

A Silent Shout: Metamodern Forms of Activism in Contemporary Performance

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ABSTRACT

There has been a recent and notable trend within contemporary performance spheres for artists to respond to various sociological, economic and political crises by creating participatory, community engaged performances. This article addresses how specific contemporary performance as activism projects have now evolved to respond to, and have been affected by, the emerging concept of the metamodern. By focusing on two 2017 productions, Mem Morrison's Silencer and LaBeouf, Rönnkö & Turner's #HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS, this article argues that the metamodern oscillation between sincerity and irony, as laid down by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, has become an integral component in these artists' performance-based activism. This article examines these performances in context with other politically engaged, participatory performance trends as well as the emerging concept of the metamodern in political and cultural spheres. The study offers a new insight into current practice formed upon the

interstice of the metamodern and youth politics, and how performance as activism can be (re)defined within the current political landscape.

I am watching a livestream of a pedestrianised street in Łódź, Poland. A bakery can be seen on the left of the screen and a security car on the right. Traffic can be heard in the background as shoppers, families and security guards walk on and off screen, oblivious to the webcam I watch them through. A year ago, I could log into the same webcam and watch a white flag flapping against an unknown desert sky. Six months before that, I could observe a crowd of teenagers staring into the camera, wrapped up against the New York winter, repeatedly chanting the mantra they saw emblazoned above the webcam; “He will not divide us. He will not divide us. He will not divide us.” The *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS* installation, by performance art collective LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner, at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź follows a tumultuous and politically charged history of the project. From its beginnings as an installation at the Museum of Moving Image, New York, through to the controversial arrest of LaBeouf, the battle between the artists and factions of the alt-right for a white flag, to the seemingly unaware Polish street that I can spy on today, it is a bizarre and ever-changing piece of contemporary activism.

Meanwhile in London, in strikingly similar aesthetics to the text pasted above the *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS* webcam, a series of placards have been placed along a high street by performance artist Mem Morrison. In stark black type against a white background are announcements of personal “crusades” (Circulate, 2017) from members of the local community. Shoppers and families walk between each placard in the *Silencer* project, stop to read a few, and carry on with their day. “Don’t Blame Muslims!,” “Fund The Third Sector!,” “Give Up Your Seat!” are just some of the striking titles on display in this silent, stationary protest.

Silencer and *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS* are examples of performance as activism that engage with the thematic of, and complexities surrounding, the emerging concept of the metamodern. I refer to metamodernism here as a cultural modality, or structure of feeling, as per Vermeulen and van den Akker’s popularisation of the term (2010) that speaks to a contemporary modality of post-postmodernism based upon a proliferation of (ironic) sincerity, affect and

depth (van den Akker, Vermeulen & Gibbons, 2017), with specific reference to particular aspects of Hanzi Freinacht's posited empathetic political metamodernism (2017). I will also examine each performance as examples of work built upon and expanding the methodological frameworks of Bourriard's relational aesthetics and specific interrelating performance modalities; Grant Kester's dialogical art (2011) and Andy Lavender's theatre of engagement (2016). I posit that these cases of politically engaged art are examples of a specific mode of performance as activism and may point the way for future performative, political engagement in contemporary culture built upon a metamodern oscillation between sincerity and irony, hopelessness and hope.

THE METAMODERN

Metamodernism's current usage was first popularised by Dutch cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker in their 2010 article, *Notes on Metamodernism*, as a posited description of tensions within a post-postmodern landscape, an "emerging structure of feeling" (p. 2) within contemporary culture that could "no longer be explained in terms of the postmodern" (p. 2). They explain that the prefix *meta* stems from Plato's *metaxis*, of a "between" or "both-neither" (p. 6) dynamic that speaks to the "tension... of a modern desire for *sens* and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all" (p. 6). Whilst modernism strove towards a singular truth and postmodernism at once negated, multiplied and deconstructed this truth, metamodernism operates within this *meta* dynamic, oscillating between "sincerity and irony, enthusiasm and detachment, naïveté and knowingness" (MacDowell, 2011). This oscillation, however, does not indicate a balance. Rather, state Vermeulen and van den Akker, "it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles. Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm" (p. 6). Examples of this sensibility within popular culture include the films of Wes Anderson, television shows such as *Bojack Horseman*, the music of Sufjan Stevens, the emergence of the *Simpsonwave* genre on Instagram, and the work of novelists such as David Foster Wallace and Zadie Smith. All exemplify an oscillatory movement between irony and sincerity, naivety and knowingness, hopelessness and hope. As

Vermeulen expands; “There is the sense [now] that you say; ‘I cannot just be cynical—I’m so tired of being ironic all the time—I want to be sincere.’ You’re not. We are all, from the start, ironic. That’s how we were raised... but we want to be sincere” (Frieze, 2014).

Metamodernism, in its oscillation between aspects of the modern (hope) and the postmodern (hopelessness), does not indicate a return to the trappings of modernist grand narratives. Instead, metamodernism presents a form of “informed naivety” or “pragmatic idealism” (Turner, 2015) that engages with a seemingly modernist revival of the strive for authenticity, romanticism and affect, whilst not “forfeiting all that we’ve learnt from postmodernism” (Turner, 2015). As Luke Turner, the British third of LeBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner, explains, metamodernism “describe[s] the climate in which a yearning for utopias, *despite their futile nature*, has come to the fore” (Turner, 2015, italics my own). In current political discourse, this metamodern strive for utopia is evident in a decisive split from the centralist political framework of the postmodern era. In the US, Trump offers to “make America great *again*,” whilst, in the UK, Brexit is a similarly symbolic offer of a “return” to a nostalgic, and possibly false, metanarrative of Britain’s own “former glory.” Vermeulen describes this (re)formation of political polarisations, be it “Obama, Brexit, Trump, Corbyn, Bernie Sanders... [as] all part of the same kind of game... a way back, or a way forward, or a way sideways to... a politics of ‘it can be different’” (Krumsvik & Co, 2017).

Although, as a cultural modality, metamodernism itself is “*neither* a manifesto, *nor* a social movement” (van den Akker, Gibbons & Vermeulen 2017, 5), despite Turner’s *Metamodernist Manifesto* (2011) gaining traction online, certain political ideologies have arisen through metamodernist discourse. Political philosopher Hanzi Freinacht, actually the pen name for Emil Ejner Friis and Daniel Görtz, posits that metamodernism can be read as a “developmental stage” (2017, p. 15) that “builds upon [the] understanding” (2017, p. 15) of Vermeulen and van den Akker’s usage of a structure of feeling. He details his vision of “political metamodernism” in *The Listening Society* (2017), of which recent attention was drawn to via the announcement of *The Initiative*, a new political party in Sweden that champion’s Freinacht as “philosophical inspiration” (Gessen, 2017) in laying down the foundations for “a metamodern politics [that] moves beyond liberal ideas toward shared responsibility for maximizing the happiness and health of everyone in the world” (Gessen, 2017). Freinacht’s political

metamodernism stems from the drive for affect, sincerity and depth inherent within metamodernism, alongside the act of continual oscillation between disparate polarities. He champions cross-party discourse and understanding as, “even if we don’t agree, we come closer to the truth if we create better dialogues” (Freinacht, 2017, p. 4), as a method of creating a political structure focused on a “deeper kind of welfare system that includes the social, emotional and psychological aspects of human beings” (Freinacht, 2017, p. 72). *The Listening Society*, therefore, is built upon a tangible and mobilised form of new sincerity (Foster Wallace, 1993), alongside an admission and application of the fact that, “everybody already is like you—a very limited, vulnerable, hurt, single human being... that is exactly why the world is a complete, utter mess. And because the world is a mess, you are a mess” (Freinacht, 2017, p. 146).

I posit that the two case studies within this article, *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS* and *Silencer*, are examples of both cultural and political metamodernist sensibilities within contemporary performance. Both exhibit a central importance placed on empathy, connection and engagement with participants and audiences, a drive for sincerity and affect in their political involvement, whilst also demonstrating clear ironic detachment from this modality within their very construction. They strive for a utopia whilst also acknowledging the falsehoods and failings inherent within this act.

MEM MORRISON'S "SILENCER" (2017)



Silencer in Enfield, London. Photo © Mem Morrison.

Silencer, produced in conjunction with *Circulate: Outdoor Arts for London*, was “both a silent march and installation” (Circulate, 2017) created by performance artist Mem Morrison. The project was described by *Circulate* as an attempt to “raise awareness of the political, cultural and individual challenges faced by local people living and working in Outer London... giving a voice to the many unsung heroes who have helped shape communities” (Circulate, 2017). Morrison and his team worked with a range of participants around the city over the summer of 2017, including “children, young people, older adults and families” (Circulate, 2017), in a series of creative workshops within theatres and arts centres that led to the creation of the placards within the *Silencer* installations. Each installation took place in a separate London borough, beginning with a silent and anonymous march of individuals holding blank, white placards in support of their “own personal crusades, inspired by unity, censorship and togetherness” (Stratford Circus, 2017). This strikes me as a particularly metamodern statement, oscillating as it does between the concepts of the collective (hope) and the censored

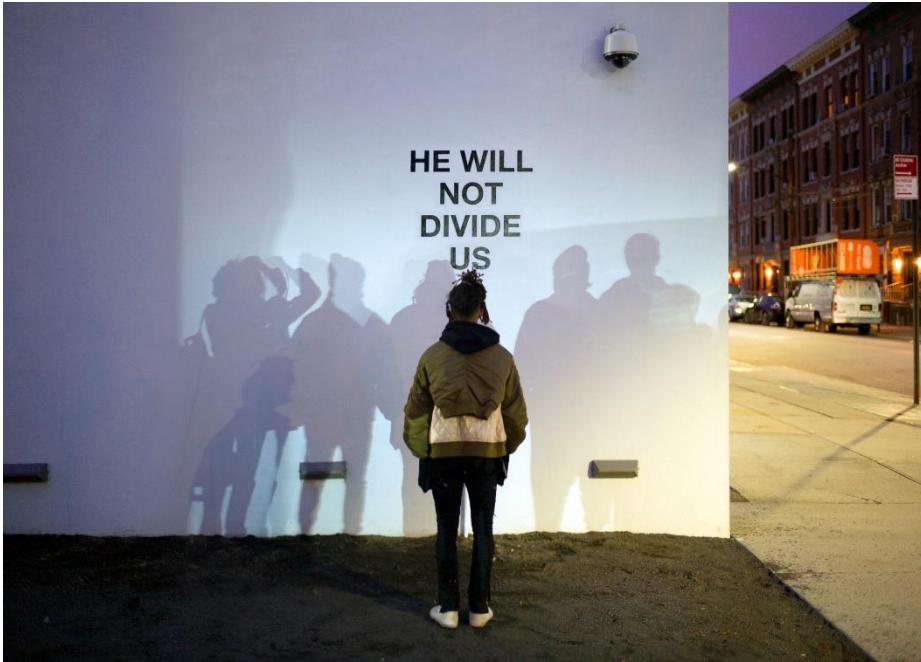
(hopeless), but the analogies will become clearer when we analyse the performance as a whole. Each silent protest ended at the place of the local installation, where placards printed with participants' individual "crusades" had been installed in place of the march's blank ones, revealing "the many contributed causes and stories people wished to be heard and acknowledged" (Circulate, 2017).

In many respects, *Silencer* builds upon previously established forms of community engaged performance. In 2016, Andy Lavender noted a trend within contemporary performance towards "'caring, engagement and commitment'... [that] moves us to a notably different lexicon from that employed during the height of postmodernism" (2016, p. 25). This performance, states Lavender, revolves around "'actuality,' 'authenticity,' 'encounter,' 'engagement'—a set [of terms] that would have seemed naïve or faintly ridiculous if wheeled out a generation or so ago" (2016, p. 25). He labels this mode of performance the "theatre of engagement," a modality that is "socially committed" (2016, p. 26) and that "provides an opening for certain sorts of political agency... in resistance to norms or uninspected assumptions, with the ability to make us see things differently and perhaps take action as consequence" (2016, p. 25). In many ways, *Silencer* fits firmly within Lavender's bracket, as well as resonating with earlier identified forms such as Grant Kester's dialogical art, which he discerned as "a body of contemporary art practice concerned with collaborative, and potentially emancipatory, forms of dialogue and communication" (2011, p. 2). As a socially engaged (Harvie, 2013) performance, *Silencer* provides a space for community and artist to engage within a political dialogue through its series of workshops, and a platform for communities' voices to be shared through both the marches and installations. It is performance as "*social interstice*," to quote Bourriard (2002, p. 45) in regard to his concept of relational aesthetics. I refer here to Bourriard's terming of relational art as "construct[ing] models of sociability suitable for producing human relations" (2002, p. 70), assembling a performative framework that, as Jen Harvie states, invokes "active participation with an environment and/or process that compels those audiences to interact socially with each other" (2013, p. 5).

However, *Silencer* offers an original and metamodern interpretation of such performative engagement. By aiming to give "a voice to the many" (Circulate, 2017) via performance modalities that share obvious

similarities with Lavender's theatre of engagement, Morrison's *Silencer* resonates strongly with that of Freinacht's *Listening Society*, where "every person is seen and heard" (Gessen, 2017). It offers a performative experience for both the participants and the audience that is "deliberately invested in social process, political perspective [and] matters of import to gathered groups of people" (Lavender, 2016, p. 26). The act of a silent march, however, deconstructs this process in a number of ways. During the march, protestors are silent both literally and figuratively, with the placards that they hold high remaining entirely blank; their personal crusades displayed in a "moment of quiet celebration" (Circulate, 2017). The name of the project itself can be read as a statement or a command; as a call to be heard, or a declaration of censorship. During the march, Morrison himself leads the row of protestors, with his singularly emblazoned placard displaying the *Silencer* logo—a symbol for a speaker marked with an 'x.' As an audience, we are encouraged to be silent and to *listen*, however, with both parties remaining silent, Morrison creates an aural space, in addition to the physical, for such relational and dialogical engagement to occur. That is the irony of the performance; it is dialogical in its silence. The act of *performing* a protest, too, is of note, with *Silencer* being framed by both Morrison and *Circulate* as an artistic installation, not a "genuine" political protest. Utilising the signifiers associated with political activism, a coordinated march with protestors bearing placards, whilst adapting them in an unexpected, silent and *blank* way, is also a re-appropriation of the conventions of political protest itself. By performing the protest in silence, both aurally and visually, Morrison is also highlighting the futility of their actions. The *Silencer* project constructs a space for dialogical engagement to occur, a platform for community participants to voice their own causes, but expects its silence to fall on deaf ears. It is a wholly metamodern performance; a "vessel for the [public's] needs and desires" (Gessen, 2017) that "attempts [change] in spite of its inevitable failure" (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010). It is hopeful and sincere in its (silent) shout whilst being ironically detached in its (shouted) silence.

LABEOUF, RÖNKKÖ & TURNER'S #HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS (2017 – PRESENT)



Jaden Smith opens the installation. Photo courtesy LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner.

To discuss LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner's #HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS is to engage in a dialogue steeped in Bourriard's relational aesthetics in regard to art that takes "as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context" (Bourriard, 2002, p. 14). As an example of performance as activism that engages with the complexities of a metamodern structure of feeling, #HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS engages with an anarchistic strive for a "politics of 'it can be different'" (Krumsvik & Co, 2017), whilst also embracing, and adapting to, a continual, inherent and inevitable failure.

The original piece was installed on an outer wall of the Museum of Moving Image, New York, to coincide with the day of Trump's inauguration and was intended to remain "open to all, 24 hours a day... live-streamed continuously for four years, or the duration of the presidency" (LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner, 2017). The installation, described by Turner as "resisting division and the normalisation of division" (L. Turner, personal communication, June 13th 2018) consisted

of a webcam, above which bold black capitals proclaimed simply; “HE WILL NOT DIVIDE US.” Participants were invited to repeat the phrase as many times, and for as long as they wished in a “show of resistance or insistence, opposition or optimism, guided by the spirit of each individual participant and the community” (LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner, 2017). The piece famously opened that morning with rapper Jaden Smith staring solitarily into the camera. He continued to repeatedly chant the phrase for over five hours as word spread via social media, encouraging more and more people to join. The live-stream from this first day shows the crowd of predominantly young people increase in number, evolving the chant into a mass call and response, a dance and even a small concert. The chanting continues into the night, with LaBeouf and others continuing to repeat the phrase into the next morning.

As an example of performance as activism, *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS*'s initial iteration demonstrates an obvious methodological relationship to Kester's dialogical art, in “soliciting participation” (2011, p. 2) within a durational, rather than immediate, artistic process whilst also constructing a relational model of sociability (Bourriard, 2002, p. 70) in which audiences can interact collectively and politically, as per Bourriard's relational aesthetics, both within the (immediate) physical and the (adjacent) online spaces. It is in its evolution as a project, however, that the full interplay between relational aesthetics, activism and the metamodern becomes evident.

In less than a week, the installation had become a target for certain alt-right groups, and self-proclaimed Neo-Nazis both on- and offline. Two days into the stream, a man wearing a cap strikingly similar to that worn by SS officers pushed past LaBeouf to “recit[e] white supremacist slogans into the camera” (Cliff, 2018). LaBeouf responded by repeating the installation's mantra particularly loudly into the man's ear, moving him away from the scene. Meanwhile, it was reported that moderators on 4chan and Reddit were attempting to stop users “organizing harassment campaigns” (Broderick, 2017) against people who could be seen on the live-stream, with “personal information being stored on a neo-Nazi wiki page” (Broderick, 2017). Other attempts at disruption included pizzas being delivered to the site of the exhibit and alt-right activists modifying the museum's sign to read “Museum of KEK” (Hewillnotdivide.us, 2017), in reference to the “Pepe the Frog” meme which has become synonymous with factions of the far right (Lawrence,

2017). Then, after an incident in which a figure at the installation “claim[ed] to be an ISIS suicide bomber” (L. Turner, personal communication, June 13th 2018) with LaBeouf “[taking] him to one side, and pull[ing] his scarf from his face so that he could look him in the eye” (Cliff, 2018), LaBeouf was arrested following the man’s “false accusation to the police, [with] the charges swiftly dropped” (L. Turner, personal communication, June 13th 2018). Shortly thereafter, the museum decided to end its engagement with the project, stating that the installation had “become a flashpoint for violence and was disrupted from its original intent” (Museum of Moving Image, 2017), despite no actual physical violence occurring on the site (L. Turner, personal communication, June 13th 2018). In fact, Turner explains that a number of issues outside of their control led to the installation’s closure; from a local politician asking the museum to close the project, to the museum refusing to supply any security for the site (Cliff, 2018). As LaBeouf explains; “it’s much easier to spin the narrative of ‘this crazy fucking celebrity millionaire asshole’ than it is to talk about what’s actually happening with the community that was showing up” (Cliff, 2018). In response to this closure, the livestream only displayed stark white text on a black background; “THE MUSEUM HAS ABANDONED US” (Hewillnotdivide.us, 2017). “They extricated themselves,” explains Turner, “Then we as artists became targeted; the work became targeted” (Cliff, 2018). This, however, was not the end of the project. A few days later, the installation was relocated to the El Rey Theatre in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where it suffered a spray paint attack before being switched off due to reports of gun shots in the local area (LaBeouf, 2017), with the artists deciding “it was unsafe to continue because of serious, credible threats of terrorist attacks by white supremacists” (L. Turner, personal communication, June 13th 2018). The webcam remained silent for a number of weeks, until the installation evolved into something else entirely.

On 8th March 2017, the image of a white flag against a blue sky appeared on the stream, with the “He Will Not Divide Us” text emblazoned on its side. Despite the location being unannounced, the flag was soon taken down by two members of the Traditionalist Worker Party and self-proclaimed Neo-Nazis (Turner, 2017), and replaced with a “Make America Great Again” cap and a “Pepe the Frog” T-shirt (Hewillnotdivide.us, 2017). The installation, still in its flag iteration, then

moved to the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology in Liverpool, England, before being taken down by the gallery due to “dangerous, illegal trespassing” (FACT, 2017). A few months later, the stream relaunched, showing the flag pinned against a white background in an unknown location. The flag was then installed at Le Lieu Unique in Nantes, France, before an “unauthorised drone carrying a burning piece of cloth approached the flag to try to set it alight” (Agence France-Presse, 2017), leading to the re-worked interactive-webcam iteration being launched at Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź in June 2018.

Regardless of the primary intentions of *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS*, its impact, meaning and scope has been enlarged by the continual interplay between the artists, audiences, and factions of the alt-right determined to disrupt and terminate the project. In their drive to create a space, or, as Turner explains, “plant that seed and set those frameworks in place” (Cliff, 2018), for dialogical interaction with an audience that engages with a politics of “opposition or optimism” (LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner, 2017), despite continual attack from self-professed members of the alt-right, the artists constructed a durational installation that continues to attempt change “in spite of its inevitable failure” (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010). The artwork oscillates between its digital and physical iterations; becoming fluid in its presentational form as a response to specific cultural and political tensions. It is empathetic in its dialogical intention; attempting to engage audiences both in person and online with a sense of collective activism, whilst also becoming reactionarily exclusionary to certain political “factions” when provoked, in that it attempts to escape and avoid further disruption. However, the act of avoidance itself cultivates further interaction with members of the alt-right. *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS* is a durational performance of activist exclamation and protest, one that actually provides a platform of sorts for two disparate political ideologies; the ones who will not be divided, and the ones who seek to divide. It is a metamodern performance that highlights the importance of activism driven art in the contemporary political climate. Oscillating, as it does, between a collectively shouted mantra, to a hushed phrase upon a flagpole, to a largely unnoticed sign upon a Polish street, *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS*'s strength is in being able to be heard at all.

CONCLUSION

Both *Silencer* and *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS* exhibit metamodern, oscillatory motions between disparate polarities; hope and hopelessness, connection and disconnect, shouting and silence. As examples of performance as activism they reappropriate and restructure specific modes of political protest as performance based upon theatres of engagement, dialogical art, relational aesthetics and forms of resistance. It is through this re-appropriation, however, that they create original and specific methods of performance as activism that reflect metamodern shifts in contemporary political discourse and culture that simultaneously strive for utopia whilst acknowledging their own futility. They act as silent or silenced shouts for change despite their inherent and inevitable failure.

On a recent visit to New York City, as part of the *Performance as Activism* conference at New York University, I found myself in the middle of protests in Washington Square Park, where hundreds of high school students joined thousands of others around the country in a mass walk-out on the anniversary of the Columbine school shooting (Hayhurst & Jackson, 2017). Surrounded by a mass of teenagers, I bore witness to a nationwide protest organised by one fifteen-year-old Connecticut student (Murdock, 2017). If the metamodern oscillation between enthusiasm and apathy is, as Vermeulen (Frieze, 2014) and Turner (2015) suggest, inherently connected to specific sociological, aesthetic and cultural structures affecting the millennial generation, the (now) young adults “for whom postmodern irony and cynicism is a default setting” (Turner, 2015), then it could be that Generation Z’s inherent focus on greater “human equality” (Fromm 2017, p. 18) will lead to different forms of performance as activism when the art of these now-teenagers comes to the fore. Whilst the millennial, metamodern structures oscillate between hope and hopelessness, between sincerity and irony, maybe the next generation will return a singular shout; one simply of *hope*. “We Are Change,” they chanted around me in Washington Square Park, “*No More Silence*.”

AUTHOR NOTE

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