

Digital Anxieties: Affect and Technological Governance in the Works of Cécile B. Evans and
Ryan Trecartin

Jeanne Voizard Marceau

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By: Jeanne Voizard Marceau

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 B. Evans and Ryan Trecartin

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Signed by the final examination committee:

_____ Examiner
Dr. Johanne Sloan

_____ Thesis Supervisor
Dr. Alice Ming Wai Jim

Approved by _____
Dr. Nicola Pezolet, Graduate Program Director

_____ 2020 _____
Dr. Annie Gérin, Dean of Faculty of Fine Arts

ABSTRACT

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Jeanne Voizard Marceau

This thesis considers the shifting relationships between affect, governance, and technology, by examining two contemporary video installations: *What the Heart Wants* (2016) by Belgian-American artist Cécile B. Evans (b. 1983), and *Roamie View: History Enhancements* (2010) by American artist Ryan Trecartin (b. 1981). I argue that these works allow viewers to better conceptualize the media and socio-political environments surrounding them by drawing attention to contemporary affective experiences and to digital anxieties such as confusion, competition, fatigue, and performativity. *What the Heart Wants* presents digital infrastructures as affective and woven within modern intimacies, ultimately critiquing the notion of a programmed sociality. *Roamie View: History Enhancements* hyperbolizes info-glut and conjures an understanding of contemporary cognition as affective, and of the performativity of neoliberal networked subjects. In both works, I also examine the artists' approaches to representation and identity. In different ways, these works fulfill technological governance in its totality, and through these intensifications, shatter common assumptions about networked life. Evans presents a world reduced to a controlling, confused, and anxious digital system, while Trecartin's characters, living with cameras 24/7, lose their bearings and are caught in endless loops of performance. Both works come to question and document the seamless integration of platform technologies as "companion systems" (James Williams) of users' affective lives. By examining the relationship between technology and emotions, these artists recognize the socio-political qualities of emotions, and their inextricable ties to history. This allows viewers to better see the potent influence of digital systems on affect, and to engage in a politics of emotions.

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INTRODUCTION

While the line delineating the online and the offline world has always been a blurred and a porous one, it has with the growth of the internet and digital technologies become increasingly obsolete and illusory. According to new media artist and scholar Hito Steyerl, the internet's underlying algorithmic structure now exceeds and persists beyond the screen "as a mode of life, surveillance, production, and organization."¹ Weaving throughout people's lives, the internet is today one of the main infrastructure mediating communications and daily experience; a dynamic network shaping and normalizing cultural practices, communication habits, the distribution of visibility, and the experience of time and space. As social media platforms further permeate the fabric of everyday social and intimate lives, they also bring about changes to the contemporary structures and mechanisms of power. Affecting all socio-political and economic life, permutations of digital technologies are connected to and accompanied by shifts in the architecture and movement of neoliberal power and capitalism evidenced by the rise of immaterial and digital labour.

While early accounts of the internet presented it as a democratizing and liberating network for connectivity and for sharing information, some users have now come to understand that pervasive mechanisms of control run through the global web. Knowledge of the ways in which algorithms define digital landscape and information access, or of ubiquitous surveillance in the post-Snowden era,² have allowed certain authors to conceptualize how a seemingly fluid and freeing network may conduct an even harsher form of control.³ However, as media theory

¹ Hito Steyerl, "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?," *e-flux journal* 49 (2013), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/49/60004/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/>.

² In 2013, the American whistle-blower Edward Snowden leaked classified NSA documents that confirmed the existence of global surveillance programs run by the US government.

³ For Gilles Deleuze in "Postscript for Societies of Control," computers and their entangled networks, as well as mutations in capitalism and labour, gave rise to insidious and "ultra-rapid forms of free-floating control" (also characterized as rhizomatic, adaptable, fluid and flexible) in which freedom is felt but illusory. Gilles Deleuze, "Post-script on Societies of Control," *October* 59 (Winter, 1992): 3. Following Foucault's theorization and periodization of disciplinary societies, Deleuze claims our current societies are control societies. In his 1987 conference "What is the Creative Act," he explains: "Control is not discipline. I am not saying this is the only aim of highways, but by making highways, you multiply the means of control. I am not saying this is the only aim of highways, but people can travel infinitely and "freely" without being confined while being perfectly controlled." Gilles Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness, Texts and Interviews 1975-1995*, ed. by David Lapoujade, tr. by Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), 322. Importantly, for Deleuze, as capitalism, technology and architecture of power mutates, old forms of resistance will no longer be adequate and "new forms of resistance against societies of control" must emerge. He then urges activists and scholars working against this newer control to look for the "rough

scholar Geert Lovink explains, with the rise of the internet: “Our environment and its operating conditions have been dramatically transformed, and yet our understanding of such dynamics lags behind.”⁴ On media platforms and their inescapable webs, technology researcher and philosopher James Williams explains that, while their inner workings and operations remain obscure and driven by financial success, users entrust platform technologies to be “companion systems” of their lives and guiding GPSes through the datascape.⁵ Writing on their psychosocial influence, he adds: “ Our moment-to-moment experiences, our interactions with one another, the styles of our thoughts and the habits of our days now take their shapes, in large part, from the operation of these new inventions.”⁶

Concerns about and resistance to technological governance and digital control have animated artists, scholars, and cultural practitioners since the early days of the internet. A wide range of contemporary artists, including new media artists who engage with digital culture and communication technologies, have responded, contested, critiqued, and documented transformations brought about by the internet. As media art historians Lauren Cornell and Ed Halter write, while early examples of new media art approached the internet as “a new medium” to play with, contemporary media artists understand it as a “true mass medium.”⁷ Echoing these scholars, I would even go as far as to call the internet a medium of life.

This thesis sets out to examine some of these important developments in contemporary art, and how artists are responding to the internet as one of the most fundamental infrastructures of daily life. It considers how contemporary art can help reveal and critique elusive and invisible forces that animate digital landscapes. To carry out these inquiries, the thesis offers a theoretical framework located at the convergence of digital culture, affect theories and contemporary art. Specifically, it provides an analysis of two works by artists Cécile B. Evans and Ryan Trecartin, respectively *What the Heart Wants* (2016) and *Roamie View: History Enhancements* (2010).

outline of these coming forms.” In some ways, this thesis extends this agenda in its examination of Evans’ and Trecartin’s works and their critiques of technological governance. Deleuze, “Post-script on Societies of Control,” 7.

⁴ Lovink then cites writer Evgeny Morozov and adds: “‘The barbed wire remains invisible,’ as Evgeny Morozov once put it.” Geert Lovink, *Sad by Design: On Platform Nihilism* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 3.

⁵ James Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light. Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 9.

⁶ Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light*, 3.

⁷ Lauren Cornell and Ed Halter, “Hard Reboot: An Introduction to Mass Effect,” in *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Lauren Cornell and Ed Halter (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), xv.

These two works are discussed for the ways they offer valuable insights into the complexities of neoliberal networked life and affects. Rather than a comparative analysis of these works, this thesis considers them as complementary contributions that crystallize and tease out insufficiently discussed aspects of networked culture, more precisely related to its affective textures. I argue that these works allow viewers to better conceptualize the digital spaces they inhabit, by drawing attention to the changing role of affect in digital dynamics, and by emphasizing some of the affective qualities of contemporary online and offline lived realities. In doing that, both artists further interrogate and document the integration of platform technologies as “companion systems” of affective lives, as per Williams’ terms. In different ways, Evans’ and Trecartin’s video-based practices interrogate the shapes and desires of digital technologies, and they unravel their relationship to power by centring affects and emotions as significant forces to consider.

Far from being isolated, their practices are a part of a large and active art historical moment where countless other artists are currently responding to digital infrastructures and their organizational power. Amongst others, works by Hito Steyerl, Amalia Ulman, Zach Blas, Trevor Paglen, Carolyn Lazard, Mimi Onuoha, and Morehshin Allahyari have also contributed to this conversation. As video installations, Trecartin’s and Evans’ works are also a part of a larger tradition of moving image art concerned with screen dynamics and technological developments as seen in early video works such as those of Bruce Nauman, Lisa Steele, Lynn Hershman, and Bill Viola, and more recently, as seen in the CGI videos of Ed Atkins and Sondra Perry, and in the machinima of Skawennati and Cao Fei. This thesis also seeks to contribute to a growing field of art historical scholarship, exemplified by anthologies on artistic responses to the internet such as Cornell and Halter’s *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century*, Aria Dean, Dragan Espenschied, and Michael Connor’s *The Art Happens Here: Net Art Anthology*, and Omar Kholeif’s *You Are Here: Art After the Internet*. It further engages with the writing of media artists, scholars and theoreticians including Steyerl, Lovink, Alexander Galloway, and Wendy Chun, whose writings have been highly influential for artists and art historians working at this conceptual crossing. Both Evans and Trecartin are intellectually and artistically embedded in the discourses generated by the above, as well as active contributors. While both artists have been researched separately, this thesis considers their contributions as confluent and draws connections between their works *What the Heart Wants* and *Roamie View: History*

Enhancements. This pairing is significant as both artists make visible prevalent conditions of the present time, more specifically as it relates to technology, affect and anxieties.

Currently based in London, UK, Cécile B. Evans (b. 1983, Cleveland, OH, USA) is a Belgian-American artist whose work moves fluidly across new media, video, performance, and sculptural installations. Since 2010, her oeuvre has been concerned with the complexities of contemporary digital life, the ways in which technology and emotions interface, and the changing value, role and specificities of affect in networked digital societies.⁸ *What the Heart Wants* is an immersive video installation composed of a large platform surrounded with water on which visitors lie down to face the projection screen. As the video unfolds, viewers follow the wanderings of a female avatar named Hyper who is the digital system responsible for the world on screen. As Hyper walks through the world she has created, she drifts through conversations with different protagonists and actors of the system. *What the Heart Wants* combines fictional and historical narratives, virtual and ‘real’ aesthetics and mise-en-scène, drawn and computer-generated personages as well as filmed actors. Evans’ digital renderings of real spaces bring forth considerations about authenticity, copying, originality and authorship— all issues that have been relevant to art history since the development of reproduction technologies.⁹ Repeatedly across her practice, she plays with digital copies to unsettle the duality between an original IRL world, and a fake digital one.

Working actively since the early 2000s, queer LA-based artist Ryan Trecartin (b. 1981, Webster, TX, USA) has been described as the “queer-video poster-boy”¹⁰ by critics and art scholars for more than 10 years. He has also garnered much attention since his body of work *Any Ever*, made in collaboration with Lizzie Fitch, took over the Power Plant in 2010, and MoMA PS1 in 2011. Trecartin’s fast-pace video-installations, with cascading frames coalescing into each other and buoyant characters talking nonstop in auto-tuned digital jargon, are well known for the ways in which they recall the acceleration and dizzying sentiments of digital culture. Trecartin’s universe, characterized by excess, “perpetual motion and [...] a myriad narratives

⁸ Pablo Larios, “Cécile B. Evans,” in *9. Berlin Biennale für Zeitgenössische Kunst The present in drag*, edited by DIS (Berlin: DISTANZ Verlag, 2016), 283.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969 [1935]). Accessed March 5, 2019. <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/benjamin.pdf>

¹⁰ Michael Wang, “Streaming Creatures: A New Generation of Queer Video Art,” *Modern Painters* 19 (5, June 2007): 102.

unfolding simultaneously,”¹¹ is best described, in the artist’s own words, as a “social science fiction.”¹² In his highly saturated theatrical sets, ungovernable, self-destructive, profane, and observant characters engage in chaotic scenes where “things get out of hand without going anywhere illicit.”¹³ His video *Roamie View: History Enhancements* (one of the seven videos composing *Any Ever*) presents a cast of eccentric personages as they wind through the world of corporate offices, hotels, and suburban homes in search of JJ’s “self” – a character whose identity has been lost as a result of too many software updates. With *Roamie View*, Trecartin presents a queer and post-modernist vision of the networked subject, where selves are fragmented, cynical, multiple, contradictory, performative, and constantly shifting.¹⁴

While the pace of the editing and the general affects that travel through the works of Trecartin and Evans are radically different, this thesis considers how they both generate an open field for visitors to reconsider their relationship to media. Through various scenes and aesthetics, these works expose some of the elusive dynamics of digital infrastructures couched in “affect,” highlighting its impact on collective feelings and cognition. This analysis thus also incorporates a sustained discussion of digital anxieties, understood for the purposes of this study as contemporary anxieties brought about by the rise of neoliberalism and the intensification of technology in everyday life.

Digital anxieties are conceptual through-lines in this thesis which successively draws attention to notions of fatigue, confusion, addiction, performativity, competition, and the neoliberal economization of life. Methodologically, this research project is grounded in digital political theory, media studies, affect theories and contemporary art. Notions of affect theory are particularly relevant to this art historical research because affects are central to the artistic investigations of Evans and Trecartin, and both artists thus contribute to contemporary debates on affect and digital culture. “Affect,” as used in the context of this thesis, is defined as the intensities and forces that move between and through bodies, and that exist beyond but also through the domain of reason.¹⁵ Conceived as always plural, rather abstracted, and as working

¹¹ Kevin McGarry, “World Apart,” in *Ryan Trecartin: Any Ever*, ed. Kevin McGarry (New York: Skira Rizzoli; Elizabeth Dee, 2011), 109-110.

¹² Nancy Princenthal, “Post-Erotics,” *Art in America* 100 (5, May 2012): 153.

¹³ Princenthal, “Post-Erotics,” 152.

¹⁴ Wang, “Streaming Creatures,” 102.

¹⁵ I use the word bodies here to refer to a variety of bodies, and not solely to human bodies. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.

across the senses, affects refer more commonly to moods, emotions, or feelings.¹⁶ While popular understandings tend to situate these as private and personal (or as located inside one's own mind and body), affects are understood in critical theory as "pre-personal intensities"¹⁷ that traverse and "compose the social field."¹⁸ Premised on an understanding of the body as porous, affect and affect theories allow this thesis to conceive of "bodies as inhabited by impersonal structures," or as active "transit points between different orders of [conscious and unconscious] reality."¹⁹

To develop these ideas further and in relation to the artworks, Section One, "Context and Methodology" attends to the theoretical and contextual underpinnings of my analyses by introducing digital infrastructures and algorithms and their relation to power and control. It then presents affect and affect theories in more depth, along with the ways in which emotions intersect with sociality. The section concludes with a discussion of the broader socio-political context for the artworks I examine; namely neoliberalism and post-Fordism.

In Section Two, "Coded Intimacies: Technological Governance and Digital Anxieties," I provide an analysis of Evans' *What The Heart Wants (WTHW)*, arguing that it formulates and interrogates the psychosocial implications of digital technologies. Before entering these ideas though, I first describe the work and some of its intersectional and feminist concerns. I then move on to the main parts of my argument on affect and technology in *WTHW*, and consider how digital infrastructures and data flows reverberate as affective throughout the work. This, I argue, further allows the artist to present digital systems as contemporary "structures of feelings."²⁰ The interfaces and functionalities of popular platforms and software shape the horizon of possibilities for users to relate to one another, as well as their understandings of love, care, and desire, among other things. Evans' video emphasizes this condition by bringing to the forefront key questions surrounding affect and technological governance, algorithmic intimacies, and the idea of a programmed sociality.

In Section Three, "Drowning in a Sea of Data: Affective Cognition and Performance," I provide an analysis of Trecartin's *Roamie View: History Enhancements*, arguing that this video

¹⁶ My understanding of affect relies on scholarly studies coming from various schools of thought and disciplines (media studies, sociology, anthropology, gender studies, and philosophy, for instance.)

¹⁷ Gregg and Seigworth, *Affect Theory Reader*, 3.

¹⁸ Samuele Collu, "New Horizons in Medical Anthropology: The Autonomy of Affect (Brian Massumi)," Lecture, McGill University, January 13, 2020.

¹⁹ Collu, "New Horizons in Medical Anthropology." Samuele Collu, "Refracting Affects: Affect, Psychotherapy, and Spirit Dis-Possession," *Cultural Medicine and Psychiatry* (2019) 43: 290–314.

²⁰ Raymond Williams, *Preface to Film* (London: Film Drama, 1954).

replicates a condition of information-overload, and of “symbolic demise” as defined by Jodi Dean and Mark Andrejevic.²¹ Following this, I propose it brings forward consideration for new forms of cognition as grounded in affective impulses. This further allows me to discuss digital economies as economies of sensibility, and to expose an ethos of performativity which I observe is a crucial element of Trecartin’s work. Performativity is understood as a result of the rise and growth of neoliberalism and post-Fordism, and I argue that *Roamie View* emphasizes these structures. I conclude this section by discussing Trecartin’s approach to identity and representation.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that Trecartin’s and Evans’ works formulate an understanding of contemporary life and digital culture by mobilizing affect and emotions as key forces to interrogate. By looking at their works, I hope to trace the ways in which they fracture and chip away at digital infrastructures (often framed as “companion systems”) to unravel new situations surrounding affect in networked lives. I argue these works shed light on some of the complexities of late techno-capitalism by prompting audiences to think through a digital condition whose invisible dynamics often remain unacknowledged.

²¹ Jodi Dean, “Affect and Drive,” in *Networked Affect*, eds. Ken Hillins, Susanna Paasonen and Michael Petit (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 93. Mark Andrejevic, *Infoglut : How Too Much Information Is Changing the Way We Think and Know* (New York : Routledge, 2013), 12-15.

1. Context and Methodology

I'd like to look at the Internet through new eyes. Not to be wowed by it, just to see it at all. I've always been terrified of getting used to something that's actually killing me – a relationship or a job. But in those cases you can count on a friend to say something. The Internet is different because all my friends are in the same relationship.²² – Miranda July

This section attends to some of the context, methods, and theories that support this art historical paper. It begins with an introduction of digital algorithmic forms of control, then moves to a discussion of affect and affect theories, and ends with a presentation of neoliberalism and post-Fordism.

Beyond Information: Digital Control and Networked Life

In *Organize: In Search of Media*, Lisa Conrad, Timon Beyes, and Reinhold Martin examine the relationship between media and organization as one “so obvious that it borders on the tautological: after all, media organize things into patterns and relations.”²³ Citing John Durham Peters, they point out that media act as “civilizational ordering devices [and] fundamental constituents of [any form, or any process of] organization”²⁴ – adding that “if media are busy ordering social or sociotechnical relations, then they are invested with power and domination, control and surveillance, disruption and emancipation.”²⁵ Conrad et al.’s reflections on the structuring and organizational power of media are significant to this thesis, whose immediate context is the social and affective governance of digital platforms and algorithms that have come to pervade daily life and experience.

²² Miranda July, “If They Could Turn Back Time,” *New York Times*, Sept. 7, 2015, New York edition, 2.

²³ Drawing attention to the ways media organize life but are also themselves organized by life, these scholars critique the extremism of digital determinism à-la Friedrich Kittler’s in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*: “Media determine our situation.” They are also, however, invested in thinking about “media as setting the terms for which we live, socialize, communicate, organize, do scholarship, et cetera.” Timon Beyes, Lisa Conrad and Reinhold Martin. *Organize: In Search of Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), vii, x.

²⁴ John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 5, 19, in Timon Beyes, Lisa Conrad and Reinhold Martin, *Organize: In Search of Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), ix.

²⁵ They add: “This intimate relation between media and organization therefore is as old as the hills (Beyes, Holt, and Pias 2019). Yet digital media technologies actualize it and perhaps exacerbate its potentials and conflicts. After all, “digital media traffic less in content, programs, and opinions, than in organizations, power and calculation” (Peters 2015, 7).” Beyes, Conrad and Martin, *Organize*, ix-x.

With recent developments in global-scale technologies, artificial intelligence and pocket devices, algorithms have in fact come to inhabit most corners of users' lives. Defined as the mathematical sets of instructions behind computational operations, algorithms filter and compute data according to various sets of rules.²⁶ Some of the most influential algorithms, like those of YouTube, Facebook, or Google, are programmed to control users' personalized feeds and the information they have access to. As crucial actors at the confluence of information and power, algorithms classify information while at the same time influence a user's interaction with it. Consequentially, these systems come to normalize or marginalize certain ideas, representations and interactions.²⁷

According to Alexander Galloway, some understand the distributed internet to be synonymous with freedom;²⁸ however the materiality and founding principle of the internet, found in its algorithmic, or "protocological apparatus," is better understood as a control mechanism.²⁹ For Galloway, algorithms map the horizon of possibility in digital interaction thus acting as "important diagrams for our current social formation."³⁰ Building upon Gilles Deleuze's theory of a technologization of the social, he writes: "Protocol is not merely confined to digital world"; it "affects the functioning of bodies within social space."³¹ As algorithms seep into the fabric of offline reality, control over life and sociality increasingly moves into the hands of the technological companies coding them.³² For Galloway, however, if such protocols are mechanisms of control, they also allow digital communications to move against centralized

²⁶ Galloway also claims protocols and algorithms are synonyms. Alexander Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 7, 30, 57.

²⁷ Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 10-12. Safiya Umoja Noble, Brendesha M Tynes, eds., and Miriam E. Sweeney, *The Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, Class and Culture Online* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2015), 4, 215.

²⁸ World-wide-web's inventor Tim Berners-Lee, for instance, claimed to this.

²⁹ Galloway claims protocols and algorithms are synonyms. Galloway, *Protocol*, 8, 60.

³⁰ Galloway, 30, 11.

³¹ Galloway, 12.

³² Or rather, they have not seeped into offline reality but have always been entirely connected and enmeshed. These thoughts on protocol and digital forms of control are also echoed in Wendy Chun's *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* though Chun centres her writing on software in its relation to memory and knowledge. Chun's book argues that software could be seen as a dominant ideology of neoliberal times, and that their logic of programmability corresponds to the shapes of post WW2 governmentality – most particularly in the way that software and neoliberalism allegedly empower user/subject/citizen. Chun further argues that the ubiquitous and recurrent use of software as a metaphor for contemporary infrastructure comes from its visible/invisible character, resonant to control as defined by Deleuze and then Galloway. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun. 2011. *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 6-9.

forms of control – and are thus animated by an ambivalence.³³ While social media and their algorithmic structures are understood as sites of control where certain behaviours are prescribed, it follows that they are simultaneously sites of relative freedom where users move with an agency of their own. As media scholar Taina Bucher explains, “algorithms do not just do things to people, people also do things to algorithms,” that “modulate and reconfigure them in both discursive and material ways.”³⁴ If algorithms are seen as “techniques directed at the “right disposition of things” through rankings and weights as architectural forms of power”³⁵; a solely top-down or disciplinary understanding would fail to account for users’ power to reconfigure their digital landscape.

Discussions on software, algorithmic and protocological power have increased in recent years as internet users better understand the phenomena and the intensity of the grip of technologies and algorithms onto their lives.³⁶ Much of this has been focused on the ways in which algorithms structure data and information circulation by giving more or less visibility to certain data, thus enhancing the traction of certain discourses over others.³⁷ As Safiya Umoja Noble explains, it is crucial to examine the algorithms structuring informational landscape as they shape knowledge and discourses and are structurally embedded in processes of sense-making.³⁸ While information technologies like Google would like users to believe in the “neutrality” of the algorithmic formulas structuring their platform, algorithms are filtering devices programmed to “rank, include, and exclude”³⁹ that aren’t exempt of neither human nor machinic biases.⁴⁰ Rather, they are coded and orchestrated by corporate entities with important

³³ Galloway, *Protocol*, xv.

³⁴ Taina Bucher, *If...Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics* (New York, NY : Oxford University Press, 2018), 94-95.

³⁵ Bucher, *If... Then*, 94-95.

³⁶ Bucher, 93.

³⁷ Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen and Michael Petit, “Introduction: Networks of Transmission: Intensity, Sensation, Value,” in *Networked Affect*, eds. Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen and Michael Petit (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 8.

³⁸ Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 2.

³⁹ Bucher, *If... Then*, 2, 34. Sweeney, *The Intersectional Internet*, 215.

⁴⁰ It is important to note that the power of algorithms (and of their programmers) over the content presented on digital platforms is, however, supplemented by a lot of invisible digital labour. Many hands go into maintaining digital services such as Google or Facebook. Content moderation workers, for instance, are hired by these corporations to filter through some of the stream of user-generated-content, whose violence algorithms cannot easily detect. The reality of this labour is significant as these workers are often located in the global south, poorly remunerated, and obliged to look at highly troubling content. The ethics and implications of this reality are well beyond the scope of this paper but this labour and its conditions must be mentioned. Sarah T. Roberts, “Commercial Content Moderation: Digital Laborers’ Dirty Work,” in *The*

ties to advertisement, who have financial interests at heart, and run on principles of click-farming.⁴¹ They thus comprise the biases of their programmers and CEOs⁴² but also of their users. As machine learning devices, algorithms evolve in response to user-interactions and absorb their users' biases to present them with personalized or "curated" feeds.⁴³ This in turns creates filter bubbles and echo chambers that promote confirmation biases. Algorithms have, in that sense, been critiqued for "diminishing the democratic potential of the public sphere."⁴⁴

Noble's research draws attention to the support of systemic oppression by information algorithms, and highlights recent cases of GAFA⁴⁵ algorithms that promoted racist and sexist discourses.⁴⁶ She explains that as these cases surface, corporations such as Google tend to deny "responsibility or intent to harm," "fix" isolated problems, and refer to them as occasional system "glitches."⁴⁷ As she highlights, the problem runs deeper and algorithms – fed by a racist and sexist culture datafied through users' clicks and preferences and structured along CEOs and programmers' desires – continue to support oppressive cultures. It was recently revealed, in that regard, that one of Facebook's official outsourced fact checker, the Daily Caller, had explicit ties with white supremacist groups and individuals: Facebook then supported their content under the guise of white nationalism.⁴⁸ As denoted by Sarah T. Roberts in *The Intersectional Internet*, "there is a long tradition in American popular culture of capitalizing on media content that degrades or dehumanizes" individuals – and certain demographics in particular.⁴⁹ By examining content moderation work on social media, Roberts emphasizes the ways in which racist, homophobic and misogynistic content are deployed and tolerated online because of their

Intersectional Internet, ed. Safiya Umoja Noble and Brendesha M. Tynes (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2015), 147-160.

⁴¹ Or any type of quantitative measuring of user's interaction and attention. Noble, Tynes, Roberts, Sweeney, *The Intersectional Internet*, 5, 150-151, 154, 215.

⁴² CEO refers to chief executive officers.

⁴³ This input from users' biases is in fact a problem that information technology companies are faced with, and that they must address to avoid promoting violent discourses.

⁴⁴ Bucher, *If...Then*, 34.

⁴⁵ Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple.

⁴⁶ Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 4-6, 9, 10, 15, 17.

⁴⁷ Noble, 35, 199.

⁴⁸ Mindock, Clark. "Zuckerberg stumbles over Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez's questions about white supremacy during Congress hearing," *Independent*, 23 October 2019.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/zuckerberg-aoc-video-white-supremacy-congress-hearing-ocasio-cortez-a9168666.html>

⁴⁹ See footnote 37 concerning content moderation labor more largely. Sarah T. Roberts, "Commercial Content Moderation: Digital Laborers' Dirty Work," in *The Intersectional Internet*, ed. Safiya Umoja Noble and Brendesha M. Tynes (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2015), 151.

marketability and profitability.⁵⁰ The complexity of questions on information online and corporate control are beyond the scope of this thesis but some of these dynamics are addressed in Evans' and Trecartin's works – as noted in Sections Two and Three of this paper.

Research on algorithmic control has, however, equally expanded in the direction of affect theories and this lays the groundwork for this thesis. While digital flows are composed of information and meaning, scholars such as Zizi Papacharissi, Brian Massumi, and Anna Munster, have effectively demonstrated that this circulation must also be conceptualized as charged with affects. For them, the movement that algorithms are concerned with is not only that of data, but equally and connectedly, of affects and emotions.⁵¹ On the affective quality of digital worlds for instance, Papacharissi writes of the formation of networked publics through affective cyber-flows.⁵² New media art historian Anna Munster understands virality (which can also be understood as digital power) as a contouring and capturing of singular affects by content that speak to a “this-ness,” an “everyday-ness.”⁵³ She then writes of the vitality of “sticky affects”⁵⁴ (using Sara Ahmed's term) in viral YouTube videos to theorize networked contagion.

Paasonen, Hillis and Petit propose the notion of “networked affect” to account for the ways in which “Networked communications involve the circulation of data and information, but they equally entail a panoply of affective attachments” that move beyond the realm of the textual or discursive, ideology or representation.⁵⁵ This does not imply a division or binary between information and affect, or signification and feeling, but regards these as co-constitutive dimensions of cognition and perception – affect can therefore be read as information because information is inherently affective.⁵⁶ This conceptualization shifts the emphasis and undermines “the figure of the rational user in control of technology.”⁵⁷ By introducing an “a-signifying” and

⁵⁰ Roberts, Noble, Tynes, *The Intersectional Internet*, 11, 147-160. Note that mass media spectacles of racialized pain and their critique in recent years are other good examples purporting these views. Mariana Ortega, “Othering the Other: The Spectacle of Katrina for our Racial Entertainment Pleasure,” *Contemporary Aesthetics* 2, 1 (2009).

⁵¹ This would prove increasingly significant as the field and practice of affective computing grows. Hillis, Paasonen and Petit, “Introduction,” 1.

⁵² Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology and Politics* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁵³ Anna Munster, *An Aesthesis of Networks: Conjunctive Experience In Art And Technology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 103.

⁵⁴ Munster, 110.

⁵⁵ Hillis, Paasonen and Petit, “Introduction,” 1.

⁵⁶ Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, US; London, UK: Duke University Press, 2010), 2.

⁵⁷ Hillis, Paasonen and Petit, “Introduction,” 9.

corporeal quality of the flow – its interaction with bodies that feel, and not solely bodies that think and filter data through rational means, these scholars have complexified discussions in digital political theory.⁵⁸

An emphasis on the affective quality of digital flows and on networked affect is also largely the result of wide-spread and intensifying affective computing, of the enmeshment of technologies with social and emotional lives, and of the increasingly prosthetic (or bodily) quality of intelligent technologies.⁵⁹ The field of affective computing has grown exponentially in recent years, and its results have yielded a significantly different landscape for emotions and affects. Digital platforms such as Facebook or Twitter have developed intelligent algorithmic systems that make feelings into “objects of technological design,”⁶⁰ allowing them to recognize, quantify and map users emotions so to appropriate and sell them to advertising and data analysis companies.⁶¹ With the growth of digital activity and of the digital economy, emotions and affects are thus increasingly collected, commodified, and tied to financial value. Their capture by digital infrastructures have become tied to corporate success, drastically impacting the current economic, political, and affective landscape. Information and affects, but also all of digital activity is now tracked and commodified by algorithms. These monitor users’ every move, monetize and turn them into profit, thus extending the market’s reach into every corners of users’ life online. In commodifying all aspects of participation to digital culture, algorithms have become essential tools of late capitalism.

The growing ties between algorithms, emotions, “surveillance capitalism,”⁶² and politics were, for example, explicitly drawn during the Cambridge Analytica scandal in early 2018 when

⁵⁸ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, US; London, UK: Duke University Press, 2002), 27.

⁵⁹ Or of the “frequent if not near-constant prosthetic connections to information, communication and media technologies.” Hillis, Paasonen and Petit, “Introduction,” 2.

⁶⁰ Transmediale. “Theme: transmediale festival 2019,” *Transmediale Archive*. Accessed March 5, 2020. <https://2019.transmediale.de/theme>

⁶¹ Most digital devices, platforms and their algorithms are now trained to recognize, map, capture and simulate human emotions. Anthropomorphized digital systems also increasingly present as ‘human’ – to allegedly ‘facilitate’ machine to human interaction.

⁶² Shoshana Zuboff defines “surveillance capitalism” as the reality of the information age and the current “model for capital accumulation.” It refers to a current condition of digital companies mining and commodifying users’ personal data to create market predictions and profit off selling or using them. It also coextends with the informatization and commodification of the body, and of human behaviours and experiences. Under the conditions of surveillance capitalism users exchange (knowingly but also unknowingly) their data for services or connectivity. John Naughton and Shoshana Zuboff, “The Goal is to Automate Us!: Welcome to the Age of Surveillance Capitalism,” (*The Guardian*, January 20, 2019),

the company was exposed of its harvesting of Facebook data to compose and sell voter profiles to political parties.⁶³ This led to targeted political advertising during the Brexit Leave Campaign and during the 2016 Trump election. These voter profiles were the results of data-analysis which mapped and appropriated users' affects to manipulate discursive, political, and capital flows.⁶⁴

Another way to understand the shifting quality of governance in relation to affect and technology is to think of the success of the 45th US President, Donald J. Trump (who has been described as “click-bait in human-form”⁶⁵) in relation to the post-truth climate and the rise of populism.⁶⁶ Studies on Trump's communications and rhetoric have pointed at how they appeal to emotional belief rather than argumentative logic and at how they function along the lines of affective manipulation through the crafting of fear, anger, and desires.⁶⁷ Trump's infamous tweets rely on shock-value, and their reception is exemplary of the ways in which affects are being mobilized as political forces in the digital era. While affective manipulation has always been a part of political campaigning (something which propaganda studies demonstrate “regardless of what age”⁶⁸ one lives in), digital infrastructures have changed the landscape for emotional manipulation in crucial and accelerated ways.

On Affect, Emotions, and Structures of Feelings

While some may argue this thesis and these artworks are a part of what has been described as the “affective turn” in social sciences, I do not understand affect studies as a “turn.” Rather, as suggested by Sara Ahmed and Ann Cvetkovich, I situate this body of scholarship within a longer lineage of feminist, queer, and critical race studies and literatures centred on the body, care, and

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/jan/20/shoshana-zuboff-age-of-surveillance-capitalism-google-facebook>. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (New York: Public Affairs, 2020.)

⁶³ Lei Zhang and Carlton Clark, “Introduction: Heartfelt Reasoning, or Why Facts and Good Reasons Are Not Enough,” in *Affect, Emotion, and Rhetorical Persuasion in Mass Communication*, ed. Lei Zhang and Carlton Clark (New York: Routledge, 2019), 2.

⁶⁴ Zhang and Clark, 2.

⁶⁵ James Williams, David Runciman, and John Naughton. “The Nine Dots Winner,” *Talking Politics*, produced by Catherine Carr and London Review of Books, Cambridge University. Podcast Audio, August 2, 2018. <https://www.talkingpoliticspodcast.com/blog/2018/91-james-williams>.

⁶⁶ The post-truth phenomenon (or political climate) has been defined as the one in which citizens are further convinced by appeals to emotions than by factual truth and expertise. It refers to the present informational moment as one in which the notion of “truth” is thought of as untrustworthy, and suspicious.

⁶⁷ Zhang and Clark, “Introduction,” 2.

⁶⁸ Zhang and Clark, 2.

emotions.⁶⁹ My own feminist, queer and anti-racist perspectives and investments have in fact motivated the exploration of affect theories in relation to these select artworks. Feminist, queer and critical race studies have demonstrated that “the personal is political,” and that emotions and affects, as well as the body and intimacy, are rich points of entry into an analysis of the social and worthy sites of examination in and of themselves.⁷⁰ This research also seeks to talk-back to a long exclusionary history in academia which has not given room to the body and to sensorial experiences.⁷¹ In various ways, this thesis (as well as the artworks analyzed) contributes to disentangling the “relation between the psychic and the social”⁷² and to challenging divisions between mind and body, reason and passions, and private and public spheres.⁷³ It thus engages in a form of cultural studies that is, as Cvetkovich explains, “not just confined to ideology critique, as important as that remains.”⁷⁴

Crucial to some affect scholars is the act of defining affect away from emotion and into distinct categories.⁷⁵ While my research does not attend to this definitional debate, it is useful to understand it, and depart from it, in the context of my analyses. Following Deleuze, Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth provide a definition of affect as forces or intensities that circulate and move between and through bodies; affects are “the name we give to those forces – visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion.”⁷⁶ They write:

⁶⁹ Ahmed explains that feminist literature has “*challenged from the outset* mind-body dualisms, as well as the distinction between reason and passion” that preoccupies scholars of the affective ‘turn.’ Feminist and critical race theorists’ work on care, private-public divisions, as well as intimacy have been crucial to the development of ideas centring affects and emotions. Sara Ahmed. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 206 (italics in original). Ann Cvetkovich. *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 8.

⁷⁰ Views shared by Ahmed and Cvetkovich. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 206. Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 8.

⁷¹ Critiqued for instance by queer, feminist and critical race theorists like bell hooks, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Amelia Jones, Virginia Woolf, Lauren Berlant, Kathleen Stewart, etc.

⁷² Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 3.

⁷³ Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 206.

⁷⁴ Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 5.

⁷⁵ Cvetkovich writes: “Crucial to such inquiry is the distinction between affect and emotion where the former signals precognitive sensory experience and relations to surrounding and the latter cultural constructs and conscious processes that emerge from them, such as anger, fear, or joy.” Cvetkovich, 4.

⁷⁶ Gregg and Seigworth, *Affect Theory*, 1 (italics in original). Often cited as precursors to the field of affect studies, are the early discussions of Baruch Spinoza and Henri Bergson, later joined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari – all of whom give central place to the body, but also to change rather than stasis, duration, transition, process, and openness. They add: “The term “force” however, can be a bit of a misnomer since affect need not be especially forceful (although sometimes, as in the psychoanalytic study of trauma, it is).” Gregg and Seigworth, 2.

Affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves.⁷⁷

For most affect scholars, affects are at once located within subjectivity, and deny the concept of subjecthood and the privateness of feeling altogether. They are both intimate, personal and singular, and absolutely impersonal.⁷⁸ Located in and between bodies, affects take a plurality of shape, they work across the senses, and are difficult to isolate and define.⁷⁹ In many ways aligned with phenomenology, affect theories centre on the body and the sensorial, and recognize embodied experiences, as well as corporeal intensities as key sites of understanding and world-making.⁸⁰

For Brian Massumi, affects and emotions “follow different logics and pertain to different orders.”⁸¹ While both are moving forces and states of mind and body, affects are specifically undefinable a-signifying intensities and forces, always multiple, pre-personal, and connected to bodily sensations.⁸² Emotions then occur more subjectively once affective intensities have become identifiable; or when affects have accumulated in a body in such way that one is able to name and semantically fix the intensities (i.e. happy, angry, sad, etc.)⁸³ Like Massumi, many theorists see the strength of affect theories and the specificity of affect in its a-signifying quality, or in how it recognizes that something lies beyond a semantic order and processes of signification – that some experiences, or forces, are untouchable by language and irreducible to ideology.

⁷⁷ Gregg and Seigworth, 1.

⁷⁸ Gregg and Seigworth, 2.

⁷⁹ Important to my thesis, whose attention is also on digital flows and circulation, is how affect theories are concerned with circulation and flux (or what moves between points of a circuit), relationalities, time, and movement.

⁸⁰ Patricia T. Clough, “The Affective Turn. Political Economy, Biomedicine, and Bodies,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, US; London, UK: Duke University Press, 2010), 207.

⁸¹ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, US; London, UK : Duke University Press, 2002), 27.

⁸² Massumi, 27.

⁸³ Massumi writes: “An emotion is subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized. If some have the impression that affect has waned, it is because affect is unqualified. As such, it is not ownable or recognizable and is thus resistant to critique.” Massumi, 27.

While this separation can be useful, this a-signifying or pre-cognitive quality of affect is a debated topic. Scholars such as Sara Ahmed emphasize that affect and meaning are not mutually exclusive processes and thus challenge mind-body dualisms in a more convincing way. For Ahmed, affect and cognition impact each other and while separable, they are not distinct but are on a continuum.⁸⁴ I align my understanding of affect with that of Ahmed and Cvetkovich who critique conceptions of emotion, feeling, and affect as inherently different processes and attend to affect's discursive and signifying dimension. This leads them – and myself in the context of this thesis – to use and to move between these terms fluidly. For Ahmed, affects, like emotions, are learned and rehearsed through cultural scripts; they are neither solely objective nor subjective, not universal or biological, and most importantly, not independent of cognition and culture.⁸⁵ She is “not interested” in separating affect and emotions on the ground of the sensorial on one hand, and of cognition/consciousness on the other.⁸⁶

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, Ahmed discusses the “stickiness” of affect and emotions, and theorizes the textuality of emotions, and the emotionality of text.⁸⁷ For Ahmed, looking at emotions matters because emotions do things to the individual and the social that move beyond the subject. According to her, emotions are involved in movement and attachments – they are “what moves us, what makes us feel, [...] that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place,”⁸⁸ thus orientating subjects towards things (objects, bodies, ideas). She writes: “to be affected by something is an orientation or direction toward that thing that has worldly effects.”⁸⁹ Ahmed's phenomenological approach to emotion also facilitates an understanding of the way emotions works to contour and shape social and individual bodies: “Emotions involve

⁸⁴ While for Ahmed affect and emotions are semantically charged, for Massumi, affect remains a nonconscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of “unformed and unstructured” potential. Massumi, *Parables*, 260. As explained by Eric Shouse, it is *because* affect is abstract, unformed, and unstructured (unlike feelings and emotions) that it is transmittable between bodies – thus becoming “potentially such a powerful social force.” Eric Shouse, “Feeling, Emotion, Affect,” *M/C Journal* 8.6 (2005), <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0512/03-shouse.php>.

⁸⁵ Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 214.

⁸⁶ Ahmed writes: “If anything, it was important for working through my argument not to assume or create separate spheres between consciousness and intentionality, on the one hand, and physiological or bodily reactions on the other (please note I am not suggesting that affects theorists assume this separation, but that the creation of a distinction between affect and emotion *can carry this implication*).” Ahmed, 208.

⁸⁷ Ahmed, 208.

⁸⁸ Ahmed, 11.

⁸⁹ Ahmed, 209.

different movement towards and away from others, such that they shape the contours of social as well as bodily space.”⁹⁰

If emotions shape proximities, and associations, and give surface to collective bodies and social bonds, then they demand critical analysis and a cultural politics of emotions. Ahmed explains that “emotions are not private matter”; they are “not simply ‘within’ or ‘without’ [subjects],” but “work in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective.”⁹¹ As emotions inform movements, attachments, and proximities, objects and bodies also become affectively charged through cultural values, repetition, and history. Associations between objects and cultural values are rehearsed in such a way that objects become read and felt as “happy or negative objects.”⁹² Ahmed emphasizes this sociality of emotion and explains that emotions accumulate in things and bodies in “sticky” ways; “feelings rehearse associations that are already in place” and create “histories that stick.”⁹³ The “stickiness” of emotions is thus involved in the reproduction of social norms and in the ways “worlds are reproduced.”⁹⁴ Significantly, Ahmed discusses how the politics of positive and negative emotions are tied to different bodies and objects (nations, migrants, queers, women, etc.) and examines how racism and nationalism work through emotions. This work on the cultural politics of emotion is fundamental to this thesis which considers emotions as important structuring social devices (thus also important political forces), and social structures as having an emotional dimension.

These thoughts also echo the notion of “structures of feelings” as elaborated by cultural theorist Raymond Williams. First coined in his *Preface to Film* in 1954, Williams described the ways in which cultures are comprised of “structures of feelings” that work in the interstices of dominant discourses.⁹⁵ Williams suggests that structures of feeling appear “in the gap between

⁹⁰ Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 209.

⁹¹ Sara Ahmed, “Collective Feelings: Or, the Impressions Left by Others” *Theory, Culture & Society* 21 (2, 2004): 25-27.

⁹² She explains: “To be affected, I have suggested, establishes relations of proximity and distance between bodies. We might aim to be proximate to what is judged to bring happiness; at a distance to what is judged to compromise happiness.” Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 219.

⁹³ Ahmed, 39.

⁹⁴ Ahmed adds: “Borrowing from David Hume’s favored word ‘impressions,’ I wanted to explore not only how bodies are pressed upon by other bodies, but how these presses become impressions, feelings that are suffused with ideas and values, however vague and blurry (in the sense of ‘having an impression’ of something).” Ahmed, 204, 208.

⁹⁵ Transmediale. 2019. “Theme: transmediale 31 Jan – 03 Feb 2019 HKW, Berlin,” in *Transmediate/art & digitalculture*. Page accessed Mach 5, 2019. <https://2019.transmediale.de/theme>

the official discourse of policy and regulations, the popular response to official discourse and its appropriation in literary and other cultural texts”⁹⁶ – emerging in their interplay as historically specific, as well as culturally and structurally produced. It follows that feelings become structural in the ways they themselves are surrounded and facilitated by other structures such as economic and political structures.

Neoliberal and Post-Fordist Anxieties

Engaging with affect theories is additionally relevant to my analyses because of the neoliberal and post-Fordist contexts of Evans’ and Trecartin’s artworks, which harness emotions and affects as part of their mechanisms and workings. While these artists are concerned with technology and emotions, they also clearly respond and engage with larger socio-political and economic contexts. Their works allow viewers to recognize that emotions do not spring (solely) from the individual but rather emerge from a complex interplay between individual and social experiences, power structures, discourses, and institutions. Evans and Trecartin prompt viewers to identify some common emotions that circulate today, as well as some of the systemic causes of these emotions. Furthermore, while this thesis mostly speaks to anxieties supported by digital infrastructures (or digital anxieties), these are equally connected to and caused by socio-political structures. Neoliberal, post-Fordist and media structures run parallel and conjointly, and while I sometimes identify specific sources to specific anxieties in the next sections, I acknowledge that the origins of contemporary anxieties are multiple, and intertwined.

First, a few notes on socio-political terminology are in order: post-Fordism is understood within the context of this thesis as the decline of industry-based labour in several (mostly developed) countries where labour is no longer delimited by the space and time of industry.⁹⁷ It refers to the rise of isolated and fragmented short-term work contracts (self-employment and freelancing for example) that require (and offer) time and space flexibility, but may also potentially demand all-time availability. Post-Fordism refers more specifically to forms of immaterial and affective labour such as digital, communicative, cognitive, and creative labour

⁹⁶ “Structures of Feeling.” *Oxford Reference*. ; Accessed 1 Jun. 2020.
<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100538488>.

⁹⁷ Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2009), 21, 35.

facilitated by the rise of automation. As these types of work demand labour from the “whole person” at all times (affective, cognitive, social),⁹⁸ they have contributed to shattering the difference between productive and non-productive time (the work vs. life in work-life-balance),⁹⁹ and connectedly, to the growth of self-management and self-governing techniques.

In *The Soul at Work*, Franco “Bifo” Berardi speaks of the “enslavement of the soul” in these new forms of labour that engage one’s inner life, intellectual capacities, and creativity. He writes that while individuals’ “language and affects presented no interest for the capitalist of the industrial times”¹⁰⁰ (being mostly concerned with the strength and capacities of physical, yet intelligent, bodies), they are now absorbed and mobilized by the system as means of production.¹⁰¹ That being said, feminists and critical race theorists of domestic, reproductive, and emotional labour have effectively demonstrated that affects were always constitutive of the economy, and that labour was never delimited by the industry. Nonetheless, automation and the decline of industry-based labour have evidently intensified the absorption of affects and emotions by labour and production.

Building up on Paolo Virno’s notion of post-Fordist “virtuoso labor,”¹⁰² political theorist Isabel Lorey theorizes contemporary precarity and state “precarization.”¹⁰³ She explains that as post-Fordist modes of production are increasingly social and involve personal experiences, contemporary modes of being, relating, and feeling become increasingly precarious. As labour becomes “interlocked” with sociality and self-relations (and as divisions between labour and life and between private and public collapse); “labor and social life become highly precarious”¹⁰⁴ and self-realization comes to take “place as a performance in public.”¹⁰⁵ Alongside a growing form of precarity, this situation induces new existential anxieties where isolation, resiliency,

⁹⁸ Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious* (London: Verso, 2015), 5.

⁹⁹ This is notably due to the ways in which these forms of labour rely on individuality, and on sociality, but also to the fact that they never fully stop happening, and that their localities are undefined (home, co-working space, cafés, studio, library, etc.)

¹⁰⁰ Berardi, *Soul at Work*, 115.

¹⁰¹ Berardi, 21.

¹⁰² Virno refers to virtuoso labor to describe post-Fordist forms of work (intellectual labor for instance) which require the skills or “special capabilities of a performing artist.” Like the work of the artist, language-based and immaterial forms of work do not have an end product and they require an audience. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 24, 49, 52, 56.

¹⁰³ Lorey more specifically theorizes precarization as a central mode of operating and governing in neoliberalism and post-Fordism. Lorey, 74.

¹⁰⁴ Lorey, 75.

¹⁰⁵ Lorey, 73.

flexibility, adaptability, and affective management (or self-reflexive work) become central to labour.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, as self-realization and social life are increasingly tied to securing future employment (and thus subsistence), anxieties unfold into these realms of life. Importantly for Lorey and Berardi, post-Fordism mobilizes individuals' desires and their paths to self-realization, which become a force for capital accumulation.¹⁰⁷

Neoliberalism – an “oft-invoked but ill-defined term”¹⁰⁸ in cultural studies and social sciences – identifies a set of practices, ideas and mechanisms that have circulated since the 1970s.¹⁰⁹ The multi-faceted, wide-ranging, and structural complexity of neoliberalism has rendered it a phenomenon that is hard to define. Different theoretical approaches frame it in different ways and it in fact refers at once to a culture, “a hegemonic ideology” but also “a state form, a policy and programme, an epistemology, and a version of governmentality.”¹¹⁰ Neoliberalism would describe new types of historically-specific arrangements and market-oriented operations occurring at various levels of governance (political and economic, and material and discursive, for instance). Broadly associated with free or flexible labour-markets and privatization, minimal state-intervention and individualism, it is often said to legitimize capitalist pursuits by the ruling class, and the alleged preservation of individual “freedom” and autonomy. According to David Harvey in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), neoliberalism can be interpreted as a wide-ranging “political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and restore power to the economic elite.”¹¹¹ To achieve these goals, neoliberal ideologies and structures place an emphasis on individual responsibility and “empowerment,” and they value competition amongst individual actors. Neoliberalism is thought to represent “the extension of competitive markets into all areas of life,”¹¹² and thus to financialize all aspects of life. This coextends with the “emergence of a new kind of subject, the

¹⁰⁶ Lovink, *Sad by Design*, 10, 12. Julie A. Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim, *Mothering Through Precarity. Women's Work and Digital Media* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 27.

¹⁰⁷ Berardi, *Soul at Work*, 13. Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 95-96.

¹⁰⁸ They further explain neoliberalism “has come to signify “that which we don't like” a placeholder term with no content (Mudge, 2008, 703).” Damien Cahill, Martijn Konings, Melinda Cooper, David Primrose, eds., *The Sage Handbook of Neoliberalism* (Los Angeles: SAGE Reference, 2018), xxvii.

¹⁰⁹ It would be associated with politics such as the ones of Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the UK for instance.

¹¹⁰ Simon Birch, Julie MacLeavy and Simon Springer, eds., *The Handbook of Neoliberalism* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 1.

¹¹¹ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 19. Cahill, Konings, Cooper, Primrose, *Sage Handbook*, xxviii

¹¹² Birch, MacLeavy, Springer, eds., *Handbook of Neoliberalism*, 2.

‘entrepreneur of oneself’ – that is, one who is constantly balancing the costs and benefits of action not only in the sphere of economic life, but also even in seemingly noneconomic spheres.”¹¹³ As it runs on a principle of competition (infused everywhere), neoliberalism promotes individualism, and instigates anxieties that eventually stimulate the flows of capital.

Neoliberalism thus relies on the implementation of a system of belief, norms, values and practices, that displaces the locus of governance at the level of the individual.¹¹⁴ As with post-Fordism, self-control and self-governing techniques emerge, as individuals comply, compete, and strive to increase their personal value. Self-entrepreneurship equally emerges as a mode of subjectivation that moves beyond the economic sphere of life, and seeps into sociality. The neoliberal subject is made precarious and anxious because of the constant competition and the economization of life. In its ideal form, it copes and responds to these conditions by becoming adaptable, resilient, self-reliant, and flexible. Resilience, however, becomes a double-edged sword, as adapting to neoliberalism may mean individual survival, but also implies perpetuating and strengthening an individualizing system of competition, detrimental to mental health, and to the formation of communities.

Post-Fordism and neoliberalism interact with emotions and affects in a plurality of ways, but the increasingly affective and social dimensions of un-bounded labour in post-Fordism, as well the precarity and unceasing competition of neoliberal culture, are significant points of departure to understand how these systems generate anxieties and shape subjects’ psyches. This socio-political climate, and its influence on contemporary subjectivations and affects, is crucial to the works of Evans and Trecartin. In subsequent sections of this thesis, I examine the ways their artworks illuminate changing conditions of affect in relation, mostly, to technology. The influence of neoliberalism and post-Fordism on contemporary affects remains, however, central to my analysis, as it runs beyond, through, and parallel to the influence of technological infrastructures. By investigating the relationship between technology and emotions, Evans and Trecartin recognize the socio-political quality of affects as well their historical character. Not only do they attend to the inner workings of technology and to digital control, but they also insightfully read these systems in relation to contemporary affects and “structures of feelings.” In

¹¹³ Nicholas Kiersey, “Neoliberalism and the Biopolitical Imagination,” in *The Handbook of Neoliberalism* ed. Simon Birch, Julie MacLeavy and Simon Springer (New York: Routledge, 2016), 168.

¹¹⁴ This is emphasized by Julie MacLeavy: “Key to this process is an attempt to instill a series of values and social practices in subjects (MacLeavy 2008b).” Birch, MacLeavy, Springer, 2.

the next section, I attend to Evans' *What the Heart Wants*, as it brings forward the affective quality of digital infrastructures and their flows, and the notion of programmed sociality.

2. Coded Intimacies: Technological Governance and Digital Anxieties

If media or technologies structure and bind the world and its movements,¹¹⁵ emotions are socially and structurally binding¹¹⁶ and digital flows are composed of affects;¹¹⁷ it becomes useful to conceptualize digital infrastructures as “affective infrastructures.”¹¹⁸ First coined by affect scholar Lauren Berlant in her 2016 article, “The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times,” the terminology of affective infrastructures has since harnessed traction in studies of digital networks to draw attention to the ways in which new media and their algorithms mediate affects, relationships, and intimate lives.¹¹⁹ This has also reached the art world in 2019, when an entire segment of Berlin’s *Transmediale/Festival of Art & Digital Culture* was dedicated to investigating this specific set of questions and concerns. As argued by poet and media scholar Tung-Hui Hu in the resulting journal: “by using the term ‘Affective Infrastructure,’ we can get at the way affect is made infrastructural—how it is stabilized and channeled, manufactured and circulated.”¹²⁰

Infrastructures are commonly referred to as the hard and soft networks or institutions that serve and bind common life (i.e.: railways, roads, educational programs, and emergency services). In the words of researcher and curator Daphne Dragona, they are associative structures that allow or impede movement, connect and separate, and as such, “tend to be associated with

¹¹⁵ Beyes, Conrad and Martin, *Organize*.

¹¹⁶ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.

¹¹⁷ Hillis, Paasonen and Petit, eds, *Networked Affect*.

¹¹⁸ Lauren Berlant, “The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34 (3, 2016): 393–419.

¹¹⁹ Berlant, “The Commons.” According to Daphne Dragona, Berlant theorized affective infrastructures as “alternative architectures of association and resistance [...] able to accommodate multiplicity and difference and allowing us to be with each other in common, moving beyond relations of sovereignty.” Though this approach to infrastructures as accommodating for “multiplicity and difference” and as potentially producing alternative futures is inspiring, in the context of this thesis, I rather consider digital infrastructures as affective infrastructures that do not necessarily work as counter-hegemonic structures. I attend to the ways affective infrastructures are set in place by technologies, and to how this results in supporting both dominant discourse and practices of relating, as well as alternative and resistive ones. Daphne Dragona, “Affective Infrastructures” in *Transmediale/art&digitaleculture Festival. Journal 3* (2019), <https://transmediale.de/content/affective-infrastructures-0>.

Lou Cornum, Tung-Hui Hu et al., “Affective Infrastructures: A Tableau, Altar, Scene, Diorama, or Archipelago,” in *Transmediale/art&digitaleculture. Journal* (2019). Accessed March 5, 2019. <https://transmediale.de/content/affective-infrastructures-a-tableau-altar-scene-diorama-or-archipelago>.

¹²⁰ Hu, “Affective Infrastructures.”

power, sovereignty, and privilege.”¹²¹ Berlant broadly defines infrastructures as “that which binds us to the world in movement and keeps the world practically bound to itself.”¹²² They can additionally be seen as systems organizing movements, established (though fluctuating) channels that structure “passing,” or supportive webs for interaction. To understand the myriad of digital infrastructures as “affective” is to recognize that some of the movement happening on those structures is composed of affects, but also that affects have become structuring forces amidst these channels.

Digital networking infrastructures can be more easily thought of as affective by considering the bearing they have on lived experiences and affective or emotional lives. They structure the digital public sphere and play a crucial role in the social dynamics of online (and offline) communities by supporting different geometries of relationships, proximities of users, orientations, and perceptions.¹²³ They influence the ways users form associations and the ways they read them. By producing “the conditions for the sensible and intelligible,”¹²⁴ they influence users’ ways of building subjectivities, self-definition and self-presentation practices.

In *If Then... Algorithmic Power and Politics*, Taina Bucher contends that digital platforms are deeply embedded within the workings of contemporary intimacies. She argues that they mediate relationships and should be considered as agents intervening within them. As mentioned previously, social media platforms and software functionalities, their interfaces, and the algorithms that structure them, shape users’ horizons of possibilities for relating, and thus come to influence contemporary understandings and practices of love, care, desire, etc.¹²⁵ Platform mediated intimacies, regarding technological developments more broadly, have been

¹²¹ Daphne Dragona, “Affective Infrastructures” in *Transmediale/art&digitaleculture Festival. Journal 3* (2019), <https://transmediale.de/content/affective-infrastructures-0>.

¹²² Berlant, “The Commons,” 394.

¹²³ Digital platforms have equally worked to further blend the private and the public spheres and to fracture their historically associated spatialities. Users can now easily access and participate in a digital public sphere from the confines of their homes. They can also share intimate stories and images within a few clicks and bring scenes of intimacy and domesticity within the public sphere. In addition to reconfiguring the public and private spheres of life, digital technology influenced perceptions and experiences of time and space. The relationship they entertain to the acceleration and growth of urban density is a good example in that regard.

¹²⁴ Taina Bucher, “Programmed sociality: A software studies perspective on social networking sites,” (PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2012), 9.

¹²⁵ An obvious example of platforms mediating intimacies can be found in the functionality of the Tinder swipe which impacts dating practices and “formats attraction” in a yes or no fashion. Taina Bucher, Mediengruppe Bitnik and Joana Moll. “Algorithmic Intimacies,” in *Transmediale/Art & Digital Culture. Archive*. Audio Recording. <https://2019.transmediale.de/content/algorithmic-intimacies>.

discussed by social anthropologist Mihirini Sirisena. Sirisena outlines ways in which mobile phones have become key instruments in daily practices of love and care amongst Sri-Lankan couples.¹²⁶ By studying couples' mobile phone usage (i.e. good night texts, lunchtime calls, or missed calls) she demonstrates how mobile devices have opened up a new affective terrain with new rituals, expectations, and possibilities for “being-with” (one another) that are now central to the weaving of intersubjectivities and intimacies.¹²⁷

For Bucher, algorithmic intimacy and the notion of “programmed sociality” draw attention to the ways in which media, software and social networking sites have come to articulate the conditions of sociality and to prescribe cultural practices, and values. Writing on the disciplinary power of algorithms, she explains: “Social networking sites are not empty spaces upon which sociality and subjectivation simply occur. Software contains certain normative and prescriptive structures.”¹²⁸ To elaborate on what she calls “programmed sociality,” based on the work of computer scientist John Von Neumann, Bucher defines “programming” as a labour of assembling or organizing, and “sociality,” referring to Bruno Latour’s actor-network-theory, as the ways in which “groups of entities (both human and nonhuman) are gathered into specific forms of collective association, enabling interaction between the entities concerned.”¹²⁹ While users exert some agency within these infrastructures, and while there is always room to move in the margins of these established systems (possibilities of misusing and disidentifying with them in the “practice of the everyday”¹³⁰) the hegemonic power of digital infrastructures remains in place and their psycho-social implications must be discussed.¹³¹

Bucher strongly critiques programmed sociality because it is orchestrated by platform corporations who have financial interests at heart, and whose models are built on that of

¹²⁶ Mihirini Sirisena, “Virtually Yours: Reflecting on the Place of Mobile Phones in Romantic Relationships,” in *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion: Feelings, Affect And Technological Change*, eds. Athina Karatzogianni and Adi Kunstman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 181-193.

¹²⁷ Sirisena, “Virtually Yours,” 182, 185.

¹²⁸ Bucher, “Programmed Sociality,” 12.

¹²⁹ Bucher, “Programmed Sociality,” 11. Here Bucher refers more specifically to Latour’s *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, published in 2005.

¹³⁰ Michel De Certeau, “Making Do: Uses and Tactics,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, by Michel de Certeau, 29-42. Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984.

¹³¹ As with every structure and infrastructure, it is crucial not to fall into a reductive determinism. Uses of the internet and of these platforms vary greatly in the “practice of the everyday,” and between culture, generations, locations, individuals, etc. Different identities and demographics are impacted differently, and questions of intersectionality are highly significant here. Something remains to be said, however, about the power of these digital structures over their users (and non-users.) De Certeau, “Making Do.”

advertising companies.¹³² The financial health and growth of these platforms are reliant on user's participation, interaction and attention, and platforms thus benefit from alienating their users by fostering addictive behavior.¹³³ Addiction and attention-grabbing is formatted into the design of these technologies and tech developers work towards these rather than towards, for instance, healthy practices of relating.

It is against this backdrop and interlacing of affect, technology, and sociality that I understand and situate Evans' practice. Her work *What the Heart Wants* (*WTHW*) is concerned with the management and commodification of affects by digital platforms and the shifting regime of affectivity this has brought about. The following parts thus explore how *WTHW* emphasizes the conditions of contemporary life by visualizing and drawing attention to affective digital flows and infrastructures, and by critiquing the idea of a programmed sociality. First, however, I describe the work and address its intersectional and technofeminist perspective.

What the Heart Wants and Intersectional Feminism

Evans' *What the Heart Wants* is a video installation composed of a large viewing platform surrounded by water, which visitors are invited to sit or lie down on to watch a forty-minute-long projection unfold (figs. 1 & 2). The video follows the figure of Hyper – a digital system that has assumed a female avatar form – as she wanders through the futuristic world that she has created with her “very best intentions” (figs. 3 & 4).¹³⁴ As Hyper moves through her world, visitors encounter a variety of places, people and objects with whom she has symbolic and interconnected yet abstracted conversations: a constellation of scenes, dialogues, and aesthetics brought forward to emphasize shifting regimes of subjectivity, affectivity and sociality.¹³⁵

Hyper's encounters in the video are multiple and varied. In some of the initial sequences she meets a group of children living in a networked modular structure (the Kinderbol Atomium

¹³² Bucher, *If...Then*, 6.

¹³³ Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light*, xi, 35.

Natasha Schüll, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

¹³⁴ Cécile B. Evans, “Cécile B. Evans: What the Heart Wants,” artist talk presented at Gerrit Rietveld Academie Conference BOTS, BODIES, BEASTS: The Art of Being Humble, April 7, 2016. Video, 31:24. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSgz3SxIrf4>

¹³⁵ As often the case with new media artworks, Evans has outsourced and commissioned some of the production of her CGI landscapes from freelancers all around the world. Barbara Casavecchia, “Cécile B. Evans's ‘Working on What the Heart Wants’” *Art Agenda*, June 2, 2016. <https://www.art-agenda.com/features/238813/ccile-b-evans-s-working-on-what-the-heart-wants>

in Brussel, fig. 5) with their robot caregiver Nao.¹³⁶ The children, silent throughout the video, have stopped using speech and performing affective intensities because, as Nao claims : “it’s too much work to perform”; or as Evans explains as part of an artist’s talk: because they are “so advanced that they don’t recognize the system.”¹³⁷ Rather, they exchange with Hyper through text or “chat” messages and windows of text pop on the screen. There they discuss the history of the internet and the frequent erasure of women’s work in its retelling.¹³⁸ Hyper later encounters a group of disembodied ears who work on a pink lake (modelled after Spencer Lake in Australia) to collect *fungus* – which stands as the natural resource that maintains Hyper’s infrastructure (fig. 6). One of the ears is vocal and engages in a discussion with Hyper on the information economy, digital labour and its ethics, emails, and bitcoins. Soon after, over an aerial shot of a natural wooded landscape, a voice-over of a ‘missed connection’ Craigslist ad (referred to as a ‘*memory from 1972*’) recounts a story of post-war depression and of a pivotal romantic meeting (fig. 7). At several points of Hyper’s adventure, advertisements of comestibles such as mayonnaise, or cheese, flying in space-like imagery, interrupt the narrative to draw attention towards new shapes of capitalism where products strive to present as human. Through these scenes, Evans critiques the emergence and consolidation of corporate personhood in legal frameworks since the nineteenth century (fig. 8). Some of *WTHW*’s characters are conjured up from previous artworks, which further complexifies the narrative and the net of relationships that composes the video. For instance, Evans’ spambot Agnes (from *Agnes*, 2014), a flickering hologram of Philip Seymour Hoffman (referred to as “a bad copy of a really famous actor”), a Japanese vocaloid named Haku (similar to Hatsune Miku), and a cynical aging invisible woman (all from *Hyperlinks or it Didn’t Happen*, 2014) come up at various points.

Importantly, woven throughout the video, a series of vignettes and characters emphasize contemporary structures of power and some of the gendered and racialized inequalities they support or accentuate. Evans decidedly sets out to open a conversation on the way online violence intersects with identity, thus positioning her work within an intersectional and feminist

¹³⁶ The Atomium was first built for Brussel’s Expo 1958 and is considered to be a monument to the Atomic Age and to Scientific Progress.

¹³⁷ Evans, “Cécile B. Evans. What the Heart Wants,” Video 32:04.

¹³⁸ The contribution of Grace Hopper (1906-1992) – an American computer scientist and pioneer in computer programming – is notably mentionned.

critique. On intersectionality, a concept coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1991, Patricia Hills and Sirma Bilge write:

When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves.¹³⁹

The perspective of *WTHW* reads as intersectional in the way it addresses and recognizes the many different axes of oppression (such as gender, race, class and ableism for instance), which inform and work together in the distribution of power and inequality.¹⁴⁰

Evans' feminist perspective was already present in *Agnes* – where the 'emotional' female spambot collected affective data on the visitors of the Serpentine Gallery's website, and in *Hyperlinks or it Didn't happen* – where an invisible woman critiqued the invisibilization of older women in visual culture. The renewed presence of Agnes and of this invisible woman in *WTHW*, as well as the children's discussion of women's role in the development of the internet, act as meaningful cues for viewers to engage in a feminist reading of technology.¹⁴¹ Evans' critical examination of the relationship of technology with emotions is also in and of itself an intersectional feminist project that refuses to consider matters of the heart as 'lower' considerations and situates the personal realm as a political one.

Hyper's appearance as a female figure is, in that regard, not incidental and works to critique the typical anthropomorphizing of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and platform interfaces as women – along with the underlying assumptions and patriarchal expectations that this holds regarding women's work and servitude (figs. 3, 4 & 9). Hyper recalls Amazon's Alexa or Apple's Siri – some of many digital systems whose voices are aestheticized as female to perform the labour of care (historically assigned to women), and to facilitate human-to-machine interactions.¹⁴² By addressing the feminization of AI, Evans critiques gendered labour histories, and the subservience and care expected in work historically performed by women.

¹³⁹ Patricia Hill, and Sirma Bilge, "What is Intersectionality?" in *Intersectionality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 2.

¹⁴⁰ Intersectionality is an "analytical tool" that recognizes the additive aspect of oppression and the idea that various layers of identity and privilege accumulate in ways that create various uneven situations, or a "tilted playing field" more advantageous to some and less to others. Collins, Hill and Bilge, "What is Intersectionality?," 10.

¹⁴¹ Later this is supplemented by digital debates concerning women's rights forums like reddit.

¹⁴² As Miriam E. Sweeney explains *anthropomorphized virtual agents* (AVAs) are often designed as women because of "gendered assumptions about women's 'natural' affective skills" and because of the ways emotional labour has historically been attributed as women's work (through reproductive labour for

Aesthetically, Hyper's representation is that of a normatively "sexy" cartoonish avatar with tight black clothing and alluring curves echoing those of videogame characters like Lara Croft, or celebrities like Kim Kardashian.¹⁴³ It is as though Evans has appropriated or borrowed from the readily available imagery online to create an emblem of female hypersexualization and objectification. Hyper's mannequin-like appearance, along with her featureless face and plastic aesthetic also recall the likes of sex dolls and bring to mind the phenomenon of women's pornification online. This phenomenon is notably analyzed by Noble in her intersectional study of the racial and gendered bias of algorithms that pornify more specifically Black and Latina women.¹⁴⁴ Following historically and culturally defined sexist and racist appetites for images, digital systems in fact appropriate female bodies and, in this case Black bodies, for capital gain.

Making Hyper into the 'consumable-female-product' par excellence also works to remind viewers of the competition for visibility that occurs online, whereby users must abide by the logic of the platform that they use if they wish to become visible and to be recognized.¹⁴⁵ The privilege of appearance in the ever-renewing sea of user-generated content (UGC) is attributed by a capitalist grammar that commodifies certain bodies over others, and nurtures affects of competition amongst users of the network by way of quantifiable 'likes,' 'followers,' or 'reposts' for instance.¹⁴⁶ In embodying the 'ideal' and 'consumable' body desired by patriarchal societies, Hyper represents a culturally-value-laden figure. Her position of power within *WTHW*'s narrative is coherent with the ways in which these kinds of commodified, bodies tend to harness online visibility and traction. It is unclear whether Hyper's aesthetic submission to the sexist logic of these systems works to critique or to support them, but the Ear working for Hyper does ask: "How in 25k is your waist so small?"¹⁴⁷ In a critique of the work, Hannah Black suggests that Evans simply understands the

instance). Miriam E. Sweeney, "The Intersectional Interface," in *The Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, Class and Culture Online*, edited by Safiya Umoja Noble and Brendesha M Tynes (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2015), 224.

¹⁴³ Hannah Black, "9th Berlin Biennale," *Artforum International* 55 (1, Sep. 2016): 350-352.

¹⁴⁴ Noble, 3-4.

¹⁴⁵ Bucher, *If...Then*, 84.

¹⁴⁶ The competition for likes or visibility (i.e.: online traction) is further discussed in section three of this research, but it refers to the rivalry embedded within platforms that function along quantifiable metrics of appreciation. These are at once useful to identify popular content and detrimental to the visibility of unpopular content. By way of ascribing value to personal content and users (likes and followers), this competition also takes place between users' profiles and their "digital self." It is then arguably harmful to the development of self-worth as unquantifiable.

¹⁴⁷ Cécile B. Evans, *Cécile B. Evans (1770-25k)* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018), 237.

ways in which users must now play by the rules of the game, and abide by the systems' principles to critique them. She writes:

After the violent repression of real and imaginary alternatives to capitalism, we are left with a social field entirely dominated by value; the increasing mediation of social life by advanced technology is one manifestation of this situation. Pragmatically rather than programmatically, this total rule of the commodity form means that political struggle cannot oppose the commodity but has to pass through it.¹⁴⁸

Furthermore, if Evans decided to go with the default, readily available skinny and sexy body-type for Hyper that is deemed ideal by patriarchal constructs of beauty and sexuality, the artist also significantly represented her as an anxious character (further discussed later in this section). Hyper's consumable femininity seems to produce anxiety, for herself, and for other actors of *WTHW*. Indeed the affects of anxiety that pass through Hyper and surround her, challenge the ubiquitous sexist visual culture that she is a part of, and make her a less consumable figure for the viewer. Hyper's anxious feelings also critique and present the commodification of women's bodies on digital platforms as an anxiety-inducing climate.

WTHW's critique also draws attention to the intersection of algorithmic bias with racism in several scenes. At one point, fact and fiction coalesce as Hyper engages in a conversation with a cell from the lineage of Henrietta Lacks which recounts the factual history of racism, exploitation and erasure that Lacks' body suffered. The "HeLa" cells of Lacks, a Black woman who died of cancer in 1951, were appropriated and exploited without consent (nor knowledge from the family) by white American scientists.¹⁴⁹ HeLa cells have since then become an important line of immortal cells in scientific research, and a highly profitable industry, but Lacks' history and name were silenced and erased for more than twenty years.¹⁵⁰ As the cell recounts its story, Hyper responds: "It sounds familiar, but I don't think this story made it through the big scan"—cleverly alluding to the unequal distribution of visibility online, its intersection with race, and to selective white HISTories (fig. 9).¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Hannah Black, "9th Berlin Biennale," in *Artforum International* 55 (1, Sep. 2016). Accessed March 9, 2020. <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201607/the-9th-berlin-biennale-63010>

¹⁴⁹ hooks, bell. "Tragic Biography: Resurrecting Henrietta Lacks." In *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*, 81-91. New York: Routledge, 2013.

¹⁵⁰ hooks, "Tragic Biography."

¹⁵¹ The notion of selective white HISTories refers to the selective omission and erasure of racial and gendered issues across historical writings and renderings, further affecting cultural practices of forgetting and remembering. While all history is a selective process, postcolonial, critical race, feminist and historiography scholars have critiqued the prevalence of this practice across, for instance, westernized accounts of history. In *Women, Race & Class* for instance, political activist and scholar Angela Y. Davis draws attention to the absence of historical writings on Black women's lives during slavery. Robin Morgan then critiques male-centric accounts of history and suggests writing "herstory" as a feminist praxis. Angela

Later in the video, conversations on systemic marginalization, love, and technological governance occur with a couple of racialized and “runaway lovers” who are unrecognized as humans by the system and forced to live in abandoned places (figs. 10, 11).¹⁵² They claim: “Border hopping, we didn’t have the right passport. They changed the laws again yesterday. We didn’t make the cut and the system didn’t see us as faces. [...] Why we don’t pass in the eyes of the system is what built the system.”¹⁵³ Through the figure of the lovers as invisible to the “eyes of the system,” *WTHW* brings into focus recent real cases of facial recognition technology that failed at seeing and recognizing darker faces (fig. 12). The lovers come to stand as a figure of racist marginalization in Hyper’s world, but also as one of resistance to the algorithmic oppression that they are subjected to. Repeatedly, the lovers critique the system and negotiate their life by moving between abandoned places. In doing that, they draw attention to mobility and migration issues as connected to the unequal distribution of privilege and visibility, thus reiterating *WTHW*’s intersectional perspective.

Overall, the world and the narrative of *WTHW* is disorienting, and non-linear – much like the experience of the internet. Affects circulate in various directions at once and anxious feelings of loss, confusion, and overwhelming abundance, are juxtaposed to robotic performativity. Though Hyper’s face is impassible throughout the video (something to which I will return later in this section), her voice and speech communicate several emotions; at points she seems in control and blasé, at others she sounds curious and critical, but repeatedly she alludes to feeling anxious and overwhelmed. The adventure through Hyper’s world underscores a digital condition of information-overload and, in narrative terms, echoes the feeling of walking through someone’s digital clutter, or Google search history. The video is a constant swirl of layered references, as it plays with the visual culture of the internet and videogames, as well as with technological, art historical and architectural references.¹⁵⁴ Aesthetically and formally, it recalls the video works of Evans’ contemporaries Camille Henrot or Hito Steyerl and their tightly

Y. Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (New York: Vintage Books (Random House), 1983), 3-4. Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings From the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977). Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2016 [1996]).

¹⁵² They are first seen in an abandoned flooded mall filled with sharks in Kuwait, then in a meeting house set in the post-nuclear ghost town of Tanashio, Japan, and lastly in the Jacuzzi Room of Mike Tyson’s abandoned Mansion.

¹⁵³ Cécile B. Evans, *Cécile B. Evans (1770-25k)* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018), 248, 250.

¹⁵⁴ For instance, the work includes the painting *Christina's World* (1948) by Andrew Wyeth, and the modernist *Berman House* (1996-99) by Harry Seidler.

conceptual weaving of heterogeneous digital editing. While in *WTHW* a familiar internet-like disorientation plays out, the anxiogenic fast pace and affects of media are not reflected. The rhythm of the video is relatively slow, the music is mostly ambient, sounds and recorded voices are clear, high-end and transparent, and the installation (with water surrounding the platform, and cushions to lie down) is relaxing, and soothing. Evans' work creates, in that sense, a space of exception or a pocket of temporal relief for moving through the visual culture of the internet. It creates, in the words of philosopher Jacques Rancière, an alternative "distribution of the sensible" that contrasts with the usual affective landscape of networked life and allows visitors to reconfigure and rethink these structures.¹⁵⁵

At times alienating for visitors in the depth of its abstractions and references,¹⁵⁶ *WTHW* nonetheless succeeds at setting up a framework for interrogating present digital realities and their affective textures. Simply through its title, *What the Heart Wants* emphasizes emotions and affects as being critical in unravelling digital complexity. Matters of the heart are centred as a key to visitors' interpretation and from then on, the installation acts as an abstracted meditation pod to contemplate the changing role and value of affect and emotions in networked societies.¹⁵⁷

No Real Less Real: Affective Infrastructures and Networked Affect

In *WTHW* digital infrastructures are presented as affective infrastructures in several ways that help visitors to recognize them as such. Evans brings into focus their materiality, physicality and corporeality, but she also centres emotions as fundamental drivers (or at least constituents) of the system, thus presenting digital flows as affective.

One of the conceptual premises used by Evans throughout her practice is that digital infrastructures impact bodies in real and concrete ways, or that "you can feel things online and they happen to you in 'real' life."¹⁵⁸ Evans departs from widely circulated ideas on the virtuality of cyberspace vs. the reality of physical IRL (in real life) space and shatters alleged hierarchy of

¹⁵⁵ Jacques Rancière, *Le partage du sensible : esthétique et politique* (Paris : La Fabrique, 2015).

¹⁵⁶ *WTHW* is conceptually wide-ranging and it brings together an array of symbolic and allegorical clues along with external and un-prefaced references to history, and art history. For instance, the AI ELIZA – in part coded to give illusions of empathy – is brought up without any specific or contextual reference.

¹⁵⁷ Evans equally discusses the notion of the soul which she argues has been abandoned too quickly as a site of inquiry in the context of posthumanism. The title of the work is also to be understood as a decentring of reason.

¹⁵⁸ Evans, "Cécile B. Evans: What the Heart Wants," Video, 8:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSgz3SxIrf4>

realness. In *WTHW*, the real and physical quality of media infrastructures is asserted in several ways: notably it is seen in the way the digital infrastructure of the video exceeds and persists beyond the projection screen and into a physical installation composed of water, a platform, cushions, and the lying bodies of the audience. As the video formally extends into the physical space of the visitors, the edges of the digital system represented dissolve.

The figure of Hyper as a digital system anthropomorphized and embodied in an avatar equally emphasizes the corporeal quality of media. While avatars are sometimes run by AI, they mostly function to relay the corporeality of human users in web-environments, acting as doubles or stand-ins, and allowing the emergence of a telepresence that supports strong affective interactions.¹⁵⁹ According to Ken Hillis, avatars are the indexical signs of their users, they signal liveliness, and have contributed to move “the internet from a purely textual medium to the multisensory web that allows for more telepresent forms of intensely affective engagements with online moving images.”¹⁶⁰ On their effects, Hillis further writes:

[Avatars’] seeming mobility works to suggest how digital technologies have come to be understood, however, implicitly and in however understated or even unstated fashion, as having the capacity and affordances to authorize action and thereby induce affect at a distance.¹⁶¹

By anthropomorphizing a digital system into a lively avatar, *WTHW* foregrounds the idea of digital systems as affective and corporeal.

This physicality and affective quality of the internet and media are brought about in other ways too. In narrative terms, the video opens with a representation and discussion of actual cloud systems by Hyper, indirectly referring to and critiquing metaphors of the internet as an ethereal “cloud” (fig. 13).¹⁶² While the “smooth and diffused appearance” of clouds connotes them as intangible, Hyper emphasizes their material qualities and impact on land and water. She then situates the concreteness of this cloud system in relation to the future digital system that she has created and embodies. Working metaphorically but in a reverse analogy, Hyper discusses clouds’ materiality to discuss the internet’s physicality, and to bring attention to its material infrastructure and implications.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Hillis, “The Avatar and Online Affect,” 75.

¹⁶⁰ Hillis, 78.

¹⁶¹ Hillis, 83.

¹⁶² The images come from the 1957 book *Cloud Study: A Pictorial Guide*. Cécile B. Evans, *Cécile B. Evans (1770-25k)* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018), 205.

¹⁶³ Interestingly, as expressed by Hillis, other metaphors of the internet and technology spatialize and anchor cyberspace in materiality: “platform,” “site,” “visiting,” “surfing,” are linguistic skeuomorphic acts

Images of Hyper inside data centres and on a freight barge hosting a data farm also emphasize the internet's physicality (figs. 3 & 14). Working along several other artists who represent this material infrastructure,¹⁶⁴ Evans' work calls attention to the "dependence of new technology on geological matter but also the way in which such technology is entangled with geopolitical conflict and inequality, since these minerals are predominantly mined and processed in the global South, with often devastating environmental or social effect."¹⁶⁵ While material traces of the internet such as server farms or underwater cables (either located in rural areas or underwater) remain to this day pretty mysterious and unfamiliar objects, *WTHW* moves them into plain sight. In countering the invisibility of media materiality, Evans also indirectly critiques the discourse of online dynamic being virtual, artificial, or unreal. In a post-humanist tradition, she emphasizes the enmeshment of the virtual with the real that have troubled any ontological division between human and technology, or online and offline space. By setting up these spaces and narratives, *WTHW* fracture ideas of the digital as a metaphorical and a lesser version of "real" life.

The work then further draws attention to the becoming-biological of the network by emphasizing "networked affect," or the affective attachments that compose digital circulation, and the phenomenon of digital affective contagion. Evans' interest in affective cyber-flows and in contagion comes across in the 'flowy' and water aesthetics of the work, in its narrative and dialogue, and in moments of dramatic language and music. Water aesthetics, first evident in the water-filled room of the installation, are also striking in Evans' assemblage of images and sounds, where they work to emphasize the affective quality of data and virtual exchange, mostly because of common and widespread symbolic associations between water and emotions (figs. 1 – 4, 6, 10, 11, 13, 14).¹⁶⁶ Visually; Hyper's data farm is located underwater, the lovers' mall is flooded, the ears work on a lake, and the colour blue persists as images of clouds and waves cycle through, binding the work with the theme of water. Sounds of rolling waves and water pools then reverberate across the actual water of the installation, and they are followed by

that carry offline spatial devices into the space of the screen. Nonetheless, a lot of popular understandings of media remain anchored in immateriality. Hillis, "The Avatar and Online Affect," 76.

¹⁶⁴ I.e.: Trevor Paglen, Hito Steyerl, Yuri Pattison and Ingrid Burrington. Cadence Kinsey, "Fluid Dynamics: On the Representation of Water and Discourses of the Digital," *Art History* 4 (Feb. 2020): 23.

¹⁶⁵ Kinsey, 23.

¹⁶⁶ German romantic works centering water as an element of the sublime (and its associations with emotional torment) come to mind as an obvious example.

soothing and ‘flowy’ music. The work’s opening song, for instance, recalls the trickling notes of elevator-music as well as soft and calming videogame soundtracks.

This also brings to mind other contemporary artworks concerned with technology, water and liquid modernity, such as Hito Steyerl’s video-installation *Liquidity Inc.* (2014, fig. 15). Filled with images of rendered waves, Steyerl’s work speaks of the unstable present of late capitalism, and of the fluid circulation of data and capital in a globalized and technologized world. As expressed by Cadence Kinsey, “metaphorics of water” abound in contemporary artworks concerned with the ambivalence of information and digitality, and with the seamless flows of global techno-capitalism.¹⁶⁷ The transparency and un-bounded fluidity of water, as well as its tangible-yet ungraspable quality, “provide a suitable set of metaphorics” for artists to address the slippery nature of materiality in the digital age.¹⁶⁸ The unknowability and immensity of water bodies suitably reflect the endless depths of the web as they lie beneath the screen-surface. As Kinsey explains, oceans then lend themselves to the complexities of late capitalism, as “crashing waves” do to the fluidity-imperatives brought about by neoliberalism.¹⁶⁹ Evans’ mobilization of water metaphorics to address crashing waves of data, and the flows of emotions that they contain, also assuredly gestures to flows of capital.

The affective quality of digital flows is also presented narratively when Hyper, standing in what she claims to be her house, discusses with the previous owners of the house, who are referred to as “memories” that are “large, deep and real.” In *WTHW*, several characters are called “Memory”; a play on words that emphasizes the digital self as an accumulation of archived memories online. Hyper’s and the memories’ house, a replica of the Berman House located in New South Wales, Australia, is a modernist villa constructed by Harry Seidler between 1996-99 – famous for its large bay windows facing a cliff and its wavy roof (fig. 16). As Hyper moves through the luxurious house, its previous owner tells her: “you are extremely insensitive and your words are shallow given the depth of emotion and experience that the house holds for me. What gives you the right to talk about memory in relation to this place? I don’t even know who you are!”¹⁷⁰ Through this, the affective qualities of memories as things that are held, carried and

¹⁶⁷ Kinsey, “Fluid Dynamics,” 8-16.

¹⁶⁸ Kinsey, 7.

¹⁶⁹ Kinsey, 7, 14, 15, 19.

¹⁷⁰ To provide some additional context over that scene; the voice-over text of a *memory* accusing Hyper of being insensitive actually comes from an actual *real* email that Cécile B. Evans received from the first owners of the house. Upon visiting her artwork, they felt “upset” by the artist’s representation and

archived by digital systems are brought forward. By creating this conflict between the system and the memory it holds, Evans presents digital systems as archives of data and emotions grounded in actual lives. The critique of Hyper as shallow further suggests that the power of digital infrastructures contrasts with the affective intimacy that compose, fill and move through them. Digital infrastructures are presented as shallow and superficial pools of water that, quite unfortunately, contain and manage the currents and the immense depths of emotions.

The affective quality of data is again apparent when a soldier's memory found in the 1972 "missed connections" section of Craigslist adds, recounts a pivotal meeting with someone who halted their suicide plan (fig. 7). Over a mountain view background, a disembodied voice recounts their experience of violence during the Vietnam war, and the life-changing romantic meeting they had 10 years prior. As the soldier speaks (and to such intensely emotional content), dramatic music plays and lines of code appear on the screen, and recall the digital rain aesthetic made famous by 1999's science-fiction action movie, *The Matrix*. The assemblage of this popular representation of data with dramatic stories and music emphasizes the affective quality of data; effectively pushing against the usual connotations of dry mathematical code syntax.

In reiterating the affective quality of cyberflows, *WTHW* allows visitors to recognize that affects and emotions have been absorbed by digital infrastructures, that they are now quantified objects of technological design, and that that their role and value is thus evolving. In an artist's talk about *WTHW*, Evans discusses her research on some of the ways emotions circulate online, and on the control that media can have over affective flows. She cites the emotional contagion study Facebook conducted non-consensually on its users in 2014, and that revealed that emotions could be "transferred" amongst users of the network.¹⁷¹ In *WTHW*, networked contagion is hinted at on several points, but very directly when the lovers discuss a fictional study titled "emotional contagion."¹⁷² By bringing these ideas into her work, Evans further creates the

appropriation of their home which was tied to their "deep and real" memories. Evans then engaged in an email correspondence with them and decided to incorporate their critique into her work. Lawrence Lek and Cécile B. Evans, "Check Marks," *Mousse* 55 (Oct.-Nov. 2016): 92.

¹⁷¹ Evans, "Cécile B. Evans: What the Heart Wants," Video, 7:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSgz3SxIrf4>. Jouhki, Jukka et al. "Facebook's Emotional Contagion Experiment as a Challenge to Research Ethics." *Media and Communication* 4 (4, 2016): 75-85.

¹⁷² In the narrative viewers understand that this fictional study was carried by a "church collecting information, and seeking personhood," and who acted as the "sole service provider" during the "war that no one would recognize." The lovers then go on to discuss the responsibilities of service providers, their potential nationalization, and the racist and colonial distribution of services like post-disaster safe-check-ins. This "war that no one would recognize" seems to be the invisible one located at the interface of users

conditions for visitors to understand digital infrastructures as systems that shape “affective orientations” (directions, desires, movement and dwellings), and “collective feelings.”¹⁷³ In fact, as they facilitate certain interactions and complicate others, digital systems favor and allow for certain proximities, impressions, and associations, and they generate certain affects, over others.¹⁷⁴ While emotional contagion isn’t to be understood as a “direct” or “smooth” transferring,¹⁷⁵ and rather emotions move through the intertextuality and experiences of users with shifting connotations,¹⁷⁶ the idea that certain affective attachments “stick” as they move through the network reveals the power of platforms to manipulate affective lives, and play with fears, desires, joys and sadnesses. For instance, affects of joy, longing or desire may be attached to images of hyper-sexualized young women and big luxurious houses in highly sticky ways. While these affective attachments originate in historically rehearsed sexist and consumerist cultures and discourses, platforms and their users now rehearse them online at a furious speed, and thicken the stickiness of their attachments. Social media platforms can in that sense be understood as facilitating channels for certain affects, and as sites that direct users towards “certain attachments and their associations over others”¹⁷⁷ – disposing users in ways that make them available and receptive to certain affects and emotions. In building and supporting proximities between objects and emotions, and thus rehearsing cultural associations, social media platforms contribute to shaping a cultural politics of emotions.¹⁷⁸

and service providers (here described as disciplinary churches) or between service providers themselves – and in which emotional contagion and manipulation could be understood as one of its many conflicts.

¹⁷³ In accordance with the ideas of Sara Ahmed. Ahmed, “Collective Feelings.” Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*.

¹⁷⁴ Taina Bucher, Mediengruppe Bitnik and Joana Moll, “Algorithmic Intimacies,” *Transmediale/art& digitaleculture Festival. Archive*, Audio Recording, 2019. <https://2019.transmediale.de/content/algorithmic-intimacies>. Many argue that digital infrastructures are polarizing, and that they instill binarity with further intensity into social life. Accordingly, Mikhel Proulx argues that structurally, digital infrastructures aim to and for disambiguation; that they run on a principle of clarity. While I would argue that digital infrastructures accommodate for some ambiguity and ambivalence, their infrastructures do prescribe relatively clear affective and discursive interactions with the content that they host (i.e.: see Facebook’s pantheon of responses: the emoji of likes, dislikes, angry, sad, surprised). Mikhel Proulx, “The Progress of Ambiguity: Uncertain Imagery in Digital Culture.” MA diss., Concordia University, 2013.

¹⁷⁵ Obviously joyful content from user #1 does not necessarily induce joy to user #2.

¹⁷⁶ Ahmed critiques discourses of direct transference and contagion models of affect theory but she still contends that emotions circulate. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 10, 218.

¹⁷⁷ Lou Catherine Cornum, “Affective Infrastructures,” in *Transmediale/art& digitaleculture Festival. Journal*, 2019, accessed March 5, 2019, <https://transmediale.de/content/affective-infrastructures-a-tableau-altar-scene-diorama-or-archipelago>.

¹⁷⁸ While newness is fundamental to platform design, algorithms build user-profiles by surveilling and collecting users’ data to identify their past likings and then produce individual feeds that cater to their taste. The type of algorithm at the source of these patterns could be identified as working through and reproducing ‘sameness.’ These types of algorithms, while useful in several ways, are complicit in a whole

Following Bucher's ideas on software and platform technologies as structures that create norms, and Ahmed's ideas on emotions as involved in the reproduction of social norms; I would further argue that the ways in which digital infrastructures interact with emotions can be seen as a powerful 'double-norming.' As digital systems and emotions are strong forces that shape the social field (applying various types pressures on individuals' experiences), their interaction is significant; and furthers their influences in cumulative ways. Upon researching the politics and developments of affect and sociality that have emerged with networked living, it became clear to me that the interaction of software and emotions with cultural norms, was a crucial site of inquiry. In investigating the forces of digital systems and emotions, and by drawing attention to the corporeal and affective quality of digital flows, networked affect, and contagion, *WTHW* contributes to this inquiry. As it makes visible interactions and dynamics at play between digital systems and emotions, *WTHW* allows visitors to productively reconsider them – and to further reckon with, what I refer to as, the doubly norming forces of software and emotions.

Programmed Sociality and Anxious Systems

WTHW critiques and offers resistance to technological corporate governance by emphasizing the notion and condition of *programmed sociality* – mostly narratively through the figure of Hyper, but also through the work's viewing structure. The T-shaped viewing platform is, in that regard, a significant apparatus to enter the work. Set in a large hall, walking towards the sitting area has a ritual or processional quality that gives the embodied experience of walking down the nave of a church (figs. 1 & 2). Viewers are invited to sit or lie down below, in what could be thought of as the crossings, or transepts. Surrounded by water, the platform also resembles an island, separated from the rest of the world. It invites reflections on social control, and isolation, and connotes the power of digital technologies over people's lives as almost religious – or as within a history of doctrine, and dogma.

array of hegemonies, and reinforce historically rehearsed associations between objects and emotions. While social media has been crucial to the developments of marginalized communities and to radical organizing – for instance in the Arab Spring in 2012, or in the development of queer communities on Tumblr in the early 2000s as well as instrumental in the democratization of information-access – something remains to be said for the ways these platforms keep “everyone cloistered into their signifying bubble.” The Invisible Committee, *Now* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e); Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 48, quoted in Lovink, *Sad by Design*, 6. Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology and Politics* (NY : Oxford University Press, 2017.) Alexander Cho, “Queer Tumblrs, Networked Counterpublics.” Conference Paper. *International Communications Association*, Boston, MA (2011): 1–37.

The figure and position of Hyper within the narrative effectively questions and unsettles the prescriptive and structuring quality of media. Throughout *WTHW*, Hyper brings viewers into the world that she has programmed and organized; whose codes and dynamics she is the programmer of. She has built a world, a complex sociality filled with various agents; some who work for the system and collect primary resources (the Ears), some who are unhappy with the system (Agnes complains quite a bit for instance), and some who aren't recognized by it (the Lovers) – but all of whom are interconnected into sets of relationships and anchored into places that Hyper oversees, moves through, and has relative control over.

By anthropomorphizing the digital creator of the system in an avatar, and by bringing viewers into the world of Hyper, Evans centralizes the structuring power of media in a sole human figure which reminds viewers of the deeply centralized and very real governance of digital life by Internet giants. As writer and architect Eleanor Saitta remarked, with intense social media usage, digital infrastructures have become crucial sites of governance and have replaced some of the usual political sites of organization. She writes: “as technology is deployed at scale and becomes infrastructure, its governance ceases to be engineering or design and becomes (geo)politics.”¹⁷⁹ Hyper visualizes the theorization of the political organization of life through media. She represents the few major players that determine and code platform algorithms. Her omniscient god-like character draws attention to the relatively unquestioned grasp of platforms and media over the organization of labour, interpersonal relationships, and daily life. This is further suggested when a dialogue between Hyper and one of the ears named ‘Ear Ear’ goes as follow:

Hyper: But I can't afford to lose power; it's really important that I don't lose power right now.
Ear Ear: We support you.
Hyper: I know you keep the system running. I need the fungus.¹⁸⁰

This exchange on Hyper's power and its production interestingly occurs over a re-imagined version of the American realist painting *Christina's World* (1948), by Andrew Wyeth. In Wyeth's version, a young girl named Christina faces a pastoral landscape (fig. 17).¹⁸¹ However,

¹⁷⁹ Eleanor Saitta, “As technology,” @Dymaxion, Twitter, 15 oct. 2019.

<https://twitter.com/Dymaxion/status/1184057421095940096>

¹⁸⁰ Evans, *Cécile B. Evans (1770-25k)*, 270.

¹⁸¹ Interestingly, the young girl represented in the painting (a neighbor of Wyeth), was also sick with “a degenerative muscle condition that left her unable to walk.” The girls' struggle with mobility is also interesting in the case of Evans' newer version. MoMA, “Andrew Wyeth: *Christina's World* 1948,”

Evans has updated and transformed her universe into an urban and technologized environment that spreads out into the distance. Moreover, a laptop lies on the grass in front of the girl, in-between her and the city (fig. 18). By inserting the laptop, Evans documents how contemporary encounters with the public sphere are now mediated by digital devices, and thus pursues Wyeth's realist style and approach. Through this representation, the world of Christina can now be synthesized by her computer screen; it is what Marshall McLuhan called a "media ecology."¹⁸² Christina's isolation in front of her technological world also works to remind viewers that while communication technologies present as places for connection or community forming, they are also vectors of alienation and isolation. Evans' repurposing, or "remix," of the painting highlights these changing conditions and of the need to remain critical of contemporary media environments.¹⁸³

As the video moves through the world and sociality designed by Hyper, viewers realize that she is overwhelmed by her task and its implications. As the political being par excellence of *WTHW*, Hyper is represented as authoritarian and decisive, but also as naïve and clueless. While walking in the data-farm, Hyper's anxiety over the ever-growing complexity she has created becomes unbearable (fig. 14). She is nothing and everything all at once and asks for help:

I am the painter and the painting. I'm the weeper of the house the portrait hangs in, it's the last one I was happy in. I am the city that I live inside of, the living, the dead, and the undead all at once. I'm not doing this for you anymore. I am you. Please Help it's so hard.¹⁸⁴

As the scene unfolds, Raymond Williams' "structures of feeling" come to mind and it seems as though, in the case of Hyper's digital system, confusion and anxiety emerge. The struggles of Hyper towards her system and her anxiety come to position digital infrastructures as "anxious systems" or as systems that inspire and channel affects and states of confusion and anxiety. This echoes what media theorist Geert Lovink suggests in his theorization of the "sadness by design" of contemporary technologies. Lovink writes of the "invisibility of technological violence" on mental health, and of the mechanisms of sadness, addiction, and distraction structurally

MoMA. *Art and Artists. The Collection*, accessed March 5, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78455>

¹⁸² Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (London: Routledge, 2001 (1964)).

¹⁸³ Through this, Evans also references remix and appropriation aesthetics as something very postmodern – a tendency that has been present across many new media and internet-themed works of the last two decades.

¹⁸⁴ Evans, *Cécile B. Evans (1770-25k)*, 246.

embedded in digital platforms.¹⁸⁵ Echoing Berardi and Lorey, Lovink contends that the development of digital infrastructures correlates with the rise of new forms of alienation, and with a banalization of precarity (a “casual precarity”).¹⁸⁶ Lovink adds that “technical media have long been socially antagonistic, undermining and isolating rather than connecting,”¹⁸⁷ and thus echoes Williams’ ideas on how – though platforms present as “companion systems” and guiding GPSes of users’ lives – they are rather “faulty” GPSes fostering isolation. While these ideas on isolation, sadness, alienation and precarity may appear as reductive or technophobic – not accounting for all the affordances of technologies, and for all the positive feelings that they may inspire or support – the normalizing, addictive and competitive structures of popular platforms do inspire anxious feelings. These feelings are in contrast with techno-utopian sentiments that date from the early days of the web, and that are, to this day, supported by Silicon Valley actors.

Evans’ choice to represent Hyper’s character as anxious, and more generally to let those feelings float through the work, ties digital systems and their programmed sociality once again to anxiety. However, in this case, the machine-human representation of Hyper reflects a posthuman condition and does not fall into a digital determinism à-la Kittler (“media determines our situation”)¹⁸⁸ in which machines are the sole beholder of power. By making Hyper into a machine-human avatar, Evans positions the sociality of *WTHW* as co-created by humans and algorithms. Hyper’s sociality is composed of both human and non-human agents who constantly impact and influence one another: an intimacy develops with and through machines. Through this, Evans emphasizes a posthumanist condition in which humans and algorithms are now inextricably linked and mutually defining: while humans are shaped by the algorithms shaping their data (and affective) landscape, algorithms are shaped and trained by humans, slowly learning through users’ clicks and evolving in responses to their interactions.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵ Lovink, *Sad by Design*, 4.

¹⁸⁶ Lovink, 4.

¹⁸⁷ Lovink, 4, 5.

¹⁸⁸ Beyes, Conrad and Martin, *Organize*, vii.

¹⁸⁹ Machine learning, and this on-going exchange and ontological fluidity between machines and humans have been widely discussed by post-humanist and media scholars such as Bucher, but also Rosi Braidotti, or Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska who explain that a divide between ‘we,’ humans and machines is no longer –and has never truly been– adequate or accurate. They write: “It is not simply the case that ‘we’—that is, autonomously existing humans—live in a complex technological environment that we can manage, control, and use. Rather, we are—physically and ontologically—part of the technological environment, and it makes no more sense to talk of us using it, than it does of it using us.” *WTHW* picks upon these notions all throughout and begins from this interest in a posthuman sensorium. Figures like Hyper, the hologram of Phillip Seymour Hoffman, Haku, and Agnes all are concerned with the development of new forms of

While Evans anthropomorphized Hyper, she did not, however, give her full faciality. Like those of a mannequin, Hyper's traits are blurred and enclosed leaving her with an impassive facelessness as she interacts with other characters (figs. 3 & 4). Hyper's representation echoes the notion of the "uncanny valley" in aesthetics of artificial intelligence. The uncanny valley refers to the idea that robots, and photorealistic computer-generated imagery, that bear close resemblance to human beings elicit uncanny or eerie feelings in humans.¹⁹⁰ Hyper's representation is significant when thinking of her as the programmer and creator of the affective infrastructure represented in *WTHW*. While she formulates anxieties and performs emotions through speech (and laughter for instance), Hyper's facelessness not only acts as a reminder of her posthuman sensorium, but also of her limits in managing and engaging with affects. As suggested by affect theorist Silvan Tomkins, the face acts as the "primary site," or the biggest surface of inscription of affects.¹⁹¹ Hyper's lack of facial expressions suggests a refusal for emotional engagement on the part of the system, an incapacity to handle and feel emotions. This, in turn, evokes a significant disconnection between platform giants and the affects their platforms are managing and commodifying. Additionally, portraits and representations of the face have also long been understood in art history as gateways or windows through one's inner world, personality, sensibility, vulnerability, or "humanity."¹⁹² By representing Hyper as a human without a full face, it could be argued that Evans locates faciality as a key site of responsibility that isn't currently met by digital systems. She draws attention to the limits of technologies and AI in reaching "humanness," and ultimately, empathy.¹⁹³

agencies, and with the movements of power and affects between machines and humans." Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska, *Life after Media: Mediation as a Vital Process* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 13. This is also reflective more largely of a turning away from anthropocentric perspectives and of an engagement with corporeality as seen within posthumanist, phenomenological, and new materialist perspectives. Paasonen, Hillis and Petit, "Introduction," 2.

¹⁹⁰ A "valley" like curve describes the phenomenon according to which: as the human-like appearance of a robot increases so does its likeability, but only up to a certain point. At that turning point, humans' appreciation of the robot drops (in the form of a valley on the curve), and uncanny feelings emerge until the robot's human-likeness increases significantly.

¹⁹¹ Silvan Tomkins, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness. Volume I. The Positive Affects* (New York: NY Springer, 2008 [1962]), 113.

¹⁹² This question on faciality, humanity and art history, as brought forward by Hyper's representation was also raised by an audience member during Evans' Rietveld Artist Talk. Evans, "Cécile B. Evans: What the Heart Wants," Video, 39:30. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSgz3SxIrf4>

¹⁹³ I equally understand this conversation through philosopher Emmanuel Levinas' notion of the *face* as a site of *responsibility* and of an ethics of face-to-face encounter. The impossibility of Hyper for a responsible *facing*, or her resistance to *inter-facing*, can be argued to formulate a critique of platform giants' denial of being invested in, or of manipulating the affective lives of their users. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2013 [1969]).

Hyper's lack of faciality, combined with her anxiety and desire for help, equally suggest that her programming task is heavy, complex, and should be reconceptualized or fragmented across different sites rather than held by few unaccountable corporate entities. The power to form digital sites and experiences could be re-distributed more widely and overseen by different actors and expert committees (i.e.: not solely by corporations who benefit from fostering addiction) concerned, for instance, with questions of mental health. Propelled by global capital, the monopoly of the Big Five (in the American model of technology),¹⁹⁴ or of state/governmental power (in the case of China's technological world for example) over the shapes and desires of technologies, and thus over sociality, is of concern.¹⁹⁵ By interrogating digital infrastructures in their relations to emotions and affects, Evans' video participates in the important work of questioning their integration as "companion systems"¹⁹⁶ of users' lives. Her work invites its visitors to re-negotiate a relationship and understanding of the structuring power and psychosocial implications of media. While it does not produce an answer, it provides (literally) a platform for thinking through these questions. A critique of technological governance over affects and of programmed sociality emerges, but it isn't prescriptive. With *WTHW*, Evans draws out empathetic questions that fracture technological hegemony and sheds light on a web of concerns at the juncture of affect and technology. In doing so, it effectively creates a public space for the contemplation of networked life, and gives insights into its affective textures. In the next section, I pursue these reflections by examining Trecartin's work *Roamie View: History Enhancements*. In this video, an overwhelming sea of data recalls the waters in which Hyper's system is drowning in. This time, however, it replicates information-overload, and it formulates an understanding of contemporary affective cognition, as well as of the performativity of networked subjects.

¹⁹⁴ The Big Five refer to Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft and Google.

¹⁹⁵ As Nesta researchers reports: "The internet finds itself dominated by two ruling narratives: the American one, where power is concentrated in the hands of just a few big players, and a Chinese model, where government surveillance appears to be the leitmotif. Between Big Tech and government control, where does this leave citizens?" Nesta as quoted by Geert Lovink, in *Sad by Design*, 5.

¹⁹⁶ Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light*, 9.

3. Drowning in a Sea of Data: Affective Cognition and Performance

Every passing second, a seemingly infinite amount of digital content accumulates in all corners of the digital landscape.¹⁹⁷ The developments, refinements, and ubiquity of information and communication technologies have induced a state of information-overload where content moves with a velocity that challenges human cognition, and simultaneously transforms how individuals trace and make knowledge. Informational-overload, or “info-glut,” has introduced a peculiar type of digital fatigue and exhaustion, which traverses and influences contemporary processes of sense-making.¹⁹⁸

Contemporary shifts in cognition have been examined by several media scholars such as Steyerl, Williams, Orit Halpern, and Mark Andrejevic – who address the drastic shifts in attitudes towards information in recent history.¹⁹⁹ Andrejevic and Steyerl explain that patterns of thinking and the nature of information have shifted as the internet introduced endless amounts of noise (content) to navigate and decipher. The “opacity” brought about by info-glut further entangles the relationship between knowledge and power.²⁰⁰ Prior to the rise of information technology, concerns were connected to the scarcity of data for knowledge-making, but now the issue lies with “extracting” information from an overwhelming “sea of data” (to use Steyerl’s terms).²⁰¹ New challenges to comprehension and meaning-making have emerged, and alongside those challenges, new methods of reading, filtering, isolating, and mapping content (or methods for coping with the noise) arise. Most of these methods rely on artificial intelligence and algorithms. Steyerl explains :

Not seeing anything intelligible is the new normal. Information is passed on as a set of signals that cannot be picked up by human senses. Contemporary perception is machinic to large degrees. The spectrum of human vision only covers a tiny part of it. Electric charges, radio waves, light pulses encoded by machines

¹⁹⁷ Bucher, “Programmed Sociality,” 9.

¹⁹⁸ Lovink, *Sad by Design*, 10.

¹⁹⁹ Andrejevic, *Infoglut*. Orit Halpern, *Beautiful Data: A History of Vision and Reason since 1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). Hito Steyerl, “A Sea of Data: Apophenia and Pattern (Mis-) Recognition,” *e-flux journal* 72 (2016). Accessed March 5, 2019. <https://www.eflux.com/journal/72/60480/a-sea-of-data-apophenia-and-pattern-mis-recognition/>. Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light*.

²⁰⁰ On that matter, Jodi Dean writes: “The lack of a capacity to know is the other side of the abundance of knowledge.” Jodi Dean, “Affect and Drive,” 93.

²⁰¹ Steyerl explains: “It’s not about the data or even access to the data. It’s about getting information from the truckloads of data ... Developers, please help! We’re drowning (not waving) in a sea of data.” Steyerl, “A Sea of Data,” 1.

for machines are zipping by at slightly subluminal speed. Seeing is superseded by calculating probabilities. Vision loses importance and is replaced by filtering, decrypting, and pattern recognition.²⁰²

As she explains, within this radically different informational landscape, new patterns of semantic engagement, filtering, and reading have emerged. Specifically, affective states of confusion become omnipresent – the politics of which are significant and will be explored in the following pages. Important to this section, is the idea that individual users have developed strategies to make sense of information in data-overload. One strategy, as Andrejevic argues, is to prioritize and use affects as ways of managing information.

As discussed in Section One and Two, internet theorists are increasingly attentive to the pre-conceptual (or pre-cognitive), and pre-discursive quality of movement and content in cyberspace. Studies of networked affect, and of the pre-cognitive context of content have complicated logocentric legacies of “the textual as *the* general framework for understanding the world”²⁰³ by focusing on materiality, corporeality, intensities and sensation in cyber-interactions.

It is within the context of semantic-overload, confusion and of networked affects that Trecartin’s work contributes to new lines of inquiry on affect in networked societies. As in Evans’ work, Trecartin documents the integration of computer-technologies as “companion systems” of networked subjects’ lives. But while Evans mostly interrogates this reality, Trecartin speculates on some of its effects, most specifically as it pertains to language, cognition, and self-definition. In the following sections, I will argue that his work *Roamie View: History Enhancements* (2010)²⁰⁴ raises key questions about the nature of content, information and patterns of cognition that occur in digital spaces, by centring affects as crucial forces. Following that, I examine how *Roamie View* exposes affect as a form of power in a post-truth and info-glut climate through the hypervisible ethos of performativity. I conclude the section on an additional and important discussion of the works’ approach to identity and representation. Although ambivalent in its politics of representation, *Roamie View* is an observant articulation of current times – and one which gives its viewers critical means to address some of the relationships between technology and affects, which the following sections turn to.

²⁰² Steyerl, “A Sea of Data,” 1.

²⁰³ Hillis, Paasonen and Petit, “Introduction,” 4.

²⁰⁴ Throughout this section (and for the sake of efficiency) this work is referred to as *Roamie View*.

Roamie View: History Enhancements

Roamie View: History Enhancements is one of the seven videos that compose Trecartin's *Any Ever*, first presented in 2010 at the Power Plant in Toronto, and produced in collaboration with artist Lizzie Fitch. This cycle of works is split in two series: a trilogy titled *Trill-ogy Comp* (2009), and a quartet; *Re'Search Wait'S* (2009-10) – of which *Roamie View* forms a part. In exhibition settings, the videos of *Any Ever* are projected within physical installations, but Trecartin refers to them as “movies” projected within “sculptural theaters.”²⁰⁵ The installations, co-created with his long-term collaborator and friend Lizzie Fitch, usually take the form of prototypical American spaces such as campgrounds, corporate offices, patios, or domestic spaces, which appear as “no-place place[s]”²⁰⁶ made uncanny through arrangements and props (figs. 19 – 21). As with Evans' work, the installations extend the aesthetics and spaces shown in the videos, and work to stage an immersive reception context.

Trecartin also shares his videos online, as several other artists working critically on the internet do. This distribution strategically increases his audience but also dislocates art-practice from its traditional elite confines. By uploading his videos to the internet, Trecartin has them exist and circulate amidst the daily flows of mass media. This problematizes conceptions of art as being “outside” or “higher” than other aspects of culture.²⁰⁷ As viewers encounter Trecartin's work within everyday cyberspace, they receive it within a new intertextuality (or inter-visibility), and may interact with it by way of commenting, sharing, reposting, and potentially appropriating or remixing the work.²⁰⁸ This section will focus on the version of *Roamie View* that is available online – which is the most widely accessible format to experience the work and is therefore most relevant to this research.

²⁰⁵ Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer and Ryan Trecartin, “Ryan Trecartin In the Studio,” *Art in America* 101, 6 (Jun.-Jul. 2013): 148.

²⁰⁶ Lehrer-Graiwer and Trecartin, 151.

²⁰⁷ It also complicates the commodification of art in interesting ways. Trecartin is able to distribute his videos online and freely, notably because his success and fame which have allowed him to continue to sell and exhibit art. He operates in specific ways – intersecting with the fashion industry for instance, or selling off-shoot products – that have made him a celebrity of sorts, a ‘brand.’ His installations, made in collaboration with Fitch, are still exhibited internationally. Ricardo E. Zulueta, *Queer Art Camp Superstar: Decoding the Cinematic Cyberworld of Ryan Trecartin* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2018), 97.

²⁰⁸ Zulueta, *Queer Art Camp Superstar*, xlii.

While the videos of *Any Ever* are officially attributed to Trecartin, collaboration is a key element of his work. Lizzie Fitch's role is crucial, and so is the work of many other collaborators (actors, performers, designers, and artists), whom Trecartin credits and entrusts "with an enormous amount of agency."²⁰⁹ As her closest collaborator, Fitch often performs, but mostly she contributes to – and sometimes takes over – the creation of video installations, props, costumes, and sets.²¹⁰ Though Trecartin directs the shoots, the actors of his movies (often his friends) are invited to improvise and contribute to dialogues and character design under Trecartin's scripted suggestions.²¹¹ Trecartin then edits the films, and creates the soundtrack and music. Because this research focuses on the online videos (rather than on the video installations made by Fitch), this research refers to *Roamie View*'s as Trecartin's work. However, the films of *Any Ever* complicate the notion of authorship, and it is crucial to credit and reiterate the involvement of Fitch and other collaborators, such as actresses Rachel Lord and Liz Rywelski.

The narrative of *Roamie View* is best described as a 28-minute-long manic adventure, winding through the neoliberal and post-Fordist worlds of freelancing, skyscraper corporate offices, four-star American hotels and suburban homes. It follows Trecartin's "gender indifferent" persona JJ Check (they/them), who has allegedly "reverted to factory presets" upon testing out too many personalities and exhausting themselves out in the series' previous video *Ready* (fig. 22). JJ's recent loss of "self," is what motivates the company of Roamie Hood (Alison Powell), joined by Liberty Lance (Liz Rywelski), and Backseat Grace (Rachel Lord), to take the road, and "roam" around in search of an 'edit' to JJ's current self (fig. 23).²¹² As the camera winds through a computer screen –passing through a road-like desktop background crammed with digital files – the theme song announces this yearning for JJ's lost self : "I roamie on your road but I don't see no JJ, so where in a view, be my city be, be my JJ." (fig. 23)

²⁰⁹ Lizzie Fitch, "Introduction," in *Ryan Trecartin: Any Ever*, ed. Kevin McGarry (New York: Skira Rizzoli; Elizabeth Dee, 2011), 9.

²¹⁰ Trecartin discusses and consider the sets to be a part of the script, and thus indirectly credits Fitch on the scripts too. In *Roamie View*, she is credited for acting (Chase Jessica), for constructing the sets, and for her collaboration on set design, sound-production (on the software FruityLoops), make-up, wardrobe, and hair, and computer assistant work (along Sergio Pastor). Liz Rywelski, and Rachel Lord are then credited for character design, Rywelski is credited for DAZ-MINE's drawings, James Tinnelly for camera work, Ibett Yanez and Silvia Cubina for casting. Trecartin is credited with writing, editing and directing. The actors credited are Ryan Trecartin, Liz Rywelski, Alison Powell, Rachel Lord, Nick Bals, Raul Cubina, Jorge Varona, Alfredo Cubina, Soleil Romano, Kenny Curran, Lizzie Fitch, Jesse Greenberg, and Lindsay Beebe.

²¹¹ This collaborative co-writing process also recalls the interactivity of the internet.

²¹² JJ is referred to as a technology, and the video thus suggests the idea of self as software, optimizable, networked, and fragmented.

JJ is introduced as “willfully” stuck in their home-office-studio-space (fig. 24). As they move between office furniture, and countless paper-documents pasted on all walls, they discuss various art objects surrounding them, and express how “cute” they all are. JJ introduces artworks they made, and some they bought off their friend Able – “the office girl.”²¹³ JJ mentions Able’s “Disabilities Act Painting”, a document on the life of an abolitionist which they misreads as “The Life and Captions and Execution of John Brown,” (exchanging the words Trial with Captions), and a “very direct – not abstract (!)” self-portrait painting pasted with personal cheques. A fan JJ made is seen blowing cash, and then JJ discusses their experimental “First ‘Old Constitution.’”²¹⁴ In that document, JJ replaced all the words “people” and “humanity” with “situations,” and the word “God” with the “Internet.”

Roamie Hood, Liberty Lance, and Backseat Grace are then seen driving to a suburban home where they meet a group of average teenage boys: Ben 1, 2, 3, and Jason (fig. 25). There, all seven of them engage in a disjointed angsty home-hang involving band practice, eating pizza, and destroying objects (fig. 26). Roamie and her friends can’t seem to help JJ find an update there, and so their excursion moves to sceneries made of stock footage imagery. TV-show-like scenes of high school intimidation, are followed by images of women happily shopping in malls, and scenes of corporate office life (figs. 27 & 28). In the third section of the video, Liberty Lance finds JJ in a hotel-room filled with ghost-like translucent plastic furniture. There, they discuss, shower, argue, and cathartically dance, as JJ gives up on finding an edit and claims that Roamie and her team should take “some time off” (figs. 29 & 30). In the final scene, a developing love affair between Able and Average Katie takes place in a modern sea-front condo. “Their ambiguous flirtation suggests that romance is simple and simplicity is romantic. In fact, they are just two bodies in a very special setting,” as curator Kevin McGarry explains.²¹⁵ As the movie

²¹³ Able’s role is an interesting critique in *Any Ever*. She/they are “a self-important careerist in charge of the Human Resources department in *Ready (Re’Search Wait’S)*” – and thus draw attention to the intersection of ability with corporate power. Zulueta, *Queer Art Camp Superstar*, 87.

²¹⁴ The first document JJ points at is actually *The Life, Trial, and Execution of Capt. John Brown* (1859). As critic Kareem Estefan explains, it is “the earliest narrative of the insurgent [slavery] abolitionist’s life, and [JJ] calls it “super cute”: “Um, it’s about how there once was a time where cute people had to do very real things to make their situation work out.” In misreading *Trial* as *Caption*, and in calling it cute, JJ creates echoes to computer programming (and their execution), rather than to legal systems, and they ridicule history. Estefan suggests that it “signals the absence, in a digital environment characterized by identity and history ‘enhancement,’ of the gravity and finitude of law.” Kareem Estefan, “A Cute Idea,” *The New Inquiry*, February 7, 2014. <https://thenewinquiry.com/a-cute-idea/>.

²¹⁵ Kevin McGarry, “Roamie View: History Enhancements,” in *Electronic Arts Intermix*, accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.eai.org/titles/roamie-view-history-enhancement#terms>.

ends, a song on the “vain” quest for selfhood and on the idea self as application rather than essence is sung by a computer-generated voice. The limits of self and identity are drawn by the lyrics “if I/is you/is all/and personal now/I have a news flash for you/everyone shares a katie/you’re not the only sky to touch that star,” and work to highlight the importance of place, structure, and context (history) over the importance of self.

Trecartin’s characters are, in sum, most definitely “companions” to digital systems. There is no space in *Roamie View* outside of their companionship; rather Trecartin explores how networked subjects cope with these unavoidable, and perhaps playful or pleasurable, relationships to digital systems. If *Roamie View* presents an idea of self as media, it further works through stereotypical representations that recall reality-television, video games, and horror movies.²¹⁶ The work plays with the tropes of popular culture and engages with their motifs in oversaturated, carnivalesque, satirical, and grotesque ways. Filled with stock imagery, slang (“cute,” “omg!”), over-the-top and explosive fashion styles, and layered popular culture references (a “Bratfest at Tiffany’s” painting has JJ exclaim “I get it!”), the films also come to challenge consumerism, notions of “good and bad taste,” as well as alleged boundaries between ‘high’ or ‘low’ art, and are thus situated within the legacy of pop art, drag and Camp. This is supplemented by the frenetic rhythm of the video which conjures up the speed of late capitalism and of the internet. In discussing the aesthetic of Trecartin’s films, Lisa Åkervall identifies it as a “medium culture” aesthetic, which encompasses an “hybridization and convergence of different cultural forms.”²¹⁷

The technical quality of the shots and the editing play into this “medium culture” convergence, evoking a crafty, DIY, and amateur quality. Unlike Evans’ seductive computer-generated imagery and HD footage, Trecartin’s work is deliberately low-tech and made with widely accessible home-camera devices and softwares. As the artist explains, the cycle of *Any Ever* was shot entirely with a small Canon camera, the audio was recorded directly on the camera’s microphone, and the editing done in iMovie.²¹⁸ The resulting DIY home-video aesthetic emerges, and is imbued with a certain nostalgia that recalls the early days of video and

²¹⁶ For instance, shots of women running and screaming with blood on their shirts recall horror movie scenes, and the shots of Roamie driving with Liberty and Backseat Grace echo the quest-feeling of videogames.

²¹⁷ Lisa Åkervall, “Networked Selves: Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch’s Post-cinematic Aesthetics,” *Screen* 57 (1, 2016): 36.

²¹⁸ Zulueta, *Queer Art Camp Superstar*, xlii.

“new media” art, brought about by the arrival of portable camera devices such as the Sony Portapak.²¹⁹

The abstracted narrative is, in sum, hard to make up, and conceptually charged. Moving through a multiplicity of references, and a cacophony of voices and images – it resists categorization and quickly-formulated interpretations, and exemplifies a fragmented and rapid hyperlink logic. Rather than driving viewers from point A to point B, the work is “packed with numerous interconnected concepts” that create impressions on current day experiences of the techno-socio-political landscape.²²⁰ While the script and editing are carefully crafted and meaning does emerge from Trecartin’s tight-net of abstractions, the first (and subsequent few) experience of the work are rather corporeal and visceral.²²¹

In the following section I examine how *Roamie View* replicates a current digital condition of information-overload, and how its visceral experience of an attack on the senses promotes an understanding of cognition as “affective.” I argue that his oversaturated videos hyperbolize new conditions surrounding language and information and that they centre the body and affects as crucial drivers of cognition. To do so, I attend to the works’ aesthetics, sound, editing, as well as to its attitude to language (through script and dialogue).

Information-Overload, Language, and Affective Impulses

Contemporary attitudes towards language and information, a state of information-overload and the fatigue that ensues from interpretation efforts in a whirlwind of content, are issues vividly presented across *Roamie View*. The frenetic and over-saturated editing and aesthetics of *Roamie View* replicate the overload and speed of information online, and they stand as Trecartin’s

²¹⁹ In ways, Trecartin’s moving images are the cinematic version of Steyerl’s “poor images,” and they convey his interest in ‘low quality’ content, and in remixing the digital DIY “trash” that piles up in the mediascapes. While Trecartin’s films put forward scenarios and stereotypes that recall mainstream popular culture, their aesthetic pushes against what Steyerl calls the “class society of appearance”—and which refers to the intersection of online visibility with class, and to the increased visibility of audio-visual production made by higher social classes (supported by conservative systems of “national culture, capitalist studio production, the cult of mostly male genius”). On poor images Steyerl writes: “Poor images are the contemporary Wretched of the Screen, the debris of audiovisual production, the trash that washes up on the digital economies’ shores.” Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” in *e-flux 10* (2009), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>

²²⁰ Zulueta, *Queer Art Camp Superstar*, xiv.

²²¹ As Kevin McGarry explains, Trecartin “builds scenes that risk sweeping away his audiences, challenging them to “surf” and ride out moments of meaning as they occur.” McGarry, “Worlds Apart,” 111.

signature style. In his videos, linearity and clarity are bypassed in favour of stacked trajectories that unfold with the velocity of contemporary screen-culture and echo the fractured, fleeting, and abundant feeds of Snapchat or Instagram. Fast-pace, abstracted, and jarring dialogues are accompanied by loud music and audio effects as multiple superimposed frames merge and cut across the screen. As layers of altered sound and images accumulate, viewers are bombarded with visual and audio stimuli from all directions.

The shots are aesthetically grainy, shaky, and contrasted. As media art researcher Ricardo E. Zulueta notes, they involve “multiple camera angles, extreme close-ups, long shots, partial views, high and low angle shots, all crosscut in a disjointed yet unifying manner.”²²² Images are then warped, and duplicated, filled with “abrupt stylistic shifts,” and interrupted by pieces of found footage or text, that move simultaneously to dialogues, events, and actions.²²³ The frantic rhythm, movement, and angles of the shots, as well as their digital alterations in post-production, make for a visceral experience of speed and noise. The soundtrack then moves between “cubistically deformed artifacts of pop songs,” club beats, ambient synths and lo-fi drum-machine loops.²²⁴ Music is then layered with the accelerated and high-pitch chipmunk-like voices of the characters, as well as with sounds of screams, or of an electronic drill turning into nothing. The accumulative combine of sounds and visuals create a “radical simultaneity” that recalls information-overload and the dynamism of UGC platforms.²²⁵

This is supplemented by the exploded timeline and the multilinear script and dialogues of Trecartin’s video, which equally replicate info-glut and the saturation of high-speed communication culture. The encounters between characters, their deeds and motives, are flooded with so much information and detail, that confusion prevails over interpretation, and rational cognition is rendered partial. Alongside abstracted dialogues, Trecartin uses formal mechanisms of utterance such as accents, stutter, tone, volume, and pitch-alterations that further the maximalist and noisy overload aesthetic. For curator Thomas Miessgang, here also quoting David Toop’s *Ocean of Sound*, the immersive soundscapes of Trecartin’s videos “evade direct cognitive interpretation and instead draw the listener ‘into the disturbing, chaotic undertow of the

²²² Zulueta, *Queer Art Camp Superstar*, xxxvii.

²²³ Thomas Miessgang, “Walking in and out of Clarity,” in *Site Visit. Lizzie Fitch/Ryan Trecartin*, ed. Ellen Blumenstein (London: Koenig; Berlin: KW Institute for Contemporary Art, 2015), 131.

²²⁴ Miessgang, “Walking in and out of Clarity,” 131.

²²⁵ Miessgang, 129.

environment.”²²⁶ As per Miessgang notes; in Trecartin’s works viewers are submerged and engulfed by an “ocean of sound,” but also a storm of images.²²⁷ Because of the radical simultaneity of signs and their abstractions, a collapse or demolition of semantic meaning units occurs. Delivered meanings are destabilized, and the video “leaves the impression of being whirled about in an unstable realm of existence.”²²⁸ This, in sum, comes to represent the experience of disjointed cognition on the internet, and the anxiety of being faced-with the web’s overwhelming depths. “You walk in and out of clarity,” as Trecartin explains.²²⁹ New media art historian Lauren Cornell, engages with this aspect of Trecartin’s style: “Trecartin visualizes this overload, challenging viewers to become active editors and curators [or selective agents] who can ‘pick up and ride’ the film at various points and then jump off. This is how we take in information today: in parts, not in one clean read.”²³⁰

Trecartin replicates this quality of contemporary cognition as it occurs in cyberspace in the space of his films: inevitably partial, selective, fractured, and rapid. The (relative) opacity of his fast-pace and non-linear editing recalls the velocity, and overwhelming quality of disparate information as presented on the internet – echoing algorithms that present users with information that move from an intimate and moving confession, to hilarious memes, violent news articles, a sneaker advertisement and a reminder of their friend’s birthday – all within the space of a two second-scroll.²³¹ As media art historian Mikhel Proulx argues:

The unforgiving rapidity of Trecartin’s videos echoes the hyper-real-time tempo of the Internet, and moreover works to preserve the psychological agitation of participating in its flow. [...] Like the cyberflâneur, he [Trecartin] embodies the real-time flow of the Net, but he sets out to release its floodgates of information. These are not discreet media-objects, but a deluge of cyberflow.²³²

²²⁶ Miessgang, 130.

²²⁷ Miessgang, 130.

²²⁸ Miessgang, 131.

²²⁹ Ryan Trecartin quoted by Miessgang, “Walking in and out of Clarity,” 130.

²³⁰ Cornell adds : “Trecartin chooses not to critique our world as it is, instead he wants to know more about the things we are ashamed of, the addictions we wish didn’t have, our repressed desires, and ways our thought processes are evolving – he wants to locate and grow these.” Lauren Cornell, “Medium Living,” in *Ryan Trecartin: Any Ever*, ed. Kevin McGarry (New York: Skira Rizzoli; Elizabeth Dee, 2011), 57.

²³¹ Early in the video for instance, Liberty Lance is driving with Roamie Hood (who also claims to be driving) and Backseat Grace. All are seemingly on separate flip phones with JJ. As they chat, loud invasive music plays, the frame multiplies, and words like “yet” and “best shot” interrupt the screen. Within seconds they claim “We’re in the past now cause I’m practicing a new concert called History Enhancement / Yeah I’m completely yes / Grace shut the fuck up / My name’s Grace and Liberty picked me up when I was searching for a band / I love redistributing myself to people who haven’t learned about me yet / I’ve got some DIY monetary participation inflation.” Ryan Trecartin, “*Roamie View: History Enhancements.*” Video, 28:23, colour, sound. 2010. Accessed March 9, 2019. <https://vimeo.com/24988447>.

²³² Proulx, “The Progress of Ambiguity,” 41.

Roamie View's speed, overload and "deluge of cyberflow," is supplemented by attitude to language that emphasize shifts in the nature of cognition. The whirlwind of sentences that compose the dialogues of *Roamie View* recall digital slang, "txt-speak," or a remix of twitter hashtags in both opaque and resonant ways. Words and sentences are uttered by characters but often act more as cultural and aesthetic motifs, or as "found language," than as semantic products.

Words and their significations are also destabilized in other ways. Sentences and words are pronounced and repeated over and over, and with their repetition, language moves from being a carrier of meaning to being merely sound. As words begin to spin and loop back they reveal themselves as shells that have been emptied of meaning.²³³ While eating pizza for instance, Grace repeats: "I just got to be me," "this is my world, you're just eating it," "I just got to be me, I just got to be me!" While this moment reveals Trecartin's interest for individualism, narcissism, and the loss of self, it also draws attention to his post-structuralist, and queer perspective on language, and non-fixity. Linda Norden also emphasizes this quality of the work: "Trecartin's words summon topical vocabulary only to decouple themselves from the referential associations – creatively, but also critically. [...] Like the admen and the linguists and Gertrude Stein a while back, Trecartin knows that repetition is a way to liberate conventional language from its moorings."²³⁴ These deconstructivist impulses – which I argue emphasize shifts in the nature of cognition – are evident in previous videos too. As argued by Norden, already in earlier works like *Wayne's World* (2003), amidst a similar whirlwind of pronouncements, Trecartin asks: "What what what what does it mean mean mean mean? What's the significance?"²³⁵

Deconstruction and linguistic repetition are also coupled with a poetic positioning of words and their function within sentences. Like the "medium culture" of its aesthetics, however, poetics in *Roamie View* are derived from popular vernacular, where familial language is made alien and interrogated through repetition and metaphors. On that topic, Cornell explains that the characters' "self-styled words, like the recombinant cast, also feel like orphan fragments – lifted

²³³ This is also a result of constant communication in participatory digital culture. As expressed by Dean, the impulse to participate in digital culture (to add, respond, or talk back), is felt as an obligation. Users are not only allowed to respond but "positively enjoined to" by the platform. Dean, "Affect and Drive," 93.

²³⁴ Linda Norden, "When the Rainbow is an Option," in *Ryan Trecartin: Any Ever*, ed. Kevin McGarry (New York: Skira Rizzoli; Elizabeth Dee, 2011), 12-13.

²³⁵ Norden, "When the Rainbow is an Option," 13.

out of everyday parlance, ontologically severed, and imbued with new meanings.”²³⁶ As she points out, the work is an alienating accumulation of metaphorical substitutions where verbs have become nouns, which have become adjectives, which have become adverbs.²³⁷ The cast of characters of *Roamie View* are symbolically named after objects, places, social positions, and cultural phenomena (i.e. JJ, Liberty Lance, Roamie Hood, BackSeat Grace, Ben 1, Ben 2, Ben 3, Jason, Daz Mine, Average Katie, Free Lance, John Listens, Chase Jessica, Phone, SodaPop, Avondale). While poetics like these complicate linear engagement, they also account for how networked life may have induced ontological slips where everything is now “made of the same stuff,”²³⁸ or for how it has become increasingly difficult to decipher and think through semantic processes.²³⁹ In that sense, the artist explains that he likes to make references “as muddy as possible, like digested information, second-hand, [and] run-through the psychological mud to emerge in a way that is foreign to itself, to create a reflection of culture.”²⁴⁰

This more largely fosters an aesthetic of overload and noise, which allows *Roamie View* to reflect and to engage with how “noise is a huge issue”²⁴¹ of our time. Sense-making strategies to cope with informational-noise and to decipher/isolate signal (information) are culturally, epistemologically, and politically significant. Not only are these important because of their relation to contemporary forms of cognition but also, with them, a new politics of information accessibility emerged. While early understanding of the internet situated it as a democratizing tool which rendered information accessible, the tools for understanding information are not. If accessibility to information increased with the internet (in differentiated and uneven ways),²⁴² accessibility to knowledge did not. Lots of useful archives, databases and data analysis tools (or

²³⁶ Cornell, “Medium Living,” 57.

²³⁷ Estefan, “A Cute Idea.”

²³⁸ Michael Wang, “Made of the Same Stuff: Ryan Trecartin’s Art of Transformation,” in *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Lauren Cornell and Ed Halter (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 401-412.

²³⁹ These metaphors also distort the notion of identity and subjectivity as self-determined. By allowing characters to symbolically stand in the place of a concepts such as Freelance or Sodapop, or by attaching qualities like Listen or Chase, Trecartin interrogates the fabric of contemporary identity; calling into question the processes of consumption, appropriation, and performance for self-definition.

²⁴⁰ Ryan Trecartin, “Ryan Trecartin Interview: The Safe Space of Movies,” interview at Astrup Fearnley Museet in Oslo, NOR. Produced by Louisiana Channel Youtube/Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, DNK. May 1, 2018. Video, 16:28. www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdmItKVe2rU&t=96s.

²⁴¹ Steyerl, “A Sea of Data,” 1.

²⁴² For example, several Arctic Indigenous communities in Canada have very limited access to the internet or to broadband. Erin Yunes, “Arctic Cultural (Mis)Representation,” in *PUBLIC 54: Indigenous Art: New Media and the Digital*, ed. by Heather Igloliorte, Julie Nagam and Carla Taunton (Winter 2016): 98-103.

ways to make sense of digital noise) are still mostly available to those working within large institutions or corporations.²⁴³ This has thus allowed “new forms of control” of information to emerge and it has impacted the relationship between information, knowledge and power.²⁴⁴ These politics are embedded within Trecartin’s work – which offers centre stage to contemporary semantic alienation.

The hollowed-out condition of contemporary information, as emphasized in *Roamie View*, could also be understood in relation to the post-truth climate, and to what Andrejevic and Jodi Dean refer to as “the demise or decline of symbolic efficiency.”²⁴⁵ In her essay on “Affect and Drive,” Dean discusses the relationship between contemporary technologies and a “demise of symbolic efficiency.” According to her, this demise is connected to the post-truth climate and to contemporary attitudes towards (impossible) expertise.²⁴⁶ Dean ties this decline to information-overload, but also the rise of amateur-journalism and the infinite “ability to falsify.”²⁴⁷ With the plurality and dissemination of diverging and contradictory accounts on literally everything, users would have come to understand the potentially constructed quality of information and its varying “degree of reliability.”²⁴⁸ As Andrejevic explains, the post-truth climate can also be understood as a “dominant attitude of savvy mistrust and suspicion towards discourse,”²⁴⁹ which would have shifted user-relationships to knowledge and cognition.²⁵⁰ This is made clear in Trecartin’s work where the space of conversation seems to have shifted from one of discursive exchange to one of affective performance and visceral exchanges. Characters do

²⁴³ Certain sense-making strategies are only accessible to certain portions of the population if you think, for instance, of the gatekeeping of databases privately held by governmental agencies like the NSA, institutions like universities, or corporate entities. Andrejevic, *Information-Glut*, 18.

²⁴⁴ Andrejevic, *Infoglut*, backcover.

²⁴⁵ Dean, “Affect and Drive,” 93. Andrejevic, *Infoglut*, 14.

²⁴⁶ Dean, 93.

²⁴⁷ Dean, 93.

²⁴⁸ Dean, 93. Andrejevic, *Infoglut*, 12.

²⁴⁹ Andrejevic, 14.

²⁵⁰ More largely interrelated and co-constitutive of the post-truth climate, the decline of symbolic efficiency could also be understood as tied to a poststructuralist and postmodernist climate – which also inform Trecartin’s videos by way of his deconstructivist attitudes to language and identity. The mistrust towards discourse and ideology inspired by deconstructivists and (later) postmodernist attitudes and their dismantling of dominant narratives since the 1960s, has also contributed to compromising symbolic efficiency. Moving further back in time, this shift towards discourse and symbolic efficiency could also be tied back to the rise of secularism and modernism in Europe and to the collapse of “inherited cultural jigs that imposed a certain coherence (for better or for worse) in individual lives.” Matthew Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2015) quoted by James Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light* (Cambridge, UK; NY, USA : Cambridge University Press, 2018), 21.

not seem to care about rational discourse, or rather they seem to have freed discourse from logic and notions of reliability.

The idea of a demise in symbolic efficiency is understood by Andrejevic and Dean as primarily related to the post-truth climate. It could also, however, be understood as a result of information-overload.²⁵¹ Just as in *Roamie View*, the overabundant number of signs and symbols that float around users and attack them from all angles, impedes on their capacities to interpret them, and decreases their urge to decode them. Symbols would lose their efficiency when coming at users with too much velocity: they would become harder to interpret, and meaning would, at least temporarily, escape them.²⁵² This is not to claim that scarcity makes things “meaningful,” or that language is now “emptied out,” but rather that the abundance and speed of information online complicate semantic engagement for the user. As Proulx further claims:

Though bloated with details, it [Trecartin’s work] leaves its viewers with little information (as opposed to data) to construct anything resembling a cohesive storyline. This is a truncated narratology that exaggerates the logic of digital speed: an artificial *attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder* that replicates the rapidity of cultural consumption in the digital age.²⁵³

Indeed the detail-overload, noise, and deconstruction found in Trecartin’s *Roamie View*, make it difficult to cognize its symbols rationally. The video seems rather to push forward a new situation surrounding information and language, cognition and interpretation. Its carnivalesque overload, and agitation rather hyperbolize a new cognitive experience grounded in corporeality and affects.

In interviews, Trecartin has expressed that, while most critics read his work as concerned with technology and social media, he is more broadly interested in language, and in the ways it has evolved and is currently being used. He argues that with technological developments, individuals have become increasingly aware of “how body language is a collaborator of the spoken word,”²⁵⁴ or of, for instance, their physical negotiation of space in front of cameras. He adds: “language has always been the thing that inspires me the most, [...] the rhetoric around

²⁵¹ This could also be traced further back to the emergence of the printing press around 1440, and to the resulting proliferation of information and texts.

²⁵² To nuance this point, it must be mentioned that poststructuralists and semiologists like Ferdinand Saussure, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Derrida have demonstrated that symbols do not and have never possessed their signifiers. Rather, symbols enter situated moments of signifying across the variables of time and space (histories, cultures), and across shifting intertextualities.

²⁵³ Mikhel Proulx, “The Progress of Ambiguity: Uncertain Imagery in Digital Culture” (MA thesis, Concordia University, 2013), 40.

²⁵⁴ Ryan Trecartin, “Ryan Trecartin Interview,” Video, 14:46.

things and the language that is used to occupy a sensation, a ‘vibe’ [feeling], or a premise.”²⁵⁵ In that sense, Trecartin’s work can be understood as a critical interrogation of language today, both in the ways it has been impacted by technology, but also in the ways it is corporeal, affective, and may communicate abstracted feelings.

For Mark Andrejevic, contemporary cognition is increasingly affective as a result of technological developments and info-glut. As he explains, networked societies have created structures that appeals to users’ affects before appealing to their discursive resources (thus orientating the act of interpretation within a preconceptual apparatus). Put otherwise, because of the overwhelming velocity of information online, a (re)turn to affective, gut-driven, or pre-linguistic engagement would prevail over discursive analysis (or simply take a role larger than before). Affective drives would thus come to play an increasingly central role in the movement and circulation of users and content online. He explains:

The significance of emotion, affect, and sentiment, are, furthermore, foregrounded by the demise of symbolic efficiency insofar as *they come to represent cognitive shortcuts through the deadlock of representation* [...] in the recent literature on decision-making, emotional responses are portrayed as shorthand summaries of learned preferences that allow information to be winnowed down subconsciously. These visceral shortcuts are portrayed as much more efficient than rational forms of cognition and comprehension. *Emotional responses become the subject of renewed interest in the context of information overload both as a means of managing information and consequently as an avenue of influence.*²⁵⁶

If, as suggested by Andrejevic, emotions and affects can be thought of as “decision-making drivers – means of cutting through the clutter,”²⁵⁷ they can be also understood as increasingly central to contemporary sense-making.²⁵⁸ While affect has always been embedded within cognition and interpretation (and this thesis’ theoretical framework rejects binary divisions

²⁵⁵ Ryan Trecartin, “Ryan Trecartin Interview,” Video, 6:18. In another interview, he adds: “I just get these flashes. The best way to explain them is ‘vibe.’ You know how a lot of people will talk now and they’ll sort of just ‘sculpt out a space’ but they don’t really say anything, but you sort of understand what they’re saying just because people are good about reading ‘vibes’ now. But then when you really look at it you’re kind of like: “What the hell that person did not say anything!” I feel like I get chunks of those that go through my head and then they start to turn into, kind of like, ‘rythmatic’ like music. And then I start to see them, and instead of it being one person it starts to become spread out across different bodies.” Ryan Trecartin, “Pew Fellowships in the Arts: Ryan Trecartin,” Interview at Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, Philadelphia, US, 2009. Video, 0:21. Accessed May 1, 2020. <https://www.pewcenterarts.org/people/ryan-trecartin>.

²⁵⁶ Andrejevic, *Info-Glut*, 15 (my emphasis).

²⁵⁷ Andrejevic, 15.

²⁵⁸ Echoing Andrejevic, James Williams writes that technologies, or users’ companion systems: “privilege our impulses over our intentions.” He adds that technologies are “designed to exploit our psychological vulnerabilities” and “direct us toward goals that may or may not align with our own.” James Williams, “Extracts from Stand Out of Our Light,” *The Nine Dots Prize*, May 30, 2017. <https://ninedotsprize.org/extracts-stand-light-freedom-persuasion-attention-economy/>

between reason and emotions), the current technological situation would have heightened this reality.²⁵⁹

For Miessgang, Trecartin's work manifests "a carnivalistic spectacle of critical affirmation of the real, under conditions of constant overtaxing of the senses."²⁶⁰

I further argue that Trecartin's multisensorial work also makes visible the centrality of affects for contemporary cognition. The visceral attack on the senses felt in the video, and the resulting "psychological agitation,"²⁶¹ fractures common understandings of cognition as rational and regrounds it in an abstracted, affective, and corporeal system of forces and intensities. The overloaded and abstracted dialogues he creates out of everyday parlance, coupled with the intensity of its aesthetic, and the exuberance and dramatic tones of his characters all play a part in setting up an experience of cognition departing from semantics, and shaped instead by ungraspable intensities. Trecartin's work seems to centre affective forces amidst the heavy flows of information. His work recognizes the importance of conceptualizing movement and analysis as impacted by affective attachments as much as by connotative and denotative ones. Again, while *Roamie View*'s characters and trajectories have significance, its editing and script encourage viewers to move away from linear logic and semantic cognition to engage with the film as a chaotic, multi-perspectival, and visceral experience that reiterates affects as central to cognition.

Again, the first and primary experience of the work comes across as highly visceral, gut-driven and embodied. As Trecartin explains, in the first more "visceral" experience of the work viewers are "navigating it more kinetically, or musically"²⁶² as the videos are "rife with semiotic instability."²⁶³ In that sense, they recall the anti-rational postures and exuberance of dadaist cabarets, and of surrealist's universe. Sensory overload and affects of confusion run high in

²⁵⁹ This can also be further, and more broadly, understood when thinking about the limits of knowability as that which can be sensed and perceived – of knowing as a form of sentience. Citing Kant, Denise Ferreira Da Silva relays that the limits of knowledge are "that which in things—now objects—is available to the senses (movements and alterations)." Cognition is seen as contingent on what one can discern and perceive. Denise Ferreira Da Silva, "1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value," in *e-flux journal* 79 (2017), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94686/1-life-0-blackness-or-on-matter-beyond-the-equation-of-value/>

²⁶⁰ Miessgang further describes it as: "A multisensory post dramatic theater, between animation and the forgetting of being – between hyperreality and the compulsion to repeat, between Marx (brothers) and Coca-Cola." Miessgang, "Walking in and out of Clarity," 133.

²⁶¹ Proulx, "The Progress of Ambiguity," 41.

²⁶² Ryan Trecartin, "Ryan Trecartin Interview," Video, 28:03.

²⁶³ Zulueta, *Queer Art Camp Superstar*, xiv.

Roamie View, but the film is not meaningless. Rather, it functions semantically like a poem; “where each word maintains in itself, all the possibilities of perception.”²⁶⁴ In fact, Trecartin wishes for his film to be read like poems, and for viewers to revisit them; to “dive down” into their abstractions, and make sense of them of their language poetically, through their own position and experience.²⁶⁵ In the next section, I examine the video as it illustrates shifting relationships between individuals, and contemporary performativity.

The Pressure to Perform

Information-overload can create a flattening of content whereby data becomes, even if only temporarily, homogenous, amorphous, and difficult to parse. This flattening, coupled with the understanding that cognition is increasingly managed or influenced by affects, entertains a relationship to performativity identifiable in *Roamie View* – and to which the following section attends.

In studies of online power dynamics and virality, scholars refer to digital economies and data-overload (and flattening) has having created an economy of attention, in which; while information has become abundant, attention has become a “scarce resource.”²⁶⁶ In the attention economy, users or marketers who wish for their content (products but also narratives, ideas, values and affects) to be engaged with, must work for it to “stand out” of the mass.²⁶⁷ To attract attention, and potentially gain visibility/traction/online power, users and corporate entities may

²⁶⁴ Here I use Québécois poet Marie Uguay’s discussion of poetry books : La poésie est arrivée. Quiconque en éprouve vraiment le plaisir ne peut oublier sa très profonde exigence. Elle est le livre parfait auquel on aspire toujours. Celui qu'aucune lecture ne pourrait épuiser et aucune histoire résumer. Celui dont la densité de diamant puise à toutes les sources de la vie tel qu'aucune mort ne peut l'atteindre. Et chaque mot maintient en lui toutes les possibilités de perception. Marie Uguay, *Poèmes* (Montréal: Boréal Compact, 2005), Backcover (my translation).

²⁶⁵ Ryan Trecartin, “Ryan Trecartin Interview,” Video, 28:20.

²⁶⁶ Herbert A. Simon, “Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World” in *Computers, Communication, and the Public Interest*, ed. Martin Greenberger (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 40-41.

²⁶⁷ According to media theorist James Williams, algorithmic networks manage attention rather than information (which nonetheless remains discursively filtered, classified and archived in important and significant ways), as attention is the marketable metric for digital companies. If an information package goes viral (or simply circulate lots) it is because it has harnessed attention and thus capital for digital corporations. Online platforms such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are defined by the attention regime. As human cognitive capacities struggle at managing high-flux of information and stimuli, attention is challenged and becomes crucial to digital dynamics. For Williams, with information-overload, attention, along with the act and labour of filtering, are sites of scarcity and central notions of late capitalism. Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light*, 13.

have recourse to a variety of tools or tactics. Some of these can be uncovered by examining studies in digital marketing and advertising; imitating the language and aesthetics of successful advertising could be a strategy, while breaking with it could be another. In her study of online recognition and appearance, Steyerl writes of the emergence of algorithms filtering between signal and noise in images. She explains that by acting as filtering devices, algorithms become crucial political actors that shape the distribution of contemporary visibility and invisibility, or of attention – and claims that this distribution occurs unevenly across the axis of race, gender and class. The politics of noise/signal dividers are crucial in a state of info-glut as they shape cultural values, and the distribution of online traction and power, or what Steyerl identifies as the visible/invisible and the heard/unheard.

Andrejevic’s conclusions on affects as the driving forces of online circulation could tangentially suggest an understanding of the ‘traction of content’ as ruled, not only by an economy of attention, but also by an economy of sensibility, or by an “affective economy.”²⁶⁸ If the distribution of visibility and attention online is traced along the lines of noise vs. signal, it could further be conceptualized along the lines of ‘sensed’ and ‘ignored.’²⁶⁹ Since information-overload floods cognitive capacities, and creates at once an attack on and a numbing of the senses (also referred to as online desensitization), content high in affects, or with the “right” type

²⁶⁸ This echoes Sara Ahmed’s theorization of “affective economies,” in which she discusses how emotions attach to bodies and objects (creating ‘adherence’ and ‘coherence’ in the social field), and accumulate various value as a result of history. Using economics as an analogy emphasizes both the ways in which emotions “circulate and are distributed across a social as well as psychic field,” and how they are involved in “relationships of difference and displacement without positive value.” She writes: “emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation.” She adds that signs can “increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more they circulate, the more affective they become, and the more they appear to “contain” affect.” When applied to online contexts, this theorization can suggest that signs with high online circulation (visibility, attention) may appear as increasingly affective. Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 79 (22, 2, 2004): 119-120.

²⁶⁹ The uneven distribution of visibility and recognition across axes of race, gender and class, predates however algorithmic oppression and moves well beyond digital infrastructures. As Steyerl indicates, this further relates to Jacques Rancière’s theorization of politics in *La Mésentente*, and to the notions he developed of the writing of speech (as noise) from voice (as signal) established on the basis of a distinction between “citizens and rabble” in the Greek polis. Historically traced along the lines of colonialism, slavery, sexism, and racism, this separation of noise from signal was one of the crucial ways to behold epistemological power for the ruling class (“sounds produced by affluent male locals were defined as speech, whereas women, children, slaves, and foreigners were assumed to produce garbled noise. [...] a kind of political spam filter.”) For Steyerl, “pattern recognition resonates with the wider question of political recognition,” and algorithms’ involvement in the separation of noise from speech (signal) makes them a major political agent. Steyerl, “A Sea of Data,” 1.

of affects, might have better chances at receiving attention.²⁷⁰ For that reason, news media outlet tend to create sensationalist or polarizing content in the hope that it crosses users' threshold of visibility/sensation, and that it is engaged with. Between "sensed" and 'ignored,' a complicated threshold of affective intensity would lie and influence not only the distribution of attention, but also the distribution of empathy. In other words, as users' senses are bombarded with sensory impulses online, they must distribute not only their attention but also their sensibility.

Based on Andrejevic's conclusion on the way users cut through the clutter aided by affective intensities, it follows that, in order to gain online traction, both users and corporations tend to use affects, and to strategically resort to "affective performativity." This interestingly, in an unanticipated way, results from content flattening and online desensitization which induce a pressure (and almost an imperative) to perform or exaggerate affects and sentiments online.

The term and notion of 'performativity' has acquired a plurality of meaning across time and history. Its theorization originates in philosophies of language, more specifically with deconstruction and post-structuralism, but it has been developed in several disciplines ranging from queer studies, to performance studies, digital studies, and art theory, to name a few.²⁷¹ Performativity as it is used across this thesis, refers to the fragmented and fluid performance of self (rather than solely gender) in daily life through performative gestures and acts. While based on Judith Butler's work on the performance of gender in everyday life (and on Jacques Derrida

²⁷⁰ US President Donald Trump's sensational and affectively-charged tweets come up again as an example of content that currently harnesses a lot of attention.

²⁷¹ Coined by the philosopher of language John L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* (1955), 'performative' (derived from 'perform') originally referred to the capacity of certain words and locutions to bring about action, "do" things, and produce the event they designate. Austin's theory of performative language was then developed into "speech-act" theory by linguist John Searle, and complemented by deconstruction philosopher Jacques Derrida in "Signature-Event-Context" (1971). In this essay, Derrida extended the performative capacity of utterances to all linguistic and nonlinguistic signs (for Derrida everything is text; "there is no outside-text"), and stressed the citational ("iterability") dimension of performativity (signs are recognizable, reproducible, and therefore cited and reiterated across a multiplicity of contexts). Following Derrida, queer theorist and philosopher Judith Butler suggested an embodied approach to sign and signification, and explored "the various ways a body shows or produces its cultural signification" to develop a queer theory of *gender performativity*. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" (1988), Butler refers to performativity to describe gender, and identity, as constructed on-goingly through performative gestures and acts – themselves coded from within culture. By exploring the constitution of gender through performative acts, Butler reveals its fluidity, and the idea that a "true" or "essential" gender identity is a fiction ("gender reality is created through sustained social performances"). Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris : Les ditions de Minuit, 1967), 227 (my translation). Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," *Theatre Journal* 40, 4 (1988): 528. Tawny Andersen, "Performativity as Critical Praxis: J.L Austin, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, Catherine Malabou, c. 1955-2014," (PhD diss., McGill University, 2017).

and John L. Austin’s work on performative language), I also turn to the framework of performance studies to understand “performativity” as imbued with theatricality. For the purposes of this study, performativity refers the presentation and affirmation of self (online and offline) through acts and gestures, but also to the desire for that presentation to be convincing, and thus, while nuanced, filled with emotional or affective intensity. I also refer to digital studies of performativity and of the online self, in which, scholars such as Rob Cover explain that identities are constructed and produced performatively on social networking sites, and that technology produces “ruptures in how identity is performed; not through an idea of virtuality or identity fluidity, as such, but through the complexification of subjectivity and selfhood that results from the practices of recording, interacting, creating, engaging, globalizing, mobilizing, and archiving our selves.”²⁷² Online affective performativity is also connected to the ways in which feelings and sentiments have become objects of technological design – with for instance the use of emojis which map a relatively disambiguous cartography of emotions. The interface of social media and their emojis enjoin users to perform affects online, and to attach them to audio-visual content in a plurality of ways.²⁷³

In the digital economy of attention, I argue that an exaggerated affective performativity has been naturalized and normalized to the point of crystallizing into an ethos or zeitgeist felt on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok or Snapchat. This ethos could be defined as one of performative subjects where users are compelled to augment the affective intensities of their participation to cross the threshold of invisibility/visibility, sensed/ignored. Again, performing affects online or attaching affective intensities to digital content may be understood as a way to create a signal in a flooded noisy pool of data. Users would heighten the affective intensities of their digital participation to ensure they are seen and heard, that their presence and content are recognized – online and off.

The advent of this ethos is, however, more than a result of hypermediated lives on digital infrastructures. Performativity, as amplified and visible in *Roamie View*, is more largely

²⁷² Studies of the selfie in visual culture and media studies, have for instance revealed it as performative proclamation of identity, that reads as “this is me now (along with the aesthetics and symbolic associations present in this picture and caption).” Rob Cover, *Digital Identities: Creating and Communicating the Online Self* (Amsterdam: Academic Press, 2016): 265.

²⁷³ With emojis, Tomkins’ idea of the face as the first site of inscription of affects comes to mind. The visual culture of emojis is beyond the scope of this thesis, but compelling questions on the ways emojis contribute to a categorization of emotions, or of the ways they might impact offline practices of facial expression and create “masks” of feeling, are compelling, and recall Trecartin’s masked characters.

connected to the rise of post-Fordism and neoliberalism as defined in the introduction, and this will follow later in the section. Trecartin has already been studied as an artist whose work theorizes protean neoliberal subjectivities, but not as much through the axis of post-Fordism.²⁷⁴

In Trecartin's work, what I refer to as the characters' performativity are their "stage-like," "performance-like," and "heightened" ways of being. JJ and Roamie for instance stare right into the lens of the camera and seem highly-aware of its presence, orienting themselves towards or away from it, and addressing or interacting with it directly. This notably comes from the artist's interest for "behavioral modes" (or ways of being) and for the ways they change across history, and emerge as a result of technological developments (i.e.: pocket and ubiquitous camera devices, as well as streaming platforms, and UGC streams).²⁷⁵ Trecartin's work critically investigates the increasingly meta-savvy relationship people entertain to the camera, and in ways, emphasizes that lessons and techniques from theater and cinema are incrementally adopted and understood across the digital public sphere. *Roamie View* in that sense, underscores an evolving, more "naturalized," "normalized," but also "performative" relationship to the camera where characters are "showing-doing."²⁷⁶ Every one of them engages with the camera directly, and it seems as though they are wearing a mask of feelings for the camera to capture. Their speech and gestures are wide and loud and echo theatrical performances where actors strive to embody a persona convincingly.

The performativity of Trecartin's characters also resonates with the affective clarity of *Commedia Dell'Arte*; the Italian form of comedy in which characters represented social stereotypes (or stock characters), and embodied specific emotions.²⁷⁷ While the stereotypical references and characters are muddier and messier in *Roamie View*, the artist nevertheless refers to characters as "frames," "titles," or "vehicle threads."²⁷⁸ Zulueta further argues that "Trecartin's designed characterizations are grotesque in their discharge of surplus

²⁷⁴ Åkervall, "Networked Selves." McGarry, "World Apart."

²⁷⁵ Ryan Trecartin, "Ryan Trecartin Interview," Video, 15:09.

²⁷⁶ The idea of performance as "showing doing" comes from theatre scholar and director Richard Schneschner. Schneschner, *Performance Studies*, 28.

²⁷⁷ *Commedia dell'Arte* is a form of theatrical comedy popularized in Italy and France from the 16th to the 18th centuries. The representations were comprised of masked actors performing specific characters and emotions in extravagant ways. Paul C. Castagno, *The Early Commedia dell'Arte, (1550-1621): The Mannerist Context* (New York: P. Lang, 1994). Michael Clarke, "Commedia dell'Arte," in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms* (Oxford University Press, 2010). <https://www-oxfordreference-com.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780199569922.001.0001/acref-9780199569922-e-482>.

²⁷⁸ Ryan Trecartin, "Ryan Trecartin Interview," Video, 15:28.

information.”²⁷⁹ Like the exaggerated performances of *commedia dell’arte*, the affective performance of *Roamie View*’s characters is intensified, heightened, and appears as “unreal”, though it is real in the movie’s diegesis. Their performativity also situates Trecartin’s work within the legacy of early video art, which from its heyday in the 70s, was often autobiographical and a performance of self (Bas Jan Ader’s *I’m Too Sad to Tell You* (1970) and Lisa Steele’s *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects* (1974) come to mind.) While Trecartin builds upon this history, he also departs from it significantly.

In *Roamie View*, the dramatic tone of characters’ pronouncements echo the more contemporary language and affective modulations of reality TV shows, or horror movies, but also YouTube’s confessional video culture, and the streams of Instagram and TikTok, which position performance at the centre of exchange and interaction.²⁸⁰ The characters hyperbolize social media’s performativity ethos, where users must be affectively loud in order to be heard, and which is grounded on the contemporary understanding that the presentation of the online self is a process of being-seen, and of being in public (as though on a screen stage). All in all, social media such as Instagram and Snapchat, but also Facebook and Twitter are built for the presentation of self, and thus the re-presentation of self.²⁸¹ A performativity ethos results from all of these intersecting forces: it is “*de-mise*” on these structures and the characters of *Roamie View* are aware of it.²⁸²

Each and every one of them shouts loudly, and asserts themselves with an affective intensity that seems inflated, excessive, and almost manic. There is too much going on in the oversaturated work on for characters to be quiet, nuanced, or evasive. For instance, upon arriving at the suburban home of the Bens and Jason (all musicians so it seems) Grace – who hasn’t heard

²⁷⁹ Zulueta, *Queer Art Camp Superstar*, 85.

²⁸⁰ Proulx, “The Progress of Ambiguity,” 39-40.

²⁸¹ More simply put, the impulse for users to self-perform and heighten their affects could also (and perhaps more simply) be understood as a result of the design and interfaces of social media platforms in their relations to camera-devices. Instagram and Snapchat are centred around image and video-based functionalities which situates these media within a cultural history of cinema and representation, creation, and performance. The interfaces of Instagram and snapchat for instance, with their built-in filters and video tools invite users to create *mise-en-scène*, to create a “movie” of sort. As these interfaces use and function within semantics, tools, and technologies historically associated with theater and cinema, they are inviting users to play within these codes.

²⁸² With the contemporary normalization of performativity, new digital forms of humor have also emerged – notably in the form of memes. Trecartin’s work picks up on this humour, and his characters seem as though to be ridiculing performativity.

them play music yet, nor really talked to them, expresses an overwhelming amount of excitement and takes centre-stage in the conversation:

Roamie this is awesome, I can't wait to play, omg you guys are so great. I'm so excited. [...] My god, sorry what's your name again? [...] My name's Grace. Omg love duets... Roamie these guys are so cute. I'm so excited to be a part of a cool, hip, edgy, fashion, young, experience. Roamie, don't I love duet?²⁸³

In the artist's videos, characters seem as though they are competing for the centrality of their affects and narratives – barely listening to one another in a chaos of needs and desires. To make sure that they are heard in the blitz of clashing trajectories (by one another, but by the camera pointing at them) – they seem as though they are performing 24/7. Characters' needs and desires are abstracted, but the dramatic intensity creates a situation where, however shapeless they are, viewers yearn to make sense of them.

The characters of *Roamie View* mimic and intensify digital-culture consumers, but they also resist algorithmic quantification, categorization, and commodification by clouding their own desires. In doing so, the performers make themselves difficult, confusing, and elusive digital subjects for algorithmic capture and commodification. If viewers of *Roamie View* are left unsure of the performers' desires, so are the profit-driven algorithms that monitor their every move. While platform algorithms aim at mapping, quantifying and commodifying users' desires by monitoring likes and interactions, the elusive desires of Trecartin's characters, obfuscate this very set of tasks. The performers model at once the tech savvy, obedient, and over-the-top performative digital user and consumer, and a more resistive one, challenging the algorithms that commodify the online self.

In his study of reenactment in art, Sven Lütticken explains that increasing attitudes towards performativity and self-performance are further connected to the culture of the spectacle, to shifts in the economy, and to the rise of neoliberalism. For him, post-Fordist economies and the concurrent shifts in labour forms, such as the developments of immaterial, cognitive, and affective labour, have increasingly tied production with identity and sociality.²⁸⁴ He writes:

What was not sufficiently emphasized in this [situationist and Debordian] analysis [of the society of spectacle] was the spectacular imperative for people to present themselves, to perform themselves *as* commodities. In the post-Fordist economy, as services jobs became more important, it became imperative to present oneself not so much as an interchangeable supplier of labor-power –which is the commodity

²⁸³ Ryan Trecartin, "Roamie View: History Enhancements." Video, 28:23, colour, sound. 2010. Accessed March 9, 2019. <https://vimeo.com/24988447>.

²⁸⁴ Sven Lütticken, "An Arena in Which to Reenact," in *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art* (Rotterdam: Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art), 17, 19.

most people sell– but to perform oneself as a unique commodity-person. [...] In a spectacular culture, everybody is a performer forever re-representing him/herself in an attractive way. [...] Media images, however [...] are in a sense only the superstructure of a society of neoliberal performative subjects.²⁸⁵

Trecartin's work, I argue, is invested in untangling this ethos and its connection to the embeddedness of identity and sociality in new forms of labour. Post-Fordist modes of labour and neoliberal structures are connected to digital performativity as they carry the impetus of selling one's individuality and personality. These structures demand that individuals stand out from a mass of others by creating an attractive employee/person profile through various codes. Conforming to the normalization of affective performance on digital spaces is thus an imperative or a strategy for users to create a signal in the sea of data. Social media and digital infrastructures, might thus be seen as a theater for acting out narratives, positions, identities in the hopes of creating an attractive self-image that might eventually secure future employment.

The structures of neoliberalism and post-Fordism all seem vividly present in Trecartin's artful theorization of a performative subjectivity. Not only does it seem as though Trecartin's characters are in competition with each other for the centrality of their affects, but it seems as though they have appropriated strategies close to advertising and to consumerism to exist beside each other (i.e.: loudness, brightness, etc.). Neoliberal affects of individualism also run high in *Roamie View*. This is seen, for example, in the lack of active listening and dialogical conversation, as well as through the emphasized "I," and "me" spoken aloud by each and every character.

Performance and spectacle are also evident through the movie sets which resemble a theater stage, or a TV set where individuals are asked to perform. Characters address the camera one after the other and seem duly aware of its presence and gaze. In the movie a plurality of devices (camera, screens, computers, cell-phones) populate the screen and promote self-performance by bringing the digital public sphere into the intimacy of the scene at stake.

Conceptualizing JJ's subjectivity as a software under construction – exhausted by too many attitudes and personalities – resonates with the neoliberal and post-Fordist exhaustion that

²⁸⁵ Lütticken, 17, 19. Beyond neoliberalism and post-Fordism, a performativity ethos would have also emerged in conjunction with the arrival and popularization of television as understood by Guy Debord in his theorization of the society of the spectacle. Performativity, as argued by Lütticken, is more largely understood as connected to the history of television, entertainment, and reality television. Lütticken equally traces this ethos to the late 50s and refers to Erwin Goffman's sociological studies "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" (1956) which identified the emerging corporate culture as already inducing a pressure on employees to self-perform.

results from constant efforts/impulses to self-define, self-promote, and self-improve.²⁸⁶ JJ is presented as secluded and in dire need of help from their friends because the system in which they live has exhausted them to the point where they are currently stuck in their home-office,²⁸⁷ lost amongst a gazillion papers, and struggling at making sense of the world. Names such as Free Lance and Liberty Lance are also cues from the artist to help viewers tap into his neoliberal post-Fordist commentary and critique.²⁸⁸ Trecartin's work asks: what of this performativity? What of this pressure to perform and exaggerate affects? Are subjects freer and better in these political, economic and media systems?

Common ideas surrounding authenticity or performance as a "fake mask," however, are refuted in *Roamie View*. There is no space outside of performance in Trecartin's world, and subjects have come to cope with performance in ways that are not solely alienating, but playful and agentive.²⁸⁹ The characters do not leave the stage upon which they are seen performing, and their world is not any less real. Rather than being submitted to performativity and this mode of subjectivation, characters in *Roamie View* have embraced and taken advantage of it, and they work within this grammar to attain their goals and desires. As Cornell remarks, Trecartin's critique of contemporary political, social and media structures is not "anti" but rather "pro," constructive and empathetic. About the world created by Trecartin in *Any Ever*, she writes:

Although born out of the heavily corporatized, media-saturated culture of today, containing all the petty problems and deep social divisions we know, this world is marked by an openness that finds potential in our worst tendencies and imagines liberatory possibilities for identity, communication and relationships.²⁹⁰

While Trecartin's world emphasizes contemporary forms of alienation, his subjects are not presented as passive. Rather their boldness and exuberance seem to claim a capacity for refusal, and for the negotiation of superstructures and "companion systems."

Trecartin's work allows viewers to understand the many ways in which neoliberalism, post-Fordism, and social media have given rise to an ethos of performativity in which affect is understood by individuals as a potential leverage of power. These political, economic and digital

²⁸⁶ JJ's exhausted self is more largely reminiscent of self-improvement and self-optimization discourses prevalent in individualistic and wellness cultures.

²⁸⁷ Characteristic of post-Fordist models of work.

²⁸⁸ This is also present in other videos of *Any Ever*, where a character named *Wait* "opts to permanently stall his career in favor of just having a job, a form of work that he can detach from his being at his convenience." McGarry, "Worlds Apart," 110.

²⁸⁹ Or characterized by choice and agency.

²⁹⁰ Cornell, "Medium Living," 55.

media structures have in fact appropriated affects and made them stronger forces amidst their channels.²⁹¹ This analysis thus argues for contemporary shapes of networked power to be considered as rooted in affect. This is not to claim, that affects were not previously embedded within power-relations and governmentality, but simply that shifts in the economic, political and media landscape (which have increasingly absorbed and quantified the body/emotions) –have given affect an increasingly central role in dynamics of power.

The strength of Trecartin’s work lies in the ways it formulates all of this in a non-didactic way. The aesthetics, semantic blurrings, attitude to language, and editing of *Roamie View* speak volumes about performativity and affect as a form of power, as well as increasingly central to cognition. The intersections of affect, power and technology are plural, complex, and filled with ambivalence, but it seems as though, through all the cacophony of his frantic videos, Trecartin succeeds at formulating a clearer path through these systems. Works like *Roamie View* generate productive questions and a useful critique of contemporary digital anxieties. In the following section, however, I discuss and critique Trecartin’s representation of identity, as it has given rise to some objections and reservations, which I also share.²⁹²

A Post-racial, and Post-gender Landscape

Trecartin’s videos have been described as queer utopias, or post-gender, post-racial landscapes where social labels are no longer applicable, or relevant. Using make-up, costumes, mannerisms, and interactions, Trecartin obscures the appearance of his characters, and blurs signifiers of race, class and gender. As Zulueta explains:

While Trecartin may cast Asian, Black, Hispanic, and/or White actors in his work, he destabilizes the very concept of racial identity by cross-accessorizing their looks with unexpected nontraditional hair and skin choices manifested for example through blue wigs, ghostly white faces, or stripes of makeup of varying skin tones.²⁹³

Aligned with the open-endedness of queer theory and postmodernism, the artist understands identity, not through fixed categories of race, gender, and class, but as “personality,” and as the

²⁹¹ Affects have always been embedded within power relations and politics (i.e.: as part of certain labor forms, or as constituent of convincing rhetoric). Still, a stronger tendency to channel affects as powerful forces would have emerged with digital technologies, and with shifts in governmentality and labor.

²⁹² Estefan, “A Cute Idea.”

²⁹³ Zulueta, *Queer Art Camp Superstar*, xxxi.

fluid application of “interchangeable traits.”²⁹⁴ Rather than queer, Trecartin defines his characters as “gender indifferent,” and claims that they treat “gender as an inventive space.”²⁹⁵ Characters may temporarily assert “an extreme position on gender” but are not required to be consistent. They might “subscribe” to ideas of masculinity or femininity, and “cancel” these associations later in the movie.²⁹⁶ While all characters are “gender-indifferent,” viewers do encounter characters that are predominantly “femme-presenting” (Backseat Grace, and Average Katie), or “male-presenting” (Ben 1, 2, 3, and Jason), and though these gendered attributions of presentation are socially constructed illusions, they matter in the context of this critique.

Trecartin understands the fluidity of gender as mirroring that of language and claims that both are “spell casting”: “it’s like magic, it’s an invention that then creates reality and agreements.”²⁹⁷ The artist also refers to his movies in utopic ways and as “adjacent sci-fi [...] where there is no grand narrative, and there is no ‘other.’”²⁹⁸ In doing that, Trecartin shatters common associations between identity, personality and markers of gender and race. His work is an explosion of the codes and regimes of representation that anarchizes, or “queers,” identity in disconcerting and compelling ways – bringing viewers to reflect and revisit their analytic bournes.

On his characters’ adoption of gendered stereotypes, Trecartin explains that they are “using the act of being stuck [...] as a recreational space,”²⁹⁹ and adds that they represent a future in which “people indulge in very limited realities [or stereotypical behaviors] because it is fun” and becomes “therapeutic.” This vision of playful and free “expression as existence” is compelling, however the utopic dimension of the works’ representational space has certain limitations. While the identities of Trecartin’s character are fluid, multiple, and situated at the edges of social labels, they address and rely on normative tropes, stereotypes, and violent histories in dubious ways. In *Roamie View*, flashes of sentences like “I only participate in closed door beatings” cut across the screen, some conversations address and “cutify” abolitionist history, and

²⁹⁴ Zulueta, *Queer Art Camp Superstar*, xxxv.

²⁹⁵ Ryan Trecartin, “Ryan Trecartin Interview,” Video, 17:10.

²⁹⁶ Trecartin, “Ryan Trecartin Interview,” Video, 17:25. In another written interview, he explains: “I see my characters exploring a technologically driven yet non-gender-centric psychologically complex transitional world which is inherently positive and energetic as opposed to neutral and formulaic.” Ryan Trecartin and A.R., “The Art of Ryan Trecartin. When MoMA Meets YouTube,” *The Economist*, Aug 4 2011, <https://www.economist.com/prospero/2011/08/04/when-moma-meets-youtube>.

²⁹⁷ Trecartin, “Ryan Trecartin Interview,” Video, 17:48.

²⁹⁸ Trecartin, “Ryan Trecartin Interview,” Video, 18:40.

²⁹⁹ Trecartin, “Ryan Trecartin Interview,” Video, 19:00.

characters' names, such as Able, Backseat Grace, and Average Katie, recall ableist, racist and sexist tropes and discourses, complicating these in ambivalent and indirect ways.³⁰⁰ JJ, Liberty Lance and Roamie's faces are further painted with white make-up in ways that obscure racial identity, but also invertly recall the racist cultural practice of blackface,³⁰¹ and do not cast "explicit judgement on it."³⁰²

Drawing attention to racist practices and histories by way of make-up, or to sexist and ableist discourses through characters' names, does add to the depth and multilayered quality of Trecartin's work, however, the satirical representation of the characters and the humoristic tone of the work do not formulate a clear critique. In my first few encounters with Trecartin's works (before being able to enter their web of abstractions); rather than experiencing a cathartic humorous release, the satirical representations came across as anxiogenic, disconcerting, and rather recalled historical and on-going mockeries directed at women, racialized and people with disabilities.³⁰³

For instance, JJ's representation, who is at a loss with themselves (in search of an edit), could be read as aestheticizing mental health issues such as schizophrenia, but in relatively unflattering ways.³⁰⁴ JJ is missing a teeth (painted in a dark shade of blue), they talk about their

³⁰⁰ Both femme-presenting, *Average Katie* and *Backseat Grace* allude to the serialization and minimization of women in sexist discourses. *Average Katie* is a mute character, and *Backseat Grace* could refer to the typical "backseat" female character of male-dominated movie narratives. Both of them, thus formulate an indirect critique of the male-gaze, and recall Laura Mulvey's work. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 833-44.

³⁰¹ The practice of blackface refers to the one in which white people use darker face-paint to portray themselves as racialized for "entertainment" purposes. It gained popularity during the nineteenth century in North America with minstrel shows – "a blend of popular music, dance, and comedy all aimed at mimicking African Americans both on southern plantation ('Jim Crow') and in the industrialized north ('Zip Coon')" – but also in Europe around the same time, and contributed to the spread of racist ideologies and representations. Often framed as a practice of the past, blackface endures today as a form of entertainment across North America and Europe, most notably during celebrations like halloween, but also at summer camps or during frosh week events at universities. Unsurprisingly, when contemporary practices of blackface surface in the media, they are often framed as isolated and nave incidents, or "innocent mistakes," rather than as recurring racist socio-cultural practices that uphold white supremacy, and the idea of blackness as "other," and foreign. The blackface practice is also connected to reface, yellowface, and brownface, all of which have different yet converging histories. Stephen Johnson, *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 2. Cheryl Thompson, "The Complicated History of Canadian Blackface," *spacingToronto*, October 29, 2018, <http://spacing.ca/toronto/2018/10/29/the-complicated-history-of-canadian-blackface/>

³⁰² Estefan, "A Cute Idea."

³⁰³ The mockery prevalent in minstrel shows, where blackface originated, also comes to mind.

³⁰⁴ Most characters could actually be read as though struggling with manic, psychotic or schizophrenic episodes or addiction. They speak fast and in constant repetition, articulating abstracted (though defiant) sentences, destroying various objects, and are animated by unrelatable tasks and gestures.

friend *Able* with admiration, repeat themselves constantly, and appear at once “possessed,” and “idiotic.”³⁰⁵ JJ’s figure could address or substantiate a foucauldian critique of “madness” as socially constructed to prevent challenges to bourgeois morality and order, but their representation is so satirical that it is rendered ambivalent.

Furthermore, as the work moves through popular culture tropes and their problematics, Trecartin’s maximalist aesthetic sometimes intensifies the violence of stereotypical representations. For instance, the stock footage scenes of women smiling as they walk in office buildings or go shopping, could read as a critique of consumerist and corporate culture but they veer into a critique of femininity because Trecartin makes it a gendered representation.³⁰⁶ While these scenes are later nuanced by radical representations of gender fluidity and critiques of masculinity (through Ben 1, 2, 3 and Jason’s boring and serial identities) they convey a feeling of humiliation towards femininity as it is dominantly constructed. In these moments, it recalls Tiqqun’s *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* (2001), in which the young female figure is used to proceed to a critique of capitalism.³⁰⁷

Certain scenes and representations of the movie are, in sum, filled with too much ambivalence to ask solely productive questions. In ways, Trecartin creates a rallying zone for the oppressed, and repressed thoughts and feelings, but I wonder and worry about viewers’ encounter with the work, and about how it can be interpreted. Trecartin’s queer and deconstructivist methodology and strategies are at once filled with political promises and pitfalls, and they raise some questions. The artist describes movies as “safe spaces” where artists can explore ideas and represent characters in ways that they do not support, or stand behind (creating for instance “gross,” racist, and sexist characters or interactions). Doing that, he adds: “doesn’t

³⁰⁵ However, while JJ’s comments are initially hard to decipher and come across as vapid, they ultimately reveal themselves as observant and insightful remarks. Curator Ellen Blumenstein has referred to Trecartin’s JJ-like characters as “society’s idiots,” or as characters who have “given up on opposition” and who bring “the system to its limits because he has become totally entrenched in it.” While the artistic exploration of this aesthetic figure can be compelling or politically promising, it is ambivalent in Trecartin’s work. Ellen Blumenstein, “Society’s Idiots,” in *Site-Visit. Lizzie Fitch/Ryan Trecartin* (London: Koenig; Berlin: KW Institute for Contemporary Art, 2015), 47.

³⁰⁶ Backseat Grace for example is depicted as self-obsessed and superficial. While her character can be read as a critique of individualism and superficiality, her abstracted speech as well as her femme-presentating look make her the perfect incarnation of the “dumb superficial” women.

³⁰⁷ Tiqqun paradoxically argues that it treats the concept of femininity and youthfulness as ungendered. Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, trans. Ariana Reines (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e); Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012.)

have to be a statement; it can be a landscape of opportunities, of thought, and invention, rather than answers, and it can be very political but not necessarily have to be activist.”³⁰⁸

While this is compelling, I wonder if the work productively evokes and rouses empathies and sensibilities? Without having to be didactical, or educative, and without having to be a political manifesto, does it plant seeds of emancipation? Does it open a space for reflection or does it foreclose it by way of its satirical affects and dubious representations? While there are ways to be allusive and oblique in formulating critique, to tell something by way of its contrary or ironically, to ask questions rather than formulate answers – certain parts of *Roamie View* create too much ambivalence. It is not sufficient to explode representation regimes if the work presents, at various points, scenes that can be interpreted as sexist, racist, or as contemptuous of poorer social classes. To which audience is Trecartin’s work dedicated if it reiterates violence and stereotypes in ways that can be offensive, triggering, anxiogenic or simply counter-productive? Amidst the blitz of stimuli, Trecartin risks this alleged movie “safe space” for his viewers, who might feel pinned to triggering moments and unable to protect themselves through disidentification. While Trecartin’s work has been described as radical in light of the post-racial, post-gender, post-erotic and queer landscape it hopes to represent,³⁰⁹ some of the parodic elements read as insufficiently sensitive to representational issues and to the ways they may affect the audience, or spread misogynistic, racist, classist, and ableist stereotypes. Though hopeful, Trecartin’s deconstructivist position on identity seems rather naïve, or as Kareem Estefan argues:

This vision of total autonomy, a myth of radical freedom that appears at once utopian and dystopian, reveals not only an unsurprising share of technoromanticism, but also a certain naive faith in the possibility of an emancipatory existentialism that disregards the force of political structures. When Trecartin proposes that we “liberate ourselves into a state where expression is existence,” one wonders, again, who the agents of such liberation will be. In suggesting that we can transcend the social constraints of race, class, and gender, and eliminate bodily limitation altogether, Trecartin appears to embrace today’s ubiquitous libertarian fantasies of technological solutionism.

Works like *Roamie View* and *Any Ever* could in that sense be read as within the legacy of provocateur and spectacular art practices. As mentioned above, they recall the social satire, political incorrectness, “bad taste,” and “grotesque” found in Dadaism, Punk, Camp, or

³⁰⁸ Trecartin, “Ryan Trecartin Interview,” Video, 0:25.

³⁰⁹ Nancy Princenthal, “Post-Erotics,” 148-155. Kevin McGarry, ed., *Ryan Trecartin: Any Ever* (New York: Skira Rizzoli; Elizabeth Dee, 2011.)

carnival.³¹⁰ These various movements have specific and complex histories, politics, and conceptual reasonings that are beyond the scope of this thesis, but they echo Trecartin's approach to "political incorrectness."³¹¹ If Trecartin refuses to abide by "politically correct" standards, it is perhaps to confront the shallowness of applying them for the sake of appearance, or consensus, while in the meantime not spending energy on what might effect concrete structural changes.³¹²

As evidenced by the previous sections, while Trecartin's approach to representation might be tricky and ambivalent, the work remains particularly rich in the depth of its cultural commentary. Section Three demonstrated that *Roamie View* formulates useful understandings of affective cognition and performativity, and that it documents networked subjects' relationships to "companion systems." Much remains to be said on *Roamie View* however, as the work is a though a book of poems; it it "that which can't be exhausted, and that which no stories can summarize."³¹³

³¹⁰ For a variety of compelling and less compelling reasons, these movements ruptured with categorization, and rationality as the dominant mode of address, to celebrate anti-conformism, the "grotesque," and bad taste. Zulueta, *Queer Art Camp Superstar*, xviii, xxxvi.

³¹¹ We could read his work as a form of "conflictual participation" (an irritant, or a form of political research, that aims towards dissensus) in light of Markus Miessen work (influenced by Chantal Mouffe). Markus Miessen, *The Nightmare of Participation* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), 92.

³¹² Questions at the intersection of representation, irony and humor, political correctness, and utopianist logics, are beyond the scope of this thesis. They signal this research's limitations and are only preliminary explored.

³¹³ Uguay, *Poèmes*, Backcover (my translation).

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this thesis, I have presented two artworks by Cécile B. Evans and Ryan Trecartin, for the ways they contribute to an emerging critical discourse on digital culture. I had first engaged with these artists' practices during the internet-themed Berlin Biennale of 2016, *The Present in Drag* curated by DIS. Among the myriad of bleak and sardonic works, theirs stood out and lingered in me as puzzling and observant. They resonated in me mostly for the ways in which they crystallized and teased out important and alienating dynamics of digital culture, some which I was at the time unable to explain to myself – though profoundly affected by. As I began studying digital culture in more depth, it became clear to me that, as media had developed, it had woven through the affective lives of subjects in ways that were yet to be understood, mapped and critiqued. Trecartin's and Evans' practices came to mind as participating to that effort. While each has their own set of concerns, I realized that both *Roamie View* and *What the Heart Wants* offered complementary insights onto technological governance, more specifically as it relates to the confluence of digital infrastructure, with affect and anxieties. Coming back to Evans' and Trecartin's works through *WTHW* (part of BB9) and *Roamie View* (not presented during BB9), was a process of reckoning with how these artists' works had sparked the beginning of a long conversation in me.

Artists such as Evans and Trecartin can detect and record, to use Berardi's words, worldly "dissonance" and eventually create the "aesthetic conditions for the perception and expression of new modes of becoming."³¹⁴ In previous pages, I have demonstrated how two contemporary artworks bring to the surface pre-existing conditions of digital life otherwise too deep to be sensed, shrouded in familiarity, or in what Marcel Proust describes as the "anaesthetic effect of habit."³¹⁵ If the landscape and structures of one's daily life tend to harden as an invisible ground of perception, artists interacting with them have the ability to reverse this dynamic, and to strip them away from the veil of habit.

³¹⁴ "Art is the recording and detecting of this dissonance – and the simultaneously creation of the aesthetic conditions for the perception and expression of new modes of becoming." Franco "Bifo" Berardi, "Emancipation of the Sign: Poetry and Finance During the Twentieth Century," in *e-flux journal* 39 (2012), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/39/60284/emancipation-of-the-sign-poetry-and-finance-during-the-twentieth-century/>.

³¹⁵ My translation: Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu: Du côté de chez Swann* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1992 [1913]): 53. L'influence anaesthésiante de l'habitude ayant cessé, je me mettais à penser, à sentir, choses si tristes.

Artists that respond to contemporary socio-political structures and experience in such ways give viewers means for being critical of this current moment, of collective structures, and, tangentially, of history. They create productive sites of ambiguity, where new associations can be drawn – associations that are not limited to language, but that also work within semantics. As Berardi explains, poetry can be thought of as “an excess of language;”³¹⁶ a space where signs can roam away from the semantic field as manufactured and organized by capitalism. For him, by refusing to enter a system of exchange value, poetry gives way to new common grounds, allowing for new imaginations and alternative futures. While the poetics of Trecartin and Evans do not present visions of a desirable or potential future, they wrench at the present in enlightening ways, and pierce through the imaginaries produced by neoliberal and techno-capitalism.

In their own ways, both Evans and Trecartin present or fulfill technological governance in its totality, and through these intensifications, shatter common visions and assumptions surrounding networked living. In Trecartin’s work, characters living with cameras 24/7 are losing their bearings and caught in over-the-top and endless loops of performance, while in Evans’ work, the world represented is reduced to that of a confused and anxious digital system. In doing this, these artists question and document the seamless integration of platforms as “companion systems”³¹⁷ of affective lives. They draw attention to the ways these technologies are ruled by the movements of capital, as well as their commodification of users’ lives and emotions in novel ways. They allow viewers to conceive of feelings as influenced by digital infrastructures, and to identify some of the systemic causes of contemporary affects such as anxiety, confusion, fatigue and performativity. Through this, these artworks also come to counter individualizing neoliberal discourses of personal health and well-being that lay the burden of responsibility on individuals rather than on institutions and collective structures. Identifying anxiety as caused by systemic failures rather than personal ones, allows subjects to think critically about the infrastructures surrounding them, and about ways to potentially impact them, or to reconfigure their relationship to them. Additionally, in drawing attention to the ways that digital structures and systems influence psyches, Trecartin’s and Evans’ works invite feelings of

³¹⁶ Berardi, “Emancipation of the Sign,” 3.

³¹⁷ Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light*, 9.

shared struggle, solidarity, and community, as well as a politicization of emotions and mental health.

This analysis has examined how these works prompt critical thinking over affect and technology, as well as the way these artists engage with intersectional privilege and oppression. However, compelling questions surrounding the ethics of representation, with regards to Trecartin's creation of a post-racial, and post-gender utopia, or with regards to Evans' representation of anxiety and mental health for instance, remain unanswered. Both Trecartin and Evans create futuristic worlds hovering between utopia and dystopia; an artistic tactic with a long history (especially in sci-fi narratives of technology), which holds at once political promises, and pitfalls. Trecartin's and Evans' insights onto the affective textures brought about by the rise of technologies, as well as the ways technologies influence language and cognition, are also only preliminary and could be explored in further depth within a more interdisciplinary framework. The stories these works tell, as well as the art histories they are a part of, are plural, and this thesis does not claim to exhaust them in any way.

As one of the main conduits of communication and affects, digital infrastructures and their norming, capitalist desires must remain interrogated and challenged. In abstracting, intensifying, softening and transforming their dynamics, Evans and Trecartin put forth a compelling and useful critique, and, more importantly perhaps, they open new common grounds for conversation. The critique of technology and the affective textures and phenomena brought into focus by Trecartin and Evans are also not solely pessimistic or alarmist, but rather empathetic. They do not suggest an outside or an exit to these structures, but rather create sites of ambivalence where viewers can understand, re-negotiate, and sense these structures anew.

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FIGURES



Figure 1 — Cécile B. Evans, *What the Heart Wants* (2016). Exhibition documentation, courtesy of Cécile B. Evans, Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna; Barbara Seiler, Zürich. Single-channel video installation (41min., colour, sound). Image Source: Kunsthal Aarhus, DMK. Accessed May 1, 2020. <https://kunsthal aarhus.dk/da/Exhibitions/Cecile-B-Evans-What-The-Heart-Wants-2017>.



Figure 2 — Cécile B. Evans, *What the Heart Wants* (2016). Exhibition documentation, Berlin Biennale 9. *The Present in Drag*, curated by DIS, Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Arts (June 4 to September 18, 2016). Single-channel video installation (41min., colour, sound). Image Source: Berlin Biennale 9. Accessed May 1, 2020. <http://bb9.berlinbiennale.de/de/participants/cecile-b-evans/>



Figure 3 — Hyper on a freight barge. Cécile B. Evans, *What the Heart Wants* (2016). Video Still. Image source: Cécile B. Evans Studio, Video Screenshot, Private Vimeo Link.



Figure 4 — Hyper's face. Cécile B. Evans, *What the Heart Wants* (2016). Video Still. Image source: Cécile B. Evans Studio, Video Screenshot, Private Vimeo Link.



Figure 5 — Children and the robot Nao. Cécile B. Evans, *What the Heart Wants* (2016). Video Still. Image source: Cécile B. Evans Studio, Video Screenshot, Private Vimeo Link.



Figure 6 — The collective of ear workers. Cécile B. Evans, *What the Heart Wants* (2016). Video Still. Image source: Cécile B. Evans Studio, Video Screenshot, Private Vimeo Link.



Figure 7 — A memory from 1972 and lines of code. Cécile B. Evans, *What the Heart Wants* (2016). Video Still. Image source: Cécile B. Evans Studio, Video Screenshot, Private Vimeo Link.



Figure 8 — Advertisement of flying commodities. Cécile B. Evans, *What the Heart Wants* (2016). Video Still. Image source: Cécile B. Evans Studio, Video Screenshot, Private Vimeo Link.



Figure 9 — Hyper and HeLa. Cécile B. Evans, *What the Heart Wants* (2016). Video Still. Image source: Cécile B. Evans Studio, Video Screenshot, Private Vimeo Link.



Figure 10 — The Lovers in an abandoned mall in Kuwait. Cécile B. Evans, *What the Heart Wants* (2016). Video Still. Image source: Cécile B. Evans Studio, Video Screenshot, Private Vimeo Link.



Figure 11 — The Lovers in Tanashio & water aesthetics and metaphors. Cécile B. Evans, *What the Heart Wants* (2016). Video Still. Image source: Cécile B. Evans Studio, Video Screenshot, Private Vimeo Link.



Figure 12 — The eye of the system. Cécile B. Evans, *What the Heart Wants* (2016). Video Still. Image source: Cécile B. Evans Studio, Video Screenshot, Private Vimeo Link.

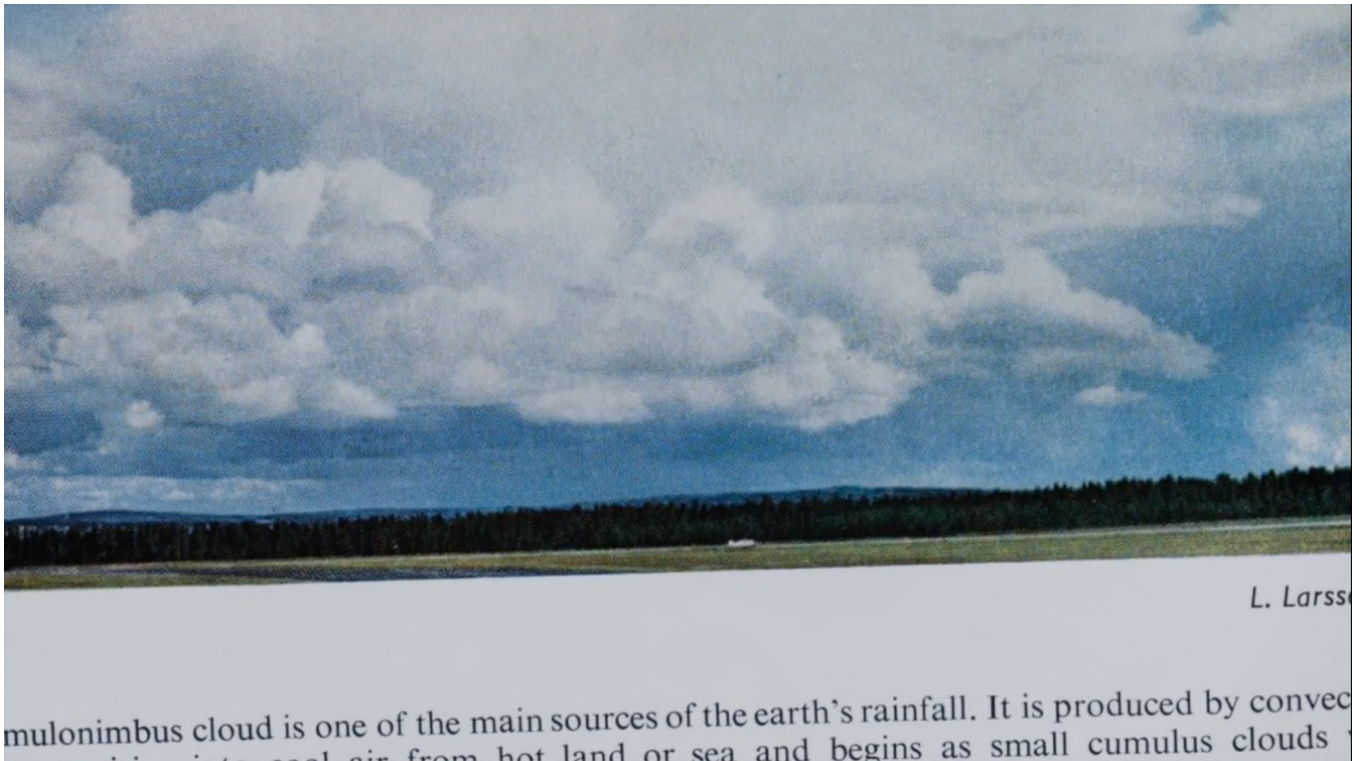


Figure 13 — Cloud Systems. Cécile B. Evans, *What the Heart Wants* (2016). Video Still. Image source: Cécile B. Evans Studio, Video Screenshot, Private Vimeo Link.



Figure 14 — Hyper in a Data-farm. Cécile B. Evans, *What the Heart Wants* (2016). Video Still. Image source: Cécile B. Evans Studio, Video Screenshot, Private Vimeo Link.



Figure 15 — Hito Steyerl, *Liquidity Inc.* (2014). Exhibition documentation. Single-channel video installation (30min., colour, sound). Image Source: MoMA. Accessed May 1, 2020. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/216220>



Figure 16 — Hyper's house, the Berman House. Cécile B. Evans, *What the Heart Wants* (2016). Video Still. Image source: Cécile B. Evans Studio, Video Screenshot, Private Vimeo Link.



Figure 17 — Andrew Wyeth, *Christina's World*, 1948. Tempera on panel (81.9 x 121.3cm).
Image Source: MoMA. Accessed May 1, 2020. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78455>



Figure 18 — Christina's Laptop World. Cécile B. Evans, *What the Heart Wants* (2016). Video Still. Image source: Cécile B. Evans Studio, Video Screenshot, Private Vimeo Link.



Figure 19 — Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch, *Roamie View: History Enhancements* (2010), from the series *Re'Search Wait'S* (2009/2010). Exhibition documentation. Sculptural theater exhibiting a single-channel video projection (28min., colour, sound). Installation shot from *Any Ever*, curated by Klaus Biesenbach, MoMA PS1, New York, US (June 19 to September 3, 2011). Image Source: Andrea Rosen Gallery. Accessed May 1, 2020. <http://m.andrearosengallery.com/artists/lizzie-fitch-ryan-trecartin>



Figure 20 — Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch, *The Re'Search*, from the series *Re'Search Wait'S* (2009/2010). Exhibition documentation. Sculptural theater exhibiting a video projection (colour, sound). Installation shot from *Any Ever*, curated by Klaus Biesenbach, MoMA PS1, New York, US (June 19 to September 3, 2011). Image Source: Andrea Rosen Gallery. Accessed May 1, 2020. <http://m.andrearosengallery.com/artists/lizzie-fitch-ryan-trecartin>



Figure 21 — Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch, *Mark Trade* (2016). Exhibition documentation. Sculptural theater exhibiting video projection (colour, sound). Installation shot from the Berlin Biennale 9. *The Present in Drag*, curated by DIS, Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Arts (June 4 to September 18, 2016). Image Source: Berlin Biennale 9. Accessed May 1, 2020. <http://bb9.berlinbiennale.de/participants/fitch/>



Figure 22 — Ryan Trecartin, *Roamie View: History Enhancements* (2010), from the series *Re'Search Wait'S* (2009/2010). Video Still. Image source: Art Forum. Accessed May 1, 2020. <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201207/ryan-trecartin-31996>.

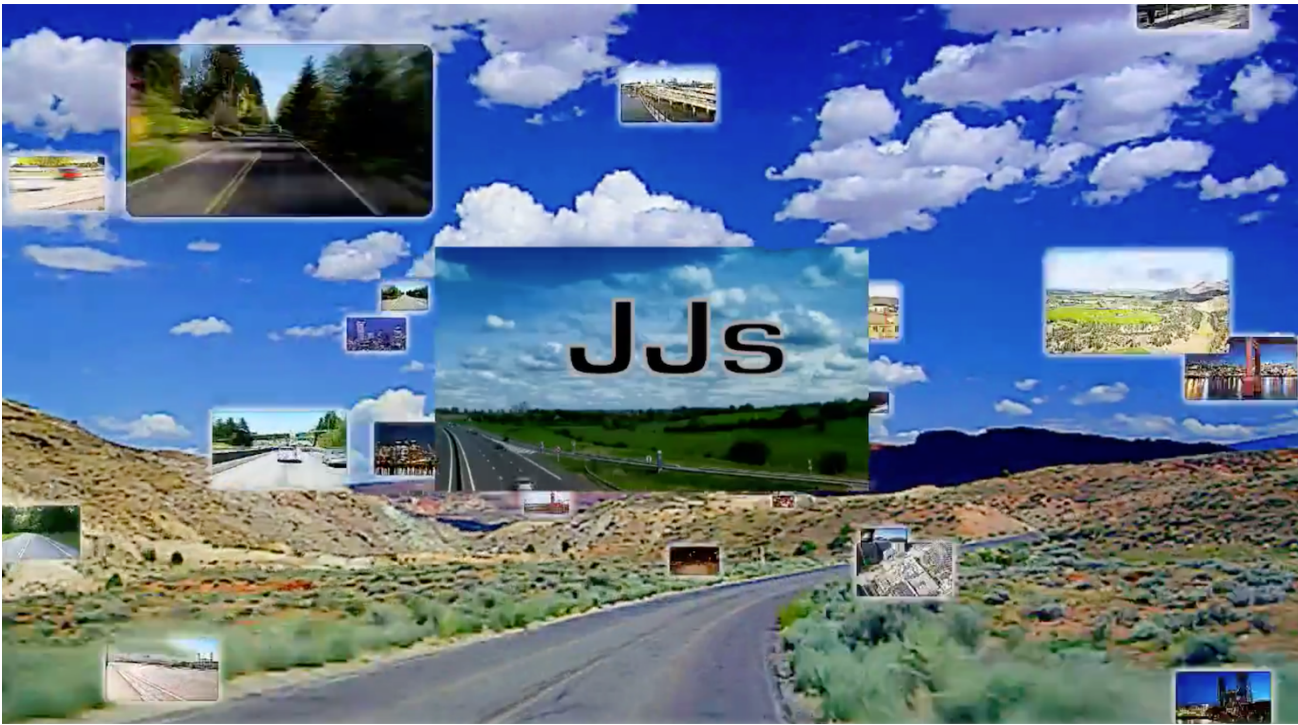


Figure 23 — Ryan Trecartin, *Roamie View: History Enhancements* (2010), from the series *Re'Search Wait'S* (2009/2010). Video Still. Image source: Ryan Trecartin; Screenshot. Accessed May 1, 2020. <https://vimeo.com/channels/669505/24988447>



Figure 24 — Ryan Trecartin, *Roamie View: History Enhancements* (2010), from the series *Re'Search Wait'S* (2009/2010). Video Still. Image source: Ryan Trecartin; Screenshot. Accessed May 1, 2020. <https://vimeo.com/channels/669505/24988447>



Figure 25 — Ryan Trecartin, *Roamie View: History Enhancements* (2010), from the series *Re'Search Wait'S* (2009/2010). Video Still. Image source: Ryan Trecartin; Screenshot. Accessed May 1, 2020. <https://vimeo.com/channels/669505/24988447>



Figure 26 — Ryan Trecartin, *Roamie View: History Enhancements* (2010), from the series *Re'Search Wait'S* (2009/2010). Video Still. Image source: Ryan Trecartin; Screenshot. Accessed May 1, 2020. <https://vimeo.com/channels/669505/24988447>



Figure 27 — Ryan Trecartin, *Roamie View: History Enhancements* (2010), from the series *Re'Search Wait'S* (2009/2010). Video Still. Image source: Ryan Trecartin; Screenshot. Accessed May 1, 2020. <https://vimeo.com/channels/669505/24988447>



Figure 28 — Ryan Trecartin, *Roamie View: History Enhancements* (2010), from the series *Re'Search Wait'S* (2009/2010). Video Still. Image source: Ryan Trecartin; Screenshot. Accessed May 1, 2020. <https://vimeo.com/channels/669505/24988447>



Figure 29 — Ryan Trecartin, *Roamie View: History Enhancements* (2010), from the series *Re'Search Wait'S* (2009/2010). Video Still. Image source: Ryan Trecartin; Screenshot. Accessed May 1, 2020. <https://vimeo.com/channels/669505/24988447>



Figure 30 — Ryan Trecartin, *Roamie View: History Enhancements* (2010), from the series *Re'Search Wait'S* (2009/2010). Video Still. Image source: Ryan Trecartin; Screenshot. Accessed May 1, 2020. <https://vimeo.com/channels/669505/24988447>