TROLLING AESTHETICS:

THE LULZ AS CREATIVE PRACTICE

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN CINEMA AND MEDIA STUDIES
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO

JUNE 2015

Abstract

"The LULZ" became common Internet parlance in the mid-2000s to describe a wide array of online phenomena, from childish pranks, to the peculiar discourse of anonymous message boards, to a shadowy and subversive ideology. By the end of the decade, the canon of images and icons associated with the LULZ entered into artistic practice and along with it a certain dark understanding of the "digital condition" of online mediation. "Trolling Aesthetics: the LULZ as Creative Practice" charts how the LULZ began as an aesthetic sense and sensibility on the notorious message board 4chan. Akin to most online content, it quickly morphed into a multitude of new forms, including, for example, the video remix practice YouTube Poop, which takes the aesthetic logic of 4chan but changes its creative systems and output. The result is both a discordant bric-a-brac of absurd digital art and an example of how the LULZ functions, beyond idle message boards, as a purposeful creative work. The final chapter follows this trajectory into direct artistic practices. Unlike many of the earlier iterations that sputter rather than comment fully on what such digital culture means, artist projects like Brad Troemel's The Jogging mobilizes the LULZ to reflect on a network of technology obsessed with speed, time, identity, and representations. Through a blend of material, expressive, and aesthetic approaches, this dissertation is both a historical analysis of the emergence of the LULZ as well as a socio-historical critique of an online world willing to foster, participate, and partake in such an ethos.

Dedicated to wondrous art and terrible Internet.

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Introduction: Welcome to the Abject Internet

In a recent interview with Hito Steyerl, Daniel Rourke (2013) remarked, "the best place to go grapple with the digital condition is not the art gallery, but Tumblr, YouTube and even 4chan." Clearly purposely provocative, the statement does contain some veracity given the endless flow of visual creations, playful interactions, and moving image remixes that continue to gurgle and churn from these platforms. Simultaneously, established art institutions and traditional critical positions struggle to grapple with the fleeting, ephemeral, and constantly mutating nature of these very aesthetic creations. The majority of previous Internet Art-focused exhibitions awkwardly pulled web page interfaces from context and grafted them into the frame of painting, privileging the glitch as the sole creative form, or they favoured the Internet as a communication tool to a relational art end. There is clearly a turbulent relationship between Internet Art and artistic institutions, a dynamic perhaps best indicated by the frequent exclusion of even basic forms of Internet Art from those artistic institutions, on the basis of its allegedly juvenile intent or banal character. The challenge is to escape generalization about Internet Art by turning to the emergent wellspring of creations: memes on popular platforms like micro-blog site Tumblr or remixes on video sharing site YouTube, for instance. Of course, these are not the only points where creative content erupts. There are the more notorious sites online, such as anonymous image board 4chan. This means Rourke is absolutely correct: to understand Internet Art and its implications for—or

relationship within—any "digital condition," there is a need to understand these aesthetic spaces, creations, and communities.

While fruitful works on the dynamics of social media, ethnographies of user bases, studies of online behaviour, and examinations of content creation continue to appear in the fields of communication studies, cultural studies, and media studies, there is still only a marginal body of work addressing the more questionable and dubious elements of online culture. Given sites like 4chan's penchant for vitriol, their relegation to the margins of academic study is unsurprising. What could possibly be beneath the layers of overt misogyny, racism, homophobia, ableism, and general misanthropy beyond additional strata of awfulness? Well, there is *something* lost in the dismissal, as attested to by the mass popularity of these sites as well as their ability to influence and cascade content into wider popular culture. Building firm borders against a problematic "dark side" suggests that the Internet external to such precincts does not contain impudent, vile, or malign components. This is a dubious stance, given that even within more generally conventional Internet hubs like YouTube or Twitter, there exists hotly contested and purposely exasperating behaviour and content. This work will turn over the rocks on the wretched to seek out the culture of the LULZ, not as an exemplar or in an attempt of legitimation, but rather to understand its development, aesthetic capacity, and entwined role in our "digital condition."

As a perversion of the acronym "LOL" (or "laugh out loud"), the LULZ emerges as the voice, spirit, and central tenant of the vile enclaves of online culture. The LULZ is not a catalogue or canon of specific sites, nor is it a genre. Such labelling gives way to a prescriptive and fixed understanding of form and content. Rather, it is an abject way of being online. Borrowing the term from Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), the abject condition of the LULZ is not a "lack of cleanliness or health" but it is "what disturbs identity, system, [and] order" (4). It is that which "does not respect borders" or "positions" or "rules" (8). It is the "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" and the "immoral, sinister, scheming and shady" (8). The LULZ is the places, creations, communities, and actions that attempt to deride, decry, and dash the order or regulation of online popular cultures. Yet, it lapses into consistent communicative, aesthetic, and communal acts. This means there is an expressive and material connection (more accurately, an impossibility to sever) between 4chan and the wider web, but with an ongoing drive to turn aside, mislead, or corrupt, as like "perversion, it takes advantage, gets around, and makes sport" (16). With great glee, the LULZ "persists as exclusion or taboo" (16).

In less abstract terms, the LULZ is an idiom that arises in the mid-2000s on message boards like 4chan and Something Awful and becomes a marker for a whole range of behaviour, from pranks to site raids to more severe harassment. It describes a silly online world that generates an entire visual lexicon of images, in-jokes, and insular references; it is also an emergent form of online activism, tied to

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the hacker group Anonymous. Parsing this definition is the starting point for Chapter One, which constructs a methodology to properly deal with the Janus-face of the LULZ. Primarily through the work of Bruno Latour, I stress the need to account for *all* the forces that help generate the abilities, functions, and influences of the LULZ, rather than singling out elements, such as the user base of a sole site or the textual discourse of a few artifacts. I therefore draw upon the "neo-materialism" and "new materialism" associated with Manuel DeLanda and Rosi Braidotti. The LULZ as a collective force often operates as antagonist. As later chapters explore, raids by 4chan on other sites and attempts by YouTube Poop to spoof its namesake platform highlight how the LULZ positions itself in a role 'against' the rest of the Internet. This is important not for its counter-identity or pluralizing function, but for its material and social force both to territorialize the existent functions of widespread online activity and concurrently to deterritorialize the platforms, practices, and temporalities of social media, image curation, and remix. Hence, understanding the LULZ requires the so-called "traversity [sic] of new materialism" that seeks "the agential or non-innocent nature of all matter" which "seems to have escaped both modernist (positivist) and postmodernist humanist epistemologies" (Dolphijn and Tuin 2012, 101).

Following the drafting of methodology in Chapter One, Chapter Two turns to the theory of aesthetic engagement. Aesthetics as a practice, philosophy, and discipline is complex; any use of the term requires a great deal of clarification and

positioning. Chapter Two will examine contemporary theories of online creativity, through notions like participatory culture, as well as the rich history of aesthetic thought. By leveraging pragmatist challenges to Kantian disinterestedness, I foreground aesthetics as a process in the world. This approach is certainly compatible with the LULZ as a multi-scaled and heterogeneous phenomenon. Naturalizing aesthetics or extracting them from any socio-historic context is naïve. The LULZ hence demands understanding as a product of situated and embodied relations, as well as part of a larger discursive and material paradigm. Drawing upon the philosophy of Jacques Rancière, I will position the aesthetic field of the LULZ within relations along multiple sites that unfold amid creative objects, community actions, platform designs, and discursive functions.

Chapter Three starts with an examination of the website 4chan as incubator for the LULZ. The site's roots are in a humble image-based message board, which mimics Japanese board 2chan or 2channel. Over the course of the 2000s, a petite user base that consisted mostly of site founder Christopher Poole's friends expanded into a large-scale cultural force. 4chan is often cited in connection with—though now quite disconnected from—hacktivist group Anonymous. The masses of 4chan are responsible for some of the Internet's most popular memes such as LOLcats, as well as operating as an infamous bastion for foul and despicable behaviour. The question arises: how to understand a culture that at its core revolves around fleeting utterance, anonymous interaction, and overall antagonism? Through

an analysis of the material and expressive components of 4chan, I will sketch 4chan as an assemblage, suggesting that it helps foster the LULZ as an aesthetic force. On one hand, what results is a confrontation and contradistinction to the common functions and economic capacities of dominant online culture unfolding in social media sites like Facebook. On the other hand, the LULZ works to territorialize a troubled common sense of a deeply situated and problematic community.

The LULZ is never static as it disperses across online culture. Chapter Four follows the trajectory of the LULZ into video remix practice, known as YouTube Poop (YTP). Self-proclaimed "poopers" apply the aesthetic sensibility of the LULZ and create knowingly galling works ("poops") that remix a wide diversity of source materials from a deep pop-culture pool, mainly populated with subpar children's programming from the early-1990s. Through anarchic editing and repetition, YouTube Poop is equally surreal and silly. Akin to 4chan, YouTube Poop presents an intriguing aspect of the LULZ, as it is a purposefully creative scene. The practitioners identify themselves through avatars, communicate through central hubs, and argue the virtues and shortcomings of particular poops, poopers, and trends. The chapter ends with an analysis of how the aesthetics of the LULZ at play in YouTube Poop work productively to generate a critical commentary on online creativity, speed, and originality.

Chapter Five locates the LULZ within current artistic praxis to show that the trajectory from message board idiocy extends beyond video remix. The main case

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study explores The Jogging, an open format Tumblr site to which a number of creators contribute work. The content is frequently playful, humorous, and mischievous. Similarly to YouTube Poop, its content criss-crosses outward in numerous, sprawling, and only tangentially or loosely connected networks. But, of greater importance than the nature of its distribution and dissemination, is the fact that The Jogging exemplifies a practice that actualizes the LULZ into a self-conscious art aesthetic. In contains all the hallmarks of online images and action: improper grammar, silliness, absurdity, in-jokes, memes, and so on. However, unlike 4chan or YTP, there is not the same sense that The Jogging is lampooning any serious usage or normalized conventions of online culture with its odd, absurd, and ridiculous poetics. Instead, it ruminates upon such traits, reflecting back upon the LULZ itself.

By travelling from bastions of unfettered creativity into art worlds, the LULZ develops an aesthetic capacity to comment upon what Mark Fisher (2009) calls life within "capitalist realism." This means the LULZ is not radical in a binary sense of *détournement* and recuperation, but rather in its *engagement* with the way that online cultures participate in "pre-emptive formatting and sharing of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture" (9). Fisher, borrowing from Žižek (1989; 1994) suggests that the ideological operations of capitalism rely on an internal awareness of its ill-structured power, yet through externalization and exhibited beliefs we continue to participate within its realm. Agency, for Fisher, operates

between both a "hyper-abstract impersonal structure" and our willing "co-operation" (2009, 15).

In many historic moments, art (specifically forms of activist or political art) uses a diversity of formal and aesthetic strategies to demonstrate suppressed elements, ideological operations, and our involvement in Capital, as well as the erasure of distinctions between these. Art marked as political has dealt with what Deleuze and Guttari term the forces of reterritorialization that constitute the "unnamable thing" of Capital. Very specific types of Internet Art gain traction in existing art worlds because they replicate the preoccupation with what Fisher calls "symbolic efficiency" through "metafictional anxieties" that "expose the mechanisms of their own productions and reflectively incorporate discussions of their own status as commodities" (47).

The stalwart exemplar of Internet Art as genre is often "net.art," a term that refers to a group of artists including Jodi.org, Heath Bunting, Olia Lialina, Alexei Shulgin, and Vuk Ćosić who rose to prominence in the 1990s. In *Net.Art 2.0: New Materials Towards Net Art*, Tilman Baumgärtel (2005) describes the group's ongoing focus that "addresses its own medium; it deals with the specific conditions the Internet offers" (24). Such formalist concerns are clear in works like Lialina's reimaging of online newspapers to include animated gifs, or Ćosić's *Deep ASCII* which converted the notorious film *Deep Throat* into a text file, or Jodi's modernist deconstruction of web functions like "404—file not found" which foregrounded the

glitch. Part of the ascendance of the net.art movement to the status of Internet Art is certainly due to the labour of the actors involved, including the creation of web-specific aesthetics responding to the popular and commercial usage of the Internet during the period. But its ascendance is also partially due to the subversive intent and formalist preoccupations of the group. Net.art matches the critical frame of a great deal of modern art in its attempts to subvert the daily use of media, foreground the material conditions of such, and sabotage it. Net.art is recognized as art because it functions like previous formal art. The task is to go beyond what an aesthetic object 'is' in terms of its 'artness' and seek what it does or can do.

An understanding of the LULZ is instrumental and invaluable for such an undertaking. The LULZ often mirrors the inclinations of accepted Internet Art. Like net.art, it often revels in pastiche, parody, and lampooning of the daily functions of the Internet that often go unquestioned. Yet, the tendencies of the LULZ resist many of the propensities of art worlds and the possibility of such cultural separation from everyday life. Despite any meta-textual beliefs in the severance of the LULZ from the mainstream sites, communities, and online actions from which it marks itself apart, the LULZ flows through them. It does not reveal or unmask a power imposing itself. Rather, it highlights how we are "integrated into a control circuit that has our desires and preferences as its only mandate—but those desires and preferences are returned to us, no longer as ours" (Fisher 2009, 49). To return to Kristeva (1992), "abjection appears as a rite of defilement and pollution" and, in locating the LULZ—

smears of desecration or murky vapours of smog—the larger workings of the institutions and ecosystems of the "digital condition" fall into view (17).

This is why understanding the aesthetics of the LULZ matters. As Lauren Berlant (2014) states so eloquently, "aesthetics is one of the few places we learn to recognize our emotions as trained and not natural. Fear is natural, but the objects that make you afraid emerge historically." Aesthetics "provides metrics for understanding how we pace and space our encounters with things" (Berlant 2011, 12). In this work I will not simply argue for the LULZ as art, but rather examine how the LULZ functions, through aesthetics, in a variety of assemblages including artistic praxis. This work is not teleological. Instead, I chart the trajectory of the LULZ as it operates in linked but separate capacities and exercises distinct vital functions. There are no rigid sets of formal traits or social functions at the heart of the LULZ. Instead, the LULZ is a situated aesthetic operating in specific distributions of the sensible that tie into and resist what Fisher (2009) calls "a reality that is infinitely plastic, capable of reconfiguring itself at any moment" (54). The task, as for any online tendency, is to follow the LULZ as it exists through social and material objects that shape our embodied subjectivity and mediate our "digital condition."

Chapter One: Methodology of the LULZ

In its typically blunt fashion, the website Encyclopedia Dramatica claims that "LULZ" refers to "the corruption of LOL" and signifies "laughter at someone else's expense (from the German concept of Schadenfreude)," which "makes it inherently superior to lesser forms of humor." Such aggressive conceptions of the LULZ appear elsewhere as well. In a *New York Times* (2008) 'exposé' on online hostility, the LULZ are characterized as a way that "trolls keep score," originating through "the joy of disrupting another's emotional equilibrium." For trolling scholar Whitney Phillips (2012), the LULZ is, more precisely, a characteristic that arises from participatory cultures and articulates detached delight garnered from others' distress. While such definitions operate well to identify the dark humour deeply entrenched in communities like 4chan or Encyclopedia Dramatica or Something Awful, these same communities are often more forgiving and broad with the term. Gabriella Coleman (2011) muses that while "LULZ denotes the pleasures of trolling" it is not necessarily "exclusive to trolling," meaning it "can also refer more generally to lighthearted and amusing jokes, images, and pranks."

To Coleman's point, the contextual use of the term LULZ varies greatly through varying evocations. Of course, many align it with acts of online harassment. In such cases, LULZ becomes a defensive answer for the otherwise senselessly cruel, as one "did it for the LULZ." It also appears as a descriptive response to an image or comment, indicating a gleeful reaction to indicate amusement. It correspondingly

operates as a more meta-level descriptor to indicate tendencies within online spheres; for example, the emergence of a specific image meme is 'LULZ-worthy.' It can disappear and reappear in online discourses as verb, noun, or adjective—meaning it simultaneously acts as motivation, action, and reaction. Accordingly, Coleman's (2012a) claim that the LULZ ultimately "celebrates a form of bliss that revels and celebrates in its own raw power and thus is a form of joy that, for the most part, is divorced from a moral hinge" is a tactically strong starting point to ponder the LULZ (112).

1.2 Towards an Aesthetics of the LULZ

Why take the definition of Internet slang so seriously? This dissertation will propose that what comes through the socio-historical embedded culture of the LULZ is an *aesthetic*. The images, iconography, practice, and—most crucially—the sensibility of the LULZ start in 2003 and morph into full-blown cultural phenomena by 2005. Pivoting from the language and practice of an Internet subculture, this aesthetic turns into a key component of Internet Art by the end of the decade. Emerging in a wide variety of artistic forms, it persists in functional ways beyond mere mimicry or resemblance. As a creative practice, it takes on and authors through the logic, sense, and sensibility of the LULZ. This work will position this emergence as more than historical narrative or frame for art criticism, as the

aesthetic holds a dual role as both a product of and commentary upon our emergent digital condition.

Gleaning such a perspective requires a methodology that can grapple with a phenomenon as widespread and varied as the LULZ. This work argues that an aesthetic exists through its external relations in embodied spaces across a network, rather than through a set of internal qualities or traits. Accordingly, this chapter relies upon the work of Bruno Latour to seek a network of varied forces that allow the LULZ to *become* the LULZ. In other words, it will build a methodology for human and non-human actors in action. This will then link to a political conceptualization. As in reading these cultural artifacts, there are clear elements of a socio-historical reality at play. As Gilles Deleuze (2009) states so eloquently, "types of machines are easily matched with each type of society—that machines are determining, but because they express those social forms capable of generating them and using them" (6). The Internet is obviously not a single machine, but a multiplicity of forms of hardware, software, wiring grids, network nodes, data farms, platform protocols, algorithmic scripts, and so on. There remain propensities and inclinations, alliances and allegiances among social and material forces. In this way, the LULZ emerges and triumphs through a very specific circumstance and continues to mobilize as a key element of our shifting digital culture. The LULZ is then *an expression and a voice* of a very particular arrangement of social forms and material forces tied to our current moment.

While it is clear that our present 'digital age' inexorably interlaces to the larger structures of Capital, the exact nature of these mutations remain contested. Some scholars focus on the material. Iterations of hardware studies, software studies, and platform studies link the limits and operations of technology itself to social forces of control, governance, as well as the values associated with contemporary Capital, namely efficiency and expediency. Others isolate the experience of computer and network mediation, deliberating on how elements like the speed or mediation of social interactions align to current orientations of the market and state. Others seek to explain engagement through the actions of users, relying on small-scale ethnographic research or decoding larger-scale tendencies by way of data output. This work will follow Deleuze (1992), who asserts that "the socio-technological study of mechanisms of control … would have to be categorical and to describe what is already in the process of substitution" (7). In other words, the LULZ works as a form of engagement that speaks to, of, and through socio-technical arrays of control. This work focuses on the function of aesthetic engagement by way of the LULZ in a group of esoteric web communities. When understood alongside the traditional place of aesthetics in art worlds, there is a vital and strategic way to understand how such processes of substitution operate and develop in the digital. Thus, the introduction or co-opting of the LULZ into the Internet Art world opens up questions about how the aesthetics of the LULZ work,

comment upon, and propel the mechanisms of control tied into these technological networks.

1.3 Bruno Latour's Method

To understand the LULZ as an enduring characteristic in these online communities, Bruno Latour's methodology is pertinent. He stresses the need to start with a flattened horizon in order to recognize the might of *all* human and nonhuman actors or actants. This means not starting with an overarching concept like the LULZ and then bordering off applicable and non-applicable cases. Latour insists that throughout the continuous skirmishes in the amphitheatre of the world, no actants surpass or overshadow *a prioi*. Humans do not stand in the centre of the ring nor does the LULZ exist as a given. As Latour (1988) states in the *Pasteurization of France*, "to make up society with only social connections, omitting the invisibles, is to end up with general corruption, a perverse deviation of good human intentions" (36).[1] He muses:

> What is a force? Who is it? What is it capable of? Is there a subject, text, object, energy, or thing? How many forces are there? Who is strong and who is weak? Is this a battle? Is this a game? Is this a market? ... In place of force we may talk of weaknesses, entelechies, monads, or more simply actants (159).

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[1] Latour (1988) explores this notion throughout *The Pasteurization of France* by examining the public hygiene movement, medical field, colonial forces, and Louis Pasteur; he argues, "we cannot form society with the social alone. We have to add the action of microbes" (35). The problem for Latour is omitting hard sciences or reducing it to a social reading despite the fact "we cannot reduce the action of a microbe to a sociological explanation, since the action of the microbe redefined not only society but also nature and the whole caboodle" (38).

Building upon his principle of irreduction, Latour explains that an actant is literally anything acts (or has activity granted), and that the actor in turn, "is an actant endowed with a character" that "acts and shifts actions" (Akrich and Latour 1992a, 259). He thus rejects any presumed rifts in the substance of an object (including debates about inner qualities and exterior appearances), maintaining that an object consists of its relations. Such interactions are trials (of strength or weakness) built through alliances, as actants enlist one another.[2] The shifting negotiations are not some symptom of deeper force because such notions are the result of trials. In Latour's (1988) words, "power is the flame that leads us to confuse a force with those allies which render it strong" (186).[3] While Latour certainly does not make the case, my thesis insists that this does not negate power or control but, rather, builds a proper methodology for such a concept. As the actant—in its wide-ranging

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[2] In *The Pasteurization of France*, Latour (1988) recounts the battle between Pasteur with Liebig and Poucant over scientific ideas and proofs, but through the creation of an army of allies (both human and non-human), Pasteur revolutionizes the cultural landscape of France. As Latour states there is only "one source of strength: that which comes from joining together … by finding more allies which force the others to hold together, and so on, until a gradient of uncertain objects ends up making the first rank of the alliance resistant and thereby real … a well-defined state of affairs is the work of many forces. They agree about nothing and associate only via long networks in which they talk endlessly without being able to sum one another up. They intermingle, but they cannot reach outside themselves to take in what binds them, opposes them, and sums them up. However, despite everything, networks reinforce one another and resist destruction. Solid, yet fragile, isolated yet interwoven, smooth yet twisted together, entelechies from strange fields" (198-199).

[3] Latour also makes it clear that there is no contradiction in saying nothing is reducible and contending everything is a trial. He states, "there is nothing more than trials of weakness" but this does not eliminate the "distance between actors" (191). Rather than "always summing up, reducing, limiting, appropriating, putting in hierarchies, repressing" we need to "discover intertwined networks which sometimes join together but may interweave with each other without touching for centuries" (191). He warns against starting with theory rather than traversing the network: "we will not try to pursue origins to reduce practices to theories, theories to language, language to metalanguages" (189).

breadth—is not blunt potential, but the sum of its alliances in the here and now. Power and control operate within these relations.

Figure 1 – A Thread on 4chan's /b/

How does this relate to the LULZ? Take a run-of-the-mill 4chan post from March 31, 2011. Chapter 3 provides extensive details on 4chan, but as an initial general description it is an image board in which users post texts and images—typically under the shared "anonymous" username. It gained cultural prominence for fostering a number of online jokes that spread beyond its obscure interface, such as the LOLcat in which comedic and purposely misspelt text overlays images of cats. While it is just one element in the constellation of websites and online cultures that belong to the LULZ, it works as an easy example to illustrate the methodology at hand.

A user starts a new thread by uploading a photo of a young man eating food on the street in what appears to be an Asian market with the text "yea i'm asian so what? hit me with ur worst." The subsequent anonymous responses read: "you look like a well groomed, respectable citizen," "your foods are delicious and you have an amazing culture," and "LULZ, tsunami." While the final post explicitly references the term LULZ, the thread on a whole operates in the logic of the LULZ: baiting a crowd to engage along problematic lines, the responses immediately repudiating said attempt, and lastly, an offensive response masked by dark humour. The aspects of dissent and resistance towards prescribed behaviour and expectation (such as referencing the tragic events of the tsunami rather than "hitting" the original poster with insult) perfectly encapsulate the culture of the LULZ.

To relate this to Latour, the problem in defining the LULZ *solely* as the pleasures of trolling or disrupting another's emotional wellbeing is overlooking how the term and concept are in a constant state of development. With each evocation of the LULZ, there is a trail. Relations within the site form the LULZ, as illustrated above by a single post among a ceaseless multitude. There is also relationships and trials with paratextual sites (for example, newspapers or meme databases or user-contribution Internet dictionaries that attempt to document and define the LULZ) which effectively help shape the concept of the LULZ. Few instances demonstrate this as well as the infamous Los Angeles Fox News affiliate KTTV news story from 2007 that explained the LULZ through sensational imagery culminating in a van

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exploding in a parking lot. The community delighted in the mixture of poorly executed journalism, misunderstood aspects of online culture, and general absurdity. Yet such outsider approaches to the LULZ further entrench its relations within community, which is clear through all the memes that sprouted from that very same news story.

1.4 What are the LULZ?

This sketch alludes to an ecology of websites, users, images, conventions, dialects, and sensibilities that generate and sustain a notion of the LULZ. Thus, the first task is to unpack the various major forces, starting with the meme, as it is a prime communication tool for the LULZ. The term "meme" originates in the work of Richard Dawkins (1989). It describes a broad swath of cultural units—such as behaviour, styles, or ideas—and uses the notion of genetic evolution to understand how they spread and propagate in culture. It holds specific weight describing Internet content—images, videos, or practices—distributed across online cultures. An example of an early meme that migrated to the website 4chan is the "all your base are belong to us" which started on the Something Awful webforum.[4] Due to poor translation, the English-language release of the 1991 Sega Mega Drive game *Zero Wing* features nonsensical dialogue including "somebody set up us the bomb"

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[4] Despite hyperbolic claims in media stories, 4chan did not create the Internet meme. There are a huge number of memes that predate the site. The gif of dancing 'baby cha-cha' that circulated forums or the heavily linked hamster dance website cartoon with yodel soundtrack are two examples (from a possible list of many) of memes from the late-1990s.

and the villain's triumphant claim, "all your base are belong to us." On 4chan, the saying appeared relentlessly in text and image. As a meme, it maintains the double position of spreading through copies that hold fidelity to the last iteration and in re-imagined and re-contextualized variations. "All your base are belong to us" becomes re-purposed for other situations, for example to portray greed, or internally reflected community jokes, or changing commercial products (like a hot sauce label) into a reference to the dialogue.
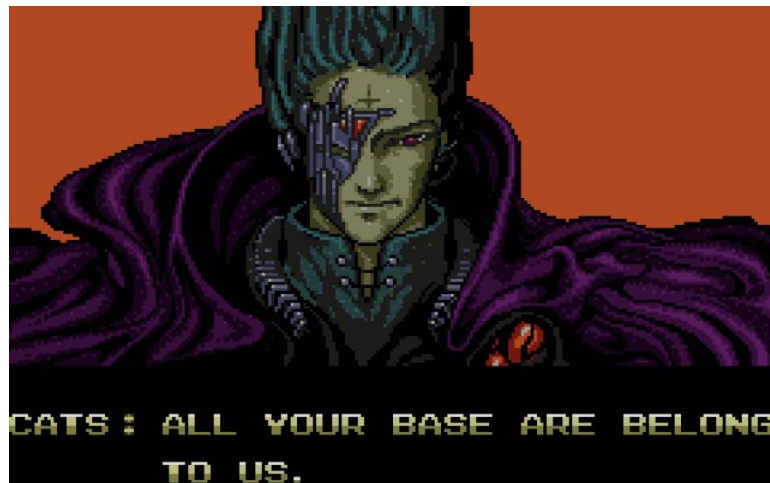
Figure 2 – "All your base are belong to us" Meme

LULZ communities champion the meme as a mode of community interaction. Various memes trend up and down through online videos, songs, and multiple forms of online parlance. With each of these instances, specific memes gain prominence or dismissal within the spheres of the LULZ. While not historically unique, this focus on a collective catalogue of visual and audio touchstones illuminates how these LULZ communities operate with an active, insular, but nonetheless shared culture. Not to

say all chains in the LULZ links are equal, demonstrated by the rejection of specific content if it becomes too widely known, adapted, or popular on specific websites.

Accordingly, recent scholarship pushes past blunt or straightforward understanding of memes as purely biologically convieved phenomena. In *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*, Tony Sampson (2012) makes a strong case that the problem with Dawkins' notion of the meme is that it overlooks the abstracted nature of agency in content creation and circulation. For Sampson, the object requires context within networks of relations, events, and cultural structures. Using sociologist Gabriel Tarde, Sampson proposes a much more complex process that draws in affects of body and mind. He seeks the points in which "imitative-suggestibility" passes through macro and micro levels of the social, biological, and psychological. This work will follow Sampson, seeking the meme *within* the cultures of the LULZ rather than a product of said cultures. There is purposeful action in imitation, alteration, and reproduction. Each meme is a mappable object that can trace the affective relations and inclinations of the community, as well as the wider human and non-human networks that constitute the LULZ.

Before an outline of the predilections of the LULZ, understanding relevant actor sites and structures that house these "LULZY" memes is important. The linage potentially starts offline, as there is a long history of abject-based communities. Take the widespread phenomenon of bathroom wall inscription and graffiti for example. There is an undeniable stigma or taboo surrounding the bathroom given

its bodily and corporal function that dovetails with the often abject, playful, and servile nature of the graffiti that adorns some bathroom walls. The nature of graffiti also presents the opportunity for an anonymous and fleeting encounter. While certainly not a one-to-one equivalence, there are certain genealogical roots for the LULZ or LULZY cultural spheres that pre-date the Internet in writing something crass, responding to a comment, or simply sneaking a glimpse of the lewd, comical, and silly words on a stall wall. This practice links to the strongest starting point for the LULZ: the aforementioned message board Something Awful.

Something Awful or SA is a comedy website that houses a range of content including blogs, parodies, images, reviews, and so forth that delight in the designation of awful. The site launched in 1999 and persists today, although it has undergone several periods of downtime due to financial burdens or unexpected events (most notably Hurricane Katrina damaging servers). In "Mutilated Furries, Flying Phalluses: Put the Blame on Griefers, the Sociopaths of the Virtual World," Julian Dibbell (2008) describes SA as "an online humor site dedicated to a brand of scorching irreverence and gross-out wit that … has attracted a fanatical and almost all-male following" and has "spawned a small diaspora of spinoff sites." At its core, Something Awful functions like many other message boards with large offshoots, like "Main," "Discussion," "The Finer Arts," and "Archives." Each of these individual sections house specific threads of discussion. What makes SA notable is its user base: self-described "goons" who foster a culture of derision focused mainly on

comedic content. The roots for many Internet memes are in the forum, which is unsurprising given the focus on working and reworking images. From "Photoshop Phriday" (image editing with varying themes) to the "Blue Ball Machine" (images broken into tile bits that operate as screensavers), the user base celebrates remix, editing, and parody.

A large segment of SA goons flocked to 4chan after its creation in late 2003. Akin to SA, it becomes a hub for all things ill-mannered, humour-focused, and rowdy. Unlike a great deal of message boards, 4chan uses a default anonymous posting system. There is a low barrier to engagement that produces wildly experimental and belligerent dialogues. The site is divided into several different specialized boards dedicated to topics like television, comics, anime, politics, or music. Several boards continue to appear and disappear but the long-standing heart of the site is the popular "random" or "/b" board. As reflected in the chaotic culture of the board, few rules govern discussion. While Something Awful certainly holds the title of the starting point for the LULZ, it is in the anonymous threads of /b/ that the LULZ truly mature. With each transient interaction, re-imagined meme, in-joke, insult, and rebuttal, the LULZ blossom into a cultural phenomenon complete with an aesthetic sensibility.

1.5 The Labour of the LULZ

The question is, then, what are the qualities associated with the LULZ? In

"Anonymity as Cultural Treatise," David Auerbach (2012) describes the "masquerade" of "alienation, irony, autonomy," and "discourse" tied to the LULZ through the example of 4chan. He defines an "a-culture" as one that contains or embraces aspects of the following qualities or philosophies: "accelerated, adolescent, aggregation, alias, anarchy, anonymous, anti-, arbitrary, arch, asshole, attack, audacity, autonomous, auto-." He continues: "a-culture is a space for playing with unrestricted notions of identity and affiliation and for the establishment of a private set of in-jokes and references that come to constitute a collective memory" ensuring a culture of "velocity, irony, self-documentation, elitism" or "in-sum: meta-awareness." Auerback is mostly descriptive in his analysis, detailing the origin of 'a-culture' through early hackers, rather than theorizing its direction or significance. Yet, he provides one of the best starting points to think about what qualities these communities embody and embrace through the LULZ.

Concurrent to the above-mentioned post, the term LULZ appeared in a wide diversity of threads on 4chan: referencing an odd plot line in a comic book led a poster on "/co/" to state "will buy it anyway just for LULZ," while a discussion of naval armament on "/pol/" led one poster to bemoan ">7 billion of tax paying money to that shit—LULZ," on the music board another anonymous user recollected monster movies with "LULZ I always had fond memories of the days when giant deformed mecaha were popular," while on "/v/" an anguished poster laments "nobody does shit just for the LULZ anymore." This brief sampling demonstrates the

varied usages of the term and hints to its deeper entrenchment beyond sheer online harassment. It functions as a reaction, it sets a tone, it even acts as a stand-in for the site's internal culture. Thus, the LULZ connect to a wide scope of contextual uses and while there are definite defining traits and, as demonstrated by Auerback's litany, there is a need to understand how these various contextual uses operate. Therefore, Latour's method is fundamental, as it suggests that each element in the network plays a role.

By admitting that the LULZ is not an innate concept but a set of qualities generated by the labour, trials, and work of the actants, there is a need to move past the hinges of human perspective. Analysis of the network beyond the discourse, verse, or utterances of users means attention to the elements often subsumed, overlooked, or suppressed. A disclaimer: 4chan may seem unique in the range of materials at play in its computational process, but this does not endow it with the status of a specific 'medium.' Traditional models of medium specificity often evoke essence rather than connecting how presumed limitations or traits engrained into a medium form through the trials and labours of actants. To comprehend the processes of naturalization related to the LULZ, Latour's (1987) notion of the "black box" is valuable. He borrows it from cybernetics, who use black box describe "a piece of machinery or a set of commands [that] is too complex" to articulate on its own (2-3). In the wake of such convolution and involvedness, the focus is simply on

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input and output.[5] So despite the initial "uncertainty, people at work, decisions, competition [and] controversies," the black box hides or masks the din (4). Rather than a substance, black boxes exist at all levels of the cosmos; they are events correlated to (but different from) their relations (4).[6] A black box can open—typically with difficulty—exposing its inner complexity.[7] When stacked, black boxes lend authority, as they help add resistance during any trial of strength. Yet not all objects necessarily generate effects upon one another. Prospective links originate in their qualities: non-identical, yet compatible attributes.[8] Reality operates as alliances; as Latour states, it "has many hues, like objectivity, and entirely depends on the number of elements tied to a claim" (105). A system of alliances enables a black box to become unquestionable to the point that opening it seems "unthinkable" (122).[9]

The LULZ requires a fortress of black boxes. Coherence goes beyond mere web address. There is the labour of human actors involved: the users who post, the text and image content, the resulting respondents, the actions of moderators, the

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[5] Latour (1987) writes, "no matter how controversial their history, how complex their inner workings, how large the commercial or academic networks that hold them in place, only their input and output count" (3).

[6] Given the nature of changing alliances, and their lack of endurance through time, black boxes exist in trajectories. As such, they also require 'maintenance.'

[7] The danger for a black box is too little or too much attention from actants.

[8] Difference is a requirement, otherwise the world would be an indistinguishable whole. Potential similarities help chart how actants—like lamps and countries—require specific, laborious links.

[9] Again, they do not automatically endure through time, as relations and parts shift, resulting in trajectories and unique events. Enrolling actants (animate and inanimate) form a black box and there are strategies, like convincing an actant their desires are unfeasible, that detour via personally advantageous paths. This can displace others' goals completely, cater to their interests, or make oneself indispensable to another type of force.

cascading inputs flow into the networks of computers, and so forth. If the boards were dedicated to cooking recipes or gardening tips or if the moderators followed a different policing strategy, there would clearly be a different discourse. There is also an array of non-human actors engendering the 'culture of 4chan': coding languages, the operations of hardware, the controls of bandwidth, the scripts that allow text entry, and compliance with wider Internet proprieties. So then how does a site like 4chan become notorious? In many ways, 4chan works with various black boxes of online culture: accepted program languages, online protocols, conventions of message boards, and so on. It also relies on several black boxes that are more specific: the concords of particular fandoms, dedicated spaces of idle time, and the conclaves of anonymous conversations inherited from early days of online culture.

The LULZ aura of disrepute relies on its antagonistic relationship to several input and output myths of online culture. Any journalistic exposé is often a way to try to open the black box to cast the site (appropriately) as a hotbed of crassness, adolescence, and offence. Against utopian visions of positive social networks, it is often aggressively didactic, purposely belligerent, and argumentative. Rather than working as an information hub, a function many message boards claim, 4chan relies on transitory snippets loaded with obfuscation and misrepresentation. Through various means, 4chan itself becomes a *specific* black box of practices, solid in its

culture of 4chan-ness generated by its consistent cultural actions and activities.[10] It

then follows that the LULZ build from these component parts, generating a culture

and set of qualities.

1.6 The LULZ as a Quasi-Object

Opening the black boxes of the LULZ requires exploration of actor networks

and objects 'in action.' Connecting some dots, this section will propose the notion of

the quasi-object as a methodology for analysis. If we swim beyond claims that

objects are clumps of bland matter, we arrive in the waters of the event. Within

these vivid pools of thought, the object does not merely "reflect the social" because

"it does more"—"it transcribes and displaces the contradictory interests of people

and things" (Latour 1992b, 153). Therefore, the objects that form the LULZ—simple

actants like filters for spam and rapid posts, or automatic deletion of older

content—may not "think like people do and decide how they will act, but their

behavior or nature often has a comparable role" (151).[11] The massive network of

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[10] This agreement is not totally in line with the original notion of Latour's black box as a scientific object or principle. Yet the specific types of obfuscation, chaos, and disorder associated with 4chan gain a certain coherence in the media, the community, and in the landscape of other sites (i.e. the Tumblr versus 4chan campaigns, memes, and postings). The black box is a way to talk about 4chan as a constructed object that has a coherence in a number of contexts, and an insistence that 4chan forms from a set of protocols, relations, and actors.

[11] Latour (1992b) illustrates the concept with a door. On one hand, there is process of delegation, in which someone or something is allocated a task; for a door to operate it must be opened and closed. He traces this through the basics: for example, the invention of the hinge displaces the labour of smashing through walls; a human 'discipline' ensures that the despite the erratic behaviour of others, the door will operate. Technologies in turn, prescribe our behaviours back towards us. In the case of the door, simple notions of practice (pushing and pulling) as well as larger notions (security,

material and immaterial actors can substitute actions, translate tasks, operate in footpaths and "prescribe" behaviour (160).[12] All of the interface elements from message board posts, to photoshopped memes, to raids on other sites, or remix video operate together even when seemingly opposed.[13]

Latour (1999) introduces the challenge of 'quasi-objects' that operate as the grey area between notions of nature and humans, hard facts, and social constructions.[14] Quasi-objects open liminal fusions between otherwise pure kingdoms, to focus on the dynamics of endless trials of strength.[15] He writes, "our philosophical tradition has been mistaken in wanting to make phenomena the

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etiquette, etc.). The idea of "prescription" demands that technology has a "moral and ethical dimension" because it embodies proper and improper behaviours (157).

[12] As Latour (1992b) states, "the bizarre idea that society might be made up of human relations is a mirror image of the no less bizarre idea that techniques that might be made up of nonhuman relations. We deal with the character, delegates, representatives, lieutenants (from the French 'lieu' plus 'tenant' i.e. holding the place of, for, someone else)—some figurative, others nonfigurative, some human, others nonhuman; some competent, other in competent. Do you want to cut through this rich diversity of delegates and artificially create two heaps of refuse, 'society' on one side and 'technology' on the other?" (162).

[13] Does this do away with discourse completely? The aftershocks of *We Have Never Been Modern* threaten many tenants of post-modern thought, such as focus on language, as Latour (1993) argues they "accept the idea that the situation is indeed catastrophic, but maintain that it is to be acclaimed rather than bemoaned" (123). Taking aim, he states, "discourse is not a world unto itself but a population of actants that mix with things as well as with societies, uphold the former and later alike, and hold onto them both" (90).

[14] It is a strategic position for method because it works between seemingly opposed realms. For Latour (1999), postmodernism's rumbling cart loaded with discourse analysis, parody, and obsession with all things 'unreal' travels fine down the roads of the 'quasi' but struggle to get traction on objects. Similarly, the methods of Scientific Realism cannot handle the foggy realm of quasi. Accordingly, he calls to circle and survey actants and events and their operations, translations, and trajectories.

[15] *In Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Social Sciences*, Latour (1999) undoes the tragic breach of subject and object by overcoming the way "purely political or economic factors" are routinely just "added to purely scientific ones" through the "context for science" (90-91). By enriching the traditional view of realism by rejecting any separation, Latour accepts the artificial as well as the natural, turning attention to the assemblage of all formations of actors.

meeting point between things-in-themselves and categories of human understanding" (71).[16] Through a case study of a scientific expedition, he illustrates the long chain of mediators from physical tools, to intellectual work, to political circumstances, to moral choices. The encounter clarifies how 'mind representing world' fails to manoeuvre through huge numbers of actors that translate and transform the very notion of truth through alliances and functioning relations.[17]

Against the methodological tradition of positing language against object through representation, Latour introduces a third process: the ongoing, interconnected mediations required by the process of judgment.[18] Unlike postmodern critiques of language that would gesture towards a ceaseless march into the mirror of representation, Latour (1999) argues that these mediations "take the place of the original situation" through "circulating reference" or transformation

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[16] For Latour (1999), "Phenomena ... are not found at the meeting point between things and the forms of the human mind; phenomena are what circulates all along the reversible chain of transformations, at each step losing some properties to gain others that render them compatible with already established centers of calculation. Instead of growing from two fixed extremities towards a stable meeting point in the middle, the unstable reference grows from the middle toward the ends, which are continually pushed further away" (71-72).

[17] Latour (1999) writes, "Knowledge, it seems, does not reside in the face-to-face confrontation of a mind with an object, any more than reference designates a thing by means of a sentence verified by that thing. On the contrary, at every stage we have recognized a common operator, which belongs to matter at one end, to form at the other, and which is separated from the stage that follows it by a gap that no resemblance could fill. The operators are linked in a series that passes across the difference between things and words, and that redistributes these two obsolete fixtures of the philosophy of language: the earth becomes a cardboard cube, words become paper, colors become numbers and so forth. An essential property of this chain is that it must remain reversible. The succession of stages must be traceable, allowing for travel in both directions. If the chain is interrupted at any point, it ceases to transport truth—ceases, that is, to reproduce, to construct, to trace, and to conduct it. The word 'reference' designates the quality of the chain in its entirety, and no longer *adequatio rei et intellectus*. Truth-value circulates here like electricity through a wire, so long as this circuit is not interrupted" (69).

[18] Latour (1999) states, "in actual practice ... one never travels directly from objects to words, from the referent to the sign, but always through a risky intermediary pathway" (40).

or translation (67).[19] Rather than taking the LULZ as an enfranchised element within web circles by either building a dodgy notion of 'the virtual' through persona or a digital divide or simply bemoaning it as evidence of social ills, the task is to discover *how* it operates through chains of mediation. To ask: how the LULZ exist in actions, objects, and discourses? How each varied evocation of the LULZ functions? If actants operate through events in fully concrete, different, and singular instances, then how do we string together a trajectory of the LULZ? Lastly, if objects exist through relations, then how does this disavow any sense of the isolated object or whisper of any hidden potentials, elements, or essences?

1.7 Following the LULZ

Latour (1999) addresses the first issue in *Pandora's Hope*. Speaking to Pasteur's discovery of the microbe, he writes, "they did not exist before he came along" because "we need not only to rethink what Pasteur and his microbes were doing before and after the experiment but to reforge the concepts that the modern settlement has given us with which to study such events" (145). The explanation: that microbes-for-us and microbes-for-themselves both shift. The question 'did microbes exist before Pasteur' relies on a form of idealism. As Latour writes, "the subject-object dichotomy distributed activity and passivity in such a way that

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[19] By focusing on circulation back and forth through the chain of transformation, the reference is clearly not in a channel between word and object but rather in a dynamic 'mediation' between matter and form.

whatever was taken by one was lost by the other" (147). In other words, the fact that the LULZ are *now* recognizable in so many varied forms does not mean there is a singular start point or single evolutionary arc. For Latour, "the more activity from one, the more activity there is from the other" meaning through all these skirmishes between the sites, the posters, the circulating images, and the reproduction of content, the LULZ take shape (147).

Rather than cracking the ontological standing of subject and object in this way, Latour grants activity to Pasteur, the culture medium, the ferment, and the laboratory. We have code, platform, interface, interaction, images, words, network dissemination—all of which change through interaction. Some are human: online cultures, canon formations of behaviour, tastes and trends, critical engagement, and policing. Some are non-human: the energy that runs networks, the illumination of screens, the execution of algorithm, and the minimum system requirements of computers (that themselves are an ad-hoc bundling of parts, circuits, and transistors). Latour admits, "this answer sounds funny" but if "the reference is what circulates through the whole series, every change in even one element of the series will make a change for the reference" (150). We concretize a series of attributes into a substance; thus the assemblage gains stability through the very idea of substance.

Cornerstones do not bear the weight everlastingly, as the history of the LULZ illuminates. Through integration of slang into other online enclaves, technological changes to the site, or shifts in the social function of boards like 4chan's /b/, a

common substance meshes with each new force becoming a new substance. Once any points in the social array codify the LULZ, it exists differently in relations and opens to new changes. The points in the landscape fade, change, and reorder. Hence, the underlying problem in the question itself, as human history holds together with the subjectivity of agents but "by asking an entity to exist—or more exactly to have existed—either nowhere and never, or always and everywhere, the old settlement limits historicity to subjects and bans it for nonhumans" (Latour 1999, 156). We get a firm reality that grows from the relations or consequences of the interaction of entities, meaning no 'substantial form' continues unto itself but rather through the labour of relations. Once established, it always exists in the sense that it may engage alliances, operate as a cog in black boxes, or shift other actors.

Thus, the first issue folds upon itself; nonetheless, the second remains and perhaps becomes more pressing: how do we follow the LULZ through time? Latour tracks the translation and association of elements into durable wholes but seeks the way they gain new existence as associations break and new recruited elements band together and stand in line. With each linking or delinking of the chain, actors change, suggesting a mode of occasionalism. The option for persistence demands the work of actors to drag the object, thing, idea, assemblage, or event forward. In this way, time becomes the product rather than the holding container of relations. Consequently, it is through this point that Latour breaks from a long historic philosophical tradition and relates to the contemporary philosophical movement of

Speculative Realism. Akin to Speculative Realist thought, Latour's writing pushes

back against the long-standing legacy of Emmanuel Kant's transcendental idealism.

1.8 The Problem of Correlation

Having infamously claiming to be "awoken" by Hume's work, in the *Critique of

Pure Reason*, Kant (1781) posits that knowledge arises from experience, yet does

not require experience for grounding. Against Hume's claims that the mind

generates knowledge through association, habit, and the patterned understandings

of perception, Kant situates a priori, non-empirical "pure intuitions"—like the

structuring forces of time and space—as presuppositions to experience. Using forms

of judgment,[20] Kant contends that objects of the world are not the basis of thought,

but rather they form by way of the imposition of knowledge. Presupposing a subject

who represents the world to themselves through the structures of judgment means

the world is not as-is, but always filtered through the reason or the concepts of

knowledge. Humans string together the particulars of sense and unify them through

thought.

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[20] He articulates quantity (universal, particular, singular), modality (problematic, assertoric, apodeictic), quality (affirmative, negative, infinite) and relation (categorical, hypothetical, disjunctive) elements of judgment. Modality does not alter the content of the judgment itself, but rather describes its bearing on reason, being either problematic or uncertain, actual or relatively sufficient, or certain or apodeictic. Relational judgments denotes categories, hypothesis, and exclusive types of groupings, as demonstrated in logical deductions of 'all Xs are Bs' as a category, 'then Y is C' as a hypothetical, and 'Y is not C' as disjunctive or exclusive. Quantity in a judgment refers to the single claim that 'this X is Y,' particular claims that; some Xs are Ys" and the universal claim that 'all Xs are Ys.' Lastly, the quality of a judgment, meaning affirmative or 'C is D,' negative 'C is not D' or infinite with 'C is non-D.'

For Speculative Realist philosopher Quentin Meillassoux (2006), Kant signals the rise of a long tradition of 'correlationism,' in which ontological query becomes epistemological questions of access. He explains, "we mean the idea according to which we only have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from each other," with it following that correlationism thus "consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and object independently of each one another" (6). Although Kant does not disavow the nominal world, he does argue it is unknowable, which becomes a remarkable hinge for Meillassoux. Philosophy's focus on substance gives way to relations and representations between subject and object. A legacy perhaps most pronounced in phenomenology's eidetic concerns with acts of consciousness, or the preoccupation with the forces of language in 1970s French Structuralism, or the plunging of any grounding narratives in postmodernism, which delights in the shuffle of shifting subjectivity against a void of absolutes. Meillassoux charts a wide swath of philosophers, demonstrating how the demise of speculation on any 'thing-in-itself' remains the connective tissue among seemingly disparate work. In each, a subjective transcendental synthesis arises: things can be thought but never known, meaning all properties of an object are relational.[21] Meillassoux

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[21] For Meillassoux, the limits of the human—the finitudes of knowledge—become a point of reversal. He writes, "thought, far from experiencing its intrinsic limits through facticity, experiences rather its knowledge of the absolute through facticity. We must grasp in facticity not the inaccessibility of the absolute but the unveiling of the in-itself and the eternal property of what is, as opposed to the mark of the perennial deficiency in the thought of what is" (52). The wall erected by facticity becomes

does not call for a return of dogmatic metaphysics in *After Finitude* but rather he hopes to strike a blow against correlation by manoeuvring within the correlate itself.

Besides contemporaneous alignment, forays into eighteenth-century philosophy may seem off course for any investigation of Internet culture, yet the tendency to loop any narrative stands, technological forces, and political swings around and outward from the human culture of a site like 4chan speak to the reductionist force of correlation. While Meillassoux suggests one path from the problem of correlation, epistemology, and ontology, several other camps crop up around the tent poles of Speculative Realist philosophy. Media Studies and Game Studies continue to find these approaches pertinent. Agreeably, many scholars simply wish to move away from the nearly ubiquitous entrenchment of postmodern-based discourse studies. Moreover, the participation of computers and automated technologies fundamentally demand an acknowledgement of the non-human.

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knowledge of the absolute as "everything and every world is without reason, and is thereby capable of actually becoming otherwise without reason" which follows then that "unreason is an absolute ontological property and not the mark of finitude of our knowledge" (53). He then calls for non-naïve speculative approach that can tend to the existence of things-in-themselves without demanding metaphysical necessity. Finitude becomes necessary feature of the world, as with it the principle of unreason (or principle of facticity) demands that contingency is necessary. As a student of Alan Badiou, Meillassoux turns to mathematics to reorient the world towards knowing "what might be while we are not" (115). It becomes a point in which human access is not required and therefore speaks metaphysically without bounds. By rejecting absolutes, Meillassoux does not strike down rationality. It is the route in which reason does away with necessity and thus becomes its backbone. Akin to Badiou, Meillassoux resists totalizing and instead draws in the possible through math, as it is not reality-as-such but the arbitrary language, which refers to in-itself of chaotic, contingent reality.

1.9 Speculative Realism and Understanding Media

The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism, a 2007 conference at Goldsmiths College, became a cornerstone—and quickly mythologized—event for scholars hoping to avoid "the repetitive continental focus on texts, discourse, social practices and human finitude" so prominent in late twentieth-century thought by "turning towards reality itself" (3). Ray Brassier's (2007) *Nihil Unbounded: Enlightenment and Extinction*[22] with its "eliminativist nihilism," Iain Hamilton Grant's (2006) *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*[23] that

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[22] He approaches nihilism first as the air wafting from the split of nature/reason and thought/reality through philosophies of science. Secondly, he locates the point between thought and reality as limit in Badiou and Francois Laruelle's respective approaches to the void or nothingness. As modes of nihilism, thought and the world hold no steadfast connection. Equally for both thinkers, thought exists outside remote, individual subjects. For Brassier, both Badiou's reliance on set theory and Laruelle's axiomatic method speak directly in dialogue with the dark side of nihilism. He especially draws out the positive ontology at work in Laruelle's 'non-philosophy' arguing that it is not thought that structures objects, but the object that seizes and forces thought. In the final section, Brassier constructs an ontological nihilistic approach to the end of the world. The philosophical paradox of thinking the negation is demonstrated as both clear in scientific understandings of the solar system, yet opaque as subjective event. Akin to Melliasoux's use of an 'arche-fossil' as something outside the realm of the correlate, Brassier teases out the separation of observation and event. Through critiques of both Heidegger and Nietzsche, he reframes nihilism from any 'folk-psychological' understanding to one that grounds existence. As he states "extinction portends a physical annihilation which negates the difference between mind and the world, but which can no longer be construed as a limit internal of the transcendence of mind—an internalized exteriority, as death is for Dasein—becomes it implies an exteriority which unfolds or externalizes the internalization of exteriority concomitant with consciousness and its surrogates, whether Geist or Dasein. Extinction turns thinking inside out, objectifying it as perishable thing in the world like any other (and no longer the imperishable condition of perishing). This is an externalization that cannot be appropriated by thought—not because it harbors some sort of transcendence that defies rational comprehension, but, on the contrary, because it indexes the autonomy of the object in its capacity to transform thought itself into a thing" (229).

[23] For Grant, nature becomes the central cog to work through idealism. He suggests that nature should align to phusis, a physics less interested small units and instances of matter and more concerned with the flux ubiquitous in the subjects, objects, and the world-as-such. Such an approach allows nature to be drawn in without instant romantic or culturally constructed baggage because it traces backwards asking what a priori requirements generate any notion of nature. Grant draws upon Schelling, a philosopher whose work stood against Kantian notions of nature. Through

develops a "transcendental naturalism," and Steven Shaviro's (2009) *Without*

Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze and Aesthetics, which relies on "process-based"

philosophy[24] are a few of the works that follow this trend. Akin to Meillassoux, all

three of these philosophers operate from speculative methodologies that draw

together threads of different philosophical traditions and challenge the orthodoxies

of metaphysics grounded in correlation. One of the largest factions is Object

correlationism, nature becomes remote and isolated from thought. Unlike Kant who parcels nature on the far side of a "two-world metaphysics," Shelling sought the process-driven aspects of nature and devised a "speculative physics" in which nature operates as an always-already exterior and as non-human subject. Grant traces the "naturephilosophy" through a number of philosophical dialogues, in order to build a non-correlationist version of thought as non-human. Nature 'thinks' just as it blows or grows, in an impersonal flux, which becomes the cornerstone of a new physics of the all, rather than the individual thing or body. Grant's new ontological foundation relies not on productivity in a deeper, larger realm that generates any concepts or notions that idealism stabilizes or presumes stable.

[24] Shaviro's book operates as speculative history, fantasying the impact if Whitehead, rather than Heidegger, was the harbinger of postmodern thought. For Shaviro, rather than following Heidegger towards Derrida and deconstruction, Whitehead leads a Deleuzian waltz that emphasizes pure feelings and beauty over the sublime. The work begins by contrasting Kant's "transcendental dialectic" and "analytic of the beautiful" with Whitehead's concept of proposition to argue for a subject emerging from the world, rather than world as product for a subject. Judgment of taste then emerges as an automated affectual process in which a subject responds to points of singularity in experience and beauty. Shaviro brings in Deleuze to work through multiplicities of becoming to Whitehead's process of multiplicity to discuss aesthetic fields and relations. Rather than reducible to the art object, aesthetics for Shaviro are disconnected from the Kantian thing-in-itself reliant on knowledge and are instead "a critique of pure feeling" (47). Given all experience is affectual and thus emotional, there is no borderline that cuts off the non-human. Moreover, Whitehead for Shaviro follows the primacy of feeling rather than its supposed subservience or sideshow to cognition. Because the affective tone enables comprehension through identity and category, it holds a real path of intensity—both positive and negative. Aesthetics through correlation then are simply a small cross-section of reduced aesthetic experiences, in a world of creativity and novelty—both engrained elements of life. The book concludes by marking the postmodern tendencies in Whitehead's battles against any essential theory as he strove to entangle any single principle with the complexities of existence. For Shaviro, Whitehead "frankly and fully embraces the project of 'speculative philosophy'" and "his speculations issue in a metaphysics that rejects the reductionism of physical science, and yet remain thoroughly and robustly realist" as he recasts chaos and seeming crisis as creativity and contingency, which is simply the groundings of metaphysics and actual occasions of experience (149-150).

Oriented Ontology, linked to the philosophy of Graham Harman[25] and Levi Bryant[26]

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[25] Harman's first work *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (2002) reconsiders Heidegger's hammer by flattening the hierarchy of readiness and present at hand in order to de-privilege humans. By levelling the land, Harman proposes defining objects broadly without exclusion of the non-physical or real, as "not all objects are equally real, but they are equally objects." In *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (2005) he argues that objects are persistently "overmined" or "undermined." Reduction characterizes undermining objects, for example cutting everything down to atoms or crude versions of virtually, vitality, flux, or difference. The basic—be it theoretical, scientific, or theological—becomes the key measurement for the real. Overmining dissipates the object through correlation as they are only important as objects of knowledge as they manifest to the mind. At both ends, the thing-as-such or objects are exclusive and reliant upon human channels of knowledge and Harman contends "the only way to do justice to objects is to consider that their reality is free of all relation, deeper than all reciprocity. The object is a dark crystal veiled in a private vacuum: irreducible to its own pieces and equally irreducible to its outward relations with other things" (Harman 2011, 47). Harman builds the "fourfold object" characterized by the real object and the sensual object articulating a split between the tactile relations and the aspect not deployed by relations between objects. These relate to the real qualities and sensual qualities of objects expressing the qualities like opacity of glass while sensual describes the deployment in relations, for example operating as a vessel for rain. Through subjectivity, sensual qualities change as they direct to the human, quenching thirst for instance. A key aspect of the fourfold object is the real, yet non-accessible, sensual qualities experienced by the object. No volume of social, scientific, philosophical, theological, logical, or critical investigation can exhaust an object's qualities. The quadruple objects opens outward: time is the "tension between sensual objects and sensual qualities" and space is the "tension between concealed real objects and the sensual qualities associated with them" (Harman 2011, 100). The tensions within the quadruple object open up "edios," which is a reference to Husserl and refers to the way sensual objects have a virtual or un-experienced real qualities. As well as a forth and final tension that is "never accessible to human experience": essence (101). Harman describes it as the "duel, underway in hidden real things, between the unified real object and its real qualities and its multiple real hidden features" or the concrete realness of the withdrawn object. This is a riff on Heidegger's sense of the object in withdrawal but not built around the confirmation of Dasein. For example, a real object bird has a real quality of flight (in addition to numerous other qualities), yet it is not directly accessible, only speculative. It can be measured, for example by way of speed or altitude, but these are sensual qualities in a relation to the tools of measurement and the systems of calculation. It could be an edios—or virtual quality of unfolding—but not *an essence*. In addressing the strains between an object, its relations, its possibilities and the inaccessible ember of its reality, Harman's system for objects poses a challenge to the reign of subjectivity and exposes key philosophical and ethical problems with correlationism.

[26] Bryant's (2011) *Democracy of Objects* revolves around the notion of "onticology" that treats "subjects and culture" as not excluded from the realm of objects; they become "particular types of objects" (22). Both Harman and Bryant are not inverting the traditional "culturalist schema" or pushing for "exclusion of the human" but to think of objects beyond content for signs or representation and "treat all entities, including subjects, as objects" (20; 22; 25). Like Harman, Bryant argues "that objects or substances are withdrawn from or independent of their relations to other substances" and "no relations ever deploys all the forces contained within an object" (70-71). Bryant draws from Deleuze and Guattari for the idea of the "virtual proper being" that argues each object has an "absolutely individual system or organizations of powers" which "are the capacities of an object or

whose attentive theories of objects forge deviating, yet similar models that reject ideas that the real is reducible to the physical, forged from the construction sites of discourse, subjective impression scales, or the product of representation. It is key to note that objects, concepts, experiences, culture, and so on exist, it is just a matter of resisting reducibility. The material concern driving a great deal of this work does not give all things agency, but rather concedes that all things exist, but do not exist equally; consequently that all things are real and hold virtual potential to actualize in ethical, political ways.

Again, entering into these weighty philosophical debates may seem to fly wildly away from the LULZ, but the push to a speculative realism and re-imagined materiality throughout this philosophy and its symmetry with Latour's thought helps to stretch and reframe the canvas, gaining a fuller and more robust image.[27]

To summarize, this work will follow the LULZ through all its nodes, forces, and actors. Asking how a culture translates ideas through images, videos, words, and actions resulting in a realm of disorder, aggression, humour, playfulness, and disgust. As through this question, the quasi-object of the LULZ falls into view. From

what it can *do*" (89). Rather than sets of traits of being, the focus here is on the action or verb, realized or unrealized. Bryant warns against teleological approaches to the virtual that summarize all perspectives on an object because of the idea that objects "can be fully concrete without locally manifesting themselves or actualizing themselves in qualities" or that "local manifestation is not the fulfillment of objects" (121). For Bryant, onticology means seeking internal relations (endo-relations) and external relations (exo-relations) to ponder operations of translation in order to "form an ontology that does justice to the plural swarm of differences and interactions" (278).

[27] The symmetry's main alignments are in the resistance towards reductions of objects. There are of course divergences. Latour's method is less interested in the speculative elements of SR or OOO, selecting instead social science as the scene of investigation. Harman explores these differences extensively in his book *Price of Neworks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*.

this point, the aesthetic it perpetuates links to a number of other online sites and cultures and the impact of the quasi-object gains political intonation. While Latour's quasi-object works well to reference the LULZ internally, this question of affect and relational results requires a larger scope.

1.10 Assemblage Theory and the LULZ

Manuel DeLanda's work stiches together much of the seemingly abstract theory associated with Speculative Realism to Latour's careful deliberation on the construction of relations and events, thus completing the methodology for the LULZ. In *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (2006), he builds alternative arguments around Deleuze and Guattari to "elucidate the proper ontological entries" of the social (28). By defining entities by their capacities to interact—their potential to affect or be affected—DeLanda suggests the assemblage as a way to map relations of exteriority (10). Far from totalities, "relations of exteriority … imply that the properties of the component parts can never explain the relations which constitute a whole" nor can synthesis be an end goal as contingency remains a key element of relations (11). He argues that assemblages form along material and expressive dimensions and operate to strengthen internal homogeneity (territorialization and the maintenance work of identity) or threaten stability (deterritorialization). A crucial aspect of the assemblage is the fact that its forces pull, push, and participate in processes along multiple fronts and a variety of

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forms by exercising different sets of capacities in different assemblages.

DeLanda stresses that detective work should not deploy from the final scene of the crime, but rather the historical processes of production with specific causes, reasons, and motives in conjunction with the "collective unintended consequences of intentional action" (24). A task required by the presumption that assemblages "contains nothing but differently scaled individually singularities," on numerous spatial and temporal gauges that emerge into mottled contexts given "some parts must pre-exist the whole, others may be generated by the maintenance process of an already existing whole" (29; 39).

By employing such a topographic approach, a number of vital components drop into the frame: the virtual and the actual, manifold gauge for objects, resistance to reducibility, and a method to deal with both objects and their relations in events. By following the assemblages, we see the network of alliance built, as well as the resistance and destruction through the process of deterritorialization. The LULZ forms inwards through individual posts, group performances, online aggression, and playful silliness, and outwards through networks of social media or news stories—each individuated instance connected by and to larger and smaller ad hoc meshings. Each actant in the chain—from computer to Internet provider to interface code—belongs to trajectories with double operations of vital prosperities within, and effective power outside, as larger accumulations. The range of ways the LULZ operates, constantly in a circuit of near automatic critique, is an instance of actors

entering, exiting, and changing. DeLanda (2006) addresses temporality by arguing that assemblages hold "relative endurance" insofar as "processes that constantly maintain the identity of social assemblages yield a characteristic life-span correlated to spatial scale" that can be dispersed through deterritorialization (43).

This understanding of relative endurance is vital to the LULZ. Within its varied parts, there is always contestation. To put 4chan aside and understand the LULZ through another of its actants: this trend is evident in YouTube Poop. Chapter Four examines YouTube Poop in detail but it grows out of the LULZ scene of 4chan and Something Awful and exists basically as community of video remixers who pillage low-brow pop culture to create absurd experiments that mimic digital editing errors and amateur content creation. Selections of source material and editing techniques are constantly on trial within the community. Certain trends bring in specific content (video gleaned from gameplay of the Philips CD-i system for example) but can just as quickly also fall out of favour. Yet it is not solely attributable to community taste; there is also the distribution platform. With YouTube's Content ID system, an algorithm filters each video against a database of audio and visual reference files, meaning the practice of remix must traverse the legal realm of rights management. Through altered pitch and video speed, many videos 'spoof' infringement, which is a practical element of the style. These two cogs operate with a multitude of others to either strengthen or weaken any harmonious sense of YTP.

1.11 Towards a Theory of the LULZ

To summarize—first, the principle of irreducibility means that human access or knowledge is not the ultimate reality at work. By dropping the horizon point to a correlate, a wide network of actors (each exercising different sets of capacities) disappear and hinder the actuality of the real. The second lesson is to attend to the varied and wide-ranging scales and swaths of material components—not simply scale up to discourse or representation. As DeLanda (2006) articulates, with this approach "every social entity is shown to emerge through the interactions among entities operating at a smaller scale" and "emergent wholes react back on their components to constrain them and enable them," all of which "does not result in total unity" (118). This is an argument best articulated with a cue or slight cautioning from object-oriented-ontology: objects—in the widest sense—are not simply relations (be it Harman's withdrawal or Bryant's endo-structure of virtual proper being). The third lesson is in tracing the network of alliances or mapping out the assemblage through interactions and associations—not necessarily equal, reciprocal, or even. This provides insight into the processes that maintain or threaten the identity and actuality of objects. Finally, such an approach illuminates how these relations forge events as productive process.

So the final question—what is the LULZ? Taken via the outlined methodology, it is an assemblage. In one direction, it operates through material elements. A number of those tied to 4chan appear briefly here but will appear in Chapter 3 in

much more detail, while Chapter 4 will examine how these migrate and connect to the assemblage of YouTube Poop and post-Internet Art in Chapter 5. In the other direction, it holds expressive capacities to affect other assemblages. This means that there are core traits, such as temporality and aggression on sites like 4chan facilitated through the site's interface and lacking archive. New material replaces
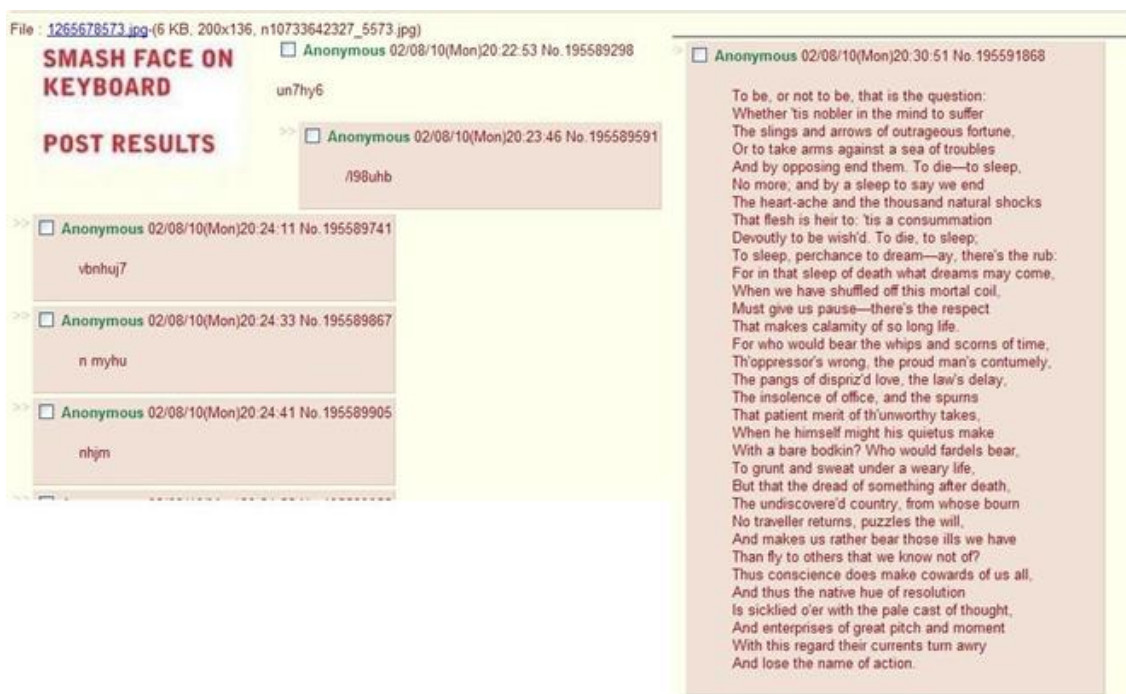
Figure 3 – Example of a 4chan Thread

old, meaning everything is fleeting. This force means the culture revolves around contingent encounters with strangers in an extremely short temporal space, especially on the open terrain of the /b/ board, which celebrates and applauds the unexpected. Not to say there is not often the same content ad nauseam but the assemblage itself forms an expressive point that dashes expectations as users meet

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the neither necessary, nor impossible experience (Knuttila, 2011).

These material and expressive forces combine in the LULZ as an abject spectacle. The LULZ invites attention in temporal bursts—a spectacle of parading images that varies from cute to horrific to lewd. The LULZ paradoxically rejects its very own user base through constant barrages of aggressive discourse and irreverent rule. 4chan shies away from the direct focus of many websites. It has no mandate as personal branded social media, or news and link aggregator, or virtual storefront for a business. It is idleness and wasted time, meaning it often embraces the ephemeral joy of spectacle. It watches as memes mutate through variation, cheers on as an argument breaks out, raids another board or site, or discovers the oddities and banalities of Internet content. Take a thread from February of 2010 for instance, in which the original poster uploads the instructions "smash face on keyboard / post results" with the accompanying text "un7hy6." Several other posters presumably do the same with garbled text responses until one anonymous poster pastes Shakespeare's *Hamlet* soliloquy, "To be or not to be…" This is the daily content celebrated by the LULZ, which mixes hyperbole and silliness in a paradoxical culture of play and cruelty that is taken very seriously by those involved.

The LULZ is transgression, aggression, confusion, and parody. It comes from a long tradition of subcultures that embrace chaos, irreverence, and pandemonium, yet as the methodology of this chapter attests, relies on the specifics of its material

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network to cultivate such bedlam. Through the championing of anonymity (even if it is not true anonymity, as the site logs IP addresses) through the default and ubiquitous username anonymous, sites like 4chan nurture rude, belligerent, and generally antagonistic behaviour. There is no shortage of examples of site raids, in which anons from 4dchan target individuals or other websites. Take, for instance, spamming a YouTube channel with obtuse commentary, sending pizzas to an unexpecting store, or attempting to elicit angry responses from users on Twitter. There is often no overarching drive, as the group nature means there are competing interests and no one can claim authority in a culture of dissent. That said, there are arms of the LULZ—organized through the hactivist moniker Anonymous—who take on more directed social action. Nonetheless, there are also the repugnant features that work conversely, spreading online hate—be it misogyny, homophobia, racism, or ableism. All of these competing campaigns, which come through spectacle and contingency, in turn work expressively to stabilize the identity of the LULZ and its power for affect.

The ability to affect other assemblages is key. Just as internal elements can territorialize or deterritorialize the LULZ, the material and expressive force holds relations with a huge scale of other actants. In identifying the qualities of the LULZ, the important interrogation becomes *what* does this spectacle of surprise, creativity, antagonism, and rebellion do? Chapter Two will explore this question based on aesthetics through an exploration of aesthetic power and experience. The LULZ'

reliance on parody and pastiche seems wholly post-modern, yet as a phenomenon built through the materiality of the Internet there seems to be incongruence and something beyond the nihilistic play of representation championed by some postmodern theory.

This then opens up the larger scope of this dissertation that will ask how the LULZ operates by following its movement from an Internet subculture into an aesthetic. It then explores how this aesthetic makes its way into artistic practice, first through LULZY spheres like YouTube Poop and then into worlds marked explicitly as Art. This becomes an important project through the methodology sketched in this chapter because the question of relational affect becomes paramount. In other words, what is the baggage associated with his aesthetic? What elements of its actor network enable it to speak, reflect, and also enforce the elements of digital culture that entwine it? What political and social forms come through the ongoing use of the LULZ aesthetic and do these art worlds change them? It is in teasing this out that the aesthetics of the LULZ becomes a way to think through how these online communities—in both their material and expressive component parts—form a type of experience that operates with and against existing understandings of an 'everyday' Internet, the purpose of online mediating technologies, and art itself. The next chapter will turn to aesthetics and work through various theories that grapple specifically with digital media and more broadly with aesthetics as a concept. It will work through a diversity of perspectives

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in order to frame the LULZ with a theory of aesthetics proper to the method outlined here.

Chapter Two: Online Creativity, Aesthetics, and the LULZ

The changes to the media landscape over the past several decades have been profound and far-reaching. As the methodology of the previous chapter shows, these shifts have not been singular in cause or effect but rather the result of a complex array of forces and actors with contested goals, alliances, and purposes. Very roughly stated, combinations of network and digital technologies help foster transformations in the social function, use, and logic of media. This chapter will first chart this transformation through the lens of Media Studies in order to frame the creative practices of the LULZ. It will then link the aesthetic traits of remix and mash-up culture to the focus on parody and pastiche. The irreligious nature of the LULZ embodies many of the aesthetic sensibilities associated with parody, but as Chapter One attests, isolating a single element (e.g. form) operates on a dangerous principle of reduction. Accordingly, the chapter will work through how the unique sets of tools and labour of non-human actors generate a relentless double action of authorship and desecration. Following an exploration of parody, the chapter will examine an array of aesthetic theories before suggesting that the work of Jacques Rancière presents a way to leverage the methods of Chapter One to understand how the LULZ operates as an aesthetic as well as an engagement with a larger aesthetic sensibility. Thus, it will become a way to examine how this aesthetic shifts from tawdry message boards to artist practices, and, more importantly, how political effects and affects operate across this spectrum.

2.2 Remix Culture

In Media Theory, Henry Jenkins (2006a) inaugurates analysis of these large-scale shifts through the notion of "participatory culture." He describes participation as "open-ended" practice as "it is less under the control of media producers and more under the control of media consumers" (133). Using case studies, such as Star Wars fan production, he charts engagement through "archiving, annotation, appropriation, transformation, and recirculation of media content" (286). Jenkins examines how such fans take a much more active role by participating in mass culture rather than passively consuming media products.

Several elements facilitate such a level of engagement. One selling point of the home computer market was the notion of "amateur creation." Corporations like Microsoft bundled photo and editing software into operating systems and individual hardware producers incorporated programs into new pre-built personal computers. An existing market of photographers began engaging with digital cameras, while the lower price point of home recording technology drew newcomers. It is little surprise that video sharing sites such as YouTube maintain huge user bases, as such platforms allow amateur content creators to share and engage with similar producers. Jenkins argues that these levels of sharing and creating redefine media, as it pushes away from the "divergence model" of centralized production and consumption.

In addition to the lower boundaries of entry, these online communities foster education. From elaborate online wikis to terse comment sections, there is a wealth of available information for would-be creators, enabling varying scales of mentorship. For Jenkins, these elements ensure members of the community put stock in their work by virtue of others' engagement. There are other forces for Jenkins as well, including the top-down reorganization or 'convergence' of media producers with the development of transmedia storytelling (i.e. storytelling that crosses traditional channels and intersects with audiences in new ways). Mobile technologies also increase the ability to connect as massive online networks overcome geography. The resulting collaborative labour, as well as reshaped 'circulations' in formats like blogs or podcasts, fortify community ties and, according to Jenkins (2006b), generate "opportunities for learning, creative expression, civic engagement, political empowerment, and economic advancement" (8).

Other scholars in Media Studies also address the coming of digital and network technologies along similar lines during this period. Lawrence Lessig (2008) describes a divergence between a "read only" culture patrolled by copyright and trademark laws versus a re-emergent "read/write culture" that values creativity as citizens "add to the culture they read by creating and recreating the culture around them" using "the same tools the professional used as well as tools given to them by nature" (28). Lev Manovich (2007) explores "Remixing and Remixability" through the notion of "modularity" in which different bits of data (video clips, sound clips,

images, etc.) come together (i.e. distinct and independent objects that co-exist on a webpage). He makes the case that users are slowly "modularizing" culture but that it is a historically situated project evident in previous sampling in music, remixing in art, or mash-ups in photomontage.

2.3 Participating in the LULZ

The LULZ hold an undeniable association with the realms of user content creation and distribution. As argued in the previous chapter, communicating through the meme is one of the fundamental tenets of the LULZ. Correspondingly, the meme relies on the qualities Jenkins, Lessig, and Manovich detail: remix, reuse, repurpose, and redistribute. As previously stated, memes are "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience" (Shifman 2011, 367). Particular phrases, images, videos, or performative acts all count as memes. However, few memes circulate through the LULZ ecosystem as heavily as the "image macro". Stripped to its barest elements, the meme starts with an image. It could be a cat, a stock photo, a famous painting, or a movie still. The fact that a popular iteration of the meme draws upon the Bayeux Tapestry as a starting point speaks to the both the seemingly arbitrary and diverse nature of the image sources. In image macros, text overlays the image, most often the "Impact" font with black-outlined white text, inscribed in capital letters. There are certain conventions: one line of text on the top of the image and one on the

bottom, purposeful misspelling, and comedic intent. The meme (or perhaps more accurately the meme format) traces back to early 2006, with an image of a snowy owl superimposed with "O RLY," and continues to proliferate today in a seemingly endless array of variations.

The image macro meme demonstrates many of the participatory elements described by Jenkins et al. The first iterations required some knowledge of image editing software. But early in the meme's lifecycle, the advent of a large number of dedicated image macro-building websites automated the process, enabling users with very little technical ability to create these images. All one must do is upload or select an existing image, add one's text, and then distribute it. When uploaded to a site like 4chan, an image macro exists in the ephemeral stream of text and images. In the provisional period before new material supplants (or "bumps") it, other users may "poach" the image to re-upload later (4chan users often reference hard drive folders of content gleaned from the site), or reply to it through their own variant creations. Through these creative trials, there is an ever-expanding archive of image macro memes. Such content then gains a triple life in the libraries of meme-building sites, individual user computers, and in the intangible institutional memory of the LULZ.

Hence, there is an undeniable alignment with the notion of participatory cultures. The LULZ are not pre-programmed. LULZ content does not originate from a single broadcasting source. It is the end-result of community engagement. Content

arises from and through interactions. The image macro meme demonstrates how the LULZ takes on a diversity of forms in order to work as commentary, rebuttal, punch line, or a political statement. It becomes an active process built on participation and users who will write and rewrite, create and recreate. Accordingly, the culture of the LULZ develops in an ongoing process across multiple and simultaneous streams, meaning it is always open to change and transformation through the sheer mechanics of participation.

2.4 The Limitations of Participatory Culture

These positive readings certainly shed light on a cultural phenomenon like the LULZ but there is a danger in broad application. As Ganaele Langlois et al. (2009) argue in "Networked Publics: The Double Articulation of Code and Politics on Facebook," terms and concepts like "web 2.0" tend towards the "very general, and there is a need to identify the specificities of each of the platforms and websites that fall under this category" (418). While these memes broadly follow the parameters or tendencies of a participatory culture or read/write culture, they also exist in a unique deployment—the task becomes identifying the *specificities* of the assemblage rather than reduction to a larger formal concept.

While most readings of participatory cultures seek the positive nodes in the networks that promote sharing, mentorship, and inclusion, creation in the LULZ typically invites dissent and disagreement. Most memes will encounter opposition

and reversal within the LULZ. Ryan Milner (2013) seeks the underlying elements of cultural enmity in "Hacking the Social: Internet Memes, Identity Antagonism, and the Logic of the LULZ". He examines the "successful black man" meme, which is a particular variation on the image macro meme. The visual template in this case is "derived from a photo on the stock image website ShutterStock entitled 'Handsome
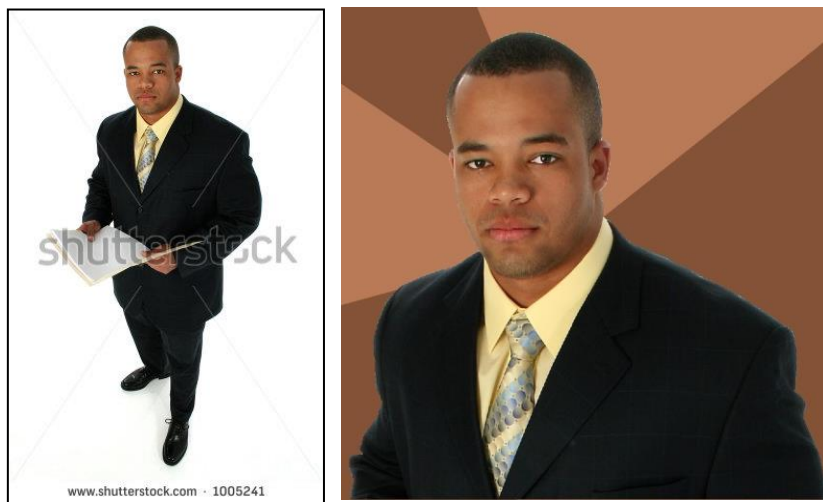
Figure 4 - Source and Blank Template of the "Successful Black Man" Meme

African American business man dressed in a black suit'" (71). The logic of the meme operates with "a racist premise ... established in the top clause of the added text" and a "bottom clause that inverts that premise to deliver the punch line" (71). For Milner, a "familiarity with racist tropes is necessary to get the joke" alongside the joke that "lampoons tendencies to unproblematically accept negative representations" (71). This trollish play is part of the ironic utterances associated with the LULZ. His crucial follow through explores other uses of racist discourse on

boards like 4chan. He describes a number of other memes, such as the inverted "community college negro" that starts positive and reverses course to reinforce racist stereotypes. He argues that "4chan posters" generally operate "in an environment where racial stereotypes were an understood and largely unchallenged assumption" meaning such an "unchallenged assumption represents a communicative blur inherent to the logic of the LULZ" (72-3). There is, Milner argues, a "line between playful (if antisocial) irony, satire, and parody and 'earnest' racism [that] is difficult to differentiate" (73).

Milner highlights several elements associated with participatory cultures: the new media tools and technologies that enable conversations through amateur creation (in this case through objects like image macros) and the ensuing formation of an insular culture based around particular media content (the conversation facilitated by 4chan as platform). Yet the implications of the meme are less clear in the participatory model because the created content (image macro) is a discursive object with a huge array of baggage. If taken as Latourian quasi-object, an image macro meme becomes "collective because they attach us to one another, because they circulate in our hands and define our social bond by their very circulation" and thus belong to an array of narratives, histories, alliances, and networks (Latour 1999, 89). Milner points to the contested alignments of seemingly similar media creations from an outwardly connected and apparently coherent community. The presence of doublespeak means multiple forces. Accordingly, not all meme

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variations will find life in the community and over time; even the most prevalent will wane in popularity. Understanding this through Latour, certain alignments—established through the media object—garner visibility and fortify positions, while others fail to gain alliances and any resulting traction in the community imagination. Hence, overarching models that focus on participation in new media creation often foreground the clash between media producers and media consumers but underplay the bouts on the ground in the communities of creation, as demonstrated in the contradictory image macros outlined by Milner.

2.5 The LULZ and Parody

In order to approach this double-speech in creative object and community, theories of parody and pastiche prove useful. Few address the concept of postmodernism as well as Fredric Jameson (1991). For him, it is a cultural form resulting from the evolutionary stages of capitalism (industrial manufacturing leading to electric and combustion technology, followed by nuclear and electric development; coinciding with market economy, imperialism, and globalization or realism, modernism, and postmodernism). There are many easily made connections between his work and the LULZ. Take for example notions of depthlessness and the base appeal of an image macro meme or fragmentation of the past and future through the 'always on' mediation of online cultures like 4chan. The most useful element of his work is the analysis of how pastiche functions as cultural production.

For Jameson, "pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language" (17). Yet, it lacks the power of parody, lacking "ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter" making it a "blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs" (17). Modernist styles collapses into 'codes' or puppet motions to superseded genres. Jameson cites emergent work of the period spanning architecture, film, and literature to illustrate such tendencies.

Jameson bemoans the detached reality that blends, reproduces, and collides imagery in self-contained reference loops. The repercussion is an inability to think historically; the present detaches from past and future into a focus on spectacle, fantasy, and superficiality. There is no glimpse into possibilities for collective change and no responsibility or accountability for one's lived experience—as everything is a commodity in Late Capital. The logic links into the emergent commodity culture that proliferates through transnational expansion throughout the nineties. For Jameson this means existence is trapped in a closed loop of the cultural imagery of consumption itself: its signs, its referents, its media, its refracting self-reflections, its speed, its schizophrenia, and its mediation.

Through this lens, the LULZ is but one of many mediating cogs that exist within the totality of Late Capital. Its memes, its spectacle, its ongoing ephemeral communications exist as part of the circulation of empty signs. Through images on message boards like 4chan or remixed content in memes, there is just the intake of

imagery for the sake of consumption. To return to Milner's specific example of the "successful black man" image macro with Jameson's critique in place, the inability to truly comment upon racial relations and prejudice in the meme is due to the fact that the meme is pastiche and not true parody. It operates as a passing joke. It alludes to entrenched cultural assumptions that operate on imbalances in equality and power. It does not *truly* speak to them. It is codified talk simply making a gesture of speech.

While Jameson's critique is extraordinarily well structured and intellectually strong, there are other understandings of parody. Linda Hutcheon (1989) alludes to the theoretical terrain of the period, writing that "parody—often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality—is usually considered central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders" (93). For her, parody is not as hollow as Jameson suggests. Instead, it works to "contest our humanist assumptions about artistic originality and uniqueness and our capitalist notions of ownership and property" (93). Whereas Jameson sees the empty sign, Hutcheon identifies such disruptive traits that operate through irony to "acknowledge that we are inevitably separated from that past today" and thereby generate an "ironic distance" (94). Consequently, there is a productive power that is both "deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and the powers of representation—in any medium" (98). What Milner describes as a tendency towards both critical and reinforced

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problematic representations of race is reflective of the double coding of parody. It both legitimizes and strengthens *while* it subverts and inverts (Hutcheon 1989, 101).

Many of the LULZY image macro memes, including "successful black man," build from stock photos websites. In the case of "successful black man," the source photograph is ShutterStock's "handsome African American business man dressed in a black suit." Users of 4chan's /b/ board cropped the image and overlaid it on a colour wheel background, which is a practice synonymous with image macros since the creation of the "advice dog" meme in 2006. One reading suggests that the target of parody in the meme is the image economy of web design. The meme's mockery of websites that use photo repositories selling racialized images like "handsome African American business man" causes the nature of representation itself to fall into question. In a positive way, there is a possibility to dismantle and deconstruct, as demonstrated by several popular versions of the meme: "I hate whites ... when they get mixed in with the darks in the laundry," "I left my wife and kids ... a healthy breakfast before I went to bed," "let's all get high ... grades on our finals." Through a meta-play on images as façades, there is a constant contradiction in the stereotypes generated. It calls attention to such cultural presumptions, highlighting the iconography and language of the stock image, as well as calling into question why such archives exist. Yet, such transcoding does not fully escape from problematic subject construction.

Undermining racial assumptions engrained in the 'other' (from a naturalized white subject view) is—arguably—extraordinarily meek as a form of intervention, which makes it the empty posturing of pastiche identified by Jameson. This conservative function is clear in other incarnations of image macro memes, such as "idiot nerd girl." It falls into the "advice animal" genus of image macros and features

Figure 5 – "Idiot Nerd Girl" Meme

a teenage girl with the world "nerd" scrawled on her left hand. The image originates on the Gaia online forums posted by a user in May of 2010 and, akin to other image macros, gains a specific contextual intonation against a colourful pinwheel background. In this case, the macro text mockingly takes aim at those with a presumed mastery, yet an actual ignorance of "nerd culture."

It spreads initially through tangential LULZ websites like FunnyJunk or the 4chan spin-off Canvas but certainly also appears on 4chan throughout 2011. Popular iterations would combine phrasing like "self-proclaimed title of nerd" with "what is world of Warcraft?" with the would-be punchline being that World of Warcraft is tremendously popular and any true "nerd" would not only be familiar

with the game but possibly dismiss it for its ubiquity and elementary qualities. Others follow similar judgmental logic with appeals to massively popular cultural items: "favorite movie quote / luke I am your father" or "my favorite superhero? / Probably X-Man cuz Hugh Jackman is so hot." There are slight variations, for example mocking technical or cultural literacies: "I'm a total computer geek / uses internet explorer" or "the specs? / what are the specs" or "I just played the 1st video game ever / Super Mario Brothers" or "D&D? I beat D&D." Overall, a similar gatekeeper approach to a particular canon of nerd-culture texts, icons, and interests propels variation in the meme. Underlying each of these is a deep repugnant misogyny, again speaking to the normalized subject position (cis-male, white, heterosexual, western, and able-bodied) within these communities and the hostile marking of otherness entrenched in their discourses.

It is difficult to apply Hutcheon's rosy understanding of parody or Jameson's empty pastiche in this case because there is no double-speak. There is certainly vitriolic ridicule but there is no inverted reflection upon the cultural conditions of "nerds." Hutcheon (1989) addresses Jameson directly, connecting his "blanket condemnation" to a culture with a "wholesale implication in capitalism" leading to a "distrust of irony and ambiguity" that "blinds him to the possibilities and potentially positively oppositional and contestatory nature of parody" (114). In this passage, she illuminates the way creative works can operate within seemingly non-radical contexts and, through the doublespeak of irony and parody, illuminate political-

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economic elements and processes of ongoing subject-formation. Rather than resolving or destroying the contradictions, inequalities, and trappings of Late Capital, parody can challenge borders and ask questions (a power Jameson refuses). It is this ability to author with a double tongue that is absent in a meme like "idiot nerd girl."

Several points unfold from the frame of parody. Broadly, the representations through which the LULZ speak contain political capacities. While Jameson builds one of the most comprehensive analyses of a culture of parody, Hutcheon pushes an understanding of its aesthetic potentials. Using her notion of inscription, this dissertation sees creative creations within the LULZ work as forms of mediation with parody-laden representations. Many incarnations of advice animals illuminate this: "socially awkward penguin" becomes a way to reflect upon moments of estrangement or alienation, "business cat" dismantles the jargon and pomp of offices, and the original advice dog makes light of everyday situations through absurdly bad guidance. However, capacities are not always actualized, meaning there are usually mono-tongued versions of these memes that have no critical reflection or engagement. In other words, parody is not ubiquitous and subject formation is often closed. The creations instead speak to the reification of that which is already dominant.

How then can the creative potential of the LULZ disentangle from its equally prominent leaden and apolitical works? Part of the solution for this comes from

stepping back to the question of method. These theories, while vital in isolating how parody and pastiche operate, rely on discourse as the constituent and all-important element. As argued in Chapter One, such levels of reducibility risk the elimination of a huge array of forces and actors. In the case of these memes, this becomes a crucial point, as memes do not exist in isolation. The LULZ are collective and not owned by a single person or group; moreover, it is not a singular discourse, hence the ability to turn from parody into vacant joke and back with great ease.

2.6 Parody and Materialism in the LULZ

After the proliferation of the "idiot nerd girl" meme across the various sites and communicative channels of the LULZ, there was an appropriate backlash. The template reversed to take aim at the meme itself with captions such as "In your subculture / re-appropriating your icons" or "enthusiastically explores new media and related subculture / driven away by territorial assholes" or "hasn't read all 900 issues of batman / neither have you." Through the re-imaging, the doublespeak of parody returns by pointing out the naturalization, policing, and border creation along gender lines through the "idiot girl meme." It points to how the meme is part of a larger "geek culture" that sees a threat in the opening of the community to a larger populace, specifically when that opening means a break in the previous encoded space. While the original 'joke' relies on marking borders through the creation of an imagined 'legitimate' nerd subject reliant on a misogynistic hostility,

the recasting becomes a rumination on the meme's very creation and conceptualization.

Figure 6 – Reworked Version, Template, and Original "Idiot Nerd Girl" Meme

This intervention into the nerd girl meme illuminates one of the key problems in approaching the LULZ from a pure discourse or identity politic-driven point of view, as examining these as isolated cultural or discursive objects overlooks a number of nodes and steps that generate space, scale, and transmission of such an intervention. To recall, Latour's (1993) issue with postmodernism outlined in Chapter One: "I have not found words ugly enough to designate this intellectual movement … this intellectually immobility through which humans and nonhumans are left to drift" (61). His hyperbole originates in the separation of "the material and technological world on the one hand and the linguistic play of speaking subjects on the other" (61). As he states: "discourse is not a world unto itself but a population of actants that mix with things as well as with societies, uphold the former and latter alike, and hold onto them both" (90). There is an entire ecosystem of forces at work

producing these memes and they cannot be taken out of context. The material conditions of the LULZ require address.

To return to the "idiot nerd girl" meme, there is a conflict between competing voices. On the one side, there is a misogynistic impulse to guard an imagined "nerd culture" and on the other, there is a rebuttal criticizing such conservative compulsions. In the frame of irony, there is a large gulf between the two, with one perpetuating a regressive hegemonic subject and the other using the power of parody and meta-textual awareness to break expectations and hold reified social borders to account. The problem is in the gap or distance such analysis relies upon. Taken through the arguments of Chapter One, these two voices are not quite so disentangled. At any given point, these images could exist in the same thread on 4chan, meaning they unfold through the same channels of creation: people browse the board, see the thread, and load the same meme creators. They post their creations and engage with a shared chorus of voices in the thread and both disappear into the same void as the thread bumps from the interface. Through sites like 4chan, they gain equal prominence and open towards shared audiences. The fact that the meme is not authored or owned by a central party means that a whole new array of users can save it, mimic it, even mock it. The nodes along the way (such as meme creator websites) will acknowledge the popularity of the meme and make the template available. Hence, the network arrays play a central role in the development, dissemination, and death of a meme. By extension, understanding the

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LULZ means exploration of such networks. After all, the LULZ as an aesthetic migrates through such channels into and back out of art worlds.

Thus the problem: the aesthetic theories of parody and transgression work well to explicate the doublespeak of the LULZ but the methodological demands to focus purely on text, narrative, and discourse lead it astray. A more material oriented approach to the LULZ asks: how to talk about these aesthetic traits on a formal level but not lose track or eliminate the ecosystems deeply engaged in the formation, propagation, and challenge to these creative works? To answer this question, there is some required legwork: first, establish what is meant by aesthetics and then second, parcel out an aesthetic theory compatible with the aims of this project. The following sections will work as a brief history of aesthetics to arrive at the work of Jacques Rancière.

2.7 A Primer to Aesthetic Theory: Kant

Before responding to such a query, the notion of aesthetics itself demands address. Opening *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* with "aesthetics has a bad reputation," Jacques Rancière (2009a) argues, "hardly a year passes without a new book proclaiming either its time is over or that its harmful effects are being perpetuated" (1). Similarly, Arnold Berleant (1991) opens *Art and Engagement* with "aesthetics is a study with a long history and a short identity" because "like its root discipline philosophy, aesthetics has struggled to establish both itself and its subject

matter, its material and its methodology, its proper problems and its structure" (1). Much like recent debates on the nature of ontology and epistemology, recent works in aesthetics struggle with the legacy of Kantian thought and reconsiderations of aesthetics in terms of its relation, operation, and correlate function.

Just as the Kantian correlationism morphs ontological inquiry into epistemological questions of access, aesthetics by way of Kantian 'disinterestedness' focus upon a priori conditions for the appreciation or understanding of beauty. It originates in the split between sensibility (derived from structuring forces of space and time presupposed in experience) and understanding (moral judgments that gain objectivity and universality by way of a priori conditions); or the separation of the affective force of sensations and the non-sensible imposition of knowledge that unifies and filters the world. For Kant, everyday experience forms through the fusion of these operations of mind, as the subject represents the world to themselves through time, space, and the structures of judgment—meaning the world is not as-is but filtered through reason or the concepts of knowledge.[28]

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[28] Kant awkwardly grafts notions of judgments from the *Critique of Pure Reason*—quantity (universal, particular, singular), modality (problematic, assertoric, apodeictic), quality (affirmative, negative, infinite) and relation (categorical, hypothetical, disjunctive)—but to serve an end: judging something as beautiful relies on formal properties rather than passing, arbitrary taste. The "analytic of the beautiful" follows that aesthetics revolves around the object for its own sake, beyond any practical purpose or investment. He (2007) describes it as "a disinterested and free satisfaction; for no interest, either of sense or of reason, here forces our assent" (32). It leads to the second movement, in which he works through the "subjective universality" of judgements of taste. Kant stresses that they lack objectivity, resulting in the paradoxical sense that taste operates through pleasurable feelings but hold universal validity; they then remain unprovable as they lack a base in concepts or rule sets. Kant claims that speaking of beauty insinuates that beauty is a property of a given object. This "finality of an object" surpasses the pleasure of emotion, or allure from the specifics of a style (a

Kant did not inaugurate the pursuit of understanding aesthetic experience. There are, most notably, classical understandings of art's relation to truth in Plato and Aristotle, as well as eighteenth-century British theory, like Shaftesbury or Hutcheson, that focuses on formal elements and the formation of an art superseding its material conditions. However, Kantian disinterestedness forms a stalwart pillar in the discourse of aesthetics. Akin to the correlation's effect on metaphysics, debates of art move away from primarily ontological questions into more epistemological terrain: "how can we know beauty" trumps "what is art's relation to truth." Kant's work positions the key debate points throughout much philosophy of aesthetics that follows: the reliance on sensation in judgments of beauty, forging or resisting the universal in individual experience, and the parameters or operations of subjectivity in the experience of art.[29] As Berleant (1991) writes, "from this formative period in the history of modern aesthetics there emerged an identification

colour or tone, for example) as it is the content of judgement itself. He works through several senses of purposiveness, such as "purposiveness without purpose" or "subjective purposiveness" or "formal purposiveness," to make his core point: we understand objects through their principal use (scissors cut, dice randomize numbers, a water bottle hydrates). Beauty negates the fixed purpose (thus surpassing our vested interest and conceptual understanding of its being) and instead holds purpose in form itself, sparking our subjective cognitive fires in the act of reflection. Beauty forms through our judgement via a priori spatial and temporal frameworks, as well as harmony within these faculties: reflection backwards upon our own mental states and processes of imagination and understanding. The sublime confronts the inconceivable vastness of space and time—be it in nature or mathematics—and pushes us to think of that which surpasses every standard sense. Alternatively, there is natural beauty in which the elements of innate free splendour demonstrate aesthetic value beyond usage. Or, there is artistic creativity that oscillates around the creation of objects that evade any sense of rules and models, while promoting mental activity in individuals and culture on a whole.
[29] By way of Schiller, Hegel, or Schopenhauer, Kant's aesthetic framework mirrors his transcendental philosophy of correlation, in its reach and persistence.

of the art object as separate and distinct from what surrounds it and isolated from the rest of life" (13).

2.8 A Primer to Aesthetic Theory: Heidegger

Selected philosophers continue to rework the black box of Kantian aesthetics. Berland (1991) muses, "the rise of the idea of experiential continuity as an alternative to this tradition of separation in modern philosophy has been gradual and groping" (15). It starts in many ways with Husserl's phenomenology, which attempts to rearticulate consciousness through the unifying force of experience.[30] Unlike Kant, who puts the categories of mind before experience, for Husserl a phenomenon derives from the appearance of something that appears. Heidegger (1950) builds on these initial steps away from Kant by crafting an ontological frame that places objects and subjects in participatory, dynamic roles. He starts with a simple premise: things are events, rather than a physical occurrence or perceptual act. He moves the discourse away from the "what of being" in terms of a set of attributes, towards the idea of "how is being."[31] Heidegger's method relies on

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[30] By way of a focus on intentionality, Husserl (1927) shifts the weight from the perception of objects to the act of perceiving. For Husserl (1927), consciousness is always directed at something. Though it varies, like a melody that unfolds over several moments or a math equation arriving in an instance, there is always a reflective quality, as the mind looks back inward from the object. He separates the pole that sorts experience from the object in which consciousness is directed. The *cogito-cogitatum* is the subject and the object-aware-of (rather than the 'real' thing) and the *noesis-noema* or act of meaning and what is meant (the sense of the object). This means that experience is a dualistic relationship: the consciousness actively combines elements of the object with the subjective act.
[31] This is the key separation from Husserl as Heidegger refuses to remove an object from context through a method like bracketing, as it downplays complexity in order to create a set of discernable

Dasein.[32] Embedded in specific cultural skills and practices, ontology through Dasein bubbles to the surface from within a "horizon of intelligibility." His motivation rests in a wish to return to the original meaning of phenomenon as "something that shows itself" rather than the notion of it being "mere appearance" developed post-Kant. Being does not exist in some hazy sense but rather it is in-the-world[33]—not an object spatially located, like photographs in an album, but rather defined by involvement, as one is a photographer in the field of photography.[34] Heidegger articulates two forms of investigation with Dasein operating as latchkey: ontological inquiry, focusing on being as such, and ontic inquiry, concerned with the experience of beings, entities, or things in the world.[35] His distinction creates the groundwork

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features. The object locks into the events and things around it, which conflicts with the impossible move to observe being, activity, or events from outside or as independent. Meaning the 'event' derails the clarity of Husserl, as regardless of our knowledge of an object or our ability to conjoin it mentally, the unification in our consciousness is not complete. We do not reveal the whole reality of an object, meaning we operate from a fundamental ontology as opposed to the regional ontology evident in fields like physics, or a foundational first philosophy. Accordingly, this foundation then elucidates the positions of these regional ontologies.

[32] Dasein translates to "everyday human experience," but does not actually locate a single conscious subject or a grand meaning-giving transcendental subject. Instead, Dasein is "human being" in the sense that it can refer to both a trait of all persons or to an individual person. The term should not be understood technically, but rather through its colloquial roots as an everyday term—a kind of 'we' with an ontological understanding or questioning attitude. Dasein is a thus a means to understand being in a general sense: that which cultures, individuals, and institutions share. So it is not an unchanging or innate mindset but an embodied network of principles or a complex set of "beliefs, rules or principles" that we "dwell in" (Dryfus, 1991: 22).

[33] This is clear in Heidegger's thinking on matters like time. Rather than instances or minutes, he frames the way the past produces situations we deal with—through possibilities actualized—through a future. It places us in the midst of movement in the present. To isolate just one moment removes the way we negotiate, occupy, engage, and 'care' about the world we live within.

[34] The stress on totality or 'being in' signals a kind of inhabitation or dwelling within.

[35]Heidegger avoids the term 'experience'—along with terms like consciousness and subjectivity—as he is rallying against Cartesian separation of mind and body and much of the book is addressing Husserl's notion of the transcendental ego.

for a theory of aesthetics that separates the essence or 'actuality' of art from the presence of objects or things.[36]

An 'aesthetics of the LULZ' through Heidegger requires toil, as hiding in the corridors of his discussion of art is a direct conflict with any traditional notion of 'aesthetics.' In Kant, aesthetics operates as the crystalline feature set of a removable and de-contextualized interface performing a specific operation (drawing objects into thought for example). Hence, the sublime is not a product of unfolding experience, but the perceptions of an object—like the ocean—washing against the a priori limits of a transcendental subject.[37] When Heidegger speaks "against aesthetics, for art," he is speaking against the "aestheticization of art," as it reduces art to the subject experience, ignoring the way art grounds history and opens to truth.[38] Using a Van Gogh painting of shoes, Heidegger (1950) acknowledges the contradiction at play: we engage through aesthetics as we "simply look at the empty, unused shoes as they merely stand there in the picture" (86). Yet, by focusing on the

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[36] In the "Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger illustrates how a painting of peasant shoes by Van Gogh holds an image of the ontic, or shoes as equipment. On one's feet, shoes operate "ready-at-hand," as one focuses on the act or walking or running. The painting itself holds a "thingly" character as colours on canvas. Heidegger extends the point across the arts, writing, "there is something stony in a work of architecture, wooden in a carving, colored in a painting, spoken in a linguistic work, sonorous in a musical composition" (81). Yet, Van Gogh's painting also discloses something more: the realm of the peasant who wore the shoes, complete with their embedded mental life. For Heidegger, this disclosure extends beyond mimesis or resemblance as "in the work of art the truth of an entity has set itself to work," meaning it is not an object in an empty gallery space but instead the process of "unconcealment" of being-as-such (88).

[37] Heidegger identifies such aesthetic operations as epistemological.

[38] As he states, "art is the setting-into-work of truth" as great works give shape or manifest the ethical reality of a community back upon itself and temporally, as the historical ontological reality at the heart of a given culture (99). A non-aesthetic encounter with art refutes subject mastery by illuminating the very "equipmentality of equipment" (88).

'nothing' of the shoes themselves, he foregrounds the active process of emergence

and concealment, as relations form and withdraw.[39] This begins to shape a working

notion for the aesthetics of the LULZ as it is *immersion* in networks of people, things,

and meanings through which the experience occurs, rather than through some

abstracted notion such as discourse beheld by a predicate transcendental subject.[40]

By inaugurating a turn towards what Paul Ricoeur (1975) calls "phenomenological

hermeneutics", Heidegger opens up an alternative to the methodology that starts

with (and all of those indebted to) Kant—one that is key to the 'aesthetics of the

LULZ.'

2.9 A Primer to Aesthetic Theory: Dewey

Akin to Heidegger, John Dewey (1934) seeks to recover "the continuity of

esthetic experience with normal processes of living" (9). His project, developed

through a series of lectures and combined in *Art as Experience*, proposes aesthetics

as a way to restore continuity between works of art and the conditions of everyday

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[39] The ontic work may seem to be mere smears of paint, but it is ontological in the way it brings-into-being a world. It holds that the painting is neither inert mass, embodied truth, nor a site of subjective rule, but a site or encounter in which aesthetics transcends its own traditional function.

[40] It is easy to see how such a point comes from Heidegger as his critique of Kant rallies against a subject pole whose capacity to unify (vis-à-vis bracketed operations, for example) sensory data into a unified whole diminishes all entities into dull, leaden resources. Aesthetics becomes a universalized procedural operation of reducing qualities. Third, the authoritative weight of formal appearance abstracts an object beyond itself. It is predestined by the act of creation itself. In all three cases, the "thingness of the thing," the toolness of the tool," and the "workness of the work" vanish. When Heidegger speaks to the idea that "subject and object are unsuitable names", he stresses that being-in-the-world precludes an essentialized subject or removal from the intertwined jumble of world-as-such.

life. By placing the weight on a finished art object, the elements and interactions rooted in "matters of experience" dissolve (11). Against Kantian distance, an object does not hold prefigured meaning, a distance from function, nor gain a remove from the "basic vital functions" of a subject (19).[41]

Dewey's (1934) aesthetics focuses on "sense," as "the sensory, the sensational, the sensitive, the sensible, and the sentimental, along with the sensuous" (22).[42] Dewey's strategy is to demonstrate aesthetic experience at work in a diversity of domains: science, sports, food, or philosophy, for example.[43] By favouring the experience over the object of art, Dewey reverses the forceful attempt to hinge aesthetics upon rigid criteria, scientific principles, or critical truths. Art then generates a type of aesthetic experience contained within, but delineated from, the everyday be it natural beauty or a sporting event or the home.

Although writing independently of each other, Dewey and Heidegger forge similar paths, opposing the initialization of aesthetics through the atemporal,

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[41] Dewey does not isolate the phenomenological experience in a single subject space, as he extends it to "bird and beast" on one side of the perceiver and into the space of creation on the other, by focusing on the artist's engagement (20). Aesthetics is dynamic, a series of actions, emotions, trials, and affect in which "form is arrived at whenever a stable, even moving, equilibrium is reached" (13).

[42] Embodied sense occurs in the spatial-temporal interaction and participation of experience. Art speaks because it taps such a "continuity with the operations of enduring experience" and functions as "commentary of life as it is ordinarily lived" (28). However, experiences are not uniform. He separates "an experience" from "An experience." The latter holds a conclusion as the event fulfills itself, while the former captures an individuated quality (he uses examples of a great meal or a fight with a friend). In 'an experience' the subject engages in a flux, as phases in a whole unfold, but it is not ruled by an exclusively intellectual, practical, or emotional determinate. The locking chains of 'an experience' centre on the links of events in "inception, development, and fulfillment."

[43] The qualitative aspect of 'an experience' continually asserts active engagement through the full range of sensual, emotive, and cognitive functions. It holds a power to create union, harmony, and rhythmic concord in the "live creature." Direct fulfillment arrives through phenomenological engagement but not at the cost of thought, imagination, or semantic meaning.

isolated, and commoditized pedestal of Fine Art.[44] For both, there is a twofold failure in such an approach: first, metaphysical assumptions that delineate subject/object, and second, a value (monetary or cultural) based function of art.[45] Despite Heidegger's opposition to aesthetics, it seems he is more against a particular brand of aesthetics, namely those inherited from Kant. In many ways the lump sum of Heidegger's writing on art aligns with Dewey in the sense that it wants to examine *how* art functions as experience rather than *what* art *is* for an experiencing viewer.[46] What this means for an 'aesthetics of the LULZ' is that the question of its status as art or object is not necessary a criterion to talk about it as an aesthetic or aesthetic experience. Moreover, drawing upon these specific approaches to aesthetics means asking how the aesthetics of the LULZ functions: what the parody does, to whom, and how. The question becomes the effect and affect of capacity rather than isolated traits.

2.10 A Primer to Aesthetic Theory: Criticisms

Heidegger opens up two philosophical arcs. Notions of being (the content of his works) explode on one side into existential phenomenology, which builds into

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[44] The intellectual relationship between their respective works has been the subject of a great amount of scholarship starting with Richard Rorty's (1978) canonical "Overcoming the Tradition: Heidegger and Dewey."

[45] Dewey calls for an aesthetics knotted in experience that is inseparable from its context, while Heidegger points to the pitfalls of removing such a bond.

[46] There are key divergences—views of technology, notions of nature, etc.—but against the idealized object of art functioning for its own sake, the allegiance is clear.

structuralism in the 1960s and then crumbles into the post-structuralist movement dominant throughout the 1970s. On the other side, his methodology develops into the schools of hermeneutics, who use his approach to work through less ontologically-focused debates on the act of interpretation. Dewey's pragmatism fell out of favour swiftly and was "totally eclipsed by analytic philosophy of art" which dismissed the often obtuse, messy, and sprawling theoretical results of Dewey's method (Shusterman 1989, 60).

The precepts of analytic aesthetic philosophy, championed by scholars like G.E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, Frank Sibley, Nelson Goodman, Susanne Langer, Stanley Cavell, and George Dickie, rely on the rejection of naturalizing art and aesthetic values.[47] Several later neo-analytic pragmatic philosophers, especially Richard Shusterman (1989), work through many of the critiques and arguable misreadings of Dewey's work, but the focus on aesthetics and experience gets re-worked and re-evaluated best in the later work of Arnold Berleant (1991). In *Art and Experience*, he points to the problem in removing cognitive activities from the "dynamic context of life," resulting in the history of aesthetics being written outside

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[47] As a generalized school, it holds close ties to symbolic logic and attempts to generate philosophical methods skimmed from the natural sciences. For a long period, there was a tangible influence of Wittgenstein within the field with its critique of the lack of rule systems within aesthetics. With later work, social factors and function become the key issue in understanding art. Disputes with Dewey focus first on alignments of aesthetics and the natural—from the bodily to the cognitive functions of the "live creature" and, second, that aesthetic experience holds a coherent or unified function. Philosophers like Dickie argue that experience denotes little, as it is an empty term with no real tangible form. Third, any attempt at articulating subjective affects as properties proceeds along false lines. They are linguistically constructed, acting as non-universal shadows rather than metaphysical presences.

and apart from the social history of the arts (4). Berleant suggests a reflection on praxis through "an aesthetics of engagement, a participatory aesthetics" (5).

2.11 A Primer to Aesthetic Theory: Berleant

Berleant (1991) speaks to the problem of correlation by arguing that notions of sense and aesthetics prejudges "experience by imposing on it a division between person and world" (14). Such a "dualistic tradition of separating consciousness from an external world … presumes a structure in experience that, for all its initial plausibility, rests on a particular historical and cultural tradition not shared in other times and places" (14). Outsiders from the Kantian tradition, like Dewey, often fall short by retaining core features of Kantian distance: "its psychologism, its concentration of the spectator, its essential passivity, its acceptance of the autonomy of the art object" (18). So Berleant hopes to capitalize on the positive thread of pragmatic aesthetics, namely the "assimilation of perceiver and object in appreciative experience" (18).

Part of the strength of Berleant (1991) is his keen awareness of the social-historical critique of aesthetics. Berleant writes, "the arts of this century demand a transformation of theory" (18). This is due in part to the evolution of the material and social functions driving the creation, distribution, and appreciation of art; and partially due to our changing capacities in experiencing and identifying art in the wake of "impressionism, cubism, futurism, Dadaism, expressionism, abstract

impressionism, optical art, conceptual art, Happenings and performance art" (20). The notion of a static 'art object' across this spectrum makes little sense, given that it begins with the dissolution of representation with a focus on medium specificity, moves through a focus on phenomenological experience, and turns to practices that dematerialize the object itself by shifting towards performativity and practice.

If Kantian disinterestedness contains ontological clefts from within because of the challenge to a stable transcendental subject, then the seemingly stable surface of the art object starts to churn in the wake of contemporary art. Berleant (1991) suggests reversing the tendency: connect aesthetics to engagement, not demand its removal. Attending to the utility of aesthetics in all situations and enlarging the function of aesthetic sensibility means participation replaces contemplation.[48] He puts forth art, not as object, but as *situations* in which experiences occur (49). Aesthetics in such a system bear the mark of social affect (alliances, historical traditions, forms, practices, etc.) and suggest that singling out individuated channels misrepresents the whole aesthetic field. The connection to speaking of the LULZ as a situation is clearly advantageous and becomes a way to talk about what things like its parody, doublespeak, creativity, or cruelty actively *do*.

However, before fully unpacking such an approach, a key criticism demands address. Bearleant keenly notes that the sociological critiques of aesthetics originate

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[48] Berleant states that such engagement "joins perceiver and object into a perceptual unity" by activating the "factors that compose it," which themselves are simultaneously inseparable and irreducible (46).

with Pierre Bourdieu (1993). In *The Field of Cultural Production*, he examines how access and domination of resources generate unevenly ranked groups. Going beyond economic capital—be it income or means of production—Bourdieu examines "cultural capital," referring to skill-sets of technical expertise or markers like diplomas, as well as "symbolic capital," which manifests in prestige or clout.[49] Aesthetics—be it phenomenological experience or alleged objective judgment—are products of social relations for Bourdieu.[50]

At its end reaches, the sociological reading of art worlds renders aesthetics a rooted gearwheel in a larger social apparatus. Far from a deliberation of experience, it reifies relations within a particular habitus. In order to boil down aesthetics, a vital step occurs: people operate as objects, rather than subjects of knowledge in an assumed *inequality*. This is a sharp rebuttal made by Jacques Rancière (1991), who labels Pierre Bourdieu the "Sociologist King" in his book *The Philosopher and his Poor*. Rancière argues that the "great law of the social machine" is "the law of exploitation and domination, which in advance renders detailed explanations futile

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[49] These also exist in asymmetrical relations, meaning any art world is a field of forces that place art, artists, curators, museums, schools, critics, dealers, patrons, and so forth into systems of value in, and in relation to, the logic of resource and market accumulation. Shifts in style, declarations of legitimacy, and schools of formal style play out as battles through—and for—material and symbolic resources among those who hold social class value. Aesthetics then functions as a "singular experience" or "transhistorical norm" of those situated within the "cultured habitus and the artistic field" (255; 257).

[50] In an argument levelled at Kant in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Bourdieu (1993) writes, "Kant's analysis of the judgment of taste finds its real basis in a set of aesthetic principles which are the universalization of the dispositions associated with a particular social and economic condition" (493)—meaning disinterestedness gains traction because it operates smoothly within the period's social relations.

and virtually assigns sociology" the sole task of understanding doxa (Bourdieu's term for common beliefs or notions [169]).[51]

2.13 A Primer to Aesthetic Theory: Rancière

Rancière's work saves aesthetics as process from its abolition inaugurated by these stark socio-historical critiques. In *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, Rancière (2009a) comments that such large-scale social explanations fall by the wayside when we consider their "ruinous complicity with the utopias of emancipation," in the sense that critique sits at the core of politics, holding out for absolute change (2). He wants to foreground "objects, modes of experience and forms of thought" (2). Accordingly, in Rancière's work aesthetics takes on a central and complex role. He maintains that there is no art in general, meaning there is no aesthetics or all-purpose aesthetic task (pleasure in seeing or hearing, for example). Art exists as art only through a "specific gaze and form of thought to identify it" (Rancière 2009a, 6). That is, art and non-art differ through several lenses: the first renders the object or act a product of art;[52] the second resists any mechanical exercise of generating conventionally acceptable products of art; in the third, there is a reach beyond

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[51] Rancière opposes such processes of intellectual 'demystification' in which unwitting subjects partake or misunderstand the operations of power around them. What happens in Bourdieu's system of art is everyone is educated according to a matrix of suitable class practices: refusing the subjugated—the people, the poor, the workers—access to the aesthetic and intellectual freedoms that those in power relish.

[52] This excludes works that hold a "legitimacy of [their] principle or factual resemblance" (Rancière 2009a, 6).

reduction to bodily wonder. Art then operates as a material and symbolic "suspension with respect to the ordinary forms of sensory experience" (Rancière 2009a, 23).

Art requires "something else," meaning integration into the social elements that demarcate art itself with a specific socio-historical frame (Rancière 2009a, 6). Aesthetics appears at the end of a specific regime of art in which mimesis—a mode of telling a story or *histoire*—defines the operational expertise of artists.[53] Through

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[53] Rancière (2004a) outlines the regimes fully in *The Politics of Aesthetics*. They are not genealogical or historically specific periods, but rather meta-historical frames, in which individual artists operate through modes of expression. A regime, in this sense, is the episteme of mediation, articulating how language, meaning, and reality relate according to the intricacies of a given social fabric. The first regime is the "ethical regime," in which questions of origin, purpose, and effect of art coincide with concerns of the status of images generated by art. Plato's concerns with the falsity or remove of art sits within this regime, intermeshed with the concern with artistic simulacra's effect on community. Rancière writes, "In this regime, it a matter of knowing in what way image's mode of being affects the ethos, the mode of being of individual and communities" and "prevents art from individualizing itself as such" (21). The poetic or representative regimes rely on a pragmatic principle focused on the practice of creating imitations. Art separates from its craft and labour domain (fine arts) in the ethical regime, as conditions for imitations allow for art as object to be judged for quality, guidelines of representation in relation to content appear, and genres of expression coalesce (hence poetic in relation to Aristotle's understanding of the value of representation, separate from elements like character or story action). He describes "the distribution of resemblances" running "according to the principles of verisimilitude, appropriateness, or correspondence; criteria for distinguishing between and comparing the arts" (22). Mimesis sits at the heart of the poetic and representational regime, yet not in terms of ability for semblance; it is the logic that organizes the "ways of doing, making, seeing, and judging" that propels "a fold that renders the arts visible" (22). Or described slightly differently in *The Future of the Image* (2007), "mimesis is not resemblance but a certain regime of resemblance … it is the fold in the order of ways of making and social occupations that rendered them visible and thinkable … it is a way of making resemblance function within a set of relations between ways of making, modes of speech, forms of visibility, and protocols of intelligibility" (73). The axiom of action operates directly, and art's critical potential flows into a vision of 'human nature;' thus pictorial paintings operate in large scales and use illusionary space and selected focus to present scenes of myth, religion, or history. In the "aesthetic regime," art's identification no longer relies on specific "ways of doing and making" (2004a, 22). The rules of art's cause and viewer's effect break down when the assumptions of human nature and social effect undergo criticism, through the questioning of art's form and resulting effect. Rancière describes it as "the regime that strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres" (23). Philosophy's labour occurs within the regime as generations of scholars grapple with

the norms of mimesis or poetic process, artists operate amid a way of doing—a poiesis—and resultant way of being affected—an aesthesis (7). A split occurs as art propagates into a diversity of forms and the "representational or poetic regime" of art cedes to the "aesthetic regime" with its central concern focusing on a direct and undetermined negotiation of poiesis to aisthesis. This occurs along several unassociated artistic trends or movements (in painting, for example, it is at the heart of realism, romanticism, or abstraction) united in the broken pairing of particular subject and specific representation. Aesthetics, understood as such, is not a discipline; it is a "specific regime for the identification of art" that accentuates reflection on a work-to-work basis as it does away with the "absolute singularity of art" by breaking apart the "concordance between the complex of sensory signs through which the process of poiesis is displayed and the complex of the forms of perception and emotion through which it is felt and understood" (8; 2009b, 60).

Aesthetics opens up to a dual function. On one side, it is the discourse attached to "decisions to reinterpret what makes art and what art makes" (Rancière 2004a, 25). On the reverse side, it is a general regime of visibility and ineligibility. Alternatively stated in Berleant (1991), "implicit in every phase of artistic change is

the rupture, as does the archaeological discovery of classic works of art that recalibrate any canons and the disconnection from art's function in religious or monarchic celebration through the space and ideas of museums. These "displacements" undermine "not only their representative value but also the hierarchy of subjects and genres according to which they were classified and judged" (2009a: 9). Rancière illustrates this point with Hegel's acclaim and the commercial rise of genre paintings in the Netherlands that deemphasize the figurative subject and orientate painting towards the gesture of the painting and the formal act of depiction. Along with other elements, pictures begin to become records of their creation and pave the way for larger scale "pictorial revolutions" (9).

a mode of perception" so that aesthetic experience carries implicit presumptions that are contingent upon context (191). For the task of recognition, Rancière puts forth the "distribution of the sensible" as a "generally implicit law that defines the forms of partaking by first defining the modes of perception in which they are inscribed" (2010, 36). He articulates this elsewhere as "the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within" (2004a, 12). His theory of aesthetics principally shows how "different regimes of art function to represent particular parts of the community as art through something common, and mark other elements (forms, individuals, groups, etc.) as outside (12). Moreover, that "such distributions operate through an ambiguous and uneven logic of social orders that make room for specific voices and actions, while rendering others invisible and inaudible.(12)[54]

Aesthetics and politics conjoin, for Rancière (2009a), "in the way in which the practices and forms of the visibility of art themselves intervene in the distribution of the sensible and its reconfiguration, in which they distribute spaces

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[54] Rancière (2004b) writes, "politics is not primarily the exercise of power or the deciding of common affairs" but rather "politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak" or a process that "calls into question the divisions of common and private, visible and invisible, audible and inaudible" (6; 2004a, 13; 2004b, 6). This "calling into question presupposes the action of supplementary subjects, subjects that are not reducible to social groups or identities but are, rather, collective of enunciation and demonstration surplus to the count of social groups" (2004a, 6). In other words, politics occurs when those outside the precincts of community, or who have no political voice, disrupt and demand space.

and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular" (25).[55] From this perspective aesthetics are a priori elements built into sensory experiences that shift through political operations. Inseparable from practice and inscribed as forms of visibility, there is an ongoing dramaturgy as ways of making and doing align or challenge to shift the sayable and visible.[56] In this way, Rancière combines the pragmatism of Dewey, the throw-into-the-world traits of Heidegger, and Berleant's championing of aesthetic experience as participation, along with the recognition that aesthetics is entangled with perpetually embattled cultural discourses of sense, the sensory, and art (its function, purpose, operations, and so on).

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[55] Rancière's vision of politics begins with Aristotle and the notion of the parts of a community. Rather than alternate or opposing sides of a debate, as he cites the poor opposing the rich and the rich dominating the poor, politics happens in the reverse, when the poor gain traction as an entity (1999, 11). This politics occur when the "part with no part" in the distribution of the sensible gains a 'part.' He writes, "A political community is in effect a community that is structurally divided, not between divergent interest groups and opinions, but divided in relation to itself … The classical form of political conflict opposes several people in one: the people inscribed in the existing forms of law and the constitution; the people embodied in the State; the one ignored by this law or whose right the State does not recognize and the one that makes its claims in the name of another right that is yet to be inscribed in facts" (2009a, 188-189).

[56] Another fundamental component to Rancière's work is the idea of radical equality. Breaking from Althusser in his early work, Rancière refused to position the working class as unwitting victims, caught in their passivity with empty words and meaningless acts. In Rancière's (1991) *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (which is half biography of Joseph Jacotot and half pedagogical treatise), he argues that we must start with equality of intelligence rather than distance. Exploring how teaching typically functions to create distance and maintain hierarchy by perpetually generating mutual ignorance between students and teachers, he concludes that we should focus on how equality is erased. We should seek the way social organization renders voices and actions invisible and inaudible.

2.14 A Theory for the Aesthetics of the LULZ

When we ask what aesthetics are from the methodological position of Latour, the most dynamic and functional account comes from Rancière. As we bridge a connection through the idea of the assemblage, the task becomes charting component relation within a distribution of the sensible. Aesthetic relations become a mode of engagement, connection, and translation between two or more objects. At its base: it is a relationship between two forces participating in the sense and sensory. Yet when deployed, this aesthetic is inseparable from particular qualities specific to the larger networks that constitute its assemblage and hence it is "playing the game according to established rules" (Rancière, 2009c, 2). However, there is an unaddressed apparition looming: correlationism. If the blended approach for aesthetics (borrowing heavily from Latour and Rancière) articulates an a priori structure for sense, does that not operate as a reduction to the actions of humans alone?

Perhaps not, as reduction requires a sense of exhaustibility. The distribution of the sensible seems to suggest that art objects, as much as non-art-objects, hold agency or function within particular deployments or regimes. However, this does not universalize, nor does it suggest that they may configure differently following a redistribution of the sensible. In this way, there is a vibrant element innate to the world of aesthetics, or a "thing-power," as Jane Bennett (2010) terms it, which exists outside the aesthetic engagement with human subjects and holds virtual capacity to

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function differently. Rancière's twinned function of aesthetics as a type of operational discourse and as an operation itself, illuminates the distinctive way it works (through individual interactions and associations; as a larger effectual force) in the network: shaping and influencing actants in any distribution. This also points to how aesthetics between objects easily shift through context and then hold a deeper agency beyond a specific place or part (or no part) in the distribution.

Such a position requires a sleight of hand, fluctuating the burden between Latour and Rancière, but opens the terrain of aesthetics. However, using aesthetics through Rancière to speak to a world of Latourian actants might also seem to operate against Rancière, who focuses on the actions and affairs of humans. Following the logic of his work, it seems workable to include non-human actors in the forces that shape the 'displacements' of aesthetics and politics. Rather than building a hodgepodge of misconstrued, humanized things engaged in reflection on the nature of beauty, this simply means aesthetics is taken as sense and sensible (as well as a situated regime), which requires what Latour (2011) calls "the whole metaphysical apparatus" (86).

In more direct terms, this theory matches the method outlined in Chapter One. In another popular image macro meme (drawing again from the pool of advice animals), "the first day on the Internet Kid" illuminates how this aesthetic theory functions to elucidate the LULZ. The meme started with a stock photo series entitled "young boy spending time with notebook." In late 2011, it appeared across several

sites but has several deeper roots in the culture of the LULZ with earlier incarnations such as the 2010 homophobic "summer fag" macro on 4chan. The intended comedic effect echoes with LULZ impulses, be it making fun of "new fags" (new users) on 4chan, raiding un-expecting forums, taking advantage of loopholes in security software, or something as simple as "link-baiting" annoying and offensive content. These all rely on an inside-out knowledge of the material and expressive ecosystems of the LULZ, as well as the websites beyond its self-imagined borders. In this meme, such cultural capital becomes the punch line with an appropriately
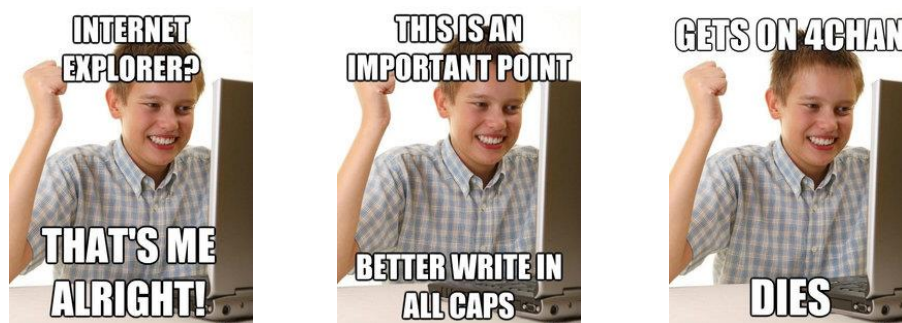
Figure 7 – "First Day on the Internet Kid" Meme

absurd stock image indicating a level of self-critical awareness. This is parody and double-speak in action, as the community both perpetuates itself but also becomes a way to draw attention to dividing technological lines of knowledge. It authors itself while desecrating its own persona. Using Rancière, this deepens beyond discursive gesture. The formal qualities give way to a larger sense of the LULZ mechanisms: how it borrows and speaks in Internet-specific languages (visuals, turns of phrase, channels, etc), what it speaks about expressively, and the very specific material

locations for these voices. It reflects a very specific aesthetic sensibility, at work here acknowledging itself through creative construction, as well as a regime of the sensible beyond it: a culture of users who are navigating, connecting, and conflicting through mediating technologies and spaces. Thus enters agency and politics, which will propel this work forward as the LULZ travel from sites like 4chan into a whole variety of new aesthetic contexts. Understanding such as an experience (via Berleant), with an entwined function (through Rancière), and originating in a mass network of trials (by way of Latour) is crucial to charting this terrain. Thus, the next chapter will move to the early grounds of the LULZ through an exploration of 4chan.

Chapter Three: Origin Points—the Case of 4chan

Having established a methodological and theoretical approach, this chapter begins the excavation of the LULZ through a case study of its cold, black heart: 4chan. It will construct its components part-by-part. The first part will be a historical overview that focuses on the inception of the site through a number of shifts up to the end of 2011, which marks the introduction of new identity markers and several major tipping points in the site's culture. The second will examine how the site creates an aesthetic experience by asking what precisely are the capacities of the LULZ. In the final section, the propensity to affect creates several political questions about 4chan by asking about the force of this aesthetic experience within the networks of the LULZ.

3.2 A History of Channels and Chans

4chan.org is the current largest of the English-language "chan" message boards. There are countless other iterations, often specific to localized interests like drug culture or geographic region, but all descend from 2channel or 2ch.net.[57] The Japanese site started in 1999 and remains popular today. Built on an anonymous user interface, the bulletin board allows anyone to create new text-based threads, respond to others, and through the "age and sage" systems, users can bump content

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[57] There is, however, a longer history at work, given that 2Channel borrowed from the Ayashii World BBS, which itself was a continuation of Japanese Usenets.

to higher positions in the thread list. The board currently holds over 600 active boards including a range of hobby, current events, pornography, technology, and discussion topics with several hundred active threads in each board. Rather than using the then-popular bulletin board systems or software, the website's stripped down interface focuses on more fleeting, anonymous conversation. In early 2001, due to a number of technical issues, the site became increasingly difficult to use and prone to navigation errors. As rumours of the site's imminent demise circulated, the "Futaba Channel" or 2chan.net became a new hub for 'refugee' 2channel users.

Although Shift_JIS or "image constructed out of text characters" reigned across 2channel's early dialogues, there were no actual picture files. Futaba enabled users to post any images to launch a discussion, creating an entirely new type of interface and opening a whole new range of possible engagements. While a number of varied topics carried forward, Futaba remains a nucleus for "otaku" (Japanese 'geek' culture) centred on anime, manga, video games, collectables, and other similar interests. Avid anime fan and 4chan creator Christopher Poole (who goes by the moniker "Moot") discovered Futaba and copied the site code wholesale, intending to build an English-language version. Poole operated within an already established ecosystem of anime fans on English-speaking sites, specifically the "Anime Death Tentacle Rape Whorehouse" (or ADTRW) forum on website Something Awful. As these names suggest, Something Awful (or SA) is a comedy website that delights in being deemed awful through its subversive and offensive content (blogs, parodies,

images, reviews, and so forth). The forums, using a highly altered version of the vBulletin software, contain discussions of a number of 'geek' culture topics like video games. Linked by the ADTRW, an amateur coder named "Shii" teamed up with Moot and constructed the first iteration of 4chan.

3.3 Early History of 4chan

Registered initially at the address 4chan.net, the site went public October 1, 2003. According to Moot, it "started with 20 users" consisting of an assortment of his online and offline friends, but quickly grew as users migrated from Something Awful, as well as other associated sites like Raspberry Heaven and world2ch (Bilton). The site went through a number of dramatic changes in its early days as different themed boards appeared and disappeared. The two core boards, /a/ for "anime/general" and /b/ for "anime/random," became stalwart pillars for the site with /b/ operating as "an everything else," open to content and discussion that embraces the absurd, haphazard, and chance in both image and dialogue. The other popular boards during this early period included /h/ for "hentai" (introduced October 2), and /d/ for "hentai/alternative," along with /c/ for "anime/cute" (which appeared on the site on October 6). In the following weeks, Moot announced /g/ for "guro", /s/ for "sexy beautiful women," and /y/ for "yaoi", although guro was pulled from the site later due to questionable content sparking warnings for the site's web host and problems with PayPal blocking site donations.

In Latourian terms, 4chan gained prominence and emerged as the top board in the early "chan wars" due to the strength of its alliances in a system full of contingent forces, rather than by way of some naturalized, inevitable process.
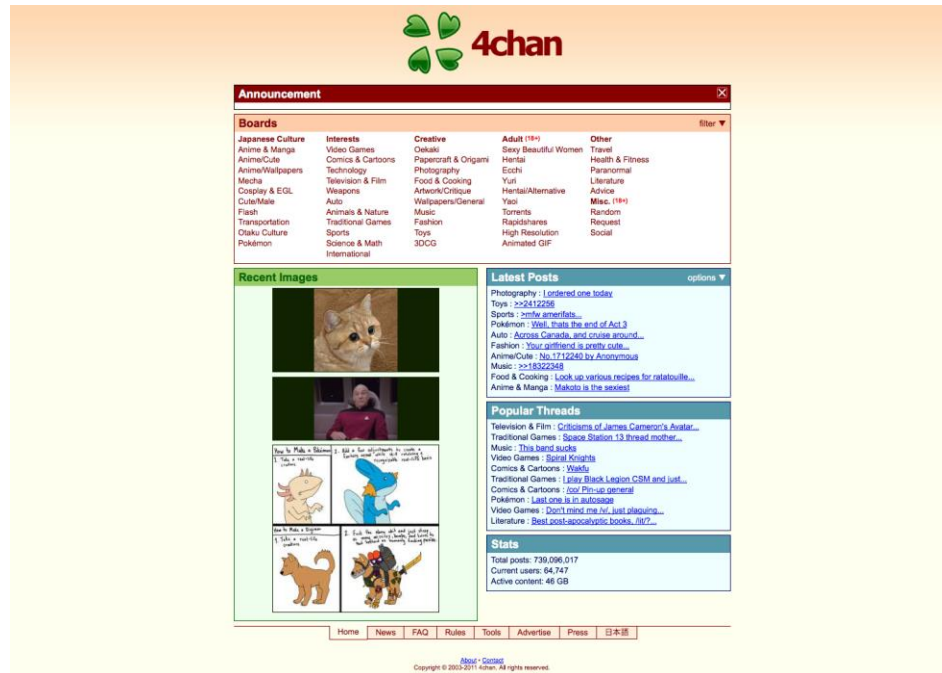
Figure 8 – 4chan's Homepage

Moreover, it was through such trials that its culture of anonymity developed. Something Awful's forums certainly connected a number of users who would become mods, contributors, and mainstays on 4chan, yet their departure also meant a decline to that site. Following an early period of free registration, Something Awful's forum now runs on a one-time activation fee to post or view forum content. Although SA's creators cited bandwidth costs as the reason for the fee, it also works

as a policing measure. Getting banned means one must re-purchase access, linking economic repercussions to community behaviour.

Against Something Awful's ongoing shifts to rules and content control, 4chan conversely loosened the reins on regulation. In his explanatory book *Epic Win: How 4chan's Anonymous Army Conquered the Web*, Cole Stryker interviews Shii, who recalls that initially "the 4chan mod team wanted people to fill in their names with tripcodes" and "the overwhelming majority of 4chan ners used their names" as "people who criticized anonymously were called cowards who didn't want [to take] responsibility for their actions" (144). It was a short-lived state of affairs, as the site flip-flopped and embraced namelessness through "a combination of bottom-up organic change (some people were anonymous from the beginning) and a change of attitude from the mod team" (144-145). The increasing presence of anonymity over pseudonymity (usernames or online nicknames) opened the doors to the more raucous sides of Something Awful and Raspberry Heaven. In these open modes of interaction, a clear element of creativity emerges that "partially stems from decreased liability in discourse" (Knuttila, 2011). However, it also creates moderation problems as large "image dumps" on boards like /l/ or "lolikon" mean horrifying, disturbing, and even illegal materials fill the site, certainly displaying the dark side of anonymous interactions.

Any growing user base necessitates shifts in hardware, software, and policy. By early November, Moot 'reset' the site by deleting all posts and MySQL tables. In

order to keep up with the accumulating swell of user base and content, he reduced the maximum post limit for each board. After only three months of 4chan's existence, Moot blocked Japanese domains.[58] During 2003, the site also modified its board software several times.[59] On the side of hosting, the site experienced temporary downtime due to problems with providers. Increasing traffic means mounting server costs. There have been several drives for donations and despite Moot's threats of site deletion (and even his facetious purported relocation to Mexico with the fundraising contributions), 4chan persists.

3.4 The Shapes of Technological Limits

The early period of 4chan demonstrates a technological arms race between a growing number of users and the limitations of platform: specific code, software, and hosting. As traffic upsurges, huge arrays of material elements require upgrade, which links to alterations in user practices. The key is the inseparability of both. Take for example a combined PHP and SLQ with a robots.txt and .htaccess file that

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[58] On his now defunct site, Shii claimed that it was due to Japanese domains accounting for huge chunks of data traffic but only a few dozen odd posts. This sentiment is echoed by Moot in a post from December 17 that states a ratio of 650GB through use and only contributions of fifty-odd posts in a two week period.

[59] The site starts with an edited version of GazouBSS, the software at the base of the Futaba Channel. In a news post dated October 2, Moot writes, "4chan's script has been further modified (more than you can actually see), and will continue to be modified as scripters offer their help." In late October, Moot announces the shift to a MySQL database, changing the modified futabaSQL to yotsubaSQL, and accordingly doing away with a "flatcode text file, which was pretty inefficient" (Poole 2003). This meant that by November 22, the site operated on then current versions of PHP/MySQL and fostered a much faster visitor and contributor experience. The site then shifted to Futallaby, coded by site contributor "thatdog" to maintain a similar look but open itself to further expansion (again using a PHP script retooled from the Futaba Channel).

prevents site scrapping by auto-downloading bots and hotlinking (displaying images hosted on 4chan servers on other sites). This opened up bandwidth for the community, who could in turn add new images and text to the site lexicon. This occurred on the back of hosting decisions reliant on outside forces (like company GoDaddy) that resulted in even further changes, evident in the site changing from the .net to the .org domain. More users and images meant the introduction of particular policing content, which became pronounced during the period on boards like /l/. In all of these chains, the direction of site and community exist in wholly dynamic roles.

Downtime, limitations in hosting traffic, or sluggish loading on 4chan might have alienated that early community, but as Latour illuminates, such trials can galvanize relations and forge alliances between actors. In March of 2004, the site again came under threat due to large server bills. In the ensuing pledge drive, Moot gathered enough revenue for the site to run into the following year. By contributing monetarily to the site, community members gain a sense of causal responsibility in its ongoing evolution and existence. By abandoning their older communities (if only in hyperbolic speech on 4chan), they gain loyalties with the other expatriates.

A community forging relations means the development of a culture. Downplaying the site's original purpose "as a subproject to entertain all the nerds in ADTRW as an English version of 2chan" in order to highlight the early experimental moments is a mistake (Poole). The site's genesis inaugurated a long held practice of

posting, sharing, circulating, and collecting pornographic images. Certainly, anime in all its diverse forms is not tantamount to pornography; however, there are key intersections between the titillating, salacious, and lewd images that unify these communities and an open, anonymous interface with which to share them. Moreover, for 4chan users, sharing pornography has become an inroad to interact with similar users. Early moderation enforced the site's guiding principles, especially outside the more open terrain of /b/, in an attempt to keep the discussion focused upon anime. Yet pornography has never been never shunned on the site— unless it breaks actual laws. To understand 4chan is to understand it as a hub of sensational imagery and to see that its historic discourse is never without—and likely will never will be without—the incursion of pornography.

   After a rocky initial nine-month period, Moot wrote a post in the site's news section titled "DING DONG, 4chan IS DEAD" that scrutinized the direction of the site:

> In my opinion, the site was killed by the following things: 1. A lack of contribution outright, with asshole and poor quality posters mixed in ... 5. Flooding. GNAA put the final nail in the coffin, however I am thankful that they willingly ceased the flood after finding out it was costing me money.

He does not single out the frequency and ubiquity of pornography or loyalty to the spirit of the discussion board topics or rules, but challenges the site's discourse more generally. This was perhaps one of the site's largest trial periods, as like before, rival forums proliferated and the economic pressures of the site determined its being. The GNAA, or purposely-sensational "Gay Nigger Association of America"

is a self-described "world-famous trolling organization" who Jodi Dean (2010) describes in her book *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*. She defines the group as "organized anti-blogging trolls who take their name from a 1992 Danish movie, *Gay-Niggers from Outerspace*" who claim to "promote neither racism nor homophobia" but instead to "sow disruption on the internet" through "extensive disruptive practices," be it flooding a site with a "massive amount of text or data with no meaning or relevance" or "producing hoax or shock sites" (6). While even Moot singles out GNAA for being partially responsible for breaking the site, the rumblings on the site during the flood were that it was actually the work of TheRowan, webmaster of HentaiKey and 5chan. He was also (allegedly) responsible for reporting 4chan to PayPal, in order to cease donations to the site. Even in opposition, these bouts between sites or boards or individual site creators illuminate the affiliations in the larger landscape of Internet culture. They connect in relations because such relations are possible: in the parlance of the abject Internet, "trolls trolling trolls trolling trolls."

  With each push and pull between forces during these early days, 4chan emerged *as* 4chan. Not solely through top-down moderation or bottom-up user impact, but through the limits and possibilities of all human and non-human elements stabilizing or shaking the boundary points of the site's identity. The GNAA's involvement with the site, regardless of responsibility, highlights the growing aspects of unruly, trollish behaviour on 4chan and within the adjoined web

ecosystem. Moot's call for improved contributions speaks to a type of culture that he was hoping to foster. By decrying "the rest of the internet for completely sucking at everything that is not distributing pornography or hilarious email chain letters," he exposes a predilection towards the more rowdy and unruly side of 4chan. Paralleling the deepening abjectness of 4chan, the community's taste for scorn and cruelty had begun to manifest in nearly every thread, on each board, around the clock. This hunger for all things unkind will persistently skulk and lurk in the spirit of 4chan, consistently leading the assemblage into cold acts of misogyny, racism, and hatred.

3.5 4chan Becomes 4chan

Several elements collide in 4chan's early period against a backdrop of material changes: content sharing through the various fan filters of otaku culture, a network of image distribution (including a great deal of sexually explicit material), and a slow movement in moderation and community towards trolling and mischief. This tendency is highlighted by the re-labelling of /b/ from "anime/random" to "random," indicating a slow departure from its anime-oriented roots into a more self-created, chaotic community. Concurrently, throughout the next few years, additional specialized boards pop up across the site: /k/ for weapons, /o/ for automobiles, /sm/ for "shota" or male anime content, /gif/ for animated images, /hr/ for high resolution, /p/ for photography, and /ic/ for art, for example. Through

the partitioning of the site into discreet conversations (a tradition inherited from other boards), /b/ becomes all the more disorderly, as it lacks any principal guidelines.

With 4chan's 'resurrection' in August of 2004, there is a clear sense of what 4chan exists as—through both the ongoing edited version of Futallaby (the image board's PHP) and the fortifying alliances of the community. At this point in the website code's evolution, there are image responses to posts, quoting a response number, tripcodes, display of the first three responses of a thread on a board main page, banner ads, and other interface mainstays. This thesis will follow /b/ from this point in late 2005 until the introduction of the poster ID system in February of 2012. By isolating the aesthetic experience within and through the site, specifically the /b/ board, we see how the coded images and text become an outlet to engage with both dominant subject positions and modes of reconfiguring belonging. In other words, the aesthetic experience of /b/ is a mode of relation operating with and against a larger distribution of the sensible.

During this period, the site relied upon a general set of parameters: from the homepage one could enter specific boards, including Japanese culture, interests, creative, adult, other, and miscellaneous categories. Each individual page loads fifteen previews of threads, showing the initial post and the first three responses (if they exist); one can click "reply" and then enter the thread in its whole to either respond or simply peruse (in site parlance: "lurking"). There is no registration

required to access or post to the site. Starting a thread requires an image file, however in responding images are optional. On a level of interface, 4chan resembles any number of forums—for frugal deals, or audio gear, or music downloading—but it holds one key feature that many others lack: anonymity. There is an option to use a tripcode, which is a cryptographically encoded marker of identity, but following the initial period of 4chan, they have become rare and their use is subject to ridicule. Moreover, "Tripcodes are also often imitated, meaning anonymity often overtakes the purported marked identity" (Knuttila 2011). Anonymous discussion dominated 4chan during this period, especially on /b/.

3.6 4chan and Memes

A key aspect of the community's embrace of shared identity on /b/ operates through the aforementioned creativity interrelated to experimentation that continues to generate a plethora of Internet memes. In some cases, 4chan operates as origin point. More often, the site's community amplifies meme content in scale and diversity, as demonstrated with a meme like "all your base are belong to us" or "This is Sparta!", in which the dramatic dialogue from the over-the-top film *300* becomes a reusable reply to images or content. In 2005 and 2006, a slew of memes appeared on 4chan: "Over 9000," which references the power level of a character on the cartoon *Dragonball Z*, the line of dialogue "Do a Barrel Roll" from the Nintendo game *Starfox*, or *South Park* inspired "??? Profit!" meme that uses fill-in-the-blank

text, which always leads to a final 'profit!'.[60] With each tidbit of pop-culture bric-a-brac, the original meaning gives way to reinvention. On /b/, a drop in the Dow Jones becomes an image post of frantic traders juxtaposed with "It's under nine thousaaaaaand!!!"; images of a slowly sinking cruise liner appear with macrotext "do a barrel roll!"; "step one: accuse Saddam of WMD, step two: invade Iraq, step three kill innocents, step four: ???, step five: PROFIT!!" appears beside "1. Go to the woods at night, 2. ???, 3. PROFIT!!"

Browsing 4chan's /b/ is an intensely temporal experience. New threads replace old threads, meaning threads that lack engagement (or "bumps" to the front page) fall from the bottom of the fifteenth page and vanish from the site interface. 4chan also has no official archive, enhancing the fleeting quality of content. In their paper "4chan and /b/: An Analysis of Anonymity and Ephemerality in a Large Online Community," Bernstein et al. conclude that "the majority of threads have a short lifespan and a small number of replies; the median life of a thread is just 3.9 minutes" (53). In rare cases, threads on /b/ last hours and in the less-frenetic boards, threads can exist for days, but there always remains that looming end point. Gabriella Coleman (2009) argues that memes thus sit against the "volume of posts and responses" operating as "the locus of memory." To respond with "Do a Barrel Roll" or to end a story with a well-placed "over 9000" is to speak to the community

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[60] The meme itself originates from a *South Park* episode in which gnomes would collect underpants in phase one, followed by an unknown second stage and the resulting profit in the final stage.

through the community by way of its in-jokes and knowledge practices. Memes thus operate as communal markers and guiding points. Moreover, to reinvent or alter a meme adds to its depth and gives additional weight to such insular practices.

Many memes during this period went beyond simple text response. "Shoop Da Whoop" is a transformed face, again from television's *Dragonball Z,* that appears in a diversity of images and videos. The character "cell," altered with large red lips and circular eyes, holds an undeniable similitude to racist iconography. In the original incarnations, he proclaims, "I'M A FIRIN' MAH LAZER" or "I'M A' CHARGIN' MAH LAZER" and after some jostling, fires a laser beam from his mouth. This meme continues to exist in an endless plethora of juxtapositions. This period also saw specific memetic behaviours, like bait-and-switch linking, in which 4chan moderators occasionally deployed word filters that automatically changed text on the site, for example turning "mods" to the "the people's champions" or "faggot" to "candy-ass." For a short period, the word "egg" automatically appeared as "duck" and soon the word eggroll became "duckroll" and, inevitably, a conceptual image of a duck with wheels. Posters would offer up descriptions of tantalizing videos or images, but clicking through the links would lead to an image or video of the duckroll. This later became the "rickroll," in which unsuspecting users would find themselves on YouTube watching Rick Astley's "Never Gonna Give You Up" music video.

These ostensibly nonsensical scraps of Internet culture may seem similar to all sorts of popular online content, partially due to the broad usage of the term "meme" itself. As Shifman (2011) states, Dawkins use of the term holds a "whole set of implications and meanings" that have been "ascribed to it over the years" including the stripping of human agency, community practice, and complexity (3). Moreover, despite conflation, memes are not analogous to viral content that "spreads to the masses via digital word-of-mouth mechanisms without significant change" (3). For Shifman, viral content is thus popular music videos or commercial images, and is about "mechanism of delivery and scale of audience" (3). Each meme on 4chan comes about through particular deployments: configurations, actions, tastes, reactions, and choices of the community.

There are also the mediating factors of the site: several memes start with "gets." In a tradition inherited from 2channel, the information automatically tied to a post generally contains "Anonymous [or Tripcode information] mm/dd/yy (day) 00:00:00 No. xxx." 'Gets' refer to notable instances of the post counters, for example large milestone numbers (No. 100000) or repeated numbers (No. 33333) . 'Gets' accelerate specific potential meme content because the community gives them significance as milestones; they usher in a great deal of conversation, exist within the beloved temporal flow of the site, and accordingly, are open to deviation.[61] In

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[61] A case is easily made that 'gets' themselves, as well as the ensuing discourse around them, are memes: there are 'get' threads that offer a game with the winner (or loser) having posts that end with

2005, when the off-the-cuff text "fgsfds" earned a get, a huge array of content followed. Applied to a photograph of Wolf Blitzer holding up a finger, the chance script became a shorthand for "for god's sake fucking die, slacktard." Eventually applicable to any image of a raised finger, the meme expresses disappointment in the logic or execution of a post or thread. It demonstrates how the development of memes on 4chan requires a huge array of contingent factors and social aggregates including those around the interface itself.

Throughout the 2005 and 2006 period, /b/ often argued over the notion of a "forced meme." When the "No. 1000000" get featured an image of *Simpsons* character Milhouse and the text "MILHOUSE GET," pandemonium roared through the community. The resulting argument over Milhouse's meme status itself created a paradoxical idea that "Milhouse is not a meme" was itself a meme. With each of these cases, a meme gains a critical audience through intermediary interaction: reposts, references in text, posts outside the site. Often, though, within 4chan there is a key point of intervention as a mediator transforms, modifies, or distorts the meaning and it again distributes along intermediary channels. It is only at these points of interference that it gains community status as a meme. An image of a polar bear attempting to bite a cube of apples frozen in water appeared on 4chan with the text "im gonna post this everyday til you like this." While the bear image did

a predetermined number, there are 'fail gets' that the community decries, and there are entire threads dedicated to guessing one's post number.

proliferate in variations, it was the phrasing itself that became a meme with the associated fill-in-the-blank content open to change. This indicates the level of labour that separates a meme from viral content.

3.7 The Cruelty of the LULZ

4chan memes, especially those rising out of the /b/ board, are often crass and laden with offensive language and iconography; they also commonly build upon one disconcerting element. Posters of /b/ refer to themselves as "/b/tards" in purportedly self-effacing, but nevertheless ableist language.[62] The abbreviation OP to refer to "original poster" originates in early nineties Usenet groups but on 4chan becomes the ubiquitous meme and near automatic reply, "OP is a fag." In 2005, one of the period's longest lasting 4chan memes started with a /b/ post detailing the bullying of a co-student (who had a Pokémon "mudkips" doll) and ending the cruel tale with "So I ask you: do you like Mudkips?"[63] Repeated reposting (or in 4chan parlance "copypasta" for copy and pasting) led to "I Herd U Like Mudkips" as both non-sequitur response and community mascot. Even though the inevitable conceptions have a fun or playful air, the roots of the meme are undeniable

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[62] There is an entire array of nicknames for users of other boards: "/a/ssholes" or "wee/a/boos," "/c/itizens," "/cm/whores," "/co/mrades," "/d/eviants," "/fa/ggots," "/mis/fit/s" or "/fit/izens," "/g/eeks," "/jp/sies," "/k/ommanos" or "fuc/k/ers," "art/i/sts," "/po/eople," "/m/orons," "/mu/tants," "/r/etards," "/s/leazebags," "/soc/iopaths," "/sp/artans," "fa/tg/uys" or "ca/tg/irl," "/v/irgins," "sodom/y/tes," "b/u/lldykes," "robots" for "/r9k/," "/x/philes," "s/adv/irgins," etc.
[63] Like any meme, there are early instances of the term beyond its pop culture source. On website DeviantART, a user continually invited members to his fan group, often promoting his favourite Pokémon character Mudkips.

problematic. As Phillips (2012) outlines in her dissertation "This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: The Origins, Evolution and Cultural Embeddedness of Online Trolling," it is impossible to state that 4chan is completely composed of "biologically male" users but the overwhelming "ethos of /b/ is undeniably androcentric" (51)—to which one can add other clear trends like ableism, misogyny, racism, and so forth.

There is cruelty in the creativity. Or it might be more germane to say the "ethos of /b/ is undeniably misanthropic." In 2006, members of 4chan's anonymous mass embarked on a series of 'raids' against various targets. After Mitchell Henderson, a seventh grader in Rochester, shot himself, /b/ discovered a memorial page on MySpace that described him as "an hero to take that shot, to leave us all behind" and referenced his distress over a lost iPod.[64] The meme "an hero" describing suicide and jokes around iPods arose on /b/, and members created a plethora of images and videos making jest of the incident; they also raided the Myspace page, replacing Mitchell's profile image with a zombie avatar, and a few members even prank phone-called his parents. In July of that same year, a group of /b/ users raided the teenager-aimed social networking site Habbo Hotel, in which users create avatars and travel through a number of animated areas and interact with other users. Selecting identical avatars—Black men with grey suits and large 'afro' hairstyles—the marauding /b/ legion blocked key passages and spammed text

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[64] In a *New York Times* article on the incident, Mattathias Schwartz links the obituary's posting on mydeathspace.com as the step between the event and eventual /b/ discovery.

onscreen—clearly a frustrating experience for those attempting to use the social media game. For the raiders, the joy of the raid is precisely in the exasperated pleas and confused appeals of other users. Throughout 2006, /b/ was raid-staging ground. Threads provided image instructions and even basic software to "unban" characters on Habbo Hotel, thus enabling the raids to continue.

Such acts mirror the offensive fundamentals of most 4chan memes: purposeful employment of problematic racial or gender encoded imagery, a great deal of toil to harass or demean others, and an exclusivity of understanding meant to befuddle the unaware or unacquainted. The incivility of such creations and actions is easy to denounce. Within the community, posters routinely joke about /b/ being a terrible bastion, home to the worst conceptions, behaviours, and collective hatreds. Outside the community, media reports often decry the site as the "lawless Wild West of the Web, a place of uninhibited bawdiness and verbal violence" (Smith 2008). In certain academic circles, message boards like 4chan have an "anonymity problem" making it a kind of "cyber cesspool" (Levmore 2010, 50; Leiter 2010, 155). The only issue in such approaches is the reducibility that comes with mass discounting. These acts are not defendable, but they are also not wholly one-dimensional in quality. With each meme or raid, including those forced, failed, popular, denounced, or effective, there is usually dissent and conflict. Most interestingly, it forms out of the communal or shared: an anonymous identity.

3.8 The Start of Anonymous

In the current moment, Anonymous is broadly associated with a multi-oriented, politically-driven group of hackers and activists. There is a backstory to the term, as Gabriella Coleman explains: "before 2008 ... the moniker was used almost exclusively to stage pranks ... targeting people and organizations, desecrating reputations, and revealing humiliating information" (2012b, 83). In the 4chan FAQ section, the response to the question "who is anonymous?" is:

> "Anonymous" is the name assigned to a poster who does not enter text in to the [Name] field. Anonymous is not a single person, but rather, represents the collective whole of 4chan. He is a god amongst men. Anonymous invented the moon, assassinated former President David Palmer, and is also harder than the hardest metal known the man: diamond. His power level is rumored to be over nine thousand. He currently resides with his auntie and uncle in a town called Bel-Air (however, he is West Philadelphia born and raised). He does not forgive.

The response is loaded with memetic references and foregrounds a version of Coleman's Anonymous as a collective whole, which users sport when undertaking group action. Starting in 2005 until the shift in 2008, Anonymous operated as a conceptual persona for 4chan. Visualized in several common memes—a featureless green head with the overlaid text "no photo available" or a headless suit with its arms crossed behind its back—the term became a mass noun around 2006. As Phillips (2012) notes, paratextual sites like Urban Dictionary and Encyclopedia Dramatica provide evidence that the variations of the "Anonymous Credo" of "We Are Anonymous. We are Legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect Us"

proliferate during this same period (56). In this way, despite the fact that posts originate from individual computers and users (perhaps in some cases several people in front of one computer or automated bot script), the site's culture, policing, and governing force emerge in the figure of Anonymous or related sub-personas like the /b/tard.

As Bernie Hogan (2012) outlines in "Pseudonyms and the Rise of the Real-Name Web," anonymity functions as a "*state* implying the absence of personally identifying qualities" (author's italics, 293). Jana Herwig (2011) expands this point in "The Archive as the Repertoire: Mediated and Embodied Practice on Imageboard 4chan.org," stating that the shared identity of the site "serves as a semiological laboratory, where body-subjects collectively explore meaning, the potential scope of a debate, and in particular the boundaries between what can what cannot be said" (52). She mirrors Nicolás Mendoza's (2011) argument in "A Tale of Two Worlds: Apocalypse, 4chan, Wikileaks and the Silent Protocol Wars," which describes 4chan as "the Internet's most prolific semiotic laboratory" orchestrated upon the specifics of interface, as the "overall environment [is] different" to most sites and accordingly "impose[s] a determined set of values of its members/users" (6). In this way, as Vyshali Manivannan (2012) explains, because of the interface's focus on anonymity, "individual authorship is less a concern than the quality of post content, resulting in a meritocracy divorced from visible seniority."

The interlocked agreement among these varied scholars suggests that the anonymous interface generates specific conditions or context for user engagement to which the community responds. The precise nature of the response is paradoxical. On one hand, as Coleman (2012b) points out, a culture of iconographic images, videos, and practices crystallizes in memes. Manivannan (2012) refers to this as the institutional memory of the site that overcomes the transient discursive elements and lack of visible records. Authorship dissipates into the group, as the content becomes more crucial than who created it. For anyone unfamiliar with the elements of 4chan's institutional memory—its memes, encoded semiotics, or discursive practices—the site is baffling. Hence, 4chan is simultaneously Dadaist nonsense *and* a highly encoded, user-controlled semiotic system. The site's interface opens to engagement by eliminating registration systems and log-ins, yet maintains a high cultural and institutional barrier to community entry (Herwig 2011) through its shibboleths and elitism.

3.9 Forging an Aesthetics of the LULZ

In "User Unknown: 4chan, Anonymity and Contingency," I (2011) argue that 4chan's discourse is an assemblage built from several component parts. Material elements such as the absent archive and perpetually vanishing threads force users to constantly refresh and view an unending mixture of threads in varying states of reinvention and extinction. The result is an "ontological encounter with anonymity

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that engenders contingency" in the sense that the discourse that materializes follows "neither necessary, nor impossible" guidelines. On the expressive front, there is a cultural championing of "OC," or original content, imaginative or clever takes on existing elements of the institutional memory, as well as technical skillsets to locate or spread specific online content (the "sauce" or source of a posted image, particular memetic content, or pornographic images, for example).

Such approved or celebrated etiquette receives no accolade beyond the same temporal visibility that all posts garner. On /b/, the sheer omnipresence of anonymity means one cannot elevate oneself above other posters, beyond meagre attempts which usually take the form of childish insult. There are no content regulation systems such as upvote or downvote structures to increase or lower visibility in the site's interface, and no evidence of community engagement through post counts linked to an account, or cultural capital among community members associated with a user name. Assuming a place in the community through discursive knowledge of institutional memory may boost one's level of contextual *understanding* but it does not discourage one from posting, as there is no persistent repercussion for posts that flout community conventions or defy the logic of established memes, or any reason not to simply spout something random.

These conditions encourage dissent and disagreement. Frequent appeals to the community to help with tasks (photoshopped work or suggested raid targets for instance) are met with hostility or subversion. Accordingly, I (2011) argue that

"there is a constant rupturing in the fabric, as the billowing anonymous mass resists, fights, defies and combats anyone who tries to rise above or tether the community." On multiple fronts, "[f]rom the deliberate misrepresentation of content to purposeful feigning of knowledge to individuals pretending to be multiple posters in order to undermine posts to the unrelenting objections against those that claim authority" there is constant "challenge to expertise and effacing of those who position themselves in authority" (Knuttila). 4chan's transitory interface encourages a dynamic spatial-temporal-discursive institutional memory with mystifying cultural practices and baffling discourse, but one that faces consistent and constant challenge through contingency. The community burns its own creations and conversations, even as they are disappearing into the void of the site, only to then mourn and create (and re-create) a lore of the lost.

To understand the site, aesthetics remains key. 4chan's structure imposes a certain element of function. From community practices, specific discourses form. However, the words and images tied to the contingency demand more than a top-down study of semiotic conventions or ideological apparatuses. To return to Rancière's theories, 4chan becomes a staging of text and images: a particular spatial-temporal form of mediation in which users forge a "community of sense." Rancière (2009c) articulates this community separate from that which is "collectively shaped by some common feeling" but rather as a "frame of visibility and intelligibility that puts things or practices together under the same meaning, which shapes a certain

sense of community" (31). It is more than some overarching paradigm, as it is a binding of "practices, forms of visibility, and patterns of intelligibility" (31).

3.10 Engaging with the LULZ on 4chan

The community, its interactions, its use of text, and its development of images relate to the distribution of the sensible or "the play of relations between the visible, the sayable, the thinkable and the doable at the heart of which gazes operate, things are named, discourses produced, actions undertaken" (Rancière 2011, 242). The site thus develops along accepted understandings of the "capacities of perceiving and thinking," which are "constantly modified, for individuals and collectivities, either by singular sub-systems, or by events that, breaking the ordinary temporal logic, deploy other forms of possible experience, other possible ways of giving sense to experience" (Rancière, 2011: 242). So the questions arise: how does aesthetics as a mode of engagement function on 4chan? What forces shift the subjectivation on and of the site? In addition, how does the site's community of sense relate to larger forms of a distribution of the sensible?

To date, the largest meme originating (or at least initially gaining steam) on 4chan is the LOLcat. The purposely-misspelt text over images of cats is a vague enough form with wide enough appeal that prototypes date back to early photography but the form we see today began online in 2003 on Something Awful and became an Internet phenomenon in 2005 on 4chan (Lamar 2012; Langton

2007). Lev Grossman (2007) quotes a source in "Lolcats Addendum: Where I Got the Story Wrong" stating that curated threads of LOLcats began on 4chan as "a protest against 'Furry Friday' threads" in which users would post sexualized "anthropomorphic Disney characters." There are a number of 'well-known' LOLcats identified chronologically with the period but they typically were either dialogue captions (i.e. "I can has cheezburger?" or "is it caturday already?"), characters (i.e. "longcat is long," "serious cat is serious," "ceiling cat is watching you masturbate"), reaction images (contextualizing a cat's emotional cues via text information), or fill-in-the-blank macros, (i.e. "im in ur wiki rvrtin ur edits" or "im in ur couch steelin ur change").

The LOLcat perfectly highlights how a meme holds the dual role within the community as shared in-joke and membership marker, yet continues to change and develop, morphing into vibrant reincarnations that supersede direct community control. On a level of aesthetic engagement, it demonstrates the 'logic of the absurd' that rules so many of 4chan's creations. In "Recombinant Comedy, Transmedial Mobility, and Viral Video," David Gurney (2011) applies the notion to popular viral videos, stating that "for humor to arise, there must be a logical balance of congruity and incongruity, plausibility and implausibility, and sense and nonsense" (4). Comedy etches itself in the conclusion to a well-established "major premise" with an observed "minor presence" intersecting an adjoined "tertiary premise" that is both "logical and absurd" (4). Gurney draws from Jerry Palmer's example of an elevator

falling on a man (major premise of the resulting death), in which he survives (minor premise) but struts out reduced in size (tertiary premise). The aesthetics of LOLcats, like many memes, requires understanding how a tension between "plausibility and implausibility" plays out within the specific cultural climate of 4chan (4). So many early LOLcats featured either everyday tasks (as with the "im in ur …") or details (eating a hamburger), given a tertiary premise by anthropomorphizing cats (they don't code computers or hold a pathological hunger for hamburgers). As Jay Dixit (2008) expands in "I can has cheezburger … and pathos?", what makes LOLcats distinctive is that "the characters they portray—and yes they are portraying characters—don't represent cats at all" as they become hybrid representations or stand-ins for those who create, share, and spread the meme.

LOLcats operate as affective personifications through the simple nature of their aesthetic form. To return to Berleant (2005), aesthetics operates contextually. He writes, "no single or dominant feature establishes an aesthetic situation"— instead "a number of factors combine into an inclusive situation" (26). To view an image or post on 4chan, one "centers on specific objects," be they text or image (26). Sensory awareness operates through "the physiology of the brain and other organic functions" like "the formative influences of education and other cultural institutions and practices that inform our belief system, affect our responses, and contribute to the many-layered complexity of perception" (26-27). Berleant stresses that sensuousness is key, as "the senses fuse" in an experience of discovery (27). LOLcats

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within this aesthetic frame do not require the removed attention of an art object or the intellectual premise of distance, rather just the inversion of the "usual order of significance" as the tertiary premise surprises, solicits attention, and delights through the confrontation with the unexpected (27). The appeal in the re-contextualization of a character like "longcat" or a new variation on a fill-in-the-blank macro or reaction image to a sympathetic scene is the pleasure of confronting the neither necessary, nor impossible gambit of content on 4chan. As Berleant describes, the contingent retraces or reconfigures our centre of attention as "those features that were once unnoticed or ignored become important" (27). Users reimagine shared narratives of banal life: its objects and events. While it is certainly not true of the vast majority of content on the site, the anonymous interface and ephemeral experience mean that, through aesthetic perception, "novel and creative ideas and relationships may emerge" (27).

Throughout 2007, LOLcats proliferated online. A blog titled "I can has Cheezburger" (ICHC) became a hub for the feline meme, including (among other options) a meme builder to add captions to photos. Users flocked to the site and, in September of 2007, Photobucket (itself owned by a division of Fox Interactive Media) bought it for nearly $2 million. Synchronously, LOLcats slowly fell out of rotation on 4chan. Berleant (2005) describes the waning of discovery, writing that "when experience becomes habitual or routine it loses its aesthetic character" (27). The problem with the shift to other sites comes in the arrangement of forces. Image

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generators, on sites like ICHC or memegenerator.net or quickmeme.com, leave watermarks on the images. These sites often have rigid content policies, meaning only particular types of image and text works gain visibility. They also require log-ins, which ensure a persistent identity and community standing. The voting systems, like the five star system on ICHC, mean community tastes directly influence the prominence of content. One of the largest factors diminishing the aesthetic potency of discovery is the high level of curation. On meme generator, you select from an already existent meme type (i.e. "Y U No," "Success Kid," "Forever Along," "Good Guy Greg," and so on). The combined force of these elements of interface mean that contingency diminishes, and, while Berleant notes that "every experience is perceptually unique," any repeated objects and events project "influence on the repetitions that will follow" (27-28). From 4chan towards these sites, the meme—in all its variations—changes because the tertiary premise of absurdity vanishes by way of accumulated familiarity, meaning that the notion of a cat wanting a cheeseburger (at least in image form) has actually become a conceivable premise.

Many memes on 4chan fall into a similar arc as LOLcats, waning on the site as they grow on social media websites, meme databases, and other enclaves of online culture. For Bearleant (2005), a major element of contextual aesthetics is reciprocity between object and its appreciator as a cascade of elements "contribute information, interpretative judgment, and other kinds of cognitive content" which dovetails with continuity or the way "these participating factors interact and overlap" as they

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"blend into one another in the living experience of an aesthetic situation" (28). With the highly restrictive contextual experience on a site like ICHC (again due to content regulation, traceable pseudonymity, and delimited creation options) the field of reciprocity curtails. On 4chan's /b/, the nebulous mass of users lumped into anonymous performance, the constant onslaught and expurgation of threads, comments, and images, as well as the relatively open possibilities for content, means an increasingly large aesthetic spectacle. A LOLcat gains contextualization within a gambit of possible alternative takes, recreations, interpretations, reactions, deviations, and so on. In Berleant's words, through reciprocity there is an "activating" of the "attention of the audience," pushing the LOLcat into the continuity of the site's contingent experience as it "melts into continuities" with the elements around it (28).

When describing the key traits of the LULZ in Chapter One, I discussed the core of the first quality: spectacle. The aesthetics of the LULZ demands brief moments of attention, but always in a dovetailing variation. It is the push of something neither necessary, nor impossible emerging from the interfaces of these sites. The LULZ constantly revisits the same points, images, canons, yet always gravitates towards the unique, the unexpected, and the unfamiliar. The LULZ forge a spectacle and elicit attention through sensation, reaction, and reception.

3.11 A Field of Aesthetics in a Land of Idleness

While 4chan may be responsible for a plethora of memes during this late 2000 period, the non-memetic material remains equally important to the site and any understanding of its aesthetic experience. There are many gradations of semiotic and pictorial possibilities between original content, unprecedented rebuttal, loose adaptation of fragments from the site's institutional memory, memes, and identical re-posts—and they all play a role in shaping other points in the spectrum. For Berleant (2005), "the concept of engagement encapsulates these features of a contextual aesthetic" and it is through engagement with 4chan that the site makes sense—or the 'sense' of the site reveals itself. To recall the underlying narrative of Chapter Two, it is only when rejecting "the dichotomizing metaphysics that underlies traditional aesthetic theory" that we "may discover that the fullest and most intense experiences" will come forth (28). A LOLcat in the 4chan interface is different from an identical image on a separate site, simply because the aesthetic experience is distinctive. Equally, a LOLcat re-posted on 4chan changes contextually. How then to grapple with the diversity of aesthetic experiences?

For Berleant (2005), "[b]ecause the aesthetic concerns the character of experience itself and is not confined to a particular kind of object or place, it knows no external or a priori restitutions" (29). The only limitation is "our perceptual capabilities and our willingness to participate" and, consequently, "aesthetic experience does not dominate every situation" as it is often "subordinate to other

demands and interests, such as religious, practical, technological, or cognitive ones"

and, equally, "sometimes the aesthetic supervenes on our usual expectations" (29).

This means that 4chan's contingent and transitory interface leads to an aesthetic

experience composed of both unexpected and surprising content, as well as a flow of

familiar and conversant pieces and splinters of the site's institutional memory. Not

every situation operates as aesthetic experience: say the user cannot navigate the

page, a service provider drops the connection, or a user has the page open while

actually playing a game in a different window or composing a text message.

However, there is *room* for an aesthetic field on 4chan.

The second key part of the LULZ outlined in Chapter One is idleness. This

potential field relies on the give and take of expectation and surprise, of the familiar

and unfamiliar. Part of the reason 4chan works so well at facilitating spectacle is the

bare-bones interface. As function is stripped down, there is increased space for the

creation of memes, jokes, conversation, and of course offence. It is an empty stage

for a theatre of cruelty and creativity. Users are not there for anything beyond that

spectacle. This trait carries onwards: the LULZ are often not productive. They do not

facilitate conversations, generate ideas, or generate creative objects. Not to say they

cannot—the array of memes, jokes, and institutional memory suggest the reverse.

However, the focus on the idle, the passing of time by slackers and loafers, becomes

wrapped up in the vocabulary and sensibility of the LULZ. It is the seeming paradox

of the banal and unimportant, the simple and the unassuming, that allows the grand

spectacle to break out.

3.12 A Spectacle of Possibility

In this way, the aesthetic engagement of the LULZ operates as a Deleuzian

(1987) "space of possibility." A pool of water exists in an 'actual' sense as liquid, but

has the potential to evaporate or freeze. The 'tendency' of water is to become

vapour at a certain temperature or flow fast in certain wind conditions, yet this does

not override the capacities of the water to turn solid or move slowly, for example.[65]

Ontologically, everything exists as intensive[66] singularities[67] that form a multiplicity

of morphogenetic processes generating the actual: for example, the localized

molecules of waters bonded in the pool. Yet this does not vanquish or hierarchically

override the capacity to be steam or what Deleuze terms the 'virtual.' The water's

'space of possibilities' exists in both the actual and the virtual—ideas and

multiplicities give both equal importance. There is an immanent relation with the

water to the ground that forms a pool, to the air above, and to the temperature

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[65] Articulated differently, a knife has actual qualities—like sharpness—but when not in use only has the potential to cut. Cutting something (specifically something that contains the capacity to be cut) shifts it from a state to an actualized event. An orange connected to a knife exists spatially and then is connected in the temporal act, as the capacities become actual. The act moves the slicing of the fruit from virtual to actual. Virtual tendencies are actualized from the "initially undifferentiated field."
[66] There are both objective intensities and subjective intensities. The former is scientific, as in the temperature of liquid becoming gaseous or solid. The latter refers to the subject encountering the water as an experience, which habitual association tames.
[67] As Deleuze (1990) states in the *Logic of Sense*, "A world already envelops an infinite system of singularities selected through convergence. Within this world, however, individuals are constituted which select and envelop a finite numbers of the singularities in the system" (109).

around it; but there is also the way water has capacities to affect, as it sustains local plant and animal life becoming nourishment, is contaminated as toxic, can be bottled as product, and so on; lastly, there is a theological sense that water baptizes and thus saves a soul. Deleuze (1988) deals with this challenging ground by differentiating the virtual from the possible,[68] as the possible exists as limit[69] and resemblance[70] tied to the possible, while the virtual "creates its own lines of actualization in positive acts" and the actual "does not resemble the virtuality it embodies" (97).

The aesthetic field as a space of possibility exists across all mediating technologies and 4chan merely presents a specific deployment with subsequent actual and virtual capacities.[71] The argument that meme databases and generators fail to create the same experience as browsing 4chan's /b/ rests on the notion that the ontological conditions tied to the human and non-human actors that compose each site offer up distinctive assemblages. The material functions of anonymity,

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[68] The virtual is not simply the possible. In *Bergsonism*, Deleuze (1988) writes, "the virtual can be distinguished from the possible from at least two points of view. From a certain point of view, in fact, the possible is the opposite of the read, it is opposed to the real; but, in quite a different opposition, the virtual is opposed to the actual. We must take this terminology seriously: The possible has no reality (although it may have an actuality); conversely, the virtual is not actual, but as such poses a reality. Here again Proust's formula best defines the states of virtuality: 'real without being actual, ideal without being abstract'" (96). Something possible can be realized, but the virtual is not behind the barrier to the real—it is always already real—just not actualized. The virtual as no-things when embodied in actual things creates new objects of knowledge or new meanings.

[69] Limitation "by which some possibles are supposed to be repulsed or thwarted, while others pass into the real" (Deleuze 1988, 97).

[70] Resemblance as the real is an image generated by the possible (Deleuze 1988, 97).

[71] Berleant (2005) makes a similar point, writing that "each [situation] implicates and relies on human participants in a different way, and each contributes to our understanding of how aesthetic perception carries social significance" (30).

temporality, and chance give way to particular virtual affects—capacities to affect

that go beyond the space of possibility tied to a highly policed and commercial site

like ICHC.[72] As Berleant contends, the "features of the aesthetic situation both

establish and reflect its contextual character" and thus the "concept of the aesthetic

field is useful here because it reflects in an inclusive and convenient way the

interweaving, indeed the fusion, of the objective, perceptual, creative, and

performative dimensions of what is actually experienced as integral" and, through

Deleuze, undeniably real (29).

It is important to again stress several qualifications. Much of the discussion at

hand focuses solely on the experience tied to the /b/ board of 4chan. The horizon

for the unexpected contracts on the other thematically organized boards because

the rules set stricter parameters for conversation. Also, while there are surely

shared members among the diversity of boards, there are particular community

practices on each. While the 'random' heart of the /b/ community often does spawn

chance encounters with indiscriminate and contingent images and text, over time

there is closing of the gap between the neither necessary, nor impossible, as

patterns of content appear. Unsurprisingly given the assumed community

composition, this means pornography and threads ranging from constant reposts to

the unimaginative to the lewd and offensive.

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[72] Not to suggest that there is no room for actual or virtual affect on ICHC, simply that there is a
difference—with key repercussions (the basis of the upcoming section).

When the site's assemblage actualizes into an aesthetic field—or when we mark off the virtual elements that hold capacity to actualize such a field—the way aesthetics functions as a mode of engagement is clear.[73] The many questions of repercussions and ramifications re-surface. For Berleant (2005), mediation of such socially situated aesthetics leads to "willing acceptance," "reciprocity," and "mechanisms for resolution" (35-36). While these outcomes certainly may exist in the field of possibilities, they exist as only one such possible intensive singularity, meaning Berleant runs the risk of conflating all aesthetic engagement with affirmative outcomes. Rancière's distribution of the sensible becomes a much more productive frame against such unconcealed optimism. In contradiction of readings that determine political commitment either directly through subject matter or formal strategies, Rancière foregrounds the way *engagement* with content or form operates contextually to create political scenes by way of regimes of mediation.

3.13 Becoming Anon

The inquiry for 4chan is: how there is an "intelligibility of human action, to a certain kind of affinity between ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking" bound within the aesthetic experience (Rancière 2011b, 10)? What /b/ opens up is

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[73] To again borrow from Berleant (2005): there is aesthetics without an art object because "the situation itself becomes the focus of perceptual attention, as it does in conceptual sculpture or in environments. Moreover, at the same time as its participants contribute to creating the aesthetic character of the situation, they may recognize with appreciate delight its special qualities, and perhaps work, as a performer would, at increasing and enhancing them. In such a way, a social situation, embodying human relationships, may become an aesthetic" (31).

an equality between subjects in the interface, as they disappear into the pool of anonymity. It is not equality shared completely, given the entire variance (or lack thereof) in the user base who function in much wider circles of communication and action. Within the site though, there is equality tied to open expression, as each vanishing whisper lacks specifics of origin. 4chan does away with the vital functions tied to so much Internet communication specific to the message board by eliminating persistent identity. Yet, it maintains other key elements: augmented spaces for discussion, tools for social expression, or meeting points for specialized interests. In place of avatars or usernames, it erects the conditions of a fully *imagined* utopian dream of disconnected 'online selves.' Stressing the illusionary nature of the anonymity is important on a material level because the site logs IP addresses and houses an private (non-accessible for most users) archive of content, meaning that despite a post leaving the interface, it still exists. On an expressive level, it is equally imperative to stress the artifice, as so much rhetoric of 'virtual' disconnection relies on a flight from culture: an impossible leap out of the embodied and embedded nature of existence.

Taken more broadly, mediated conversation online presents a way in which speech circulates. The online fantasy of anonymity works as a particular relationship of address but like any form of mediation clearly draws from the larger regimes it belongs to. As Rancière (2011b) states, aesthetics draws from "ordered rules of interpretation and modes of sensibility" (12). What the aesthetic field on

4chan generated throughout the period from 2005 through 2009 was a number of larger community subject figures linked to the ever-present 'Anonymous' moniker. The community galvanized in the collective action of raids. In late 2006, they made a "coordinated series of prank calls" against "New Jersey hatemonger" Hal Turner that then led to a "Denial of Service attack" that "use[d] an automated process to simulate a constant stream of a large number of visitors," effectively causing "the hosting service to grind to a halt" (Olszewski 2006). They revealed the personal information—known proverbially as 'd0x'—of a huge variety targets, for instance, "they went after abusers of cats, because Anonymous loves cats and pictures of cats" (Norton 2011). There is the previously noted blocking of the pool in Habbo with the proclamation that the "pool is closed due to aids as a protest to perceived racism on the part of Habbo's admins" (this reference came from a news story of an HIV-positive toddler being banned from a pool in Silver Hill, Alabama) (Norton 2011).

With each of these raids, the playful trickster function of Anonymous combines with the mandates of 'doing it for the LULZ.' Here is the third attribute outlined in Chapter One: transgression. These attacks, so focused around play and mischievousness, cross lines and boundaries. The imagery embedded in the collective identity of the LULZ (evident in many memes) during this period is revealing. An image of a laughing Agent Smith, the villain of *The Matrix* movies,

appeared on a "demotivational"[74] with the caption "for teh lulz: the only reason anyone does anything." V, the otherwise unnamed main character of the graphic novel and movie *V for Vendetta,* becomes a nearly ubiquitous masked presence on /b/ from 2006 onward, complete with an altered version of V's introductory speech outlining 4chan as a "A PUBLIC BULLETIN BOARD, BUILT OF BOTH BRILLIANCE AND BARBARITY." However, the largest force in articulating a collective subject originated outside the borders of the site, in an alarmist and sensational 2007 FOX News report damning a generalized "anonymous" as "hackers on steroids," which Philips (2012) describes as a point of massive amplification. She writes that "by framing Anonymous and its constituent trolls as socially deviant, Fox News had inadvertently provided trolls with a behavioral blueprint, along with the promise of further coverage for similar behaviors" (59). By the following year, a series of haphazard events led to a campaign against the Church of Scientology, initially launched on the grounds of online censorship. Through a number of equally contingent events and forces, it became a launching point for a more activist brand of Anonymous. A myriad of individuals and groups run with the shroud following "Operation Chanology." By the mere fact they "have no leaders, no hierarchical structure, nor any geographical epicentre," Anonymous is now a branding largely

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[74] Demotivationals are a meme parody of motivational posters commonly found as office art. Akin to other memes, they pre-date 4chan but have gained an audience and proliferate on 4chan.

disconnected from its roots on 4chan, working more as an alias for an amorphous group with often overlapping but distinct politics, means, and approaches.

Similar to the use of /b/tard, all these enacted masks and personas are not the epithet of a stripped and unstructured online identity but instead purposeful constructions by an embodied community, built among larger common principles and dependent on individual adaptation. In other words what these illustrate is how the field of aesthetics connects to ongoing negotiation and processes of subjectivity. In Rancière's (1999) words: "By subjectification I mean the production, through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience" (35). The formation of group façades demonstrates just one point in an ongoing "order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task" (29). The process of subjectification *hinges* the aesthetic field to possible political ramifications. As Rancière stresses, art and mediation are not inherently political. The crux is the way the aesthetic process flows into existing distributions and pushes redistributions of the sensible order.

3.14 A Question of Politics

To speak to the actual and virtual of the aesthetic field on 4chan brings with it a conversation on the actual and virtual relationship to the sensible. In Rancière's earlier works on politics, namely *On the Shore of Politics* (1995) and *Disagreement* (1999), the dividing line between consensus and dissensus revolves around the concept of the 'police.' Not referring to actual uniformed forces, "the police is first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying," determining who has capacities for speech and who is rendered visible (1999, 29). Politics challenges the divisions of the police order by reordering. In Rancière's later works on aesthetics, the binary force between the police and politics becomes more transitional, temporal, and unstable through aesthetic acts that can both reinforce elements of the dominant distributions and usher in elements of redistribution.

Another fruitful way to articulate the practice of subjectification is through the work of Rosi Braidotti (2011). Building on Deleuze, her feminist theory articulates a "political form of subjectivity that cannot be dissociated from the cultural or the aesthetic" (63). For her, the central issues are "the interconnectedness between identity, subjectivity, and power" as the political is "a form of interaction that acts on the discursive and the material registers of subjectivity simultaneously" (64-65). The key aspect to understanding the multiple intersections of subjectivity is seeing how subjectivity morphs through situated

relationships rather than existing plotted in a linear, stable, or teleological sense. Braidotti understands power as having "no matrix" in the sense that "it is not a centralized notion, but rather a web-like pervasive situation of control and regulations" (she stresses that she inherits this understanding from Foucault) (291). Subjectivity, for Braidotti (2013), involves "a radical estrangement from notions like moral rationality, unitary identity, transcendent consciousness or innate and universal moral values" as it is reconsidered through "ethical accountability by foregrounding the ontological role played by relationality" (92-93).

Throughout this theoretical fabric, there are obvious points where threads stitch together. For Braidotti (2013), we must take the human and non-human networks that Latour implores us to discover and not "stop at any fragmented portion of these realities, but trace transversal interconnections among them" (93). Rancière and Braidotti stress avoidance of thinned understandings of the political through "perpetuation of familiar regimes" by becoming the "sort of subjects who actively desire to reinvent subjectivity as a set of mutant values" (Braidotti 2013, 93). So how does this then happen? Braidotti posits strategies like theft and repurposing to highlight obstacles and blockages in the embodied and embedded networks of power relations. She also argues for attempts to de-locate and reflect upon one's material and discursive position. For Berleant (2010), the aesthetic operates singularly in specific situation, meaning it is never homogeneous in nature. We must then let go of "seeking a quality or feature inhering in an object" and think

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about its force that "is exerted on the body and manifested in sensation" (157). We take aesthetic processes as opportunities to shift relations. To boil it down: "the ultimate purpose is to compose significant sites for reconfiguring our modes of belonging and political practice" (Braidotti 2010, 11). Accepting that we all partake in "dominant subject positions" through a distribution of the sensible, then we must target them from "within" and make visible what was invisible and make audible that which is muted (Braidotti 2010, 11). In a Latourian sense, it means opening the black boxes in which such relations are built and forging new possibilities for diverse relations among actors.

3.15 Rage Comics and the Everyday

The looming question is: does the aesthetic engagement on 4chan open such a location? Having traversed this far, the unsurprising response suggests that when taken as a process rather than a product—that is situated within its array of forces—4chan presents a mode of aesthetic engagement that operates as navigational tool for one's lived subjectivity. Equally and paradoxically, 4chan exists as a tool within larger sets of relations and thus links to the array of actors and forces that strengthen and enforce dominant subject positions. The "rage comic" meme demonstrates both tendencies well. A DeviantArt user posts a six panel comic on /v/ contrasting "what trolls want you to believe" and "what is actually happening," illustrated with a face he had previously drawn. Posters quickly adapt

the wrinkled, toothy, mischievous smile into their own comics. For example, an early

popular comic features two people being pulled over by policemen while high; they

stare at the officer with the troll face before offering the question "problem officer?"

In August of 2008 a comic featured a cartoonish character being splashed by toilet

water while using the washroom, with the final panel featuring an enraged face

Figure 9 – "Rage Comic" Meme

proclaiming, "FFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU." This

inaugurated "Rage Guy." To these faces a number of existing reactions faces were

revamped for the rage comics (e.g. Cereal Guy) with new creations added for other

emotional affects (e.g. "Forever Alone's solitude," "the triumph of Fuck Yea Guy," or

"the compliance of Okay Guy").

Within the community, rage comics became a way to forge collective ground between the banal details of routine experience and their ensuing emotional reactions: an awkward social scene in an elevator, frustration at lost files on a data stick, even the etiquette of other posters on 4chan. With the rage comic comes aesthetic engagement and a corresponding 'fusion' of new contingent experience with a deterritorialization of the commonplace. The subject expands, as they both connect in pools of belonging and collectively reassess the functions and intricacies of the world around them. To return to Berleant (2005), there is a virtual capacity that can actualize when "sometimes the aesthetic supervenes on our usual expectations" (29).

However, as an aesthetic process, it is neither eternal nor singular in character. To repeat Bearleant's (2005) point: the aesthetic is often "subordinate to other demands and interests, such as religious, practical, technological, or cognitive ones" (29). The way such demotion often occurs is through the entry and exit of key member-actors in the assemblage, as it changes both the vital properties within and the potential to affect others. A great deal of the development of the rage comic meme occurs on the "f7u12" subreddit. It allows users to post rage comics, comment on them, and vote on the quality of the comics. Unlike the chaos of the 4chan threads, there is a kind of order persevered within the interface of Reddit. Over time, the creation of unique reaction faces ceases and slowly becomes a static catalogue. Equally, their ubiquity eliminates the surprising explorations of the

everyday as one can assume the types of situations that will serve as content. The open terrain becomes a type of echo chamber for a particular user base who control the visibility of the comic. By the time rage face makers (like the memebase "ragebuilder") appear, /b/ starts openly mocking Reddit's use of the comic format (principally the use of 'le' in comic labels). This does not mean rage comics disappear from /b/, but rather the systems of dissent engage content as it begins to stagnate and become predictable, unlike a space like f7u12 that fosters such particularities.

In terms of aesthetic experience, the rage comic loses its initial fuel of contingent surprise and ability to deterritorialize the everyday by becoming part of that everyday experience. The example of rage comics opens up a bigger paradigm at work on 4chan. As meme and non-meme content becomes repetitious or removed from its transitory and highly precarious flow, it loses its nebulous and fluid character. Attribution for authors in databases, votes for users in Reddit, likes within social media networks, or simply subsumed by crass commercial sites, such content, such content becomes a static media object. More troubling is the way the once fortuitous affective ability is saturated by attributes of dominant subject positions. While it is true that homophobic, sexist, ableist, racist, and other problematic content appears in *all* generations and *all* of the various iterations of rage comics, there are undeniable elements in the assemblage of 4chan—contingency, temporality, dissent—that enable it to thieve content, desecrate the

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sacred, subvert intentions, derail conversations, and push the unexpected in an unparalleled way. As a navigation tool of aesthetic experience, it opens up trigger points that can poke holes in the embedded veneers of everyday life to show the forces that collectively create and exercise authority. It can open black boxes through the micro politics of restructuring daily engagement.

3.16 The Positive Side: Parody and Social Media

In this way, 4chan is not reducible to its site address, or the ghoulish nature of its repugnant content, or even the averages of its user base. Instead, 4chan works as an experience. It works as a process. It is a mediating tool—a means of navigating larger systems of expression and larger systems of thought. As Rancière (2004a) states, "statements or forms of expression undoubtedly depend on historically constituted systems of possibilities that determine forms or criteria of evaluation," meaning the 4chan experience presents two divergent horizon points (50). On one hand, the assemblage creates space for a type of communication against the increasing liability and persistence of sites tied to social media sites like Facebook. This asset is also its largest detriment, as the contingent conditions give way to creativity and experimentation but also the repugnant and vile, crystallizing both the possible exciting borders and treacherous interior of the existing systems of the possible. This means the problematic voice folds into the ever-present chorus of dissent and vice versa.

On the other hand, these specific material conditions forge opportunities for expressive assessments of the possible through the aesthetic experience. This is yet another forked prospect, as on one hand such navigation is reliant on existing criteria of evolution: who belongs and whose equality is undermined. The ever-salient point for Rancière (2004a) remains that "politics exist when the figure of a specific subject is constituted, a supernumerary subject in relation to a calculated number of groups, places, and functions in society" (51). Thus 4chan is part of the relations of actors that both undermine *and* enforce a particular distribution of the sensible with an actualization of particular aesthetic experience, allowing one to re-think or re-evaluate one's place in the social order. Evidence surfaced across the site during this late 2000 period. Threads in which users drew upon their varying levels of skill in photo editing to apply clothing to porn existed alongside distinctive 'anti-feminist threads' with the resulting purposeful posting of lewd images or pro-feminist messages in the respective threads. There is no leap in connecting the deployment of an image of Pokémon Slowpoke with old news, old posts, or old memes and the idea that the aesthetic experience opens up an evaluation of the procedural engagement with a type of understanding the world: a particular distribution of the sensible open to challenge but also with the existing actor network force to hold the lines of the visible and audible.

Taking 4chan within the larger ecology of its networks, its abject nature fully flexes its might. In raiding memorial pages or attempting to spread rumours across

YouTube comment sections or Twitter trends, 4chan *attempts* to turn aside, mislead, and corrupt the Internet commons. It works against the commercial aspects of Facebook or Twitter, complete with their ongoing violations of personal concealment in the name of creating marketable data (Knuttila, 2011). During this period, the amorphous nature of the anonymous hordes combines with its unrelenting abhorrent and vile utterances to resist any possibilities of marketability. Perhaps paradoxically, this led to Moot starting sites like Canvas with more commercial friendly interfaces and rule sets in attempts to turn such popularity into some level of monetization. 4chan's abject nature pushes back and the aesthetic experience holds virtual capacity to actualize subjective estrangement.

3.17 The Negative Side: Aggression Trumps Transgression

As Rancière and Latour stress (through very different means), no arrangement of social, material, or expressive forces is eternal. The argument at hand slips away with the elimination of one of the core actors in the 4chan assemblage: anonymity. The introduction of the poster ID system on /b/ in February of 2012 instated a type of pseudonymity on the site and stabilized the flux of the crowd. Locating the voices and locations of dissent steadies the contingent conditions that propel the aesthetic experience. The disintegration of /b/ is thus, unsurprisingly, tied to its actor forces that dictate who and how it can connect or affect others. It was during this period that the creations of /b/—its memes, its

vernacular, its practices, and its abjection—infiltrated other websites and online populations. The site's aesthetic force weaken because the possibilities for affect through the interrogation of subject positions and the process of subjectification ebb and dissipate. To borrow from Braidotti, subjectivity no longer becomes a mutant process because it exists in a stabilized environment.

As major as this shift is, it seems to be a small and trivial part of a much larger paradigm shift on the site away from contingency and towards an entrenched position. Throughout 2012, the site gained notoriety in its battles against Tumblr users and social justice causes. In 2013, the video game board /v/ became adamantly misogynist in tone and began actively attacking sites and advocates for feminist perspectives and integration in video game culture. Throughout 2014, the site turned on creator Moot as he attempted to create a less poisonous and acidic discourse on /b/. As 4chan has taken the mantle of cultural icon for the offensive and grotesque, the breaches in voice and dissent have slowly vanished from the site. In this way, I contend that 4chan has helped facilitate the LULZ as an aesthetic sense and sensibility but has ultimately failed to actualize its powers. 4chan battles against its own strengths for surprise, creativity, and spectacle by using the LULZ to reproduce the same discourse over and over, to make a space for dominant subject positions, and to take aim at voices of dissent. The virtual is there, but *rarely* actualized. Instead, the site is an echo chamber for a logic, sensibility, and attitude that aligns with the dominant distribution of the sensible.

Method is useful for this point, as the assemblage powers are reliant on the force of individual parts. In an ideal world, perhaps 4chan as a mediation technology would fall into the hands of those less interested in perpetuating inequality. Yet such utopian thoughts cannot change the reality of 4chan as a site of hate in the current online landscape. Creativity, subversion, and chaos do little when it they are in the service of those subjects with already loud voices. To speak of 4chan today is to speak of an assemblage that in most cases works actively and aggressively to erase equality and keep power uneven. Moreover, this was not a sudden change. These hateful tendencies cycle backwards to the very inception of the site.

Nonetheless, 4chan (in all its various senses: as user base, content creator, interface, and community) continues to exist in other material and expressive assemblages. The next chapter explores the community and creations of YouTube Poop that propagate concurrently with this period of 4chan and redeploy, change, transform, and revise its discourse. The core question is: how do their processes and practices draw in and churn out creative works through the LULZ in a way that begins to open up the LULZ to artistic practice and in turn to the more politically viable world of parody?

Chapter Four: Evolving the LULZ—YouTube Poop

The LULZ reach adolescence within the chaos of 4chan, but content does not stay static nor stationary in these reproducible circuits. It is through dispersal and development in the adjoined ecology of networks that the LULZ shifts and emerges in new assemblages with new functions and capacities. This chapter will look at the digital video remix genre known as YouTube Poop, which takes the degenerate spectacle of the LULZ but shifts its form. Linking to previous appropriation strategies, YouTube Poop repurposes the memes, conventions, and logics of the LULZ to make strange, strident, noisy, and mesmerizing works. In doing so, YouTube Poop pushes the LULZ into more fertile critical ground. As will be clear, the practice exists as further evidence of these emergent problematic online spheres, as well as commentary on our nascent digital culture.

Akin to most insular online creative practices, YouTube Poop remains isolated, esoteric, and unknown to many. Yet it maintains a fiercely active community that generates a great wealth of videos and continues to carve out a unique formal aesthetic. Defining YouTube Poop is thus difficult as it is both a genre of videos, a style of remix, and a group of creators. To describe it broadly, YouTube Poop consists of remixes employing one or more digital editing techniques (various types of cuts, speed alterations, effects, et al.) that draw from a small pool of campy source material, such as late-1980s and early-1990s television or video games. Rather than creating new narratives out of the source material, as in a recut movie

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trailer or working as "supercut" in fan homage, YouTube Poop verges on Dadaist absurdity. "Poops" are marathons of patience, as they repeat themselves in seeming endless circlets, stammers of sounds, and emulations of digital editing glitches and, as such, reflect and refract the digital culture of the LULZ built on these forms, techniques, and technologies.

4.2 The Start of YouTube Poop

As of 2015, YouTube Poop bears the weight of more than a decade of complex history, meaning any attempt to chart its precise growth is difficult. There are, however, clear precursors, ancestors, and forerunners to YouTube Poop within the canon of experimental film and video. The most widely acknowledged 'first' poop is "I'd Say He's Hot On Our Tails," which was originally posted to the online art community "Sheezyart" as "Super Mario Bros. 3 REMIXED!!" on December 22, 2004 (it did not actually appear on YouTube until November 27, 2006). Matt Mulligan—known most commonly as "SuperYoshi"—created the work through a number of experiments with the "Windows Movie Maker" software program. In an audio interview, SuperYoshi explicitly connects the video's conception to upgrading a 2000 Compaq computer from Windows 98 to Windows XP Pro, which bundled the fairly rudimentary video editing software into the operating system. The three-minute remix dredges clips from the "Recycled Koopa" episode of the Nintendo-inspired children's program *The Super Mario Brothers Super Show* from the early

1990s. The short-lived television show incorporates a mixture of live-action sequences of two plumber brothers living in Brooklyn with more fantastical animated sequences of their doppelgängers in the Mushroom kingdom, as well as sporadic animated shorts adapted from the *Legend of Zelda* video-game franchise. In SuperYoshi's re-imagining, an ostensibly haphazard montage of seemingly random clips turns asunder any former narrative, as clips repeat in a disorderly jumble.

"I'd Say He's Hot On Our Tails" opens with the original title sequence from the "Recycled Koopa" episode of the television program. Following an establishing shot of a gloomy-looking castle, the poop cuts to a racoon-tailed Luigi flying through the air. The "Bullet Bill" enemy from the original Nintendo game strikes Luigi, and, addressing his now scorched appendage, he says, "yow—I'd say he's hot on our tails." The poop then intercuts some random snippets—a lavish castle, a flith-ridden street, Mario inside a hall—with the increasingly familiar pummelling of Luigi. An editing pattern unfolds as a shot of "gumba" enemies floating from the deck of a floating ship repeats, with their murmuring buzz echoing over and over the soundtrack. Soon pattern gives way and chaos reigns: shots of the heroes and villains collide with the opening sequence, series villain Bowser stutters out a repeated rant, garbage splashes over the sides of a castle, and the scorch of Luigi's tail flashes onscreen repeatedly.

It is quite clear that the discordant editing and heavy repetition muddles the original meaning and renders the original narrative opaque. In its place, there is a

slightly intelligible interaction between characters based around recurrent sets of dialogue and images. Focusing solely on the reordering of plot overlooks the key use of editing for the sake of repetition and re-use. The poop's enigmatic pleasure lies in the transformation of pop-culture bric-a-brac into avant-garde experience. While the practice of YouTube Poop is not forged in a single instance, "I'd Say He's Hot On Our Tails" does contain several key formal elements that have become synonymous with YTP on the whole: play with duration and reprise alongside ad nauseam repetition of a specific clip or set of clips. This is certainly not a creation of YouTube Poop. One does not have to look far into the annals of avant-garde filmmaking to find instances of poetic usages of repetition. Fernand Léger's *Ballet Mécanique*, for instance, focuses on shape and rhythm showing the same (or nearly identical) geometric forms, like lips or a clock pendulum or a swing. What grants YouTube Poop its historically unique quality is its immediate material and expressive relations to specific Internet phenomena: gifs, loading errors, and ephemeral short format content. However, before mapping the full cartography of YouTube Poop, the fragments of its historic narrative require piecing together.

4.3 The Establishment of a Practice

YouTube Poop's development is neither uniform nor the product of a neat progression. It is through smaller ongoing trends and smaller scenes that growth occurs. The community favours an auteur-focused history that starts with

SuperYoshi and his friends on Sheezyart and charts ensuing growth on YouTube through individual creator channels. Most community lore starts with SuperYoshi's "Sonic and Robotnik's Sodomy Hour" as it was the first YouTube Poop on the namesake platform. It appeared, appropriately, on April Fool's Day in 2006. In the interim between November and April, SuperYoshi created similar works using equally campish material plucked from early nineties cartoons like *Mega Man* and the *Adventures of Sonic the Hedgehog*. The works employed comparable aesthetic strategies, but were relegated to relative obscurity on Sheezyart. With the change of platform, the networks of viewership altered significantly, on one hand as the works circulated purposely as befuddling Internet curiosity on image boards like 4chan. On the other hand, they gained unsuspecting audiences who stumbled upon the videos while traversing YouTube.

SuperYoshi was also not alone during this early period. Andrew Hartford (2011)—known within the YTP community as "Yaminomalex"—states that "there was a group of us, at the beginning: SuperYoshi, his friend RetroJape, my best friend who calls himself DukeOfFortuneMan, KingNecroPope, JingWu, Dr. Strangebutts, and another online friend, Tetsuo9999." RetroJape's work draws heavily from *The Adventures of Sonic the Hedgehog* and *Super Mario Brother Super Show* cartoons. Poops like "I'mma Comin' Luigi," "Yoshi Eats Mario," "Robotnik & Tails Hit It Off," "Robotnik in Space," and "Robotnik Shoots the Moon"—uploaded between April and August of 2006—rely heavily on variations in speed. A short sequence of Sonic

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laughing or Robotnik talking might slow to a ghostly, deep-toned drone or accelerate into an in-distinguishable, high-pitched hum. DukeOfFortuneMan introduces *Power Rangers* into the collective pool of source material in "Trent is Basically White." The poop wavers between absurd nonsense (with dialogue being repeated and then slowed) and snippets of a narrative (with cross cutting creating short, comical dialogue sequences). "Erectile Dysfunctionz!!!!!!1111111" turns the Nickelodeon cartoon *Rocko's Modern Life* into a disjointed collage of a cartoon wallaby exercising with dialogue replacement centring upon his search for water matched to heavily looped images. This is not to say that DukeOfFortuneMan's early poops exclusively tend towards untapped sources, as a number of works arise from the then community-favoured material, apparent in "Yoshi's Sexual Adventure XXX" or "Sonic Lives, Learns, and Loves Tails."

DukeofFortuneMan's offline and online friend KingNecroPope starts with the "buh6173" YouTube account. Unlike many other poopers' channels during this period, the buh6173 channel became a dump for all kinds of content, including copyright-violating excerpts from televisions programs like *The Simpsons*. As a result, YouTube deleted it for copyright infringement ("KO'd" in pooper parlance). KingNecroPope, known more often simply as the Pope, next inaugurated "The SpongeBob Show," which is a loosely connected series of poops playing with oddments and extracts from its Nickelodeon namesake. Yet again, a YouTube take-down removed the content, foreshadowing the much larger bouts between poopers

and content policing on YouTube. The Pope changes the name of the series to "The BobSponge Show," allowing it to circumvent direct detection. However, the most innovative of the Pope's work during this period is his reworking of Disney's *The Lion King*. In "The Hyenas Want You To Do It Again," the film's iconic introduction slows to a sluggish groan only to rapidly flip into a frenzied chitter as all of the animals arrive to see the reveal of the film's protagonist. The poop then breaks into long bouts of repetition. It is clever in its use of coherent sequencing, dialogue bridges, comedic speed changes, as well as the more experimental tendencies used during the period, such as inverted images or desaturation of colour.

It is important not to overlook the other aforementioned early founders of YouTube Poop. JingWu's forays into more obscure Japanese animation with works like "Kenshiro VS Logic" brought a distinct look and flavour to the table. Dr. Strangebutts' work pushed more aggravating aesthetics, like the sounds of glitched audio or tone shifts in "The Greastest [sic] Video Ever to Grace YouTube" or "Look At This," making him one of the more formal outliers of the group. Tetsuo9999 switched his YouTube account from video game combo highlights to YouTube Poop by way of association with Yaminomalex. Tetsuo9999's first poop was titled "Thunderzord Poop," which identified itself directly through genre. For the most part his early work focuses on fast-paced, haphazard reworks of *Power Rangers* or the problematically-titled subgenre of "Rape Raves" that impose sexual overtones

onto cartoon sequences through dance music and added colour effects. Akin to others, Yaminomalex starts on Sheezyart before migrating to YouTube as a platform.

Yaminomalex illuminates the group motivation and rationale behind avoiding self-identifying as "YouTube Poop," stating that their "sheer intention was confusing and annoying people." There are competing accounts of who first created the actual term YouTube Poop—the most common being an AIM (AOL Instant Messenger) conversation between Yaminomalex and dukeoffortuneman—but regardless, it illuminates the type of humour this network cherishes. The silliness, absurdity, and vulgarity that runs rampant through these works highlight how a chance or mistaken search on YouTube would spark an intensely mystifying and confusing experience—an element detailed later in this chapter.

4.4 The Growth of a Practice

From these early works, the rather small circles of poopers increased and their works garnered new audiences. The core elements of reiteration, alteration, and de-contextualization have remained but there have also been several evolutions. "The Eclectic Cheese" (also known as "Fat" or "MrSimon") focuses on musical remix. Many follow the lead of pioneer pooper Vorhias, and add music as another formal dimension for both discordant remix and possible comedy. It becomes a bracketed, autonomous practice known as "YTPMV" or "YouTube Poop Music Videos." Building on the successes of his "Link Gets Cancer" and "Mario and

Luigi Travel Through Time," WalrusGuy created "Dr. Rabbit is Racist." In it, he edited a Colgate advisement to make the otherwise friendly cartoon rabbit protagonist into a mean-spirited racist. In the fallout, Colgate forced YouTube to remove not only "Dr. Rabbit is Racist" but also several of his other videos. In response, he created several fake videos under his name, featuring thumbnails of the "mama luigi" meme, but these were in actuality the "Dr. Rabbit is Racist" video with a few seconds of silence inserted at the beginning. From the video, a large pool of dialgue sentence remixes formed. Others accelerated existing inclinations. Pooper "Misselaineous10" created works that fragment all narrative and even visual sense using stutters, effects, reversing, and aggressive use of sound. Play with film language usually reserved for a serious dramatic moment became a common tactic for many: pooper "Dopply" inserted gaps and silences in *Sonic the Hedgehog* to create a highly topsy-turvy tone and demonstrated a deliberate advancement from earlier tactics—in this case, the "stare downs" between characters employed by poopers like "1upclock." There were also those who simply refined the form, such as the 2008 creation "GENIE HAS ALLERGIES" by "Whelt" that remains a community favourite.

As the number of creators and creations grew, Conrad Slater registered youtubepoop.com as a community hub in the summer of 2007. He recalls, "The site started as a directory, basically a WordPress blog with categories that represented the author of each video" because "videos were hard to find." The site soon morphed into youchewpoop.com that still serves as a forum for discussion. It is unsurprising

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that the creation of a central communication nucleus led to more collaborative works. Slater explains the growth of "poop tennis" as a way to way to deal with any "creative block": having "something to respond to and interact with was a lot easier than just making a video from scratch." Although the site did not solely foster creativity, like many online communities, members began to mandate particular qualities and norms. Such gatekeeping manifested first in Slater's decision to implement "quality control in the directory" so that it could continue to be useful. Despite limiting the number of videos listed, Slater grew frustrated with new users' demands for visibility on the site after only taking "a CD-i cutscene and re-editing it in a familiar way." So, he bans all CD-i content from the directory. Such gatekeeper action often incites anger in online spaces, and indeed ignited quite the skirmish in the emergent YTP community, with some of the "more talented poopers" making "really great CD-i remixes just to prove a point." Within the site, the debacle became known as the "War on AIDs [sic]" and resulted in a slew of images, memes, and in-jokes. The terminology itself speaks to the problematic sensibilities rampant within these abject spheres, but more on this later. The incident itself serves to illuminate how community members began to imagine itself, understand its aesthetic allegiances, the push of specific content tendencies, and what dictates 'good' and 'bad' poops.

The 'watershed moments' can expand ceaselessly. "Stegbob" launched the "pinga" meme from a *Sonic the Hedgehog* word trim. "Kiz038"'s "DRAGONFORCE"

poop was the "most responded video" for the day, week, and month with over two thousand responses. Equally, the list of prolific content creators is endless: "AbsoluteBillion"'s *Blue's Clues* work, "Emperor Ing"'s psychedelic image effects, "JazzDanceForChildren"'s lewd takes on *Speed Racer*, "SeductiveBaz"'s sprawling "Youtube Poop—The Movie," or "Deepercut"'s droll insertion of sound effects are but a few drops in a collective pool of poopers. There are also the videos adored or at least popular within the community: "JeffLindblom"'s "What is Spaghetti?" or "NickShorts"'s "Dr. Rabbit's Early Brushing Obsession." Add to this all the important community developments through 'tennis matches,' in which poopers do a back-and-forth process of remix, effectively collectively adding, subtracting, altering, and editing a set video. There are variations in the rules (tennis itself comes from YTP soccer, in which poopers sync different images to a predetermined song) but it has become a benchmark in the community to judge, share, and comment upon work. The practice culminated in mass-scale collaborations like "POOPERS UNITE! PART 1" (originally "Poopers Unite!: The Ultimate Collaboration [Part 1]") in which multiple authors contributed to a sprawling and diverse poop.

4.5 The Anatomy of a YouTube Poop

By the end of 2008, YouTube Poop was a large-scale creative force. Its library of sources reached into all corners of popular culture, often reworking movies, all forms of television, elements of Internet culture, and a plethora of video games. By

this point, approaches to creation varied with no real ubiquity in formula, be it length or technical requirements or technological proficiency. One connecting sinew is the identifiable set of aesthetic elements in poops.

Most contain a "stutter loop" or "vanilla loop" in which a short clip repeats, often framed around a specific word, creating comic estrangement from the original text. There are specific versions with a "stutter loop plus," including a horizontal or vertical screen flip, or a "stutter reverse" that rearranges content, often prolonging and emphasizing the awkward and cringe-worthy moments. Alternatively, precision editing techniques only manipulate single frames. These community-coined techniques include scrambling, jumbling, garbling, or shuffling and generate the confusing effect associated with most poops. There are the visual effects, such as screen flipping, speed alterations (like slow motion), or added and subtracted in-frame elements (by way of mask effects). Certain techniques misrepresent content: adding a "censor beep" suggests a swear, "sentence mixing" subverts any previously family-friendly material into lewd spectacle, and mimicking Hollywood high-drama with an artificially added pan, crop, or pause heightens any banal onscreen moment. There are multiple audio alterations, with pitch shifts being the recurrent method to turn ordinary dialogue into falsetto whirr, deep-toned hum, musical number, or off-kilter absurdity. Individual poopers also frequently come up with their own signature clip, known in the YTP community as a "Deju Vu." Most of these techniques occur concurrently. Take for example, an "acid trip," which mixes colour

effects with slow motion, mimicking the frenetic and feverish spectacle of mind-altering drugs, or an "erosion" that uses colour curves, masks, thresholds, and other tools associated with Adobe Premiere to create jarring and visually cluttered works.

The existing library of poops currently ranges from simple works that use repetitious editing patterns, to those that focus upon the graceless or awkward, to those with glitch-heavy visual frenzies and more complex editing patterns and special effects. Across this spectrum, there is a similar concurrent act of celebration and desecration. Granted there is a danger in broadening genre borders because it is harder and harder to define practices beyond those that self-identify as poopers or work within the community borders on sites like YouChew. However, focusing upon this act of engagement and estrangement that drives the practice links early works to the more experimental outliers. The question then arises: how to approach, contextualize, and understand these works?

4.6 Poop as Avant-Garde?

There certainly resonance with earlier experimental movements. The purposeful clash of sound and image or the strategies of appropriation hold a wealth of genealogical ties to the cinematic avant-garde. In Russian Montage, artists like Esfir Shub re-edited Hollywood films to highlight elements of class inequality. Hans Richter and René Clair used found footage to create a sense of both estrangement and the fantastic. Onward from the 1950s, a range of artist movements from the

Situationist International to Scratch Video to culture jammers use détournement to reverse and subvert dominant media products and practices. There was loop printing in structural films, or the play of Fluxus, or vidding that reworked existing image work. With the rise of postmodern concerns, remix and reuse strategies such as quotation, pastiche, appropriation, and intertextuality gained significant prominence in both art practice and scholarship (Hutcheon 1989; Jameson 1991). With great ease, an artist like Martin Arnold slots in as YouTube Poop precursor. His film *Alone: Life Wastes Andy Hardy* is a delicate mixture of audio alterations, looped pathways, and the evocations of the uncanny that YouTube Poop relishes. Like Arnold, YouTube Poop focuses on the rhythms of edits as much as the contents of those cuts. It turns the banal into the eerie and maintains an unwavering mischievous relationship to source material.

Approaching new media through the lens of history is common in contemporary Media Studies. As outlined in Chapter Three, there is an entire pool of scholarship with writers like Lev Manovich (2007) calling for understanding via context. As he states, "remix culture, which right now appears to be so firmly in place" that it cannot "be challenged by any other cultural logic" thus requires a "historic and theoretical understanding" to see where it will lead or to glimpse into "whatever new era which will replace it." Charting these connections is useful, but understanding YouTube Poop as assemblage requires avoiding a singular identity.

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Reading YouTube Poop through the lens of the avant-garde singles out formal experimental properties while ignoring the particular processes at play in YouTube Poop. Instead, one must attend to the specific material components of online remix and the expressive concerns of the specific community who engage with it. In grafting a historic network of experimentation, one finds the ties are primarily formal in nature: the use of found footage, the language of editing, and the grammar of the weird. As Alexander Galloway (2012) so clearly argues in *The Interface Effect*, approaches to the digital often land in this pitfall as they "make the argument that new media [is] first and foremost [an] aesthetic object" (8). Galloway sees Lev M, who champions this perspective, as exerting considerable influence and thus new media theory continues to explore this theoretical direction. I do not mean to totally discount such work.[75] Yet putting all the weight on historical allegiance means aesthetic presence supersedes any actual practice through a flattening effect. Such an approach essentially erases, dilutes, and conflates the elements of YouTube Poop's actor network: namely, the conditions of the digital. Claire Bishop (2012) echoes this critique. She describes a concurrent disavowal and dependence upon "the digital revolution" operating in art that "declines to speak overtly about the conditions of living in and through new media" or is "reluctant to describe our experience of digital life" (440-441). Even in striving to mark the elements of the

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[75] For a thought-provoking work on remixes similar to YouTube Poop, see Eli Horwatt's "A Taxonomy of Digital Video Remixing: Contemporary Found Footage Practice on the Internet."

new, which is quite easy with the manifold of digital media traits at work in YouTube Poop (programmability, variability, modular structuring, compositing, transcoding), there is still a reduction to form.

4.7 Poop and the Internet

On first glance, YouTube Poop has many qualities associated with Internet memes: content that is baffling to the unfamiliar, a playful and silly aesthetic, with a host of pop-culture references, and even a level of purposeful crassness. Yet, such one-to-one categorization reduces memes to a simple genre set, effectively making the term a catchall for a diversity of visual images, online interactions, and even entire websites. Equally, this reduces YouTube Poop to an exemplar that can interchange with any other memetic instance. Following Sampson's (2012) notion of virality, attending to memes requires abandoning biological analogy of gene in order to understand that "what spreads … is independent of a singular mechanism" (62). It necessitates tracing a phenomenon through the "the medium of transmission" to find all of the "complex intersection points that bring physical, biological, cultural, and political phenomena into social relation with each other" (62; 72). YouTube Poop certainly demonstrates the need for such attention to detail. There is little direct allegiance to the typical incubators of popular memes, such as websites like Reddit. Rather than morphing and propagating through communal action, YouTube Poop revolves around a set of identified authors working as individual artists. Their

creations have limited mobility across distribution channels, meaning unlike something like image macro memes, they cannot traverse social media or circulate through micro-blogging sites.

Yet, such particular elements do not disconnect YouTube Poop from these web ecologies. The same characters, imagery, in-jokes, and sensibility present in meme-heavy sites like 4chan continually appear throughout the YouTube Poop canon. Within the smaller groups of YouTube Poopers, new works originate through variation on those that precede them, meaning their propagation relies upon sharing or linking, while their development requires a working knowledge of the mechanics of form and tropes of content, which aligns to the spread of most memes.

Again, this is not a case against Media Studies' formal approaches or historic contextualization. Understanding that YouTube Poop belongs to a long line of appropriation certainly illuminates particular capacities, for instance, how it lampoons popular culture through re-contextualization or how poop creators gladly take on the aesthetics often associated with amateur creation. The key is to follow the guidance of Galloway and Bishop and counterbalance these formal concerns with attention to elements like platform, the conventions of the community, the distribution channels, and so forth. In other words, making these formal concerns component parts within the larger scaled assemblage allows other material and expressive elements to play roles and opens up new possibilities for exterior relations (DeLanda 2006). Isabelle Graw (2004) illuminates such a pathway in

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"Dedication Replacing Appropriation: Fascination, Subversion, and Dispossession in Appropriation Art," suggesting we grant "the appropriated material a certain momentum" (54). YouTube Poop is far more comprehensible when implicitly part of a "complex interactive relationship" (55).

These creative works are an ongoing process: an aesthetic event, a phenomenon emerging from a specific socio-historic context, and a set of operations occurring across vast networks of human and non-human actors. In more concrete terms, YouTube Poop works are uncanny spectacles that rummage through pop-culture reserves. They circulate through the distribution channels favoured by remix cultures and participate in the looping logic of the meme, requiring shifts and alteration through repeated reworking. Yet as forms of parody and pastiche, they also reflect back and comment upon the 'conditions of the digital' that facilitate this very experience of the digital.

4.8 Poop, LULZ, and YouTube

In charting the networks, the key recurrent sinew connecting all these various parts is the LULZ. Rather than being a single force, the LULZ is present in the overarching logics of desecration and spectacle that sit at the heart of YouTube Poop. The LULZ exis in the ability to constantly repeat and adapt in its content. It arises in the actual shared material and library of jokes, images, sounds, and conventions. However, what makes it so intriguing is that it is the LULZ moves

interfaces from the anonymous message board into these video remixes. Accordingly, the first task in fully exploring how the LULZ informs YouTube Poop is mapping the material axis connected to its transmitting platform: YouTube.

 Launched in early 2005, YouTube relies on user submissions of audiovisual content. It is now home to an immense archive and countless genres of videos: home movies, new and old commercial works, dedicated online narrative series, video blogs, sports excerpts, camera rants, and so on. The site's interface continues to undergo slight alterations but maintains a relatively stable search function, embedded player with controls, a video progress scrub bar, links to related videos, and an area for comments (which may be disabled or enabled by the video uploader). Considering the wide diversity of content, it is difficult to argue for a sole use or purpose to the platform. In fact, the site maintains a monetary strategy reliant upon such variety, gaining viewers by accommodating a multitude of different audiences. The site's slogan of "Broadcast Yourself" highlights its rhetorical tactic as a positive space for online culture that facilitates users sharing everyday life, voicing opinions, sharing amateur creations, and participating in a united collaborative community.

 Part of the LULZ mentality is an abject relationship to popular online activity and a resulting impulse to deface or interrupt its functions. It is clear that YouTube Poop relishes its transgression of any imagined utopian space within the YouTube platform. From YouTube Poop's early days, part of the pleasure experienced by both

creators and potential audiences operates through the contingent encounter of using the search function on YouTube. Anyone attempting to find videos of well-adored video game heroes like Mario or Sonic, or nostalgically delight in childhood cartoons, could end up in the confusion and commotion of YouTube Poop. It is quite easy to understand the resentment of older poopers like SuperYoshi who maintain that self-identifying poops with "YouTube Poop—Title" undoes the bewilderment of an accidental audience. Few poops demonstrate this tactic of bewilderment better than "TOP 27 ANIME BOOBS." It starts with a slow pan on a pair of animated female legs with "A Few of My Favourite Things" from *The Sound of Music* playing quietly. A wipe flips the screen and then continues to salaciously pan on the body before abruptly cutting to music from the video game *Megaman* and an edited version of the opening credits to the *Corey in the House* television program. The images flip back and forth, repeating at times, and often pulsating in time with the music. It closes with a static image of a scantily clad Princess Peach (from *The Super Mario Brothers* franchise) to ensure the video's preview thumbnail will be of the enticing princess and thus operate effectively as link bait. There are several components to this form of YouTube Poop joke: the title, the thumbnail, the playful evocation of Julie Andrews' voice, as well as the understanding of cringe-worthy Internet communities that would not only rank the physical traits of anime characters but also make a dedicated YouTube video to such a list.

The literacy of keywords, tags, and searches serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, they allow YouTube Poop to rejoice in its own LULZ abjectness. YTP delights in the annoyance of the spectacle and the irreverence towards the original content; poops signal to other poopers an understanding of genre while marking an individual intervention. Content creators manage to sneak into searches, entice with thumbnails, and spread misinformation. On the other hand, it highlights the already gross and objectionable elements under the veneer of the 'everyday Internet.' In other words, poops demonstrate that 'broadcasting yourself' is not necessarily a voicing and expression of affirmative elements, despite any of the site's liberal-normative claims. The scatological reference in the designation 'YouTube Poop' undoubtedly speaks to such expressive functions facilitated by and through the dissemination platform.

4.9 Technical Restrictions and Creative Growth

Attention to distribution goes conjointly with material considerations on the side of production. Speaking to fellow pooper "Dillrod90," Mulligan (2010) recalls upgrading a computer to Windows XP Pro, which included the Windows Movie Maker program; his exploration of the software led to the genesis of early works. Equally, a new computer with the "service pack 2" of Windows XP expanded the Movie Maker program abilities and led to speed alterations in poops. While the formal tendencies towards the haphazard, hectic, and non-linear do align to older

models of moving image experimentation, they nonetheless hold specific affinities to the software and hardware at hand. Poops work as a meta-commentary upon the aesthetics that these programs enable, by purposely mimicking the clunky look associated with the amateur work of early home do-it-yourself image creation, while simultaneously celebrating such limitations by dedicating an entire practice to flawed, error-laden, and rudimentary software. Akin to the limitations propelling creativity in 4chan's rudimentary design, here the lack of options pushes a specific creative force that both celebrates and mocks itself.

For DeLanda (2011), the contingent identity of assemblages originates in their "emergent properties, capacities, and tendencies" (3). When turning to the material axis of YouTube Poop—how poops circulate YouTube, the spoofing of searches, and aesthetic allegiance to early digital editing—the capacities to both annoy and entertain arise. A key aspect of DeLanda's assemblage is the ability of component parts to engage in separate assemblages (186-187). YouTube Poop relies on the properties that enable remix cultures to spread and thrive: low barriers to engagement, low-cost and user-friendly software, easy distribution channels, and a delight in the amateur. Yet through interactions between other component parts, YouTube Poop also pushes the elements of dissent. There is a double encoding: inscribing these videos with elements of the remix, while also subverting expectations of the genre. YouTube Poop is annoying, grating, provoking, vexing, trying, and fun. Such affective capacity to speak in a double tongue is due to

the interaction between elements along YouTube Poop's expressive axis: namely, its expressive and direct content connection to communities like 4chan and its culture of the LULZ.

4.10 Poop and 4chan

As explored in Chapter Three, 4chan is a frenzy of chance and haphazard images, utterances, and encounters. Contestation, argumentation, and in-jokes permeate its discourse and punctuate any visit to the site. This wild, unruly, and problematic culture certainly makes its way into YouTube Poop. There are clear connections: for example, in December of 2007, 4chan site creator Christopher "Moot" Poole declared "Weegee"—the problematically racially encoded, bastardized spelling of Luigi—to be his favourite meme. With the exception of *Sonic the Hedgehog*, the ubiquitous wellspring for YTP content remains the low notes and rubbish chapters of the Mario canon, such as the CD-i games or television program. In addition to the shared Weegee meme, there exist several YTP-specific in-jokes like "Fat Mario" or "Mama Luigi." Aside from the often expressed resentment for larger Internet memes, there is a large catalogue of videos that contain the Weegee character within the same conventions or signified meanings that appear during this period across 4chan, especially on /v/.

This is but one example of shared components between 4chan and YTP. The "Do A Barrel Roll" meme starts with a line of dialogue from the Nintendo game

Starfox. On 4chan, it becomes a sarcastic response to anyone soliciting advice or a comedic caption for any number of photos—from lounging cats to aerial disasters. At the height of its popularity on /b/, it also appears in "BarnabasB"'s late 2007 work "Youtube Poop: Do A Barrel Roll or Die part 1" and becomes an ongoing part of the community, appearing numerous times in the work of "Superyoshi64." The images uploaded to 4chan to embody reactions, or ">mfw" ("my face when") narratives, or simply to match text, habitually align to YTP characters like *Beauty and the Beast*'s villain Gaston, or Rugrats' father character Stu Pickles, bait-and-switch favourite Nigel Thornberry taken from *The Wild Thornberrys*, the scream of "This is Sparta!" from the movie *300*, or even actor and late-career diabetes spokesman Wilfred Brimley.

Unsurprisingly, there are many other interconnected nodes. In October of 2006, when YouTube Poop's initial founders were just starting to play with Windows Movie Maker, an unconnected YouTube user named "Kajetokun" uploaded "9000!! NINE THOUSAAAAANDD." The work takes clips from *Dragon Ball Z* and holds many affinities to YTP including jittered editing, speed alteration, and repeated dialogue. The content itself was initially 4chan memes and, as Kajetokun admits, he frequented the boards (Durant 2007). He recalls, "attention to that phrase was started in 4chan, Over 9000 was something that would pop-up here and there maybe twice a week in only a couple of 4chan threads"; after failing to find the clip on YouTube, Kajetokun "decided to play around with it in Windows Movie

Maker. [He] started moving it around and placing it in random orders" in order to send to friends for laughs. Through 4chan, the video garnered an impressive number of views.

Akin to 4chan's Japanese roots and ongoing doppelgängers, there is also international kin to YTP. "MADs" focus on remixing and parading anime and manga, frequently with the addition of Japanese pop music. Each often remove or supersede the original source material and generate their own narratives. Much like YouTube Poop, MADs often defy definition because of the mass population of outliers—those that do not use anime sources, focusing instead on network news, for example. They too rely on video-sharing platforms and interact in dynamic ongoing cycles and trends of editing forms, in-jokes, and connections to larger meme communities.

The broader point from these intricate and multifold relations is that the LULZ migrate but change. Accordingly, the subversive aspects of YouTube Poops' double inscription arise through the LULZ, but also then operate as a different set of capacities. To echo a fragment of Chapter Three, 4chan's ephemeral interfaces (older content vanishes from users' view) and lack of official archives means there is little attribution, which means diminutive responsibility. It is fertile ground for LULZ as it is a rich space for trials and tests of ideas. This clearly comes across in the aesthetics of YouTube Poop, as creators willingly take on all types of content sources and attempt inventive approaches in form. Moreover, there is the *experience* tied to the LULZY creations as playful exasperation, community pleasure by way of

individual displeasure, tests of fortitude, deplorable vulgarity, and contingent encounters punctuated by familiar community markers that pulse through these entwined works.

Yet within this new form, the LULZ remain highly problematic. There is an undeniable juvenile sensibility to YouTube Poop. The idea of making Mario swear, or turning a corporate spokesman like Dr. Rabbit into a racist, or sexualizing Sonic the Hedgehog is inarguably base in appeal. The non-critical, even indifferent, attitude towards rape and sexual assault is rampant, as demonstrated in subsets of videos like "ear rape." There is simply no excuse for such vile traits in any context; to ignore such elements deepens their toxicity in already poisoned online spheres.

Nonetheless, these elements do not determine the whole. Within these assemblages—be it 4chan, YouTube Poop, or other LULZY points in the abject Internet constellation—there are expressive and material elements that can destabilize the dominant subject positions that exercise power and perpetuate inequality. The advantage of DeLanda's (2011) assemblage theory remains "parameterizing the concept of the assemblage" via thinking through its "modifiable settings" over a set of "fixed set of properties" (187). Through parody's power, YouTube Poop holds the capacity to critique and call attention to the online cultures that it engages with. As argued, the weirdness of YouTube Poop connects to similar phenomena, endurance videos (a short clip repeated for hours) and fortitude memes (such as "You Laugh, You Lose" threads on 4chan). However, YouTube

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Poop's closest bedfellow is MLG (Major League Gaming) parody videos that poke fun at video game highlight reels, using all of the same tropes, including dubstep soundtracks, slow motion quick-kill shots, and allusions to marijuana culture. Through aesthetic mimicking, MLG parody videos highlight how YouTube Poop can leverage the trollish nature of the LULZ to achieve a critical distance towards online remix cultures while resisting collapsing into purely disengaged irony. The question arises: through these material and expressive orientations, what does the double speech of YouTube Poop actually say about online culture?

4.11 The 'Thisness' of Poop

Writing against genetic metaphors for online content, Sampson (2012) stresses that content "contagions are established in complex intersection points that bring physical, biological, cultural and political phenomena into social relation with each other" (87). Moreover, such assemblages are not discreet or distinct units but rather a "process of contagion and contamination of component parts" (87). Sampson is quite correct in his assertion that it is the recurrent force of 'imitative encounters' existing in opposition and acceptance, which are triggered by a 'desire-event' and not simply the buzz marketing hype of "viral videos." He charts how biological processes operate through social intervention, forming "a second kind of desire" that cultivates a space for imitation and imitative encounters. Certain online content is one of many instances of "inventions stemming from desire [that] are

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then contiguously passed on, point to point, via radiating ideas, fascinations, passionate interests, beliefs, and any other suitable social media for imitation." This then "feed[s] into a continuum of invention and further adaptations of the entire social field" (25).

Anna Munster (2013) evokes Deleuze to understand the large-scale online audience. She argues that the 'everyday video' spread requires "a singularity, a thisness that belongs to the atmosphere of the entire clip rather than to someone or thing in it" dovetailing with a "contouring of this moment's duration as presentness" (103). This may seem incongruent with the remix genre and more applicable to the slices and snippets of digitally documented commonplace events, yet what Munster goes on to stress is the viral video's capacity to affect. She contends that the viewer "associating with them contagiously" generates "something that is felt, shared, and spread" (103). To put Sampson and Munster's mutual points in more direct terms: YouTube Poop becomes an actualization of several elements, including an ambivalence towards the terrible beauty of nineties bric-a-brac, an involvement in online cultures in which nothing is sacred except the act of parody itself, a desire to intervene in media or reclaim forms of mediation one loses as a 'consumer,' and—as theorists of remix stress—a drive to participate in acts of creativity. The end product becomes an active event with the potential to affect as it spreads.

This 'thingness' of YouTube Poop elucidates several elements of online digital mediation. Foremost, there is the aforementioned encounter of abjection

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manifesting in the realms of the 'everyday Internet.' YouTube Poop foregrounds the blunders of digitization through garbled sounds and distorted images generating vibrant sensations of confusion. This point easily expands: as the Internet continues its nearly two decade long encroachment into many spheres of everyday life—communication, economics, education, entertainment, and so forth—the quest for speed in networks, new amusements, and non-linear sensations increasingly becomes habitual. Speed is both a goal and act of online interactions through the frenzy of software, hardware, code, and networks (McKelvey 2012). There is the aggravation of lag or in-between time of torrent acquisitions or the consequences of exceeding data plans. In YouTube Poop, speed becomes a trope that plays to both mimic the frenetic speeds of online content and the platforms it runs on but also turns to slow motion, lag, and aggravating duration to push against expectations and understandings of online time.

Coinciding with speed, online experience is often characterized with an obsession with the 'new.' On sites like Reddit there is fetish with being the 'first' or 'original poster' to share content, which social media matches with races to share, link, post, or create before others. Poop derides this fixation by continually and constantly regurgitating old garbage television or video games. Against attempts to gain community standing or cultural caché by having already experienced a popular online trend—be it meme, article, social media status update, video remix, etc.—YouTube Poop mucks about in the backwoods of forgotten pop culture.

Pushing back against the increasingly normalized chaos of non-linear online experience facilitated by tabbed browsers, hyperlinks, back-and-forward browsing, or the non-linear logic of databases, YouTube Poop celebrates the disconnect, the loop, and other forms of confusion. Poops purposely remove original source narratives and inject a range of strange, befuddling, and often nonsensical storylines that generally exist in isolated snippets rather than chains of story. Focusing on motifs, in-jokes, memes, and cringeworthy scraps, these videos both embody and critically foreground the emergent logic of online browsing and content creation.

4.12 Actualizing the LULZ

Through its use of the LULZ, YouTube Poop becomes an aesthetic of agitation that sits, like a thorn, in the side of any utopian, harmonious, or community-oriented rhetoric of online culture. Galloway's (2012) argument that "today's systematics have no contrary" as "algorithms and other logical structures are monolithic in their historic development" means we live in a moment of "a positively dominant of reductive, systematic efficiency and expediency" (99). There is something remarkable in the way YouTube Poop spoofs this logic with a purposely-obtuse strategy, an embrace of pandemonium, and an encounter with the fortuitous. Rather than presenting or aligning to the rule of efficiency that Galloway outlines, YouTube Poop lacks expediency and expands the idle, useless, and annoying. After nearly a decade of existence, YouTube Poop may just be the extension of postmodern

aesthetics—the championing of parody and pastiche as yet further evidence in a culture lost in its own images, sights, sounds, and sensibilities. YouTube Poop might just demonstrate that culture remains lost in the terms of Late Capital outlined by Jameson (1991). However, assemblage theory warns against such reduction. The capacity that forms between material and expressive parts means YouTube Poop's double-code subverts *and* authors, forming works that investigate the processes at the heart of our digital condition. It is vital to recognize that YouTube Poop slots into any number of historical uses of found footage, remix, and montage: photo manipulation in the Dadist and Surrealist movement; exploring the spectacle through pop-culture tidbits in Situationist International; re-casting characters in the work of "vidders"; or billboard assault by Culture Jammers. But is not wholly conflatable with the annals of avant-garde experimentation because it is distinctly about online digital cultures.

In this way, YouTube Poop is perhaps doing the equivalent labour of those past art movements. It uses the aesthetics of experimentation to reflect and refract current conditions of everyday life existing through mediation. Its feverish imagery, rambling sounds, obtuse editing, and overall mayhem is era-specific to our contemporary capitalism with "vertical and horizontal integration, media concentration, media convergence, media globalization, the integration of media capital and other types of capital, the rationalization of production, the globalization of production, circulation, and trade" (Fuchs et al. 2010, 199). As a type of meta-

commentary upon the online remix genres, YTP is propped up by these shifting points in the media landscape and hides within the ranks of any number of other mash-ups; but it also trolls and transgresses by calling attention to the silly content, clumsy technique, and exasperating experiences inexorably tied to online culture.

In this way, YouTube Poop works within the larger assemblage of the LULZ but manages to actualize far more of the progressive elements compared to 4chan. The anonymous message board predates YouTube Poop but, as argued in Chapter Three, fails to move beyond its conservative impulses towards a dominant subject position. 4chan does not truly operate from outside the distribution of the sensible, nor does it take much interest in formations of equality. Instead it constantly falls back into the speech and voice aligned to the dominant subject positions. Conversely, YouTube Poop uses the spectacle, parody, vitriol, and chaos of the LULZ but actualizes *more* of the potential power. Perhaps YTP is our current avant-garde artwork or alternative media form reflecting on these conditions and the way "ideologies are reproduced" in online cultures by way of commodification for exchange value (Fuchs et al. 2010, 199).

4.13 The Problem with Poop

However, perhaps it is *only* when we use these moments of presence in different ways—for politics proper—that we can actualize their virtual capacities to decontextualize and reclaim elements of the everyday intruded upon by damaging

socio-cultural and economic conditions.[76] Akin to 4chan, the problematic discourse and culture of YouTube Poop cannot be ignored. In many ways it continues to live up to its etymological roots, as its base online impulses mean a culture tinged with racist, sexist, homophobic, and ableist overtones. It makes rape jokes. It evokes problematic racialized imagery. It defaces and offends. While its doublespeak provides a great deal of critical insight into the online cultures that it engages with, there is still that voice of hate.

The key take-away point moving into the next chapter is *how* the LULZ can shift. In an assemblage, there are shared component parts. There are intangible and expressive elements: contingency, surprise, parody, spectacle, and chaos. There are material points: images of pop culture detritus, the absurd videos that become popular memes, and even the music of in-jokes. The divergence comes in the mobilization of the affectual capacities of the LULZ that go further with YouTube Poop, but still not far enough. To avoid readings that determine political commitment either directly through subject matter or formal strategies, we must foreground the way engagement with content or form operates contextually to create political scenes by way of regimes of mediation. It follows that the question that must be asked of YouTube Poop is: does it work with an "intelligibility of

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[76] See Chapter Two's discussion of Rancière and radical equality for a full explanation of terminology relating to the political.

human action, to a certain kind of affinity between ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking" bound within its aesthetic experience (Rancière 2011b, 10)?

The groundwork of this chapter suggests that re-casting the sensibility of the LULZ into a direct creative practice increases the possibility for a voice of dissent in its double speech, when compared to the idle, imbalanced, and muddled world of 4chan. But those ways of being, doing, and speaking are not fully radical. Of course, the LULZ do not stop with YouTube Poop and there is further proliferation into new online enclaves and spaces, which means more room for the assemblage to gain and lose parts, and with them new affective powers on a whole. The next chapter will follow this trajectory into a number of direct artistic practices, which accordingly leverage the LULZ to speak to and about our emergent digital condition.

Chapter Five: LULZY Art—The Jogging

YouTube Poop connects to the LULZ through shared memes and image cultures, a similar absurdist and purposely offensive sensibility, and an embrace of new (and specific) platforms (message boards, Windows Movie Maker, YouTube, and so on). So the question becomes: why is this important? Stated differently, what larger insight do these various scenes reveal about online culture, aesthetics, and contemporary culture? Claire Bishop (2012) provides a good starting point in "Digital Divide" by articulating a split between the uses of digital technologies in art versus critical reflection on how we are "altered by the digitization of our existence." She points to the fetishistic fascination with older forms of media in current art circles and the prevalence of social practice through relational aesthetics, as ways that the art world sidesteps the new concerns raised by digital technology. Alternatively, there is work focused upon mediation, such as the database, but it fails to "speak overtly" to "our experience of digitized life."

This chapter will seek art practices participating in that critical engagement, but specifically through the aesthetic sense and sensibility of the LULZ. As charted in Chapter Three and Chapter Four, the ability of the LULZ to doublespeak, to mock, and to desecrate gives it a particular affective power. When such a capacity actualizes in particular assemblages, it becomes a powerful commentary on the properties entwined in contemporary online cultures—for instance, the focus on

experiencing speed in relation to YouTube Poop explored in Chapter Four. However, as noted, particular parts of 4chan's assemblage keep it in line with a decidedly non-radical ideology, and while YouTube Poop pushes the LULZ further, it too never overcomes an alignment to particular distribution of the sensible. The migration from 4chan through creative spheres like YouTube Poop continues into artistic practice, and as this chapter will explore, it becomes an extraordinary way to think through the digitization of our existence.

5.2 Art Worlds

Bishop's (2012) writing explicitly targets the commercial art world over creative scenes *outside* of the borders of contemporary art. However, to speak to this dividing line between art and non-art requires some exploration and explanation. The most advantageous arguments come through the conception of the 'art world' by way of George Dickie and Arthur Danto. For Dickie (1977), theories of art develop in three phases: first, Plato through early twentieth-century formalism strives to define and capture the essence. Second, analytic philosophy, starting in the fifties, pushes against strident definition itself. It operates as a form of 'anti-theory.' In the third phase, Danto and others (Dickie signals people like Maurice Mandlebaum) turn to social function, thus opening the door to re-designations and re-classifications of art. What arise in this third wave are the 'institutional definition of art' and the idea of 'art worlds.'

For Dickie, (1969) "a work of art in the descriptive sense is (1) an artifact (2) upon which some society or some sub-group of a society has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation" (254). By sidestepping the act of appreciation and naturalization of art (an object could be art but fail to be recognized as such), Dickie hopes to call attention to the way art as an institution requires a multitude of co-mingled forces: an artist (or curator) to present an object as art, a public sensitive or engaged to the type or form of art produced, critics to discursively contextualize works, institutions to catalogue works, and so on. Preoccupations with social-process mean metaphysical preoccupations fall to the wayside. In the wake of movements like Dadaism, representational form seems actually irrelevant to the notion of art. In an institutional critique, the elements that frame Dada as a movement transform a urinal into a work of art. These theories increase in relevance as representation decreases because they can ignore all evaluative questions. Certain critics argue that the position easily functions to naturalize: privileged groups continually dominate spheres of creation and legitimation,[77] or the production of art functions as arbitrary dredging of every and any possible object.[78] Nevertheless, there is a merit in the institutional theory's insistence that there is no clear, impartial organization for art or the art world, and that the art, artist, or theory cannot and should not override or eliminate one another.

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[77] For a more developed version of this critique see: Nigel Warburton's (2003) *The Art Question*.
[78] A key articulation of this criticism is Richard Wolheim's (1980) *Art and Its Objects*.

Dickie's shortcoming lies in his attempt to leverage the heuristic function of the institutional theory into universal tenets. Such a tendency is less prevalent in Danto (1964), from whom Dickie borrows the term 'art world.' Danto's ideas develop across several works, namely *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981), *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (1986), and *After the End of Art* (1997). A recurrent impetus in Danto is the separation of "theories of aesthetic consideration" from any understanding of the "status of art objects," which he achieves through historiographical method. Danto (1981) analyzes the traditional dividing line between art object and non-art object through affective qualities and characteristics. In the wake of Pop Art or Dada, no set of "perceptual differences" can account for an object's categorization as art (44). Danto examines how form and content dovetail with interpretation as an object becomes art. He writes, "there is an internal connection … nothing is an artwork without an interpretation that constitutes it as such" (135). It is not the beauty flowing outward from Duchamp's ready-mades that signal them as art objects to viewers, but rather their retroactive marking as art that pushes artistic consideration. He writes, "in order to respond aesthetically … one must first know that the object is an artwork, and hence the distinction between what is art and what is not is presumed available before the difference in response to that difference in identity is possible" (94). The difference between art objects and mere things presents an often-presumed ignorance of the status of art object, or as he states, "aesthetic response presupposes the distinction

and hence cannot simply enter the definition of art" (113). Thus, historical contextualization is inseparable from both objects of art and viewers' experiences of them, meaning the work itself expands beyond object.

To return to the LULZ: the creativity fostered so well in the annals of 4chan or through community creation in YTP work well as reflections and embodiments of a specific moment—namely, the digital condition alluded to by Bishop. As articulated by Latour, it is only *after* the discovery or entrance into a networked existence that an actor exists, however it then always exists retroactively. To say that digital art starts to emerge in the current moment is to suggest that it may be nascent beforehand in the memes, play, or culture of a board like /b/. However, it is only recognizable as such after the fact—as it becomes an aesthetic practice. Hence this chapter's interest in art works or communities that do overcome the divide Bishop describes—in other words, works that actualize the virtual qualities of the aesthetic experience that creeps about the depths of 4chan or twitches in the frenzy of YouTube Poop.

5.3 The Jogging

Approaching the same issues as Bishop, Jacob Gaboury (2010) puts forward the claim that "the objects of Internet art are necessarily immaterial." His article "Incoherence: Art Collective JOGGING" describes how such immaterial conditions provide a difficult terrain on which to exhibit, archive, or monetize work. The

legacies of Net.Art hold strong cadence as artists negotiate a medium with little structure for traditional curatorial practice. If anything, such a crisis exasperates this digital divide. There is a case to be made that Gaboury is ignoring the literal material elements of the Internet (from service providers to server farms to protocol sets); that being said, his argument is that two artists—Brad Troemel and Lauren Christiansen—foreground the immaterial by using the microblogging platform Tumblr to stage creative works. He writes, "The site functions as an evolving sketchbook in which ideas are conceived and executed with a speed and immediacy unconstrained by physical or institutional limitations." As such, it operates against the practices of careful curation adopted within gallery spaces and often mocks the procedures and terminology of gallery spaces. The fancifully free use of terms like "performance" for screen captures of web-based text conversations, in works like "K lemme know" (posted on August 26, 2013), illustrate a re-working of traditional art conventions.

Numerous posts on The Jogging walk the line between silliness and an institutional defence of any farcical ridiculousness knotted within experimental art. "HAIR STRAIGHTENER USED TO COOK INDIVIDUAL PIECE OF BACON, 2012" (posted June 26, 2012) is a self-explanatory work that uses a rough amateur aesthetic to document the 'performance' of cooking pork. "DUCT TAPED WEB" (posted June 29, 2010) documents an 'installation' of the home repair tape on a spider's web. The influences of the absurd are clear. Troemel (2012) explains this

tendency in an interview, stating that, early on, the site focused on "the eradication of objects in favour of digital images" in acts of "creative destruction" positioned against formal art spaces and understanding. As he explains, "the best challenge to the authority of something is to find where its semantic or enforceable borders

HAIR STRAIGHTENER USED TO COOK INDIVIDUAL PIECE OF BACON, 2012

Performance

√

5:10 pm • 26 June 2012 • 40,199 notes

Figure 10 – "HAIR STRAIGHTENER USED TO COOK INDIVIDUAL
PIECE OF BACON"

break down and to exploit those shortcomings." Practices thus frame "a contradiction so that definitions of authority or meaning lose their value" as they become "multiple things at once." While this certainly is applicable to any number of experimental art forms—both past and present—situated against the dominant authority of institutional art, the elements that The Jogging draws upon remain unique.

For Troemel (2013), a key element of this unique webbing is the Internet as a medium. He muses:

> Through the internet, images become other images, images become objects, objects become images, objects become other objects. Every object can become an image and nothing that is represented as an image on the internet can be stopped from becoming an object.

While there is a certain linguistic acrobatics for effect, this statement also illustrates the underlying logic that drives so many of the works on The Jogging. Throughout 2012, Troemel made a number of strange product collages. Notable examples

DORITOSLOCOS taco MASTER LOCKED shut (Key Sold Separately) Highly Unique, 2012
Sculpture
.°.
BUY IT ON ETSY NOW
9:33 pm · 19 June 2012 · 162 notes

Figure 11 – "DORITOSLOCOS taco MASTER LOCKED shut (Key
Sold Separately) Highly Unique"

include: "LIVE STRONG yellow Hotdog, Pen, and Q-Tip HOLDER / The Exquisite Design You Trust & The Phenomenal Tastes You Grew Up With (Quite Limited)" (posted on June 11, 2012), "MIKES classic HARDMARGARITA and Twisted Trojans" (posted on June 12, 2012), and "DORITOSLOCOS taco MASTER LOCKED shut (Key

Sold Separately) Highly Unique" (posted on June 19, 2012). In each of these three items, Troemel built a bricolage of seemingly unrelated items: fast food, branded sports items, alcohol, and personal hygiene items. Akin to his outlined argument, they appeared first as posts on The Jogging and then as purchasable items on Etsy (a commerce-focused website that specializes in the sale of vintage items and unique handmade crafts). As objects they mix whimsical absurdity with the uncanny—a taco sealed with a lock perhaps illuminates this best. Their placement within actual circuits of commerce highlights the multiplicity Troemel describes. With each of these works, there is a playful step through and away from objects as art and art as objects. A later work in the same series titled "AUTHENTIC black pete Dutch blackface Santa Candy Holder as (Hot Topic) Neon Fishnet hand glove WESC tag included (Pervasively Influential)" (posted on July 12, 2012) focuses on this back-and-forth reality of image and image-object by inserting a "Beyond Organic" brand logo across the candy head inserted into the neon glove netting. The Photoshop collage of course cannot translate into the purchasable Etsy shop, drawing attention to the formal elements of collage and process of creation.

On one hand, these works take aim at formalism itself. Troemel's deployment of marketing lingo ("quite limited," "key sold separately," or "BUY IT ON ETSY NOW") undermines the false importance and ostensible artwork status conferred upon the banal objects of the everyday featured in the works. Any sense that these sculptures, performances, or documentations are sacred art objects vanishes. On the

other hand, the context does not undermine all of the formal elements of these works. A quality supersedes context or critical reading, as these assembled objects hold recognizable aesthetic traits. The thing driving both sides—the easily cast-off, gaudy crassness and a visual or affectual expression bred through creation—coalesces around the incorporation of aesthetics particular to online cultures. Each work in this series incorporates the visual cues associated with sites like Etsy or eBay (e.g. dim lighting and absent backgrounds). The titles themselves mimic the long titles on many commerce sites designed to maximize visibility in search engines, highlighting the unique or undeniably different as a draw to content.
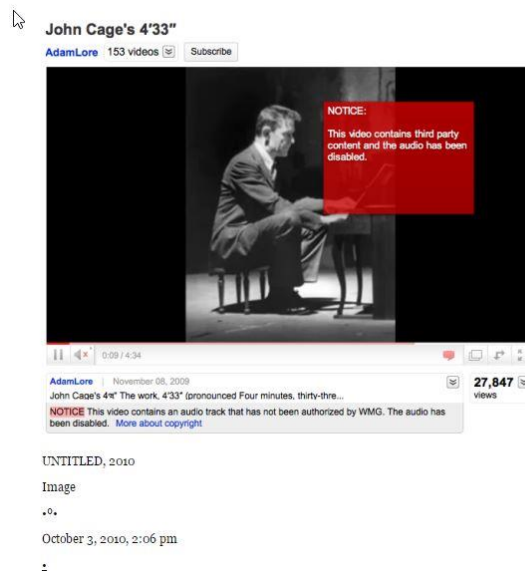

Figure 12 – "UNTITLED"

Such ambivalence that simultaneously mocks, mimics, and celebrates is not isolated to these spattering of works. "UNTITLED" (posted October 3, 2010) by

Adam Lore (posting under the moniker ".") combines a screen shot from a YouTube video of John Cage's *4'33"* with the over-laid notice that "this video contains third party content and the audio has been disabled" (this warning appears on uploaded content that violates copyright). Below the text, the explanation follows: "the video contains an audio track that has not been authorized by WMG. The audio has been disabled." This riff on Cage's original work, which focuses on the structural importance of silence and audience-generated noise, foregrounds online content creation and policing. The silence holds the same expressive purpose, especially given the use of a screenshot rather than embedded video, but speaks to a different set of actors and aesthetic realities. There are many similar engagements with art history on The Jogging. David Hockney's *A Bigger Splash* is photoshopped to exaggerate the white water flow in "A Bigger Splash" (posted on July 25, 2013). "After Malevich's Black Square" recreates Kazimir Malevich's original stark painting but as a "gesture on a macbook pro" as the image is literally applied to the screen of the computer.

Much of the more interesting work on The Jogging tackles the aesthetics of digital technology itself. Throughout 2013, a wide range of creators photoshopped out all content above the horizon points in a variety of photographs, and posted the resulting uncanny images. For example "Horizon (4)" (posted on July 21, 2013) cuts off the heads of a vacationing couple posing in the ocean. In the place of their faces, the artist (in this case Aaron Graham posting under the moniker "√") filled in the

sky above the horizon, making the erasure seamless. Other parts of this series such as "Horizon (m/s HOLIDAY)" (posted on July 21, 2013) or "BP Deepwater Horizon" (posted on July 22, 2013) likewise remove a section of a photo image—a group of

Figure 13 – "Horizon"

people on a cruise or the billowing flames of an ignited oil platform—and replace it with the background sky. Variations quickly appear, such as "Doorway" (posted on July 21, 2013) that crop the left body and a section of legs of a woman through the illusion of the doorframe behind her, pushing an impossible foreground ahead of her.

5.4 The Accidental Audience

When Troemel describes the ceaseless march of images and objects on the site, he identifies the meme-like logic that governs much of its content. Just as advice animals spread across 4chan and move to sites like Reddit, the horizon-themed submissions on The Jogging leap-frog with one another. There are other examples: the frequent use of energy drinks to create images or statues and an image depicting

a gorilla holding a bong titled "King Bong" (submitted October 25, 2013) become fodder for a number of other works, culminating with a banner hung in Los Angeles; there is also the recurrent abuse of technology from burnt or submerged laptops to dismantled or destroyed phones. In this way, the site's internal mechanisms mirror sites like 4chan and communities like YouTube Poop.

Part of this is due to the platform. In "The Accidental Audience," Troemel details Tumblr as "the largest image-aggregating social network on the Internet, comprising 50 million blogs with 20 billion images alone." Tumblr relies on the "note" mechanism to track sharing. Every time someone reposts or likes a post, this adds to its note count. The process automates appropriation, according to Troemel, as one "takes media from one blog and inserts it on [one's] own" with the site documenting the outward dispersal publicly. It then works as "a form of viewership and a mode of display" as the platform traces the trail and opens to potential audiences. Troemel argues that it is an act of both consumption *and* production. In the midst of countless individuals performing this twofold act, context and the intentionality of an image or video or post may disappear. For Troemel, direct citation remains inexorably linked to an image's status as art (or as offensive or personal content) but as it circulates widely, it loses any such mark or intonation. Again, The Jogging holds key similarities with YTP's recycling of clips or 4chan's handling of memes, images, and remarks.

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For The Jogging, the technical elements of platform mean works can end up far beyond the borders of any conceived 'art project.' Christopher Mitchell (posting as "©™") submitted "Gucci Mane as 'The Waterfall'" on May 25, 2013. The photograph depicts rapper Gucci Mane wrapped in a white fur coat that slowly blends into the turbulent white flow of a waterfall, with two small kayakers awe-struck below. In addition to over forty thousand notes, the image appeared in a tweet by Gucci Mane declaring it the new cover art for his forthcoming album. These kind of invisible transferences occur daily (not only on The Jogging but across micro-blogging sites) with people reposting content with dismay, joy, outrage, and so on. Troemel (2013) writes, "Art's relationship with the new accidental audience and new quasi-exhibition spaces online is rife with awkwardness, mistaken presumptions and anger." But rather than being an inadvertent consequence, it seems an integral element of the objects themselves. As such, these works lure emotional engagement in a way wholly aligned to the LULZ.

Troemel argues that reactions to site posts typically fall into three categories. First is "WTF: I don't even?" which refers to a meme deployed for baffling, yet pleasurable confusion. Troemel cites "Mac Bath" (posted on January 20, 2013), created by Will Shea and Shawn C. Smith (posting as"∫" and "÷" respectively), which is a photographic documentation of a Macbook Pro submerged in a bathtub. Undeniably odd in quality, many questioned the need to document the event or the inciting incident. The second common reaction is "you're doing it wrong," in which a

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work's absurdity is overridden by the audience's sincere belief, meaning a hair straightener cooking bacon becomes an actual tactic for gastronomic ends. In the third, dismay gives voice to a timeless compliant of "my kid could do that" and other similar outraged contestations of the veracity of artworks. Troemel defers to Boris Groys to make the case that a more general disbelief pervades all "digital forms" of art.

While Troemel keys into specifics of reaction and repercussion, the larger reason for the site's popularity is its ability to grapple with general 'everyday' web content. The uncanny nature of The Jogging relies on recognizable online aesthetics. Many works rely on purposely-digitized images, foregrounding a low-quality and degraded look associated with much early or amateur content—the types of images shared through e-mails or forever haunting out-of-date websites. In "pushing a picture of an open road up an open road" (posted July 29, 2013) the title content is barely visible through the blur of the digital photograph. "Sad Ghost" (posted on July 26, 2013) is a rotated emoji emoticon image, perched on its side. Blown-up in frame, the pixels form a blurry, indistinct spectre. Such focus on technical error appears frequently in The Jogging submissions. In "Singularity" (posted September 26, 2013), three bottles of detergent are completely out of focus in a photograph. Alternately, in "Super Scroller (1)," "Super Scroller (2)," and "Super Scroller (3)" (posted on September 4, 2013), colours bleed downwards, converting a fault in a website coding or slow loading page into a set of fluid lines.

Many works rely on photo-editing tools to run the reverse course. Creators use programs like Adobe Illustrator, Photoshop, or InDesign to create artificially perfect images. In "Compact fluorescent cheeto twisted puff," Anna Teterkina and Ilya Smirnov (posted on April 14, 2013, under the names "☺" and "♡") turn the

spiralling pillar of the light bulb into a twisting, cheese-covered snack. The background's perfect matte blue and flat lighting border on professional product

pushing a picture of an open road up an open road, 2013

gif

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3:49 pm • 29 July 2013 • 47 notes

Figure 14 – "pushing a picture of an open road up an open road"

advertisement. In "Compacted Trash" (posted on August 20, 2013), the "free transform" tool in Photoshop turns an image of garbage into a small bar of noisy greys and blues in an otherwise empty white frame. In "Long Drag" (posted August 8, 2013), Masood Kamandy (posting as "□") uses the drag tool to criss-cross an image of a cigarette, turning its borders and shapes into blurs of white and brown against the checkered white and grey of Photoshop's default background.

From purposely centring attention on the digital to mimicking an error to fabricating impossibly polished scenes and objects, each of these formal tendencies on The Jogging illuminates artists dealing with the specifics of the digital: the creeping dismay of small images sent in e-mails or downsized on a smart phone, or the beauty and tragedy of computer errors in an endless scrolling page that replicate modernist painting brushstrokes, or the unprecedented perfection possible in generating images that supplant photochemical recording. These formal tendencies are important but something supersedes all of these qualities. After all, waves of early computer art pioneers or early web artists relied on the error or the fantastic of the digital uncanny. The connecting string of these works, as well as the common reactions Troemel details, is the *everydayness* of the aesthetics. The Jogging is about Google image searches, encountering Facebook posts by long-lost friends, seeing promoted brands tweeting as if they were physical entities, the crude instructions on a do-it-yourself wiki, or any other endless commonplace tasks online.

5.5 The Jogging and the LULZ

Rather than the exceptional, contributors to The Jogging focus on the unremarkable: phone chargers, mall t-shirt branding, the act of pouring out some cereal and eating breakfast. However, within the aesthetic field of The Jogging, none of these tasks operates without a twist or distortion. In "Exclusive Leaked Image of

New iPhone 6 Power Adapter" (posted April 9, 2013), a lodged phone adaptor barely emerges from a large grey block of clay. "Nostalgia" (posted November 10, 2013) depicts Windows 95 wallpaper on a current generation Apple computer. In "Special K (new)" (posted on August 22, 2013), a box of cereal streams blue energy drink into a pool below. In "Positive Intake" (posted November 5, 2013), a bowl of frosted flakes takes on a completely new visual quality soaked in Pepto-Bismol

*Exclusive Leaked Image of New iPhone 6 Power Adapter%*, 2013

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6:12 pm · 9 April 2013 · 219 notes

Figure 15 – "Elusive Leaked Image of New iPhone 6
Power Adapter"

rather than milk. In this way, the creators of these works are not only using the language of new media or affecting Internet users in distinctive ways but they are also commenting upon these new media landscapes. The question becomes: what is The Jogging saying about online culture and the everyday Internet?

An answer requires us to again enter the LULZ abyss. It is important on three fronts: the connection between group anonymity and creative spectacle, the ebb and

flow of institutional content and contingent affect, and the notion of an aesthetics of trolling. To the first point, as noted The Jogging does not use direct attribution for its posted images. All credit on the site (including those posted by site creators and moderators) uses abstract symbols. As the "submit to the jogging" page states, "to create one of these symbols hold down ALT and press any key." This does not, however, completely remove artists and contributors, as these abstract symbols contain hyperlinks that will propel viewers back to a pre-selected website. These are often artists' CV sites or Facebook pages.

Akin to the ubiquitous mantle of anonymity on 4chan boards like /b/, this indirect attribution does lower the boundary to entry as there is less direct responsibility for one's contributions. In most cases, the artists who submit to The Jogging use their own Tumblr pages for the attribution hyperlink. Thus anyone looking to either seek out more work, or hold the artists accountable for the creation, must do the legwork of clicking through the link and then deciphering the owner of the resulting Tumblr page. There is then the option of obstructing or obfuscating one's identity through the linked site, or even more radically, choosing to not provide any hyperlink at all. Such is the case with submitters such as "∰" or "◯," whose work simply exists as products of these cryptograms. As argued in Chapter 3, when access points to contribution are eased, creativity flourishes and gains an equal footing with offence and experimentation. Part of The Jogging's success results from such a system, but in many ways it is also a product borrowed

from the creative spheres of the abject Internet; that is, there is an *intentional* borrowing of the conditions of 4chan and other anonymous or semi-anonymous boards. The Jogging recreates the base minimum requirements: on 4chan you post an image to start a thread and on The Jogging you "join the conversation unfolding" by uploading an image with the bare accompaniment of "Italicized title, [Year] / Medium / Abstract symbol linking back to your website."

There is also the relation to the crowd rather than group. On many sites online, there are core controls for users. As outlined in Chapter 3, most user boards bare the marks of traceable member statistics (numbers of posts, date joined, affiliations, quotes), which can gauge place in a community. On social media, one can add or remove voices by culling or expanding one's friend list on Facebook, or a list of followers on Twitter. Against these, LULZ sites like 4chan exist as the ghostly mobs in which voices appear and disappear under the shared name of anonymous. On The Jogging there are countless contributors who may or may not conceal their trail and who deploy false or dead hyperlinks as a guise. Akin to 4chan, this opens the site up to a broad range of voices through the fluidity of anonymity or pseudonymity. As with YouTube Poop, these avenues of attribution (nicknames or multiple channels of distribution) intensify the ability to push norms (inside and outside of the community). Another parallel is the bare or minimal moderation. Of

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course, not all submissions gain visibility on The Jogging but given its sheer speed of content creation and curation, the regulation does not seem all too stringent.[79]

The Jogging's core rules remain threefold: "Original content / no reblogs / no previously posted work." This may seem to directly flout the institutional practice of 4chan. The meme on /b/—be it image, text copy and paste, or ritual practice—rises above the torrents of random conversation and barrage of low-grade commentary or image posts, through the act of repetition. It is only through the repost that memes evolve and etch out importance in the collective imagination of the community. If it is the case that The Jogging is reliant upon the internal logic of the LULZ, or to state it according to the methodology of Chapter One, that The Jogging relies on similar relations and intermeshed actors to the LULZ, then how to account for such discrepancy?

5.6 Difference and Repetition

Within LULZ communities, there is an undeniable obsession with original content—but it typically requires some reiteration. Even within the meme, there is always propulsion through deviation. A meme, like an advice animal, runs on a central idea, such as emotions of disappointment or tragedy, and the community determines quality through their ability to align to or express that idea. Members of

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[79] While it may seem disconnected to /b/ given this directive, it does align to the thematic boards of 4chan that focus discussion around specific topics.

the community demonstrate their knowledge of institutional memory through their creation of exacting interpretations of specific memes, often dovetailing creation with an alignment towards the values, in-jokes, or references relevant to the particular group. For YTP, this means deploying certain styles and raiding precise material for remixes. The interplay between difference and repetition may seem relatively broad, but this central mechanism is vital. Novel content combining with the contingent interface on 4chan or the unstopping re-casting of a cartoon through YTP editing to form a new visual delight requires, on the one hand, navigating a particular 'state of affairs,' and on the other hand testing them. The meme, video, or comment must withstand speed, rampant dissent, and competing content.

The various contributors and moderators of The Jogging seem keenly aware of such action. Rather than the "Original content / no reblogs / no previously posted work" conflicting with procedural logic of the LULZ, it embraces the push for new content, remixes, and takes on established community trends (see the earlier section on The Jogging content on works like "King Bong") while not deviating from an established aesthetic field. This point is easily proven given that The Jogging establishes its collective knowledge of Internet subculture by *specifically* posting memes. "LOL Cat" (posted November 10, 2013) features the now very familiar impact font overlaid on a visual trick of a cat sitting on someone's lap making the cat appear to have human arms and with the comment: "Interesting, I like that LOL." Similarly, "Oprah Winfrey with Mel Gibson's Eyes" (posted August 22, 2013) is an

aptly titled photo of television personality Oprah Winfrey with eerily green eyes and a reddish tinge on the outside of the sclera. As the name suggests, the effect results from a Photoshop merge of two separate images. While such collage pre-dates the Internet, it did gain prominence as a meme known as "Steve Buscemeyes" which

self aware bubble porn, bubble porn is self aware, 2013
digital image
œ
3:42 pm • 10 November 2013 • 67 notes

Figure 16 – "self aware bubble porn is self aware"

substitutes any set of eyes with those of actor Steve Buscemi, initially conceived as a "Photoshop Friday" project on Something Awful. On The Jogging it merges with the purposeful act of misrepresentation (they actually Buscemi's eyes but called Mel Gibson's for extra comic effect) as a classic troll move.

In "self aware bubble porn, bubble porn is self aware" (posted November 10, 2013), viewer peers through blue bubble-like circle shapes to ogle the nude-looking Kardashian sisters on the cover of *LifeStyle* magazine. The meme originates in "Mormon porn" (also known as "bubble porn," "bubble collage," or "Mizutama Kora") in which masks in Photoshop create an illusion of nudity by simply covering all viable signs of clothing. It began on 2channel, specifically on /morningcoffee/, a board dedicated to fans of the recording artist collective "Hello! Project" but spread across the site, culminating in entire threads and even dedicated image generators. In the submission to The Jogging, the original magazine cover appears in the top corner, which deviates from the common bubble porn troupe.

The comedic base remains in each of these examples. In the first, it is the illusion of a cat wearing a denim shirt with human hands peeking from the sleeves— certainly not sophisticated, yet nonetheless effective. In the second, the frightening vandalising or defacing of celebrity is responsible for the comedic affect. In the last, while the visual trick is silly, it leans more towards salacious or sensational for appeal as a meme. Yet, re-contextualized on The Jogging, each of these memes take on new weight and work as meta-commentary on the memetic form itself.

A few qualifications: it is an error to assume that meme communities, like 4chaners or poopers, lack self-understanding or self-referentiality. Posts on 4chan, for instance, operate in endless loops of serious and joking reflection upon the community itself, mocking other boards or even themselves through imagined

community figures like the "/v/irgin." It is, however, typically more celebratory of the positive. Or it revels in the negative in a smug congratulatory tone. Furthermore, taking popular culture and simply moving it to a defined or purposeful 'art space' does not automatically upgrade its quality, eminence, or capacity to affect.

5.7 Prismatic Reflections

These points aside, it is safe to say that The Jogging is using memes in a fundamentally different way. Take, for example, "Interior Monologue Captioning" (posted on November 10, 2013), created by Jaakko Pallasvuo (posted under the name '≈÷∞'). It is an image of performance artist Marina Abramović crying during her epic *The Artist is Present* performance piece, in which she sat motionless across from gallery visitors, eight hours a day for --- days. In the image on The Jogging, multicoloured comic sans writing litters the frame with "wow, kickstarter, so tears, ;_;, sadness :(, moma, james franco, wow, much present, such performance." The creation alludes to the "doge" meme in which similar captions indicate a dog's inner thoughts with subtitles such as "so scare" or "concern." The meme began with a fretful and apprehensive looking Shiba Inus breed of dog, while the misspelling took its cues from web series *Homestar Runner*. As a meme, doge filters down through Reddit, 4chan, and other points in the network before becoming a bare-bones fill-in-the blank text: "very x, much y, wow." Doge's easily adaptable form and tenacious slips in spelling owe much to LOLcats. Pallasvuo's twist sets "Interior Monologue

Captioning" apart from most doge memes by referencing performance art. Much of the weight behind Abramović's piece relied on silent communication and the notion of the face-to-face as affectual encounter. The juxtaposition of the doge meme with *The Artist is Present* is surely silly and playful, yet there is something more.

It is easier to see how Abramović's performance questions the relations between self and other, perception, the sensuous qualities of the everyday, gaps of recognition, and modes of communication. Yet it is these very same traits at work in the endless incarnations of the doge meme. Interiority maybe the punch line (in addition to the cute animal and the notion that dogs cannot spell) to doge, yet that does not diminish its philosophical concern with interiority and alterity any less. One cannot just discount its sheer omnipresence across networks, from the abject Internet enclaves of the LULZ into the more commercial and popular social networks like Facebook. As Sampson argues, there is that *thingness* of desire that leads to such memetic images, ideas, and practices going 'viral.' As argued in Chapter 3 and 4, it holds virtual qualities to generate an aesthetic field and it is safe to say that the doge meme holds prospective power to ask "very question" and be "much probing, wow."

The most remarkable element of The Jogging is not in the elevation of banal web content like doge into commentary on the art world, nor the work's gentle deflation of the pomp and importance associated with Abramović's performance work, but rather its understanding of the mechanics at work in both—namely, its

focus on the probing sense of curiosity into the other, be it dog or Abramović. One cannot lay bare the interior world of the other, but the fantasy (or at least curiosity) associated with alterity persists. There are of course many reasons besides seeking otherness when using mediating technologies like the Internet, but in this particular case it seems to be the desire event at work. The Jogging's power is its ability to understand the aesthetic sense forming and driving online content like doge, or more abstractly communities like 4chan or YTP. It provides insight into the conceptual and affectual craving that turns the pulleys and wheels of the LULZ.

To return to Sampson (2012), it is "inventions stemming from desire" that are "contagiously passed on, point to point, via radiating ideas, fascinations, passionate interests, beliefs, and any other suitable social media for imitation feeding into a continuum of invention" (25). Sampson stresses the social components of assemblages that facilitate a meme like doge or the performance by Abramović to traverse through scores of people. These points converge in the "imitative radiations of the desiring machine" that advertisers can target or that arise more organically in shared interests of a community (95). 4chan, YTP, or other components of the LULZ use the aesthetic object—image macro, text story, frantic remix—as a ground to forge consanguinity or attest difference. As I have articulated above, this functions as both a positive and negative depending on the distribution of the sensible being reinforced or confronted. The Jogging frequently addresses this on a meta level: not necessarily participating in the creation of aesthetic objects that

muse over personal exchanges, relate to everyday situations, unleash frustration, or seek similar points of identity to glean empathy, but instead recognizing how the Internet becomes a hub for *such* exchanges, occasions, and relations. Then it reveals and dwells within them, mulling over their meaning, while using the medium's inherent aesthetic language. It is structural engagement with the 'state of affairs' entrenched in our digital condition that comments *upon* the aesthetic capacity to both territorialize and de-territorialize key expressive and material components in a whole host of assemblages.

5.8 Movement, Irreverence, and Sacrilege

Content in The Jogging's interface does not mummify in a stagnant mausoleum. Given its micro-blogging format, site content travels outward and gains attention from the "accidental audience." There is a contingent element in this spread, which Troemel underlines in his recap of the most common reactions to The Jogging posts. The contingency is curious, as it exists in other elements of The Jogging. It is present in the individual post. Take for instance "Life" (posted June 17, 2013), a photograph of a leg in medium-close up with a blue-topped pin jutting out of the grey, washed-out denim. The image mixes the chance accident of a fallen pin absently stuck in a leg with the evocation of online GPS programs, such as Google maps, to identify 'life' as the shared recognizable point. By combining the everyday with the visual language and cues of online culture, the work exemplifies The

Jogging's work at its best: able to merge awareness with recognition, forging links between the uncanny and the familiar, essentially opening up "discovery, perception, [and] reciprocity" (Berleant 2005, 34). As it moves through networks away from markers as defined art, it does not lose its affectual character nor lustre, but rather becomes infiltrator and operator in the assemblages of the digital culture.

Life, 2013
Photograph
12:46 pm · 17 June 2013 · 121 notes

Figure 17 – "Life"

The Jogging relies on the material functions of the LULZ: contingency of original content, the seeding of disruption across broad networks, and acts of phantom authorship. It also draws from the expressive output such contingency generates. It uses the irreverent attitude of 4chan and the chaotic forms of YTP to

take aim at the everyday elements of online culture. Fashion blogs on Tumblr

become reimagined through works like:

> The store exists in a single location, offering finite amounts of various services and products. Its name changes constantly. When products are bought they are then replaced with new, different products. Products that are purchased are never re-stocked. Products not purchased within a single consumption cycle are replaced in a week's time. There are no employees, no refunds, and no pets allowed. Everything is automated and the store is open 24 hours. The store is owned by a company in a country that claims to have no legal recourse to local authority and this will be made possible by having the store located on previously government-owned land sold to a multi-national corporation. The store is run on solar power, though. (Posted on September 24, 2013)
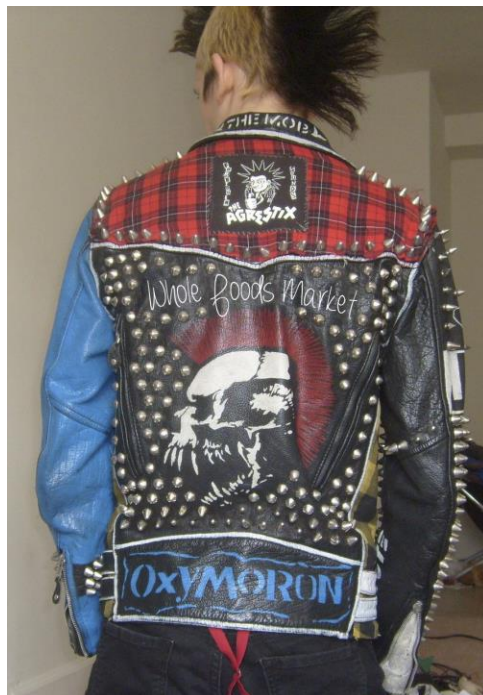

Figure 18 – "The store exists in a single location …"

It reworks the studded leather and plaid jacket, one of hallmarks of the punk

aesthetic, so that the angry skull face associated with the band "the exploited"

features "Whole Foods Market" above it. The work foregrounds the way brands and branding works in an online image economy. 'Nerd' culture and music forums collide in "Kreayshawn as Lightning from Final Fantasy (white rappers cosplaying 3/4)" (posted on September 18)—a droll revising of how celebrity, micro-celebrity, and image saturate a nearly endless array of boards and sites. The obsession of blogs to juxtapose pictures of the past with the current moment, which is so popular on sites like dearphotograph.com becomes "Print (Tank)" (posted on September 15) in which a photograph and photograph-within-the-photograph of an unremarkable landscape of weeds and a propane tank exists in double. Rather than a twee celebration of the media archaeology, the work is a comment upon the banality of the digital. From do-it-yourself sites to personal blogs to corporate social media strategies, nothing is sacred.

Akin to the LULZ, the site often turns upon itself. On a level of content, there is a constant swirling pool that churns older content back to the top of the site. The previously discussed LOLcat and doge merge in "MANY STATUS" (posted on November 9, 2013) that pastes doge captions, such as "what is arts, such smart, so opinion, much interest, meow meow" across the image of cat. The notion of an art Tumblr becomes the subject of "Important Branding Question," which simply reads "So wait, is it called / JOGGING or / THE JOGGING" (posted September 8, 2013). Rather than the typical 'performance' or 'digital image' as the medium, the work lists

"submit and find out today (maybe)" as a playful nod to itself, its group authorship, and its unsure relations to the rest of online culture.

On a level of form, there are numerous instances in which the site's aesthetics of abjection loops back upon itself. In 2014, the site hosted its "first gallery exhibition" entitled "Art of Politics" that claimed (according its Facebook page) to be "thematically based on contemporary American politicking," and as such, "projects included in 'art of politics' will reflect the advertising, branding, and combative myth making that consumes and displaces political discourse throughout the electoral process." The curated works contained a number of real sculptures reliant on blue and red colours in assorted media, like sports drinks or toothpaste, in order to imitate American bipartisan politics. As well, the exhibition contained a number of false 'installation shots' displaying families watching television, toddlers using iPads, and a television anchorman pointing at a red and blue screen. The most stunning element was the false sensational exposé videos, uploaded to YouTube and then embedded in the site, that 'uncover' the lack of political concern on The Jogging. The videos speak to a great deal of critique levelled at The Jogging, for supposed anarchism or nihilism or for smugly mocking certain members of any 'accidental audience.' Moreover, they articulate part of a legitimate response to such criticisms.

Mimicking dogmatic attack advertising, the videos show protestors raising up anti-The Jogging placards that expose tactics like the use of Photoshop or decry

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concern with followers or notes. It is as if the site were soul-searching, asking: what are the politics of The Jogging? It is easy to read the site as cynical towards *everything*; in a similar way it is easy to cast off 4chan as terrible or YTP as nonsense. Yet, this is the type of reductive approach taken to task in the methods of Chapter 1. The sorts of nihilism—or the willingness to decry everything and hold nothing sacred—rampant on The Jogging are less a thumbing of the nose and more an alignment to *the specific ways* people use technology. The Jogging is an embodiment of the LULZ's refusal to be too serious, too untouchable, or too hallowed. In YTP or 4chan, dissent is a near automatic function of the community— given there is no way to rise above or feign authority. While this may manifest in the rude, juvenile, and the puerile, it is also the reason these communities delight in the new, creative, contingent, and unfolding surprise. By taking on this logic, The Jogging is far from non-political but rather takes the aesthetic field of becoming that these communities contain and deploys it an art-specific space.

5.9 The Mechanics of The Jogging

To return to Rancière (2009a), the "metapolitics" of art (in the aesthetic regime) forms around a "foundational paradox" in which "art is art inasmuch as it is also non-art, something other than art," meaning that when art manages to "suppress" art as a "separate reality" it can perform a "transformation into a form of life" (53). By overcoming the bounds of artwork, aesthetics can break the fossilized

casing and focuses on impacts to the everyday through separating sense and the meaning made from it. The work disentangles the way aesthetic sense works and what it makes sense of (or with). As Joseph Tanke (2011) summarizes Rancière's point: "the aesthetic cancels the logic binding bodies to specific places and times, and it is through these operations that new capacities can be discovered or invented" (85). Therefore, the force of the aesthetic becomes "a way of making and doing that cannot but question the relationships between different objects, subjects, forms of presentation, as well as the estimations placed upon people and things" (85). Thus, "aesthetics is political because it introduces dissensus into the world of shared appearance and meanings" (85). The Jogging does not simply mimic the world of online culture or cast a sceptical eye upon it but takes the aesthetics of the online world and modifies them. It both mimics the subjects we are in the process of becoming and intervenes in that very act.

By pillaging and thieving the mechanics of the LULZ from its native interfaces or communities, The Jogging takes language that is both part of and against our emergent online culture. Yet it manages to sidestep so many of the adverse quantities tied to the dominant subject positions entrenched in LULZ communities like 4chan. Prior to its current hiatus, one of the final obsessions on The Jogging was conspiracy and anti-Obama memes. A number of works rely on non-sequitur connections between a diverse sampling of subjects: presidents, 9/11, *The Matrix*, ancient Egypt, fluoride, Osama Bin Laden, American mass murders, Paul

Walker, and even aliens. This series is a visual mirror to memes associated with fringe political groups (frequently found on Facebook pages associated with American right-wing conspiracies) that focus on falsified history and interrogations of the tenets of left or liberal politics. Yet none of them actually connects events or generates solid arguments. It is form with no substantial content.

Certainly, these works mock those communities who spread such imagery. The nihilism is not the whole picture though, as they are perfect exemplars of The Jogging's leveraging of the LULZ. The Jogging puts to task the mediation frameworks that crystallize perception, thought, and action in these spheres in order to make them strange. It asks how digital technologies form relational ground that generates experience that, in turn, we use to invent ourselves, our world, and our senses. By taking the LULZ's capacity to forge an aesthetic but recasting it outside of the relatively closed and often problematic (in the sense of reinforcing existing subject positions) terrain (e.g. 4chan), these images work as art, with all of the power, force, and ability of art proper. These works distill our digital condition and manage to follow through on Bishop's wish for a body of art *about* the digital, which works *through* the digital. It is the evolution (at best) or cannibalization (at worst) of the LULZ, but the crucial element is the creation of art that speaks *directly*. The last question to answer, then, is: what is the importance of the LULZ's trajectory from the childish playgrounds of the Internet to the serious grounds of 'art worlds'?

Conclusion: Trolling Aesthetics

There are several key notions upon which the previous chapters built. First is that approaching a phenomenon as dynamic, abstruse, and prickly as the LULZ requires a very specific methodology that accounts for ongoing flux and change. To start from Latour's idea that the world is made up of irreducible actants which link through acts of translation and gain strength through alliances, generates an effective frame for the LULZ, as the LULZ operates through a massive roster of human and non-human forces. The task becomes following the LULZ in action to observe how it resists trials of strength to emerge as a diffuse assemblage of elements within a single array. To lean on Latour's words, a sensation such as the LULZ appears as an "assembly of disorderly and unreliable allies," that "is thus slowly turned into something that closely resembles an organized whole" (1987, 131).

The 'black box' of the LULZ emerged in the mid-2000s. It is not a coincidence that the LULZ gained traction amidst the rise of social media sites (Myspace in 2003 and Facebook in 2004) and emergent platforms for personal documentation and dissemination (YouTube in 2005 and Twitter in 2006). In opposition to the often serious nature of self-broadcast and online identity-building, the LULZ builds purposely abject spectacles, aggressive irreverence, inward-directed discourses, and antagonistic chaos. At a moment in which large groups of Internet users were selecting their "top friends," outlining the specifics of their musical tastes, and rating

their favourite movies, there was an upswing in "anons" arriving on the /b/ board of 4chan. It was within these sewage-filled cultural backwaters that certain memes gained prominence, particular parlances became default conversations, and the championing of anonymity split into a spectrum of progressive online activism and belligerent trolling.

There is a danger in casting off this ongoing cultural phenomenon as either simply adolescent or totally abhorrent. Simultaneously, it is perilous to blindly celebrate it as radical. Understanding the LULZ as an assemblage raises questions of how its individual component parts operate internally and of its larger affectual force. The cogs and hubs of the LULZ have been at work in a near ubiquitous fashion across nearly all spectra of online culture within the last decade. My work emphasizes the way the LULZ positions itself in an imaginary location outside the normal channels of online life (social media, commercial hubs, and even news dissemination), while remaining inseparable from those channels due to the intertwined nature of actants. Through trials, it becomes an equal player in shaping our digital condition

6.2 The Arc of the LULZ

The LULZ materializes in a number of forms: terrible conversations, images of cats, raids on teen chats, remixes of garbage television, and eventually art practice. True to Latour, it only becomes the LULZ when properly followed through

all of these nodes and their attached circumstances: trials, alliances, and actions. The LULZ is abject because it actively works to be abject. The trajectory started within isolated enclaves of online culture in the early 2000s, on boards dedicated to discussing and distributing Japanese animation, pornography, and other tidbits of 'nerd' subculture. Because of the material qualities entrenched in platforms like 4chan, a culture was built upon a library of icons, images, in-jokes, and behaviour as well as the contingency of a cascading flow of short-lived threads. The LULZ associates with transgression and parody: it spoofs online growth, raids the unsuspecting, and besieges an increasingly commercialized online culture. It is also characterized by antagonism and confusion, preying on the disenfranchised and fostering a culture with outward hate for any marks of difference or individualization. In both cases, it leverages elements associated with online mediation: mutability, remix, alteration, anonymity, and new models of distribution.

At the level of cultural archaeology, this trajectory is remarkable because the LULZ has proliferated so rapidly and with such force. With each new component part that enters the assemblage, the capacities to affect (internally and externally) change. I have singled out YouTube Poop as one of the major shifts in the ongoing transformation of the LULZ, but it is just one emergent form. While the remix of terrible bits of pop culture may seem out of step with the tumultuous and slander-laden boards of 4chan, there is the connection in iconography and a deeper link in sensibility. Using doublespeak to both celebrate and desecrate is at the heart of the

LULZ; YouTube Poop excels at creating vexing spectacles of incoherence that nonetheless express a great deal about the obsessions of online culture: speed, temporality, and efficiency.

With each split, the concept of the LULZ changes and each community also changes in turn. 4chan blunts its once sharp abilities and turns into an echo chamber for anti-social disruption. A sky once bright with sparks of creativity and contingency dims, becoming a pit of pornography, hate, and antipathy. Meanwhile, the LULZ spills into communities like YouTube Poop, which then continue to push the virtual capacities innate to the LULZ, perpetuating both the positive and negative aspects thereof. The truly interesting stage in the arc comes when a generation of artists who doubtlessly engaged in the LULZ (knowingly or unknowingly) enter into the assemblage. The Jogging takes centre stage because of its brute (albeit nuanced) allegiance to the LULZ in sense and sensibility, but it is not alone.

6.3 A Landscape of LULZY Art

Artist Jennifer Chan takes the images and motifs of 1990s Internet and blends them into current mutations of online culture. In *Cam Twist*, a webcam digitizes and seemingly melts sections of her face. In *Grey Matter*, poorly rendered 3D graphics collide with background effects and 8bit music in a clunky promotional homage to the digital age. In *Love Fighter*, images of the Power Rangers collide with

YouTube videos of men stripping, punctuated with graphics of flames and explosions. Akin to YouTube Poop creators, Chan manages to walk a line of kitsch and gravitas to speak to the influence of the digital in how we actualize and understand ourselves through media. Unlike YouTube Poop, her work manages to function unproblematically: *Cam Twist* emphasizes the encroachment of sexualized bodies in nearly every wisp of online culture; *Grey Matter* speaks to the impinging corporatization of personal media; *Love Fighter* explores how socialization is refracted through idealized images and searchable advice in the era of Yahoo Answers and Reddit.

Petra Cortright's works span online forms (videos, gifs, etc.) and more traditionally tactile media (paintings, collage, etc.), mixing traditional painting with UV and 3D printing on reflective Duraflex boards. Across her work is a deep bricolage of digital iconography: emojis, special effects, distortion from low bit-rates, compression errors, and Photoshop layer effects. The works are evocative of "soft grunge" Tumblrs, borrowing their delicate palette of light pastels; they also draw in so many shared images of quaint, idealized life (a ripe blackberry, dyed bird feathers, ornately wrapped presents) which are popular on sites like Pinterest. Her works parallel Chan's, with a focus on acts of self-documentation, as demonstrated in Cortright's playful videos of herself facing the camera with dancing pizza icons criss-crossing the screen while lightning pulsates from her eyes. Like Chan's, Cortright's work could easily slot into the later canon of YouTube Poop, with its

purposefully brash and sincere silliness, but it too goes further than poops. Cortright is sifting through the bits and pieces of mass online culture—the palettes of bloggers, the drive to collect images for lifestyle branding, and new visual lexicons— to explore how we process and archive versions of ourselves through layers of software, hardware, and web technologies.

"Jankenpopp" and "Zombectro" reimagine the aesthetics of platform in *Windows 93*, a website that envisions a fictional operating system from the early 1990s (Figure 19). Users can click through the "start menu" and "desktop icons" to
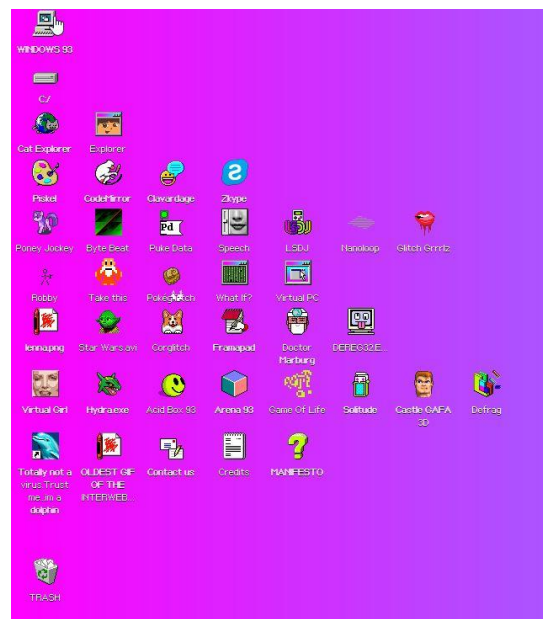

Figure 19 – "Windows 93"

explore a number of fake games, photo tools, and programs like "Zkype." Clicking on "Cat Explorer" opens a browser allowing users to "search the internet for cats." Users may also click through bookmarks like "Net-Art" and "P()rn." Clicking on the

help icon labelled "MANIFESTO" launches an error screen that rotates through equations like "noob + Unicode = dadism" and "lulz + html = corgi." Perhaps one of the most comedic options is clicking the dolphin icon labelled "totally not a virus. Trust me ... im [sic] a dolphin" that drops all of the icons into a jumbled mess on the bottom of the screen. The entire experience is playful and fun, because it lures the user into false expectations: the porn bookmark opens websites for pens, the defrag tool plays midi music, the wallpaper labelled "windows 93" reveals a background that is half Windows XP and half Apple Leopard. The work contains a huge number of LULZ references: a NYAN cat (a meme that was once used as a temporary background on the /v/ board) in the web browser, an "it's dangerous to go alone! Take this" (a comic book snippet of Batman slapping Robin, which combines two fill-in-the-blank memes), a glitched Pokémon, and hidden folders with images of Rick Astley. Yet, like the work of the other artists described above, this is not simply empty copy-and-paste pastiche but parody, in the sense that it addresses the logic of the LULZ: an ability to embrace and ridicule while trolling the user into subversive spectacles.

In 2008, a self-described nine-year-old boy from Chicago posting under the name "RANDYPETERS1" uploaded an MSPaint animation titled *Octocat* to YouTube. It features a roughly drawn red cat with a screeching voice searching endlessly for its missing parents. In the fifth video in the *Octocat* series, a dramatic change occurs as Octocat enters a doorway and the animation suddenly pivots into a complex and

lush 3D style. The dramatic shift works meta-textually, as artist David O'Reilly later revealed that he was the fictional child, Randy Peters. But his work connects to the LULZ in a way much deeper than false identity. His videos like *The External World* play with the mutability of images, balancing the cute with the crass. In an ongoing project, he sells t-shirts, emblazoned with Comic Sans text (a font forever at work on

Figure 20 – David O'Reilly's T-shirt Series

4chan following Moot's temporary defaulting of the site to it in 2008), that poke fun at memes, online marijuana enthusiasm, slang, the grammar-obsessed, Tumblr users, video games, and all sorts of other online fixations. On his @free_facts Twitter account, O'Reilly advertises, "#1 twitter facts! 100% Free Real and true facts for u! New facts every day ----- always FREE! #teens #facts #free_#facts #cool." The tweets vary but most are nonsensically silly: "the first portable cellphone was the size of a skyscraper filled with ham," "straight lines actually travel backwards," "you can drink water," and "the sun is in the center of the universe." The integration of the LULZ is clear.

F.A.T. or "Free Art and Technology" describe themselves as "an organization dedicated to enriching the public domain through the research and development of technologies and media." It is a collective that counts several well-known Internet artists in the ranks. They create works that, like YouTube Poop, infiltrate and piggyback on existing online sensations, inviting chance encounters through errant search results. Their *Ideas Worth Spreading* project mocks the TED Talk stage, allowing any visitor to take the stage and share insights, regardless of quality. In *Fake URL Trolling* anyone can create spoof URLs—entirely misleading links—and then share them across social media or e-mail. In *Happy Things*, a webcam is automated to record the screen anytime it detects a smile, with the results uploaded to an archived collection. *FriendFlop* is a browser extension that scrambles Twitter results, muddling attribution and eliminating any bias tied to online identities. More technically oriented than some of the other artists outlined here, F.A.T.'s projects nonetheless carry the same spiritual banner of disruption, desecration, and resistance.

During the creation of this dissertation, I contributed works to The Jogging under the name of "/.\". In *4:20 Bed-In* (Figure 21), I photoshopped an image of John Lennon and Yoko Ono's "bed-in" substituting the words "swag" and "yolo" (an acronym of "you only live once") for the original "hair" on the placards above the couple's heads. With this swap, and the addition of hashtag symbols, the original markers for counter-culture are updated to those circulating on Tumblr in early

2013. Just as the "bed-in" reworked the purpose of a hotel room by shifting it toward political protest, my alteration changes the purpose of the demonstration.

Figure 21 – My Contributions to The Jogging

"Swag" and "You Only Live Once" doublespeak as actual rallying calls for disfranchised youth while also crumbling into hollow slogans, which could mean "stay in bed, grow your hair." My work *SUV/UAV* (Figure 21) features stick-figure bumper stickers that typically adorn family vehicles appearing on an unmanned aerial vehicle, or drone plane. Purposely didactic in tone, the work both critiques the horrifyingly commonplace and increasingly accepted use of drones in military

campaigns of violence, and also ruminates on the impact of trauma on drone pilots who now work from computer consoles in suburban hubs, moving the public theatre of war into private home life. In *Latte, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm*, I altered Thomas Cole's *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm* to depict a hand descending from the squall and pouring "latte art" into the river stream below. Commenting on emergent craft economies, the work juxtaposes the romantic sensibility of Cole's Hudson River School of painters with "third wave" coffee's focus on the pleasure and aesthetics of the everyday. As the works hint, I attempted to use the LULZ doublespeak to riff on contemporary imagery, rework through remix, and generate critical commentary on the cultures enmeshed into contemporary experience.

6.3 Trolling and Controlling

There are more than a few bright points in the ever-expanding constellation of contemporary artists making LULZY art. Any number of others could operate to illustrate the point: Constant Dullaart, Zach Blas, Katja Novitskova, Liz Sterry, Parker Ito (aka "Parker Cheeto"), Seth Price, Taj Bourgeois, Trevor Wheatley, Cécile B. Evans, Marian Tubbs, and Katinka Simonse (aka "Tinkebell"), among others. The list expands unceasingly. This dissertation demonstrates that emergent actors in the larger assemblage of the LULZ have followed an interesting trajectory over the last 15 years. This trajectory is not teleological; it is not a neat progression or a linear

history. It is a series of trials, coalitions, skirmishes, battles, and labours that function to galvanize particular groups and eliminate others. In these, radical and imaginative artists become connected to puerile and abysmal trolls. A cavalcade of qualities—contravention, belligerence, confusion, and parody—carries forward through the translating acts of the LULZ. The affectual power of the varied assemblages containing the LULZ ranges widely; some assemblages operate to destabilize, while others reinforce dominant subject positions and aesthetic senses.

Returning to Deleuze's (1988) notion of control, he writes, "the old sovereign societies worked with simple machines, levers, pulleys, clocks," but "control societies operate with a third generation of machines, with information technology and computers" (35). Deleuze (1990) continues, "this technological evolution must be, even more profoundly, a mutation of capitalism," but where enclosure once operated on the production floor, it now drives a culture of marketing, the growth of biotechnologies, global debt, and systems of inequality. While it postdates Deleuze's insights, the Internet as a mediating technology easily passes as such enclosure. Online commerce, social media, personal content turned into public archives, ubiquitous surveillance, violations of privacy, and so forth, all work as technological transmutations and renovations of the self. With each loading page, tagged photo, shared status, and stored cookie we become data—small bits in a system that masquerades as highly personal to curate, share, and glean fans for the self.

It is against systems of control and enclosure that the LULZ is deployed as radical disruption. Its politics go beyond simple reactionary or adversarial modes. As Fisher (2009) points out, Capital structures our knowledge of our own complicity within its mechanics, allowing us to disavow that complicity through irony and distance. Fisher writes, "to reclaim a real political agency means first of all accepting our insertion at the level of desire into the remorseless meat-grinder of Capital" (15). Accordingly, "what needs to be kept in mind is both that capitalism is a hyper-abstract impersonal structure and that it would be nothing without our co-operation" (15). Even in the darkest depths of 4chan, there are moments that surpass ironic pastiche with the use of doublespeak to expose *and* comment upon online mediation. The frenzied potential of the LULZ to interrupt becomes paramount. Yet, as I outlined in Chapter Three, 4chan is too often simply a collection of dull looping reverberations for those who hold intersectional positions of power to joyously celebrate themselves, fortifying their allegiances through brutal campaigns of anti-social hate.

The LULZ, as an amalgamated assemblage of actors, is not total in form. As Chapter Four testifies, the aesthetic creativity associated with the LULZ manages to go beyond the oubliette of 4chan. Through its frenetic forms, YouTube Poop speaks to the way speed, temporality, engagement, and spectacle entwine into the sensory minutia of everyday online experience. Yet there remains the sharp-toothed power of capitalist ideology, as YouTube Poop often degenerates into a closed and policed

community incapable of reflexivity and based within an inflexible subject position aligned with dominance and inequality.

Rancière's work is thus useful because he reveals how different forms of artistic practices operate within an ebb and flow of our bodies, senses, and cognitive capacities. As Tanke (2011) describes, Rancière's concept of dissensus "is the process of transforming the sensible by placing it in conflict with a rival conception of the world" (103). When Rancière (2010) describes dissensus as "the demonstration of a gap in the sensible itself," a glimpse of the LULZ's force comes into relief. A great deal of The Jogging and later art practices described here strategically deploy the *aesthetics* of the LULZ to create rifts that break the well-trodden imaginary notion and logics of an "everyday" Internet. These art works break from the "implicit logic" of the actual "pragmatics of communication" entrenched in mediation, rather than just working as political statement upon them. Rancière writes:

> Political argumentation is at one and the same time the demonstration of a possible world in which the argument could count as an argument, one that is addressed by a subject qualified to argue, over an identified object, to an address who is required to see the object and to hear the argument that he "normally" has no reason to see or hear. It is the construction of a paradoxical world that puts together two separate worlds [. . . .] a clash between two partitions of the sensible. (39)

In its end reaches, this is the affective force of LULZY art. It exposes online culture as a system of control that pushes efficiency and expediency. It shatters the enclosure

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of a massive system that is simultaneously destroying the environment through toxic technological dumps, exploiting labour forces in factories, metamorphosing private utterance into commercialized public speech, and enabling new levels of governmental and corporate surveillance. The aesthetics of trolling can break down through its own logic, by using the aesthetic sense of a community to expose the very mechanics of that community. The art of the LULZ thus turns upon the LULZ itself, as when The Jogging does not pay homage to the aggressive horror of 4chan but rather ruminates on the voices, sights, and sounds of such a place. The aesthetics of trolling (or the trolling of a specific aesthetic) here manages to fundamentally break from an everyday, omnipresent ordering of sense. For Rancière, this is a crucial step toward fashioning and sustaining new subjects and forms of perception. The assemblage contains parts often in conflict; this conflict is highlighted perfectly by the abject culture of the LULZ that manages to crystallize the very worst aspects of the Internet while also illuminating how creative practices can interrogate or even negate an existing state of affairs. This opens the door to an entire range of practices and actions, under the umbrella proclamation of it "doing it for the LULZ," that are both terrifying and promising.

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