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SHOW

A thesis

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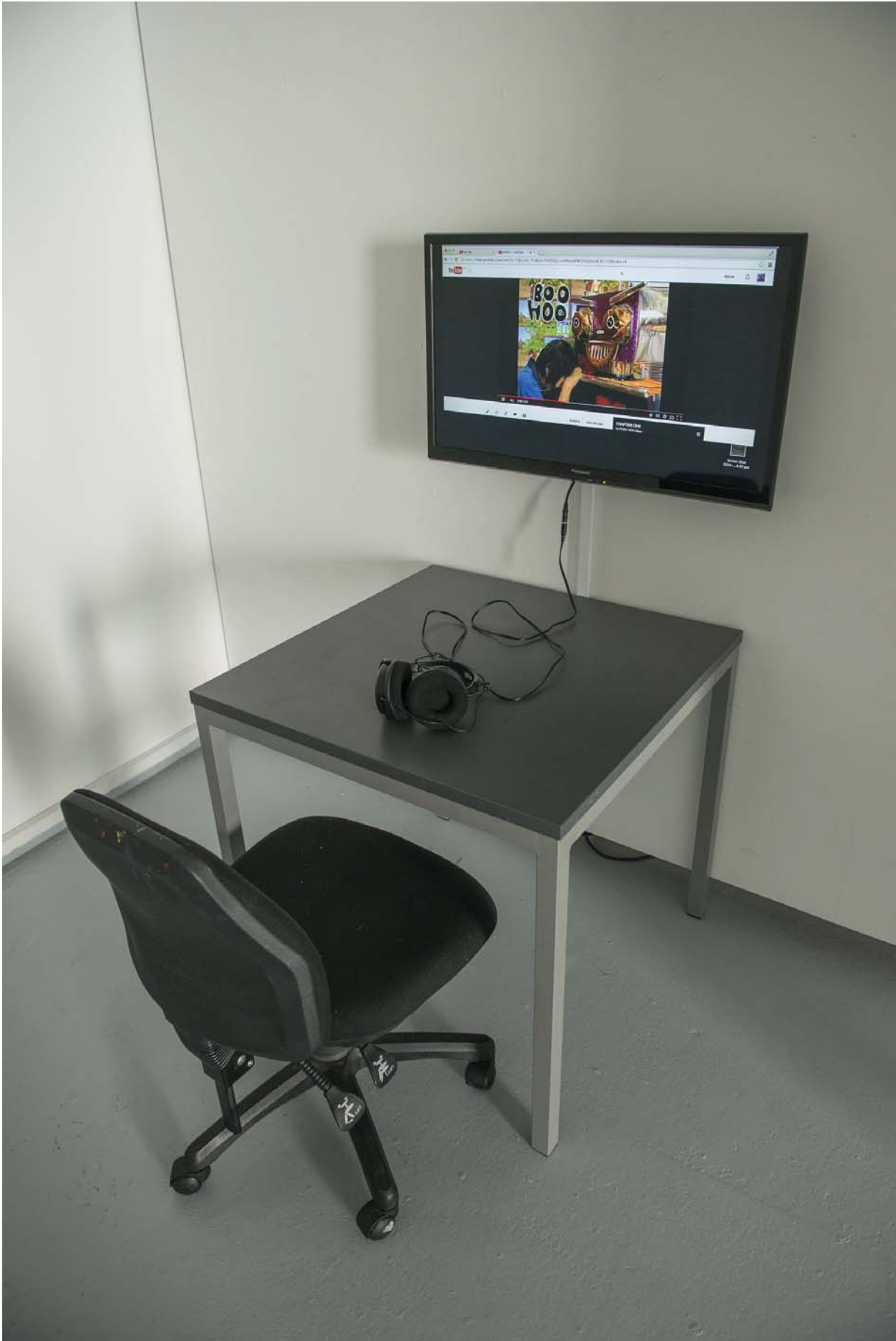


Abstract

These videos are what is left following a failure to develop a net art performance practice grounded in trauma as a conceptual apparatus. I had hoped that this series would lead to a performance event that would respond to Hal Foster's contextualization of the Real in contemporary surrealism.

Some clarification on my departures from Foster's ideas are in order, since he is a critical theorist antipathetic towards performance – my intention was to create a piece that contextualizes while dismantling time as a representational stage in which performer's subjectivity occurs (this has precedence in Dan Graham's *Performer/ Audience/ Mirror*), revealing the performer's agency as something outside of his continuous self-apprehension - traumatically alienated from, rather than integrated with, their psychic economy. I wanted to explore the notion of ideology persisting (in a structural sense) in what most (myself included) internet users take for granted as post-ideological, personalized platforms.

My mistake was to protract, rather than make succinct this basic premise: I conceived the performer and mirror as the internet user performing a dialogical relationship with the unary signifiers of his voice on computer screen. Following this, fulfilling my idea of 'traumatic performance' soon became a matter of finding a way to draw an antagonistic relationship between this dialogue in real time (the net art event) and subjective time (the performer's speaking position, as it comes to be represented through the internet), which I found a critical basis in Lacan's formula of the Hysteric's Discourse. While I felt I had sustained a consistent attitude towards effect, I felt that I ended up endlessly reproducing what I shall call a space of private epiphanies on certain autobiographical pivot point – the project is marred by a kind of coded expressionism which I feel is besides the point.



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1. Preface

In Zach Blas's contra-internet work, the artist tries to imagine the internet as a socio-technological totality in which regimes of neoliberal subjectivity are propagated at the expense of others. Without touching on the more subversive aspects of his work - I have adopted the formula of Lacan's Master's discourse in order to picture such a totality, beginning with the concept of a unary signifier that tries to conceal the truth of one's barred subjectivity – a split between the conscious and unconscious. This is to say that a fundamental inconsistency is concealed in the name of the internet user, which dictates the parameters of a cluster of associative signifiers indicating an individual, and assigns them to a false finitude that produces an excess that comes back to disrupt coherence - The Hysteric's discourse attempts to give agency to the split subjectivity via a naïve style, addressing this totality at face value, questioning it while being enraptured in its confines.

With regards to the conscious, we have the question of agency: The writer Humdog said that people can only think of cyberspace as a utopian community because it is literature, and thus subject to editorial revision (*Pandora's Vox: On Community in Cyberspace, 1994*). During the course of making work around these ideas I have come to think of this editorial freedom as a kind of ruse, in that our participation as subjects of the internet does not provide any alternatives to preexisting orders, but, at most, grants us a kind of reflexivity in which we come to see how we 'willfully' reproduce prior regimes. In formulating artistic strategies around this there was always the sense of wanting to tease out a performance 'outside time', of a subject not within the present - what I have learnt from my work is that my terms of privacy gains currency only in the terms of spectacle – there is no memory of an 'original moment' in the videos I have produced.

2. Post-Internet, Post-Ideological?

In his delineation of virtual reality through psychoanalysis, *From Virtual Reality to the Virtualization of Reality* (1996), Žižek calls the computer an 'evocatory object', a machine à penser (thinking machine) which, beyond its instrumentality as an object, performatively raises questions about the nature of human thought – something I consider a blueprint for what ended up as my installation. A trajectory that coincides with my general interest in the Lacanian narrative of beings alienated in language systems begins in a 1998 debate hosted on the online forum <eyebeam> <blast>, when Lev Manovich dismissed the notion of culturally-specific Internet art, instead predicting a focus on "social, linguistic and psychological networks of people entering the space of modernity". This articulation seemed to me as ideal to explore Foster's notion of art in the collapse of a referential stage, but it becomes further complicated 2 decades later, after the proliferation of memes and the rise of the internet prosumer, followed by various curatorial strategies to account for issues like networks of access and the modularity of the art object. Robin Peckham, in a talk delivered in 2014, disagrees with art historical discussions that frame post-internet art as return to surrealism, breaking up the banality of universal culture as it's been spread by the internet via the joy of the bizarre. Instead, he notes post-internet's tendency towards the appropriation and adaptation of images towards new purposes, tracing this activity back to

institutional critique.

Relating this to my installation, I suppose the question would be what the status this 'evocatory object' takes in a gallery, and - if it can be taken as an analog for an internet user's consciousness during the process of creation – whether such a subject can respond to the institutional setting. This is not something I'm terribly interested in as my interests are populist and try to avoid discourses that are too rarefied – my focus is more on the production of subjectivity on the internet and how it can be a self-reflective act, using performance to "animate the formal and conceptual ideas on which art-making is based upon" (Goldberg, 2001). Nevertheless, I shall address these issues enough to leave space for the reader to draw their own conclusions.

I relate to the tendency to frame post-internet politics as a throwback to modern movements like surrealism - For me it stems from a desire to bypass problems raised by Foster, to return to a point where a shared reality can be still be acknowledged through performance (I use this word not in its contemporaneous sense, but Goldberg's more provisional definitions of the term, which she traces the roots of the genre back to modernism). This is to say, a point in history where relations of drawing subject-object distinctions (the relationship of the artist towards the work) assumed by the artist is refers to of socially constructed life/art boundaries (the relationship the performer stages between themselves and reality). Within such relations, the performer is able to reference (and challenge) the very coordinates by which his position of agency is determined. For example, consider the Dada artist's ability to allude to the production of distance between life and art in his performative declaration of a readymade: By emphasizing what appears to be a disproportionate amount of his agency by determining an object he has not produced as art (while still claiming a relationship towards the object nonetheless), he rejects the ideological tendencies behind art/life divisions that structure the rarity of institutionalized art objects as they are determined by a disproportionate influence of critics. In short, the performed distance between subject-object relations reflects a structured distance between life and art, in order to critically redeem this distance from stagnation. Dada achieves the anti-art critique of production the way surrealism achieves a psychological critique of ideology: both movements animate the subject object relations that determine the efficacy of the work. Following this, we could posit the subject as a performative dimension signified through a material absence in the gallery, in congruence to Lacan's theory of the signifier as gaining coherence through absence.

As I said in the abstract, I don't think I managed to execute these ideas effectively – but I feel it is pertinent to at least consider how the computer in my installation signifies while flattening out relations of distances and proximities between the gallery and personal space. In the post-internet context, I hope I can retain some basic formal ideas of a materialist critique, while questioning the assumption that the performer's image can stand for objective conditions of an ideological stage, which he has the agency to restructure and transform to his own whims in the aftermath of the radical subjectivization of the authority of media that Foster tries to trace in *The Return of the Real*. Foster compels the reader to "rethink transgression not as a rupture produced by a heroic avant-garde outside the symbolic order, but as a fracture traced by a strategic avant-garde within the order" (Foster, 1996, p. 157). The primacy of the performer's agency becomes threatened in latter half of the 20th century because nothing stages

subject for themselves - their relationship to their image is not a stable subject-object distinction, but an image without 'a stage', existing in obscene proximity towards the viewer. Foster describes a paradigm shift "from reality as an effect of representation to the real as a thing of trauma", marking a point where ideological and anthropological readings of performance collapse into the psychoanalytical: What was once easily described as the movement of subjects responding to (and thus reinventing) the structural determinations that produce them is irreducibly complicated by the analysis of the limiting structures that constitute subjectivity itself.

The representation of anthropological data in Dan Graham's constant feedback on his mirror image, is, to me, not unlike a stream of status updates on social media - frequently deconstructed as the psychological projections of the viewer. In *Performance/Audience/Mirror* a stable relationship between the psychology of the performer and viewer is implicated within these limiting structures, revealing them to be already a minimal affect in reality. An absence is produced by Graham via an ambiguity in identification that reveals any articulation or reading of a formal framework in which a social relationship takes place does not allude to reality - rather, it becomes a shield against the trauma of the Real (what Foster, following, Lacan, calls a superimposed 'image/screen' that points towards, while simultaneously 'veiling' the real, thus taming it within a symbolic framework). In this sense, the mirror image becomes a late capitalist counterpoint to the readymade, in that the artist's gesture draws a relationship towards his image that produces a distance within himself (a "barred subject"), registering as a distance of time between Graham's description of his surroundings and the viewer's continual observation of the mirror. This results in a condition that Foster also identifies in Cindy Sherman's work - a state in which one cannot help but catch themselves objectifying the artist. The performer's image is not a referential stage, but a rupture in performer-viewer intersubjectivity.

I find this rupture occurring in notions of what people find discontinuous to the gallery space, not an absence represented materially in the gallery, but a psychological absence, a blind spot that coincides with any articulation of a subject-driven agency attempting to organize relations to conceal its incongruity. To illustrate, during a panel entitled *Artists as Activists: Activating Public Spaces* at Art Stage 2014 in Singapore, Malaysian Curator Simon Soon makes the assertion that he'd rather not see activism in a gallery. Soon questioned the motivation behind organizing discussions about arts activism in the context of an art fair, warning against the fetishization of the spirit of mass movements in a field that had fallen behind what he calls "artless" cultural productions. According to Soon, the creators of the Youtube show 'Sexcussions with Alvivi' (the joint pseudonym of Alvin Tan and Vivian Lee, a couple who posted sex videos on their tumblr and subsequently played out their relationship dynamics on the Youtube platform), is far more radical than artists operating in galleries consciously making what he derided as preachy and "hipsterish" activist art, singling out the artist-activist Fahmi Reza, known for his work *Najib's Head Stolen From Billboard* where he uploaded a (staged) act of political vandalism on a public billboard on Youtube as documentation. Alvivi's widespread notoriety in contrast to the short-lived controversy of *Najib's head* is telling - prosecuted by the government for sedition for uploading a personal photo of themselves eating pork during a Muslim religious festival, Alvivi have become champions of free speech not with specific acts of subversion but by painting in broad gestures. It would be useful to compare the couple to someone like Ai Weiwei (dubbed a "wonderful dissident,

terrible artist” by the New Republic – “With Ai, the means are purely instrumental, just a way to get to an end.” (Perl, 2013) appropriating the lexicon of internet memes and retweeting people’s support mechanically as a gesture of defiance. Following Soon’s sentiments, there is a curious sense that in order to make potent art there has to be an absence of conscious attention to the condition of production; not a mediated act of sousveillance legitimized by the gallery as seen in Reza’s work, but a use of the internet that somehow, does not belong in the gallery.



Beyond Soon’s reductive dichotomies between art and ‘non-art’, the gallery and internet, and the political and apolitical/ personal, I think he illustrates how people are struggling with the paradoxes that come with the idealization of the internet experience (which Zizek calls a reality which we “escape into” rather than confront the real of trauma.) On one hand social media gives previously marginalized groups a voice, helps activists organize dissent against state controlled media. On the other hand marginalized subjects cohere as something else online, something that seems all-inclusive but in reality reproduces prior structural oppressions via the privilege people assume as mediated subjects. Internet platforms shed light on the nature of power nowadays - In today’s context, the master is no longer the one who controls you but the one who gives you the most freedom, the authority who tells you that you are free as a subject. Succumbing to indulgences of commodity capitalism, we default to what Zizek calls a “private use of reason, constrained by contingent dogmatic presuppositions”.

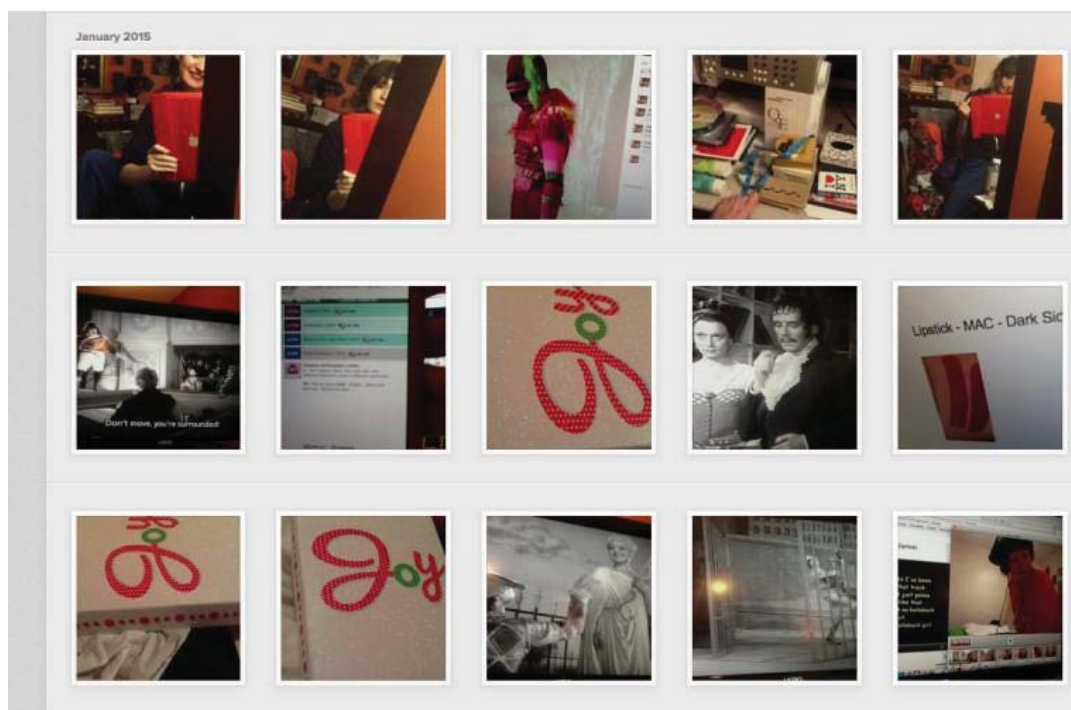
In regards to artistic strategies that deconstruct the microexpressions of the contingent and dogmatic; diaristic performance art sounds questionable given the oversaturation of self-absorbed millennials looking for attention online, but I feel if "timed" right, it can bring light to what was previously apparent but invisible. I feel that 'outsider art' needs to be redefined in the post-internet context, and my provisional definition of this are net artists who reflect on the post internet problematic via an inability (or unwillingness) to assimilate. An artist of interest in these regards is Anna Matskevich, a schizotypical Russian woman whose primary medium is Youtube. A crucial element of her work is their inaccessibility: Thousands of videos uploaded in a manic frequency, sometimes up to 30 a day, and their subsequent deletion. In some of these videos she is ranting incoherently in a camera, in others, performing some

kind of dance ritual in public spaces. The more she disseminates herself, the more she is rendered incoherent (as of this writing Matskevich has been institutionalized, all her videos taken down). The Youtube platform absorbs rather than delimits her, as indicated in one of her video descriptions:

“The future is absent. the present is also. the past is disputing every second. that woman female object stopped to exist in 1999, you can see shadow only. the fighter of removed is representing to you its fight. which soon will not be needed as we all will burn. i said i drown in information, like a swimmer, who is exhausting to fight with waves in the lake or ocean.”



Another artist who acts out a tentative relationship to social media is Jessica Ciocci, a founding member of the Rhode Island collective Paper Rad (whose stylistic ethos can be best summarized by their assertion that there is been no discontinuity between their art and what they have been doing as children). Her online presence, as a work in itself, is, in my opinion, by far more challenging than anything the other Paperrad members have gone on to produce. Like Refbatch, albeit in a more self-aware way, she employs the same diaristic strategies that hinge on microscopic shifts in consciousness. On her IG she documents her experience of things on her computer screen, her mirror when she takes a selfie with a red ipad, etc. She is so radically personal she becomes an anthropologist studying herself, in the same way we are forced to cast a clinical eye on Anna. It's a 'messier' approach to internet performance, and one that seems to elude institutional recognition.



To compare these artists in the context of other internet performers - artists like Ann Hirsch (who played the self-obsessed cam girl Scandalicious on youtube) and Amalia Ulman (as various avatars on IG) engage in dialogical relationships with the object gaze of the internet, while Ciocci and Refbatch perform 'hysterical' dialogues with objects themselves, seeking the impersonal in personalized devices in order to drain them of a certain pleasure of reciprocity in public sharing, and in turn, they elude their own objectification; As the worst thing for that can happen to the Hysteric is to become an object of enjoyment for the Other (Nobus, 2013) to become an instrumental tool, in order to sustain their position of questioning.



comic by Jessica Ciocci.

2. About a year and a half ago Jessica Ciocci deleted her Twitter account. Now [she's back](#). But sometimes she tweets about deleting it again, which scares me because I need her tweets. Her account isn't a place to find carefully drafted witticisms — it's more like an open nerve touched to the network, and the sparks that fly from the connection simultaneously express an urge to be social and a disgust with that urge. (Sometimes she posts photos of her comics, drawn in the same spirit: half-human creatures making stunted small talk.) This is what we would hear if the emoticon `:/` could speak.

3. The Master's and hysteric's discourse

In regards to this idea of the contingent and dogmatic, perhaps it would be useful for the viewer to consider that in addition to the changed annotations, what has been altered is that the ~~SHOW youtube playlist is now public on the internet~~ (I have since taken it down), though it wasn't during the installation – they were private videos viewed through my personal account itself. I am not entirely sure what the rationale behind this was beyond the general idea of projecting a private space into the gallery. In truth – I'm not trying to be disingenuous here - I don't feel like I can reflect on these decisions realistically. I feel the confessional nature of the videos is an illusion, because what I'm comfortable talking about changes from one person and moment to the next. The boundaries between what I consider public and private is marred as to a radical uncertainty regarding who is watching:

"You interpret the situation one encounters in front of the computer screen - for example when communicating via e-mail - as a situation of Hysteria. There is actually a great deal of uncertainty in these forms of communication: You can never be sure who is reading your input or in what way. You are aware of this situation all the time and try to anticipate the other's reactions. Also, important additional features of face-to-face communication like gestures or tone of voice are missing..." – Žizek, *Hysteria and Cyberspace*.

Further obfuscating my disposition is that fact that where there *are* people concerned - I have worked with collaborators for my videos - I become passive reactive in regards to their interactions with me, employing circumstantial lexicon and gestures in my videos, appealing to others as consumers of the same TV shows, the surface presentation of people of particular political and cultural identities, communicated degrees of emotional familiarity. DJ Spooky notes this tendency towards fragmentation by invoking sociologist Sherry Turkle's book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, where she talks about case studies on how looking at information on screens affects children:

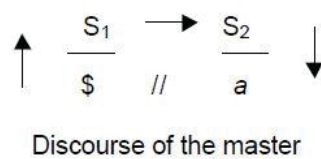
"One thing she noticed immediately is that people would come up with new pseudonyms and nicknames and create different methods of engaging with the information on the screen. I think that's fascinating because it gets at the mirroring or mimetic function between the screen and the self."

I relate to tendency towards fragmentation is paradoxically, on a psychological level, a need for coherence – an internal coherence in a layered virtual space. François Michaud, the curator of Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch's *Any Ever*, talks about the artists' technique of incorporating preexisting found material, comparing it to a sequence from an episode the TV show *Love Boat*, where Warhol played the role of himself. The fact that the actors knew that he was coming aboard created what Michaud calls a 'mise en abyme', symptomatic of the mixture of different types of reality. This symptom is prevalent even in youtube vloggers, who talk to the camera to leave notes to themselves on how to edit things in the future – in a context where time and space becomes flattened out, I not only appear as a kind of fragmented unity, I perceive myself as one when projecting myself as spectacle.

This posits mastery of one's place on the internet as an acceptance of a constitutive disparity. In regards to this Žizek proposes a reading, where the experience of the computer as a medium of mastery and control is countered by the experience wonderment and amazement – being enraptured in it (1996), respectively calling these oppositional levels the difference between "hard" (obsessional) and "soft"

(hysterical) programming. The first experience seeks to instrumentalize the computer, determining set subject-object relations, the second wishes to “have a dialogue” with it, asking the computer: who am I, as a subject?

Trying to be partisan about this I adopted a theoretical framework that treats both levels as mutually interconnected. I have turned to Lacan’s discourse theory because I am dealing with disruptions and ‘glitches’ in language and their organization and articulations of the subject on the internet. As opposed to models of communication that attempt to eliminate noise (Verhaeghe, 1995), Lacan begins with the premise that there is a necessary failure that built into the act of communication.



The moment we unquestionably accept our agency as internet users, we enter a discourse where we can presume mastery over our internet avatars. S1 is the signifier of the framework that holds the coherence of a unified subjectivity together, not unlike the youtube annotations on SHOW. The annotations hold together transitions between material that are deliberately left ‘empty’ and incoherent, and the annotations are added after they are uploaded to link segments together; As of this writing, (in private) what runs through the videos in SHOW 2 is an alternate history of the soviet union, reflecting on my revisionism of the videos, though before it was something more crass, perhaps verging on self-sabotage (?). That these boxes hold together words that have provisional status is important to me. I call these signifiers of ‘real time’ (because they have) extrinsic meaning and no intrinsic meaning – this is to say that they can only be alluded to through demonstration (playing out the experience through time) and not defined by language.

S2 is the field of the intrinsic, an associative network, the technical knowledge necessary to sustain the parameters of S1. What began as a contingent framework soon takes on a kind of self-contained coherence – despite my reluctance to actively adopt a stable identity in these videos, the serial nature of SHOW sees that certain overall impressions constantly ‘add up’ to an impression of a specific kind of subject behind the screen. Thus S1, coinciding with certain formal features of the social media platform (the ‘availability’ of features on Youtube, such as annotations and playlists) marks a kind of contingent horizon for S2’s ability to reflect on its properties, as exemplified in Simon Soon’s defaulting to the democratic and artistic potential of the internet that empowers the prosumer.

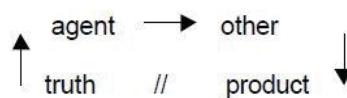
What S1 conceals is the intersubjective rupture, an absurdity in the heart of the subject; In an essay entitled “*Social media is not self expression*” published in *The New Inquiry* it is asserted that “Self-expression is the internalization of social authority, not the externalization of a true identity” (Horning, 2014). In regards to any experienced or articulated internal coherence, my position is rendered absurd (\$, the barred subject) by presumptions that emerge at the horizon of my reflexivity when I try

navigating these notions of the contingent and dogmatic; I assume, in the moment my identity coheres online, that I have escaped (what can sometimes be) the bane of the ideological or culturally specific, that I finally emerge as someone free from these determinations. At the most, my deferral to the norms of a social platform is chalked down to a matter of choice - I cohere as an internet user with agency by retroactively denying specific moments that structure my constitution. This is to say that I internalize a discontinuity in order to be perceived as continuous within the network I occur in.

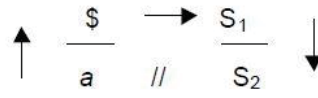
This absurdity can be illustrated with the #gamergate phenomenon, which is essentially a group that is defined by the denial of the very structural privilege by which they come to be organized via a collectively sustained fiction of nonexistent neutral point on the internet (“ethics in game journalism”). This is analogous to the internet troll has made it a personal mission of his to make fun of people who take things too seriously – again, there is a self-subversion to this: why do trolls take not taking things seriously so seriously? My definition for a troll, is thus, someone who is aware of the contingency of these boundaries but mistakes it for a totalizing relativity that overshadows the pragmatics of social grace.

The internet user, under the master signifier, produces material that the subject has no words for and can only be registered through trauma, a repository of unconscious gestures awaiting verbalization. Something that has emerged in the internet lexicon is ‘trigger warning’ (which I see as having roots in the acronym ‘NSFW’). These are to indicate signifiers that potentially trigger trauma to account for the fact that not all people are affected by signs in the same way, that is to say there is no consensus on how a problematic trigger is normalized within a linguistic network, so the best thing to do is acknowledge their traumatic currency. The trigger warning deals with a paradox by applying a temporal logic by which it becomes resolved virtually: The triggered are affected because something that has not been integrated into their psychic economy is now made explicit to be something that is within, yet outside their consciousness (symbolizing a kind of penetrative excess). The trigger warning in the real excess (a) produced when we assume contingent boundaries to our speech.

In the master’s discourse, S1 is given the space of agency, driven by the disparity (the truth of the subject’s position, in short - S1 is not S2) in addressing S2 the field of the Other (language), which produces an excess.



In the hysterics discourse, however, what is given agency is \$ itself:



Hysteric's discourse

This puts the subject in the position of identifying with a structure of speech, the synchrony of which is a question-answer – what entails is a double characteristic of resisting speech while causing it. (Wajcman) Driven by the need to resolve a traumatic excess, the subject questions S1, producing different new associations.

In regards to the annotations in my editing of Show, it was an attempt to hystericize the notion of linear (events as they play out live) time in both my experience of editing the footage and the viewer's experience of watching it. There is a fluidity and a stagnancy that goes beyond the framework I'm using in the appropriation of hysteria (as a mode of questioning and as a symptom), a giving agency to the split between the conscious and the unconscious without actually interrogating the unspoken parameters of what drives speech; No matter how I keep exercising agency as revisionist of my internal world and external actions. The relationship I have with objects, the relationships I have with myself (language, self-apprehension), and the relationship I have with other people is compartmentalized in the same way, and things are not happening in tangent - I socialize faster on the internet than irl. It's reflected in how I have been segmented as a user of different social platforms: Rather than existing in tangent, as an integrated person with a dialogical relationship with these media, I exist as a compartmentalized, hyperlinked, cross-stitched entity.

What I find hard to reconcile with is that this postmodern tendency towards fragmentation masks a desire to do something real with the internet – I set out to shatter illusions rather than reinforce them and there's a sense of wagging the dog with the videos and I don't feel like revisiting them. I hope I had documented my interactions with others more extensively, or hadn't deleted the documentation, perhaps I would have communicated something of more value here.

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