Being an Important Artist: Creative Production and Artistic Branding on Social Media

By

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abstract

The arts-based research in this thesis explores the status of creative labour and artistic identity on social media through the creation of branded Tik Tok accounts and multi-platform media content. The thesis addresses the platformization of artistic production on social media and investigates the ambivalent relationship between self-fashioned creative identity and corporate branding strategy, both within and without the arts academy.
The project is composed of films created to highlight the labour of social media practice within a competitive attention economy that positions the artist as performer and product of consumption. Some of the interventions involve characters who aspire to become famous (e.g. @garbahje), some directly reference well-known celebrities (e.g. @celebritydeepfake), and others create self-referential collaborations with local influencers that highlight the labour behind online branding (e.g. *The Real Alex Kazemi* and @puppyteethstudios). These projects are situated within lineages of post-internet aesthetics and camp, developed to create an ambiguous tone that reveals the complexity of presenting or performing artistic authenticity within a neoliberal platform economy.

acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis supervisor Dr. Alla Gadassik and all my besties in the mfa cohort. u guys rock can you believe i graduated lol

list of illustrations

introduction

This thesis support document accompanies a body of creative research that addresses the following research questions: What is the difference between an artist and a content creator? How is the platformization of artists onto social media affecting this divide? Is it possible for a viewer to distinguish authenticity from performative affect in an online environment? This thesis examines these questions through a series of interventions, including the creation of branded Tik Tok accounts grounded in filmmaking; a short form documentary about microcelebrity Alex Kazemi; and a Tik Tok collaboration with artist/content creator Jaik Olson. In various ways, the creative interventions complicate divides between fine art and online content to inquire into the porous boundaries between artistic production and creative commercialization.

As an individual and an artist I have experienced pressure to conform to the conventions of online self-positioning: cultivating a creative "brand" to display myself for an audience and prospective financial supporters. Due to my aspirations in the arts, my articulation of a brand which might represent me within this artworld superstructure has increasingly focused less on expressing myself and more on building a portfolio for potential employers. My thesis project critiques this assumption and questions how the current conditions of self-branding affect the lives and careers of artists and content creators, and whether the premised desire for upward mobility restricts one from authentic artistic expression and inquiry. To better my understanding of the online cultural production environment, I have chosen to practice online content creation and reflect on my findings. This involved building a series of distinct brands from the ground up. Each of these held their own Tik Tok account hosting a unique series of short videos, whose branding manifested visually through filmmaking stylization, thematically through scripting, and performatively through persona-driven performance.

This thesis project was my first venture into filmmaking coming from a background of photography. My first instinct was to mimic the popular do-it-yourself style of social media production. This required writing, filming, editing, and starring in videos by myself. Unlike most popular social media content creators, I chose to create new Tik Tok accounts that explored singular, stylized concepts related to my interests in comedy, creative labour, and underground queer aesthetics. I designated each account a short pilot period, in which I would closely follow its online success measured in Tik Tok views, likes, and comments.

Most of the accounts acquired less attention than desired (averaging below 500 views per video), shifting my focus to a new account.

The experience of throwing myself into the competitive attention economy of Tik Tok and constantly failing to earn attention took an emotional toll. For this reason I discovered more comfort behind the camera. I became much more experimental, as I could detach my face from my online and offline brands. I began as a narrator and puppet master to the slices of bread on @celebritydeepfake. After showing this work in the mid-degree State of Practice exhibition, local celebrity pop author Alex Kazemi contacted me, which led to our collaborative documentary film *The Real Alex Kazemi.* I saw my work reach a new level through centering Alex's performance in this film, leading me to pursue more collaborative work with Jaik Olson through our Tik Tok account @puppyteethstudios.

In appropriating different media genres, such as drag makeup tutorials, satirical sketch comedy, and celebrity documentary for this thesis project, a throughline of my work is its thematic focus on the post-internet celebrity culture and the resultant pressure for individuals to carefully curate digital expressions of self into a brand. Some of my interventions involve characters who aspire to become famous (e.g. @garbahje), some directly reference well-known celebrities (e.g. @celebritydeepfake), and others create self-referential collaborations with local influencers that highlight the labour behind online branding (e.g. *The Real Alex Kazemi* and @puppyteethstudios). I purposely have located my thesis work precisely within these online formats as 'projects' to demonstrate and extend their capacity for critique.

This paper covers what I believe are the most successful Tik Tok series I have made as research elements of my thesis project; they represent three of the twelve accounts I created and left behind. For the purpose of this paper I have not based the success of my series on their online metrics, but rather chose those which best investigate the research questions above. I have also included *The Real Alex Kazemi,* which is not a Tik Tok series, but a short film influenced by my Tik Tok investigations. *The Real Alex Kazemi* is the featured work in my thesis exhibition.

An instrumental element of online self-branding is promotion to specific audiences through hashtags. Another important tool is the username, which often reflects the spirit of the brand in a short quippy form, conventionally led by the @ sign. In the spirit of online cultural production, I divide this paper into hashtagged (#) sections that outline key terms and illustrations of my work denoted by the @ sign.

I begin this paper by questioning who is @mattyflader and the possibilities and limitations of my positionality. I move on to anchor my work through the key terms #werk and #fame. Then, I examine the pivotal works I completed over the past two years: @garbahje, @celebritydeepfake, *The Real Alex Kazemi,* and @puppyteeth. I discuss these works in chronological order to demonstrate my developmental arch over the course of the program. Finally, I step back to analyse my practice through the lenses of #postinternet and #humour.

@mattyflader

I have a hard time branding myself, projecting an image of myself into the digital world, and writing sections about myself like this one. This has always been the case for me, and it shows through a lifelong ping ponging between participation and refusal of social media culture. While I recognize it is important to this research for me to define my stance on social media platforms and uncover potential biases, I struggle to pinpoint the way I feel about my online identity. At the beginning of this MFA program I had an Instagram account for posting my artwork, which I later deactivated temporarily and have recently deleted its contents, while reactivating the account. I prefer a life unmediated by posing for calculated photos that define my digital brand. However, in 2022 it often feels like such behaviour is a refusal to participate in my community. Moreover, I have heard innumerable times that people do not want to work with me, can't fathom a successful career for me, or even believe that I don't exist, without a digital trace of my branded existence.

I continue to wrestle with my presentation of self online. Beginning an art practice that centres self-branding has added another layer of complexity. Moving behind the camera has helped by providing me some anonymity, but has also been a stumbling block: without being the consistent face of my brand, my fragmented series get lost in the noise of the internet. I have tried to remedy this by creating an artist website that contains selections of my work, but that has required me to put my name to works that were previously anonymous.

Increasingly, creative and cultural producers are challenged to address the relationship between their social identity and their online presentation. Culture writer Jia Tolentino's essay, titled "The I in Internet," analyses the cultural shifts of self-identification and performance since the prevalence of social media. Tolentino frames social media participation as a crippling imperative of modern sociality, stating that "in real life, you can walk around living life and be visible to other people. But you can't just walk around and be

visible on the internet—for anyone to see you, you have to act.'"[1] One's visibility is hinged on constant updates through posting about the self on social media platforms, creating pressure for individuals to either post or cease to exist. Tolentino likens this display of self to sociologist Erving Goffman's theory of identity as playacting.[2] Through this analogy she argues that "the self is not a fixed, organic thing, but a dramatic effect that emerges from a performance," which in the case of the internet manifests through social media posts[3]. However, unlike in stage performances there are no spatial or temporal boundaries for one's online engagement, making the pressure to perform ubiquitous.[4]

These stakes are further heightened due to the fragmentation of identity that results from the formal elements of the internet. Film scholar Lisa Åkervall links modern self subjectivity with the networked environment of digital media.[5] Åkervall argues that perception of self is shifting towards one that "registers the paradoxical tendency of digital media cultures to undermine the boundaries of the individual self while simultaneously cultivating the performance of an extreme and narcissistic self, flamboyantly displayed through the mechanisms of social media."[6] Due to the interconnectedness of the internet, we register our identity based on "media, practises, and peers," seeing ourselves as interchangeable pieces of larger networks of identity archetypes.[7] Moreover, the mapping of selfhood onto social media platforms presents the self as a constellation of personas who act according to the norms of their respective platform. As such, one may interpret the self as a network of selves within a larger network of others, each required to simultaneously perform their identity for their peers.

The constant pressure to perform my identity on the internet is spiritually and creatively exhausting for me. It is especially draining to know that my presentation is directly linked to my career's viability, as my social media accounts and website serve as my portfolio. I am still trying to navigate the best way for me to coexist with the culture of social media. This sense of ambivalence and alienation has led me to create highly performative fictional personas. It has also led to a lot of cringey performances that cannot move beyond a self-obsessed digital coming-of-age. I explore both of these outcomes in my work as apt

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[1] Tolentino, Gia. *Trick Mirror*. Random House New York, 2019. page 22.

[2] Tolentino 30
[3] Tolentino 34
[4] Tolentino 36
[5] Åkervall, Lisa. "Networked Selves: Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch's Postcinematic Aesthetics." *Screen,* vol. 57, no. 1, 11 Apr. 2016. Page 35
[6] Åkervall 35
[7] Åkervall 36

cultural relics of a period when creative makers like myself are caught between a variety of expectations both within and beyond traditional arts institutions and commercial industries.

In my thesis project I teeter between the positions of artist and content creator. This struggle is perhaps most felt through the ambiguous tone of my films– each presents an unclear number of ironic layers, begging the question of how separated I am from the work. To me this ambiguity does not mark a separation, but a connection to my back-and-forth feelings about social media. I celebrate and I satirise web culture in equal parts, reflecting my ever-changing relationship to my digital self image. Through my research I have found that I am not alone in this struggle. The management and code switching between personas to build a digital brand can be understood through a lens of labour studies.

#werk

Cultural theorist Michel Feher describes that in the context of capitalist neoliberal subjectivity, the self is expressed by the metric of human capital.[8] One's human capital is defined by both environmental inputs and their ability to make contributions to that environnement; it positions the self to be valued within a market of others and their capacity to mobilise their skilled training, embodied traits, and social cachet into human capital.[9] As investors in our own human capital, neoliberal subjects self-identify as "managers of a portfolio of conducts," that accumulate into one's human capital valuation.[10] Feher argues that neoliberal conditions demand the self to constantly appreciate the value of their human capital lest it will decrease, mimicking the role of a business executive appreciating the stock value of a company.[11] As a result, individuals work to increase the stock value of their human capital through behaviours that reaffirm one's market value.[12]

Feher's theory of human capital translates to the context of social media, as platformization pushes the self to increasingly be perceived through branding terminology. As if in direct reference to Feher's theory, social media platforms demand the user to constantly self appreciate their human capital: in this case human capital may be defined by one's skill to achieve the outcomes of follower count, engagement, or other forms of online acclaim. Self appreciating one's digitally branded identity can take the form of posting,

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[8] Feher, Michel M.. "Self-Appreciation; or, The Aspirations of Human Capital." Public Culture 21 (2007): 21-41.
[9] Feher 26 - 28
[10] Feher 30
[11] Feher 27
[12] Feher 28

commenting, or curating content to assert one's superior taste. Each of these behaviours contributes to a campaign advertising the value of one's human capital. As such, the creation and maintenance of an online digitally branded persona should be considered as a legitimate form of labour.

In the context of social media one's human capital may be best understood through the corporate terminology of branding. The normative self-understanding of online neoliberal subjects equates self expression to a delivery of visually, tonally, and conceptually similar content to establish one's brand that might make an impact in the extensive information available online. Social media self branding operates the same as one's human capital whereby each behaviour an individual makes appreciates or depreciates the perceived value of their brand. Certain individuals, including myself, choose to focus their available labour time into the self-appreciation of their social media brand. This is the group of people my thesis research takes up.

In some cases branding self-appreciators work in the hopes of translating the speculative stock value of their brand into a financial payout. This includes a range of individuals like content creators trying to gain online followers for future corporate sponsorship, or a student getting a masters degree in the hopes of getting a higher salaried job in the future. The self appreciation of one's brand value can be a sort of job tied to a precarious source of income; some creators post for leisure without the intention to make money, some work part-time on the side of another job, and a handful are able to support themselves as full time content creators. These full time content creators are paid for their expertise in trafficking mass attention towards advertisements for their own merchandise or associate brands. Due to their ability to dedicate more time than casual counterparts, professional content creators dominate every genre and platform of online entertainment. These sparse professional positions are coveted for their influence on the culture, earning potential, and time in the spotlight.

In her research on content creators and her book *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love*, communication scholar Brooke Erin Duffy reports that much of the labour in the industry is rendered invisible and remains unpaid. Content professionals' labour extends beyond their performance for the camera to include the invention and maintenance of a digital brand, negotiating their online authenticity, and managing relationships with fans and peers.[13] Behind the successful few content creators who are able to make wages for their

[13] Duffy, Brooke E. *(Not) Getting Paid To Do What You Love*. Yale University Press, 2017. Page 25.

labour there is a much larger group of individuals creating content for free. Duffy describes this unrewarded many as “aspirational labourers”, a group of individuals working to build a career in content creation by performing the same labour as paid content creators[14].
She defines aspirational labourers as “un(der)-paid, remunerated with deferred promises of “exposure” or “visibility,” even as they work long hours to satisfy brands and convey authenticity to observant audiences”.[15] Much of this unpaid labour is motivated by a “Do What You Love” ideology that invents dreams of the ideal career that balances work and leisure.[16] Unfortunately, most of these creators fall short of their dreams as “just a few digital content creators reap significant material rewards from their activities”.[17]

Duffy’s research demonstrates that establishing and maintaining one’s online presence requires a lot of labour. Creators must keep up a regular, frequent schedule of posts and track their success through digital metrics, mimicking the labour performed by a traditional media outlet.[18] Moreover, aspirational labourers work to come across as authentic in their digitally mediated expressions of self.[19] This manifests through performed moments of relatability and vulnerability, allowing audiences to invest into the person behind their social media brand. Through interviews Duffy found that “it was difficult for the content creators I spoke with to pin down a definition of self-expression that didn’t foreground its reception or its communication of a brand “niche,”” showing how self-proclaimed authentic self-expression is hindered by market pressures to commodify the self.[20] Balancing between authentic self expression and upward mobility for the self brand is a laborious act requiring much trial and error to find intersections between the creator and viewer’s tastes. My many Tik Tok accounts that failed to reach an audience speak to how long this struggle can persist. Duffy’s research posits that content creation is a lot of labour, most of which gets rendered invisible by being lost in the noise of the internet beneath more successful creators.

Throughout my time at this MFA program I have taken on the process of creating twelve distinct online personas on Tik Tok. Through these miniseries, I follow the established content creation pathway as defined by Duffy, branding myself as a relatable member of specific groups. Each of the accounts I created has a unique approach to trying to reach a target demographic, mimicking the labour of an advertiser. I begin this process by

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[14] Duffy 24
[15] Duffy 11
[16] Duffy 23
[17] Duffy 38
[18] Duffy 161
[19] Duffy 165
[20] Duffy 216

researching relevant “markets” of attention as demarcated by hashtags. I search for communities with enough traction to get my account started but not so much that it could easily get buried. My target is to find a few hashtags with between one and ten million views. I found that my intentional branding became stronger as I removed myself as the main performer and could focus more on building visual and conceptual branding appropriate to target communities, showing the amount of labour required to achieve online attention.

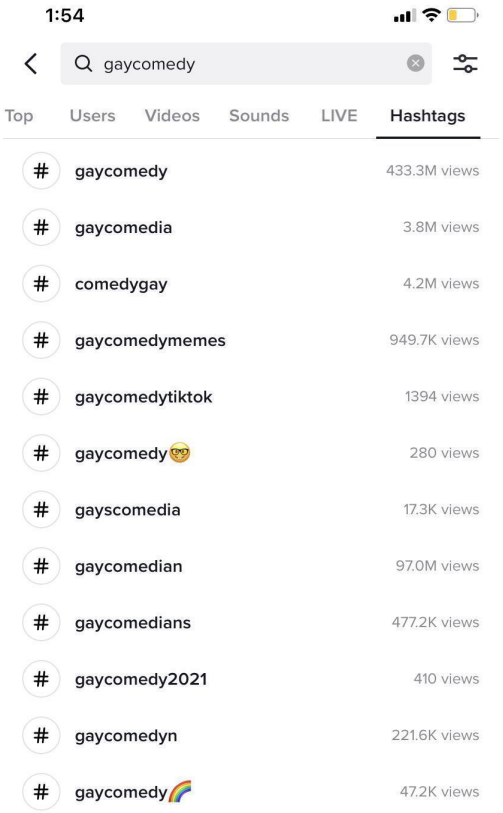

Figure 1. Flader, Matty. “Screenshot of Tik Tok hashtag search function.” 21 Feb. 2022

On top of maintaining, and often failing to maintain, these attempts at successful content creation, I also managed my brand as an artist at school, which was measured against much different guidelines. Online my personas have been focused on growing an audience through provoking outrage and confusion, whereas at school I have been asked to be more critical and intentional with the content of my work. It has been a dual effort for me to manage and switch between these personas. The result has caused some identity trouble at school, with professors insisting on my clear legibility as an artist rather than “just” an online content creator. This alerted me to a sense that social media production and institutionally-legitimated fine arts production are incompatible, shifting my understanding about the role aspirational labour plays across different platforms. Whether I am trying to be

an entertainer or a more "serious" artist, I am an aspirational labourer trying to secure a promising future for myself within a variety of potential creative industries. My position at school is also one of aspirational labourer trying to find a stable source of income from my creative work in the future. As a result, I have to navigate between making work that stands as a solid, straightforward portfolio of technical skills for future employers, and work that is conceptually layered enough to graduate with this MFA degree. I have found these to be demanding of two different filmic aesthetics, making it hard to satisfy both.

Aspirational labour is something content creators and artists both go through as a sort of rite of passage into professional positions in their respective fields. Today, young artists (even those who do not make work about/for social media) are similarly pressured to create and manage digital brands that define the viability of their careers. For myself as a filmmaker, I find the boundary between my artist and content creator identities to be extremely thin, as any artwork I produce "outside" of social media (i.e. *The Real Alex Kazemi)* is still most practically published in a digital environment. The screening environment of a film might help one discern it between "art" and "content". However, the pressure to build a digital brand to use as a portfolio, the low cost of publishing film online, and the high potential to reach an audience makes the internet an enticing setting for any young filmmaker.

#fame

In his book *The Attention Merchants,* legal scholar and White House Technology official Tim Wu frames attention as a commodity traded through media platforms. Wu explains that directing one's attention towards a corporate advertisement leads to future sales and brand recognition, leading to capitalist expansion of the attention economy to enter every corner of public and private life.[21] Wu names the capturers and directors of mass attention "attention merchants", tracing the profession back to 19th century newspaper ads.[22] Attention merchants evolved with technology through the developments of radio, television, and the internet, as their maxim of converting attention to revenue remained.[23]

Wu demonstrates that attention can be understood as a limited resource within an economy of attention, as one's focus can only be spent a fixed amount of times per day. Attention merchants battle for the limited human gaze to compete for capital. Attention

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[21] Wu, Tim. *The Attention Merchants.* Alfred A. Knopf, 2016. Page 13-15.
[22] Wu 16
[23] Wu 17

merchants for radio, TV, and billboards still exist, but influencers (i.e. professional content creators) are a new and effective kind. This class of attention merchants has grander appeal than career opportunity – these merchants enjoy life in the limelight. Wu compares the attention economy to democracy and capitalism in their abilities to create an often unattainable ideological dream of success, stating:

> "And so just as American democracy promised that any child could grow up to become president, and American capitalism promised that through hard work anyone could become rich, the attention economy threw up its own mirage for the discontented masses: fame for everyone".[24]

The commodification of attention has made fame a version of wealth that can be aspirational to people from a variety of socioeconomic positions. With the rise of social media stars and their glamorous lifestyles, some of whom are just "normal" teenagers, achieving fame through online self expression has become a big incentive to participate in social media culture. The economy of attention frames influencers and celebrities as the "winners" of the market based on their ability to amass attention. Yet, many of these winners have spoken out against this ideal, exposing their unhappiness even at the top of the attention-grabbing hierarchy.[25]

My thesis research revealed how my online upbringing has raised me to crave mass attention; so much so that it took me a year of unlearning through performing and posting myself to Tik Tok to realise that I did not personally want fame, I had just grown up in a culture obsessed with it.

The construction of fame is a common theme in my work. This is mostly in response to my journey of working through this realisation of who I want to be and what my values are. In this body of work, the narrative begins with my valorizing and yearning for fame in @garbahje, then moves to alienating celebrity status to show its absurdity in @celebritydeepfake, then begins to critique fame as an unending chase to no means in *The Real Alex Kazemi.* Finally, I illustrate the expectation for artists to strive for online fame in @puppyteethstudios.

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[24] Wu 661
[25] Wu 681

@garbahje

Garbahje is a Tik Tok account and persona I created as research elements to encapsulate the struggle for fame of a content-creating aspirational labourer. Garbahje is a drag queen who makes all of her own costuming out of recycled garbage materials. Chip bags and tangerine peels loosely held together with masking tape assemble her unique take on the artform of drag. Her design philosophy to barely transform garbage materials from their raw forms displays her artistic vision in costume making. Garbahje subverts normative beauty standards to underscore the potential for beauty to be an inventive space despite one's craftsmanship ability. More gripping than her unique drag stylings is the narration she provides to create an unsettling atmosphere suspended somewhere between comedy and tragedy.

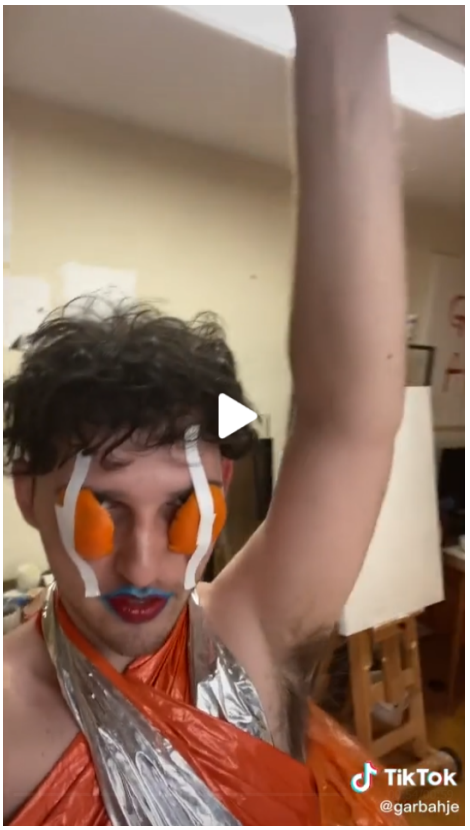

Figure 2. Flader, Matty. "Screenshot of @garbahje 1." Feb. 20 2022.

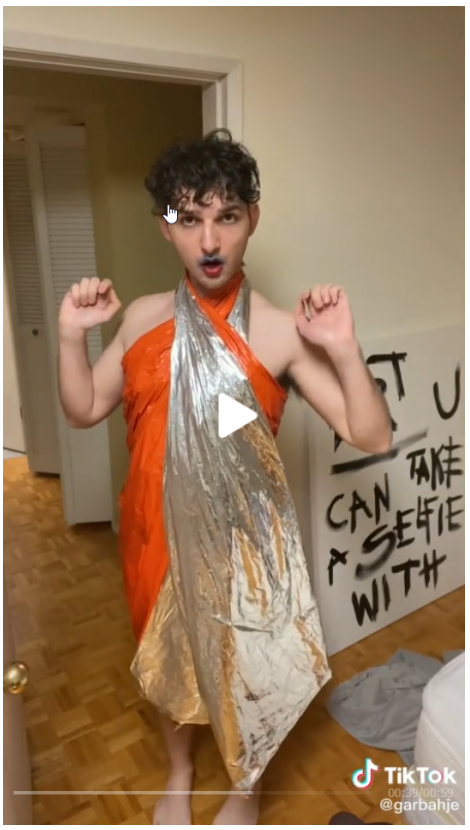

Figure 3. Flader, Matty. "Screenshot of @garbahje 2." Feb. 20 2022.

She makes short videos documenting the DIY creation of her looks, as well as beauty tutorials and daily vlog-like updates. In this Garbahje video she awkwardly sings and cracks jokes over an underscoring of a popular Tik Tok song in direct address to her audience. The viewer peers into the journey of her seemingly improvising a drag look from tangerine peels and an orange heat blanket. Quick cuts between sporadic thoughts coupled with bad-made-mediocre costume material choices define a certain unhinged tone to the video – as if her constant failed attempts to connect with an online audience have pushed her off the edge.

What unifies the videos across different genres is an undying sense of self deprecating humour that clashes with her seemingly false sense of overconfidence. The viewer is left guessing as to how much Garbahje believes in herself. She clearly struggles to find an identity, trying on different tropes and archetypes set up by already famous queens. Watching her is comedic in a dark way; one can't help but feel guilty laughing at her even when she cracks a joke. Although her drag style clearly leans on camp ridiculousness, something oddly genuine lurks below the surface of her presentation. I wanted to create a character that people could see trying and failing to be a star. She was trying more than anything to be famous. Garbahje is someone who was trying to follow the roadmap of previously successful content creators: she organises herself around the easily reproducible genre of drag tutorials;

outrageously performs a heightened version of her personality; and tries to brand herself around the simple, standout concept of using garbage as drag material (hence her name).

Garbahje is hyper aware of these ideals, and in this work, I purposefully make her struggle with them extremely visible. She holds up these ideals as the guidelines of her brand. Through this branding she struggles to come across as entirely authentic – she is too result-oriented in her approach to achieving marketable authenticity to come across as authentic. Garbahje (and myself) particularly struggled to face the real-time audience feedback through the Tik Tok metrics of views and likes. She would often try to reproduce the videos that received the most attention, twisting into uncomfortable positions for the gaze of her audience. The tension between "authentic" presentation of self and sustaining a relationship with the audience creates the central conflict of the channel: how can a creator possibly be unapologetically authentic while upholding a strong brand identity and listening to their audience's demands?

Garbahje's shaky performance amplifies the pressure of immediate feedback that comes with online performance. Over time she self-edits her on-screen personality to become the most popular version of herself. She shows how easy it is to get lost in this listening and how it interferes with the possibility for a genuine self to develop in an online setting. Rather, the validation-seeking self is pushed and pulled by the audience's attention.

The like-based platform of Tik Tok requires performers to do a balancing act between performing an idealised persona versus freer self expression. That tension is what makes Garbahje's performance so cringey and also so human. She is trying to make it in a system that is stacked against her. She's finding her own way to be true to herself and showing how difficult that work is in a social media setting.

Duffy's research shows that for every successful content creator there are thousands trying and failing to get online recognition.[26] These aspirational labourers work for free to produce content to the benefit of Tik Tok and other social media platforms. A key takeaway from this project is the similar desperation for online attention that Garbahje and myself outside of the character face. As an emerging artist, I am similarly implicated in the economy of attention, forced to fight to sustain an audience through any means possible including: in-person networking, regular updates to social media profiles, and the curation of a digital persona deemed follow-worthy by others. As an anecdote, I recently had a curator unsure of whether or not I was a real person because I had deactivated my Instagram account. Being an

[26] Duffy 39

artist within contemporary neoliberal regimes requires a level of public visibility, and for young artists that visibility is specifically expected to be performed on social media platforms. In this way, I found that social media content creators and visual artists are not so dissimilar: they each must master their digital persona and its cultural exports in order to achieve outlandish goals of being paid to do what they love.

The inseparability of Garbahje's struggle motivated by a hunger for fame and my own journey as an emerging artist became extremely emotionally taxing. Garbahje is ultimately a caricature of myself: daftly she moved from an expressive outlet into being an exhausting monster of a pity party to maintain performing for an audience of 100. Presenting myself through my face and body and constantly failing to find success was starting to take a toll on me – was I not young and pretty enough to make it on Tik Tok? I wanted to continue my research while removing all traces of myself from it. My next intervention embraced working anonymously.

@celebritydeepfake

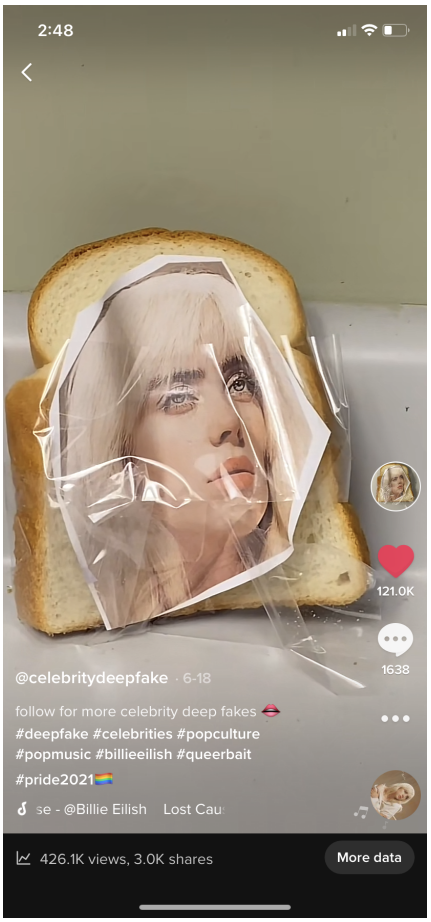

Figure 4. Flader, Matty. "Screenshot of @celebritydeepfake 1." Feb. 20, 2022.

@celebritydeepfake began with a lot of scrolling. In this project I used time spent watching the endless stream of content on Tik Tok as immersive material research in order to better my understanding of today's pop cultural climate. I tried for a long time to uncover trends in viral videos that I could appropriate towards building an audience for myself. After countless hours of scrolling I found that in spite of many disparate approaches to filmmaking ranging from husband pranks and hydraulic press channels, the key to a successful video is captivation. Some videos captivate through jokes, some through storytelling, and some through unattainable sexual desire. To make this success my own I chose to create the most captivating atmosphere possible: a video series so absurd it had to be watched, liked, and shared.

I started by constructing a persona that was grounded enough to relate to, yet pushed a little too far off the edge by his pursuit of online attention. This was not a stretch for me at the time after six months of constructing and killing countless personas that failed to find a significant audience. Rooted in desperation to achieve virality, my character arose as an unhinged artist who's lost control over his perception of reality. He takes on the familiar persona of a gay man obsessed with pop culture, especially young pop stars. However, his main characterization comes from his commitment to creating deep fake videos utilising the worst deep fake technology possible: celebrity face cutouts hastily taped onto slices of white bread.

The series of thirteen videos are each under one minute in duration. They consist of simple lofi iphone shots that recall the platform's popularized filmic language limited to cuts and zooms as a result of the app's built-in filmmaking interface. The bread puppets are situated in conversation with each other over minimalist colour block backdrops that reveal to be my kitchen and living room, adding another level of comedic failure to the work. The inclusion of these shots keys the viewer into the character's self-awareness, demonstrating his flawed character as a constructed identity tailored for online performance.

The absurdity of the bread puppets by analogy suggests the absurdity of celebrity culture which is predicated on the arbitrary ability for a person to amass attention. Using well-known pop star faces as puppets reduces them to stock character pawns used to produce entertaining narratives much like a celebrity tabloid might do. The puppets also suggest an uneven relationship between stars and their fans, who use celebrity images to map out their own lives and (re)produce star images and narratives.

Affect is also key: I voice over the puppets experimenting with varying levels of performativity to obfuscate my position toward the subject matter. For most of the films I choose a removed, uncaring demeanour that refuses to attempt impersonating the celebrities. Rather, the monotonous, robotic sound of my voice mimics the popular text-to-speech function used by Tik Tok filmmakers. The text-to-speech function serves as an artificial barrier between the maker and viewer allowing enough separation to express true feelings: an intimacy born from digital anonymity. My vocal performance works to add another layer of irony to the project, signalling to the viewer that they should laugh along with me, as well as providing a kind of anonymity that signals a strange authenticity. The non-performance creates a confusing atmosphere that suspends viewers between layers of reality.

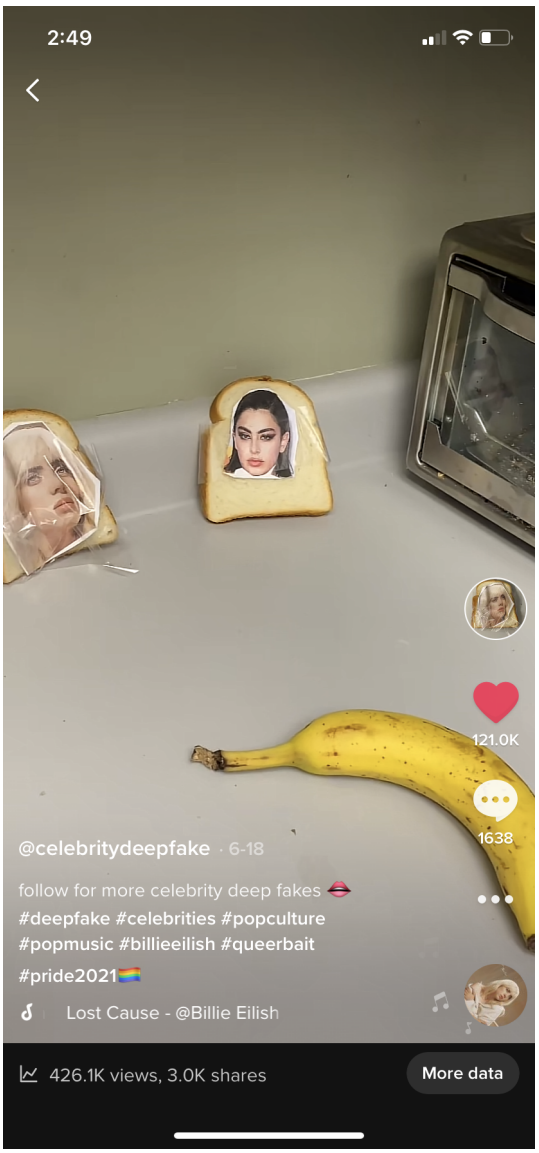

Figure 5. Flader, Matty. "Screenshot of @celebritydeepfake 2." Feb. 20, 2022.

A key part in capturing attention is the scripting for the videos. To maximise algorithmic growth, a video on Tik Tok has to get a high percentage of engagement in the form of likes and comments from its initial viewers. This rings true based on my experience as a creator on the app. While one might assume the best way to achieve viewer interaction is by releasing quality content, I would wager that releasing controversially terrible content is much more algorithmically rewarding. Most people won't comment on a video they like, but they will on something that makes them angry. Most of my comments on my most successful video were in fact people arguing over Billie Eilish queer baiting and Lana Del Ray's dicey politics. To capitalise on controversy, I wrote scripts about culturally heated current events that people were already arguing about.

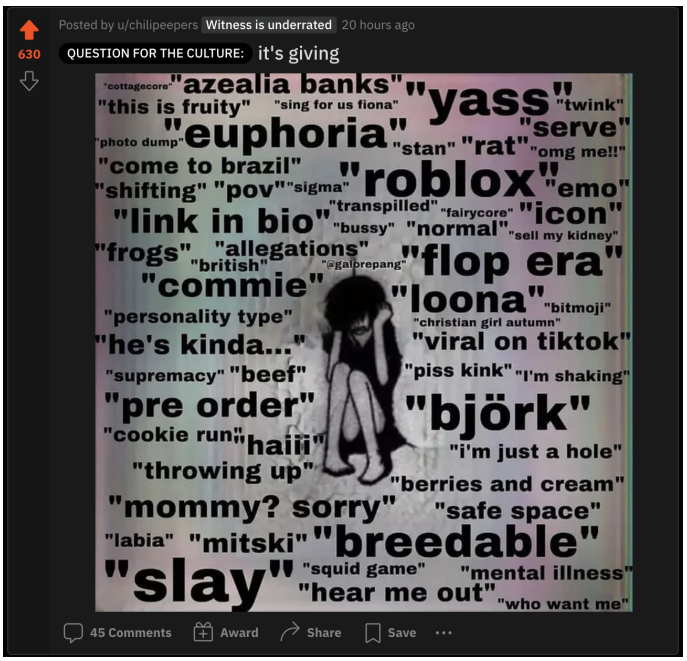

Figure 6. u/chilipeepers *"it's giving."* Sept. 21 2021. *www.reddit.com/r/popheadscirclejerk/comments/q0wiig/its_giving/.*

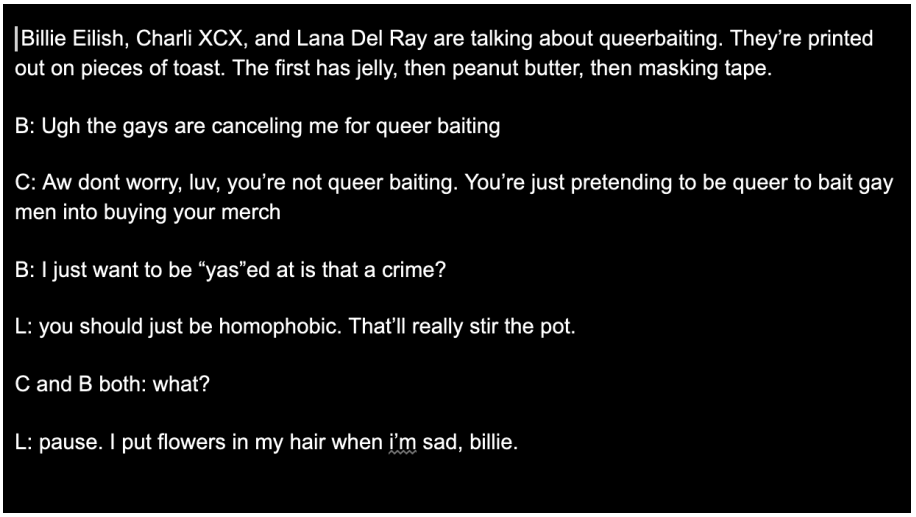

Figure 7. Flader, Matty. "@celebritydeepfake script appropriating pop worship language" Sept. 10 2021.

My inspiration for my scripts came from the reddit communities r/PopHeads, r/PopHeadsCircleJerk, and stan Twitter. Each of these communities vary in their levels of ironically celebrating and attacking celebrities over whatever breaking scandal the day brings. Just like on Tik Tok, the platformization of these communities results in extreme opinions rising to the top over reasonable ones. Basically, it's a bunch of people fighting for the attention of the group by making sweeping statements and blowing up non-issues, often

through the lens of supporting or denying liberal social justice. In my opinion these cultures are a reproduction of problematic tabloid culture in an interactive format.

Baked into these community conversations, especially on stan Twitter, is a unique culturally formed language. The script is a liquefaction of this culture through celebratory/satirising appropriation of the dominant language. Words like “stan” “living” “queer baiting” that mimic the sensationalized publications and conversations that dominate pop cultural sphere through grabbing the most online attention. My scripts appropriate this language to recall the communities in a reflective manner -- my language use inserts my work into pop culture worship algorithms while the visual strategy undercuts normativity, reflecting back the absurdity of these communities. The meaning of the work rests in nonmeaning.

The audience reaction to these videos was fairly large, achieving 5100 followers and a video with 428,000 views. As per my design, the comments sections were filled with people either playing along with my irony or refuting my points. The ladder people went on to argue with other commenters about the private and political lives of the mentioned celebrities.

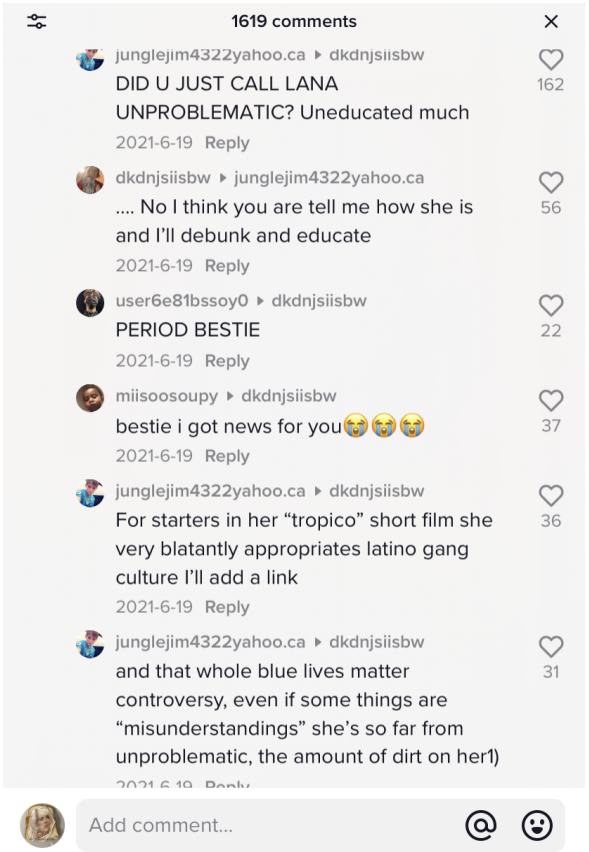

Figure 8. Flader, Matty. “Screenshot of comments section of @celebritydeepfake 1.” Sept. 10, 2021.

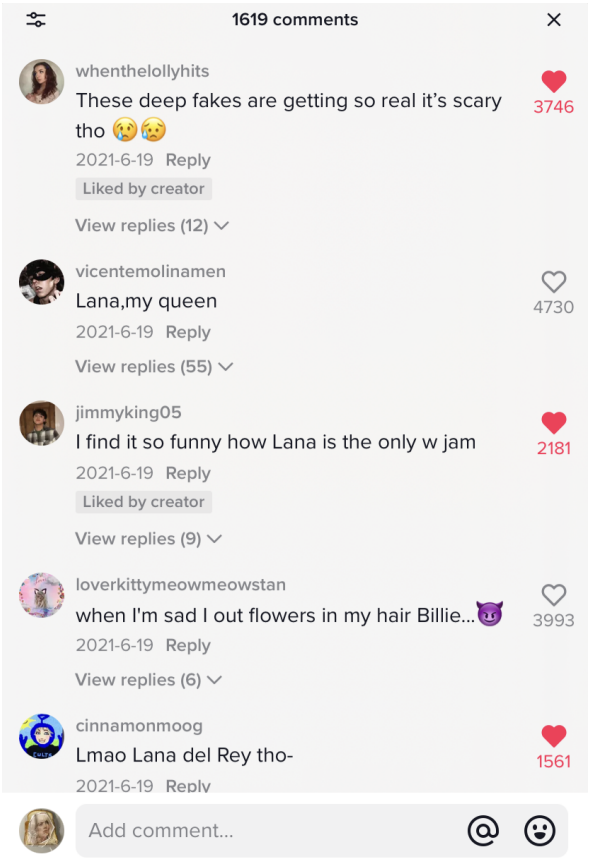

Figure 9. Flader, Matty. "Screenshot of comments section of @celebritydeepfake 2." Sept. 10, 2021.

For the mid-degree State of Practice exhibition I showed @celebritydeepfakes in the RBC Media Gallery in the Emily Carr building. Moving the work from Tik Tok into the gallery space completely changes the viewer's interaction with it. Rather than just projecting the Tik Toks onto the wall, I tried to extend the experience of seeing the work in its natural habitat to the gallery space. What defines Tik Tok is the platform's hold on the video's formal elements (16:9 aspect ratio, length under a minute, celebration of shot-on-iPhone content) meeting the creation of a digital public that speaks among themselves and directly to the artist. I allow the gallery viewers to leave a comment on slices of bread primed to be written on with a sharpie and taped to the wall, echoing the raw energy of materials that build the cinematic universe of @celebritydeepfake. The wall becomes a comment section where the public can leave a trace of their amusement or bewilderment and interact with one another.

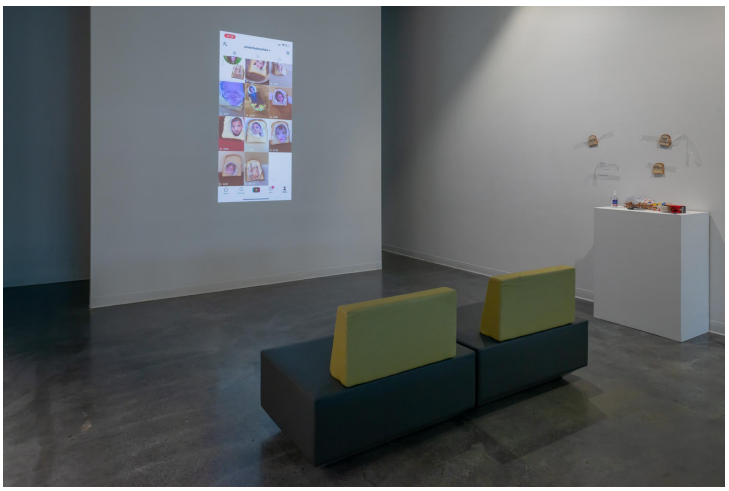

Figure 10. Love, Michael. “Installation photo of @celebritydeepfake in the SOP exhibition 1.” Sept. 1, 2021.

Figure 11. Love, Michael. “Installation photo of @celebritydeepfake in the SOP exhibition 2.” Sept. 1, 2021.

Mirroring that wall I placed three selections from my Tik Tok comments, each taped to a slice of bread and sitting on a small custom-made shelf. The two walls face each other in a conversation between the digital public algorithmically formed around the work and the physical public institutionally formed around the work. I found that some gallery viewers recorded social media stories of themselves leaving or looking at bread comments, complicating the binary of online and offline cultures that coexist in the space. This layout posits that the boundaries between institutional artistry and social media content creation are not as firm as one might think; merely a porous wall that leaks information back and forth through from pop culture to art.

I chose to stop making videos under @celebritydeekfake despite its success because I found that its controversial design failed to fulfil my good intentions. I wanted the series to be a satirical look into the escalation of non-issues brought on by algorithmic interventions into internet discussions – the creator’s character was meant to caricaturize this issue by showing

the extreme opinions that form about the mundanities of celebrity lives and the lack of change that can come from such critique. However, after fleshing out the idea over a series of videos I found that the tone was easy to read as hateful, as if the channel was meant to besmirch the names of women whose art I actually hold dear. While this ambiguous tone was able to metrically succeed online (proving my point that extreme opinions trump rational ones in the digital economy of attention), I didn't feel it was ethical to continue: the ambiguity of my intent set by my ironic tone made it too easy for a viewer to take what I said at face value. Overall, the common pre-existence of such hateful content about celebrities online made my satirical opinions too believable. I feel that this project brought equal amounts of criticality and hate into the world whereas ideally it would only be the former.

A big takeaway from this project is that the inability to distinguish truth from fact almost always underpins the online expression of one's identity and beliefs. Through this research I affirmed that sometimes the tonal nuance I want to create cannot exist well on the internet.

The Real Alex Kazemi

Showing @celebritydeepfake in the gallery led me to meet well-connected local microframous celebrity Alex Kazemi. Brought on by his curiosity about my satirization of social media, Alex contacted me and we started talking about our shared interest in the philosophy of constructing an online identity for mass pop cultural consumption. After meeting a few times Alex agreed to collaboratively investigate our intellectual kinship through the medium of a short documentary film in homage to the style of Tik Toks I had previously produced.

The film opens with Madonna's Instagram story of her reading a passage from Kazemi's recent occult book *Pop Magick*. This introductory method provides the viewer a peek at Kazemi's impressive cultural resumé, allowing them to be wooed by his approval from the famed pop star. I go on to further mythologize Kazemi, giving a mysterious account of how we met in the familiar style of an investigative documentary filmmaker. In a moment of contrast I open on a shot of Kazemi shirtless in a bathroom having an insecure moment about his body image. This short scene undercuts the genre expectations for the film to unironically celebrate Kazemi – it creates a moment of intimacy with the mythologized subject, allowing the viewer some faith in the authenticity of his on screen performance.

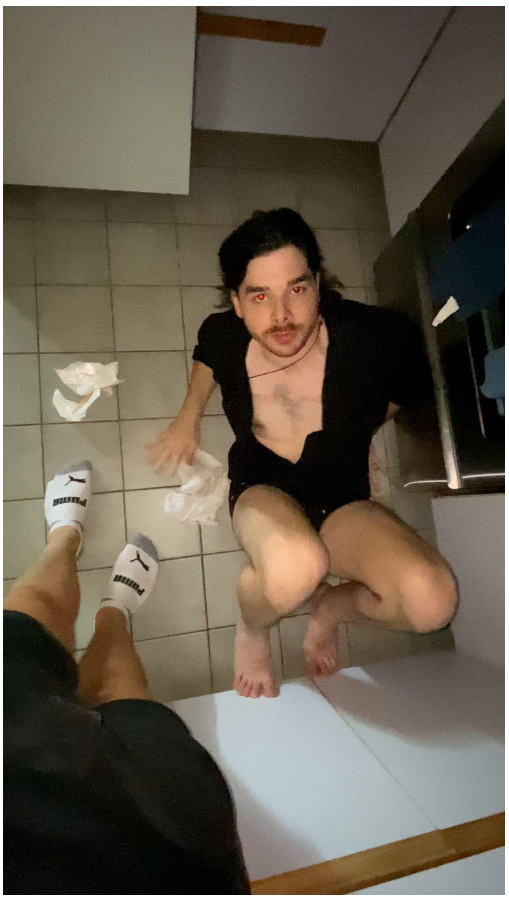

Figure 12. Flader, Matty. “Screenshot from *The Real Alex Kazemi,* also used as promotional image for the film.” Oct. 30, 2021.

Figure 13. Flader, Matty. "Screenshot of candle magick from *The Real Alex Kazemi*"" Oct. 30, 2021.

The film moves further into conventional exposition with Kazemi introducing himself in talking head shots, describing his life, career, and aspirations. His general attitude towards life and fame are so aspirationally extreme they appear almost fictional. Coupled with his undying belief in seemingly bizarre Magick and Kabbalah, his character comes off as somewhat delusional. Throughout the film I orchestrate these unbelievable interview moments with intensely intimate, almost suffocating scenes of Kazemi and I. The result is a push and pull of the audience's belief in the authenticity of his performance: the lines between reality and fiction are blurred in the unravelling chaos of Kazemi's performance for the camera for a digital audience.

My formal choices to shoot in vertical shot-on-iPhone format place the film within the contemporary struggle to document a mythologized version of the self online through calculated social media posts. The format challenges the old horizontal format of the cinema, suggesting the influence of social media filmmaking as the filter through which new young audiences view media and perhaps life itself; Kazemi becomes a version of himself trapped within the vertical frame despite his refusal to participate in social media. *The Real Alex Kazemi* extends beyond the story of Kazemi and his eccentricities. It centres the

complications of presenting an authentic glimpse of oneself online. Due to the curation of self inherent to all genres of online cultural production, the assumption of self-interested motivations for gaining attention make it impossible to tell the difference between reality and its histrionic recreation. Moments of authenticity cannot be discerned from those which are staged to be perceived as authentic.

In *The Real Alex Kazemi* the moments that read as authentic, such as the opening bathroom scene, the bedroom truth or dare scene, him receiving a phone call reporting a failure to connect with a Tik Tok star, and the sequence of Kazemi getting evil eye from the camera, are paradoxically both staged and real. They come across as real and unacted, as if the durational filming process we undertook grew his comfort to bear it all in front of the lens. However, one can't help but see these as opportunistic moments for Kazemi to manufacture a connection with the audience, especially due to his overstated ambition to be famous.

To further complicate the authenticity of the film I weave in self-reflexive "backstage" moments. In one shot, I reveal the production schedule of the film, as Alex controls which parts I've highlighted to completion, nodding to the construction of the project and its inescapability from Kazemi's obsessive control of his public image. The final scene of the film takes a similar function: I direct Kazemi to speak the scripted final line repeatedly until I get the performance that reads as most authentic. This scene underscores the paradox that within the valued performance of authenticity is an undying layer of artifice; moreover, it complicates the entirety of the film, begging the viewer to question to what degree the footage is real or acted. I intended this as the final scene to create a call to action for the viewer to apply this question to the rest of the web content they might see that day. The film's metacommentary attempts to critique the nature of online content itself in the way it impossibly exudes authenticity through calculated signalling. I wager that every content creator is just like Alex Kazemi, anxiously crafting their persona and aesthetic choices around marketing ideals in hopes of being approved by the Madonnas of the world.

Kazemi admits to letting his ambitions for fame take ownership of his life and relationships to the point where he lost control over his selfhood. "I couldn't tell what's real and what's the simulation anymore," he states in the film, referring to his curated public image as an artificially simulated version of himself that became real as more people began to believe it. To the public, Alex Kazemi is whatever appears in a google search of his name. In the reception of the film it seemed easy for viewers to shirk this off by seeing him as an eccentric, an outsider to society, or a scripted hyperbolic character created to satirise

influencer culture. The reality is that his story is not so different from my own or my classmates in all of my schooling. To have a web presence is to do the labour of obsessively curating the self, performing for the camera, and typing stylized affects behind neon screens. We are each boiled down to a series of intentional digital fragments.

The film criticises Alex's yearning for fame, framing it as an insatiable cycle of desire born of self-consciousness. His obsessive self-promotional nature allowed him to achieve a certain level of fame through media attention, but he remains unrecognisable in most circles. Alex is perhaps best described as "microfamous," a modernization of fame that allows individuals to be acclaimed in their niche algorithmic genres of online production, but mostly unknown in the public eye. Tim Wu points to Twitter's 2006 invention of the followers system as the birth of microfame, which allowed individuals to amass significant attention from their engaged demographics, yet remain as one of many largely unknown online content creators.[27] Due to the condition of microfame existing on the internet, it is defined by the infrastructure of social media platforms "extend[ing] beyond a creator's body of work to include a community that leaves comments, publishes reaction videos, sends e-mails, and builds Internet reputations with links".[28] The existence of microfamous individuals points to a fragmentation of culture brought on by the internet, algorithmically separating individuals into demographics of taste. A teenage girl interested in witchcraft and candle magick may know Alex Kazemi, but anyone else will have never heard his name.

In an attempt to optimise the googleability of my own name, I worked with Alex to land the film on the digital platform of a decent magazine. The film ended up in Wonderland, a reputable arts & culture magazine with well-known celebrities on the cover, which really pleased both of us. Getting that placement, however, was no easy task.

First we worked on defining the unique selling points of the film and distilled them down into a bite-sized email to send off to a few people in the press (don't ask how we got their email addresses). While the content of this message was defined by our USPs, the form intended to call upon GenZ culture through tone and lack of capitalization. I worked especially hard to play a humble, earnest artist character with a prescient story about youth culture.

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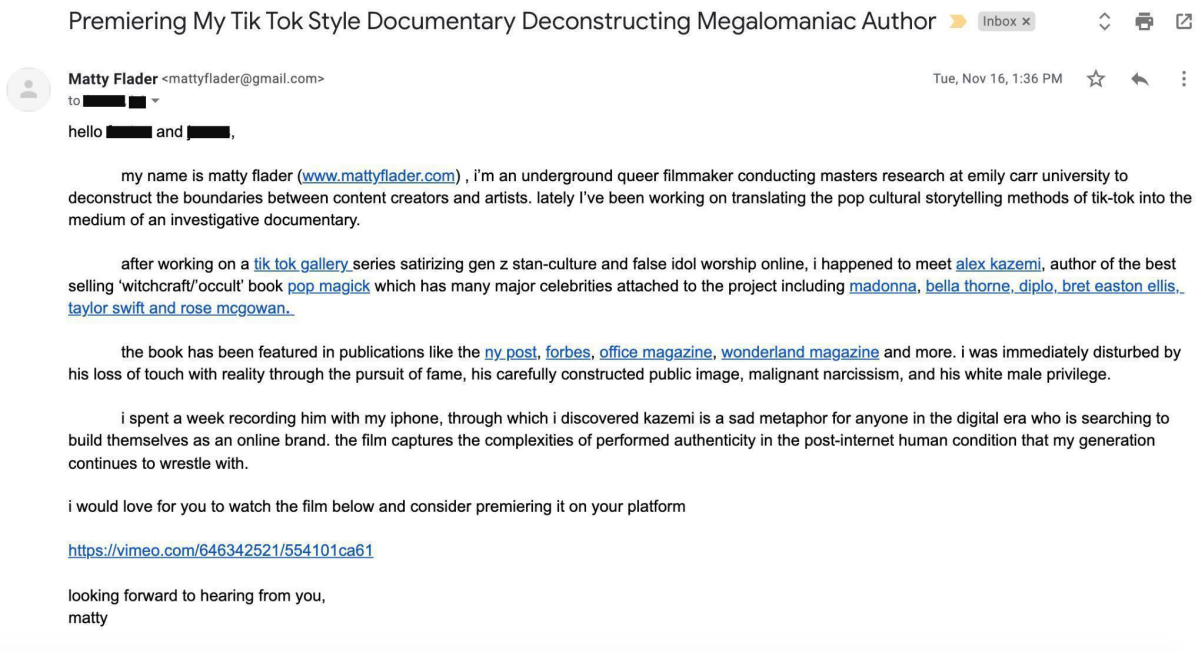
[27] Wu 659
[28] Wu 654



Premiering My Tik Tok Style Documentary Deconstructing Megalomaniac Author Inbox ×

Matty Flader <mattyflader@gmail.com> Tue, Nov 16, 1:36 PM
to [redacted]

hello [redacted] and [redacted],

my name is matty flader (www.mattyflader.com) , i'm an underground queer filmmaker conducting masters research at emily carr university to deconstruct the boundaries between content creators and artists. lately I've been working on translating the pop cultural storytelling methods of tik-tok into the medium of an investigative documentary.

after working on a tik tok gallery series satirizing gen z stan-culture and false idol worship online, i happened to meet alex kazemi, author of the best selling 'witchcraft/'occult' book pop magick which has many major celebrities attached to the project including madonna, bella thorne, diplo, bret easton ellis, taylor swift and rose mcgowan.

the book has been featured in publications like the ny post, forbes, office magazine, wonderland magazine and more. i was immediately disturbed by his loss of touch with reality through the pursuit of fame, his carefully constructed public image, malignant narcissism, and his white male privilege.

i spent a week recording him with my iphone, through which i discovered kazemi is a sad metaphor for anyone in the digital era who is searching to build themselves as an online brand. the film captures the complexities of performed authenticity in the post-internet human condition that my generation continues to wrestle with.

i would love for you to watch the film below and consider premiering it on your platform

https://vimeo.com/646342521/554101ca61

looking forward to hearing from you,
matty

Figure 14. Flader, Matty. "Screenshot of press release email." Nov. 16, 2021

While an interesting exercise in directing writing towards a particular demographic, this email was unsuccessful at landing us a web placement. Luckily, Alex had been written about in Wonderland before and was able to contact an old friend in the organisation, demonstrating the interrelationship between online and offline social networks as vital to upward mobility.

A content writer at Wonderland allowed Alex and I to write the article and artist Q&A attached to the premiere of the film, adding another complication of the perception of reality into the film's universe: we got to write whatever we wanted while benefiting from the inherent trustworthiness of an established media platform.[29] I wrote both the questions and answers for my own Q&A, constructing a glamorous narrative of an enigmatic up-and-coming filmmaker. This was an excellent opportunity for the upward mobility of my brand as an artist, and a key piece in my resumé for future opportunities. This article snowballed into a press piece written for the front page of Emily Carr University's website about my film getting published.[30] The writer of this institutional article pulled quotes from the Wonderland article, unknowingly sourcing my own kind words about myself as journalistic truths.

My experience of mobilizing existing platforms for self-promotion and performative self-aggrandization recalls Chris Burden's *TV Commercials* made between 1972-1975. Burden produced a series of commercials that he aired on late-night television, paying to

[29] See the Wonderland article at: www.wonderlandmagazine.com/2021/11/29/alex-kazemi-2/
[30] See the ECUAD article at: www.ecuad.ca/news/2021/matty-flader-real-alex-kazemi-wonderland

broadcast his artistic vision to Americans at home.[31] One of these ads flashes a series of famed artists followed by his own name: "Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Vincent Van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Chris Burden".[32] (add photo) This ad exposes the ease at which Burden could purchase notoriety through television broadcasting.[33] Rather than adhering to the conventional gallery system to represent his brand, Burden engaged mass media to direct attention towards himself, reclaiming control over his performatively branded self.

Burden shows that the trusting relationship between viewer and media outlet allows an individual to self mythologize themselves to a broad audience, establishing that person as a familiar household brand. Burden's commercials show the possibility for an action to simultaneously act as a piece of performance art that critiques systems of culture and a self-promotional tool to shape the path of one's career. In my opinion the latter does not reduce the potency of the former: it enhances the mode of critique by taking up space in the media culture that it exposes. Burden's commentary on television ads would be less engaging if shown in a gallery setting because they would not show the artist's mastery of the system that allowed his placing on the television in the same way.

With the release of *The Real Alex Kazemi* into the world I similarly try to use the media as a tool to self mythologize myself as the artist behind the work. By being given the opportunity to write my own article and artist Q&A for Wonderland, I was able to use the credibility of the press platform to guide the audience's perception of me. A vast dissimilarity between today and the 1970s is that there are far more media (and social media) platforms competing for the audience's attention. As a result, this experiment could not penetrate the public consciousness the way that Burden's could. Despite the acclaim of the magazine, my feature article at Wonderland ultimately had fairly low cultural impact. This goes to show the incredible difficulty of standing out as a cultural producer in the attention economy. Even an article in a reputable magazine is a drop in the ocean of content that users have to pick from on a daily basis.

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[31] Burden, Chris. "Chris Burden - The TV Commercials - West Coast Video Art - MOCAtv." *YouTube,* uploaded by The Museum of Contemporary Art, 25 Feb. 2013.
[32] Burden
[33] Burden

@puppyteethstudios

My collaboration with popular local queer artist @puppyteeth started as a chance for me to build my portfolio to set me up for a job after graduating. @puppyteeth is an illustrator and painter who runs a fairly successful business through selling merch to his hundred-thousand follower Instagram account. I reached out to him offering to extend his brand onto Tik Tok, expanding brand reach to new audiences on the platform with content that doubly serves as Instagram Reels to help fill in his existing content schedule.

For this series I chose to more closely follow the aesthetic norms of Tik Tok, particularly mimicking the genre of videos in which artists create content about their artwork. This genre seems to favour illustrators and painters, often including drawing tips and tutorials, timelapses of their work, and generic tips about the business of artmaking. I take inspiration from these examples to write scenarios that @puppyteeth and I improvise from. To closely mimic the existing genre, I shot the videos in the Tik Tok app. I use text to overlay video titles alongside the popular text-to-speech function.

In this series text is a helpful tool to set up the expectations of the viewer, which can later be subverted for comedic and conceptual effect. For example, one video begins with a text-to-speech title reading “3 reasons why I should be your fave artist,” followed by a clip of @puppyteeth admitting “I don’t have any reasons. I’m not doing this,” allowing for a non sequitur moment of comedy that illustrates his discontent for making such a self-promotional video.

Following the aesthetic norms of Tik Tok content has allowed for genre parody as well as increased visibility. Our ironic tone comes across in @puppyteeth’s performance to provide a metacritical atmosphere separating these videos from most in the genre. However, the videos also benefit from being more easily categorised and distributed by the Tik Tok algorithm due to their aesthetic similarities to those of the genre. The tone is doubly helpful for @puppyteeth who can now self promote more shamelessly, blaming it on the gay intern’s hunger for channel success.

After some experimentation to find a collective vision, we chose to generate content around our shared positions as aspirational labourers. @puppyteeth plays the role of himself in the films, an artist begrudgingly participating in social media. Reflecting his real life success on Instagram, his income is tied to the management of a digital persona with regularly scheduled content and purchasable merchandise. While he is making money off of his social media presence, it is not a lot and he aspires to earn a better living. Despite his best

wishes, he is bound to the platform and must keep up with trends, updates to the algorithm, and manage his relationship to his audience through his comment section for the upward mobility of his branded career. His bored, irritated characterization makes it apparent that he does not want to participate in the films he is making, but must self promote online in order to keep his practice alive.

I play the role of the gay intern, who also mimics my real situation in the relationship as an unpaid content creator overextending myself to build a portfolio. Gay intern speaks from behind the camera to give directions, showing his role as content creator to tailor @puppyteeth's performance towards algorithmic success. After all, gay intern has personal stakes in @puppyteethstudio's success, and he does what he can to capture any possible online attention.

@puppyteeth "employs" the gay intern in a somewhat abusive manner, pointing to the nature of unpaid invisible labour in the social media industry. One video reveals a dark, cold, gated passageway as the gay interns sleeping chambers, suggesting his captivity within @puppyteeth's home. However, the gay intern takes his own form of control through his direction of the videos to control the public image of @puppyteeth, heightened by the not-wanting-to-be-there dynamic. The two have an interchangeably abusive power dynamic, allowing us to make light of the real hardships we endure as aspirational labourers.

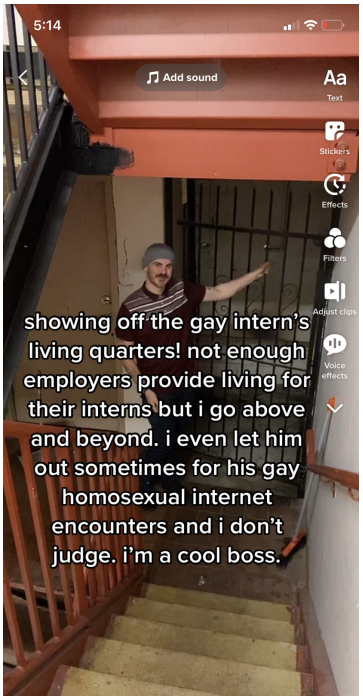

Figure 15. Flader, Matty. "Screenshot from @puppyteethstudios." May 15, 2022.

The aesthetic of the series evolved after an initial "failed" attempt. Before appropriating Tik Tok aesthetics, we filmed Jaik as his clown alter ego Pop. These videos

attempted to play on the Internet Ugly aesthetic through lazy handheld camera work, an abandoned building setting, failure embedded into the transition editing, and absurdist content that demands closer inspection. I am happy with the way this work demonstrates my stylized filmmaking and believe it to be a personal achievement in expressing my artistic point of view. However, the videos were failing to receive practically any attention online, which considering his already large following, reflected poorly on the ability for Jaik's brand to reach an audience. While both of us enjoy the series, continuing that line of work would act to lower the notoriety of his digital brand and could affect his already precarious business. As Feher's theory of human capital suggests, Jaik as a neoliberal subject cannot escape the conditions that require him to constantly be selt appreciating the perceived stock value of his brand as an artist.[34] The key to understanding this series is the underlying tensions Jaik and I each face as actors in reality: we are each forced to appreciate the value of our human capital by showing our ability to participate in social media normativity to continue the paths of our careers. Despite the shifting power dynamic, we as characters undergo the same struggle to achieve a living in our respective realms of creative production.

Luckily, as we moved on to parody the genre of artmaking Tik Tok we were able to strike a balance between our artistic vision and the necessary market validation. Outside of our collective filmic universe, the series has had a positive impact on Jaik's art practice. He has been receiving a lot of comments in person from fans and friends in our community, expressing their love for our Tik Toks.[35] Another major outcome of this series is the rejuvenation of his Instagram engagement, which was on the decline before our collaboration. This is speculatively due to Instagram's sharing algorithm preferring users who publish reels as it is a feature the platform is trying to push in competition with the domineering Tik Tok. Since Jaik monetizes his art practice through Instagram, these engagement outcomes affect the viability of his business, allowing him to continue practising art for a living. Just like his filmic character, Jaik relies on social media platforms to earn a living and must keep up with their latest demands. In this case, that meant updating his posting practice from simple documentation of his artworks to include short comedy videos to satisfy the demands of Instagram and his audience.

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[34] Feher 27

[35] While I make the videos in Tik Tok, they are mostly seen on the competitor's platform Instagram Reels, demonstrating the linguistic impact Tik Tok has had on our culture.

#postinternet

One thematic thread throughout my works is an interest in the aesthetic cultures of the Internet. For example: I take inspiration from the language of stan subcultures in @celebritydeepfake, the trendy format of drag makeup tutorials in @garbahje, and the aesthetic that arises from Tik Tok's in-app limitation in *The Real Alex Kazemi.* This has always been an interest of mine, as my cultural upbringing was majorly online. My work allows outsiders a look into some cultures of my interest that exist online. I try my best to understand these cultures from within, appropriating popular tropes in half satire, half celebration to point out and add to the absurdity of online content. This interest of mine situates my work within the lineage of post-internet art.

Art critic Bryan Droitcour describes "post-internet art" as an elusory term that "avoids anything resembling a formal description of the work it refers to, alluding only to a hazy contemporary condition and the idea of art being made in the context of digital technology," encapsulating my translation of online culture into artwork.[36] For me, a driving theme in my practice is critically looking at the pressure to perform my identity for an audience online. This pressure hits very close to home to someone who has grown up seeing online performance become a near necessity and experiences that social expectation with anxiety. For people who are artists or other kinds of aspirational labourers, the pressure can be even more immense: your online presence becomes both your resume and calling card and to opt out of positioning oneself for external anonymous consumption is to refuse business.

Droitcour argues that post-internet art objects are designed with an obsession for online self promotion; works frequently look good in gallery documentation shots posted on the web without mindfully activating the space of the gallery.[37] He gripes about this kind of artwork, simply calling it "boring to be around."[38] What underlies Droitcour's analysis is the notion that the existence of social media (including artist's individual websites) morphs the form of contemporary artworks in gallery spaces into those more favourable in online conditions. While post-internet works are often made by individuals who straddle the artist/influencer line, the works themselves can be seen as influencers posing for pictures as an act of neoliberal self promotion. This makes post-internet art an especially apt medium to explore the boundaries, affects, and possibilities that the pressure to perform online can pose

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[36] Droitcour, Brian. "The Perils of Post-Internet Art." *ARTnews.com*, 29 October 2014.
[37] Droitcour
[38] Droitcour

on an individual. My gallery installation of @celebritydeepfake complicates the boundaries between on and offline, suggesting the internet's cultural impact as a ubiquitous force that seeps out of the screen and into the society of the physical world.

The content of my films is often humorous, which is also inspired by online meme culture. I understand humour as a vital artistic sensibility. Mine in particular is situated deep within the Internet. Post-internet humour is visual (memes), linguistic (tweets), and attention-grabbing (Tik Tok) in its form. It can be seen as a self-reflexive response to earlier internet humour like Advice Animals, which mimicked the set up/punchline style of comedy popular before the internet.

Post-internet humour "rejects traditional aesthetics of beauty, logic and capitalism in favour of a visual language that reflects the darkness, absurdity and unknowability of modern life."[39] It reflects the conditions of a generation (Gen-Z) born into increasingly mediated social and political crises, accelerating economic and climate catastrophes , and a generational divide that has grimly led to comedy which assumes an equally irrational and absurd universe.[40] This sensibility is certainly an echo of the Dada movement, which is now similarly seen as a response to a "profound disgust with the world," or at least the world as it was conceived by Western Enlightenment and rationalism.[41] Post-internet humour subverts the expectation of a joke's punchline rationally following its setup. Instead, the joke is that there is no punchline -- the content is just blatantly weird enough to stir up an emotional response.

Due to the oversaturation of online information and content at Gen-Z's fingertips, what is considered funny is rapidly changing.[42] The cycle of meme freshness is growing shorter and shorter due to the rapid consumption of jokes online.[43] Gen-Z has responded with a severe hatred for mainstream culture and an ironic gaze onto content.[44] There's a growing sensibility that's arising from the culture of ironic enjoyment of online jokery, favouring absurdity and lowcraft aesthetics achieved through distortion.

Artist and writer Nick Douglas' 2014 essay "It's Supposed to Look Like Shit: The Internet Ugly Aesthetic" best describes the sensibility of my work. Douglas describes a new artistic sensibility called "Internet Ugly," defined by "affected visual carelessness" either by

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[39] Gaudin, Madeleine. "Call It Fake, Call It Neo-Dada: Absurdist Internet Humor Is an Artistic Movement." *The Michigan Daily*, Stanford Lipsey Student Publications, 20 Apr. 2021.
[40] Aroesti, Rachel. "'Horrifyingly Absurd': How Did Millennial Comedy Get so Surreal?" *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 13 Aug. 2019.
[41] Greszes, Sam. "Shitposting Is an Art, If History Is Any Indication." *Polygon*, Polygon, 18 Dec. 2018.
[42] "Why Is Gen Z Humor So Weird?" *YouTube*, YouTube, 19 Aug. 2020.
[43] "Why Is Gen Z Humor So Weird?"
[44] "Why Is Gen Z Humor So Weird?"

mistake or design that re-humanizes virtual spaces through showing the messy hand of artists and content creators.[45] This carefree aesthetic is the core of shareable meme making leading to its influence on the greater culture of the Internet.[46] Douglas explains that the visual roughness of the aesthetic is a result of the speed at which conversations happen online: it doesn't make sense to spend a lot of time on an image designed to be seen only once by an uncertain amount of viewers.[47] As well, the structure of the Internet provides amateur creators the power to reach mass audiences and is not gatekept for quality or finish like traditional media.[48] Amateur-looking ugly content is not marginalised online like in other mediums – it's celebrated for the authenticity it provides.[49]

One might assume that the existence of Internet Ugly premises a binary of artists who strive to make beautiful work, and online content creators who strive for the grotesque. This would be a neat way to differentiate artists from content creators, however, it is not the case. There are many artists who play on the grotesque and the raw to achieve authenticity and many content creators who aim for beauty and cleanliness to achieve professional status. Internet Ugly is one of many of the prevalent aesthetics on the Internet and is far from all-encompassing.[50] It is a key interest of mine from my exposure to it and participation in it growing up.

In the Internet Ugly aesthetic ugliness provides online viewers with a sense of trust that the creator is an amateur creator participating in the community.[51] Quickly-made choices signal membership to an in-group of the online culturally literate. This sensibility well describes the quick aesthetic choices I make as a filmmaker. When I'm making work for Tik Tok, it makes sense to have it done quickly as each video has a high chance of not gaining any visibility in the competitive attention economy of the platform. What is important is not a clean, professional look, but an ambitious idea.

#humour

Although my filmmaking has crossed themes, genres, and platforms in the past two years, all of my films are defined by a deliberately uncanny tone. They each strive to find

[45] Douglas, Nick. "It's Supposed to Look Like Shit: The Internet Ugly Aesthetic." *Journal of Visual Culture,* vol. 13, no. 3, 16 Dec. 2014, page 337, 315.
[46] Douglas 315
[47] Douglas 316
[48] Douglas 329 - 330
[49] Douglas 330
[50] Douglas 315
[51] Douglas 335

beauty in visual recklessness and urgency. Coupled with a tone that straddles irony and sincerity, my filmmaking begs a questioning of my positionality and whether or not I am distant from the work as an artist. My films ask whether or not my persona is a put-on, how many layers of irony are in my presentation, and what the stakes are for my getting attention.

Such a practice could be understood through the lens of camp as defined by cultural critic Susan Sontag. The camp sensibility is about ironically finding merits in lowbrow culture; it asserts that a different kind of beauty can be found in the sheer overambition of certain unacclaimed works of art.[52] Sontag argues that for this reason, the purest forms of camp are made in earnest by artists trying to achieve greatness.[53] There is certainly a lowbrow aesthetic that runs through the haphazard choices I make in my films: a shaky iPhone camera, an up-the-nose shot of Alex Kazemi, a messy living room or kitchen setting, and a deepfake made from a slice of bread. These may signal a kind of failure to the viewer, who may then go on to share it with their friends in the campy jest of "look at this crazy artist I discovered". However, if the artist's securely located intentions are so important to the camp sensibility, I wager that the ambiguity of my intent cannot allow my work to be truly camp. As I learned from my work on @celebritydeepfake, the anonymous, absurdist-leaning conditions of Internet culture do not allow the viewer to understand my position so clearly. Andy Kaufman and Richie Culver are two artists who similarly wield the aesthetics of failure to destabilise the ability to distinguish irony from sincerity.

Andy Kaufman is a big inspiration for the tone and possibility of forms my work can take. Kaufman was a groundbreaking performer who forged his own eccentric path in the world of commercial television entertainment. His work transcends the categorizations of comedian or performance artist; through his behind-the-scenes manipulation of media platforms and understanding of public persona as performance, he challenged these boundaries welcomed in a new age of self-aware celebrity. Throughout his career, Kaufman performed on a variety of television shows including *SNL*, *David Letterman*, and most famously the scripted sitcom *Taxi*.[54] Over these performances he appeared as a set of discrete personas, none of which followed the conventions of comedy or of any kind of explicit performance at all.

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[52] Sontag, Susan. *Notes on "Camp"*. Penguin Random House, 2018. Tolentino, Gia. *Trick Mirror*. Random House New York, 2019, page 7.
[53] Sontag 6
[54] Forman, Milos, director. *Man on the Moon*. BBC, 1999.

An exemplary Andy Kaufman act was simply standing on stage and reading *The Great Gatsby* to the increasingly bored and upset audience.[55] A minute into the act came the audience's realization that he was not going to stop. The notorious Gatsby act "frequently became a contentious endurance contest between Kaufman and the audience when performed onstage for an entire set; on occasion, Kaufman eventually emptied the venue."[56] Rather than a joke, the set operated as a betrayal of the audience's trust in the container of a stand-up comedy show. Through the simple action of reading a book, the performance subverts the viewer's expectation for a live show to be engaging, highly produced, and wrap up to the viewer's satisfaction in an hour or two. That subversion contains all the humour of the work. There is no further punchline.

There's a normative way to perform comedy, which involves the call and response of a comic telling a joke and the audience laughing. This formula reproduces itself endlessly to keep viewers entertained (at the time TV was the media lingua franca, now this similarly repeats itself on social media channels). Kaufman's act rejects and illuminates this normativity, allowing viewers to analogize their viewer-performer relationship with Kaufman to his generic counterparts. He dismantles the audience-performer relationship, asking them to receive entertainment more critically. His *Great Gatsby* routine was performed through his well-known Foreign Man character, who constantly fumbled on stage with severe nervousness.[57] The Foreign Man's role as a social "other" tested the audience's reaction to differing cultural ways of being. His lack of performance skills brought up visceral responses of empathy or impatience, making the audience's reaction the focus of his performances.[58]

Moreover, his choice to perform through distinct personas reinforces the performativity of appearing on TV to the point of irony. He pushed the existing industry norms to their extreme, underscoring the fact that everyone on screen is performing a constructed persona with questionable levels of authenticity. His work disenchants one from the magic element of performance, showing the harsh reality that becoming a performer requires one to become a simulacrum of themselves.

This work of Kaufman's informs my work on Tik Tok. I create a behind-the-camera persona in @celebritydeepfake that intentionally creates cracks in normative filmic and performative conventions to stir up a response in the viewers. Just like with Kaufman's routine the audience's reaction to the work becomes more important than the artist's aesthetic

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[55] Forman
[56] Greene, Doyle. *Politics and the American Television Comedy*. McFarland & Company Inc., 2015. Page 158
[57] Greene 158
[58] Greene 160

choices, and in my case determines the algorithmic success of the video. Both my persona and Foreign Man create an ambiguity behind the artist's intent, leading viewers to question the act's authenticity. This confusing atmosphere was central to Kaufman's practice, evident in his remark: "what's real? What's not? That's what I want to do with my act. Test how others deal with reality."[59] The ambiguous tone created by Kaufman's distinct choices to "fail" in his line delivery, body language, and ideas for shows makes the audience lean in with curiosity. If nothing else, it's captivating. In my case, tested realities force the viewer to reconsider their trusting relationships with other Tik Tok creators, becoming more scrutinous and aware of the innate performativity of digital existence.

Another artist examining social media and its impact on art making and consumption is Richie Culver. Culver is currently a 38 year-old interdisciplinary artist residing in London. He is known for bold, graphic, large-scale paintings featuring poetic witticisms. His practice involves issues of class, race, and masculinity, but I am most taken by how quickly he swaps roles between artist and social media content creator, demonstrating how porous this cultural barrier can be.

His best-known painting is titled *DID U CUM YET*. The large canvas is mostly bare, except for a large, juvenile looking black lettering spelling *DID U CUM YET* and some quickly-done, energetic black scribbles. The painting is documented in what appears to be the artist's studio, which is quite tidy aside from some spray paint marks on the wall that bring to mind a rough kind of street-like edge, suggesting to the viewer a kind of coolness and authenticity of the spaces inhabitant. The photograph is uploaded onto Instagram, conveniently housing it within a clean digital interface that recalls the aesthetic of the 'white cube.'

While rather minimal, the painting is an elegant relic of post-internet cultural shifts and the stranglehold that social media has on our lived experience. The phrase "DID U CUM YET" is abstracted in the context of this painting and left open to viewer interpretation. Literally it recalls a failed sexual experience. Yet, placing the words onto a canvas becomes a commentary on the relationship between artists and audiences: as if artists are asked by society to bring experiential ecstasy, but always stumble and remain unsure about their impact. It underscores the expectation for art to permit emotion and to capture indescribable human experiences. This work is partially satire, highlighting this expectation in a humorous way. Yet, its directness also boils down the viewer-artist relationship to its core, offering the

[59] Greene 166

most pure form of communication from the artist's mind to the viewers in a compact package, the way information is often consumed online. Just like other internet poetry that's packaged in tweets and captions, this work struggles to deliver real rigour or nuance, but it certainly stirs up an emotional response.

Beyond just putting the words on canvas, uploading the painting's documentation on Instagram reads as very deliberate. It opens up new interpretations, such as an analogy between browsing social media and having sex. This could point to the kind of euphoria that social media users get from posting and receiving online validation, maybe the vulnerability users show in their digital personas to grow their following, or maybe it just furthers the idea that social media is a marketplace and sex sells. The formal elements appeal to community-constructed standards of online beauty that manifest visual trends on platforms like Instagram.

The key to his work is his understanding of Instagram's visual culture trends and capitalizing on them to his career's benefit. The directness, explicit phrasing, and overall absurdity of this painting can effectively speak to a viewer who will encounter it while scrolling through a sea of images. Once captured, the viewer engages with the work through Culver's persona that exists outside of this photo's frame and begins to wonder who would make something so striking in its lack of craft. The extremely minimal contact that the artist makes with the canvas brings out assumptions about his character: whether he's lazy, stupid, or narcissistic enough to believe that everything he paints is a gift of sorts. It stirs up emotions in the viewer, creating controversy in the comments which is ultimately how content most often grows to online virality. The work appropriates viral aesthetics to further Culver's reach and allow him to critique the viral culture of Instagram.

After the work blew up on Instagram, Culver decided to destroy the painting and make a book out of all the online comments it generated. The book makes visible the bonds creators form with their digital publics, marked by anonymous reactions of extreme love and hate -- a physicalization of the social media experience. His creation of this book underscores that for Culver the painting itself is secondary to the performative act of posting his work on Instagram to elicit response. Culver provokes a response from his audience which is physicalized in comments and metrics to form meaning.

From Culver's work I can more clearly chart a pathway for my research as a form of critique through roles I have created as an online provocateur. Like me, Culver problematizes the boundaries through deliberately causing confusion in our understanding of the differences that separate between artist and social media content creators by posting his artwork on social

media and placing his social media responses into the physical world of culture. He positions art and pop culture within an endless feedback loop, understanding both ends to cut through the noise and create visibility for himself.

Another individual continuing the lineage of performative ambiguity on Tik Tok is Megan Stalter. Stalter is a character actor best known for her performance as an incompitant intern on the TV comedy *Hacks*. She also has a successful online presence, posting short character-driven sketch videos of herself on Tik Tok and Twitter that often garner mass attention. While each of these characters have different professions, personalities, and mannerisms, they often take on the name "Meg," challenging the norm of presenting the self online as a singular branded identity; in contrast, Stalter uses a deliberately uncomfortable tone in her performances to unify her comedic brand.

The throughline in her characters is their continuous attempts to impress others while constantly failing to do so. In an interview for Paper Magazine, Stalter well describes her characterizations by saying: "I feel like all my characters are people whose lives didn't turn out a certain way, but they're still trying to pretend like it did."[60] Her characters are so believable in their attempts at persuading the viewer they create ambiguity as to whether their failures are embedded or not. This believability invites the viewer to look down on the characters' failures. In this way Stalter recalls the aesthetics of an Andy Kaufman performance to similarly dismantle the normative performer-audience relationship: it is constantly unclear whether the audience is laughing with Stalter or at her.

Especially due to the online environment that hosts it, Stalter's work may be categorised within the aesthetics of cringe humour. The cringe aesthetic overlaps with the camp sensibility and post-internet conditions, and can be defined as "content deemed humiliating on account of the poster's looks, behaviour, or talent, and the lack of apparent self-awareness about those things."[61] Similar to camp, cringe is predicated on the viewer's feelings of moral, physical, or social superiority and can reaffirm the value of the viewer/sharer's cultural capital. Cringe differs from camp in that it does not induce a celebration of the performer, but rather a visceral abjective wincing leading viewers to mostly leave mean spirited comments.[62] Rather than some viewers being "in on the joke" as the camp sensibility designates, cringe audiences are universally experiencing the pleasurable pain of the performer's lack of self-awareness.

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[60] Gillespie, Katherine. "Megan Stalter: Faking It 'Til She Makes It." *Paper Magazine,* Paper Magazine, 6 May 2020.
[61] Jennings, Rebecca. "Cringe Tik Tok is Taking Over." *Vox,* Vox Media LLC. 20 Nov. 2020.
[62] Jennings

Stalter's controlled performance that induces cringe complicates the boundaries of the aesthetic: just as attempting to manufacture camp can be futile for its lack of earnest, manufacturing cringe is a difficult feat. The environment of social media and the homemade filmic quality of her videos plays a role in her success at creating cringe successfully. On Tik Tok especially her work is able to reach new audiences who are unaware of her artistic positionality and assume her to be these failing characters. This is evident in the often hateful comments Stalter receives for posting these works of experimental comedy online.

Kaufman, Culver, and Stalter show that a great way to critique systems of normativity is from within. These artists take on whatever names or archetypes they are given and infiltrate systems as a platform for their critique: Kaufman comedy clubs and television, for Culver Instagram and art galleries, and for Stalter Tik Tok and Twitter. A sense of humour is key in these practices as well as my own to provide an entry point that generates viewer interest; comedy grabs the masses' attention, which can be redirected toward reflection on societal normativity. This kind of trickery is what I try to embody in my practice that spans across digital platforms -- a tongue-in-cheek appropriation of online trends that subvert themself to become critical.

These artists transgress the boundaries between high and low art: Kaufman and Stalter through straddling performance artist/entertainer divides and Culver through fine art painter/Instagram influencer divides. These transgressions make it easy for the gatekeepers of the fine art world to dismiss these artists based on their unpretentious, unironic celebrations of artforms deemed as lowly. Whether or not and by whom their work fits the category of "art" is besides the point: their work insists on troubling society's conventions of categorization to both question the need for such constructions of difference and expand the possibilities of artmaking. I take inspiration from Kaufman, Culver, and Stalter as I myself try to complicate the boundaries between artist and content creator through my uncanny practice. Straddling categorizations may complicate the opportunities available in one's career within the context set out in a late capitalist society determined by neoliberal figures and signatures, but as these individuals show, it can also be important in breaking new ground for a particular art form.

conclusion

Through my thesis project I have situated my work within theories of online cultural production labour and the economies of attention; as well as analysed my work through

post-internet, camp, and experimental humour lineages. I have experimented making films on Tik Tok to cultivate a metacritical style and collaborative working process. The body of film and installation works that comprise my thesis project reflect on and ask questions about contemporary positionalities such as those of the fine artist, the creative professional, the public content creator, and their intersections within online and offline networks of capital.

Over my time working on Tik Tok within an MFA program I occupied a grey area between the supposedly separate worlds of art and content. I have made projects that brought an artistic metacriticality to content creation, such as @garbahje, @celebritydeepfake, and @puppyteethstudios, and have also tried to bring the aesthetics of Tik Tok content into the more traditional art medium of documentary filmmaking in *The Real Alex Kazemi*. The divide between art and content is most felt in the individual goals of each of my works: for the Tik Tok works my goal was to wield my personal aesthetic tastes to reach a large audience, while for the *The Real Alex Kazemi* my goal was to most effectively deliver the conceptual and affective layers of the piece. These two goals are present in all of my works to some degree, as my Tik Toks heavily lean on tone, and my documentary used press releases and personal deals to publicise the film on a glossy platform. However, my own personal measure of the work's success hinged on popularity for the content-leaning works and concept for the art-leaning work. The divide between art and content, even in my own works, has made itself tangible despite its socially-constructed immateriality.

Teetering along this boundary has created a generative space for me to reflect on contemporary culture. Especially due to the strength my work finds in ambiguity, I focused my efforts on production of artworks that illuminate the divide rather than clarifying my position within the spectrum of art and content. However, throughout my experience attempting to resist categorization, I was met with a surprising rigidity from an art institution asking me to clearly assert my legibility as something distinct and distinguished from the creative production taking place on social media platforms. .

In the arts educational institution my use of new media, particularly using social media as a material, has been treated with suspicion and scepticism. Unlike some of my peers, who work in more traditional art media, I have been in a constant battle to prove my validity as an artist and graduate student. I have been asked by several instructors why my work is "fine" art and how MFA research could help me. I have been told my work is not critical, and that anyone with a phone could make it. I have been positioned as a contentious student instructed to tell my professors how to help me, as if somehow my role were to rewrite the curriculum.

While it was not entirely my intention to provoke such a degree of response, I hope that some of the faculty have come to reconsider certain assumptions about creative production through navigating my work. By obstinately working on Tik Tok despite the response such work elicited, my thesis process exposed the high stakes for the art institution to remain hierarchically superior to previously deemed déclassé content creators. My work seems to represent an ever-crumbling and yet ever-restructured divide between art and mass-produced culture. Despite my lack of interest in critiquing the institution, this is how my work has become legible. Throughout my research I have found that the boundary between artist and content creator has become hazed over in post-internet conditions: artists are forced to create branded identities through websites, Instagrams, Tik Toks, and Patreon accounts to stay afloat in the competitive economy of attention and conditions of neoliberalism. Content creators, a lot of whom have no artistic or philosophic merits, are the people Gen-Z audiences look to for entertainment and for making sense of their circumstances . As my work has shown, both artists and content creators share the struggle to create an online branded identity to gain recognition and the chance to earn a living, making their daily lives somewhat similar. The difference between artists and content creators remains unclear, and I begin to question if for the modern consumer there is a meaningful difference between art and content, or if there is any practical use for dividing the two realms of cultural production apart from reaffirming the superiority of artists and the art institution.

My research on this issue is ongoing. Perhaps my biggest takeaway is that the answer to this question is vitally based on the context of inquiry; the difference between an artist and a content creator depends on if one asks in an art school, at a dinner party, or in the comment section of a Tik Tok. Moving on I hope to continue my research through making films on, off, and about social media and look forward to different contexts informing me in new ways.

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