

Economies of Character

(or, Character in the Age of Big Data)

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and effort and that it has not been submitted anywhere for any award. Where other sources of information have been used, they have been acknowledged.

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Date:5 November, 2015.....

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Abstract

In the age of big data, character becomes a newly foregrounded object – and product – of scrutiny. New credit scoring methods, which draw on big data analytics, claim to paint rich, nuanced pictures of prospective borrowers’ “true characters.” Micro-entrepreneurs, such as hosts on Airbnb, trade in reputation-images, seeking the best possible ratings and reviews in an online marketplace built on highly visible metrics. Surveillance apparatuses (both governmental and corporate) place ever more emphasis on propensity, analyzing not what a person has done so much as what she *might* do in future. In doing this, such apparatuses construct, enforce and enact new ways to hold people accountable for their represented, future selves – and to the characters understood to link their present selves to those futures. How might artists best respond to new social and economic pressures placed on character (as a concept governing representations of particularity and propensity) in the age of big data? What can be learned from contemporary art about the new economies of character, given art’s long-standing, privileged relationship to the production and circulation of its artists’ and subjects’ (perceived and represented) “characters”?

Examining a wide range of artworks – including some recent works that respond directly to big data, but also many more that, more broadly, anticipate its perceptual politics – I argue that a significant response to such problems can be found in works that disturb the distinction between embedded, first person perspectives and so-called objective, external viewpoints on their subjects. Representations that trouble the distinction between shared and first-person perspectives enact the tension between privacy and sharing that has become increasingly vital to speculative market logics linking character to finance. The shared/private space of the disturbed first-person view lends perceptual logic to the personalization of prediction afforded by big data, and stages contemporary conflicts between privacy and sharing, quantities of data and qualitative perception.

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Introduction

The initial impetus for this thesis came from a studio visit I received seven years ago from an extremely interesting writer, whilst on an artist residency in Canada. At the time, I had been making large-scale installations, composing nodes of sculptural activity comprised of hundreds of “micro-sculptures” made from cheap everyday objects. These works had been heavily influenced by Sarah Sze, whose ability to marry material and flow in her work I greatly admired. In the years after I encountered her installations, I found myself trying to do works with “conceptual” material premises, but never finding these to be enough on their own; instead, I wanted to weave a tapestry of almost-concepts, like writing an abstract novel of affects using materials “embroidered” into spaces. My sculptural activities at this time were also, in part, experiments in presenting unabashedly sensuous, joyful work – wrangling ameliorative, even utopian, affects out of commodity forms through small enactments of the compulsion to commune with their materiality. It seemed to me that, especially in Vancouver (where I lived at the time), such desirous work was generally understood to be incredibly naïve and romantic. Yet on the other hand, I often felt strongly adverse to what struck me as a form of hermeneutic snobbery in the art world I encountered, which seemed, on some level, to favour didactically “critical” references in artworks. (How many exhibitions contained a direct reference to the visual cultures of May 1968, but in doing so, seemed, in part, to reduce these to pawns in a strategic game of referencing?). In this art scene, with its deeply photoconceptualist history, referencing moments of resistance seemed, to me, favoured to the

point of discounting more troubled forms of complicit engagement with capitalist inflections of desire, disavowing any potential that might arise from enacting embodied, conflicted, yet ostensibly “naïvely” desirous affective dispositions concomitant with the lived experiences of consumerism. While I admired and appreciated the historical interest and insight of many Vancouver artists, what was missing in the tacit logic of the Vancouver art world, it seemed to me, was an acknowledgment of the role that its critical references played as *currency*. Enacting criticality, these references often (though certainly not always) elevated their artists “above” the terrain surveyed, which in turn elevated these artists’ status in an art world that trades in currencies of criticality. The Vancouver art world’s predilection for referencing seemed to reinforce the implied mastery of the artists who wielded them, and to tacitly exclude modes of address that stemmed from, and emphasized, the split-ness of their subject position. To borrow from Lacan’s four discourses (without entering into a full discussion of these here), broadly speaking, many strategies of referencing moments of resistance, though these moments certainly represented egalitarian, anti-capitalist and anti-oppressive impulses, nonetheless seemed to reinforce a master’s discourse within an art world whose currency is criticality, accruing a quiet authority and becoming, simply, dominant strategies to be obeyed. The strategies of reference seemed, more often than not, to exclude what Lacan would have called the hysteric’s discourse, which begins from the position of a split subject who flies at the master, questioning forms of authority that rely on obedience. As Bruce Fink, in his excellent gloss on the four discourses, points out, the hysteric “maintains the primacy of subjective division, the contradiction between

conscious and unconscious, and thus the conflictual, or self-contradictory, nature of desire itself... knowledge is perhaps eroticized to a greater extent in the hysteric's discourse than elsewhere" (Fink, 1995, p. 133).¹ Without quite knowing it at the time, this is what I wanted that I could never quite find in Vancouver: a discourse (written, as it were, in and for materials, materials with voices, placed in choral formations in which they could "speak") that worked with complicity, with split subjectivity, as modes of enquiry, as the basis for an eroticized swimming-in knowledge that, in a sense, crashed together an almost spiritualist desire to reconcile oneself with materials, with a sense of how split, how consumerist, that desire must be.

I showed my studio visitor my installation shots. He said (and of course, I'm paraphrasing here): "well, the first thing I want to say when I see such complex work is the simplest thing possible: that you want to show me a world." After identifying Sarah Sze as an influence, he remarked: "it's a funny thing with her work. On the one hand, I feel like there's so much going on that it all collapses back onto her, like all she's really saying is: 'hey, look at me, I'm being quite inventive, quite creative.' But on the other hand, perhaps the

¹ Lacan presents four mathemes, which describe each of the four discourses (the master's discourse, the university discourse, the analyst's discourse, and the hysteric's discourse) as a particular relation between a master signifier (S1), knowledge (S2), the real (a) and a split subject (the crossed-out S). The generalized form of these relations is:

$$\frac{\text{agent}}{\text{truth}} \quad \text{---} \quad \frac{\text{other}}{\text{product}}$$

For example, the matheme for the master's discourse:

$$\frac{S_1}{\cancel{S}} \rightarrow \frac{S_2}{a}$$

describes the master (S1) asserting dominance over a slave or subsidiary (S2), producing object (a) as a product or loss, but repressing the truth of his own status as a split subject. (For instance, the capitalist presides over his workers, taking surplus value as a product, yet concealing his own weakness.) On the other hand, the matheme for the hysteric's discourse:

$$\frac{\cancel{S}}{a} \rightarrow \frac{S_1}{S_2}$$

depicts the split subject flying at the master, calling his dominance into question, producing knowledge as a product, and with the real as the hidden force. (See Fink, 1995, p. 129-136.)

extreme specificity of the materials takes it beyond that.” I was quite intrigued by this comment, such a succinct expression of the collapsibility between the extreme materiality of an artwork and its expression of a self-centered world, a first-person *character* whose viewpoint and idiosyncrasies the work expresses. Yet this expression of collapsibility (and particularly, the association of a work collapsing into its author’s “me” as being implicitly problematic, narcissistic, or self-absorbed) must also be understood as an implicitly gendered one. Indeed, a year or so later, on another residency, I mentioned this conversation to a curator I was working with. “But don’t you think he was being sexist?” the curator asked. “I mean, that’s the kind of put-down that women artists hear all the time.” Indeed, narcissism has been one of the most common criticisms of women’s art – particularly 1970s feminist performance art. Many feminist artists, historians and critics have questioned the misogynistic assumptions that often underlie such critiques, and have suggested that while, indeed, some cultural expressions of narcissism may be profoundly alienating and patriarchal, there might be other, radically feminist ways to perform narcissism, to use it as a driving force in one’s work. For instance, Amelia Jones, writing on Hannah Wilke’s work, remarks, “Paradoxically... Wilke suggested that her [narcissistic] self-love was built on self-knowledge – and thus subversive of the patriarchal construction of the feminine body as *only* a picture, only display” (2003). Narcissism that performs, as Jones puts it, “in a lacerating kind of way” (2003) has the potential to profoundly question the female body as patriarchal image, and to instead affirm its lived knowledge. My studio visit gave me a clear image of the problems associated with constructing a critique of narcissism (for

instance, in response to Sarah Sze's work) as a certain kind of relation between materiality and enunciation: a view according to which engagements with extreme material specificity collapse into a set of gestures that simply call out: "hey! Look at me!" Yet this prompted me to read the collapsibility between materiality and subjectivity as a condition of possibility, rather than as a caveat. I became interested in the ways in which the qualitative particularities of these collapses might change over time, how they might be conceptualized, and what might be their future.

Such questions coalesce around discussions of anthropomorphic presence in art; for just as an artwork can (perhaps narcissistically) affirm the artist's presence – or even her "character" – so too can it produce an anthropomorphic presence seemingly, at least, all of its own. In 1967, Michael Fried famously denigrated minimalist art for its tendency to produce anthropomorphic presence, rather than presentness as such. Unlike the best modernist paintings, in Fried's view, the anthropomorphic presence of minimalist sculptures was theatrical, drawing too much attention to the relation between the artwork and its environment, and giving way to a temporality which went on and on – much like life itself – thereby failing to afford the presentness that the best artworks could provide. Given those who had reread Michael Fried's 1967 critique of anthropomorphic presence in minimalism (and of its concomitant senses of theatricality, of time that simply goes on and on, un-contracted into a kernel of "presentness") as a positive condition of possibility, rather than a caveat, would it not make sense to say that the condition Fried identified had been expanded qualitatively since his time? Would it not make sense to say that, while "anthropomorphism" was a

rather unilateral pronouncement denigrating any and all “presence,” a strain of artists since have become more involved in more sharply distinguishing the character of these presences, pulling apart how, exactly, the materials’ “character” and the authorial personas from which they rhetorically arose might support or contradict each other, sculpting minute strings of qualities until they consolidate into characteristics of imagined subjects?

Further, teasing out strings of qualities-cum-characteristics of presences or personas reveals two conflicting logics of “creating life” at stake in sculpture. On the one hand, Victor Burgin (1984), Amelia Jones (1998) and a slew of other thinkers influenced by Derrida have quite convincingly critiqued a “metaphysics of presence” at play within many artistic practices, which involve (as Jones would have it) invoking the veiled presence of an (implicitly male) artist – a phallogocentric effect that is, ultimately, in service of the market, of humanism, of patriarchy. On the other hand, is it possible that some animistic explorations of “presence” through art might be part and parcel of a feminist critique of the politics of being, and of giving, life – galvanized, perhaps, by the split subject of the hysteric’s discourse, who explores materiality and character from the point of view of a lived contradiction between being and signing, a lived contradiction between one’s conscious statements and actions and how those build up into habits, actions, tendencies, effects, character? Further, if artworks, and artists, were once privileged producers of “character,” experimenting with the intersections of qualitative particularities that produce personas, nowadays, via big data analytics, all citizens produce data-streams of material through which they can be characterized. Given this (could we call it a proletarianization of

character?), how can traditions of characterization inherited from art of the past century intervene?

The formal structure of the above sense of collapsibility between materiality and subject position would resurface and reshape itself, years later, during what I would describe as Goldsmiths' "speculative realist" moment from approximately 2012-2013. Quentin Meillassoux's critique of correlationism – the assumption that philosophy could only deal with the correlation between human thought and the material world – struck a chord with many thinkers. Graham Harman's rereading of Heidegger (which was cited earlier in this thesis) offered a fresh new perspective on objects, and Reza Negarestani's sprawling theory-fiction was felt as a major tour-de-force. Yet intrigued though I was by the work of many thinkers in this camp, I was also instantly sceptical of their invocation of a "Copernican revolution." Just as Copernicus had divested men of their lamentable pride in believing that they were the centre of the universe, so the story went, speculative realism could divest philosophy of its humanist bent, its predilection for continually, and tacitly, reaffirming the borders of human perceptions and perspectives on the cosmos. This pretence seemed to me highly suspect from a Lacanian perspective. In *Seminar XX*, his seminar on love, feminine sexuality and the limits of knowledge, Lacan remarks, in passing, that the Copernican revolution was not, in fact, a revolution. When one operates within the confines of a conceptual framework in which one entity (say, the sun) revolves around the other (the earth) in a circular orbit, flipping the centre and the periphery does not constitute a conceptual revolution. The revolution, Lacan claims, was *Keplerian*, not Copernican; Kepler, who refined the diagram, revised the terms

of the orbit from circular to elliptical, made a new concept of relation between the celestial bodies possible (Lacan, 1998, p. 42-43). To accuse post-structuralist thought of being too “correlationist,” too human in its outlook, had potential to open up new lines of research,² yet also harboured a tendency for this gesture to fall back on itself, giving way to a smug self-satisfaction that one has transcended humanist privilege. (And, to put it bluntly, who can better claim to have transcended a privileged, humanist subject position in philosophy, if not relatively privileged, mostly white, mostly male philosophers who, due to accidents of their birth, have not had to bear the burdens of being identified as raced, classed, and gendered beings, and thus purport to speak on behalf of “the human”?)

To return these debates to questions surrounding the collapsibility between, let us say, extreme subjectivity and extreme objectivity in art: if oscillating back and forth between interpreting a work as extremely “object-oriented” and extremely “subject-oriented” is analogous to following through with the (always partially collapsing) logic of the “Copernican revolution,” then what would a “Keplerian revolution” look like in this terrain? If a debate that oscillated back and forth between accusations of narcissism and fetishism on the one hand, and celebrations of subjectivity and engagement with materials on the other, would always be, in some sense, deadlocked, then what other spin could be placed on these relations?

² Among the most convincing of these, in my view (though it is not explicitly aligned with speculative realism) is Susan Schuppli’s research around what she calls the material witness: materials which bear the imprint of events and phenomena and, when carefully analyzed, can bear witness to those events. See Schuppli (2014).

It is the content of this question that informs the persona that my work plays out, and that, sometimes, I play within my work. The persona (which I sometimes name – erosamon, Hodecce – and often leave unnamed) assembles an aggregate of thoughts, concerns, priorities, aesthetics and concepts that are, somehow, the right size, texture and shape to carry such questions. The thoughts, concerns, priorities and sensibilities that inform my practice (a decidedly “femme” aesthetic; a deep sense of complicity balanced with a naïve glee; a concern for ethics, care and love; a slightly second-wave feminist tacit need to work through ritual, and to assume a privileged relationship to “creation;” a keen sense of doubt, uncertainty, and the desire to be able to say something of the future) are all, undoubtedly, uncomfortable. How can I speak of a “femme” aesthetic without dredging up the spectre of essentialism? What right does anyone concerned with truth, criticism or justice of any sort have to their complicit glee? What good can ethics do as a concept when, as Rancière convincingly argued (2009, p. 120-123), ethics, as a form of thought, systematically sidesteps the necessary work of politics in order to blandly (even dangerously) defer to “the human” as a conceptual category? What good is it to make work that refers to the labours of ethics and love, when those have been deployed for such broadly patriarchal and capitalist purposes over so many centuries? What good is it to privilege “creation” when markets thrive on controlling flows of creativity, on putting them to work? All of these lived conceptual and ethical tensions, I would argue, are questions of *character*; for they activate a sense of lived complicity – a sense of contradiction between one’s being and one’s doing – that point

precisely to the complex interiority that character, as a representational concept, governs.

Studio Practice

My ongoing studio project, *Weathervane*, is an attempt to produce what I term a hysteric's divination discourse, which departs from precisely the complicity in the above questions. It navigates the uncomfortable grounds of humanism and character, ethics and essentialism – working from the conflicts each of these call forth between being and signing, egalitarianism and privilege, the power to represent a whole (humanity, women, one's character, the future) and the inevitably problematic presuppositions on which this power is based. In an age of big data, claims on individuals' futurity will be made increasingly automatically, and will be increasingly tailored, more delicately grafted onto each individual life. In this context, the hysteric's divination discourse aims to preserve at least a small space for idiosyncratic divination practices, which might at least hold open the possibility for a critical response to the hegemonic forces of prediction. My art practice departs from the “stupid” desire of a conciliatory character, employed as a method through which to place analytic data-scapes – and their thick, compelling claims on the future – into question. The task is to both retain that wilful character's naïve delight as method, and, on the other hand, to remain vigilant about the rapid changes in the expanded contexts to which such practices, even in – and in fact, *through* – their wilful ignorance, aim to speak.

In an ongoing series of works, which combine and recombine in various forms to become installation components, this project responds to the

doubts and uncertainties involved in late capitalist decision-making, from the perspective of an idiosyncratic, indecisive character (the feminine persona of the works) who invents scores, salves and scaffolds for the decision-making process. I explore the oracular mode of address through object making, song, dialogues with objects, video and performance. In doing so, I examine the libidinal economies that underpin the desire to know the future, and to imprint uncertain worlds with "good" decisions.

These works developed from a predominantly sculptural practice. One of the strains in this work was an exploration of sculptural forms that acted as distorted subjective diagrams, enacting some part of an abstract conception of subjectivity (for instance, Freud's image of symptoms as containers, into which new sources of excitation could flow "like new wine into an old bottle") (Freud, 1997, p. 46) within a material field. For instance, *Model for a Screen* (2012-13, Figure 1) was made from an intensive carving process. I layered and glued together several A4 multi-coloured children's notebooks, and then carved a complex, rounded, perforated structure from them, with twelve holes, which resembled an odd, irregularly shaped and useless piece of furniture, like a dividing screen which would not partition a space particularly well. I then dipped half of this form first in tar, then in black aquarium pebbles, in a mock process designed to mimic the production of common shingling material found in North America (which consists of heavy paper coated in tar and covered with pebbles). Thus, the sculpture looked completely different from one side to the other: the "back" half was completely black and rough with pebbles, while the "front" side revealed the depth of its surfaces through the striations of layered colours of paper, like topographic lines on a map. On one side, a

protective “skin” was added, repellent to water and touch, which disguised the way the form itself had been carved; on the other side, the striated layers illustrated, for the eyes, the way the form had come to be, and translated its spatial logic into a “flat” one of colour and line. In this way, the piece seemed to speak to its own emergence, as if its holes – thrown together like a mutant Lacanian torus – were slowly, imperceptibly “speaking:” speaking a concept of subjective emergence, and speaking to a history of idiosyncratic styling, which bears witness to both the rise of individualistic consumption (for instance, concepts of dressing to match one’s “personality”) over the past century, and psychedelic design as form of expression both part of, and opposed to, such individualistic concepts of consumption. I was interested in creating objects that seemed to have a “voice” – and also to speak to the complexities of what such an idea carries with it in terms of individualism.

One of the major tensions in my studio practice has been between the drive to produce stand-alone, individual works and to make installations and more open-ended components, which could be re-arranged to suit different exhibition environments. I always saw *Model for a Screen* as a prop to be put into contact with other objects or operations; thus, in its last iteration, it was coupled with a single vertical line from a laser level, which transformed it into a (quite inefficient) machine for creating a dotted line (as its presence interrupted the flow of the laser’s light onto the wall behind it). Of course, the laser level line “ignores” many of the object’s properties, “perceiving” it, as it were, as a mere obstruction – and speaking, thus, to the reduction of characters’ properties in relation – a parallel exploration to my writing, in Chapter 1, on character as a subtraction or “glimpse” of a more complex

whole. But what was the precise nature of the juxtaposition that such pieces sought?

Model for a Screen was by far the most “decisive” of works made in what can only be described as a very awkward studio phase when I first arrived in London. My studio experiments, on the whole, felt wandering, uncertain; as a result, I began to make works that took this profound sense of indecision as their subject matter. My video *Birth of a Decision Maker* (2013, Figure 2) reflects on the libidinal economies of decision-making from the perspective of a profoundly indecisive subject, thereby focalizing a discussion of systemic decision-making concerns within an idiosyncratic, first-person perspective. It combines imagery culled from iPhone footage of my domestic space and screen recordings of online activities (for instance, scrolling through a Google image search, or using decision-making websites such as www.facade.com’s Yes/No Oracle pen, which allows users to type in a question and receive a yes or no answer). This wandering imagery serves as a backdrop for a simple, rhythmic narrative, reminiscent of children’s storybook writing, which describes an abstract character only known as “the decision maker:” “The decision maker wears trousers. They are blue, or they are brown. The decision maker knows which one.” The singsong, childlike narration speaks the perspective of a character closely observing the decision maker – his incisiveness, his intrigue – bemusedly, and perhaps lovingly – as if trying to understand from whence his decisiveness comes.

In March 2014, I co-founded the collective School of the Event Horizon with Kate Pickering and Steven Levon Ounanian. For a group exhibition at Tenderpixel, London, we explored, and parodied, the world of predictive

technologies, for a work called *Oracular Sponge (Version 003.1a)* (2014, Figure 3). This work consisted of custom packaging for the Oracular Sponge (Version 003.1a), a fictitious divination product, whose packaging was reminiscent of Silicon Valley's streamlined techno-fetishism. Alongside the packaging was a press release, printed on silver A4 paper, affixed to the wall, advertising a product launch for the Sponge. During a performance at the end of the exhibition, Pickering, Ounanian and I ritualistically removed the Sponge from its perch in the lower gallery, brought it into the performance space in Tenderbooks in a slow procession, and proceeded to introduce, pitch and un-box the product for a demo. When I opened the packaging, it was empty; as the Sponge's handler, I mimed the act of unfolding it (unfolding nothing), setting this nothing afloat mid-air, and operating it with gestures vaguely reminiscent of those used to operate iPads. Meanwhile, Ounanian invited the audience to ask the Sponge questions about the future. In response to the questions, I "operated" the Sponge while Pickering (who was "hooked up" to it) drew diagrams, recording its workings; Ounanian interpreted these verbally in real time. We were interested in producing a fictitious device that would "granulate" the future so finely, bring so many possible outcomes into focus at once, that it rendered itself completely useless.

School of the Event Horizon's first exhibition was for a Peer Sessions residency at ASC Gallery (5-11 April, 2014). For this show, we each headed a department at the fictitious School of the Event Horizon (perched on the edge of a black hole); mine was the Department of Objects to be Shrunk to a Single Point. Responding to the contingencies of the space and the collaborative process, I decided to cut holes out of the gallery wall, hide in a sealed-off area

behind it, and stick my arms out, performing various gestures and displaying an array of objects throughout the private view and at various points throughout the show. I called this piece *Weathervane* (2014, Figure 4). Likening my arm to an object or instrument, I repurposed the actions I performed (which included free-form dancing, giving coded signals such as a thumbs up, and displaying and demonstrating various objects, such as a die and pompoms) as signs in a cryptic meteorology, which seemed willfully purposive, divinatory – yet could not be readily interpreted. This mode of performance fed back into my solo work, leading to an ongoing series of open-ended reflections on divination practices and processes, which extended and re-imagined the premise of the signaling arm that, lacking an interpretive key, spoke mutely to both an unknown future, and to the desire to know that future. For instance, in *and now I'm going to tell you a story, and it's the story of the selection process* (2014, Figure 5), I re-imagined the arm-and-wall scenario as part of a portable, two-sided portable wall structure – blank and white on one side, and rough and equipped with shelves on the other. The shelves displayed various objects accompanied by mismatched labels (for instance, a ball of pink yarn labeled “SATELLITE”). I positioned this prop so that viewers were likely to see the blank side of the wall first, with my arm moving through it. Then, they could walk around the piece, and see all of the objects around me, displayed on shelves, waiting to be displayed on the other side of the wall by my arm. In, again, rather storybook fashion, this piece gave a sense of decision making as a subtractive process, in which actualities are selected from a range of available possibilities. Yet the precise logic of the objects' selection remained inaccessible. Like a plainclothes oracle, I

immersed my motions in the object world, and aimed to give the sense that they were abstractly telling of futurity. This way of working came to permeate a series of fragments – of writing, sculptural “sketches” for devices, thick, chunky paintings incorporating everyday objects, and a *capella* recorded tracks – that spoke to the desire to know the future, or to construct an attitude through which one could forge a path to one’s own future. For instance, in *A Way to Choose the Divination System* (2014, Figure 6), I roughly constructed a wheel-like device in MDF, whose spokes housed a range of domestic objects (from pencil to hairbrush to toothbrush) that could be affixed to a wall and spun. This piece suggests that a random selection of one of the objects on the spokes could help one choose a particular interpretive key through which to divine the future, yet the content of any such divinations remains unknown.

What, exactly, is at stake in referring to divination, but un-fixing the specificity of its prophecies? Is working with tropes of divination, while allowing these to remain “open,” enough of an intervention, given how hegemonic predictive practices have become? The hysteric’s divination discourse aims for more than just an “open-ended” form of divination; it departs from, and interrogates, the kernel of complicity at the heart of divination. If divination systems strive to reconcile the seeking subject with an image of the “right” path forward, then the seeking subject acts as a vehicle for that conciliatory desire. In my work on divination, I try to depart from this complicity in the split, seeking subject, seeing it as a tool for dismantling fixed (or hegemonic) forecasts. In the process, this work, perhaps, re-imagines the figure of the oracle (who, at times, becomes fused, or confused, with that of

the seeker) as a trickster, who designs pathways to the future in order to suture them to a set of attitudes that course through her.

The Future-Oracular

Broadly speaking, the cultural backdrop which informs this studio work is a newly-emerging predictive address that I call the future-oracular. This form of address was, perhaps, most powerfully encapsulated in 2007, when Google CEO Eric Schmidt described Google's future ambitions as follows: "to enable Google users to be able to ask questions such as 'What shall I do tomorrow?' and 'What job shall I take?'" (Palmås, 2011, p. 347). Palmås himself understands this quotation as yet another piece of evidence for the prevalence of predictive practices in contemporary business practices. However, I would contend that Schmidt's comment describes a future-oriented ambition that goes far beyond the predictive, and points toward another conception of futurity altogether. "Prediction" seems a good term to use when describing, say, Wal-Mart's attempts to figure out its future sales – analytics that speculate on relatively simple consumer decisions, at a small scale with respect to the totality of the consumer's life. "What job shall I take?" clearly exceeds such a scale; it speaks on a scale much closer to conceptions of that individual's *fate* – where she might "end up" in life, what vocation might be best for her. The questions Schmidt poses are located much closer to self-reflection and self-modulation through decision-making than the term "predictive" seems equipped to encompass; they also speak to the user's desire to know something of herself. Here we have an image of the user herself coming to the platform, wondering about her own life. The term

“predictive” does not encapsulate this late capitalist subject, perhaps overwhelmed with decisions, in her *inquisitiveness* toward her own future.

Schmidt’s comment speaks in the future-oracular. If Google manages and monetizes the point of contact between a specific user and an arsenal of amassed information, then the future-oracular address (“What job shall I take?”) produces a singular pathway between that user and its information.³ The production of such pathways also reflects and presupposes a sophisticated claim to knowledge of the user (as in, for instance, Google’s analysis of email keywords to determine the user’s interests, which will be discussed in Chapter 4). It presupposes a significant level of doubt in the user about her future path, and a significant level of trust the user brings to her interactions with the interface. What better place to locate such an assemblage of affects and attitudes toward futurity than within the history of divination practices?

What is an oracular form of address? On what conceptions of futurity does it thrive? What is the scope, the truth-value, the performative power, the preclusive power of the future-oracular (which I have named, as such, in hopes of likening it to a tense-structure, a “grammar of time,”⁴ a structuring principle for utterances)? Of course, oracular practices, such as those of the Oracle of Delphi, proliferated in the ancient world. As is widely known, the

³ I say “its”, here (even though I do not use this consistently throughout), because a user is not necessarily human, even though I am predominantly focusing on human users in this work. As Bratton (2014) points out, it is necessary to contend with the wide range of non-human users, such as “sensors, cars and robots.”

⁴ I borrow this term from Peter Rawlings’ essay “Grammars of Time in Late James” (2003), in which Rawlings addresses the “burgeoning anteriority” (p. 273) of both America in the post-Civil War period, and of Henry James’ writing, the “classically American predicament that is pondering (prospectively and retrospectively) the foreclosure of choice, the ultimate unavailability of ubiquity, even for natives of the New World, and the evanescent dream of sustaining endless possibility, and the impossibility of doing so” (p. 278).

ancient site at Delphi was inscribed with the phrase “*gnothi seauton*,” which translates as “know thyself.” The first thing one must do, in order to correctly interpret the Oracle’s cryptic phrases, was to know oneself – for an incorrect interpretation of the Oracle’s message could bring disaster. The future-oracular addresses its subject on his own terms, according to his own self-understanding; the advice is only as good as the subject’s ability to interpret it.

Yet we could also call this incitement to “know thyself” as an expression of differential power between prophet and seeker. The oracle, of course, can never be wrong in such a scenario; if her advice is wrongly interpreted, surely this must be the fault of the seeker’s flawed self-understanding. Further, we could say that the priests at Delphi, who mediated between the oracles and the seekers, enacted a form of information politics. The excellent documentary *The Oracle of Delphi: Secrets Revealed* (2003), which chronicles archaeologist John R. Hale and geologist Jelle Zeilinga De Boer’s interdisciplinary work on the fault lines that ran underneath the temple at Delphi, speaks to the oracular as an enactment of information politics (though they, themselves, do not use this term). Hale and De Boer proved once and for all that the ancient Greek historians’ accounts of the oracles’ activities, which included descriptions of their inhaling intoxicating vapours coming through mountain fissures, were indeed accurate (contrary to modern-day archaeology’s prior conclusions).⁵ Nonetheless, this does not explain why

⁵ The oracles, Hale and De Boer conclude, inhaled ethylene gas before prophesying. This is the gas that, in modern times, was once widely used as an anaesthetic. Though highly effective in this regard, the gas also has the drawback of being extremely flammable. (Nowadays, ethylene is used to artificially ripen bananas after they have been shipped.) Previously, modern archaeology, unable to correctly interpret the geology in the area, had dismissed the Greek historians’ accounts as fabrications; Hale and De Boer’s work restored their word in the eyes of the archaeological community. It also pointed to the unique tensions between matriarchal and patriarchal religions that were played out at Delphi. The Oracles of

the oracles' words were so widely taken to be truth. That they inhaled ethylene gas is a very significant fact for restoring the early historians' credibility, and paints an intriguing picture of prophesy as a collaboration, of sorts, between voices: those of the oracle and those of the mountain. But why were the oracles seen as bearers of truth?

As the documentary suggests, there might be two reasons. The first reason is not particularly surprising: the oracle's cryptic phrases could be neither proven nor disproven, thereby making it quite difficult to definitively discredit their power. The second reason, however, uncannily reflects the conditions of contemporary information politics (in Tim Jordan's sense of the term, 2015). As De Boer explains, because people travelled from all over ancient Greece to consult the oracle, the priests learned a great deal about the events of the day by listening to their questions. Thus, when someone came asking for advice as to, say, whether or not to go to battle with a neighbouring city-state, the priests could make use of the information they had gleaned from other seekers' questions to provide a context for the offered answers. This distribution of informational power is not entirely dissimilar to Google as it operates today: as a major gateway connecting questions to information, and amassing yet more information in the process based on users' questions and queries. (Of course, just as the oracles at Delphi were handsomely paid for their services by seekers bringing lavish gifts and tributes from the city-states, so Google compensates itself richly through selling user information to advertisers and, in turn, selling advertisers the chance to win at

Delphi were women; originally, they spoke on behalf of Gaia, the goddess of the earth. As time went on, they came to prophesy on behalf of Apollo, and priests mediated their actions; however, since it was the women who were intimately aware of how to work with the mountain's gases, they remained in the unique position of speaking on behalf of a male god.

keywords auctions through its AdWords program.) The future-oracular is a grammar of time connecting a seeker of counsel with a multivalent body of information (whether this comes from the gods, a gas, an amassing other travellers' questions, a computational framework, or a combination of these), which is then reflected back to the seeker as a prophesy about his future. Of course, this scenario consolidates the political power of the priests, the guardians of a centralized information-hub.⁶

The future-oracular, as a mode of address, involves highly personalized, *prophetic* claims on particular subjects: claims to present not exactly – not entirely – what *will* happen to a given subject but, rather, what *should* happen, what is the best path forward, given an array of available possibilities and personal propensities. As such, it emblemizes something of the tensions between prediction and precarity, self-actualization and soft prohibition that surround neoliberal subjects and their decision-making processes. Since decisions act as gateways to habits – and, habits, in turn, shape character – the future-oracular is precisely an address to the (overwhelmed, precarious, indecisive or anxious) neoliberal subject's character-in-formation – her forging a path to her future self, as it were.

⁶ Surely there is not a perfect analogy between Google's servers and the idiosyncratic edges of the oracles' utterances. Although I lack the space to develop this thought fully here, it is worth briefly contrasting two ancient Greek devices for understanding futurity: the oracle, on the one hand, and the Antikythera mechanism, on the other. The Antikythera mechanism (which is thought to have been made between 150 and 100 BC, and is often described as the world's first computer) was a complex, delicately calibrated, multi-gear device, used to predict planetary positions and other astronomical events. Yet while the Antikythera mechanism predicted planetary events that came "like clockwork," as it were, with perfect regularity, the oracle's predictions focused on human activities, contingent on unpredictable contexts, and tinged with an expression of what one "should" do – a claim to state what was best for the seeker in a given situation. Perhaps we could say that big data analytics fuse these two kinds of claims on the future together (or at least begin to merge them).

How does this image of soft persuasion – soft reconciliation between an available field of (consumer or cognitarian) action and the neoliberal subject’s future self, her future character – come to bear on contemporary art? The pluralistic, “anything goes” art world has been, one could argue, largely emptied of both opportunities and expectations for artists. Only very few will receive adequate funding, critical attention or market success. Yet on the flipside, many will have been trained to feel a great deal of freedom to choose medium and method, context and content, for their work (so long as they can find a way to keep producing in such prohibitive economic climates). In this context, perhaps the most persistent remaining expectation of artists is that they be, in some sense, good decision makers. Whatever their medium or method, their decisions should “add up” to something, produce a resonant gesture (unencumbered by anything extraneous) or deeply galvanize a particular context – maximizing experiential returns (be they perceptual or conceptual) on limited resources. (This is, perhaps, a suitably neoliberal “investment-image” of art production.) The meta-analysis of decision-making remains a stalwart of higher education in fine art. Critiques in studio-classrooms scrutinize and sharpen artists’ choices, recalibrating the presuppositions that underpin decisions, or increasing these decisions’ suppleness in the face of recalcitrant materials or unpredictable audiences. How does this persistent meta-expectation of both contemporary art and its artists stack up against the predictive and precarious pressures on decision-making faced by neoliberal subjects? My recent studio work departs from his question, inventing and examining divination rituals and predictive methods, while emptying these of specific prophetic content. Yet in a world in which the

future-oracular is, in itself, becoming normalized as a mode of address to neoliberal subjects, how must my own invocation of this tense structure, this address, differentiate itself from the hegemonic usages of the oracular? Tracing a short contextual history of my practice, I come to understand my work as an attempt to speak in the future-oracular from the perspective of the unknowing, precarious, overwhelmed subject; to speak as a *bad* decision-maker, to produce a hysteric's oracular discourse (in the Lacanian sense), which takes the complicit desire to know how to act – to align oneself with the world, to choose what is “right,” to fit into a pre-determined future – as the very method through which oracularity (with all its soft controls) might be held in question as the modality through which soft modulation operates.

Analytic Futurities

The contemporary future-oracular unfolds against a backdrop of ever-more ubiquitous predictive and pre-emptive analytics. In “Predicting What You’ll Do Tomorrow: Panspectric Surveillance and the Contemporary Corporation” (2011), business sociologist Karl Palmås describes the gradual move toward future-oriented analytic practices by key corporations. In a postfordist economy, he argues, corporations rely less on disciplinary practices and enclosures, and more on panspectric forms of surveillance and control – that is, monitoring practices that draw from a broad range of sources, senses and analytics rather than predominantly visual cues, as in panopticonic surveillance (see also Deleuze 1992; De Landa 2006). Deterritorialized contemporary corporations, whose hierarchies are maintained “through increased capacities to control meaning, culture, subjectivities and effects” (p. 346), seek to monopolize by means of data

analysis, to analyze propensity, and predict the futures of their customers. Companies base their success, in part, on the ability to foresee intentions. For instance, Wal-Mart, the world's largest corporation, is able to price out competitors, on the one hand, because it pioneered in the computational analysis of its entire supply chain (see Lanier, 2014). By modeling its supply chain, it was able to bargain each of its suppliers down to the last dollar, thereby massively reducing overhead costs and gaining a dominant position in the market. Meanwhile, on the other end of its operations, Wal-Mart succeeds due to its capacity to estimate future sales. Such estimations take into account even the effects of weather patterns on customer spending (for instance, Wal-Mart might rush order Kellogg's strawberry pop tarts right before a hurricane, since statistics show that customers stock up on ready-to-eat food before a disaster). Similarly, the American casino chain Harrah's tracks individual customers' gambling success through loyalty cards, and calculates each customer's "pain point" – "the level of gambling losses that will send the visitor home, and possibly make them not come back for a while" (Palmås, 2011, p. 348). In response to these individually-calculated pain points, "luck ambassadors" approach gamblers to take them out for a steak dinner (if the data shows they love these) when they have had a bad day. Thus, Harrah's "micromanage[s] the feelings of the consumer" (p. 348), so that their experiences are just enjoyable enough that they come back, while ensuring maximum profitability for the company.⁷ As Palmås points out, such

⁷ It is worth considering how pain points differ from haggling practices – or even to think of pain points as a high-tech extension of haggling practices, but this time with the deck stacked against the customer. Both haggling and "pain points" revolve around a logic of maximum extraction and an awareness that one customer might be willing to part with more money than another for the same thing. Pain points, however, statistically optimize and homogenize such strategies; they give the shopper less agency, less of an arena for her skill at "walking away",

analytic practices increase power differences between large and small corporations (the former of which are likely to better reap the rewards of sophisticated analytics).⁸ They also increase power differences between corporations and consumers. While the consumer only has access to his/her desires and the available products and prices he/she finds, corporations analyze ever-greater swaths of information through which they can pinpoint consumers' habits.

Corporations' uses of data can be traced back to early decision support systems (DSS) and executive information systems (EIS), which emerged out of research conducted in the late 1950s and 1960s (Palmås, 2011, p. 349). More recently, however, Palmås points out, a technological threshold has been crossed, such that corporations can use data proactively, rather than reactively. Following Nigel Thrift, Palmås writes of such practices as part of the emergence of a new "capitalist meteorology" (p. 351), a new form of business intelligence based on a Tardean understanding of users in a highly networked environment, who are highly susceptible to "imitative rays" of behaviour and whose actions, thus, can be predicted (p. 352).

What is the nature of such prediction – what is its claim to truth? Data analysis (including, though not limited to, predictive analysis) presents a fundamental epistemological problem, in that it inherently invites confusion between correlation and causation. An arch example of this is an article published in *Nature* by Google employees (Butler, 2008) – since disproven –

using the illusion of disinterestedness to advantage. With advanced analytics, no customer can hide behind the illusions he/she proffers.

⁸ For more on the massive concentrations of wealth produced by having access to sophisticated computation, see also Lanier (2014).

which claimed that Google's data could predict the spread of flu by analyzing distributions of searches for terms such as "winter flu." The relationship between queries about the flu online (which are very easy for companies to track and analyze in real time) and the viral spread itself (which is far more difficult to track in real time) is fundamentally indeterminate, even if there might be some overlap between the spread of a virus and the expressions of online curiosity about it. It is precisely this kind of indeterminacy – this site of confusion between correlation and causation – that is woven into the predictive fabric of control societies, modulating people's ranges of options and possibilities in a variety of situations. Character, a perceptual and conceptual logic of personhood that does not depend on causation, then retroactively apologizes for such confusions between correlation and causation: if a customer is deemed unreliable, it must have been in her character. As Annie McClanahan points out in her study of character and credit scoring, Amex customers in 2008 received letters stating that their credit scores had gone down because customers who shopped at similar establishments to those they had shopped at had shown a lesser propensity to pay back loans (2014, p. 38-39). Obviously, there is no reason why a new customer would fail to pay their credit card bill simply because they had spent at similar establishments to those who had not. However, this is precisely the correlative logic through which access to credit is differentially granted. As Deleuze (1992, p. 5) argues, control societies address *dividual* persons, not individuals as such.⁹ Whereas the concept of the individual connotes indivisibility, and is opposed to the masses, the control society *dividual* is

⁹ Deleuze coined the term "*dividual*," which has since been taken up by several anthropologists, such as Nurit Bird-David, cited in Chapter 1.

permeable, divisible, modulated and controlled by data-flows, trans-personal tendencies, and statistics. It is precisely the dividual subject who must pay a higher interest rate because he shopped at similar establishments to those who proved to be poor credit risks.

In what Bernard Harcourt (2007) has called our actuarial age, predictions based on statistical analyses profoundly shape personal lives, deciding not only credit scores, but even juridical outcomes, such as who is granted parole, or whose car gets pulled over for an ostensibly random, routine check. Harcourt shows that statistical analyses have modeled – and actively shaped – inmates' futures in criminal law since 1935, when the Illinois State Penitentiary hired its first-ever actuary to use the “Burgess Method” for determining the likelihood of an individual’s success or failure in parole based on group recidivism rates. Fast-forward several decades, and actuarial logic – the employment of statistical, rather than clinical, methods to determine risks of criminal behaviour or to administer justice – completely “permeates the field of criminal law and its enforcement” (Harcourt, 2007, p. 2). For some, the use of actuarial logic to, say, more “smartly” target tax audits or routine vehicle checks, is simply a necessary efficiency within an economic landscape in which legal resources are limited. For Harcourt, on the other hand, actuarial logic distorts the very concept of justice itself. It produces biases in the carceral population, and can even increase crime in certain instances, as when, for instance, white drivers in the US accurately perceive that they are unlikely to be targeted by police performing routine checks. In a data analytic society, predictions control financial markets, corporate practices, credit scores and juridical process. Access to the best predictive methods – granting

their users thick, compelling claims on the future – becomes a predominant technique of power. Yet what kinds – what concepts – of futurity do such predictive practices conjure up? Further, how do these practices, which seek to pin down the unknown through calculation, measure up against experiences of instability (political, environmental and financial), precariousness (of workers, students, the unemployed and the marginally employed), and the massive uncertainty that comes along with these?

In what follows, I outline three major conceptions of futurity at play within the analytic landscapes outlined above: the probabilistic, the possibilistic and the pre-emptive. Each of these three species of futurity has already been identified within discussions on predictive analytics and their concomitant tactical concerns.

The Probabilistic, the Possibilistic and the Pre-emptive

Of course, many actuarial methods are based on the calculation of probabilities. The Burgess Method, used to predict recidivism, was based on just such probabilistic analysis based on group recidivism rates. Yet probabilistic methods, which focus on that which is most likely to happen, fall short in certain contexts – for it is, after all, highly unlikely that only highly likely events will occur. Counter-terrorist tactics and risk assessment for nuclear power plants require the analysis of extremely improbable events that – if they occur at all – are certainly not likely to be repeated, but nonetheless must be taken into account. For such analyses, possibilistic thought becomes a more valuable tool than probabilistic thought. Possibilistic thought (Clarke, 2008) focuses on analyzing events that fall outside of probability's range of

focus, and is sometimes blended with probabilistic modeling – for instance, in financial institutions’ Value at Risk calculations for the derivative market – in an attempt to give a fuller picture of the blend of continuity and contingency that characterizes a cultural conception of the future. As John Hogan Morris describes them, calculations such as Value at Risk, which blend the probabilistic and the possibilistic, act as “a way of governing future instability in the present” (2014).

Yet the analysis of the extremely improbable is also implicated in a broader set of tactical shifts. As Brian Massumi describes it in his work on the U.S. military (2007), there has been a move from preventative to pre-emptive tactical logic since the cold war. (This will be described in greater detail in Chapter 4.) Whereas, say, a cold war nuclear arms race is founded on a logic (however flawed in practice) according to which future attacks might be prevented through matching (and hopefully exceeding) the enemy’s weapons arsenal, pre-emptive logic does away with any such notions of balance. Pre-emption, for Massumi, is performative; in an era of uncertain enemies and improbable, ever-shifting forms of attack, enemies must first be smoked out of their holes, actively *created* through acts of aggression. This will invite retaliation along the lines on which the U.S. can then say their enemies always already would have done. The future, as it were, moves into the present: potential enemies are actualized, actively created, by performative acts and statements that will be retroactively proven “true” through combat. How does pre-emptive logic make its way into the broader landscape of both corporate and personal modes of rendering the future knowable? What is the difference, for instance, between probabilistic and possibilistic thinking,

preventative and pre-emptive measures, in medicine, in education? In his analysis of “technological solutionism” (Silicon Valley’s “there’s an app for that” attitude to tackling seemingly all social problems) Evgeny Morozov (2013) points to some interesting potential answers. As already mentioned above, app-based, individualistic solutions to everything from nutrition to medicine, exercise and environmentalism tend to encourage people to micromanage their own behaviour, but to pre-empt any discussions on a broader, systemic level. What is pre-empted, it seems to me, is an address to the commons, in favour of either atomized, individual self-management. In a world of great tactical uncertainty (be this on the level of personal, economic or military decision), probabilistic logic comes to be routinely blended with possibilistic logic. This blending of probability and possibility, in turn, partly underpins pre-emptive tactics, which manage massive uncertainty through performatively (and perhaps coercively) calling an opponent into agreement with one’s own view on that opponent. Yet these kinds of futurity also give way to the future-oracular, which is becoming increasingly palpable, particularly in online addresses to neoliberal subjects overwhelmed by precariousness, uncertainty or indecision due to an overabundance of choice. The cultural logic of pre-emption, in fact, acts as a precondition for the future-oracular. (We could say that the future-oracular, itself, is a subsidiary address associated with pre-emptive logic applied to personal futures.) The future-oracular performatively calls into being the subject’s character-to-be as a form of agreement with her economic landscape. Yet it also depends on a new set of technical preconditions through which the contemporary surveillance economy has been produced.

Deriving Suspicion from Innocent Lives: Character and Information Politics

These new technical preconditions came dramatically into public consciousness in 2013. On 20 May of that year, Booz Allen Hamilton infrastructure analyst Edward Snowden, having taken a leave of absence from his work, quietly fled from Hawaii to Hong Kong. Shortly afterward, stories of the classified documents he leaked, which revealed the enormous extent of the National Security Agency's global surveillance program, rippled through the world. Snowden's chosen collaborators, journalist Glenn Greenwald and filmmaker Laura Poitras, held an interview in his hotel room, helped him tell his story – and, in doing so, wrapped the NSA revelations in images of personal motivation. Greenwald asked, “Why should people care about surveillance?” Snowden replied:

...Even if you're not doing anything wrong, you're being watched and recorded, and the storage capability of these systems increases every year, consistently, by orders of magnitude. [...] It's getting to the point, you don't have to have done anything wrong. You simply have to eventually fall under suspicion from somebody, even by a wrong call, and then they could use this system to go back in time and scrutinize every decision you've ever made, every friend you've ever discussed something with, and attack you on that basis, to sort of derive suspicion from an innocent life and paint anyone in the context [*sic*] of a wrongdoer. (Davidson, 2013; Greenwald *et. al*, 2013)

As Snowden states later, he leaked details about the NSA's PRISM program in hopes that the public would exercise their powers to influence policy; for policy is “the only thing that restricts the activities of the surveillance state” (Greenwald *et. al*, 2013). Snowden's biggest fear, he said, was that the public would do nothing with the information he had revealed – that they would become cognizant of the NSA's overreach, but be unwilling “to take the risks

necessary to stand up and fight to change things, to force their representatives to actually take a stand in their interests” (ibid.). Snowden, here, ruminates over the fate of the activist subject, who, too cowed by threats, too depressed by the hopelessness of protest, or too wanly endowed with civic courage, cannot act.

Yet seen another way – from the perspective of the political life of perception – Snowden’s statements read as harbingers of a new politics of character. Deriving suspicion from innocent lives: Snowden’s image aptly captures the sense in which characterization – the perceptual and conceptual acts involved in attributing character to someone, or something – emerges out of complex and interested acts of selection, speculation and attribution. Given vast amounts of dormant personal data to play with, characterization involves actively selecting palettes of facts and tendencies and painting with them, reconstructing representations of someone’s character out of swaths of information, attributors’ desires, perceptions, representational tropes, bureaucratic procedures, power relations, and computational capacities. To characterize an individual (be it a person or thing) is to extract a smaller set of qualities and propensities from its fuller complexity: economizing that complexity by rendering it recognizable, circulable, and actionable. So-called “big data” – a broad term referring to a state in which large quantities of available, storable information, which overwhelm traditional data processing capacities, come to be processed by a range of sophisticated new automated analytic methods – rewrites the relations between an individual’s “full complexity” and characterization, by enabling ever-greater quantities of tangible information to be retrieved and analyzed in the production of

characterizations. (Such analyses could include those carried out by human agents with privileged access to databases and analytic tools, or characterizations made automatically by a host of algorithmic witnesses.) Anyone can be painted as a wrongdoer – even if they have done nothing wrong – simply by virtue of the fact that the NSA and institutions like it could, in future, have entire lives’ worth of personal data to paint with.

Though the NSA’s surveillance activities may be alarming, they are also, as yet, spectacularly ineffective as security tools. As Grégoire Chamayou notes, the NSA contributed nothing whatsoever to public safety throughout its entire telephone metadata collection program (2015, p. 8). Yet, as both Chamayou and Snowden point out, the NSA’s programs were never about public safety. They have always been about power (Chamayou, 2015, p. 8): and specifically, a form of *biographical* power. The ambition to automatically construct sleeper dossiers on each person, such that their personal information could be retroactively retrieved should they come to be “of interest” in the future, constitutes a form of “*biographical power* founded on the generalized informational capture of the micro-histories of individual lives,” as Chamayou puts it (2015, p. 7). This form of power seizes on the ability to selectively construct representations of character out of available information – to *economize* the image of a person’s being according to the political exigencies of a particular time. The ability to retroactively paint anyone according to the political demands of a given context, or, conversely (as we shall see in later chapters) to actively predict people’s future behaviours, constitutes a vast shift in the logic, functions and politics of represented personhood.

Two years after the Snowden revelations – in 2015 – it appears that the NSA’s powers are about to be severely limited. But is this really so? In May 2015, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the U.S.A. Freedom Act, which curbs the NSA’s ability to collect phone metadata in bulk. This bill seems to limit the NSA’s access to personal data, and thus its powers to characterize individuals. Yet, as Shane Harris points out, this bill has actually been viewed as a big win for the NSA within the intelligence community. The U.S.A. Freedom Act does not actually end the phone records program; it merely “requires that phone companies, not the NSA, hold onto the records” (Harris, 2015). With just “a little more trouble,” the NSA can still access all of the records, without having to shoulder the burden of maintaining the databases themselves – an extremely cumbersome and expensive task (Joel Brenner, former inspector general of the NSA, quoted in Harris, 2015). The bill, in effect, merely outsources the NSA’s data storage operations to the corporate sector.

Rather than enacting a limitation on surveillance – and the predominantly biographical, *characterizing* powers it puts into practice – the U.S.A. Freedom Act indicates, if anything, an *expansion* of the logics of government surveillance throughout the corporate sector, a normalization of these corporate apparatuses’ enlistment in the political control of subjects. Myriad corporate surveillance apparatuses already track users’ online activities. As Benjamin Bratton quipped in 2014, with hindsight, the NSA might appear to be the least of the public’s worries in terms of surveillance – the “public option” in a sea of corporate captures entailing not even the slightest hope of public oversight. Online tracking and consumer identification – which,

ultimately, seek to calculate credit risk and maximize profit – enact new forms of governmentality (Foucault’s term for modifying citizens’ conduct in order to make them more governable), managing the link between consumers and the financial world’s interests. Not only do neoliberal subjects find themselves, as Lazzarato (2012) and Graeber (2011) have argued, controlled by debt and access to credit (which tether finance to morality); practices for determining creditworthiness increasingly borrow their techniques of judgment from big data analytics. The “fintech” industry boldly claims to understand prospective borrowers’ “true characters,” using algorithmic analyses (sometimes combined with psychometric testing) in their quest to underwrite the “underbanked” – those with a poor credit history or no credit history, who might yet still be trustworthy borrowers. Both government powers and governmental control (operating through finance) perform, produce, invest in, and shape “character.” On the one hand, these apparatuses claim to paint the “truth” about their subjects’ characters, while, on the other hand, they draw on the incredible malleability of that truth by choosing which qualities to subtract from a larger whole, which criteria to select and analyze, which conceptions of good consumer-citizenry will be the measure.

Contemporary Art and Characterization

This pervasive shift plays out as a relation between (human or mechanical) perception, information and new forms of mechanical insight (via algorithms’ analytic work). Given that art has a privileged relationship to the production of complex aggregates of qualities (what Deleuze would call percepts), artists have a role to play in questioning how newly economized – and financialized – practices of characterization come to bear on everyday

perceptual and political life. Given character's increasing capture by sovereign and governmental forms of power alike (in spite of – even because of – its concomitant malleability), how can artworks question the limits of such forms of capture, theorize them, or intervene in their “soft” rigidity? While many artworks directly engage with algorithms, data-sets, informatic structures and online surveillance, my study focuses more broadly on works which stage a sustained encounter between a subjective, first-person viewpoint (whether performed, narrated or otherwise represented) and a complex array of information and/or objects. It was the early producers of readymades (Duchamp and, far less famously though no less credibly, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven), who rethought mass-produced objects as playing fields, of sorts, through which fictitious authorial personas could practice fictitious “acts” of creation. In the age of big data, what is the status of such fictions? Do the readymade's fictitious personas transform, or translate, into the data-constructed characters ubiquitous online today? Many artists, since Duchamp and the Baroness Elsa, have deemed “character” to be an artistic product of sorts: be it the artist's fetishized persona veiled “behind” an abstract painting; a fictitious being produced through performance, as in works by Eleanor Antin and Lynn Hershman Leeson; or a conception of rarefied artistic subjectivity circulated in the press as “antics.” How might such artistic productions of “character” be newly redeployed in an era that pervasively produces and economizes character, and routinely characterizes *all* citizens (and not just artists or exceptional figures)?

This thesis is comprised of a series of experiments with such questions – each of which, I hope, will infuse the others in unexpected ways.

Throughout the thesis, I perform a set of leaps between various discourses pertaining, on the one hand, to concepts and constructions of “character”; and on the other hand, to the economy, in various senses (the contemporary surveillance economy, which capitalizes on personal information; the financialized context for contemporary art production; the Christological economy elaborated by Marie-José Mondzain). Each of these staged encounters between “character” and “economy” will produce an insight which might then be used as a springboard for subsequent chapters, thereby enabling me to produce an idiosyncratic, interdisciplinary theory of the political significance of “character” – as product of the surveillance economy – for contemporary art, and contemporary life more broadly.

First, it will be necessary to construct a conceptual prehistory, of sorts, for character in the age of big data. (After all, the technical, economic and conceptual conditions that inflect character’s current political currency have been developing over centuries.) In Chapter 1, I outline a broad and necessarily interdisciplinary literature on character, and consider some of the problems and paradoxes that come along with its study – beginning with an analysis of how character mediates between subjective and objective positions – and between subjects and the object world. I give special attention to Deidre Shauna Lynch’s *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture and the Business of Inner Meaning* (1998), which makes a compelling argument against the pervasive structuralist understanding of character as an inherently conservative, humanistic and ultimately illusory literary phenomenon. (Why, she wonders, take a reductive, moralistic stance toward such a rich and complex object of study, when so much can be learned from

the inherent contradictions character performs?) Lynch argues that representations of complex, interior lives in eighteenth century British novels grappled with a newly internationalized commodity culture, helping readers learn how to render their strange new possessions truly private. Thus, in Lynch's view, complex literary characters themselves are technologies for grappling with economic shifts felt through everyday interactions with objects. How does such thinking on character come to bear on the present? After tracing several lines of thought that expand on the pervasive links between character, objects and economies (which span art history, literary theory, theories of objects, business sociology and critical finance), I outline my own theory of character for the age of big data: character *economizes* personhood. Within a neoliberal context, to characterize someone – or to perform one's "character" – is to come to be represented in what I call the speculative shared interior – a representational form that hinges on a paradoxical combination of futurity and presentness, an interior, "first-person" perspective and the fact that such a perspective, if it is to be shared, must always be speculative – and speculate on the relation between that person's values and the valuations routinely performed within his/her economic context. To say that, in the neoliberal world of big data analytics, character economizes personhood is to speak to the ways in which character enacts a *subtraction* of significant qualities from a larger information set; but also to the ways in which character circulates those qualities as speculations on – or provisional guarantors of – value.

My next chapter, "Economic Figuration," also lays some representational groundwork, but in a different direction: tackling the

conceptual and perceptual relationships between character and economy as background conditions for the representational and governmental functions of character in contemporary art, and in contemporary life more broadly. Of course, one of the dominant ways in which the relationships between the economy and the qualitative particularities of contemporary art have been framed is through an analysis of the art market. Many accounts of art and financialization depict contemporary artworks (and their concomitant expression of inherently unstable, speculative value) as cogs in an increasingly abstract and powerful, financialized market, thereby subjecting the analysis of art entirely to the terms of finance. (Ultimately, this involves understanding contemporary art's ideological role as its expression of the link between two different conceptions of value: rarefied personal and perceptual qualities, on the one hand, and highly unstable, and at times wildly large, financial quantities, on the other.) While such analyses of the art market are extremely important, they also tend to sweepingly subject art to financialized conceptions of value. Conversely, in this chapter I reverse the mode of analysis. Rather than beginning with the financialized art market as a base – and basis – upon which to build my analysis of art's qualitative particularities (which could include both the artworks' unique qualities, and the imagined qualities of the artists to whose lives these artworks point), I begin with character itself – seen, here, as a reflexive economic concept – as a representational base from which to build an analysis of economic value. “Character” itself – as expressed in art's production of perceptual particularity – might reshape conceptions as to what constitutes the economy in the first place, revealing something of the qualitative dimensions of the economy itself

– the information, glory, and “animal spirits” (to borrow a term from Keynes) that, more and more, must be understood to have intrinsic economic value – even if some of these qualities are not routinely, directly monetized. I outline some economic theories that privilege such qualitative terms, thus allowing “character” (as qualitative particularity rendered speculatively as propensity) to be understood as, quite directly, economic. I outline examples of what I term “economic figuration”: acts of rendering the economy, itself, as a kind of perceiving, and perceived, figure in literature and art. Thomas Bridges’ *The Adventures of a Banknote* (1770), Mark Lombardi’s *Narrative Structures* (1990s) and Amir Chasson’s portraits (2008 –) outline a range of approaches to staging these perceptual relations between economy and character, which, in their work, is always mapped in relation to the contested terrain of the first-person perspective.

In Chapter 3, “All Data is Credit Data,” I examine two newly developing practices for determining creditworthiness and character: new credit scoring methods in the “fintech” industry, which draw from big data analytics; and online ranking and rating apparatuses (such as customer reviews on Uber and Airbnb), which act as ever-present reminders of the emerging economies of reputation. With these recently developed business apparatuses, the conceptual links between character, morality and economy are being rewritten. Big data lends fintech companies heretofore unfathomable claims to “truth value” in their representation of prospective borrowers’ characters. The reputation economy encourages individuals to use their “character” as a form of capital. Ratings and reviews grant credibility to micro-entrepreneurs on online platforms, and outsource regulation to consumers. In light of the

increasingly regimented relations between character and finance that such apparatuses allow, what can be learned from histories of marginal, artistic explorations of minor economic thought – which, long before big data, already experimented with the relations between economies and character? The French Fluxus artist Robert Filliou (1926-1987), for instance, espoused and enacted Charles Fourier's radical economic thought, and understood his work as a poetic economic practice. Filliou made a sharp distinction between the poetic economy enacted by the Eternal Network of artists and what he termed the "economics of prostitution" (which emphasized self-promotion, professional conduct and competitive behaviour). In the face of a pervasive economics of prostitution, Filliou believed that an artistic proposition's value was equivalent to the amount of innocence, imagination and freedom it was worth. Arguably, recent years have witnessed a blurring of the lines between poetics and prostitution (in Filliou's senses of these terms). The reputation economy quite happily incorporates the two, valuating "genuine" and "generous" behaviour – going that extra mile for the customer – alongside self-promotion in an era of job scarcity, precarity, and the commodification of emotional labour that has long been associated with the service economy (Hochschild, 2003). In light of these developments, Filliou might be considered an unwitting precursor to the reputation economy; but is it possible to understand his qualitative conception of the economy other than in this admittedly somewhat facile, melancholic narrative, which routinely paints images of radical political economies being incorporated into the neoliberal mainstream? To explore this, I compare Filliou and George Brecht's joke shop in Villefranche-sur-Mer, France, *La Cédille Qui Sourit* (1965-8) and some sort

of contemporary counterpoint: my experience of this same town, almost fifty years later, through Airbnb (a platform that, arguably, inherits Fluxus' interest in openness, sharing and contingency). Is it possible to use Filliou's work as a means through which to analyze and understand the Airbnb experience, performing a financialised phenomenology of Airbnb? Conversely, is it possible to say that recent artworks that focus on the conflicts between qualities and quantities, economics and morality are more apt responses to the neoliberal normalization of "genuine" feeling and "good" character than anything Filliou's economy of innocence, imagination and freedom might be equipped to recommend? Rather than either condemning Filliou's practice as a romantic performance of the "genuine" economy, or nostalgically upholding his practice as an authentically radical economic expression, I attempt to suggest a third alternative: that Filliou's work conceptualizes "goodness" – here, understood as both a moralistic character trait, and a reflexive economic concept – as creditworthiness, and creditworthiness, in turn, as an *application*. However, the question as to which institution one's goodness might apply remains open.

In what sense might "goodness" – or any other character trait, for that matter – come to be considered measurable? Modern and contemporary philosophers, economists, artists and thinkers have, time and again, either passionately argued against the quantification of qualities *tout court*, or, on the other hand, strongly advocated for more rigorous methods for quantifying qualitative aspects of experience and exchange. What is at stake in this stark philosophical and methodological contrast? How can one conceptualize this contrast without either romantically dismissing all quantification, or falling into

a positivistic fetishism of quantity for quantity's sake? In an interlude, I briefly contextualize these tensions between quantified and qualitative concepts of character, and examine the education policy advocacy group Character Counts as an exemplar of what I call strategic quantification: a way of provisionally making one's claims visible – and actionable – within a given institutional context by quantifying them.

In Chapter 4, I shift to a closer examination of character and surveillance, within a future-oriented analytics context. As a future-oriented concept, character speaks to a host of emerging predictive apparatuses, through which ever greater analytic efforts are placed on propensity, and managing future risk. I examine artworks that respond to newly future-oriented surveillance practices, and reveal something of the pre-emptive logic at play within contemporary tracking and monitoring. Works by SWAMP, Hasan Elahi and Erica Scourti, I argue, posit a theory of surveillance as characterization: as actively selecting subjects' qualities and speculating on their propensities.

Through precise attempts to render creditworthiness and reputation knowable, and techniques for determining propensity, character has been pervasively captured, produced, and rendered determinable – however provisionally or problematically – in the age of big data. It has come to express an oddly objectified speculation on personal value. The economies of character are in full swing; and indeed, many artworks have spoken to, pointed toward, or theorized these shifts. Yet, for all its increasing rigidity, character is also a relational, and immensely malleable concept – a shared and practiced fiction. As Peter Osborne argues (2013), the narrative turn in contemporary art is predicated, in part, on the fact that narrative acts as a

point of indifference between fact and fiction. Character is yet another point of indifference between fact and fiction. As well as purporting to carry a kernel of truth about its bearers, it also affords its attributors great licence to select and analyze relevant characteristics – and affords its bearers the possibility (at least on some level) to lie, to fake, to adopt guises, to become other: to *play* a character and not simply to *be* one. Is this flexibility grounds enough to claim an emancipatory dimension to character? Can character's malleability protect citizens from their increasing over-determination in an age of big data (given, in particular, the latter's interests in neurology and raw data, which place less and less emphasis on the exigencies of conscious self-presentation)? What other economies of character might be possible?

One pervasive response to the 2013 NSA revelations, and to the emerging politics of big data that they have made visible, has been the call to protect the right to privacy. Yet, in analyzing recent artworks by Erica Scourti, Hasan Elahi and others, which have directly responded to contemporary surveillance practices, it becomes clear that advocating for privacy, though it may certainly have some limited uses, is not an adequate response to the emerging contours of information politics at play. Firstly, this is because, as works by these artists clearly show, in the age of big data, there is an uncomfortable alliance between privacy and privatization that renders privacy advocacy highly problematic. Further, to follow Michel Feher's theory of neoliberalism, the very basis for both neoliberal economy and its forms of governmentality is that of sharing (as a social value and way of being), and of the share (as an economic form which foregrounds derivative, shared forms of investment) (2015). Hence, to champion privacy as a response to big data

(while it might have some important, limited applications) is to turn away from the very economic and subjective conditions of sharing to which one must, in this context, respond. For better or worse, sharing – for all its messy, uneven, and uncomfortable economic, affective, social and subjective dimensions – is a necessary, though obviously difficult, component of any analysis of this terrain. To characterize is to share – to share in producing an impression of someone, to share in the construction and attribution of her characteristics, to help form the representational basis through which her persona might circulate in a neoliberal economy as a producer and guarantor of value.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, it is for precisely this reason that character, as both a theoretical concept and an object of concern in the artworks I look at, might help us. Although character, of course, has been pervasively associated with individuals and their particularity, this is only half the story. Character, as I am arguing throughout, is always relational, always shared: a complex meeting point between particularity and perception, which, upon representation, can be circulated, shared more widely. Character is a shared (or, at times, *un*-shared, contested) speculation, and, as such, governs the link between the individual and the share (in the multifaceted senses above, to which Feher draws attention). Deidre Shauna Lynch's argument (which pertains to modern literature's link to the rise of British liberalism) posits character as a means to understand the emerging problems of the private – to mentally and ideologically anchor the wild influx of newly available, international commodities within private life. What she downplays, however (which was anticipated in the liberal era, but which, by now, is central to character's neoliberal alliances) is the fact that literary character not only

imagines privatisation as such. It also invents ways to *share* privacy: to dismantle privacy through privacy itself, to interweave two private acts (of writing, and of the fictitious internal acts of perception and reflection carried out by characters), and put these interwoven privacies into circulation. The paradox of shared privacy, anticipated in modern literature, pervades the sharing economies of today, which trade in online reputations, and mediate tensions between “personal” characteristics and shared metrics. This tension characterizes the very concept of character as it plays out in neoliberal contexts, as shared (or partly-shared, problematically shared) speculation pervasively linked to individuals. More fittingly than privacy, the artworks I examine posit a politics of character as the perceptual basis for analyzing the age of big data, and situate shared, fictitious acts of perception as contested grounds on which these conflicts unfold. It is precisely this first person perspective that is currently being colonized by big data analytics. Analyses of smartphone data and MAC (media access control) address activity trade in information on personal experience, rendered at eye- (and thumb-) level. This makes it all the more vital to construct, however provisionally or fleetingly, a theory and a politics of character in/as the paradox of the shared first person. This is the basis of character’s vastly important political and representational currency today.

Chapter 1

Character Economizes Personhood

In 2010, Hito Steyerl provocatively advocated for the political and emancipatory potential of becoming an object. The vast majority of emancipatory practices, she notes (for instance, feminist, anti-racist, and queer activist positionalities) have been focused on the struggle to become a subject of history, rather than an object of someone else's. Yet given the difficulties and contradictions involved in navigating a subject position – the sense in which this involves not only assuming a privileged position within a history, but also being subject *to* a distribution of power – she asks: “Why not try siding with the object for a change? ... Why not be a thing? An object without a subject?” (2010, p. 3). The object who strives to be thing-like, “without subject” – like David Bowie's much-reproduced, post-gender 1977 “*Heroes*” single persona, a wildly proliferating image-life – might erode or evade the sharp divides often presupposed to exist between thing and image, subject and object, I and it. For Steyerl, these states are no longer sharply separable; the image is a thing as much as the things it depicts. As things, we are not pictured *by* images so much as we participate *in* them – in their autonomous lives, their circulations.

Character itself is a kind of image: an image (whether visual or not) of selfhood; of qualitative particularity, singularity; of positionality or role (within,

say, a given plot, group or milieu); and of behavioural tendency, ethical makeup, grit. In the age of big data, myriad apparatuses (just a few of which I will discuss in this thesis) constantly turn people into characters, into images of themselves. Surveillance programs, news sites, online algorithmic identification, credit scoring, gaming avatars, reality television, self-presentation on online platforms, ratings and reviews: contemporary life swarms with hosts of new characterizing mechanisms (not to mention much older ones, such as literature, or being known by a variety of people in various contexts, each of whom perceives and understands you, your motivations and your social roles differently). Willingly or unwillingly, knowingly or otherwise, contemporary citizens become characters, image-objects of themselves, with every act of self-representation, and every online click in the surveillance economy – an economy set up, as Jaron Lanier (2014) points out, to promote the “free” sharing of content, yet vastly favour players who make use of sophisticated computation in order to track their supply chain, their customers, or both: to come know their customers better than the competition, in order to maximize profits.

What does it mean to truly become an object *without* subject? Given the surveillance economy’s myriad characterizing apparatuses, which always, already make characters out of us – in a sense, making us *subject* to the surveillance economy by making us into image-objects – is it really possible to become an object without also being subject? What conditions would have to be recognized in order to make this possible, to find the emancipatory potential in object-ness? Whether or not one agrees that such a pursuit is imaginable, or likely to be gainful, within a surveillance economy, the

contradictions involved in actualizing Steyerl's pronouncement offer a useful starting point for a chapter outlining a brief theoretical history, and theory, of character for the surveillance economy. Steyerl's compelling description of how one *participates* in object-ness, in image-ness, rather than simply being represented by images, usefully describes something of the lived experience of being intertwined with the fate of one's represented being – one's character – as it circulates autonomously from platform to platform, person to person, server to server.

Circa 500 B.C. Heraclitus, in a famous aphorism, described character as destiny – as if one's fate were inscribed in the fabric of one's being from the beginning. In the age of big data, character is perhaps better seen as a destiny-producing, or destiny-inflecting device: credit scores, reputation and audience measurement are derived from complex encounters between a person's behaviour and its analysis; but they then precede and out-circulate their human counterparts, like magnets for future potential, galvanizing their present conditions. (Characterizations can easily be self-fulfilling: for instance, those deemed creditworthy borrowers will receive better interest rates and thus be better able to act in a creditworthy fashion.) To become a character is to be object-ified, transformed into an image – to take on propensities as image, to feel oneself participate in, and become tethered to, one's object-ness, one's image-ness. In this chapter, I depart from Steyerl's description of becoming-object as I develop a theory of contemporary character. Yet, unlike Steyerl, who strives to imagine an object without subject, what would it be to find a way through this terrain that sticks with the difficult tensions between objects and subjects – that sees, in fact, any characterization as a circulating

image-object expressing the relation between perceiver and perceived? How can one make sense of this strange image-like status of character – and of the strange ways in which its characteristics are shared, and rendered shareable? Further, in an economy that frequently relies on character as an image or guarantor of one's value, what theory of character best describes these functions, and their genealogy? Navigating a broad, interdisciplinary literature on character – as well as some related concepts, which help to fill out its fragmented history – I argue that it is insufficient, for my study, to simply theorize character as a *guarantor* of economic value, or an epiphenomenal element within the surveillance economy. Rather, character itself is an economic concept, which speaks to the attributions, speculations and exchanges of traits between various actors. Put another way, character *economizes* personhood, if by personhood, we mean the sense of familiarity with another person or thing that accrues over time (or through analytic acts, including acts of perception or computation), and if we understand “economize” to denote both a sense that one's traits have been pared down from a greater complexity, and rendering those traits circulable, actionable, and subject to speculation.

The first requirement for such a theory of character is a basis through which to think through the paradox of the shared characteristic, which ostensibly represents a person's qualitative particularity, but is, of course, inflected with their perceivers' views, interests and judgments – and thus, acts as a form of currency uniting perceiver and perceived. Sara Ahmed's theory of character (2011) provides just this. Ahmed describes the tensions between the traits others *want* to see in the people they perceive and how those people

actually act. She describes character as a “technology of attribution” (p. 233), a way of navigating, and regulating, this difference – the difference between the expectation and perception of tendencies and traits. Ahmed’s theorization compellingly paints characterization as a relation between perceivers and perceived. Yet there is, perhaps, an even more basic sense in which this is so: for we could also say that a character (for instance, as represented in a literary character) is an invitation to inhabit a subject position – or an object position – imaginatively, to share in the thought experiment of seeing the world as another (real or fictitious) entity sees, and experience the difference between the two subjectivities (one lived, the other imagined, represented). Canadian artist Geoffrey Farmer regularly explores the spatial dimensions of such acts of subjective sharing. For his piece *Ghost Face*, for instance (shown as part of his 2008 solo exhibition at the Musée d’Art Contemporain de Montréal), Farmer constructed a column very similar to, but slightly out of line with, the columns already in the museum (Figure 7). Farmer’s column was hollow on one side, and contained a stepping stool placed as if to aid someone in peering out of two eyeholes, which were cut out of the front of the column. With this piece, Farmer invited visitors to imagine, on the one hand, “wearing” a column, disguising oneself within it – becoming, with the column, one hybrid fictitious character. On the other hand, this piece enacted an invitation to “see” the world as a column would – and to inhabit all the contradictions that come along with this. How does one become an object, anyway – when such an empathetic act is likely to end in an act of anthropomorphism? Farmer’s work acts as an invitation to enter into a relation between several viewpoints on the same scene, as “seen” from the

perspective of the column (which can only be imagined by humans, and rendered subject to a certain base-line anthropomorphism): a relation between the column; the person inhabiting the column, wearing it like clothing or like a disguise; and any onlookers, who might imagine an amalgamation of the two – or who, conversely, might see simply a hollowing-out of the column form, a subtractive act (two holes and a side cut out) that disguises the column as a disguise.

Farmer frequently plays with this overlapping of subject positions within the same object. This is particularly clear in his 2004 work *I thought that I could make a machine that would pierce the fabric of reality, in your world it appears as a 16th century sign* (Figure 8). A hanging shop sign depicts a photograph of an explosion on water, perhaps a high-impact crash site: a hyperbolic image of the interaction between two entities, which stands in for the perceptual conflict between the “I” and “you” of the work’s title. A later version of this piece multiplies the relations; a cut-out of the sign-form, painted green-screen green, faces an image of the crash-site sign on a television screen. If we take it that Farmer is punningly making the hanging shop-sign into a sign of signs (in the broader, semiotic sense of the term, meaning a relation between signifier and signified), then the piece layers two different models of relational encounter in the sign: the depicted crash and the clash between signifier and signified. The work’s title, then, navigates a further layer of encounter, asking viewers to consider the distances between the object “in itself”, the object as the “I” of the title sees it (implicitly the artist’s persona), and the object as the “you” of the title sees it (implicitly the viewer). Objects, in

Farmer's work, mediate between various subjective viewpoints – bear the differences between fictitious world-views inhabited by various characters.

An object's "character" changes depending on its context and the subjective lives of its perceivers. Louise Erdrich's novel *The Antelope Wife* (1988) features just such a subjective transformation of an object, staged as a narration of a wedding cake's changing character. The groom in the story happens to be a baker – and his wedding cake follows a special recipe he has been working out from memory for his entire life, ever since, as a child, he tasted an exquisite cake made by a German prisoner of war as a plea bargain for his freedom. The wedding guests gaze at the cake with great anticipation throughout the reception – until the unstable ex-husband of the bride shows up, and drunkenly declares that he has poisoned it. All of a sudden, its character changes. It becomes ominous and menacing; everyone looks at it with terror. When the ex-husband is finally removed from the premises, the groom assures everyone that he is not such a fool as would leave his own wedding cake out where it could be poisoned. Afraid but still eager, the crowd begins to eat. The cake is divine; and the baker realizes that the missing ingredient in the recipe – the elusive element he had been seeking for so many years – was fear.

Works such as Erdrich's and Farmer's are arguably comprised of many competing (and even contradictory) character-spaces. Character-space is a term I adapt from Alex Woloch's work on nineteenth-century novels. Woloch defines the character-space as "the *intersection* of an implied human personality... with the definitively circumscribed form of a narrative" (2003, p. 13). His development of character-space as an analytical method for literature

is particularly attuned to the tensions that arise from the demand for an implied human life to be adequately represented, and the narrative pressure that curtails some characters' roles and expounds on others'. While Woloch's study is attuned to human characters in novels, mine will adapt the concept of a character-space to a different purpose: studying the roles of character-spaces in artworks, on the way to an economic theory of character.

Character-spaces, in my study, can include not only the limiting pressures of narrative on the demand for equality on represented personhood; more broadly, they can also include sets of perceptual, conceptual and contextual cues that produce implied "characters" through, or in relation to, objects in an artwork. These could include implied, fictitious authors (for instance, Duchamp's fictitious personas); fictitious subjects connoted by a scene (for instance, Mark Manders' ongoing project *Self-portrait as a Building* (1986-), which uses arrangements of objects and architectural spaces to imply a fictitious author "Mark Manders"); implied figures made out of objects (for instance, the compound human/column "subject" in Farmer's *Ghost/Face*); and implied subjective viewpoints (for instance, that of Farmer's column, or the implied subjects viewing his 16th century sign).

Such artworks, I argue, are responding to a phase of semicapitalism in which character itself, as an *image-object* of essence, becomes a kind of exchange value, circulating between media platforms, jpegs, and textual descriptions. (We could say that, from the perspective of such circulations, character – as an image-object that seems to represent subjectivity, and towards which both "subjects" and "objects" tend – has in some sense *replaced* subjectivity as a primary object of interest for a number of artists.) By

experimenting with the relationships between objects, images and “characters,” inanimate materiality and the first person, the artworks I study both mobilize and dismantle the assemblages from which character’s circulations depart. In doing so, they draw attention to the heterogeneous nature of the combination of matter and the first-person status attributed to it, creating “characters” that reveal the very problem of character – as an expression of “interior” particularity that must be perceived from the outside, of private experience that, paradoxically, must be shared in order to be understood as private.

Why Character?

Analysis of phenomena similar to some of those I have described above has come under a number of banners: for instance, commodity fetishism, totemism and charisma in economic and anthropological thought; personification, prosopopoeia and persona in literature; and anthropomorphism, animism, theatricality and author-function in art history. Much in these discussions is highly relevant to what I am studying, but the term character – though necessarily broad – most precisely describes the tensions between ascribed essence and circulation, object and person, actor and narrative. That said, since I am studying a plurality of “character-functions”, I will draw from several of the aforementioned discourses, paying particular attention to the ways in which the concept of character comes up in each. I hope that my broad study of the literary histories, art-historical trajectories and current philosophical uses of character (and related terms) will begin to flesh out a rich and conflicted field, which will galvanize my discussion of the many contradictory character-functions in the artworks I

study. Since the word “character” has so many meanings, my first task is to focalize these, identifying a conceptual locus within the term's semantic range, without necessarily obliterating the possibility that other senses of the term could come into play in my argument as well.

In our time, the most common uses of the term character tend to be thoroughly entrenched within a human frame of reference. By character, we often mean fictitious personages in stories, books and films. In another sense, character might mean the mental and ethical makeup of a person – as in, for instance, a “character-building” exercise, or the demand that a politician be of “good character.” Yet in etymological terms, these are amongst the later senses of the word; it was not until the mid-seventeenth century, for instance, that the term connoted a fictitious personage. One of the first propositions of my study is that we de-familiarize the term, shift the focus to some of character’s earlier etymological senses: as a graphic mark or engraved symbol, and, somewhat later (by metaphorical extension), as defining quality. In these earlier senses, character cuts through readymade distinctions between subjects and objects, people and things. Whether of a surface that has accrued scratches, stains and other signs of use over the years, or of a person who has developed a set of habits over decades, character speaks to an intuitive sense – often felt in a split second – of the singularity of an object or person’s “lifespan:” its essence, its sense of having been formed, its propensities. In a similar way, objects bear the imprint of their having been made or formed, their use over time, and their potential activity in the future. Their “character” is bound up with the perception and intimation of the particularity and potential they bear.

For things as for humans, the ongoing process of acquiring “character” often involves playing a role, being *useful* within a given milieu. Nietzsche (1974, p. 302) remarks that when someone has worked the same job for several years, he in effect *becomes* the character he once merely played. What began as the performance of a typified role (which could be turned on or off at will) has become permanence; a worldview inscribed in the individual according to his/her role within an economy of labour. William James’ writing on habit contains a similar expression of the processes through which workers become “set” in their ways through repeated acts of work. By the age of thirty, he declares, professional mannerisms set like plaster into the very being of their bearers: doctors think and act like doctors, salesmen take on the outlooks, skills and prejudices of salesmen, and so on (2001, p. 10-11). Yet in the current economic climate – in which permanent jobs are much harder to come by – the narrative economy of characterization through work becomes, perhaps, even more palpable, due to its absence or dysfunction. In his critique of the increase in short-term, contract-based employment of an increasingly mobile work force in the 1990s, *The Corrosion of Character* (1998), Richard Sennett argues that precarious working conditions deprive employees both of benefits such as health coverage, and of a means to narrate their lives effectively to others. The constantly mobile worker finds herself with no solid basis through which she might convey her identity to those around her.¹⁰ Inclusion within (or exclusion from) a labour economy (and a social milieu largely understood in relation to labour) involves complex processes of

¹⁰ Sennett’s book was written before online social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Linked In took off, perhaps more than making up for this deficit in self-narration. Nonetheless, in light of Sennett’s work, we might think of these more recent developments in social media – which palpably circulate “character” – as responses to a crisis of self-narration.

characterization: both internalizing a limited worldview and set of habits, and becoming legible to others within a given economy.

Character, as I am describing it here, cannot exist *as character* on its own. It is an *image* of identity – an essence that can only ever be conceptualized in relation to existing epistemic frameworks, and that must be observed at a distance from its bearer, accruing according to an ever-shifting assemblage of signs (actions, gestures, sounds, feelings, a sense of attitude or disposition, moral stances, various visual cues) observed in a moment or over a period of time. Like the graphic symbol engraved in a surface, character is “read,” interpreted by someone (or possibly something) else in a complex – but sometimes deceptively quick – act of perception. Such acts of perception are, of course, rife with preconceptions. Indeed, the role of such preconceptions – largely attached to visual cues – is an important aspect of the study racism, sexism and classism.¹¹ The perception of “character” can all too easily act as the naturalized locus for racism, classism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia. Thus, while these more “classic” forms of identity-based prejudice and bias are only part of the story of identity in the age of big data (when minute and increasingly particular measurements of one’s individual “character” can be made and put to use, alongside reified identificatory categories), they remain stubbornly present, as we will see in later chapters. (For instance, as Annie McClanahan [2014] argues, FICO® credit scores aim to quantify concepts of “creditworthiness” as a character trait, and thus to eliminate racist, sexist and ageist lending practices. Instead,

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion of the significance of this point for recent art, see Jennifer A. Gonzalez’ discussion of the epidermalization of race (a concept she gleans from Frantz Fanon) as it relates to the work of contemporary installation artists interrogating the formation of race in the United States. (2008)

however, they tend to merely launder these biases; for instance, people of colour and the elderly routinely receive lower credit scores than their similarly qualified white, non-elderly counterparts.) Given these complexities, it is important to de-naturalize character-spaces, de-familiarize them – unpick their relational complexities and stretch them to the point of collapse.

As Graham Harman (2007, p. 135) notes, it is very difficult for people to perceive themselves as characters, since each person experiences the surplus of their own subjectivity over that of all other beings. We experience the vast indeterminacy of our own interior lives, the extent of our inner freedom, far more fully than we do others' – although we entertain the empathetic sense that the interior lives of other people, animals, and even objects could be just as complex as our own.¹² When we perceive someone as “such a character,” Harman notes, we are more attuned to the *mechanism* in her being than to this unbridled, first-person feeling of inner freedom (2007, p. 130). We perceive the way in which habit has crept in, perhaps unbeknownst to its bearer, reducing the scope of her actions and expressions to a smaller palette of possibilities.¹³ To be perceived as having “character” in the sense emphasized above, then, is to be perceived from the outside as being *less* than this primordial interior complexity. Yet at the same time, it is to

¹² Harman refrains from subjecting such observations to historical or epistemic analysis; he also tends to construct his discourse from a universal (and arguably, implicitly white and male) perspective. Of course, Harman's interest is ontological, and not epistemological; and he aims to go against what he views as the post-structuralist over-emphasis on the correlation between ontology and human perception.

¹³ William James also wrote compellingly on habit in materialist terms in his *Psychology: The Briefer Course* (2001). As he points out, just like a piece of paper that has already been folded will fold more easily a second time along the same crease, so habit economizes activity, creating a neural shortcut. As we age, according to James, it becomes harder and harder to change such habits. In a literary sense, Harman's observation of the reductiveness of character (as compared with a more expansive sense of interior indeterminacy) corresponds with Alex Woloch's observation that character navigates the dual demands of internal complexity and narrative economy in *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (2003).

be perceived such that the observer has a sense that there is a greater interior life – a greater indeterminacy – than can be comprehended from the very outside from which the perception of character *must* be staged. In this sense, character indicates a zone of indeterminacy in perceiving objects and people – a sense in which an observer both reduces an object to the signs of its singularity, and senses the limitations of that very reduction.¹⁴ A character is, in short, the concept of interiority, paradoxically, perceived from an outside – an outside from which it can never actually be experienced.¹⁵

Character, as I am describing it, must bring together an object and at least one perceiving subject. Ironically, we could say that the subject of character is in fact the person or entity *perceiving* another's character – not the person or object perceived. The object of character, conversely, would be the entity to which character is attributed. We could even say that character is an *objective* property. In their book *Objectivity* (2007), American historians of science Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison show that when the terms “objective” and “subjective” emerged in English from the Latin *obiectivus/subiectivus* in the fourteenth century, they had exactly the opposite

¹⁴ While it may seem more intuitive to think of the first person in terms of people and other animals, it is by no means unknown to the history of philosophy to imagine such first-person experiences of interior complexity such that it cuts across the distinctions between subjects and objects, people and things. (For instance, in the early 1890s, Charles Sanders Peirce wrote: “Viewing a thing from the outside, considering its relations of action and reaction with other things, it appears as matter. Viewing it from the inside, looking at its immediate character as feeling, it appears as consciousness” (2000, p. 353).

¹⁵ I should briefly note that, until recently, and particularly in poststructuralist thought, a reliance on the distinction between interiority and exteriority was often considered rather backward and/or conservative. For instance, in their introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus* (2004, p. 10), Deleuze and Guattari associate a novelistic concern with the interiority of subjects and substances with both romanticism and the State apparatus. However, I would argue that among the tendencies that characterize some important developments in recent thought (via the work of Graham Harman, Robin MacKay and Reza Negarestani, among others) is one that would reinstate the importance of the interior/exterior divide. For instance, MacKay's writings on geotrauma (2012) make extensive use of the interior/exterior divide, by emphasizing how entities are formed through being cut off from others – as in the core of the earth's burning immanence with the sun.

meanings from the ones they hold today: “Objective’ referred to things as they are presented to consciousness, whereas ‘subjective’ referred to things in themselves” (2007, p. 29). The terms fell into disuse in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By means of a reinterpretation by Kant and those influenced by him (including Fichte, Schelling and Coleridge), by 1850 the terms had shifted 180 degrees to encapsulate the meanings they now hold (2007, p. 30-31). According to the older sense of the term “objective” (which much more astutely speaks to the dynamics of character as I am framing them here), character is an inherently objective property that tenuously unites two subjective entities: that of the perceiver and that of the perceived object. The image, which Daston and Galison’s work affords, of an objective property uniting two subjective entities complements the object oriented ontology outlined above. The concept of character speaks to the glimpse at an unseen “truth” about a subject – her “real” personhood, which can never be fully known. Yet in spite of this sense of glimpsing a truth, character traits – as when, for instance, we perceive someone as “such a character” – are in fact objective not because they directly refer to a “real” truth about a person, but because they instantiate a conceptual and perceptual meeting point between two subjective stances.

Of course, if I use the terms “subject” and “object”, there are two kinds of distinctions that seem likely to be confused: that between those who act and those who are acted upon (in the grammatical sense), and that between human subjects and things. When I describe characters as “objects,” I emphatically wish to stress the first kind of distinction and not the second. Character is an object, primarily, of perception and conceptualization –

whether by a human, another entity, or a computational mechanism, such as an online algorithm that attributes identity to users. As Graham Harman (2012) points out, a perceiving subject need not necessarily be human. Just as a patient becomes a medical object of examination for a doctor (thus being reduced to a certain set of qualities relevant for their interaction), so sunlight drastically reduces the newspaper it shines through, only taking stock of the qualities relevant for the interaction at hand. (In one of the relatively few art practices to invoke non-human perception without deferring to a globalized conception of a “cosmic address”, the American art/research/design collective spurse grew bacterial cultures derived from swabs taken from all over the Indianapolis Museum of Art, as part of a thought experiment designed to consider the museum outside of a human perceptual purview. What would it mean, this piece asks, to consider the museum from the perspective of its resident bacteria? What could the concept of a museum be to them?¹⁶) Of course, the situation might be, in some ways, more complex with a human perceiving subject, who will be influenced by various epistemic imprints, discursive frames and sign systems – though these may not be entirely foreign to other organisms, as the field of biosemiotics attests. Yet the difference between the sun as a “perceiving subject” and a human perceiving subject, in Harman’s view, is ultimately one of degree, not of kind. That said, the mechanisms I am describing work somewhat differently on human and

¹⁶ spurse, “Sub-Mergings”, 2006. For this eight-month project, spurse analyzed the Indianapolis Museum of Art and its grounds from a microbiological perspective. They describe their rationale for the project as follows: “*Sub-Mergings* began with a simple observation: human beings are over 90% bacteria. What does it mean then to think of ourselves as “self-reliant” individuals? Our non-human composition would suggest that we are not individuals but ecosystems of many differing creatures and logics” (2006).

thingly objects. To help define these more clearly, I will differentiate between two different poles on two different axes of object-character.

The first axis encompasses the distinction between what, following Vivian Sobchack, we could call *subjective objects* and *objective subjects*. Sobchack (2004, p. 288-290) uses these terms to describe the sense in which the same entity can move through both object and subject status, as it experiences different degrees of agency in various situations. First Nations American artist James Luna, lying motionless in a glass vitrine in his piece *The Artifact Piece* (1987, Figure 9), becomes a subjective object, a focal point for a museological gaze who is still, nonetheless, imbued with a complex range of subjective feelings and sensations. Likewise, an object can easily become subjectivized, as when, for instance, Geoffrey Farmer displays everyday objects emitting audio-recorded voices on a large, low plinth (2005-2008). Sobchack grounds her investigation of these terms within a Merleau-Pontian vocabulary of the flesh, for which I do not wish to stake a claim here. (Like Merleau-Ponty, Sobchack retains the somewhat anthropocentric perspective of much phenomenology.) Nonetheless, her distinction is useful for my study in that it helps me articulate an important, common sense distinction between human and thingly object-characters. While human object-characters tend to seem *reduced* in their qualities and in their level of agency within a given situation, for thingly object-characters the situation is somewhat more complex. There is still this sense of reduction – for I may not know, say, a tool or toy outside of my ability to use it, or a sign beyond my ability to read it. However, when, say, Thomas the Tank Engine smiles at me, this reduction is layered with animation: an often anthropocentric *upgrading* of the object

toward an (often anthropomorphized) subject status. (That said, the relationships between this ostensible “upgrading” and anthropomorphism are complex indeed – I will say more on this in my section on animism below.) With thingly object-characters, animation and reduction are often complexly intertwined.

Sobchack’s uses of the concept “subjective object” calls into mind another recent – and perhaps more extreme – discourse, which I will call a discourse of becoming object. Hito Steyerl (whose work I described above) draws from Mario Perniola’s book *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic* (2004), in which he describes a kind of sexuality that entirely leaves behind the organic cycles of birth and death, climax and release – one becomes an object, becomes clothing.¹⁷ Sobchack’s objective subjects are often described as victims, their agency reduced (often horrifically) by another subject or event; despite depicting a crossover between “objective” and “subjective” states of experience, she writes from the assumption that subjectivity holds some emancipatory potential. Steyerl and Perniola, on the other hand, envision a thing-like state (in images as in sexuality) entirely removed from the rhythms and struggles of subjecthood.¹⁸

¹⁷ This is the kind of sexuality Perniola sees in Burroughs’ writings (in which the use of drugs initiates a move away from organic, bodily cycles), or in Kant’s treatise on marriage. Kant distinguishes between the noumenal sense of a person’s being a thing “in itself” and the phenomenal sense of its appearing as an object for others. What is striking, for Perniola, is that Kant’s moral imperative is based at the noumenal and not the phenomenal level; it is fully based on the “thingness” of the body for itself, and not on a subject or an object. (2004, p. 37-38).

¹⁸ Though I do not have space to develop it fully here, another fascinating description of the complex relationships between “I” and “it” comes from Leo Bersani. Bersani (2006, p. 212) points out that many misunderstandings of Freudian psychoanalysis would be avoided if the name of the *id* (which is James Strachey’s Latinized translation of what Freud wrote of as “*das Es*,” which means “the It” in German) were simply translated into English as “the It”. This term, he argues would give a far more adequate sense of what Freud meant to depict: the unconscious as something thing-like, before characterization and before consciousness, filled with sexual desires but also with vast reservoirs of possibility.

If the first axis of distinctions I pointed out was that between objective subjects and subjective objects (even though I leave open the possibility that some objects could be without subject, in Steyerl and Perniola's sense), the second axis encompasses the distinction between the perception of interiority-for-itself and interiority for something or someone else. If I observe, say, a lava lamp, I might perceive its "character", an "attitude" or style of expression it exudes. If I display the lamp prominently in my flat along with several other knickknacks, together they might convey something of *my* interiority, my self-expression and tastes. Further, if the lamp is placed on a shelf as part of a sculpture, such as Haim Steinbach's *Ultra-Red no. 2* (1986), it becomes part of a complex expression, which reflexively evokes these tropes of self-expression as economic (self-)expressions through the objects available to be bought or made in a given milieu of circulation and exchange (this is part of the conceptual legacy of still-life painting). These latter senses are, of course, inextricably intertwined with the rise of commodity culture over the past several centuries, from the increasingly personalized use of interior décor in the eighteenth century to the increased promotion of products as personal expressions of the "liberated" individual in the 1960s (Curtis, 2002). A narrative and/or artistic milieu might provoke a complex interaction between an object's "own" character, and a mobilization of the object as a sign of someone/something else's, against a backdrop of economic valuation. An object-character can bear the *use-value* of "interior" expression for another, even as its character is an economic value in and of itself – an expression of the very circulation of traits and characteristics.

While character in the sense I am using it has a great deal to do with narrative, since I am emphasizing the earlier etymological senses of the term over the later ones, it is not so fully caught up with narration as others' uses of the term might be. In fact, we could say that an intimation of interiority-in-itself, or, to use Graham Harman's phraseology yet again, a sense of the object as that which withdraws from all relation, is, paradoxically, the profoundly anti-narrative kernel around which narrativity organizes itself. It extends itself in the medium of narration but also seems to subsist in spite of narration. Object-characters mediate between narrative time and a temporality that resists narration, and exceeds the plots within which it resides.

Literary Histories of Object-Characters

Even within literary theory and criticism, character is only recently returning to favour as an object of study, after having been equated both with realist stylistic biases and with humanist ideology for several decades. As Rita Felski notes in her introduction to *New Literary History's* 2011 special issue on character (its first devoted to the topic since 1974), there has been a revitalization of character as an object of study over the last decade. While contributors to the 1974 *NLH* issue seemed convinced that character was an anachronistic concept which could do little to produce new thought (as in Cixous' "The Character of Character," 1974), the 2011 contributors shared a conviction that character could disclose, and not merely disguise, subtle nuances of historical changes in personhood (Felski, 2011, p. v). Indeed, while certain concepts of character might house moralistic assumptions or conservative expectations of consistent behaviour, to study character is often

to find breaking points, inconsistencies in such expectations – ways in which character breaks “out of character”. Sara Ahmed’s contribution to the recent *NLH* issue on character (cited above) epitomizes this new, more nuanced (and perhaps more ambivalent) approach. “An idea of character,” she writes, “is an idea of consistency” (2011, p. 231). Such expectations of consistency can easily generate their own object, as when a person’s behaviour doesn’t quite match, say, a friend’s previous experiences of him, and is thus dismissed as “out of character.” The distinction between a person’s “in character” and “out-of-character” behaviour might have more to do with an observer’s preconceptions and desires than it has to do with the person whose “character” is being judged. A character, for Ahmed, is only ever experienced in profile (profile being Husserl’s term for that which we can perceive of an object from a particular viewpoint). This does not mean that we perceive profiles *of* characters; rather, “profile is what characters are composed of” (2011, p. 233). Character itself, for Ahmed, is a “system for creating distinctions between things,” for creating truth about them (p. 232). Ahmed examines “problem characters” in George Eliot novels, arguing that willfulness – a particularly problematic character trait for many child-rearing pedagogies – acts as both a character trait and a trait that breaks “out of character,” reclaiming non-normative modes of living and “perform[ing] a disagreement with the very judgment of being wilful... a disagreement that will not be visible to the one who judges... Willfulness thus resists the system of characterization even when it appears to fulfil its dreams” (p. 250).¹⁹ Ahmed’s

¹⁹ In a similar vein, Omri Moses’ study of the works of T.S. Eliot, Henry James and Gertrude Stein (2005) examines the ways in which these authors call into question the prevalent presupposition that a character’s moral integrity must be coupled with consistency of behaviour.

approach highlights the performative aspects of character – the ways in which attributions of character can create the very normative understandings and expectations of consistency to which they refer. Paradoxically, she also, arguably, slightly over-systematizes character. Her description of “character” itself as a system seems to imply a generalized attribution of ideological force lurking “behind” a field of specific performative acts and discursive histories, rather than a fragmented and frayed terrain of negotiations between objects and their various perceivers’ preconceptions. Her work combines the suspicion of the ideological functions of character that prevailed in 1970s literary studies with an interest in examining just how such ideological moulds can be made to break out of their bounds.

Since my use of the term character does not align perfectly with the most common-sense literary use of the term (as fictitious personage), I am particularly interested in some recent literary scholarship that explicitly theorizes the relationships between characters and their economic underpinnings – topics that, though they may begin in literary terms, tend toward the economic. In her renowned 1998 book *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (1998), Deidre Shauna Lynch provides a social constructionist account of the rise of the character – understood in the now-familiar sense of a represented human, interior life – in eighteenth century British literature. She points out that the common criteria through which we tend to evaluate fictional characters now – as “round” or “flat” – are not nearly so natural as they may seem to contemporary readers; in fact, they were not instated as criteria for understanding character until the last two decades of the eighteenth century.

While it is something of a truism in literary studies to associate the rise of highly particularized, unpredictable, interior characters with the “rise of individualism,” in Lynch’s view, this is a tautological construction which does little to explain how eighteenth century readers actually *used* the characters they spent so much time with. She sidelines the popular conception of characters as representations, in order to look at the oft-overlooked sense of characters as things in the world – things to which readers ascribe use. To emphasize these aspects of the rise of character, for Lynch, is to draw attention to the sense in which characters are subject to a “political economy of truth” (1998, p. 3) in the Foucauldian sense of an ever-changing set of techniques and procedures for navigating that which can be considered true in a given place and time, and the cultural practices set in place for ascribing truth to certain things and not others.

One of Lynch’s targets is a certain ahistorical conception of character, exemplified by the literary critic Ian Watt and his followers. Watt’s 1957 book *Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* helped to establish a narrative of characterization according to which it evolved only with respect to the development of its own internal logic. According to this critical narrative, characterization develops through a dialectical conflict between the internal and external demands of character, which were finally resolved in Jane Austen. For Lynch, this account falsely suggests that the development of characterization was somehow sealed off from the material contingencies of the societies in which it occurred. Thus, she explores the complex, often material and emphatically trans-media history of character as it relates to the rapid rise of commodity culture. She argues that “people used

characters... to renegotiate social relations in their changed, commercialized world, to derive new kinds of pleasure from the changes, to render their property truly private, to cope with the embarrassment of riches. A new 'world of moving objects' was one in which new forms for imagining and enforcing social division were requisite" (1998, p. 4-5). In an era of such massive changes to the material practices prevalent in British culture – when imports increased exponentially, interior spaces became vastly more “personalized” with knickknacks and trinkets, and practices of reading and writing themselves became commodified, readers, Lynch argues, used characters as a kind of social technology, a means through which to learn both how to personalize themselves within a newly commodified culture, and through which to navigate the ironies of enacting self-actualization within a market culture which introduced the unprecedented regularity of exchange value into social life.

Lynch seeks to de-familiarize and historicize many realist assumptions about character, by attesting to the many and varied ways in which characters were understood at various points in the eighteenth century. In the first half of the century, there was practically no talk of the individualization or interior lives of characters; in fact, literary “characters” referred to letters and typefaces as much as they did to fictitious persons in books. Mid-century books such as Thomas Bridges' 1770 *The Adventures of a Bank Note* demonstrate that objects such as bank notes could serve as protagonists, their easy travels from one locale to another paralleling those of the “characterless” gentleman of stories from the same period, whose person was devoid of particularity precisely because he was so well-travelled. In the late

Georgian and Regency periods, a new romantic conception of character began to take shape, and the character's inner life took on a new importance. Finally, after 1770, characterization's meaning became cemented as the representation of subjectivity. Not only did social constructions of character radically change throughout the century; the aesthetic criteria through which they were evaluated also evolved. In the middle of the century, a character was not so much round or flat as he was subject to a “discursive economy” (1998, p. 10), wrought in as few descriptive strokes as were required for him to fulfil his narrative function. (An overly individuated character was considered grotesque.) Lynch aims to account for the historicity of the personal without recourse to the modern concept of identification, which in her view blurs important distinctions between a reader's empathy with what a character *is* and what he or she *does*.

If one of Lynch's targets is the ahistorical criticism of Ian Watt and his followers, which tends to radically disassociate character from material contingency, history and function, another of her targets is structuralist criticism, which denigrated the ostensibly humanist underpinnings of the realist character as a “presence” that seemed to exceed, surpass or underlie a text. By dismissing character's seeming underlying presence – its sense of *being* – as a humanist illusion, the structuralists missed opportunities to explore what, in fact, that sense of presence actually *did* for readers (for instance, throughout the mid-eighteenth century, Lynch argues, it became more and more apparent that characters' sense of being could “train the reader in sympathizing and so in participating in a social world that was being reconceived as a transactional space, as a space that held together through

the circulation of fellow feeling”) (1998, p. 89). Much as it tried to attack the ideological underpinnings of the notion that character exceeded its textual representations, structuralism failed to come up with terms specific enough to carry out this criticism effectively, tending to rely on general concepts such as “capitalism,” “the novel,” and “the subject.” Thus the targets of their critique tended to be insufficiently situated, seeming to emanate from a generalized unconscious. Without intending to, many structuralist critics performed the very essentialism and ahistoricism that they meant to critique. They also tended to glamorize unconventional texts that seemed to radically subvert the generic conventions of character, rather than doing the much harder work of understanding how a text might negotiate existing conventions. In this way, in Lynch’s view, they reinforced the very individualism that they meant to critique.²⁰

Lynch consistently emphasizes the thing-like status of characters, “their quality of being at once 'out there' and 'other-than-us,' the way that, like the commodities in *Capital*, they seem more autonomous, memorable, and real than their makers” (1998, p. 18). (This comes is extremely close to what I am calling the character as image-object in our contemporary moment.) It is this convergence between character and thingly qualities, I argue, which both points to the relevance of literary studies of character for art-historical studies of sculpture and other object-based contemporary art, and isolates an important socio-economic problem in that, within the current episteme at least,

²⁰ While Lynch might be quite right to criticize the structuralists for their reliance on generalized critical terms such as “capitalism,” she too seems to come into some difficulty here: for there appears to be a tension in her work between a more generalized argument about how characters relate to an economic base (the rise of market culture), and a far more specific account of how particular commodities and cultural practices of reading relate to characters (which, as she rightly points out, do not have an autonomous history).

we cannot help but “characterize” objects, developing complex, sensory relationships to their surplus value.²¹

Like Lynch and others, Alex Woloch (2003) addresses the aversion with which many structuralist literary theorists have responded to character over the years; but he also addresses the counter-criticisms of this “anti-humanist” stance. Woloch compares these two positions: a formalist one that declares character to be an ideological, illusory, or even bourgeois construct; and a referential one that questions the simple conflation of narrative constructs with social categories and argues, instead, for the validity of implied persons in literature. He finds them equally convincing, but also too co-dependent, each vehemently opposing a caricatured version of the other. This critical impasse arises because these two positions, together, represent the dialectical tension between formalism and referentiality that characterizes the literary process itself. Thus, Woloch’s groundbreaking study *The One vs. The Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* aims to recast this theoretical impasse as a literary process (2003, p. 17). According to his view, minor characters, as implied persons who are given very little share of narrative attention, bring into focus the inherent tensions between the demands of (implied) personhood and the uneven attentions administered by narrative space. Characters must compete for space within narratives; they are subject to a “flux of attention and neglect” (p. 2). Given that narratives are full of uneven matches and inequalities – the narrative form

²¹ Another writer who has studied the importance of objects in literature is Bill Brown, who has been widely read for his work in “thing theory”. His book *A Sense of Things: the Object Matter of American Literature* (2004), examines the ways in which turn-of-the-century American writers questioned the roles that things played in shaping national culture, and organizing their users’ anxieties and affections.

amplifies the proportions of analogous real-life disparities (p. 8) – Woloch claims that “minor characters are the proletariat of the novel” (p. 27). The realist novel, so intensely class-conscious, explores class disparities through the narrative tensions between minor and major characters. To develop an analytical method that accounts for the competition of major and minor characters – and the tensions between implied personhood and textual space – Woloch analyzes nineteenth-century novels in relation to character-space (“the *intersection* of an implied human personality... with the definitively circumscribed form of a narrative”) (p. 13) and character-systems (“the arrangement of multiple and differentiate character-spaces... into a unified narrative structure”) (p. 14). He examines the “distributional pressures” (p. 13) that inform various scene, and identifies two kinds of minorhood in the novel (p. 25): that of the worker (who is reduced to a functional use within the narrative), and that of the eccentric (who is reduced to a fragmentary, oppositional role). In the realist novel, whose achievements include both depth psychology *and* social expansiveness (p. 19), a study of the interplay and overlap of character-spaces can powerfully lend voice to the tensions between the achievement of individual depth (an ideal of humanism) and its uneven distribution in both social space and narrative space (viewed as a character-system). These uneven distributions lend voice to the irony that any humanist subject “could” be fully rendered – could become the main character – but few, in fact, are. Woloch, arguably, focuses too exclusively on human characters in his study, rather than allowing a wider range of actors, including objects, to come into his analysis.²² Nonetheless, could his methods be

²² Woloch’s extreme focalization on human characters becomes particularly clear in his

extended to include the distribution of various descriptions of objects throughout a novel's narrative, or even the character-spaces of data analytic surveillance apparatuses? In future chapters, I attempt to account for images of the economy in art and literature, as well as conceptions of "creditworthiness" in the surveillant scenarios of contemporary finance, along just these lines, pointing to the uneven distributions of attribution in contemporary characterization spaces.

While the term "character" has played its most prominent (though often contested) roles in literary theory, the term comes into play in several other contemporary discourses, many of which are quite helpful in conceptualizing the relationship between character and object-ness. Although my summation of these will necessarily be quite incomplete, a brief look at recent scholarship in Actor-Network Theory, Speculative Realism, and animism will demonstrate the significance of "character" in conceptualizing recent theoretical, philosophical, political approaches to objects.

Actor-Network Theory and Speculative Realism

In some senses, the term "actor", as Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) uses it, functions similarly to the ways in which I use the term "character". By actor, Latour means both human and non-human actants (technologies, animals, countries, trousers, etc.) that, together, form a

reading of Roland Barthes' "Reality Effect" (1986). Barthes argues that it is impossible to know when to curtail particularity in a text – whether to stop describing a scene "here" or "there", since every scene is inexhaustible to discourse. Woloch reinterprets this point, arguing that "the realist novel is structurally destabilized not by too many details or colours or corners, but by *too many people*" (2003, p. 19). By writing colours and corners "out of the scene" of his character-spaces, Woloch misses opportunities to examine the material world depicted in novels. He does this for a number of reasons: to close the parameters of his study around accepted boundaries, to focus on class, and because of an investment his study maintains in the tensions between an abstracted notion of human right and particular social disparities.

relational network, according to which they take their shape. In *Reassembling the Social* (2005), Latour lays out the fundamental principles of ANT – a mode of sociological thought that seeks to undo many of the fundamental assumptions of what he describes as the “sociology of the social.” The latter is a “mainstream” sociology – epitomized by the work of Emile Durkheim – that propagates the assumption that “the social” is a sort of “substance” that binds people together, that “social ties” are somehow different in kind from the myriad relations between actors, that “social factors” operate “behind” the facades of everyday interactions, that said social factors “cause” phenomena such as the domination of one group of people over another, and that “social” life is comprised of human-to-human relations and does not need to take objects or technologies into account. He argues for a more arduous route that meticulously follows the networks through which the actors themselves (both human and non-human) produce associations.²³ Latour argues that both large and small “agents” require figuration – so that the depiction of a specific individual and that of a country *both* are abstract renderings of a sort. (In the next chapter, we will explore the complexities of figuration in more detail.)

If individual agents of all kinds are abstractions, then it is no great stretch to use fiction as a tool for understanding how such abstractions are deployed. Latour does just that in his partially fictionalized account of the development of an alternative form of public transportation in *Aramis, or the*

²³ Such a sociology (or associology as Latour quips he would have liked to call it) (2005, p. 9) involves increasing the relative share of mediators (which “transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning of the elements they are supposed to carry”) (p. 39) over intermediaries (which simply transport meaning or force without changing it); taking into account the fact that action is overtaken – or “*other-taken*” – shared between a node of actors – without jumping to the conclusion that such “other-taken-ness” can be construed as a generalized social force (p. 45); and dealing with the complexities through which agency comes to be figuratively rendered.

Love of Technology (1996). This book presents an exhaustively detailed account of the conception, research, development, and eventual demise of the Aramis train system, which was intended to provide passengers with point-to-point transportation in Paris with no stops in between. The system would have used small vehicles that were programmed by a central control system and grouped together with immaterial couplings programmed by the control system. Through conversations between fictitious characters (Professor Norbert H. and his intern, a young engineering student who narrates the story), interview excerpts with various people involved in Aramis' research and development, short theoretical and philosophical interludes, official documents, prosopopoeial passages, and quotations from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Latour painstakingly maps the tenuous relations between actors that create the shared, speculative, as-yet unrealized technological object.²⁴ *Aramis* aims to restore the subject of technology to fiction; it also comments on the necessity of developing forms of thought supported by fiction, and even of thinking of technological innovation as fiction. "By definition," he writes, "a technological project is a fiction, since at the outset it does not exist, and there is no way it can exist yet because it is in the project phase. This tautology frees the analysis of technologies from the burden that weighs on analysis of the sciences" (1996, p. 23). Following Latour, it will be useful to consider character as a tenuously shared fiction, while also, unlike Latour, drawing attention to some of the ways in which

²⁴ When it comes to producing a new technology, such shared fictions, Latour notes, are highly tenuous. If the actors agree on how Aramis performs, he notes, the project lives; if they disagree, it dies; and if they agree on a misunderstanding (as is often the case with Aramis), then the situation is very complex indeed. Eventually, the sociologist and his intern conclude that the project died because it wasn't loved enough; in other words, no one was willing to make the changes necessary for the project to become viable.

character does *not* act, retaining some separateness from its narrative milieu, from its circulations.

This emphasis on a state of non-interaction between objects brings my study somewhat closer to the Object-Oriented Ontology of Graham Harman. Harman, who was highly influenced by Latour, nonetheless criticizes the latter for tending to *reduce* objects to their relations, privileging their interactions with other actors over their being, which exceeds any interaction. (This is a tendency that Latour inherits largely from Nietzsche.) An object, for Harman, cannot be described merely in terms of its relations; in fact, the object withdraws from all relation, exceeds relation.²⁵ Robin MacKay (2012) and Reza Negarestani (2011) (thinkers who have been loosely associated with the speculative realist movement, though they would not describe themselves as speculative realists) offer yet another way to think of character as a profoundly non-human phenomenon (though they do not use the term “character” as such). Perhaps one of the most ostensibly “human” mechanisms through which the formation of “character” has come to be conceptualized – trauma – could be seen, in their terms, as mere instances of a broader phenomenon: the origin of any object in its having been cut off from another body of

²⁵ As a movement, Speculative Realism is particularly concerned with asserting the independence of objects from any human perception of them. This concern largely takes the form of a critique of correlationism: Quentin Meillassoux’s term for the belief that philosophy can only address that which falls within the correlation between objects and (human) perceptions of them. Meillassoux’s account of correlationism explicitly critiques many of the tendencies of poststructuralist thought, which, broadly speaking, tends to overlook that which exists beyond human perception (2007). Although making ontological claims is beyond both the scope and the interest of my study, it is nonetheless interesting to note that the distinction between an object “in itself” and its correlation with (human) perception closely matches the twofold sense of character I emphasize – as a speculative, shared interiority, but one perceived from an outside. It is thus no surprise that Harman uses character to illustrate some of his arguments. (As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, in *Guerilla Metaphysics*, Graham Harman discusses humour in terms of character.) He has also used literary character to analogically describe his philosophy of objects, remarking that just as a good literary character seems to exceed any actions it carries out in a given plot, so an object exceeds any given use to which it is put (Harman and Geoghegan, 2012).

material. According to this way of thinking, the earth itself – whose molten core holds record of its burning immanence with the sun – is a traumatic structure, in which the evidence of its having been cut from the sun burrows deep into its interior, rising to the surface only occasionally in the form of volcanic eruption. From the perspective of geotrauma, such an eruption is no different in kind from a momentary breakdown in a person who has experienced a traumatic event. There are several potential problems with such an account;²⁶ nonetheless, it provides a compelling depiction of “character structure” as a property of many objects, including humans.²⁷

It has often been observed that speculative realism proper, thus far, lacks an adequate account of subjectivity (Bryant, Srnicek and Harman, 2011).²⁸ However, in the work of Harman at least (in part due to Latour’s influence), it does not lack a concept of character; character, perhaps, is more useful to speculative realism in articulating a meeting point of sorts between subjectivity and objects. Yet both Harman and Latour seem to have a rather ahistorical, “common-sense” conception of literary character, rather than a historically grounded one. (This is not at all surprising, since neither are

²⁶ Elsewhere, I argue that speculative realist geophilosophy is subject to a Rancièrian critique, because one of the unintended effects of its description of the earth as a traumatic structure is to retroactively construct “the human” as a stable, all-inclusive category to which the earth is opposed. As Rancièr’s work shows, it is impossible to evoke such a broad category – such a widely applicable “we” – without glossing over several exclusions, since politics must always deal with the fact that not everyone has equal access to the powers of speech within any given “we.” Ironically, then, it is possible for geophilosophy to reinforce, rather than counteract, certain humanist assumptions (of equality, equal agency, etc.) rather than disrupting them.

²⁷ MacKay and Negarestani’s account is based on a conception of a universal continuum of matter – one that Harman does not share.

²⁸ In their summary of unresolved issues for speculative realist thought, Bryant, Srnicek and Harman (2011, p. 17) ask: “What ontological status should be granted to our everyday experience? Is there such a thing as a ‘subject’ to whom phenomena appear? Do the objects that populate phenomenal experience have an ontological role or are they merely epiphenomenal products of our particular neural circuitry?”

literary scholars, and since character, in itself, is not an object of their studies). One can learn from these thinkers' use of the term character (and related concepts, such as actor and geotrauma) to discuss objects as mediators between a withdrawal from all relation and correlative overlapping of perceptions and "essences" – while at the same time placing their insights within the more sharply focused historical contexts that literary studies can provide.

Animisms

In his study of American literature, Alan Bourassa (2009) describes a (modern) literary character's interiority as a *delay* of sorts between stimulus and response, a means through which authors introduce an aperture of unpredictability in their works in the spaces between action and reaction. Whereas a rock will react predictably when kicked, a person might react in any number of ways, according to a far broader spectrum of potential responses (2009, p. 6-7). Yet, while human literary characters indeed bring a measure of indeterminacy to texts, a rock, too, could be a "character," given a discursive economy in which its actions and "motivations" were rendered with a degree of indeterminacy. Jimmie Durham's work for the Sydney Biennale, *Still Life with Stone and Car* (2004, Figure 10), provides a rock with just such a discursive economy. In this piece, a boulder with a pleasant, docile face childishly painted on its side happily crushes a red convertible. As it does so, it assumes some of the implied complexities of character as an *animistic* relationship with objects, navigating the distances between the dead weight of objects and the agency ascribed to them, between physical action and perceived motivation, between interiority and attribution.

The term animism captures something of the perceived complexities that unite object-ness and agency, dead matter and its seeming aliveness in circulation. As Nurit Bird-David has argued, the very concept of animism, as it was elaborated by E. B. Tylor in 1871, is deeply problematic, as it was “developed... within a positivistic, spiritual/materialist dichotomy of 19th-century design in direct opposition to materialist science, in the belief (and as part of an effort to prove this belief) that only science yielded ‘true’ knowledge of the world” (1999, p. S68). Nonetheless, in her view, animisms should be re-conceptualized as relational, and not failed, epistemologies – as authoritative epistemologies (not somehow “lesser” to Western scientific belief) meant to attune the attention to “relatedness, from a related point of view, within the shifting horizons of the related viewer” (1999, p. S69).²⁹ Revising the Tylorian concept of animism, for Bird-David, involves expanding notions of personhood. In this vein, she draws on the work of Irving Hallowell, who notes that in Ojibwa ontology, personhood is not seen as a subcategory of the human. Rather, personhood is the overarching concept, and it includes “human person”, “animal person”, “wind person” and “stone person” amongst its subcategories (Bird-David, 1999, p. S71; Hallowell, 1960).³⁰ The Indian Nayaka tribe’s *devaru* (or spirits attached to certain things or places – for

²⁹ As Bird-David (1999, p. S67) quips, it is rather remarkable how consistently recognized and broadly accepted the term “animism” has been across the disciplines of anthropology, ethnology, religious studies and developmental psychology, in much the same form as it assumed in E.B. Tylor’s initial development of the concept in 1871. This persistence is especially puzzling given how problematic many of Tylor’s assumptions were. He relied on second-hand accounts of so-called “primitive” peoples, which he characterized, quite problematically, as childish. He relied on modern, positivistic conceptions of “nature,” “life,” and “personhood”, which caused him to “prejudge the attribution of ‘personhood’ to natural objects as empirically unfounded” (1999, p. S68). Bird-David posits that the term animism should indeed be revisited and updated, in order to avoid a problem in which, as various discourses leave the term in more or less its original form, they collectively reaffirm Tylor’s assumptions as “real”, thus perpetuating a derogatory gloss on supposedly “primitive” beliefs.

³⁰ Bird-David builds on Hallowell’s observation, arguing that “the idea of ‘person’ as a ‘mental representation’ applied to the world in pursuit of knowledge is modernist” (1999, p. S73).

instance, a hill *devaru*), are not individual persons (in the Western, modernist sense) but *dividual* persons, persons “constitutive of relationships” (1999, p. S72); they objectify the Nayaka relationship with a given hill or stone.³¹ My use of the term character is closely related to Bird-David’s view of dividual personhood, in that it is attributed to things and people alike, and distributes relational properties across persons.³² Character is a perceptual technology for attributing “personhood” (in Hallowell and Bird-David’s expanded sense) to familiar things and people. As such, it cannot be merely a medium for the conservative, and even coercive experiences of attribution to which Sara Ahmed refers – even though, in the age of big data, such coercive attributions of personhood often come to the fore. Yet taken more broadly, the ability to attribute character to people and things might, in certain circumstances, enable a collective representation of relatedness and continually re-composed assemblages of agency binding subjects and objects, people and things.

³¹ Bird-David’s observations and theorizations of dividual personhood are, of course, rendered such that they are specific to the Nayaka tribe that she studies. That said, they are not entirely dissimilar to certain minor conceptions of selfhood in modern thought (for instance, William James’ radical empiricist view of the Me, in which possessions literally constitute part of the self). James (2001, p. 44) writes, “In its widest possible sense... a man’s Me is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank account.” James’ radical empiricism seems to bear some resemblance to Bird-David’s account of the Nayaka’s relational epistemology. That said, what obviously differs in these two accounts is that the *devaru* are of the objects/people to which the Nayaka relate; James’ objects, on the other hand, are incorporated into the Me.

³² Relational epistemology has, arguably, become increasingly urgently needed in the so-called “West” of late. Bruno Latour (2010) embarks on a similar defense of animism but expands Bird-David’s claim, arguing for the urgent importance of “animistic” thinking for contemporary scientific and political debates – and particularly environmentalist ones. While many environmentalists have been crippled by accusations of anthropomorphism if they attribute any form of agency to plants, animals, carbon dioxide, the ecosystem or (worst of all) Gaia (as in James Lovelock’s oft-ridiculed Gaia hypothesis), what should seem far more striking, for Latour, is the invention of an *inanimate* materialism. *Inanimism* – the belief that somehow material actors can possess no agency of their own, can merely take an initial cause one step further – is the strange invention. Although it has been the more “animistic” thinkers (such as Lovelock) who have been accused of anthropocentrism, inanimism is in fact the most anthropocentric world view of all: for it imagines a world in which human agency goes unchecked by the agency of other materials and things (Latour, 2010, p. 481-483).

How can one reconsider the histories of attributing consciousness to objects in art and modern society, without merely replicating the ethnocentric biases of previous generations of anthropologists? Isabelle Stengers' essay for *e-flux* (2012) powerfully articulates this problem as a potential: animism's potential to profoundly question how one positions oneself (as an academic, artist, or scientist) in relation to the knowledge and beliefs one conveys. How, she asks, can we speak of animism without either reducing it to another academic field over which we can claim a transcendent authority, or simply upholding it as a more "correct" or "interesting" belief, thereby reinforcing the dichotomy between rationality and irrationality but merely valuing the latter over the former?

To tackle these questions, Stengers invokes the Deleuzian call to "think by the milieu" – to refuse to consider a phenomenon apart from its milieu. (According to this call, for instance, one would not analyze the Virgin Mary according to scientific criteria, since the figure of the Virgin Mary works for worshippers according to a very different milieu from those which propagate scientific thought.) However, even this move is not enough – for to acknowledge the situated-ness of, say, the Virgin Mary within a specific milieu is still to leave dichotomies between, say, nature and the supernatural completely intact.³³ In order to address this problem, Stengers proposes viewing writing – and other forms of agency – as animistic, in that writing

³³ Stengers remarks that even André Breton's attempt to take magnetism out of the hands of scientists and physicians, proposing that it should be understood according to automatic trances in the milieu of art, was more an appropriative gesture than a transformative one, as he simply proposed that art, rather than science, was supreme.

transforms the writer.³⁴ However, even this move could reassure us too readily – for it is easy enough to cite a philosopher’s concept, to view the assemblage as simply an idea among others – one that does not profoundly question the position from which one speaks. Stengers suggests reclaiming animism as a specific, heterogeneous practice rather than a general one – a word that helps us to become situated within specific assemblages.³⁵

Indeed, there is an “animistic” sensibility seeping into various art historical discourses; for instance, W.J.T. Mitchell’s book *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (2005) freely attributes desire to pictures, images and sculptures. He refers to images as surplus value, but also as species, with pictures as their organisms. He argues that, although art history has long since been uncomfortable with such attributions of agency to images (since they vastly diminish the scope of the artist’s agency, making the latter merely a host), it is common sense to attribute agency, vitality and even fertility to images. Even a phrase often used in the advertising industry – “does it have legs?” – intimates that the images produced, if they are good enough, will have a life of their own. Mitchell’s writing, along with Stengers’, expresses a pressing need to re-examine the means through which objects’

³⁴ This, again, follows the Deleuze-Guattarian idea of the assemblage, positing that agency is not an attribute of a subject, but rather of an assembly of heterogeneous elements, which transform and animate the subject.

³⁵ Elsewhere, Anselm Franke (2009) makes a similar argument to Stengers, noting the conceptual difficulties that the traversal of territorial, epistemological and conceptual borders (a precondition for any discussion of animism) poses for thought. In particular, he notes, such traversals are often framed through dialectic thinking, through which exceptions tend to reinforce the very logic to which they appear to be opposed. Further the “modulated” boundaries of a ‘society of control’” (p. 3) incorporate plurality and transgression quite effectively. How, then, is it possible to think counter to modern “rational” thought, without nonetheless strengthening the “rationalist veil,” the sleight of hand which invokes a reader’s complicity in reinforcing the assumptions of the rationalist/anti-rationalist split in the first place? Unlike Stengers, Franke does not call for a recourse to magic or a Deleuzian assemblage; he advocates for close attention to the “economies of projection” operant in zones of colonial contact (p. 8), and invokes Michael Taussig’s demand that we think-through-terror, from the assumption that the world is already upside-down (p. 9).

agency can be understood. If characters, in the age of big data, are pervasive image-objects – speculative, shared, represented interiors, circulated on platforms and plinths – then surely these image-objects also have lives of their own, punctuating data flows and organizing the potentials available to their subjects.

Toward an Art-Historical Discourse on Narrative and Character

“In sculpture it’s almost as if one can never actually make an object at all, only the fiction that surrounds it.”

- Katrina Palmer (2010, p. 108)

While the term “character” is not widely used in art history thus far, it will become, I think, increasingly relevant as a discursive frame, both for works that literally depict or construct fictitious characters and, more broadly, for works that have hybrid sculptural and narrative sensibilities. Indeed, for some contemporary artists it seems that these modes of thought are inextricably linked. To get a sense of why this might be the case, we can begin with two discourses quite central to twentieth century developments in art history: those around authorship and presence. As is well known, in the late 1960s poststructuralist thinkers (notably Foucault and Barthes) sought to divest artwork and texts of the “author function” by making clear the latter’s role as a limitation on the potential meanings of a work. Since then, “expressionistic” works such as Jackson Pollock’s have often been thought to uphold the myth of the author (in this case, a tragic/alcoholic, Byronic genius-hero) as organizer of the meaning of the work, whereas “cooler” pieces such as the conceptual works of Michael Asher or Sol LeWitt have aimed to transcend the rhetorical role of the author as the origin and source of an

artwork. I suggest that in our contemporary moment, this dichotomy is complicated by the fact that the “author function” has been greatly complexified. Indeed, I argue that it has been largely superseded by a broader phenomenon that I call “character function” – an artwork’s evoked fictitious persona, personality, attitude and/or presence, which complicates the relationship between artwork and author. In a sense, character-function in contemporary art *erodes* the artist-artwork dichotomy. In many modern and postmodern artworks, the artist and the artwork were extremely rhetorically separable from each other. The most extreme case of this kind of rhetorical separation is to be found in the readymade. As is widely known, many of Marcel Duchamp’s works consisted of the combination of a readymade object and a fictitious artist who “created” the work (for instance, R. Mutt – the “artist” behind *Fountain*, 1917³⁶, and Rose Sélavy, who “authored” *Anemic Cinema*, 1926 and *Fresh Widow*, 1920). Often, these works have been thought to enact a purely democratizing gesture, as if they simply declare that anything can be art. However, as more nuanced readings of Duchamp (DeDuve, 2001, Jones, 1995) have shown, the situation is not so simple. In another sense, the readymades’ very medium could be considered to be authorship itself. Thierry DeDuve has argued that, contrary to appearances, the Duchampian readymade was a thoroughly aristocratic gesture, a vaccine strategy *against* the democratization of art (2001, p. 27). The simple conjunction of object, fictitious author and institutional context can produce two diametrically opposed readings (as democratic or aristocratic gesture) based on whether

³⁶ While *Fountain* is most often attributed to Duchamp, it is important to note that several historians have credibly argued that the piece could have been produced by the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, and not Duchamp. (The latter only claimed the piece as part of his oeuvre much later.) See, for instance, Jones (2004) and Gammel (2002).

one interprets the work from the perspective of the commonplace object “winning” a place in the gallery on behalf of all objects, or from the perspective of authorship increasing the scope of its dominion.

I would argue that, while this extremely dichotomous conjunction of object and authorship might still be with us today in an eroded (or perhaps vestigial) form, it can no longer function as it did for Duchamp or his early admirers in the nineteen-forties and 'fifties (in part because the readymade has become a cliché). Instead, what has emerged is a character-function that is, in some sense, independent of the artist and, to an extent, even independent of the artwork/object itself. There have been a great many fictitious artist-personas in artworks over the last four decades or so (Lynn Hershman-Leeson performance as Roberta Breitmore from 1974-1978; Eleanor Antin's fictitious author-identities such as *Recollections of My Life with Diaghilev, 1919–1929 by Eleanora Antinova* (1981), Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* cycle (1994-2002), Mark Manders' *Self-Portrait as a Building* (1988-), Patrick Keiller's fictitious autodidact named Robinson, Olivier Castell's imaginary lives of artists. Yet some of these later projects do not begin from a rigid distinction between the rhetorical roles of authorship and object. They begin, I think, from an understanding of expression not as self-expression, but as a rhetorical category all its own, a phenomenon of circulation which might provisionally create its own points of “origin” or even merely “touch down” occasionally as authorship, origin and ownership.

Characterization also arises from dialogues surrounding presence in sculptural work. The American critic Michael Fried (1967) famously condemned minimalist art for evoking a subtle, vaguely anthropomorphic

presence, which he deemed to be theatrical.³⁷ Since then, many artists (who did not share in Fried's derisory attitude towards these phenomena) have explored the conditions through which such theatrical presence can function (especially in sculpture, performance, and video). It is possible to see characterization in recent sculpture as a direct development from Fried's articulation of the anthropomorphic presence of sculptural works; but whereas he described only an indistinct anthropomorphism, artists such as Rachel Harrison (who, for instance, sculpted a large, multicoloured, blobby cement shape with a thermostat on the front and named it *AI Gore*, 2007) develop further distinctions by invoking a broad range of different kinds of presences (attitudes, "personalities," etc.) – indeed, we might simply call these "characters." Seen in this way, characterization could be considered to be a central development of sculptural effects since minimalism.

Of course, though sculptures – or any objects – can exude a sense of being character-like by virtue of an anthropomorphic presence extended in time, this is only one of the ways in which they can do so. Indeed, since Fried, many artists have explored a broad range of relationships between such (potentially anthropomorphic) presence and narrative; we could even speak of a "narrative turn" in contemporary art. Perhaps one of the most striking and original accounts of this turn comes from Boris Groys. In his essay "Art in the Age of Biopolitics" from *Art Power* (2008) Groys argues that in recent years, there has been a widespread turn away from presenting artwork, and toward presenting art documentation in galleries and other sites of artistic display. Of course, this can be explained in terms of a generic shift; as performance,

³⁷ Fried may have been wrong to think that all such "presence" was necessarily anthropomorphic.

intervention, site-specific work, earth works, experiments in everyday living, and political actions arise as artistic “media,” there corresponds an increase in situations in which an “original” art event or context cannot be directly presented in, say, a gallery exhibition; it can only be referred to indirectly (and by no means transparently or unproblematically) through a document. However, overarching this media shift, for Groys, is a more general cultural shift away from an interest in artworks (which are, after all, end products of life which, in being produced, discard the category of life itself as a “mere” process) and toward the idea of life itself – “pure duration” - as an art.³⁸ As part of this shift, “Art becomes a life form, whereas the artwork becomes non-art, a mere documentation of this life form” (2008, p. 53). This reflects a shift into an age of biopolitics, in which the lifespan itself becomes manipulable (via medicine, cloning, etc.), and thus political. With the widespread acceptance of the fact that life spans are artificially fashioned comes an increasing difficulty in differentiating “natural” from “artificial” life; for where is the line between, say, a life artificially begun and “naturally” continued, or the between the biological and the mechanical (as these poles of identity become increasingly intertwined in, for instance, the figure of the cyborg)? Given the widespread erosion of such distinctions, the difference between the living and the artificial, according to Groys, becomes “exclusively a narrative difference” (2008, p. 56). Whereas it cannot be observed, it can be told, as the narrative form “evokes the unrepeatability of living time” (p. 56). Thus “The artificial can... be made living, made natural, by means of art documentation, by narrating the history of its origin, its 'making.' Art documentation is thus the art of making

³⁸ We can hear in this section a strong accord with Giorgio Agamben's call for a politics of means in “Means Without Ends” (2000).

living things out of artificial ones, a living activity out of technical practice” (p. 56).

To describe in more detail how the document can be shown in a space (say, a gallery) without perverting its nature as a document (as opposed to art), Groys turns to Walter Benjamin's account of the aura in his 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1969). Groys points out that the aura – which is precisely that which distinguishes between the “living” artwork and its technical substitute, the context-less copy – is not simply “lost” in modernity (as a cursory reading of Benjamin might suggest). The aura – the subtle, imperceptible sense of a work's relationship with the site in which it is found – comes to be an aura only because the possibility of perfect technical reproduction renders moot any direct sensory evidence of the link between a work and its origin (Groys, 2008, p. 61). Technical reproduction, ironically, *produces* the aura in the very act of its disappearance. A careful reading of Benjamin reveals that originality is not lost in modernity; it merely becomes variable. Originals may be deterritorialized as copies, which in turn might be reterritorialized as originals. We can see this latter motion – the profane illumination, in which the copy's “loss of aura” is reversed – enacted in the figure of the *flâneur*, that modern figure-in-motion who comes to the copy, *sites* the copy. The installation, for Groys, turns the viewer into a *flâneur* – into one who goes to the (reproduced) object, inscribing it within a living space. Groys concludes: “To be an original and possess an aura means the same thing as to be alive. But life is not something that the living being has ‘in itself.’ Rather, it is the inscription of a certain being into a life context – into a lifespan and into a living space” (2008,

p. 63). This point, Groy's believes, links the artistic and biopolitical realms; for in an era where there is increasing concern about the emergence of a siteless, artificially reproduced life (exemplified by cloning), documentation and installation-based practices develop strategies for resisting sitelessness, for making the artificial living and the repetitive unique.

Groy's essay is remarkable, though by no means airtight; he would do well to distinguish more clearly between biological and narrative definitions of life (he only discusses the latter, and thus seems to conflate the distinction between life and death with the distinction between "natural" and "artificial" life). As part and parcel of this problem, he also seems to conflate the narrated "liveliness" of auratic art objects and of living entities themselves. (That said, it is precisely this conflation that, for W.J.T. Mitchell, is fundamental for sculptural practice.)

Groy's account helps me to articulate the range of contemporary artwork that I will examine. While I was tempted to use the term "contemporary sculpture" to define the parameters of my study when I began it (and this term still fits much of the work I discuss), I quickly diverged to include videos, performances, performance-installations and textual practices under the broader term "object-based art". Indeed, in a historical moment often described as "post-medium" (Krauss, 1999; Manovich, 2001), a term such as sculpture might be too simple – or at least require clarification. To a certain extent, Joanna Burton's work on the "collapsed field" of contemporary sculpture is helpful here (2006, p. 10-16). Burton argues that, whereas Rosalind Krauss described an expanded field of sculpture in her famous essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" (1979), over the last few decades

this expanded field has “collapsed.” This is not because of any reduction of sculptural possibilities; much to the contrary, in recent decades just about anything can be counted as part of the category of sculpture. It is, rather, because the negations around which Krauss’ argument was based (for instance, her definition of sculpture as “not landscape” and “not architecture”) no longer hold up. The double negations collapse into a state of total affirmation: a bland, comfortable field of “yesses” in which “anything goes,” usually referred to as installation. Burton’s argument is astute and complex in its account of the unexpected ways in which expansion can turn into collapse. In fact, this collapse of distinction (which might even extend to encompass the distinction between object and artist) is an important precondition for characterization. Characters accrue all kinds of inconsistent marks, house all manner of contradictory beliefs and values. The perception of character requires that one be well attuned to contradiction, complexity and collapse. (We could even say that character *trains* recognition toward contradiction and complexity.) Burton’s argument starts and ends with the attempt to define sculpture; working as she does within these rather formalistic limits, she appears to view installation as a rather conservative “jumble” of tendencies, in which ostensibly vast differences collapse into sameness. Groys, on the other hand, (whose argument is more ambitious but less precise than Burton’s) views installation as a strategy for re-siting the document, and thus affords installation direct biopolitical significance. Underlying a trans-media approach to object-based work (made by and/or about object-characters) is an understanding that an object does not simply appear in and of itself but must

always be presented, perceived, contextualized, and extended in time according to narrative milieu.

Patrick Keiller's *London*

Patrick Keiller's 1994 film *London* (British Film Institute) navigates just such tensions and extensions between characters, contexts and perceptual purviews. Shot in 1992, the film consists of documentary footage of London – pubs, gate posts, crowds, parks, markets, bomb sites, financial districts, suburbs, the Thames – captured silently on 35mm film. These shots have been layered with ambient sound and an off-camera, unnamed narrator (voiced by Paul Scofield). The narrator, who, we are told, has just returned to London after working as a photographer on a cruise ship, describes his friend and erstwhile lover Robinson's studies of the city. Robinson is a marginally employed autodidact who observes landscapes and cityscapes in order to uncover the molecular constitution of history, and in this way discover the future. Robinson has an extremely bleak view of the city (then in one of its bleakest times) and re-imagines it as a monument to various French poets (for instance, Canary Wharf becomes a monument to Rimbaud). Throughout, the narrator most often gives voice to Robinson's thoughts and impressions, and not his own; but the opening description of London is ambiguous. It floats between signifying Robinson's perspective, the narrator's perspective, an impersonal attitude, and a truth statement about London itself:

Dirty old Blighty. Undereducated, economically backward, bizarre – a catalogue of modern miseries. With its fake traditions, its Irish war, its militarism and secrecy, its silly old judges, its hatred of intellectuals, its ill health and bad food, its sexual repression, its hypocrisy and racism, and its indolence. It's so exotic – so... homemade. (*London*, 1994)

The film, we could say, consists of three main character-spaces: that of the narrator, that of Robinson, and that of London itself. Robinson's idiosyncratic perceptual and conceptual purview allows the film to present a critical attitude toward London – and its recent politics – not as a transcendental claim but as a particular intersection of London's and Robinson's attitudes. In doing this, the film explores a feedback loop between the production of the city and the production of its subjections. It examines the lines between a critique's *doing* something and its *becoming* part of a worldview, attitude, or habituated thought pattern. It both posits that London's "character" is a relational phenomenon, and refuses to reduce London to this characterization, drawing attention to the way in which the filmic images of the city exceed Robinson's descriptions. The footage's hypnotic, durational gaze seems to move in and out of line with Robinson's observations and depicted attitudes. As it does this, it asks viewers both to be seduced by the pull of Robinson's attitudes, and to recognize the city itself (the city that is suggested by, but also supercedes, its cinematic representation) as irreducible to this characterization. The camera comes to represent London itself as an inorganic witness, which produces, absorbs, and exceeds Robinson's attitude. The film explores the crippling effects of an overarchingly negative characterization; but it also draws reflexive attention to the political dimensions of the processes involved in characterizing objects, and posits that characters – and artworks – can "store" critiques as attitudes, which may allow them to have effects beyond those they may be capable of exciting in their current milieu. As Keiller remarks in his essay "Architectural

Cinematography” (2002, p. 1) (adapting an observation of Henri LeFebvre’s), in certain films the cinematic gaze becomes the precondition for another life.

For an object to act as a character, it must evoke some sense of its capacity to have its own interiority and outlook. Yet to be perceived as a character, it must also be reduced from this interior complexity, seen and “characterized” from the outside. Thus, character is a profoundly “objective” property in the original, disused sense of the term “objective:” an object’s properties as they appear to consciousness. It is precisely this status as an objective property that situates character at the crux of a number of interests in recent art, philosophy and theory. The interdisciplinary pre-history of character for the age of big data that I have sketched above lays the groundwork for an economic concept of character, according to which character economizes personhood, navigating between concepts of “essence” and circulation, relation and withdrawal, objecthood and agency, internal complexity and the reduction and attribution of characteristics.

Character effects (such as anthropomorphism in advertising, and the circulation of artists’ antics and “personalities” in the press) have been exploited long before the age of big data, the latter of which adds yet another level of characterization to citizens’ everyday lives and online actions. Yet works by Geoffrey Farmer, Patrick Keiller and many others *détourne* such ingrained practices of recognition, drawing attention to the ways in which recognition must always economize, reduce, and intermingle with misrecognition. These artworks are a means through which contemporary artists question the social roles of aesthetics as perceptual training in an increasingly image-based economy. Through character, aesthetics questions

itself, finds itself poised at a precipice between a proliferation of fictions and deference to an inaccessible “truth” about objects. Following Isabelle Stengers, in subsequent chapters I seek methods for studying character, as an economic concept, that do not merely reinforce a preconceived line between fiction and truth, but experiment with ways to think at the borderlines of this dichotomy. Perhaps this requires that one accept the invitation – extended by several of the artworks I study – to think like an object – and, in doing so, to embody the economy.

Chapter 2

Economic Figuration

With multinational capitalism, Frederic Jameson notes, comes a fundamental representational problem of unprecedented magnitude: “to think a system so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the natural and historically developed categories of perception with which human beings normally orient themselves” (Jameson, 1995, p. 2). The inability of perception – or even most detailed research, for that matter – to encompass the complexities of globalized financial networks gives rise to an urgent problem concerning access to information on finance. As the Bank of England’s Director of Financial Stability, Andrew Haldane, quips, financial innovations such as structured credit (designed to diversify investment and thereby minimize risk) result in a situation in which end investors are “no more likely to know the name of the companies in their portfolios than the name of the cow or pig in their exotic hot dog” (Haldane, 2009, p. 16). Certain forms of structured credit, such as collateralized debt obligations (CDOs), would require over one billion pages of research in order for an investor to understand precisely where his or her money had gone (Haldane, 2009, p. 17). And Haldane, here, is speaking only of a necessary, even structural ignorance within the investing class – the death of due diligence among investors. This is to say nothing of the much broader lack of knowledge, and lack of access to financial network information, among citizens more generally. The London-based non-profit organization Positive Money notes that most people – even those who have

studied economics at the university level – do not know how money is currently circulated and produced. This is in part due to a lack of readily available teaching material for the general public, and in part due to vastly out of date teaching methods in university economics courses. Whereas in the UK, for instance, most people assume that the Bank of England creates money, while high street banks gather their customers' savings in order to give loans, in fact the Bank of England only creates 3% of money in the UK. The rest is invented electronically when a high street bank approves a mortgage or loan; when giving a loan, the bank will simply create the money that they are loaning out (Positive Money). Speaking from vastly different positions, both Haldane and Positive Money affirm the need for a democratization of access to network information. For Haldane, “network information is a classic public good” (Haldane, 2009, p. 23), as increased access to such information can help to increase financial stability. Positive Money seeks not only to democratize network information, but to democratize practices of money creation themselves: to educate the public in order to change financial law, to take the power to create money out of the hands of the very financial giants who caused the 2008 financial crisis in the first place (Positive Money). Democratization requires the effective dissemination of information, which in turn depends, to some degree, on its narrativization.

Both Haldane and activist organizations such as Positive Money and the New Economics Foundation (a UK-based think tank seeking economic, social and environmental justice), in fact, draw attention to the importance of narrative strategies in disseminating information on financial networks in a variety of ways. Haldane remarks on the immense performative power of

popular narratives on the financial crisis of 2008 via communications: “As woe became the popular narrative, depressed expectations may have become self-fulfilling” (Haldane, 2009, p. 23). Haldane applies various “network disciplines” (including ecology, epidemiology and engineering) to financial networks in order to explain how relatively modest triggering events (such as Lehman Brothers’ bankruptcy in 2008) can sweep through systems, causing fear to seize them, blocking circulation as panic narratives circulate wildly (Haldane, 2009, p. 3). Similarly, the New Economics Foundation’s website notes that part of their mission is to counter the British Coalition government’s powerful “austerity” narrative (which involves the dissemination of well-worn assertions such as “Britain is broke”, “austerity is a necessary evil”, and “welfare is a drug”) (New Economics Foundation, 2013). One of the problems that challengers to this widely-accepted economic narrative face, they argue, is on the level of storytelling: “none of the challengers tell good stories with simple ideas and powerful images, [sic] they are more likely to rely on academic language” (New Economics Foundation, 2013). In an era of academic over-specialization, scholars in various fields can lose sight of the general public; an increased awareness of narrative techniques for disseminating such specialized information becomes increasingly important.³⁹ As financial networks become more and more complex, narratives’ ability to simplify, democratize and disseminate network information takes on greater urgency and will merit further study. Yet often (and quite understandably), existing accounts of the relationships between financial networks and their narratives (promulgated by Haldane, Positive Money, the New Economics

³⁹ For instance, in medicine the sub-field of narrative medicine emerged in response to the over-professionalization of medical practices, and the need for more detailed accounts of the narrative complexities of the relations between patients, doctors, colleagues and the public.

Foundation and others) tend to rely on rather simplistic accounts of how narratives affect the public's understanding, and/or quite realist strategies for narrating economic information. They assert that certain hegemonic narratives affect the public's perception of networked capitalism; but these assertions, too often, seem to rather simplistically script the narrative (and its epidemic spread) as the "cause" for a distortional "effect" in the public's perception, as if to assume that an unmediated, unconstructed, or transparent understanding of networks could be possible in the first place. The impossibility of such a basis for a network epistemology (and perhaps, more broadly, for any epistemology) demands a more complex account of the relations between narrative, economy and representation. Similarly, activist organizations often use familiar realist and/or advertising-based narrative modes to re-cast financial networks. This may well increase the public's receptivity to these new narratives; however, it might also preclude possibilities for more nuanced modes of understanding how narrative might perform economic understanding in the first place. In light of these problems, I will examine literary and artistic works that explore complex strategies for understanding the relation between economic networks and their figuration within a narrative and/or pictorial milieu: Thomas Bridges' novel *The Adventures of a Bank Note* (1771), in which a bank note observes various human interactions as it is passed from pocket to pocket; Mark Lombardi's drawings presenting detailed research on international financial scandals; and London-based painter Amir Chasson's diptychs of abject, slightly disproportioned portraits of businessmen paired with abstract statistical diagrams (2009-10). What can be learned from past works that navigate such complexities? What can

comparisons between such instances across eras reveal about changes in the economy, and the changing economy's relation to representation?

In order to explore these questions, it is first necessary to expand the list of modalities through which economic complexities meet with narrative and/or pictorial disseminating mechanisms – means through which they might become, in something like the sense Jameson describes, perceptible or knowable. These (potentially) democratizing mechanisms are not only *narrative*, but also *performative* and *figurative* – and the relationships between narrative, performance and figuration that they entail are often complex. I use the term performative, here, in two overlapping senses. First, there is the sense in which representations of financial networks interpellate “the economy”, produce it as a real fiction, actively affect not only how it might perform (to which Haldane’s account of the “woe” narrative’s power attests) but also, in a sense, what it *is*.⁴⁰ Secondly (and this will be developed further in subsequent chapters), there is the sense in which “the economy” becomes a real abstraction, something that individual actors (such as humans and commodities) perform by adopting certain attitudes, dispositions or qualities. (For instance, this sense of the performative would include Arlie Hochschild’s account of the commodification of emotion in flight attendants’ professional performances, which demand that they represent the “genuine” caring disposition of the companies they work for – that they both play to, *and go*

It is tempting to argue, here (though I have yet to encounter another author that has done so), that Jackson Pollock’s paintings are an important historical precedent to Lombardi’s use of pictorial space. As they must move from non-existence to existence through a series of complex technical and design procedures, they can be thought of as fictions that become real. In a similar move, but one with a reverse causality to Latour’s, I argue that the economy is a real fiction, in the sense that it is so complex that it must be abstracted, reduced by description in order to be brought down to the size of an actant.

beyond, the expectation that they act professionally, perform courteously – and, as such, perform something of the disposition of the service economy itself [2009].) By figurative, I mean that in order for “the economy” to become representable as an agent within a given narrative milieu, it must be *concretized* in order to take on the form of a character, a subject, a figure. This concretization of the economy as a figure is quite clear in some of the works I study, such as Bridges’ *The Adventures of a Bank Note*. However, in a broader sense, figuration is inherent to *any* narrative milieu in which the economy might appear as an agent. For instance, it is possible to read a sociological text such as Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello’s *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005) as in part a figurative exercise, in that it transforms “capitalism” into a recognizable agent by giving it a subject position within a narrative context.⁴¹ This is not to say that figures such as “capitalism” or “the economy” are necessarily more abstract than any other kind of actor. Nietzsche remarks that any linguistic agent is a fiction, an abstraction promulgated by language; even to say, for instance, that lightning strikes is to invent an imaginary subject, “lightning”, which “strikes” – when in fact there is nothing but the build-up and release of a relational charge. According to this view, agency is, properly speaking, a property of relation, and not of a subject (Nietzsche, 1967, p. 45; Massumi, 2002, p. xxiv).⁴² As Bruno Latour argues,

⁴¹ This point comes to the fore in several instances in Boltanski and Chiapello’s phrasing; arguably, their book is, among other things, an exercise in personifying “capitalism,” transforming it into a narrative agent. To cite just one example, a sentence such as “In the postwar years, capitalism was compelled to transform itself to respond to the anxiety and insistent demands of generations of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, whose expectations of upward social mobility... or of preserving the advantages they had acquired, had been disappointed” (2005, p. xliii) is typical of what I would call a “personifying spirit” at the heart of Boltanski and Chiapello’s conceptual procedures. What sort of agent is “capitalism,” exactly, which could be “compelled” to reinvent itself as the authors describe?

⁴² Of course, this view is not without its criticisms. Graham Harman accuses Nietzsche, Deleuze, and Latour of “overmining” the object – in other words, of reducing objects too much

disciplines such as sociology require a much broader and more rigorous account of figuration; for figuration is required to render any agent, give it features, no matter how “concrete” or “abstract” that agent might seem:

Individual agencies, too, need abstract figurations... no one knows how many people are simultaneously at work in any given individual; conversely, no one knows how much individuality there can be in a cloud of statistical data points. Figuration endows them with a shape but not necessarily in the manner of a smooth portrait by a *figurative* painter. To do their job, sociologists need as much variety in ‘drawing’ actors as there are debates about figuration in modern and contemporary art (2005, p. 54).

In Latour’s view, an actant such as “my neighbour Joe” is every bit as abstract a figure as “the economy”; the magnitude of the economy merely brings the necessity for abstraction in *all* figuration to the fore.

Going back, then, to Jameson’s assertion that globalized market capitalism presents a problem of unprecedented magnitude, and infusing it with Latour’s insights on the problems of abstract figuration more generally, we can say that there are at least two (and arguably, three) dimensions to this problem. There is, first of all, a general epistemological problem concerning the need for any actor to be abstractly figured. There is, compounding this first problem, a problem of both the scale and accessibility of the information that would make it possible to render an actor so large as “the economy” in any significant detail. This we might describe as a problem on the level of an economy of attention: as Haldane and others have made clear, in many instances the amount of research required to understand a given financial milieu vastly exceeds the amount of time that a given participant would have

to relations. (Harman invents this term as an opposite to the philosophical tendency to undermine objects, by assuming that they can be described by reducing them to component parts, such as elements or atoms.) However, Harman’s own object-oriented ontology runs into difficulties in describing how objects change that are, in fact, avoided by relational ontologies such as Nietzsche’s.

to investigate it.⁴³ There is a third problem, which could be called a problem of immersion or incorporation. According to this problem, the effects of, say, advanced capitalism are so omnipresent, so immersive, as to make it difficult to extricate signs of their workings from a general field of phenomena and effects. This is a problem that is inextricably intertwined with a broader intellectual problem in theorizing capitalism. As Stewart Martin observes (2012), accounts of the economy with a Hegelian, teleological bent (from Marx to Boltanski and Chiapello) tend to understand capitalism through tropes of incorporation; they imagine capitalism as an entity that will swallow everything up, incorporate all worldly things, all ostensible “outsides” (activism, dissent, artistic critique) “within” itself.

Let us call these three problems, problems concerning the correlation of thought to perception. In other words, all three present planes on which it is necessary to grapple with the difficulty of rendering concepts perceptible – and comprehensible through their perceptibility – from the vantage point of an individual actor or observer within the field. Embedded in this assertion, that the dimensions of the problem I outline have to do with locating a meeting point between thought and perception, is another presupposition: that such points of contact, which determine the means through which thought about the economy might come into contact with perception, are sites which determine the politics of the economy’s representation. In other words, there is a presumed political agency ascribed to these sites; if, for instance (as the New Economics Foundation would have it), better access to more nuanced

⁴³ For more on the attention economy more broadly, see Davenport and Beck (2001), who argue that “in postindustrial societies, attention has become more a valuable currency than the kind you store in bank accounts” (p. 3).

economic narratives amongst a general population might change the outcome of an election, then there is a democratizing, pedagogical potential in such figurations. Conversely, attempts to render the economy perceptible and understandable through simple imagery can be mobilized for conservative ends, as in Margaret Thatcher's frequent characterization of her economic regime through tropes of "housewife economics" – since, as a woman (so the narrative went), she was aware of the prices in the shops and knew firsthand about the effects of economics on daily life. John Campbell (2013) describes this rhetorical strategy as "a brilliant way of making the harsh and theoretical doctrine of monetarism politically acceptable". In addition to this, I would add that Thatcher's housewife persona achieved this through a gendered claim to *perception*; the figure of the housewife, which Thatcher performed strategically and intermittently, has a privileged access to economic truths, in the both quotidian and archaic sense of economy as *oikos* (or the management of the household), through acts of shopping and budgeting. Whether deployed for hegemonic or counter-hegemonic purposes, such characterizations of the economy can have palpable political effects.

How might the economy be rendered perceptible, figurative, and even provisionally "inhabitable" as a subject position? What I call *economic figuration* – instances in which the economy becomes represented as a character within a given narrative context – perform the economy, produce the economy, translate its machinations from imperceptible to perceptible within a set of narrative constraints. In doing so, they produce a particular relationship between economy, representation and embodied experience. Bridges' novel imagines that the economy itself (characterized by the bank note) possesses

perception, and focalizes human interactions within the bank note's "sensory" range. Lombardi's drawings construct an aggregate, "omniscient" perspective on multinational capital (in Nitzan and Bichler's sense of capital as power, 2009). Chasson's diptychs invite comparisons between the perceptual technologies of facial recognition and diagram reading; in doing so, they question the very sensory architecture underlying any attempt to render the economy perceptible. These works encompass some of the perceptual, performative and representational complexities pertaining to the economies of their respective times. Analysis of such complexities could generate criteria as to what might count as a "critical", "democratizing" or "truthful" form of economic figuration; it could also generate new figural strategies for those seeking to democratize network information.

It might be protested that my approach ascribes too much agency to acts of economic figuration within literary and artistic works. As a friend quipped during a discussion of a draft of this chapter, wouldn't this approach be like engaging in a discussion of the features of a specific dishwasher with respect to the meta-issues of commodity pricing? (I laughed and responded, "Is that filed right next to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic?") Though the theoretical approach taken by many scholars examining such issues would, indeed, separate the microcosmic level of a specific cultural artefact's semiotic/sensory procedures from the macrocosmic level of their activities within broader systems of production and exchange – would even consider the former irrelevant with respect to the latter – my approach emphatically counters such a separation. I follow Latour *et. al's* assertion that "the whole is always smaller than its parts" (2012, p. 591). Latour develops Gabriel Tarde's

use of the Leibnizian monad as a sociological trope, and posits that there is more complexity in the actor than in the network – for the actor is the “envelope” that contains the network as attributes (2012, p. 593). While it was quite difficult for sociology, in Tarde’s time, to grapple with such a mode of thinking, in the digital age, such thought has become far more intuitive; for instance, one searches for the CV of an academic one does not know, and sees in the CV a network, which is also, at the same time, that academic’s professional qualifications, her relevant personal attributes. The authors are careful to claim only that this monadological principle will obtain while searching through data sets, for instance, online; they refrain from making any claims as to how these data sets might relate to “real life” personal attributes more broadly. Despite this, I would claim that their argument is extensible, at least in theory, to perceptual data more broadly. In fact, it might be argued that one of the major contested frontiers in the exercise of power in our time is precisely at the shifting epistemological distinction between perception and data.⁴⁴ (2012, p. 599). Within search engines, it is easy to see actors and networks on one level playing field; reciprocally, the actor delineates a network, and the network defines its actors. According to this view – if I am permitted to make a leap from data, in Latour *et. al*’s argument, to *perceptual data*, more broadly, in mine – an actor such as a dishwasher or an artwork is a whole larger than its entire network, in that the network (in this case, let us call it the economy) might be viewed through the artwork’s (or dishwasher’s) qualities, which, in turn, taken together with the qualities of many other objects rendered from some unimaginably global perspective, comprise the economy.

⁴⁴ Current developments in facial recognition technology aim to make data sets (such as uploaded photographs) recognizable, identifiable without recourse to human perception. This will make processes such as identifying protesters in Instagram photos far more efficient.

Such an assertion, in this context, might sound rather like Barthes' famous dictum that "a little formalism turns one away from History, but a lot brings one back to it" (1993, p. 96-7). But beyond this, the dishwasher or artwork, viewed in this Latourian way, is also a *viewpoint* on the network. Extrapolating slightly from Latour's language, and infusing it with an even more overt animism, we might say that the actor (the artwork, the dishwasher, the text) *perceives* the economy, presents "the economy" (to those who view it carefully) through an act of its perception – perception which is, in fact, the only way that such an abstract figure as "the economy" could come into being in the first place.

On Image and Economy

Before discussing examples of economic figuration directly, it is necessary to further analyze the concept of the economy itself, as it relates to images (and hence, to perception). For the economy, in addition to being (in a Latourian sense) yet another abstract figurative image, also has a privileged relationship to figuration, through its historical link to the very concept of the image. Further, a neoliberal context in which political discourse is routinely reduced to economic terms (in which politicians are more likely to garner votes by appealing to a *quantitative*, financialized conception of the good in service of an image of "the economy", rather than any qualitative conceptions of public good that might be proffered by various forms of public service, environmentalism, welfare, educational reform, cultural activities, social ties, etc.) increases the political urgency of understanding how "the economy" circulates as an image. The widespread reduction of politics to economic terms increases the urgency of unpacking the ways in which "the economy" can function in itself as an image within the discursive economies of politics,

when it is also a concept that speaks to, or perhaps even governs, the very idea of imagistic circulation in the first place. This leads to a double situation in which, on the one hand, various images tend to be *reduced* to economic terms and, on the other, a figurative image of the economy performs a both contradictory and reflexive role, as the very image of the circulation it describes (which might be rendered “critically”, such that, in some sense, they run counter to those very circulations).

If one of art’s functions is to produce figurative images of actors (in Latour’s expanded sense of figuration that includes any and all renderings of actors, whether in idiomorphic or anthropomorphic form) – and often *critical* figurative images of such – then a good place to start our analysis is with contemporary art’s relationship to the economy via the image. Contemporary art has been conceptualized both as a site of production for (possibly critical) figurative images of the economy, and as the very *image* of neoliberal economy itself. How can one unpack this seemingly reciprocal representational relation between art and economy, via the image, wherein contemporary art plays the contradictory roles of *producing* a (critical) image of the economy, and of *being*, in itself, the very image of that economy?

Several recent texts have presented a critical view of contemporary art’s relationship to financialization and neoliberal economics; such texts often proffer what are fundamentally figurative claims about art’s relationship to economy. To cite one example: Noah Horowitz claims that the art investment fund “is not only emblematic of the enterprising new ways in which contemporary art is sold and experienced...; it is modern global finance embodied” (Horowitz, 2011, p. 145; Malik and Phillips, 2012, p. 211). What is

the significance of these sorts of figurative claims in recent attempts to address art's relationship to economy?

Sotirios Bahtsetzis (2012) discusses the significance for art of the switch from the art market (as it was formed in the nineteenth century) to art business as it emerged in the 1980s. Countering the popular narrative of art's relationship to money as one of heroic struggle against commodification, he argues (following Peter Osborne, 2006) that in a newly affirmative culture, art's autonomy has been entirely functionalized. For autonomy is precisely that which produces an illusion (or might we call it an image?) of autonomy: the very sort of illusion that becomes the moral justification for post-democratic hyper-capitalism, which autonomizes and aestheticizes "both commercial pragmatism and political functionality" (p. 3). Under the terms of the current political-economic regime, autonomy, once a cornerstone of avant-garde modernist thought, can only function as an "alibi"; for "art does not expose its uselessness for its own sake, but rather reflects the uselessness of neoliberal administration and, by extension, of a post-capitalist market" (p. 3). Accordingly, art's ostensible autonomy functions as nothing other than "the second fetish character of art" (p. 5). If the commodity fetish conceals exchange value, then art, as *intensified fetish*, "conceals not only the exchange value of the product, but, most significantly, the generic fetish character of commodities or capital in general" (p. 5). "Autonomous" art, as intensified fetish, conceals the economy's need for an alibi in the image of autonomy; and a particular reading of this situation (offered by Bahtsetzis and others) reveals that this autonomous alibi is a very *image* of the neoliberal economy. Bahtsetzis adapts the term *acheiropoieton* (meaning not

handmade), used to account for the divine origins of icons during the Byzantine empire, to describe the way that, within the current economy of images (which does not make the divine visible, but, rather, makes the visible divine), art creates an illusion of autonomy, and thus “the illusion of a non-alienated social-being, although it is in fact located at the very heart of neoliberal speculation” (p. 6). According to this logic, auction houses, for instance, actually *degrade* art objects, robbing them of their status as intensified fetishes; for the most important fetish character of art is in its ostensible ability to resist commodification. In spite of his rather bleak view of the functionalization of autonomy, Bahtsetzis is not entirely pessimistic. He argues for a reciprocal understanding of the relationship between art and markets: “Andy Warhol’s conflation of art and business attacks the culture industry by adopting its rules. On the other hand, this same culture industry attacks Warhol’s subjective literalism by adopting his artfulness” (p. 3). He also asserts that “art’s double nature, which intervenes both in cycles of financial speculation and in the actual productive economy of affective time, still offers options for working within structures of managerial, economic, and political control... the marketability of art should not be seen as its handicap, but as its safeguarding screen – a *trompe-l’oeil* until a universal economy of the artwork can be established” (p. 11).

In spite of the many important insights that Bahtsetzis develops (particularly around the insight that autonomy has been functionalized), one cannot help but sense some fundamental slippages in his argument. There is something that remains undefined in the claim that art’s uselessness now reflects the uselessness of neoliberal capitalism. What, exactly, is the status

of that reflection? Is neoliberal capitalism “the real” that produces art’s reflection? Or, does the “reflection” somehow predate, or emerge independently alongside, that which it reflects? The problem with this formulation is that it seems to, in part, take on (or even smuggle in) the classic form of a base-superstructure argument, according to which an economic ‘base’ determines a cultural ‘superstructure’. Would not a flatter ontology be more appropriate to describe the relationship between art and economy – one that assumed that these were both equally abstractly rendered agents? Further, is it really valid to claim that ostensibly autonomous art produces an image of non-alienated social being? This may well have been the case in the 1950s, but in an era of rapid over-consumption of art images via tablets and smartphones, it strikes me as highly unlikely that the subjective mechanisms involved in art reception have changed so little as to leave such a vestige of non-alienation intact. Doesn’t art (much like Bahtsetzis’s essay itself) also produce *images* of alienation? I say this not, of course, to return to a simplistic affirmation of art’s “criticality” *vis à vis* its ability to analyze alienation, but rather to say that Bahtsetzis and others like him miss an opportunity to explore the hinge linking contemporary art’s modes of *being* and *representing* the economy. Or rather, it seems that this relationship is assumed to be one of repression: the artwork egotistically desires to produce a critical image of the economy, but in fact is unconsciously complicit with its machinations. In seeming to disavow (though somewhat ambivalently) art’s ability to produce aberrant *images* of the economy, Bahtsetzis seems bent on ignoring the possibility that (albeit, a very few) artworks might imagine the economy such that they are (whether by accident or by design) *not* recuperated by neoliberal

capital – or, further, that their specific enunciative effects might defy the generic explanations that a recuperative account of artistic critique could proffer. In seeming to deny such possibilities, Bahtsetzis falls into the trap of reserving for himself (as critic) the sole position capable of revealing the economic truth hidden “behind” the ideological smokescreen of contemporary art. On a reflexive level (in addressing his own role as a producer of epistemology), his critique fails to address the complicity of critique within an information economy that can easily recuperate it. On the flipside of this, in art, it also fails to see any redistributive potential in the sensible beyond a recuperative model that presumes a rather simplistic, dialectical interaction between art and economy.

In a similar vein to Bahtsetzis – but with some important theoretical differences – Andrea Phillips and Suhail Malik (2012) analyze the complex relationships between art and financialization. Expanding on Horowitz’ claim cited above, they argue that “art does indeed embody the truth of finance, and it does so precisely in its failure or limitation as a kind of free-market investment... it also reconfigures the significance of what is frequently heralded as the condition and satisfaction of its collectors: their love of art” (p. 212). Whereas art objects have often been understood as dysfunctional with respect to the market, priced unreliably and subject to the unpredictable passions of collectors, Malik and Phillips argue that it is this ostensible dysfunctionality which makes art the very paradigm of financiality, or price-setting’s autonomy from “production, use-value, consumption, or other bases external to finance” (p. 221). Just as Bahtsetzis argued that art’s autonomy has become a mere alibi for the autonomy of neoliberal capital, for Malik and

Phillips, the collector's love of art (as well as that of art viewers, artists and art professionals) functions as an alibi for a privatized political economy in which care, as a concept inherent to public good, has been upbraided by love, an inherently privatized concept. According to the concept of sabotage, or the *necessary* unproductivity of business capital, which concentrates and privatizes power at the expense of industry, the art object's ostensible "dysfunctionality" in the marketplace can no longer be seen as exceptional, or "outside" of the market. Further, any schema that presumes a separation between financialized capital and cultural capital (à la Bordieu), that presumes that cultural or social capital is of a different kind than financial capital, is no longer valid; for, "as art clearly instantiates, prices are correlated at once and necessarily with cultural or symbolic institutionalization" (p. 225). Art's capitalization, *qua* sabotage, also no longer has much, if anything, to do with commodification; the question of commodification has "no traction on its financiality" (p. 226). Within the art *qua* sabotage model, "the artist acts a compensatory fable for the continued sabotage art's institutional capitalization inflicts on general production" (p. 226). Further, any argument that posits that art is an "outside" to capital – familiar Adornian, Brechtian and Bataille arguments that laud the failure or non-productivity of art – complement art's financiality, and even perform a "remoralization... of institutional sabotage" (p. 227).

Malik and Phillips' argument covers similar terrain to Bahtsetzis, but with a far more convincing breadth and focus of financial research. Their claims around sabotage, and the irrelevance of commodification to new forms of art's financiality are groundbreaking; and in their strong argument (which

draws, in part, from Nitzan and Bichler, 2009) against the presumed Bordieuvian separation between “cultural” and financial capital brings them much closer to the flat art-economy ontology that Bahtsetzis, arguably, fails to achieve. But is their ontology really as flat as it seems to claim? While they have no doubt eroded the separation between cultural and financial capital, they have, arguably, done so unidirectionally: by “reducing” art to finance, without sufficiently accounting for a reciprocal aestheticization of finance by art. The concept of art as “alibi” for financialized sabotage is couched in the tropes of ideological – or proto-ideological, as they like to call it – critique. Yet, if the concept of an alibi seems to envision the physical and perceptual forms of artworks – and the love which these might inspire – as *covers* for financialized sabotage. But what more can be said about the reverse scenario: finance’s aestheticization?

Malik and Phillips’ argument is inspired by a desire to remove the “proto-ideological support for the decontamination of power through art’s ethos” (p. 218). It calls out a situation of widespread doublespeak in the art world, according to which art’s “critical” capacity is sought after, and various “critical” gestures are shipped around the world without enacting or effecting even a modicum of their supposedly critical claims in any way. Their essay is a pointed – and much-needed – attack on the distance between what the art world *says* it does and what it *does*. As incredibly pertinent as such critiques are, is it also possible to claim that there could be some, dare I say, “critical” potential in certain artworks that maintain a purposive distance between their “doing” and “saying”, their performative and constative functions with respect to economics? There are a number of compelling arguments which could offer

such a perspective. Norman Bryson, for instance, elegantly counters the assumption that an artwork must not be “hypocritical” in this respect in his study of seventeenth-century Dutch still-life painting (1990). He argues that *vanitas* still-life paintings, as rhetorical devices, seem unconvincing to modern eyes, in that they both act as warnings against overindulgence in luxury, and are, in themselves, the very epitome of the luxurious object. This split between the performative and constative functions of the *vanitas* paintings, for Bryson, is not so much a point to critique as it is an opportunity to explore various philosophies of reading. Bryson traces this performative/constative split to a thirteenth-century debate about how to read Christian texts. On the one side of the debate, readers were meant to empathize with every expression of pain, with every sentiment portrayed in texts on the suffering of the saints. On the other side of the debate, such textual depictions of suffering were meant to demonstrate to readers their *inability* to empathize with saintly suffering; this side of the debate promoted a more detached style of readership, which encouraged an attentiveness to the necessary failures of the text to embody experience. In a similar vein, but in a different context, Franco (Bifo) Berardi (2012) advocates for the importance of the ironic kind of reading proposed by poetry (if we understand irony as a conception of the distance between a sign and its meanings, rather than as cynicism) in light of the recent financial crisis. Whereas avant-garde modernist poetry, he argues, presaged many of the financialized developments of late capitalism, poetry can still teach us a way of viewing the world – a kind of built-in distanciation between signs and their given political-economic contexts – that might yet produce some potential for social movements of the future. Berardi’s claims

around poetry tend to be quite general; he is rather romantic about poetry at large, and fails to provide a convincing account as to how, exactly, ironic reading might produce political potential. Arguably, adopting a Berardian (or Brysonian) account of the importance of ironic distanciation too simplistically would either merely reinstate an obsolete division between financial and cultural capital, on the one hand, or act too broadly as an apology for any and all hypocrisy within art, on the other. (Assuredly, there are some forms of irony/hypocrisy that might point to quite interesting philosophies of reading within certain contexts, whereas, in other forms, irony/hypocrisy might be entirely unthinking and opportunistic.) And yet these arguments point to a potential that, arguably, Bahtsetzis, Malik and Phillips underemphasize.

How would it be possible to give a place for Berardi and Bryson's conceptions of ironic distance without reinstating a division between cultural and financial capital? I argue that the answer to this problem may lie in adopting a *temporal*, rather than "oppositional" or "critical" understanding of distance. According to this understanding, irony allows for a temporal gap between perceiving signs and producing meaning. Arguably, such a temporal gap is entirely economic, but economic in an entirely different sense to the one understood by Bahtsetzis, Malik and Phillips. For the economy is itself a conception of historical time. The concept of economy deserves to be rendered with a qualitative, conceptual polysemy that is more adequate to its broad range of semantic senses (including one which is temporal, which I will expand below), and which, as such, resists being subsumed by discourses on financialization that describe only the *current*, hegemonic economic conditions within a neoliberal milieu.

The economy (as I will demonstrate below) is, quite directly, a conception of temporality and also a conception of the circulation of images; so I will restate the above summary (which was developed along the axis of temporality) in terms of images and representation. As I have tried to demonstrate, in arguments that aim to erode the perceived “oppositional distance” between neoliberal art and economy (art’s much-mythologized “critical” or “oppositional” stance with respect to the economy) by reading contemporary art (reductively, and necessarily so) as the very *image*, the very *figuration* of the economy itself, there tends to be a conflation of a *representation of politics* with a *politics of representation*. In other words, on some level these arguments see in contemporary art nothing more than a representation of politics: the very image of neoliberal economy rendered in the medium (or on the recording surface?) of the “contemporary art world” as (in a Latourian sense) abstract figure. They miss, in another sense, art’s ability to be a politics of representation: to enact – singularly, for each work – an address to the future. Such an address is also inherently economic, but not in the financialized sense of the term. I am proposing that art’s “politics”, in the phrase “politics of representation”, might be understood as its capacity to act as part of a history in the future. In other words, it is precisely in the ways in which an artwork is *not* currently being understood, in its potential to act differently than it does in its current political-economic milieu, that we might seek art’s politicality *beyond* a base instrumentality to current political and economic conditions (the latter of which Bahtsetzis, Malik and Phillips quite astutely describe), but also without presuming that this politicality is somehow “outside” of, or opposed to, the economy.

To further understand the complex relationships between financialized economy and temporality, and between representations of politics and politics of representation, demands an expansion of the semantic qualities of economy, along the lines explored by Marie-José Mondzain in her study of the Byzantine origins of the contemporary imaginary (2005). Mondzain analyzes the arguments that surrounded the Byzantine iconoclastic crisis – a crisis during which the question of the political was fundamentally a question of images. Further, the defence of images during the iconoclastic debate elaborated a fundamentally economic conception of the image. Mondzain argues that “the question of the economy cannot be separated from the question of the image itself. ‘Whoever rejects the icon rejects the totality of the economy’” (p.3) In administering the unconscious of their subjects, in regulating their belief and obedience through a philosophy of the image (p. 15-16), the church fathers founded a conception of the image that is, Mondzain argues, still very much the face of humanism today (p. 4). At each major turning point in political and religious thought, the question of the legitimacy of the image gets raised (p. 5); politics, in Mondzain’s analysis, plays out on the level of iconicity. Thus, her study takes place precisely on the level of a politics of representation, in the sense I alluded to above.

To understand the linkage between image and economy in all its richness requires a close analysis of the term “economy” that may be counterintuitive for contemporary readers. Mondzain takes stock of the many meanings that the term *oikonomia* held in Byzantium, including a living linkage between the invisible image and the visible icon (p. 3); “prudent adaptation to circumstances” and “realist relativism” (p. 7); “opportune” and “well thought

out” (p. 7); a system of thought that takes into account both the historical specificity of the persons who enact it, and the living character of the word (p. 12); a “science of effects” played out on the “moving ground of everyday reality” (p. 12); “enlightened flexibility” and the resolution of inconsistency (p. 14); and an art, not without guile, which acts as the basis for rhetoric (p. 13). In spite of this daunting polysemy, she chides scholars who have failed to see any sort of semantic coherence in the concept of economy. She also marvels that so many highly skilled translators fail to translate the term economy – *oikonomia* – directly as “economy” when working with Byzantine texts. (*Oikonomia* has been routinely translated as “*incarnation, plan, design, administration, providence, responsibility, compromise, lie or guile*, without any indication that all of these refer to the same word.) (p. 13) This, she argues, is surprising given how absolutely central the economy was to the Byzantine defence of images; and it reveals a widespread misunderstanding of the importance of the relationship between images and economy – central to the Byzantine understanding of the image but still with us today. Her detailed semantic study traces economy from its pre-Christian origins to the various ways in which it was conceptualized during the iconoclastic crisis, at which time the term gained its semantic coherence.

The Greek word *oikonomia* has its etymological roots in the administration and management of domestic life (p. 18). The classical authors understood the concept to be one of utility and profit (either in a quantitative, financial sense, or in a qualitative sense (as in well being, or the sovereign good) (p. 18). For Aristotle, the term designated the acquisition and proper functioning of a domestic life; without such a preliminary site for social

cohesion, no concept of politics could be possible. (Thus, for Aristotle, economy is prior to politics.) Implicit in economy, for the Greeks, was both a conception of means (to an immaterial end), and a conception of an “organic, functional harmony” – a providential and natural order to be serviced (p. 19). In the writings of Dionysios of Haricarnassus, economy referred to the manner in which a literary work is organized (p. 19). From its very beginnings, Mondzain argues, economy presupposes a consideration of ends (without, consequently, being a cynical concept); it acts as a “science of relations”; and it “both renders a service and takes into account the very idea of service” (p. 19). As expounded by the Church fathers, the economy’s role was to “introduce the figure and history into theological thought” (p. 23). According to the two main systems for Christian economic thought – the Trinitarian economy and the Christological economy – the incarnate Son is the economy of the Father. “The incarnational economy is nothing other than the spreading out of the Father’s image in its historic manifestation, which is made possible by the economy of the maternal body” (p. 23). The virgin birth produces the living image; the economy is a concept of relation within the divine, and between the divine and the providential management of the visible world (p. 24). The economy’s semantic coherence lies in its status as a concept of relation that administers the visible world in the image of God.

In service of this semantic organizational principle, Mondzain identifies five senses of the term economy as it appears in various early Christian texts. There is, first of all, the Trinitarian economy, which manages the relations between divine unity and triplicity; between the eternality of God’s “secret room” (p. 26) and the temporality of His unfolding in history as image; and

between the signifier and signified (as an economic relation of “relative similitude”) (p. 30). Secondly, there is the Christological economy, which follows as a consequence of the Trinitarian economy. According to this economy, Christ is “economy par excellence” (p. 31). He is image, relation and flesh – a prototype for the organization and management of the visible within the world. There is the providential economy, which covers the sense in which “there can be no economy without the spectacle of the world” (p. 36). The providential economy keeps open the relations between visible spectacle and the enigmatic spectacle of mystery, and bases the organization and management of spectacle on a natural model that is, in itself, an image of the divine order (p. 35). There is an economy of the flesh: the vitalist and functionalist sense of economy according to which the human form is itself an image of the divine. This economy encompasses the circulations within the body (for instance, of blood), makes transubstantiation conceptually possible, justifies the Church’s use of bodily metaphors to describe its own organization, and contrasts Christ, as one who gives of his flesh, with, say, the opposing image of the vampire, who takes flesh. Finally, there is the economy of speech, which is not without guile. This conception accounts for the discursive, educational and strategic aspects of economy. It also answers to the fact that, while icons can be faithful to (invisible, divine) images, they can also lie. Yet the Church fathers did not forbid lies or guile, if these were used in service of the truth. Mondzain concludes, firstly, that “The economy is thus a manifestation of history, but it is not limited by history. It exceeds all strictly historical circumstances in order to reveal the meaning of history itself” (p. 48). Secondly, she concludes that “the economy is an operative concept

that is defined by its living fertility” which is modelled after that of the virginal womb (p. 49).

Given Mondzain’s groundbreaking study of the warp and woof of economy’s semantics; given the unparalleled detail of her attention to the performative and qualitative intricacies of the concept as it has been inherited (in at least ostensibly secularized form) from the Byzantine empire; and given the skill with which she accounts for the imaginal as a politics of representation, how might these insights be applied to more contemporary discussions of the state of the image with respect to financialized neoliberal capital?

This is a question that might lead us to examine Giorgio Agamben’s work on *oikonomia* (2009). Agamben delivers an incisive – and rather pessimistic – appraisal of the significance of the Byzantine economy for our time. In Agamben’s gloss, the Byzantine, imaginal conception of the economy arose as a direct response to the problem the trinity posed for the Church (he thus privileges one of the five senses of economy Mondzain analyses), which needed to both “introduce... God between being and action” (p. 16), and justify itself as a monotheistic religion by proposing a relationship of resemblance between the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. *Oikonomia* was the apparatus par excellence, in a Foucauldian sense of the term apparatus, which Agamben understands as a heterogeneous set of “practices, discourses, and bodies of knowledge” (p. 19) – “literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings” (p. 14). These include not only familiar Foucauldian subjects such as schools,

confession, and disciplinary procedures, but also “the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones, and – why not – language itself” (p. 14). In a disciplinary society, such apparatuses create “docile, yet free bodies that assume their identity and their ‘freedom’ as subjects in the very process of their desubjectification” (p. 19-20). But whereas the economy was once the apparatus that acted in *service* of the Church’s power, in our time the economy has run amok, and functions in service of nothing. We live in an era, Agamben intones, of “the triumph of the *oikonomia*, that is to say, of a pure activity of a government that aims at nothing other than its own replication” (p. 22). This shift in the function of *oikonomia*, as apparatus, points to a broader shift in how apparatuses can function in our contemporary moment. For while, Agamben argues, every apparatus implies a process of subjectification, and every process of subjectification also entails a process of desubjectification, in the current phase of capitalism, “processes of subjectification and processes of desubjectification seem to have become reciprocally indifferent, and so they do not give rise to the recomposition of a new subject, except in larval or, as it were, spectral form. In the nontruth of the subject, its own truth is no longer at stake. He who lets himself be captured by the ‘cellular telephone’ apparatus – whatever the intensity of the desire that has driven him – cannot acquire a new subjectivity, but only a number through which he can, eventually, be controlled” (p. 21). According to this logic, the very possibility of a subject position, by means of the economic apparatus, has been spectralized, turned into an image of itself.

There are problems with Agamben's account: he is arguably rather quick to generalize about the triumph of desubjectification amongst contemporary apparatuses (though this is to some extent understandable as an antidote to, say, the rather naïve, utopian enthusiasm that greets many technological advances, such as the smartphone). By broadening (and arguably, overextending, or even over-generalizing) the range of understandings that Foucault himself suggested by the term apparatus, he risks conflating apparatuses and prosthetic objects (in Elizabeth Grosz's sense of the term, 2005). In Grosz's conception, the use of prosthetics – from clothing to tools to architecture to language – is a property of all animals; her Deleuzian-feminist conception of prosthetics relies much less on a preconceived separation between “human” or “animal” and “prosthetic object” than Agamben's seems to do; instead, she views, say, humans and their prosthetic objects as co-evolving. While problematic in its own right in some respects, this conceptualization puts some pressure on the all-to-quick conflation of objects with apparatuses with power in Agamben. And there seems to be something rather teleological in Agamben's conception of *oikos* for its own sake as a kind of means being end for politics; his pessimism seems to preclude a consideration of how current conditions might change. What other ways might there be to bring Mondzain's complex analysis of the economy into discussions of contemporary art and finance? What kinds of narratives – and narrative analyses – might shift the focus toward a politics of representation, in Mondzain's sense?

The Adventures of a Bank Note

One potential answer may be to focus on works that stage complex encounters between the economy, its figurations and its perceptions. Beginning by focusing on the latter, a striking example of a narrative form that conceives of the economy as, in itself, *perceptive* in its circulations lies in a once popular, but now quite obscure narrative form: the eighteenth century it-narrative with a bank note or coin as the main character. Such narratives, which unfold around a first-person note or coin, both represent the economy and recursively examine the economization of narrative space. Here, I will focus on Thomas Bridges' *The Adventures of a Bank-Note*, which came out in two volumes in 1770, with a subsequent two volumes published in 1771. Around this time in England, there were several popular stories which featured coins and bank notes occupying the first person, including Helenus Scott's *The Adventures of a Rupee, Wherein are Interspersed Various Anecdotes Asiatic and European* (1772) and Charles Johnstone's *Chrysal, or, The Adventures of a Guinea* (published in 1760 with two subsequent volumes in 1765). There are also a number of more recent examples of narratives that follow a single bank note or coin as it weaves between people, places and situations. These include Bresson's last film *L'Argent* (1983), which loosely adapts the first part of Tolstoy's novella *The Forged Coupon* (first published in 1910), and shows how the circulation of a forged 500-franc note eventually causes a man to lose his job and family, and finally commit murder. Other examples include Marguerite Yourcenar's novel *A Coin in Nine Hands* (1934), which follows a ten-lira coin through nine hands on a single day in Italy in 1933 (including a would-be assassin of Mussolini), contrasting the coin's "sociability" with its owners' solitude. Even more recently, Andy Frith's low

budget independent films *Dirty Money* and *Dirty Money 2* (2011) each trace a £50 note as it makes its way into various hands in a succession of shady deals on a single day in Southeast London. The American website *Where's George?* (www.wheresgeorge.com) enables users to track their one dollar bills over time; they write "www.wheresgeorge.com" on dollar bills, prompting new recipients to go to the website and add locations and transactions to the roster. These works enact both a desire to know that which usually remains unknown about money – its social life – and a fascination with the relationships between the circulation of money and the narrative form itself conceptualized as a kind of circulation. Yet for the most part (with the possible exception of *Where's George?*), these more recent examples have inherited a humanistic understanding of literary character that has been hegemonic since the late eighteenth century. They tend to narratively privilege complex, interiorized depictions of human agency over that of objects, animals and other non-human agents – even within narratives that examine the impersonal agency of money. *The Adventures of a Bank-Note* and other stories from the mid-eighteenth century explore narrative possibilities that, arguably, have been less accessible to writers since: both the depiction of money in the first person, and what could be seen from a contemporary perspective, at least, as a radical flattening out of human characters as they are seen from the perspective of money. Yet is it possible that there is also something quite contemporary about these mid-eighteenth century narratives of money – in Agamben's sense of the contemporary as an untimely quality, a disjunctive and anachronistic relationship with the present that "puts to work a special relationship between the different times" (2009, p. 52), and sees the past as

something that, touched by the shadows of our own time, “acquired the ability to respond to the darkness of the now” (p. 53)? My own reading of *The Adventures of a Bank-Note* will not be a properly historical one; it will be an attempt to forge a relationship between its eighteenth century moment and the present, to use recent methods of narrative analysis to ask: what might *The Adventures of a Bank-Note* have to teach about the financial narratives needed in our own time?

One of the few published historical accounts of *The Adventures of a Bank-Note* comes from Deidre Shauna Lynch’s book *The Economy of Character* (1998). Lynch views Bridges’ novel (and others like it) as works that are more concerned with imagining society than the self (p. 7). The possibility to think of bank notes as having their own histories of circulation, Lynch notes, was readily available to mid-eighteenth century minds due to the physical form of bank notes at the time. Prior to 1797, when the Restriction Bill caused Britain to adopt a uniform, anonymous paper currency, bills of exchange would be produced by particular banks, and would require bearers to countersign them over to a third party, who would then be required to countersign them to another party, and so on (p. 97). Thus, the form of the bills themselves bore witness to their previous activities through the list of endorsements – or perhaps we could say characters – they accrued. (This is not the case with the narratives featuring coins as first-person characters; these Lynch reads in terms of their presentation of a flat physiognomy, in their circulation of the face of a head of state.) Yet these narratives were also useful tools for “readers and writers who found themselves dwelling in a new commercial world, one altered by new trade routes and new forms of credit

and full of strange commodities that invited the gaze and emptied the pocketbook” (p. 24). Money, Lynch notes, both acts as a vehicle for the narrative form, and stands in for a social agreement on a standard of value in this newly commoditized world (p. 96). The first-person banknote humanizes the economic system, and subordinates individuals to impersonal circulation. As it performs these functions, it also demonstrates the intricate relations between “coin, character and countenance” in the first place (p. 98). In fact, in Lynch’s view the banknote functions in a rather similar way to the figure of the gentleman, who has perfected the art of circulating in society, and, thanks to his being well-travelled and well-mannered, acts as a featureless “broker of differences”, who finds out others but is not found out himself (p. 98).

The Adventures of a Bank-Note gives a light-hearted and humorous account of a series of interactions between a banknote and its owners, the tales they overhear, and the objects they encounter. Volume IV, for instance, begins with the banknote enumerating several of its recent travels within a paragraph, and then settling down for several chapters with a Mr. Derbyshire, whose heart, the banknote notes, “was as light as a feather” (p. 2). As Mr. Derbyshire and a friend sit on a bench one evening at Ranelagh, watching the “curious figures” that passed by, they observe a fashionable, comely woman walking with an exceedingly strangely dressed man; the friend recounts the tale of how these oddly-matched figures came to meet. The man, being the captain of a large ship that trades slaves to the coast of Africa (p. 6), had come to land on a rare occasion to pay a visit to his cousin, who had recently married the fashionable woman mentioned above. Trying to look respectable, but unfamiliar with land customs, he employed a tailor, a hatter, and a French

barber to suit him up; the latter concealed his black locks with a strange white wig that he claimed was the height of fashion. When the captain called upon his cousins, he was taken into the parlour to wait. There, amidst all the unfamiliar objects of domestic life, he encountered a large mirror, which surprised him greatly, as he had not seen his own reflection before, and did not recognize himself in the new clothes and wig. Walking up to the mirror to see who was the strange person staring at him, he bashed into it and broke the glass, the surprise of which sent him barrelling backwards into an armchair, flattening a guitar, which in turn caused him to gesticulate and send the dessert glasses to the floor. On encountering this scene, the lady of the house admonished the servants for letting a madman into the house; finally, her husband arrives and explains that this was, indeed, his seafaring cousin. Being a discerning woman, she saw the captain's honesty, sincerity and artlessness, and ever since relished her visits with him.

The banknote and its owner follow the captain and his cousin, and observe both the captain's observations of the passersby, and their observations of the captain, in two chapters entitled "Sea remarks on land animals" and "Land animals returning the compliment". In the first of these chapters, the captain continually uses seafaring metaphors to describe his impressions of the people he encounters; in the second, various passersby use the metaphors supplied by their respective professions to describe the captain's strange countenance. (For instance, the banker declares that "He never set eyes on such an unnegotiable piece of paper" [p. 31]). The banknote then goes fishing and to a sermon with Mr. Derbyshire, who, afterwards, explains to his friend the story of how he met the honest

clergyman, an Irishman who loves potatoes. Early in his career, he was warned of the dangers of innovation in his profession by a cautionary tale in which a clergyman tells churchgoers that there will be a plum pudding waiting for them each afternoon when they get to heaven, only to have several of his poor listeners hang themselves in time for their next lunch.

With regret, the banknote leaves Mr. Derbyshire and, after six or seven exchanges, joins John the Ratcatcher, who conspires to take revenge on the rats in his cellar by trapping them under a large pot in hopes of starving them to death, only to find that he has accidentally trapped them in with a large portion of his favourite smoked ham, which they greatly enjoy. The banknote partakes of several more adventures, which take it in and out of London, and ends with what appears to be a direct address to its readers, imagined as though they were gathered in together in a public meeting.

As described in the last chapter, Alex Woloch (2003) views the narrative space of the novel as a competition between many characters for limited narrative attention and import; minor characters – who tend to be caricatures rather than fully rendered individuals – reflexively draw attention to the limits of this narrative attention, and function as the proletariat of the novel. In *The Adventures of a Bank-Note*, all the characters are minor, in a sense: none of them hold the plot's attention indefinitely. Together, they seem meant to represent society as a multitude of particularities strung together by exchange; and economic exchange, in itself, as a chaos of encounter – always involving misunderstanding in the exchange of appearances – continually unleashed upon the world. That said, several of the novel's features might warrant an expansion or re-thinking of Woloch's analytical

categories. In his assertion that characters compete for narrative space, there seems to be an assumption that characters (particularly minor ones) might, on a reflexive level, *desire* more narrative space for themselves, push back on the “desire” of the narrative itself in fleshing out certain characters and skipping over others. This assumption seems complicated in *The Adventures of a Bank-Note* by the fact that the banknote itself acts as a sort of economic spy, who lingers on certain lives it observes in a way that (we can imagine) might well seem invasive to its recipients. This is particularly the case with John the Ratcatcher, who is portrayed for several chapters as a vengeful man for his un-Christian anger toward rats. The humour in these chapters arises, first of all, from the banknote’s greater esteem for rats than its human counterparts might have, and therefore its deliberate “misapprehension” of the scene as it would appear to a more humanistic distribution of value; and, secondly, from the exaggeration in importance of the Ratcatcher’s private, domestic activities, which contradict how he might like to portray himself in public. (As the banknote notes, he is an intelligent, highly respected, patent-holding man.)

If this novel is certainly not operating within the rather humanistic understanding of a competition of characters for narrative space in the novel that Woloch develops, then what accounts for the differences in how the characters are portrayed? I argue that there are several factors that come into play in determining how the narrative space is parsed out. Firstly, the shape of the narrative space is determined by the interplay between the banknote’s passivity and activity. It cannot determine into whose hands it falls; and often, it repeats the conceit that it would have liked to tell us more about a particular

story, except that it was whisked away too soon. To this extent, it passively perchances upon the narrative thread it recounts, moved by a collective agency of circulation. However, within this conceit of passivity, the banknote clearly chooses which stories to focus on (based on what the reader might find entertaining), and develops dispositions toward the characters it portrays. Thus, it produces an interplay between monetary exchange and moral affinity. This interplay of passive exchange and moral judgment in the narrative form happens thanks to perhaps the most obvious fact about the narrative, and the most radical for contemporary readers: that it takes place within the perceptual purview of the banknote. Imagining money looking back, characterizing humans is the key feature of this narrative that differentiates it from most comparable contemporary narratives. The banknote perceives, observes, characterizes. It seems to oscillate between acting as a featureless object-agent, and (through the occasional mention of some rather human features or habits) a humanization of the economy; it even, at times, appears as a thinly veiled stand-in for the author. In spite of there being some ambiguity as to what features the banknote might, or must, possess in order to have a perceptual purview, this purview forms the conceptual basis for the novel's narrative space. Yet it is not only the banknote's perceptual purview that is at stake here: for the note also overhears the stories and perceptions of many others, which are often nested within each other; for instance, the banknote observes Mr. Derbyshire's conversation with his friend, in which is encased the observations of the sea captain and his land-dwelling cousins. These nested perceptual frameworks create a division of degrees between those who characterize others and those who are characterized. (For

instance, the sea captain is both caricatured and characterizes others in his observations of passersby; Mr. Derbyshire, on the other hand, is scarcely fleshed out as a possessor of traits himself (other than the banknote's assessment that his heart is "light as a feather"); rather, he is portrayed mainly as a possessor of disinterested perceptions of others. Roughly speaking, this differentiation between the characters who perceive, while having few features themselves (the banknote, first and foremost, and secondarily, Mr. Derbyshire), and the characters who are merely perceived or caricatured within the novel's narrative spaces plays out in relationship to their respective proximity to money. The characters who make a purchase, thus acquiring the note, also have a purchase on the narrative's trajectory. In addition, they are situated in the foreground of the banknote's perceptual purview, and thus there is a closer sharing between their narrative perspective and the banknote's. However, this narrative proximity between the note's and its possessors' perspectives is not equally shared between owners; the banknote takes a much more distanced stance toward its owner John the Ratcatcher than it does to Mr. Derbyshire, for instance. In addition to proximity to money differentiating between the novel's observers and observed, a moral and dispositional affinity between the banknote and *some* of its owners – i.e. the banknote's perception of certain of them as *good*, and possessive of an open attitude toward others – creates a closer affinity of perspective. Thus, while the novel portrays economic exchange as a comedic clash of characterizations and encounters between disparate worldviews, it also portrays the economy, as a *relation* between the banknote (its synecdochal representative) and its deterritorializing trajectory, as (in a way that

Mondzain's account of the economy would recognize) a pursuit of the good. But this sense of the good is always in relation to the chaos of exchange, which accompanies the movements of the characters.

Mark Lombardi

If the *Banknote* narrative constructs a first-person, embedded economic viewpoint, localizing economy in the exchanged note's abstract range of perceptions, Mark Lombardi's drawings do the exact opposite: they construct an omniscient perspective on an overwhelming range of financial transactions, contacts and influences. His diagrammatic drawings (which he referred to as *Narrative Structures*) document complex financial scandals, international money laundering schemes and other nefarious machinations of power. They were based on thousands of pages of research into scandals such as the Harken Energy scandal (which involved alleged insider trading by George W. Bush after his failing oil company was purchased by Harken, largely in order that it could make Bush a board member and take advantage of his extensive political connections) and the Savings and Loan scandal (in which several troubled American Savings and Loan institutions – many with high profile board members and close connections with the CIA – turned themselves into Ponzi schemes during the 1980s and 1990s in the wake of deregulation). Lombardi used a legend consistent across his mature work, according to which solid lines with arrows (either one- or two-directional) indicated any kind of influence, control or mutual relation; arrows with broken lines indicated flows of money; zigzags indicated a sale or transfer of asset; and looped lines indicated the sale or spin-off of a property (Ross, 2003, p.

52). The drawings take on various structures; some, such as *Charles Keating, ACC, and Lincoln Savings, ca. 1978-90 (5th Version)* (1995, Figure 12), and *George W. Bush, Harken Energy, and Jackson Stephens, ca. 1979-90 (5th Version)* (1999, Figure 13), are webs of names of individuals and corporations organized around timeline-strata, as if to translate a spatially disparate web of power and influence into a roughly temporally distinct mass of quasi-events. Others, such as *World Finance Corporation, Miami, Florida, ca. 1970-79 (6th Version)* (1999, Figure 8), take a roughly circular shape, envisioning the spidery tendrils of the WFC's sphere of influence. (This drawing diagrams a series of "major and minor plots" surrounding a two-year inquiry into the WFC's dealings, including Jeb Bush and his business partner's default on an S&L loan that cost American taxpayers \$4 million.) (Ross, 2003, p. 70) In spite of their punctuation by timelines and global clusters, all of these structures can clearly be understood as rhizomatic, diffused networks. They depart from Hans Haacke's systems theory/institutional critique works (most famously *Shapolsky et. al Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971, 1971*), which were a major influence on Lombardi; however, here, the complexity Haacke envisions is taken almost unfathomably farther. Looking back even further, we can see these works as not only extensions of early developments in institutional critique (by Haacke, Ashley Bickerton and others), but also as extensions of history painting. As Herbert Ross puts it, these drawings "update history painting in terms of theories of globalism and rhizomatic schematizations of power. In these works, [Lombardi] replaces the taproot theory crucial to history painting – that great individuals are the initiators of important events – with a new model

based on less centralized, more serendipitous channels of power” (p. 13). If the financial transactions chronicled by Bridges’ banknote represent an attempt, as Lynch claims (1998, p. 7), to envision society as a whole through the travels of a banknote which unites that society’s disparate members through its ongoing travels, then Lombardi’s drawings translate a similar concern into an era in which it is not a quotidian clash of (financially-inflected) encounters that might seem remarkable to readers and writers newly experiencing an unprecedented level of imported commodities for sale, but rather the emergence of a relatively concentrated global elite of key players from a web of dispersed, seemingly “open”, networked transactional structures which, in their very diffuseness, both produce and conceal this elite. In other words, whereas Bridges’ banknote reveals something of the deterritorializing propensities of finance, Lombardi’s drawings, for all their ostensible dispersion, reveal finance’s *reterritorializing* propensities in the form of a new, concentrated yet dispersed global elite. These drawings are attempts, in my reading, to make sense of the simultaneous dispersion *and* concentration of power within globalized capitalism. They implicitly ask: how is it possible to conceptualize new forms of the centralization of power, which must of necessity be continually dispersed, laundered, and otherwise exchanged between various governmental and corporate institutions and players, *as the performative acts of its very coalescence?*

One of the ways in which these drawings grapple with such questions is in their experimentation with the narrative form itself. As Hobbs writes, “We might hypothesize that Lombardi’s narratives correlate well with the enlarged scope of narrative studies and in fact expand them in a new direction, since

his drawn arcs replace the core element of stories, i.e. their action” (p. 47). If, Hobbs reasons, we adopt a structural definition of narrative (such as that of Russian formalist Vladimir Propp) as beginning and ending static situations delimiting a series of events, then Lombardi’s drawings can be considered to be both realistic and abstract: realistic in their use of names as static poles within the narrative, and abstract in that the actions and events themselves are lacunae within the drawings, replaced by mere lines and arrows. Hobbs notes that the abstraction of events in these drawings account for many viewers’ frustration in trying to “read” them, as they have been given, as it were, an architecture of events but little explanation of them (p. 47). Yet by abstracting narrative in this way – by keeping the realist referents of proper names but reducing the events in which they have been implicated to lines – Lombardi produces the meta-event of the structure of power and influence – which is represented, here, as a *character structure* of sorts; an associative dance of recognizable individuals and institutions. By reducing events to lines, he can also tackle multiple plots within the same narrative structure. For instance, Lombardi’s *World Finance Corporation, Miami, Florida, ca. 1970-79 (6th Version)* consists of a circular web of transactions and influences arranged around a roughly central hub (the World Finance Corporation) with twenty-three transactional/influential vectors emanating from it. (One of these, for instance, shows Guillermo Hernández-Cartaya’s influence over the WFC. Hernández-Cartaya, who was both a head of the WFC and a “double agent working with the C.I.A., the Mafia, Fidel Castro and Colombian drug cartels” [Ross 2003, p. 66] had been a central figure in earlier versions of Lombardi’s WFC drawings.) Most of these vectors, in turn, split off into other vectors,

some of which, in turn, burst into a peripheral hub of activity centered around another institution (such as Union de Bancos, Panama). The spidery webs of connectivity are placed within a circular frame of influence (including figures such as Jeb Bush). The web's structure encapsulates something of Lombardi's multiple strains of research into the role of the WFC played in trafficking Columbian drugs and laundering their profits; Hernández-Cartaya assisting the C.I.A.'s money laundering activities while he maintained connections with Narodny Bank, which funded Russian undercover agents; Hernández-Cartaya opening Union de Bancos, Panama, which laundered massive amounts of hot money; Jeb Bush and Armando Codino's \$4.5 million loan from Broward Federal Savings in Sunrise, Florida, which, after being reappraised (and vastly undervalued) by federal investigators, led to Bush and Codino repaying only \$500,000; and many other facets of the bank's expanded networks' undercover activities. The vectors linking the players in this dense field of legally sanctioned, illegal and semi-legal activity, being curvilinear, give a sense of gravity to the hub; the cluster, itself, appears as an autonomous globe. Hobbs describes this as a "circular and quasi three-dimensional configuration where the dispersal of power appears to result from the almost autonomous force of liquid capital's global flows" (2003, p. 66). Though the drawings represent crimes perpetrated by individuals and institutions, the drawings seem almost to ascribe more agency to the flows represented by the lines than to the individual actors themselves – or, at least, they seem to put into question whether the activity comes from the actor or the network. If, in *The Adventures of a Banknote*, the banknote's circulation served as a direct analogue to narrative structure itself as the motion of a

particular viewpoint through space, then Lombardi's Narrative Structures grapple with financial liquidity's challenge to narrative structure. The complexity of financial transactions requires the development of narrative strategies capable of describing multiple, simultaneous plotlines and activities. This multiplicity, in turn, presents itself as a hybrid between literary and pictorial modes of experience. The arrows of multiple plotlines form a dense pictorial web that the wandering eye parses out, reorders into partial, quasi-temporal sequences.⁴⁵ And yet, similarly to *The Adventures of a Banknote*, these works also express a subject position by virtue of their construction of a vantage point from which this information can be viewed. Lombardi acts as a sleuth or an architect of knowledge (Ross, p. 17), and ultimately, in Ross' view, constructs a utopian vantage point from which to consider the wealth of information presented (p. 39). Lombardi constructs an impossible overview, creates a hitherto impossible omniscient perspective – but one that favours structures of connectivity over explications of their particular content.

Nearly the only realist content in the drawings (apart from a few annotations and the conceit that the lines represent a trace of the actual power relations within a given financial milieu) is in Lombardi's use of proper names. The names are nodes, stable points within a dispersed, liquid flow.

⁴⁵ It is tempting to argue, here (though I have yet to encounter another author that has done so) that Jackson Pollock's paintings are an important historical precedent to Lombardi's use of pictorial space. (There are, of course many others: most obvious among these was, perhaps, Lombardi's interest in the use of diagrams and flow charts in the corporate world.) Contrary to the Greenbergian interpretation of Pollock, and more in keeping with the persistence of pictorial elements in the latter's works amidst their "abstract" webs of lines, remains the potential to read Pollock as a harbinger of a combined literary/visual form of understanding pictorial space. According to this reading, Pollock's painterly lines demarcate the picture plane according to a flow of possible plot lines, which occasionally almost-concretize in the form of possible representations emerging from the mesh. The emergence of such a literary/pictorial hybrid is, in many respects, one of the historical shifts that make a study of character important for art history.

For Hobbs, Lombardi's use of proper names represents a new type of realism, according to which pictorial detail is replaced by detail in rendering connectivity. According to this form of realism, "the art object... performs a deliberately limited representational role at the same time that it reveals the identities of its subjects through the relationships it uncovers" (p. 32). (This line of thinking is in keeping with Latour *et. al's* subsequent work on monads as sociological tropes, mentioned above, which sees "within" an individual the scope of his/her networked relations.) While I agree with Hobbs' claim, it is possible to expand on it, in light of Nitzan and Bichler's *Capital as Power* (2009).

The persistence of names in Lombardi's networks, in the first place, could be understood as, in fact, prescient of Nitzan and Bichler's theory of capital as power. These authors argue that both neoclassical economic and Marxian accounts of capitalism share in a fundamental problem: neither can explain precisely what capital is. Neither the 'util', neoclassical economy's hypothetical unit of satisfaction (encompassing goods, assets and their productivity), nor abstract labour (the Marxian base unit of capital, which conceptualizes dollar value as reflective of the amount of social labour required in the production of a good) can account for fluctuations in magnitudes of price, which may have little to do with either production or assets. This is because both theories (having inherited two central dualisms established in the eighteenth century: one between politics and economics, and the other between the real and the nominal) (p. 10), attempt to understand capital as a merely economic entity. For Nitzan and Bichler, the dualistic thinking required to theorize capital as economic served various aims

of both neoclassical and Marxian economics (the former of whom were quite happy to perceive the market as autonomous, and the latter of whom sought to critique its machinations from within); but it is no longer adequate to an analysis of big business, big governments, mergers and other large-scale phenomena that “upset the presumed automaticity and self-regulating tendencies of capitalism” (p. 11). Such developments, which take price farther and farther away from the strictly “economic” considerations of goods, satisfaction or labour, require a less dualistic account of capital, which understands capital as power itself:

The elements of corporate capitalization – namely the firm’s expected earnings and their associated risk perceptions – represent neither the productivity of the owned artefacts nor the abstract labour socially necessary to produce them, but the *power of a corporation’s owners*... Moreover, the power to generate earnings and limit risk goes far beyond the narrow spheres of ‘production’ and ‘markets’ to include the *entire state structure of corporations and governments* (p. 8).

Given the importance, in business, of monopolization, dominance within a particular market, and maintaining important political connections, owners’ *personal* power comes to the fore as a central component in the analysis of capital. If Lombardi’s drawings, as Hobbs claims, replace the taproot theory of individuals’ significance seen in much history painting, they also give these characters a new kind of significance: as nodes of power capable of sculpting capital flows within the state of capital.

Nitzan and Bichler’s understanding of capital as power rests on an important distinction between industry and business. Whereas many economic theories, they note, conflate industry with business, they instead follow the economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen, who both distinguishes

sharply between the two, and insists that they have a *negative* relation to one another. Whereas industry is the sphere of production – a collective, creative endeavour – business is “the domain of pecuniary distribution”, which functions differentially rather than collectively (Nitzan and Bichler, 2009, p. 15), in order to control and limit industry. Industry, within capitalism, does not function for its own sake, but rather for that of business. The ownership of industry by modern capitalists “doesn’t contribute to industry; it merely controls it for profitable ends. And since owners are absent from industry, the only way for them to exact their profit is by ‘sabotaging’ industry” (p. 16). In this view, it is not industry or production that acts as the basis of capitalism; rather, it is the control of industry by business – industry’s sabotage at the hands of business – which produces differential gains from what could otherwise be collectivist enterprise. “Ultimately”, Nitzan and Bichler argue, “capitalists are driven not to produce things but to control people” (p. 17). Capital, as power, is precisely what exerts that control (as well as the means of securing that control and its symbolic representation). Further, power, in these authors’ final analysis, is “confidence in obedience. It expresses the certainty of the rulers in the submissiveness of the ruled” (p. 18). If confidence is high, rulers will actively shape a society; if it is low, they might be more inclined to react to potential threats, rather than to initiate changes.

Lombardi’s diagram-drawings, which focus on (often quite prominent) names and institutions, support precisely this view of capital. They speak not of industry, but of business (exemplified in large part, here, by financial institutions) as the exertion of power in what Nitzan and Bichler would call the state of capital (which comprises both corporate and governmental

institutions, embodying “the same encompassing mode of power”) (p. 8). Nitzan and Bichler’s conception of the state of capital as a unified corporate/governmental field might, arguably, downplay some of the important conflicts arising between governments’ and corporations’ respective geopolitical territories and infrastructural responsibilities (which are drawn out more sharply in, say, Benjamin Bratton’s Stactivist work, or Evgeny Morozov’s critiques of the insufficiently contested, increasingly political roles assumed by Silicon Valley) (Bratton, 2014; Morozov, 2011). Yet the “state of capital” perfectly suits Lombardi’s choice of subjects: instances of collusion, tax evasion, insider trading, money laundering, the acquisition of prominent board members with strong political connections and other nefarious activities that reveal capitalization as the accumulation of power (whether legally, quasi-legally or illegally) across corporate and governmental platforms. The well-known name – which gathers influence, power, and perhaps notoriety as it makes its transactions – is another kind of symbolic representation of that power.

Nonetheless, the names in Lombardi’s drawings do not circulate uncontested; some are accompanied with annotations in red letters, which indicate their conflicts with the law. (For instance, *World Finance Corporation, Miami, Florida, ca. 1970-79 [6th Version]* notes that Guillermo Hernández-Cartaya was convicted in 1982.) The proper name occupies a contested space between two conflicting connotations: power wielding, on the one hand, and legal rights and responsibilities, on the other. The proper name is subject to law; a proper noun, a distinct signifier, it is the potential subject of crime, the potential bearer of a crime’s responsibility. But the name which

accumulates enough clout can act in ways that most cannot: using its influence to bend the law, acquire privileged access, produce an oversight, or camouflage its private dealings into the governmental fabric to such an extent that to submit it to a full criminal investigation (as was the case with Guillermo Hernández-Cartaya of the World Finance Corporation) would “compromise national security” (Hobbs, 2003, p. 70). The name, made of characters, is an object, a character, which might, if it wields enough power, produce the means through which it can evade its status as subject to law. Composed of characters (letters, names, individuals, corporations), Lombardi’s structures reveal the centralization of power within dispersed networks (using drawing as an act of centralization, an occasion for omniscience). Operating at the basis of this centralization of power, the proper name oscillates between connoting an egalitarian, collectivist conception of human right and responsibility, on the one hand, and a differential site for the accumulation of power, on the other – whose logic, ultimately, is one of sabotage.

Amir Chasson

In quite a different way, Amir Chasson’s paintings also analyze the role of individuals within the spheres of business and finance. His series of painted diptychs from 2009-2011 feature quasi-realistic portraits of slightly awkward looking men: presumably businessmen, most often against a plain background, as if posing at a portrait studio. Next to the portraits are textured, layered canvases portraying abstract diagrams and charts, which often look as though they might convey financial or sociological information, except that there is no contextualizing information or legend with which to understand them (see *Ten dimensional tetrahedron*, 2011, Figure 9 and *Green Three*

Dimensional Topo Map Using Fishnet Lines, 2010, Figure 10). These works operate by means of stark contrasts: between portrait and diagram; between the rough, painterly texture of the diagram canvases and their “cool”, precisely-rendered objects; and, more minutely, between the photorealistic conceit the portraits entertain and their awkward handling upon close examination (the brushwork appears slightly inconsistent; the dimensions of the faces are more akin to a collaged sense of spatiality than to any deep, structural engagement with the architecture of the face). Awash with contrast, the eye seeks similarity. Darting back and forth between the pairs of canvases, it formulates transitions (formal, narrative, conceptual) between face and diagram. An arrow jutting out of a tetrahedron seems to answer to something of the upward tilt of a middle-aged man’s jaw; a topographical diagram, describing spiky irregularities emerging from a relatively flat surface, stands in for an idea of the portrait as a spatial descriptor, a device that morphs a flat surface, transforms a spatial plane into a facial plane by pulling out nose, cheek and brow. In a sense, the diagrams continue the act of painting the portraits for us; their spatial cues pull on the portraits, as if applying a bit of makeup to the latter’s spatial gestures. Thus, these works present the possibility that “painting” – as in the act of visually morphing a flat surface into a series of virtual mottled planes – can be done by a non-human actant outside of a particular canvas; an external perceptual influence which actively reconfigures a painting’s perceptual field over time. This inserts an Eisensteinian montage logic into painting. The principle according to which one image, in a filmic sequence, will magnetize the perceptual/semantic field of the next over time is re-envisioned here as a painterly device.

Of course, this would certainly not be the first time that an idea of montage or filmic sequencing has entered into painting (I think of Rauschenberg's near-identical diptychs, or Joyce Wieland's canvases showing temporal progression by means of a conceit of progressing film stills, as in *Sailboat Sinking*, 1965, to name but a few examples). But what seems remarkable here is that this cultural logic, in Chasson's work, is absorbed into the temporalities of painterly looking. Juxtaposition, here, appears not as something that could go on ad infinitum, but as a lure for the eye to invent a transition between disparate members of a viewing a pair. And what makes this act of inventing transition seem so rooted in pairing (other than the obvious fact that these works are diptychs) is the extent to which this act of pairing seems so utterly asymmetrical (at least at first). The way that one canvas inflects the other is *not* a reciprocal perceptual/conceptual operation – for what the diagrams lend to the faces – a perceptual pulling on the face itself, a prosthetic physiognomy – the faces do not at first appear to offer back to the diagrams. Instead, they offer the diagrams a *narrative* infusion; a social life (which they always already have) doubled back to them by virtue of the faces' ready ability to signify sociality by means of a scenario, a figure, a character. The men's aspects function as anchors in a scenario navigable by means of available realist (literary) tropes. Are these the faces of the cognitarians "behind" the sociological, mathematical or financial work presented? Are they the purveyors of such abstracted information? Are they the repressed of the diagrammatic image – the abject, psychologised individuals who bear the privileges and burdens of such impersonal exactitudes of information? Are they the indexical referents for their

respective, legend-free diagrams? The real estate agent's portrait; the CEO's CV; the social climber's profile pic. The portraits in Chasson's paintings seem to speak to an aspiration to ascendancy carried out, in part, as a proximity of person to information. In another sense, they carry out the aspirational tendencies that the form of the businessman's portrait implies, which is based, in part, on the projection of confidence. (Sianne Ngai, in her brilliant study of Melville's *The Confidence Man* [2005, p. 62], argues that confidence is the affective tonality of capital itself, and can circulate within scenarios of capitalist exchange as a feeling that nobody actually feels: one agent falsely projecting it to the next and so on.) Stories, suggested ties between the images, swarm up in the gap between the canvases; but none of them seem fit to fill the gap. All that is left is a sense of confidence (orbits of confidence, belonging to both face and diagram's forms of assertiveness) in the process of breaking down, as it plays out on faces overfull with ambivalence and distortions. Overfullness – as it pulls apart faces or dances in diagrams awkwardly forced onto pockmarked surfaces – disallows the unanimity of feeling that the “confident” demeanour must display.

Each image, in itself, entertains an instability, inviting perception to navigate various kinds of gap, but also to come to terms with how unnatural, how hard won, are perception's inventions of stability and self-similarity. The painterly textures hovering, in glossy paint, “behind” the carefully rendered diagrams, with no apparent causal relation to the latter's rigid lines, introduce a wedge of expressivity into the diagram's informative aesthetic. This meeting of texture and information both produces a provisional agreement between them (suggesting that the diagrams, freed of their measures and legends,

might collapse into “pure” expressivity), and upsets that momentary agreement, playing two seemingly incompatible aesthetics (one belonging to the figure, the other to the ground) against each other. But even more striking are the changes that happen over a prolonged engagement with the painted faces. Little by little, features appear to unmoor themselves from the face; eyes, oddly disproportioned, float in a sea of what should be their anchor: the socket. Noses protrude asymmetrically, rendered in the most skewed perspective. Curled up mouths lose their relationship to skin and jaw, becoming worm-like and autonomous on a fleshy field. Little parcels of features seem to swim away from the rest of the face. The face, itself, comes in and out of various states of comprehensibility; at times, it comes into focus as a face, and at other times, this strange autonomy of features seems to pull it beyond recognition, forcing viewers to come to terms with a momentary inability to produce a whole out of constituent parts, even in such a conventional form as the portrait.

What happens to perception in Chasson’s portraits seems akin to the bizarre perceptual operations chronicled in Oliver Sacks’ exquisite descriptions of his encounters with patients suffering from rare neurological disorders. In *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* (1987), for instance, Sacks describes a brilliant and charming musician and teacher, Dr. P., who suffered from a profound visual agnosia owing to a tumour or pronounced degenerative process localized to the visual cortex of his brain. This man was able to see perfectly well (with a few exceptions) – but was often completely unable to make the cognitive leap from seeing to recognition. While he had no trouble in recognizing people from their voices or movements, he would not

be able to recognize faces unless by one pronounced feature; he could distinguish particular features but could not get a sense of the face as a whole. Even in their first encounter, Sacks noticed that the man looked at him strangely, as if scanning the face, searching it for singularities, rather than apprehending it altogether. Dr. P., Sacks remarks, “construed the world as a computer construes it, by means of key features and schematic relationships” (1987, p. 15). When handed a glove and asked what it might be, the musician gives a remarkably abstract response. Seeing it but not comprehending it, he describes it as a “continuous surface... infolded on itself”, that might be a container of some sort. When asked what, precisely, this infolded surface might contain, Dr. P. exclaims, “it would contain its contents!” with a laugh – and then speculates that perhaps it could function as a coin purse for coins of five different sizes (p. 14). (Insofar as there is abstraction in Dr. P.’s perception, there is also a compensatory practice of invention; strange new objects for thought, like the five-pronged coin purse, spring into being.) What is lacking in Dr. P.’s perception Sacks describes repeatedly in terms of physiognomy and persona. When Dr. P. mistakes a National Geographic photograph of an unbroken expanse of desert for an image of a riverside guesthouse with diners awaiting their dinner on the patio – as if meandering off into pure invention based on an extrapolation from a few of the image’s tiniest details – Sacks remarks, “He never entered into a relation with the picture as a whole – never faced, so to speak, *its* physiognomy” (p. 10-11). When he fails to recognize photographs of his family and friends, Sacks concludes, “A face, to us, is a person looking out – we see, as it were, the

person through his *persona*, his face. But for Dr. P. there was no *persona* in this sense – no outward *persona*, and no person within” (p. 13).

Sacks’ strikingly detailed descriptions of neurological anomalies carry with them several claims both tacit and explicit. They reclaim the captivating, accessible narratives once common to scientific writing (for instance, that of Darwin) for neurology. They keep alive the art of vivid description of the doctor-patient encounter in an era suffering from a bureaucratization of medical practices, and a resultant loss of nuanced descriptions in medical records (which have been largely replaced by a tick-box system – one symptom of investor oppression within financialized capitalism, which seeks to increase profitability by maximizing the efficiency of encounter). In portraying a relational encounter between a person with highly abnormal perception and a highly-trained examiner of consciousness, these narratives pull apart “normal” perception, reveal something of the layers of complex relational procedures – neural twists and turns, inter-objective relations, interactions between action and perception – that must be in place in order for people to be able to take for granted what they see. Though his work, of course, points to the importance of neural activity, Sacks never seems to ascribe a purely neurological causality to his patient’s experiences; on the contrary, he insists on house visits, pays close attention to the ways in which his patients navigate their worlds, their relationships, their objects. In this way, his approach is akin to a growing contingent of philosopher/neuroscientists, best typified, perhaps, by Alva Nöe, who argues (2009) that consciousness cannot be found locked away “within” the brain, but, rather, is something that we do, very much in the world, through interaction. With their detailed relational

mesh, Sacks' narratives examine consciousness in this extended sense, as an ongoing mediation between patient and world. In undoing normal perception, these narratives also undo the objects perceived. These undoings are fertile soil for thought experiments: what might it mean to subtract the persona from the person? What might it be to depart from the perceptual procedures associated with physiognomy – to perceive the world abstractly, heterogeneously, without a capacity for the recognition objects, for an object-oriented ontology?

Do Chasson's abstracted financial diagrams have a physiognomy – like Sacks' photograph of the desert does, or like the portraits they are paired with surely do? In this question (to which the diptychs seem to clearly answer “yes”), finally, the doubly infusive procedure by which one canvas in Chasson's diptychs inflects the other comes to a parallel. For the portrait – a device that, in the slow obstinacy of its features' relations to the whole face, dismantles normal, transparent perception – inflicts *its* abstraction on the diagram. It asks us to recognize the tasks of understanding finance and other forms of informational power as physiognomic in ways in which we are not necessarily equipped to perceive. It uses perception as the ground on which it claims that power, in semicapitalism, cannot be subjected to a myth of the given. It asks anew what kind of perception might naturalize the physiognomy of finance, might pull its “face” into focus, this object which so readily evades the realm of the sensible (even though we might ubiquitously sense its effects.) It proposes that, in an era of information oversaturation, in which, as Jameson describes, the task of understanding globalized finance is one of “unprecedented magnitude”, the ability to synthesize complex information – to

make the perceptual leap from information to *its* physiognomy – takes on a new import, becomes a contested terrain in the politics of representation. What might be required, these paintings seem to suggest, is to construct partial objects of study that denaturalize perception, and in so doing, might themselves produce (like Dr. P.'s five-pronged coin purse) means for constructing, dismantling and reconstructing physiognomies of finance, which ferry finance to the edges of the perceptible.

Conclusion

The Adventures of a Banknote, Lombardi's *Narrative Structures*, and Chasson's diptychs represent three possible approaches to economic figuration that might be understood as complex, iterative, and rife with both enunciative potentials and blind spots. The *Banknote* enacts an embedded, first person strategy based on personifying the economy. In so doing, it creates a link between the situated perceptual purview of the banknote, which unites strings of particulars in its travels, and a periphery of larger-scale referents. (For instance, we see the increased scope of international trade – and colonial exploits – both “close up”, through the banknote's perceptions and the characters' encounters with commerce and commodities; and in the extreme distance, in, say, the passing mention of the sea captain's activities on a slave ship in Africa.) The task of the narrative space in the story is to envision the economy as a field of overlapping perceptions and encounters. Lombardi's drawings construct omniscient narrative structures for global finance. They allow viewers to perceive that which is normally hidden: an overview of highly secretive transactions by the global elite. They give narrative logic pictorial dimensions by broadening the scope of narrative

beyond linearity; in doing so, they obfuscate particulars about the relations between actors in favour of clearly creating a place for them in a network. These networks of characters point to the tension between character as container for human right and as vehicle of power. Chasson's diptychs call into question the perceptual schisms between feature and physiognomy, and between two seemingly distinct kinds of complex information: the face and the diagram. They render face and finance incomprehensible, in order to point to the paucity of perception in the face of finance's physiognomy. In Bridges' narratives, the economy possesses perception; in Lombardi's, the economy is rendered perceptible; and in Chasson's paintings, the economy ruptures, defamiliarizes perception; or, conversely, perception is rendered inadequate to the tasks of conceptualizing the economy.

Of course, there are many other works in both art and literature that I could have chosen to discuss: Cildo Meireles' *Insertions into Ideological Circuits 2: Banknote Project* (1970), in which the artist stamped subversive messages (such as "Yankees Go Home!") onto banknotes before placing them back into circulation; Hans Haacke's *Shapolsky et. al Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (1971); Iain Baxter's "landscapes" made from framed Canadian bills; Melville's *The Confidence Man* (1857) and Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875), each of which complexly describes social scenarios in which finance wreaks havoc. But it seems to me that the three strategies Bridges, Lombardi and Chasson explore delineate between them a broad and relatively inclusive range of possible strategies for mapping relations between economy, character and perception. I have chosen not to historically contextualize these

works overmuch, in favour of emphasizing their ability to produce new meanings out of context, or even be extended by future works. It is precisely in exploring the *perception* of the economy – the economy’s perception, the economy’s production of perceptions – that these strategies can raise questions about the aesthetics of finance. By inviting viewers and readers to construct a financial imaginary on shaky ground – personifying, abstracting, and de-familiarizing finance – these works challenge many of the ways in which art has been understood to relate to economy and finance: either, reductively, as a mere “reflection” or “expression” of finance (perhaps in spite of its alleged “critical” intentions), or (within the framework of Marxist criticism), as either expressive of a reified set of signifiers demarcating class positions through taste, conspicuous consumption, displays of wealth, and the like; or, more broadly, as expressive of a “pan-capitalist” alienation. Important though such analyses may be, they do not fully address the performative dimensions of economic figuration. In rendering the economy within synthetic, unfamiliar perceptual purviews, the narrative and pictorial structures I have chosen escape some of the normative tendencies often found in economic narratives proffered by organizations such as Positive Money, and, perhaps, point to ways in which it might be possible to reframe discussions on the democratic distribution of information on incomprehensibly vast financial networks.

Chapter 3

“All Data is Credit Data”: Reputation, Regulation and Character in the Entrepreneurial Imaginary

In 2012, financial services entrepreneur and ZestFinance.com CEO Douglas Merrill told the *New York Times*: “All data is credit data. We just don’t know how to use it yet” (Hardy). Merrill, whose background includes degrees in psychology and social and political organization, worked as Chief Information Officer and Vice President of Engineering at Google before founding ZestFinance.com (formerly ZestCash). This Los Angeles-based financial services tech company uses big data to help its client companies make better credit underwriting decisions. In doing so, ZestFinance also claims to provide better credit options for the so-called “underbanked”: those whose reliability as borrowers may well exceed their credit score, due to their having either no credit history or a poor one. As Patrick Jenkins from the *Financial Times* describes it, ZestFinance operates on a simple theory: “that consumers’ online behaviour can be a decent proxy for their reliability in managing money” (2014). ZestFinance.com is one of a spate of recent “fintech” startups: companies that use big data analytics to improve, expand, update or even (to use the inflated rhetoric that the companies might like me to use) revolutionize current banking and lending practices. But such claims to innovation seem to hinge on a concept of realism, on a claim to better understand borrowers’ propensities – their “true” characters, as it were. (Indeed, a screen grab of the fintech company VisualDNA’s homepage from

November 2014 does exactly that, inviting visitors to “take a personality test and find your true character” – see Figure 11.)

What are some of the implications of new methods of correlating character and finance for art practices – and what forms of insight might art practices whose interests are directly “economic” provide in the newly aestheticized fields of finance? In this chapter, I describe developments in, first, the fintech industry and, second, what Rachel Botsman and others have termed the reputation economy. In the latter, reputation, in itself, becomes a form of capital, of sorts; trust, in turn, acts a kind of currency. Such developments are particularly palpable in online forums and so-called “World 3.0” businesses such as Airbnb, which sell bespoke local services, social encounters or relations – personal exchanges scaled up via online platforms. Before I consider the aesthetic implications of these developments, I must first pose two background questions about these terrains (to which, admittedly, I am neither aiming to give, nor capable of giving, particularly technical answers; rather, my analyses are intended to open up ways of thinking about the subjective implications of these terrains). First of all, how are the fintech industry and the reputation economy related to each other? Secondly, if fintech and the reputation economy do, indeed, work together to form the front lines of a multifaceted and ever-shifting economic regime, how do they redistribute power between users, micro-entrepreneurs and corporations? After exploring these questions about the structural effects of the reputation economy, I turn to a question that is (in something akin to Mondzain’s understanding of economy mentioned in the previous chapter) economic in its very aestheticism. If the idea of perceiving “good” character is both an

aesthetic construct (routinely felt and judged when, for instance, someone meets a prospective employer, renter, friend, colleague or partner for the first time) and an increasingly quantified, calculated phenomenon (in both big data analytics and in the increasing visibility of online metrics for measuring “clout”), what is the new economic role of this phenomenon (reflexive? vestigial?) as the very image of a meeting point between the *perception* and *calculation* of valuable personal qualities?

In my analysis of the relationships between the economy of “credit data” envisioned by fintech and the reputation economy enabled by “World 3.0,” it is productive to think of these developments as an unconscious/conscious “rhyming couplet,” or pair of developments. Whereas the architectures of the reputation economy enable and encourage the conscious self-projection of trustworthy characteristics, the fintech industry scours online behaviour for its hidden, unconscious signs. Both sides of this unconscious/conscious equation reveal a great deal about the redistributions of power enabled by online platforms (which, of course, are backed by highly centralized power, concentrated in the hands of a small number of financial players who wield stupendous economic advantages by operating sophisticated servers). The reputation economy encourages micro-entrepreneurs to self-regulate their behaviour in a highly competitive environment that arises, in part, from a systemic evisceration of the middle class. (Scarcity of long-term, well-paid work increases competition for short-term contracts, bit work, etc.) In such competitive environments, corporations can benefit from reputation by viewing it as both an embodiment of competition and a means through which to outsource regulation, and

encourage individual users to assume systemic risk. (In this economy, we could say, reputation replaces regulation.) On the “unconscious” side of the equation, fintech companies increase access to credit for the “underbanked,” thereby expanding the credit market; in doing so, they also benefit from an online architecture that obfuscates provenance. In other words, as Jaron Lanier (2014) points out, pervasive design decisions, such as one-way linking rather than two-way linking, make it very difficult for those without powerful servers and access to sophisticated computation to understand online information or attention traffic patterns; this leads to a surveillance economy based on garnering value by “spying” on, and aggregating, user activities more effectively than one’s competitors. By reconstructing provenance, those who practice big data analytics wield advantage over competitors with less powerful computational abilities; they also invent a new master’s discourse (to borrow Lacan’s term), claiming to discern the “truth” about their subjects.

In this milieu, it is safe, I think, to assume that cultural understandings – and aesthetic judgments – of “goodness” are shifting – perhaps fundamentally. How might these emerging conditions change the implications of artworks’ depiction of the relations between character and economy, past and present? French Fluxus artist Robert Filliou’s work, from the 1960s until his death in 1987, enacted principles of what Filliou called the “poetic economy”, in which objects could be exchanged based on the amount of innocence, imagination and freedom they were worth. While such thinking might have arisen from the utopian, radical economic thought of Charles Fourier (whose ideas Filliou espoused in his work), given recent shifts, could the “poetic economy” be considered a precursor for neoliberal-era

apparatuses through which qualities associated with character come to be directly valued? If so, how can one conceptualize such a shift without simply bemoaning the loss of economic “innocence” in broad and general terms, in keeping with, say, Boltanski and Chiapello’s account of the recuperation of 1960s artistic critique in 1990s management discourse (2007) – which, as Rancière points out, is extremely general and, for the most part, simply “provides fuel for the melancholic version of leftism” (2009, p. 35)? Might it be that the widespread, financialized interests in “good” character, as seen in fintech and the reputation economy, only reveal their precise dimensions and proportions in proximity to supposedly “bad” or “undesirable” character traits? Might it be something like, say, Lizzie Fitch and Ryan Trecartin’s recent exhibition at the Zabłudowicz Collection, London (2014), that precisely tests the limits of creditworthiness, using “ugly”, yet “creditworthy” character traits to demonstrate that credit must always rely on a set of locally shared assumptions as to what might be considered “desirable” behaviour? Ultimately, fintech and the reputation economy challenge artists to reconceptualise “goodness” as “creditworthiness.” However, as such, goodness becomes a kind of *application* – and in the artworks I analyze, the question as to which credit-granting organization/apparatus goodness “applies” remains radically open.

The Mathematical Unconscious

Major players in the “fintech” industry can claim to capture “true character” through mathematical acts akin to an unconscious reading of “symptoms” of creditworthiness. (While there is a wide range of fintech innovations, including streamlining e-commerce payments and developing

software that can deal with crypto-currency platforms, here I will focus on companies such as ZestFinance and VisualDNA's sophisticated methods for reading creditworthiness as a property of individual users.) By analyzing traces from users' online and social media activity, ZestFinance can claim to improve underwriting by 40% compared to the best-in-class industry standard (zestfinance.com). Further, such realism – such accuracy in calculating credit risk – might result from unexpected methods for analyzing existing data. As Merrill explains in an interview with the *New York Times*, “All data is credit data... This is the math we all learned at Google. A page was important for what was on it, but also for how good the grammar was, what the type font was, when it was created or edited. Everything... Data matters. More data is always better” (Hardy, 2012). This statement aptly summarizes Merrill's conception of credit data as something that might be read obliquely, manifesting in unexpected ways, through unconscious signs, if only it is interpreted with the “right” mathematics.

Of course, Merrill's comments reflect a highly idiosyncratic understanding of the significance and function of “all data.” It would be very easy to imagine a world in which data, as such (for instance, on weather patterns, astronomical phenomena or neurological processing), were not particularly closely linked to credit. Yet in a neoliberal era in which both household and government debt have skyrocketed; in which access to privatized social rites such as home ownership or, more broadly, having a family are increasingly predicated on access to credit; and in which intangible assets such as future profits on resources or cognitive capacities take on increasing importance, Merrill's pronouncement provides a crystalline image

of the pervasive power of speculative value (both qualitative and quantified), harnessed by data analytics, and attached to individuals. It encapsulates the shape of an entrepreneurial imaginary – an avant-garde, if you will, in the business world – which ever more pervasively links data to character (in the Heraclitean sense of a tendency-as-destiny), and character, in turn, to finance: to the propensity to repay, and to behave reliably and responsibly with respect to money and other mediators of exchange. Such links are certainly not new; as Graeber (2011), Lazzarato (2012), Nietzsche (1967), Mondzain (2005) and others have suggested, the links between economy, debt and morality are very old indeed. Graeber, for instance, contends that the very languages of money and morality have been closely intertwined for millennia; Mondzain argues that the concept of economy inherited from the time of the Byzantine iconoclastic crisis is the very form of humanism today. That said, the pervasiveness of the link between finance and (moral) character achieved through data analytics has fundamentally shifted, due to both the speculative logic of the credit market and fundamental shifts in computational practices. In an era of fintech, quantitatively assessing “character,” institutionalized as risk assessment, takes on new proportions, and new algorithmic witnesses.

As Jaron Lanier points out (2014, p. 110-113), so-called “big data” might, in fact, refer to two different things: big data in the sciences, and big data in business. On the one hand, in scientific analyses of very large data sets, robust methodology, skepticism, and the reproducibility of experiments to make sure that correlation has not been confused with causation are tantamount. On the other hand, business and financial uses of big data seek

profitability, not truth. As such, big data analytics used in high speed trading and computational business practices tend not to be overly concerned with distinguishing between correlation and causation. If a calculation works, it may be used. The drive to treat all data as credit data within the fintech industry, clearly, falls within the latter set of data analytic practices. It functionalizes data as a tool for expressing the power relation between creditor and debtor, both literalizing Deleuze's pronouncement (1992) that, in a control society, man is controlled by debt; and driving that control into the very representational fabric of his being "creditworthy" (or otherwise). Merrill's pronouncement focalizes "all data" toward this purpose, rendering data as a tool with which to paint a truthful picture of a person from the perspective of key measures of financial reliability, which might, in turn, have recursive financial effects (for instance, rendering one person as a good credit risk, thereby driving her interest rates down and making her more likely to be able to manage her loans – or, conversely, strapping other, "high-risk" prospective borrowers with prohibitively high interest rates, thus making them less likely to behave reliably as debtors).⁴⁶ In addition to this potential recursivity, Merrill's statement expresses a relation between data, quantity, and realism in portraying risk. "More data is always better;" it means more predictive accuracy when rendered in the right math, more fodder for equations. Further, in encapsulating a sense of the many oblique angles along which data analytics might inquire in their drive to determine creditworthiness (not only looking at the content of messages but also their form, their grammar, their metadata), Merrill renders data analytics as something akin to a

⁴⁶ For more on the "cascading disadvantages" of bad credit, see, for instance, Pasquale (2011).

psychoanalytic practice, a search to digitally read and interpret symptoms on the skin of one's digital being, which run alongside (and possibly counter to) conscious online self-expression. Data mining digs for unconscious truth, reveals symptoms. (In the words of a TV character, an analyst of email records in the American legal and political drama *The Good Wife*, "metadata don't lie.") (*Hail Mary*, 2015).

By using big data to make more accurate risk assessments, Merrill's company can claim to be doing both lenders and borrowers a favour. Lenders, its website claims, can save money by lowering default rates. Worthy borrowers with unimpressive credit histories can gain much-needed access to loans. In an impassioned 2012 TEDx talk prominently displayed on his company's website, Merrill paints a picture of the underbanked by describing his own sister-in-law, a single mother of three and a full time student with a full time job who, like more than half of Americans, would not be able to come up with a few hundred dollars to deal with an emergency on a few weeks' notice (www.zestfinance.com). For responsible, yet underbanked prospective borrowers like Merrill's sister-in-law, simply getting a flat tire could be the beginning of a downward financial spiral. Painting a more accurate picture of their character using big data, Merrill claims, ameliorates the situation. FICO® credit scores, invented in the 1970s, are "largely non-predictive." Invented at a time when computation was difficult and data storage was very expensive, FICO® was built on logistic regression, a basic, probabilistic statistical method ideally suited to working with small data sets. The financial world, as Merrill puts it, is "stuck in FICO® Land;" yet with so many new data mining methods currently being developed at Google, Amazon and other tech and commerce

companies, there is no reason why this industry cannot shed its fear of “using all data as credit data,” thus helping those without recognizable credit scores to obtain the loans they deserve (www.zestfinance.com). Thus, a prospective borrower who does not have sufficient creditworthiness for a subprime credit card, but who is far less of a credit risk than a payday loan company’s interest rates would warrant, can get something in between two exorbitant, though vastly different, interest rates. “Close your eyes and imagine,” Merrill intones, “a world in which subprime credit is not dominated by FICO®, but is actually dominated by your behaviour... really deep, rich understandings of you as a person” (www.zestfinance.com). This system, Merrill suggests, would be, in some ways, similar to the days before FICO®, when bankers would assess a prospective borrower based on personal meetings and gut instincts. But it would be different in that such holistic “instincts” could be informed with much more complex, nuanced information than simply judging someone’s character on the spot could provide. Speaking to Wired UK, Merrill says that denying people access to decent credit rates is not fair, because “credit is the entry point to modern society.” To use big data well, however, to make this fairness come about, takes much more than simply solid math; it takes great inventiveness to work with data. As Merrill puts it, “It’s not just about science, it’s also about art. The hottest job should be data artist – those who understand the quirks of data” (Clark, 2013). For Merrill, then, both mathematical and perceptual practices of discernment are art forms, and require subtlety, sophistication and sound judgment to produce – although big data analytics, when used with sophistication, can render far more nuanced readings of an individual’s propensity.

Yet such expressions of the rarefied skills required to analyze data are offset by the fintech industry's positivist bent and truth-centered assertions. Gil Elbaz, former head of Google's engineering office and CEO of Factual, expresses the fintech and information industry's positivist bent quite clearly. (He was also an early investor in Merrill's company.) His company, Factual, sells information to companies on a sliding scale, depending on how much it is used. It employs advanced mathematicians and data scientists from Google and LinkedIn, and boasts customers such as Facebook, CitySearch and AT&T. According to Elbaz, Factual's purpose is to provide information for scientists to watch and companies to use. (Thus, he conceptualizes the divide between big data for science and for business within his business model.) Elbaz' father recalls that when Elbaz, who grew up in Israel, was told about the Israel-Palestine conflict, he responded that "the hatred would end if the two sides could just agree on the facts" (Hardy, 2012). Facts, for Elbaz, are conflict reducing, purely truthful (even if they require acts of interpretation) rather than socially constructed. Such truthful bases can also be found, in Elbaz' business model, the in personal realm, if in a more medical sense than in Merrill's more speculative construction of character. As Elbaz explains: "Lately, I've been thinking that we need to get more personal data... I want to figure out a way... to get people to leave their data to science" (Hardy, 2012). Facts such as "genetic information, what they ate, when and where they exercised — ideally, for everyone on the planet, now and forever" (Hardy, 2012) could be used to further the health sciences in the future. Of course, such facts could just as easily be used to police access to jobs, health care and insurance options – a possibility to which Elbaz draws less attention in his

interview. Nevertheless, within fintech companies whose practices are primarily predictive, we could argue that there is a one-step removal from such “factual” ground, in that, however compelling computational analyses of tendency might be, the future cannot be predetermined in advance.

Yet still, a discourse of truth prevails. For instance, the Shoreditch, London-based VisualDNA offers credit scoring based on psychometric testing. Its founder, Alex Willcock, quips, “Not everyone has a credit score, but everyone has a personality type” (Jenkins, 2014). In addition to analyzing IP address activity, VisualDNA also administers a 10-15 minute personality test, which mostly asks test-takers to choose between images meant to reveal attitude toward risk. For instance, questions might ask quiz-takers to choose a favourite form of leisure: a day out with the family, a night of partying, or a good book? “Psychology + big data = understanding,” VisualDNA’s website homepage claims. As of November 2014, a bar along the bottom of the homepage added: “take a personality quiz and find your true character” (visualDNA.com, Nov 2014; see Figure 11). However, in 2015 and current at the time of writing, this has been changed to read: “Think you’re agreeable or conscientious? Take a personality quiz and find out!” (visualDNA.com, May 2015). (Was the language of “character” too much, too judgment-rich for VisualDNA’s demographic?) VisualDNA has been running in Russia for a few years via Syvaznoy, a phone retailer-cum-bank; some lenders who have used their services report a 50% decrease in loan default rates (Jenkins, 2014). As a result, Experian (the credit rating agency) and Mastercard have signed on as clients. Willcock aims to target 30 million of 1.9 billion “addressable

unbanked” over the next few years using these psychometric credit-scoring methods. As Jenkins (2014) describes it:

The world is not going back to the old order of a bank manager knowing each of his customers individually and making credit judgments on that basis. Big data and psychometric tests have the potential to replicate the personal touch, and ensure lenders know more about their customers than they ever used to.

Jenkins, Willcock and Merrill clearly link big data analytics with a “personal touch,” seamlessly blending quantitative character analyses with more “intuitive,” qualitative conceptions of character discernment.⁴⁷ Such claims to artfulness, truth and positivism require “master” figures, who are capable, through calculation, of knowing borrowers better than they know themselves. Like early psychoanalysts who claimed to interpret the meanings of dreams as if they could be read by a single, skilled eye, fintech calculates destinies, and in doing so, performs them, makes them true.

If, for Heraclitus, character was “destiny,” perhaps for Merrill and others of our time, character, as pervasively *represented* destiny, becomes more of a gateway. A future-oriented concept such as character, in an era of widespread speculation, enables access to the security and rites of passage that, for a shrinking and increasingly pressed middle class, must be accessed through credit. Yet it is also a financial frontier for fintech companies whose business models depend, at least in part, on expanding the credit market to the “underbanked,” and perpetuating a passive language according to which it is tech companies and not, say, peers, who can ultimately determine a

⁴⁷ In the next chapter, I further discuss the history of FICO® credit scoring, which replaced more informal methods for granting loans, based on lenders’ discernment (McClanahan 2014). Qualitative and quantitative conceptions of credit scoring continue to shift, complement and augment each other (McClanahan 2014, Dunkley 2014).

person's character. This is the transactional language of a surveillance economy, made possible by online design choices favouring anonymity over sociality, and sophisticated servers over content providers (see Lanier, 2014). While some have addressed concerns over privacy that fintech exacerbates, amongst financial and tech journalists, the response to startups such as Merrill's has tended to be positive. Peter Jenkins of the Financial Times writes, "Admittedly, some of the data mining that fintech companies carry out makes liberty campaigners jittery. On balance, though, it is refreshing to see new ideas being brought to the traditionally obscure process of granting consumer credit" (2014).

The Reputation Economy

If fintech presents the unconscious side of online reputation, which must be analyzed en masse by mathematicians and data experts, the reputation economy represents the conscious side of this equation. So-called "World 3.0" businesses – such as Uber, TaskRabbit and Airbnb – depend on reputation, encouraging users to leave reviews for each other in order to garner support for their entrepreneurial or consumptive activities. Such businesses model new ways to manage the sale of "real life" experience or service with online reputation as a guarantor; to wit, on these platforms, reputation outsources regulation.

One of the most prominent "World 3.0" businesses is Airbnb. (As of March 2015, the company has been valued at \$20 billion.) (Clampet, 2015) Airbnb was founded by Brian Chesky (its current CEO) and Joe Gebbia. Their background was in art and design; they attended the Rhode Island School of

Design and initially intended to start a design business together. After studying at RISD, Chesky moved to Los Angeles and worked as a designer; dissatisfied with the post, he moved to San Francisco to join Gebbia and start a business. They were completely broke, and there was a design conference coming to town, which they planned to attend. They noticed that all of the hotels listed on the conference website were already sold out; needing to come up with a way to pay their rent, they decided to blow up some air mattresses in their apartment, rent them out, and make breakfast for whoever came. The range of people who wanted to come surprised them; and eventually, after many stops and starts, they turned Airbnb into a business. By Chesky's own account, he was incredibly naïve at the start of this project; he had never heard of couch surfing before. (In a sense, then, he and Gebbia accidentally financialized a domain that already existed, in a different form, as a "free" interchange – or at least, even if no gift economy is ever truly "free", it was not yet a financialized form of exchange). It happened according to happenstance; their poverty necessitated entrepreneurial action, and eventually led to their design and development of new liaisons between small-scale and large-scale entrepreneurialism. In the early days of their company, their background in design – and the lack of financial acumen that this seemed to imply – was perceived as a company liability by potential investors; but Chesky and Gebbia came to see their background as one of their greatest advantages. After all, at RISD they had been taught to create a world, not to simply conform to a pre-existing one. After all, Chesky argued, the business world had a rather limited view of design; entrepreneurs often tended to see

design as simply the practice of making a product. Airbnb, instead, designed situations, interfaces, and encounters.

Graham Harman has argued (compellingly, if not in a particularly airtight fashion) that “design will always be political, since it sets down the background conditions that govern the next phase of overt activity, which is doomed in turn to grind to a halt someday (2012, p. 93). Despite its critical, avant-gardist legacy, in Harman’s view, art mainly reflects on past configurations of objects and their potential, pulling cultural artefacts from their naturalized backgrounds. Design, on the other hand, *produces* that which will become the background conditions, the taken-for-granted, in the future. Harman’s division between art and design is certainly quite simplistic; nevertheless it provocatively proposes that design quietly carries the futurity that art expressly promises. Airbnb’s political restructuring of social encounter, its psychogeographic repositioning and redistribution of encounter with respect to tourism and tourist cities’ distributions of private and public space, have cornered a market. They have been scaled up to the size of big business, setting new background conditions for travel and commerce. Airbnb creates a new diagram, a new design, a new condition of possibilities for linking intimate, personal relations, on the one hand, with finance and the free labour of reviewers, on the other.

Airbnb’s business model designs a structure of relation based on exploiting the free labour of clients and customers, in the form of oft-prompted, but ostensibly “freely” written reviews. These reviews allow the company to deregulate lodging. They contribute to a business structure in which reputation replaces regulation; reputation produces an alibi for the

company's lack of regulatory oversight, and outsources responsibility for the risk deregulation carries onto the consumer.⁴⁸

This situation can be seen as just one aspect of the emerging reputation economy. Reputation, of course, is nothing new, and has been important in various arenas for centuries. Yet in an era of precarious labour, social media and pervasive online reviewing, reputation regulates a greatly expanded range of economic, financial and personal activities, and brings together the practices of personal and professional life, domestic and business activities in new ways. Analyzing the reputation economy as it is experienced through Airbnb-mediated encounters can serve as a point of departure for what I am calling a form of financialized psychogeography: a close analysis of the structures of feeling experienced by Airbnb users who are placed within this financialized structure that puts new, and newly configured, forms of pressure on reputation, disposition and character.

As Alison Hearn (2010) has argued, online ratings and reviews, now a dominant force in managing individuals' encounters with businesses and with each other, comprise a newly dominant form of market discipline administered through affective conditioning. Hearn dismantles the prevalent assumption

⁴⁸ In a famous case, in which, as Chesky concedes, the company failed to provide adequate customer support, a woman who rented her property through Airbnb had her home ransacked by crystal meth addicts, who, among other things, punched a hole in a wall to gain access to a locked closet in which valuables and documents were stored, while all the while sending her emails thanking her for respecting their privacy and assuring her that they loved her home. While Airbnb did eventually cover her damages, their initial response was poor. This prompted the woman to raise the question: what did Airbnb offer that a free platform, such as Craigslist, didn't? Craigslist would have, in fact, allowed her more control as to how she chose to communicate with her prospective renters; so the free service might have been much better than the paid one. Chesky, for his part, refers to this as an incident that helped Airbnb to vastly improve its customer care. Now, he says, we simply bend over backwards for the customer (Lacy, 2013). In spite of the fact that Airbnb does now underwrite responsibility for major damages incurred, on a smaller scale, the customer still assumes responsibility for risk (which they can certainly afford to do), and may never know exactly what he/she is walking into.

that online tools for producing and managing reputation (such as customer reviews of products and sellers on platforms like Amazon) – are successfully making more voices heard, producing a democratic exchange of unbiased, freely-expressive, virtuosic consumers. Instead, she draws attention to how tightly controlled the reputation economy quickly becomes, and how remarkably homogenous it is. While many might assume that they are likely to find a fair and wide-ranging spate of reviews for a particular product or service, in fact, a 2002 study found that eBay seller ratings were 99% positive and 0.6% negative; similarly, a 2009 study of all online ratings across the web found them to average 4.3 out of 5 (Hearn, 2010, p. 434; Fowler and DeAvila, 2009). This situation speaks to, performs and produces what Hearn calls the “smiley-faced” disposition of the contemporary work world. Hearn cites several possible reasons for this. (That said, we might do well to remember that, especially in recent years, this smiley-faced-ness has come to be counterbalanced by the voracious hatred of online trolls.) Smiley-faced-ness might be due, in part, to the sheer technophilic thrill of feeding back; or to a pervasive sense of fear of a bad review, coupled with a desire to enact a *quid pro quo* modus operandi with respect to reputation: if you give me a good review, I’ll give you one back. Ultimately, however, Hearn concludes, this disposition is “likely the combined result of reputation measurement and management systems working to bolster the interests of their corporate employers” (p. 434).

Instances in favour of the latter explanation have only grown in number and in aggressiveness since the time of Hearn’s writing. These include several recent lawsuits launched by businesses against individuals who have

posted negative reviews. For instance, in July 2014, blogger Caroline Doudet was successfully sued in a French court by Il Giardino restaurant in the Aquitaine region of France, after she posted an online review entitled “the place to avoid in Cap-Ferret: Il Giardino” (Rawlinson, 2014). The restaurant owners argued that because the review appeared fourth in Google search results about the restaurant, Doudet’s words were unfairly hurting their business. Critics of the case argued that the judge had unwittingly invented a new kind of crime: ranking highly in search results while saying something negative. (Google’s search engine algorithms are, of course, beyond any blogger’s control.) As Doudet quipped, “What is perverse, is that we look for bloggers who are influential, but only if they are nice about people” (Rawlinson, 2014). Several similar cases have emerged in the U.S. – for instance, T&J Towing of Kalamazoo, Michigan filed a defamation suit against 21-year-old college student Justin Kurtz, who started a Facebook group entitled “Kalamazoo residents against T&J Towing” after his car was towed from a building parking lot despite his having a permit, costing him \$118 (Frosch, 2010). As Frosch notes, First Amendment lawyers tend to see such cases as just the latest incarnation of a much older legal strategy: the strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP). These lawsuits, Frosch notes, are not necessarily put forward with an eye to winning (and often do not win); rather, they are meant to intimidate individuals who might speak out against businesses with the prospect of gruelling and costly time in court. (Indeed, as Rawlinson notes, Caroline Doudet’s French court case took place in an emergency court, since the prosecutors argued that their business was

still in the process of being hurt by her review; thus, she was not able to find herself a lawyer in time, and represented herself.)

In a similar vein, the EU recently upheld the “right to be forgotten” in a case brought forward by Spanish man Mario Costeja González against Google Spain. González argued that search results persistently turned up information about his home having been repossessed in 1998; this was unfairly tarnishing his reputation. In an interview with *The Guardian*, González explained, “I was fighting for the elimination of data that adversely affects people's honour, dignity and exposes their private lives. Everything that undermines human beings, that's not freedom of expression” (Travis and Arthur, 2014). As New York-based British comedian John Oliver quipped in an episode of his show on the *Right to be Forgotten*, the irony is that, thanks to this case, the only thing anybody outside of Spain knows about González is the one thing he did not want them to know: that he was “that guy who didn't pay his mortgage” (2014). Irony notwithstanding, the EU now mandates that Google must amend “inadequate, irrelevant or no longer relevant” search results when an individual requests it (Travis and Arthur, 2014). Both strategic lawsuits and the EU's “right to be forgotten” legislation paint the reputation economy as a fraught, highly valued and highly contested terrain that pulls at the fabric of free speech and raises many questions as to what would constitute “fair” parameters for representing character online.

Strategic lawsuits and the right to be forgotten speak to a newly emerging form of inequality: inequality of means (financial, social, spatio-technological, temporal and legal) through which to curate a reputation. Of course, if, as Douglas Merrill once said, “all data is credit data” (Jenkins,

2014), then the financial world has an incredibly foregrounded role to play in the production of new forms of subjection that would link a (broader, systemic) condition of financialized risk with individual responsibility, understood and rendered representable as “character”. Given such incredible and wide-ranging pressures on individuals to produce and circulate “good”, “reliable”, “responsible”, and, above all, “nice” characters, and given businesses’ often vicious attack on those who would tarnish their image, Hearn’s description of the “smiley-faced” disposition of the reputation economy comes as no surprise. How might this “nice-ification” of capitalism through the reputation economy effect analyses of previous epistemic contexts in which the desire to be genuinely “good” – in the sense, for instance, that the French Fluxus artist Filliou advocated – operated?

Robert Filliou at the Cédille

“There is a great deal of poetry in economics. But there is also a great deal of economics in poetry. Definitely.”

- Robert Filliou (1970, p. 76.)

“... In the deadly jungle in which we live, the only genius is to be ‘good’...”

- Robert Filliou (1970, p. 45)

I’m sitting in a flat I rented from Airbnb in the seaside village of Villefranche-sur-Mer, France (just east of Nice). It’s a beautiful late August, high tourist season. I’m sequestered from the sun by the shadowy, narrow streets in the old part of town, which was first built up after Charles II, Duke of Anjou, enticed locals to build closer to the water in 1295 with tax privileges, in order that their settlements might help defend the coastline from pirates

(Barelli and Rocca, 1998, p. 22-31). The bay onto which the town faces has been strategically significant for centuries, since its waters gain great depth close to shore. Now, it serves another strategic purpose: harbouring enormous cruise ships. By day, the beach swells with umbrellas, bathers and towels; by night, the patios of the old part of town swarm with diners. Cacti creep over balconies, flowerpots and steep, rocky hillsides. Once a fishing village, the main industry is now tourism.⁴⁹

This is the village where, in 1965, the French Fluxus artist-poet Robert Filliou and the American artist-composer George Brecht opened a shop of sorts, called *La Cédille Qui Sourit* (The Cedilla that Smiles, Figure 12). It was located at 12 Rue de May, a small but central, stepped street in the heart of the old part of the village. Across the street was an antique shop; down the steps, a small, dark passageway led past cellar doors and kitchens, toward the seaside. (Natilee Harren has eloquently described this small, dark passageway as “the asshole of Villefranche”) (2013, p. 223). The shop was filled with Fluxus experiments and small works, displayed chaotically. Often, Filliou and Brecht would be absent, preferring instead to invent games and proposals at the café down the road. The two artists were sometimes joined by their Fluxus associates from New York. By 1968, Filliou and Brecht could no longer afford to pay the rent, and the shop closed; Filliou continued to elaborate his principles of a poetic economy.

The activities at the *Cédille* formed part of Filliou’s nomadic, often chaotic and unclearly-defined art/life practice – which I am envisioning as an

⁴⁹ In an interview with Sarah Lacy (2013), Brian Chesky, founder and CEO of Airbnb, remarks that tourism is a two trillion-dollar industry worldwide; fully half the size of the oil industry. The economic importance of this industry, Chesky argues, is routinely underrated.

expanded field spanning individual artworks, performances, collaborations, writings and studies, experiments of many sorts, a family ethos, and a constellation of techniques and modes of being through which to practice deep friendship. Filliou consciously combined interests in art and poetry with economic theory. He envisioned a qualitative conception of an economic praxis, which he theorized through his actions. He termed this the “poetic economy,” which linked an Eternal Network of artists through innocence, imagination and freedom. (This he opposed to what he termed an “economics of prostitution”, which emphasized competition, hierarchy, sales and self-promotion). As much as Filliou theorized the economy consciously in many of his works and writings (and followed the utopian economic thought of Charles Fourier), perhaps the most important, most central component of his economic explorations was in his character; his performative embodiment of the qualities of the poetic economy, mapped into (and through) his personhood, his lifespan, the personal connections he worked on. As he put it, “The real talent I have is for friendship. Ninety-nine percent of my work is not visible” (Tilman, 2007, p. 174; trans. Harren, 2013, p. 210).

Since Filliou’s time, the economy has shifted in directions that seem, in certain ways, to be curiously aligned with those he envisioned (and in other ways, to be completely alienated from his vision). Precarious, temporary, somewhat nomadic employment conditions (of which Filliou and his friends were “pioneers” of sorts) have become far more the norm among what Franco “Bifo” Berardi (2010) has referred to as today’s alienated cognitariat. The virtuosic practices and performances of friendship, likeability, care and various forms of emotional and immaterial labour has – as Paolo Virno, Arlie

Hochschild (2003) and others have argued – been dramatically foregrounded, and often exploited, in a postfordist economy. Further, as Allison Hearn (2010), Evgeny Morozov and others have shown, reputations – be they garnered online through “likes”, reviews, credit scores or other quasi-metric platforms – have been given new forms of economic work, which has led to a ubiquitously (and perhaps oppressively) “smiley-faced” disposition in online forums (Hearn, 2010), and to a state in which (as Morozov argues) subjects will be increasingly controlled by quantifications of their creditworthiness. The more citizens’ actions are measured, the more their past actions are linked to predictive models of their future character, the less uninhibited they might feel to experiment openly with “risky” behaviour or “abnormal” styles of being. Though these developments foreground links between the performative, the affective and the economic, much like Filliou’s embodied theorizations did, they are clearly a far cry from the utopian, emancipatory conditions that Filliou and his compatriots imagined for their embodied economic practices.

What, then, is it to consider Filliou’s embodiment of economic theory as a precursor to later developments in postfordist, neoliberal capitalism? What would it be to test the viability of Filliou’s “poetic economy” today, when arguably, such an economy has been seamlessly blended with an economics of prostitution? In what proportions should such comparisons be broad, general, specific, linear, or aberrant, transversal? Further, what can be done with such a critique? Is it possible for artists of today to put forward a qualitative conception of economy that is not always, already financialized?

Filliou: a Brief Introduction

In order to address such questions, it will first be necessary to assemble a brief overview of Filliou's practice. Robert Filliou (1926-1987) was a French Fluxus artist and poet, active from the early 1960s until his death. After moving to the United States in 1947 to work for Coca-Cola, and later earning a masters degree in economics at UCLA, Filliou was stationed in Korea as an advisor to the United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency. In 1954, he left his career with the U.N., and traveled to Egypt, and later Spain and Denmark (Filliou, 1970, p. 8). In 1957, he married Marianne Staffels, and their daughter Marcelle was born in 1961. The family lived a largely nomadic life, as Filliou worked on various projects in France, Canada, the United States and Europe. They lived in poverty more often than not – sometimes living off of donations from friends, and sometimes giving away the money he acquired to his students. Filliou spent the last three years of his life in a French Buddhist monastery with his wife, and died in 1987.

Filliou's artwork was diverse and often ephemeral, spanning performance, spoken word, writing, small-scale publications, video, sound recordings, sculpture, and various forms of collaboration and social experimentation. Commenting on the videotapes Filliou produced in Canada, Sharla Sava notes, "Perhaps they should not be conceived of as a coherent body of work, but rather as a collection that encompasses diverse proposals, monologues, or enactments of his ideas. Sketchy when considered as discrete units, these videos work in concert with one another and with the broader range of concerns on which Filliou had been working for many years" (Robertson, Sava *et. al*, 1995, p. 18). Sava's observation applies equally well

to Filliou's oeuvre as a whole; his work asks that one forge connections between disparate works rather than, on the one hand, isolating single works, or, on the other hand, generalizing about the body of work as a whole. Since Filliou is relatively little known, I will try to evoke a sense of his work below.

Filliou constantly blurred the line between art and everyday activities. He did not wish to reproduce the orthodoxies of art history, which separate "artist-geniuses" from "everyday people," and "masterpieces" from quotidian creative acts. In his sound piece *Whispered History of Art* (1963, recorded 1977) he teaches an "art history" bereft both of artists and of "artworks", and filled, instead, with everyday acts of wonder from various points over the last one million years. Each time he describes some man's creative act (and they are, indeed, all men) – squeezing some snow and listening to the sound, boiling a bone and watching it change, observing the imprint a coin makes on the earth – he whispers, "Who that man was is not important. He's dead, but art is alive. I mean, let's keep names out of this" (Filliou, 1963).⁵⁰ A humorous lecture on the last one million years of art, the piece focuses on everyday experiments, and invites the listener to participate – by, for instance, pouring some vinegar onto a piece of chalk and seeing what happens.

Emphasizing the everyday experiment, Filliou redefined art as "a form of organized leisure' capable of providing 'a potentially revolutionary set of values'" (Filliou, 1970, p. 23, 78; quoted in Sava, Robertson, Sava *et. al*,

⁵⁰ Robert Filliou, *Whispered History of Art*, UbuWeb Sound: Robert Filliou, <http://www.ubu.com/sound/filliou.html>. Of course, it is important to note that Filliou is less than "revolutionary" in rendering all of the "artists" in his account men (although, as he often does, Filliou weaves a personal narrative into his social narrative, and his wife and daughter feature prominently in these sections). Though a detailed account of gender in Filliou's work is beyond the scope of this essay, it is fairly plain to see that he is replicating some patriarchal assumptions here.

1995, p. 22). Humour and playfulness were essential in enacting these values, and Filliou often employed a koan-like or riddle-like quality in his work. In his book *The Seat of Ideas* (1981), for instance, Filliou presented a photograph of a seatless chair frame, with a sign affixed to it that reads “The Seat of Ideas”. At first, such a gesture may appear as an overly literal, simplistic and illustrative approach to sculpture; yet perhaps the gesture might better be understood, firstly, as a point of intersection between poetry and sculpture; and, secondly, as a form of advocacy for a particular style of address – the simple, flat, innocent, naïve persona. The work takes off from its persona’s “simplicity;” and this simplicity becomes its riddle, its question, and its humour.⁵¹

Filliou often directly rethought social, legal, pedagogical and economic norms. At the *Cédille*, he and George Brecht proposed to a French legislator that marriage licenses become temporary;⁵² if a couple did not renew their license after five years, it would be automatically annulled. Likewise, Filliou rethought the axioms of primary school education, imagining contemporary art in the curriculum in his book *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts* (1970). He also proposed alternative economic models in his artworks, suggesting that art needed to espouse “an alternative theory of value... an *enhanced* economy where abstract labour, instead of being defined through the relative exchange value of the commodity, could be evaluated in relation to the ‘innocence,’ ‘imagination,’ or ‘freedom’ it was worth” (Sava, in

⁵¹ An accompanying text by Edwige Regenwetter playfully suggests many possible interpretations of “the seat of ideas” (which, unlike the hermeneutical digging that Susan Sontag disparages, form a friendly hum around the image). Robert Filliou and Edwige Regenwetter, *The Seat of Ideas* (Calgary: Syntax/Egg Press, 1981).

⁵² This was one of the many proposals that came out of the storefront Brecht and Filliou operated in southern France, named “La Cédille Qui Sourit.”

Robertson, Sava, *et. al*, 1995, p. 22-24). Thus the “innocent” address of a work like *The Seat of Ideas*, in Filliou’s way of thinking, is directly economic in value. Filliou proposed this alternate theory simply and directly in his sculptural work *Permanent Creation Toolbox # 1* (1969), which consists of a toolbox containing a collapsible yardstick and neon signs for “imagination” and “innocence.”

The work of Charles Fourier largely inspired Filliou’s challenge to commodity-based notions of economic value. Fourier, the nineteenth-century French utopian socialist, has been known for uttering strange economic assertions, such as: “a beneficial increase in the passionate intensity of the earth would gradually transform the briny seas into a tangy lemonade flavour” (Fourier, 1971a, p. 9; Sava in Robertson, Sava *et. al*, 1995, p. 38). Marxists roundly critiqued Fourier’s work for “failing to provide a workable economic theory” (Sava in Robertson, Sava *et. al*, 1995, p. 38); yet twentieth-century thinkers such as André Breton, Herbert Marcuse and Roland Barthes took him up again as an important figure for the new left. In a manifesto published with the Great Bear pamphlet series in 1966 entitled “A proposition, a problem, a danger and a hunch”, Filliou writes with Fourierist fervor, “A problem, the one and only, but massive: money, which creating does not necessarily create. A *Principles of Poetical Economy* must be written. Write it” (Robertson, Sava *et. al*, 1995, p. 21). Through his artwork, writings and friendships, Filliou theorized a “poetical economy” – which embraced non-hierarchical, non-competitive, friendly relations between an “eternal network” of creators. This points to “a different concept of value” which rejects the “endless consumption and accumulation of goods and property” and instead embraces leisure as the

most valuable commodity (1970, p. 49). Filliou's conception of economics gives economy a "character"; it replaces abstract, quantifiable conceptions of money for the qualitatively specific characteristics, inhabited, lived and performed.

Filliou's oeuvre reads not as a collection of discrete works, but as an archive of interconnected fragments which, to some degree, must be traced back to the situations of their initial production, and to the experimentations of their creator. Many of Filliou's works and statements de-emphasize or disparage authorship. Concerning one of the twentieth century's most famous artists, Filliou remarks:

You know, Duchamp used to say in his later years, 'What do you mean I'm famous – my greengrocer does not know who I am.' I used to say that I am quite the opposite of Duchamp – only my greengrocer knows who I am. Duchamp added that 'we must abolish the idea of judgment.' I have worked it out further, I think we must abolish the idea of admiration (Morris and Trasov, in Robertson, Sava *et. al*, 1995, p. 72).

But does Filliou's work manage to abolish admiration? His works in homage to Fourier might suggest otherwise; and Filliou himself certainly had his followers. Vancouver curator Hank Bull recalls:

he was pretty obsessed with his ideas, and had a powerful presence that was capable of taking over in many situations. I think he has been accused by certain people of demagoguery, and of having "followers." It's a problem with idealism, that it flirts with authority. But Robert was aware of all that and you can see in the tapes as he continually questions and deconstructs his own position (Craig and Bull, in Robertson, Sava *et. al*, 1995, p. 69).

Similarly, as Clive Robertson notes, in producing a historical account of Filliou's work, it is "difficult in retrospect not to mythologize the person; to be blinded by, dismiss or decontextualize his maxims and aphorisms; or, finally,

to be seen to be installing another art monument to masculine generosity” (Robertson in Robertson, Sava *et. al*, 1995, p. 59). Thought Robertson laudably acknowledges the tendency to over-mythologize an artist, Filliou himself wove personal mythology into his works. For instance, in *Whispered History of Art*, he declares that art’s birthday is January 17th, one million years ago. January 17th happens to be Filliou’s birthday. Yet what if one were to view Filliou not as a positivist “origin” for his work, but rather as a character of sorts, who loosely weaves together the myths, tales and stories which inevitably swirl around a set of scattered, schizoid practices? (Is it possible to do this without admiration, or while deploying admiration differently?)

In the past few decades, there has been a return to socially engaged art practices, which can be traced back to the experiments of Fluxus artists beginning in the 1960s.⁵³ Often, these have been exhibited, discussed and critiqued under the rubric “relational aesthetics” – a term coined by French curator Nicholas Bourriaud. In the mid-1990s, Bourriaud (2002) declared that recent art reflected the larger turn toward tertiary economy, and that artists increasingly sought to offer social services rather than goods for exchange. This often involved artists using gallery spaces to construct temporary “service-areas” for visitors: offering free lunch, setting up a bar or a reading room.⁵⁴ To many writers, these projects appeared to offer utopian, idealistic social spaces where barriers between people could melt away. Yet this

⁵³ See, for instance, Rodenbeck (2007). As Rodenbeck points out, the influential curator and critic Nicholas Bourriaud failed to contextualize recent participatory art practices in relation to the history of Fluxus art. This was “a defensive maneuver,” a deliberate erasure of the legacy of Fluxus work in order to make current practices appear more “new.”

⁵⁴ An example of the art that Bourriaud championed was Rirkrit Tiravanija’s installation *Untitled (Tomorrow is another day)* (1996). For this piece, Tiravanija built a life-sized, fully functional replica of his apartment in a museum. Visitors were invited to come inside, cook a meal, take a nap or shower, and “hang out” with strangers as if in the bounds of a domestic space.

utopian conception of social art practices has become increasingly unpopular over the past decade, due in large part to Claire Bishop's highly influential essay "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics" (2004). Citing Ernesto LaClau and Chantal Mouffe, Bishop argues that such utopian social practices are all the more exclusionary for their ostensible inclusiveness, as they fail to account for the inescapable antagonism that arises when people are socialized differently, internalizing slightly different symbolic orders. As such, these works preclude the possibility for truly democratic exchange – which, in LaClau and Mouffe's account, must always leave open a space for antagonism to play out *without* resolution (Bishop, 2004). Bishop persuasively argues against the use of ethical criteria for judging socially engaged art practice, countering the assumption that more "inclusive" or "democratic" projects are necessarily better works of art (2006). However, as Amelia Jones points out, Bishop's argument, in turn, falls prey to the assumption that "antagonistic" artwork is inherently "better art" than utopian work. Jones, for her part, questions the assumption that a stable, consistent cultural "value" can be located "within" a given artwork. In Derridean fashion, she insists that a work's capacity to resist hegemonic forms of cultural production is always situational, and never inherent (Jones, 2010). Indeed, there seems to be an assumption of verisimilitude at work in Bishop's essay: that if a work enacts, represents or reflects, say, a "naively" utopian ideal social space, its being-effects (i.e. its influence on its visitors' subsequent actions, reflections, social engagements, and ideas) will necessarily follow along the same lines.

In light of this problem, perhaps Filliou's practice offers a solution of sorts – for what if Filliou's persona as "aberrant economist" is a necessary

performative frame for his Fourierist economic principles, precisely because it enforces a rhetorical *distance* between the work's professed values and their effects in/on/as being? What if the naïve innocence of, say, *The Seat of Ideas* comes to be associated not with the artwork's rhetorical claim to a truth value, but, rather, to the persona to which it is tied – the rhetorical *belief* in innocence, housed in a particular character or style of being, which both makes the artwork's iteration of innocence possible in the first place, *and* subjectivizes its claim, introducing a critical distance between the work's persona and the viewer's belief (or lack thereof) in the artwork's utterances? Filliou's persona *subjectivizes* his artworks' truth-claims; in performing the Fourierist economy, he stages a relationship between economy, performance and perception (much like Bridges' banknote in Chapter 2) – and opens up the possibility for viewers to either share in that relationship, abstain from it, or nuance it with their own inflections. By framing his ideas as those of an aberrant economist, he turns his readers and viewers away from interpreting the theories he proposes as “true” or “false”; rather, he emphasizes their ability to do something *through* and *for* a subject, a character; and, in turn, to be either speculatively shared, diffused or dismissed. Filliou's persona opens a rhetorical distance between ideas, their flows, and their representations – precisely the sorts of distance that the representational economies of character always must put into play, and navigate.

The Depressed Subject of Possibility (or, Late Capitalist Decision Making)

This is one way in which Filliou's practice can speak back to current debates in contemporary art. His work clearly demonstrates how an artwork's persona can enact, and enforce, a distance between representation and its

being-effects, between an utterance and the character who activates it. The persona opens up a subjectivized field, a space of indifference between a truth claim and its subjections. Yet if, on the one hand, a character such as Filliou's aberrant economist persona opens up an indeterminate space between a work and its concomitant claims, on the other hand, the entreaty to become a character – to habituate oneself with an eye to one's *best* future self – has become a perniciously overdetermined site of self-regulation in a neoliberal context. How does the vast expansion of predictive practices (be they probabilistic or possibilistic, preventative or pre-emptive), operant in fintech and in other data analytic contexts, relate to the felt experiences associated with the rapid expansion of consumer choices and available life decisions (at least on some levels and for some, reasonably well-off citizens) – and the concomitant pressures these place on the formation of character?

In a recent lecture at Goldsmiths (2014), Franco "Bifo" Berardi quipped that politics, today, is impossible, due to the proliferation of choices. In a landscape in which anything is possible, perhaps nothing is possible by way of political discussion; there is no ground, no vantage point from which to begin. Berardi's view is one toward which, I imagine, the American psychologist Barry Schwartz would be sympathetic. Schwartz (2000, 2004) observes the effects of vast quantities of consumer choices on shoppers and citizens: the feeling that, just as one can choose between hundreds of styles of jeans in a shop, so too can one choose from myriad career choices, partners or life decisions. (Again, this sense of abundant choice may only ring true for some, reasonably well-off citizens, and it could very well be in the process of diminishing in the next decades, as debt straps new generations.

Nonetheless, for the moment at least, it at least partially generalizes as a consumer-democratic image of late-capitalist decision-making.) In short, Schwartz speaks to the conditions and consequences of the decidedly contemporary feeling that one can choose to be whatever one wants. While the freedom to choose has been a broadly celebrated aspect of modern life, Schwartz studies the anxieties that comprise the underbelly of such (often overwhelming) freedoms. He argues that, while some choice is certainly better than no choice, too much choice can be extremely debilitating. Although Americans tend to greatly value freedom, autonomy and self-determination, it is entirely possible for choices to become excessive, and for people to experience freedom as tyranny. Too much choice (whether in choosing a life partner or in deciding between hundreds of pairs of jeans) can increase people's levels of dissatisfaction with the choices they have made, since the proliferation of choice gives the impression that it could always have been possible to choose better. Further, Schwartz argues, an excess of choice could be a contributing factor to clinical depression – since an abundance of choice increases a subject's perceived responsibility for his/her (dis)satisfaction. When there is only, say, one career option to choose from (as when, for instance, a son must take over the family business), any dissatisfaction the subject feels with his fate can be attributed to the world, to "the way things are." When options abound, individuals blame themselves if they are not satisfied with their decisions, haunted with the thought that they might have chosen better.

Already, this form of haunting emerged as a trope in modern fiction. Andrew Miller, for one, argues that the alternate lives that characters in novels

by Dickens and James imagine for themselves “say something about the peculiar contingency of modern experience” (2007, p. 119). Yet, closer to the present, this image of being haunted by the paths one did not take re-emerges in various accounts of depression – for instance, in Alain Ehrenberg (2010) and Christine Ross’ work (2006). Ehrenberg writes,

Depression began its ascent when the disciplinary model for behaviours, the rules of authority and observance of taboos that gave social classes as well as both sexes a specific destiny, broke against norms that invited us to undertake personal initiative by enjoining us to be ourselves... Depression presents itself as an *illness of responsibility* in which the dominant feeling is that of failure. The depressed individual is unable to measure up; he is tired of having to become himself. (2010, p. 4)

For Ehrenberg, depression is the flipside of the weakening of disciplinary structures in the 1960s. This is not to say, of course, that one should nostalgically wish for a return to discipline; after all, the 1960s witnessed the very emergence of “sovereign man”... “the modern political idea... that we are owners of ourselves.” That said, the underbelly of this ideal is a pervasive sense that, as Ehrenberg puts it, “nothing is truly forbidden, nothing is truly possible” (p. 7). For her part, Christine Ross theorizes the depressed subject as both a trope and a mode of enquiry in contemporary art. She writes, “Depression – the *insufficiency of self* – could well be, as recent sociology has suggested, the fatigue that results from the individual’s compliance with neoliberal norms of independence based on the demand for the *reiterated creation of self*” (p. xxii). Earlier psychoanalytic discourses of sadness, built for a disciplinary society (such as Freud’s writing on melancholia) had an object, an external cause and, presumably, a finite duration, an eventual resolution. Depression, on the other hand, turns inward, starting and ending

with the depressed subject him/herself. “Closely related to this shift”, she continues, “is art’s apparent abandonment of emancipatory intent” (p. xxiii), its disavowal of avant-gardist strategies with all of their itinerant faith in the ability of art to provoke some form of social change. The failure of critique is the bad faith of the art world, the depressed admission of art’s political powerlessness. Ross’ writing expresses a similar sentiment to that in Sianne Ngai’s book on minor, un-heroic “ugly feelings” in literature (2005). Ugly feelings, Ngai argues, perform a reflexive role in literature, because they speak to the very condition of an art form that posits political critiques but has little power to change anything politically.⁵⁵ In Ross’ view, many contemporary artists address a depressed subject, and embrace a “depressed” mode of address, as a positive condition. For instance, the “depressed” eye pictured by Rosemarie Trockel’s video *Eye* (1999), in its laconic, unseeing state, can bypass restrictive identificatory categories to which fully cognizant eyes might be subject. Given the weariness of too much choice, and the negative feeling loop that this generates, a new kind of vision emerges; new burdens give rise to the surprising potentials harboured in depressive vision.

In spite of such potential, it is worth bearing in mind that new burdens, such as those shouldered by the depressed neoliberal subject, also give rise to new forms of technocratic solutions and preclusive strategies. Take, for instance, the popular policy term “nudging.” This term was popularized by

⁵⁵ Ngai and Ross’ observations are compatible, in my reading, despite that each author chooses to frame their observation slightly differently. Ngai’s privileges the ugly feeling itself over the subject who feels it (the latter of which Ross, on the other hand, foregrounds). Ngai speaks of the feeling as semi-autonomous, circulating between and across subjects, and perhaps, even, circulating without being felt by *anyone* – as in the false “confidence” that hangs in the air, passed off from fraudster to sucker to fraudster, in Melville’s *The Confidence Man*. On the other hand, Ross stresses the reflexive, depressive loop of feeling as particular to the neoliberal subject, who is continually asked to recreate herself.

economists Robert Thaler and Cass Sunstein, whose 2008 book *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness* describes ways that policy makers can fashion “choice architecture” to help individuals make the best decision possible with the least effort. For instance, policy makers can carefully construct default choices in situations where individuals are likely to forget to “tick the box” before the deadline. Busy professors who have to choose whether or not to continue contributing to their retirement benefits package by a certain date may or may not remember to come in and do so; an effective choice architecture should set the default decision to that which is most likely to represent the best interests of the professors, even if they do not respond (in this case, it would be to continue on with the current contribution levels). Similarly, choice architecture demands that school cafeteria managers recognize that where they place foods (do the entrees go first? The desserts? The crisps? The fruit?) will impact which foods children choose, and thus impact their health. Thaler and Sunstein call their work on “nudging” and choice architecture a form of “libertarian paternalism”: a political and economic philosophy according to which individuals should have the freedom to do whatever they like – but policy makers should also actively intervene to help them recognize, and make, the *best* choices.

Thaler and Sunstein are well aware that their work raises a fundamental ethical problem: according to whom are these architected choices the “best”? The school cafeteria example they use immediately calls to mind the school cafeteria’s close cousin, the grocery store, which has strategically placed products for decades (by, for instance, by positioning the most popular brands in the “bulls-eye zone” – on the second and third shelves

from the top – which is associated with the highest sales) (Sigurdsson et al., 2009). Such placements, of course, are carried out in the name of profit, not public health. The authors maintain that this ambiguity – whose best interests are represented in an architected choice? – is an area of grave concern for choice architecture. Nonetheless, they maintain that nudging can be used for the public good as long as it serves the best interests of users, as they themselves would define their best interests. Considered in light of Ngai’s, Schwartz’, Ross’ and Ehrenberg’s writings, we might view choice architecture as a pre-emptive salve for the depressed neoliberal subject, overwhelmed by choice. Such tactics, as envisioned in behavioural economics, preclude the reflexive literary capacities of, say, Ngai’s ugly feelings, or the productive capacities of, say, the depressed eye in Trockel’s video installation, in Ross’ reading. They also reiterate the normative logic that Deleuze critiques in his essay on societies of control, through which non-normative decisions are welcomed, but architected into an uphill landscape – made subject to an economy of effort, pre-empted and scrutinized at every turn. Choice architecture, I argue, must be understood as a pre-emptive logic, which always risks conflation of that which is “best” for individuals with that which is best for stakeholders (be they those invested in grocery store profits or in privatized “public” health platforms). This is because, following Nitzan and Bichler’s work on capital as power (2009) (which I outlined in Chapter 2), there can be no dichotomy between the corporate and political infrastructure, which together form the state of capital.⁵⁶ Choice architecture also must be understood, contrary to Thaler and Sunstein’s framing, as an address to the

⁵⁶ In addition to this, we could consider the political import of Thaler and Sunstein’s choice architecture in light of Graham Harman’s description of design as inherently political, in that it sets the backgrounds, the givens, the taken-for-granted, for future decisions (2012).

overwhelmed and/or depressed neoliberal subject. If we agree with Berardi's assessment that politics is not possible in a landscape oversaturated with choice, then what does choice architecture do for the political landscape? It may be true that, with extremely limited and modest applications, nudging might be useful in increasing the time that subjects can spend on "more important" decisions. Yet if applied more broadly, choice architecture might be read as one component of a "one-two punch" against the political: if the depressed subject bears the mark of the exclusion from politics due to an overabundance of choice, choice architecture then moves into this overabundance, precluding and pre-empting politics within an always-already depoliticized field. The representative shape, the representational logic, of this depoliticized field is character. Choice and decision-making, insofar as they lead to habituation, shape "character." The depressed neoliberal subject, oversaturated with possibilities, yet weary of self-actualization, arguably experiences far more pressure to become a "good" character than Filliou. Whereas for Filliou, the only genius was to be good, in a neoliberal context, being good is, perhaps, not so much a form of genius as it is a constant pressure.

A Tyranny of Thumbs: on the Genius of Being "Good" in the Age of Fintech

This shift requires a shift in understanding as to how concepts of "goodness" – as a character trait – can play out in contemporary art. In an age of fintech, in which reputation both interprets unconscious expressions of "creditworthiness" and mandates conscious expressions of one's reputable nature, what other forms of distance must be introduced into statements about the genius of being good? In an age in which Airbnb has politically

restructured the financial imprint of encounter, psychogeographically repositioned sociality with respect to lodging and finance, is it possible to believe in the virtues of the nomadic life, like Filliou did – even to enact such belief for the purposes of locating its iterability? Given the great many thinkers of late (Graeber, Lazzarato, Mondzain) who have been preoccupied with the deep relationships between morality and indebtedness, is a Fourierist economics practicable in a neoliberal era? What viable contemporary directions might arise from Filliou’s concerns given the widespread colonization of “goodness” by fintech and reputation?

One such direction (which is worth mentioning, although I will not go into a great amount of detail on it here) is that measurement takes on increased importance. Some of Filliou’s lesser-known works, such as *Eight Measurement Poems* (1966) propose odd, idiosyncratic means of measurement, such as measuring distance by insoles, whistles, mousetraps, hair berets or tea bags. Given the arbitrary and market-driven nature of pervasive forms of (self-)measurement today, and given the instrumentalized confusion between qualitative assessment and quantitative measurement that characterize the reputation economy’s interest in “character,” such strategies take on great significance. Works such as Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s *Zero Noon* (2013, Figure 13), a digital clock that counts the hours according to a vast array of internet-refreshed statistics, which reset at zero each noon, might be considered inheritors of Filliou’s concerns on this front. At the press of a button, users can switch between various units of measurement: the number of pistols manufactured in the U.S. since noon, the number of tobacco-related deaths since noon, the number of tortillas (in tons) consumed

in Mexico since noon. In a talk at Carroll/Fletcher, London (2014), Lozano-Hemmer spoke of this piece in light of his interest in archaic, associative forms of measurement: the practice of measuring, say, a journey from one village to another in raindrops. This line of thinking echoes Filliou's measuring sticks, which line up various mass-produced objects as "units." In such examples, the relationship between the unit of measurement and the thing measured might have both metonymic and poetic dimensions. Distance takes on the haptic qualities of felt raindrops encountered on a particular trajectory through the countryside; space borrows the concept of infusion from the tea bag. *Zero Noon* asks users to consider the relationships between such poetic dimensions of measurement and the particular kind of truth claim taken on by statistical data, which both purports to accurately represent something of a collective state of affairs, and to generalize about how that very state of affairs intersects with any given subject, any given swath of time. As statistical subjects, we become immersed in the act of imagining human activity on an unimaginably large scale, while all the while being acutely aware of the generalization within statistics: the dubiousness of their having an exact claim on the present based on their analyses of the past, however oft-refreshed these statistics might be.

Of course, it would be easy enough to dismiss Filliou's optimism about goodness, to label it a mere anticipation of postfordist working conditions and neoliberal pressures on reputation to come. Such is the basic structure of many critiques of the fates of critical gestures from the 'sixties; Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) is perhaps the most well known example of such an argument. Yet such critiques can tend to become rather over-general, and fail

to account for the small-scale successes within a given project. In light of this, another way to consider Filliou's purchase on the present might be to say that, for more recent artists, "goodness" must be understood as a generalized apparatus that continually morphs into an extremely context-specific currency – as an apparatus that, in a data analytic context, performs its generality *through* analyzing and appealing to the particulars of a social context. Lizzie Fitch and Ryan Trecartin's exhibition at the Zabłudowicz Collection, London (2014, Figure 20) might be considered exemplary of a tendency in this direction. The strange, futuristic characters featured in the artists' movies are obsessed with popularity, gossip, and conspicuous consumption – the very embodiment, we could say, of an economics of prostitution. Rampant and repulsive, yet seemingly very desirable to each other, they challenge viewers to understand "good" character traits as utterly context-specific, and dependent on a set of local norms of expression, being and belonging. However, in suggesting this, I do not wish to suggest that Filliou's concept of goodness is transcendental. For already, in Filliou, there is a sense in which goodness aligns itself with creditworthiness, and acts as a sort of *application*: an application for companionship, care, love, friendship, support, shelter, money, experience or opportunity. The question, then, is simple: with one's goodness, to whom, and to what, can one apply? Perhaps there is something in this question that must always, even in the most controlled of situations, remain open.

Interlude

Quantifying Character? On *Character Counts* and Strategic Quantification

In a 2014 *Frieze* blog, Jörg Heiser asked several artists and writers to respond to recent developments in big data, algorithms and surveillance. What is art's responsibility, he asked, in the face of these pervasive shifts? Martha Rosler's response conjugated this question in terms of quantification more broadly. She articulated the classic (and arguably somewhat romantic) conception of quantification as an essential bureaucratic tool – part of the problem, “part of the rationalization of the world picture” (Heiser, 2014). “Data nets,” she writes, “are at the beating heart of modern states, requiring intensive, long-term joint efforts in all fields to mount meaningful defences against their expanding, pernicious use” (Heiser, 2014). It is easy enough to describe this anti-data battle cry a little bit simplistic; after all, are all uses of data necessarily in the service of bureaucracy? Following Jaron Lanier (2014), might we argue, instead, that the problem with such bureaucracies is not data as such, but rather that data is corralled and controlled by very few key players? Given an era in which right-wing governments often actively suppress data – as in, for instance, the Canadian Harper government's notorious muzzling of scientists whose research does not support their political agenda (Jones, 2015) – wouldn't a more nuanced conception of the ways in which data might, at times, be profoundly anti-authoritarian, anti-bureaucratic be required? (To be fair, Rosler points to “détourning the data”

as a viable artistic strategy in the struggle against quantification.) Critiques such as Rosler's, insofar as they presuppose a pastoral image of a world prior to quantification, when things were less bureaucratic, less controlled, more immediate, certainly contain a hint of romanticism. Nonetheless, this form of critique has thrived in modern and contemporary thought. From Bergson's rallies against the measurement of time, to Oliver Sacks' lamentation for the bygone days of richly nuanced, narrative patient reports in hospitals (replaced by simplistic, yet supposedly efficient tick-box forms) to Jacob Silverman's recent writing on the pernicious pervasiveness of online metrics, the past century (and more) has been punctuated with rallies against a homogenized, wholly quantified world. Such critiques seem to speak to a deep-seated frustration with the reduction of rich, qualitative experiences to bureaucratic procedures and surveillant control – however, soft, nuanced and pliable those controls might come to be. Yet how can these critiques be mobilized effectively against quantification, against the violence on which bureaucracy is ultimately based (see Graeber, 2012), without simply amounting to a pining for a pre-quantified era, dreaming of an “outside” to contemporary life that, if anything, might mar activist progress by over-generalizing the terms of contention, or deflecting what otherwise could have been effective, situated counter-strategies?

The concept of character is at the crux of such difficulties. As we have seen, character is being quantified and calculated in many new ways, as it becomes an ever more important locus for control in a credit economy. Yet it also holds a privileged relation to qualitative particularity. How, then, does “character” relate to quantification? Insofar as observers can claim to judge

character – to assess the tendencies and particularities of a singular being – what happens when such particularities and habits are quantitatively analyzed? What is the precise relationship between quantified analyses of habits and tendencies and the fleeting sense of qualitative particularity – say, looking into someone’s eyes and getting a sense of who they are – that the concept, and act, of perceiving character suggests? Is “character” inherently quantifiable, given, for instance, the ability of a robotics lab’s algorithms to program Artificial Intelligence operating systems with ethical decision-making parameters, or the ability of a corporation’s algorithms to predict what a specific consumer might want to do (or buy) tomorrow? Conversely, does quantification merely represent an abstraction of character, a bureaucratization of character? Does the ability to “quantify” character represent a fundamental epistemic shift in the evolution of the concept of character itself?

Given various analytic practices associated with big data – as we have seen with respect to new practices of credit scoring in the previous chapter – the tenor and currency of such questions are shifting fundamentally. Yet, even beyond these recent upheavals, the tensions between quality and quantity were already built on shaky philosophical ground. Thus, alongside examining some new technologies and practices through which character comes into contact with quantitative modes of understanding (new algorithmic conceptions of identity, pre-emptive policing, algorithmic ethics programmes implanted in robots, various forms of consumer forecasting), it will be helpful to briefly examine some twentieth- and twenty-first-century philosophical debates on the relationships between quality and quantity in general. My

intention, here, is certainly not to solve such philosophical conundrums; rather, it is to point to the conceptual difficulties involved in articulating the relationships between quality and quantity, and also to give a sense of what might be at stake in a conception of qualitative particularity as either amenable, or foreign, to quantification. Finally, a brief look at the educational policy advocacy organization Character Counts, with a few thoughts as to how their work links to art's privileged relationship to producing "character," gives a sense of what the practical consequences of articulating fundamentally qualitative or quantitative conceptions of character might be. Against the grain of many discourses on "character," Character Counts advocates for strong metrics for character capabilities (such as emotional intelligence, determination and self-control), in order to make a clear case to policy makers that it is worthwhile to teach "character" to students. While this position is questionable on a number of fronts, it is nonetheless a compelling example of what I might call the strategic counter-quantification of character: quantifying character in with an aim toward an emancipatory pedagogy, which could at least potentially increase class mobility, rather than control.

Modern and contemporary thought has questioned the relationships between quality and quantity again and again. Bergson famously championed the ontological priority of quality over quantity in *Time and Free Will* (1895). He argued that number was necessarily a spatialization of time – it is impossible to "count" units of time unless one imagines this series of units lined up in succession – and hence to count time is to abstract it. Quantity, for Bergson, reductively encroaches on the ever-changing, rhythmic textures of heterogeneous, durational experience. To count a clock's pendulum swings

and conclude that, say, ten seconds had passed would be to abstract time, to falsely quantify what can only be qualitative: the continual, rhythmic shifts in the continuous experience of the pendulum swing (Bergson, 1913, p. 104). Writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century – an era of increasing scientificity – Bergson’s account of the illusory nature of quantification had high stakes. Through this argument, he countered the rising tides of measurement, and argued that it was in duration, that we are free. If, after all, he writes, “our action was pronounced by us to be free, it is because the relation of this action to the state from which it issued could not be expressed by a law, this psychic state being unique of its kind and unable ever to occur again” (Bergson, 1913, p. 239). Duration, for Bergson, was both antithetical to measurement, and the realm of both free decision and the emergence of the new.

Deleuze, of course, was one of the main inheritors of Bergsonian thought. Yet despite that he actively differed with Bergson on very few points, he did take issue with Bergson’s ontological prioritization of quality over quantity. If Bergson was one of the major influences on Deleuze’s conception of the virtual, the other was Leibniz, whose conception of virtuality comes from his work in calculus – his discovery of the necessity of a number that was not zero, but which was too small, as it were, to exist. For Deleuze, “quality is nothing other than contracted quantity” (Deleuze, 1988, p. 74; Hallward, 2006, p. 19). As Peter Hallward points out, “One of Deleuze’s main criticisms of Bergson is simply that his way of privileging the intensive and the spiritual over the extensive or spatial wrongly attributes ‘to quality everything that belongs to intensive quantities’” (Hallward, 2006, p. 167, citing Deleuze, 1994,

p. 239). Affect, for Deleuze, was fundamentally a *quantity* of charge, which would, in turn, produce qualitative effects. Deleuze was certainly not alone in taking issue with Bergson's understanding of quantification; Bertrand Russell, for instance, spoke of Bergson's poor understanding of number, and the latter's famous debates with Einstein were something of an embarrassment. Nevertheless, echoes of Bergson's ontological prioritization of quality can be found in various strains of neo-vitalist and animistic thought.

More recently, notable proponents of the ontological priority of quantity/maths over quality can be found in Badiou and his disciple Meillassoux. Badiou famously claimed that mathematics is the very basis of ontology (2005), and uses set theory extensively in his philosophical work; Meillassoux (2008) follows suit. However, Graham Harman, amongst others, has argued that Meillassoux is wrong to mathematize ontology; he advocates, instead, the ontological primacy of objects, which, for him, can be reduced neither to qualities nor to equations. In the sciences, as Ted Striphas points out (2015; see also Granieri, 2014), the emergence of the concept of information in the 1940s was one of the major intellectual developments that would eventually make algorithmic culture possible. The concept of information implies a new understanding of the relationship between phenomena and information; all events, beings, qualities and situations, according to this formulation, can be understood as information-bearing and, therefore, quantifiable, comparable and analysable. Yet another intellectual legacy that might lend credence to quantification's ontological priority – and its broad applicability to a wide range of values and phenomena – comes from Gabriel Tarde's 1902 treatise *Economic Psychology*. A variety of

contemporary thinkers are viewing Tarde's treatise as increasingly relevant to recent economic shifts, according to which it is less and less plausible to assume that psychological and qualitative factors (such as moods) are merely epiphenomenal to the market's measurements. Tarde accounts for many psychological factors, such as glory, in his economic theory; if economics is the study of all values, then surely, according to his view, it should study as wide a range of these as possible, and not merely those that are routinely monetized. As Bruno Latour and Vincent Antonin Lépinay (2004) point out, Tarde never repeats the well-worn, humanist lament that economics quantifies everything – even those aspects of life that should remain unsullied by quantification. Rather, he argues the exact opposite: economists do not go far enough to quantify all of the forms of value that exist in a society – of which monetary value is merely the tip of the iceberg. The few instances outlined above give a sense of the wide range of intellectual, political and philosophical stakes in prioritizing either quantity or quality across philosophy, the sciences, cultural theory and economics. According to a view such as Bergson or Rosler's, quantification is directly linked to bureaucratization and homogenization; in a Deleuzian or Tardean view, qualitative particularity, far from being antithetical to quantification, either emerges from quantity in the first place, or can be rendered fully quantifiable.

Character tests the limits between such qualitative and quantitative parameters. According to older practices of characterization, such as interpreting a literary character, or judging what kind of person someone is by observing her qualities, a glimpse of someone's "character" aggregates qualities, tendencies and rhetorical subtleties so densely, so experientially,

that they might be thought of as antithetical to quantification. On the other hand, as new algorithmic paradigms for stylistic analysis, determining creditworthiness, and constructing ethical parameters take off, we may find that character is by no means antithetical to quantification – or even that what humans perceive as “qualitative” in character, machinic analysis perceives quite differently as precisely quantifiable, analysable traits and tendencies.

Algorithms for Ethics?

To give just one example of the ways in which traits classically considered to belong to “character” have migrated to the realms of computation, a recent article in *Wired Magazine* (Higgins, 2014) revealed that the U.S. Office of Naval Research is funding a team at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Tufts and Brown Universities (headed by Matthias Scheutz) to explore the problems associated with providing autonomous robots with a sense of right and wrong. In the Human-Robot interaction lab at Tufts, the team explores ways in which “unique algorithms and computational mechanisms” might be embedded into existing Artificial Intelligence architectures, enabling the system the flexibility to “override... planned actions based on moral reasoning” (Higgins, 2014). Thus, a medical robot on a battlefield could algorithmically determine whether, for instance, to stop to pick up another soldier while in transporting a first soldier to hospital; or whether to perform a painful surgery on the spot if it meant saving a soldier’s life. Developing an algorithm for ethics would allow robots to function autonomously, making their own decisions at a deeper level of reasoning. This research is an extension of Scheutz’ ongoing examinations of human-robot interactions (Scheutz, 2012), on which I will not elaborate here. Yet the

very possibility of producing an algorithm for ethical behaviour raises questions as to whether such complex “character traits” as ethical propensities are, indeed, inherently personal in the first place. Computational practices for producing and judging character traits may well render people subject to new forms of control (as in the sophisticated credit scoring methods in Chapter 3). Yet they also free “character” from the strictures of human perception and, thus, begin to slowly change cultural conceptions as to what constitutes a character trait in the first place.

Character Counts

Whether or not character traits are inherently quantifiable, however, is only one aspect to consider. Another is what the strategic implications are of using either qualitative or quantitative language to describe character within a neoliberal policy milieu. Character Counts is a small organization, which navigates such questions. Character Counts describes itself as a “new, independent centre that promotes, evaluates, and designs public policy interventions that build character” (Character Counts). It was founded by Jen Lexmond (a London-based social researcher and policy analyst) and Richard Reeves (a Washington, DC based writer and journalist). Character Counts is certainly not alone in promoting a return to “character values” in education; other centres with a similar agenda include the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham; Character First (a division of Strata Leadership, Oklahoma City); the Washington, DC-based Character Education Partnership; and the Center for Character and Citizenship (based in St. Louis).

As Lexmond points out, “the most effective strategies to build character cannot take aim at it directly” (2012, p. 6). While there is a place for direct discussions of compassion, fairness, honesty and other character *attributes* in education, character cannot simply be didactically taught; it must develop through experiential learning opportunities in supportive environments. Lexmond’s task is to work with policy makers, youth, families and social researchers to “identify character building programs” across various educational platforms, “build consistency in defining and measuring character”, “link outcomes to future costs and benefits”, and “improve the commissioning process”, building demand for quantitative evidence for the benefits of character development in various policy-making contexts (Character Counts). Lexmond argues that even though the concept of character is sometimes an awkward fit with contemporary society, a growing body of research from neuroscience, social mobility analysis and developmental psychology shows that developing what she calls “character capabilities” – such as “integrity, empathy and grit” can have long-term impacts that benefit society as a whole (2012, p. 1). Tracing the development of character discourses back to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, she points out that the term *ethika* in Greek translates not as “ethics”, but as “matters to do with character” (2012, p. 1). Character is a complex concept at the core of ethics, which refers to how people are shaped through their repeated actions and habits. Lexmond defines character as “the qualities that make someone a good – or not so good – person, but also... a set of skills that contribute to personal success and wellbeing” (2012, p. 1); in short, it is both a self-interested and other-interested idea, bringing together interests in doing good

to others with aims toward “happiness and flourishing” (2012, p. 2). Yet developing policy for character building in education also faces challenges; for how is it possible to help students develop character-based skills needed to achieve the “good” life without prescribing what that good life might look like? The answer, Lexmond argues, is to consider character as capability – a “set of general abilities that allow an individual to live a flourishing life, both in an ethical and instrumental sense” (p. 4). Policies should look to developing character capabilities, but should never prescribe what kind of a “good” life these capabilities should be aimed toward.

Lexmond’s concept of character capabilities is not only both self- and other-interested; it also refers to internal capabilities, which might be strengthened or weakened by external circumstances. (For instance, a banker working in a banking firm in which prudence is not encouraged might find that his/her ability to calculate risks and benefits diminishes.) Thus, on a policy level, character development has to do with providing appropriate environments for the development of character. This, Lexmond argues, can be seen in the move toward Thaler and Sunstein’s “nudging” concept in behaviour change policy, according to which policy makers manipulate “choice architecture” in order to subtly influence behaviour toward more pro-social, environmentally friendly, healthy directions.

Lexmond is careful, in her analysis, to note the discrepancy between discourses around “good character” in education and the surrounding political landscape in which such discussions might take place. Growing up in the Iraq war era, she writes of her experience of a keen sense that there was a separation between the virtues she studied in the classroom and how they

were applied in the world (p. 4). However, her analysis of those discrepancies could be sharpened both by a deeper analysis of what character, itself, can be, and by a more critical analysis of the ways in which “character”, as a concept, might be instrumentalized politically. While she defines character as both a set of attributes and a set of capabilities, she fails to acknowledge that character traits might be both *relationally* and individually defined. As we have seen, Sara Ahmed (2011) notes that the attribution of a character trait – for instance, wilfulness – to a person might say more about the person attributing the trait than it says about the person to whom the trait purportedly belongs. Further, the character trait might say more about broader cultural presuppositions than to any essential property of the individual. For instance, in the George Eliot novels that Ahmed discusses, wilfulness is attributed again and again to female characters who swim against the grain, challenging the hierarchical power structures to which they are meant to submit. The attribution of character traits itself, then, is a technique of power, a way of pinning cultural ideals and power differentials on individuals. To say that character is *exclusively* relational would perhaps be to fall prey to a poststructuralist over-emphasis of the power of performatives. That said, Lexmond’s analysis leaves open the question of how to establish policy, pedagogy and metrics for character without accounting for the relational, normalizing and performative roles that such metrics themselves might play. An attempt to quantify or algorithmize character traits such as the ability to defer gratification might tend to reinforce, rather than challenge, what count as “good” traits within a given milieu.

Further, while having strong character capabilities may, indeed, help empower individuals, in the face of increasing disparities between the rich and poor, and a widespread erosion of the middle class, it is important to carefully question what character can and cannot provide in terms of mobility. In the face of increasing poverty and income disparity, it may well be that many students with perfectly “good” characters will not manage to find the mobility they have sought, in spite of their scholastic achievements and well-adapted attitudes. I would also question Lexmond’s claim that a character-based pedagogy is in keeping with nudging strategies in behaviour modification policy. Following Evgeny Morozov (2013), one could just as easily argue that nudging can actually preclude the decision-making processes that might rely on character capabilities. For instance, a “smart trash can” nudges individuals to improve their recycling habits by taking photographs of their trash each time the lid is closed, analyzing the photos to assign recycling points, and publishing these points on Facebook. Yet this activity has fundamentally changed the motivation an individual might have had to recycle in the first place. Rather than being about an ethical commitment to environmentalism, the gesture becomes gamified, turned into a points-gathering exercise. Further, such nudging techniques place a disproportional emphasis on individual self-monitoring of habits, rather than broader discussions about more challenging political questions to do with monitoring industry and business. (For instance, nudging focuses on helping individuals closely monitor their diets, rather than the much more difficult task of, say, holding the food industry accountable for its effects on public health.) Morozov calls this over-emphasis on self-monitoring solutionism: the reduction of complex social

and political problems to simplistic, “there’s an app for that” pseudo-solutions on the level of the consumer.

Along this line, another potential critique of Character Counts’ claims might come from a Rancièrian account of the role of ethics in contemporary politics. As Rancière argues (2009, p. 120-123), a focus on ethics in political discourse – deference to “doing the right thing” – is fundamentally an exceptionalist logic, which precludes political discussion by deferring to a “common humanity” rather than dealing with sustained conflicts, antagonisms, and legal debates. To defer to ethics is to sidestep politics; to refer to a “common humanity” fails to account for the fact that any conception of the common must always include some and exclude others. Further, there must be a way for such character-based pedagogies to care for styles of being that, while they may seem not to fit within a metrics of “good” character, actually perform complex and perhaps not readily understood roles within various milieus (social or otherwise). I have often thought of Manfred Pernice’s sculptures, for instance, as material “arguments,” of sorts, for the importance of the curmudgeon (see Figure 21). While seeming, perhaps, not to possess “good” or “positive” character traits, the curmudgeon might perform more complex observations, sentiments, insights and styles of caring than others with a more straightforwardly and recognizably “good” or “well-adapted” character. The curmudgeon’s styles of caring, I would argue, are differently temporalized, and scaffold different forms of relation between caring, intellectual observation, and practices of agreement and disagreement, than those with more straightforward styles of caring, of enacting a relationship between caring and emotion. It is entirely possible that temporal and stylistic

diversities in caring practices are highly beneficial to the diversity of social (and even antisocial) space. Although Character Counts certainly seeks to reconcile a qualitative heterogeneity of character traits with the strategic benefits of applying metrics to character (so that “character” might become more visible to policy makers as a valid concern), metrics risk normalizing conceptions of “good” character traits, failing to account for either the relational properties of character (as something that is differentially attributed to people), or the rich complexity and unique capacities of marginal styles of being – minor forms of thought enacted, through image-being, as character.

And yet, for all of its potentially normative and conservative tendencies, for all of its potential to reduce political discussions to familiar personal terms, for all of the potential pitfalls of Character Counts’ project, I remain ultimately sympathetic to its aims. As Michel Feher argues (2013), any effective form of activism must necessarily borrow from the available representations of the human condition proffered by the very form of power that it aims to critique. In light of this, one could argue that Character Counts’ drive to quantify character is a perfect answer to the neoliberal era’s emphasis on both metrics and self-esteem. By becoming visible to policy makers on their terms, Character Counts might be able to use metrics to support a richer range of qualitative experiences for students. Further, if one were to use Lexmond’s reasoning in order to arrive at a slightly different definition of character than the one she herself uses, one might come to define character as both a representational concept governing the economization of personhood, *and as an ability to resist or defer immediate, imitative agreement with the socio-political practices and presuppositions that form the fabric of one’s surroundings.* If such a

definition were taken, then character could be understood as a hinge-concept, which combines (depending on its discursive context) both extreme normativity and the potential for parrhesia in the Foucauldian sense: the ability to speak truth to power. In this sense, perhaps Character Counts holds open a space for resistances to come. Quite unlike Rosler's blanket refusal of data and quantification as violently rationalist and bureaucratic, Character Counts uses metrics for character to nourish and sustain the possibility of resistance. Further, as we have seen in Chapter 2, many arguments on art and financialization entrench the idea that, by producing, circulating and selling artists' rarefied, signature styles – their "character" evidenced in, and doubled by, the character of their masterworks – artworks enact a humanist apology for the machinations of the financialized market, both justifying and prefiguring wild, idiosyncratic pricing fluctuations. Yet, on the other hand, perhaps it might be interesting to consider how the status of artworks, as privileged carriers of qualitative particularity (established by the perceptual acts that contemplate these particularities), is changing from the opposite perspective as well. As metrics become more pervasive, and more pliable, than before, and as metrics for character, in particular, become more pliable and subtle, in some ways, due to data analytics, and more homogenous in others, certain artworks might challenge the kinds of subtleties in character analysis metrics privilege, and support minor, or marginal, styles of being. As we have seen in the last chapter, Robert Filliou's practice upholds just such a marginal style of being; in doing so, it anticipates some of the "character-work" to come for artists working in a neoliberal milieu. Manfred Pernice, Ryan Trecartin and many others continue the work that Filliou's practice anticipates in this regard,

presenting odd or idiosyncratic “characters” (whether directly through images, or rhetorically through material constructions), who challenge viewers to think differently about how concepts of “good character” function, and how they might come to matter.

Chapter 4

Surveillance and the Production of Character

In 2003, the art collective SWAMP⁵⁷ (Doug Easterly and Matt Kenyon) videotaped themselves going through a McDonald's drive-thru fifty-seven consecutive times in Calera, Alabama (*McService*, Figure 122). The two artists order hotcakes and sausages, Sprite and other typical fast food items in a perfectly usual way, generating almost \$200 in sales over five hours. Eventually, their behaviour arouses suspicion; McDonalds staff call the police, who prevent the pair from going through the drive-thru a 58th time. But what, exactly, aroused this suspicion? Ostensibly, the drive-thru customers are the perfect consumers: politely generating sales, enacting the most zealous and insatiable of appetites. Yet the *pattern* of their behaviour is irregular (or, more precisely, it is so regular that it is irregular; a series of completely "normal" activities repeated to the point at which they become a hyperbolic caricature of consumption). Having ordered one round of meals, they are supposed to be full; or at the very least they are supposed to move on. The biological rhythms of hunger and satiety, and the demands of daily life activities, are meant to intervene in this perfect circuit of consumption. Repeating an action to such an extent that it no longer finds a grounding logic in the body's appetites or in the routines of daily life – normative expectations of what

⁵⁷ SWAMP stands for Studies of Work Atmosphere and Mass Production. Doug Easterly and Matt Kenyon, who worked together until 2012, founded it in 1999. Kenyon now runs SWAMP as a solo project.

should motivate the behaviour – means that there must be other strategic considerations informing it. The repeated drive-thru loop (a consumptive death-drive diagram? a Sisyphean drawing on the pavement?) – brings up a deep-seated fear (grounded, ultimately, in exceptionalism and counter-terrorist politics) of the *opacity* of strategy with respect to the actions of which it is comprised. The act of going through a drive-thru, having become unhinged from its usual motivations, acts as a sign of a hidden, strategic motivation, the nature of which the actual act – going through the drive-thru in the usual way – reveals nothing. Their strategy’s illegibility – which is also the *customers’* illegibility (the over-perfect drive-thru customers are allies, perhaps, of some of the great illegible protagonists of modern literature: Melville’s Bartleby, Wharton’s Lily Bart) activates a fear, particular to post-9/11 life in the West, of the ability of quotidian actions to be *détourned* for nefarious purposes.

Yet terror may even be too strong a word, as such fears, arguably, have become more quotidian and more banal since 2003; in a “smartphone state”, there is a widespread unease at the differential relation between site and context. Interventions into daily life can easily be uploaded to social media sites on the spot; thus, there is a strong sense that a person’s behaviour might be intended as a sign for an audience that is not present. Similar drive-thru customers could be “playing” the McDonalds staff for the amusement of their Facebook friends, for instance. (This sense of the potential to be “played” was already palpable in 2003; the police officer in *McService* asks, “What are you gentlemen looking for? What’s the prank, what’s the joke?”) Such a sense might not provoke fear so much as

annoyance at being reduced to a dupe within someone else's prank, at being caught between one's performance as emotional, service industry labour and one's performance as the "whole" person one senses oneself to be. Indeed, Easterly and Kenyon might well be annoying the drive-thru employees toward the end of their circular travels, by increasing their labour – which may well increase McDonalds' profits, but does nothing for the workers' pay. The video documentation of the performance sets up an uncomfortable tension between two different dichotomies of oppression: one in which the mostly black women who work at the drive-thru serve the white male artists, who mildly provoke them as they use them for their video; and another in which producing and consuming are re-envisioned as equally laborious tasks, equally profit-mined by McDonalds. Who, precisely, is the oppressed in this image, which double-codes oppression – as if to suggest that McDonalds has swallowed previous class divisions whole, preserving and mobilizing their retroactive clashes, as it subsumes both sides?

The employees' decision to call for help seeks to stop "vaguely suspicious" behaviour from escalating into something dangerous. (This peer-to-peer policing partakes of a subjectivist logic that equates the ability to arouse suspicion with criminality in the future anterior.) Enjoyment, a reliable source of legible motivation, does not have a stable relationship to quantity; whereas one McDonald's meal might be enjoyable (to some), fifteen in a row would surely not be. Likewise, one trip through the drive-thru could be classified as "normal" behaviour; fifty-seven trips in a row could not. The post-9/11, post-internet sense of unease at the separability both of action from a seemingly "legible" intention, on the one hand, and of act from context, on the

other, becomes narratable as a question of character: what kind of a *person* spends their day going through a drive-thru over and over? What are their hidden motives – and how can one understand the significance of the fact that they appear to be hidden?

One place to begin would be to link the work back to its artists' intentions, which appear to be camouflaged in a field of quotidian actions. In this case, the intentions appear to be largely analytical. SWAMP claims that its aims were to examine the drive-thru's contribution to "highway culture," its role in siphoning profits from local communities to international corporations (SWAMP, *McService*). However, as the drive-thru siphons profits, they note, it also produces a "regular pattern of information." They write:

Control regulated by mass marketing and mass production is exchanged at the window, with regular intervals of profit occurring throughout the day. Our performance, despite the fact that we spent almost \$200 in 5 hours, contradicted the semantics of this socioeconomic construct (SWAMP, *McService*).

McDonald's collects patterns of information from its customers, and not just money; these patterns seem to impose far more exacting expectations on their consumers than simply that they spend as much money as possible – even if such expectations remain largely hidden from consumers. The artists' intention to analyze, through mild provocation, seeks out the intentionality of the corporation; it tries to understand McDonald's' means of conceptualizing its customers, and not merely its production of profits. Yet by creating a complex scenario of looking, which depends on several actors' attributions of abnormality to others, SWAMP also manages to arouse police suspicion. Clearly, more than just the semantics of the drive-thru and its corporate

overlords are at stake; the spectre of terrorist threat has seeped into the picture. Thus, *McService* activates a field of tensions between overlapping surveillance acts and apparatuses, each of which attributes characteristics to its subjects in different ways. In what ways, for instance, does corporate surveillance (companies' analysis of not only their sales, but also of *who* generates those sales, and why) relate to police surveillance (which, in this case, seems aimed at pre-empting potential threats in response to citizen calls – even if its actual target ends up being consumer abnormality)? How do acts of citizen pre-emption (for instance, the employee who must have called the police to report SWAMP) relate to the counter-terrorist police apparatus – and unfold against a backdrop of the constant attribution of intentionality and characteristics to other actors in a complex scenario? (These, of course, include attributions that SWAMP might make of McDonald's, its employees – in this case, mostly black, disadvantaged women – and McDonald's normalizing effects on the employees' behaviour.) Consumerism and counter-terrorism: how do these two motivations – one corporate, the other driven by state security – overlap with one another within concrete, multifaceted surveillance scenarios? What do these two subspecies of surveillant motivation share, how do they diverge from one another – and how can their interconnectivity be felt, perceived and sufficiently analyzed in the complex relational milieus implicated in acts of surveillance? In this chapter, I suggest that performances by SWAMP, Hasan Elahi and Erica Scourti offer an analytical method through which to approach the complexities of multiple, overlapping motivations in surveillance. My analysis, I should note, does not

focus directly on the dizzying complexities of state-corporate relations.⁵⁸ Rather, I focus on how various state and corporate motivations become visible, perceptible, and representable within surveillance scenarios. As I will argue, an account as to how a variety of actors, each with different motivations and capacities, might conceive of a surveillant subject requires a theory of surveillance scenarios as sites of *characterization*. By characterization, here, I mean complex, relational acts of attribution by which characteristics are ascribed to an object of surveillance, often based on some form of analysis of his/her propensities and patterns of behaviour (whether observed by people, through computational analysis, or with a combination of these). Characterization, the representational concept that best conveys how surveillance scenarios rely on the *attribution* and *circulation* of characteristics rather than their mere “discovery,” highlights the fact that representations of surveillant subjects are not simply reflections of who that subject “is,” but, rather, crystallize complex power relations between subject and state, and between consumer and corporation. Acts of characterization come into play in situations in which the relationship between a person’s patterns of action and their *motivation* come into question. Analyzing surveillance performances through the lens of characterization highlights the disjunctions between

⁵⁸ Indeed, there are vastly divergent theories as to precisely how state and corporate power relate to each other. To cite just two here, which make for a pointed contrast: Benjamin Bratton (2014) argues that national governments are a vestigial form of power, more symbolic than actual, in the process of being superseded by corporate power. Just as monarchies remain, in many countries, as the last remnants of an outdated form of power, so nation-states remain, despite the fact that their power has already been largely lost to corporations. Nitzan and Bichler (2009), on the other hand, argue that state interests and corporate interests form a continuous whole, a “state of capital.” Corporations use governments to extend their power, just as governments use corporations to extend theirs. Indeed, their interests are one and the same: that of accruing capital, which they define as power. Power, in turn, they define as “confidence in obedience... the certainty of the rulers in the submissiveness of the ruled” (p. 17). Indeed, recent pronouncements about the ambiguous relations between state and corporate power, such as Julian Assange’s recent article on Google conducting back-door diplomacy for the U.S. government (2014), probably exacerbate more than they resolve the tension between these two theories.

various forms of surveillant motivation, which play out differentially in – and, indeed, as – representations of surveillant subjects. Characterization enacts a form of *commerce* between self, state, and corporate interest, allowing representations of personhood, behavioural pattern and tendency to circulate between actors and accrue legitimacy and value.

Patterns of Life: Characterizing Behavioural Tendencies

What kind of person would go through a drive-thru fifty-seven times in a row? At moments in which an unusual behavioural pattern throws the relationships between action and intentionality into question, characterization steps in to bridge the gap. SWAMP's piece draws attention to the complex semantics of the drive-thru as a site of information gathering. This focus, in fact, anticipates developments in surveillance practices and problematics that would become increasingly dominant – and increasingly automated – in the years to come. Writing twelve years after *McService* was made, Grégoire Chamayou (2015) speaks to the possibilities and limitations of the National Security Agency's surveillance practices in a manner that closely echoes the issues brought to light by SWAMP's performance. NSA surveillance picks out "signatures" from an "ocean of information" (Chamayou, 2015, p. 2-3). Its practices, Chamayou claims, are descendants of those that monitored older oceans: the U.S. Navy's Sound Surveillance System, established in the 1950s, which searched out signature patterns in complex sound signals. Yet unlike the 1950s Navy, for whom the target, if not the signal, of sound surveillance was quite clear (one sought to distinguish a submarine from, say, a school of fish), the NSA's counter-terrorist mandate seeks to distinguish

benign from nefarious *intention*. Such a target is inherently problematic: “What algorithm,” Chamayou asks, “would be capable of detecting behavioural indices that could unmask this kind of intentionality?” (2015, p. 4). Given this difficult philosophical problem, the NSA does its best to reconstruct intention through Activity-Based Intelligence; analyzing patterns of life and seeking irregularity, it seeks to make activities induce identities (p. 8) and intentions. Yet, in spite of the Orwellian nightmares to which the NSA’s seemingly all-knowing gaze (revealed to the public by Edward Snowden in 2013) might justifiably give rise, Chamayou notes that the NSA has been spectacularly ineffective in foiling terrorist plots, contributing nothing whatsoever to public safety throughout its entire telephone metadata collection program (p. 8). Just as the pre-emptive prohibitions on SWAMP’s drive-thru activities, carried out by “touchy” McDonald’s staff and police in a fear-gripped, post-9/11 America, failed to distinguish between an analytical artists’ project and a prospective terrorist plot, so the NSA’s sophisticated surveillance apparatuses seem far more likely to *produce* presumed intentions than to uncover them lurking behind abnormal behavioural patterns. As an analyst of surveillance practices, how can one begin to develop a critical language for such acts, which involve the active selection and production of characteristics?

Technologies of Attribution

Many critical responses to surveillance practices in the post-9/11 world take privacy as their central concern. While there are certainly important reasons to advocate the right to privacy, it is also necessary to point out privacy’s limitations as a lens through which to analyze the complex, relational milieus of ever-shifting surveillance scenarios. Some of these limitations have

been well articulated within the emerging field of feminist surveillance studies. As Dubrofsky and Magnet (2015) argue, privacy, in and of itself, does not necessarily help or protect everyone; for instance, victims of domestic abuse, if anything, suffer from the privacy of their own homes. Moreover, given that surveillance makes certain bodies hyper-visible, while it allows others to “blend in” or even remain entirely hidden, focusing on privacy as a blanket issue fails to account for the fact that it “is a right not granted equally to all” (Dubrofsky and Magnet, 2015, p. 4). Another way to question privacy’s ability to address new forms of inequality facilitated by surveillance have come from accounts of corporate and financial surveillance practices emerging largely out of Silicon Valley. Evgeny Morozov (2013), for instance, asks: what good is a hypothetical right to privacy, given that, in a world of vast concentrations of corporate and financial power, customers are routinely rewarded for “volunteering” to provide their information – receiving better rates, better access, and supposedly “free” extras if they do so? When added up, such bonuses make privacy a pricey proposition. Enacting customer loyalty in a surveillance economy, as SWAMP do in contracted fashion, involves not only fitting into corporate semantics, but also willingly volunteering one’s information along with one’s cash. Ours is a time of immensely concentrated wealth and power in the hands of a few corporate, computational and financial players.⁵⁹ Privacy, in the face of such vastly privatized interests, becomes a luxury many cannot afford. Given these dynamics, as Mark Andrejevic points out, “Privacy debates... come to stand in for discussions that might more

⁵⁹ For an account of how the surveillance economy and how it concentrates wealth in the hands of a few businesses and financial players, whose computational capacities can vastly outstrip their competitors, thereby eviscerating the middle class of content and service providers, see Lanier (2014).

directly address the question of who controls the information infrastructure and for what ends” (2011, p. 279).

Such critiques are quite important; however, there is another, perhaps even more fundamental representational problem with the privacy debate. In painting images of governments and corporations peering into private lives, stealing traces of propensities, behaviours and intentions – seemingly traces of their subjects’ “true selves” – privacy advocacy fails to account for the *speculative* nature of intentions and propensities in the first place. Whose suspicion, for instance, is reflected in the police’s characterization of SWAMP as suspicious? The attribution of possibly nefarious intentions to the duo expresses complex speculations by various perceivers, as well as observed abnormalities in the actions of the perceived. Given this, and given, for instance, the NSA’s complete failure to discern intentionality in complex behavioural patterns, it is misleading to imply that the objects surveillance apparatuses seek are unearthed, pre-existing coordinates from private lives. Rather than viewing the attributive acts of surveillance as invasions of privacy (though they certainly may be facilitated by these), conceptualizing them as complex, relational, and speculative sites of characterization more aptly speaks to the sense in which the suspicious characteristics of surveillance subjects are not so much found as they are co-produced.

As Sara Ahmed (2011) suggests in her study of “problem characters” in nineteenth-century novels, it is useful to think of character as a glimpse: “it is not that we have a glimpse of character but that a character is a glimpse, [is] what creates an impression that there is someone being glimpsed” (p. 232). To characterize a person is to play with the impression that one has reduced

her essential qualities, behaviours and propensities from a larger whole in an act of perception (and perhaps preconception), fabricated a smaller set of attributes that seem to aptly express the whole, while still sensing the limits of this smaller set as knowledge of the “whole” person. If this is so, then surveillance apparatuses such as the NSA’s, which rely on vastly expanded data storage capacities, rewrite the relations between the total quantities of data collected and such productive acts of glimpsing, by expanding the palette of available information that can be used to characterize someone. Ironically, in this context, personal characteristics become more *qualitatively* malleable, due to the increased *quantity* of personal information in sleeper dossiers, and to the increased capacity to quantitatively analyze this information.

In the age of big data, enormous databanks of personal information, along with sophisticated analytical techniques with which to correlate the data, might induce a broader, more wildly inventive range of prospective characterizations than ever before. On the other hand, data’s strong association with “truth,” for many (though this correlation is, of course, quite contestable⁶⁰) might lend such characterizations the conceit of an unprecedented realism. With the capacity to analyze such vast quantities of data, algorithmic analyses can interpret their subjects’ behaviours like never before. Yet in spite of any such conceit to realism – to adequately (could we say democratically?) represent the whole person from whom these few qualities have, somehow, become elected representatives – characterization is always (to use Ahmed’s phrase), a “technology of attribution,” an ascribed sense of self-fulfilling intentionality that “establishes ‘the commerce’ between

⁶⁰ See, for instance, Van Dijck (2014) and Lanier (2014).

reader and text” (2011, p. 233). If, as Ahmed suggests, such a description of characterization might be extended beyond the bounds of fictional worlds to describe relations between readers and characters, then surely it can also be repurposed as a fitting description of the commerce between surveillance apparatuses and their subjects, describing how characteristics are attributed and exchanged between various actors.

Characterization, as “technology of attribution,” speaks to the ways in which tendencies to understand certain subjects as more “problematic” than others might be self-fulfilling. Racial profiling, of course, is a prime example of this. Hasan Elahi, along with millions of non-white people in the U.S. and elsewhere, knows very well how pervasively and violently the state can differentially attribute suspiciousness according to racist preconceptions. Harcourt (2007) has shown how deeply ingrained racial profiling is in contemporary juridical and police practices, which rely on statistical calculation of individuals’ propensities, many of which are filtered through highly problematic, preconceived racial categories. McClanahan has written of the ways in which ostensibly “objective” FICO® credit scores launder racial discrimination (2014, p. 47-48). Writing in the aftermath of yet another recent instance of police brutality against African-Americans (this time, an attack against teenagers at a pool party in McKinney, Texas), Sinthujan Varatharajah (2015) reflects on the difficulties and ironies involved in even being able to find a position from which to protest as a racialized subject, given that acts of protest often have higher costs (legal, personal and financial) for non-white subjects than for those who can mobilize their white privilege to protest racism. He writes:

Growing up in white supremacist societies many of us have been conditioned to work hard to remain invisible... we grow up internalizing the criminalization of our bodies and are taught from childhood life-saving lessons to circumvent these macro- and micro-aggressions. It is these many little moments that accumulate throughout our lives when we, for instance, pull the seatbelt tighter when the cops drive by, when we dress in ways to not appear as threats, when we make sure that the supermarket bill is visible to not be considered looters, or when we choose to not call out racism (2015).

Varatharajah compellingly portrays how deeply internalized is the threat of constant characterization for non-white Americans, who must expend so much effort, day in and day out, simply to appear non-suspicious – or, rather, simply *not* to appear as a subject of interest. Characterization, as a concept, covers both acts of attribution that are directly linked to preconceptions about race, sexuality and gender, and those that appear more minutely adapted to assess individual traits and propensities (even though these, of course, are by no means entirely separable from larger identificatory categories). Yet, while surveillance apparatuses can characterize anyone, some bodies have a much harder time passing as inconspicuous than others. In a field of newly proliferating, automated and arguably correlative “technologies of attribution” – big data analytics, social media platforms and credit scoring innovations, for instance – characterization speaks to the active yet subtractive, perceptual and conceptual work of attribution, which actively creates characteristics to match preconceived problems. “Put simply,” Ahmed writes, “when someone becomes a problem, *we tend to question their character*” (2011, p. 233). Equally, when a surveillance apparatus characterizes someone, this may express a self-fulfilling response to a preconceived problem.

The surveillance-based performances I examine below – *McService*, Elahi’s *Tracking Transience* (2005-, Figure 23), and Erica Scourti’s *Life in AdWords* (2012-13, Figure 24) – span ten years (2003-2013) between 9/11 and the Snowden revelations. Each of these works enmeshes “problem characters” – or problematic traits *in* character – with idiosyncratic acts of attribution carried out by, through, or (so to speak) “in the style of” surveillance. Given the rapid changes in surveillance practices and players within this decade, these three works represent a broad range of apparatuses, monitoring practices and concerns, involving many actors, from citizens, to police, FBI agents, online users, corporations, self-documentarians and algorithms. While *McService* focuses on pre-emptive citizen reporting and extra-legal police measures, *Tracking Transience* documents Elahi’s location and daily activities in obsessive detail online. Finally, Scourti’s piece documents the artist keeping a daily diary, emailing it to her gmail account, and then reading out the AdWords Google’s algorithms selected to match her consumer profile. Each of these works experiments with making its performer(s) visible as surveilled subjects; in a play of exaggerated docility, the performers produce acts of what could variously be read as curiosity about, empathy with, or even submission to their respective surveillance apparatuses, giving each apparatus what it seems to “want” (an anomaly; full transparency; and a fertile range of emotions and interests amenable to consumer desire, respectively). The performers’ acts allow their audiences to learn something about how such watchful eyes and sensors see. Revealing complex, surveillant scenarios, these three pieces delineate an evolution, of sorts, between three different rhetorical structures through which surveillance-

based characterization comes to be represented: from self as threat, to self as set, to self as product.

From Threat to Set: Character, Quantity and Spectres of Motivation

McService demonstrates, with elegant simplicity, how easily absurd repetition unhinges action from motivation. In this piece, the performers' actions have lost their legibility with respect to hunger and other motivating factors that would normally determine an individual's decision to go to McDonald's. Enjoyment, a reliable source of legible motivation, does not have a stable relationship to quantity; whereas one McDonald's meal might be enjoyable (to some), dozens in a row would surely not be. Likewise, one trip through the drive-thru can easily be classified as "normal" behaviour; fifty-seven trips in a row cannot. This normalizing gaze, which seeks to distinguish "normal" from abnormal behaviour, can be understood as part of what Brian Massumi (2007) has described as a wholesale shift toward pre-emption as an "operative logic of power" in contemporary politics. (Massumi focuses particularly in American military tactics, though his discussion could also be generalized to account for shifts in the politics of everyday life.) The Bush administration, he writes, unabashedly embraced a pre-emptive logic, as is evidenced by the following statement from Bush himself in 2002: "If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long. We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans and confront the worst threats before they emerge. In the world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path to action. And this nation will act" (quoted in Massumi, 2007). Massumi delineates three ontological and epistemological modalities through which the future might be understood and strategically grappled with: prevention,

deterrence and preemption. Prevention, he argues, does not have its own ontology. It “operates in an objectively knowable world” and must be applied – as in, for instance, the use of specialist information (from economics or medicine) to build preventative policy. Deterrence steps in where prevention fails. It operates in the same way as prevention, epistemologically (in that it “assumes knowability and measurability”); but it transforms not-yet-seen effects into future causes. It is according to a deterrent logic, for instance, that a nuclear arms race makes sense; it translates a future threat into a present danger by building up a nuclear weapons arsenal in the present. But it does so in a balanced way; it aims at equilibrium between one’s own nuclear arms and one’s neighbour’s. Oddly enough, deterrence also acts as an “apotheosis of humanism” (Massumi, 2007), in that it relies on the fundamental humanity of the opponent: surely he is sane enough not to push the button. However, deterrence only works as an operative logic between potentially equal military powers; it fails in unbalanced or unstable circumstances, which call for preemptive measures. Unlike previous modalities for operating tactically with respect to the future – prevention and deterrence – pre-emption, for Massumi, operates in relation to a fundamental uncertainty in a world in which potential threats have not fully formed, and may not have even yet emerged. Within this strategic logic, “threat has become proteiform”; and “the global situation is not threatening so much as threat-generating: threat-o-genic” (2007). Operating in an imbalanced playing field, in which a highly funded, yet large and cumbersome US Military responds to terrorist threats that might be smaller in scale but wield the significant advantage of surprise, preemptive action follows an incitatory logic, according to which “the most effective way to fight

an unspecified threat is to actively contribute to producing it” (2007). In other words, in order to fight a threat that has not yet emerged and is thus not yet knowable, it is best to provoke it into concrete existence. Such a strategy is, of course, inherently performative and self-perpetuating; it operates on a conditional logic according to which it is impossible for policy makers to ever have been wrong. For instance, even if it has been proven since the Iraq war that Iraq never had the weapons of mass destruction that Colin Powell claimed it did as an alibi for U.S. invasion, the former Bush administration can argue that Iraq still *would have* used them if it could have. Pre-emption responds to fear as the “palpable action in the present of a threatening future cause”; it operates on an affective plane, and retroactively makes its enemy into “*what it always could have been*” (2007). Truth, in this schema, is retroactive; facts are grown “conditionally in the affective soil of an indeterminately present futurity” (2007). For Massumi, the self-perpetuating logic of preemption – as a kind of “conflict unlimited” – is of the utmost concern.⁶¹

While these border zones bear the weight of the most brutal forms of data-managed violence, a softer violence pervades data analytics’ more quotidian, consumerist, financialized inflections of online activity. Snowden’s image of “deriving suspicion from an innocent life” (cited in the Introduction) in light of Massumi’s argument, places characterization firmly within the

⁶¹ Certainly, more recent scholarship on U.S. military practices in zones of exception only lends further credence to Massumi’s concerns. For instance, Susan Schuppli (2014) analyzes the legal implications of the U.S. military’s drone program’s use of kill algorithms, which can quite literally execute without involving humans in their decision-making processes, and manage decisions such as whether or not the sixteen-year-old son of a radicalized cleric should be added to the kill list because his father had been killed by a U.S. drone strike, and thus he might be more likely to become radicalized himself. Who is legally responsible for a killing executed by an algorithm? Schuppli’s work, we could say, attests to new forms of sovereign power emerging at the margins of control societies through analytic technologies.

framework of pre-emptive logic. “Character” and characteristics (such as being “suspicious”) are always speculative, and often self-affirming objects; in *McService*’s case, they are brought into being through fear as an affective agent through which potential future threats can act on the present. SWAMP’s piece demonstrates how such indeterminately present futurity plays out in the sphere of domestic security in post-9/11 America, through citizen fear and extra-legal police prohibitions. In the post-9/11 domestic security climate, character is the speculative object of pre-emption *par excellence*.

If *McService* speaks to the creation of a threat simply through repetition of an action, American artist Hasan Elahi’s *Tracking Transience* project (2005-) does just the opposite: it ameliorates threat through repetition. In 2002, Elahi was detained at the Detroit Airport on his way back from an exhibition in Amsterdam. Without knowing why he had come under suspicion (perhaps another with his name had been placed on a no-fly list?), he was held and questioned by the FBI for hours about the reasons for his frequent travels, whether he had visited any mosques, and whether he had moved explosives out of a storage unit. His familiarity with American culture, as well as showing the agents his Palm Pilot filled with records of gallery exhibitions, meetings and talks, eventually led to his release. He was subjected to lie detector tests, and required to check in with FBI agents for six months back in Tampa, where he lived at the time. But how could he ensure that he would not be detained in the future? As he put it, “Once you’re in the system, you’re in... It’s incredibly disturbing when a country, particularly your own country, uses discrimination as a basis for an investigation” (Scharper, 2013). The ubiquity of false leads, biases and scapegoating generated by racial profiling across a wide range of

surveillant and predictive monitoring practices – from airport screenings to credit risk assessment and policing – is certainly a stark reminder that the traits attributed to subjects of surveillance are not “theirs,” but are complex outcomes of characterization.⁶²

In response to these experiences, Elahi began notifying the FBI whenever he left the country, in order to avoid hassles in airports. Eventually, this practice led him to launch *Tracking Transience: the Orwell Project*. On his website, www.trackingtransience.net (2005-ongoing), he frequently updates his location, and posts copious photographs of the scenes that comprise his everyday life: meals, highways, hallways, toilets, airports, gas stations, chain stores, and signs. The current version of the website begins with a homepage detailing his most recently entered coordinates with a flashing red arrow on top of a map and a scroll over a photo of the location. (The maps are produced in collaboration with the United States Geological Survey, which provides aerial surveillance images in response to his photographs' geographic coordinates.) (Creative Capital) Without warning, the page begins to flash through images (or whole subsets of images) from Elahi's life: perhaps an unmade bed in a hotel room, a nondescript watering hole, or a mosaic of small images of toilets or tacos compiled from various locations on various days. There are purely textual entries, detailing the coordinates of some of his favorite locations, his flight history, and his bank records. Elahi's

⁶² See, for instance, McClanahan on the laundering of racial bias in supposedly “objective” FICO® credit scores (2014); Harcourt (2007) on racial profiling in predictive policing practices (both mentioned above); Dubrofsky and Magnet's emphasis on the ways in which new categories of racial identification are emerging in surveillance scenarios, such as the “terrorist look-alike” (2015, p. 9); and Chamayou's discussion of the use of racist sobriquets in NSA training material, as well as new forms of racial profiling emerging in the realm of big data analytics (2015, p. 4)

project responds to surveillance, yet without advocating for privacy in a straightforward way. (Indeed, although he ostensibly gives up his privacy, Elahi claims to lead a very private life, in spite of – or even, given that he has pre-empted the FBI’s targeting him, *because of* – constantly sharing its coordinates.) (Ashraf, 2010) Rather, Elahi’s work intervenes in the *economy* of surveillant information. In other words, he intervenes in how images and information from his private life circulate – how they play out, in their very circulation, a relation between images of life and life-as-image, between visible spectacle and the mystery of the unknown (in some of the senses Mondzain elaborates, as discussed in Chapter 2). As he puts it, “I share everything with the FBI — and everyone... Their currency is secrecy and access to information. Making information public devalues their currency” (Creative Capital). Of course, Elahi’s assessment here is debatable; in one sense, making information public might *increase* its currency in various contexts (for instance, within art discourses). Yet Elahi wishes to draw attention to the fact that publicity devalues the currency of information for those who benefit from its being broadly unavailable to the public: in particular, the purveyors of surveillance apparatuses. Given this analysis, we could say that *Tracking Transience* tackles *privatization* rather than privacy as such – it is not the individual’s right to privacy that is the object of critique, so much as the ability of secrets (be they governmental or corporate) to generate value for some while they impoverish the power of others. Surveillance is part of an economy that garners value due to its being held privately, at an advantage over others; such value diminishes as soon as that information becomes public. If characterization establishes a commerce between a

represented person and his/her “readers” (be these governmental agencies, corporate algorithms or online user-citizens), then Elahi’s project explores a way to enact that commerce differently, making his “character” more widely available so as to counter the privatization of his information-assets.

There is another sense in which Elahi’s piece focuses on privatization more than privacy: in its interest in mass-produced objects, architectures and meals, and the ways in which they intertwine with a hollowed-out expression of his character – a sum total, of sorts, of his habits and propensities, which establish his “normalcy” as a consumer, but reveal little, if anything, of his thoughts, ideas or intentions. His images are sparse, unpopulated and banal. No friends or family come to view; there are only objects, meals, places and occasional passersby in the distance – a portrait of an alienated, consumerist life, rendered in the first person. The photographs bring to mind Ed Ruscha’s series of deadpan portrayals of American locations (such as *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, 1963). Like Ruscha’s, Elahi’s images seem to dissolve their own interest in spatial specificity. Presenting spatially specific phenomena as so many *quantities* overwhelms their specificity, draws attention to the tensions between the local and the non-local in these scenes. On trackingtransience.net, users witness mass-produced outputs of globalized corporate and financial circuits, whose origins, structures and workings are just as obscure to the casual observer as the inner workings of a surveillant subject’s mind might be to the FBI, even when it has some help from citizens like Elahi, who provide personal information and correct at least some of its misattributions. Unlike in Ruscha’s project, Elahi (as target, referent, viewpoint, persona) remains the conceptual focus of the work, even

as the specificity of his own life seems to disappear into an atmosphere of everyday artifacts. He becomes a *set*, in the mathematical sense of “a collection of things (called its *members* or *elements*), the collection being regarded as a single object” (Enderton, 1977, p. 1). Elahi does not picture himself as a subject (his own likeness does not appear in the work); rather, he appears as nothing more than the sum total of all locations, surroundings, activities and meals experienced (or, at least, indexed, evidenced), photographed and put into circulation by his website. He turns the cameras; he becomes, in a sense, an empty container – nothing more than a first-person perspective that links many different objects and environments. The sum total of these is his character, his represented *being* – but one which turns the focus away from his own particularity, away from future speculations as to his behaviour, and onto the world, and the economy, he witnesses. Elahi has been subject to the FBI’s characterization of him as suspicious, based on a few, erroneous and poorly chosen indices of “possible terrorism.” In response, *Tracking Transience* proposes the set as an alternative structure through which to represent character online – one which devalues privatized information currency, shifts the focus away from racialized bodies, and democratizes the weight given to each of Elahi’s (often rather mundane) activities, eroding exceptions with tides of represented habits.⁶³

⁶³ This act, arguably, generates empathy for the mundane objects Elahi pictures in his photographs, or even experiments with what it means to become an object (be it a thingly object or an object of investigation): to partake in objects’ stubborn recalcitrance to the cultural logic of surveillance. Hito Steyerl (recounting a conversation she had with Elizabeth Lebovici) remarks that emancipatory practices generally involve striving to become *subjects* of history, rather than its objects; but, she asks, given the difficult contradictions involved in adopting a subject position, why not “side with the object for a change?” (Steyerl 2010) Elahi, indeed, “sides with the object” in this work; dissolving himself into his web of objects and places, he generates some remarkable portraits of generic objects and places with curiosity and wit. To disappear as an object of surveillance, in Elahi’s project, is to embrace

Tracking Transience seems ever more prescient, as today, droves of citizens routinely volunteer information about their activities, meals, and whereabouts on social media. Elahi's project acts on the faith that sharing information about so-called "private" life will, in a sense, de-privatize its information-flows, decrease its usefulness to government agents who only derive value from that to which they have privileged access. This is certainly the case in some instances (in Elahi's case, the public's witnessing his project tempers the FBI's singular hold on characterizing him as "threatening" or "non-threatening"). That said, there are also a host of recent developments in big data analytics that allow corporations to benefit from users' free sharing of personal information online.

Life in AdWords

London-based artist Erica Scourti examines some of these developments, which make newly automated forms of characterization possible. For almost a year (March 2012 – January 2013), she emailed her daily diary to her gmail account, to see what kinds of AdWords would come up. She then "performed to webcam the list of suggested keywords linking to clusters of relevant ads" (Scourti, 2013a). This process resulted in deadpan readings of disjointed, generic yet oddly personal clusters of words and phrases, at times hilariously at odds with her webcam-recorded image as a lived being-in-time. As she reads (often, it appears, in her bedroom at home, dressed casually in tank tops, bathrobes, sweaters or pyjamas – and at times

surveillance fully until it flips its gaze, and looks out onto the cold, dead world of planes and plazas, meeting rooms, living rooms and fast food joints.

accompanied by a black and white cat), the keywords settle in clusters on varying aspects of her activities, emotions, musings and social roles. “Heart problems. Match single. Video funny. Makeup look,” she reads, in a robe and what appears to be a partially dry, greenish facial mask, with a bit of cluttered bedroom in the background (2013b). Some of the keyword clusters relate to generic experiences that reveal more about the time of year (and how it is feted by large groups of people) than about Scourti herself. “New Year’s eve. Drank. Drank too much. Fireworks. Good wishes for New Year,” begins her January 2013 AdWords compilation (2013b). Other keyword clusters offer glimpses of her interests and concerns as an artist; MFA degree programs, London galleries and shipping solutions all feature. Still other keywords seem to speak to consumer concerns – prospective spending habits or online searches (for song lyrics or friendship poems, for instance); and to health and physical ailments (severe sore throats, or the benefits of drinking water). Finally, there are those keywords that touch on subjects typically coded as private, and even “internal:” anxieties, stress, depression, emotions, love and relationships. Essential to each of these provisional categories is a rhythmic ebb and flow that sees them waft in and out of each other’s purview, loosely weaving together scraps of separate activities, anxieties and aspects of identity. In her March 2012 compilation, she recites: “Lyrics lyrics. Feeling tired. Always feeling sad. Feeling depressed. Healthy eating food. Music and lyrics. Eating out. Song lyrics.” And the next day, slumped in bed, she reads: “Love relationship. Love relationships. Love and romance. Severe sore throat. Lyrics lyrics. Anxiety and depression. Anxiety and stress. Depression and anxiety” (Scourti, 2012a). The keywords circulate feelings, interests and

concerns, quite literally, as commerce in an attention economy, in which companies pay for the privilege of having their websites stand out from millions of others by competing in keyword auctions. What substantiates these keywords' claim to value is that they are hinged on algorithmic "readings" of the individual online user and, thus, ostensibly closely reflect her expressed habits, interests and concerns. In doing so, Scourti's piece points out, they also paint a picture of her character.

That habits shape character is certainly nothing new. In *The Gay Science* (first published in 1882), Nietzsche describes the relationship between a worker and his habits in terms of character (1974, p. 302). He remarks that when someone has worked the same job for several years, he in effect *becomes* the character he once merely played. From playing to being: character is that which stiffens through work, repetition and time. What is the analogous scenario to Nietzsche's in an era of immaterial labour, in which an "alienated cognitariat" (as Franco "Bifo" Berardi [2010] calls it) drifts from job to job, task to task, contract to contract? The keywords algorithms Scourti's piece reveals highlight at least two new means through which habits stiffen into representations of character in the surveillance economy. On the one hand, the concept of the working self, here, extends beyond the traditional, liberal-era realms of work to encompass consumer behaviour, entrepreneurial activities associated with landing art projects, the emotional labour of maintaining personal relationships, and the like. One's character encompasses more than simply a particular role one plays in a specific context; it blends work, consumption, personal life and entrepreneurialism, navigating the tensions between all of these roles and conceptualizing each of

them as, in some sense, equal forms of immaterial labour. On the other hand, the automaticity and ubiquity of such readings reifies the rhythmic flux and flow of habits, interests and concerns, making their stiffening into representations of “character” through algorithmic analysis a matter of course. Yet neither of these statements go far enough – for there has also been a complete reversal. The worker – for all her precarity, her anxieties, her endless mixing of heterogeneous tasks and social roles – becomes a product, whose attention, tendencies and even identities are sold to Google’s corporate clients.

As Christian Fuchs writes in his critique of the political economy of Google, “Google commodifies users’ cognition, communication and cooperation by engaging in surveillance of these activities, creating data about them and selling these data to advertising clients. The cognition dimension features personal, ecological, technological, economic, political and cultural user data as well as user-generated content” (Fuchs, 2011). Google AdWords, a primary agent of this political economy, is based on an auction system through which advertisers compete for prominent screen positions with respect to keywords linked to specific users (Fuchs, 2011; Girard 2009, p. 31). AdWords allow advertisers “to target ads for example by country, exact location of users and distance from a certain location, the type of device used... the mobile phone operator used... gender, or age group” (Fuchs, 2011). While Google may well be a pioneer in selling such specificities to advertisers, it encompasses only one amongst a host of recent developments in monetized online surveillance. John Cheney-Lippold (2011) refers to some such developments in his work on algorithmic identity

production, which he understands as a form of “soft biopolitics.” He describes the online data collecting practices of, for instance, the Quantcast corporation – one of many companies that provides audience measurement services for member websites, thus helping them to best target advertisements to individual IP addresses. Based on browsing history, one of Quantcast’s algorithms might decide that an individual user is, for instance, male. Maleness emerges as a trait, in Quantcast’s formulae, purely numerically, without any reference to the user’s embodied identity. Yet, conversely, the identifications at which the algorithms arrive self-modify in a cybernetic loop, sometimes overturning or modifying the initial assumptions that led to a particular identification being made in the first place. For instance, if I visit cnn.com, and am thus designated as male (due to 78% of visitors to the site having been previously identified as male), and then, because of my subsequent browsing history, I am adjusted to female, this new information might modify the initial statistics that declared 78% of cnn.com visitors to be male in the first place. Such practices make gender a completely digital, and thus measurable, property.

In the process, Cheney-Lippold argues, “the regulation of gender as a category... becomes wholly embedded within the logic of consumption, where categorical behaviours are statistically defined through a cybernetics of purchasing and research that marketers have deemed valuable for identification and categorization” (p. 171). This new algorithmic identity, Cheney-Lippold argues, operates at a distance from traditional liberal politics, and enjoys an unprecedented ubiquity (p. 165), as its “logic, rules, and explicit functioning work to determine the new conditions of possibilities of users’

lives” (p. 167). Whereas earlier in the history of market research, census-data laden geographies and psychographic categorizations (which identified various consumer types in order not to essentialize demographic categorizations) involved retroactively interpreting limited data-sets, new online analytic capabilities allow companies to analyze consumer data in real time. Further, such shifts in market research focus “not on essential notions of identity but instead on pliable behavioural models, undergirded by algorithms, that allow for the creation of a cybernetic relationship to identification” (p. 168). The more data that is collected, the more identified the user’s identities and desires become; and the more identified users become, the more cybernetic modeling can be streamlined, optimizing the ways in which it calculates the user’s identity. This constant feedback loop, Cheney-Lippold argues, is a form of control best understood according to Deleuze’s concept of modulation (1992): a technique used in societies of control in which actual “discipline becomes more or less unnecessary if control can be enacted through a series of guiding, determining and persuasive mechanisms of power” (Cheney-Lippold, 2011, p. 169). Instead of working through discipline and normativity, modulation “configures life by tailoring its conditions of possibility. Regulation predicts our lives as users by tethering the potential for alternative futures to our previous actions as users based on consumption and research for consumption” (p. 169). As online identification apparatuses constantly – and automatically – characterize users based on their consumptive and affective labour, so they shape users’ potential future online experiences along the same lines as their characterizations, thus actively closing the loop between characterization and subjectivation. Scourti’s piece

stages a dialogue between two descriptive technologies for representing complex, interior life (one very old, the other quite recent): the diary (as a form of becoming-character through self-representation) and its algorithmic analysis (an apparatus that characterizes). As she continually reads her AdWords, a double pedagogical process takes place. She “teaches” Google’s algorithms to recognize her more efficiently – to translate diaristic interiority into algorithmic interiority. In doing so, she learns something of how these algorithms see; as she reads out her keywords, it is almost as if she is learning how to speak their language. Ted Striphas’ work helps to conceptualize this dialogue further (Hallinan and Striphas, 2014; Striphas, 2012; Granieri, 2014). He argues that concepts of culture and technology (which were closely aligned in pre-modern times) are now re-aligning in new ways. For instance, the emergence of the digital humanities, which uses computational tools to analyze cultural materials in ways that human observers cannot (for instance, by analyzing several thousand novels to find a heretofore unrecognized subgenre) shows that there may be certain aspects of “human” culture that are only intelligible to machines. Striphas’ term “algorithmic culture” describes the ways in which algorithms increasingly do traditional “cultural” work: “of the sorting, classifying, and hierarchizing of people, places, objects, and ideas” (Granieri, 2014). For instance, Google and Facebook use algorithms to determine what appears in a specific user’s search engine. This language wrests interests, doubts and desires into clouds of tendencies. Scourti’s actions point to the cybernetic feedback loops at the heart of a newly emerging “political economy of propensity” (Thrift, 2009) articulated, in large part, through data analytics companies, online advertisers

and social media platforms. As Nigel Thrift (2009) argues, there is a newly emerging “political economy of propensity” in contemporary societies, the outlines of which have yet to be entirely written. Propensity, he argues, should be “understood jointly as both a tendency-cum-attraction and an innate inclination, that is, as a disposition to behave in a certain way which is only partly in control of the agent” (p. 83). In order to understand propensity in societies in which communication capabilities have been ramped up, and, thus, in which contagion is all the more palpable as a bio-social phenomenon, Thrift turns to Gabriel Tarde’s *Economic Psychology* (first published in 1902). Tarde’s work helps to explain what Thrift views as a missing component in most theories of political economy: something akin to Keynes’ ‘animal spirits’ – “contagious spirits like confidence, fear, ‘irrational’ exuberance, bad faith, corruption, confidence, a sense of fairness, and the very stories we tell ourselves about our economic fortunes” (Thrift, 2009, p. 84). Until recently, very few thinkers considered such forces to be “anything other than epiphenomenal to the real business of economy and, even then, they are often consigned to what is quite literally a spirit world outside of the bounds of normal economic calculation” (p. 84). Tarde’s economic theory differs in that it considers psychological processes of imitation to be integral to the operation of markets, and to be inherently quantifiable. As such, it is well aligned with “how aspects of the economy which were considered as without the sphere of economic calculation are gradually being brought within through the increasing interest of business and economics in things biological”, leading to a world in which “semiconscious action can be put up for sale” (p. 85). The ever more ubiquitous predictive and pre-emptive practices of algorithmic

surveillance (or dataveillance, as Van Dijck, 2014 prefers to call it) trade in propensity, routinely produce and monetize its images out of desires, disturbances and moods that are partly personal, and partly expressions of “imitative rays” of shared interests, feelings and behaviors that spread through social networks. These analytic apparatuses analyze older modes of documenting interior complexity (for instance, letter writing reconfigured as email), in real time, in hopes of securing future value in the present. In her May 2012 compilation of AdWords, Scourti speaks to such concerns in the language of AdWords’ algorithms: “Relaxation techniques for anxiety. Predict future. Tell me my future. I want to know my future” (Scourti, 2012b). This string of AdWords seems meant to appeal to the “personal” anxieties about the future attributed, by algorithms, to Scourti; yet perhaps they speak even more loudly to how such anxieties (be they actual or invented through analysis) have fallen into lockstep with the surveillance apparatuses’ own preoccupations with prediction, propensity, risk assessment and producing value through these. If Elahi’s piece represented character as a set of indexed habitual experiences and tendencies, in order to devalue the highly anomalous attributions to which the FBI subjected him, then Scourti’s piece grapples with the commercialization and normalization of characterization through the analysis of precisely such rhythms of habits and tendencies. Scourti’s piece analyzes a structure of characterization as a cybernetic feedback loop in which algorithmic analyses of her tendencies align with and shape the personal desire for self-actualization⁶⁴ in complex ways.

⁶⁴ Self-actualization, in itself, can be understood as a form of neoliberal governmentality. As Michel Feher (2009) argues, concepts of self-appreciation are inextricably linked to the emergence of the concept of “human capital” in the mid-twentieth century, which initially

Characterizing Differently? Toward a Critical Language of Attribution

With each surveillant act of characterization comes a complex expression of the interplay between a surveillance apparatus and the “character” of its subject. Several actors’ and apparatuses’ inclinations, perceptual capacities, economic interests, presuppositions and desires actively shape how a characteristic can come to be attributed to its character. Scourti’s project clearly demonstrates this by setting up a nuanced, ongoing dialogue between her self-reflection through writing and the algorithms that track her, amplifying certain doubts, desires and consumer interests over others and transforming these into monetized attention-lures. Elahi’s project takes the FBI’s desire for his transparency to an extreme, and sees its subject dissolve into a haze of locations, habits and objects that open surveillance onto other forms of witnessing and self-characterization. While Elahi’s website inscribes – and protects – his lifespan with a “safe” range of represented, repetitive habits and tendencies, SWAMP uses repetitive, habitual behaviour against the grain, as (to use Massumi’s term) “threat-o-genic.” Repeated behaviours, in SWAMP’s setup, unmoor action from intention, throwing character into question. (The question “what kind of person would do such a thing?” lurks in the background whenever intention seems conspicuously illegible.) All of these projects establish character as a vitally important, speculative object of surveillance. Characteristics belong to no one person, since they are always attributed relationally; as such, their problematics are

referred to “the set of skills that an individual can acquire thanks to investments in his or her education or training” (p. 25). The widespread use of the concept of human capital, Feher argues, “is less a symptom of the gradual “commodification” of the liberal subject than it is the expression of an emergent neoliberal condition” (p.25), which must, in fact, be embraced as an enabling condition by activists in the neoliberal era.

those of privatization (which determines which actors have the representational power to attribute characteristics to others most forcefully within a given surveillant milieu), rather than of privacy.

SWAMP, Elahi and Scourti provide insightful studies of these emerging dynamics. In doing so, their projects also suggest that an adequate response to contemporary surveillance involves developing new criteria for characterization: a critical language for the ways in which characteristics can be selected, elected and co-produced from available data sets and tendencies by various interested parties. Such a language could speak far more pointedly than privacy to the aesthetic and speculative dimensions of surveillant citizenship, in an era in which representations of individuals' futurity have ever more influence on their present.

Conclusion

In spite of the rapidly changing technological, financial and representational contexts with which we all must grapple, some moments seem almost to repeat themselves. Let us return, once more, to Patrick Keiller's film *London*, which so compellingly captured, through the narrated attitudes of an absent, silent character, the sense of keen disappointment felt by many after John Major's surprise, outright election win for the British Conservative Party in 1992 – despite the polls' previous pronouncement that Labour was narrowly in the lead. On 7 May, 2015, the British election almost perfectly echoed the results Keiller (through Robinson, his film's silent, absent main character) lamented. Robinson clearly and plainly characterizes London in the face of what he views as an abysmal election result, denigrating the unfairness in the capital, the repressiveness of British life, London's backward policies, its backward thinking, its hatred of intellectuals. In 2015 as in 1992, the polls indicated a vote much further to the left than the actual results reflected. Thus, there was a wave of shock the morning after, as the nation woke up to David Cameron's surprise majority win.

The polls were wrong, again, in 2015; but by now, there was yet another problem, another apparatus of political miscalibration. This is best encapsulated by Eli Pariser's term the "you loop" (2011). As Pariser points out, the more that algorithms identify users online, the more they guess our identities and interests, the more they pre-emptively filter what we see online according to our presumed tastes. This leads to a "filter bubble," or "you loop"

– a sense in which one finds oneself in an echo chamber online, an infinite regress of reflections and inflections of what are already (more or less) one’s own perspectives and opinions. My own Facebook feed, right before the election, was some kind of a progressive paradise, filled with left-wing artists, writers and activists swapping Labour and Green votes to maximize their anti-Conservative weight. While it is certainly nothing new that one’s friends might tend to share in one’s political interests and commitments, online filtering exacerbates this tendency to sameness, actively eliminating antagonism from each user’s perceptual purview online, and enabling the spectre of political solidarity to seem more concrete, more tangible, and less fragile than, suddenly, it reveals itself to be the morning after the votes are counted. The automatic governance of online feeds and search results speaks to a new politics of the first-person perspective online, which will continue to have profound consequences for the ways in which political will can be felt, understood and practiced in the future.

In this thesis, I have attempted to show that character – an economic expression of the paradox of the shared/interior perspective, reduced and rendered circulable – is an ever-more important, contested site in an age of both widespread speculation and widespread computation. One’s “character” – for instance, one’s creditworthiness, or one’s being a good investment for a job or contract – is increasingly subject not only to older forms of judgment (such as the complex perceptual and [pre-]conceptual acts involved in one person looking into another’s eyes and seeing, represented there, her “character”), but also to a host of new technologies of judgment: online, algorithmic assessments, which actively calculate one’s riskiness as an

investment of any sort. Bernard Harcourt (2007) traces the use of statistical means to calculate – and thereby influence – individuals' future behaviour back to 1935, when the first American prisons predicted recidivism rates using the Burgess Method (invented in 1928) and granted parole accordingly. Since then, and in the face of both increased computation and increased privatization, character has come to be measured more and more – and access to education, opportunities, good prices, credit and, in some cases, even freedom are granted or curtailed accordingly. On the one hand, these dynamics emerge through, and as, representations of people – for instance, by new online identification or credit scoring algorithms. On the other hand, as Pariser's "you loop" reminds us, such characterizations also actively feed back to us what are deemed (credibly or otherwise) to be our "own" perspectives. Online, automated characterization filters first-person perspectives of digital space, producing a new politics of self-similarity which pre-conditions vision.

The pervasive and ever-changing measurement techniques employed in the age of big data have been associated, on the one hand, with a broad and ambitious (if by no means uncontested) claim to truth. As MIT researcher Alex Pentland enthusiastically puts it,

Who you actually are is determined by where you spend time, and which things you buy. Big data is increasingly about real behaviour, and by analysing this sort of data, scientists can tell an enormous amount about you. They can tell whether you are the sort of person who will pay back loans. They can tell you if you're likely to get diabetes...They can do this because the sort of person you are is largely determined by your social context, so if I can see some of your behaviours, I can infer the rest, just by comparing you to the people in your crowd (Naughton, 2014).

Within this positivistic understanding of big data, more data, and more sophisticated means for analysing it, amounts to more realistic renderings of people's "true" feelings, tendencies and motivations: or, as Douglas Merrill would put it, "really deep, rich understandings of you as a person" (ZestFinance.com). Yet viewed from another perspective, big data does not produce truth about the users it analyzes, so much as it produces a new set of techniques for power, pre-emption and control. In a short piece for *The Baffler*, Jacob Silverman suggests that metrics, in the age of big data, might best be seen as ways to divide and conquer – to encourage people to blame themselves if they fail to live up to the arbitrary and flawed criteria to which they are subject. In a world in which workplace analysts and data brokers divide citizen-consumers into hyper-specific demographic categories enabled by big data analytics, such as "Busy and Coping," "Irritated and Unsettled," "Rural and Barely Making It," or "Ethnic Second-City Strugglers," perception, Silverman notes, is reality (2015). Those perceived to be credit risks for any reason, however arbitrary, may experience what Frank Pasquale terms "cascading disadvantages" (Silverman, 2015, Pasquale, 2011) – self-fulfilling prophecies – whereby, for instance, those deemed uncreditworthy are more likely to act as bad credit risks, due to the exorbitant interest rates they face; as a result, they might face even worse interest rates in future. While the analytic languages of character in the age of big data claim to be predictive, it might be better to say that they are pre-emptive; they actively parse out, allocate and shape individual perspectives and potentials based on an intricate, analytic dance with the subjects they perceive. In so doing, they

render representations of their subjects' futurity as active agents governing their options in the present.

If the equations in Thomas Piketty's tome *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013) are to be believed, the rate of economic growth no longer exceeds the rate of returns on capital; in other words (to put it very simply): broadly speaking, having money, in the first place, makes more money than working for money ever could. Thus, the dream of class mobility vanishes, and the world slips back to Victorian levels of wealth inequality. For Piketty, massive disparities between the rich and poor are central features, not accidents, of capitalism. It was only due to an unusual sequence of events, which produced large capital shocks from *circa* 1914-1945 – destroying massive amounts of wealth owned by the elite – that economic growth momentarily exceeded the rate of returns, leading to a short-lived, more equitable wealth distribution in the post-war period. Now, this economic situation is reversing itself; barring another round of unprecedented capital shocks that target what is owned by the elite – or revolution – an increase in wealth inequality seems likely in the decades to come. (Indeed, at the time of this writing, Credit Suisse just released a report which found that the top 1% of the world's population now own 50.4% of the world's wealth.) (Treanor, 2015)

If this is, indeed, where wealth distribution is headed, will all of the twentieth century's concomitant modern ideals fade into the background? Caught up in this slow and massive shift in wealth distribution, a generation or two of thinkers (who are, more or less, the same age as neoliberalism – which was born, so the story goes, as I was, in 1979) were raised with a gap

between our modern-era ideals and the new, neo-Victorian economic realities we now face.⁶⁵ We grew up with the ideals of the welfare state, of class mobility, of equality and equal opportunity for all (however flawed or incomplete might have been their realization). If these values are already, in a sense, slipping away – shadows of the twentieth century as we enter a new age of the super-rich, who benefit, among other things, from privileged access to the economic benefits of computation – then what is the best representation of the human condition (to borrow a term from Michel Feher, 2013) that would make this vast shift in wealth concentration palatable enough, invisible enough, seemingly justified enough to pass without mass revolt? One answer to this dilemma, of course, is to parse out people’s differential benefits, advantages and opportunities based, on the one hand, on the presumption of a base equality, in keeping with modern, egalitarian ideals – on the presumption that anyone *could* have a “good” character and thus, reap the benefits they so richly deserve, should they only choose to act, self-actualize, accordingly; but on the on the other hand, to differentially grant interest and investment to people based on differences in their behavioural tendencies, their character – differences of character, which (at least, so they seem) are within one’s purview, one’s power to change: yet, in fact, stand in for a newly personalized rationale for inequality emerging in the age of big data. This is not to say, of course, that the structural disadvantages of being poor, or being subject to racism, sexism, homophobia or transphobia have gone away. Rather, it is to say that the representational economies trading in *images* of such structural (dis)advantage come cloaked in an ever richer,

⁶⁵ I am indebted to Andrea Phillips on this point; she raised similar questions about the gap between welfare state and neoliberal ideals as a problem for educators at Goldsmiths in fall 2014.

deeper, more personalized languages of behavioural particularity, aspiration and tendency, which can ever more convincingly claim to afford individuals the advantages they “truly” deserve.

In a sense, this is nothing new. Many have already noted the right wing tendency to blame the poverty of the poor on their poor “character” (see, for instance, Giridharadas, 2015). There is a deeply entrenched right wing literature on character; to cite just one example, in the run-up to the 2008 American presidential election, Republican candidate John McCain and his co-author Mark Salter published *Character is Destiny: Inspiring Stories Every Young Person Should Know and Every Adult Should Remember* (2007). Inspirational figures, such as Winston Churchill, who overcame adversity and hardship to become great leaders, in this context, seem poised as if to justify policies that produce that hardship in the first place. Retroactively, they give austerity measures a starring role in a moralizing tale – however demoralizing the realities of austerity might be. Yet, even though this may be the case, character transcends the bounds of this right wing narrative. In the very same U.S. election of 2008, in fact, Heraclitus’ aphorism “character is destiny” also emerged on the opposite end of the political spectrum. Ralph Nader, when asked to describe his views on Barack Obama just after he was elected in 2008, said he believed Obama to be highly intelligent, with a keen perception of key political issues. Nevertheless, as he told interviewer Paul Jay:

...The key is his personality. You know, Heraclitus, the ancient philosopher, once said, “Character is destiny.” And I would say personality is decisive. He does not have a challenging personality. He doesn’t speak truth and democratic power — you know, organizing people — to plutocratic power (The Real News, 2008).

Already in 2008, Nader understood Obama's overly conciliatory character as the destiny of his presidency. Given droves of disappointing developments in American politics since 2008 – failure to close the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, unlawful killings perpetrated by the U.S. drone program, the NSA's surveillance program and the subsequent scapegoating of Edward Snowden, to name only a few – perhaps many might view Nader's judgment of Obama as having been subsequently justified. Yet the very idea that one politician could change an enormous, and enormously corrupt, system of government seems, in itself, far more suspect than Obama's character. To pin the sundry failures of the American political system since 2008 on one man's flaws, of course, is to grossly over-simplify an enormous – even unfathomable – institutional complexity, to partake of a shorthand that would circumvent the complexities of policies, legalities, and closely intertwined corporate and institutional interests: to render these, somehow, intuitively perceptible, boiled down to “character.”

This is a form of fiction that, if Nader's comments are any indication, are every bit as compelling, as a representational shorthand for futurity, on the far left as they are for the far right. If the right wing discourse of “good character” focuses on figures who overcome austere conditions in order to succeed in a difficult economy (thus embodying the perfect, “creditworthy” subject), the corresponding far left discourse envisions great individuals with the strength of character to speak truth to power, questioning the grounds through which creditworthiness comes to be allocated in the first place. Such imagined individuals are characters, in fact, so truthful that they can break the bounds of character, which doom us all to conceive of ourselves, and others,

as either creditworthy or otherwise. As carriers of public faith in the relativity of late-capitalist values – in, at least, the vague potential, in the age of the bloodless coups of finance,⁶⁶ for something other than capitalist accumulation to hold sway – the left wing discourse of character preserves faith that goodness, as an application (as I framed it in Chapter 3), can apply, so to speak, to other institutions – perhaps institutions yet to come.

We could say that the president's role, as figurehead in a representative democracy, is both representative and *representational*: he personifies the government, and perhaps also the propensities and potentials any government might have to change tack, to better represent its citizens. As figurehead, Obama economizes institutional complexity as qualitative, felt character – and, in doing so, translates speculative, economic concerns into the moral/perceptual realm of personal qualities, of creditworthiness. It is this double role of the politician in a democratic system (however suspect its status as an actually democratic representation of its citizens might be) as both *representative* and *representational* that is at stake in a politics of character. The ubiquitous intertwining of representative and representational roles encapsulates the ways in which traits, too, become selected and elected representatives in a broadly moralistic, speculative system of power, and circulate as economic values.

Politicians, along with celebrities and other public figures, are surveillance pioneers. In 2013 (as discussed in the introduction), Edward Snowden spoke to the sense in which surveillance apparatuses like those of

⁶⁶ I refer particularly to Greece here, which has been all but forced to accept austerity measures, against the will of its people, in the summer of 2015. Many commentators have framed his turn of events as an illegal act of financial violence – a bloodless coup that aims at regime change for the benefit of the investor community (see, for instance, Milne, 2015).

the NSA could allow those with privileged access to information databases to go back in time, deriving suspicion from innocent lives, painting anyone and everyone as wrongdoers simply by scrounging for scraps of unpalatable behaviour, tucked away in sleeper dossiers. Yet if these are, for most of us, conditions yet to come, politicians and other prominent public figures already live them. A politician's having tried marijuana once as a teenager can easily be repurposed as smear campaign fodder in the competitive game of squeaky-clean public images. The American legal drama *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009-) speaks very well to these frontiers of online surveillance culture, of which public figures (unwittingly or otherwise) bear the brunt. At one point in the series, a prominent Chicago lawyer, Diane Lockhart, comes under consideration for a judgeship. When she finds out she is in the running, the first order of business is to hire her firm's investigator, Kalinda Sharma, to conduct a private search, digging up any and all information that could possibly be used against her, in the vast landscape that is her digital footprint. Among the scraps of "dirt" Kalinda finds are corny, steamy fan-fiction blog entries about the characters in romance novels, traceable to Lockhart's IP address. These, it turns out, had been written from Lockhart's desktop computer by her cleaning lady. Into this moment of confusion, *The Good Wife* condenses many intertwined logics of character and characterization. The romance novel characters, enveloped in the cleaner's enthusiasm, bear the reified markers of a class position expressed through readerly tastes. Leaping out of the pages of their novels, these fictitious subjects find their lives extended, on the blog, in the sugary medium of the cleaner's prose. Through a routine conflation of all of Lockhart's IP address activity with her own,

personal activity, these signs of classed desire stick to the more prominent woman, thwarting the unimpeded flow of her otherwise relatively untarnished reputation. If the series, in itself – as just about any realist fiction does – uses characters, and character development, to fuel plots, *The Good Wife* also juxtaposes this essentially literary technology with another emerging technology of characterization: that of the surveillance apparatus, which produces another kind of *fictioning* of personhood that will, so it seems, only have more impact on citizens in the future.

If politicians, prominent public figures and celebrities are surveillance pioneers, rehearsing and prefiguring the kind of scrutiny to which all citizens, one day, might be subjected, activists are another group that bears this burden. In one of the most poignant scenes in Laura Poitras' film about Edward Snowden and the NSA revelations, *Citizenfour* (2014), journalist Jacob Appelbaum asks a group of Occupy Wall Street activists, assembled for security training, how many of them have been arrested, had their retinas scanned, had their phones confiscated and taken into the back room on their court date, or had been subject to other acts of targeted surveillance designed, in part, to intimidate protestors. (Many raise their hands.) Appelbaum tells them that these are the conditions that all protestors will face in the future. Made to bear the brunt of characterization enabled by surveillance, future activists will face more personal scrutiny than ever before as they face the structural inequalities that over-produce images of the personal in the first place.

It is clear that, in an economy of reputation-images, bolstering or tarnishing character becomes subject to more and more tactical concern; and

negative characterizations are differentially allocated to some more than others. This is very clear both in the realm of politics, and in the politics of online prominence. Yet another recently emerging example of this would be revenge porn. Women whose angry ex-boyfriends publish intimate images of them online without their consent face a new form of non-consensual image violence – reputational violence, even. As Hito Steyerl has suggested (2010), in a culture of ubiquitous image circulation, we are not only, not so much, represented *by* images as we participate *in* them, finding ourselves inflected by their circulations, their lives. If this is so, then revenge porn represents a new form of image-rape, which is aimed at tarnishing its victims' character. In a landscape of creditworthiness and risk, praise and notoriety, characterization can be a tool or a weapon. And yet, for all of these critiques of the economies of character – for all of the ways in which characterizations' claims to realism might, in fact, turn out to be, quite simply, claims to power – I certainly do not wish to dismiss the topic as an object of study, or subject it only to critical scrutiny. To the contrary: character, and characterization, redistribute represented relations between individuals and power – they stage, contain and carry the conflicts between ungrounded speculation and the truth claims made by the apostles of big data analytics. All this makes character an exceptionally urgent area of study. For it is by understanding how character works, how economized personhood, distilled in acts of characterization, navigates the conflicts between data, truth, qualitative particularity and speculative economic value, that we might arrive at an understanding of how to characterize differently, to hold open the possibility for other, less normative

forms of recognition for qualitative particularity than those most often upheld by big data analytics to take hold.

Illustrations



Figure 1. Emily Rosamond (2012-2013) *Model for a Screen*. [Notebooks, tar, aquarium pebbles, glue, laser level, Perspex plinth. Dimensions variable – sculpture: 11.5 x 8 x 1”].

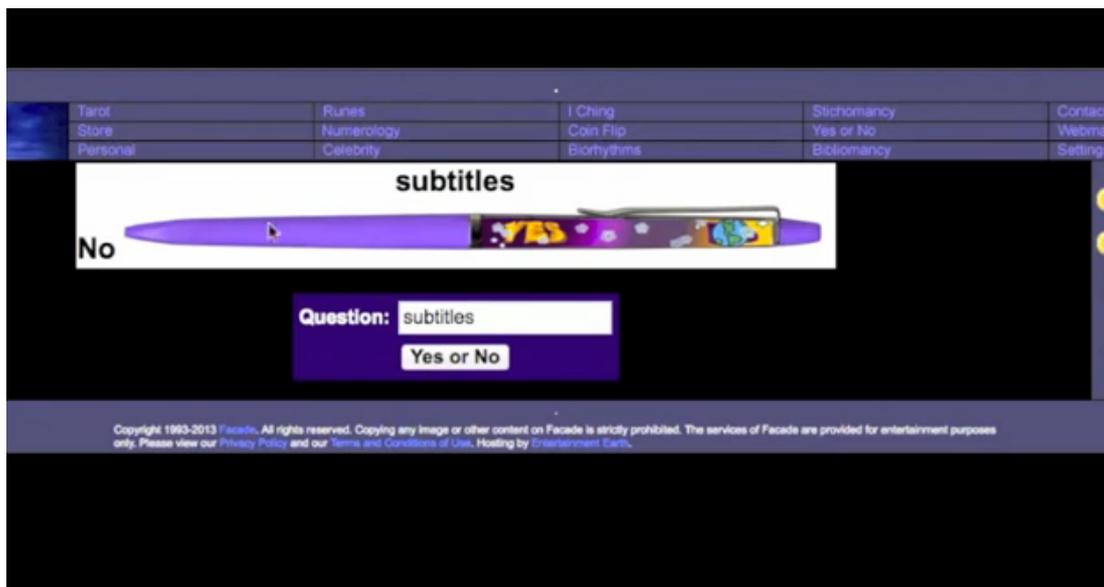


Figure 2. Emily Rosamond. (2013) *Birth of a Decision Maker*. [Video, 2:03].

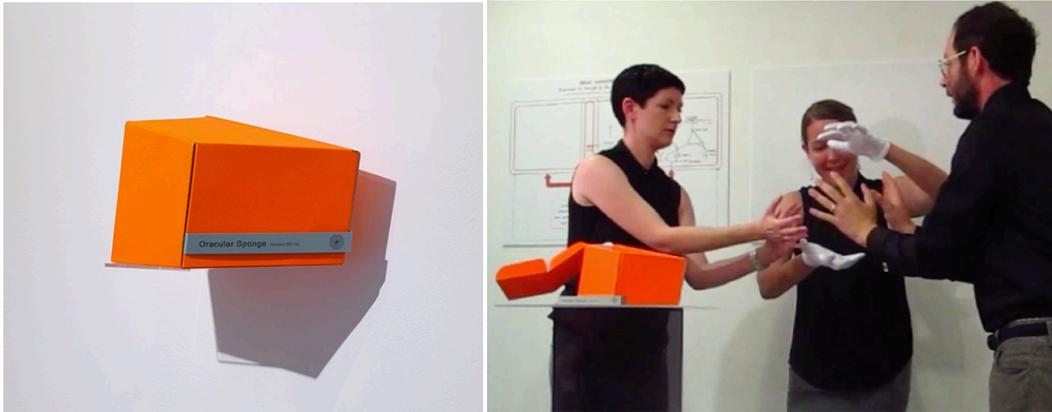


Figure 3. School of the Event Horizon (Steven Levon Ounanian, Kate Pickering, Emily Rosamond) (2014) *Oracular Sponge (Version 003.1a)*. [Custom packaging, press release, and product launch performance with unboxing and divination exercise] London: Tenderpixel/Tenderbooks.

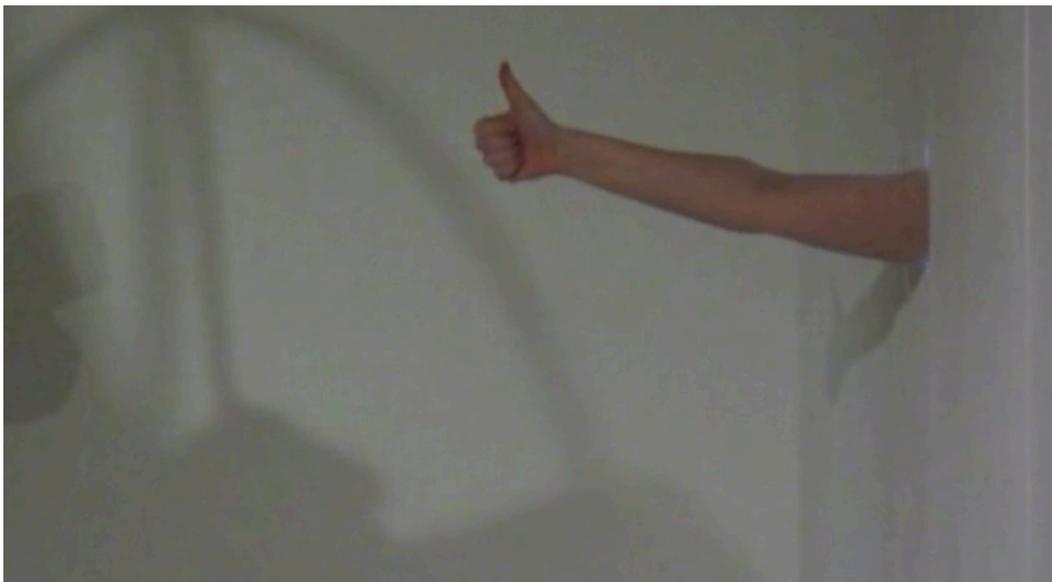


Figure 4. Emily Rosamond. (2014) *Weathervane*. [Performance with arms emerging from two holes cut into gallery wall, displaying various objects, 3 hours; documentation video 4:36]. London: ASC Gallery.

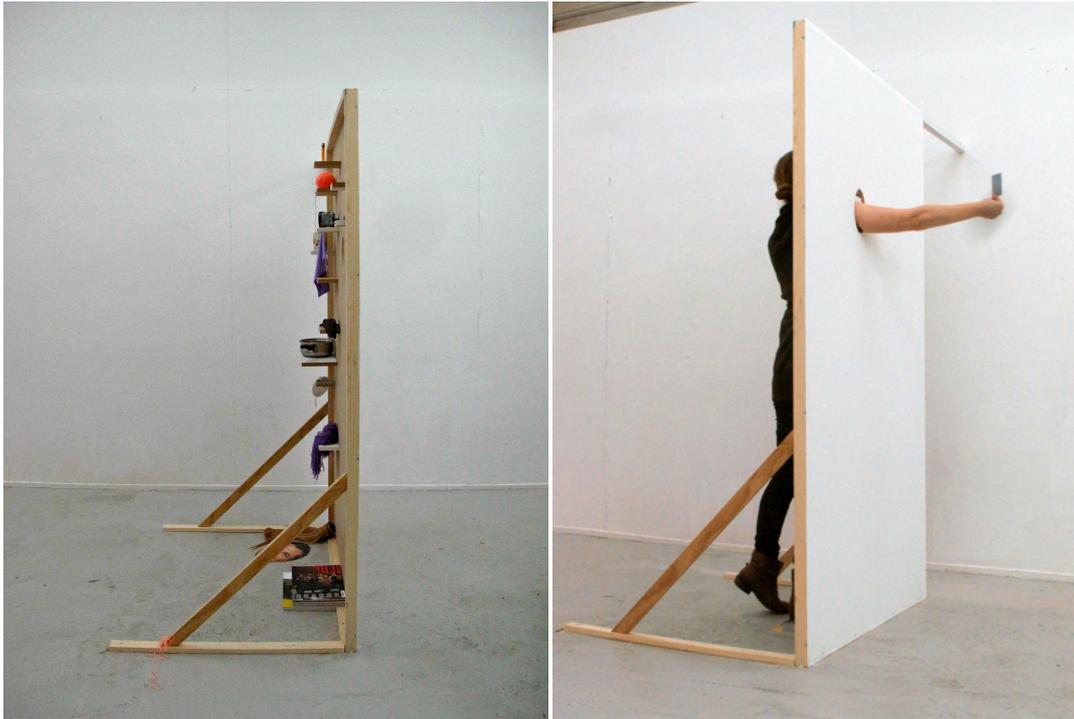


Figure 5. Emily Rosamond. (2014) *And now I'm going to tell you a story, and it's the story of the selection process.* [Performance with wall and objects]. London: Laurie Grove Baths, Goldsmiths.



Figure 6. Emily Rosamond. (2014) *A Way to Choose the Divination System.* [MDF and various domestic objects, approx. 32 x 32"].



Figure 7. Geoffrey Farmer. (2008) *Ghost Face*. Montréal: Musée d'Art Contemporain.



Figure 8. Geoffrey Farmer. (2004) *I thought that I could make a machine that would pierce the fabric of reality, in your world it appears as a 16th century sign.*



Figure 9. James Luna. (1987) *The Artifact Piece*. San Diego: Museum of Man.



Figure 10. Jimmie Durham. (2004) *Still Life with Stone and Car*. Sydney: Sydney Biennale.

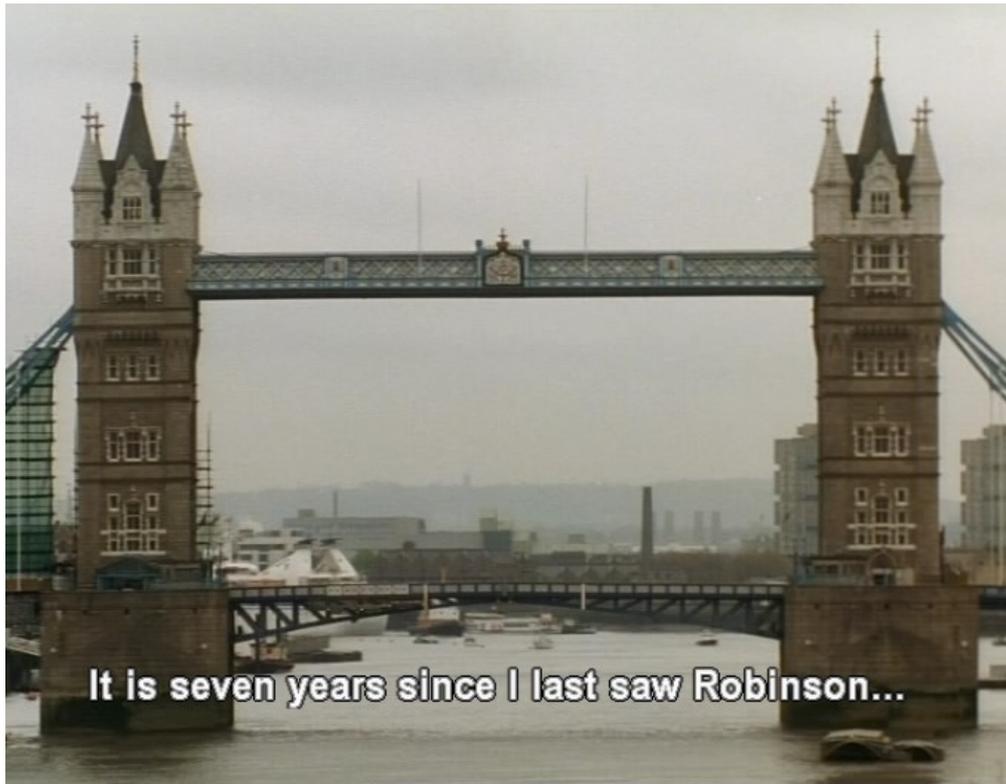


Figure 11. Patrick Keiller. (1994) *London* (still, with subtitles). London: British Film Institute.

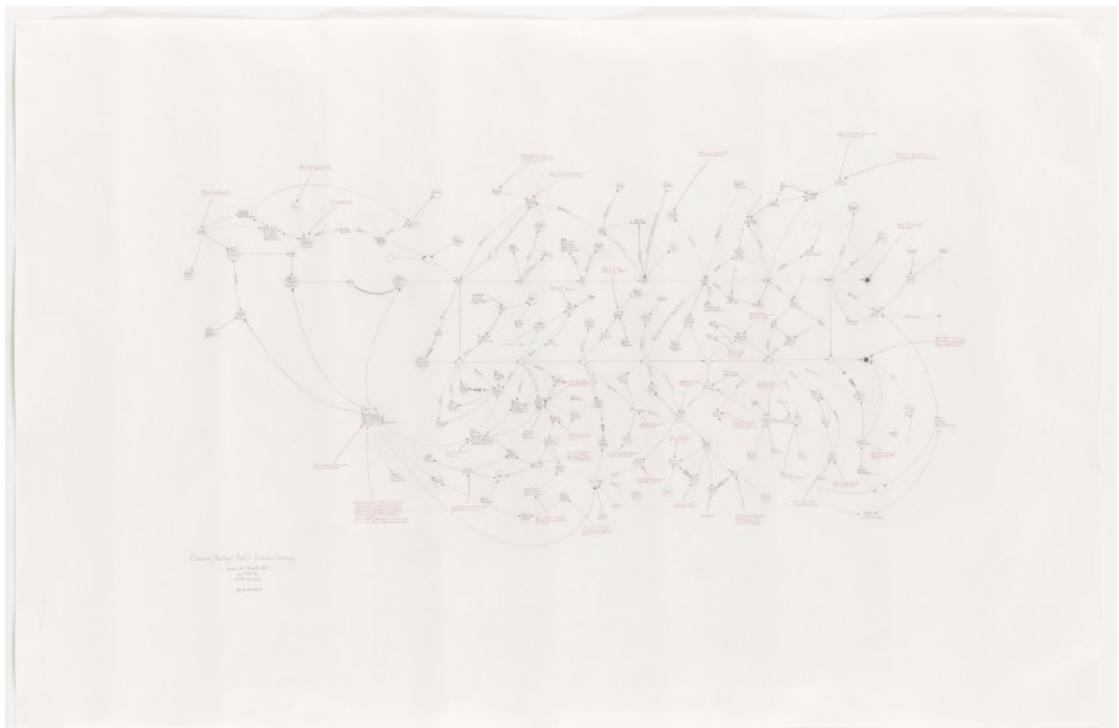


Figure 12. Mark Lombardi. (1995) *Charles Keating, ACC, and Lincoln Savings, ca. 1978-90 (5th Version)*. [Coloured pencil and graphite on paper] Collection of Sarah-Ann and Werner H. Kramarsky.

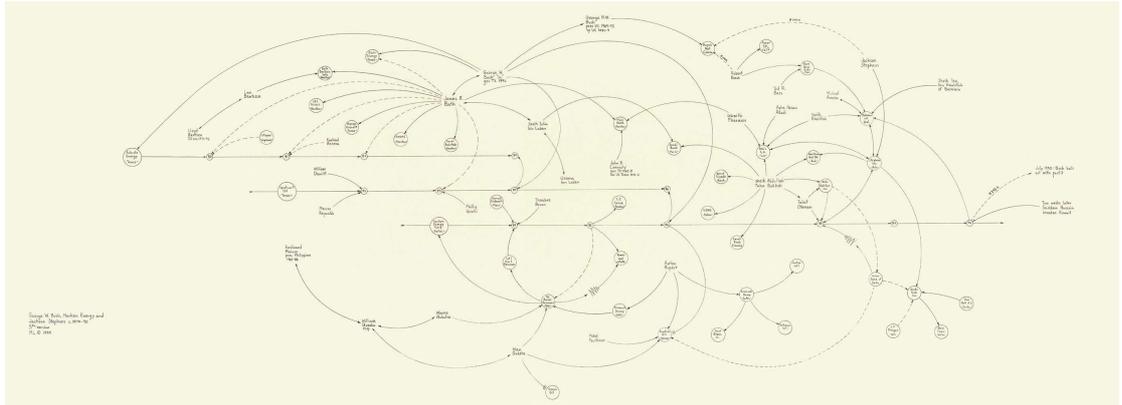


Figure 13. Mark Lombardi. (1999) *George W. Bush, Harken Energy, and Jackson Stephens, ca. 1979-90 (5th Version)*. [Coloured pencil and graphite on paper].

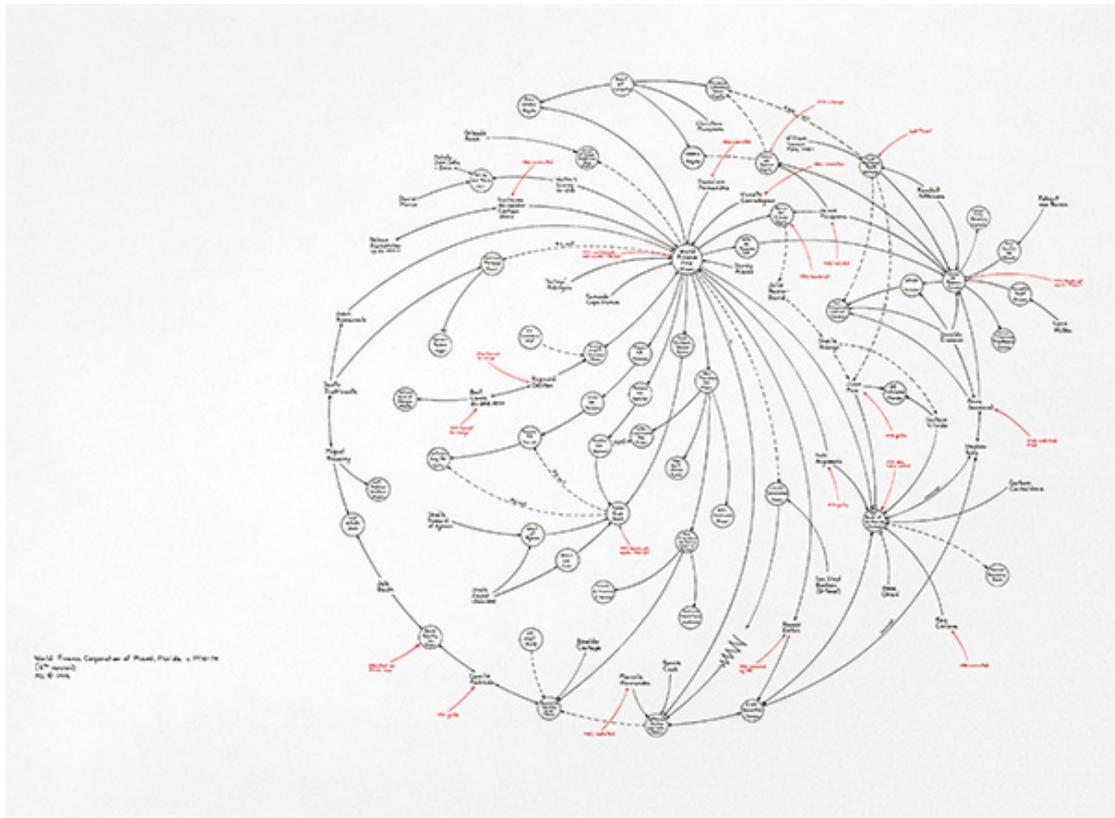


Figure 14. Mark Lombardi. (1999) *World Finance Corporation, Miami, Florida, ca. 1970-79 (6th Version)*. [Coloured pencil and graphite on paper].

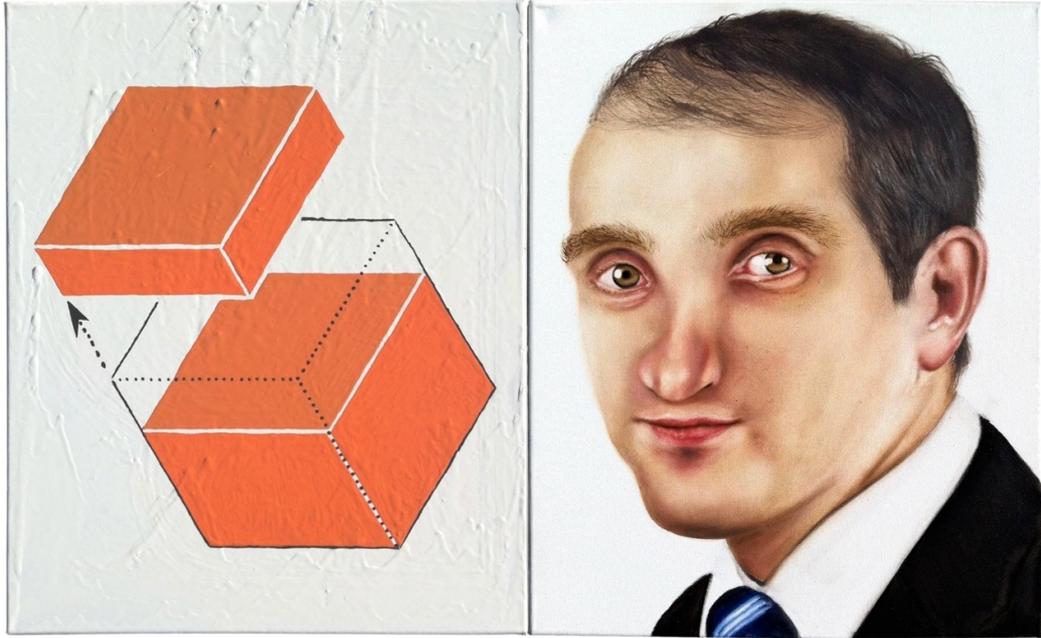


Figure 15. Amir Chasson. (2011) *Ten dimensional tetrahedron*. [Oil and household paint on canvas].

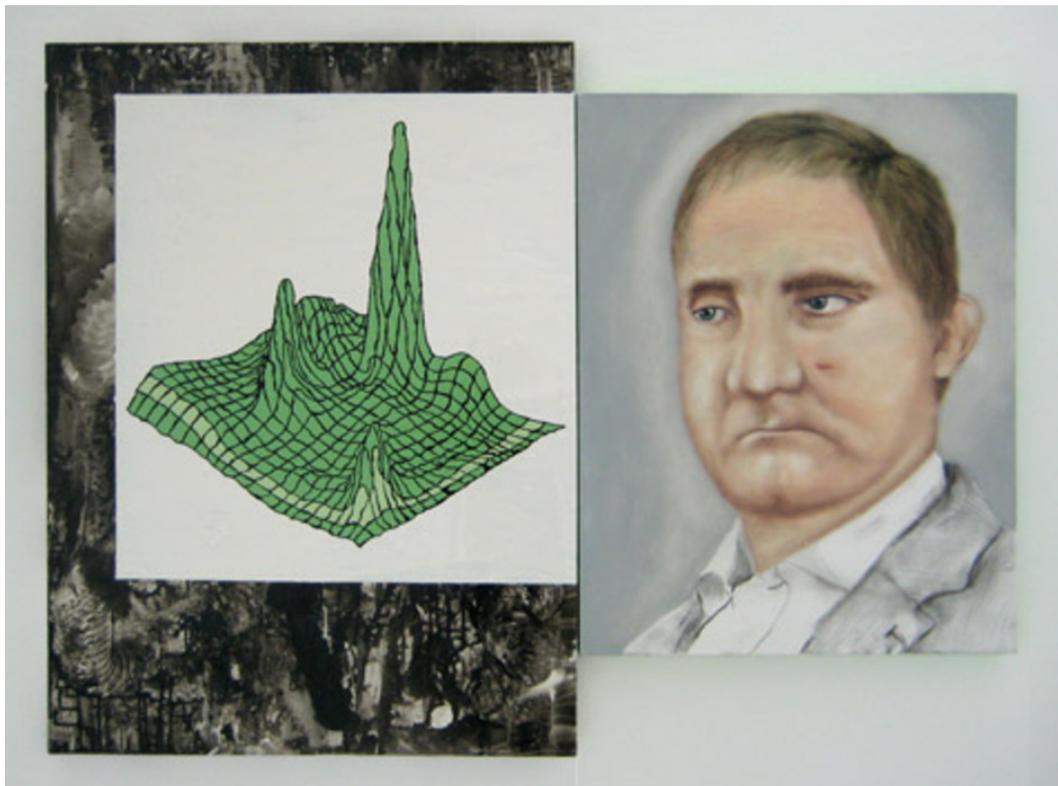


Figure 16. Amir Chasson. (2010) *Green Three Dimensional Topo Map Using Fishnet Lines*. [Oil, charcoal and household paint on canvas].

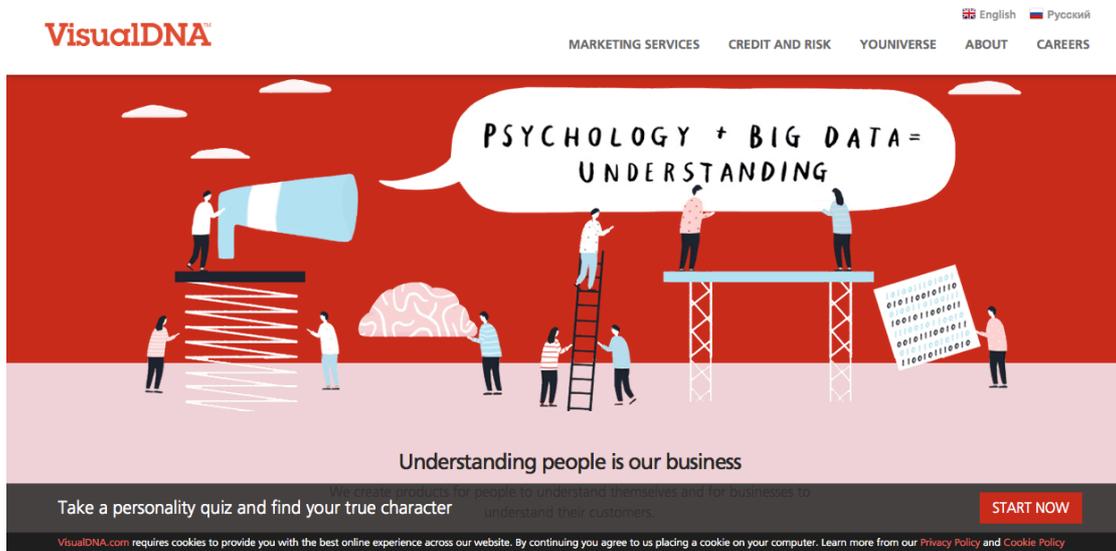


Figure 17. (2014) “Homepage – VisualDNA.” VisualDNA.com [Accessed 15 November].



Figure 18. George Brecht and Robert Filliou. (1965-1968) *La Cédille qui Sourit*. Villefranche-sur-Mer, France: 12 Rue de May.

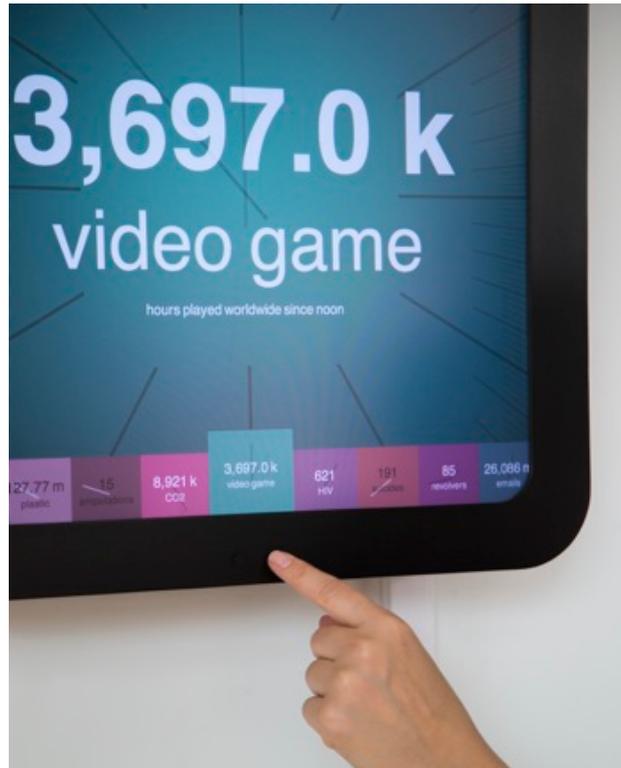


Figure 19. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. (2013) *Zero Noon*. [Computer, processing software, square HD display, electronics, metal enclosure].



Figure 20. Lizzie Fitch and Ryan Trecartin. (2013) *CENTER JENNY* (still). [HD video, 53:15 min].



Figure 21. Manfred Pernice. (1999) *Block F*. [Chipboard, paint, Neon lights, Ektachrome laminated glass, typewriter and written text on paper].



Figure 22. SWAMP (Studies of Work Atmosphere and Mass Production: Doug Easterly, Matt Kenyon). (2003) *McService*. [Performance/video].



Figure 23. Hasan Elahi. (2005-) *Tracking Transience: The Orwell Project*. www.trackingtransience.net. [Website].



Figure 24. Erica Scourti. (2012-2013) *Life in AdWords*. [Webcam performance].

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