



Critical Affection  
An Expanded Portrait of the Artist-as-Player in Digital Cultures

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Tom Penney, 21<sup>st</sup> June 2017

# Critical Affection

An expanded portrait of the artist-as-player in digital cultures



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# Abstract

Digital cultures engage users' social, creative and emotional labour – a process that can be described as affective. For some theorists and artists, this dynamic is inherently exploitative. However, within this exploitation is the potential, particularly in social media and games, to provide fuel for playful critique. The concept of 'play' is frequently used to describe users' engagement within such cultures. This phenomenon evokes a long history in the arts of deploying 'critical play' modalities. In light of this situation, how might we begin to sketch a broader portrait of a 'player' engaging with the site of 'critical play'?

This PhD project explores this question through a mapping of artists' critical play within digital environments. With the focus upon affective engagement in digital environments, I argue that it is the reflection and interrogation of processes of identity representation that, in turn, drive much of the motivation for 'playing critically' as a productive probe. More generally 'Critical Affection, an expanded portrait of the artist-as-player in digital cultures' seeks to contribute to play debates at the intersection of games studies, new media and contemporary art.

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# 1 Introduction

## About this Dissertation

This dissertation accompanies a body of practical artwork produced for a PhD project titled “Critical Affection: An Expanded Portrait of the Artist-as-Player in Digital Cultures”, for the award of Doctor of Philosophy (Media and Communication) at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. The project reflects my situatedness between three fields as an academic and practicing artist – contemporary art, games studies, and digital media. Developed separately from various segments of writing in this dissertation, the following articles that I have written or contributed to have been published. These include:

- “Playing the Subject”, 2017, in Cermak-Sassenrath, D (ed.) *The Playful Disruption of Digital Media*, Springer, Singapore.
- “Digital Face-ism and Micro-Fascism”, 2016, in Wilson, S (ed.) *The Official: International Journal of Contemporary Humanities*, vol.1, no.1
- “The Art of Play: Ethnography and Playful Interventions with Young People”, 2016, with Hjorth, L, Balmford, W, Greenfield, S, Gaspard, L, Naseem, A, in Hjorth, L, Horst, H, Galloway, A and Bell, G (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*, Routledge, London
- “Faceism and Fascism in Gay Online Dating”, 2015 in Proulx, M (ed.), *.dpi Feminist Journal of Art and Digital Culture*, no.32
- “The Radical Productivity of Play”, 2015 with Nash, A in *The Philosophy of Computer Games Conference*, conference proceedings, BTK University of Art and Design, Berlin, 14 – 17 October 2015
- “Bodies Under Glass: Gay Dating Apps and the Affect-Image”, 2014 in Green, L and Pink, S (eds) *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy: quarterly journal of media research and resources*, no.153, November 2014.

## **Exhibitions**

This dissertation discusses work shown in two exhibitions. These were:

- *Radicalism* at the Newport Substation, Melbourne, Australia, 17<sup>th</sup> January – 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 2014
- *Tabularium* at Slopes Projects (Utopian Slumps), Melbourne, Australia, 21<sup>st</sup> August – 13<sup>th</sup> September, 2014

## **Practical Component**

An accompanying body of work to this dissertation is available in a zipped folder alongside this PhD submission, as well as online at [www.tompenney.com.au/phd/index.html](http://www.tompenney.com.au/phd/index.html). This constitutes the practical component of the project. Instructions for accessing interactive works can be found in the root folder of the zipped file contents, or as a link at the top of the webpage “index.html”, found either within the zipped contents or at the direct web link.

## **Motivation**

Just prior to the beginning of my PhD research, art theorist and historian Claire Bishop published her essay “Digital Divide” on *Artforum* in 2012. Over the past few years, the premise of Bishop’s article has persisted while technology has increasingly empowered ‘non-artists’ and ‘non-experts’ online and seen artists either resist technology entirely or fully embrace the internet, sometimes uncritically, as a response. Bishop articulates a division between “new media art” and “the mainstream art world” (Bishop, 2012, p.1). The premise of this division is that while mainstream artistic practices seemingly avoid contemporary digital technology (Bishop uses the examples of works that focus on analogue media and social practice), the disavowal of, and thus the ghostly presence-in-absence of, the digital is in fact what underpins and sets the political project of all contemporary artwork. Bishop essentially makes the point that, whether participating in digital cultures, or opting out, the embrace or denial of digital technology here marks the impetus for the majority of contemporary art. However, Bishop finds it odd that new media art, while openly associating itself with digital technology, uses but does not effectively critique the digital state of culture we find ourselves in. Therefore Bishop’s central question becomes:

While many artists use digital technology, how many really confront the question of what it means to think, see, and filter affect through the digital? How many thematise this, or reflect deeply on how we experience, and are altered by, the digitization of our existence? (Bishop, 2012, p.1)

I want take Bishop's question seriously. Many artists and art theorists reacted strongly to Bishop's article. For example, Italian art theorist Domenico Quaranta retorted:

There are legions of artists responding to the digital age [...]. These artists are neither new media artists nor mainstream contemporary artists: they are artists that sometimes use digital media [...] sometimes spread their work on the internet (2012, para.3).

The premise of many critiques of new media art is that technology is already present, by default, in any works that are produced in the social context of such technologies, and that "New Media as Grand Project has already been done, and arguing the transformative potential of technology should be superfluous in a world of smartphones." (Watz in Quaranta, 2013, p.iii). In this dissertation, 'technology' refers to contemporary advancements in digital networked technology, such as social media, games, apps, smartphones, and online dating. Artists may exhibit a disavowal of technology (often for political reasons) however both artists and everyday users find themselves using the same systems and participating creatively in an indiscernible way. Today both artists and non-artists are participating in a creative, vernacular use of creative tools in digital cultures and the boundary between art and 'non-art' is blurred as a side effect of this mass-availability. Social media, apps, and games are ever-present 'listeners' for anyone's creative input. The "sharing, storing and saving... of... 'banal' everyday content" (Hjorth 2013a, p.99) has become a mode of existence.

In this environment of sharing and narcissistic intimacy everyone becomes some sort of artist engaging in normalised creative behaviours that enable the dissemination of extimate content. Photographs of food, cats and selfies construct personally curated digital environments. This is enabled by sharing features on Facebook, apps, and image platforms like Instagram. Jean Burgess has referred to 'vernacular creativity' as a term for the incorporation of 'folk' practices into digital cultures (Burgess 2006, p.1). Within the digital vernacular, everyone can operate as a producer of content, a creative user. On the internet, the practices of artists and non-artists collide in a content free-for-all; "vernacular creativity" is

not “placed in opposition to the mass media; rather, it includes as part of the contemporary vernacular the experience of commercial popular culture” (Burgess 2006, p.1).

The critical power of art might appear somewhat impotent within this structure, where artists and users appear to operate using a similar expressive logic. The work of artists has long appeared narcissistic and is a central quality to their output. Centring artwork on the self has been a strategy to interrogate subjective experience and shift power from external systems to the individual. Hjorth (2013a, p.100) writes “some artists are productively using Facebook to send out invitations, others are using it to perform a type of public intimacy in which messages, photos and newsfeeds all catalogue and cultivate the image (and aura) of the artists”. At a glance this does not seem to be a trend divergent to that of regular, creative users, rather, that artists in this scenario are complacent, participating narcissists.

Indeed, even the current generational movements of Post-Internet Art, or of the “Diamond Generation” (Obrist 2014, para.4), have seemingly resigned to structures that compose this expressive circuitry. Of the “Diamond Generation” (artists born after 1989) Harry Burke (2013, para.8) states it is “...no longer viable to maintain a binary between insider and outsider art practices, that sooner or later all forms of oppositional culture will have to interface with the mainstream”. In the article “The Image Object Post Internet” by Artie Vierkant, recent art is also defined as: “art responding to [a condition] described as 'Post Internet' – when the Internet is less a novelty and more a banality.” (Vierkant 2010, p.3). In resigning to banality, there is a pervasive acceptance of the normalization of ‘the Internet’ as a powerful and dominant affective structure. We know from movements of internet criticism, such as that written and edited by Geert Lovink and Rasch (2013), that the internet is far from banal in the implications it has for any of its users and their identities. Lovink reflects particularly on social media as “closed systems” (2013, p.13) that keep users as far away as possible from understanding how they work, and lauds that “dismissing social media as neutral platforms with no power” is “implausible” (2013, p.11). Given these trends, Claire Bishop’s questions of critical engagement or resistance appear well-founded and provocative.

## **Play and Labour**

Why should we be critical of technology when producing art? We should be acutely aware that the internet is not a banal or impotent system, and, particularly in terms of our identities,

every creative action has implications when produced within that system, When we are hooked into expressing ourselves on internet platforms, we become participants within the agency of systems designed by others. This can happen in non-digital systems too, but in digital systems in particular we have the impression that we are empowered inside them. In *Communities of Play* (2009, p.280), Celia Pearce claims:

While people [including artists] may feel empowered by their new communities in the global playground, the bottom line is that their communities, their property, indeed their very bodies, are owned by corporations.

Julian Kücklich has discussed 'playbour'; labour as it relates specifically to social media and games. As Kücklich puts it "the relationship between work and play is changing, leading, as it were, to a hybrid form of 'playbour'" (Kücklich 2005, para.4). This is essentially a labour that feels like play, where users create their own content playfully. As such, we are encouraged as creative users to enact our subjective voices in social media and games through 'play'. This is often for the benefit of the structures we play in, not only ourselves. Largely this is so that content can be sold back to us through the analysis of the 'big data' being gleaned from users through playbour. Trebor Scholz has identified that the internet is riddled with paradoxes; it is both a "playground and a factory" (Sayers, 2013, para.4). Mark Nunes (2013) has written about the effects of this. For Nunes, social media encourages people to express a self; selves affirm their individuality at all costs. On Facebook, for example, this is sold as a kind of "social good; to contribute to society now becomes an act of contributing content within communicative capitalism's 'fantasy of abundance'" (Nunes, 2013, p.10). Mark Zuckerberg, co-founder owner of Facebook, speaks of a scenario where "the world will be better if you share more" (Nunes, 2013, p.10).

Take Google's recent change in privacy policy as an example, which collects information from its array of services (including Gmail, YouTube, Google+) and merges them into a single account in order to "provide better services... from figuring out basic stuff like which language you speak, to more complex things like which ads you'll find most useful or the people who matter most to you online" (Van Zoonen, 2013, p.47) we gain a picture of how services are defining us as specific 'types' of user through our playbour. The service is sold as supporting individual subjects through a user-friendly interface that "gives us what we want", however Google uses this data in a similar way to Facebook, to define a

user in a network in order to sell content back. Adam Nash (2014) who refers to users as “digital anxiety slave workers” says here:

At the same time that the cult of individual empowerment is promoted through the networks of digital capitalism, the only measure of success that is held up is necessarily an advertiser-friendly quantitative one of generifying demographics, the bigger and more generic the demographic group the better [...]. The valorisation and empowerment of the individual (what we might broadly term the selfie culture), seductively masks the genuine goal of quantifying individuals into demographic clumps in order to advertise products or services that have been designed for just such clumps (Nash 2014, p.7).

The internet here has an impact on notions of identity as essentialising rather than diversifying subjects. We can consider that through the closed feedback loops that Google sets up, a compounding of the individual takes place. Within the frame of Facebook, for example, content not only legally belongs to Facebook, but users are understood as a “vertex or node... [that]... marks an identity” (Nunes 2013, p.15). Rather than a multiple the user is an aggregate; a whole combined from disparate elements that are the relationships or “actions and associations” that converge upon the “vertex” (Nunes 2013, p.14-15). The individual is understood through an “algorithmically generated data profile of contacts and keywords that defines a user as ‘dividual’ or ‘instance’ within a larger relational database” (Nunes 2013, p.12).

While we are encouraged to creatively communicate ourselves at great speed, and this behaviour may seem fragmenting, the multiplicity of these performances constitute a whole from the invisible perspective of the digital systems we subject ourselves to. This serves to define and limit our identities despite certain claims for subjectivity, i.e., that users can communicate through social networking “as they so desire” (Nunes 2013, p.13). Van Zoonen acknowledges “diversity as a desirable goal for social and cultural policy” (2013, p.44) but questions whether this is being achieved. We can consider these aggregate data selves, if fed back to us through algorithmic marketing systems, as ‘compounding’ the individual through decreasing the scope of one’s content. We may feel like we are players playing in the utopia of digital media, but the more we play, the more we are understood by the system we play in.



## **Aim**

I seek to build an alternative profile of what it means to be a player or ‘the one who plays’ as it pertains to digital cultures given how artists, and particularly how myself as an artist, plays critically. The aim of my research, therefore, is to reflect deeply through practice, as Bishop suggests, on the experience of affect in my, and other artists’ engagement in digital cultures. I am motivated to examine a situation in culture, where subjects engage with affective structures, the differences between artists and users are hard to discern, and a degree of exploitation occurs that has implications for individual subjectivity. Play, like improvisation and experimentation, is a feature of practices of both artists and non-artists within this situation, but to what degree is it critical? Moreover, to what extent can play critique as a form of artistic engagement?

Here I expand and build on strategies that are outlined in Mary Flanagan’s *Critical Play* (2009) that investigate how this cultural situation can be ‘played’ by artists. I use Flanagan’s ideas to motivate practical research, and develop those ideas further as a contribution to other digital artists, and to digital culture debates occurring in areas such as play studies and digital media criticism more generally. By engaging with a variety of such critical play strategies, I aim to articulate an understanding in my dissertation of how the notion of play functions critically for artists and how, or if, play can create a space for critical distance. As I build this list of strategies, potential frictions – even paradoxes – between notions of ‘play’ and ‘critical distance’, complicate the need for this question to be answered. I explore these notions through using art as an “enquiry machine” (Jungnickel 2015, para.1), which includes critical play (including artists’ doll play, re-skinning, un-playing, and re-writing) and identity play as well as perversity, queerness, humour, and caricature. These frictions and paradoxes can be tested or thought-through, via the practical creation of art as research, as discussed in Chapter 2.

## **Research Question**

*What exactly does it mean for artists to ‘play critically’ within affective digital cultures?*

## Key terms and concepts

### Digital Art

I wish to use the term ‘digital art’ from now on, rather than ‘new media art’, which invokes a certain hangover from the 1990s. As Lev Manovich puts it:

As digital and network media rapidly became an omni-presence in our society, and as most artists came to routinely use it, the new media field is facing a danger of becoming a ghetto whose participants would be united by their fetishism of latest computer technology, rather than by any deeper conceptual, ideological or aesthetic issues – a kind of local club for photo enthusiasts (Manovich 2003, p.5).

I wish to use ‘digital art’ to distance myself from this identification, and more appropriately include the nuances surrounding digital art, be it in the form of games, curated Instagram feeds, or gallery-based artworks. This takes into account the shifting boundaries and contexts into which digital art plays. Having said this, and although it appears to have similar aims, I additionally wish to distance myself from the category of Post Internet Art in which I have been placed as an artist numerous times by people in my artistic community. Although this term generally represents many of my peers and a context I am responding to (the works of Ryan Trecartin or Oliver Laric have much in parallel to my own), the conceptualisation of the movement is flawed given temporal assumptions embedded in the prefix ‘post’.

Artie Vierkant’s proposition that the internet is banal does not go far enough for me in terms of critical value. Vierkant does however present a case for the redundancy of the term ‘new media’, where “New Media is here denounced as a mode too narrowly focused on the specific workings of novel technologies [...] It can therefore be seen as relying too heavily on the specific materiality of its media” (Vierkant 2010, p.3). In a well-known interview on post-internet-ism with seminal post-internet artist Marisa Olson by Regine Debatty, Olson states:

There doesn't seem to be a need to distinguish, any more, whether technology was used in making the work – after all, everything is a technology, and everyone uses technology to do everything (Debatty 2008, para.12).

While this kind of thinking is very useful in terms of accepting technology as an inevitable influence in the practice and evolution of art, it has also become part of a trend in post-

internet-ism that excuses and minimizes analysis of the actual systems and influence that ‘the Internet’ has over the work and art in general. The notion that we are somehow ‘post’ the internet; that it is banal, just a tool, a blank-canvas, or a no-brainer, dangerously elides serious contextual considerations. We see the result of this today in the wake of the 2016 American election, fake news, alternative facts and echo-chambers – this influence cannot be taken for granted. In post-internet-ism such ‘banal tools’ can (but don’t always) serve as justification for quite self-absorbed practices. It seems the only real criteria for art under this term is that it is ‘internet-aware’ (Debatty 2008, para.12), a status that can mostly be achieved by employing visual internet tropes. Indeed, post-internet “objects” (Vierkant 2010, p.3) are more “developed with concern to their particular materiality as well as their vast variety of methods of presentation and dissemination” (ibid.) which is a quite loose and formal way to frame its outcomes. I don’t mean to say that Olson or Vierkant believe that artists should engage with the internet in such a flippant manner, but I think that it has played a part in justifying quite superficial work in this way.

### **Being Critical and Critical Distance**

‘Being critical’ is more of a general sentiment here than one that can be tied to specific definitions or authors. In art it can mean a number of things: challenging or subverting institutions, the status quo, language, provoking questions, encouraging reflection and revealing new experiences. It is important for this dissertation that ‘being critical’ is also understood as a function of play, where “critical play” according to Mary Flanagan means:

[...] to create or occupy play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life. These questions can be abstract, [...] or concrete [...]. Critical play is characterized by a careful examination of social, cultural, political, or even personal themes that function as alternates to popular play spaces (Flanagan 2009, p.6).

Flanagan’s research addresses play for the most part from the development of “radical game design”. I do not however focus on game design, as I am using her reflections on play to consider art. Flanagan’s is also an art historical approach that looks to the past in considering critical approaches to play. Games and new media art researcher Ragnhild Tronstad critiques Flanagan’s research in his article “The Productive Paradox of Critical Play” (2010):

Flanagan does provide loose definitions of ‘play’ and ‘games’ [...] leaving both terms rather open for associated meanings. However, she doesn’t address the apparent paradox in the concept ‘critical play,’ or how these two terms, put together like this, must necessarily influence each other. What happens to play when it becomes critical? And how might critical content be influenced by play? (Tronstad 2010, para.6).

As I articulated in my aims above, I hope that my own research builds on Flanagan’s and can help her to respond to such a criticism, as I believe Flanagan does in fact address the paradox that Tronstad identifies. It is the very nature of critical play as a paradox which has led to the production and proliferation of many artworks in the past, including within my own practice. I believe critical play is a legitimate and rigorous form of enquiry that can yield interesting results through further articulation.

‘Critical distance’ is a term I use in consideration of jokes and humour, especially in terms of producing playful judgements or comic contrasts. Drawing on Sigmund Freud, Henri Bergson, and Jack Babuscio (see Chapter 3) I take into account the notion that we distance ourselves through laughter, in order to be ‘in’ and ‘out’ of something at the same time, and that this is similar to the paradox of ‘critical play’. We could say that being playful, or telling jokes, produces ‘critical distance’. I draw out this concept more fully in my discussion of perversity and perverse play (Chapter 3).

### **Affect and Affection**

When Bishop speaks of affect, she is referring to the way artists might interrogate how users come to be changed (affected) by internet culture. I have raised this in terms of implicit narcissism, which can link us into affective circuits; “men [sic] at once become fascinated by any extensions of themselves in any material other than themselves” (Fisher n.d, para.2). In this case, digital networks are the ‘material’ carrying such representations of self in digital culture.

In Baudrillard’s terms (1988, p.12) “The scene and the mirror have given way to a screen and a network”. Like looking into a mirror, the screens of digital culture provide us with many opportunities to exercise our fascination with our own extended image; video games, social networking sites, and online dating systems are but a few general examples of environments that involve representations of ‘self’ participating in networks beyond a

physical bodies. Individuals seek to maintain, act through and present these external ‘selves’ to others. These ‘selves’ might be game avatars, personal profiles, profile pictures, or blogging identities. Through creative engagement in digital cultures, individuals can both change, and are changed by, what appears on (mostly) screens in the contemporary world. As for contributing to Bishop’s claimed disavowal of an interrogation of affect, this is a form of circuitry that all users in digital culture participate in – whether they are an artist or not.

My deployment of the concept of ‘affect’ in this dissertation draws from its definition in Benedict de Spinoza’s *The Ethics* (1677). In his thought, affect is closely bound to emotion. ‘Affect’ refers to modifications and variations produced in a body, including in the mind (which should not be seen as separate to the body), by an interaction with another body that increases or diminishes the body’s power of activity (Negri 1988, p.xv). Affect is therefore about power, or the capacity to act. Both Spinoza and Deleuze are interested in what a body can *do*, rather than what it *is*. For Deleuze and Felix Guattari, affect stands independently of any affected subjects and are pre-personal as transitional states of bodies. This is important in Deleuze’s definition of art, because an art object represents a bloc of affects in an objective state (Young, Genosko and Watson 2013, p.25). This aspect of the term ‘affect’, however, as it concerns a definition for art, is beyond the scope of the dissertation and is left alone in terms of analysis.

To differentiate it from affect, *affection* more specifically refers to encounters between two specific bodies; an affected body and an affecting body according to Brian Massumi (Shouse, 2005). Affection refers to an encounter where affects are exchanged, and therefore to power relations between individual bodies. In digital cultures, individuals are often represented as images on screens, and therefore Deleuze’s structure of affection-image is expanded on and discussed extensively in Chapters 4 and 5, where affection and power relations are key to my critical analysis of online gay dating apps through a number of digital artworks exploring the face as a fascistic digital structure.

### **Identity and Essentialisation**

In the concluding segment of my dissertation, affect and affection will be discussed in light of Gilbert Simondon’s notion of “individuation” (Simondon, 1992) as it pertains to play through comparison to Miguel Sicart’s concept of playful “re-ontologising” or “Quixotean Play” (Sicart 2014a, para.21). In a discussion of subjects interacting with other bodies in

digital cultures, we need to consider how affection and the interplay of affects change or define ‘bodies’ as individual states through time; when is something ‘what it is’? When is someone ‘who they are’? Can we equate ‘identity’ to ‘body’? If so, on one hand we have identities (bodies), on the other we have affects, and as affects act upon bodies, identities change. This process is referred to as individuation.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) Sara Ahmed alludes to this process when she explores “how emotions work to shape the surfaces of individual and collective bodies” and that “bodies take the shape of the very contact they have with objects and others” (Ahmed, 2004, p.1) over time. Gilles Deleuze tells us additionally in *Difference and Repetition* (1994) that individuals are defined by their rate of change, through the interplay of affects and individual states, rather than by any solid identity. In this, Deleuze is heavily influenced by Simondon (Nash 2014, p.2), and it is an important concept in the final chapter when individuation is discussed as a core component of understanding artists’ critical play. I have come to understand that the playful re-ontologising of self, otherwise understood as the manipulation of the representation of stages of individuation is core to artists’ critical play and this is discussed in Chapter 7.

### **Queerness**

This dissertation represents a queer perspective on art and play. Through my engagement with online dating spaces as a queer artist, it is important to consider how such spaces come to shape their users in terms of sexual identity. Ahmed is interested in the sexualisation of space generally and how spaces orient us. I generally mean ‘queerness’ or being ‘queer’ as a broad divergence from normative patterns of identity formation and relationships to digital culture and society in general. For example, Chapter 4 specifically deals with a project I produced as a critique of the gay online dating applications *Grindr* and *Hornet*, which facilitate homosexual alternatives to physical and online dating. In Chapter 4, the face is discussed as a coded structure that may limit or render static otherwise queer orientations, and foregrounds this with a discussion of Deleuzian affection-image. Ahmed provides us with an identification of what makes something queer:

Queer orientations are those that put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by the lines of conventional genealogy. Queer orientations might be those that don't line up, which by seeing the world 'slantwise' allow other objects to come into view. A queer orientation might be one that does not overcome what is 'off line' and hence acts out of line with others (Ahmed, 2006, p.107).

Queerness has implications in any discussion of affect and identity because queerness engenders the potential for lines of flight away from conventional genealogy. These are less recognisable, perhaps less solid (and more changing), identifications produced in contrast to codified, normative ones. Judith Butler asserts in her writing on masculinity that behaviours "stick" through a "stylized repetition of acts through time" (Butler 1990, p.192) and become codes of behaviour if enough people perform them in a similar way.

The nature of digital cultures, especially given the influence of algorithms and aggregates of digital data, as well as the swarming of like-minded users around similar identifications, means that many more perspectives and tendencies can become such 'repeated actions over time' than ever before. If 'play' functions to repeatedly hook users into performing similar actions 'over time', creative or otherwise, then what room for queerness is there in notions of play? Play, it would seem, cannot always be seen as so freeform or fluid as queerness radically posits.

### **Players and playfulness**

For the purposes of this dissertation, a player is not just someone who plays games, experiences play culture, or is a participant in play and games studies. The notion of play has been around for too great a period of time to be limited to this field. Artists have forever been using the concept of play to describe both internal and external relationships between their world and their practice. Indeed the word 'play' is used quite generally in the art world without being well accounted for. This dissertation works towards contributing to an expanded definition of a 'player' by considering how artists play critically. Miguel Sicart already makes a strong case for the expansion of the notion of play in *Play Matters* (2014):

What we want is the attitude of play without the activity of play. We need to take the same stance toward things, the world, and others that we take during play. But we should not

play... We want play without play. We want playfulness – the capacity to use play outside the context of play (Sicart 2014b, p.21).

This is perhaps what I am striving for when I discuss or use the term ‘play’ as an artist throughout my dissertation, as I have not designed digital games or experiences that might even be codified as play experiences, rather I am looking at an attitude or more elusive underpinning towards playful processes. I have not designed artworks that necessarily appear similar to art-game crossovers (‘art games’) like those of Pippin Barr or pervasive games; community games or games for socialisation and wellbeing, as Flanagan or others might. My artworks and their playful underpinnings tend to have much more ambiguous, personal and dark undertones. Sicart argues:

Playfulness allows us to extend the importance of play outside the boundaries of formalized, autotelic events, away from designed playthings like toys, or spaces like the playground or the stadium. It effectively allows seeing how play is a general attitude to life. Playfulness expands the ecology of play and shows its actual importance not only in the making of culture but also in the very being of human, on how being playful and playing is what defines us. We are because we play, but also because we can be playful (2014b, p.34).

This concept of play defining who we are becomes very important in later stages of the dissertation. Throughout my exploration of identities, faces, and bodies leading up to Chapter 7, the concept of individuation gains prominence as something that underpins all play processes. In Chapters 3, 4 and 5, the concepts of caricature, subversion, microfascisms, and probe-heads will serve to illustrate playfulness as a dark, critical, radical, and even a curiously reductive strategy.

## **Play**

Theories of play can be traced back from contemporary thinkers of games like Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, through Brian Sutton-Smith, Roger Caillois and Johan Huizinga, and finally into the early aesthetics of Friedrich Schiller and Immanuel Kant. My investigation follows what we could call the aesthetic tradition of play thinking (Sicart, 2016). Kant’s contribution to one of the first major theories of art, via the concept of beauty, primarily involves “A freeform play of the senses” which is “[...] conceived by Kant to be a product of the mind’s mental freedom and autonomy in assigning normative structures in the world,



such as harmony, perfection and function” (Sageng 2014, p.2). As such, Kant’s loose definition of play in relation to beauty involves at once a subjective, personal freedom and an appreciation of the objective world as it “ought to be” (Sageng 2014, p.3). The ongoing flavour permeating theories of play today echoes this paradoxical ‘freedom in structure’ or ‘freedom versus structure’ or ‘at once free, yet also bound’ type of conception that informs the phrase ‘critical play’. Schiller’s response to Kant’s account of play and beauty in his letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) involves a play-based society where activities and identities within such a society evolve and change in a playful, freeform way:

Schiller famously held that one must posit a ‘play drive’ which mediates between the timeless demands of subjective identity on the one hand, and the givenness and situatedness provided the sensuous drive (Sageng, 2014, p.3).

Schiller’s definition of play thus involves mediation between subjectivity and external reality (or, in his words, the “sense” and “form” drives) in a similar manner to Kant’s, but Schiller extends the notion of freeform play ideologically into the concept of “aesthetic education” with the aim of helping society to achieve political freedom through the interplay of many binaries like passivity and activity, infinity and matter, sense and form. In these instances play comes to illustrate playfulness in culture rather than the concept of play as an organised practice centred on the experience of games. It is this fixation on gaming and perhaps even the development of games studies and cultures of gamers that can distract us from the universal nature of play, where games become the limiting of play to specific forms of late capitalist consumption. This gives play an exchange value both in terms of its consumption as an activity and as a form of knowledge.

Play as commoditised consumption is a difficult proposition. Roger Caillois, in *Man, Play and Games* (1961), informs us that concepts of play require a broader plane from which to offer perspective, because “Huizinga seemed to ignore or minimise the diversified forms of play and the many needs served by play activity in various cultural contexts” (Caillois 1961, p.ix) and Caillois affirms that similar types of binaries as present in Kant and Schiller are present in conceptions of play in the Twentieth Century:

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious”, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly (Caillois 1961, p.4).

The “intense” and “utter absorption” of play should mean that it has a real-world impact, at least insofar as play affects our lives, our minds and our relationships to others, yet Caillois goes on to try and distance the outcome of play from the world, defining play as “free, separate, uncertain and...” importantly to our discussion “...unproductive”:

It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings that tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means (ibid.)

I, however, strongly agree with Flanagan’s assertion that play can be thought of as entirely productive and very integrated with the so-called ‘real world’. Play has some real impact to bear on reality which, to Flanagan (2010, p.5) is “not an invariant external structure” and is therefore very much affected by what play produces. Creativity theorist Mikhail Csikszentmihalyi supports this notion by asking “How is it possible for play to be both divorced from reality and yet so rife with real-life consequences?” (Flanagan, 2010, p.1).

This has implications for the widely debated notion of Huizinga’s “magic circle”. As theorist of synthetic worlds, Edward Castronova has pointed out, a synthetic world “cannot be sealed completely; people are crossing it all the time in both directions, carrying their behavioural assumptions and attitudes with them” (2005, p.147). When it comes to the boundary between synthetic play worlds and reality, for Castronova “the distinction is increasingly difficult to see” (ibid). In this sense, play worlds will always be assessed in terms of how we make sense of them given our existing reality.

While we may think then of a play scenario as being born of an existing reality and existing on that reality’s terms, play scenarios can also render alternative realities on their own terms. Flanagan’s assertion that artists’ play is subversive is here relevant, as play not only reflects ‘reality’ but also produces something when it is critical of it. Important to

Flanagan's argument is that artists (in her case, particularly visual artists, but I acknowledge that many types of artist can participate in this claim) have long known this, and through the study and deployment of representations artists play with realities by making copies of them which are slightly different (Flanagan uses Freud's 'uncanny'), tweaked through a subjective lens, or subverted entirely.

By understanding a play construction in relation to the world, we become sensitive to subversion or critique by picking up on changes and manipulations that have been selectively made by a creator through translation. This subjective influence alters its logic (of representation and operation) through its status a simulation, which as we know is an "imitation of the operation of a real-world process or system over time" (Banks et al, 2001, p.3). The differences between the 'real' world and the 'play' world allow us, the player, to perceive of the 'real' world in a new light and perhaps it is these new versions of existing reality that play produces. We may find ourselves having control over systems we otherwise might not have (particularly concerning, in Flanagan's writing, the agency of young women), or by having the space to discover new possibilities in simulations that we might not have had the chance to in the 'real' otherwise.

## **Community of Practice**

So what does play look like according to this dissertation, given that artists participate in it? My own artworks, discussed later, were produced between 2013 and 2015, and I have since made work that is not discussed in this dissertation at any point. The context or theoretical backdrop for my artwork up until the time I had started my dissertation in 2013 was post-internet-ism, which I have mentioned and critiqued earlier. Since exactly 2008 (the year the term 'post-internet' was coined) I have been making art responding to the internet, games and technology informed by net-art concepts such as telematics, and, I have been working with the real-time 3D game engine Unity3D since its first release.

My work was featured in a show *Tabularium* at Slopes Gallery, Melbourne in 2014. This show exhibited works by other international and renowned post-internet artists. It was curated by Alana Kushnir and included Jon Rafman, Lawrence Lek, Heman Chong, Anthony Mancellini, Ry David Bradley, Katja Novitskova and Eloise Bonneviot. Problematically though, I never did and still do not, see my work as being post-internet. My contribution was

indeed overlooked by some reviewers who felt that I was not enthusiastic enough as a post-internet artist to be mentioned alongside any of these people. This status may have had a silver-lining; as the film maker John Waters advises in his video interview with Amanda Marcotte, when making art “try to get on the coolest people one year ahead of you in school’s nerves” (Marcotte, 2017).

The community of practice that I see my work being most contemporarily aligned with has risen or matured in the last four years, since I began writing this dissertation. This ‘community’ that I talk through is more analogous than homologous – it isn’t centred on any particular social grouping or actual community, although some international Facebook groups like *Casual 3D Potluck*, *Casual VR Potluck*, or *Unreality Journeys*, as well as studying with game designers, has helped me to find artists and designers working in a similar zone to myself and some, particularly Robert Yang and Pippin Barr, *do* work together. Some would see themselves as game designers, some as artists. Some are inspired by games, others by social media. The game designers I mention here might be thought of as ‘art-game crossover’ or ‘art-play crossover’ artists under the terms ‘Alt Games’ or ‘Art Games’, while others are ‘outsider artists’ or popular, humorous, queer artists with online followings working particularly in the realm of real-time 3D art, which is the medium I most closely identify with as an artist. There is no particular term that draws them all together, but I see elements of each in my own work and research contribution. I have followed the work of each individually and many of them follow me through social media, especially Instagram, YouTube and Facebook. Generally I connect with the following artists because they:

- Exhibit an interest in the history of play and games, evidenced by the way they employ game-like tropes in formal as well as conceptual ways.
- Portray 3D art in an anti-aesthetic, punk, glitch, broken, grotesque or subversive way and are not trying to create clean or utopian representations of technology.
- Are not ‘too serious’ – they use humour, are playful and freely delight in a play with the vast possibilities of digital forms in 3D.
- Don’t tend to centre the work on their own self, self-empowerment, entrepreneurship, or income (with the exception of Wendy Vainity who does this in a subversive way) as this is very common to post-internet-ism. This

means that the artists aren't trying to rationalise their lack of empowerment in digital media systems by performing narratives of personal capital or 'disappearing into' capitalism.

- Are queer, punk-like, or portray issues pertaining to homosexual engagement with digital media.

### **Robert Yang**

<http://www.debacl.e.us>

Robert Yang is a celebrated alt-games designer and thinker whose work covers a similar critical conceptual territory to mine in terms of queer and psychosexual content. He is a major figure in the conception and dissemination of the term 'alt-games'. Alt-games – a term that has been around since 2015 and includes games that are “too experimental or offbeat to be ‘indie’ or ‘AAA’” (Kareem, 2015, para.1) – still resist solid definition but basically refer to small-scale independently made games that are personal, have a specific or reduced focus, an artistic focus, and/or are not being made for profit (unlike indie games) (@Inurashii, 2015). Yang's notable works are many and include: *Cobra Club* (2015), a digital play experience where players can create and modify dick-pics (penis photographs) of an alterable 3D avatar; and *Stick Shift* (2015), a “Short driving game about pleasuring a gay car and bringing it to climax” (Yang, 2017, para.6).

In 2014 I exhibited a number of works that involved the play of 3D sexual bodies that were a critique of the gay dating app *Grindr* based on my personal engagement with the platform. These works are discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, but I see how Yang has developed these themes in his own work after mine to be an affirmation (in my own mind) of the relevance of my own digital experiments in this contemporary area. I don't personally see my own work as being 'alt-games', but I see a likeness in my desire to caricature affective systems in a critical way, something that I discuss in Chapter 5. My critical caricature of affective systems particularly resonates with the alt-games tenet of having a reduced focus – being a critical portrayal of a specific experience – and heightening or exploding that experience by distending not only the visual or sonic tropes of it, but also the mechanics – through metaphor, anti-aesthetic, and humor. In my own work, for example, this involved the reductive portrayal of *Grindr* through a naked body that could be smeared around in a glitchy way 'under' the screen using touch input in *Gay Under Glass* (2014), or the reductive mapping of ego-gratification to the 'like' button in *Fragile Ego* (2013). This reflects a similar

spirit of caricature and humor that Yang exhibits when he maps homosexual arousal to a car gearstick in *Stick Shift* (2015) or the entire *Grindr* experience to that of taking the perfect dick-pic in *Cobra Club* (2015), although this pic would be deliberately glitched and distorted because of the nature of the 3D bodies used.

### **Pippin Barr**

<https://www.pippinbarr.com/>

Pippin Barr could be thought of as an “Art-Games” practitioner, which is a term that has been around since the early 2000s, and much longer than “Alt-Games”,. The prototypical art-games artist that people usually refer to is Cory Arcangel but Barr is a more relevant fit here, particularly because of his sense of humour, which is quite dark and witty. Humour is something important to play and to my practice, which I discuss in Chapter 3. Arcangel also has some humour in his work but, in general, I see his work as being more about form, and the tension between games and art as forms or objects. Art-games could refer to artworks produced inside games (machinima), about games (Arcangel), or games that are about art, which many of Barr’s are: Barr calls his outcomes “games” (Barr, 2017). Obvious art-games in his oeuvre include “Art Game” (2013) and many of his games refer to celebrated performance artist Marina Abramovic including *The Digital Marina Abramovic Insititute* (2013), and *Post-Apocalyptic Abramovic Method Game* (2016). The caption for Barr’s game *Let’s Play: Let’s Play: Ancient Greek Punishment: Art Edition Edition* (2016) reads:

It’s a game! In a painting! On a wall! In a gallery! In a game! Or something! Marvel as you once again confront that most boring question! Are games art?! Is art some kind of a damn game to you?! (Barr, 2015, para.1)

Like Barr, I care, but like to pretend I am flippant about the question ‘Are games art?’ because to me art and games are linked by aesthetics and play. I tend to believe that the issue of classifying art and games are based on communities of practice (who is viewing or consuming the work) more than anything else, or, if they aren’t, it is at least more useful to see these distinctions as superfluous in order to make original content that occupies its own space. What I actually like about Barr’s art-games is, like alt-games, they present very specific and reduced mechanics for conceptual purposes – often they deliberately break or resist the player in order to make a particular point, and display dark and humorous outcomes as a result. Like play and critical play in general, Barr’s work explores frustrating paradoxes

and tensions through humour and subversion. Two examples are *Let's Play: Let's Play: Ancient Greek Punishment: Art Edition Edition* (2016), and *Sisyphus: The Game* (2010); both games that emphasise futility of interaction and punishment of the player or their avatar through banal or repetitive gestures (pressing the same button over and over again, for example). Other later works of his such as the recent *V r 3* – a gallery of digital water (Meier, 2017, para.1) also reflect my interest in the digital aesthetics of 3D art.

### **Hunter Jonakin**

<http://hunterjonakin.com/>

Hunter Jonakin is another art-games type of artist though he refers to himself as a multimedia artist (Jonakin, 2017, para.1) and operates in a more traditional contemporary art sphere. We first connected over our interest in the influence and legacy of the big-business artist Jeff Koons whose work I've written about (Penney, 2010). Jonakin's best-known work is a refitted arcade machine that houses a first-person-shooter called *Jeff Koons Must Die!!!* (2011) in which the player goes around a gallery that exhibits a Koons retrospective and can destroy the artwork with a rocket launcher until Koons's army of lawyers shows up to attack them. Jonakin's approach is reflected in some of my own work produced in an earlier period, such as my first ever fully realised Unity3D artwork *Valhalla – Virtual William St* (2010), also a first person shooter produced for two sculptural video-game machines depicted below.



Figure 1, Tom Penney, *Valhalla – Virtual William St* (2010). Curtin University, interactive real-time 3D environment in expandable foam, plaster, clay, wood and electronics.

There are important conceptual and formal connections between our practices. A lot of my work prior to starting this dissertation, between 2008 and 2011, responded to the philosophical problem that Koons had created for art through his smarmy, showman-like and egocentric conflation of art with capital, as well as conflating this business-like pursuit with forms of spirituality, such as his claim for his giant flower puppy that “Puppy communicates love, warmth and happiness to everyone. I created a contemporary Sacred Heart of Jesus” (Koons 1993, p.144). Koons has also stirred up theorists, especially Rosalind Krauss, through the way he elevates kitsch, appropriation, banality and pop cuteness to the status of high or fine art (Rothkopf 2014, p.25).

We could easily trace Koons’s legacy through to many of the issues post-internet-ism exhibits. One such example is Ryder Ripps, who has been compared to Koons when exhibiting and appropriating a woman’s Instagram through a series of warped hyper-realistic paintings in his show *Ho* (Sokol, 2015) which was meant to be Ripps’ critique of a “constant reflexive feedback loop of ego” (Sokol, 2015, para.4). Ripps even hired some of Koons’s own assistants to make the work (Sokol, 2015, para.5). He has in turn been criticized for his own egocentrism (and misogyny) by objectifying an entire person for his own personal gain. He has done this in not only one project, but also in others such as *Art Whore* (2014) where he was “soliciting sensual masseuses from Craigslist (whom he consistently refers to as “sex workers”) to make drawings for him in order to demonstrate that he’s being exploited as an artist” (Kimball 2014, para.2), which is problematic and concerning given Ripps is born of both wealth and privilege.

What I like about Jonakin’s work and its critique of Koons, is the attempt to simulate the destruction and disavowal of these problems of ego for art, positioning the player to sidestep these paradoxes for art thinking (the blurring of the self and the system), through a subversive caricature of Koons and his practice, using representation as well as mechanics to ham this up and ‘play’ it. The symbolic diminishing of an ego-gone-wild by reducing it, here through its simulation and rocket-launcher assault in a play experience, is important to me as an artist and important to the notion of a playful caricature. It participates in an oft-forgotten or overlooked legacy of humorous punk in art, a humour that allows us to simulate and step outside of a problem in order to see it objectively. I discuss this function of humour further in Chapter 3.



## **Wendy Vainity**

<https://www.youtube.com/user/wendyvainity>

Wendy Vainity is a self-taught ‘outsider artist’ who lives in Adelaide, South Australia and has been referred to as “the Henry Darger of the Internet” (Chayka, 2012). I knew of Vainity before many of the artists in this community of practice selection: I fell in love with her work immediately. Vainity is a great example of an artist working with the portrayal of self or identity online, but she does it in a very free-form way that doesn’t pay any heed to the egopolitics of contemporary art discussion. Vainity plays with the presentation of her own body in a completely bizarre, self-effacing way. It’s not self-conscious in that it attempts to hide any insecurity or boost her own profile, it really is as if she does not care at all about what anyone thinks and genuinely enjoys the material remixing of her own body and self (via an avatar) through tacky, surreal, and garish 3D video art.

Vainity makes 3D representations of her body which are often rigid and awkward, lip synched badly to distorted audio, use motion capture dance moves, have erratic CG hair with settings maxed out to uncanny and disturbing proportions, wears CG cloth outfits that flap in similarly uncanny and bizarre ways, uses bright colours and lots of tacky generated effects and lots of distorted audio. This lack of care for what people think expresses itself in fantastic titles such as “bare-arsed Tedda bear does lunch in the park” or “just all other my crap” (sic) (Vainity, 2017). As I discuss in later chapters, particularly Chapters 2, 6 and 7, identity play and this ability to ‘play oneself’, be it through figurative representations of one’s own body, or through the manipulation of extensions of the body in other objects and symbols, is crucial to the notion of artist’s critical play because its consistency is that of a constant re-framing and testing of what the self might be over time.

## **Theo Triantafyllidis (Trian)**

<http://slimetechnology.org/>

Theo Trian is a contemporary artist working with real-time 3D and the software Unity3D like myself. Trian’s employment of anti-aesthetic, abjection, and remixing of the body is quite akin to my own. Similar too, is the way he works with clay objects and 3D scans of these objects to produce deliberately crude, wet-looking digital sculptures using shiny digital shaders. This is how I produced many of my past 3D digital forms, and I continue to use 3D

photo scanning techniques to do the same. In “Self Portrait (Interior)” (2016) Trian reflects many of the concepts I discuss in Chapter 5, where a digital representation of his own body becomes a digital Surrealist “autotopography” (Bal, 2002). When cultural theorist Mieke Bal discusses celebrated post-surrealist artist Louise Bourgeois’ sculptural practice, she uses “autotopography” as term to describe the perverse and psychosexual reversal of the ‘interior’ of Bourgeois’ subjectivity to an ‘exterior’ environment; a topography that allows others to physically (or, in the case of Trian, digitally) explore a psychology and interiority of a body and its subjectivity. Much of Trian’s outcomes feature random and disparate objects, body parts, animals, foods, and erratic abstractions. Such a practice functions to fetishise and rapidly parse a perverse series of partial objects as digital forms. I discuss this type of perversity as artistic practice in Chapters 3 and 4.

### **Cool 3D World**

<https://www.facebook.com/cool3dworld/>

*Cool 3D World* is a collaboration between Brian Tessler and Jon Baken and started as a Vine account. Like Wendy Vainity’s work, *Cool 3D World* is a series of videos rendered in a 3D software package that has become hugely popular online. The videos display grotesquely distorted, monstrous human forms participating in bizarre acts. ‘Human’ bodies lay eggs, grow trees from their face, eat other bodies, have whole universes inside them, make ugly baby sounds, sing horrible songs, or pop pimples that explode into new beings. Sometimes they defecate whole sandwiches or it rains gurgling, grimacing faces, or there are lakes filled with naked men rotating and making squeaky sounds. Bodies scream and repetitively enact the same unsettling movements and animations. There is something like a contemporary version of a 90s ‘gross-out’ cartoon like ‘Ren and Stimpy’ feel to these videos, although a sense of plot has been abandoned for Surrealistic segues into new transformations. In a similar way to Trian above, such work reflects a perverse fascination with the re-organisation of the body, a type of ‘probe-head-ism’ that I discuss in Chapter 5, as well as the subversion of bodies as objects that can be reorganised and transformed that I discuss in Chapters 4 and 6.

### **Geoffrey Lillemon**

<http://www.geoffreylillemon.com/website/>

Geoffrey Lillemon is a queer artist working with a punk, camp, garish real-time 3D art, "outgrowing the stems of popitude culture, art fabrications, and digital dystopia, vowing for

retirement in a pixellated renaissance of the Disney ghetto" (Lillemon, 2016). Much of his work like *Hiss Missy* (2016), *Bitmap Banshees* (2016), or the *Nailpolish Inferno* (2014-2016), portray queer representations of bodies and a fascination with surrealistic subversions and psychosexual arrangements of bodies. There is also an interest in witches and dark magic, something I discuss in Chapter 5. The *Nailpolish Inferno* (2014-16) is "[a] strip club filled with looks of the digital media world and all the extremes that pass through our field of vision: vain, semi-celebrities, grotesque figures, and techno glitter" (Lillemon, 2017, para.9). Rendered in real-time 3D with exaggerated digital materiality, these works mirror attitudes in my own, especially in regards to the playing down of ego. As in other examples, Lillemon's work involves a pure joy expressed through the ability to play with, rearrange and remix bodies in a Frankensteinian manner and subvert good taste and the normative arrangements of bodies.

### **Tender**

[https://creators.vice.com/en\\_au/article/this-piece-of-meat-just-swiped-right](https://creators.vice.com/en_au/article/this-piece-of-meat-just-swiped-right)

Cors Brinkman, Jeroen van Oorschot, Marcello Maureira, and Matei Szabo produced an artwork in 2015 called *Tender* which was a subversion of the dating app *Tinder* (Veix, 2015). *Tinder* is a dating app where you can say 'yes' or 'no' to people's profiles who are in your area. The artwork was a machine that had a rotating arm and a slot for a phone that had the *Tinder* app open. A piece of meat was attached to the rotating arm that rotated forever, swiping 'right' on every *Tinder* profile that came up on the phone's screen. When you 'swipe right' as opposed to 'swipe left' on *Tinder*, it means that you like the look of the person's dating profile that is on your screen. *Tender* was essentially a machine that liked everyone's dating profile. This work has participated in a similar playful critique to my own way of representing the body and the futility of dating apps in a mechanical, comical way, as discussed in Chapter 4.

### **Other Artists**

There are many other artists that I could include as aesthetic or conceptual peers in this community of practice, such as Austin Lee, Jon Rafman, Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran, Philip Brophy, Sam Lyon ("Jellygummies"), Eva Papamargariti, Ryan Trecartin, Paul Yore, Mo Chamas, Georgie Roxby Smith, "Badly Re-Created Animation Film Frames" (<https://9gag.com/gag/5570127/badly-recreated-animated-film-frames>), all whom share an interest in the medium of digital 3D art, digital form, punkness, queerness, anti-aesthetic,

subversion, surrealism, and humour. All to varying degrees constitute perverse practices and all re-imagine bodies in subverted, transformed, and reconfigured ways. Many of the above utilise 3D scanning and printing techniques, transferring anti-aesthetic forms between physical sculptures and digital applications. Some are interested in magic, alchemy, and witchcraft (see Chapter 5). This reflects my interest in doing the same with my own plasticine sculptures and characters from *The Sims*, discussed throughout the following chapters of this dissertation.

## 2 Playing Critically

In late 2015 I picked up a copy of *Toys Redux: An Anthology on Play as Critical Action* (Gygax and Welter, 2015) that had accompanied an exhibition at the *Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst*. The anthology draws together artists for whom play is central, without looking at games, toys, or play experiences in any limiting way. The book, while promising an “anthology on play as critical action”, offers mostly political sentiments and accounts for the ways artists have been influenced by video games or toys. I hope to shed more light on what play actually does critically for this community of practice, or how it might operate in artistic practice, and subsequently incorporate this into an expanded definition of critical play by the end of the dissertation.

In order to achieve this I investigate my own practice, which is characterised and informed by critical play that involves the creation of critical artworks. The artworks I have made in this research critique gay online dating applications and make use of a number of digital applications. In this mode of production, play becomes the method by which critical ideas are generated. The production of work and its surrounding thought processes, rather than necessarily the art-outcomes themselves, are the more important factor here in terms of the generation of new knowledge. This chapter is concerned with the articulation of this largely practice-led research method. These methods especially concern the theme of identity and inform the conclusion of the dissertation in Chapter 7 which concerns the production of identities through play.

### **Art-Based Research**

Art-based research is a form of practice-led research. In *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts*, Graeme Sullivan argues that the “imaginative and intellectual work undertaken by artists is research” (2010, xix). He continues:

The critical and creative investigations that occur in studios, galleries, on the Internet, in community spaces, and other places where artists work, are forms of research based on studio art practice. Rather than adopting methods of inquiry from the social sciences, the research practices explored subscribe to the view that similar research goals can be achieved by

following different yet complementary paths. What is common is the attention to systematic inquiry, yet in a way that privileges the role imagination and intellect plays in constructing knowledge that is not only new but has the capacity to transform human understanding (ibid.)

As this PhD seeks to use my own individual approaches to making art in order to approach the research question art-based research has been the logical methodology. This process involves exploring play techniques, as integral to cultural practice (Flanagan, 2009; Sutton-Smith, 1997), within art practice. Focusing on the idea of play and affection in digital cultures, this research (both the artworks and dissertation) evolves around a series of iterative probes and inquiry. For art-based researcher Shaun McNiff:

[...] a defining quality of art-based researchers is their willingness to start the work with questions and a willingness to design methods in response to the particular situation, as contrasted to the more general contemporary tendency within the human sciences to fit the question into a fixed research method. The art of the art-based researcher extends to the creation of a process of inquiry (2007, p.33).

This “particular situation” for my research, as suggested by McNiff above, was discussed in Chapter 1 in relation to digital artists, play, and affective technology (which includes dating apps) within digital cultures. Throughout Chapter I discussed a number of approaches, forming a process of inquiry in response to this situation, or as McNiff has called it “the creation of a process of inquiry” (ibid.). This approach draws from an adapted version of Mary Flanagan’s “Critical Play”, and begins with the term “enquiry machine” (Jungnickel, 2015).

## **Enquiry Machines**

While McNiff states that art-based research need not adopt methods from the social sciences, art-based research projects such as this one can inevitably create insights into social problems given the contexts that such artists work in or reflect in the creation of practical work. Noortje Marres, contributing to Nina Wakeford and Celia Lury’s anthology *Inventive Methods* (2012), writes about the “living experiment” as a way of living through a problem practically:

[...] the living experiment presents a notable device of social and cultural research: it provides a format or ‘protocol’ for exploring and testing forms of life, which is today widely applied

across social life. And because of this [...] can be used to explore collective practices of researching social and cultural change, as engaged in by actors who do not necessarily identify themselves as ‘social researchers’ (Marres, 2012, p.76).

In my own circumstances, the environment in which I am a ‘living experiment’ involves my use of gay online dating applications (and to a degree other social media sites and video games). This will be discussed at length in Chapter 4 Fascism in Face-ism. To artists generally, their method of research is their own and very much reflects their own lives and habitual modes of enquiry. Artists form “living experiments” (Marres, 2012, p.76) as they are very much connected to and sensitive to their lived environment as the pool from which is inspiration is drawn. In this regard, outcomes, while not necessarily offering conclusions on social problems lived by the artist, offer insights that have been distilled through a subjective framing of a lived problem by them. Thinking through social issues occurs in and around the production and reflection upon such outcomes, and either the initial problems the work responded to, or new problems created by the work.

As such, the creation of artwork for this research can be thought of as the construction of an “enquiry machine” (Jungknickel, 2015, para.1) or “Dewey Organ”. An enquiry machine, given Kat Jungknickel’s research, is a way of visualising and creating problems and considers the different publics involved with such problems. To me, the production of a body of critical artwork work is the production of an enquiry machine; a symbolic representation of, or artifact produced in face of, a problem that provokes thinking about its subject matter. Chapter 4 discusses this in relation to gay online dating publics and the problems that concern them.

## **Identity Play in Artists’ Methods**

### **Playing Many Selves**

For digital artist Mark Amerika, the Deleuzian fashion of wandering around in affective circuits testing the notion of a ‘self’ is key to contemporary arts practice. A term used here is “nomadism”, which refers to a decentred wandering. Within Amerika’s concept of “technomadism”, a practice of ‘testing’ via the body becomes a critical research approach; it is a tool for discovery through asking questions about where the self is located or constructed. Amerika claims “it’s the artist [as a self] that is the medium or instrument that is most capable of conducting radical experiments in subjective thought and experience”

(Amerika 2008, p.75). This is the discovery of new approaches through the performing artists' experiences; by testing situations through becoming different "selves". He largely refers to this approach as "technomadism".

A technomadic research approach involves artists acting-out on "whatever playing field they happen to be on at any given time" (Amerika, 2008, p.76). This reflects the 'perpetual present-ness' of Gilles Deleuze (1988) and Frederic Jameson's (1991) notions of schizophrenic identity in postmodern culture. In this situation, this "playing field" becomes the digital cultures artists engage with, namely social media, online dating or video gaming. Amerika calls upon the image of Eleanor Antin's "one person art-making machine" and uses the words of Vito Acconci to foreground the way in which a technomadic artist may engage with different media given different "playing fields":

[...] if I specialize in a medium, then I would be fixing a ground for myself, a ground I would have to be digging myself out of, constantly, as one medium was substituted for another – so, then instead of turning toward 'ground' I would shift my attention and turn to 'instrument', I would focus on myself as the instrument that acted on whatever ground was available (Acconci in Amerika, 2008, p.75).

The technomadic 'one person art-making machine', where the body or 'self' becomes an instrument through which all contexts are filtered and responded to given a relevant medium, could be considered a critical, or at least interrogative, approach. If we take the position that one can use whatever mediums are necessary in the moment to respond to a given context, then in an affective scenario, and given digital cultures are contexts, this involves the testing or play of the self against them; artists must "...step into the fold and 'play themselves' – even if that means having to reinvent their artistic personas over and over again" (Amerika, 2008, p.82). This introduces the concept of 'play', or technomadic play, as testing the location of an affected 'self' in digital cultures, and raises the artistic medium chosen as reflecting any relevant explorations pertaining to this play.

My own playing of 'many selves' is evident in a prior work of mine, *The Tarot Self Portrait* (2010) (Figure 3). In this work I had attempted to subvert the fractal narcissist, by assimilating the entire library of the Tarot into my own body. I had been reflecting on how my own Facebook images came to mirror a library of 'possible selves' back to me, but how



my reflection upon these images were plagued with what Amerika might refer to as notions of ‘not self’; none of the images are actually ‘me’.

In this example, the sheer absurdity and tackiness of the poses and costumes break down any notions of immortality (of replication of these archetypes into infinity, or their application to any human being) through their clumsy materiality and personalised application. Facing my own self-portrait here, as a set of objects, I do not feel that any are flattering or self-promoting – there is a disconnection between me and the outcomes and representations of me that I feel are not necessarily ‘me’. They resist my narcissism and instead I ask myself questions such as “oh dear... what am I?... what are these?... am I this?... is it possible to be immortalised through these things?” I therefore ask through this disconnected questioning; could this be a playful, sunnily ironic example of technomadic practice and ‘playing the self’?



Figure 2. Tom Penney, *The Tarot Self Portrait* (2010), digital images

As an art historic example in our discussion of artists’ identity play, the accessibility of vernacular tools (in this example, photography) lends a ‘disappearance’ to Cindy Sherman’s work: “I recall doubting Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-80): wasn’t she just a narcissist taking pictures of herself all day long?” (Allen, 2011, para.9), but we have to differentiate here between narcissism as behaviour of creative users, and as a feature of some artists’ work. I suggest that, although it is difficult to tell where narcissism as self-

involvement starts and ends for artists, it could be confused with deliberate strategies that seek to blur boundaries and disrupt. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, for example, have discussed “schizophrenia” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983) as a model for resisting the co-option of identity in contemporary capitalism. While Jameson (1982) and Jean Baudrillard (1988) have both used “schizophrenia” to describe subjects critically in such a society, Deleuze and Guattari believe that the lack of consistent identity schizophrenics experience, and their difficulty participating in normative language systems, allows them to resist its effects but still be productive (Peretti, 1997). This is the difference between online participation as egotistical and self-affirming (narcissistic) and online participation as a rapid testing of what the self ‘might be’ where there is a lack of a consistent identity (schizophrenic). Both could produce a similar volume of output and engagement. I want to make it clear that I am aware that the use of ‘schizophrenia’ is not in-vogue, and using it to describe behaviours that have nothing to do with clinically diagnosed schizophrenia is problematic and even insulting to those who experience it. A better word to use than ‘schizophrenia’ is ‘nomadism’ but I have mentioned it here as it comes up once or twice as a concept in Deleuze’s analyses, which I refer to throughout this dissertation.

Evoking Judith Butler, Cindy Sherman plays different roles, producing self-portraits with cameras, indeed ‘playing many selves’ in order to question what constructs an identity by confusing the boundary between self and other. In doing so Sherman subverts media representations of women; ‘testing’ the point where Sherman is herself, and what external representations are otherwise defining and constructing her. In her work *The Untitled Film Stills* (1977-80) the artist dressed up and photographed herself as different ‘types’ of women in popular film, television and printed media. Interestingly Sherman states “I feel I’m anonymous in my work.... When I look at the pictures, I never see myself; they aren’t self-portraits. Sometimes I disappear” (Collins, 1990, para.1). Here Sherman’s work seems more nomadic than narcissistic; it is easy to confuse the two. Sherman doesn’t take these photos to affirm herself, perhaps she does it to *find* herself. Part of what we see in the work of artists that play many selves is that they ‘disappear’ into a multiplicity of performances through their mimicry of external ‘acts’ and media portrayals. While appearing narcissistic in form, the work operates differently to regular producing narcissism; it can have a critical, resistant component. It therefore functions as a recalcitrant activism towards self-discovery and visibility.

## Critical Play as Method

### Identity Play

Therese Lichtenstein comments in her interview with Cindy Sherman that a “...sense of process and play comes through in your last show in that the poses and arrangements of the mannequins, accoutrements and settings did not seem preconceived. It reminds me of how children play with dolls” (Lichtenstein, n.d, para.1). The work of Sherman (or Post-Internet artists such as Ryan Trecartin and Ed Fornieles), can function as a kind of identity play; a testing of where an identity starts and finishes in media culture, and of what informs or constructs it. The vehicle for this has been through the manipulation of Sherman’s own body, and in later work, dolls that stand in for a body.

As such, a playful approach in the digital becomes a kind of ‘technomadism’, where one turns their own fantasy worlds, nomadic wandering and boundary-testing into an interrogative practice. This reaches a parallel in doll play, which like the media stereotypes, possible selves and online systems Sherman ‘tests’ herself against, present dolls within which projected selves can be enacted. Here, play is a way of questioning our identities and is relevant to the current rapid authorship of profiles, which involve constant testing of the representation of an identity or what it could be and appear like to others. Artists play when they create artwork, and designers design for play experience in games and interactive works.

In *Plei Plei* (2013), Jussi Holopainen offers a definition of identity play in their text “Exploring Play” based off Sherry Turkle’s analysis of digital identity in *Life of the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*” (1995). In identity play: “the person is testing and exploring the limits of what he or she is like as a person, including moral standards, values and preferences, behavioural patterns, skills and knowledge” (Holopainen, 2013, para.17). This reflects Turkle when she discusses how “it is on the internet that our confrontations with technology as it collides with our sense of human identity are fresh, even raw [...] we are dwellers on the threshold between the real and virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go along” (Turkle, p.10). Indeed, everyday users undertake a form of identity play when they navigate their various constructed profiles on MySpace, Facebook and other social media systems, as well as in the play of video game characters. No matter which digital culture one is participating in, the concept of play appears to be involved on some level.

## Critical Play and Subversion

Play can [...] function as a tool to understand the self. Many anthropologists like Sutton-Smith have argued that play is the way children work out social and cultural norms.

—Flanagan 2009, p.5.

Mary Flanagan has undertaken research into to framing the relationship between art and play culture. As a feminist game design approach, Flanagan's *Critical Play* (2009) explores specifically how players of games (especially girls) have used doll play, domestic play ("playing house"), dress-ups, and "re-skinning" to critique and examine their identities in relation to broader human systems. Flanagan discusses "play as method" for artists, an element of which I interpret here to be identity play as Holopainen or Turkle describe, however Flanagan goes further. To Flanagan, Sutton-Smith provides grounds on which to situate notions of play as a critical activity through subversion, which is "the turning [of a thing] upside down or uprooting it from its position; overturning, upsetting; overthrow of a law, rule, system, condition..." (OED 1989, p.88).

For Sutton-Smith the dark side of play emerges from the transgression of a game's structure or rules, inciting subversion. Whereas for Flanagan this means subversion operates "from within" and possibly ignites cultural change; play "keeps a species flexible in evolution [with the] potential to help define social norms and identity" these are through the "use of play forms as forms of bonding, including the exhibition and validation or parody of membership and traditions in a community" and Flanagan goes on to say this is "essential to cultural formation" (Flanagan, 2009, p.5).

In *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997) Sutton-Smith organises play into four major categories; play as learning, play as power, play as fantasy and play as self. As "power play" play involves the symbolic "practice of real-life functions" such as "bonding and belonging" (Flanagan, 2009, p.4) the play space becomes a symbolic "world" where rules can be changed and tested to imagine them differently. In a "play as self" this can mean that different bodies come to represent these worlds and associated changes, as seen in the work of Sherman. An artist's subversion might involve taking a cultural situation, rather than the rules set up by the symbolic play space, as the space for play, as many have done through political intervention, performance and disruption. The work of Fluxus, The Critical Art

Ensemble or Barbara Kruger, would be some examples, and in these scenarios the blurring of art and life suggests the transgression of a ‘magic circle’ in order to involve ‘the world’ as the space of play. In Chapter 1 of this research, the ‘play space’ as intersection with ‘the world’ was outlined as a situation I engage in. Now I move to look at how identities, specifically, might be tested in digital art through Flanagan’s notions of critical doll play.

### **Art and Doll Play**

Flanagan opens much of her discussion through the art historical subversiveness of Dadaism and Surrealism. Out of these movements Flanagan draws the use of artists’ dolls or “the peculiar emergence of dolls in twentieth-century art” (Flanagan, 2009, p.37). The man-sized “marionettes” in Alfred Jarry’s Play *Ubu Roi*, and Hannah Höch’s “Dada Dolls” are some examples. Emphasis however is placed on Hans Bellmer’s dolls, for their violating depiction of the female form, which “objectified, fetishised and ultimately degraded the female body” (Flanagan, 2009, p.42). These dolls however functioned critically in the Surrealists’ time to highlight issues of desire, fetishism and political unrest. Flanagan’s reasoning for the use of dolls in art are Deleuzian and Freudian; the presentation of other possible worlds in dolls link reality, (artistic) fantasy worlds and subversion:

A frightening countenance is the expression of a frightening possible world, or of something frightening in the world – something I do not yet see. Let it be understood that the possible is not here an abstract category designating something which does not exist: the expressed possible world certainly exists, but it does not exist (actually) outside of that which expresses it (Deleuze in Flanagan 2009, p.41).

The notion of Freud’s uncanny is deployed also, which “helps us ground an investigation into the human fascination with automata and life-like figurines” (Flanagan, 2009, p.41) because the uncanny is linked “to desires repressed from infancy, and [...] this return to repressed desire is based on a desire for control, a viewer’s or player’s reaction to uncanny situations can create dread, fear, or fascination out of what on the surface appears to be an everyday circumstance” (ibid.). The tradition of subverting or re-framing the body in this way is continued in the work of postmodern artists such as Jake and Dinos Chapman, who similarly violate the presentation of bodies through life-size dolls, and thus the expectations we have over ordinarily perceiving a desirable body and the contexts that construct such desire.

### **Video Game “Dolls”**

Flanagan further links doll play to video games, like that of *The Sims* series (Maxis, The Sims Studio, 2000-present); “[t]here is a desire to produce meaningful interaction that motivates the creation of new worlds” through play (Flanagan, 2009, p.57), and these worlds are accessed through digital game play. Flanagan emphasises the subversive possibility inherent within these doll-play worlds; a way for individuals to play with and subvert the normative and banal structures of domesticity and consumer capitalism through objects (dolls and dollhouses) that represent key features of those systems. “The fun of the virtual house is inextricably related to mastery of the household objects and the human-like dolls that are so very familiar” (Flanagan, 2009, p. 56).

This feeling can function as a critical but enjoyable process. “A great deal of pleasure... is derived from subverting these set norms and exploring the boundaries of what is, and is not permissible” (ibid.). When playing *The Sims*, the player is “put into a controlling position” (ibid.) over personal anxieties, through the objectification of bodies situated in symbolic worlds. Flanagan uses a Freudian perspective here, that it is enjoyable for players to enact their gaze over objectified bodies; satiating a “desire for mastery over the object” (ibid.). Doll play can here become transformative, symbolically representing an altered version of the player’s reality. This is not unlike contemporary art, which at many points constructs an altered vision of reality for others to participate in, as a separate and manageable, symbolic representation in the ‘other’ space of the gallery. The work of Cao Fei is invoked (discussed further in Chapter 6 Queering the Sims) where her *RMB City* (2007-11) becomes both a video game and gallery space that her avatar, her ‘doll’, inhabits. Doll play also has implications for narcissism, in that human beings as objects, become part of the ‘world building’ activity of the narcissist.

### **Re-Skinning, Unplaying**

Flanagan goes more specifically into the subversive strategies of doll play, two of which are “re-skinning” and “un-playing”. “Re-skinning” is a user-made intervention in games, a form of modding, where graphics are replaced by users to change the games’ meaning. A notable example of this is for the purposes of “somasochism and sexual experimentation” (Flanagan, 2009, p.109). My own experience with the mods of websites like “Pandora Sims” suggest this is the case; offering subversions of the game incorporating nude anatomical features and incorporating sexual and homosexual animations and interactions, thus breaking

the game's normative boundaries, and changing its nature to incorporate minority or underground perspectives. "Un-playing" is slightly different, in that players might exploit existing mechanics to work against the encouraged goals. In *The Sims* this might mean trapping a character in a room without doors and setting them on fire, or making them wet themselves by not incorporating a toilet into the house's design.

Flanagan's strategies help us to think about the 'play' between the artist, screen, and exploration of identity. Her reflection on doll play, and the objectification of represented human bodies in critical doll play, suggests how artists as 'players' might treat bodies and virtual bodies subversively in contemporary digital culture. Of course, many feminist artists like Maria Abramovic have performed in ways that suggest the manipulation of an objectified female body, as in *Rhythm 0* (1974), but Flanagan's work applies this to the realm of the digital, which is highly manipulative in that bodies are easily objectified, altered, and changed in the windows of our screens. Games offer us manipulable worlds, intensified at a point by the individual screen, and displayed for the amusement of a player. As such, narcissism or nomadism are invoked; such representations become objects, as extensions of the narcissist's body, or wanderings of the nomad's fantasy world.

In terms of 'play as method' for artists, Flanagan uses the words of Johan Huizinga; "All art derives from play" (Huizinga in Flanagan, 2009, p.8). Play as a process of making art can be further demonstrated by Flanagan's use of Macleod (1999) "If I had to say that I had a methodology then I have a method of play which is bringing things in without a pre-established notion of their use". One of the inconsistencies with Flanagan's consideration of 'play as method' is that she does not focus on the experience of creating art as a play activity, rather she focuses on making art to design critical playful experiences. Issues of what constitutes 'experimentation' rather than 'play' is not something that Flanagan covers; for artists, a lack of 'pre-establishment' is a common theme when discussing the emergence of outcomes through play.

For Amerika, play in this form takes on a certain unconscious quality, the aim of 'playing a self' is to reveal things previously unknown, and here Amerika's referral to playing many selves actually complicates the notion of critical play: "Where [is the artist-researcher] to go and play, the way any great athlete would play when they say [...] 'I am not conscious when I am playing ...how can we encourage more research methodologies that

essentially support the artist not being conscious while playing? Is that even possible... ?” (Amerika, 2008, p.79). This complicates the searching for a ‘critical play’ as the nature of being ‘critical’ implies a degree of consciousness; an awareness of one’s situation and of the correct questions to ask in order to ‘be critical’.

### **Design Method**

Flanagan has articulated in *Critical Play* (2009) the notion of ‘play as method’ for artists which sits well within an emergent art-based method and complements Amerika’s approach to “playing oneself” (2008) or seeking play in the consistent present-ness of digital cultures. I have considered her method as it applies to the term ‘critical’, as well as how such a method might apply to artists. Although Flanagan could go into the idea of ‘play as method’ in greater detail, we can expand on the idea of the body as instrument to consider the playing with bodies (as with Flanagan’s discussion of dolls) as complementary to Amerika’s approach. This is a way artists can make discoveries through transformation, reconfiguration, subversion, and intervention with their own body and others’ bodies; their subjectivity, and the subjectivity of others in digital systems. In particular, the image of Deleuze’s nomad (or schizoid) is invoked as a ‘player-as-tester’, in contrast to the image of a narcissist as a ‘player-as-participant’. This became play as testing the location of a ‘self’ or of identity, as in Holopainen and Turkle’s notions of identity play. To re-iterate some major strategies of critical play discussed thus far include subversive play in the form of:

- Constructing Artists’ Dolls
- Re-Skinning
- Unplaying
- Re-writing

With these elements in mind, as the artist I have become the ‘critical player’; the one who tests selves, the limits of my body (and other bodies) and reflects to some degree, Deleuze’s conception of nomadism. The situation I respond to in digital culture becomes the emergent zone; the milieu for critical play. The situation (digital cultures) and its actors (subjects within digital cultures) are what becomes ‘played’, through various tools and approaches that I call upon in individual projects as an “art-making machine” (Amerika, 2008). My method involves becoming the technomadic, critical playing, one-person art making machine, who



tests “alteration” (Bishop, 2012) or affect through the critical play of bodies including perceptions of my own.

### **The Materiality of the Method**

In keeping with art-based research, and its emergent approach, any number of materials and tools may need to be deployed to engage in the above approaches. For the most part, and given the nature of my own practice, my materials and tools involve:

- Using game engine software such as Unity3D
- Using photo-editing software such as Adobe Photoshop
- ‘scraping’ images from offline to distort and change (see Chapter 6)
- Constructing mannequins, dolls and bodies from traditional art materials (clay, plastic, plasticine etc.)
- 3D scanning forms and bodies to use in virtual spaces
- Bringing forms, such as avatars, out of the computer via 3D printing
- Using code, and expanding on existing knowledge of Javascript
- Drawing digitally and traditionally

### 3 Queerness, Humour and Perversity

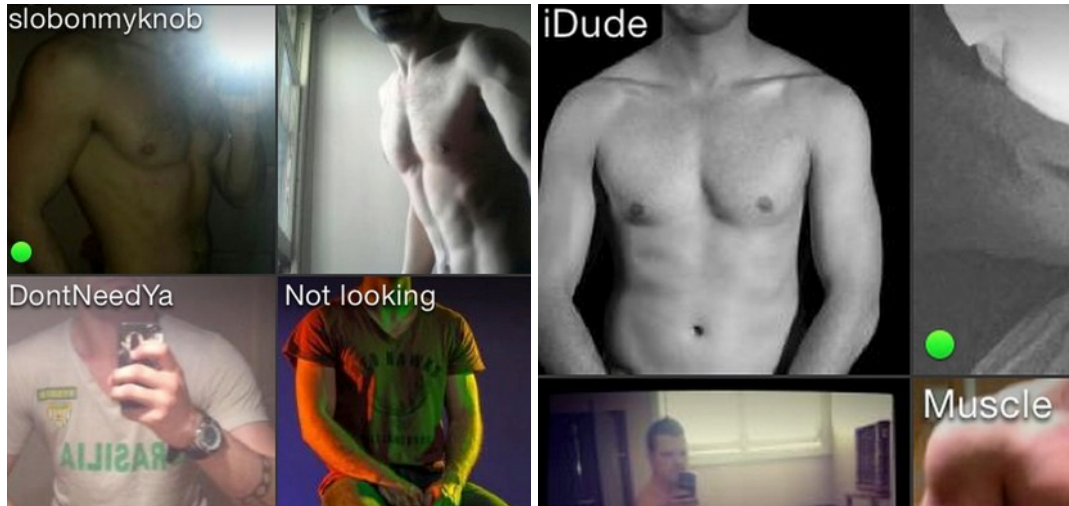


Figure 4 Tom Penney, 2014, screenshot of profiles displayed on the gay dating app *Grindr*.

Where Flanagan's *Critical Play* (2009) is a feminist approach to thinking about game design, I am using critical play to think about artists' processes, specifically my own. While I am a feminist, my research additionally involves creating representations specific to gay men from a queer perspective. The world of gay men's experience is often hidden to non-participants. Gay men in online dating environments differ from women and non-gay men in specific ways that require a critical attention that may not be entirely readable through a lens of house and doll play. Also, my work does not have an immediately constructive or social element; much of Flanagan's writing is complementary to Claire Bishop's in they both have a keen research interest in art as activism.

In fact, much of Flanagan's artistic output can be seen as emerging from movements such as Relational Aesthetics, and have the compassionate social concern that has been discussed between Nicholas Bourriaud and Bishop over the years. We might generalise that this is a positive and constructive approach that characterises much Anglo-American feminist art discourse, whereas my own work throughout this project has been characterised by concepts of isolation with screens and the consumption and manipulation of representations of male bodies. It is problematic and comes to constitute its own form of enquiry machine.

My own work perhaps deals with more sinister territory and is more ‘male’ in the critical, binary sense; technocracy, manipulation, control, affective distance, and obsession with partial bodies are all involved in my artistic outcomes. This may resonate with the representation of bodies by early male surrealists such as those by Hans Belmer that Flanagan finds uncomfortable as discussed in Chapter 2, *Playing Critically*. These speak to many of the complex and intense power relations experienced daily on gay online dating apps, as well as my affinity with screens and code. As I was encouragingly raised with technology but also went to one of the first ‘laptop high schools’, I had far too many opportunities to begin prematurely in the world of gay pornography and meeting strangers from gay online websites such as Mogenic.com (which no longer exists) and Gaydar.net. As a result, while my interaction with men in screens online is comfortable and eerily routine, it is also altogether unfulfilling.

Given this sinister element, the work is also presented through shifting levels of irony and humour, and has a fairly camp aesthetic of ‘loud’ colours and a ‘digitally trashy’ atmosphere. Generally it also has a very dark, black and distinct humour that comes from being raised in a family with British-Irish heritage that worshipped Monty-Python-esque comedy. This section is not only about sexuality but also about how queer humour, when coupled with perversity, functions in terms of critical distance. As a queer weapon, humour is a classic tool for subversion. At the centre of this is a way of critically ‘playing’ issues of affection in online encounters.

### **Queer Humour and Subversion**

At the heart of queer approaches are relations to normativity and visibility. Queer people and artists have often used humour as a tool of political subversion and to render the invisible, visible (such as through camp aesthetics). As mentioned in the definition of ‘queerness’ in Chapter 1, queer orientations function as lines of flight from normative constructions that may or may not overtly represent fascisms limiting the boundaries of an identity. In his discussion of the “camp” aesthetic as “a product of the gay sensibility” (Babuscio 1978, p.7) Jack Babuscio describes a central paradox, that:

Society says to gays (and to all stigmatised groups) that we are members of the wider community; we are subject to the same laws as 'normals'; we must pay our taxes, etc.; we are, in short, 'just like everybody else'. On the other hand, we are not received into society on

equal terms; indeed, we are told that we are unacceptably 'different' in ways that are absolutely fundamental to our sense of self and social identity. In other words, the message conveyed to us by society is highly contradictory: we are just like everyone else, and yet, we are not. It is this basic contradiction, this joke, that has traditionally been our destiny (Babuscio, 1978, p.127).

What Babuscio identifies in this paradox is the construction of identification plagued by the logic of a joke. In Freud's analysis jokes function with a paradoxical structure and are related to play. To him, jokes are judgements first and foremost; "a joke is a judgement which produces a comic contrast" (Freud 1905, p.25). Freud refers to German philosopher Kuno Fischer's similar definition that draws from Kantian perspectives on play, in that a "joke is a playful judgement" (Freud 1905, p.26) analogous to aesthetic freedom. The "joke" identified by Babuscio above concerns the binding of dissimilar things into such a comic judgement (Freud 1905, p.27) that is, the binding of queer ways of being different into the judgement of the normative; the terror of being judged, reduced, essentialised. Perhaps it is through the frustration and exasperation of the joke-like structure of the societal position of queer and gay people that phenomena like the critical humour and camp of queer people are born; "a joke comes about through bewilderment being succeeded by illumination" (Heymans 1896). The second illumination of a joke, according to Heymans (1896) is its "resolution of the problem into nothing", that is, the impotence of the judgement, which inevitably produces such frustration and exasperation.

Through Judith Butler, subversion has become key to the political project of queer theory and queer performativity. If a joke is here a judgement against the freedoms of queer people, then jokes can just as much be weaponised as judgements; propositions against normativity. Subversion is here the seizing of middle-class pretentiousness (Sontag 1964) and the exposure of its artifice through camp aesthetics — a method which my work employs: loud, colourful, ugly, predisposed to highlighting artifice, and upsetting pretention through the inversion of taste. Generally this is in keeping with the logic of the joke:

Humour constitutes the strategy of camp: a means of dealing with a hostile environment and, in the process, of defining a positive identity. This humour takes several forms. Chief of these is bitter-wit, which expresses an underlying hostility and fear (Babuscio 1978, p.127).

Wit comes to expose a bringing-to-the-surface, the ironies and paradoxes of the world in the service of critique in the face of a frustration or bitterness, which in this dissertation, *Critical Affection*, concerns gay online dating apps:

Camp can thus be a means of undercutting rage by its derision of concentrated bitterness. Its vision of the world is comic. Laughter, rather than tears, is its chosen means of dealing with the painfully incongruous situation of gays in society (Babuscio 1978, p.128).

### **Humour and Critical Distance**

Laughter in the place of tears functions as a way to remove the emotional impact of such judgements. According to Henri Bergson in his theorisation of the meaning of the comic, humour tends to reflect a certain numbing of affection in the exchange of affects. Laughter, especially, allows us to stand apart from an object of humour, yet still appreciate it. Laughter is perhaps a coping mechanism, a release from the intensity of charged subject matter and environments. It is here that we come across the notion of distance in humour; which operates both playfully and as a critical tool. For Bergson, laughter renders things with intelligibility rather than emotion as there is an:

[...] ABSENCE OF FEELING [sic.] which usually accompanies laughter. It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing affect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion (Bergson 2002, para.5).

We could say therefore that laughter and humour have perversely technical properties and come from a privileged position. This is the position of being distant enough of mind to calculate the logic of a joke's connection, and be shaken by the affects of laughter after-the-fact. To be the appreciator rather than the object of the joke one has to be separated enough from the comic judgement so as to make the connections between the joke's elements in a relaxed rather than violating sense. It would appear that the comic, here as artist, is perverse and manipulative rather than always necessarily emotional. The comic artist 'crafts' through playful and subversive connection making, in order to produce a comic affect, which in turn implies a critical or affective distance; a distance that withholds pity for the sake of a comic judgement, for we must:

[...] put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity [...]. In a society composed of pure intelligences there would probably be no more tears, though perhaps there would still be laughter (Bergson 2002, para.5).

## **Perversity**

Humour and the crafting of jokes features a distanced connection-making; the ability to hop along the surfaces of ideas and draw them together; manipulate them to create comic judgements without falling deeply into them. This is perversity. I equate artistic production to perversity. To Deleuze, a pervert is someone who can constantly shift their libidinal energy into different territories by creating new desires, rather than fixating on certain fetishes in particular. “Nothing is more fragile than the surface” (Deleuze 1990, p.95) writes Deleuze in *The Logic of Sense* (1969) during his series on “The Schizophrenic and the Little Girl” where he describes the difference between two forms of nonsense.

The first form of nonsense Deleuze sees in Lewis Carroll (*Alice in Wonderland*), is an account for nonsense constructed from existing language (a nonsense of surface at the level of language, such as word games), whereas in Antonin Artaud (*Theatre of Cruelty*) Deleuze perceives a nonsense of depths, of the body (1990, p.96). In Deleuze’s writing, the former kind of nonsense is the result of Carroll’s privileged perversion “[...] a little pervert, who holds onto the establishment of a surface language, and who has not felt the real problem of a language in depth – namely, the schizophrenic problem of suffering” (1990, p.97). In contrast, for Artaud “there is not, there is no longer, any surface” (1990, p.99) for the schizophrenic, whose nonsense is a product of everything being “body and corporeal” (ibid.) [...] and who struggles in a world where “the inside and the outside, the container and the contained, no longer have a precise limit” (1990, p.100).

For the most part, I cannot claim to be all that different to Carroll, “an affected little girl” (1990, p.99) who enjoys the surface play of language perversely when it comes to objectifying the depths (of any bodies). Many of my outcomes are an example of this; puns through which I fetishise and play with skin and body parts, and partial objects in a digital environment. Yet, the production of this and other works has always relied on this perversity or a desire to fetishise subject matter in order for it to exist. Perversity is very important in production, especially for artists who have a playfully subversive practice. As professor of

philosophy Philip Goodchild (1996, p.81) writes, this perversity is indeed productive to Deleuze:

The sexuality of surfaces operates through perversion: one surface is always substituted for another - the search for the phantasm yields something else of a different nature as its result, but this result can be made into a new object of desire, producing new phantasms, maintaining the plateau of intensity.

“Phantasm” here refers to Freudian psychoanalyst Melanie Klein’s account for a child’s construction of a surface (language) from the depths (a world of schizophrenic part-objects). Phantasms function as an “ideational surface” (Deleuze 1990, p.242) for objects and relations without prior sense; they are psychic objects that function as models for sense. In this respect a phantasm forms “an obsessional image” (Smith 2012, p.330); the place where the ego merges with a phantasm (this is in fact Deleuze’s notion of narcissism). We could say that an artistic practice relies on the maintenance of a “plateau of intensity” – the maintenance of a series of phantasms – in order to keep it running as an anti-cliché or subversion (enquiry) machine. As in my own and other artists’ practices (such as Cindy Sherman), these subverted phantasms come in the form of a series of obscure self-portraits and portraits of others. To Deleuze the pervert is a person who has achieved “mastery of surfaces” (1990, p.104); a productive archetype able to constantly produce new desires for themselves through fixation on new objects, as partial objects or phantasms. Each artwork is an intensity or intense-surface in a psychosexual series of fetishes, something that holds up and honours the object as perverse.

### **Online Dating Apps**

A sexually exciting fetish may be an inanimate object, a living object, part of a human, an attribute of a human, or a whole human seen as an abstraction. — McDiarmid 1978, para.1.

Perversity, jokes, and a discussion of the surface are apt when taking into account the language of gay online dating apps. “Men as a Class are the Fetish” is the title of an artwork created by David McDiarmid in 1978 and the text quoted above is embedded into this collage. In this artwork, McDiarmid cut up an assortment of images relating to homoerotic masculinity. A leather boot, a collar, a torso, a penis, a face with a moustache, all within separate square and rectangular borders come to form an image of men themselves as a

fetish, or as a class (as the title proposes) through these partial objects. Rather uncannily this effect is achieved in gay online dating apps such as *Grindr* today, which effectively cut up the male body, and collage it into squares based on desire and attraction.

In her 1990s artworks, British artist Jenny Saville presented a defiant exploration of the glassy surfaces that objectify bodies, particularly concerning the representation of women in media, shop windows, television screens and shiny magazine pages. In her large-scale photographic series *Closed Contact* (1995-6), Saville presses her body directly against a glass surface as if challenging it to contain her (Saville and Luchford, 1995-6). Today, any person who chooses to have a profile on an internet site has the privilege of being presented beneath the shiny glass surfaces of mobile smartphones and computer screens. We all contribute to how we see our bodies, a role previously reserved for celebrities, supermodels and the stylists and editors who dictate their image. Where better to see these bodies-under-glass in proliferation than on dating websites?

The discussion now turns to bodies-under-glass via the lens of smartphone dating apps for gay men. These include *Grindr*, *Jack'd*, *Hornet*, *Scruff*, *Recon* and many more. While a great deal of research around these apps has focused on health, especially how such apps affect the distribution of HIV, or in cultural studies research into ideas of community, individual performativity or race, my engagement with these apps as a heavy user informed my production of a series of playful artworks testing the relationship between bodies, users and glass interfaces through finger-based swipe gestures (see Chapters 4 and 6).

Brett Victor (2011, para.16) calls the current state of interaction design “Pictures under glass”. Victor laments that interaction design, indeed “the future of interaction design” (Victor 2011, para.1) is limited to the gestures made by hands on glass surfaces, and that the two major functions of hands (feeling and manipulating) are completely underutilized in current state-of-the-art. I would propose that the effect of this has been to “numb” interaction with elements under glass surfaces, which to our discussion involves the human body, or the human-body-as-face. Bodies as (re)presented under glass surfaces become manipulable, non-visceral, gaze-oriented visual bodies, for consumption as objects by narcissists through the personal screen. The commanding fingers of these users rub numb, as if calloused, upon the surface of visual bodies.



The consumption of bodies here is, however, two-way and works off a mutually shared narcissism (as discussed in Chapter 1) that most users will probably take for granted. Users are set up by the very interface to operate narcissistically and to think about themselves and what “they want”. It is the very setup of the experience and affordance of the interface, delivered through a personal screen as if ‘for’ the user, that produces narcissistic and defensive behaviour. One must remember that at every moment one is browsing through images of other people, that we are also one other image in the screen of some other person who is also skimming over us, checking out our face or perhaps even blocking us before we have had a chance to engage in a chat. Baudrillard talks of the “vitrified exacerbation of the body, of vitrified exacerbation of genitalia, of an empty space where nothing takes place and which nonetheless fills our vision” (Baudrillard 1987, p.34) as a result of media spectacle. In the case of the app *Grindr* (and others) we are faced with a constantly updating, user-produced media spectacle involving both bodies and genitalia. The presentations of gay maleness proliferating within *Grindr* are not the products of *Grindr* necessarily, but the products of gay males using the app. Claims of essentialisation have been made in literature surrounding gay online dating, such as in the work of Ben Light who claims of the system “Gaydar.co.uk” that:

Individuals write a version of themselves and of this gay community into being. However, because of the desire to commodify ‘the difference’ that is gay, predominantly white men, online and offline, such inscriptions become monolithic caricatures that are obdurate and enrol even those who do not participate in such arrangements at all or only by proxy” (Light, Fletcher & Adam 2009, p.304).

The standard on *Grindr* is to participate in such arrangements by taking a selfie of oneself and posting it to the profile space. Lacan asserts that an identity is formed when a child recognises its own reflection in the mirror; the mirror's representation of the body turns it into an object to be compared against other objects of language (Lacan 1949, p.503). If “media images act as Lacanian mirrors that cause identity formations to be ideologically laden” (Peretti 1997, para.28), then the app *Grindr* allows the user to participate as an objectified media image. One's own image on the screen, or selfie-as-mirror, is displayed alongside others in the *Grindr* interface as a square in the top left corner, comparable to others around it. Baudrillard's echo bounces again: “While here everything is of equal visibility, everything shares the same shallow space” (Baudrillard 1987, p.33).

Peretti (1997) further asserts that, in Lacanian terms, consumer capitalism needs subjects who continually re-enact the infantile drama of mirror stage identifications in order to maintain productivity. The speed of the app, its constant update of profiles and their immediate proximity to each other, leads subjects to constantly question their participating image. This is not a seasonal change of fashions but a minute-by-minute update of images. As soon as a single picture consolidates the external self, it is immediately threatened again when compared to a context of other profile images. Is one displaying the right image, encoding the correct type of person, that in turn attracts the right types of people? By participating this way, through the portrayal of many selves, one feeds *Grindr* the images that construct its types through a positive feedback loop; a mirror, and each individual becomes an object to be consumed.

We often live in gay worlds which are quite efficient sex delivery systems but men then have to focus a great many of their emotional needs into this one avenue and that itself creates new risk situations which are again often inadvertent but that we are called upon to manage one way or another (Adam 2011).

Kane Race here references an interview with Barry Adam concerning his analysis of “sex delivery systems”. Race describes *Grindr* as providing an appropriate service insofar as it deals in the market of producing sexual encounters or “hook ups” (Race 2014), but in terms of providing solutions to problems of intimacy, loneliness, or even more innocently seeking ‘like-minded’ others in the local area (as is the claimed original intention of the app), *Grindr* and other apps may not suffice. One might rather look to *OkCupid* or a more ‘serious’ dating website for the complicated question-based matching algorithms provided, as those are in the business of ‘producing relationships’. *Grindr* was developed by Joel Simkhai, who in a similar vein to other digital software legacies originating in California, started little (with \$5000 of his savings) and ‘got big’ (Hall 2013, para.7). *Grindr* does not manage its users in the same way as Google, Facebook, or other less demographically targeted social media systems. It has no investors and is funded entirely by advertising on its free version (*Grindr*) and subscription fees on its paid version (*Grindr Xtra*) (Hall 2013). Here it operates as a closed power structure, which we know historically might tend towards oppression, and like any libertarian capitalist product, applies itself to the greatest number of users by packaging their modes of engagement into symbolic, simulated choices (Nash 2014).

## **Affection-Images in Gay Online Dating**

I would like to propose here that the smartphone is a kind of surrogate object of affection, being the physical device through which affect is sent and received. Smartphones are on our bodies, we touch them all the time, and we might even bring them to bed with us. Through the prevalence of apps like *Grindr*, gay people have come to expect that the app and their smartphone will bring them affection and sexual gratification at a steady pace. One is ever-presently checking for a buzz in the pocket that indicates a new message has been received.

The way we must, however, read this affection is numbed by the interface and its reductive tropes. Affection and intimacy cannot be perfectly translated, or modulated, into the comparatively discrete packages of representation provided by the app. In *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (1986) Deleuze discusses “affection image” as a kind of image used in filmic shots. This refers to close-ups of the face that aim to reveal the interiority of a connected body (its emotions), either projected onto, or read from within, the workings of a face. “There is no close-up of the face, the face is in itself close-up, the close-up is by itself face and both are affect, affection-image” (Deleuze 1986, p.98). My interest in the idea of an affection image stems from my own frustration as a user in reading affection in images of other men online within a system that purports to provide it.

To Deleuze, although affection-images are always ‘faces’ (or ‘facified’) they do not have to actually be faces. A close-up on a clock-face is for example an attempt at revealing the interiority of the clock, or of the clock’s reflective state, or response to the environment around it. This idea is important when thinking about online dating apps, in particular *Grindr*, because we are faced with a wide variety of images from which to glean affection, many of which are not faces, or are still and unrevealing. To Deleuze, a facial system implies the body; a face is ‘read’ in such a way that it describes the functions of the body it facialises. On gay apps, users are for the most part represented as bodies or faces. Users can use other images (landscapes, for example) but such users will mostly be ignored; they are not at all ‘readable’ and do not communicate affect. A face is a body; we must imagine the body that supports it. What is the face that is imagined? One we can go on a date with? What is the body that is imagined? One that we want to have sex with?

The face is the organ carrying plate of nerves which has sacrificed most of its global mobility and which gathers or expresses in a free way all kinds of tiny local movements which the rest

of the body usually keeps hidden. Each time we discover these two poles in something - reflecting surface and intensive micro-movements we can say that this thing has been treated as a face – it has been facified, and in turn it stares at us and looks at us [...]” (Deleuze 1986, p.98)

Yet on dating apps we cannot read these micro-movements and are instead presented with ‘poker-faces’; still faces that mask their interiority. We cannot read any real emotions in the body; we must interpret each face as a ‘type’. Deleuze continues:

There are two sorts of questions that we can put to the face, depending on the circumstances: what are you thinking about? Or, what is bothering you, what is the matter, what do you sense or feel?” (Deleuze 1986, p.99).

If we are to ask any of these questions of any face online, what we must conjure in our minds is a concept of the inner workings of the person and their possible affection towards us as read through a single image, or series of images, and a discrete set of phrases and data on a profile. The profile is the face of the person, and instead of reading muscular micro-movements in a user’s facial features we read data and static imagery. Imagery is not here like Baroque painting; it does not express or externalise maximal folds of emotion or meaning, it is a close-up, generally cold, and designed to mask anything but the ‘objective’ appearance of the person; this is the ‘any-person-whatever’ of the person, that is, the person designed to catch the most number of affective responses.

The face that attracts the most number of other faces is generally not a revealing face, but one that allows others to project their own desires onto it (a reflective face). This is not a specific person but a person functioning as a type. What we find here is the Deleuzian distinction between “quality” and “power” in the affection-image, the difference between reading a face as having qualities “common to several different things” (the still, whole, face as a “type”), and the expression of “power which passes from one quality to another” (the ability to read movements in individual features in the face) (Deleuze 1986, p.101). We must read other human beings in terms of their “quality” as we do not have enough expressive information. We must fit these self-representations to what we already expect similar images to behave as. As such we find in many, a person who has self-aggregated so as not to offend, but defend, against any suggestion that they’re a non-sexual person; a person that otherwise

cannot capitalise in the facial market. What is ultimately consumed in this market varies (affection, intimacy, hook-ups), but all begin with the image, and an image must initially represent all opportunities. Even if a user chooses to have no image, they will be represented by a blank automatically generated silhouette of a face in most cases; the ultimate “poker face”.

### **The body as affection-image**

To Deleuze, faces represent bodies (their inner workings, the operation of their organs) and faces are close-ups. But, as I have shown, in a body-under-glass world when we are faced with a body image as a profile image we must read close-up bodies as faces. A torso online, as an avatar, is to be met as face. It is the first point of contact for an identity and we must guess the identity of its owner. If it is a healthy looking torso, then it describes a sexually-abled body that can achieve the purposes of a sexual exchange. When we read still bodies or torsos for affection, as faces, we do not get all that much from them. Like faces, torsos present a flat plate with a few features upon themselves; two nipples like eyes and perhaps a crease in the belly denotes a mouth. Different levels of muscularity, ribs or fat tell us limited information about the lifestyle or personality of the subject. I am not claiming to read the torso as a literal face of course, but in the Deleuzian sense discussed above, and consequently in some respects it is an even more “reflective” face than an expressionless selfie – it is more stern and more poker-faced – intending to reveal even less than a cool expression or a semi-sexual pout on an actual face.

### **The penis as affection-image**

The penis-as-closeup is a tradable affection-object in a body-under-glass world. Each, like torsos, can stand in for identities. A penis-as-input is on display. On some apps (*Jack'd*, *Manhunt*) these can be the profile image. On others (*Hornet*, *Gaydar*) they must be private images that users reveal to each other if they want to ‘display what they are working with’. Sometimes, the penis image will be the first image the user sends to you to initiate communication if their profile is completely blank. The penis-as-close-up represents the Deleuzian pole of “power” more often than not. Movement is more easily imagined here; the rise and fall of arousal. Veins suggest power or the flow of blood – and there is the urethra (a singular eye) – the growth of the erection or the folds of the testicles. It is ‘happy to see you’. A flaccid penis is relaxed and confident perhaps, where an erection is ready-to-go. A penis perhaps reveals more than a torso or a bottom, but it is still an affection-image that avoids the

presentation of a totally revealing face, and as a type of image indicates a masculine readiness to take sexual action over other affections.

### **The bottom as affection-image**

The bottom as a face presents itself as a willing receptacle in any sexual exchange. Its represented body is ready and available. Like the penis image it can be sent as a private photo and communicates submissiveness (sometimes aggressive submissiveness) and the intent to be penetrated. Two flat cheeks, and the anus, somewhat like the urethra, but as a mouth of sorts. As a whole, solid type of form, the bottom is the ultimate reflective face, because, unlike the penis it is illustrative of quality rather than power and desire can be projected onto it. As submissive, more often than not, it reflects the desires of the dominant male in the sexual exchange. It yields very little in terms of movement unless where the anus is opening or closing, pushing out or winking, almost always to indicate a desire to be penetrated. The bottom, having less individual qualities than the penis, stereotypically acts to reveal little more than the quality of a willingness to receive.

### **The finger fingering affection-images**

The other body part that plays a significant role in our discussion of the body-under-glass, of course, the finger. The finger to me is the extension of the will of the user, for whom bodies and their parts are displayed. The finger is external to the glass and the affection-images beneath it; it is what numbingly browses and swipes through displayed bodies. It is what punches out the opening lines of conversation, and presses the ‘block’, ‘send’ and ‘chat’ buttons. It pokes at glass but feels very little in terms of sensation. The finger as a narcissistic control mechanism, a scepter of command, is the physical manifestation of the user’s internal judgment; the point of decisive action. It decides what external objects are to be included or excluded from the users’ world, that is, which objects “make the cut”. I have known users who have blocked thousands of profiles before ever initiating contact, just so that this world is constructed according to the benefit of the user through the personal screen, so that only those best matching the user’s desires appear. The finger chooses what complements the narcissist, but as mentioned earlier, is a numb unfeeling finger. The user, like a god over their iPhone world, is a closed circuit.

## **Partial Objects and Affection-Images**

Through the above readings of body parts as affection-images, the term ‘partial object’ is apt as a post-Freudian term present in Deleuze that describes the breaking down of an object (here the body) into its component parts. Partial objects are those perceived and desired in isolation from the whole. The classic example from Melanie Klein is of an infant desiring interaction with the mother’s breast (Klein, 1946, p.1). Often partial objects refer to sex organs. On *Grindr* isolated images of male body parts become objects of desire in isolation from the whole. Because partial objects are symbolic, they are essentially consumed for what they represent in a system of desire and do not actually fulfil desires. This exacerbates an unending process of desire and consumption as such images are produced in abundance. As users log in and out, the user browses, the geo-location changes, and the illusion of an abundance of symbolic desires in the form of affection-images and partial objects is produced. Divorced from a unified whole, affection-images as partial objects cannot be read or actually confronted, as a person faces another person, but will always reflect desires that are projected on or into them.

This process becomes a repetitive and perverse browsing-over-time, as the gaze skips over face after face or consumes dick-pic after dick-pic, one becomes accustomed to, or even oriented-towards, a mastery of a perverse surface, a play of bodies, and a system of unending desire without fulfilment. The purity of the partial object – the promise it offers – eclipses the messy reality of situated bodily experiences. Even after such experiences, the phone will buzz, the list, re-opened, and partial objects represented. Each object is readily suggesting more idyllic scenarios that seduce users away from pursuing others. These others may be more situated affectionate realities that are frightening and confronting.

## **Orientations Toward Affection-Images as Partial Objects**

A queer phenomenology might offer an approach to sexual orientation by rethinking how the bodily direction “toward” objects shapes the surfaces of bodily and social space. — Sarah Ahmed 2006, p.68.

I have discussed my definition of affection-image and how I wish to use the term in relation to a facial language in gay online dating apps. I have also briefly mentioned that the processing of these images at the level of the individual constitutes the time-based production of a standard of participation online. Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations*,

*Objects, Others* (2006), introduced here in Chapter 1, sheds light on how situatedness with objects-over-time (sexually) orients us. We know through Judith Butler (1990, p.192) that identifications such as masculinity rely on the “stylized repetition of acts through time” and that identification is a time-based language. We can here think about how such behaviours become normative in online settings, where the online setting is an everyday ‘domestic’ space for gay men. The repetitive consumption of images, the behaviours of pressing, swiping, blocking, typing and looking, surely orient, and have a lasting effect on, users of *Grindr* and similar apps.

Ahmed (2006, p.57) discusses repetition, saying that if “the work of repetition is not neutral work; it orients the body in some ways rather than others”. Just as typing this dissertation produces tension in my arm over time, inscribes itself, physically on my identity as an academic, just so does such situatedness with affection-images, and the repetitive treatment of their associated users on smartphones, produce lasting qualities, inscribing behaviours and orientations in gay male users. Ahmed’s approach is phenomenological and concerned with relations to objects in the world. Ahmed invokes a primal narcissism via Schutz and Luckmann (1974, p.4) to say “in such a world, everything is orientated around me, as being available and familiar to me” (Ahmed 2006, p.33). This is the nature of the smartphone app, which presents other users ‘in terms of’ the individual through the personal handset. These other users are presented as ‘within reach’; their faces always face our body. We are familiar with them. It is through the turning-towards, the facing of ‘the face’ of objects we can think of narcissism differently here; affection-images and profiles constitute objects ‘within reach’ for a subject, as such objects have faces that ‘turn towards’ subjects consistently over time.

Putting aside any suggestion that orientation necessarily starts with objects, we can ask what kinds of objects bodies ‘tend toward’ in their tendencies, as well as how such tendencies shape what bodies tend toward (Ahmed 2006, p.57).

As one sits comfortably in a private setting, skimming through affection-images, one faces many faces. Through reading Ahmed we might consider that in the comfort of the home (the union of the domestic and *Grindr* as a privately networked space ‘within reach’ of or ‘on’ the body), one becomes oriented-towards the partial object, the affection-image, the close-up, as a default mode of engagement. “The repetition of the work is what makes the work



disappear” writes Ahmed (2006, p.56); the practice of swiping, gazing, blocking and chatting become invisible forms of labour that shape our tendencies towards consuming affection-images and partial objects as ‘comfortable’ inscriptions on our behaviour. “Orientations shape what bodies do, while bodies are shaped by orientations they already have, as effects of the work that must take place for a body to arrive where it does” (Ahmed 2006, p.58). The body must therefore arrive at an orientation that faces the symbolic in affection-images, the symbolic desires of partial objects, and not of their reality.

The normative can be considered an effect of the repetition of bodily actions over time, which produces what we can call the bodily horizon, a space for action, which puts some objects and not others in reach” (Ahmed 2006, p.66).

To Ahmed, this normativity also constitutes a straightening or a ‘lining-up’ of things, so that if something is out of line, it is immediately noticeable or queer. *Grindr* constantly presents ‘within reach’ a certain kind of face (discussed next in Chapter 4). In the *Grindr* interface, which relies on the arrangement of bodies in a grid, it is easy to spot bodies that attempt to participate ‘out of line’ with the usual standards of participation. Queer, which is originally “a spatial term” (Ahmed 2006, p.67) “does not follow a ‘straight line’, a sexuality that is bent or crooked” (Cleto 2002, p.13). In the *Grindr* grid, bodies are co-located as affection-images. “For Merleau-Ponty, the sexual body is one that shows the orientation of the body as an ‘object that is *sensitive* to all the rest’, a body that feels the nearness of the objects with which it coexists” (Ahmed, 2006, p.67), although Ahmed adds that this sensitivity itself can already be a queer one.

### **A Human Algorithm in Face-ism?**

We might relate these actions over time to the ‘algorithmic’ treatment of identity in contemporary digital cultures mentioned in Chapter 1. Here, through mass usage, people have done exactly what they criticise digital algorithms in ‘Google culture’ of doing: forming aggregate models and standards for human beings from processing massive amounts of user data. Users rapidly processing and judging the masses of *Grindr* images they view, aided by, but not entirely because of, machines. This is the inscription of a ‘straightening up’, a ‘falling into line’, and a normativity that is occurring over time, through repetition. Gay men are then applying these averaged images to their own standards of self-representation. We can easily today refer to machines that also recognise faces this way, through arrangements of

contrasting pixels in a camera image, or facial recognition. Machines learn to interpret faces by parsing as many images of faces as they can. If human users repeatedly affectively process similar faces then that composite 'face' must inform desirable standards in their mind. This 'straightening' of gay online dating apps and idea of an algorithm is what I discuss in the following chapter.

## 4 Fascism in Face-ism

Hardness is not the absence of emotion, but a different emotional orientation towards others. The hard white [male] body is shaped by its reactions: the rage against others surfaces as a body that stands apart or keeps its distance from others. We shouldn't look for emotions 'in' soft bodies. Emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientations towards and away from others.

— Sarah Ahmed, 2004, p.4

Critiques of *Grindr* are not only phenomenological or psychoanalytical. They are deeply political. In particular, the critique of *Grindr* as a space that promotes normativity (or 'homonormativity') amongst homosexuals is common and topical. Usually this normativity is characterised in terms of white-maleness and its racism towards and exclusion of bodies that deviate from a 'gym-fit' white male standard. Racism classically manifests on *Grindr* through requests like 'no Asians'. This normativity extends to the pervasive privileging of masculinity; the demand for 'masc only, no fems' is very common on *Grindr* profiles.

We must recognise that while *Grindr* is a homosexual space, it isn't necessarily a queer one. The white male body structures a 'norm' against which judgements are made. This becomes a kind of vortex or 'black hole'. Fit, white, masculine male bodies are privileged as something the majority 'tend toward'. Users reject (mostly by ignoring the advances of) bodies that deviate from this model. Users attempt, by averaging themselves out, to remove or hide the qualities that render them specific racially, sexually or emotionally (see poker-facing in Chapter 3). Alternatively they stop participating altogether. The result is a monocultural grid of bodies that highlights not only what "bodies 'tend toward' in their tendencies" (Ahmed 2006, p.57) but also "how such tendencies shape what bodies tend toward"(ibid).

### **Microfascisms**

Ahmed implicitly claims that the white body is 'hard' and emotionally challenged. This is not because it lacks emotions, but because it distances itself from, or turns away from others; a different kind of emotional orientation. The way the white body deals with complex emotions is to disconnect, to not participate in affective exchanges, to face elsewhere. On *Grindr*,

ignoring the advances of another, blocking others, or even pre-emptively saying ‘no fems’ on one’s profile constitutes this ‘turning away from’.

The consequences are intense and heavy silences; tense and emotionally charged spaces of time where affection is not being reciprocated. Such waiting games can only be tempered by attempting to contact more and more people, ‘trying one’s luck’, and further inscribing repetitive engagement with still faces into the orientation of the user ‘playing’ the game of *Grindr*. However, what causes any of us to ‘turn away from’ others? Here I take into account Deleuze and Guattari’s extended concept of ‘micropolitics’, and then ‘faciality’ from *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988) in order to discuss the maintenance of, and submission to, powerful and implicit codes accompanying faciality in gay online dating apps. I am not generally discussing repression at the hands of forces external to homosexuality, but forces of male homosexuality acting upon itself.

Only microfascism provides an answer to the global question: Why does desire desire its own repression? [...] Desire is never separable from [...] micro-formations already shaping postures, attitudes, perceptions, expectations [...] etc (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.251).

When Deleuze and Guattari talk about “micropolitics”, they are talking about the propensity for everyone to want others, the external world, to conform to their own rules. This is an internalised politics functioning on the level of the individual. “Microfascism” is an internalised algorithm of judgement. We could say that the forming of a micropolitics is part of being oriented over time – it constitutes what we will ‘accept’ or ‘reject’ when we face towards things, but is also structured by the things we face towards over time. The personal nature of *Grindr* on smartphones constructs a thriving environment for microfascism. This is in part because the structure of judgement is very much based on an algorithm – a microfascism of the face. If affection-images represent desire as partial objects do, then a more perverse form of desire is repressed if our consumption of others as desire objects is limited by internalised microfascisms informed by the orientated privileging of white bodies. The face, at least in terms of affection-images, is the structure of this politics.

## Faciality as overcoding of the face

Hand, breast, penis, stomach, penis, vagina, thigh, leg and foot, all come to be facialized... an overcoding of all the decoded parts. —Deleuze 1988, p.199.

Face-ism is the structure of microfascism in terms of affection-images on *Grindr*. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, the plateau called “Year Zero: Faciality”, Deleuze and Guattari extend their discussion of the face, to “a machine specific to faciality” (1988, p.200) especially in regards to how the structure of the face organises our response to other human beings. “Certain assemblages of power require the production of a face, others do not” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p.205). *Grindr* requires the production of a face. In this scenario, the face is discussed as divorced from the body; a sign rather than a physical object. This is the discussion of the face not as a head (where it is part of a body), but as a system of overcoding. “Overcoding” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p.71) refers to the use of language to dominate through translation, and refers to the overriding of heterogeneous things existing on their own terms, unifying them in a new way, under a new code. When something is “overcoded”, it ceases to be ‘messy’. In terms of capitalism money is an example of a numeric code that generifies labour and value through translation. Our example here is the face, which, when overcoded, becomes a language and a measure of difference, a standard, rather than a ‘head’:

The face is produced only when the head ceases to be part of the body, when it ceases to be coded by the body, when it ceases to have a multidimensional, polyvocal corporeal code - when the body, head included, has been decoded and has to be *overcoded* by something we shall call the Face... to be facialized” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p.198).

In *Anti-Oedipus* (1983) Deleuze and Guattari refer to McLuhan in the discussion of overcoding, which is important to capitalism. Capitalism uses the “electric flow” (which we might interpret to mean the digital today) as a “technical means of expression that correspond[s] to the generalised decoding of flows [...] instead of still referring, in a direct or indirect form, to despotic overcoding” (1983, p.240). We might think of *Grindr* or the proliferation of many other face-based applications, along with facial recognition, to be a digital deterritorialisation of the head, that allows it to be re-territorialised or ‘overcoded’ when it is divorced from the context of a real body. On *Grindr* this is the head’s status as a partial object. This both allows it to be treated as an object, as previously discussed, but also

allows it to be manipulated and played with, as we see in many other playful face-swapping and editing apps like Snapchat for example. I will discuss the expressive qualities of this in my own practice in later chapters.

### **Microfascisms and black holes**

In Chapter 3 I discussed contrasts of light and dark as they apply to a facial grid. In terms of faciality microfascisms are represented as the black holes of the facial grid – the point at which an individual is defined not by its reflectivity but by its subjective openings, the place where an individual sucks the external world into itself (its eyes, its mouth, its nostrils) – the places where the agency of the face and connected body are most powerful. ‘Black hole’ is synonymous to subjectivity, a ‘sucking-inward’. To Deleuze and Guattari black holes are intertwined with whiteness, the placement of the black holes in the reflective surface of the white face mirror the dominator influence of White Man, who manipulates the world through overcoding, subjecting other languages to their own. ‘The face’ for Deleuze and Guattari is a white male political structure, overcoded so as to reflect the idea of white men themselves:

The face is not a universal. It is not even that of the white man; it is White Man himself, with his broad white cheeks and the black hole of the eyes. The face is Christ. The face is the typical European [...] The face is by nature an entirely specific idea (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p.206-7).

This ‘specific idea’ for Deleuze and Guattari is white-maleness and deviation or proximity to it. In this culture, the face has become fixed. It is over-coded and has ceased to be polymorphous. A face is always judged in relation to the white face. Deleuze and Guattari claim that ours is a culture of submission to the white-male facial system. In such a system, “It is not the individuality of the face that counts but the efficacy of the ciphering it makes possible” (1988, p.205) therefore faciality allows for a code to be applied to all faces and subjects them to the same judgment. “This is an affair not of ideology but of economy and the organization of power” (1988, p.205), and therefore speaks to the territory that the white body has gained, and continues to maintain, on *Grindr*. On *Grindr*, a user with their own subjectivity, their own status as a black hole, surveys a grid of reflective faces. They are a singularity that other faces exist ‘in terms of’, forgetting that, in fact, each other face is a black hole perceiving them to be a reflective surface that they project their own desires onto.

## Faciality in Grindr

A smartphone full of faces is a place for microfascisms to operate and collide. Each face perceived by a microfascist as reflective masks another microfascist. Each body replaced by a partial-object creates a temporal and aesthetic delusion between the two. Every microfascist will assume that others exist in terms of proximity to their own body, ‘within reach’ of the microfascist. I am here, with myself, and my phone. These subjects are for me, they present themselves to me. I can delete, block, sort, filter, chat, ignore, turn off, engage or not — as I see fit. I am not buffeted by complex faces; faces that respond, faces that I am challenged to assess myself against, to have a discussion with. The faces have already been “slid” into. They have been “slid” into my pre-digested facial units. They are static, unresponsive. Responses before-the-fact are imagined and based on typification; what is seen, projected upon the reflective surface of an affection-image.

The logo of *Grindr* is a mask; a dark, skeletal face, but “[e]ven masks ensure the head is belonging to the body, rather than making it a face” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p.206). *Grindr* might be seen as an entity, a body (such a mask is hard to read), but using *Grindr*, we can definitely say, as has previously been discussed, that the human face becomes ‘overcoded’ with potential readings. Why is a face needed? As the locus of an identity a face is a point of contact with another. The face comes to constitute largely a language of the interface, of the surface. When one opens an online dating app, one is presented with surfaces. Surfaces (faces) within a surface (the interface) representing another kind of surface (geo-location). These are all 2-dimensional coordinate images with only x and y coordinates operating within a grid, or grids within grids. As discussed in the previous chapter, ‘the face’ itself uses a grid structure. Then, the app interface itself is a grid of profiles, and these are arranged according to their coordinates on a global positioning grid. The interface of gay dating apps itself is generally a fractal sort of face; we see a face composed of faces. *Grindr* may use a mask as its icon, its identity, its face, but its real ‘face’ is the ‘grid of gays’.

[...] moments of switching dimensions can be disorientating[...]. Bodies that experience disorientation can be defensive, as they reach out for support or as they search for a place to reground and re-orientate their relation to the world. So, too, the forms of politics that proceed from disorientation can be conservative, depending on the “aims” of their gestures, depending on how they seek to (re)ground themselves. And, for sure, bodies that experience being out of

place might need to be orientated, to find a place where they feel comfortable and safe in the world (Ahmed 2006, p.158).

### **The Face as an Algorithm**

There is something absolutely inhuman about the face. It would be an error to proceed as though the face became inhuman only beyond a certain threshold: closeup, extreme magnification, recondite expression, etc. The inhuman in human beings: that is what the face is from the start. —Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p.198.

One of the features of our algorithmic society, as hinted previously, is that it is a society where swarms of people produce, without much guidance, their own norms and trends without policing or curation by experts or intellectuals. We cannot claim there is a despot, nor celebrity conspiracy, at the helm of *Grindr* enforcing a white male regime upon its users. These users construct this reality for themselves based on whatever “despot” exists within them, and whatever politics the app encourages, through the presence of faciality and microfascism. As mentioned earlier being with the app and its language of affection-images can consist an orientation-towards certain types of images over time, and this in turns inscribes itself on the politics of users.

Just as digital facial algorithm systems work by recognising light/dark contrasts in the face, according to Deleuze and Guattari human beings do the same when it comes to reading faces. This is why they refer to faces with a binary logic of black hole/white wall; a grid of contrasts that constitute facial identities on a grid. To put it simply, imagine the “white wall” is the (reflective) surfaces of the face/grid, and “black holes” are shadows formed by the inset of eyes, mouths or nostrils upon this plane. This is relevant in our discussion of *Grindr*, which features a proliferation of faces that must be read and accepted/rejected en masse and at great consumptive speed, as a form of language or overcoding, rather than as something immediately affective or corporeal. Affection is ‘read’ rather than always ‘experienced’.

faciality assumes a role of selective response, or choice: given a concrete face, [it] judges whether it passes or not, whether it goes or not, on the basis of the elementary facial units. This time, the binary relation is of the “yes-no” type. The empty eye or black hole absorbs or rejects, like a half-doddering despot who can still give a signal of acquiescence or refusal (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p.207).



Facialisation operates on a logic of ‘yes’ or ‘no’ — one either conforms to an accepted degree of deviation from the norm or does not — and if not, facialisation proceeds to evaluate one’s degree of deviation from the norm. This, Deleuze and Guattari propose, is how prejudice operates; by measuring their degree of deviation from European norms in the white face model. As such, the face structures normativity online. Faces are grids that operate as maps, telling us, for the most part, about the normativity of a person’s representation. The face essentially becomes the inhuman in humans. A human-generated algorithm that sorts, accepts, rejects and defines normativity based on traits.

### **“Wanna Play?”**

Dries Verhoeven is projecting other people's private Grindr texts in the middle of Kreuzberg, Berlin – and many aren't too happy about it. —Tsjeng 2014a, para.1.

In late 2014, Dries Verhoeven caused public outcry with a new artwork produced through his interaction with *Grindr*. Verhoeven aimed to "expose the opportunities and tragedies of a phenomenon in gay culture: the sex date app" (Tseng 2014a, para.7) by installing himself publicly in a glass shipping container in the streets of Kreuzberg, Berlin. Verhoeven would open a conversation with another man online using the app, under the guise of looking for a sexual exchange or ‘hookup’. He would print out and post large blown up screenshots of these (very private) conversations into the windows of the shipping container in Kreuzberg.

Meanwhile, the man he was communicating with would be under the impression that he was arriving somewhere to have sex with Verhoeven, but the address Verhoeven gave the man would be that of the glass shipping container, and so he would arrive to see his own (often lewd) conversation blown up for the world to see. Many were outraged when they appeared, even aggressive; “somebody had tried to hurl a brick through the glass-walled trailer that Verhoeven was living in” (Tseng 2014b, para.8). Verhoeven has since been banned from *Grindr*, and had his exhibition shut down within five days. There was massive public outcry on social media, particularly Facebook.

Verhoeven's artwork exposes issues surrounding the ethics and affective consequences of digital systems like *Grindr* have on their users: this is the fragility of *Grindr* and its clandestine community; at once both a site of empowerment (to find gay men anywhere, invisible to the rest of the population) and extreme insecurity (the threat of exposure, particularly via public exposure). As Tseng (2014a, para.13) reflects:

Gays require safe spaces to exist in... Granted, Grindr is not exactly a 'safe space', but it is a space for us to communicate our desires and needs. In this digital world, it's one of the few safe spaces we have. [Verhoeven] is violating that.

Verhoeven's artwork operates through a kind of "Dark Play" where "Dark play is used as a playful approach to play situations, in which the disruptive nature of play can be used to break the conventions of gentrified play contexts" (Sicart 2014, p.23). In this scenario, online dating becomes the play context, where users are often manipulating and producing self-images in order to maximize an affective/affectionate response from the application(s).

I realised that on many occasions it wasn't sex that I was looking for, but more the affirmation that I got from the sex. The sounds of the various apps had the effect of a slap on the back, an incoming message meant interest. I felt like a teenager who needs the approval of his classmates and so conforms to their rules and their jargon. In less than half a year my texts had been reduced to simple one liners like "Hey there" and "What's up?" my photos did not show the man that I was, but rather a bad imitation of the typical torso photos (Verhoeven 2014, p.2).

Verhoeven's reflection demonstrates how he as a user felt condemned to performing the codes that *Grindr* inscribes within him and many of its users. In the following discussion I demonstrate how I came to enact my own 'dark play' on the topic of *Grindr* and other online dating applications.

### **Works at the *Radicalism* Exhibition 2014**

Artwork of mine at The Substation, Melbourne, 2014, curated by Drew Pettifer, played with and depicted facialised partial-objects in order to critique faciality and masculinity in online dating. Faciality was discussed in terms of how a focus on images depicting faces or body parts can be read as affectionate. Partial objects refer to objects of desire perceived separately

to the whole body. Simply playing with facialisation and partial objects however is not enough.

How does playing with faciality and partial-objects constitute a critique or original knowledge in terms of a dissertation on critical play? A user keeps their distance from any physical encounter for a time and skips around on a digital surface of faces, relying on only affection-images, profile statistics, and chats for approximations of intimate immediacy. Such a process is reflected in my own work, which, like the logic of comic judgments and perversity, reflects a consistent skipping or skimming of facial languages. The difference is that such comic judgments are made for critique in the place of essentialisation, and they use essentialisation in the form of caricature. This process of caricature is discussed in Chapter 5.

For the *Radicalism* show I presented four artworks; a large digital print (“Selfie”), a video (“Tough Guy / Big Red X”), and two works on iPad (*Gay Under Glass* and “TinderFlick”), all centred on the theme of online dating applications, particularly *Grindr*, but “TinderFlick” concerned the pansexual *Tinder* app. *Radicalism* was presented during Melbourne’s “Midsumma” queer festival (January/February 2014) that sought to explore “...radicalism, resistance and defiance around questions of gender and sexuality in the contemporary moment” (The Substation 2014, para.1). My four works were presented in a dark dungeon-like space suited to screen works but also reflecting the somewhat seedy or ‘out of sight’ nature of *Grindr* and its related subject matter. All of these works were formalized versions of experiments produced earlier in the research period, which went on to inform the more involved *G-Net* work at *Tabularium* (2014) which will be discussed later in this Chapter. The first work I made was a video called *Tough Guy / Big Red X* here is a quote of the blurb that Drew Pettifer and I wrote for the artwork’s wall panel:

[...] *Tough Guy / Big Red X* looks at how users perceive and treat representations of other people in contemporary dating apps. The artist swipes unceremoniously through dozens of *Grindr* profiles, rhythmically blocking each user as their profile loads. The finger, insensitive towards these bodies-under-glass, becomes an extension of the artist’s ambivalence towards the app’s ability to provide meaningful affection. Each subject becomes a discarded body preceding an endless series of options as the artist challenges the standardisation of queer identity encouraged by the app’s design (Penney and Pettifer, 2014).

*Tough Guy / Big Red X* made a normally private process of judgment public, in a similar but less affronting way to Verhoeven. It aimed to make viewers highly conscious of the number of users, faces, or bodies they themselves discard or swipe through daily on their own device. It turns a private screen into a public display, exacerbated by stock videos of crowds playing in the background behind the phone. The screen itself becomes an intensive or reflective face: intensive because the artwork displays a series of repetitive movements, although these reveal nothing except a mechanical body – that of the screen or *Grindr* itself. The participating finger is merely an extension of this process. It responds to its environment rather than revealing any interiority that is of the phone itself or the artist who is off-camera.

The user must ask ‘am I the same as this phone or this finger when reading the artwork?’ The faces or affection-images of each discarded user are equally unimportant. They are not read individually because all are treated the same. All stats and individual characteristics are rendered meaningless when subject to a single, repeated action that seems not to care for any such criteria. The video becomes expressive of a machine, the facial algorithm, and the inhuman-in-humans that exist to impersonally and perpetually discard images of *Grindr* users.

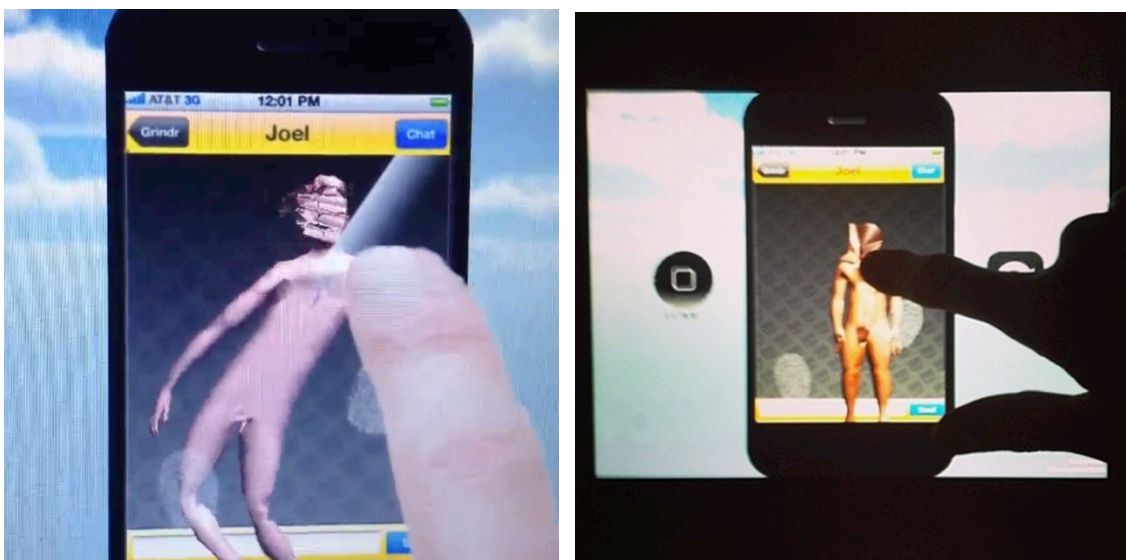
### **Gay Under the Glass**

Playing with meshes of bodies in the software Unity3D resulted in early versions of *Gay Under Glass* (2013-14), an artwork made for iPad that presented viewers with a body loosely and flaccidly hanging within a faux *Grindr* frame. When the user touches their finger to Joel’s body, Joel’s face connects to the player’s finger and his body can be dragged around, via his under-the-screen face. Using the iPad viewers can directly touch the interactive body with their finger rather than use a mouse. As they drag the body a smudging-glass sound is heard which makes the user more conscious of their dragging the body with their finger.

I discuss the use of bodily meshes as an artistic play process in more detail in following chapters. In chapter 6 I discuss specifically how this relates to critical doll play. I generated this work while thinking about how dating apps present ‘bodies under glass’ and had in mind Jenny Saville’s feminist photography, where she had pressed her own flesh and skin against glass for a series of photographs in defiance of screen-based culture and female body standards. In my work I used the mesh of a male body sourced from *The Sims* (see

chapter 6). I turned it into a ‘cloth object’ (also chapter 6) and used a transparent cube object to squash it and approximate the fleshy quality of a body pressed against glass.

Earlier iterations of the work involved a 2D cut out finger that replaced the mouse cursor, so that the body could be dragged around under the simulated glass. This cut out finger approximated a real finger before I moved it to iPad. The subsequent poor approximation of a finger, in place of a cursor, was later removed so that viewers could directly feel the numbness of pressing, dragging and glitching out the body on the screen, rather than exacerbating this by adding another representation of a finger between them and the content. This clumsy 2D finger does however have some merit on the web version of the work, where viewers have to use a mouse rather than use their own finger to drag the body around. It was important that this work be on iPad rather than just on a computer screen, because I wanted players to be able to connect this experience haptically to their everyday experience of app usage on phones and other touchscreens. I wanted the gestures to relate as closely as possible to how fingers use touchscreens daily. Users needed to touch the body with their finger to drag it around to make connections between the gaze, the finger and the screen.



Figures 4 and 5: Tom Penney, *Gay Under Glass* (2013-14). Differences between the original desktop version of with cut-out finger image replacing computer arrow, and touch-input version installed in the *Radicalism* exhibition.

The final version for exhibition used a more realistic skin colour on the body mesh rather than a flat colour, giving it more of a simulated flesh quality. I also added a face. I felt it was

important to add this because otherwise you feel like you are just dragging around a mannequin. I wanted to suggest that this body might not simply be a ‘toy’ and had some reality as a body being subjected to your gaze and under the screen manipulation. Now with a personality (a face), the body of the man, Joel, appears squashed up against the screen and glitches slightly, particularly where the face and penis are. These are the two most affective or affectionate parts of a *Grindr* based body, and they protrude the most, becoming the most affected by the squashing of the simulated glass. I see this as an affront to the affection-image; distorting it beyond its capacity to function as a partial object or to be ‘read’ effectively. It is a way of breaking or subverting this language.

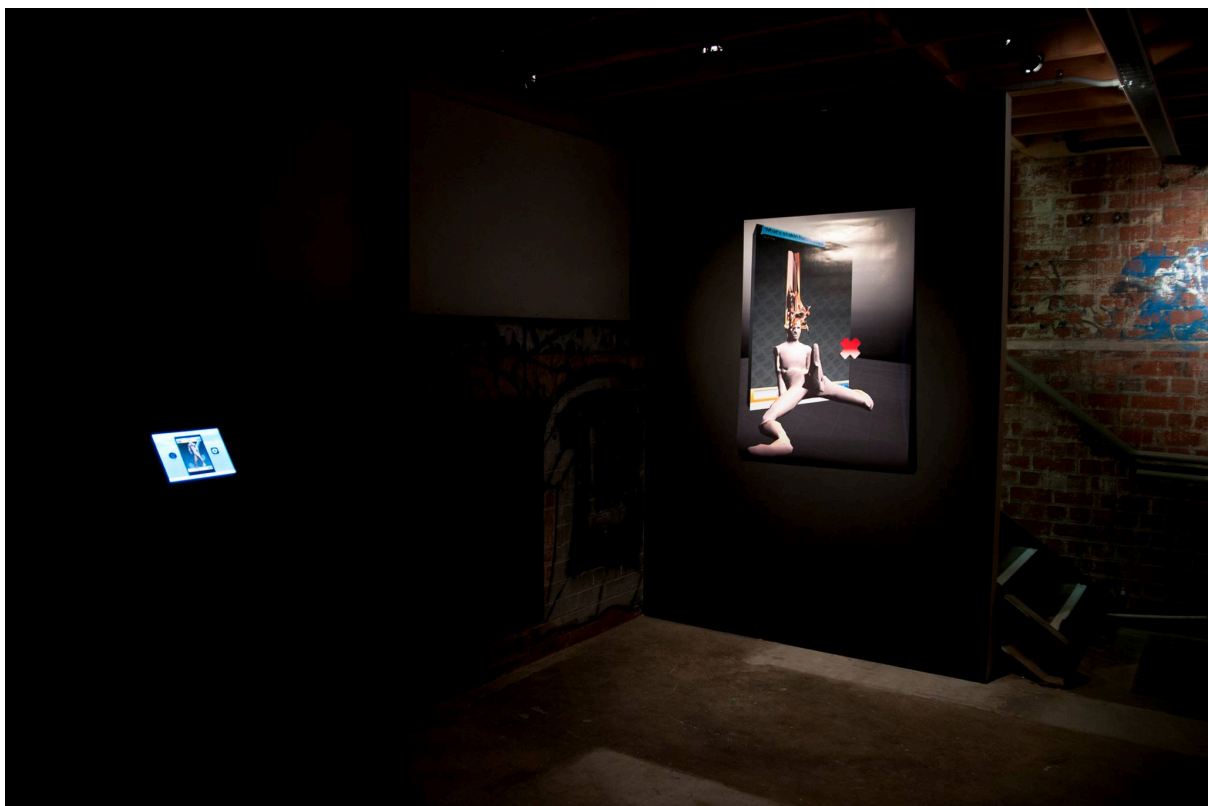


Figure 6: Tom Penney, from left ‘Gay Under Glass’ (2013-14), ‘A Handsome Man’, *Radicalism* exhibition (2014). Photo by Hoda Afshar

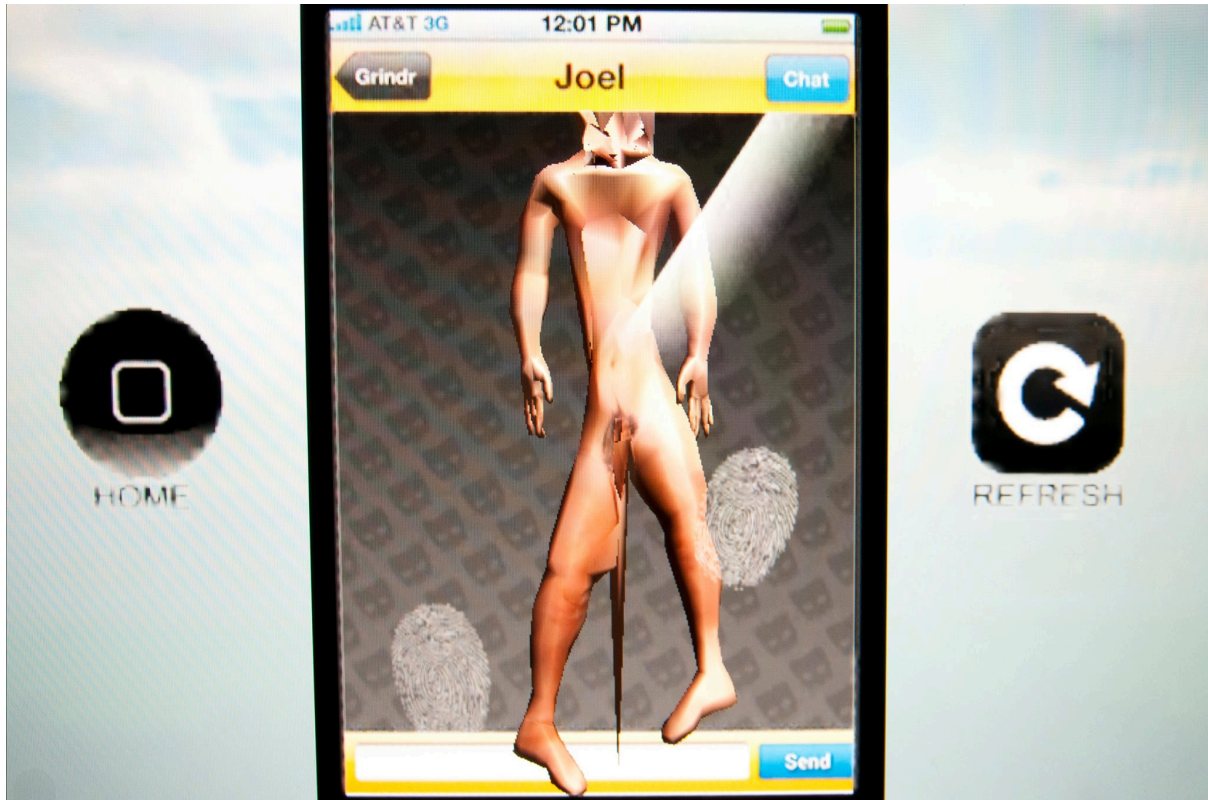


Figure 7. Tom Penney, *Gay Under Glass* (2013-14), screenshot of iPad installation.

There are two oddly crisp and isolated virtual fingerprint marks on the screen deliberately made to approximate real fingerprints. This plays alongside the uncanny approximation of a body, or the shoddily cut out finger from earlier iterations. It is intended to be a deliberately poor simulation of ‘touch’ speaking to the affective numbness of touching bodies within screens. When viewers do touch the screen and drag the body around, another poor simulation takes place – the sound. The audio heard in the work is an edited series of open-source sound files of rubbing glass played one after the other, randomly, so long as body is being dragged around. They are quite abrupt, they don’t fade in or out, and it’s quite easy to hear the same sound bites repeat because the list of possible sounds is not long. It’s like a video game where you hear the same sound effects, such as slashing, firing a gun, or gaining a point repeated over and over. It is humorous because clearly the sound — like the image — is an approximation, a simulation, and not smooth or realistic.

The notion of affection or affection-image as discussed here and in chapter 3 as it applies to this work is problematized. The work sends-up or makes farcical the problems I have identified earlier in this dissertation. Dragging the loose, saggy body around via its glitched-up face is rather satisfying, even sadistic. The body is pressed against the screen

with some clumsy semblance of non-virtual physicality. The viewer gets a strong sense of their own sadistic manipulation of the body as they use their finger to smear it around. The intention is to invoke a self-awareness of the kind of ‘god complex’ through the objectification of a virtual body beneath a commanding finger. I write further about objectification and commanding finger in relation to the video game *Black and White* in Chapter 6.

The glitching of the face, and this glitching as a point of contact with the finger, creates a physical relationship to the distortion of facial imagery; the distortion of the affection-image. This distortion also extends to the manipulation of the body and penis. The body is the most expressive component here, it distorts and twists when it collides with itself, the finger, and its profile-prison. The penis and face, both affective close-ups, are glitched and provide us with no information. The unnatural smudging sound emanating from the finger’s interaction only makes it more obvious that there is no real physicality at play either; these are strange simulations of any visceral experience. The whole work becomes a slapstick irreverent downplaying of these elements; of the body, its relationship to a personal glass screen, and to a user who sees that body as an object, and intends to make this absurdity clear to any user of *Grindr* through this uncannily-portrayed ‘version’ of a simplified *Grindr* encounter.





Figure 8. Tom Penney, *Gay Under Glass* (2013-2014), Unity3D web app version, screenshot of the web version.

### **TinderFlick**

‘TinderFlick’ (2014) was a work developed specifically for the *Radicalism* show. I had always wanted to make a work about *Tinder*, another dating app, because the method of browsing through possible dates is unique. On *Tinder* one is presented with profile image after profile image, at which point the user makes a quick decision to ‘swipe left’ or ‘swipe right’. One ‘swipes left’ to discard a human being; these people you are not attracted to. If however you ‘swipe right’ this indicates you might like to chat to the person, and, if they also happen to ‘swipe right’ on you then you get a match and can chat to each other. ‘TinderFlick’ relates to the video ‘Tough Guy / Big Red X’; viewers perform dismissive swipe or flick gestures on ‘TinderFlick’s’ virtual bodies. These gestures dismiss bodies and imply users’ judgment although here they can do it themselves rather than watch my finger do so. In this scenario, I have played with the idea of *Tinder* being a fire, both positive and negative. Here, no matter which direction you swipe the constant onslaught of bodies, they land in the fire.

In this work, there are only four bodies that rotate through, although each time they are presented with a randomly generated name. These are white, generic bodies, two male

and two female. I used open-source meshes and turned them into floppy ragdolls whose heads always face the user, as if silently begging the user to ‘pick me!’ or, seem to offer them some affection. The user places their finger into the profile space to flick the body left or right, the person’s head snaps to the finger, often extending their neck in an absurd fashion and leaving their body flailing about behind them. The bizarre disconnect of the head from the body creates a strange relationship between each person’s face and their connected body. When the head is “flicked” either side, the body often snaps back as if on an elastic band (via the neck). After a user has discarded a few bodies on either side the ‘bodycount’ starts to rise, and the cadavers become uncontained by the space either side of the ‘profile’ area. They loll about, toppling throughout the whole scene. This artwork is an expression of complete ambivalence towards the ‘*Tinder* treatment’.



Figure 9. Tom Penney, *TinderFlick* (2014), screenshot of web version

The concerns elaborated in these works, notably regarding the relationship between bodies, screens, faces and fingers, have been explored through a number of works during my practice particularly those shown in the *Radicalism* exhibition in Melbourne. I began with a discussion of an unusual tension; between the notion of an app providing meaningful affection to users, and this affection as undermined by the strange narcissistic and numbed affective circuitry that such apps engender. Throughout my work I have drawn conceptual parallels between elements of gaming and dating apps in order to draw attention to the

simulations of the body present in app-dating environments. My work has seized the concept of critical ‘world building’ (see Chapter 6) to create uncanny parodies and symbolic reductions of online dating environments. These reductions have involved a focus on using the finger or swipe-gestures to select, discard, or distort virtual human beings. The work draws viewers’ attention to their own gestures and judgements by taking them out of context and rendering them absurd. This enables viewers to translate the parody back to their own use of dating apps and reflect upon how they objectify other users and themselves.

### **Tabularium (2014)**

Later in 2014 I built upon the works presented at the *Radicalism* exhibition to create an artistic ‘probe-head’ (see chapter 5) that examined the reconfiguration of facial politics of using *Grindr* and other gay online dating apps. This project was exhibited at Slopes Gallery, part of Melbourne’s Utopian Slumps, in the exhibition *Tabularium* curated by Alana Kushnir. *Tabularium* at large had a post-internet art focus, and included works by Jon Raffman, Ry David Bradley, Eloïse Bonneviot, Heman Chong, Anthony Marcellini, Rachel De Joode, Lawrence Lek and Katja Novitskova. My works however sought to do something different to this general trend and I think they sat awkwardly amongst the other standard post-internet pieces. I had never conceptualised myself as a ‘post-internet artist’.

### **Museum**

I presented my online components of the exhibition in a form that I called “Museum” in keeping with the exhibition’s theme of *Tabularium*, a closed archive “which was constructed in around 78 BCE to house official legal documents of the ancient Roman State.” (Kushnir and Lek, 2014, para.1). It was important to me that I reference the history of Greco-Roman sculptures at some point to infuse the works with a frame of classical white-maleness. The background for “Museum” which is a container for many of the works previously discussed and presented online, is a museum scene built in *The Sims 3* that I have taken a screenshot of, blurred and Photoshopped (more details in Chapter 6). The phone browser hovers on a layer above the background as if you were looking at these works on a smartphone or iPad in a virtual gallery. The background of the phone browser is one of the images that I didn’t end up producing as a print or finished piece when developing “Selfie” (see Chapter 6). “Museum” became a web-based interface through which you could access the works previously discussed in this chapter, as well as an additional work *G-Net*.

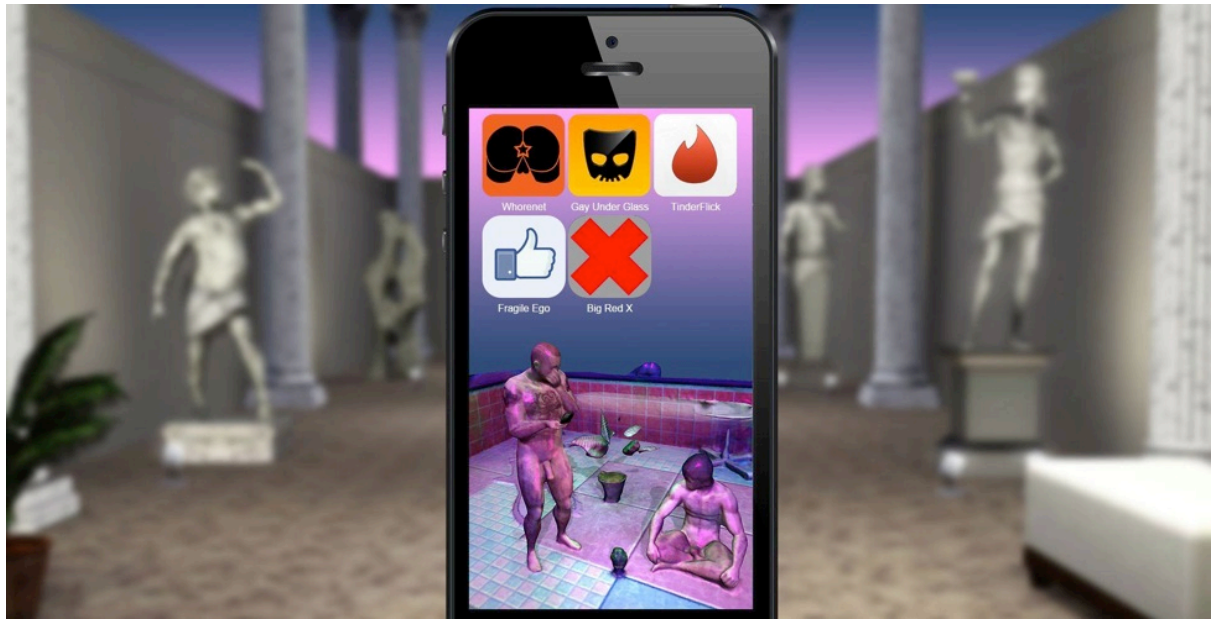


Figure 10. Tom Penney, *Museum* (2014), screenshot of the website.

### **G-Net**

The primary new work I produced for *Tabularium*, and accessible through “Museum” was ‘G-Net’, a parody app deriving its title from the gay dating app *Hornet*, which is very similar in nature to *Grindr*, adopting the same grid location based-interface, orange colour scheme and profile structure. The main screen of *G-Net* first introduced the user with a logo displaying a stylised star-shaped anus between two butt cheeks and the words “Finding others nearby” (web version) or “touch to find others” (iPad version) before loading a grid of square rooms that one monster inhabited each. At the bottom of the interface was a ‘trough’ that collected any monsters you didn’t like and blocked. Blocked monsters slid down the screen and landed in the trough. The design of each room was to be somewhat like a padded cell, subtly alluding to the self-entrapping feedback loops that users might get themselves into, addictively, in using such apps.

### **Doll Play for ‘G-Net’**

‘G-Net’ evolved from extensive play with both physical and digital materials. This for the most part involved the creation of bodies resembling partial objects. I sculpted a number of forms from plasticine to get an immediate sense of physical creation over my characters, these were later 3D scanned and rendered as digital meshes. Much of this process I can describe as semi-erotic. I rather liken the experience of moulding my preliminary sculptures out of plasticine to that of forming a body, or moulding flesh. It is very queer, this process of

sculpting reductive phalluses, as one is both creating a perverse object (eluding to one's own sexual interests) and interacting with it in order to later objectify it as a critical object.

In a sense, each monster is an ideal-object: a subverted, dark object rather than a 'good' object. These objects only become individuals when when they are in the app, characterized by other profile stats, and text that has been programmed to randomly generate, alongside different skin colours. As general designs, each monster-style functions as a generic, reductive 'type', pulling the pantheon of homosexual 'tribes' into a pantheon of reductive body-type-styled monstrosities. In *G-Net* these were objectified in the same way users might be within the interface of the actual *Hornet* or *Grindr* apps; the fetish of their presentation as generic (anti)ideal objects was extended to their physical creation. Importantly these bodies were not represented as 'whole'. They were 'whole' in the sense that they were objects, but as bodies they were merely detached parts, or resembling parts, but with an added singular eye.

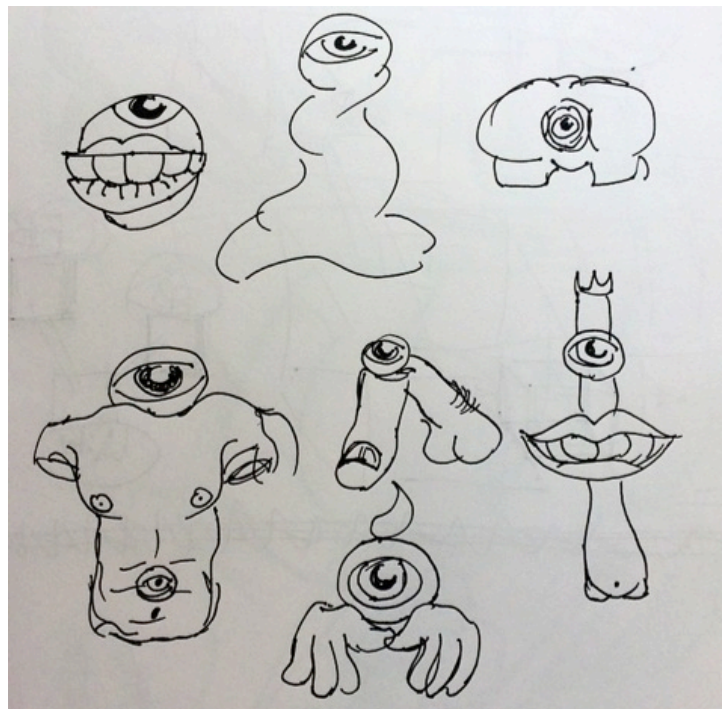


Figure 11. Tom Penny, *G-Net* (2014). Initial sketch designs for the monsters.



Figures 12 and 13. Tom Penny, *G-Net* (2014). From left, original plasticine sculptures, and rendered as digital meshes made from 3D photo-scans.

I had actually got some of my inspiration for the way each monster would ‘inhabit’ the main profile browsing space by reading about dolls houses in Mary Flanagan’s writing as discussed in Chapter 2. Many traditional dolls houses are ‘cut-away’, revealing a series of rooms often of equal size that the dolls can inhabit. I combined this idea with the grid of squares from *Grindr* or *Hornet*, and although the reference is not at all obvious in the final outcome, it is where the idea came from in part. The second influence here, ‘dungeons’, is discussed in Chapter 5. The ‘grid’ of rooms in a dolls’ house might structure a domestic space, granting each room its symbolic and contained purpose, but here the square boundary of each profile space offers a different kind of ‘domestic’ prison; the everydayness for gay men is the *Grindr* or *Hornet* interface and each face is a denizen of its own frame. As mentioned earlier, every monster’s profile is decorated with randomly generated statistics to give it a personality. These are age, distance (from the user), height and weight. Additionally, a profile title was generated from a long list based of profile titles I had witnessed on real profiles such as “Masc 4 Musc”, “Total Top”, “Horny Bottom”, “Twink for u” and “Wrd Looking”.

This work took a lot more planning and time than other works in my dissertation. It was my most ambitious work, and I sought assistance from a programmer, Stevie Griffiths, to make it. Mostly, planning involved how we would arrange a series of rooms that could automatically load in random features from a library of ‘pieces’. These included which

monster mesh would be used, which skin colour, what profile name, whether it would or wouldn't like you, and other statistics. We set up a grid of co-ordinates that would spawn 'rooms'. Each 'room' had a controller (written in UnityScript code) that would determine the features that would be loaded into it. Additionally there was an external controller that could determine if a room needed to be replaced (because you had 'blocked' that character), as well as determining the room you were looking at, and therefore which cloth-based mesh to animate and light up. UnityScript code also controlled things like the chat feature.

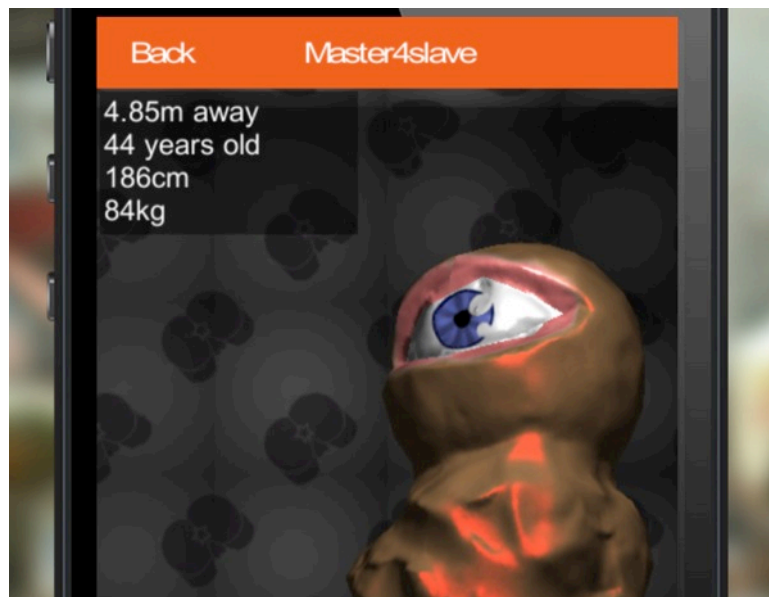


Figure 14, Tom Penney, *G-Net* (2014), view of a monster inhabiting its room with randomly generated profile statistics.

*G-Net* was programmed so that users could actually chat to the monsters. For each randomly generated monster, there was a 3/10 chance that it would be "into you". If a monster was "into you" it would gradually spam you with introductory messages such as "hi", "hi", "hi", "I'm horny", "hi", "wanna fuck?". These messages (and this may come as a surprise to non-users) are very common in real-world *Grindr* encounters. It is very common for a guy to continually spam you with "hi", failing to catch on that you are not interested. If you typed anything into the response area, the app would search through your response for sexual keywords and reply using them if it liked you. For example, if you offered, "I'm horny", it might reply "Hot, yes I love horny". The effect is deliberately clunky and robotic, alluding to realistic code-based interaction of the app experience. Essentially you could have a very crude, sexual, pseudo-conversation with each monster.

Additionally, if the monster liked you, with every reply you gave it the monster would inflate. It would puff up with comic inflation sounds like it was becoming erect, excited and engorged with blood. Alternatively, if the monster was not “into you” and you attempted to converse with it, it would take a lot longer to reply or not reply at all. It would deflate and become wilted from disinterest, until it decided to block you, in which case the screen would say, “You have been blocked”. You could also block each monster yourself using a block button, at which point they would be ejected from their room and slide into the “trough” at the bottom of the interface and be replaced with a different randomly generated monster. Responses from disinterested monsters were short and rude, examples include: “fuck off”; “I’m not interested in <sexual keyword from your message>”; “I’m not into you kinda guys”; “Ur not my type hey”; “Yeah whatever”. This combined with the depiction of monsters whose ‘faces’ have been reduced to singular, unblinking eyes, is designed to render the dating app experience as an altogether unsatisfying and alienating one.

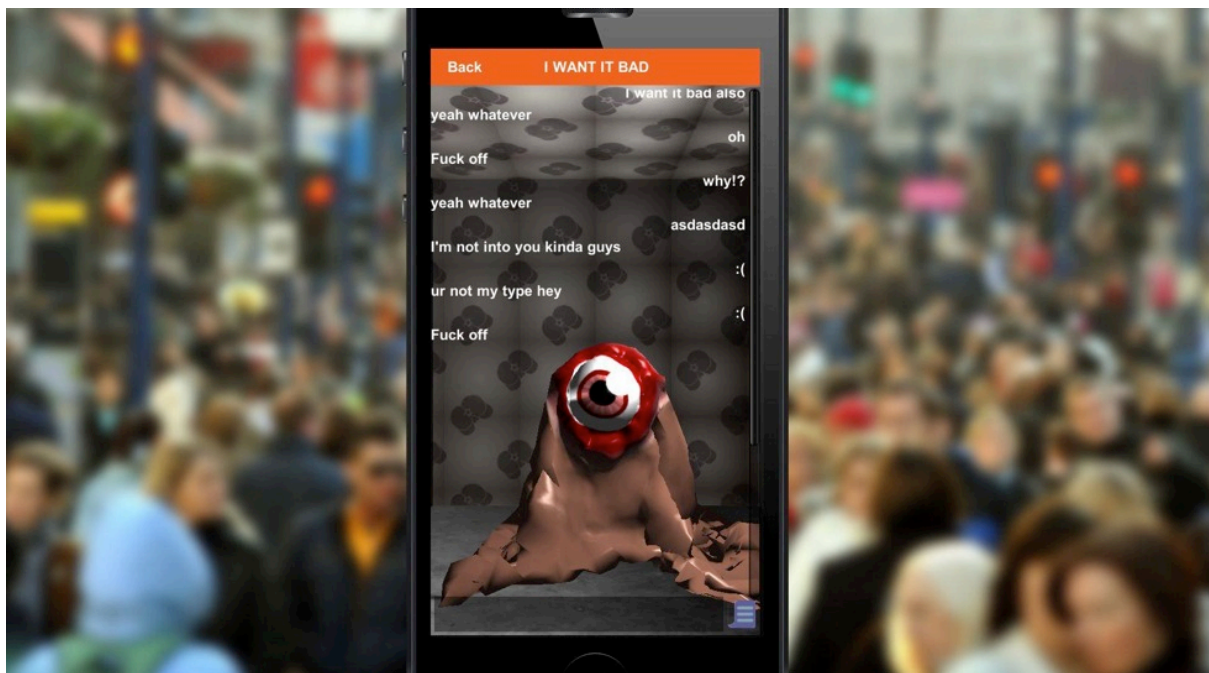


Figure 15, Tom Penney, *G-Net* (2014), chat view of monster in the web version.

*G-Net* used profile text based off the type of text seen in real *Grindr* and *Hornet* profiles particularly profiles that expressed a crude, reductive image of what it means to use the app. Many of the pieces of text chosen reflected the defensive, hyper-masculinity of the environment. Examples include “Message me all u like.., Just don’t expect a response unless you look like a current ELITE athlete. Footballer 5yrs ago = no!”, “no Indians”, “hit me up NSA cant host anon. Descreet”, “Don’t msg me if ur ugly coz I don’t wanna reply but ill feel



bad bcoz I ignore basically everyone who messages me and basically everyone I message ignores me”, and “Show me your face if you wanna get anywhere (seriously though I’m probably not going to talk to you if you don’t have a face picture”. It was important to me that these profiles reflected real life, because, it was in fact harder to come up with them myself than use what was seen in reality, the situation being “reality is stranger than fiction” when it comes to what you can find in these unexposed, semi-anonymous environments, especially where men are hiding their identity and using the app for an ideational fix rather than intending for anything face to face or personal.

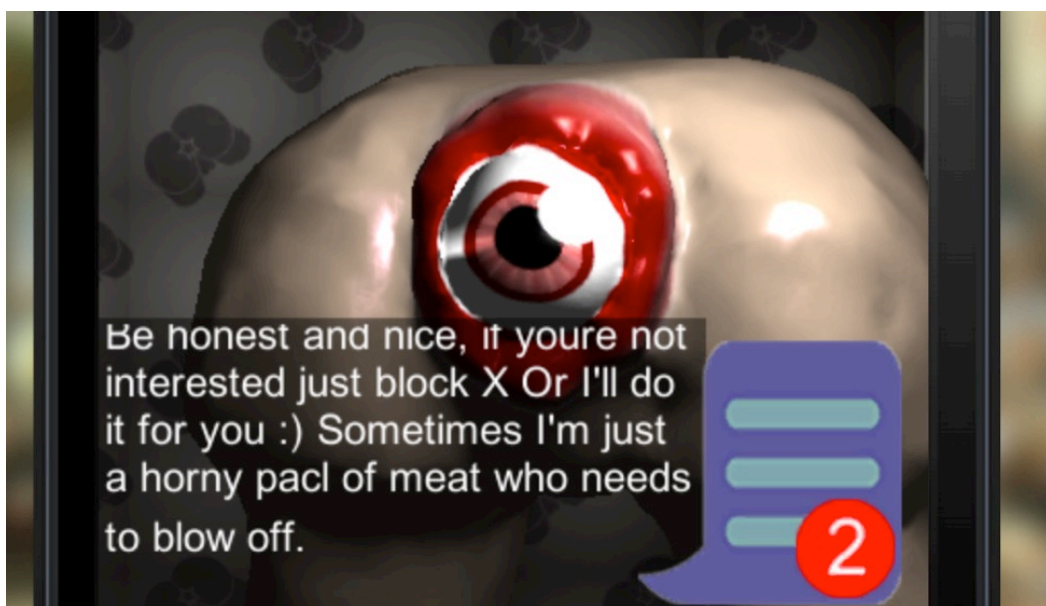


Figure 16, Tom Penney, *G-Net* (2014) image of a monster’s profile with profile text inspired by real life (spelling mistakes included).

### Exhibition and Reception

Playful designs are by definition ambiguous, self-effacing, and in need of a user who will complete them... rather than imposing a context, playful designs open themselves to interpretation; they suggest their behaviours to their users, who are in charge of making them meaningful. Playful designs require a willing user, a comrade in play. This approach to design downplays system authority. —Sicart, 2014, p.31.

When Sicart discusses the iPhone’s Siri as a playful design, he notes “Siri has a personality, she is quirky, ironic, even a bit dry” (Sicart 2014, 32). With my own work *G-Net* the app becomes a dry and condemning playful reduction of existing apps, and requires that anyone interacting have a sense of humour. In *G-Net* ‘personality’, or represented personalities, are

cutting. The app is not designed as a tool for people insecure about the depicted digital culture to start worrying about non-users looking down upon their activities; I doubt they would understand the joke. It is designed for savvy users who wish to recognise the “problem” that *Grindr* or *Hornet* represent to a specific culture. The ideal normal response would be something like ‘hey, yes, haha, I see this everyday, this is a good distillation of that experience’. Therefore, there is a certain solidarity hoped for here, that anyone coming to experience the work will become a “comrade in play”. In the web-viewer version of the artwork, the application is housed in a fake iPhone border, which along with the application, floats above a blurred background of a public crowd.

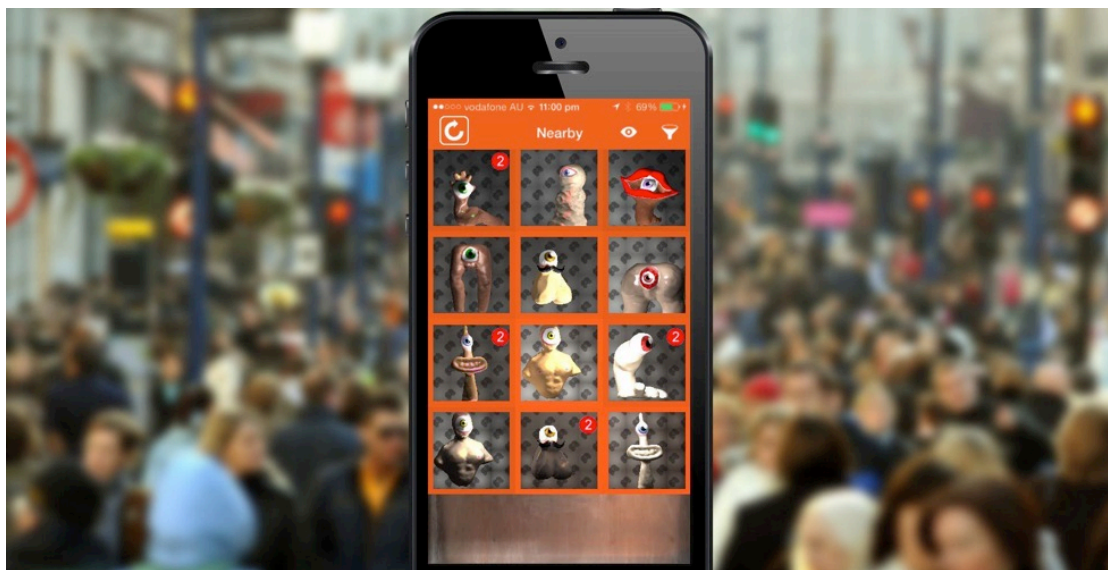
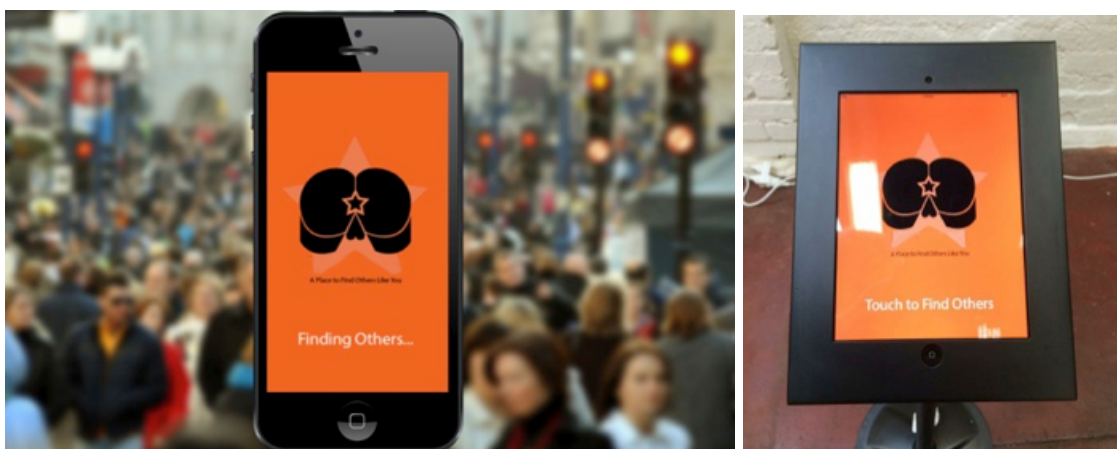


Figure 17, Tom Penney, image of the full interface of *G-Net* (2014) as seen on the web version, with blurred ‘public’ background.



Figures 18 and 19, Tom Penney, from left: *G-Net* (2014) as it appears on a web browser, and iPad installation view at the *Tabularium* exhibition.

## **Perversity and Critical Play**

Through the production of *G-Net* I encountered a problem with the concept of Critical Play as it applies to critical reduction and objectification. *G-Net* not only comments on the perversity of users of *Grindr* and *Hornet*, but also functions to focus perversity on behalf of me: the artist who produces perverse caricatures of perverse behaviour. Thus my examination of artistic practice becomes a subversive exercise in facial logic. To Deleuze and Guattari this is a practice of becoming-clandestine, producing a probe-head (see Chapter 5), and is to become a kind of Frankenstein:

[a] demented experimenter who flays, slices, and anatomizes everything in sight, and then proceeds to sew things randomly back together again. You can make a list of any part-objects you want: hand, breast, mouth, eyes [...] it's still Frankenstein" (Deleuze 1988, p.201).

The works function as caricatures of dating apps, and each profile also operates as a reductive caricature of its users that objectifies their content in the same way that the original does. It is this conflict that I address in the following chapter on caricature and the digital.

## 5 Caricature and the Digital

The comic is concerned with the ugly in one of its manifestations: ‘If it [what is ugly] is concealed, it must be uncovered in the light of the comic way of looking at things; if it is noticed only a little or scarcely at all, it must be brought forward and made obvious, so that it lies clear and open to the light of day [...]. In this way caricature comes about. —Fischer 1889, p.45.

In this chapter I articulate how a number of works have informed the notion of caricature as a way of seeing for the playful artist, particularly in terms of re-arranging organizations of the face in spite of a kind of oppression of the face. In particular, this is about how the line between critique and essentialisation become blurred, or share the same logic, when it comes to critical play. These ideas originate in my reading of Mike Kelley in “Foul Perfection” (1989). Particularly, this chapter relates to the Chapter 7 and its discussion of the production of identities, through the notion of arresting, freezing or capturing aesthetic representations of identity in the form of caricatures and comic judgements. Freud’s analysis of jokes relies on German philosopher Kuno Fischer’s illumination of caricature above; that caricature comes to represent a comic judgment.

In a sense, a caricature as an artwork is also a playful judgment. If we consider that play scenarios function as subjective representations, as simulations of existing ones, we might come to think of a caricature as behaving similarly to simulation in the form of ‘critical inversion’ as discussed in Chapter 1. Caricature’s critical distance is constructed through this paradoxical status. ‘Probe-Heads’ are a Deleuzian term referring to the method of breaking-up, re-arranging or modifying the organization of face, to change orientations towards faciality. I talk about caricature’s relation to probe-heads here.

### **Caricature**

An artist has the opportunity to subjectively represent faults for the purposes of critique through caricature. As a strategy this serves to distance the artist critically from the critiqued by subjecting subjects and systems to their own play. For example, in the traditional visual arts hierarchy, caricature is often treated as a low form. It is something we expect to see in popular newspapers and children’s books. Historically caricature has been used most

effectively by the middle and working classes to critique aristocracy, government, and power structures in general by rendering key figures within such structures as grotesque or ugly. For example in the famous case of William Dobell, his 1943 Archibald Prize winning portrait of Johnny Russell was contested in the Supreme Court of Australia on the basis that it was a 'caricature' and not a "proper" portrait (Eagle 1996, para.10).

In a practical sense caricature is about exaggeration or reduction. I'm referring here to Mike Kelley's definition of caricature as "a portrait that deliberately transforms the features of its victims so as to expose and exaggerate their faults and weaknesses..." (Kelley 1989, p.21). Kelley goes on to expand this definition by discussing it in terms of essentialisation, pointing out that "although they may appear to be very different, caricature, which uses deformation in the service of ridicule, and the idealised, heroic, classical portrait, are founded in similar essentialist assumptions" (Kelley 1989 p.22). The key here is that the purpose of caricature is to critique, not to immortalise or to affirm the essential qualities that the caricature attempts to draw-out. It does this by highlighting certain features of the critiqued; a slight bump in the nose becomes a great big lump.

In low comedy and political cartoons, reductive and distortional practices exist side by side. Here, both approaches are set up to attack false or hated authority, for in the context of caricature's distortions, the refined heroic figure becomes a comic butt (Kelley 1989, p.27).

As a subversive tool caricature is associated with scatology and low humour with the aim to destabilise its subjects. In a way, a caricature could be seen as a threat to a represented individual, although this is a different kind of threat to abjection which presents us with elements divorced from the unity of the body such as urine, blood, or severed limbs. With caricature elements are retained within the unity of the body however they are exaggerated. No information is really 'added' it is only highlighted or exaggerated. The threat of caricature lies not in any threat to unity, but in emphasising what is already there; the 'truth', albeit a totally subjective one. In such a scenario caricature is threatening if the subject is insecure about certain observations of their own body or identity. Kelley articulates further; "Caricature is at root based on the idea of essence, the inner truth [...and that...] caricature has a kind of 'good' twin in less discordant attempts to essentialise the human form" (Kelley 1989, p.21), however this truth is presented as an ugly truth, rather than one that is beautiful.

## **Essentialisation in Portraiture**

“The face, according to Deleuze and Guattari, has become a frozen structure in Western history and culture, perpetuating a cult of “personality” and setting up exclusionary zones between surface “features” and the depth of “mind” that lies behind these. The human has subsequently been evaluated and determined according to this dominant facial system” (Munster 2006, p.21).

Affect theorist Anna Munster here reflects on Deleuze, Guattari, and the face as a prominent structure in contemporary digital media. Through the algorithms that digital media uses to interpret us and our faces unintended caricatures may be produced. Social media synthesizes information based on data about individuals in order to optimise an understanding of a person and streamline their networked experience; it essentialises them for these purposes. Avatars and profile pictures as faces often stand in for bodies in digital cultures. Portraits, like dolls, ‘stand in’ for individuals. In Joanna Woodall’s text *Facing the Subject* (1997) she discusses the portrait as a “conscious depiction of particular individuals” that “bring[s] out hidden information”, “reaches an understanding of its sitter” and has a “central role as an arbiter of identity and presentation” (Woodall 1997, p.5-7). Thus the notion of a portrait stands as a medium, between the individual subject and its representation to others. Woodall also suggests that on the topic of constructing a portrait “...a principal medium is thus precisely the individual’s body-features” (Woodall 1997, p.260). It may be that portraiture is a relevant way to present an individual, its subjectivity, (or as a reflexive process) its narcissism.

## **Algorithmic Caricature**

The research of Alesandro Ludovico and Bronac Ferran help us to situate the notion of portraiture in the context of the digital, where ‘portraits’ are everywhere and can be made by anyone. But I would also like to frame their investigation as one of caricature. “The appearance of our individual faces in other peoples’ screens is now in quotidian” (sic.) suggest Ferran and Ludovico (2013a, p.1) in their analysis of artistic responses to “representations and misrepresentations of the face” (Ferran and Ludovico 2013a, p.1) in contemporary digital culture. Ferran and Ludovico mirror the definition of ‘portrait’ that Joanna Woodall alludes to in 1997; that “the portrait’s function has been to represent an

identity through its somatic traits” (ibid) but they now emphasize the machine’s role in the interpretation of such traits.

It would be safe to say that the idea of ‘portrait’ and the degree to which it represents ‘truth’ about a subject is now even more tested given the digital. Surveillance systems, face-tracking software, and apps designed to distort or re-touch the face all surround the reception of individual faces today. “Personal profiles lie within bureaucratic archives, are held in passport and ID records and captured, often trivially, in the documentation of everyday movements by surveillance cameras” (ibid). Ferran and Ludovico’s intent is to draw attention to the way faces and identities are mediated by ‘machines’, and to strategies that disrupt or subvert the machine’s ability to recognise individuals, or have an influence over one’s representation, indeed, to ‘play’ this system.

Ferran and Ludovico describe a number of artworks that shed light on strategies disrupting the relationship between a human identity and a machine’s treatment of its image. “...artworks are elaborating on machinic perception of faces, and ‘construction’ of a biometric identity” (Ferran and Ludovico, 2013a, p.1). They highlight and seek to subvert concepts of individuality that are measured, reduced, or quantified by mechanical perceptions. The most important strategy I notice in the works discussed by Ferran and Ludovico, is the symbolic use of algorithms that judge facial information about users wrongly, or present them negatively, thus placing the role of the ‘judgemental machine’ in a negative light.

This focus on algorithms is present in the popular blog “Nick Clegg Looking Algorithmically Sad” (2013), in which photos of (then) British Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg are analysed and show “scientifically, how his profile can be analysed as sad most of the time” (ibid). This work is humorous; it shows how the software used to analyse his facial emotions, and then how it gets it wrong; even if Clegg is smiling, the analysis comes out as “sad”. In this sense the work highlights that computer algorithms can get it wrong, ignoring individual nuances and forming a blanket judgement of the subject. Whether the authors have tweaked the algorithm to provide a bias is not certain, but the message remains the same; the work forms a contemporary political caricature of Nick Clegg through the algorithms it uses, emphasizing his character as purely ‘sad’.

The idea of a portrait altered by algorithms is expanded in Ludovico's own artwork. With artistic partner Paulo Cirio, Ludovico is responsible for the *Hacking Monopolism Trilogy* (2009-11), which includes their most famous project, *Face to Facebook* (2011). Operating within the critical new media traditions of hacktivism and artistic intervention, *Face to Facebook* saw Ludovico and Cirio 'scrape' profile data from one million Facebook users. This data included the profile image, name, some personal data, and some relationship data of each user. Ludovico and Cirio then customized a facial recognition algorithm to sort photos of smiling Facebook users into six simple categories (Ludovico and Cirio, 2013b). The six categories were 'climber', 'easy going', 'funny', 'mild', 'sly' and 'smug' and were chosen to reflect the type of words we use to judge people from a distance (ibid.). These words represented comic judgments. Their system effectively sorted 250,000 profiles before the artists uploaded them all to their fake dating website; "www.Lovely-Faces.com". "Lovely-Faces.com" was soon taken down due to the great controversy and threats of legal action it inspired, but before it was removed, visitors to the website were presented with a dating-site-style interface that enabled them to choose a suitor by browsing through the sorted faces from within the six artist-designed categories.

The work of Ludovico and Cirio does an excellent job of highlighting questions about the use of our personal data, given our complacency within pervasive social networking systems. By using algorithms to reduce human faces to category judgements ('climber', 'easy going', 'funny', 'mild', 'sly', 'smug'), and filtering potentially any individual through the algorithm, Ludovico and Cirio show us that anyone could be a 'victim' of identity sorting by digital algorithms. The "Face to Facebook" project helps us to consider in greater depth the concept of an algorithmic image of an individual, in a humorous way, even producing caricatures not only of individuals but of the way an entire social media system treats its individuals.

### **Autoscopia**

Adam Nash, Justin Clemens and Christopher Dodds' *Autoscopia* (2009) was "an attempt to explore the affective cycle established between the material and the networked self" (Nash 2012, p.18). *Autoscopia* produces "search-based composite portraits" (ibid) using the affordances of Google, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, as well as more "insidiously invasive" but publicly available "search engines specializing in background checks and public record searches" (ibid). The work allows a visitor to enter a name that will be used in



conjunction with search engines to produce a composite portrait using images returned under that name, as well as a written profile constructed in much the same way using text. Until 2010 *Autoscopia* also produced *Second Life* characters for each name search who “tweeted” their existences on Twitter.

Through these searches, and tweets, the *Autoscopia* portraits were “recursively feeding themselves back into the results of future searches” (ibid) to the point that the profiles have been “continuously running online long enough now that Google will actually return the *Autoscopia* page for certain names as the top ranking result” (ibid). As Anna Munster puts it clearly: “the autoscopic portrait that the site generates of Barack Obama will become a future element composing his incrementally heterogeneous data self, both in *Autoscopia* and in future search engine results for his name” (Munster 2013, p.49), as a result “...the trace left by the digital entity may have more power, in the virtual world, than the trace of its associated material entity” (ibid). As such, *Autoscopia* uses digital algorithms to generate and project perpetual caricature-composites of the individuals searched within its system and reflects the ever-compounding, personally produced caricatures of our own selves we produce in tandem with the digital media systems that interpret and construct us.

### **Caricature as Critical Play**

For my purposes caricature is a Critical Play strategy that places control of subjects and their representation in the hands of the artist, somewhat like doll play. I will discuss my own doll play in relation to Critical Play in *The Sims* in Chapter 6. Artists can subjectively manipulate and re-imagine their subjects through reduction, distortion, and exaggeration. For me, playing with caricature, as in my *Grindr* works, is a way of taking back control over something that is perceived to be all-powerful.

Artist Carla Adams and I have both treated our subjects as dolls subjected to a process of caricature. Adams was a peer of mine in earlier stages of the *Grindr* project, though our practices are separate. ‘Caricature’ has allowed us to take control over various subjects’ representation in a virtual environment. We draw over subjects and emphasise different qualities in order to portray their weaknesses in a digital culture. This system, for both of us, has largely involved online dating. Our transformations are caricatures that imagine structures as broken and forlorn rather than functioning. Much of Adam’s recent works have involved her encounters with men through video webcam chat *Omegle*: she takes images of

the people she interacts with via webcam, and paints over them so as to mask their identity but emphasise their perceived-as-flawed nature.

In *Very Sad Men* (2012) the subjects she has chosen are anonymous but the nature of the colour and shape in each image is blob-like, crude, and unflattering. The colours are sickly or pale. These caricatures emphasise sadness in each subject from the subjective point of view of the artist, being the singular feature that is brought-forward in the representation. Adams has also recently constructed her caricatures in sculptural form, using papier maché to create lumpy, sagging versions of her online encounters. The effect of these caricatures is to render them powerless as objects on the other side of a screen; reversing a relationship that would normally position the female as the object of a male gaze. In this scenario, the men become objects as artworks that can be positioned or played with like dolls in order to subvert the new domesticity of social media. By imagining this environment differently through caricature, the sadness of anonymous webcam interaction is emphasised and critiqued by the artist. These are similar to a number of early digital experiments I did early on during my project by painting over profile images of *Grindr* users in Photoshop called *Profile Pics* (2013).



Figure 20 and 21, Carla Adams, *Very Sad Men* (2012), acrylic on board

### Caricature and the Queer

The caricaturist's secret lies in the use he [sic] makes of controlled regression. Just as his [sic] scribbling style and his blending of shapes evokes childhood pleasures, so the use of magic beliefs in the potency of his [sic] transformations constitutes a regression from rationality. [...] The hostile action is confined to an alteration of the person's 'likeness'[...]. Only this interpretation contains criticism. Aggression has remained in the aesthetic sphere and thus we react not with hostility but with laughter. —Kelley 1989, p.25.

To the caricaturist there is indeed some belief in the power of reduction. To reduce something to an expression, a gesture, is to capture an essential part of it. In this capturing is a certain objectification; to ‘own’ the expression on paper (or on the screen), to see the subject, rendered and trapped within a negative depiction, is to control it. The subject has been subverted, re-skinned, un-played. As an object though, is the caricatured subject one of desire? Desire here is perhaps desire for subversion. To Kelley, caricature is additionally made sense of through the Freudian Oedipal complex, in which caricature comes to represent a subversion of the “falling in-line” of the symbolic father, or family’s direction. The concept of familial subversion as it pertains to my own practice will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

The Oedipal complex constitutes the beginnings of the forms of political and social authority, the regulation and control through the superego or conscience. On the other hand, the political caricature permits the displaced manifestation of the repressed aggressive desire to oust the father. The political enemy, or the subject of distortion, becomes the projection of the hated parent and through caricature can be struck down” (Kelley 1989, p.26).

### **Caricature as Black Magic**

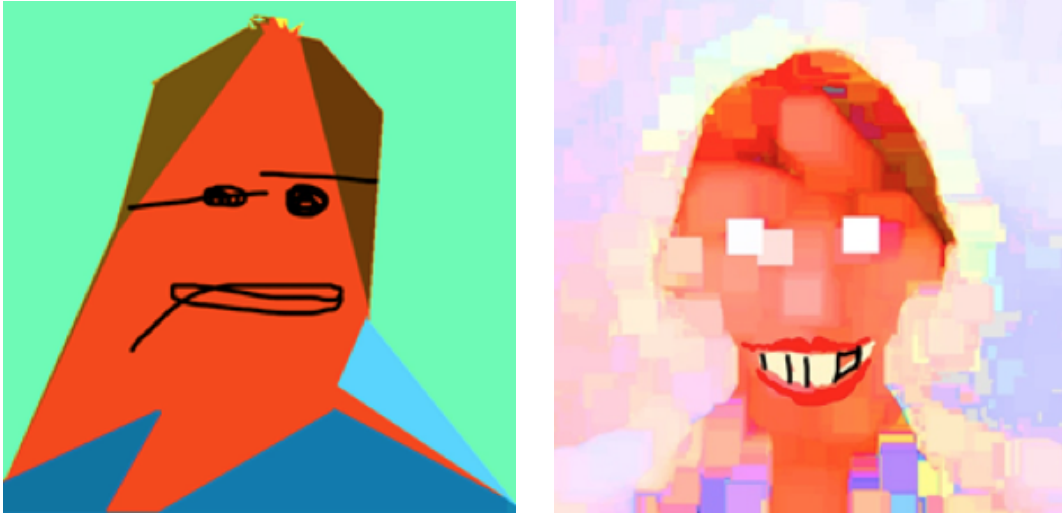
My interest in caricature-as-magic is not new. In one of my older works, *The One Minute Soul Capture* (2009) I exhibited an interest in the “use of magic beliefs in the potency of [my] transformations” as described by Kelley (1989, p.25) above. *The One Minute Soul Capture* refers to the computer’s reductive role in processing individuals as a kind of ‘caricaturist’. This project was framed through my performance as a witch who, having lost her magic powers had to use computers to perform dark magic (I called this *The Dark Arts of Art*). She, the witch, seized the profile images of my Facebook friends and digitally transformed them, each in the space of one minute, using quick and over-used filters on Photoshop. This process was filmed comedically as an instructional crafts show, where the witch showed you how to do it at home using your own Photoshop software. Each subject was reduced to an unflattering digital caricature. Its outcomes were essentialisations of individuals realised in digital artefacts, however they were negative depictions rather than celebratory.

This concept of *The Dark Arts of Art* was also inspired by J.K Rowling’s “horcruxes”, a fictional dark magic artefact from her *Harry Potter* (1997 – present) series. “Horcruxes” are objects that a dark wizard can use to store fragments of their soul. By splitting their soul this

way, a dark wizard will be immortal until all such objects are found and destroyed. I had imagined that each ‘soul capture’ was a dark artefact in this way, and put them on a website, encouraging users to download the images. The rationale was that each time the images were downloaded, the soul would split into even smaller fragments within each copy on different users’ computers, further immortalising the caricatured egos. The comment here was that digital spaces allow for ever-fragmented digital objects that disseminate our egos online, echoing Baudrillard’s notion of a “fractal subject”, a concept that I explore further in a recent work titled *The Garden of Horcruxes* (2016) that I discuss towards the end of this Chapter.

[...] one can speak of the fractal subject [...] diffracted into a multitude of identical miniaturized egos [...] completely saturating its environment [...] the fractal subject dreams only of resembling himself [sic] in each one of his fractions. That is to say, his [sic] dream involutes below all representation towards the smallest molecular fraction of himself [sic]; a strange Narcissus, no longer dreaming of his ideal image, but of a formula to genetically reproduce himself [sic] into infinity (Baudrillard 1988, p.40).

While such a process could be interpreted as a critique of the narcissism of each subject’s self-representation on Facebook, I had masked their identities entirely through each image and as a collection the work became more about the overall process of reduction. The gesture of ‘the filter’ became a metaphor for the subjective essentialisation a computer perceives on its end of the screen-as-mirror. The framing of this reduction as ‘dark magic’ placed it in a critical light by rendering it an ‘evil’ act. With a screeching Monty Python-esque voice, shoddy makeup, and, wearing a torn sheet and Crocs shoes, the character of the witch who performed the dark magic became a meta-caricature: a witch who conflated digital processes and dark magic, who ‘became one with the filter’, and a caricature of systems producing caricatures of subjects. The witch subjected others to her own system; the captured souls became agents of her expression, and the individuals in them had no agency in their own.



Figures 22, 23, Tom Penney, *The One Minute Soul Capture* (2009), digital images

### **Probe-Heads**

Deleuze and Guattari ask how it is possible to dismantle the face if it is such a dominant mode of subjectification; “How do you get out of the black hole? How do you break through the wall? How do you dismantle the face?” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p.218) and they use the term “probe-head machine”. Simon O’Sullivan suggests in “On the Production of Subjectivity: Time For Probe-Heads” (2012) that these ‘probe-heads’ are alternative ways of organising the face; cutting lines through the fear that is generally present when a human sees a face that is too deviant from the white-face model as discussed in Chapter 4, and is deemed abhorrent or monstrous (O’Sullivan 2012, p.190). “A probe-head might in fact be any form of practice – any regime – that ruptures the dominant [faciality]” (O’Sullivan 2012, p.191).

For an artist like me, the concept of a “probe-head” elicits an artistic interrogation of faciality and attempts to poke at or unravel the face; putting it back together or rearranging its features to produce something that is beyond the normal representation of human as defined by faciality. This ‘probe-heading’ constitutes a kind of perverse facial play, a subversive, dark or critical play. This type of play is often found in art history:

Artworks might likewise operate as probe-heads (Francis Bacon’s portraits for example (at least as Deleuze writes about them), but we might also add the more ‘expanded’ practices from the 1960s to today that often offer even stranger – non-facialised – diagrams for subjectivity, for example with performance art, installation, happenings and the like) (O’Sullivan 2012, p191).

My own works, such as *G-Net* discussed in Chapter 4, participate in this tradition by presenting digital monsters that re-compose affection images through caricatured partial objects. We can connect the practice of probe-head-ism to playful caricature in this sense, because “[f]rom this formalist point of view, the whole low-art pictorial tradition of the monster can be viewed as an expression of the pleasure of shuffling the components of a form” (Kelley 1989, p.28), the ‘form’ here referring to facial organs.

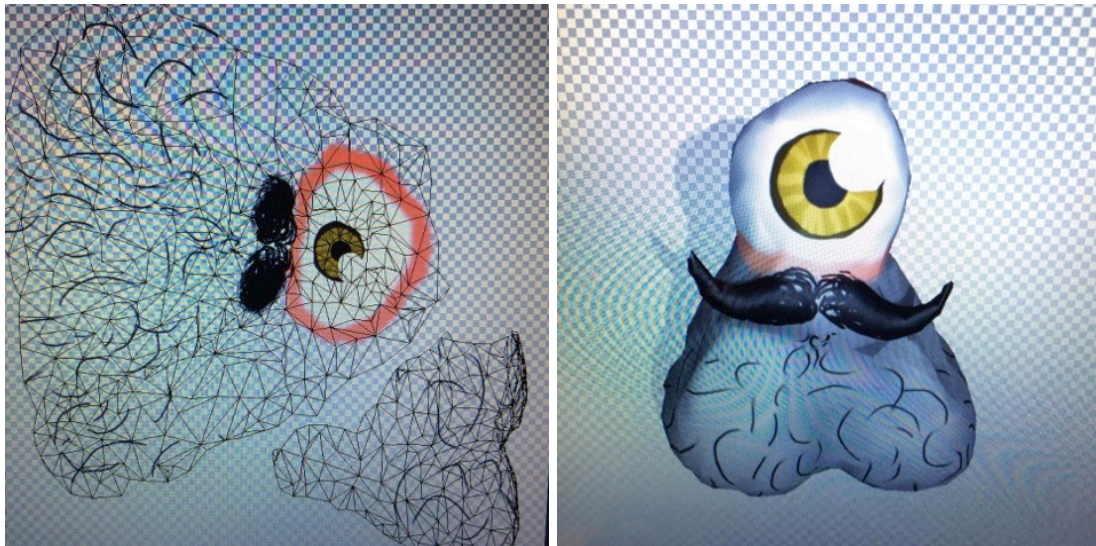
### **Probe-head-ism as critical or dark play**

I attempted to employ a probe-head machine in the production of work, that is, create work that responded to the faciality of *Grindr* but that was ‘beyond’ portraiture or a standard representation of the personalities or faces one might find within, and operate in an altogether more reductive and Frankensteinian manner. This was the employment of a playful ‘Mr Potato-Head-ism’ (a toy which features a blank potato that you can plug different facial organs into as you please) as probe-head. *G-Net* became saturated with ‘caricature’ – a feature of which included phallic monsters based on the affective partial-objects I listed as affection-images earlier in Chapter 4. These include monsters based on a bottom, a hand, biceps, torso, penises, legs, testicles and a mouth, and all had only one eye. The singular eye was intended as the ‘black hole’ of each of these facialised partial objects; the transformation of each body part into a micro-fascistic, anti-affective and (alienating) face. The experience was one illustrated with poker-faced monsters daring you to interact with them, and judging you just as much as you were judging them.

### **Death Masks and “Unskinning”**

During the development of all the works throughout my project, particularly *G-Net*, I have produced 2-Dimensional ‘skins’ of 3D objects. These are the basis for what I call my many “Death Masks”. These are outcomes that came from a playful and experiential engagement with digital materials during the process of preparing 3D models for interactive work. This kind of ‘skinning’ (as Flanagan might refer to it) is not however applied to a pre-prepared virtual doll character like a *Sims* character or playable game character, it is applied to a virtual body created by myself firstly from modelling clay and then as a 3D scanned form. When a model is textured (given a colour and surface detail) in 3D, its x,y,z coordinates are flattened to a 2D grid of u,v coordinates. When a 3D model is constructed from photo-scanning software, it produces a messy set of coordinates that are unlike the symmetrical and optimised 3D mesh coordinates produced by 3D artists and animators when

a mesh is sculpted from scratch. These function as additional caricatures or ‘probe-heads’ of the already caricatured ‘affection-images’ as monsters.



Figures 24 and 25, Tom Penney, from left, development screenshots of monster from *G-Net* (2014), post and pre u-v unwrapping.

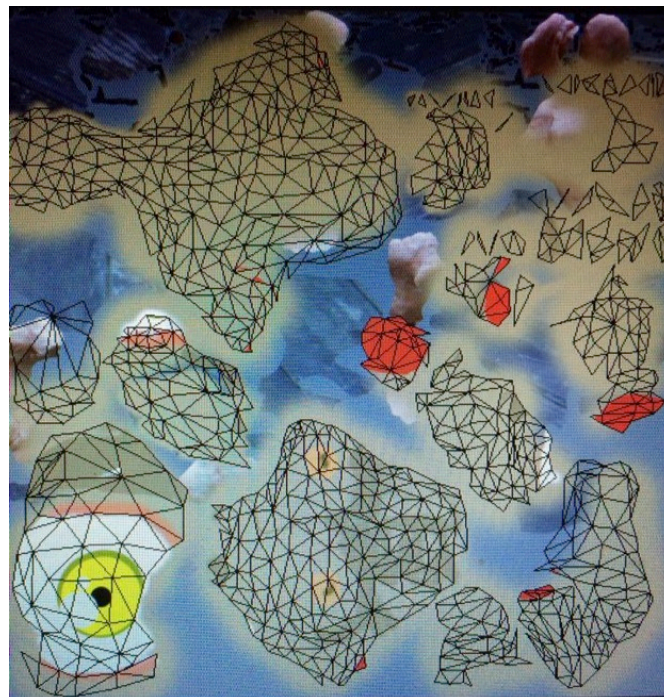
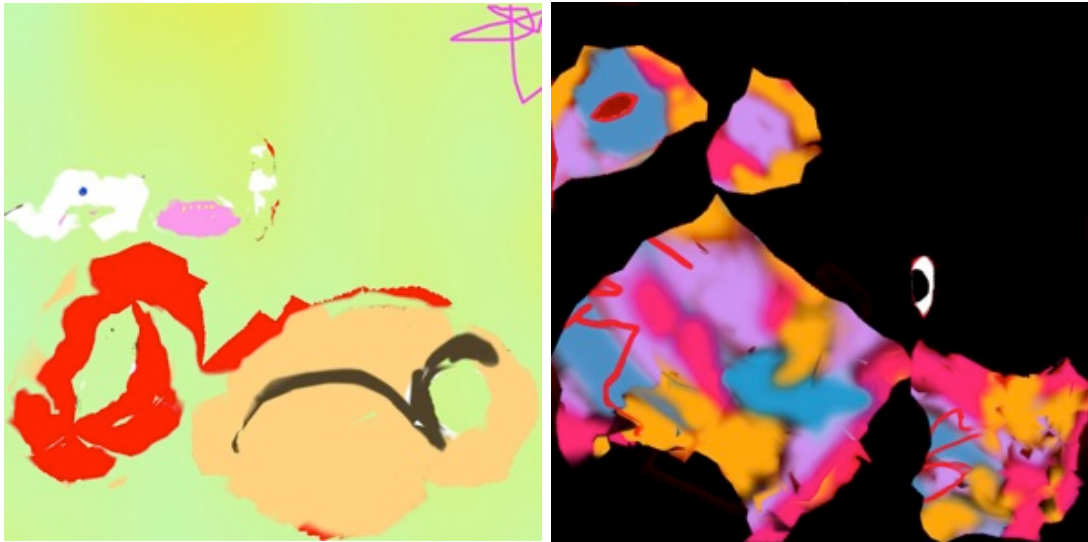


Figure 26, Tom Penney, 2014, a ‘skin’ of one of the scanned sculptures, unfolded into digital 2D space.



Figures 27 and 28, Tom Penney, a series of *Death Masks* (2014), digital images made from colourising and unwrapping the skins of various monsters.

### Fragile Ego

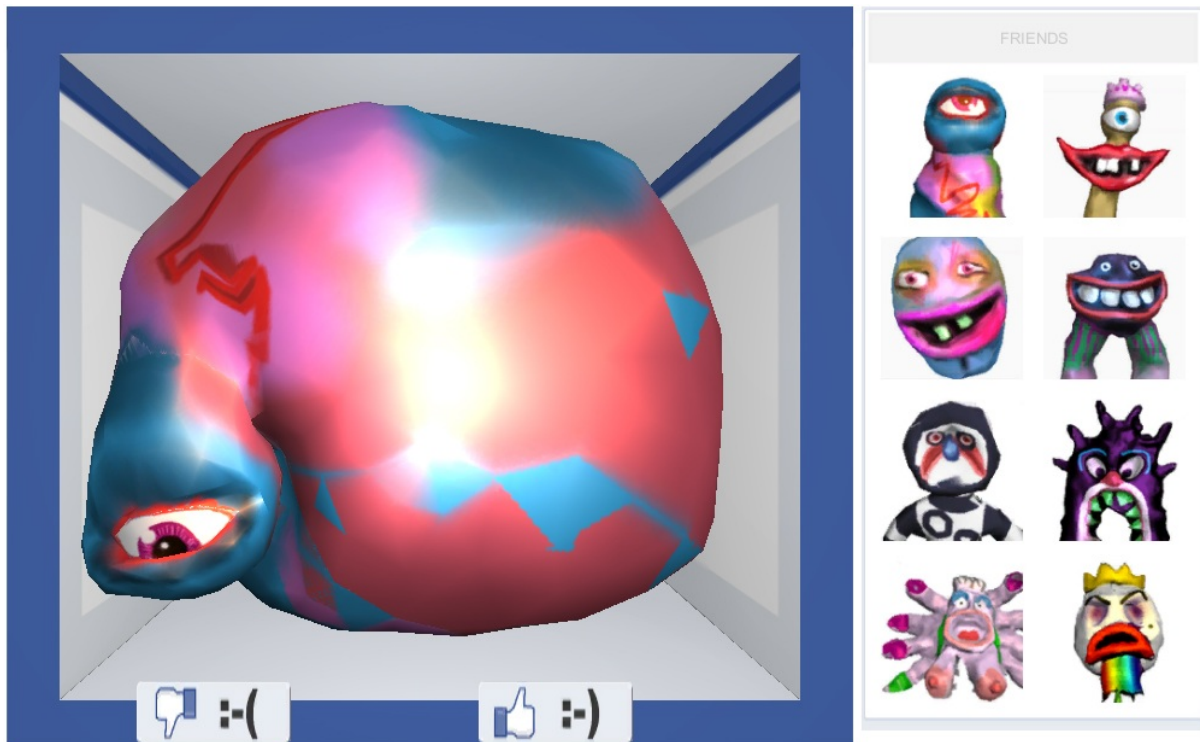


Figure 29, Tom Penney, *Fragile Ego* (2013), screenshot.

The use of caricature to represent whole interactive environments can set artists apart from media systems rather than see them operate from within. By this I mean that artists can attempt to distance themselves from systems like social media by attempting to produce their own critical, standalone representation of such systems. This kind of caricature – system-as-



caricature – has implications not only for artists but for designers of games and interactive media as well, such as ‘Alt Games’ designers or ‘Art Games’ designers discussed in Chapter 1. One method of constructing a caricature of a system is to use basic gestures of interaction, such as the swiping of the finger in my work *Gay Under Glass* (2014) (see Chapter 4), as symbolic of ‘interaction’. For example, in *Fragile Ego* (2013), a recent work made for this dissertation in Unity3D, I exaggerated the feature of the ‘like’ button on Facebook and used it as a central, critical motif. By reducing the Facebook environment to two symbolic actions (clicking a ‘like’ or ‘dislike’ button) viewers are able to inflate or deflate phallic monster characters contained within a box reminiscent of a Facebook page, until they explode. This gesture acts to form a critical representation of Facebook by emphasising the relationship between ‘input’ and ‘ego’ (more clicking = bigger ego, less clicking = deflated ego), highlighting this functionality by rendering it simplified and absurd. An entire system is criticised through two buttons. This simple system acts as a caricature of Facebook through the emphasis of a single reductive mode of interaction.

### **Dungeons Bosses and Caricature**

In *Fragile Ego* I drew a lot of the imagery from my past playing of video games. In particular, my intention was to bind the notion of a ‘dungeon boss’ into a comic representation by connecting it to the idea of a Facebook profile. To Jacques Lacan the phallus is an expansion-retraction object signifying desire for power (Hill 1999 p.103-5). My claim is that on Instagram and Facebook, the ‘like’ button is a kind of phallus linked to social status. It is the expanding-contracting provider of an immaterial desire-object (the number of ‘likes’ boosting a fragile ego). I chose very phallic, inflatable, balloon-like forms for this reason. Interaction with the inflatable monsters needed to be sexual and highlight this caricatured judgment of Facebook, of the desire for social connection and affection. Kelley discusses the sexual in reference to the monstrous body:

The grotesque displacement of the order of the body is a mainstay of popular art. Cartoons and horror films provide numerous examples of it, and in many of these the move towards abstraction is consciously erotic [...] the parts that most often come to the foreground are the genitals. The monstrous figure truly becomes an erotic ornament (Kelley 1989, p.27-29).

As such my reductive representations aim to be both joke-like reductions and comically sexual. In the same way cartoon characters can extend and bend their bodies, or can be

polymorphous and violently sexual, as in the work of Tex Avery or Basil Wolverton (Kelley 1989, p.29), my work tries to invoke a perverse and detached fascination born from tensions between attraction and repulsion. This surely is not too different from the attraction and repulsion between our desire for social affection (in faces-as-bodies) and our disdain towards the endless feed of banal updates on Facebook.

As part of my dungeon-boss-profile metaphor, I gain pleasure from imagining that Facebook profiles are like the video game dungeons that ‘dungeon bosses’ inhabit. They are kind of psycho-geographical spaces with a creator-god at their centre. The depths of the dungeon are in stark contrast to the overworld, which is the place for towns and villages, normal people, civilisation and regular goings-on. In contrast, Dungeon spaces offer monsters and abominations that wander around, as well as traps, puzzles and strange obstacles that have no apparent justification for existing other than to make players’ journey into the dungeon’s depths a challenge.

At the core of many dungeons (archetypically those in *The Legend of Zelda* (1986-present series)) are a final obstacle that, curiously, take the form of a monstrous body; a monster of epic proportions that reflects the very essence of all previous challenges within the dungeon, and is usually the dungeon’s *raison d’être*. By slaying the monster, the corrupted environment is restored or healed. Such dungeons are a mine of psychoanalytical perspectives, particularly those which concern the Oedipal myth; the symbolic journey to find ‘sense’ beyond schizophrenic depths (discussed in Chapter 3), by slaying a phallus and healing the land (‘mother’). In a ‘dungeon complex’ we have three main elements; the environmental structure, the evil ‘presence’ (or ‘boss’), and the player themselves.

Boss fights are like something right out of Jungian psychoanalysis and dream interpretation. In *Aspects of the Masculine Ark* (1961) Carl Jung discusses the image of the phallus and his childhood preoccupation with representations of God (which in Freudian psychoanalysis would constitute an Oedipal father-image), or rather, dark inversions of this representation in the form of a subterranean phallus. “At all events, the phallus of this dream seems to be a subterranean God ‘not to be named’ [...]”

“Above the head, however, was an aura of brightness. The thing did not move, yet I had the feeling that it might at any moment crawl off the throne like a worm and creep toward me. I was paralyzed with terror” (Jung and Beebe, 1984, p.xi).

The description of Jung’s dream phallus as a worm, with a single eye, a mound of flesh, is fitting to this depiction of the dungeon boss. A boss ‘sees all’ in the confines of its own dungeon and thus is often sporting a single eye, or many disjointed eyes. *The Legend of Zelda* features boss-upon-boss where eyes are a theme or are cyclops-esque (“Vitreous”, “Ghoma”, “Bongo Bongo”, “Kholdstare”, “Arrghus”, “Mothula”, “Eyesore”, “Blind”). They can also be heavily facialized, usually with a disembodied floating head and sometimes with giant floating hands (“Ghodan”, “Ramrock”, “Façade”, “Stallord”, “Onox Dragon”) or worm and snake-like (“Volvagia”, “Lanmolas”, “Moldorm”, “Twinmold”, “Slime Eel”, “Morpha”, “Molgera”). In any of these three cases the ‘weak spot’ of the boss, that is the place for the player to strike it, is the same as its affective trope. Shoot it in the eye. Smash it in the face. Cripple its hands. Chop its tail off. Hear it howl in electronic sub-human pain. A boss fight is the Artaudian theatre of cruelty (see chapter 3). From the (symbolically) schizophrenic depths they face us. They do not speak, they have no language, and they must be destroyed.

### Bosses of Australia



Figure 30 Tom Penney, *Bosses of Australia* (2015), screenshot

A dungeon boss appears as a caricature; an homunculus. It is condemned to eternally represent its nature through its exaggerated and intense organs. It is howling in pain and uttering non-human noises. I am not referring to the kind of homunculus summoned by a wizard, nor the kind that ancient scientists believed semen to be. I am referring to the medical drawings known as homunculi, which depict parts of the body in proportion to the number of sensory nerves they contain.

A medical homunculus is an ugly looking representation of a naked person with giant hands, giant lips and a giant tongue (these are the locations of the body with the most number of sensory nerves). A boss monster is a body that gives and receives affect but only in the form of punishment or pain and is subordinate to the environment it generates and which generates it. The locus of affect, of its pain, is its exaggerated parts; its large singular eye, its massive disembodied hands, its snake-like tail. These are its weapons, and also the only places it (or the player) ‘feels’; a place for only one kind of symbolic feeling (a sexual, affective, and violent form of pain).

When its organs have been destroyed, it moves from being an intense and perverse object to an inert nothing; obliterated, sanctified with no remains. The player has deactivated its extended and perverse body (its dungeon and its organs), temporarily fixated on this sexual being by fighting it (the dungeon’s mature, sexual organ) and healed, cured or passed it. Any affront to the boss creature is an affront to its extended body. Oedipus has prevailed.

For the caricature of then-Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott in *Bosses of Australia* (2015), I drew this analysis into such a caricature as a joke; a comic judgment, where Abbott’s boss-ego was imagined as such a creature, and Australia became the psycho-geographical dungeon-reflection of his psychology. It wasn’t hard to imagine Abbott’s ‘weak points’; his large lips and big ears served perfectly as engorged, sexual, affective organs to affront, endlessly.

### **The Garden of Horcruxes**

The most recent work I have produced for this dissertation combines my interests in dark magic, dungeon-bosses, caricature, fractal subjectivity and ego into one real-time 3D environment. Titled *The Garden of Horcruxes* (2016) it is available on the Apple App Store for iPhone, as well as for desktop via my website. It can also be viewed with a Google

Cardboard viewer on an iPhone for a virtual reality experience. In this artwork I drew from all of the concepts I have mentioned above, to produce a single ‘art-dungeon’ that has additionally been informed by my discussion of Koons and Jonakin in chapter 1. I used my caricatured partial-object-monster sculptures from the development of *G-Net* as my ‘horcruxes’ influenced by playing *The Legend of Zelda*. At the ‘core’ of *The Garden of Horcruxes* in an underground cavern there is a cyclopean, Jungian phallus-monster. Players can hurl colourful paint blobs at the sculptures and hit them in the eye, to which they react with boss-monster sounds.

In *The Garden of Horcruxes* players can walk around a sculpture garden of my one-eyed ‘horcruxes’, which I imagine, in a Surrealist fashion, to be a space that reflects the perverse psychology that has produced all of the imagery that I have explored and justified throughout this dissertation. In this sense it is an ‘autotopography’ – a constructed environment that functions like a self-portrait (Bal, 2002). In 2010 I had attempted something similar called *The Horcrux Dungeon* (2010) where I decorated a single digital 3D room with images of artworks of mine signed with my signature in a Duchampian fashion.

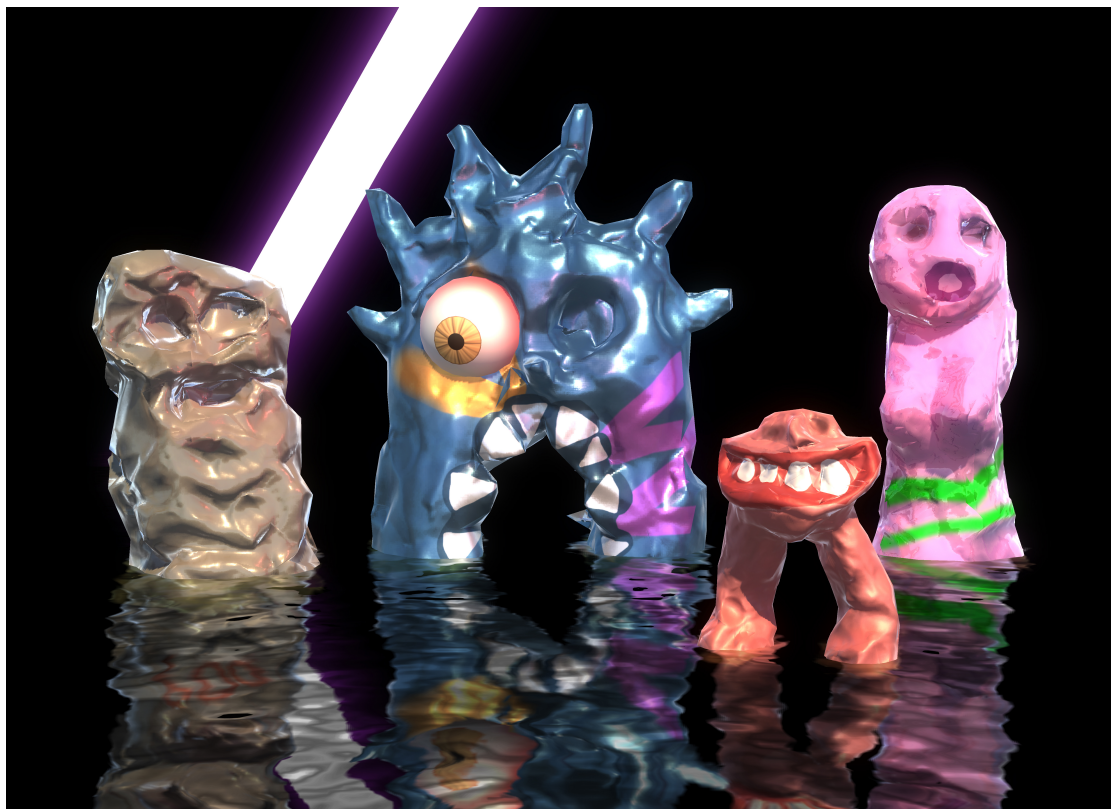


Figure 31 Tom Penney, *The Garden of Horcruxes* (2016), development screenshot.

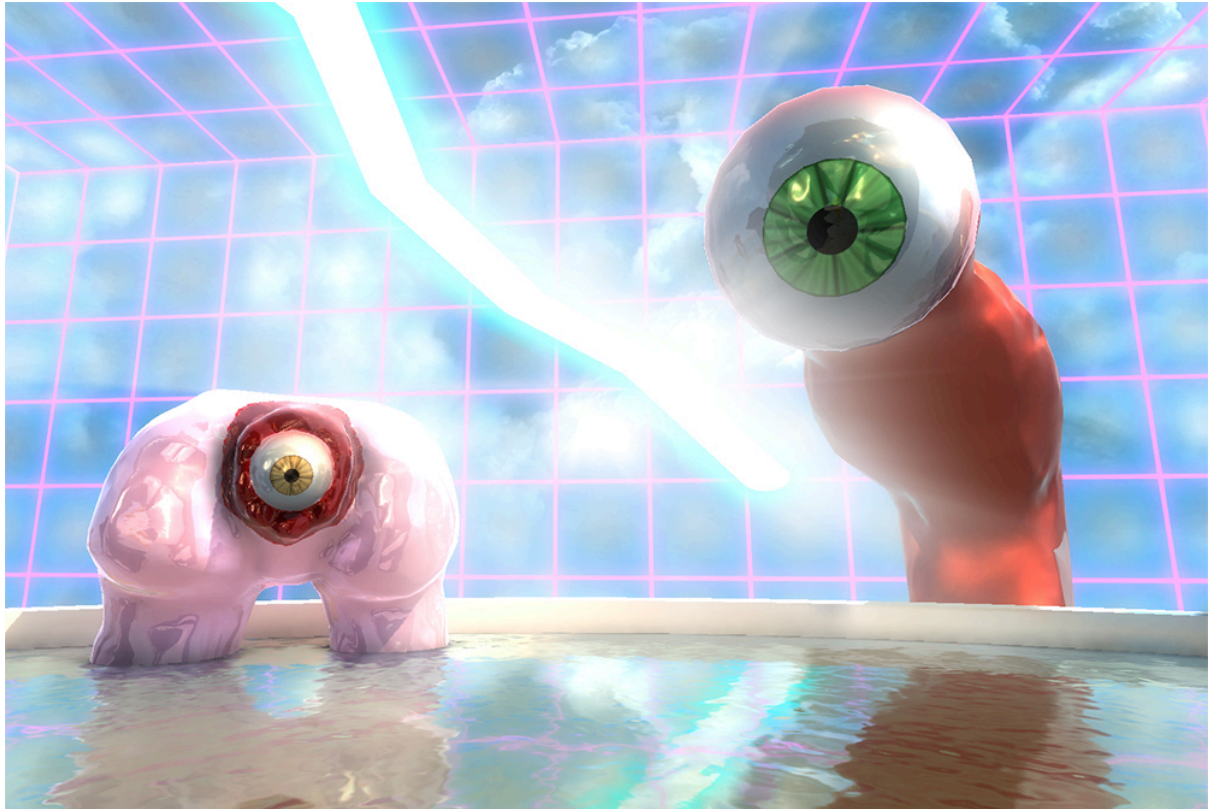


Figure 32 Tom Penney, *The Garden of Horcruxes* (2016), screenshot.



Figure 33 Tom Penney, *The Garden of Horcruxes* (2016), underground cavern opening, screenshot.

## **The Politics of Caricature**

If the face is a politics... dismantling the face is also a politics involving real becomings, an entire becoming-clandestine. —Holland, 2013, p.88.

Often when Deleuze is invoked, we get the sense of a political call-to-action, although my invocation of probe-heads here in terms of caricature is not so necessarily radical given the conflict that I raised at the end of Chapter 4 where reduction is here used to create critical representations of systems and their users, but such systems are being critiqued because they already reduce people. Caricature as critical play can use reduction and essentialisation in the service of critique, but it itself produces problematic and simplified representations. Caricature has no political alliance; it is problematic for both the right and the left just as microfascisms are. The politics of the caricaturist is certainly grey. I don't think that caricature ever fully dismantles the head or the face as the concept of probe-heads might call for. It is rather another form of arrangement of a face particular to a critical aim. Even critical versions produce new versions. As in Deleuze's critique of Lewis Carroll in my discussion of perversity in chapter 3, the caricaturist, like the pervert of the surface who stays with language rather than destroying it, remains within the identification of faces. A caricaturist relies on maintaining some semblance of the structure of the face; it merely shifts its organization by extension and reduction.

Caricature is not such a revolutionary act, although caricature often accompanies the dissent of power that leads to call-forth change. Revolution (as change) is not an aim necessary to caricature because caricature does not present a totally new world. Caricature presents an uncanny version of an existing one in the same way Flanagan discusses the representation of play worlds. Caricature, although used politically, often does not have any particular allies. Seeing the world in caricature is the world of the stand-up comedian. Nothing is sacred. It has no particular desire for revolution because it requires the maintenance of a world worth critiquing to continue to plateau in a perverse manner. Because caricature is also about pleasure, such perverse or polymorphous pleasure lies in the plasticity and manipulation of the face and the desire to be critical for its own sake.

Finally here I would like to add that a feature of play worlds is that play worlds functioning as simulations need not offer a single moral path for the player to follow. Simulations, if they are to represent choices and respect the autonomy of players, offer both

‘good’ and ‘bad’ choices for players to take in various scenarios. Traditional artworks might offer ambiguous messages, but they tend to represent the politics of their respective artists in one way or another. If an artwork is ‘ambiguous’ it represents an ‘ambiguous’ politics – it can’t really transform itself into anything more extreme on either side. Play experiences, however, can transform themselves through the options that are designed into them by play designers (designers of games for example) because players decide how they will use the tools at their disposal to alter the functioning of the represented system. If caricature functions to caricature systems as well as the identities that structure them, then the politics of caricature may apply here to the design of games, both which I see as (critical) playful experiences.



## 6 Queering The Sims

In this chapter I discuss the role that the playing of *The Sims* has had in the production of my artworks. I use Ahmed and Flanagan to help make sense of orientations or tendencies-towards play and the queer, as they pertain to a game based on domesticity and family life. In *Women and Gaming: The Sims and 21st Century Learning* (2010), James Paul Gee and Elisabeth R. Hayes note that *The Sims* is a game “where the majority of players are girls and women [...and...] it is odd, perhaps, that when males play a military game [...] we do not say they are playing with toy soldiers. But when women play *The Sims*, we say they are playing with a dollhouse” (Gee and Hayes 2010, p.2). What does it mean for men, extending themselves in mobile devices, to play various encounters online, and what is subverted if doll-play is used as a metaphor for such encounters? What do the parallels between family, doll play, video gaming and queerness hold as implications in terms of this project? This penultimate chapter looks at how artworks produced during this dissertation have formed aesthetic judgments by binding ideas like domesticity and online dating together through metaphor. This informs the final Chapter where it is considered how such judgements, in turn, shape identity representation through the fixation on roles or representations in play contexts.

### **Personal History Playing the Sims**

I have been playing *The Sims* since it was released; I was 12 years old at the time. I used to play *The Sims* in a female friend’s bedroom. We would each be on our own laptops, playing independently, yet still sharing our creations. We would play like this, co-located, for hours on end. My friend would build functional, one room houses for her Sims which contained mismatched furniture and made more sense in terms of efficient game mechanics than real-life aesthetics (having a toilet next to the bed to speed up getting ready for work, for example). Mine were architectural endeavors where I would hardly actually play the families I made and focused on building nice houses. We bought all of the expansion packs and had many user-created items and mods, plenty of which were sexually explicit, such as various ‘nude patches’ that removed pixilation on nude Sims and other features that we found on independent sites. I continue to do this to this day.

Later on when I had moved away from home, I started to use *The Sims* to create queer characters and scenarios. I would write bizarre stories and use the character creator in *The Sims* to design their bodies and clothes. Often I would make families of elderly women who I would give deranged and obscure psychological traits. They would take jobs in criminal career tracks and have magic powers. The resulting life-stories were very much like something from films by John Waters or Pedro Almodóvar. In “Critical Affection”, I returned to playing *The Sims* again but this time for the purposes of rendering my experience within my own work, external to *The Sims* game world itself.

### **Playing with Objectified Bodies**

On the topic of the finger-swiping and narcissism of online dating, video gamers may remember the famous title by Peter Molyneux’s Lionhead Studios, *Black and White* (2001). This was an archetypal ‘God Game’ where players were represented by a floating virtual hand, with index finger outstretched, on screen. This hand could do ‘good’ or could do ‘evil’ with relative ease; it could pick up individual villagers and throw them, set them on fire, heal them, make them breed or physically beat up other creatures. This hand would morph in appearance depending on its alignment on a scale from ‘good’ to ‘evil’. Gamers could get satisfaction from becoming either and they could see their actions shaping the world through visual feedback of the game; the hand would change in appearance (to look gnarled and ‘evil’ for example), and the landscape would alter (become barren, or abundant with flowers depending on alignment).

When using dating apps, however, our hands do not change to represent our influence over the environment (other people) as we manipulate interactive content. Instead we browse through other human beings using our fingers on a touch-screen, not casting fire and brimstone upon them, but nonetheless employing some level of tactility and gesture that implies judgment; a block button, a chat button, typing the words ‘hello’, all imply some action that confirms or denies another human being access to our own personal individual milieu.

As such, video games are an important format for me to utilise when critiquing or parodying online dating worlds; especially through this notion of a ‘God complex’; a surveyor who is in charge of and has power over a world that is perceived by them and no other. Video games, just as dating apps, rely on simulation. When we create a character in a

role-playing video game, for example, we adjust a series of sliders representing height and weight (or moral alignment), as well as tick check boxes for gender, archetype, or facial hair. We do precisely the same thing when we set up our profiles to be used on dating websites, but instead of selecting an archetype such as ‘the mage’, ‘the warrior’, or ‘the rogue’, apps like *Grindr* now allow us to select from gay ‘tribes’ such as ‘bear’, ‘twink’ or ‘clean-cut’. Profiles composed of just as much information as anybody’s video gaming avatar, sets up a curated participant in this multiplayer ‘game’.

The term *Grindr* seems appropriate; in video games the term ‘grinding’ refers to mindlessly slaying enemy monsters for hours in order to ‘level up’, and it seems as users of *Grindr* we tend to do the same; we addictively consume images of bodies in order to ‘get up’. A great, much earlier parody of this kind of body-defined-by-sliders scenario appears in John Tonkin’s 1990s work *Elastic Masculinities* which can be accessed on Tonkin’s website (Tonkin, 1996). This is a really simple work where viewers can adjust sliders to create awkwardly distorted male human bodies beyond the boundaries of any acceptable standard that we might find in a videogame, or as acceptable standards on a dating site, however here it is done through images rather than using 3D meshes as is common in video games today and in my work.

### **Virtual Worlds as Doll Houses**

In Chapter 1, I outlined Flanagan’s position on how virtual worlds relate to doll-play, particularly through play in *The Sims* series. As a general summary, play with virtual scenes of domesticity and the everyday allow us to work through issues in the real world that are concerned with the represented, but we can additionally subvert those representations or change the rules of the simulated environment by ‘unplaying’, ‘reskinning’ or ‘rewriting’ their respective scenarios. We don’t only build new worlds; we can construct critical versions of existing ones.

Also important here is the notion of a ‘world builder’ who has some agency or omniscience over the represented play world; in a sense, a kind of narcissist for whom such a world is presented in terms of. As I am looking at how this operates for art rather than games specifically, I need to think about how artists have used games or ‘doll play’ as platforms for artistic production. The work of Cao Fei is relevant here, as her *RMB City* (2007-11) becomes both a video game and gallery space that her avatar (her ‘doll’) inhabits. Doll play also has

implications for my invocation of a narcissistic god-like complex, in that human beings as objects, become part of the ‘world building’ activity of the narcissist.

No matter how much a player in a paper house or in an online world works to maintain his or her dolls, the desire to return to the place before desire – that is, the paradise that drives the fantasy play in its first impulse – always lingers (Flanagan 2009, p.57).

I see the work of Cao Fei as a form of playbour (see Chapter 1) because her work is made by playing inside another’s designed system, specifically, *Second Life*. Cao Fei is also a “machinimist” (Hjorth 2013b, p.137) since any narratives come from those practiced inside the game world. Fei also demonstrates a degree of identity play through social practices like cosplay. Greeves (2013, para.3) emphasises that “In promoting cosplay as tactical, Cao Fei celebrates a generation disenfranchised by real life who cocoon themselves in fantasies just as schizoids might retreat to internal fantasies to avoid facing a world of realities”.

Cao Fei is possibly the best-known artist operating in *Second Life* and with it problematizes the public intimacy that typifies the online interaction and play of selves. The intimate-made-public interactions of Fei speak of a “paradoxical culture of extreme narcissism coupled with an intense desire for external connection” (Fateman and Greene 2004, p.86), which problematises the notion of online intimacy as being one of “extimacy” (Clemens, 2001, p.1), which in the Lacanian sense means that the ‘inside is on the outside’, or they are one and the same, implying a certain lack of the critical distance. Her work is characterised by a romantic utopianism offsetting the political and economic scenario of contemporary China and its relation to global capitalism. “Utopia needs to be constructed by us working together” (Fei cited in Fang, 2008, para.37) says Fei. Anna Munster identifies a general problem in the new media research in which Fei’s work participates: “Posthumanism gives us some new possibilities for human-computer engagement, but it often continues to subordinate the sensate body to the transcendent technological world that is offered via the interface” (Munster 2006, pp.21); an interface that allows one to access these fantasy worlds and remain complacent within them.

### **Differentiation from Machinima type works**

The methods that I use in my play of *The Sims* as a medium for creating artworks are very different to the play in virtual worlds that come to typify artists working in online environments such as Cao Fei in *Second Life*. We might more loosely refer to this kind of art here as ‘Machinima’. Although I consider the play of some artists in game spaces, and their documentation, to constitute artworks, I do not consider my own ‘play’ in such spaces to be my primary artwork. Instead, I try to break the condition of playbour, or using the creative tools designed within others’ systems, by taking that content outside of the original world and re-working it in a more generic game-engine package: specifically, Unity3D.

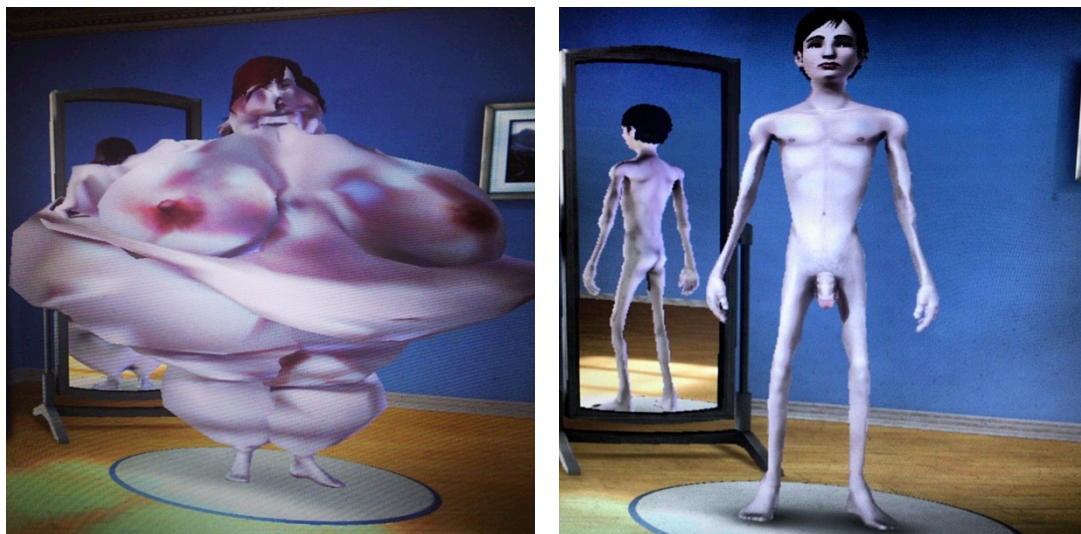
Although I concede that of course, such software has limitations and tends to lend itself toward game or game-like outcomes (arguments about whether creative software packages limit expression are somewhat beyond the scope of my project), it can be seen as more of a blank-slate scenario than using limited in-game tools such as character-creation or terrain sculpting systems that are presented to players within games. While mods might allow users to create any 3D content and incorporate that back into a game, I have rather found ways to take content out of existing games for the purposes of subversion, where the possibilities for manipulation in terms of parody, or producing critical ‘versions’ of such environments become enhanced. Essentially, parody requires an original from which to build a critical inversion. By taking this out of the game, such an original can be distended, distorted, and ‘caricatured’ by editing the original content in more powerful 3D sculpting and interactive packages like Autodesk Maya or Unity3D.

In terms of ‘world-building’ Unity3D presents a 3-dimensional plane where objects can be arranged, built, scaled, reduced, and skinned. Unlike games which each have their pre-set conditions and conventions of size, colour, and general design, setting up parameters for users to design within, a package like Unity3D is a game-creation system, which means all of these features are completely left up to the artist or designer. By dropping objects into the 3-dimensional interface I can imagine whole environments where objects interrelate in a virtual space and produce relationships that construct meaning, perhaps not unlike the visual arrangement of elements in a painting. In this sense the difference between narcissist-as-user or narcissist-as-artist becomes blurred. At least when I manipulate bodies and other content in such a space I transfer some of my behaviour from being a God-gamer to being an artist, though maybe these have similar origins.

When I play around with my 3D images I feel like I am controlling a kind of video game world; I am used to playing simulation games where one controls different characters, populations and environments. My Unity3D worlds become symbolic dollhouses; here dollhouses that are caricatures of the systems that subjects might operate within, rather than artworks produced from within the parameters of those systems themselves. For this project, I had created a series of male ‘dolls’ in *The Sims 3* each with their own personalities, looks, and character traits. I then used these as the origin for models that I placed in a Unity3D world.

### Scraping Sims Meshes

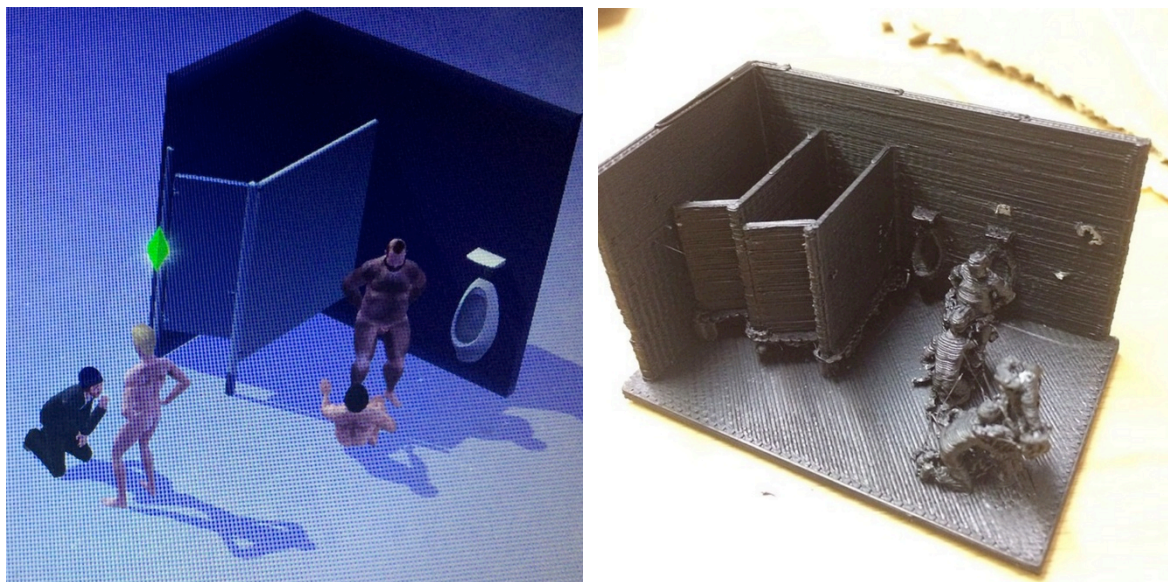
Originally throughout *Critical Affection* my production of characters in *The Sims* was for the purpose of efficiency. I had originally intended to use characters based on Sims I had created in *G-Net*. Rather than having to model my own characters, I was working with various methods of exporting the Sims bodies, after using the in-game character creation system to design them. I refer to this as ‘scraping’ in the same way that Ludovico and Cirio (2011) refer to their ‘scraping’ of profile data from Facebook profiles; data that is available but just not immediately accessible through the regular interface. I had installed a number of mods to assist in the design of my characters, including nude mods (adding penises to men, and vulvas and breasts to women) as well as ‘slider’ mods, which allow me to extend bodily proportions to distended and extreme sizes in the character creation system:



Figures 34 and 35 Tom Penney, 2014, *The Sims 3*. Screenshots of applied body slider extending mods.

I used a number of methods to scrape meshes that I had designed in the Sims. The first main method I attempted was to capture 3D ‘snapshots’ of the game world from the memory of my computer’s graphics card itself using a Direct-X based tool called “3D Reaper DX”. By running *The Sims* through 3D Reaper DX, I could press a key on my computer (F12) to save a copy of whatever meshes were running through my graphics card at that moment in time, including texture files and materials. The software often produced erratic and bizarre results, and never matched up the textures correctly.

Sometimes all of the objects captured were placed directly on top of each other, making it hard to extract the right data. My focus was on capturing characters’ bodies, and these often came in multiple pieces. Despite this, I did manage to capture a small number of bodies that I used in some experiments. I had to work on the meshes in Autodesk Maya to reconnect detached mesh body segments, particularly the hair, for them to work in the Unity3D environment. Some of these meshes I used to attempt to create physical 3D sculptures, although the results were too complex and produced broken results due to the low resolution of the printer:



Figures 36 and 37 Tom Penney, 2014, screenshot of *The Sims 3*. A gay sex scene in with nude mods applied, and on the right the same scene printed as a plastic 3D print.

I had used one of these meshes to create my first interactive piece *Gay Under Glass* (2013-14) which I have discussed previously in chapter 4. Scraping a Sim’s body was useful as it was a very generic male body, and it came with a penis because of my nude mod. Rather than

use the mesh in its original state, I turned it into a ‘cloth object’ in Unity 3D. When ‘cloth objects’ are closed objects in Unity3D they function much like balloons; they become soft and blobby, they can deflate and inflate, so that’s what I did to my Sim, who I nicknamed “Joel” after the founder of *Grindr*. While playing with this soft body in Unity, posing it and arranging it, I was creating a transparent cube object that acted like a screen that could press against the Joel character and squash him. I took many screenshots of this process, because the blobby body had so many variations of how it would react with the ‘glass’, often producing amusing poses.

At one stage the hair was behaving so strangely that it slid down the wall like a snail-trail behind Joel as he slumped under and popped up the other side of the invisible glass, pushing the ‘air’ from his body into his penis. This moment was captured in a screenshot that I used to create a large poster-sized work that accompanied *Gay Under Glass* at the *Radicalism* exhibition in 2014. I skinned the wall behind him with one of my own screenshots of a *Grindr* conversation (“what’s shakin handsome?”) and added a ‘block button X’ for interest and composition. A further set of three images was produced of earlier stages in the experiment that were from poses of Joel reacting to the virtual glass. These were called the “Bodies Under Glass” (2013).





Figure 38 Tom Penney, *A Handsome Man* (2014), digital image

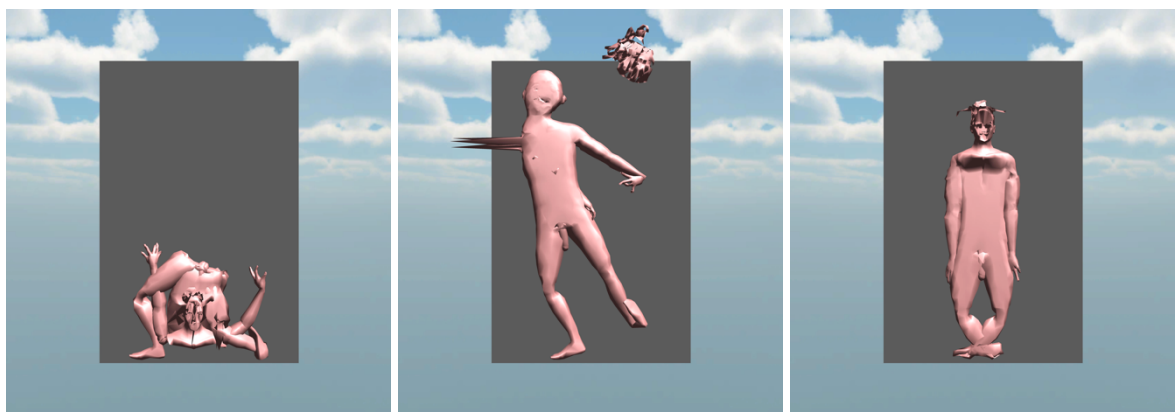


Figure 39 Tom Penney, *Bodies Under Glass* (2014), triptych of digital images.

In terms of ‘play’ as an artistic methodology, such play happened less in the game than in the manipulation of the content in the Unity3D world. Play was important in the game for producing a kind of relation to the characters as artistic ‘prey’; making representations of ‘alive’ bodies that I could exploit, that I could see, in their wholeness as objects to be pulled out, manipulated and changed. Originally, I had proposed that I might do something similar with real profiles (I did to an extent, as discussed in chapter 5), but the ethical implications of using recognisable-as-real profiles are not acceptable, given my critique of post-internet-ism.

Instead, I was finding a different way to the imagine psychologies and related bodies that I might encounter in ‘the real’, and forming some relation to them as ‘living’ entities, which I approximated by using simulated bodies in the game world and treating them as ‘types’ rather than specific humans. Adding balloon-like qualities to the Unity3D bodies that originally had limited agency, animation, and AI in the game, was akin to reanimating a corpse, turning it into a clown, seeing it come alive through a clumsy and comic approximation of liveliness. What occurred with the treatment of these ‘dolls’ as objects was a kind of cruel but humorous, critical distancing. The nature of the forms – blobby, sagging, organic, faceless – was a kind of slapstick reduction of any idealized form that *Grindr* might represent.

### **Selfie (2014)**

The second method I used was a bit more creative than the first. I had been experimenting with 3D scanning methods for a few years, but only recently discovered photo scanning in 2013. After some initial experiments with photo-scanning the sculptures I had made with modelling clay (which became the main process for incorporating characters into *G-Net*, see chapter 4) I considered using 360-degree screenshots of video game content for the same photo-stitching process. For this procedure I used both Autodesk’s 123D Catch and Agisoft’s Photoscan.

The first games I attempted to create photo scans from were *Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks, 2011) and *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (Bioware, 2011) because I knew that in these games, the camera could be easily controlled to capture screenshots of a character from

the variety of angles needed to produce an accurate scan. Unfortunately, due to the low resolution of screenshots in comparison to digital SLR camera photos, the photo-scanning process often produced a result with little data, and not enough visual interest to be used for artworks. This is because areas of flat colour and little detail work against the software, as it needs to use complicated patterns and a variety of colours to use as reference points when constructing the perspective of a 3D space from a series of 2D images.

I then attempted to use this same process in *The Sims 3*. It was even easier to control the camera in *The Sims 3* because it has a built in 360-degree camera function for players who wish to record the progress of their Sims families' lives from all angles and share them online. Such screenshots can also be recorded from all angles while the game is paused, making it much easier to capture a still scene. If things are moving, a successful photo scan is less likely although aesthetically strange and interesting mistakes can occur. At first, my scans were unsuccessful as they had the same issues as the previous games, in fact even more so, because the large areas of flat blue sky and green grass offered no distinct perspectival reference points for the photo scanning software.

My solution however came in *The Sims 3*'s features of being able to build and alter the environment. I started setting up very strange looking spaces to stage my characters in, with lots of odd patterned carpet squares and distinctly patterned, coloured, or shaped objects in various locations to act as reference points for the software. The first scans done in this manner produced successful and even quite poetic results; the environment was accurately portrayed in some areas due to the density of visual pattern, but the character I was trying to capture at the center of this information was often only partially captured because I had used flat colour on their clothing. Here are two of my first results imported into Unity3D:

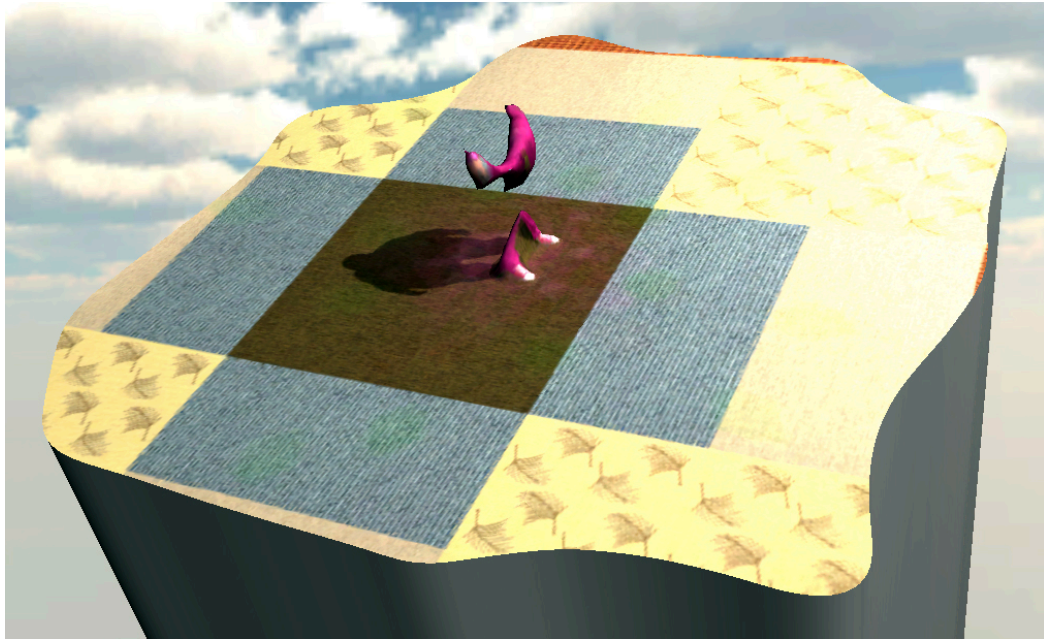


Figure 40 Tom Penney, 2013, *Untitled*, digital image produced from 3D models based on screenshot scans.

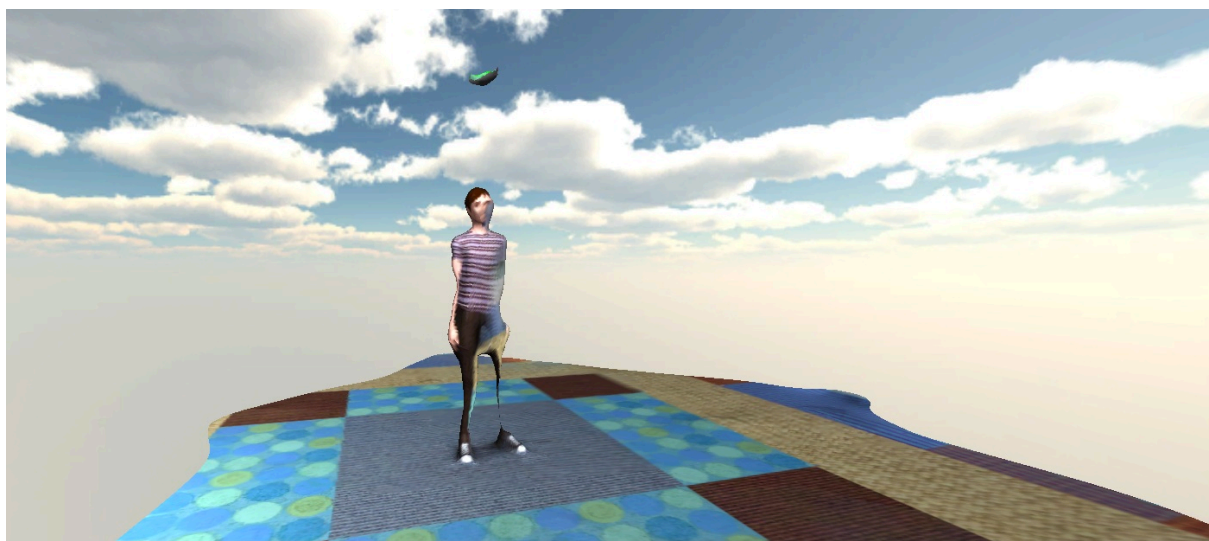


Figure 41 Tom Penney, 2013, *Untitled*, digital image produced from 3D models based on screenshot scans.

These experiments, representations of myself and a friend, felt successful because their partial portrayal of their subjects with a still fairly accurately captured environment resonated with the concept of a digital identity, appearing muddled or lost, poorly approximated by a digital screen. I enjoyed the way the photo-stitching algorithms interacted with the photo-stitching software, and lost the true nature of the characters at the centre of each scene. I

decided to extend these experiments to the creation of some more generic gay ‘types’ in *The Sims*.

I created some households populated by these characters; matching the generic ‘tribes’ you could label yourself on *Grindr*. I created a bear (hairy bearded man), a twink (skinny effeminate man), a jock (sporty, gym-fit man) and others. These characters made full use of the nude mods I had installed, allowing them to operate normally as family members but be completely naked all the time. I wanted to incorporate the smartphone into these scenes to represent these characters as *Grindr* users. What was interesting here is that to get my characters to pose and take selfies, I had to actually play them for a while. The game did not include ‘take selfie’ as a default command; I could only get my Sims to take selfies after having skilled up in the ‘jock’ skill-line. I enjoyed the concept that to make my Sims appropriately, I would have to sculpt them into the very gym-fit standards that *Grindr* demands. I bought Sims sports equipment and got them to play ‘beer pong’ until they were all ‘jock’ enough to take selfies. I then worked on 3D scanning them from photos of them holding their smartphones up to take photos of themselves.



Figure 42 Tom Penney, 2014, *Selfie 2*, digital image

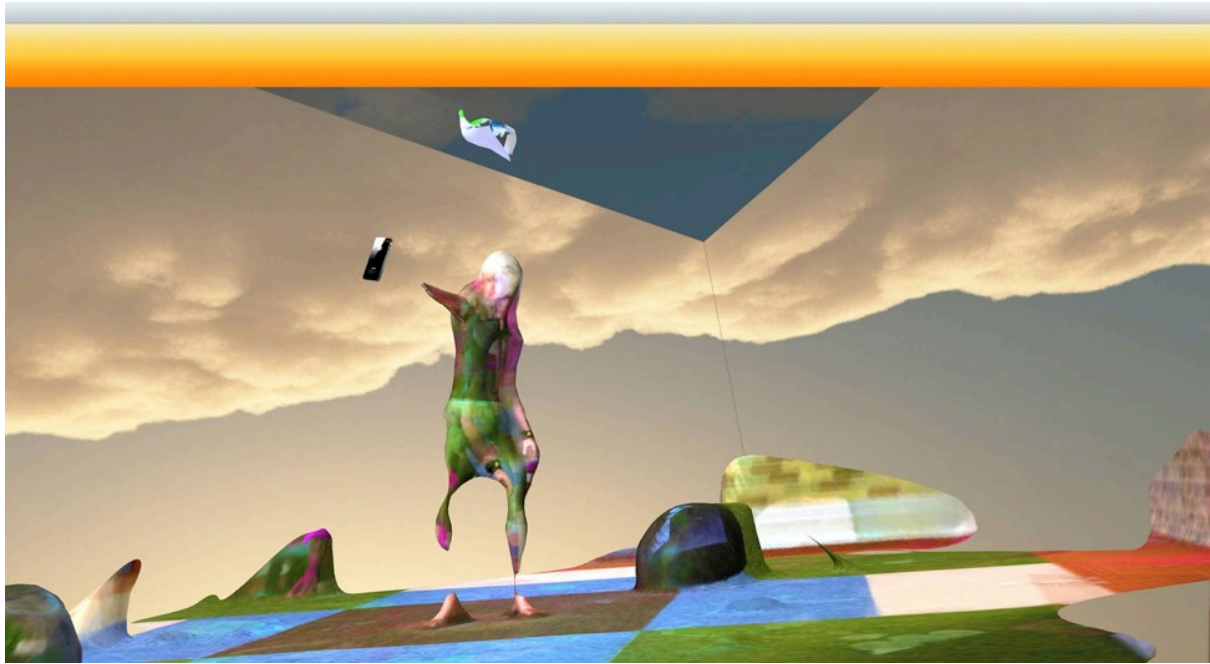


Figure 43 Tom Penney, 2014, *Selfie 1*, digital image

Figure 42 and 43 are two of the most successful selfie-scanning outcomes. Only the bodies and the ground are made from the *The Sims* scans. They were then placed into Unity3D where I added a background and manipulated the lighting. I then took high-resolution shots of the scenes using Megagrab, a Unity3D plugin, which can output pixilated images of any resolution keeping the crisp features of the vector-based mesh.

I then moved the images into Photoshop, enhanced the colour, and added a *Grindr*-themed bar across the top. This is basically the old header of the iPhone *Grindr* app with all stats and other information removed so that only the colour remains. Additionally, I added a crisper iPhone model into the scene so that it had a more distinct presence. I like to imagine that the represented fragmented and distorted scene is the ‘selfie’ that the phone camera has taken of the central body and has misinterpreted their identity. For the 2014 *Tabularium* exhibition, I printed the second image in large format and face-mounted it to perspex, which resembled a glass screen.



Figure 44, Tom Penney, *Selfie*, 2014, *Tabularium*, Slopes Gallery, Melbourne. Installation image. The artist and Kati Elizabeth look at the art.

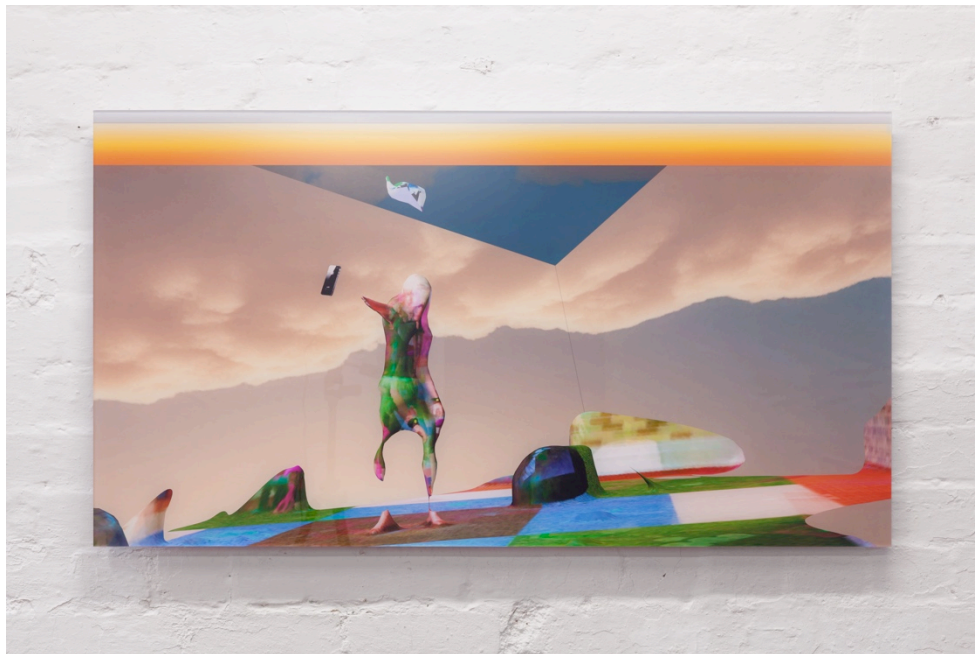


Figure 45, Tom Penney, *Selfie*, 2014, *Tabularium*, Slopes Gallery, Melbourne. Digital print face-mounted to perspex.

At first, the scans produced partial bodies as in the images above. Then, in some instances, I added hair to all of the bodies in order to create more pattern-based information on their skin so that it wouldn't completely disappear. The following image shows a scan where the bodies were more complete because of the body hair information. This image was used for the phone menu background of the web-based component at the *Tabularium* exhibition. I had

additionally created a museum-like scene with statues of male bodies that I blurred and used for the background of the whole webpage. As the exhibition more generally was about digital archiving and took its title from ancient Rome, I wanted to reflect the male-centric notion of a symposium through the incorporation of these bodies and the parallels to the male-centric world and idealized body standards of *Grindr*.

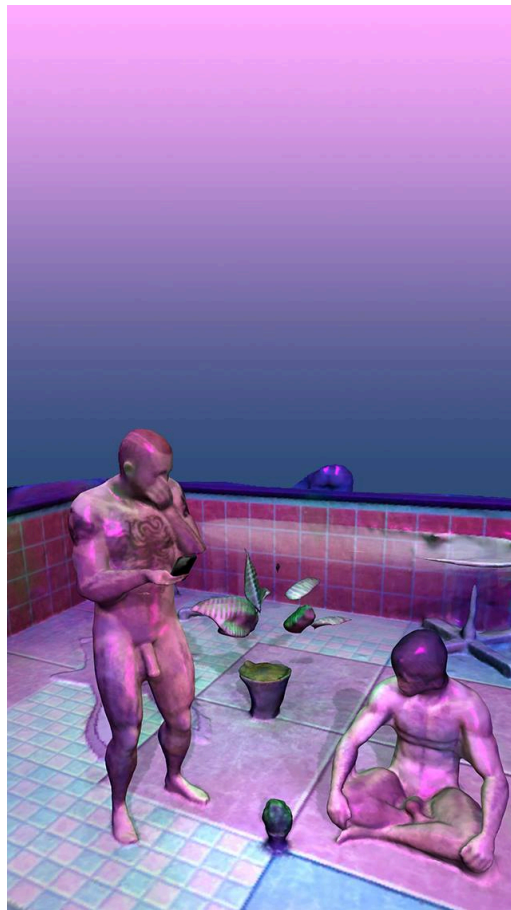


Figure 46, Tom Penney, *Untitled*, 2014, digital image



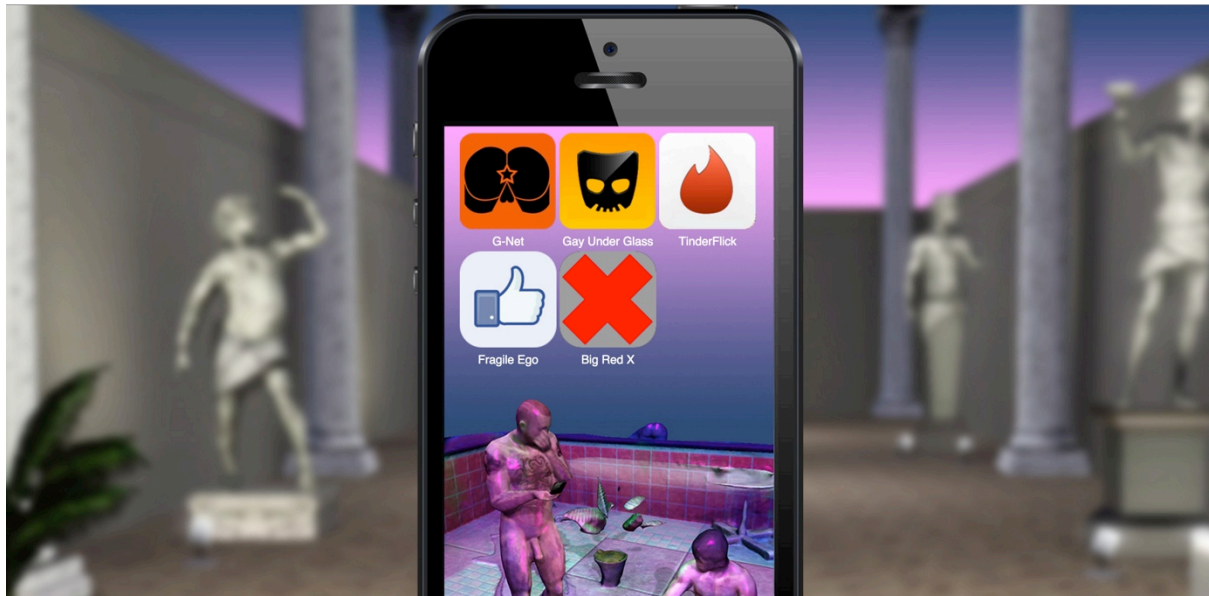


Figure 47, Tom Penney *Museum*, 2014, screenshot of website for the *Tabularium* exhibition.

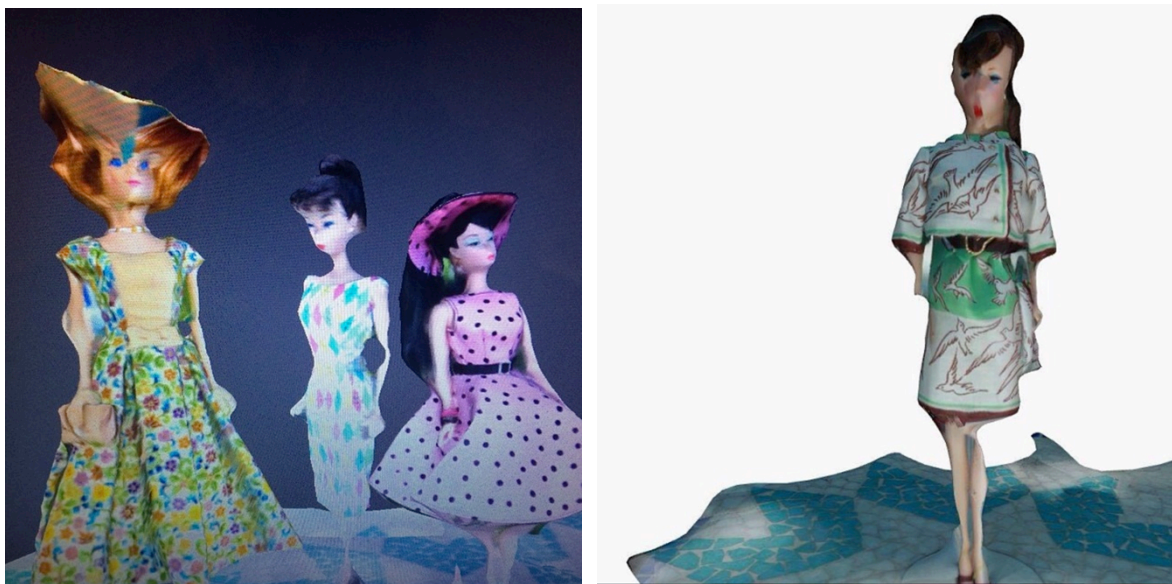
From the processes I developed on *The Sims* bodies, I began to construct an idea of what ‘critical play’ or ‘critical distance’ mean in terms of ‘play’ for this project. Here it consisted of a perverse manipulation of bodies and representations of typical gay identities. Play really refers less to the play of the game, than to the playful manipulation of external representations of bodies for the purposes of critique, parody, or humour. As discussed in chapter 5, I’ve used a degree of reduction and essentialisation for the purpose of critique of *Grindr* just as much as *Grindr* itself has been discussed as doing the same to others.

### **The Sims and the Family**

*Grindr* is like a complete inversion of a family or representation thereof. Like a dolls house, it presents a series of squares with windows into the lives (or bodies) of others, as in the cutaway rooms of a Victorian dolls’ house. The bodies, as objects, partial objects or dolls in these spaces exist in terms of the gaze of the individual, the master-user, the app-God or the game player. Affection with the *Grindr* app constitutes a banal everydayness, a perverse domesticity, a silent yet extimate ‘family’ that does not return gratifying affection like those in proximity to you might, especially if one is single or lonely. Users of *Grindr* even see the same users around them in their area every day but do not speak to each other. Indeed, the concept of ‘family’ in general often butts heads with queer or homosexual identities, who flee Freudian Oedipal structures of family, home and domestic life, seeking to ‘construct their own’ family from friends and supporters. With this notion of ‘family’ and the ‘the domestic’

in mind I produced another work from my play with *The Sims* as a medium: a family Christmas portrait.

Originally this work was going to be based on scans of my mother's doll collection: she owns over 600 vintage Sindy dolls, Barbie dolls and others. My father too has avidly collected *The Lord of the Rings* figurines. When we were kids everyone had their own collections of things at home, including my parents, such as Cadbury Yowies (an Australian chocolate containing animal toys like a Kinder Surprise), stuffed toys and so forth, generally it was a kind of middle-class consumer mania. Collections, figurines and toys run in the family. So I suppose I am navigating my family of collectors of toys as a collection of toys when I invoke the concept of doll-play in the context of queerness and critical play. At first I asked my mother to prepare a selection of twenty or so dolls for which she had designed her own clothing. I proceeded to 3D photo scan these dolls. I never actually used them for a work, it just never came together quite right, although I think the process was important. I didn't really know what to do with them other than hold onto them as a collection of distorted digital approximations of her own handiwork. Perhaps just as scans they are interesting enough as a series of digital artifacts.



Figures 48 and 49, Tom Penney, 2015, digital 3D models produced from photo scans of Barbie dolls dressed by Sal Penney.

Concurrent to creating my gay Sims households for the above artworks and scanning my mother's dolls, I also had a replica made of my own family's house, in Adelaide, within *The*

*Sims 3*. I then used this as the basis for a portrait, which can also be thought of as a ‘caricature’. I took great pleasure in approximating their house with the Sims-based catalogue of furniture and decoration, probably because the translation of the space was like kitschifying the already-kitsch. The kitsch logic of the middle-class domestic space with cat photographs, Christmas tree, and dog toys perfectly translated into the colourful, generic objects provided by the Sims game. I created all the characters and had them sit and watch television in the living room. A challenge here was to make them all sit at the same time, as their conflicting AIs often saw them get bored, or fidget, or get up and move around. I had to use the “move objects” cheat to be able to manipulate their positions in the scene.

Once they were seated I paused the game, and took my 360-degree screenshots for the 3D scan. This work is different to the previous Sims-based works in that it is not just an image. It functions in real-time 3D; the work is actually a very simple Unity3D app with a scene that rotates over time so you can see it from all angles. The additional element in this ‘domestic’ scene from works previous was the incorporation of 3D portraits of my family’s heads. I extracted their heads from 3D photo scan portraits I did for them the day after Christmas, in which they all wore their Christmas cracker dinner party hats for some extra kitsch. I then placed those heads on their respective Sims equivalent bodies.



Figure 50, Tom Penney, *Penney Family Christmas*, Unity3D application, original 2014 version.



Figure 51, Tom Penney, *Penney Family Christmas*, 360-degree digital image, 2016 version.

### **Orientation through play**

From the process in the development of the above works we can extend the idea of ‘play’ to involve a personal degree of subversion and queerness in the form of artwork. Sarah Ahmed’s discussion of a queering through turning-towards objects is important here, as playing *The Sims*, using *Grindr*, making art in a digital software package or being in a family, have all come to demonstrate queer orientation through the repetition of actions over time; the being-with and manipulation of the bodies, forms and subject matter.

Altogether, while being critical of *Grindr*, the treatment of representations of bodies in the creation of digital artwork has been informed by it. The artistic critical distance and treatment of digital bodies mirrors the kind of detached, inquisitive consumption of images of bodies that happens in online dating. The use of the mouse in 3D imaging software and games in real-time to pose, move, alter, and transform digital bodies, both in this project and informed by continued use of games and apps throughout my life, has demonstrated an affinity with this screen-based orientation towards a perverse desire for bodies.

Ahmed’s discussion of orientation and the family has its origins in Freud; that heterosexual or ‘normal’ family identifications fall ‘in-line’. A “family love requires

‘following’ a certain direction, or even having a certain orientation” (Ahmed 2006, p.73) to continue the family line, or in Freudian terms, the line of the father. In my family portrait, my father stands alone; his gaze is different to the others and is not fixed on the television screen. Something is queer, for, if we are to take a psychoanalytical and normative model, his direction should be setting the line of the gaze, setting the object of desire, for his family to follow. Something is awry in this kitsch, middle-class paradise, and speaks (at least from my perspective) of the failure of a middle class dream with the father at the wheel of the ship.

Similarly, common groups like families share ego-identifications in the form of desire for similar objects in line with this Oedipal and father-centric model. In my work we can see this shared identification in the form of a tendency towards games, toys, dolls and representations of this kind. In my case however, it is clear in the denial of my own family relations (I am not present in my family portrait, I am the observer, the manipulator of their representations), my own queer ‘fleeing from’ this normative structure, that this manifests as a subversive or critical tendency in representing such subject matter rather than unashamedly and irony-free. There is no Jeff Koons here. It is as if criticism becomes the excuse to enact shared identifications with the family but remain distant, and so a joking and paradoxical logic is required, a ‘critical affection’ with subject matter concerning the family.

By taking of all of these elements together (family, games, gay dating, art), on paper, or in words, it is difficult to draw parallels between them or see them in the same context. In artwork however, which is particular to a subject’s personal life, an artist has an opportunity to bind such things into a judgement based on their own connections and logic, a sort of unity where they come together and make sense in the context of a practice. What is queer or subversive about these ideas together lies in this joke-like logic (see chapter 3); the artworks together represent judgments on the nature of *Grindr*, family and play by finding parallels between them. The binding-together of these disconnected elements forming the ‘joke’ comes in the form of the artworks themselves, which are a nexus for these embedded judgements (or essentialisations, caricatures).

The artworks I’ve discussed take families or dolls, but mix them with the representations of games, gay people, and app usage. Such parallels constituting these judgements are based on metaphors between the personal screen and the ‘God gamer’, the fine line between ‘world builder’ and ‘narcissist’; paradoxes that present the critical and non-

critical, artist and world, critic and the critiqued, with the same essentialisations, reductions, symbols, and logic. My practice, which does not 'burrow-deep' but presents many facets, is based on a perverse surface-play, which, as discussed in chapter 3, mirrors this critically distant, joke-like logic by jumping around and making connections in a light, playful and distant way. It gets bored, it needs a new desire, and so, it finds new connections to subvert, complain about, critique.

# 7 Conclusion – The Artist as Player

In discussing the ‘artist as player’ I wish to solidify as part of my contribution to artistic practice, games studies and play-thinking how play is an activity that facilitates the production of identity through the testing of simulated identities against play scenarios. Play helps to render some consistency to the chaos of self-identification by providing fixed ‘frames’ that propose possibilities for orientations, or for selves to become, for a time, in a play scenario. These can either be assimilated into an identity or kept as a distanced state but they will always have some influence over individuation however infinitely small or large. Something this dissertation and my practice as a whole has explored, has been the rapid binding and skipping over perverse surfaces. Identity play here features the testing of what a self can be, a maintaining of plateaus of perverse intensity in and against scenarios represented by play activity, although this does not have to be in the context a game.

## **The Aesthetic Tradition of Play Theory**

In *Play Matters* (2014) Miguel Sicart identifies many different traditions in which play is theorised. These include play in anthropology, childhood development, games studies, design and importantly, aesthetics, within which my own, and Mary Flanagan’s work is situated. Contributions to the idea of play in the aesthetic tradition have philosophical roots in the German Humanist and Romantic traditions, which I thought through in chapter 1 given the writings of Schiller, Kant, and Huizinga. Instead of following games studies or design from this point, play has been examined primarily through the artistic and aesthetic tradition of subversion (Sicart refers to this as the carnivalesque) as evident in the surrealist, dadaist and fluxus movements, and from there, postmodern and contemporary forms of art in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. My own practice and reflections have illustrated this rhetoric of artistic subversion through the production of concepts and works involving caricature, queerness, humour, campness and perversion.

## **Play as a process of re-ontologising**

Sicart proposes that “play is probably the dominant way of being in the modern world” (Sicart 2014a, para.33) especially due to the advent of ubiquitous digitisation. Does this mean we have entered the society that Schiller (see chapter 1) dreamt of? Sicart suggests that this is because computers are perfect mediums for play:

Computable worlds tend to be playable worlds because they have clear rules, similar to the rules we use when we play. Both play and computation reduce the world; they create these circles of magic, bounding the world (Sicart 2014a, para.14).

Sicart tells us that computers can perform very fast calculations, store and manipulate data, sense the world and participate in networking (Sicart, 2014a). This allows them to produce multiple new realities through appropriation and language. These reductions ‘frame’ snapshots of the world and these snapshots are produced according to the rules of languages of the computer. Sicart references Luciano Floridi’s philosophy of information here when theorising play; that play, in relation to the digital, reflects the process of Floridi’s “re-ontologising” (Floridi, 2014). Play is an activity that re-ontologises; that is, it is a way of appropriating the world and making new sense of it. It both understands what ‘is’ as well as produces new versions of what ‘is’ in the form of playful propositions, appropriations, games or subversions. Play and its capacity to re-ontologise is based in its prior understanding of the world but also in the products of its subversions of the world. The process of maintaining this flux of identities is a playful re-ontologising, or, play itself. Sicart’s other name for this in the context of computing machinery is “Quixotean play: a negotiated appropriation of the world” (Sicart, 2014c).

Sicart’s use of the term “Quixotean play” for re-ontologising forms of play is modelled by the story of Don Quixote. In the story a “man goes crazy from reading too many books” and thus “his reality constantly clashes with fiction” (Sicart 2014a, para.3). The message here is that in play, worlds are created from language but such new worlds also produce new realities for our existing world. Creative and playful acts reduce the world and its elements to languages we can understand and control. This is an act of domination over the content that it appropriates. Like Baudrillard’s concept of simulation (1983), the resulting representation, as an aspect of the world reduced to a form of language, goes on to construct our reality just as much as the original did. Deleuze and Guattari also refer to Don Quixote in their discussion of faciality, as they see Quixote’s hallucinations as schizoid (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p.203).

Just as artists dominate and control their materials and content, contorting them into new visions, so too is play a “[...] a way of taking over the world and making sense of it, of



putting deeply complex assemblages together” (Sicart, 2014, p.11) but at the same time binding them to rules and languages in order to create the collective conditions required to communicate, understand and participate in play. The digital exacerbates this relationship play has to the world, because computers also dominate their content, computationally reducing the world to the language of computers and thus re-ontologising the world using their own kind of computational sense.

### **Digital Artistic Practice and Play**

If play is and will be a dominant way of being in the contemporary world, has not artistic practice always been a playful way of being? I see artistic engagement with the world as a subset of playful engagement. I think that play is broader than artistic practice, and when looking back to the ideas of Schiller, Kant, or Huizinga (chapter 1) we can see that, Schiller especially, considered art to be a form of playful engagement and a way of being in society rather than play being a subset of an artistic engagement or a ‘way of seeing’. Play is broader than both aesthetics and politics. In a Deleuzian sense play is a way of maintaining chaotic precariousness but also a way of rendering the rate of this chaotic precariousness at a speed that is pleasurable and comprehensive.

Gilbert Simondon states of ontogenesis, that “[...] it could be said that the sole principle by which we can be guided is that of the conservation of being through becoming” (Simondon 1992, p.301). At the conclusion of this dissertation we could interpret play as an activity that attempts to honour this “conservation of being through becoming” via play as a process of re-ontologising, that is, as a process that permits the free-form and chaotic changing of identity through time, but renders identifications through comfortable rules, languages and roles, fixes them and stops them from flying away at an infinite speed. This rendering in *Critical Affection* has taken place through digital reduction, representation, caricature, and comic judgement: the speed has been set by a creative perversity.

### **Play and Chaos**

If art is intended to disrupt clichés, we might think of queerness, which for Ahmed disorients us in the face of normative orientations, or critical play, which renders clichés as uncanny representations before adding unstable or subversive elements. In *What is Philosophy?* (1991, pg.?) Deleuze speaks of the “daughters of chaos”; the “chaoids”, that is, three fields (science, art, and philosophy) that have a creative relationship between chaos and society, and that

maintain chaos at a rate fathomable by human beings. Humans generally consume clichés to protect themselves from the fear of chaos, rather than face chaos itself. To Deleuze chaos is infinite speed, the speed of the universe as incomprehensible to human beings. Chaoids function to help us get a grip on chaos, to make it palatable, in the form of novel ideas and perspectives that give it consistency. Science does this through axioms and formula, philosophy through the creation of concepts and art through the distillation of affects and percepts of a non-human nature. What of play? Deleuze does not mention it, but we will.

If play is, as Clint Hocking claims, the universal structure or broad attitude, “The dominant cultural form of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” (Hocking 2011, para.1) that Sicart investigates, it certainly has a relationship to chaos, maintaining it, or rendering elements of chaos accessible. Play navigates a tension between chaos and order; it allows chaos to be glimpsed at but at the same time contains it in the form of rules, languages and roles. I address this as a major element of my contribution to the expanded idea of what it means to be an artist as a ‘player’, particularly through the lens of identity play as it has appeared throughout this dissertation.

### **Identities as Chaotic**

Normally, defining who or what our ‘selves’ are is a difficult and turbulent exercise where we risk sounding either too rigid or too vague depending on our self-image. As I have already discussed, in play we have the opportunity to conceive of ourselves in a simulated role, to take a break from the immediate terror (chaotic possibility) of the question ‘what / who am I?’ Through play, we place the hard-to-navigate infinitudes of self-definition on hold by conceiving of ourselves as a representation such as a player character, pieces on a chessboard, or a role marked by a special costume. To Deleuze “[...] there is not an I that produces, but a process of production of which the I is a kind of product [...] the finite subject’s relation to an infinite process of which it is a residuum” (O’Sullivan 2006, p.170). An identity is a dynamic construct in progress, something that is different at every moment, as forces both small and large interact with it at every moment through time. If play has a relation to chaos its function would include giving consistency to the chaos of a subject that is never fixed, by symbolizing possibilities for the self within play roles. These roles frame the subject who *might* be for a time, and are, what I come to call ‘play frames’.

## Time, Play and Identity

Miguel Sicart's "Quixotean Play", a re-ontologising conception of play, can be read using Gilbert Simondon's concepts of individuation and "ontogenesis" (Simondon, 1992). Ontogenesis refers to beings as constant products of individuation (a process of becoming) and not the other way around, that is, as things that have individual states a-priori before deciding to change.

Key to my development of the idea of a 'play frame' is the relationship between time, play and identity. As above, Deleuze believes an identity is defined by its rate of change over time, rather than by any individual states in an individuating process. We can additionally refer to Simondon in the discussion of identities, play and time to whom there is no 'individual', only a perpetual process of individuation (Nash and Penney 2015, p.5). Time has always played a part in contemporary identity politics. As discussed in chapters 1–3, Judith Butler asserts that masculinity relies on the performance of acts deemed masculine over time, and that identities are based in the fixation of ritualised performativity (Butler 1990, p.192).

We could say that play activities such as games are performative in this sense, as they require the deployment of various patterns of role-play over time. Take two examples; playing *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004-present), and playing *The Sims*. In both of these games players have an opportunity to create roles based on a series of options that are selected and packaged into one or more playable characters. In *World of Warcraft* these roles take the appearance of classic fantasy role-playing archetypes (a thief, a mage, a warrior, a cleric) but a player can dress and tweak their character for personal preference.

In *The Sims* a player may construct a character that reflects a contemporary suburban or domestic reality. In either case, we can render specific roles consistent over time, saying something like 'I always play as a caster (mage)' in *World of Warcraft* or 'I always make a character that is close to myself and my own home in *The Sims*', for example, or we can test different ones over time; 'I have eight different alts (alternative characters) on *WOW* that I play' or, 'I have made a whole neighbourhood of different Sims that I like to play one after the other'. Through the former approach, players may tend towards consuming play roles that are assimilated into fairly fixed patterns of self-representation, while in the latter, play is an opportunity to become or test one's self against many different roles that are subsequently drawn into an individual. Through this activity, one is producing an identity in tandem with

the game either by consuming a pattern in relation to themselves or producing variance in order to incorporate difference into one's experience.

We have seen further evidence of identity play at work in art. As I discussed in chapter 2, Mark Amerika (2008) refers to his digital media arts practice as being “technomadic”, a process of constantly resolving his ‘self’ against his ‘not-self’ through the constant play of the self on different territories. By ‘territories’ he generally means artistic media, but acknowledges that an artistic medium in the digital age could be anything. This constitutes an interrogative practice that facilitates a rapid testing of how the self can be applied when delivering different concepts, in disregard of an identity becoming fixated on specific media. It is a form of identity play for artists to be able to “[...] step into the fold and ‘play themselves’ – even if that means having to reinvent their artistic personas over and over again” (Amerika 2008, p.82). The ‘playing of oneself’ refers to the ability for an artist to test whether it is possible to incorporate a different perspective into their identity, and to push the capacity for ones self to further incorporate multiple perspectives. This belies a clear influence of the Deleuzian term ‘becoming’, and Amerika’s use of the term ‘nomadism’ here clearly riffs on its Deleuzian provenance.

### **Play Frames**

Play in the context of art must always be some form of identity play, ontologically speaking. Artistic play is identity play and identity play is the process of Sicart’s re-ontologising; the extraction of stages of individuation in Simondonian ontogenesis and subsequent reduction of these stages to forms of language to be manipulated. What a Deleuzian/Simondonian perspective has offered my thinking, as it has been discussed through the lens of identity play, is that play is a way to contain, render consistent, or otherwise represent the chaos of identity within this ontogenesis which can be referred to as re-ontologising. I am not, at the end of this dissertation proposing a contribution to philosophies of ontology, but rather using such a provocation as rhetoric, and as useful for future interventions in play thinking. Sicart has helped us to consider this in the space of the digital.

If “[i]ndividuation corresponds to the appearance of stages in the being, which are the stages of the being” (Simondon 1992, p.301) then (identity) play must be the attempt at proposing these *appearances* of stages for beings as propositions for identity-constants but still granting them an interchangeable impermanence in the form of roles or representations.

The phrase that I will use is a ‘play frame’, not in the sense of framing of an object, as in art or a still picture, but more like the frames of a movement-image, a way to distil a moment of chaotic individuation and propose its reality for longer, in order to, for a time, orient the world around a fixed snapshot in a process of becoming, or at least propose a fixed state of this becoming. If, say, I have too many roles to choose from, too many potential selves, or I am overwhelmed by the spiralling abyss of identity politics, a play process through art or games allows for a fixation and escape from endless diversification through a particular stereotype, caricature, archetype, behaviour or other trait for a time. In this sense pattern-consumption is very enjoyable, relaxing, a breather in the midst of computational and digital chaos. To Sicart our enjoyment of computational play with computers as “dumb machines” (Sicart 2014a, para.10) shows our predisposition towards fixed languages, just as how we enjoy playing out the reductive stereotypes and languages that come with comedic humour and parody.

We could invoke Barthes’ here in his famous discussion in *Mythologies* (1973 p.15-26) of wrestling matches; people attend the wrestling match to consume the pattern recognition of eternally good and evil characters battling each other in the ring; they already know which one is going to win in the larger-than-life performance. We could think of these roles as the frozen stages of an ontogenetic process; lifted out of flux and rendered or proposed as eternal and enduring but which we can easily discard and identify with another if we choose.

We can think of play as it has been discussed throughout various artistic strategies via the lens of my own practice as interventions into the process of individuation. Caricature has become a spiteful arrest; a freezing of the individuating nature of represented subjects (a denial of access to this natural process) and role-play has become the proposal of suspended solutions to selves that change over time in the face of the chaos of self-identification. While playful gestures such as these have predictably traversed binaries of self/other, chaotic/contained, or open/reduced, many of them have been meta-playful in the sense that they can be seen to spitefully intervene in the process of individuation itself, and not just towards representations that are merely symptoms of a broader socio-political context of relating individuating subjects and machines. Such gestures – of caricature, jokes, perversity, unplaying, rewriting, scatology, representing partial objects etc., violently reach into a chaotic series of individuating states and pull out representations in garish forms, as if to say

‘well here you bloody well go; isn’t it ridiculous that we fixate on objects (as ‘frames’), or obsess about identities, but at the same time desire the stability they represent, in the form of fetishes, domestic roles, symbolic reductions or otherwise?’

### **Profound Anxiety**

I return to the broader context of digital media here and some of my original inspirations and frustrations for writing this dissertation to which I responded in thought and the production of artistic work. The kind of play discussed in this dissertation has represented a spitefulness towards the state and promise of popular identity politics in general, as well as towards the hegemony of overarching digital systems in contemporary capitalism that hijack our desire for the privilege of identity politics yet provide or operate through some other axiomatic perversion – such as *Grindr* providing its own ‘frames’ for represented bodies and associated identities to represent themselves within, the terror of familial domestic roles, the way Google compiles information on individuals, or the echo-chamber effects of social media.

Adam Nash highlights this tension in *Affect, People and Digital Social Networks* (2014) – a tension between the desire for fixation and the actual potentiality of selves is something that digital social networks exploit, almost through the same use of ‘play frames’ that I have identified. They manipulate the fact that individuals are “individual and more-than-individual; [that a subject] is incompatible with itself” (Combes 2013, p.32), and that “[i]t is understandable that a subject may attempt to resolve the tension by doing the opposite, by turning inward and looking [...for a...] mode of relations that reinforces a static sense of individuality” (Nash 2014, p.4). The outcome of this is the maintenance of plateaus of anxiety in individuals, the maintenance of the questioning of identity, a rapid breaking down and re-enforcement of identifications and the manipulation of desire to represent frames of the self. A product of this state of play is anxiety (of identity) itself.

### **Critical Play and Critical Distance**

At the outset of this dissertation, Flanagan’s *Critical Play* was responded to and critical distance was desired in reaction to a perpetual loop of affectivity in the context of digital cultures. But at this concluding point, the negotiated form of this idea of ‘being critical’ is that play cannot ever purely rely on critical distance, and requires that players are also bound to the rules of the world in which they are representing, distilling, reducing or binding through play. This is illustrated in the notion of a ‘play frame’, which is only ever the illusion

of a fixed role, and acts to soften anxiety towards the infinite speed of individuation. Such a frame can be treated like an object, to step away from, examine, laugh at or critique, before being discarded for another and before plunging back into the affective intersection of play and ‘the world’.

Play rather maintains a relationship between the two, allowing the flow between fixed and fluid, distant and overwhelmed, to be palatable. I claim here that critical distance is only one half of critical play, and that the critical component of play is not to be distant but instead to be a custodian of the precarious relationship *between* critical distance and overwhelming identification. Identity play becomes the expressive arm of a ubiquitous state of unresolved anxiety. States of anxiety, as discussed above, in which fixed identification cannot ever resolve itself against individuation expresses itself through identity play where identifications and roles are used as intense foci against perpetual and chaotic states – allowing us to ‘have our cake and eat it too’ by using these foci to maintain an illusion of fixation whilst we continue to develop as individuals at infinite individuating speeds. In this sense, the concept relates to my earlier discussion of perversity (chapter 3) in which plateaus of intensity are maintained through the rapid shifting through these frames of identification.

### **On Critical Affection**

The title of this dissertation is, of course, *Critical Affection* which itself represents the tension that I articulate in this final chapter; the desire to freeze and distil, to distance, to step away from (‘critical’), yet also to become absorbed in a process and connect others, objects and orientations (‘affection’). This is the realm of artists, who are constantly overwhelmed by the realities they critique but are situated in and participate in. They simultaneously distance themselves from and fetishise objects in this reality on their own terms – a love/hate relationship.

I would like to claim that artists-as-players are people who produce and maintain ‘play frames’ in order to test the tension between fixed and chaotic stages of individuation; they participate in Sicart’s Quixotean re-ontologising. They undertake this production as a critical exercise; playing with the distance between chaotic individuation and the distortion of this process by freezing individuation in states of language, rules, representation – ‘play frames’. In my practice and that of others this has looked like role-play, caricature, jokes,

symbolic reduction, subversion, the representation of partial-objects, fetishisation and language games.

I want to here draw attention back to the artistic community of practice discussed in chapter 1 that has evolved in a similar thematic and material field to my own over the course of my PhD. These contemporary digital artists particularly engage with digital bodies and identity representations in a playful, digital way using similar imagery and exposing similar lines-of-flight from the normative boundaries of games, art, bodies, identities etc. They often use digital means of representing bodies to expose the failure of computers in attempting to dominate organic forms to their own rules and languages. In this sense they are all artists-as-players, simultaneously fetishizing yet trying to send-up and laugh at the content they create and which they criticise through subversion.

The conclusion of this dissertation is not only a closing-off but also an opening-out. The opening that proceeds from this point is a question of ethics where play, critique, and affection intersect. If we have entered a state of ubiquitous play what then are the ethics of practicing in this way?



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