

## Dark Jesters Hiding in Plain Sight:

*hoaxes, hacks, pranks, and polymorphic simulations.*

*I take my desires for reality because I believe in the reality of my desires.*

— Graffiti, Paris: 1968

## Curating on a Tight-rope

At the beginning of 2017, researcher and curator Annet Dekker and I began installing the exhibition “*How Much of This is Fiction*”<sup>1</sup> ([FACT 2014](#)) which had been in the planning for nearly two years. The show featured sixteen politically driven media artists who use deception in the form of all manner of political pranks, hoaxes and hacks.

With just weeks before the launch, it became clear that the political ground had moved under our feet. We found ourselves having to deal with two distinct but interconnected developments. Firstly the dark jesters and meme warriors of the Alt\_right insurgency had used classical DIY “Tactical Media” to help to bring Donald Trump to power. We were forced to accept that we were organizing an exhibition of Tactical Media when a movement associated with the far right of US politics were doing Tactical Media better than we were. Secondly, the art and politics we were celebrating deliberately used fiction and hoaxes, at a point when terms like “Post-truth” and “fake news” had become emblematic of the widespread erosion of trust in rational debate in the public sphere. We were thus in danger of finding ourselves complicit in poisoning the well of public discourse.

As curators, we needed to both differentiate the Tactical Media tricksters we were celebrating from the Alt-right insurgency, whilst justifying continuing to deploy media fictions in these radically changed circumstances. I'll use the opportunity of this chapter to extend this process of self-critique beginning with an interrogation of some of the original concepts and ideals associated with Tactical Media, a movement of the 1990s which inspired the exhibition.

## Background

The exhibition "*How Much of This is Fiction*" re-visited the concept of Tactical Media in the light of the many changes that had taken place in digital cultures and media activism since the 1990s. Tactical Media is a politically driven cultural movement that typically combines art, experimental media and political activism. Although it has been present around the world in various forms since the early days of mass communications, it was first identified and named as a distinctive movement by an unruly alliance of artists, media pirates and theorists working in Amsterdam in the 1990s. ([Garcia, Oldenborgh 2007: 93-207](#))

As a movement it took the concepts and techniques of contemporary art and design out of museums and advertising agencies and applied them directly to campaigns and political protest movements. The key principle to this day remains not so much to *describe* or *explain* but rather to *do*. As a movement it is not so much discursive as performative. It deals in "*media acts*", frequently taking the form of hoaxes, hacks and sometimes shocking and provocative media pranks. As with other Art-into-life movements (such as Situationism, Fluxus and Dada), Tactical Media celebrates the

avant-garde principles of freedom, participation and experimentation. But to these principles it adds a strong belief in the power of digital media and the Internet to spread their participatory practices and principles further and wider than ever before. Rather than attempt to represent the whole movement, we focused on one of the principal threads: the *trickster*, that is, artists and activists who deploy hoaxes and hacks to engage in political campaigns in ways that unsettle expectations and imagine alternative futures.

Our way of using the term “tactical” including its relationship to the role of “the trickster” was taken from the Jesuit thinker Michel de Certeau whose “The Practice of Everyday Life” (1980) introduced a form of cultural politics far more supple and rich than the Cultural Studies movement of the time.<sup>2</sup> In place of these traditional forms of media literacy based on questioning sources and interrogating the ideology of quasi-neutral media representations, de Certeau focused instead on the *uses* to which audiences put media representations, and the multiplicity of ways in which these forms might be tactically appropriated and repurposed by consumers. He was among the first to detect the new role of the “consumer” or “user” of media as an active partner in the creation of meaning. In this way de Certeau created a user language appropriate to profound changes in social, economic, and power relations taking place

“where the figure of the consumer takes center stage alongside (or even instead of) the worker, or better where these two figures are merged. Hardt and Negri thus speak of ‘affective labor.’”(Shaviro 2006)

But unlike the utopian theorists of the internet—who came later, and who saw these developments as evidence of a democratization of culture (touted at the time as “user

generated content” or “citizen journalism”) de Certeau’s vision was far darker. From the outset he saw the relationship between *strategic* power and *tactical* resistance as a profoundly asymmetric struggle, a process whereby the weak are continually probing for opportunities to momentarily turn the tables on the strong.

In de Certeau’s writings the tactical is never far away from the archetype of the

“trickster,” which he writes of as using:

clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, ‘hunter’s cunning,’ manoeuvres, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike. [Tricksters] go back to the immemorial intelligence displayed in the tricks and imitations of plants and fishes. From the depths of the ocean to the streets of the modern megalopolises, there is a continuity and permanence in these tactics. (de Certeau 1984: xii)

The references in this quotation to the *continuity* and *permanence* of tactics are important, as they point to an understanding of the tactical as no mere staging post on the journey to strategic power but a political and even an aesthetic choice which includes a repudiation of the logic of power itself. As this essay develops it will become clear that this is both Tactical Media’s strength and its weakness.

## The Dilemma

Towards the end of 2016, a few short months before the show was due to open, history caught up with us. We found ourselves confronting a political upheaval directly linked to the subject of our show. We were forced to address the fact that the insurgencies on the Alt.right were disrupting the boundaries between fact and fiction

far more effectively than we were. Indeed the disruptive power of media fictions had become THE story of 2016 as the term “post-truth” elbowed its way into the centre of public attention, becoming the Oxford English Dictionary’s word of the year. ([Oxford Dictionaries 2016](#)). As 2017 dawned, the turmoil around the shifting nature of public discourse showed no signs of fading. Terms such as “alternative facts”, “post-truth” and “fake news” had become overnight clichés frequently used to discredit oppositional voices. We found ourselves overtaken by events, bystanders witnessing the extreme right of US politics mainstreaming the disruptive media tactics we had mistakenly believed to be our own.

In the midst of a kind of epistemic bedlam, established media sources were thrown into crisis. We as curators, promoting fiction as a legitimate method of both activism and research, [felt](#) forced to defend [our own](#) practices [from the charge of complicity](#). On the one hand the exhibition appeared extremely prescient, guaranteeing more than the average amount of public engagement. On the other hand we had to ask ourselves to what degree we were ourselves complicit in poisoning the well of public discourse.

### [The New Autonomous Zones](#)

As is well known by now, Alt.right are an unholy alliance connecting “teenage gamers, pseudonymous swastika-posting anime lovers, ironic *South Park* conservatives, anti-feminist pranksters, nerdish harassers and meme making trolls whose dark humour and love of transgression for its own sake” ([Nagle 2017: 2](#)) have been hijacked by actual white-segregationist neo-Nazis who used the mischievous culture of LULZ as cover to propel their ambitious political program all the way to

the White House.

The hugely popular message board 4chan was the platform from which the Alt.right sprang. In an earlier phase it also harboured more progressive variants, including the online activists of Anonymous, whose anarchist-left-leaning factions had actively supported the uprisings and occupations of 2010–2011.

One of the most notable chroniclers of this earlier phase was Gabriella Coleman, an anthropologist of dissident internet cultures who began researching the area seriously in 2008. In a journal article much later, in 2012, she declared that the original drivers for her investigations had been her need to ask the question “how and why the anarchic ‘hate machine’ had been transformed into one of the most adroit and effective political operations of recent times?” (Coleman, Gabriella, 2008: 83)<sup>1</sup> Now, five years later, we need to invert Coleman’s question and ask; how and why 4chan has been transformed from a space dominated by the anarchist left, into a realm associated even more with the Alt.right?

The most articulate set of answers to this question are to be found in Angela Nagel’s provocative and important, *Kill all Normies*, in which she traces the origins of the Alt.right to the surprising source of the fight-back of male game nerds against “a revived feminism threatening to change their beloved game culture.” (Nagle 24) Nagel goes on to elaborate the complex journey from these apparently trivial beginnings into what later became the Alt.right, describing how these obscure marginal cultures were in turn propelled into the cultural and political mainstream through the mediation of charismatic media personalities like Milo Yiannopoulos and Steve Bannon, whom she brands the *Alt.light*.

Academics like Coleman who had been researching the area long before the emergence of the full-blown Alt.right had [tended to strike](#) a celebratory [tone](#) emphasizing the emancipatory potential of the movements and [being inclined to gloss over](#) some dubious politics that in retrospect looks naïve. Arguably, they failed to heed important warning signs [that would have been obvious were it not for the distracting sub-cultural aura of “cool” associated with the hacker sphere.](#)

Writing today, Nagle’s vision is understandably darker and she has little time for any trace of the indulgence and academic tolerance shown towards the malignant views of trolls like weev. But Nagel goes a stage further, arguing that the ethos of transgression [and mischief for its own sake](#) is the latest expression of a nihilistic thread running through the heart of the modernist avant-garde, stretching back to the Romantic rebellion of the likes of Blake and De Sade, through to the Surrealists and the Situationists (whom she at least concedes “have a better world in their hearts”) en route to the ’60s counterculture and (in the worst case scenario) culminating in the Manson murders, as the “logical culmination of throwing off the shackles of conscience and consciousness, the grim flowering of the id’s voodoo energies.” (Nagle 35)

Nagle’s powerful polemic is persuasive and eloquent but I am reluctant to follow her all the way down a road that leads to Freud’s social [and cultural](#) conservatism. The Alt.right’s taboo busting [success in dominating the message boards and de-stabilising](#) established norms of zero tolerance towards racism and sexism could be equally attributable to the US state’s success in suppressing the one online force that might

have hit back; the left-leaning activists of Anonymous. We should never forget that the campaign that led to vicious and disproportionate prison sentences for Anonymous hackers succeeded in creating paranoia and driving what might have been the most effective opposition to Alt.right underground. This, as Nagle herself points out, “created a vacuum in the image boards which the rightist side of the culture was able to fill with their expert style of anti-PC shock humour memes.”

[\(Nagle 14\)](#)

In the end there is no social vibrancy without subcultures and there are no subcultures without risk. In a world dominated by the likes of Facebook’s “real-name” policy and mass state surveillance, 4Chan and its principles [anonymous discourse](#) remains a vital source of subcultural energy. It is that rare thing on today’s Internet: a totally unregulated space. In this context the principal of unregistered anonymity, which began as an expedient, then became an ethos that turned into a movement, [can still be turned to](#) progressive [ends](#). The cultural and political importance of these spaces (as well as their huge popularity) is a standing rebuke to the widely held assumption that the era of Tactical Media, and *autonomous zones*, have been superseded and can be written off as “folk politics.” The right to anonymity and the corollary of the value pluralism that flourishes in these autonomous zones remain important founding principles of the early internet and is a positive freedom that is still worth fighting for. It is by no means certain that stretching these principles to the limit and taking the “road of excess” must inevitably lead to the palace of the Alt.right. Although Nagle’s hazard warnings are timely and important and should always be heeded, [they should](#) not always [be](#) obeyed.



## From What if to As if

An exhibition in a gallery of course operates according to a fundamentally different spatial and temporal logic to that of meme culture. It is precisely this less volatile temporality that we might look to for a culture and politics one remove from the tyranny of the 24/7 news cycle, that might re-introduce the possibility of history.

In this spirit the title of the exhibition “How Much of this is Fiction” is taken from one of the works in the exhibition by Swiss artist Maia Gusberti, in which these words are turned into a neon sign and placed in a number of different contexts allowing for a variety of interpretations of the particular locations they inhabit. [As Gusberti explains](#), “The sign can act as a *subtitle* for an environment, as a spatial commentary, as a hanging question, or as an assertion.” [\(Gusberti 2014\)](#) The possibility of multiple readings combined with the inference that we must at all times retain a critical scepticism were all factors in the work ultimately becoming both a piece in the exhibition and the exhibition title.

As a whole the show began as a kind of thought experiment based around a distinction we returned to again and again, between works that operated on the basis of “what ifs” and works that acted “as if.” The former led to satirical acts designed to unmask the workings of power, the latter were more utopian, leading to forms of activism which, rather than *demanding* change, act “as if” change had already occurred.

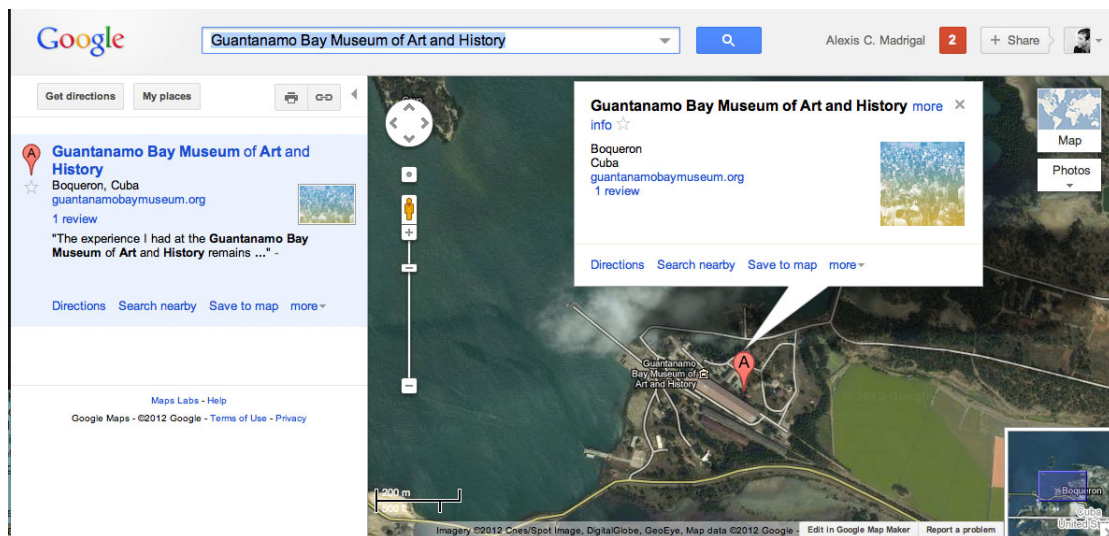
Science Fiction writer J. G. Ballard, writing in 1974 in the introduction to the French edition of his masterpiece, *Crash*, describes a media landscape “ruled by fictions of every kind [...] soft drink commercials coexist in an over-lit realm ruled by advertizing and pseudo-events, science and Pornography,” which in turn suggests a new role for the novelist:

in a world ruled by fictions of every kind—mass merchandising, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the pre-empting of any original response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel. It is now less and less necessary for the writer to invent the fictional content of his [sic] novel. The fiction is already there. The writer’s task is to invent the reality. (Ballard 1974)

The novelist and artist Tom McCarthy has argued that the key point we should extract from this paragraph can be found in Ballard’s use of the word “invent.” We should note, argues McCarthy, that Ballard “is not using the words discover, intuit or reveal but *invent* [...] reality isn’t there yet it has to be brought forth or produced...”<sup>2</sup> In this lies the inherent potential of the “As if” modality: it is a politics that seeks to invent a reality that does not yet exist, not through demanding change but through acting as though change had already taken place.

### **The Guantanamo Bay Museum of Art and History (GBMAH)**

One of the clearest examples of the “As if” principal in the exhibition is the artist Ian Alan Paul’s concept of the Guantanamo Bay Museum of Art and History (GBMAH).



### Ian Alan Paul 2012

If you type the words “The Guantanamo Bay Museum of Art and History” into Google Maps you will arrive at **both** an existing site and a location which began in the imagination of the American artist Ian Alan Paul, who imagined a situation (in some ways comparable to the situation in Roben Island where Mandela was imprisoned) in which a place associated with incarceration and worse has been transformed into a space for the critical imagination to roam free.<sup>3</sup>

The critic Alexis Madrigal, writing in *The Atlantic*, described how the work “draws its power from this resonance: if [Gitmo](#) exists because of one fiction, perhaps **it can be closed by another?**”<sup>4</sup> [“The point isn’t to trick people” the artist declared in a recent interview. “Its to increase that one moment of wonder that hopefully leads to the question of what’s possible.” \(Madrigal 2012\)](#)

The actual detention center at **Guantanamo** is an information vacuum that only the imagination can fill. No one really gets to see the camp, as reporters’ and other

visitors' experiences are carefully shaped and guided by U.S. authorities. The detention facility, as a place where people are held, interrogated, and sometimes tortured, remains an imaginary place for all but the prisoners and the national security officials who operate it. Week by week up until Trump's election, we read continuously of both its imminent closure and its stubborn persistence, making the end of the prison paradoxically appear as both inevitable and impossible.

The Guantanamo Bay Museum is a conceptual space in which we as curators collaborated with Ian Alan Paul to commission new works and frame a variety of existing works in a way that illuminates how the world has changed since 9/11 and the subsequent "war on terror", [legitimising](#) the normalization of torture, extrajudicial kidnappings, and decades of incarceration without trial.

The works in the exhibition do not eschew the partisan; Tactical Media has never taken the position of the observer standing outside of events. But the exhibition is a deliberative not a reactive space in which the selected artists typically exhibit a combination of *three attributes* whose simultaneous presence not only differentiates these works from Tweet culture and the meme wars but also from mainstream practice in the contemporary art world. They are the *trans-disciplinary*, that is works combining different media formats and platforms; the *interventionist*, works typically addressing actual campaigns; and finally *research-based*, works in which art methodologies are used to create experimental approaches to what knowledge can be.

<sup>3</sup> This shift towards a hybrid of the artist/researcher intertwined with artist/activist, is part of a much wider generational movement away from what Bruno Latour has called the "the purifying practices that define modernity." ([Latour 1999](#))

## Zone\* Interdite; Fiction as Simulation

Nowhere is this constellation of attributes more visible than in the work *Zone\* Interdite*, by the Swiss artists Christoph Wachter and Mathias Jud (Wachter & Jud). Ideally *Zone\* Interdite* is the first work you encounter in the Guantanamo Bay Museum of Art & History. It is a highly elaborate simulation, a 3D walk-through of the actual detention center and part of a remarkable ongoing research project, which began in 1999 as a piece of online, public research that set out to map the world's secret military landscapes ([Wachter & Jud: 2000-ongoing](#)).<sup>5</sup>

Paradoxically, even though it is forbidden to either depict or enter these places much of the information and many of the images are easily available in the public domain. Large sections of the archive are drawn from a continuous churn of images in the public media.

In assembling the archive the Swiss duo have deployed aerial footage and Google [Maps](#) alongside crowd-sourcing, prisoner testimonies, [and](#) social forums developed by military personnel [in](#) their own leisure [time](#) [which](#), inadvertently, share images and information that reveal more than intended. Furthermore, the archive is actively participatory, providing visitors with the means to contribute additional sites, [and](#) to improve the project with [the results of](#) their own searches.

The virtual reality walk-through featured in the exhibition was one of a small number of special projects within the wider *Zone\* Interdite* archive which is for the most part made up of text and images. However when resources allow Wachter & Jud have

sought to develop a number of the more notorious sites into extensive and freely accessible 3D simulated walkthroughs [\(Wachter & Jud: 2017\)](#) Apart from the Guantanamo Bay example we feature in the exhibition, they have also created similar walkthroughs for Camp Bucca in Southern Iraq and Bagram Airbase. In some ways the use of open data in this work harks back to the dream of the open net as a utopian space of universal access.

### **[Homeland is not a Series: DIY Media, Low Tech Subterfuge, and Infiltration](#)**

At the other end of the spectrum in terms of technological sophistication is the more spontaneous but highly effective work *Homeland is not a Series* [\(Amin 2014\)](#) This is a classic media hack, and a perfect example of how subterfuge and infiltration combined with simple DIY media tactics retain the power to shake up the consciousness industry.

Three artists—[Heba Y. Amin](#), [Caram Kapp](#), and [Don Karl](#)—who later adopted the ironic tag the “Arabian Street Artists.” managed to hack the [hit](#) TV series *Homeland*. Originally they were commissioned by the producers of *Homeland* to “decorate” the walls of a rundown industrial complex in Berlin, where the series was being shot. The “brief” was to make the site look authentically Syrian, by spraying the walls of the film set with slogans in support of Assad. Instead the threesome conspired to subvert what they saw as the prejudice and racism of the program by “re-drafting” their brief by spraying subversive messages on the set: “Homeland is a Joke: We’re not laughing.” “Black Lives Matter.” “Homeland is Racist.” and “Homeland is Watermelon” (Watermelon is Arabic slang for something not to be taken seriously).

No one in the production team noticed until it was too late and the Arabic speaking viewers picked up on the messages propelling the prank into the wider public domain, where it went viral as an international media sensation featured in major news outlets including Time Magazine and CNN. The artists described how the producers and set designers paid little attention to Arabic script. They assert that for the Homeland team “Arabic script was merely a supplementary visual that completes the horror-fantasy of the Middle-East, a poster image dehumanizing an entire region to human-less figures in black burkas and moreover, this season, to refugees.” ([Amin., Kapp. Karl, Portas, 2015](#)) In some ways *Homeland is Not a Series* is a classic piece of culture jamming that goes back to the campaigns deploying the techniques of the critical postmodernist art of the 1980s.

All of the examples cited above, whether they use advanced technologies of VR simulation or the classic low-tech tactical media of culture jamming and media hacks, could have been made before the web 2.0 era transformed the internet from a relatively open space into a platform-centric realm of interconnected “walled gardens” in which a critical understanding of the underlying technical infrastructure became as important as a grasp of the traditional forms of media literacy based on images and narratives.

### Media Literacy in a New Key

The term “platform capitalism,” popularized by Nick Srnicek, describes a major shift in the way that capitalism operates since the arrival of web 2.0 effectively mainstreamed digital cultures. The key characteristic of this transition has been the

reconfiguration of the net into an environment hosting discrete online platforms requiring participants to accept and internalize a shared set of standards and protocols. It is these shared standards that make exchange and coordination of large populations of users possible. In this sense platforms can be defined as intermediaries connecting various group actors. Anything from a political party to a stock market or a newspaper can be seen as a platform. But the web 2.0 platforms have been able to leverage the network effect to scale globally. The importance of the network effect drives an expansionary business model as its survival depends on extracting and exploiting ever-greater volumes of data from users.

Before the era of platform capitalism, critical media art and cultural politics dealt primarily in the language of a postmodern capitalism inspired by the likes of Lyotard and Deleuze/Guattari and embodied in a politics of identity, representation, and counter-representation whose principal currency was image and narrative. From the 1990s onwards, however, Tactical Media and new forms of hacktivism emerged that placed ever-greater emphasis on engaging with “platform specific” tactics that confront and challenge the business models, legal protections, and technical infrastructures of specific platforms.

Two examples of artist tricksters can be cited as applying experimental methods to particular platforms: Evan Roth’s work “Bad Ass Mother Fucker” and Constant Dullart’s “The Possibility of an Army.”

Evan Roth’s work is one you would be most likely to encounter by way of a postcard. On the card is an image of Google’s well-known landing page, with the crude twist that in the search bar is printed “bad ass mother fucker.” If you take the hint and



[press search](#), near the top of the recommendations list [you'll find a link](#) the artist Evan Roth. Needless [to say](#) the artist's [elegantly aesthetic work](#) could [never be mistaken for being a "bad ass mother fucker"](#)(Roth 2005)



Evan Roth's "selfie." (2005) Photograph: Courtesy of Evan Roth

What seems at first like a childish prank is a skillfully executed "Trojan horse" that shines a spotlight on the hidden workings of Google. As internet theorist Michael Seemann points out, "assigning the term 'bad ass mother fucker' to the artist's name only happens when enough external users actually search for the term." [...] "The more people that search the term, the more intimately Roth's name becomes linked to the phrase in Google's algorithms [...] demonstrating the self-reinforcing power of the network effect." (Seemann 2015: )

Constant Dullart's work *The Possibilities of an Army* is even more concrete in its polemic clarity, as it confronts Facebook's controversial "real-name policy" in which the social media giant insists that all users are registered under their "real names." This policy is an important fault line as it contravenes one of the foundational principles of the internet: the right to anonymity.

Dullart's poetic prank cunningly confronts this policy by creating literally thousands of fake profiles, achieved in part through the bulk [“buying of phone numbers and internet proxies in bulk”](#). (Jozuka 2015) and then attaching them to the names of the long dead soldiers from an 18<sup>th</sup> century army the *Hessian Mercenaries*, who were paid by the British to fight in the American War of Independence.

In this new war of independence, this time from a US social-media empire, initial casualty rates have been high with roughly 70% of the first regiment ruthlessly hunted down by Facebook bots and humans, and their accounts blocked. According to the on-line art journal *e-flux*, however, about 10% of the casualties have been brought back to life, as Dullart has continued to manage the project acting to ensure that new identities were swiftly crafted in digital sweatshops in Pakistan and the Philippines”.(Hollein 2016)

Both Dullart and Roth's works illuminate some fragments of the opaque business models and info currencies of “platform capitalism.” based on what Dullart has called “quantified social capital.” as individual profiles are ransacked and sold on whilst on the other side of the fence new agents of manipulation are becoming ever more adept at gaming the systems operated through a new global labor force of low-paid workers who spend their days concocting fabricated identities in click farms around the world, spreading rumor and opinion, disrupting or creating trends, and shifting the moods of the social mind.

### **Risking Complicity**

To return to the two questions posed at the start of this chapter, we asked: “is it possible to differentiate the Tactical Media tricksters in the exhibition from the meme warriors of the Alt.right?” And secondly, “can the exhibition and works described above be seen as complicit with the ‘post truth’ or ‘fake news’ era and part of the general poisoning of the well of public discourse?”

To be fixated on “fake news” is a distraction. The politics of spin, mendacity, and systematic deceit did not suddenly appear in 2016 with Trump’s election and Brexit. But it may well be remembered as the year in which mainstream media lost its dominance.

The popular success of today’s mobile digital cultures is based on their insertion into every aspect of life, becoming what digital sociologist Noortje Maares has called a *total social fact*. But their distinctive impact on politics and the public sphere is founded on the ethically flawed and unsustainable business model of advertising-driven click-bait. It is a world in which, in the words of Evgeny Morozov, “truth is whatever produces the most eyeballs (Morozov 2017)” This fact, when combined with a loss of trust in expert-based knowledge, has contributed to a tragic lack of seriousness in public discourse at a time when seriousness was never more urgently required.

The strengths of the exhibition are marked by the absence of any engagement with Tweet and meme-culture, coupled with the obvious knowledge and expertise of the artists who are all in different ways able to visualize the forces at work in the battle for the social mind.

Most importantly the exhibition as a whole challenges the accelerated temporality of the meme-wars, opening up opportunities for visitors to take the time for the multiple steps required for a line of argumentation to unfold and for critical thinking and genuine dialogue to take place. Alongside these strengths however the exhibition also exhibits weaknesses and they are if anything more pressing.

In comparison with the energy and impact of the Alt.right, the aestheticized politics on display can appear lacking in both dynamism and political ambition. The tendency of leftist Tactical Media (including the powerful Anonymous movement) to avoid direct engagement with the logic and structures of political power, has often led to movements that are more successful at occupying the square, the street, the university department rather than seats of government. This has left the spaces for unabashed white supremacists to step in to take their chance becoming successfully entwined with the Trump campaign and the presidency.

These unhappy conclusions must lead us to ask whether we can detect any counter-moves that could go beyond the achievements of the Alt.right? It is far to early to say but the surprising result of the 2017 UK General Election allows us to hope that the youthful and energized tech-savvy activists of Momentum, the UK-based pro-Corbyn support movement, indicate the emergence of a new kind of expressive, grass roots networked Labour movement in the UK, unafraid of engaging effectively with the institutions of electoral politics whilst also operating at one remove. This cannot be compared to the complex online ecology of the 4chan message boards that gave rise to either Anon or Alt.right but there are nevertheless some interesting parallels. Like the meme warriors of the Alt.right, Momentum's youthful base ensured an

instinctive grasp of [how](#) the [depth and mimetic power](#) of social media [could](#) bypass the mainstream media in ways that [were beyond the grasp of today's](#) Conservative Party. [It was not only that the highly effective memes and videos produced by Momentum and their allies were far more widely shared, completely outperforming the crude attack ads that emerged from Conservative Central Office, it was also the way in which](#) Corbyn's rallies [were turned into "media events"](#) in [and of](#) themselves. [This tactic came](#) straight out of the Trump playbook as [did](#) the decision [to](#) simply [take the risk to](#) "let Corbyn be Corbyn", [and so avoid Miliband's painful triangulations.](#)

Once again the established media, [which, crucially, included pollsters,](#) appeared to have lost the plot. Of course none of this should be overstated but it helps us remember [that](#) the recent success of the [US](#) extreme right's [success](#) in capturing and deploying [grass roots, DIY](#) Tactical Media methods is neither indicative nor irrevocable.

[It is also](#) time [to begin to re-think and in many cases resist](#) the accelerationist passion for the hyper-compressed discourse of Meme and Tweet culture. It is [another](#) symptom of what Frederic Jameson's described in his essay ["The Aesthetics of Singularity"](#) as the ["volatization of temporality, a dissolution of past and future alike, a kind of contemporary imprisonment in the present."](#) [\(Jameson 2015:120\)](#) Jameson goes on to ask what historicity is, arguing that "in our current situation history can only be re-awakened by a utopian vision lying beyond our current globalized system. [...] Genuine historicity," he asserts, ["can only be detected by its capacity to energize collective action."](#) [\(Jameson 2015: 120-121\)](#) It's early days, but hope springs eternal.

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## Notes

1. The first version of the Exhibition though with fewer artists in a smaller gallery space was held in Amsterdam's gallery The "Framer Framed" with the title "As if" and was accompanied by a two day conference. <http://framerframed.nl/en/expositives/expositie-as-if-the-media-artist-as-trickster/>
2. Like earlier formulations of Tactical Media, notably in a short manifesto co-written by myself and Geert Lovink "The ABC of Tactical Media" (1997) <http://www.tacticalmediafiles.net/articles/3160/The-ABC-of-Tactical-Media> Gabriella Coleman also identified the link to de Certeau's concept of the *tactical*, asserting that the hacktivist movement "Anonymous operates tactically, along the lines proposed by the French Jesuit thinker Michel de Certeau" [...] "because it does not have a place a tactic depends on time – it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized on the wing. The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces that are alien to them". Gabriella Coleman, *Our Weirdness is Free*, (MAY, June 2012) 85
3. The three core attributes of Tactical Media -*trans-disciplinary, research-based, activist or interventionist art*- are the precise constellation of attributes which critic Claire Bishop's deliberately excludes in her influential book *Artificial Hells* on the participatory/social turn in contemporary art. At the outset in her introduction Bishop declares that her book will not be addressing "trans-disciplinary, research-based,

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activist or interventionist art,” as she insists that “these projects do not primarily involve people as the medium or material of the work.” I am arguing here that it is precisely the areas she has excluded—the trans-disciplinary, the research-based, the activist, and the interventionist—that offer the most radical and far-reaching potential of the social turn in art, and that it is precisely this constellation of attributes that suggest a partial definition of tactical media and its achievements. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells, Participatory Arts and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 5.

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