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The self-design of contemporary confessional art

Abstract

If the 1990s saw what Outi Remes has identified as 'the confessional turn' in contemporary art more recent practices have sought to further deconstruct coercive mechanisms of ritual and shame. Michel Foucault's late examination of the confessional and its radical potentiality to form 'the technologies of the self' that break the bonds of confessor and confessant marks out confessional practices as the establishment of power structures that lends itself to its own subversion. More recently however, the ubiquity of confessional forms in culture and its structural relation to institutions of power have taken on different sets of values than earlier art examined. As Boris Groys has attested in a set of essays (2009-19), there exists a contractual anxiety of self-image and the consumption of that image that marks out a different set of conditions from that explored by Foucault. Whereas previous formations of the religious confessional demanded a coercive stripping of the autonomy of the confessee, the contemporary confessional is a political empowerment of self that is both equally destructive *and necessary*. This shift – from the 'zero-design' confessional of Rousseau to the 'self-design' confessional of Shia LaBeouf – has, this paper argues, been widely embraced by a new generation of video artists working in a new anxiety. This paper suggests that the previous oppositions – zero-design = truth, sincerity, shame vs. self-design = mistrust, insincerity, power – demand a deconstruction. This paper argues for the capacity of contemporary confessional video art practices to occupy the slippages between the previous order of confessional practices and contemporary conditions of self-design.

Keywords: confession, self-design, video art, Groys, Foucault

Introduction: The sincerity of self-design

In 2008 and 2009 German-based media theorist Boris Groys published two interrelated essays in the open-source online journal *eFlux* that dwelt on the question of self-design and sincerity.[1] Groys argued that following the death of God in the late 19th century the concept of the soul underwent a seismic shift from an internally imprisoned and designed condition to one designed from the outside by external factors (politics and aesthetics); the soul no longer became a vehicle for the body but for that of its clothing. This radical privileging of the aesthetics of the soul – that which Groys names 'self-design' – takes on a new orientation: 'Where religion once was, design has emerged. The modern subject now has a new obligation: the obligation to self-design, an aesthetic presentation as ethical subject.'[2] Over the course of two essays – and throughout discourses sustained elsewhere – Groys posits that the Enlightenment corollary of confession=truth=sincerity demands deconstruction following the death of God and the emergence of the biopolitical aesthetics of self-design. Groys is careful here in articulating the 'design' of this argument. Through a reading of Adolf Loos's 'Ornament and Crime' – though in truth beginning with Nietzsche – Groys argues that the early twentieth century sought out 'a unity between the aesthetic and the ethical' that in turn condemned ornamentation.[3] This unity is, in Groys' usage, its design. No longer concerned with how our soul looks to God, we concern ourselves with confessing to our political surroundings. But there is much more at stake for Groys than the amelioration of politics and theology. The previous separation of the work of politics and the work of art are similarly made much more fluid than under the previous order.

The politician – so Groys argued – was previously concerned with the production of politics, a legislative practice. The artist represented politics through narration and depiction but *did not produce* politics. This demanded a particular relation between politics and art that is no longer co-dependent: 'The contemporary politician no longer needs an artist to gain fame or inscribe himself within popular consciousness.'[4] The

[1] 'The Obligation to Self-Design and Aesthetic Responsibility', *eflux #0 June 2008* and 'The Production of Sincerity', *eflux* #7, June 2009. These essays were collected and published along with 7 further essays in *Going Public,* Sternberg Press, 2011. This paper uses this edition.
[2] Groys, 2011, pp24-25
[3] Groys, 2011, p22
[4] ibid. pp39-40

politician no longer 'produces' politics so much as they manage the *image of its production*.

Written some 30 or so years prior to Groys' essays on self-design a similar structural realignment is examined by Michel Foucault. In *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Foucault makes a number of observations outlining the relationship between truth, sexuality, and confession within his genealogy of confession that mark out its interests to 'self-design' (and is acknowledged by Groys, albeit obliquely, throughout his essays of the self-design period). Here, the field of analysis of Foucault's later work (1980-1984) is concerned with alternatives; alternatives to biopolitical subjectivation. Foucault's genealogical framework of confession in antiquity reveals how a transformation of antiquity's pre-Christian 'care of the self' practices developed into the first forms of Christian asceticism. Foucault argues that 'care of the self' practices, contributed alongside the emergence of Christianity. What emerged during this time was a re-conceptualisation of ancient 'care of the self' practices; a re-conceptualisation that Foucault maintains forms the contemporary Western episteme of subjectivity. For instance, we could say that the perpetual verbalization once practised in 'exagoreusis'[5] is appropriated and recalibrated in many contemporary confessional forms. For instance, 'exagoreusis' has been reinscribed in psychoanalysis without the need for a renunciation of the self.[6] The new aesthetic presentation of the self, hinted at in the mechanisms of Groys' 'self-design', helps to re-conceive and also to recontextualise the dynamic between art and life. This has a particular resonance with contemporary confessional video art practices in which the shift away from traditional tactics of confession and politicalised self-disclosure present in earlier confessional video works, is replaced with an ambition to represent—through a deeper consideration of subjectivity in a tele-visual apparatus—more autonomously controlled subjectivities and staged personalised realities, experiences and situations to present a more complex politics of self.~~Foucault analyses how the process of 'subjectification' through the number of religious confessional practices across the European populace during the early Middle Ages, came to form an inescapable politic of subject within its theological~~

[5] Exagoreusis is the second discourse of the self-disclosure associated with early Christian practices identified by Foucault. Prominent in the fourth and fifth centuries, 'exagoreusis' was a less public and theatrical technology than 'exomologēsis' used in the disclosure of the self. Acts of 'exagoreusis' were expressed verbally and often consisted of prayers which formed around an intricate framework of theological rules, and involved taking account of one's everyday actions

[6] Hymer, Sharon, *Confessions in Psychotherapy* (New York: Garnder Press Inc.,1998).p23.

~~structuring system. Thus, religion is caught in an inescapable politic of the subject. For example, such confessional practices centred around eliciting from confessants their private *internal* thoughts and experiences in exchange for exoneration and redemption. This pre-modern framework of power, Foucault maintains, became a significant method in establishing social obedience for a number of centuries to come. Here, Foucault reveals how the coercive force beneath such rituals of absolution do not reveal truth, rather it *produces* it.[7] By the late eighteenth century, as secularisation gained momentum and the European populace became increasingly more dense and widespread, new mechanisms of power began to emerge that shifted the conditions of how the production of power and its effects could be manipulated. As the scientification of a number of biopolitical discourses developed (hospitals, schools, prisons, asylums), a more efficient, and less visible dispersal of power become apparent.~~

Foucault's genealogy of confessional practices - from its theologisation through to its secular medicalization (psychoanalysis) - is picked up by Groys to examine a new set of conditions for the post-millennium.[8] Confessional forms are no longer ubiquitous with the maintenance and salvation *of an internal life* (as Foucault will suggest was the case with historical forms) but rather the construction and preservation *of an external life*. Foucault and Groys argue that confessional forms of the past were coercive in their lack of 'design' – zero-design in Groys terminology – and that more recent forms of confessional practice evidence total aestheticization, 'self-design'. Furthermore – and here Foucault and Groys share a genesis with Rousseau – more recent confessional forms are not concerned with producing 'truth' and are instead concerned with the *neutralisation of suspicion*. Such a shift is undoubtedly political as much as it is cultural and social.

The aestheticization of politics – which has a much longer lineage through Benjamin, Debord, Ranciere, et al. in theory and Situationism and Suprematicism et al. in art – is not the subject of this study however. What concerns us today is the deconstructive maneuvering of self-design following Groys and the late work of Michel Foucault (a spectre throughout these more recent essays). The principle of 'self-design' – a set of

[7] Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality Part One: The Will to Knowledge*, Paris: Gallimard, 1976.

[8] Though, as this paper will argue, the phenomenon of self-design arguably reached its apotheosis in mid-late 1990s art. More on this later.

conditions emerging in the 20th century that are not sincere but *rather produce sincerity* – is one that is not solely the concern of media studies of the representation of politics. As practiced by artists, the practices of self-design and its impact on contemporary confessional discourse has proven a fertile ground in which to occupy and perform. This paper seeks to examine the relation between Groys' 'self-design' and Foucault's 'technologies of the self' through its relation to a set of video practices since the mid-1990s. Here, an extension of Foucault's reworking of the biopolitics of power is examined, in order to frame such video practices and contemporary confessional discourse, as a less coercive and regulatory practice.The confrontation of 'the image of the self' forms, this paper argues, a valuable conceit in the works of Tracey Emin, Dani Marti and Allan Currall. These artists each in their own way mobilise video to explore the amelioration of truth=sincerity and the anxiety inherent within such a maneuvering. And whilst this conceit can be seen in the earlier video experiments of Richard Serra, Hannah Wilke, Robert Morris et al. a new set of biopolitical frameworks and ethical contracts emerge in more recent works that marks out a new confessional discourse.

Part One: Towards a genealogy of confession

Foucault outlines four types of technologies, and reveals how each technology is subtly and powerfully interwoven in their impact on individuals:

> Technologies of production, which allows humans to manufacture, transform and manipulate; Technologies of sign systems, which allows humans to establish meaning through signs, symbols and signification; Technologies of power (or domination) which contribute to the discipline, control and subjectification of individuals and populations; and Technologies of the self, which refers to the practices and strategies by which individuals represent to themselves their own ethical self understanding. [9]

The last two technologies; the interaction between oneself and others; the techniques of domination, and the history of how the subject acts upon itself are what Foucault

[9] Martin, Luther H., Gutman,H., Hutton, Patrick H., (eds), *Technologies of the Self: A seminar with Michel Foucault*, The University of Massachusetts Press, Tavistock Publications, USA, 1988. p-18.

turns his attention towards during the early-mid 1980s.[10] These late texts mark significant shift in Foucault's thinking on confessional discourses and serve as a powerful - if underread - precursor to Groys' later writings.

Foucault's initial analysis of how the subject is created within regulatory forces present within various Western institutions to establish process of 'discursive subjectification' is replaced with a more complex consideration of the relations between subjectivity and truth through an analysis of ancient, philosophically driven, technologies of the self practices.[11] Here, Foucault's more varied conception of disciplinary power opens up new perspectives regarding the socio-historical conditions that mediate power and its effects. Within his genealogy of confession Foucault emphasised the possibility of politicising the relationship to the self. In doing so, new lines of inquiry become available for individuals to engage with self-subjectivity. The task for the individual, through 'technologies of the self', Foucault informs, is to formulate a more considered strategy for rethinking the politics of ourselves. By outlining the details and techniques of ancient philosophically-driven technologies of the self practices, Foucault, ultimately, attempts to form an historical ontology of ourselves by establishing an expanding framework of self-subjectivity.

What can be seen through the increased visibility or widespread use of self-disclosure in public spaces and spheres is that confession is now a ubiquitous phenomenon within contemporary society. The varied forms of confessional discourses are all-pervasive; it impacts and influences educational, health and legal discourses, and perhaps more overtly, within confessional modes of entertainment ('Reality' TV), and much of our online presence (Facebook, 'reality' TV programs, Instagram, the blogosphere).[12] Throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries various modes of technology have been adopted by contemporary confessing subjects that have seen traditional boundaries between private and the public become radically redrawn, often

[10] Foucault, Michel.,*The History of Sexuality Vol 3: The Care of the Self*. Paris: Gallimard, 1990.

[11] Menhan, Christopher J., *Care of the Self, Foucauldian Ethics, and Contemporary Subjectivity,* The University of Rhode Island, USA, 2012. Senior Honours Paper,p.263. <Http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/srhonorsprog/263> Accessed March 14, 2016.

[12] Renshaw, Sal., Review, Taylor, Chole., *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault: A Genealogy of the 'Confessing Animal'*, New York: Routledge, 2009, in *Foucault Studies,* No 8, pp.174-179, 2010.

on a much larger scale. More recently, Groys has furthered his initial inquiry into self design by observing that, 'self-design has entered a new era - an era of mass production.'[13] Within such online environments, together with the highly mediated environment 'Reality TV' there can be seen a destabilising of historically ritualised and institutional practices of confession taking place which reflect not only a redefinition of confession, but also an extension of the parameters of *how and where* the disclosure of private experiences now takes place.[14] Subsequently, what can observed within this format is a shift in how confession – as a phenomenon of self-design – is now widely used to disrupt previously held concepts about privacy through the temporary abandonment of what was historically not permissible (or encouraged) in public life.

How we currently think about confession - its current application; its relationship to public and private spaces and spheres; and its influence within a society more at ease with expressing highly personal experiences in public spaces - has as, Janna Malamud-Smith asserts, been largely influenced by the dominance of mass media throughout the twentieth century and the increasing popularising and acceptance of psychological thinking in a post-Freud society.[15] Subsequently, it is through the increased visibility of one's self that which traditional pre-existing boundaries between public and private are now routinely contested, expanded, and oftentimes disregarded. The seemingly automated abandonment of privacy in order to increase personal visibility is telling. What can be revealed through the use of such technologies is that confession or self-disclosure can be seen to play an important function in the construction of identity and contemporary Western subjectivity. Given this, can the prevalent use of technology, adopted within contemporary confessional discourse, reflect a need to locate a form of validation (and/or self-transformation) within the collective by attempting to eliminate pre-existing boundaries relating to privacy and selfhood?

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[13] Groys, Boris. 'Self-design and public space', *The Avery Review*, #3 (2014) <http://www.averyreview.com/issues/2/self-design-and-public-space> Accessed March 14, 2016.

[14] The conditions of 'online confessions' - Vlogging, Youtubing etc - is not of disinterest to this paper. We focus however on the pervasiveness of this deconstruction strictly in video practices. We hope to pick up the question of the online confessional at another time but for now note that we believe that the instrumentalising of zero-design, 'low-fi' and mythically unmediated confessional forms are in fact completely consistent with Groys' argument here.

[15] Malamund-Smith, Janna., "Private Matters: In Defense of the Personal Life", Massachusetts: Addison Wesley, 1997.

As Outi Remes observes, confessional art practices, specifically late twentieth century British art, produced a serious art movement that responded to this social demand for the hyper-confessional by producing art that, 'mimics, reconsiders, and departs' from such historical confessional definitions and associations such as the religious ritual and the more therapeutic exchanges within psychoanalytical environments.[16] A number of postmillennial artists working with video have mobilised a new paradigm of confessional art that that locates a more urgent and self-designed political framework as productive grounds for self-subjectivity. In other words, artists who approach their confessional art practice as a strategy for rethinking the politics of the self.

Whilst the 'narcissistic aestheticization' of the artist on screen became ubiquitous with the emergence of video art in the 60s and 70s the capacity of video to provide a platform for such a maneuver re-emerges in the mid 1990s to examine another set of possibilities for the confession. As Joan Jonas and Hannah Wilke will – in the 1970s – critically examine, construct and deconstruct the self through often excruciating confessional performances so Gillian Wearing and Tracey Emin will examine a generational shift in examining the aesthetics of self-design.[17] If the video practices of baby boomers examined the tortured inheritance of older confessional forms – private, coercive, oppressive – newer practices of video art examined the public ubiquity of the confession. Such forms, as we shall see, were far from the private critically coercive disclosures of the past. In Wearing and Emin's case the confessional is neither shameful nor coercive; instead the video confession is liberated, collaborative, public, triumphant. Though it may maintain many of narcissistic tropes of mock heroics and reflexivity, the video art of the 90s – we argue – examines a new set of inherited social and political conditions. For Wilke and Jonas (and many more) their generation was the generation of the belatedly repentant and stubborn Richard Nixon; for Wearing and Emin, the 'it depends on what the meaning of "is" is' stubborn Bill Clinton. Such a shift

[16] Remes, Outi., *The Role of Confession in Late Twentieth-Century British Art* (PhD), The University of Reading, 2005.

[17] For related, if sometimes conflicting readings of the narcissistic impulse of early video practices, Rosalind E. Krauss' benchmark 'The Aesthetics of Narcissism' (1976) and David Joselit's 'Touching Pictures: Toward a Political Science of Video' (2012) are important to this reading. Whereas Krauss proffers a psychoanalytic reading of the artist on video as a structuralist play on the synchronous and asynchronous performances of self, Joselit favours an Arendtian strategy of deconstructive political binaries of *oikos* [private] and *polis* [public]. Joselit's work is of particular interest here as it marks out the exacerbated conditions of the amelioration of private=zero-design=sincerity that Krauss and Foucault began to unpick in the mid-1970s.

cannot be underestimated. Emin in particular examines both the ubiquitousness and unreliability of the public confessional in order to examine the conceits of self-design that dominated cultural politics in the mid-1990s.

Part Two: Why I Never Became a Dancer

As Remes observes, confessional art, specifically late twentieth century British art, produced a serious art movement that responded to this social demand for the hyper-confessional within late 90s British culture, by producing a confessional art mode that set out to depart from such historical definitions of confession and its associations with religious rituals and the more therapeutic psychoanalytical environments.[18] Tracey Emin is widely known for extending the boundaries of self-representation by transforming her private life - in public spaces - into works of art. Her work is predominantly characterised by its subject matter; the externalisation of her fears, her personal triumphs, and her disappointments, by disclosing details relating to negative experiences with sexual promiscuity, abortion, rape, her abusive relationship with alcohol, and self-neglect. Released in 1995, Emin's video work *Why I Never Became a Dancer* opens with a series of vignettes of her hometown Margate, a seaside town of Kent in the UK. The cinematography is jagged and includes meaningful landmarks of Emin's childhood and adolescence; her old school, local parks and shops, and the beach. The vignettes are overlapped by a narration by the artist as she relays her experiences of leaving school at the age of 13, experimenting with casual sex, and chronic boredom. One day she comes across a disco dance completion, and seeing it as a ticket out Margate, decides to give it a shot and enters the competition. Whilst performing her entry, she is verbally humiliated by a group of ex-sexual partners. They repeatedly shout, 'Slag, Slag, Slag' as she performs her dance for the judging panel. In the narration, Emin 'names and shames' these men by declaring, ' Shane, Eddy, Doug, Richard...this one's for you'. The video moves into a shot of the artist dancing and twirling triumphantly in an empty dance studio to Sylvester's 1978 track, 'You make me feel (Mighty real)', before the video ends with a shot of a bird flying up out into an open blue sky. Both confessional and poetic, the work helps Emin to reclaim or exonerate her humiliation and transform it into something more self-empowering and

[18] Remes, Outi., *The Role of Confession in Late Twentieth-Century British Art* (PhD), The University of Reading, 2005.

fun. The transformation, is visible through a politicalization of her personal narratives, which is the key to her reclamation and self-subjectivity. The reclamation is seen in how the artist, specifically through the use of video, forms a reimagining of the mechanism of confession and confessional art.

Confessional art in the 90s

Confessional discourse has been the subject of interrogation, through a variety of methodologies, for a number of artists whose work gravitates around themes of selfhood, the politics of transgression, and through the presentation of personal narratives in public space. Through a reimagining and a vigorous questioning of confessional discourse, a number of contemporary artists have been able to interrogate the multiplicities, shortcomings and contradictions of identity and selfhood.[19] Modes of performance and video-based confessional art that when used as a form of resistance within public spaces (gallery and/or non- gallery spaces) can be viewed as a potential social/political agency for self-affirmation/actualisation**.**

Groys revisited

To return to Groys briefly, the anxiety of late 90s was exacerbated in the post-millennium by a coercion of a different sort. The necessity of confronting the image is no longer the sole preserve of politicians and philosophers. Artists too are forced to confront the image of the self: 'to correct, to change, to adapt, to contradict this image.'[20] If the newer confessional forms of Emin and Wearing question the coercive conditions of the confessional, the postmillennial artist confessional is more or less mandated.[21] But this mandate comes – as we mentioned before – not to produce truth but rather to conceal it: 'Now, every kind of design—including self-design—is primarily regarded by the spectator not as a way to reveal things, but as a way to hide them.'[22] As such, through the make up and heavily produced media snippet what must be scrutinized is

[19] Artists working with confessional discourse have experimented with how such themes could be implicated and more fully articulated in their creative practices. within a number of mediums within and outside of video. Briefly, some examples here include; Tim Miller, Ana Mandeita, and Peter Land, Dias & Riedwig, Sam Taylor-Wood, and Louise Bourgeois.

[20] Groys 2011. p41

[21] One might think of Ai Weiwei's blog, Richard Prince's Instagram and Grayson Perry's countless media appearances as extensions of their own confessional practices.

[22] Groys, 2011. p41

not the presence or absence of the confession – 'I did this', 'I feel shame' – but rather the sincerity of its telling and/or its evasion.

But as Groys reminds us, what is at stake for the artist is somewhat different to that of the politician of media celebrity. The contemporary politician seeks to gain from the confession possible public sympathy at the disclosure or by burying truth behind the confession of another act. Conversely, in admitting to a fraudulent act the confessor may in part restore faith in a system of truth production undermined by the act itself.[23] The artist however has, it might be argued, little to gain from such a contradiction. *The artist has always confessed and simultaneously always questioned its veracity,* as Groys argues:

> In today's world, the production of sincerity and trust has become everyone's occupation—and yet it was, and still is, the main occupation of art throughout the whole history of modernity: *the modern artist has always positioned himself or herself as the only honest person in a world of hypocrisy and corruption*.[24]

This construction of the modern artist is in many respects a fallacy borne out of Modernity that demands questioning. It demands questioning not solely from the point of practice but in the demands from the spectator. As the spectator of politics and culture is now attuned more towards suspicion and mistrust than towards truth and sincerity so the privileged position of 'honest artist' must also be scrutinized. The notion that that spectator recognizes an unquestionable truth in the image presented by the artist but questions the image made by anyone else cannot be sustained. And so the artist must play the game. But to play game does not mean capitulating to the same dual mechanism of confessional and concealment, rather it is to occupy the crack demanded by the inevitable slippages of self-design. Under the previous order – into which we might albeit begrudgingly place our earlier generation of video artists – art retained, or rather regained, the capacity of the image to imbue truth. Through practices of 'zero-

[23] 'Thus, to make the politicians look trustworthy, one must create a moment of disclosure—a chance to peer through the surface to say, 'Oh, this politician is as bad as I always supposed him or her to be.' With this disclosure, trust in the system is restored through a ritual of symbolic sacrifice and self-sacrifice, stabilizing the celebrity system by confirming the suspicion to which it is necessarily already subjected.' ibid

[24] Groys, 2011. p42-43

design' – Minimal, Conceptual, System – *the artist occupies the crack between truth and sincerity* in order to show us the world as it really is. Such a faith in the old order – in Rousseau, in Malevich – is no longer viable however:

> Zero-design attempts to artificially produce this crack for the spectator, allowing him or her to see things as they truly are. But the Rousseauistic faith in the equation of sincerity and zero-design has receded in our time. We are no longer ready to believe that minimalist design suggests anything about the honesty and sincerity of the designed subject. The avant-garde approach to the design of honesty has thus become one style among many possible styles. Under these conditions, the effect of sincerity is created not by refuting the initial suspicion directed toward every designed surface, but by confirming it.[25]

Here Groys articulates a deconstruction of sorts, and like De Man and Derrida before him Rousseau provides us with the material. In Rousseau's universe, zero-design produces truth, sincerity, and shame. In self-design it is mistrust, insincerity, and power that is generated. Emin's *Why I Never Became a Dancer* adopts this retrieval of the 'honest' artist whilst, we argue, also occupying several slippages - artist-celebrity; confessee-confessor – that remind us that the old binaries of truth and mistrust have become increasingly porous. Emin's position remains unclear in its mobilization of the 'honest artist', and that seems to be the point.

Part Three: I am sorry Daniel Clowes

In late 2013 suspicions were raised regarding the origins of American actor-cum-conceptual performance artist Shia LaBeouf's directorial and self-penned debut 2012 short film *HowardCantour.com*. Initially, social media contributors noted the similarity between the critically accepted film and *Justin M Damiano,* a short story by cult graphic novelist Daniel Clowes published in 2007. The accusations of plagiarism came at first from fans of Clowes rather than from Clowes and his publishers. The accusers pointed to a number of narrative and character similarities that stretched beyond fair-use and were consistent with a plagiarised work.

Following initial responses from LaBeouf that the similarities were coincidental and secondary to the plot of his film, in early 2014 LaBeouf took to Twitter to confess the

[25] Groys, 2011. p43

deceit.[26] What followed were a series of apologies which included LaBeouf hiring a private biplane to carry the message 'I am sorry Daniel Clowes' across the sky (the picture was then tweeted) (fig.2). Most interesting of all was the what appeared at the time to the three most critically thoughtful tweeted apologies:

> Copying isn't particularly creative work. Being inspired by someone else's idea to produce something new and different IS creative work. / In my excitement and naiveté as an amateur filmmaker, I got lost in the creative process and neglected to follow proper accreditation. / I was truly moved by his piece of work & I knew that it would make a poignant & relevant short. I apologize to all who assumed I wrote it.[27]

Within hours LaBeouf's apology, retweeted several thousands of times by fans of both LaBeouf, Clowes and their cynics, was similarly put under scrutiny. LaBeouf's apologetic tweet was, it was claimed, plagiarised from an internet guide into providing apology.[28] The internet guide, a public call for help into 'How to apologise' the suggested apology was, if not taken word for word, similar enough for readers to accuse LaBeouf of plagiarising his apology from an internet user named 'Lily'.[29] If irony fails to merit new definition at this point, confession certainly does.

LaBeouf's exercise in self-design marks outs the necessity of examining the confessional forms in which it occupies itself. The traditional form of confession - zero-design, private, producing truth - is here highly designed, public, *producing only the appearance of truth*. Whereas the confession is - as Groys notes - indebted to the work of recuperation of faith, LaBeouf's plagiarised confessional marks out the necessity of developing new critical criteria for that of contemporary confessional art.[30]

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[26] In January 2014, LaBeouf stated that his Twitter account was 'meta-modernist performance art', see Shia LaBeouf Explains Plagiarism Drama: My Twitter Is 'Meta-Modernist Performance Art' by Lily Harrison <http://www.eonline.com/uk/news/502383/shia-labeouf-explains-plagiarism-drama-my-twitter-is-meta-modernist-performance-art> Accessed 28 January 2016

[27] Bryan Enk 'The Strange Saga of Shia LaBeouf's Latest Plagiarism Scandal', https://www.yahoo.com/movies/bp/strange-saga-shia-labeouf-latest-plagiarism-scandal-230528438.html> Accessed 28 January 2016

[28] Beaumont-Thomas, Ben. "Shia LaBeouf escalates plagiarism row with Daniel Clowes via bizarre tweets." theguardian.com. <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/jan/08/shia-labeouf-daniel-clowesplagiarism-twitter-row> Accessed 28 January 2016

[29] ibid.

[30] LaBeouf's plagiarised apology was not the first, not even by LaBeouf himself. Earlier in 2014 LaBeouf entered into a public war of worlds via Twitter with fellow actor Alec Baldwin, his co-star on a Broadway

Part Four: Dani Marti

Post-millennial practices indicate the artist's own mistrust of their own image. In the work of Australian and Scottish-based Spanish artist Dani Marti the open contradictions present a set of paradoxes that cannot be easily be reconciled through a reliance or adherence of an older form of confessional.

Time is the Fire in Which We Burn (2009) is a multi-format work encompassing painting, installation and video. The video works in particular occupy – for us – a new set of conditions of confessional practice that evidence the inherent contradiction and deconstructions of self-design. The video in particular – which can be viewed separately from the same-named installation – demands a discomforting disorientation of truth and lies.(fig.3)

The video takes place in bed with the artist – sometimes present, sometimes not – in conversation with 'John', a former drug addict, gay porn actor and former (or present) sex worker. Confessor and confessant are both naked and, we might assume from the ubiquitous cigarette and crumpled linen, post-coital.[31] It is unclear from the beginning whether a transaction has been made either for sex or for the interview ('John' only reveals his sex worker past some way through the video). The conversation between the two is warm and appears open. 'John' confesses his addicted past, his attitude towards living positive, and the difficult relations he has with family, friends and former lovers. He expresses regret at not being able to forge better relations but at the same time remains committed to the destructive and redemptive power of 'love'. On occasion funny, at other times bleak, it is not always clear to whom 'John' is confessing. What began as an intimate 'zero-design' dialogue of intimacy and sincerity is questioned by the occasional absence of Marti who disappears off-screen. Throughout the disappearances it is unclear then if Marti or the camera is the confessor; we are unaware if Marti is able to hear 'John's' confession. Throughout, as the narrative continues it becomes clear the 'John' may not be 'John' at all, but rather a pseudonym. Is 'John'

play from which LaBeouf had walked out prior to opening. Signalling the end of feud, LaBeouf offered Baldwin a public apology that appeared plagiarised from a 2009 *Esquire* magazine article by the author Tom Chiarella.

[31] In the whole film, the only cut in the film is - it is inferred - a break during which Marti and 'John' have sex.

telling ‘Marti the lover’ the truth, a post-coital confession borne out of trust and sincerity? Or is ‘John’ telling ‘Marti the artist’ what he thinks he wants to hear, or indeed what he has been told to say? The aesthetic – a single camera with minimal movement – a*nd the appearance of sincerity* in ‘John’s’ narrative mark out the complicated navigation and paradoxes inherent within self-design. All at once confessional and sincere, ‘John’ also gives us reason to doubt the story. The possible presence of a financial or consensual physical transaction marks out Marti as unreliable confessee and ‘John’ [a probable pseudonym] an unreliable confessant. The absence of Marti for portions of the confession questions whether Marti or the camera is the confessee. Is ‘John’ presenting his narrative to Marti – a private confession between two lovers and friends – or to us, the absent spectator?

Time is the Fire in Which We Burn examines the complex structures that underpin the contemporary confessional. Appearing in its first instance adhering to the zero-design of Rousseau - private, sincere, truthful - it appears throughout to offer a more complex self-designed structure: open, insincere, untrue. Throughout the hour and 7 minutes of its playing out if oscillates between zero- and self-design, between sincere and self-serving. This reading may appear cynical but it reminds us of what is at stake. As Groys reminded us earlier, there is an aesthetic presentation of an ethical subject that marks out a new paradigm that he calls ‘self-design’. In such terms Dani Marti’s work - as it does many times throughout other works of this period - situates itself uncomfortably between sincerity and self-design. As an ethical subject, ‘John’ is a troubling work. If John and Marti are lovers, the reading of the work is one closer to zero-design: intimate but coercive, private, sincere, codified, truthful. If Marti is the paying-artist and ‘John’ is the paid-sex-worker, as is implied, it is a work that moves more towards self-design: a transaction, decoded, the *appearance of* sincerity, *producing the appearance of truth*.

As Kirsten Lloyd remarks apropos *Time is the Fire in Which We Burn*, ‘Marti makes no attempt to disguise the play of construction and manipulation upon which each encounter is based.’ This is of course true. But whereas Lloyd is keen on distancing from Groys’ concerns with the project of self-design by favouring a reading focused on ethics of transaction and intimacy there is Lloyd’s reading a commitment to the belief in ‘zero-design’ that, this paper argues, is untenable. Whereas Lloyd reads tenderness and Marti’s genuine concern for ‘John’ - and genuine affection of ‘John’ for Marti -

there is undoubtedly an oscillatory and paradoxical condition examined in *Time is the Fire in Which We Burn*.[32]

Without rushing to demand a queer reading of Marti's work, which has been done elsewhere, what is important to this maneuver is the biopolitical deconstruction of the binaries of zero- and self-design that are present in the work. Kirsten Lloyd, who does acknowledge this deconstruction through a reading of an earlier Groys text, hints at the problematic 'frame' of such an unanswerable paradox:

> Boris Groys has identified the fundamental difference this type of practice presents, suggesting that it re-conceives the relationship between art and life in a completely new context 'defined by the aspiration of today's art to become life itself, not merely to depict life or to offer it art products.' Leaping into the territories of biopolitical production, artists move away from the traditional tactics of mimesis and representation to instead stage experiments, shape situations, and otherwise direct social realities. These developments challenge the very framework of the artwork: does art documentation constitute art itself or does it simply refer to it?[33]

As with Emin, the dynamic of Marti's work is different from that of earlier video practices. The highly regulated and private structures of earlier video practices - one might think of Lynda Benglis and Robert Morris' frequent dialogues - is of a previous time, examining the capacity of video to offer synchronous and asynchronous structures of self-reflexivity. For Marti however, these structures are of a different era and deconstructed in their own terms the inheritances of their time. If Benglis and Morris are the generation of HUAC and 'Tricky Dicky' then Marti is the generation of *Big Brother* and Shia LaBeouf.

Alan Currell's Encyclopedia

[32] 'Set against a narrative of rejection, indifference, and exploitation, the combination of his garrulous stories and on-screen gestures exposes an intense longing for touch, attention, and physical intimacy. He scrutinises Marti's body, stroking his skin and picking at his blackheads as he talks.' Lloyd 2001, p70. Incidentally, Lloyd explores Groys' *Art Power*, published one year before his two eFlux articles. In the later articles - which we consider here - self-design and the 'ethical subject' is key to Groys' argument, something that Lloyd believes to be lacking in the earlier *Art Power*.

[33] Lloyd, 2011/ p72

Scottish artist Alan Currall has used video and the 'talking head' delivery as the primary mode of his practice since the 1990s. Traversing the Emin and Wearing triumphant self-design of the mid-1990s through to the unreliable self-design of Dani Marti in the post-Millennium, Currall's practice evidences the same deconstruction through often subtle appearances of sincerity and fabulism. Often low-fi, the appearance is often that of 'zero-design' - shoddy lighting, no apparent use of costume, make-up, no post-production - Currall explores the breakdown of sincerity and truth through a series of stark narrative juxtapositions.

Currall's 2000-2001 project *Encyclopedia and other works* began as a curation of his talking heads from the mid-late 1990s, presented first in Stoke-on-Trent (his English town of birth) and then at Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne. The videos weave between the earnest and the silly, the appearance and sincere longing for meaningful friendships and the clichés of their failure. Between the mock ignorant 'pub philosopher' and the oracular fabulist, Currall's videos form part of the dissolution of zero- and self-design. Disheveled and in everyday clothing throughout the many videos, Currall's videos feast on zero-design, but rather than producing truth they simply induce doubt. In *Lying about myself in order to appear more interesting* (fig.4) we are presented with what appears to be a very genuine 'show and tell' of a personal archive of objects through which Currall explains their considerable personal value.[34] In the same exhibition, *Rules for Paradise on Earth* repeats ad nauseum cliched aphorisms borrowed from friends, family and popular culture: 'There's plenty more fish in the sea', 'Do unto others' etc. Presented as a sincere commentary on the vacuous sincerity of others *Rules for Paradise* reveals, we argue after Groys and Foucault, that the appearance of sincerity undoes the production of sincerity. Currall plays with us, lulls us into false sense of belief. The zero-design has all the hallmarks of zero-design=sincerity=truth production. But given the ubiquity of its content - the trope of archival practices in 1990s art, the aphoristic advice of loved ones - it is also all about appearances. It is, in its abandonment of the sincere - total self-design.

Jetsam (fig.5), an earlier short talking head video work from 1995, is indicative of this strained relationship between sincerity and zero-design in Currall's work. Wearing a

[34] Koop, Stuart. (ed.) *Encyclopaedia and other works*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2001.

non-descript t-shirt Currall narrates straight to camera his autobiography: Currall is an alien whose ship has crash landed into Scotland. The alien has taken on a human appearance and decided to become an artist and work at a local art school. It makes for an easy allegory of strangeness - alien meaning 'other', Currall is English-born but identifies as Scottish - but it also plays out a discomforting relation of design. All at once, Currall is being serious and sincere *when he wants to be* and silly and insincere *when he wants to be*. The work then oscillates between the sincere and insincere, between truth and its appearance and between zero- and self- design. Throughout however Currall maintains the appearance of zero-design, its appearance being spontaneous and improvised. In so doing, Currall reminds us that what is at stake with sincerity and truth is not its production but the appearance of its production.

Conclusion

Observing the pervasiveness of confession and its use in contemporary society Andreas Fejes and Magnus Dahlstedt following on from Foucault, also argue that contemporary Western society is in fact a 'confessing society.'[35] Confession plays a significant, and often nuanced, role in late modernity. For example, as Fantome (2006) observes, "confession plays a significant role in judicial matters, health and welfare assessment, family interaction, and sexual relationships." The significance of confession for contemporary life is exemplified by the roles it plays in many different, often nuanced, aspects our society. For example, confession plays a significant role in judicial matters, health and welfare assessment, family interaction, and sexual relationships. Given this, private life is now very much public business. Foucault's analyses confession as part of late nineteenth, early twentieth century discourse on sexuality. His analysis however reaches far beyond sexuality. Indicating the importance of confession within the arts Foucault notes, 'a literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage.[36] Despite the prevalence of confession is our society, and its relationship to confessional art practice, the presence and availability of analytical discourse relating to confessional video art is largely underrepresented in the landscape of contemporary cultural practice.

[35] Fejes and Dahlstedt, 2013.
[36] Foucault, 1990.

Foucault is writing 20 years prior to *Big Brother* and Bill 'I did not have sexual relations with that woman' Clinton, and 30 years before Assange, Snowden, Lance Armstrong and Shia La Bouef. And yet, for Foucault, the highly regulated, coercive mechanisms of confessional forms were already being broken down through subversive deconstructions. These ameliorations took place for Foucault in heterotopian spaces of deviation and ritual - bathhouses, underground bars, cemeteries.[37]

This paper has focused specifically on video art from the mid-1990s onwards in order to explore how Groys' Foucauldianism might reveal the deconstruction of contemporary confessional forms. Such a maneuvering is far from specific to video practices and finds useful analogies in film and other forms of cultural media.[38]

Of course, Groys' Foucauldianism did not end with *Going Public*. Throughout 2017 and 2018, Groys' continued to probe the platforms and technologies that 'design' the self, arguing that: 'Thus, writers and artists, if they want to be realist, have to learn to live with the suspicion that their descriptions of the human psyche are pure fiction—until history confirms the realism of their work.'[39] Taking his position into new territories of realism, Groys' new genealogy of design is, we argue, a continuation of Foucault's desire to trace the human from its origins in the design of the soul to the design of the self.

[37] Foucault, 1990. p64

[38] Werner Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness* (1992) and *The Wild Blue Yonder* (2005) both exhibit a similar such deconstruction. *The Wild Blue Yonder* in particular articulates the destabilizing effect of zero-design read in a world of self-design. Carefully edited location shots of deep underwater diving in and around both Arctic circles - as you might find on the National Geographic television channel or narrated by David Attenborough - are juxtaposed with low-fi zero-design ramblings of an nameless oracle narrating an apocalyptic disaster that recontextualises the the high definition location shots of isolated and inhospitable underwater seascapes. Here, the appearance of zero-design (as always, carefully choreographed and highly designed by Herzog) undoes the truth of the high-definition underwater footage. Here, as with other practitioners in what has been termed 'the documentary turn' in post-Millennial practices, the myth of zero-design (as Groys might read the Minimal turn in the 1960s) and its conflation with sincerity demands a rigorous re-reading. Though of a different currency of Currall, Marti and Emin the mobilisation of the zero-design confessional form similarly calls into question the inherited forms in cinema and documentary.

[39] Groys, 2016. This essay, along with several later essays of 2017 were collected together in 2018 by Beatriz Colomina, Nikolaus Hirsch, Anton Vidokle, Mark Wigley as part of *Superhumanity: Design of the Self*, a publication of over 50 essays by thinkers each exploring the new design of the self. Employing Groys' first observations in self-design as their starting point, the collection appeared following the drafting of this paper and we hope to consider the implications in due course.

It may appear audacious; however, it might be argued in conclusion that Groys' metanoic self-design is *merely an exacerbated form of Foucault's earlier technologies of the self*. We say 'merely' not to diminish Groys' contribution but to rather suggest the Foucauldian impulse that runs through Groys' essays of this period. Foucault's earlier biopolitical discourse sets out a set of inherited conditions for confessional practices that were already being questioned by the late 20th century. Groys picks up the subject reframed for the 21st century spectator to whom the confessional practices of the past are now but a dim spectre for most. For Tracey Emin, Dani Marti, Allan Currall - and we can add Simon Denny, Tim Miller, Catherine O'Sullivan, Ryan Trecartin we see new structures of confessional practices emerging in art since the 1990s. Groys' self-design reminds us of the irreversible deconstruction of previous forms and how contemporary art seeks to occupy the cracks that has emerged in the seismic collapse of regulated structures of confessional discourse.

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