

# Next-Level Spleen

JOHN KELSEY



Steve McQueen, *Shame*, 2011.  
35 mm, color, 101 minutes.  
Brandon (Michael Fassbender).

**FOR MOST ARTISTS TODAY**, the laptop and phone have already supplanted the studio as primary sites of production. Early signs of this shift were evident in what became known as relational aesthetics, which, in retrospect, seems wrongly defined as a practice in which communal experience became the medium. It is more properly understood, rather, as a capitalist-realist adaptation of art to the experience economy, obviously, but also to the new productive imperative to go mobile, as a body and a practice. In other words, community declared itself a medium at

the very moment that it was laying itself open to displacements it could never survive. Meanwhile, exhibitions were planned on laptops, then dragged and dropped into institutions. Work took a discursive turn, meaning it was now efficiently distributable on a global scale. In the mid-1990s, the figure of the artist, too, seemed to undergo a decisive mutation: The Margiela-clad PowerBook user was more nomadic and adaptive than his antecedents, smoother and more agreeable, better organized and more instantly connected with other members of the burgeoning

creative class that had emerged on the front lines of economic deregulation. The contemporary artist now functioned as a sort of lubricant, as both a tourist and a travel agent of art, following the newly liberated flows of capital while seeming always to be just tempting within the nonstop tempo of increasingly flexible, dematerialized projects, always just passing through. This was all vaguely political, too, in a Negrish sort of way that promoted the emancipatory possibilities of connection and communication, linking the new speed of culture to the “convivial”

spirit of everything relational. The mutation of the artist continued to follow its irrevocable logic until we eventually arrived at the fully wireless, fully precarious, Adderall-enhanced, manic-depressive, post- or hyperrelational figure who is more networked than ever but who presently exhibits signs of panic and disgust with a speed of connection that we can no longer either choose or escape. Hyperrelational aesthetics emerged between 9/11 and the credit crisis and so can be squarely situated in relation to the collapse of the neoliberal economy, or more accurately to the situation of its drawn-out living death, since neoliberalism continues to provide both the cause and the only available cure for its own epic failure.

No feasible—or even recognizable—form of political engagement appears on the hyperrelational horizon, and no real horizon either, so we engage speed itself, attempting to overflow given spaces of politics with the disruptive force of the leak. If relational art aestheticized community, it did so in a decadent way, reading Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* in the context of Thatcher's "There is no such thing as society" and Deleuze in advance of e-flux. For the postrelational artist, however, nothing is more detestable than smart, spreadable conviviality, because the problem now is that togetherness can no longer be experienced outside of aesthetics, and there's no more avoiding the fact that isolation has been systematically designed into connectivity. Nowadays, networks are referenced and theorized ad nauseam, but no longer with any utopian sentiments attached. Last year, we read about Twitter revolutions in the mainstream press at the same time that we skimmed journals such as *Collapse* and *Sic*, belated translations of *Tiqqun*, and the sci-fi novels of Maurice Dantec ("post-World" scenarios involving humans becoming modems, the terminal loss of language and bodies). There was also Occupy, which seemed like it could have been anything—a viral insurrection, an aggressively peopled kind of live-stream, a general strike—until it was surrounded by police and bogged itself down in democratic process. Still, a permanent fault line may have been produced in that moment, inasmuch as the return to normal hasn't been entirely convincing either.

The network-disgust that's experienced by even the most positive-minded artists today is captured in our continued abuse of the meme "LOL," which becomes ever more applicable in direct correlation to the degree that we overkill it and wear it out. Not even a word, the term itself performs the loss of language and of laughter, even. It's a disembodied and thus efficiently transmissible abbreviation of laughter that in its repetition seems to reveal both the ecstasy and the anxiety of our nonstop displacement within social media. An overwritten, highbrow press release

about networks may be LOL. Or a JPEG of a knowingly failed painting. But mostly *LOL* signals the amputation of laughter from the body and its recoding as the silent, poison-dart-like flight of a postword within a network. The more we abuse it, the more it functions as the postlaughter of wit minus bodies, always somehow aimed at the bad faith of postcommunal connectivity.

Back home after the opening of a summer group show about "networked painting" (at Zach Feuer Gallery in New York), I'm still getting my head around the exhibition's title, "Context Message." Aside from a possible reference to the *Kontext Kunst* context of the early 1990s and to whatever faded, vaguely LOL echoes it may be producing in the cybernetic noncontext of Berlin–New York now, mostly I'm thinking, What else could the message be but that networks have decidedly replaced context, and that the only critical option remaining is to present art today as a stomach digesting itself in public, in real time? Except that the stomach is a network and there is no more public, because cities are just conveniently impossible places to hang out while art pretends to finish itself off for good. In other words, it's a show about hyperrelational decadence in the age of high-speed connectivity, with real paintings by Michael Krebber, Merlin Carpenter, Jutta Koether, Bjarne Melgaard, and R. H. Quayman, as well as by the next-generation gallerists and bloggers who keep these and other names vaguely viral while at the same time inflicting LOL degrees of insecurity on them, or on the notion of the artist profile, meanwhile casting serious doubt on the possibility of positively inhabiting something like a context or network (or city, for that matter). The other LOL message here is that "network" is both a critical hot topic and a shamelessly with-it way of selling paintings in this economic End of Days: Not only do you get this painting-thing, you also get everything it's connected to—a direct link to something like extrinsic value, the "general intellect" of an invisible postcommunity. It's difficult to say which of these artists is most favorably positioned within the self-terrorizing, self-trolling spiderweb of "Context Message," but the joke we're all in on has to do with how paranoid and insecure the artist has become within the noncontext we've inherited from relational aesthetics, the LOL thing to do with this feeling being to reblog it as painting.

Baudelairean spleen—or disgust as a poetic channel—was always connected to an idea of modern beauty, was maybe even its preferred medium. Any channeling of beauty today would have to occur in relation to crisis and the sublime of viral insecurity. The outmoding of the studio and possibly even of the artist herself, as we deliver our human capaci-



Above: View of "Context Message," 2012, Zach Feuer Gallery, New York. From left: Trevor Shimizu, *Spa Castle Detail*, 2010; Trevor Shimizu, *Spa Castle*, 2010; Lola Pettway, *Housetop Medallion*, 2004; Martin Kippenberger, *Kain's Flocken*, ca. 1980; Elaine Reichek, *Sampler (Othello)*, 2001; Uli Hohn, *Untitled*, 1993; Nicolas Guagnini, *Responsive Eye (Bridget 7)*, 2012.



Michael Krebber and Tyler Dobson, *Bad Joke Painting 1*, 2010–12, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 40".

ties over to network speed, provides the strange new conditions under which any coming aesthetics must emerge. So we will have to make poetry of the fact that language does not survive speed. Wasn't Paul Virilio already approaching something like an art of speed and catastrophe in books such as *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* (1980) and *The Accident of Art* (2005)? The poststudio has become the non-site of production as circulation, with some sort of artist plugged into it. Via this connection, the figure of the artist herself dematerializes, becomes a profile—viral, bloggable, friendable, and defrienable—her most abstract work being herself, or her own connectivity. And there's no way to separate the mobilization of this abstract, disappearing artist from the wider, systemic (and some would say anthropological) crisis we are living through now: The two phenomena are linked to the same automatisms, installed within the same futureless no-time of cybernetworks. We wonder whether art is possible after Facebook (and, for that matter, whether even Facebook is possible after Facebook). If the artist

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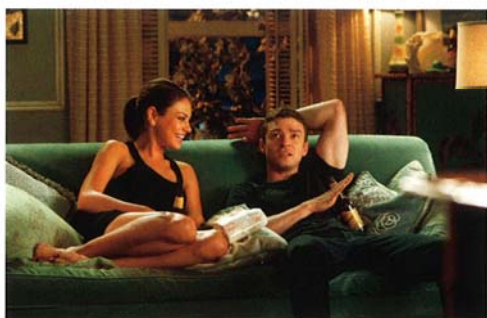
today is a sort of “friend,” she always already includes the possibility of being a nonfriend or a bad friend. Next-level spleen, in other words, is also linked to the threat of defriending that’s implicit in friending. It’s the affective register of undecidable friendship within the hyperrelational networks that enmesh us so ex-intimately today, in this panicked, postlaughter moment of blogger terror. Networks are themselves delirious, paranoid structures; we all know that they can be a medium for betrayal, too.

Some recent movies deploy characters who could be stand-ins for the postrelational artist. There is Michael Fassbender’s depressive sexaholic in *Shame*, who connects with all New York women while retreating into ever more harrowing experiences of remoteness and narcissistic exile. There are the high-speed couples of last year’s nearly identical

rom-coms *Friends with Benefits* and *No Strings Attached*, who detach in order to connect more efficiently, constructing a handy iCouple within the no-time of the metropolitan interface. There’s also Charlize Theron’s alcoholic teen-romance writer in *Young Adult*, who, when she ventures out of the solitary confinement of her high-rise home office, is confronted with the fact that real-life connection is no longer available to her: She (or the world, or adulthood) is already too far gone. All of these cases involve successful professionals exiled in the midst of their own hyperrelational activities, who’ve lost the possibility of experiencing otherness except in the banal, flattened-out terms of the screen profile, who can only interface and data roam, whether online or in bed. The abstraction of the body within the screen-like void of the social is performed by actors who seem to Skype their gestures and tweet their lines, reformatting acting for the windowlike stages of Net space. These are performances of distributed affect.

If to work and communicate as artists today is to extend this cybercapitalist desolation and contribute to the dis-ease of metropolitan togetherness, it seems inevitable that we’ve arrived at a splenetic experience of abstraction. Whatever community we share now is the one that constantly sabotages itself: the anti-community of networked souls. Franco Berardi and others have written about a depressive epidemic that’s both symptomatic of and structurally integral to capitalism’s development as an info-sphere, to economic deregulation under conditions of high-speed exchange. The posthuman speed of circulation means that the world now escapes our capacity for attention and that we’ve lost our time for otherness, and therefore for ourselves. Under the present dispensation, *connection* is defined as the functional relationship between formatted materials or components. Via networks, human relations are reformatted to the pure syntax of the operating system. In other words, bodies become desingularized as time and attention are extracted (fracked) from the living person. And as a defensive reflex, we disconnect in the midst of communication, meaning we depress ourselves, shut down, make time. The title of Berardi’s book *The Soul at Work* (2009) suggests a sequel: *The Soul on Strike*, in which individualized depressions would link up to form a channel or medium for a radical interruption. Occupy depression?

The networked artist starts from the fact of being a human medium for metropolitan circulation and a modem for largely ungovernable cybercapitalist processes. Normally, when everything’s running smoothly, media disappear on us, retreating into their own efficiency, but in times of crisis they become strangely perceptible again. Systemic crisis could be a mirror for hallucinating the artist as



Above: Will Gluck, *Friends with Benefits*, 2011, digital video, color, 109 minutes. Jamie Rellis (Mila Kunis) and Dylan Harper (Justin Timberlake).



Above: Ivan Reitman, *No Strings Attached*, 2011, 35 mm, 108 minutes. Adam Franklin (Ashton Kutcher) and Emma Kurtzman (Natalie Portman).

Below: View of “Stewart Uoo: Life Is Juicy,” 2012, 47 Canal, New York. From left: *Don’t Touch Me (Oil Spill)*, 2012; *Don’t Touch Me (Bikrahm Yoga)*, 2012; *Confessions (9Women)*, 2012. Photo: Joerg Lohse.



channel, the screen that reveals the extent to which our practices are the crisis too. We get the feeling that we haven't truly begun to inhabit networks, that more ecstatic and catastrophic modes of interconnection remain to be tested. *Concatenation* is a term that sometimes comes to mind when trying to describe the creativity of machinic processes. As our activities continue to concatenate with programs and networks, the production of works seems less and less the result of individual artists' creative efforts and more like a swarming, hivelike way of doing and making whereby our gestures become inseparable not only from those of others but from the automatisms that allow us to interface—with our own work and with one another. How can we proceed from the feeling that our works already dispossess and excommunicate us as artists and persons? And what comes after the realization that contemporary artists no longer hold a monopoly on creativity? Everything seems to suggest that the only way for artists to survive their own precarity is by taking it to the limit, risking their own definition. Inventing the gestures that outrun and scramble our own ontological coordinates, overflowing preset subjective and productive formats, we work toward unleashing otherness within communication, and communication beyond the profile.\*

As it mobilizes and gains speed, art becomes a lot more like what literature once was (which is a strange thought now, when literature is itself being superseded by digital culture): In its time, literature was a massive info leak that eroded disciplinary hierarchies, overflowing national borders and property lines alike. Why should art remain confined to the channel of the artist, the gallery, and the object? Relational aesthetics was probably already asking the same question, but not in a convincing way. As technological processes concatenate with human desires, producing mutations that always seem to occur at the outer limits of both the inhabitable city and our own capacity for attention, to disconnect while leaking could be a hyperrelational attitude. Spleen, that resistant affect which remains when all others have been channeled as productive labor, surrounds networks but won't be put to work in them. Avoiding both formats and employment, spleen makes time for the artist after the artist. □

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\* For example, in the press release for "Life Is Juicy," Stewart Uoo's exhibition this past summer at 47 Canal in New York, the artist and his cowriter, Juliana Huxtable, narrate an experience of identity and gender mutation via the avatars of ultraviolent video games. Here, man-machine concatenation unleashes a fearsome cyber-vagina that goes to war against phallic order and doubles as a strategy for seducing real-world boys. Peopled with charred, shredded mannequins that translate his digital heroines into sculptural terms, Uoo's exhibition maps an ecstatic, chaotic space in between that of the gallery and the game, via a narrative that reboots bodily human time within screen time.

## MEDIA STUDY

### ISA GENZKEN

#### ABC

**MY FIRST OUTDOOR SCULPTURE (CONCRETE, STEEL, 48' 9" X 36' 9" X 16", EXTENSION TO THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY IN MÜNSTER, GERMANY), SKULPTUR PROJEKTE MÜNSTER, 1987**



#### Titles (selection):

*Jeder braucht mindestens ein Fenster*, 1992

*Fuck the Bauhaus*, 2000

*Sesam Öffne Dich!*, 2009

*In Honour of Jasper Johns and Myself*, 2011