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**POOL — May 2012**

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F/F

— Amelia Ulman

Fotolog reached its peak in 2008 with over 30 million registered users, primarily from Chile, Argentina and Brazil. As a standard photo-sharing platform, it wouldn't be worth writing about if it wasn't for the magnitude of its usage and cultural consequences. Fotolog became a trend, a symbol, a brand<sup>1</sup>, a tribe. In Argentina and Uruguay, Fotolog users were known as "floggers", representing a generation of open-minded, sexually tolerant, and educated teenagers. In Chile, they called themselves "Pokemones". While Pokemones were influenced by Japanese culture, they shared many interests with floggers, such as apparel and hairstyle. From head to toe, the Flogger and the Pokemon were easy to differentiate from other subcultures, such as Punks, Goths and Emos, even though their aesthetics were an amalgamation of many of these groups. This sartorial overlap was something that led to the many infamous fights between old and new tribes outside the malls of Buenos Aires<sup>2</sup>, Santiago and Montevideo; similar to those viral Emo vs. Punks confrontations in Mexico. The disputes, far from merely being kids fighting over clothing, were evocative of South America's evolutionary and transitional stage. It wasn't all about the hair; Floggers, Pokemones and Emos were androgynous youth who threatened the established patriarchal and homophobic South American culture. These groups represented that half of the southern cone's youth that came from an Europeanised middle class. This resulted in attacks, harassments, abuses and even murder in Argentina— in 2008, a 16 year old was kicked to death outside of a club by a group of teenagers from an opposing tribe, the Cumbieros.

1.

Fotolog was particularly addictive due to its restrictions. Limited daily to one picture, 20 comments, one layout, a colour chart and a 520 x 410 px *Oeil-de-boeuf*, the platform succeeded because of its game-like set of rules. Its structure encouraged consistent daily use, which became the epicenter of its allure. Fotolog forced anyone with the aim of maintaining a current blog to adhere to a fastidious uploading routine. If the opportunity to update was missed, the rewards would not be reaped. To keep a popular profile, one

had to commit to strict, regular posting— once a day, every day. Similar to Facebook "likes", the finite amount of comments made the 20 signatures a currency, a goal that had to be achieved regularly for the sake of nurturing one's online persona, leading users to overproduction, a constant desire for renovation aided by new photos and special effects. A aesthetic commonality between the most popular Fotolog users gave birth to the Floggers as a tribe or style, dictating the hair, the outfits and the musical tastes of the winning combination for popularity. It was a blend of mid 2000's European teen fashion, electro dance music, plus some elements from Emo and anime culture.

This competition for attention was derived from the anxious ambition to provide entertainment and garner popularity through updates. Cultural capital manifests itself in virtual environments just as it does physically. Social inequality and class become apparent online as much as offline, frustrating the optimistic expectations of the net as a utopian playground in favour of a digital mirror of people's offline realities— a conglomerate of social networks. The colours and the fonts, the writing and the grain, all functioned as indicators of social class and background, transforming the semiotics of the interface into a decisive factor in the nature of one's social interactions.

2.

In the crowd, a feeling of insecurity discomforts. *Although users cannot live in cyberspace alone, the necessity of a dwelling and the need for belonging, make the building of a community a solution for uprooting, for uncertainty. While we dwell plurally, we do it separate from the others, the strangers, protecting ourselves from the hostile.* Gradually, certain groups flourished in Fotolog, cliques formed and communities emerged in parallel with those forming offline. A hierarchy took shape, mirroring the two halves of the population— the higher and the lower. In a dynamic in which the peripheries constantly tried to become the hegemony, the formation of a new photo sharing platform took place under the name of Fotocumbia.

In 2008, the creation of this bootleg version of Fotolog functioned as a statement against the rules of the original, including total freedom of content (pornographic

images welcome), unlimited photo uploads, music and an embedded chat room. It was an online embassy for the Cumbieros, an uprising against a system that didn't accept them.

While floggers were a representation of the 2000's South American flippant youth, which rebelled against the old establishment with a queer attitude, they were still middle class— they played by European rules and were intolerant of their poorer and darker skinned contemporaries. On the other hand, the Villeros, the Cumbieros, emerged from a much lower social class. Many of them were immigrants (or from immigrant backgrounds) from rural sides of the Patagonia and from other Latin American countries. They rejected the Europeanised and Americanised aesthetics which were considered the top of the cultural hierarchy. Claiming a new style to represent their people, with tropical and Latin American beats, they also embraced the stereotypes that made them repulsive to their wealthier peers by using violent lyrics, politically incorrect attitudes towards women, homophobia, antagonistic attitudes towards authority, and explicit references to drugs— portraying the reality of their situation as outsiders.

Floggers were the ambassadors of a Eurocentric identity, while Cumbieros were the enraged other, agitated by cynicism. The restricted access to the Villa Misera is a lock, a bolt that protects one class from the other. By not allowing the access to any outsider and by inverting the criteria generally applied outside of it (in the high-street, downtown), the community protects itself and generates its own economy of cultural capital. *The fortress shelters daydreaming, the fortress protects the dreamer, the fortress allows one to dream in peace; the community protects the dreamer, and the dreamer creates it's own content*<sup>3</sup>. The dreamer succeeds in removing herself from the periphery and takes a place at the top of a hierarchy of her own creation. The nihilistic aura of the Cumbia Villera was said to be a descendent of Tango, which also started in arrabales (poor quarters of the City of Buenos Aires) and was sung in the immigrants' slang, the lunfardo (mix of Spanish and African/ Italian expressions). Being a style that ultimately became a legitimate national symbol of identity, it's

not surprising that the initially despised Cumbia Villera music and style were later popularized into an acceptable depiction of the unprivileged. Carlos Tevez, who signed with Manchester United in 2007, had cameos in a few Cumbia Villera shows and was always vocal about his upbringing in the Fuerte Apache. Pablo Lescano, frontman of Damas Gratis, precursor of the Cumbia Villera, was awarded the Clarín Prize<sup>4</sup>, invited to perform on Susana Jimenez's TV Show<sup>5</sup> and played at the MTV awards in collaboration with mainstream performers. Their music portrayed Argentina's reality as tango did before it. It was accepted, saluted and respected.

### 3.

Every trend has a trajectory and lifespan— a rise and fall, an appropriation and repackaging. The only way for the Cumbia Villera and the Cumbieros to be accepted by the establishment was to lose their original meaning and become a commodified aesthetic. In 2011 Fotolog had plans of changing the layout that made it famous (and which Fotocumbia copied), Fotocumbia was rotting and malfunctioning with bugs, Cumbia Villera was praised and played overseas in cultural events<sup>6</sup> while being diluted through religion in the mainland<sup>7</sup>, Floggers barely existed anymore, and a band called the Wachiturros came to life. The Wachiturros are a boy-band of dubious quality, who proclaim themselves to be Cumbieros, Rochos and turros<sup>8</sup>. They were immediately featured on TV, played at theatres like the Gran Rex<sup>9</sup>, garnered hordes of fans and manufactured merchandise— all of which rapidly led to the creation of a new subculture. They were soon hated by many. Viral videos and posts made reference to their past as floggers, and a new label was created for this new style, the one of the Flogger or the Cheto Arrepentido (Repentant Posh Kid). The Wachiturros and the Chetos Arrepentidos dress like Villeros, dance Cumbia but invert the symbols. By not singing about the topics characteristic of the slums and distorting the aesthetic by adding a queer element, the Wachiturros act as a subversive agent<sup>10</sup>.

To dance in front of the real Rocho or Turro, copying his clothes but wearing lipstick, is an attack to the only valuable thing the Villero possess: genuineness. The Chetos Arrepentidos play with this disrespect towards the holiness of the

fortress, making themselves a target for abuse and violent attacks, from online bullying to physical aggression. Sexuality aside, the fight is about realness, about the legitimacy of class, a struggle against artifice and a desire for a singular style. The thing that was now accepted was the visual, and not the original context. While Cumbia has been repackaged and made ready to sell, its origins remain untouchable and restricted, its reality rarified. The never-ending list of videos in which a critique is being made against the Wachiturros or the Chetos Arrepentidos evokes the voice of the defeated. They are made by those claiming to be genuine in an attempt to raise awareness of their legitimacy and that which threatens it.

Class imitation becoming class aversion and vice versa has existed throughout history. The cycling of trends continues, macro-scaled by the sampling without crediting of third world beats and in the way in which underground styles are appropriated and commodified by the middle and upper classes. In a sea of dromology velocity wins and superficiality is easiest to digest. Class warfare pushes content to be easily absorbable, removing any trace of criticality. With content appropriated and the originator pushed aside, the need to be protected against alienation arises. Once again, the outsider builds a shelter where she can feel safe, protected. The dreamer creates new symbols and new content in a never-ending attempt to reach the centre from the periphery.

#### Notes

1. In Spanish the word Fotolog is used to define any sort of photo blog.
2. Abasto, a Mall in Buenos Aires, was the IRL meeting point for the floggers.
3. The use of the word 'fortress' is not unintentional. El fuerte Apache (The Apache Fort) is one of the most famous re-housing projects in Buenos Aires.
4. Clarín, the largest newspaper in Argentina. The Clarín Prize, is an award program that have taken place since 1998 and honours Argentine achievements in entertainment, sports, literature, and advertising.
5. Susana Jimenez's TV show is to Argentina what Oprah is to the US (?)
6. In 2011, a cultural event from the Paris-Buenos

Aires Tandem, concluded with a session of Cumbia Villera, at the Centre 104, Paris.

7. At the end of the decade, Cumbia Villera's violent and explicit lyrics turned into more pop-like, romantic and friendly topics, after an intense process of evangelisation.

8. Guachos and Turros are Argentinian words from the Lunfardo, meaning bastard, shameless.

9. The Gran Rex, which opened in 1937 as the largest cinema in South America, is today one of Argentina's biggest venue for the staging of international shows.

10. Similar to current Chav aesthetic, first appropriated from the underclass by the gay community via fetichization, and currently made trendy through tumblr aesthetics.

*Those parts of the text which are in italic, are modified excerpts from Bollnow's Human Space and Bachelard's The Poetics of Space.*

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- Written from the perspective of an expat. 2011-2012*

**Notes on Hell, Blogs**  
— Bret Schneider

Blogs are most interesting when they resemble without being the same as language, when the blogger creates an idiosyncratic syntax of imagery out of the collective inchoate *imagerie*, the zoetrope of culture, like a baby organizing mobiles from its cradle.

Do we blink more than we use to? As the world in its vast image of inchoateness scrolls by, we blink at it the same way, or not the same way that Neanderthals once blinked at the exterior world they were starting to extricate from.

That the blog is so prominent and successful in its photographic stream of thought, that it has become ‘memetic’, that it can communicate and even implant ideas from one mind to another as if by magic, as language once did thousands of years ago and still just as enigmatically today, tacitly implies that language and words may not have a future. Every blog title is secretly, Do words have a future?

Blogs that are not directly art-related, that do not feature art work exclusively, that are not trying to reinvent art for the internet age, that erroneously (but perhaps truthfully in an unintentional way) perceive the artless bureaucracy as the herald of aesthetic experience now unknown, are far more interesting than those that are, because they examine the true artlessness of our moment, the incapability of whole experience. The artless blog is freer; it has the ability to incorporate a great diversity of content without being limited to the tightened narrow of stock conceptual restrictions, they lack the obsolete criteria that had determined a course of contemporary art that is obsolete without realizing so, their lack is their bane of drift and their redeeming quality.

In blogs one finally sees the co-existence of pornography and art, a situation (at least) as old as Baudelaire. Art as prostitution, that art is pornography, no longer a metaphor, put to the test in the blog lab; centuries too late? Maybe. Very literal coexistence of what once was opposite, a cauldron of uncritical coexistences and oppositions.

The diaristic quality of the blog is its most ubiquitously understood and compelling

aspect, without a clear relation of either category, because they are not understood as categories. Blogs can’t be understood today.

Blog ‘writing’ shares with art, or at least an old idea of art now forgotten, an attempt to write history apperceptively. Compare the artist today to the artist who went on world discovery expeditions in the 17th century, who was indispensable for recording new people, things, and geologies. It is almost miraculous that there was this drive, but what they thought they were recording also got in the way of being objective. All thought must be emptied, digressions, parataxes are permitted to include those things that our petty little conceptualizations leave out, unbeknownst to us. We see something different that the past saw in itself, and so too will we look as if we got in the way of our moment, even as we obsessively represented it. There is something more dynamic and apperceptive in the blog format, which is by default digressive, filled with paths leading away from ourselves.

The intense difficulty of comprehending the moment at its best, ripest, most acute, symptomatic and problematic, is due to an overripeness-turned-decay that thwarts representation, whose decay repulses a rationalized subjectivity that will only touch the decay with white gloves, and yet some total and whole constellation demands to be represented, driving all reflection wild and pell-mell, reflection mimicking a throng. If one wants to grasp the true essence of the moment in all its barbaric diversity, one has to mimic “the mess” (Beckett) in form, comprehension is a formal problem of how to represent a reality that has run away from us, that has overproduced and reproduced obsolete forms *ad nauseum*.

The art-obsessed blogger, who pathologically and romantically must turn everything into art, (as opposed to the blogging blogger), when working under the umbrella of contemporary art categories, is blocked from successfully achieving a representation of reality by an adherence to obsolete categories; both contemporary and postmodern art tropes now canonized and recognized even by those who cling to them as insufficient to resonate experience. The contemporary art blog aims to ‘treat’ new

forms of consciousness like the blog with contemporary art categories that are not understood in their particularity, though something is understood that has not been related. Whereas blogs that lack such aesthetic rationalization render apparent the true arbitrariness of contemporary life, and something seems related which is not understood, and seems incapable of being understood, and is perhaps interesting for that explicit reason.

Turning the internet into an aesthetic playground or cultural 'answer' to abandoned aesthetic problems would be akin to Kafka's hunger artist crawling back into his cage decades after he finally found the food he liked.

Communication in blogs is reminiscent of the type of communication that once occurred between curiosity collector and its visitor, showing off ones collection, more is said through the objects than through their discourse, through the raw material that just ... compiles. Blog communication differs insofar as it measures not the proprietary prowess of the collector, but the striving for a final image, for the essential image that outshines all the others, that becomes The idol, whose diversity is a means of metabolism, and so the great public sphere of the blog also has its final goal in the end of communication, in the retreat of heterogeneity into a single homogenous idol, and yet the goal is incapable of being reached.

Some curiosity collections in the early colonial era had 'curious' exotic peoples as part of the collection—e.g. a dwarf—and this dwarf would also be trained to give discursive tours on the (other) objects of the collection, maybe realizing it itself was a part of the collection too. The guide emerges out the material not itself, like a demon that doesn't belong but is its natural logic. It can't be trusted and yet it knows better than anyone the contours which it conveys. Something similar occurs with artistic discourse.

Blogs are most interesting in their diaristic panorama, mapping the shadows which filter through the bedroom window. They are hyper-individual and retreat into this singular and very real hermetic illusion as a way of dilating its outside.

Blogs perhaps function like mobiles above

a baby's cradle, they are captivating by dint of their mesmerization ... critical function. It may also be true that what is curious about the blog form is that it attempts, unsuccessfully, but important in its ineptitude, to collapse the distinction between cultural enchantment and cultural criticism.

Imagery is the enemy of the blogger in the same way that words were the enemy of the 19th century poet. They have not been revealed to be the true problem they are intuited to be. Visual imagery, like language in modernity, is an alien fabric, historically specific but in ways no one can really articulate. Its constraints on consciousness are more sensed than made apparent, and 'the image' is not about the image at all, but about something alien to the very idea of seeing.

In the sense that art has always been a manner of organizing the exterior world that is alien from the subject, that it is a nexus of friction between two irreconcilable strangers, blogs share something in common with art. But it is also true that this has been accomplished best not via art per se, but a freer form of organizing that art as such is too young to know. E.g.: the journal or biography are often more revealing reflections of a historical moment than are fine arts, which have not really articulated their position as autonomous from representation, they do not fit, cannot fit. Blogs fit, and yet something is lost. The emergence of the blog as a ubiquitous social phenomena is prehistory's anxious way of trying to make sense of itself, of offering the material for historical understanding in such a way that it cannot be overlooked or avoided. Blogs are asymptotic remedies for severe collective amnesia.

Jon Rafman's *16 Google Street Views* shows a world in which human beings are perfunctory, anomalies, accidents, are irreconcilable blights in the landscape. Humans dot the landscape like impish footnotes to a demonic second nature, and imply some tramp-like image of redemption.

It is certainly true that we have created a world for ourselves that necessarily excludes ourselves. We are not supposed to exist in the paradise we are creating, a paradise now thoroughly mapped for this

reason of unliving, life not lived. We send zillions of images into space, into a void, as documents of an existence we want but cannot have, as documents of a hypothesis. The mapping of the world excludes those for whom the map is made.

There is something akin to fire worship in the glorification of the Internet, but we wouldn't know what.

The flickering of images that volatilize vertically out of sight mimic the entrancing flames of fire. And now we can freeze & return to certain moments in a stream that is otherwise ephemeral and passes us by. Can we really?

The figure ambiguously facing the sea in Rafman's *16 Google Street Views* obviously looks like David Friedrich Caspar's *Wanderer above the sea of fog*, and it looks circumscribed. But it is also compelling because the subject undoubtedly recognizes that it is being followed, that the narrative is a script, that the fog is an effect, sublimity is mapped out, but doesn't care. There is something else on its mind. And 'something else' is always a threat to the irrationally circumscribed order. What is on its mind? Besides, the image also looks freer, and captures the moment of unknowing better than Caspar's, which is symmetrical and pat in comparison to Rafman's subject, which curiously looks all wrong and aberrant, freedom as calculable. German Romanticism was crucially philosophical, conceptualizing an aesthetic program for the next few centuries as much as it made its own totemic and self-prescribed art... something similar today?

Caspar also painted numerous canvases of people looking out windows, a common trope in the 18th century (e.g. Hammershoi). There is maybe something reminiscent of looking out into an alien world from ones' abode in the blog experience, which also brings that alien world into the area of singular contemplation, as a flickering dance of the collective *imagerie*. To go out into that natural, hellish world seems almost besides the point of what it means to examine a life incapable of being lived.

Blogs place the arbitrary current of external events back in the variegated impressions of discreet individuals who interpret them differently through actively

organizing contentious impressions from a current that impresses weirdly. The blog has to do with the image as poetry did with the word and its simultaneous concealing and probing of what lay behind it: something non-communicative. There is something about the experience of the blog that has nothing to do with imagery or communication, if only because the imagery is obviously cast as illusion, as the curtain which ... a stage for experience.

...a manner of actively organizing the world in the image of ... Is there any criteria by which to organize?

The measure of the blog is the quality of its lucidity, it is individual particularity that is socially demanded to open up onto something more universal, not consciously of course, it exists in the way a glass sphere exists in a landscape, it distorts it but simultaneously refracts it, all blogs are refractions of the entire universal stream, but they are not mere illusions, though they are illusions. We do not need more light to see, we need less, to see.

The metabolization of the dreamworld, and, also, the bizarre sort of refraction of reality blended with dream that occurs when the eyes are awakened and blurred.

All image blogs are *lontano* effects.

Undoubtedly, the best representations of our particular moment are photo blogs, which are comprehensive without bragging about their openness. I don't speak of a particular one—why?

There's an unspeakable connection of blog imagery to ancient Greek sculpture, in that most of the images show the crucial nexus of action, the singular moment of grace. Movie-stills, for example, common on blogs, capture the moment in the impression of the blogger, and this has greater flexibility than ever. But so does an unhappy ballerina.

And all these images pile up as if they were already discarded statues with penises lopped off by barbarians, already stored in some ambiguous annal.

All images crawl out from the bowels of prehistory like cockroaches pilgrimaging from woodwork to the center of a room to die. They seem to live only for this moment, to have been practicing their



death pose that in being concretized correctly will preserve and illuminate the enigmatic essence of their specific life.

It is proving difficult to materialize the ideal simplicity of the journal form, which is given an extended significance via the phenomena of blogging. Countless ideas, theories and so forth tend to detract instead of bolster the attempt to write history from the apperceptive periphery that is so interesting. Already, rationalized knowledge seems to burden the form so much that simple, free play of thought seems an impossible ideal, direct simplicity becomes a confounding impossibility.

The figurines in *16 Google Street Views* look as if suspended in a snowglobe, or insects eternally caught struggling in amber, *sub specie aeternitatis*. They seem trapped in a sort of atmospheric medium, crystallized in an eternal pose like a figurine, “solidified into images of bronze”, in Hegel’s words describing Dante’s *Inferno*, frozen as they lived, but cast in a new light, appearing as real people in the world to an enigmatic and circumscribed order, brought before the tribunal of the universal concept that has recently taken a permanent vacation. One can’t speak of order today, it is a profanity. But the truancy of judgment doesn’t mean that subjects are freed from their agony: it only means that they are not permitted redemption, that they are not able to be seen in the image of their potential, of what could, and should have been, and only in the image of their agony resultant from temporary social conditions.

“In hell the movement is energetic but the figures are plastic and stiff in their agony, lit terrifyingly”.

Only, hell is not a divine order, but a human constructed order, in which a counteractive and illuminating sympathy that lights hell’s figurines on fire, such as Dante’s, is nullified. The ‘medium’ in which they are suspended is the anaerobic stuff of a rationalized society, a gritty “creatural” quality, in the words of Erich Auerbach, that is rendered unprecedentedly unavoidable. These figurines are incapable of overcoming the atmosphere which they breathe, recycle, which fills their lungs and every crevice of their infinite subjective porosity, they are incapable of doing anything other than

expressing their oppressive atmosphere, the fabric of the air that is social life awry.

Absorption, what photo blogs offer is absorption, the blogger seems captivated by its photographic material, while the viewer can spend hours idling away time, absorbed and captive to an idea of matter.

Something must have to be said for the experience of browsing, of scanning the photo blog, as the images flip upwards rapidly, as if the viewer wants to render them into motion, into a real action beyond contemplation, but can only do so most unsuccessfully.

There is something Hieronymous Boschian in the photo blog as well, everything unimaginable under the radiating and hellish sun meshes a comprehensive screen, a “vulgar cauldron” of pseudo-activity.

“the sacred Past hath no fixed statues erected to it, but all things irreverently seethe and boil in the vulgar cauldron of an everlasting and uncrystallizing Present”—Melville

If we can supposedly see more clearly through technological lens’, it is only because it is far more abstract than the immediate experience of looking. It rather seems that we see less clearly, that technological means are inhibitive in a very revealing way. It is curious that the best ‘net artists’ don’t take advantage of sophisticated technological tools as they are commonly understood, but disabuse them of their common use. By comparison a good experimental musician finds a secret life beyond presets, somehow, and not merely by resistance. Everybody knows this. It is more important to discover what could have and maybe should have been, than it is to futuristically create the next big thing that will revolutionize bla bla bla.

One can’t experience the comprehensive perspective the internet has to offer if they are interested in the internet as such, which is the antithesis of perspectivism. It would be akin to writers and readers who can’t see the world through the pen in which it was written.

Cezanne saw much more clearly than Seurat, who utilized scientific and technological means of seeing. Cezanne

was more lucid because he had his *forme tout sienne*, sealed off from the supposed means of the tools in his era.

On blogs everything looks better than it really is, and it shows how things ought to look all the time, and how they seem like they are just about to look, but cannot, and will not ever, it seems. They are rhetorical, even as they approach the practical wish list.

Photo blogs show the individual cloaked in the stuff of the world, which looks like the entire universe printed pell-mell on a cloth in which the individual is swaddled. The individual has not yet extricated itself from the breast of the natural world, which it suckles like a child that does not yet realize it is distinct from a nature which is antagonistic to it by being indifferent to it (second nature). But the impression that the entire universe is presented before the babe's eyes is impression, though not merely impression.

It is perhaps true that the homogenization of social work and socialized non-work work renders individuals indistinct from one another, which breeds both empathy with anyone and also impotence and genericness. I think of Megan Boyle's statement that she could tag on *...from a Mexican Panda Express employee* to the end of her own blog post book because her indistinctness renders any perspective possible and immediately available, as if one could swap skins as if they are masks. There is also a horrific side to perspectivism, which ought not be valued in itself but as a means.

Literature today ubiquitously approaches the confessional, a form once tied to Christianity, e.g. St. Augustine and later Rousseau, who sought to clear his reputation, and accidentally created a freer literary form than had hitherto existed. Rousseau's *Confessions* is the father of all blog writing and recent literature influenced thereby, bringing the mundane particularity of one's own arbitrary individuality before a troop of absent judges, a truant jury. Why do people want to confess today? To whom? For what?

The 'confessional' is not merely 'informal' writing, but an integral mode of writing history, in the manner of a Cellini or Rousseau. The indignant attitude through

which Cellini relates to everyone he comes in contact with is not an artifact of the age, but is the crux of historical detail. Cellini's braggart, almost poor writing style, which has a naïve lack of tact and self-editing, captures the spirit of the age better than any scientific or historical address, specifically because his subjectivity is ripened to the point where it becomes an object of the era—Cellini's free and unedited passion penetrates the opacity of the moment, despite the fact that he says himself that he is not writing history. If Cellini—or Rousseau—was a 'good' writer, by the common mannerisms of omitting inessential details, we'd have no image of the intimate relations that appear random, but contribute to the consciousness of the moment—e.g. the insults and casual violence crudely flung around in every direction which indicates a raw and still quibbling set of tribal relations which were are beginning to transform—or Cellini's attention to how much he got paid for each artwork, who owned it when, the work conditions of his shops, and so forth, that are all essential anchors to understand the complex social relations of the moment. Form needs to be free and experimental in order to articulate the newness of each moment—in a negative social situation, the inessential to us is perhaps the truly essential.

There is also something more or different than the confession form happening in new writing, because it is obligated to confess everything, to confess every stray thought that is not in the least incriminating. This is an acceleration of absolute transparency—the minds of humans become more and more like the modernist glass building, in which everything is shown, everything is refracted, everything is rendered vulgarly naked.

Now that a mollified fine art is shown to irreversibly coexist with soft porn, Greenberg's 'avant-garde and kitsch' is made undoubtedly relevant, aesthetic antagonisms cannot be ignored any longer, even as they are.

That blogs are experienced in a rapid scroll indicates that the world is best appreciated when it is not seen, when it is incapable of being seen.

So many blogs gravitate around imagery of architecture not because they are

superficial or nostalgic, or because they are shallow formal modernists etc., but because they show how the world should be architected but cannot be...yet. Current social conditions restrict the realization of an aesthetic world—that Trotsky once said that the average person in a free society would be an Aristotle, can also be that the average building in a free world would be a challenging pleasure to stroll through to live in, an atmosphere that is not oppressive. Such blogs are the preservation of a dream in a time of vulgar reality principles.

Photo blogs turn real things into real imagined things.

As sanctions, blogs take on the character of the library in the baroque period, whose contemplative character Benjamin emarcated as distinct from renaissance external activity. Like the baroque library, the blog is concealed from all the detritus of history, immune to decay. While the photo blog mandates that the entire world is cloaked in itself, and implies something public, that publicness is always a projection/ideal.

**When an Image Becomes a Work:  
Prolegomena to Cattelan's Iconology**  
— Domenico Quaranta

"The idea is to reorganize something already there, re-present something that already exists."<sup>2</sup>

Open Google.com. Write "dead horse" in the search bar. Select "images". The first search result is the image of a dead horse, lying on tar, a sign knocked in its flank. The sign says: "If you ban hunting, there will be lots of these." The website featuring the image<sup>3</sup> explains that the macabre scene was arranged by some farmers protesting against a fox hunting ban. The blog post dates back to June 10, 2007. The image exists in two versions, almost identical, probably shot by the same camera a few seconds away: the point of view is the same, only the cars on the street and the passers-by change. In the second shot, in the background, a boy takes a picture.

Also, this image has a clone. It was created two years later, by an artist answering to the name of Maurizio Cattelan, in the shape of a sculpture titled, as most of his artworks, *Untitled* (2009). In the official picture, shot by Zeno Zotti and featured in the catalogue of the exhibition "All", Maurizio Cattelan's retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York<sup>4</sup>, the only differences are in the setting – the laminated flooring of a white cube – and in the sign, where the original warning has been replaced by a simple and evocative "INRI". The framing is exactly the same: the white sign is at the center of the picture, and the position of the photographer brings the beast's muzzle to the forefront. The horse is reproduced almost literally: the forelegs cross, and the hind legs line up in the very same way.

Once noticed the indisputable effectiveness of the original image, Cattelan made his best to stick to it, and he just took off the incidental details, like the passers-by and the blue rope used to drag the horse in the place where it was found and photographed; and to be sure not to lose this effectiveness as an image, he commissioned an official "media version" of the sculptural work<sup>5</sup>.

Yet, these two images are also very different. The first refers to a news item, the latter is a work of art. The first has the richness of reality, the latter the pithiness

of an allegory. Furthermore, the horse may belong to a found image, but it has also been for a long time an important part of Cattelan's iconography, as an alter ego of the artist himself. In the original image, Cattelan sees the potential of a foolish sacrifice, and turns it into a universal icon with a simple but effective reference to the death of the Christ. A minimal shift, but one that turned the found image into something that, indisputably, belongs to Cattelan.

**Cleptomania**

"I'm always borrowing pieces – crumbs really – of everyday reality."<sup>6</sup>

Maurizio Cattelan is a self-declared kleptomaniac. In his personal mythology, the trope of the thief comes second only to the one of Oblomov, the idle artist running away from his shows, exhibiting fake medical certificates, inviting people to keep their vote, collecting money to pay a young artist (himself) to avoid working for a whole year, renting his space at the Venice Biennale and organizing another Biennale (actually a holiday) in the Caribbean. Cattelan the thief asked a sketch artist to make portraits of himself according to his friends descriptions; he stole the name plates of some professionals in Forlì; he stole Zorro's Z, Fontana's cut, the Red Brigades' star, the neon sign of a cafe and a pharmacy, an entire exhibition by another artist, and made a portrait of himself entering a museum from a tunnel dug under the floor; but above all, he stole ideas: from other artists, the mass media, and everyday life.

For obvious reasons, his appropriations from other artists are quite well known. The analogies between his *Love Saves Life* (1997) and Katarzyna Kozyra's *Pyramid of Animals* (1993), both inspired by the four musicians of Bremen tale, have been widely discussed. But the list could go on for long: *All* (2007) makes us think to Luciano Fabro's *Spirato* (1968); *Untitled* (2007), the woman hanging from a door jamb, materializes out from a picture of Francesca Woodman's *Angel Series* (1977 – 1978); and both *La rivoluzione siamo noi* (2000) and *Untitled* (2000) play with Joseph Beuys, his language, his mythology.

Art criticism often reacted to these robberies in an interesting way. Cattelan's detractors used them to prove his lack of originality; his supporters often minimized

them, turning them into “quotations” (that would turn him into a late postmodernist, which he isn’t). Clearly, the XIX Century myth of originality is still so strong to prevent us to follow an artist where he himself wants to bring us, confessing over and over his inclination to stealing.

*What if we choose to follow him along this way, all the way? Let’s make a working hypothesis: that theft is Maurizio Cattelan’s favorite formal strategy, the one he used the most. That beyond most of his works there is another image, an hidden sub-text, awaiting to come back to light.*

This is not an attempt to undermine the reputation that Cattelan’s work got along the last twenty years, but to understand the indisputable success of the images he created; this is not an attempt to reduce his works to the images that inspired him, but to measure the difference between the two; this is not an attempt to demonstrate his lack of originality, but to understand what actually Cattelan’s originality is; how he situates himself in the contemporary media arena, and in a cultural environment where, as novelist Cory Doctorow said, “we copy like we breath”<sup>7</sup>; and what he has in common with a new generation of artists for which appropriation is no more a subversive cultural strategy coming with an ideological baggage, but a natural, daily gesture, an habit, a way to contribute to an ongoing discourse<sup>8</sup>.

#### **Permanent Food**

“Spector. What constitutes a successful work for you? Cattelan. I like when the work becomes an image.”<sup>9</sup>

Maurizio Cattelan has an absolute respect for images. The confirmation comes from the quote above, where the word “image” is used with a strong, unusual meaning, in some ways closer to the medieval concept of “icon”, or the modern concept of “meme”. In this sense, an “image” is a visual sign that circulates outside of the context in which it was produced; something which imprints itself into one’s memory, and which is reused, duplicated, altered by anybody, losing all ties with its “author” and developing new meanings any time it is used. It is something that doesn’t exist as a “work”, but as a “subject” with its own life, able to self-replicate and to spread itself.

Just a few artists are able to create “images” of this kind. With rare exceptions, the visual imagery produced by contemporary art remains within its jurisdiction. For the most part, the collective imagery of the twentieth century has been developed, rather than by artists, by other professional image-makers: film directors, photographers, cartoonists, designers, illustrators.

In this context, Maurizio Cattelan stands out as an exception. The Italian artist, who made such a few “artworks” along his short career, circulated much more “images” than any other artist of his time. How did it happen?

My answer is: feeding on images. An act of feeding that isn’t just stealing, but that rather improves an image which, once it’s out there, should be considered a commons, no more a property. Filtering, like a sieve, the tons of images that the media – newspapers, magazines, TV, the internet – pump on him (and on anybody else), and choosing the ones that he like and that better fit in his agenda, Cattelan rephrases them and sets them free in the communication flow again, allowing other people to find a new meaning for them.

This is, you may say, what any artist does, but what makes Cattelan unique is his hunger, his instinct, his ability to synthesize, his methodology and determination in producing artworks able to become an image, to enter the collective imagery and be reproduced and distributed in any kind of communication system. As Francesco Bonami said: “Cattelan’s works have three lives. They live in reality, in the media and in memory. Their first life is human, the second is spiritual, the third is eternal.”<sup>10</sup>

This reference to the semantic field of food is not accidental, since Cattelan himself (and his spokespersons) used it many times. Massimiliano Gioni recently referred to him as a “great consumer of images”, and talked about his “bulimia of images”<sup>11</sup>. Back in 1996, together with Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and the designer Paola Manfrin, Cattelan conceived a magazine called *Permanent Food*, published in 15 issues up to 2007. *Permanent Food* describes itself as a “second generation magazine”, declares a “free copyright” and samples images from any kind of source: fashion magazines,

illustrations, posters, art magazines, newspapers, fanzines, catalogues, and, of course, the internet. Everything is presented out of its context, without text labels and references, cleaned out from its functional status of advertisement, work of art, amateurish creation, and from its own history. *Permanent Food* is literally what the title declares: a permanent act of feeding imagination, thanks to what's selected and to the way it was put together – an ephemeral assemblage open to the contribution of the user, since the binding has a tendency to break up. In other words, the magazine is an ode to re-use, a collage meant to be destroyed and put together again, a work of appropriation and sharing.

The semantic area of food is recalled also in the scatological title of *Toilet Paper*, Cattelan's brand new magazine, launched with the fashion photographer Pierpaolo Ferrari in 2010, after his farewell to art. It is, again, a magazine made only with images, but these images are not stolen, but original, professionally produced in a studio. As Pierpaolo Ferrari explained:

Every image is the result of an idea, often simple, and later becomes a complex orchestration of people participating in a tableaux vivant. This project is also a relief valve for our minds. We both work in fields where thousands of images circulate. Producing images is part of our job...<sup>12</sup>

And yet theft, sometimes announced, more often not, takes place in *Toilet Paper* as well. Let's take, for example, the November 2011 issue. The back cover declares its inspirations: Mike the Headless Chicken, Mario Sorrenti, Richard Avedon. Mike the Headless Chicken was a chicken that lived for 18 months after his head had been mostly cut off. The story dates back to the Forties, and was largely discussed in the media. The image published in *Toilet Paper* is a faithful reproduction of one of Mike's best known photographic portraits: the chicken stands firmly, its head on the table, right in front of its legs.

Mario Sorrenti, an Italian fashion photographer, inspired the image of an anonymous model in pants, her body covered by an horde of yellow clothes pegs.

As in the case of the dead horse, the

differences between the copy and the original are minimal: Sorrenti's black and white photo became a color photography, the layout changed from vertical to landscape. When the original image works well, variations are, for Cattelan, useless mannerisms: much better to keep it as it is.

It's not easy to say how many other thefts, or loans, can be found in the various issues of *Toilet Paper*. Here, like in *Permanent Food*, Cattelan explores the underworld, choosing images cultivated in small niches, with a low level of visibility and not, like a pop artist, images that already entered mainstream culture. However, it's quite easy to find, in the issue we are considering, the tribute paid to the cute cat meme. Well rooted in the popular imagery, this interest for cute cat pictures literally exploded online, where they have been shared and modified, adding short notes in a grammatically incorrect English that turned them into "LOLcats"<sup>13</sup>. Without any text, *Toilet Paper*'s cute cat photo seems to be there waiting for its own transformation into an "image".

#### Internet Memes

"If you have an apple and I have an apple and we exchange these apples then you and I will still each have one apple. But if you have an idea and I have an idea and we exchange these ideas, then each of us will have two ideas." George Bernard Shaw<sup>14</sup>

The last example brings us back to the internet: a context that, according to what I wrote so far, is interesting for at least three reasons. First the internet, however ephemeral and always changing, offers good opportunities to keep track of the life of an image. Even when the original gets lost, images are often copied and uploaded to other websites. Often they are tagged in ways that makes it possible to get them back from the nowhere where they disappeared thanks to a simple "Google Search". In other words, while it might be difficult or even impossible to trace the origin of an image seen on a magazine, an underground fanzine or a wall, online it's relatively easier to find what Cattelan saw, years ago, and inspired him a new work. There, the reach of his plumb can still be measured.

Second, the internet is an extraordinary place for the circulation of images. An horizontal, democratic, bottom-up

medium, the internet allows an image to become successful without making its appearance on the mass media in the first place. Internet images don't belong to anybody, they are public domain. They spread and are used and abused according to their own potential, and not thanks to the firepower of those who make and distribute them. There, you don't need money, powerful means of production and authority to be seen by millions of people: you just have to satisfy a specific need at a specific time, according to rules that's not easy to convert into a recipe. Did you never make eye contact with the dramatic chipmunk? Did you never dance listening to Charlie Schmidt's piano cat? Did you never share a lolcat on Facebook? If you are able to use it, the internet is an extraordinary source of "images", and an addiction for those who are, like Cattelan, hungry of them.

Last but not least, the internet is the place where the idea of copyright that Cattelan adopted in his work as an artist and as an editor was actually developed in the first place. George Bernard Shaw's sentence, quoted at the beginning of this paragraph, was displayed full page in the 11th issue of *Permanent Food*. That sentence is probably one of the most sampled quotes of the digital age, first appropriated by the free software community, and later by those who would like to apply the same model to any kind of cultural artifact.

Besides the dead horse, there are at least two more works by Maurizio Cattelan whose origin can be found for sure in an internet image. The first is a 2002 sculpture, as well called *Untitled* (2002), displaying a taxidermied donkey suspended to an overloaded cart. Cattelan found inspiration in an image widely circulated online in the late Nineties, shot somewhere in the Middle East and still quite easy to find googling "funny donkey". This appropriation – mentioned also on the Guggenheim catalogue – strikes, again, for its transparency: in the official, "media version" of the work, now part of the Dakis Joannou collection – the framing is the same of the original image, and the visitor walking on the left is in the same position, and plays the same role in the economy of the image, of the Arab man watching the bizarre incident.

The third work, *Untitled* (2009), is a sculpture in polyurethane rubber and

steel of a black rubber boot stretched over the bust of a human head. The original picture dates back to 2006, and was largely circulated around the Web, probably thanks to its fetishist and masochist implication, as a fast Google search for "rubber boot head" immediately shows. Cattelan reconstructs the vernacular image, playing with its high culture associations (Fantomas, Surrealist objects) and finding for it a position in his long gallery of self-portraits. Again, the official picture (shot by Zeno Zotti) displays the same framing of the original meme.

In this case, "meme" is the right word, because the image has been appropriated and used as well by many other anonymous web users. A comparison between Cattelan's work and these vernacular appropriation of the same image is interesting. Whatever the purpose that originated the image was, the picture of the rubber boot head was used in many "demotivational", images created using a standard layout (a black frame with a sarcastic text label) that makes the picture "say" different things any time: jokes about originality, the right use of rubber boots, the safety of using it that way, or... diarrhea. Using a different language and approaching different audiences, Cattelan and the other users who appropriated the same image are actually doing the same thing: using an image produced by others to say something that belongs to them.

True, a swallow doesn't make a summer. But three, demonstrable references do not only support the main idea developed in this essay – that theft is one of Cattelan's favorite artistic strategies – but also its main corollary – that the internet is one of his favorite sources, and one of the archives we have to browse if we want to trace the origins of his images. They invite us to focus on works whose dependance on existing images has still to be proved. They provide a fertile ground for research and hypotheses. In many cases, of course, it will be almost impossible to prove these hypotheses without a complete access to Cattelan's "browser", his physical, or mental, archive of images. An archive that promise to be huge, because of his hunger of images and because his familiarity with the internet started very early. Back in 1996, the American website Ada'web launched, in collaboration with *Permanent Food*, *Permanent Foam*, "a second generation webzine with a

selection of pages taken from sites all over the world wide web.” The website – an ancestor of Delicious, allowing user to visit a collection of links and to contribute with his own links – is now a collection of “404 not found” pages, but it allows us to date Cattelan’s interest in the World Wide Web<sup>15</sup>.

A work whose “internet pedigree” is likely, but difficult to prove is *Untitled* (2007), the sculpture of a suspended horse with its head stuck in the wall. Look for “stupid horse” on Google Images and you will immediately see the similarity with the image of an horse with the head stuck in a tree. In this case, some changes have been made: Cattelan’s horse is not sitting on the floor, but suspended at a considerable height, as if it got caught in the wall while jumping an obstacle, or as if it is the back side of an invisible hunting trophy mounted on the other side of the wall; and still, the similarities with the found image are quite strong.

The same ambiguity can be found in *Untitled* (2008), a sculpture featuring two abandoned shoes with plants growing in them. Apparently, this work was inspired by an image posted in 2007 on an Iraqi blog called “Soldier at home”. The two images display the same kind of shoes, and the same kind of plants; the framing is different, but they are both set on a threshold. Cattelan’s sculpture was made for an exhibition in a Nineteenth-century former synagogue in Germany, that survived the Nazis because a farmer employed it as a barn. But if its relationship with the Iraqi blog’s image could be proved, we’d probably understand more about the peaceful sadness, and the sense of impermanence that it generates in the viewer. Again, Cattelan appropriates a found image, giving it a new meaning and reintroducing it in the media landscape, allowing others to use it as well.

Yet, the relationship between these two images is mined by the emergence of many other, similar images. Using shoes as flowerpots seems to be quite a popular activity, as proven by searching for “shoes planters” on Google. So, the question is: is *Untitled* (2008) a classical example of appropriation, or rather part of the ongoing history of a meme?

The fact is that Cattelan’s work establishes

a give-and-take relationship with the vernacular imagery circulating on the internet; and this relationship is extremely suggestive, even when it isn’t fully demonstrable. A tentative phenomenology of this relationship could be articulated like this:

1. Direct appropriation: Cattelan’s sees an image, and turns it into something else.
2. Preliminary research: Cattelan wants to do something, and before doing it he starts a web search for related keywords, in order to study similar visual solutions and finally come up with a successful image.
3. Interference: Cattelan’s image is part of an ongoing flow, or, as we said before, of the ongoing history of a meme.

Most of the examples we did so far probably belong to either the first or the second category: Cattelan finds the image of the dead horse and decides to turn it into a work of art; or he wants to write a new story for his favorite alter ego, starts a web search for “stupid horse”, finds an image and use it as a starting point for a new work. But what about, for example, *A Perfect Day* (1999), where he taped to the wall his gallerist Massimo de Carlo? Is it just another occurrence of the “taped to the wall meme”, that produced a plethora of pics and YouTube videos easily available online, or the starting point for it? Did Cattelan appropriate an image, contribute to a meme or start it?

And again: what is the relationship between *Untitled* (2000), a picture of a man with a big cork in his mouth, and the pictures of freaks filling their mouth with almost everything?

Or between *Betsy* (2002), the old lady sitting in the fridge, and the dozens of pretty girls who tried to do the same? May the two bunnies with big eyes (*Untitled*, 1996) have been influenced by the popular culture obsession with large pupils as displayed in manga, porno and sci-fi iconography related to biotechnologies? And what do the two big dogs nursing a chick have to share with the popular interest for images documenting bizarre relationships between beasts? Are we really sure that now famous images such as the suicide squirrel (*Bidibidibidiboo*, 1996), the ostrich with his head stuck in the gallery floor (*Untitled*, 1997), the cow



with two Vespa handles inserted into its head as horns (*Untitled*, 1997), the donkey with a TV set on its back (*If a Tree Falls...*, 1998), the buried fakir (*Mother*, 1999), the Ku Klux Klan elephant (*Not Afraid of Love*, 2000), and even the kneeling Hitler (*Him*, 2001) and the Papa crushed by a meteorite (*La Nona Ora*, 1999) are only the outburst of Cattelan's imagination and genius? Maybe they come from somewhere else. Maybe he just discovered them, navigating that rich forest of signs that was once the city, and that is now the net.

### Conclusions

To become an image means to abandon the condition in which a work of art is referred to by name, in a usually narrow discursive space, and embrace the condition of those images who everybody knows, usually without knowing what's their name and where they come from. Cattelan was able to reach this goal better than any other artist. Probably this is why most of his works are untitled. His sculptural works are made to be photographed, shared, distributed, commented and manipulated by others. We may go even further, and say that they are born to be used in a demotivational poster. Often they come out from the information flow through casual browsing, looking for such keywords as "squirrel suicide", "sitting donkey", "dead horse". A few artists share the same awareness about the ways images are circulated in the media. Cattelan proved it with his publishing projects, *Permanent Food* and *Toilet Paper*. With his recent retrospective, which is literally invading the internet with its kaleidoscopic photo documentation<sup>16</sup>. With *L.O.V.E* (2010), the first true "memement" in the history of art: a monument born to be photographed, shared, used as an emoticon in a chat, or as a response in an email.

But to consider Maurizio Cattelan's work this way may also provide a better ground for understanding the work of a younger generation of artists who grew up in the same information environment, and who relate to it in very similar, or completely different, ways.

### Notes

1. This essay has been inspired by a conversation with Eva and Franco Mattes. They first discovered, and pointed to my attention, some of the appropriation discussed in this text. I stole them many ideas, but of course I'm fully responsible of the way I used them.

I'm also in debt with Alterazioni Video, who after the publication of this text in Italian sent me some new links.

2. "Nancy Spector in conversation with Maurizio Cattelan", in VVAA, Maurizio Cattelan, Phaidon Press, London – New York 2000. P. 8.

3. <http://www.targetrichenvironment.net/?p=897>.

4. Nancy Spector (ed.), Maurizio Cattelan. All, Guggenheim Museum Publications, New York 2011, p. 241.

5. According to Massimiliano Gioni, "when he makes his sculptures, Cattelan thinks since the very beginning to their translation into an image. Usually only one image of his sculptures circulates, and it becomes the media version of the work." "In media res". Massimiliano Gioni interviewed by Lucia Longhi, in Flash Art Italia, Issue 299, February 2012, p. 34. My translation.

6. "Nancy Spector in conversation with Maurizio Cattelan", cit., p. 17.

7. Cf. Jason Huff, "We Copy Like We Breathe: Cory Doctorow's SIGGRAPH 2011 Keynote", in Rhizome, August 12, 2011. <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2011/aug/12/cory-doctorows-siggraph-2011-keynote/>.

8. Cf. Randy Kennedy, "Apropos Appropriation", in The New York Times, December 28, 2011. [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/01/arts/design/richard-prince-lawsuit-focuses-on-limits-of-appropriation.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/01/arts/design/richard-prince-lawsuit-focuses-on-limits-of-appropriation.html?_r=1).

9. "Nancy Spector in conversation with Maurizio Cattelan", cit., p. 22.

10. Francesco Bonami interviewed by Lucia Longhi, in Flash Art Italia, Issue 299, February 2012, p. 31. My translation.

11. "In media res", cit., p. 34. My translation.

12. Pierpaolo Ferrari, in Elena Bordignon, "Toilet Paper Magazine", in Vogue.it, September 14, 2010, [www.vogue.it/people-are-talking-about/art-photo-design/2010/09/toilet-paper-magazine](http://www.vogue.it/people-are-talking-about/art-photo-design/2010/09/toilet-paper-magazine). My translation.

13. Cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lolcat>.

14. Quoted in Permanent Food, Issue 11, 2003.

15. Cf. <http://www.adaweb.com/context/pf/foam/toc.html>.

16. Francesco Bonami goes even further, saying: "His work is related to the media image. The pictures of

the Guggenheim exhibition tell us about a show that doesn't really exist. The museum looks much bigger, the works seem to explode in space [...] But what will remain in memory and in the history of art are the pictures, and thus another show [...] The pictures of the show are the true show, the one the artist imagined, without the technical problems. The ideal show." In Francesco Bonami interviewed by Lucia Longhi, cit., p. 31. My translation.

**Troll Culture:  
A Conversation with Stefan Krappitz  
— Matei Samihaian**

Finding out about Stefan Krappitz's book *Troll Culture*, felt like an odd coincidence, as I was in the process of investigating the possible connections between the art of trolling and trolling as an artistic practice. I stumbled upon Olia Lialina's link one day while looking up social hacking strategies and pre-2.0 trolls that had to adapt their tactics to a new social networking reality. I knew that trolls were really marginalized by the media (a recent action by the BBC underscores this tendency) and was curious to discover alternative approaches to this premise, approaches that were opposed to the view of trolls being these sinister basement dwellers planting traps on different online platforms while lurking in shadowy spaces waiting for innocent victims. Such a surprisingly narrow understanding of troll culture paints, what is actually a very fluid and adaptive practice—into a modern day portrait of a gargoyle in front of the computer screen. As I was reading Krappitz's book, the alternative understanding of troll culture I was looking for began to present itself. What I read wasn't a one sided affair either: it both exemplified the awesome and fun parts of trolling while criticizing actions that picked on defenseless victims or that used insults as vicious weapons.

I thought about this for a while and started drawing lines between the Anonymous movement, artistic practices and the trolling strategies that *Troll Culture* touched upon. Some of these lines were dotted, some broke off somewhere in-between, while others connected seemingly unrelated actions and critical positions. I felt the need to find out more about these possible connections and interactions so I sent Stefan some questions I had regarding his book. Below is our conversation.

**Matei Sâmihiãian** The first obvious question is why did you choose to concentrate on this subject for your book? What did you find so interesting about trolling?

**Stefan Krappitz** At first, I was really influenced by Olia Lialina's and Dragan Espenschied's work on Internet amateur culture. Their way of seeing the good things in Geocities or Comic Sans MS was

and still is very inspiring to me. Trolling was always something that fascinated me, because it can be so much fun to use an infrastructure in a different way than it was thought of (Tobias Leingruber i.e. FFFFFF.AT calls this "skating the web". Also an influence). I'm not claiming to be a supreme expert in trolling, but I loved to troll Internet forums or chat rooms with my friends in the late 90s and early 00s. When I got aware of 4chan and Encyclopedia Dramatica, I was fascinated by the creative methods some of the trolls developed there.

At first, my topic was 4chan, Anonymous and its troll culture, but since the approval of the topic, Cole Stryker announced a book entitled *Epic win for Anonymous* and the Anonymous movement grew somewhat bigger than troll culture. I neither wanted to rewrite Stryker's book (since he had already written it very well), nor did I want to write on the political aspects of Anonymous protests. I was more interested in the troll culture part of the topic, so I narrowed it all down a bit.

At the same time, I really saw a strikingly negative consensus in media coverage about trolls. Even interesting books like Stryker's describe trolls as "bored teenagers". This is not fair, in my opinion!

Another thing that bothered me was the lack of literature on trolling.

For example, most of the few cited texts on Wikipedia are from the 90's and belong to books that don't even concentrate on trolling (Judith Donath writes about identity and deception on the Usenet, and Julian Dibbell writes about a griever in an early text based online community called Lambda MOO).

My motivation was to prove that trolling can be fun. I wanted to show the phenomenon of trolling as something worth researching. It was also very important to me to show the whole thing from a rather neutral point of view by describing both "how to be a troll" and "how to defend from trolls".

**MS** Given the multiple forms of action you interpret as trolling (the Socrates example in the book), what do you think the difference is between trolling and culture hacking? Is it the lulz?

**SK** Yes, the lulz is a very important part of it.

Lulz is by the way an often misinterpreted word. It can't be used as a synonym to lols. Lulz includes some form of Schadenfreude.

**MS** Isn't that too much of an insider joke that rings a bell only to a chosen few?

**SK** It lies in the nature of trolling, that not everybody, especially not the victim, knows what is happening. However, if more people do know about the joke, the overall lulz created by it is increased. Often, it is enough to reveal the joke afterwards. Think of David Thorne, who created a fake profile of a young girl on Facebook. This girl "forgot" to set her birthday party to private and ten thousands of users joined the Facebook page for the party all the while Mr. Thorne was selling t-shirts to the "best party ever". Politicians and journalists all of a sudden started to discuss this Facebook party. After all the buzz settled down, David Thorne revealed the true story. If he hadn't, this would have remained just some poor girl's crashed birthday party, but by revealing the whole story, many lulz have been had afterwards with all the buzz that was created. All of this made me think, "Well played, Mr. Thorne."

Sometimes however, being one of the few in on the joke is just the best thing of trolling. There is a good example from Germany. After a school gun rampage, politicians blamed violent video games like Counter-Strike or aggressive music like Slipknot for it. Apart from the tragedy that is connected with a school rampage, reactions from politicians and the media enraged the younger generation. When there was a school shooting in Winnenden, a random troll from krautchan (German 4chan) faked a suicide note from the shooter as a krautchan forum post. The German media somehow got ahold of this and criticized the whole Internet, because this guy had foretold his doings before online only nobody took him seriously before. The message itself was really digging up all these stereotypes and it got so far that the interior minister of Baden-Württemberg read the message, which was full of hidden German chanspeak (grillen gehen = go to a barbecue = commit suicide or Bernd = The name for the German Anonymous),

live on every television station. Getting a leading politician of your state to read a fake message was definitely lulzy for the few that recognized its real source by the German chanspeak.

As it was revealed to be fake, the whole German media was put in an embarrassing situation for not even checking the source of the message.

**MS** To me it seems more like a micro-culture – a trolling-specific one (game grifeing, 4chan raids etc.) – that's only relevant to specific cases or actions. Isn't there a danger to pinning down these very fluid strategies into a genre or a culture or to analyze them in an anthropological manner?

**SK** You are absolutely right. This is why I used a relatively wide definition.

As I wrote in the introduction to the chapter, "Be a Troll" those methods change all the time. Trolling is about always finding new ways to act differently from what people would expect. This is also the creative aspect that I like the most about trolling. Infiltrating a system, like Tracky Birthday called it. When writing about trolling techniques, all you can and should be doing is making exemplary "screenshots". Fitting these liquid forms into fixed traditional academic categories is not the right thing here. It's not about the current techniques, but about the creative methods in generating new ones. For this, I give various examples in my book and explain how they work, in order for you to develop them further.

Think of a feminist community. If you would create an account just to write something like "Why are you on the Internet? Get back to the kitchen and make me a sammich!", the only thing likely to happen is that your account and the post getting deleted. So many people have tried this before, that by now, the message has become pure noise to a target group. To be a successful troll you have to come up with something new.

**MS** After recently seeing a video about a Welsh troll that was defaced by the BBC, I found myself lurking on different channels to see reactions to the video. While in your book you criticize these simple minded trolling strategies, what is your reaction to the replays and comments in relation to

the way the BBC handled the whole issue? Is there something at stake here?

**SK** This is a really difficult question, because you can't generalize. In this case, I really don't like the way the BBC is approaching the troll. He had no real chance. The sole purpose of the interview on the street was to make him look like a stupid sociopath. It could have been really interesting to find out about his motivations, but obviously the BBC was not interested in this. If you want to find out about a trolls motivation, you shouldn't be so extremely judgemental, but rather respect them, even if the troll IS a sociopath.

On the other hand, this guy is not a good troll at all. While I found it extremely difficult and overbearing to point out the border between morally bad and good trolling, I tried to give it some direction. Just writing insults on a memorial page on Facebook is as creative as randomly punching a twelve year old schoolgirl in the face. Creativity is somehow an indicator of quality here.

There is however some kind of guideline to trolling in my book.

Julian Dibbell wrote:

*the Internet is serious business' means exactly the opposite of what it says. It encodes two truths held as self-evident by Goons and /b/tards alike — that nothing on the Internet is so serious it can't be laughed at, and that nothing is so laughable as people who think otherwise.*

While there is nothing more ridiculous than people taking certain things on the Internet too serious, it is quite normal to care about your real-life. When I'm using the term real-life, please note that it does not necessarily exclude online activities. Life on the Internet is real too and sometimes it matters and other times it doesn't. Deciding where to draw the border is one of the most important things when it comes to identity on the Internet. Ruining this real-life and laughing about people taking it seriously is, contradictory to mocking people who are taking weird aspects of online life too serious, the lamest variation of trolling.

The comments on the video are interesting, in that they somewhat resemble the

unfiltered view of the users. While some are just negative about trolling, others go in the direction of "trolling can be fun, but this guy is not even a real troll for he is just randomly insulting people."

This is also somewhat similar to my opinion.

Trolls should judge their own actions and try to be as creative as possible and to create maximum lulz! By just hurting people that are legitimately grieving for their lost ones, you are neither creative, nor are you creating lulz for anybody else than yourself.

After all, this video shows the bad reputation of trolling in traditional media versus the more sophisticated reputation of trolling among the users (comments). I really like this confrontation.

**MS** In your view trolling as a cultural phenomenon is closely linked to anonymity. Do you feel like trolling shouldn't happen on social networks like Facebook or Google+ or that it should be done in a different way? I'm thinking that you'll probably feel more "entitled" to troll a friend rather than a stranger, but then where's the lulz...

**SK** While I link trolling to anonymity, I also do link it to identity or pseudonymity. At first this sounds conflicting, but at a closer look, it is not. Both anonymity and identity are listed as techniques against trolling in different sources I reviewed and it perfectly makes sense.

The idea of trolling linked to anonymity is somehow obvious:

If everybody is anonymous, you cannot be made accountable for your actions. Your true self remains hidden and this makes it really hard for you to be confronted with your own actions.

On the Internet, this is known as John Gabriels Greater Internet Fuckwad Theory or, in psychology, as the online disinhibition effect.

On the other hand, people are more likely to expect trolling in anonymous environments. That's why 4chan has the rule "Pics or it didn't happen!". Timestamping is also a necessary technique to get credibility in anonymous

environments.

In addition, it is really difficult to pick a target and see the effects of your actions as a troll when everybody is anonymous.

Identity is often cited as a good technique to prevent trolling, which is not completely true. While trolling on Facebook or Google+ is harder than in anonymous environments, results can be a lot more rewarding.

There are several reasons for this: First of all, people on Facebook are normally not expecting trolls as their conversational partner. Second, it is really easy to pick out a target. Third, the troll sees the impact of its actions. The only difficulty in those identity-based environments is to fake a reasonable identity. I've seen threads on 4chan, where troll accounts on Facebook build networks by befriending each other. A fake account with 78 friends is much more believable than one with zero friends.

An example on how to troll your friend on Facebook would be (your friend needs to be in the same room with his computer) to sneak to his computer when he is away to the bathroom or gone for a smoke, and set the default privacy options on his Facebook to "visible just for yourself". Since he likely doesn't expect this, he will continue posting stuff and wonder why nobody likes or comments on his posts. There are lots of good ways to troll on Facebook and Google+. David Thorne used Facebook too when he set up that fake public Facebook party. Nobody expected the young girl to be a fake profile of a troll. That way the whole action could work.

**MS** Internet serious business? Gabriela Coleman sees the lulz as a departure point towards a more socially engaging way of political activism. What's your take on the subject?

**SK** I think that the border between activism and trolling is really blurry.

While some forms of protest, like hacking the website of Paypal are easier to classify as activism (they didn't do it for the lulz primarily), others are classy examples for trolling. Remember operation slickpubes?

A guy from NYC collected the pubes and toenails of other members of Anonymous

and covered himself in Vaseline and said toenails and pubes. He then ran into a Scientology building and smeared the pubes and toenails all over the place. Since he was also covered in Vaseline, he was so slippery that the security couldn't grab him. Other members of Anonymous filmed it and uploaded the footage to YouTube to spread the lulz.

In the actions of Anonymous, both collective trolling and activism are really close and most of the times include each other.

*YouTube PornDay*, for example, was an action in which Anonymous protested against YouTube's policies by flooding it with porn. The aspect of lulz is bigger than the activist component, which classifies the action as trolling.

**MS** Art as trolling or the art of trolling?

Some artists employ trolling strategies within their work, I'm thinking of jodi's thumbing youtube project, the Ten Tenten facebook one, but also of Tracky Birthday or Costant Dullaart promoting his IRL exhibition by trolling almost everyone in his Facebook list. There's certainly a sort of difference here by means of targets and lulz audiences. How do you see this artistic trend in relation to troll culture?

**SK** Trolling is an art!

I see great potential in trolling as an art. One example, which is also covered in my book, is Dennis Knopf, aka. Tracky Birthday's Bootyclipse, where he downloaded bootyshaking videos from YouTube, removed the bootyshaking and re-uploaded them to YouTube under the exact same name with the same tags as the original.

He also trolled everybody by setting up a fake NY-Times page (that is down now), containing an interview with himself, when he launched his new album called "New Album".

Another great troll/artist is Dragan Espenschied who made a collaboration with Aram Bartholl when he spread the fake news, that Google Streetview now costs money in Germany because otherwise Google couldn't afford the costs of everybody requesting to get their house blurred out (that is an actual problem with

the people here in Germany). He attached a link to a fake Streetview page that required payment to browse the content. Although the input fields for the payment information were dummies, the site got marked as a phishing site very quickly and disappeared, but the idea behind this action is really nice.

Since trolling is about creative play with people's expectations or about infiltrating systems, I see a big connection to art!

**MS** Do you have some good examples of RL trolling?

**SK** Of course! RL trolling can be a lot of fun!

I remember trolling Aram Bartholl once, when he held a lecture at Merz Academy and went outside to get a cup of coffee. I ran forward to his notebook and plugged in the receiver for my wireless mouse to the back of his notebook (one of those that stand out just 3 millimeters when plugged in). As he came back and showed us something, I could safely open any YouTube video while he was talking to us with the projection in the back. Even as he realized, that something is wrong, he still didn't know how it worked!

Another more artistic action, two fellow students and me came up with (also during the workshop with Aram Bartholl) was infiltrating Media Markt (German version of BestBuy). We printed out pictures and put them on USB-Sticks and went into the Media Markt. Then we photographed the pictures with the digital cameras they had on display and used their displays as our canvas. Then we went on to the computers and set the pictures from our USB-Stick as wallpapers on the PC's and Notebooks.

We started some kind of exhibition like this. Sadly, while the employees had no idea what we were doing with the USB-Sticks, they did see our camera very quickly and threatened to throw us out of the shop immediately if we go on filming. Therefore, the documentation sucks.

Not that artistic but still really nice is sticking small trollface stickers over the sensors of optical mice, or making candy-apples with onions instead of apples, or somehow getting people to visit shock sites like lemonparty.org (don't go there unless you want to see three elderly men doing "things.")

Tracky Birthday came up with a nice idea to troll party people when I talked to him about my book. Just take an existing party and design new flyers for it. The fake flyers, however, state that it is a pyjamas party or some bad-taste party. Print them at some online discount printer and lay them out everywhere. Then turn up at the party to see the people going to a regular party in pyjamas.

Another great idea, I found somewhere on the Internet involves those deer-cameras that automatically take pictures when something in front of them moves. All you have to do is open the box and borrow the SD-card. Then, at home, open one of the pictures on the card and photoshop some kind of monster into it. Then put the card back into the camera and wait for the television to broadcast a story about the monster in the woods.

Again, all this works because you would not expect someone to do this.

**MS** Are you a troll?

**SK** Aren't we all trolls sometimes?

Here is a record of my most epic actions as a troll:

*<http://nm.merz-akademie.de/~stefan.krappitz/>*

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*Edited by Cristina Vremeş*

### **Colophon**

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