esteban, 2009, p.3). Esteban also aligns Queer with the idea of hope and astonishment. He states that *“[a]stonishment helps one surpass the limitations of an alienating presentness and allows one to see a different time and place”* (Esteban, 2009, p.5) and employs the Queerness of Warhol’s speech as a manifestation of astonishment. Esteban argues that this is particularly evident by Warhol’s constant and benign exclamations of “wows” and “gees”. Particular minimalist light installations by Cuban-born Queer artist Felix Gonzales Torres also contribute and contextualize to Esteban’s argument of Queer art being an art of astonishment by it’s simplistic yet viscerally poetic beauty.



Fig. 13

In contrast to Esteban's observations, Mike Kelly's essay *Cross Gender/Gross Genre* un-packs the history of Queer aesthetic. He argues that it has operated under the guise of a "homosexual evil" being portrayed by Macho/Queer, leather clad, and Camp characters in Kenneth Anger films since the 1950s/60s (Kelley, 2000, p.5). It is worth noting here that I use Queer like I use the Gothic. That is, as a stylistic module that interrogates and manifests new associations with popular imagery. Also how Queer amplifies Gothic's history of Campy-ness with the first

Gothic novelist Horace Walpole. Kelley argues that Queer's history in popular culture is evident through the glamour of rock stars. He uses Mick Jagger to outline how he transfused different transgressive sub-cultural aesthetics and performative characteristics. He argues the Queerness of Jagger was due to his on-stage movements being simultaneously "black" and "gay" that hybridized him as both 'dangerous' and 'evil' (Kelley, 2000, p.5). Kelley argues that it is by an amalgamation of transgressive and controversial sub-cultural aesthetics and performativity that has carved out Queer aesthetic in popular culture history.

These 'dangerous' and 'evil' Queer associations are, again, in contrast with Esteban's writing on Queer. What I find most interesting about these two arguments and with Sontag's observations of Camp in relation to the Queerness of my own work is how a Queer aesthetic simultaneously involves astonishment and controversy. My work in, dimly lit environments, depicts controversial popular imagery or imagery that I have drawn out to be so with an aim to astonish the viewer. Esteban identifies astonishment as an important philosophical mode of contemplation. The .gif's manipulation of the image both lures the viewer in to its content on a hypnotic level but also rejects the viewer's gaze with intense perception-destabilizing effects. This operation the .gif has on the viewer contributes to Esteban's notion of queer rejecting a time and place and through astonishment surpasses the limitations of an alienating present-ness, allowing the viewer a glimpse into another time and place. I associate the operation of Queer, throughout its history and with how Esteban articulates it's sensibility, as fighting for a place in society and how art, through Baudrillard's perspective, now fights to recover radical illusion. If Queer, as Esteban argues, is a utopia, a glimpse into another time and place, the art that I make Can be considered as doing the same thing. Firstly, The gallery space is where I displace the content I select on blogs, which refers to another time and place and whole regime of aesthetic and ethical discourses. I look for cultural endpoints circulating in both virtual and physical platforms and displace the manipulation of these endpoints from the blog into an art context. I aim to transcend this imagery through strategies of shock, entertainment and astonishment as well as encouraging a rigorous contemplation from the viewer.

## Installation

This chapter will discuss the installation of my work and how each component fits together. I will introduce this chapter by outlining three main objectives I wanted the install of this work to do.

1. I wanted to subvert well-recognized and popular imagery and transcend this content with a precarious environment that deploys the viewer as a spectator. Given the aims and modules I have worked with in this project of destabilizing the viewer's rapport with popular content, the Gothic and super-hybrid qualities such as immersion and entanglement, the space needed to impose an aspect of uncertainty upon the viewer. My aims of uncovering truths for the viewer hidden within popular content results in an experience of immersive uncertainty that transcends popular and banal imagery by forming new insights and associations that draw new conclusions for this imagery.
2. In order for the viewer to experience the displacement of content and imagery in a precarious environment, the space needed to reveal itself only by the viewer submitting and encountering it on their own accord. For instance, when you first approach the doorway of where my work is exhibited the space looks inactivated and empty – you can't see any of the work until you step into the space. The viewer can also not experience the work at its entirety until they have followed a passageway I have laid out for them. The viewers find themselves in a maze-like scenario not knowing what to expect around each corner and are also forced to encounter the work in the chronological order I mapped the work out to be viewed in. This methodology of using the maze highlights how the viewer is subjected to an interrogation of formulaic imagery in how they themselves are under the command of a contrived and formulaic encountering of the work.

3. I wanted the space to be atmospheric and elusive, one that impacts and contributes to the viewer's overall experience of the work. This is why the space is dimly lit, and how the lighting used to light or caused by a work's residue of light builds an ambience and affects other works and the space collectively. This is also why I used a smoke machine in the install that amplifies the projection used in *Starfield2010* and also creates a gothic-esque mist that permeates the space and contributes to the conceal/reveal ethos of the work and the dimly lit environment. The atmospheric quality of the install is over the top, vivacious and in places lightheartedly camp, yet also bears a heavier temperament with more sinister and serious undertones.

I will now outline specific mediums, works and the placement of these components in the space to reflect and explain my installation decision-making. Works that are informed by the .gif format i.e. [Untitled]JonBenetRamsay.Untitled .gif series.2010, *Infinite Regress* and how *Starfield2010* unites a profusion of the ready-made and the moving and static image and converts these into a collaborative and compressed format, quasi of the .gif, are displaced from their original technological conceptions. None of the works are exhibited on computer monitors and are removed from their homely virtual context of the Internet. This decision of rejecting the .gif's usual place of access and presentation highlights my aim to converge virtual platforms with physical platforms like an art space. By displacing the .gif's normal environment and transfusing it into an art space for critical analysis the viewer doesn't witness a barrier between the work and the technology it is predominantly associated with and the works are exhibited on the physical domains popular culture is presented through like the T.V monitor, cinematic projection and by readymades.

While the photographs are exhibited in the centre of the space, encoding a fragmentation of popular narrative and imagery formed by banal readymades that capture and critically analyse their place in cinematic popular culture, they also share the same domain as the work *Infinite Regress*. As the photographs confront the viewer with a static engagement they are positioned in a passageway-like space, with *Infinite Regress* positioned at the end of the passageway, alluding to an extension of this space by its looping .gif format. In the work Danny Torrence's tricycle meandering is butted up against an awkward protrusion of a pillar that makes up the space's given architecture. This creates a spatial

tension where the moving image's content and perception ricochets against and becomes ruptured by the spaces architecture. It also indexes the viewer's act of submitting to the act of following the spaces designated maze scenario, not knowing what lurks behind each corner.

Lastly, the viewer's first experience with the exhibition space formed by the work [Untitled]JonBenetRamsay.Untitled .gif series.2010 is similar to the one that concludes it by the work *Starfield2010*. Both works act together in how they outline the cohesion between the moving and static image and what elements go into this make-up. The JonBenet work critically uses the .gif to transcend dual static images to the point where their repeated breakdown and rupturing causes a sensory perception of movement for the viewer. At the opposite pole of the space *Starfield2010* projects the moving image of a screensaver onto a static ready-made image of the band *Wham!* and outlines the ingredients of a .gif to be a projected content of either static or moving nature and how this content transcends it's origins of ready-made imagery, be it from the cinema or an extraction of banal and popular imagery.

## Conclusion

I consider virtual platforms of the Internet, particularly that of the blog, to be the stadiums of the Twenty First Century. I also consider art, in all of its holistic capacities, to contribute to this stadium of highly idiosyncratic inquiries into a postmodern discourse. For this project, I wanted to challenge the idea that art has become a dystopic platform and reinvest my art making with compelling dynamics that fuse reality and hyper-reality. I also wanted to work with what was readily available to me in order to critique this dynamic. By using things, popular things, that we as a society feel drawn to or uneasy around I aim to jump-start or manifest compelling illusions of our present reality. My emphasis on converging the time-based and static image was used to address the issue of time and how, as an artist, I can manipulate time's grasp on imagery by speeding it up, slowing it down or rupturing it into a frenzy that subverts it into a state of liquidation. This interest I have with challenging the signatures and impact of time on the artifice coincided with stylistic and critical methodologies that amplify popular imagery's presence and deviation within a globalized society. This methodology aims to celebrate and affirm yet unmask the artifices of our everyday realities that are increasingly splintering off into other places of mediation. I also wanted this project to lend itself towards an open critique of subcultural

minorities and the cult followings of these minorities. This was with an aim to place these minorities with a position of empowerment and how the fringes of society, and the content they identify with, withhold truth about dominant society and culture at large.

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