Parafictional Artists.
From the Critique of Authorship to the Curatorial Turn

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July 2017

Royal College of Art

Copyright statement

Abstract

This thesis examines the intersection of authorship and fiction in artistic practices from the 1980s until the present. Based on a series of examples of imaginary or partially fictional artists who are, nevertheless, able to function as authors in the contemporary art world, the thesis proposes the term "parafictional artists." The concept of the parafictional, coined by the art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty, is here revised to emphasize the capacity of these artists to interact with the art world in a plausible manner despite the disclosure of their imaginary nature. Such interactions include exhibiting and selling works, giving interviews, publishing books, or performing under their own name.

Rather than focusing on *why* numerous artists from a broad geographic background have decided to employ fictional authorial strategies, this thesis explores a different set of questions: *How* does the extended practice of developing and exhibiting parafictional artists reflect as well as modify the ways in which contemporary authorship functions in todays' highly institutionalized, mostly global, art world? And, *what* are the consequences of the introduction of these fictional explorations into artistic identity for the interpretation, presentation, and encounter with artworks?

In order to answer the above questions, the thesis is divided in two parts. Part I utilises an art historical framework to propose interpretative models to analyse parafictional artists. Starting from the critique of authorship and its articulation by new art history in the 1980s, the thesis applies revised ideas on the importance of biography and intentionality to a number of selected case studies, including Reena Spaulings, Barbara Cleveland, Robbie Williams, The Atlas Group, and the three Janez Janšas, amongst others. Part II brings these debates up to date and questions the working logic of the critique of authorship from the 1990s onwards. This second part draws a parallel between the emergence of parafictional strategies and of curating as a professional activity and discourse, as a consequence of changes in the organization of the art world. The thesis concludes by examining a series of exhibitions and argues for a curatorial understanding of parafictional artists that, beyond critique, contributes to the production of knowledge through fiction.

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Acknowledgements

Author's declaration

During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

Signature:

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Introduction

Overview

The contemporary art world is immersed in a conflict between form and content. Made up of numerous institutions, this expanding network of schools, universities, art centres, biennials, galleries, art fairs, magazines, publishers, websites, mailing lists, etc. relies on what can be considered the system's most vulnerable node: the artist. Today, surviving as an artist outside of the institutionalised art world is almost impossible, whilst living within it generates a series of contradictory demands: to be socially-engaged, yet economically successful; to question authorship, yet maintain it; to reject capitalism, yet work according to its norms. In this sense, artists embody the paradoxes of the art world, a space in which critical thinking is expected but which, at the same time, flourishes under neoliberal conditions. Institutions today require bigger audiences, greater budgets, while they simultaneously advocate for socially-committed and politically-meaningful art. The coherence between subject matter and praxis, between work and life that many expect from artists is impossible because the context in which they must survive is one made up of contradictions. With this in mind, what are the strategies that contemporary artists find to negotiate such conflicting demands?

The emergence of what I describe in the following pages as parafictional authorial strategies is a response to this peculiar scenario. The action of creating an imaginary artist and making her function as an author dramatically challenges some of the art world's expectations about how artists must perform. Significantly, the plausibility of these *parafictional artists*—as opposed to purely fictional ones—is not linked to keeping their imaginary nature unknown, but rather to their capacity to behave as any other artist, creating works and then exhibiting, discussing, and selling them. The particular characteristics, however, of the multiple-use name Luther Blissett, of the (a)historical female performer Barbara Cleveland, or of the indistinguishable three Janez Janšas, to name a few, also generate productive controversies and ethical dilemmas amongst interpreters, including art historians and curators, as well as the public. For instance, are the biographies of parafictional artists relevant when analysing their works? If under a parafictional identity there are

several or even many people working, how do you locate the author's intention? Furthermore, who gets to keep any economic benefit generated by such artists and how do you credit them? If collaborating with a parafictional artist in a public project, how much and where do you explain her dual nature? As a curator or as an institution, how do you deal with the potential confusion or misunderstanding produced by these strategies? And, following this ethical question, are there any limitations to the use of fiction when applied to identity?

As can be gathered from the above, two impulses cut across this thesis. The first is connected to interpretation, to the production of readings and understandings of these artistic practices. As I will go on to explain, not much has been written about the topic of fictional authorial strategies from an academic perspective. Apart from some brief accounts by art historians like David Joselit or Carrie Lambert-Beatty and other writers like Marco Deseriis or Peter Osborne, there are no in-depth analyses about how these artists use fiction to produce operative artistic identities. With that in mind, how should we write about and describe parafictional artists? One of the things this thesis provides is a series of interpretive proposals that employ art historical devices (particularly the artist's biography and intentionality) to help us to position parafictional artists within current debates and to observe how their particular characteristics reinforce or modify certain existing paradigms.

The second impulse is related to the presentation of parafictional artists in public settings. While all interpretations have public aspects, here I am specifically referring to the curatorial aspects of producing projects about—or that include—fictional authorial strategies. Throughout my research I have identified a significant number of exhibitions and other activities where curators have incorporated works by fictional or parafictional artists (the distinction, as I will explain more fully, is linked to the capacity of the latter to function as authors despite revealing their imaginary nature). Therefore, I will examine and discuss how different professionals in various institutional settings have approached the above-mentioned dilemmas when presenting these authorial strategies. My intention in so doing is to propose a curatorial understanding that utilises some of the ideas of what is known as "the curatorial" (for instance, the displacement of the thematic and the reconsideration of the curator's role) to contribute significantly to the discussions generated by parafictional artists themselves.

If the driving questions of this thesis are about interpretation and presentation, fiction and authorship are its two main discursive frameworks. As I will

go on to describe in some detail in this Introduction, there has been a recent wide-ranging reappraisal of fiction as a contemporary art methodology. The use of fiction has been valued as an effective way of questioning how conceptions of trust, truth, or authenticity function in all kinds of contexts, as well as for how the construction of fictional worlds can generate an alternative way of exploring the complexities and paradoxes of reality. As for authorship, while still being a fundamental principle for the construction of value within the art system, it is a term with a substantially bad reputation. In Chapter 1, I will map out the theoretical "fall from grace" of the concept of authorship, as well as the limitations that such a negative take implies for understanding how artists function in a networked art world. As I will try to prove, it is in fact the intersection of fiction and authorship that can help us to comprehend (and question) the logic that governs the contemporary art world, to discuss how and who is *authorised* to produce and show, to say and see, to interpret and present, and even to modify some of those expectations.

The Atlas Group

As it is well-known by now, The Atlas Group was the collective identity under which Lebanese-born, US-educated, and New York-based artist Walid Raad presented a series of supposedly veridical documents related to the contemporary history of Lebanon, and in particular to the Lebanese civil wars (1975-1991). The Atlas Group Archive, which can be consulted online, was developed between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s (the exact dates depend on what source you check) as an apparently systematic arrangement of films, photographs, and documents that had either been produced by invented characters (Files Type A), by anonymous ones (Files Type FD), or created by the members of the Atlas Group themselves (Files Type AGP).[1] One of the most exhibited series in the archive is the result of the efforts by Dr. Fald Fakhouri, a presumed famous Lebanese historian, to collect cut-out photographs of all the exact models of cars that had exploded during the civil conflict (fig. 0.1). The series is usually presented in a grid, as if each page belonged to the notebook in

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[1] "The Atlas Group Archive," The Atlas Group, accessed 21 May, 2016, http://www.theatlasgroup.org/.

Figure 0.1. Dr. Fald Fakhouri, *Already Been in a Lake of Fire_Notebook Volume 38*, digital colour prints, 1999, The Atlas Group Archive. Installed at the exhibition *Trust in Fiction*, CRAC Alsace, Altkirch, 2016. Photograph by the author.

Figure 0.2. Souheil Bachar, frame from the single channel video *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English version)*, 2001, The Atlas Group Archive.

which Dr. Fakhouri had annotated his gradual findings before donating it to the archive. Similarly, Souheil Bachar, an Arab captive who allegedly shared imprisonment with the British and American prisoners during the infamous Lebanon Hostage Crisis (1982-1992), collaborated with The Atlas Group to produce the series of videos about his captivity known as *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* (fig. 0.2). Bachar's testimony is translated from Arab into English and read out loud by a Western woman's voice in, presumably, the only tape available for international audiences.

Figure 0.3. Anonymous, frame from the single channel video *I only wish that I could weep*, 2002, The Atlas Group Archive.

Another contributor to the collection is only identified as "Operator #17," an assumed Lebanese army intelligence officer whose out-of-character poetic tapes record the sunset over the seaside boardwalk in Beirut (fig. 0.3). In this case, the video segments are preceded by a written text that explains the research carried out by The Atlas Group to identify the intentions of the anonymous operator.

In these mentioned examples, as in the rest of the files created by Walid Raad through The Atlas Group, fiction is present at the level of production and presentation, yet the geopolitical context of the documents is specific and factual. The adoption of a series of elements that conventionally convey authority (from The Atlas Group's anonymous identity to the rigour of the historian, and from the organisation of an archive, to the use of grids, translations, and research) can be seen as a way to undermine their unquestionable relation to truth. As has been pointed out in relation to the aesthetically pleasing "documents" produced by Raad, "history is shown as an aesthetic folly that leads viewers to examine . . . their assumptions about archival truths."[2] In this sense, fiction is here used to challenge the authority usually associated with certain modes of the documentary from a series of unconventional and even subversive subject positions, a point to which I will soon return.

This specific approach to art making by an artist/collective working on the tumultuous past of a Middle East country has turned Raad into a favourite with art

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[2] Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, and David Joselit, *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, 2nd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 769

historians from the UK and the US, as well as with curators working in the global art world. Amongst the texts that will be discussed in this thesis, Raad appears in Peter Osborne's book on the fictional character of "the contemporary," in Carrie Lambert-Beatty's essay on the plausibility of artistic parafictions, and in the entry dedicated to the avatar in the compilation *Art Since 1900*.[3] In the case of the exhibitions that I will go on to discuss in Chapter 4, The Atlas Group was included as an example of a fictional author in the exhibition *Trust in Fiction*, curated by the Argentinian Santiago García Navarro at the French art centre CRAC Alsace, and in the project *Alias*, curated by the London-based artists Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin at the Photomonth in Krakow, Poland. So, why exactly did the construction of a parafictional artistic collective that produces and presents illusive documents related to a very particular place and time achieve such wide-spread success amongst writers and curators dedicated to the analysis of critical international contemporary art? In my view, and despite the nation-specific content of the artworks, it is The Atlas Group's ambiguous relation to "Lebanon," yet confident use of fiction as a globally-sanctioned art methodology that makes this project particularly attractive to such a wide variety of interpreters.

By initiating this thesis with the case of The Atlas Group and Walid Raad, and their success amongst the art historian and curators interested in the "fictionalization of artistic authority,"[4] I want to start to approach how fiction can play an important role in the debates around the identity of the contemporary artist in the global art world. In an essay by the also Lebanese artist and writer Walid Sadek about art production in the Arab country, the position of what he calls "post-civil war" artists who having survived the conflict in the 1990s decided to turn it into the subject of their works (a generation that would include Walid Raad) is described in the following terms: "No longer part of the wreckage or governed by the extended and damaged time of a civil war, such an artist gladly appropriates the responsibility of speaking for other and accordingly enters the coveted circuit of international

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[3] Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausability," *October* 129 (Summer 2009) and Foster et al., *Art since 1900*, 764-769.

[4] Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 33.

exhibitions."[5] Sadek, it must be said, does not censure these artists' "opportunistic" choices but rather marks their performance as "unavoidable." After such a convoluted war, it would seem logical that artists from Lebanon chose to produce works inspired by these events, and that their art functioned as a welcomed testimony of the episode in the international art context. But, as I have mentioned, rather than choosing a first-hand account of the episode, Raad preferred to produce questionable documents by made-up characters and present them through a fictional collective or "imaginary foundation"—as he has sometimes described The Atlas Group[6]—thereby complicating the direct connection between the Lebanese content of the art and the Lebanese identity of its author.

That non-Western artists exhibiting internationally are expected to refer to their cultural background in their artworks is the centre of much critique in discussions about globalisation and contemporary art.[7] Quite evidently, such discussions share a number of concerns with the identity debates about the gender, race, and sexuality of the artist; namely the dynamic by which non-male, non-white, non-heterosexual *and* non-Western artists are apparently obliged to be discussing otherness in their works. As art historian David Joselit has pointed out, "in encountering art that is unfamiliar in the West, we are looking for what is quintessentially Chinese or Indian or Nigerian about it in order to consume it. The problem is that artists are consequently expected to perform authenticity."[8] One could say that by inventing The Atlas Group—a name whose geographical reference could indicate a Maghreb-related origin, while its mythical connotations could suggest a global collective—Raad "liberates" himself from his given identity as a Lebanese artist. Yet, rather than using that strategy to produce artworks unrelated to

[5] Walid Sadek, "Peddling Time When Standing Still. Art Remains in Lebanon and the Globalization That Was," in *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, ed. Jonathan Harris (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 43.

[6] Alan Gilbert, "Walid Raad. Artists in Conversation," *BOMB* 81 (Fall 2002), accessed 10 May 2016, http://bombmagazine.org/article/2504/walid-ra-ad.

[7] See Rasheed Araeen, "Art and Postcolonial Society," in *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, ed. Jonathan Harris (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 365-374; and Hans Belting, "Contemporary Art as Global Art. A Critical Ensemble," in *The Global Art World. Audiences, Markets, and Museums*, eds. Hans Belting and Andreas Buddensieg (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2009), 38-73.

[8] David Joselit, "Collective Consciousness: A roundtable," with Dipesh Chakrabarty, Kara Keeling, Kobena Mercer, Michelle Kuo, Emily Roysdon, and Huey Copeland, *Artforum* 54 no.1 (Summer 2016): 271.

his cultural background, his various fictional devices allow him to discuss Lebanon's history in terms that resonate with the interests of the international art scene.

The Atlas Group case synthesises a series of current dilemmas around authorship, institutional visibility, and identity in a global art context. As we have seen, the ambiguous relation between virtual and factual, true and false, fictional and authentic is key in Raad's construction of The Atlas Group as an authoritative yet unreliable figure. Meanwhile, the international success of Raad in the West highlights how the expectations associated with the identity of contemporary artists are transformed by the geographic expansion of the art world. What is more, the use of a series of tactics that seem to destabilize the access to truth despite its archival language and documentary conventions, is accompanied by the careful manufacture of a series of subject positions (the idiosyncratic Lebanese historian, the abused Arab captive, the sensitive army intelligence officer, as well as the unidentifiable archival collective[9]) that further question the logic of certain identity categories prevalent in the West. As art historian T.J. Demos explains in relation to Raad's work, "the intertwinement of fact and fiction correlates with the disidentification of the subject from conventional collective affiliations and essentialized identities."[10] In that sense, it is possible to think of Raad as performing "tricky tactics" that, in Jean Fisher's words, "insinuate into the codes of a given discourse and subtly undermine its claims to truth."[11]

In 2006, when I was studying an MA in Modern Art: Curatorial Studies at Columbia University in New York (an experience that, as will become clear throughout this thesis, marks the origins of my interest in artists using fictional identities), Walid Raad came to give a lecture to one of our seminars. If my memory does not fail me (although the untrustworthiness of memory is precisely the point of many of Raad's works), we were in a small room, and the presence of this serious and elegant Arab man suggested a particular type of in-between position at a mostly white, in mostly Western surroundings. It was the first time I was encountering his work, and throughout his meticulous choreographed talk, I remember feeling an

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[9] In the case of *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* it is particularly telling that the person "playing" Bachar is a well-known Lebanese actor, yet a totally unrecognizable figure for Western audiences.

[10] T.J. Demos, *The Migrant Image. The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durnham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 194.

[11] Jean Fisher, "Embodied Subversion," In *Live. Art and Performance*, ed. Adrian Heathfield, (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), 59.

awkward insecurity about the material he was presenting.[12] The talk ended with a deadpan revelation by Raad of the fictive nature of part of the information he had been presenting. However, the exact relation of Raad to The Atlas Group and the exact origin of their archived documents remained ambiguous. As I will go on to further explain in this thesis, the possibility of having a live encounter with an artist using a mix of facts and fiction in the construction of their identity and work, is a particularly privileged experience. It also point out to another important issue that I will also further explore: the embrace by contemporary artists using fictive devices today of the physical or discursive sites in which their fictions operate. Or, in other words, the relational and interventionist character of parafictional artists. In the particular case I just described, the physical and discursive site was a western university, a particularly loaded space of knowledge formation, in which someone with the specific otherness embodied by Raad was coming to produce a moment of uncomfortable unreliableness.

After this digression into my own unreliable memories, I would like to conclude by emphasizing how, in my view, Walid Raad has the attractive ability to approach a particular national reality through a language that feels familiar and recognisable to an international art audience (even if I, as a young student, felt unsure about this exact language). Or, to refer specifically to Raad's authorial choice, The Atlas Group accepts the condition of the global art world in which it operates, including, as Carrie Lambert-Beatty argues, "its competing demands for local specificity and global inclusion."[13] On one hand, The Atlas Group Archive presents a series of narratives about characters from a particular geopolitical context; one which is impregnated with conflict and otherness despite the lack of factuality of the stories presented. On the other, The Atlas Group is an ambiguous as well as subversive subject position, one which is global and collective yet fictional. For Peter Osborne, to whom I will shortly return, such "fictionalization of artistic authority" corresponds to the fictitiousness of the contemporary itself.[14] In my opinion, the construction of The

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[12] In a conversation with curator Achim Borchardt-Hume, Raad explains how he is usually aware with everything surrounding the presentation of his projects, also in his lectures: "I find myself quite sensitive to elements such as the lectern and table, char and stool, bottle and glass of water…; the peripheral objects that are always in university lecture halls…the technical or other difficulty that will inevitably interrupt the presentation." In the exhibition catalogue *Miraculous Beginning, Walid Raad*, curator Achim Borchardt-Hume (London: The Whitechapel Gallery, 14 October 2010—2 January, 2011), 15.

[13] Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe," 77.

[14] Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 33.

Atlas Group is part of a strategy that allows Walid Raad not only to question artistic authority but to successfully participate in the international art world. At the same time, by turning to fiction as his artistic methodology, Raad is able to produce art that, despite its geopolitical specificity, fruitfully intervenes in the debates around the identity of contemporary artists in the global art world. The modification of certain expectations about who is legitimised to produce and present, to say and see, to witness and testify, is here explored by fully embracing the political implications of those actions. In light of the expansion of the art world, and the incorporation to its institutions of artists from varied backgrounds, a strategy such as the one exemplified by The Atlas Group presents an influential model for how to successfully intervene in the global art scene while remaining geo-politically meaningful.

Fiction as a contemporary art methodology

I begin this investigation by describing and interpreting the case of The Atlas Group/ Walid Raad because the terms through which it has been discussed identify many of the conceptual debates I will be raising throughout this thesis. This "zoom in" on the specificities of a single example requires me now to "zoom out" in order more fully to describe the themes of this research. Raad is, of course, not the first artist to invent an alternative artistic persona and present work through him/her. For instance, and quite famously, Marcel Duchamp presented his *Fountain* at the New York Society of Independent Artists in 1917 as R. Mutt and produced several works as his alter ego Rrose Sélavy.[15] Nevertheless, Raad is exemplary of what I identify as an expanding tendency in recent contemporary art for artists to work totally or partially, alone or collectively, under a parafictional identity. By that I do not mean the mere substitution of an artist's officially recognized forename by a fictitious one, but rather the more complex articulation of a parafictional artist who, despite their dubious nature, and through a variety of strategies, is able to perform as an author, that is, to produce works and present them publicly under their own name. Unlike

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[15] See Moira Roth, "Marcel Duchamp in America. A Self Ready-Made," in *Difference/Indifference: Musings on Postmodernism, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage*, eds. Moira Roth and Jonathan Katz (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 1998), 17-27. Other contemporary artists using pseudonyms and constructed identities for a variety of reasons include Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns as Matson Jones, Richard Prince as John Dogg, Bruce Conner's use of various alias and alter egos or the members of the collective General Idea.

pseudonyms, parafictional artists have biographies, styles, and interests of their own which might or might not correspond to the ones of their "creators." In that sense, and as we shall soon see, parafictional artists come closer to what the Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa described as "heteronyms."[16]

I am borrowing the term "parafiction" from art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty who uses it to describe partially fictional art projects that, at least for a period of time, are taken at face value by a number of people. Although inevitably connected to the two vernacular definitions of "fiction" (as describing both events and people that are made-up, and also events that are untrue), what Lambert-Beatty describes specifically as parafictions are proposals in which "real and/or imaginary personages and stories intersect with the world as it is being lived."[17] This capacity to operate as factual regardless of their veracity is what distinguishes parafictions from fictional narratives that remain in the sphere of the imaginary (I will shortly return to some of the literary uses of the term fiction). Through examples like The Yes Men's impersonation of World Trade Organization representatives at conferences and on television programs, Eva and Franco Mattes' (aka 0100101110101101.ORG) well-orchestrated campaign to rename Vienna's Karlplatz as Nikeplatz, or Michael Blum's presentation of the pseudo-historical feminist translator Safiye Behar at the 2005 Istanbul Biennial, Lambert-Beatty explains how parafictional projects rely on convincing props, and platforms invested with credibility to question current "pragmatics of trust".[18] Following Paul Virilio's insight on how power operates its censorial control not by omitting data but by inundating us with endless information,[19] Lambert-Beatty praises parafictions for their capacity to train our ability to distinguish, from the vast amount of material thrown at us, the real facts from the rest.

The parafictional artists whose practices and concerns form the bulk of this thesis project (including The Atlas Group) also construct their credibility through the use of convincing props (their artworks) and by their inclusion in events at reliable platforms (museums and galleries). The term is therefore applicable and fits the

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[16] Fernando Pessoa, *Antología de Álvaro de Campos* (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1978).

[17] Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe," 54.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Paul Virilio, *Strategy of Deception*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 2000).

aspirations of those interested in considering how reality and fiction work together in the construction of an artist's identity. My use of the phrase parafiction, however, significantly differs from Lambert-Beatty's one: while for her, the revelation of the fictionality of parafictions puts an end to their plausibility, I believe that the disclosure of the imaginary nature of parafictional artists does not undermine their capacity to function as authors. Quite the contrary, for even after their dual nature has been revealed, parafictional artists are still able to interact with the world in a *credible* manner, and in so doing, further question the classical real/imaginary dichotomy.

Writer and philosopher Peter Osborne has also signaled the importance of fiction in recent art. For him, the actuality of fiction as a contemporary artistic methodology is related to the fictional character of "the contemporary" itself. As he argues, the contemporary is a term that embodies a fiction both in terms of time— for the periodisation "contemporary" generates the impression of the unity of multiple times—and in terms of space—because it projects uniformity over distant geopolitical areas. In his view, art and artists can only "occupy, articulate, critically reflect and transfigure so global a transnational space" if they are themselves able to reproduce something of the fictional structure of the contemporary.[20] Writing about Walid Raad and his pseudo-historical projects with the made-up collective The Atlas Group, Osborne explains how, in this case, the construction of the fictional collective on the one hand, and of a series of fabricated documents about the actual Lebanese Civil Wars (1975-1991) on the other, are both strategies intrinsically linked to the fictional rationale of the contemporary itself. In Osborne's opinion, the capacity of Raad to develop a fictional subject position (The Atlas Group) and semi-fictional content (constructed videos, diaries and photos relating to the conflict), is what turn his projects into successful interventions in the context of the contemporary.

Lambert-Beatty and Osborne are two of the numerous academics, writers, curators, and artists presently discussing fiction and its multiple applications in the context of contemporary visual art, as well as beyond. For example, the Department of Visual Culture at Goldsmiths University (London) organised in 2015 the day-long conference *Fiction as Method: A Conference on Counterfactuals and Virtualities in Art and Culture*.[21] Recent exhibitions that have researched the intersection between

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[20] Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 28.

[21] *Fiction as Method: A Conference on Counterfactuals and Virtualities in Art and Culture*,

fiction and visual arts include *More Real? Art in the Age of Truthiness* at SITE Santa Fe and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (2012/13); *The Shadows Took Shape*, exploring contemporary art through the lens of Afrofuturist aesthetics at the Studio Museum in Harlem (2013/14); or, more closely related to my own interests, *I Am Another World: Artistic Authorship between Desubjectivization and Recanonization* at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts (2013/14). As we will see in more detail, this widespread interest in practices as varied as fake documentaries, science fiction literature, counterfactual history, staged photography or the virtual worlds of video games has, in my view, a common denominator in the appraisal of fiction as a significant working methodology.

Two main propositions seem to justify that positive assessment: on the one hand, *intended confusion between fiction and reality* is perceived as an effective way of questioning how conceptions of trust, truth, or authenticity function in all kinds of contexts, including in the everyday; on the other, yet closely related, *the construction of fictional worlds* through sounds, words, images, etc. is appreciated as an alternative way of exploring the complexities and paradoxes of reality. Given that fiction is one of the two main research contexts in which I have decided to situate the artists discussed in this thesis (authorship being the other), let me unpack a bit further the reasoning behind this broad mapping of the present-day interest in fictional methodologies primarily, but not solely, through the ideas of Lambert-Beatty and Osborne.

Initially, let us consider the first proposition. The ways in which we perceive truth and give our trust in all kinds of situations is fundamental to how we understand our surroundings, make decisions, and organise our lives in society. Not surprisingly then, numerous artists have developed projects that deal with the working logic of truth and trust, the values associated with them, or their misrepresentation. To explore the practical applications of these concepts and in what could appear to be a paradoxical decision, many of those practitioners choose to employ fiction. For instance, parafictions such as The Yes Men's development of the parodic website GWBush.com during the 2000 US presidential election campaign are understood by Lambert-Beatty as artistic projects able to teach us how trust functions within official discourses. In this case, the implied idea is that due to the widespread (ab)use of lies by politicians and economic powers of all kinds, citizens of

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organised by Jon K. Shaw and Theo Reeves-Evison (London: Goldsmiths University, 17 October, 2015).

the twenty-first century have become qualified skeptics. In opposition to such well-trained cynicism that makes it harder both to be outraged by falsehoods and to identify what truths might be worth fighting for, Lambert-Beatty values how the usage of fiction in art projects can help us not only to be distrustful, but, more significantly, "to decide when one has been sufficiently so."[22] Lambert-Beatty's positive evaluation of parafictions resonates with many others studies and texts on art which produces "constructive and deliberate blurring of fact and fiction."[23]

A point worth mentioning in relation to these contemporary artists and art projects is their detachment from the ways in which such fact/fiction blurring was characterised in the discourse of postmodernism. For example, in his seminal text *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard argued that we live at a time of simulation in which self-referential signs and symptoms "threaten the difference between the 'true' and the 'false', the 'real' and the 'imaginary.'"[24] Indeed, for some recent critics discussing the influence of documentary techniques in contemporary art made over the last decade or so, the impossibility of distinguishing between fiction and reality, fake and authentic, is an idea still indebted to post-modern thinkers like Baudrillard.[25] Yet, for other contemporary academics, what makes the recent use of fiction distinct is its underlying notion of *a certain truth* worth discovering. By that I do not mean a genuine Truth which is hidden behind the fiction, but the fact that some truths—e.g. "the impossibility of the concordance of life and image" in documentary art, as Hito Steyerl puts it[26]—are also real. To return to Lambert-Beatty, "in experiencing most parafiction—where the fictional hangs on the factual—one is evaluating not only

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[22] Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe," 78.

[23] Andrew Boyd, "Reality Bending" in *Truth is Concrete. A Handbook for Artistic Strategies in Real Politics*, eds. Steirischer Herbst and Florian Malzacher, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 153. For another positive assessment, see Michelle Grabner, "On Bullshit: Lies, Truthiness, and Parafiction," *X-tra: Contemporary Art Quarterly* 11, no.3 (2009): 48-53, accessed 19 October, 2012, http://x-traonline.org/issues/volume-11/number-3/on-bullshit-lies-truthiness-and-parafiction/. For an analysis of specifically photographic projects including fictional elements see Lucy Soutter, "Fictive Documents" in *Why Art Photography?* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), 52-69, and Laura Bravo, *Ficciones Certificadas: Invención y Apariencia en la Creación Fotográfica (1975-2000)* (Madrid: Metáforas del Movimiento Moderno, 2006).

[24] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: The University of Michigan, 1994), 3.

[25] See Michael Nash, "Reality in the Age of Aesthetics," *Frieze Magazine* 114 (April 2008): 118-125.

[26] Hito Steyerl, "Art or Life? Documentary Jargons of Authenticity," in *Truth, Dare or Promise. Art and Documentary Revisited*, eds. Jill Daniels, Cahal McLaughlin, and Gail Pearce (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 7.

whether a proposition is fictional, but what parts of it are true," and why this matters.[27] Or to put it otherwise, the use of fiction in art is no longer considered a way for the artist to create a hoax that once revealed produces a critique, but rather fiction is seen, in T.J. Demos' words, as "a medium for the construction of truth, producing images that are psychologically significant and historically meaningful."[28]

This change of focus allows us to think about those contemporary artists invested in confusing fiction and reality as engaging in everyday circumstances. Rather than the postmodern artist who explored how representations replaced reality from the relative isolation of their studio, in this new model, artists are putting their fiction to work *in relation to actual events.* Whether it is by appearing in the public arena, using the media, the Internet, or the exhibition space, the artists employing fiction in this manner are openly engaging with the audience and the situation in which the exchange takes place. The embrace of the physical or discursive sites in which their fictions operate, and the impact of these constructions on actual events, have favoured the labelling of these artists voluntarily mixing authentic and inauthentic elements as "interventionists."[29] Inevitably, such interventions imply a variety of ethical dilemmas regarding the alteration of information and the manipulation of the public. The debates around these ethical implications are, again, unlike previous postmodern discussions about the difference (or lack thereof) between a deceptive fake and a genuine artwork.[30] What is at stake now is not an abstract consideration of aesthetic values, but the ethical consequences of deception in contextualised situations, and throughout time.[31]

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[27] Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe," 78.

[28] Demos, *The Migrant Image,* 191. In this text, Demos makes a distinction between his own use of fiction and Lambert-Beatty's concept of parafiction, which he assimilates to a hoax.

[29] See Foster, Krauss, et. al., *Art since 1900*, 769. On occasions these interventionist artists can also be described as activists, yet interventionist artists seems to also include artists whose interactions do not necessarily have or reveal clear political agendas.

[30] For two related readings on inauthentic and forged art from an aesthetic perspective see W.E. Kennick, "Art and Inauthenticity" and L.B. Cebik, "Forging Issues and Forged Art," in *Ethics and the Arts. An Anthology*, ed. David E.W. Fenner (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1995): 77-96 and 97-114.

[31] For a recent analysis of the ethical implication of the "art scandal" that relates its impacts to a specific cultural and socio-political context, see Maria Karlsoon and Måns Wrange, "Scandal Success! The Political Economy of the Art Scandal," in *Scandalous. A Reader in Art and Ethics*, ed. Nina Möntmann (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 89-105. Similarly, Theo Reeves-Evison has argued that what distinguishes contemporary artists working with deception today is a focus on process, on how their lies unfold over time, in particular spaces, and with varying effects. See Theo Reeves-Evison, "Rogues, Rumours and

Furthermore, and as we will see in Chapter 3, the *relational* character of parafictional artists—the fact that their effectiveness as authors depends on their agency in specific circumstances—will facilitate the ethical reading of their actions, rather than the moral judgement of their intentions.

The second type of positive analysis of fictional methodologies relies, as I have already pointed out, on a broader acceptance that by constructing fictional worlds, visual artists are able to meaningfully explore the complexities and paradoxes of reality. Peter Osborne's reading of Walid Raad and The Atlas Group in relation to the contemporary is a good example of this perspective.[32] Of course, many literary forms from Greek theatre to XIX-century realist novels have presented imaginary situations that are, nevertheless, reflections on factual circumstances and events. In fact, the influence of literature's exploitation of the imaginary to reflect on the factual, is acknowledged in Osborne's interpretation of the fictionalisation occurring in The Atlas Group's work. As Osborne explains,

> it [the fictionalisation] also renders explicit a certain general fictitiousness of the post-conceptual artwork, which is an effect of the counter-factuality inherent in its conceptual dimension, and imparts to it a structurally 'literary' aspect.[33]

This "literary aspect" that Osborne only hints at, is made more explicit by critics and curators discussing the impact of the science fiction genre on contemporary art projects of the last decades.[34] In a sense, what is actually attractive in science fiction literature for contemporary art is that the "counter-factuality" of the narrative—that is, the distance between what the novel imagines and the actual circumstances that

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Giants: Some Examples of Deception and Fabulation in Contemporary Art," *Parallax* 21, no.2 (2015): 196-212.

[32] I am not suggesting that these two perspectives are incompatible but only that their focus is slightly different. For instance, both Lambert-Beatty and Osborne have written about Walid Raad in their texts. Yet they read Raad's projects either emphasising their specific yet multiple play between credible and incredible facts, or as a broader reflection on the logic of the contemporary world.

[33] Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 33.

[34] For a general overview of the influence of the genre in contemporary art, see Amelia Barikin, "Making Worlds in Art and Science Fiction," in *Proceedings of the 19th International Symposium of Electronic Art*, eds. K. Cleland, L. Fisher and R. Harley (Sydney: The University of Sydney, 2013), accessed 26 November, 2015, https://www.academia.edu/5206524/Making_Worlds_in_Art_and_Science_Fiction. For specific examples of artists influenced by science-fiction narratives about the fear of otherness, see the exhibition catalogue *Alien Nation*, curators Jens Hoffman, Gilane Tawadros and John Gill (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 17 November, 2006 – 14 January, 2007).

might have inspired it—is more evident than in other forms and, for that reason, more intriguing.[35]

Fiction is today an accepted form of knowledge, and the re-evaluation of science fiction from a product of mass culture to a compelling methodological proposal is a key example of this changing scenario. I believe that it is useful to understand this recent interest in fiction, and in particular the reappraisal of science fiction, in relation to the relevance of speculation in different academic forums. Without going into a detailed explanation of what has been labeled as "the speculative turn" in continental philosophy, it might suffice to say that for its proponents, certain contemporary problematics like the ecological crisis or the ubiquitous presence of the technological cannot be tackled through previous critical and linguistic philosophical paradigms. In order to confront these new challenges, the defenders of speculative realism explain that philosophers "have begun speculating once more about the nature of reality independently of thought and of humanity more generally."[36] In this sense, fiction, as a form of speculation, is re-evaluated as a model that proposes alternatives to analysis and critique in its approach to knowledge. Moreover, as a counter-factual system of exploration, fiction—and more so science fiction—can be described as a methodology that, like speculation, "accommodates our awareness that things could be different."[37] In other words, rather than evaluating what has happened, science fiction speculates about what could have happened or what might happen under different circumstances. As has been argued in relation to speculation, "what emerges from a speculative process is and remains virtual. This does not mean that what emerges lacks reality, but rather that it remains in a process of potential realization."[38] This capacity of science fiction as "speculative process" to propose alternatives that, although unverifiable, belong

[35] It is worth stressing that I am not dealing here with all kinds of storytelling and narrative art, but with how fiction functions at a structural level in order to better understand its application to the construction of parafictional authors. In this sense, my focus on science fiction is related to how fiction as a form of knowledge is visible in the genre, more than an interest in the genre per se.

[36] Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman, "Towards a Speculative Philosophy," in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 3.

[37] Carin Kouni, foreword to *Speculation, Now. Essays and Artwork,* eds. Vyjayanthi Venuturupalli Rao, with Prem Krishnamurthy and Carin Kuoni (Durham, NC: Duke University Press and New York: Vera List Center for Arts and Politics, The New School, 2014), 11.

[38] Vyjayanthi Venuturupalli Rao, "Speculation Now," in *Speculation, Now. Essays and Artworks*, 20.

to the realm of the possible makes the genre an ideal model for artists exploring the complexities and paradoxes of reality.

In the explanations about the influence of science fiction on art projects, one of the points usually highlighted is the capacity of the genre to construct immersive worlds which operate according to specific sets of rules. For some critics, the "rightness" of these rules—which do not have to be truthful but must be coherent and comprehensive—guarantees the credibility of the alternative worlds presented by both writers and artists.[39] Yet, in many contemporary artworks using fiction, the information given is incoherent or unsatisfying, as Osborne explains in relation to The Atlas Group's systematic use of "aberrant chronologies and narrative contradictions."[40] The disruption of the believability of the fiction can be motivated by a straightforward revelation of its spuriousness, or, in most cases, by a more self-reflective consideration about the arbitrariness of any fiction's rules. In fact, and as with fiction itself, uncertainty appears not as a way to voluntarily deceive audiences but as a fundamental part of any reality.

The disruption of the plausibility of what is being presented can also be noticed in art projects influenced by another type of immersive world-making, that of videogames. As Domenico Quaranta explains, a great number of contemporary artists influenced by videogames intervene in the games' structure by modifying its software or introducing alternative narratives with a variety of aesthetic and political aims.[41] Nonetheless, videogames are particularly interesting in the context of this research for another reason: their role in the reconfiguration and the wide-spread familiarity with the figure of the avatar. Taking the similarities between the idea of the avatar and that of parafictional artists, it is worth briefly considering the transformation and popularity of what until recently was a very specific religious term.[42] The etymological origin of the word avatar is to be found in the Sanskrit

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[39] See Barikin, *Making Worlds*. Her observations follow Nelson Goodman's influential book *Ways of World-Making*.

[40] Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 34.

[41] For a summary on the ways in which artists influenced by videogames intervene in the logic of the games' structure see Domenico Quaranta, "Game Aesthetics. How Videogames Are Transforming Contemporary Art," in *GameScenes. Art in the Age of Videogames*, eds. Matteo Bittanti and Domenico Quaranta (Monza, Italy: Johan & Levi, 2006), 297-308.

[42] The trickster, "in his/her role as provocateur of chance and mischievous mediator and translator between the divine and the human" can also be connected both to the avatar and the parafictional artist. Jean Fisher, ed. *Re-verberations. Tactics of Resistance, Forms of Agency in Trans/cultural Practices* (Amsterdam: Jan van Eyck Akademie Editions, 2010), 7.

"avatarana," literally meaning "descent," which refers to the physical embodiment of a deity when it "comes down" from heaven to earth.[43] An avatar is, therefore, the material incarnation of an immaterial divinity in its earthly form. More recently, the word has been appropriated by the discourses on the virtual world to refer to "a computer-generated figure controlled by a person via a computer."[44] Similar to the already mentioned heteronym—and probably different from its sacred version— these virtual characters can have characteristics of their own that do not need to match the offline identity of the person using them. In this new sense, any digitally constructed figure has the potential to be described as an avatar.

Returning to the sphere of artistic methodologies, in 2005 art historian David Joselit started using the term avatar in connection to a series of practices that he labelled as "navigational art." He characterised these artworks as proposals that without being examples of new media art per se, allowed artists to *move freely* between physical and virtual territories, confusing the distinctions between the factual and the fictional. In his words: "the avatar makes possible an imaginary/real mobility that the artist's physical presence in site-specific art could hardly allow."[45] Amongst the examples of this new type of art he included Janet Cardiff's auditory projects in which the participant is presented with a sound experience that contradicts the information coming from the rest of his or her senses, or Matthew Barney's cast of fictional characters that co-exist with actors playing their own identities. As I will further describe in Chapter 2, in later texts Joselit narrowed down the notion of the mobility of the artists to the non-physical territory of identity, and proposed, quite dramatically, the avatar "as a new form of artistic subjecthood."[46] Without necessarily agreeing with Joselit, I think that the development of parafictional artists—like the use of avatars by artists—reveals something important about the conditions in which the artist's identities function today. Yet, more than simply a new form of subjecthood, parafictionality is, I will argue, a way of

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[43] "Avatar," Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed 12 March, 2017, http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=avatar.

[44] Beth Coleman, *Hello Avatar: the Rise of the Networked Generation* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2011), 12.

[45] David Joselit, "Art, Avatars and the Contemporary Mediaspace," *Artforum* 43, no.10 (Summer 2005): 278-9.

[46] Foster, Krauss, et. al., *Art since 1900,* 764.

acknowledging the complex and paradoxical positions of artists as authors in the contemporary art world.

Joselit's introduction of the fictive figure of the avatar as a way to think about the mobility of the artist, as well as Peter Osborne's interest in the fictionalisation of artistic authority in relation to the contemporary, start to indicate how parafictional strategies can be used to discuss the identity of the artist today. But before moving on, I would like to make one final point about fiction as a contemporary methodology in relation to its intrinsic connection to politics. The ideas of philosopher Jacques Rancière about the topic seem to have influenced writers appraising art projects that intentionally confuse fiction and reality, as well as critics valuing the production of knowledge through the construction of fictional worlds.[47] In the short text *The Politics of Aesthetics* (published in English in 2004), Rancière argues that in the present aesthetic regime, fiction and non-fiction genres share procedures for constructing meaning. The vindication of similar descriptive and narrative arrangements in "writing history and writing stories,"[48] facilitates an important move away from the classical real/imaginary dichotomy. It also allows Rancière to defend that "the real must be fictionalized in order to be thought", while signaling that "it is not a matter of claiming that everything is fiction."[49] For him, therefore, both politics and art construct fictions: descriptive and narrative arrangements through which meaning is made intelligible. Both, at the same time, "produce effects in reality,"[50] for political statements and artistic works propose forms and models of being, seeing, and saying that affect how people conceive themselves and others. In that sense too, art and politics are indistinguishable. As Rancière reminds us, authoritarian governments worldwide have censored not only rival political discourses, but also literary and other aesthetic productions, for embedded in them is the capacity of all fictions not only to present alternative worlds, but to generate different models of behavior, to produce other social organisations, and facilitate new ways of communication. Concurring with Rancière's views, I believe that

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[47] Explicit references to Rancière can be found in several of the texts used in the writing of this section. See, for example, the opening quote in Nash, "Reality in the Age of Aesthetics," 118 or the footnotes in Kouni, "Foreword," 13.

[48] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York and London: Continuum, 2004), 38.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid., 39.

parafictional artists are not only able to reflect contemporary paradigms of authorship but also to affect them and even to transform them.

My name is Legion: for we are many

A legion of parafictional artists seem to be gathering not at the walls of the art world, but already within them. Apart from The Atlas Group, many others with various degrees of visibility are starring in all kinds of encounters. From Reena Spaulings multi-tasking as artist and gallerist to Janez Janša, Janez Janša and Janez Janša's "officially-sanctioned" name change; from the research of Natascha Sadr Haghighian into new forms of hyper-professional art production to the tribute of the Australian collective Brown Council to the under-recognised performance artist Barbara Cleveland, the strategy of developing a "fictional artist with a real career"[51] is becoming more and more pervasive. At the same time, a substantial number of curatorial projects from the mid-1990s onwards have directly addressed these authorial strategies. By mounting exhibitions in which the participating artists employ pseudonyms, alter egos, or produce works through non-existent entities of one or another kind, a series of institutional and freelance curators are presently reflecting on these contemporary art practices. Their curatorial decisions and catalogue essays imply, for the most part, positive appraisals. These curatorial initiatives taking place in metropolises such as New York, London, Sao Paulo, or Istanbul, as well as in numerous places all over Europe, America, and Asia, are, together, the most common vehicle through which parafictional artists function as actual authors.[52]

Despite the undeniable attraction of such strategies to contemporary artists working today, as well as to curators organising exhibitions world-wide, there is a limited literature on the subject, and no in-depth analysis that tries to understand the phenomenon both in its specificity as well as in its diversity. Before attempting to

[51] This expression was used by art critic Roberta Smith to describe the parafictional artist Darko Maver. Roberta Smith, "Art in Review. Eva and Franco Mattes," *The New York Times*, 9 March, 2007, accessed 12 May, 2015, http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=940CE7DF1331F93AA35750C0A9619C8B63.

[52] Although most of the examples I will be discussing come from Europe and North America, I believe that parafictional strategies can and are being used in other geographical contexts too, in part due to the globalisation of the art world. In Chapter 2, I will come back to the question of the identity of the artist in the global art world.

write such an analysis myself, I would like to introduce a phrase—"My name is Legion: for we are many"—that, I believe, strongly resonates with the variety of intentions and interpretations assigned to parafictional artists. In the New Testament we can read the story of the encounter between Jesus and a man possessed by demons. According to the Gospel of Mark (5:9), Jesus asked this individual for his name, to which he replied: "My name is Legion: for we are many." This dramatic line, which has been adopted and adapted by numerous popular culture ventures—including black metal bands, horror movies, and comic books—was also used by Roland Barthes to characterize the plurality he perceived in a new kind of writing which he described as "text" in opposition to the monolithic, fixed, single, and sacred interpretation of what until then had been known as "work":

> The work has nothing disturbing for any monistic philosophy . . . ; for such a philosophy, plural is the Evil. Against the work, therefore, the text could well take as its motto the words of the man possessed by demons: "My name is Legion: for we are many".[53]

In the sense used by Barthes—and more so given the intrinsic dependence between the advent of the text and "the death of the Author" (a point to which I will soon return)—the phrase "for we are many" can also frame the *radical polysemy* implied by parafictional artists and the varied interpretations that their existence can elicit.

In a more literal sense, the expression can also account for the psychological perception of the multiple others which co-exist in each of us, and for how strategies such as the development of parafictional artists can personify that "possession". Plus, if in present-day self-help discourses the call to "be authentic" is a sort of sacred motto,[54] parafictional artists imply a certain *evil* difficulty to discovering one's "true self." The "multiple, invented, personal names" of the Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa are a great example of the idea that we are all *innumerable others*. As it is well-known, Pessoa wrote under numerous identities, including that of a futurist poet (Alvaro de Campos), a neo-classical one (Ricardo Reis), and their common tutor as well as Pessoa's own teacher, Alberto Caeiro. For Pessoa, these were not mere pseudonyms, but heteronyms, for each had his own biography and intellectual

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[53] Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text" (1971), in *Image, music, text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 160.

[54] See Charles Guignon, "The Culture of Authenticity," in *On Being Authentic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 1-6.

independence which allowed them to develop their own interests, and make their own aesthetic choices. As Pessoa himself stated, "A heteronym's work is that of the author outside its own person; that of a personality completely fabricated by him as it could be done by any of the characters from any of his plays" [my translation].[55] In a famous text about the relationship between Pessoa and the authors he invented, the Mexican writer Octavio Paz affirmed that "the authenticity of the heteronyms depends on their poetic coherence . . . Reis and Campos said what perhaps he himself [Pessoa] might never have said."[56] In that sense, the plausibility of Pessoa's heteronyms depends on being able to present them as convincing authors working independently, rather than on them being "real" or not. Pessoa's inauthentic others—whether demoniac or not—have been an inspiration for artists and curators thinking about fiction and authorship over recent decades.[57] Admittedly, Pessoa's heteronyms have also become a useful way for me to think about the characteristics of parafictional visual artists and the consequences of their existence.

From quite a different perspective, the phrase "My name is Legion: for we are many" has also been appropriated to articulate political demands for its connotations of community, specifically of one made up of outsiders. This was the sense in which, I believe, the collective identity Luther Blissett employed a slightly modified version of the expression in the *Declaration of Rights* authored in his name:

> What the industry of the integrated spectacle owes me, it is owed to the many that I am, and is owed to me because I am many. From this viewpoint, we can agree on a generalized compensation. You will not have peace until I will not have the money! LOTS OF MONEY BECAUSE I AM MANY: CITIZEN INCOME FOR LUTHER BLISSETT![58]

During the second-half of the 1990s, the name Luther Blissett functioned as an open source alias that a network of people and activists used to present counterculture proposals that would feed off each other. Originated by a group of Italian students,

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[55] Pessoa, *Antología de Álvaro de Campos*, 33.

[56] Octavio Paz, "Unknown to Himself" (1962), in *A Centenary Pessoa*, Fernando Pessoa, eds. Eugénio Lisboa with L.C. Taylor (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995), 9.

[57] For example, the exhibition *Pretext: Heteronyms* curated by Juliet Steyn and Richard Appignanesi in 1995 was inspired by Fernando Pessoa's authorial strategies, and so was the more contemporaneous *Alias* curated by Adam Bromberg and Oliver Chanarin in 2011. Both will be discussed in Chapter 5.

[58] Quoted in Marco Deseriis, "'Lots of Money Because I am Many': The Luther Blissett Project and the Multiple-Use Name Strategy," in *Cultural Activism: Practices, Dilemmas and Possibilities*, eds. Beg M. Zden Firat and Aylin Kuryel (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 78.

hackers, and artists, Luther Blissett—a name which had originally belonged to a British-Jamaican footballer—became, over the course of a few years, the author of a series of media pranks, interventions in the urban space, and politically-minded texts throughout Europe. The invitation to share the name's visibility with whoever was interested in appropriating it, was supposed to turn Luther Blissett into a "readymade author" whose pre-established reputation was open for everyone to benefit from.[59] In order to guarantee the name's status and democratic logic, in December 1999 the group of people most closely related to the Luther Blissett Project decided to "sacrifice" the identity, and, in so doing, detached themselves from it, while inviting others, elsewhere, to start using it.[60] As I will go on to further explain in Chapter 2, Luther Blissett is an immediate predecessor of a certain type of parafictional identity we can encounter in the art world today. Linked to this, the use of "for I am many" in his *Declaration of Rights*, can be regarded as inspirational for those communities of practitioners that join together under a fictive multiple identity with the aspiration of gaining a more powerful political voice while remaining beyond any sort of individual identification.[61] In this openly *interventionist* sense, the phrase implies the validity of the demands made to the very few who economically exploit the creative labour of the many.

Finally, as I have proposed and will further argue, the development of parafictional identities is a growing tendency in recent contemporary art. Over the years I have taken to write this thesis, I have spoken to many artists, researchers, curators, and critics about the topic. Through these conversations I have learnt about the Jewish-Belgian surrealist artist and pornographer Justine Frank; about Luis Ospina's documentary *Un Tigre de Papel* (*A Paper Tiger*) on the non-existent Colombian artist Pedro Manrique Figueroa; about the transformation of Claire Fontaine from a French notebook brand into an internationally successful author; about the reappearance of Walter Benjamin and Kasimir Malevich in XXI-century Belgrade; about Olivier Castel's conception of over thirty creative identities; about

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[59] For an overview of the name's original working logic see the compilation of texts published in the website *Luther Blissett Project*, accessed 10 July, 2015, www.lutherblissett.net, or Luther Blissett, "The Luther Blissett Manifesto," in *Mind Invaders. A reader in psychic warfare, cultural sabotage and semiotic terrorism*, ed. Stewart Home (London and New York: Serpent's Tail, 1997), 41-44.

[60] Luther Blissett, *"Seppuku!" the Luther Blissett's ritual suicide*, accessed 5 July, 2015, http://www.lutherblissett.net/index_en.html.

[61] Researcher and performance artist Sibylle Peters uses the expression "Being Many" in a similar fashion. Sibylle Peters, "Being Many," in *Truth is Concrete*, 129-131.

the time travels of the artist Rosalind Brodsky who died in 2058; and about the invention of the painters Nikolai Buchumov and Apelles Ziablov by the Russian-born tandem Komar and Melamid. Thereby, I can imagine a near future in which parafictional artists will become ubiquitous within the art world and their numbers legion.

No Tag. Anonymity, Pseudonymity and Alter-Egos

The presentation of the amply positive assessments of contemporary art projects which use fiction as a methodology situates the parafictional artists I will be discussing in a broader context of interests and concerns. Having said that, what motivates me as a trained art historian and practicing curator to explore the intersection between authorship and fiction in contemporary art? Looking back, I remember that during my BA and MA studies in Madrid and New York respectively, I developed an ongoing interest in artists who collaborated with non-artists in the production of their works, as well as in the theorists who supported them. I recall reading essays by Miwon Kwon, Grant Kester and Claire Bishop on new genres of public art, conversation pieces, and the discontentment of collaboration.[62] Also, I can recall being captivated by the mix of utopia and exploitation in works such as Francis Alÿs' *When Faith Moves Mountains* (in which a vast number of volunteers try to displace a sand dune), Santiago Sierra's projects with prostitutes or illegal immigrants, or Thomas Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument* built at a Turkish-German social housing complex during Documenta 11. At that time, I even wrote a hypothetical proposal for an exhibition which would include projects in which artists collaborated with animals, with disabled people, or with persons in different types of precarious situations, and which I ironically titled *Happy Together*.

In relation to those interests, I started thinking about what happened to artists' supposed authority when they decided to work anonymously. As opposed to literature, I could not find research conducted on the topic of anonymity or pseudonymity in contemporary visual arts, so in 2009 I decided to submit an

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[62] Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Location Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), and Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 51–79.

Figure 0.4. Installation views of *No Tag. Anonymity, Pseudonymity and Alter-Egos*, La Casa Encendida, Madrid, 2009.

exhibition proposal to a curatorial contest in Madrid with the title *No Tag. Anonymity, Pseudonymity and Alter-Egos*. Our project (I submitted it with co-curator Héctor Sanz Castaño) was selected and we presented the resulting exhibition in the galleries of the cultural centre La Casa Encendida.[63] The main questions we explored on that occasion were *why* questions: why had visual artists rarely used pseudonyms or anonymity as opposed to their widespread use in all kinds of authored texts, and why were we now able to find a good number of recent examples of their utilisation in visual art projects? To demonstrate the veracity of our statement, we included projects by activist groups like the Guerrilla Girls and ACT UP, by anonymous collectives like Bernadette Corporation and Artists Anonymous, by artists creating under multiple identities like Bruce Conner and Joan Fontcuberta, and by made-up artists like the Serbian Darko Maver (see fig. 0.4 for installation shots of our exhibition in Madrid). We also presented documentation of street art produced under pseudonyms, which in hindsight I consider to be a different thing altogether, since these artists use fake identities due to the illegal status of their actions.

As for the artists and collectives producing "legal" projects, we described their motives as being primarily socio-political or mainly meta-artistic. In the first group, we included those artists who aimed to hide their identity because their openly critical messages could have negative consequences for themselves if their names

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[63] The catalogue of this exhibition and of the other two that won that edition of the contest *Inéditos* is available online. *Inéditos 2009* (Madrid: La Casa Encendida, 30 June—30 August, 2009), accessed 9 December, 2015, http://ineditos.lacasaencendida.es/assets/upload/ineditos2009.pdf.

were known. Such has been the case for numerous writers over the centuries. As for what reason artists have had to do so less frequently, the explanation we gave at the time was the relative ambiguity of messages conveyed visually as opposed to the explicitness of verbal ones (of course, the opposite could also be argued, yet this is what we proposed as a possible justification). The importance of having a recognisable signature in order to access the art market or any other kind of professional circuit seemed to be another probable reason for fewer artists than writers to work anonymously. If we think about the numerous novels that despite being published through a pseudonym achieve a bestseller status, it seems logical to affirm that due to the commercial organisation of the literary world and the mediation of editors and publishing houses, those writing can more easily remain unknown than visual artists attempting the same route.[64] Consequently, in our exhibition, we identified the critique of the economic function of the author's name in the visual arts from the Renaissance onwards as the main meta-artistic impulse to work anonymously now.

Despite its failings, the exhibition was well-received and to this day I encounter people from the Spanish art world who remember the project, particularly young artists who have told me they were inspired by some of the proposals on display. We also, however, received some criticism and challenging questions. Amongst them, I remember someone asking what was the relation between the authorial strategies that we were identifying and the content of the works on display; were the artworks saying something about anonymity and pseudonymity by themselves or were they just its by-product? Whether one chooses to interpret an artwork created through a pseudonym in direct connection or independently from its conditions of production remains a problematic question worth further exploration. A further issue that came up was why Héctor and I had not experimented with anonymity or pseudonymity ourselves. While in New York, I had been inspired by the appearance of an invented curator, Toni Burlap, as a sort of third curator of the 2006 Whitney Biennial; but as with the "physical" curators of that Biennial—Chrissie Iles and Philippe Vergne— Héctor and I were not prepared to go unacknowledged. We did, however, ask our teacher from Universidad Autónoma of Madrid, the late Juan Antonio Ramírez, for a

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[64] During the writing of this thesis I became acquainted with the Elena Ferrante phenomenon and her best-selling *Neapolitan Novels*. Despite the author's insistence on remaining unknown under her pseudonym, in 2016 a journalist revealed the "true" identity of the writer. The "unmasking" was criticised by the literary world and by the numerous fans of the novels.

short text to open our section of the catalogue that would be authored under his, at the time, publicly unacknowledged pseudonym, Clavelinda Fuster. His/her text is a wonderfully playful, as well as a profound take on identity and art, and I quote him/her here at length:

> Life is a dream—that is, the individual is simply an actor playing perhaps one, or possibly various different roles. The self doesn't exist. We shouldn't be surprised by people's later fascination with the notion of a double identity, and with all manner of masks and cross-dressing. From this perspective, the multiple, invented, personal names of Fernando Pessoa are only the refined replicas, reproduced in the context of high literary culture, of an underworld inhabited by Fantomas, Caligari, The Phantom of the Opera, Superman, Batman, The Spirit, the Bearded Woman of the circus, and an endless stream of other doubles and double-acts. . . . What I'm trying to say is that if every human being is an impostor, the disguise reaches a sort of paroxysm in the case of the creative artists. It wouldn't matter if the creator signed the piece or not, if he/she were one person or another. The name—who did this or that— is only useful later on, so as to organise the junk in the museums, in the antique shops, in the library catalogues—and so as to fill the sacks of the vanities. Clavelinda Fuster, *c'est moi*?[65]

When in 2012 I wrote the first proposal for my PhD dissertation, I felt that a single exhibition had not been sufficient to engage deeply enough with how artists were questioning their own position as authors via fiction. My perspective was at the same time becoming both wider and more specific. I was no longer interested in anonymity per se, and had realised that the exhibition *No Tag* had brought together artists who were developing strategies too varied to be jointly researched. Yet, I was also aware that the kind of artists I was concerned with were not working in isolation but that other discourses and settings like the discipline of art history or curatorial practices were influencing what they could do and how. In a sense, I stopped being so concerned with *why* artists were personally using anonymity or pseudonymity, and started to consider *how* and with *what consequences* they were developing fictional strategies; from particular intentions to broader contexts of meaning and interaction.

Still, though, what moved me to curate that exhibition is similar to what motivates me to write this thesis. Firstly, there are a good number of artists who are articulating their identity as authors using fiction in one or another sense, yet this

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[65] Clavelinda Fuster, "Soy Yo?," in *Inéditos 2009*, 19.

remains an area largely under-researched. Although researchers and art historians such as like Peter Osborne and David Joselit have paid some attention to the consequences of the intersection between authorship and fiction in contemporary art, and even though collective name strategies like the one employed by Luther Blissett and others have been researched in some detail by academics like the media sociologist Marco Deseriis,[66] I have not found a single study that looks at the topic in its full complexity. Secondly, the proposals that parafictional artists are developing are theoretically challenging in relation to biography and intentionality, as well as to copyright or audience expectations, and this makes them worth discussing, as I will hopefully demonstrate in the following chapters. Finally, I believe that initiatives like the exhibition *No Tag* or this text can provide to those involved in the contemporary art world some useful tools to navigate better an institutionalised setting deeply affected by the logic of globalisation and neoliberalism. I believe there is a potential for parafictional strategies to be valuable examples of how to negotiate contradictory requirements, to provide us with models for how to intervene without having to comply. By that I am not saying that parafictional artists represent immediate liberating or emancipatory proposals (that is where interpretation can help us to distinguish between what parafictional artists seem to intend and how they actually operate), yet, I do claim that the fictional authorial strategies that I will be here discussing can inspire artists, curators, and other agents to find new methods, other devices, different procedures to reconcile what might resemble unresolved or irresolvable situations.

Thesis structure

Parafictional artists are able to operate as authors in the contemporary art world; they are included in exhibitions, appear in specialised media, and sell works. Yet their identity is hard to pin down—fake? (Mis)appropriated? Collectively-used? These circumstances elicit a wide variety of interpretations and responses: from being perceived as democratic figures who can, for instance, give open access to the privileges of authorship, to being criticised for jeopardising the authenticity of the

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[66] Marco Deseriis, *Improper Names. Collective Pseudonyms from the Luddites to Anonymous* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

problems that "real" artists have to confront. In fact, these contradictory responses demonstrate that parafictional artists are productive vehicles to investigate *who* are being called artists today, *how* is their behaviour understood, and *what* do they represent within the art world. From this perspective, it is the operative character of parafictional artists that makes them a more useful vehicle to understand current transformations in authorship than, for instance, attempts to gather descriptions of all the artists that have ever appeared as central characters of stories, plays and novels.[67]

In order to produce a complex reading that responds to the plurality signified by parafictional artists, this thesis is arranged in two parts and five chapters. While Part I attempts to generate a series of interpretations of specific parafictional artists using the tools of art history, in Part II the focus shifts to the extended art world and to how curating can be a valid alternative to present and discuss the work of parafictional artists in public. Following this arrangement, the initial chapters of each section ("The artist in new art history" and "Fiction(s) in/of the contemporary art world") serve to contextualise the proposals that are then made in the rest of the chapters. These proposals range from interpretative ones about the different meanings and functions of parafictional artists to curatorial ones about how to intervene most productively in the very problematic that these fictional authorial strategies reveal.

Chapter 1 is conceived as a literature review on the concept of artistic authorship from its initial transformation in the late 1970s to the present well-established repudiation of the term. This detailed examination of the main critiques against authorship is necessary to understand how parafictional artists working today are able to destabilise current paradigms of contemporary artist-hood. Thus, Chapter 1 reflects on a series of texts written by art historians grouped under what has been loosely termed as "new art history." For these writers—including Griselda Pollock, Fred Orton, Rosalind Krauss, and Hal Foster—the central role that the artist as author had played in previous art historical accounts had necessarily to be re-thought in light of the influence of post-structuralist ideas. The chapter focuses on two main ways in which such reconsiderations on the protagonism of the artist were made: firstly, by questioning the function of the biographical in the construction of the identity of the

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[67] See Koen Brams and Krist Gruithuijsen, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Fictional Artists* (Zurich: JRP Ringer, 2010).

artist; and secondly, by revisiting the methodological implications of intentionality in the interpretation of artworks. Biography and intention appear, therefore, as the two main fields through which the role of the artist is discussed and contested by this generation of art historians. Their ideas and opinions are, as I will show, still extremely influential, and to a great extent, the legacy of new art history conditions how authorship is conceptualised today.

Following the above, Chapters 2 and 3 describe and analyse parafictional artists as authors, first in relation to biography and then in connection to intention. Through the introduction and discussion of examples, both chapters attempt to present the intersection of authorship and fiction not only from the perspective of art history (as in Chapter 1) or the curatorial (as in Chapter 5), but by concentrating on the practices and artworks developed by the artists themselves. More concretely, in Chapter 2, I propose two contexts or discursive settings to understand the impact of fiction on the biographical; each of these "modes of the biographical" function as a sort of sub-chapter under which I present short case studies. The first mode considers how current conceptions of identity within art discourses are viable or unfeasible ways to comprehend the identities of parafictional artists such as Reena Spaulings, Barbara Cleveland, Donelle Woolford and of Elena Scourti's ghost-written memoir *The Outage*. The second mode looks at models of artistic labour and copyright in the neoliberal economy and connects parafictional artists like Luther Blissett and Robbie Williams to such debates. At the same time, the section tries to differentiate between previous fictional strategies employed by visual artists and the parafictional artists I am discussing here by focusing on the unique capacity of the latter to produce a critique of authorship *at the same time as* being viable artists in economic and/or institutional terms. Therefore, the two sub-chapters share the ultimate purpose of locating parafictional artists in present-day discourses, distinguishing their examples from previous models in which fiction was used by artists in other ways and with other consequences.

Without forgetting the central role of the biographical in the construction of any parafictional identity, in Chapter 3 I concentrate on the second of the above mentioned fields: intention. Here, I initially offer a methodological approach on artists working with fiction today that accepts the consequences of agency but avoids the pitfalls of intentionality. To put this method into practice, the chapter describes in detail the case of the three Slovenian-based artists named Janez Janša, Janez Janša and Janez Janša, and proposes a way of understanding them as "agents without

intention." I met the three Janez Janšas in 2014 when I invited them to participate in a project I developed for the Herbert Read Gallery in Canterbury. As a result, my interpretations are informed by my first-hand experience with their project and artworks. Similarly, the hypothesis that agency can be conceptualised independently from intention was first tested out in an exhibition I organised in the same gallery, and therefore it was also affected by my personal relation with artists and audiences. As a result, some of the ideas and insights in this chapter are related to my own practice as curator, and in that sense, Chapter 3 is a good transition into Part II which deals with the relevance of curating and with specific exhibitions.

If Chapter 1 contextualises the critique of authorship and how it can be applied to parafictional artists, Chapter 4 aims to situate such debates in the contemporary art world. The chapter describes the structural transformations experienced by the art world from the early 1990s until its current configuration as a network of interconnected institutions. Such changes, I argue, run parallel to the increasing protagonism of the professional curator on the one hand, and to the development of parafictional artists on the other. The chapter, in fact, is organised with the goal of connecting the discussions around curators and curating to the employment of parafictional strategies by artists. In both cases, the idea of authorship in an apparently inclusive art world and the dispute over meanings play a fundamental role. What is more, it is because there seems to be no outside to the art world that artists and some curators decide to turn to fiction to overcome certain limitations of how they are meant to function in such a tightly knit context. The chapter ends by looking at the ethical implications for curators who decide to approach fiction in their own projects, and how their agency as that of the artist and the public varies in different institutional settings.

Finally, in Chapter 5 I discuss exhibitions that have included artists working under different kinds of fictitious identities. As pointed out, there is a limited amount of art historical research on the subject of fictional authorial strategies. In contrast, a good number of curatorial projects have directly addressed the topic. The decision of curators and institutions to present these artists and their artworks constitutes, therefore, the most revealing attempt to understand the phenomenon. My examples range in time from the mid-1990s to the present, coinciding with the reconfiguration of the art world into a network structure and with the spread of the critique of authorship beyond its original academic context. I have organised the curatorial projects discussed into three categories: (A) projects in which artists remained

anonymous or were asked to invent an heteronym, (B) exhibitions in which the use of fiction as an authorial strategy was itself the theme of the exhibition, and (C) curatorial initiatives that went beyond the thematic and beyond the exhibition as the sole mode of curatorial presentation. While the different cases that I will discuss provide important evidence about how curators approached and explained artists using fiction during the period examined, the chapter ends by endorsing those projects that accept fiction as part of the curatorial process itself. In my view, it is by acknowledging how fiction can affect curatorial processes that it becomes possible to generate new understandings of how authorship (including the curator's) functions in the contemporary art world.

PART I

Chapter 1. **The artist in new art history**

The critique of authorship

The Atlas Group and Luther Blissett cannot be described as mere pseudonyms; they are parafictional artists with personalities, styles and art works of their own, despite such attributes not corresponding to any particular or single body. Parafictional artists are also able to participate in exhibitions, sell to collectors and institutions, give talks and interviews, or publish texts even once their fictional nature has been revealed. Thus, they are *problematic authors* both in a traditional sense and in more contemporary ways: Can you use their name to classify their work? Is there any continuity or coherence in their *oeuvre*? What significance shall we give to their biographies? And to their intentions? Furthermore, can their identity signify in the way other artists' identities do? What type of cultural worker do they represent? Are parafictional artists entitled to copyright? From whom do you need permission if you want to exhibit their work? Are they ethically responsible for their actions? Perhaps one could disregard these questions—as some do—by stating that parafictional artists are only artworks, not artists;[1] yet these "artwork-artists" are able to perform, as Michel Foucault would say, the "author function."[2] In fact, parafictional artists behave as knowledgeable agents who have learned the lessons of post-structuralism on the deserialization of the transcendental author, and on the constructed nature of all forms of expression, while at the same time provoking tensions with current paradigms of contemporary artist-hood.

Critical approaches to contemporary artist-hood can be crudely separated into two models: that of the socially-sensitive, politically-committed, collaboratively-

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[1] Such is the view, for example, of the artist Osman Khan regarding Donelle Woolford. Greg Baise, stephen garrett dewier, et al., "Will the Real Donelle Woolford Please Stand-up?," ∞ *mile* 5 (April 2014), accessed 10 July, 2014,
http://www.infinitemiledetroit.com/Will_the_real_Donelle_Woolford_please_stand-up.html.

[2] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" (1969), in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin Books, 1984), 101-120.

working, non-commercial artist, and that of the commodified, aesthetically-pleasing, disengaged and individualistic artist. For a vast number of writers on contemporary art coming from a long-term commitment to critical theory, this broad distinction tries to differentiate, as Johanna Drucker explains, the "good faith" from the "bad faith" artist depending on their distance or complicity with the logic of the cultural industry.[3] To which of the two models do parafictional artist belong? Considering their undeniable interrogation of individuality, originality and authenticity, they could be perceived as being aligned with anti-market positions. Yet, due to their fictive nature, their *intentions* can be easily dismissed as profit-seeking; a way to "play" the politically-committed artist or to follow whichever cause is fashionable, in order to be invited to exhibit and sell. Moreover, one could suggest that parafictional artists operate as a commercial strategy to give more visibility to artists who under their own identity would not get access to certain privileges. So, are parafictional artists progressive in their performance of authorship (is such a position even possible?) or are they regressive and opportunistic? Rather than passing immediate moral judgment on them, in Chapters 2 and 3 I will be discussing in detail ways in which parafictional artists are problematic authors by examining a number of case studies. First, however, I find it necessary to identify the origin of those theoretical discourses that define our current approach to artist-hood, and particularly how the reconfiguration of art history into a more critical discipline since the 1970s affected how the figure of the artist has been understood since then.

"Authorship" is a term almost entirely absent in art historical publications from the last ten years, except as a concept to be disputed, diffused, or reassigned. For example, in the extensive series of *Documents of Contemporary Arts* published by Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press dedicated to all sorts of concepts and practices like chance, humor, the studio, painting, etc., by May 2017 there was no volume on authorship. John Roberts—whose attempt to look in detail at evolving theories of authorship after Marcel Duchamp is rare within the literature—was in 2007 still recounting a trajectory where progressive artists criticise "the fetishization of artistic subjectivity" by developing models of production opposed to the one of "the master in his studio."[4] Roberts, a social art historian, actually disregards other types of

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[3] Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams. Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 250.

[4] John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form. Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade* (New York and London: Verso, 2007), 147.

critiques of authorship such as appropriation as merely "formal" or "autistic."[5] For him, a socially significant critique of authorship takes place when the artist dissolves artistic authorship "into the social division of labor" by, for instance, collaborating with non-artists.[6] Specialist in visual cultures, Irit Rotgoff, similarly concerned with how artworks are produced, distinguishes between a type of positivist collaboration which serves to bring people together for commercially strategic reasons, and another form of collaboration which results in a questioning of production itself and provokes "the subjugation of the heroic, individual artist to the cultural embeddedness of the art work."[7]

From the above, we could deduce that when the concept of authorship appears in socially-sensitive art history (or related discourses like visual culture) it results in an inevitable link between the single author and the "bad faith" artist, as if to gain the position of "good faith," the artist had to renounce the aspiration of being an individual author(ity). This "denigration of authorship," as described by Claire Bishop in relation to the imposition of ethics as the main—and sometimes single— criteria in the appreciation of participatory practices, can riskily evolve into a hardening of "simplistic oppositions [such as] egotistical versus collaborative artists";[8] a type of antagonism that demonstrates its limits when applied to parafictional artists.

In order to understand these disapproving approaches to authorship, it is crucial, as already mentioned, to review a series of fundamental debates and shifts in art historical discourses that starting in the 1970s and gaining centrality in the 1980s were labeled—not without dispute—as "new art history."[9] The mainly Anglophone

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[5] Ibid., 69.

[6] Ibid., 152.

[7] Irit Rogoff, "Production Lines," *Collaborative Arts – Conversations on Collaborative Arts Practice* (2013), accessed 5 May, 2014, http://collabarts.org/?p=69.

[8] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Arts and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York: Verso Books, 2012), 125.

[9] See the history of the coining of the term and its disputes in Griselda Pollock and Fred Orton, *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), xvi-xix. I am using "new art history" following Jonathan Harris, *The New Art History: a critical introduction* (London: Routledge, 2001), in which the author expands its notion to include what he calls "critical" or "radical" art historians. The core group of English art historians associated with New Art History—T.J. Clark, Orton, Pollock—had initially developed their practice under the influence of Marxism. However, under the term "new art history" (in lower case), I am also including American-based art historians like Krauss or Foster whose background was not directly linked to social art history but who had a major part in the

art historians whom, mostly working from UK and US-based universities, were identified with this academic movement had a common interest in contemporaneous theory and in applying it to the study of art. Coming from different backgrounds, and with more or less notable political intentions, the defence by new art history of a discipline more permeable to ideas coming from other fields of knowledge—from semiotics and linguistic analysis to Marxism, psychoanalysis and feminism— expanded what art history could say and do. Art historians such as T.J. Clark, Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock, Fred Orton, Janet Wolff, Nicholas Green, Lucy Lippard, Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, David Summers, Keith Moxey, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, or Mieke Bal, amongst others, were modifying the conditions under which art was understood and valued, and in their texts they were ultimately interested in changing interpretative models.

As I will show over the next pages, the focus of the analyses carried out by the academics of new art history were, for the most part, historical and modernist personalities such as Rembrandt van Rijn, Édouard Manet, Auguste Rodin, Vincent Van Gogh, Pablo Picasso and Eugène Atget, as well as the artists associated with Abstract Expressionism—most notably Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko—due to the widespread characterization of these figures as supreme examples of individualism and expressivity. The undeniable influence of the reconfiguration of the figure of the artist by new art history seems to have exhausted what could be said about artistic authorship. In significant opposition to how the art market basis its value system on the construction of artists as value-making, identifiable, meaningful authors, forward-thinking art history as well as other related discourses like curating or art criticism have, for the most part, rejected an engagement with any affirmative approach to authorship. In fact, by reviewing some of these art historical positions on the subject, I hope to demonstrate that their arguments constitute the theoretical framework that supports the well-established dismissal of the term.

The following sections are organised according to the two main focuses through which new art history discussed the figure of the artist: biography and intentionality. In the first case, a thorough critique of the centrality of the artist's biography in the discipline and the consequent disconnection of art's interpretation from any other historical, ideological or trans-personal context produced new ways

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transformation of the discipline by applying concepts and methods influenced by the study of language in structuralism and the critical categories proposed by post-structuralism.

to write and talk about artists. Here, the influence of post-structuralism—and very particularly of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault's ideas on authorship—inspired a series of methodological and interpretative proposals that attempted to give response to theoretical demands as well as to socio-historical accuracy. In the case of intentionality, the dependence between such a concept and the centrality of the biographical, and the parallel questioning of its theoretical relevance to art's interpretation, caused art historians to reconsider the role given to artists' intentions in their own analysis. Some, as I will show, opted for coming up with compromise solutions as to the *place* of intention in relation to the evaluation of art. Other academics, however, preferred to substitute such a charged term for alternative ones that can be read, again, as combined responses to theoretical and historical (or *timely*) concerns.

The "life and work" paradigm: rethinking the modern biographical methodology

"What makes it so difficult to abandon a methodology criticised long and hard for its wanton neglect of issues of social determination and effects?"[10] This question, posed by Nicholas Green at the beginning of a review on a series of monographs on Édouard Manet, Auguste Rodin, Camille Pisarro, Claude Monet and Paul Cézanne printed in 1986, is illustrative of the struggle of new art history to modify the centrality of the modern biographical methodology in a discipline built upon the stories and achievements of unique individuals ever since the times of Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*. Although by the first-half of the 20th century, influential studies like Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz's *Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist* had demonstrated how mythologizing tales had been used over and over again to construct the figure of the artist, the kind of approach new art history was distancing itself from was not based on the unprovable yet recurring anecdote, but on a "detectivesque" analysis of biographical clues grounded in the belief that something about the exceptional nature of the artist must be reflected in his work.[11] This biography-based methodology sustained

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[10] Nicholas Green, "Stories of Self-Expression: Art History and the Politics of Individualism," *Art History* 10, no.4 (1987): 527.

[11] See Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Homes: Clues and Scientific Method," *History Workshop Journal* 9 (1980): 5-36.

itself in the essential relation between the life of the artist and his work, as if the questions the latter poses could be resolved by patiently looking into the documented details of the former. As Green explains, "the documentation acts as an extension, a deepening of the function of witness, so that the information on a birth certificate can provide access, as if through the eyes of the author, to the artist's earliest years."[12] Through the detailed analysis of official reports like licenses, medical records or inventories, as well as personal documents like letters or diaries pertaining to the life of the artist, it is a methodology that aspires to present itself as objective and as close to a scientific model as possible, but which overlooks, in Janet Wolff's opinion, how "all art is collectively produced"[13] and erases the role of social structures and professional institutions in the process of art-making.

It is worth mentioning that the modern biographical methodology supported the role of the art historian as a *connoisseur* who can guarantee the authenticity of a painting, drawing or sculpture based on a series of "verifiable" proofs. Such was the promise made by Giovanni Morelli when he proposed that it was possible to recognise correctly an artist through the meticulous analysis of the way in which he painted anatomical details; a method that the American Bernard Berenson further developed to great economic success.[14] The biographical verification, therefore, is also a cultural operation that validates an art market in which the correct attribution of artworks determines their monetary value. The art historians invested since the 1970s in reassessing the centrality of the artist's biography are aware, as I will show, of the economic context in which art history operates, and their proposals need to be viewed as a reaction to how the discipline traditionally backs a particular ideological organisation of value in the cultural industry.

As already mentioned, one of the most problematic consequences that new art history detects in the factually-supported belief of linking the worth and understanding of art making to the available information about a particular artist's life, is that other forms of relations and structures—social, economic, institutional—that connect the artist to its context are absent or appear only tangentially, as background. For instance, Griselda Pollock maintains that institutionalized modes of

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[12] Green, "Stories of Self-Expression," 528.

[13] Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 118.

[14] See Gabriele Guercio, *Art as Existence. The Artist's Monograph and Its Project* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2006), 194-224.

art history are responsible for producing the dominant notion of the artist as an unhistorical figure. In fact, she argues that the reductive and uncritical use of biographical facts in art historical discourses has the pervasive effect of producing a reading of the artist's work through his life and of his life through his work:

> Art and the artist become reflexive, mystically bound into an unbreakable circuit which produces the artist as the subject of the art work and the art work as the means of contemplative access to that subject's 'transcendent' and creative subjectivity.[15]

For Pollock, rather than a historiographical account, art history is a circular tale in which the artist acts as the source and the explanation of the work, while at the same time *he* is understood through *his* work, a unique personality whose mysteries can be unlocked through the attentive analyses of *his* paintings and drawings. In that way, the myth of the mad genius—in which Pollock detects fantasies of otherness rather than signs of clinical pathologies—is consistently used in the case of Vincent van Gogh to separate him from the historical conditions of his practice and to confine him to a space of self-reference in which art and artist alone explain one another.[16]

But, whereas Pollock is concerned with how a circular approach to the artist's "life and work" produces an unhistorical, self-referential artistic subject, other art historians appear to be more preoccupied with how it affects the interpretation of artworks. Rosalind Krauss, for example, describes the biographical art history "as a history of the proper name,"[17] and portrays it as incapable of responding to the variety of significations of the artwork, for it substitutes all possible allegorical, semiotic, stylistic, or any other trans-personal interpretation for "a more local and specific reading" with questionable aesthetic value.[18] As an example of how the "biographical turn" limits any non-personal understanding of the artwork, Krauss describes how the identification in 1967 of the male figure in Pablo Picasso's painting *La Vie* (1904) as his suicidal friend Carlos Casagemas produced a shift in the explanations of the work from its relation to the fin-de-siècle allegory to

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[15] Griselda Pollock, "Artists Mythologies and Media Genius, Madness and Art History," *Screen* 21, no.3 (1980): 58.

[16] Ibid., 65.

[17] Rosalind Krauss, "In the name of Picasso," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1985), 25.

[18] Ibid., 29

straightforward associations with Picasso's experiences and self-image.[19] If through the modern biographical method the explanation of the artwork is to be found in the life of the artist, the agency of art to have any meaning or produce any effect other than the one *intended* by its creator is compromised, a point to which I will return in the following section.

As I hope is becoming clear from the previous paragraphs, new art history problematizes art historical positivist operations—like dating, attribution, and authentication. In contrast, the discipline starts to articulate itself through a new set of terms like agency (the decisions and actions involved in the making of artworks, which can also be applied to artworks as if they were responsible for those choices), structure (the conditions and conventions in which and through which art is produced, presented and consumed) and ideology (the mobilization of those conditions and conventions to defend the interests and positions of a particular group or view point). The goal of such methodological change is to connect art "to the society which produces and consumes it,"[20] as well as to reclaim the polymorphous meanings of artworks from the artist "as the fixed point of meaning."[21] The configuration of a traditional discipline based, to a great extent, on the achievements of a succession of individual artists is substituted by an attempt to question, amongst other undisputed beliefs, the idea that the work of art is the *direct expression of a gifted man*. The theoretical underpinnings of such critique are to be found in structuralist and post-structuralist positions, and more specifically in the two texts—*The Death of the Author* by Barthes (1967) and *What is an Author* by Foucault (1969)—that appear repeatedly and are quoted recurrently by art historians disputing the privileged status of the artist. Taking into account the enduring influence of these texts, I consider it useful to review their main thesis in relation to how they helped to re-think art history beyond the modern biographical method.

Beforehand, however, I would like to introduce a terminological problem of my own which is connected to the appropriation of these texts by art historical discussions. As it is clear from their titles, the two mentioned essays use the term "author" (from the Latin *auctorem*, meaning "one who causes to grow") rather than "artist". Author is an expression usually associated with written works rather than

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Frances Borzello and A.L. Rees, eds., *The New Art History* (London: Camden Press, 1986), 5.

[21] Wolff, *The Social Production of Art*, 117.

with visual works, where the expression "artist" is preferred. But due to the influence of these seminal texts and others which dealt mainly with literary creations, as well as to the lasting-impact of structuralism and post-structuralism's opinion that "all human culture itself is fundamentally a language,"[22] the term "author" is borrowed and applied to art when what is intended is to stress the idea—related to the word's etymology—of the artist as the *originator* of works. In an attempt to make a consistent use of the words "artist" and "author," from now on I will use the expression "author-artist" when the term is being used to refer to the person characterised as the originating agent of the work (such as in the critique of the modern biographical method by post-structuralist influenced positions); and I will employ "artist" when the meaning of the word is not necessarily connected to that characterization. As for the word "author," I will only capitalize it if I am directly quoting how a particular thinker used the term (as in Barthes' case) but will keep it in lower case in all other instances, as I believe the expression already has such negative connotations that I prefer not to add to its repudiation by writing it with a derogatory *A*.[23]

Taking into account the above, it is worth mentioning that despite being engaged with problems directly connected to written language and literary creation, Barthes' essay was originally published in the multimedia magazine *Aspen*, which probably helped to extend its conclusions to other authored creations. *The Death of the Author* is first and foremost an attack on the establishment—whom Barthes personalizes in the figure of the critic—and its construction of the author as an individual who pre-exists his work and who symbolizes the logic of the humanistic and capitalist subject: autonomous, self-knowing, value-maker. For Barthes, the writings of Honoré de Balzac, Stéphane Mallarmé, Marcel Proust, or the surrealists demonstrate a different situation; one in which authors are only constructed through writing and, rather than being the explanation to the text, they are one of its products. Language is what pre-exists, and the modern scriptor—which is how

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[22] Arthur W. Biddle, and Toby Fulwiler, *Reading, Writing, and the Study of Literature* (New York: Random House, 1989), 80.

[23] In an article from 1991, Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson decided to use the term author instead of artist, for they argued—in contrast to my own rationale—that the first concept was more neutral than the second one. As I have explained, new art history—including Bal and Bryson's contribution—has reversed this charge so that today it is author more than artist that is the one with a specific "connotational baggage." Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *Art Bulletin* 73, no. 2 (June 1991): 180.

Barthes characterizes the writer after the death of the Author—rather than *expressing* himself, is just *translating* from pre-established sets of meanings. As a result, the text is never an original expression but a compound of previous texts, previous voices, previous cultures whose interpretation cannot be located in any "Author-God" but in an impersonal addressee, the abstract reader, to whom the death of the Author would give "birth". For Barthes, the opening of the text to multiple readings is a symptom of the denial of a theological approach to knowledge based on the discovery of truth and origin. This lack of fixation, however, comes at a cost, for if "the reader is without history, biography, psychology,"[24] all interpretations become equally meaningful as well as equally meaningless, a point that art historians interested in questioning their own "situatedness" as interpreters will refuse.

Foucault's *What is an Author?* (first presented as a lecture) can be considered a response to Barthes' text and, more specifically, a call to think through the consequences of the death of the Author. In the context of the desacralization of the transcendental author, Foucault considers what is an author's name, what is its relation to the work and to the writing, and how it functions ideologically. The author's name, which, according to Foucault, belongs to the category of the proper name, also serves to classify, organise and differentiate types of texts, and it is used, within a given society, to guarantee the status of certain forms of discourse. Far removed from any belief in authors as exceptional individuals whose genius is enough to assure the social recognition of their work, Foucault explains how a proper name only performs the author function in certain circumstances that depend on how authorship is ideologically constructed throughout time. For example, while in pre-modern times literary texts were anonymous and their worth was connected to their supposed longevity, in the modern literary tradition an author is the legal owner of a text as well as the guarantor of its value and meaning. Yet, in contemporaneous scientific texts, authors function differently, for the authenticity of these texts depends not on their attribution but on their "membership in a systematic ensemble."[25] The realization that authorship is not the spontaneous ascription of a discourse to an individual but one which depends on changing legal, economic, and institutional conditions allows for a reconsideration of the types of

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[24] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" (1967), in *Image, music, text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 148.

[25] Foucault, "What is an Author?," 109.

questions that the critic can pose in relation to texts and writing, as well as a profound reexamination of which and how subjects can function as authors.

An identity for the artist

Hence, what does new art history propose as an alternative to the pre-existent, exceptional, self-referential, meaningful, unhistorical author-artist of the modern biographical methodology? Producing a socially-sensitive art history is not sufficient, as the acceptance of the dilemmas presented by Barthes and Foucault, amongst others, complicates any attempt to decipher art's meaning through a detailed and faithful reconstruction of the socio-historical context of the artist alone. As Fred Orton and John Christie explain,

> Consider what is no longer available or accessible: persons as unitary identities; authors as producers of texts; contexts as relevant to texts; sources as access to lived history; 'beginning' and 'origins' as explanatory foundation.[26]

Nevertheless, Orton and Christie, as well as Wolff or Keith Moxey, find it necessary to address the artistic subject, for, despite rejecting the humanistic and capitalist notion of the author-artist and the circular relation between "life and work", they still consider it necessary to *position* the individuals that produced the art.[27] What then seemed an "unjustifiable theoretically"[28] yet inevitable endeavor, is particularly important here because the ways in which these art historians reconfigured the artist after the modern biographical methodology constitutes the immediate referent for the types of approaches to contemporary artist-hood which I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. As I will show in the next chapters, the interpretations of

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[26] John R. R. Christie and Fred Orton, "Writing on a Text of the Life," in *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed*, eds. Griselda Pollock and Fred Orton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 308-9.

[27] Such a necessity persists to the present, as is acknowledged by the editor of a book on the topic: "despite claims by theorists that an unbridgeable gulf exists between artist and artwork, bridges continue to be built." Charles G. Salas, *The Life & The Work. Art and Biography* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2007), 2. Also, in his thorough and critical investigation on the evolution of artist's monograph throughout history, art historian Gabriele Guercio defends that the project of linking the life and the work of an artist, "may still be our own." Guercio, *Art as Existence*, 22.

[28] Griselda Pollock, "Agency and the Avant-Garde: Studies in Authorship and History by Way of Van Gogh," in *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed*, eds. Pollock and Orton, 321.

authorship after new art history also shapes the ideological frameworks through which parafictional artists are produced, presented, and consumed. Thus, let us look at what type of artist new art history proposed.

In social art history, as represented by T.J. Clark, the artist is contingent upon his historical and social context, his agency reliant on the ideology of the social class to which he belongs. For instance, the artistic practice of Manet is seen as defined not just by his belonging to the bourgeoisie but by his placement within it, including his acceptance or rejection of the economic interests, social values, technical capacities and representational traditions of that group.[29] New art history is the heir of this perspective but at the same time finds itself having to re-articulate social art history through the incorporation of critical theory, including the conception of the author as constructed in the text, rather than pre-existing it (or, in the case of the visual artist, a situation in which "it is not the individual who makes images, but the vast image bank of world culture that images itself forth through the individual," as the critic Thomas McEvilley describes it).[30] The concept of artist that new art historians like Christie and Orton propose as a result of the influence of critical theory is clearly not the unhistorical individual, yet it is not an artist conceived *only* through its social ties; instead, it is "a particular kind of person in a particularized social, ideological formation at a particular time."[31] This type of subject, the protagonist of "a certain type of biography,"[32] is no longer conceived as having a fixed essence; rather, and in line with philosophical conceptions on subjectivity that try to surpass certain post-structuralist dead-ends, it is a changeable, plural, individual permanently involved in the process of narrating herself.

As the philosopher Charles Guignon explains, the narrativist conception of the subject that thinkers like Jean-Luc Nancy or Cornelius Castoriadis defend, is in accordance with the "pool of possible interpretations made accessible in the social context [yet, it is not] the static self-sameness of a pre-given thing through time."[33]

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[29] See T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life. Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 259-60.

[30] Thomas McEvilley, *Art and Discontent: Theory at the Millennium* (Kingston, NY: McPherson, 1991), 101.

[31] Christie and Orton, "Writing on a Text of the Life," 309.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 126-7.

The narrative conception of the self, in which the life is seen as a text and subjectivity "is better grasped dynamically,"[34] gives back a certain agency to the individual. Nevertheless, it also makes any choice contingent to what is possible at any given historical moment. According to Moxey, who prefers to describe this approach as semiotic given its textual base, the narrativist conception accounts "both for the definition of subjects by the cultures to which they belong and for their capacity to challenge and resist certain of the values that characterize those cultures."[35] Similarly, for Christie and Orton, the narrative account permits art historians to combine "structural and epochal causation" with a historically grounded account on how subjectivity is actively produced by the individual.[36]

Along with this narrative depiction of the artist, art historians like Mieke Bal, Abigail Solomon-Godeau or, yet-again, Pollock, opened up a self-critical examination of the discipline's participation in the production of knowledge, and more specifically, on how in texts and other art-historical practices, artists become "discursive constructions."[37] For instance, in her essay on the erection of Eugène Atget as a canonical figure in the history of photography, Solomon-Godeau demonstrates how a wide variety of writings on "Atget" (Solomon-Godeau's own quotation marks when she refers to how other writers have approached him) share the common interest of converting the commercial photographer working on assignment into an author with a "creative fingerprint."[38] Similarly, for Bal, "Rembrandt" (Bal's own quotation marks when she refers to her own approach) is first and foremost a "cultural text" produced by the attribution of a series of works to a particular artist and their resulting interpretations.[39] Pollock, on the other hand, differentiates between Vincent Van Gogh—the historical person whose subjectivity was constructed in specific socio-historical conditions—and "Van Gogh" (in quotation

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[34] Guercio, *Art as Existence*, 279.

[35] Keith Moxey, *The Practice of Theory. Postructuralism, Cultural Politics and Art History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 55.

[36] Christie and Orton, "Writing on a Text of the Life," 309.

[37] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Cannon Fodder: Authoring Eugène Atget" (1986), in *Photography at the Dock. Essays on Photographic History, Institutions and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 29.

[38] Ibid., 30.

[39] Mieke Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt". Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 8.

marks by Pollock)—the set of properties that have been associated with the name a posteriori.[40] In line with Foucault's thesis, the artist's name—"Atget", "Rembrandt", "Van Gogh"—stands for a series of collectively accepted values and ideas that have been established, to a great extent, by the ideological interests of the art historical discipline, with the later help of other forms of presentation and consumption like blockbuster exhibitions, fictional biopics, Hollywood movies, and record market prices. But for Pollock, the differentiation between Vincent Van Gogh and "Van Gogh" guarantees that the attempt to write about artists from the past is historically grounded, as well as a self-conscious positioning of the art historian, inevitably influenced and actively engaged in further constructing the set of properties associated with the artist's name. As she recognises, her writing will have to be "about the transitions and discontinuities of early European modernism in the 1880-90s grasped through the discontinuities, disruptions and failures which are what I shall produce as 'Van Gogh'."[41]

In the texts that I have been referring to so far, the term author-artist is being actively substituted by other concepts like subjectivity and identity. At the same time, the appreciation of the artist as author is changing from a positivist approach to a critical one in which authorship becomes a function and the artist a set of properties. These shifts are the theoretical base for the approaches to parafictional artists that I will be discussing over the next chapters, but also for the unavoidable suspicion that when used affirmatively, the term author *must* refer to the author-artist: the unhistorical, centered, meaningful, and exceptional individual of the modern biographical method. A certain exception seemed to occur within feminist art history where the consequences of the death of the Author would have arrived too soon, given that women had only recently acquired the social position and institutional legitimacy to be recognised as author-artists. As Linda Nochlin demonstrated as early as 1971, the social order, institutional arrangements, and ideological organisation of the art world—such as the art academies, the myth of the artistic Genius, or the hierarchy of artistic genres, amongst other conditions—had made it structurally impossible for women to access the position of "great artist."[42]

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[40] See Pollock, "Agency and the Avant-Garde", 320.

[41] Ibid., 340.

[42] See Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1971), in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (Colorado and Oxford: Westview Press, 1988), 145-176.

By the 1980s, however, feminist challenges to the status quo had gradually allowed for a revision of those structures. In light of the new possibilities that this opened for women, and as Pollock herself demands, "What about the status of the artist when she is a woman? Does it make sense to push her off the stage when she never really had a part in the play?"[43]

While Foucault's identification of the author as a function of discourse enabled an in-depth critique of the historical and social conditions under which certain individuals became author-artists while others did not, it also transformed artists into abstractions limiting their capacity to express their subjective agency, which in the case of individuals who until then had had little access to the conditions that determined authorship, became a controversial limitation. Linda S. Klinger, for example, accuses theoreticians of turning the author into a construct isolated "from the realm of education, law, economic, and gender that inflect individual identity and artistic production within society," and in so doing ignoring that those exact conditions explain why "women had never enjoyed in the first place the privileges of transcendent subject-hood and Author-ity now critiqued by poststructuralism."[44] And Bal and Norman Bryson venture that "as soon as authorship for female artists was called for, the rules of the game changed so that 'authorship' could appear as an archaic concept, and the demand could be construed, by male critics, as 'regressive'."[45] Yet, feminist vindications of the status of women as author-artists—as well as those on behalf of all other individuals who are not the male, white, middle-class, able, Western protagonist of the modern biographical methodology—*required* a change in the structures of the art world, including in the articulation of art history an succession of extraordinary author-artists. For instance, when reviewing the contribution of feminism to art in the 1970s, Lucy Lippard decided not to use individual artist's names in order to avoid "the art world's linear I-did-it-firstism," which she perceived as being part of the patriarchal system that had pushed women artists aside.[46] Thus, the author-artist, whose meaning is perceived as culturally fixed

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[43] Pollock, "Agency and the Avant-Garde," 319.

[44] Linda S. Klinger, "Where's the Artist? Feminist Practice and Poststructural Theories of Authorship," *Art Journal* 50, no.2 (1991): 45.

[45] Bal and Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," 184.

[46] Lucy Lippard, "Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s" (1980), in *The Pink Glass Swan. Selected Essays on Art* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 171.

by its belonging to a particular tradition, is substituted—also in feminist art history—by other terms capable of invoking the agency of the artist as well as his or her social conditions, like the above mentioned identity or subjectivity.

The expressive interpretation: reorienting intentionalism

"Why, then, if the expressionist fiction seems so suspect, is it renewed today?"[47] Writing in the context of the boom of neo-expressionism in the art market of the 1980s, Hal Foster's question refers to the not-so-surprising fact that contemporaneous appreciations of the expressionist style—based on how it *apparently* "encodes the natural and simulates the immediate"[48]—seem unaffected by the theoretical recognition of the constructed nature of all forms of expression. Although Foster is primarily concerned with artistic practices, the "expressionist fiction" or "expressive fallacy" (as he entitles his essays for reasons that will soon become clear), also characterised a much disputed type of art historical interpretation that relies on the supposed "immanent expressive meaning" of the artwork, as the members of Art & Language describe it.[49] For the art historians writing under the influence of post-structural theory from the 1970s onwards, such assumptions about the expressive value of art conceal under their "naturalness" or "self-evidence" long-sustained ideological goals. In that way, Art & Language censures the expressive critics for ignoring or hiding any reflection on the material conditions of production that made the artwork possible—like, for instance, the economic needs of the artist—, while for Rosalind Krauss the unproblematic presentation of terms like "originality" and "authenticity" tries to preserve a positivist interpretation of "the institution of art (and its history)" from the scrutiny of theory.[50]

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[47] Hal Foster, "The Expressive Fallacy," in *Recordings. Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1985), 75.

[48] Ibid., 60.

[49] Michael Baldwin, Charles Harrison, and Mel Ramsden, "Art History, Art Criticism, and Explanation" (1981), in *Art History and Its Methods. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Eric Fernie (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), 266.

[50] See Baldwin, Harrison, and Ramsden, "Art History, Art Criticism, and Explanation," 265, and Rosalind Krauss, "Sincerely Yours," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 193.

As well as for how it attempts to produce a self-apparent explanation of the meaning and value of the artwork, the expressive reading of art was also attacked in new art history for how, despite its apparent formalism, it is intrinsically bonded to the modern biographical methodology. As Orton and Christie defend, "expression claims which stick emotions to paintings are claims inferred from what critics know or conjecture about the life of the person who made it."[51] For example, in the case of the interpretation of Mark Rothko's "black paintings" from 1969-1970, Orton and Christie explain that critics like Richard Wollheim could stipulate and justify the sombre feelings *in and produced by* the canvases by relying on the knowledge of Rothko's imminent suicide.[52] The stated or disguised use of causal equations between the artist's psyche (inferred from the biographical data available), the meaning of the work, and its effect on the spectator, depends on the conception of the artist as a subject with *intentionality*, for only if Rothko intended (consciously or not) to express his anguish in his "black paintings" is such a reading possible. Indeed, recovering, deducing or explaining the artist's intention through the attentive exploration of the expressive qualities of the artwork is a quest that runs parallel to— and is supported by—the recovery, deduction and explanation of the author-artist's work through the attentive examination of his biographical data. One depends on the other: those invested in the recuperation of the artist's intention—including his emotional state—will find in the artwork a validation of what they *already knew* thanks to the information obtained through biographical methodology, and vice versa (the "life and work" paradigm).

For Mieke Bal, intentionalism is, thus, a method "bound up with individualism," while for Krauss, art history's dependence on a unitary understanding of the artist's intentions as stable and coherent is one of its main interpretative flaws.[53] Yet, artist's talks, interviews, statements, manifestos, and other texts are loaded with intentionality. Furthermore, as Thomas McEvilley states, "it is clearly impossible to exclude the artist's intentions from the critical process" as information as apparently objective as the date of an artwork has an undeniable impact on our

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[51] Christie and Orton, "Writing on a Text of the Life," 303.

[52] Ibid., 295-297.

[53] Mieke Bal, "Intention," in *Mieke Bal Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 236; Krauss, "Sincerely Yours," 193.

critical awareness of what we then believe the artist knew or intended.[54] Similarly to what happened with the biographical method, art historians critically thinking about their discipline could not just avoid intentionalism but had to deal with the "unjustifiable theoretically" yet inescapable problem of positioning the artist's intentions (manifested or not) in the interpretations of the artworks. In fact, and as I hope will become clear, there is an intimate connection between how the figure of the artist is understood and constructed and the role given to intentions in the interpretation of the works. Or, in other words, the ways in which art historians proceed to make connections *or not* between the agency of the artwork on the one hand and the agency of the maker on the other is a decisive index of their methodological (and hence ideological) stand.

In order to further explore the theoretical underpinning of art history's discussions around intentionality, I would like to refer back to Foster's questioning of the expressionist fiction. As stated, the quote is extracted from an article entitled *The Expressive Fallacy*, which is—although Foster doesn't say so—a direct a reference—yet, a critical one—to another seminal text in literature theory, Monroe Beardsley and William Wimsatt's *The Intentional Fallacy*, originally published in 1946. Focused on poetry criticism, the essay is considered an early call to move away from the disproportional attention paid to authors and their intentions when analyzing the success and meaning of poems, and just as Barthes and Foucault's thesis on writers, it has had an undeniable influence in art history. Thus, I will briefly review their main arguments.

For Beardsley and Wimsatt, a poem does not belong to the critic nor to the author, but to the public: "It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge."[55] This public dimension of the poem, which clearly resonates with Barthes' later claims, implies that also the evaluation of the work has to occur in the public sphere without resorting to the author's private intention as a judging standard. In fact, what they endorse as a correct method for literary criticism is one centered on what is internal (or public) to the poem—semantics, syntax, plus cultural references—, rather than what is external (or personal)—the author's diary entries, letters, etc. They do

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[54] McEvilley, *Art and Discontent*, 46.

[55] Monroe Beardsley and William Wimsatt, "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts. Contemporary Readings in Aesthetics*, ed. Joseph Margolis (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), 93.

accept the relevance of intermediate (or semi-private) evidences such as the particular meanings that certain authors give to words or concepts, but only as long as critics do not concentrate their attention on these aspects, disregarding the internal proofs. For Beardsley and Wimsatt then, the "intentional fallacy" is exemplified by the critic who looks for external evidences to find out the writer's motivations rather than producing a "true and objective" critical enquiry by concentrating on how the poem itself shows whether or not the author succeeded.[56]

Interiority versus exteriority

What constitutes the interiority and what the exteriority of the artwork—and their respective roles in the interpretation of a work of art—is a guiding principle to understand how art historians and critics writing under the influence of Beardsley and Wimsatt's arguments, position themselves in the intentionalist debate.[57] I would therefore like to appraise three methodological attempts—those made by Thierry de Duve, David Summer and Mieke Bal—to think through intentions after the "intentional fallacy," and highlight how the interior and exterior of the work are put to play in each interpretation.[58] My own goal in doing so is to consider whether the means by which these art historians resolve these methodological difficulties opens up valid solutions to my own challenge: what value, if any, shall the intentions of parafictional artists occupy in my analysis? (A full response in the shape of an interpretative proposal will be discussed in Chapter 3).

De Duve's acceptance of the intentional fallacy premise is explicit in a case study he develops on Manet's painting *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère*. The stated purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that this artwork in particular is the painter's "pictorial testament, the content of which is the explanation of how to look at all his paintings

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[56] Ibid., 104.

[57] For instance, for those defending the autonomy of the artwork's value, artist's intentions would, in principle, remain not only external but excluded from the interpretation of their productions.

[58] Two of the three texts that I use in this section were written after the 1980s, yet they belong to representatives of new art history. The choice of these particular later texts in the case of de Duve and Bal is largely due to the more explicit reference to intentionalism here than in their earlier writings.

in order to recognise in them the new definition of a picture he had invented."[59] In order to do so, de Duve will go through a detailed comparison of two contradictory models of perspective projection that could equally match the spatial construction at work in Manet's *Bar*. This methodological exercise is supposed to be a "true and objective" critical enquiry in Beardsley and Wimsatt's sense, for de Duve is careful to emphasize that he is supporting his analysis only in internal evidences instead of using external ones like the artist's biography (although de Duve *knows* that Manet died soon after) or the critical reception of the work at the time. The main problem that de Duve encounters is that in order to pick one of the two *internally* valid geometric reconstructions (and their respective conclusions about the painting's meaning), he must link the picture back to the artist's intentionality, and for such an exercise he must rely, in the absence of external proofs, on his personal judgement. De Duve, who is aware of the already discussed drawbacks of expressionist claims, concludes,

> In the absence of "external evidence" (a piece of writing by the artist, the reviews of the critics, the testimony of contemporaries, etc.), what access do we have to the artist's intentionality? None other, I would argue, than what I called *aesthetic intuition*. Is it methodologically trustworthy? The question will not be settled here, but it is raised.[60]

The methodological dilemma faced by de Duve—how to connect the agency of the work (its effect) with the agency of the maker (the artist's intentions) when external evidences are invalidated and internal ones are able to demonstrate contradictory explanations—is resolved, at least momentarily, by turning to his aesthetic instinct. Of course, de Duve acknowledges that a personal opinion might not be a "verifiable" proof, but he is highlighting the important fact that art historical analyses do rely on the particular views and aesthetic choices of the interpreters.

A more historically motivated proposal appears in David Summers' essay "Intentions in the History of Art." In this critical analysis of intentionalism, Summers starts by warning that the abdication of what is exterior to the artwork implies throwing "the whole burden of a work's significance upon its presumed formal

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[59] Thierry de Duve, "Intentionality and Art Historical Methodology: A Case Study," *nonsite.org* 6 (July 2012), accessed 3 April, 2015, http://nonsite.org/article/intentionality-and-art-historical-methodology-a-case-study.

[60] Ibid.

expressive univocity,"[61] a point with which de Duve as well as Foster would presumably agree. Yet, for Summers, the rejection of external evidences, such as the circumstances in which artists produce, poses not only theoretical but also historical challenges, for in his view, context plays an important role in explaining why artworks are designed the way they are. So, to avoid a reduction of the artwork's meaning to the discovery of the artist's intention, what Summer proposes is "a certain definition of intention" that will maintain the centrality of the work's internal evidences but which will also be able to give a contextual or structural explanation for change.[62] The intentionality that Summers proposes is still connected to agency or "purposefulness", but it is never only a subjective act or individual will; on the contrary, intentions are inevitably tied to trans-personal circumstances such as the appearance of a new technique or the decline of a typology. For instance, in the case of Leonardo da Vinci's intention to paint a Virgin and Child, Summers argues that, he *necessarily* had to "draw upon and transform existing technical and iconographic traditions."[63] Thus, if intentions are contextual and historical rather than subjective and individual, Summers defends that it could be possible to recover them by analyzing how motifs, techniques, and formats (all trans-personal) are embodied *in the artworks themselves*.

Summers' explanation of how internal evidences are capable of accounting for exteriority (context and intentions) is, however, compromised by the introduction of another concept, the "arbitrary", which is how he justifies those "aspect of a work assignable to the artist himself as an agent," in an attempt to avoid historical reductionism.[64] Summers' "certain definition of intention" is parallel in time and purpose to Christie and Orton's attempt at constructing "a certain type of biography." Both efforts seek to keep writing historically in light of contemporaneous theoretical debates: Christie and Orton's conception of the artist as a narratable individual whose choices are contingent on what is possible at any certain historical moment, matches Summers' attempt to reconcile the idea of intentions having a trans-personal dimension with individual agency through the concept of the

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[61] David Summers, "Intentions in the History of Art," *New Literary History* 17, no. 2 (1986): 307.

[62] Ibid., 309.

[63] Ibid., 311.

[64] Ibid.,319.

arbitrary. Both are practical working models that allow scholars to proceed without getting trapped in paradox.[65]

Another take on the part of history in the interpretation of the artworks—or, more precisely, on "the agency of images over time"[66]—is pursued by Bal. Bal does not defend art's "expressive fallacy", yet in her view, the term intention—even when it refers to the artist's context, as in Summer's discussion—has an implied positivism and individualism that makes it ill-equipped to account for "art's effective and affective results" throughout history, including in the present.[67] Let us remember that Bal had conceived "Rembrandt" as a cultural text rather than as a historical subject, which would then justify her openly anti-intentionalist position. To thwart individualism, she defends "narrativity" as a way to complicate the opposition between interior and exterior. Through this term—which shares features with how it was employed in the narrativist conception of the artist's identity—Bal attempts to include in the explanation of the work the way it affects us *now*, despite such effects being unintended, unknown or incompatible with the intentions of the maker. If, as Bal argues, we acknowledge "the temporal effect of delay as an integral part of the image"[68] (or, in other words, if we accept that the internal analysis of the artwork has to contain the story of the processes through which in different circumstances art is able to signify differently) we could theoretically account for an image's agency without having to rely on the biographically verified intentions of the artists nor to eliminate the socio-historical dimension of all interpretations. Bal's narrativity is an invitation for the art historian and the cultural critic—as she describes herself—to engage with the historical circumstances, personal interests and particular goals of all interpretations by critically acknowledging the active role of the interpreter, rather than focusing on trying to recreate the context, concerns, and intentions of the artist.

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[65] Most critical academic art history occupies some variant of these positions while, of course, in many other contexts like the market or the media, the author and his intentions remain central interpretative and value-making tools.

[66] Bal, "Intention," 238.

[67] Ibid., 263.

[68] Ibid., 256.

Beyond the academy

The reconsideration of the *place* of artistic intentionality in the interpretation of art through new art history introduced, as I have explained, a variety of new terms such as aesthetic intuition, the arbitrary or narrativity. Just as in the case of the reconfiguration of the figure of the artist after the modern biographical methodology, such novel proposals and approaches changed the ways in which art was and is discussed. But why are the methodological discussions of new art history specifically useful in the context of this investigation on parafictional artists? Firstly, because, as I will go on to show in the next chapters, these propositions play an important part both in the development of parafictional artists and in how such artists have been written about and exhibited. Secondly, because the art historical reconfiguration of artists and their intentions after post-structuralism is also a central guide in my own considerations on the protagonists of this study, as will become clear over the next two chapters. Beyond Part I of this thesis—and its clear emphasis on interpretation—in Part II, I will be dealing with the extended contemporary art world where, however, the influence of the ideas brought forward by new art history is also present.

Earlier in this chapter, I alluded to the economic connections between the academic discipline of art history and the art market through the cultural/economic operations carried out by connoisseurship. However, it is crucial to emphasize the co-existence of the art historical discipline and the broader cultural industry of art structured not only through the market, but also through publishing companies, specialised media, art galleries, museums, educational institutions, etc. For instance, if the contemporary art world seems to be dominated by an "economy of authority"[69] (in Griselda Pollock's words) that organises monetary and ideological value around individual, self-referential, extraordinary author-artists, this is not explicable without the construction of the status of such figures in art history. At the same time, new art history needs to be contextualised as a reaction to previous art historical practices, as well as to how art is produced, presented, and consumed beyond the academy in specific historic and political contexts. For example, Nicholas Green's already quoted question about the frustrating lack of social determination in the modern biographical method ("What makes it so difficult to abandon a

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[69] Pollock, "Agency and the Avant-Garde," 324.

methodology criticised long and hard for its wanton neglect of issues of social determination and effects?") is extracted, as stated, from a critical response to the appearance of a series of monographs on several Impressionist painters in the editorial market; Krauss' denunciation of art history "as a history of the proper name" was written to coincide with the opening of a major retrospective of Picasso at the Museum of Modern Art in New York; and Nochlin has explained how her 1971 text shared the "political energy and optimism" of the contemporaneous Women's Liberation Women.[70] In fact, the new art history project has to be understood as *actively invested* in changing prevailing understandings of artistry and creativity beyond the academia by transforming the interpretative models of the discipline itself. As Solomon-Godeau defends in her essay about the canonization of Atget as an author-artist, all "operations of cultural legitimation possess economic as well as ideological interests,"[71] and in that sense, I believe that the endeavor of new art history to alter the hegemony of the modern biographical method and the status of the author-artist from the 1970s onwards can also be understood as a successful cultural operation with its own ideological aims.

Although, of course, there are major block-buster shows about individual, centered, canonical figures, and despite the art market still being dominated by male artist's names, there are also numerous exhibitions, publications, and initiatives that even when dedicated to a single artist, acknowledge the changes that *via new art history* the figure of the artist has undergone: from a coherent individual with a pre-given personality to a narratable subject with a varied (and variable) identity; from a humanistic and capitalist subject to one whose agency is necessarily interacting with the structures and ideology of her socio-historical context; from a self-referential author-artist explicable through the "life and work" paradigm to an artist who is the result of how throughout time her name and work have been employed to produce value and meaning; and from a self-knowing entity whose intention can be easily detected in his work, to a figure whose changing and unknowable goals are just one of the numerous possible entry points into art's meaning over time.

The co-dependence between art history and the cultural industry of art will recur in the following chapters, and particularly in the second part of this thesis that deals with the location of parafictional artists within the contemporary art world, and

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[70] Nochlin,"Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" xiii.

[71] Solomon-Godeau, "Cannon Fodder," 31.

specifically with how curators and curatorial discourses have presented these artists in public. But for now, and as a loose cross section of current debates, let us search for the term authorship in the archive of sent announcements of contemporary art activities and exhibitions *e-flux*: in the first twenty entries alone, artistic authorship is forfeited, questioned, lost, de-centered, challenged, criticised, and refused.[72] The press releases sent out by e-flux to inboxes world-wide figure institutional events from all over Europe, Asia, Australia, and the Americas, giving the impression that the attack on authorship is sanctified by international consensus.[73] The critique of the author-artist that new art history started in the 1970s and 1980s is, by now, the central institutionalized example in current critical approaches to contemporary authorship, and the constant vilification of the term by art museums and galleries around the world, the proof of its institutional success.

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[72] "Search Results for 'authorship'," *e-flux*, accessed 31 March, 2015, http://www.e-flux.com/?s=authorship.

[73] I am not the first to have used the *e-flux* archive of announcements to make a diagnosis about the art world. See Alix Rule and David Levine, "International Art English," *Triple Canopy* 16 (30 July, 2012), accessed 13 January, 2017, https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/issues/16/contents/international_art_english.

Chapter 2. **Modes of the biographical**

Parafictional artists and biography

In Chapter 1, I described how the critique of authorship that frames many current approaches to contemporary artist-hood is influenced by the methodological proposals of new art history. In my review of the writings of art historians Griselda Pollock, Rosalind Krauss, Fred Orton, Hal Foster, Mieke Bal, etc., I detected two main ways through which the artist as author had been questioned: by rethinking the role of the biographical and by reorienting the importance of intentionality. Given the significance of these two concepts—biography and intention—in the construction and critique of authorship, and my interest in finding out to what extent such critique is still a useful interpretative model, the following two chapters investigate how the dual nature of a series of parafictional artists intersects with biography (Chapter 2) and intentionality (Chapter 3) in particular ways.

The parafictional artists whom I will be analysing in Chapter 2 are organised according to two discursive frameworks dealing with identity and labour, respectively. In each resulting section, I will explain how the fictional biography of these artists affects, and is affected by, certain structural conditions and conventions. In that way, I will first discuss the cases of Reena Spaulings, Barbara Cleveland, Donelle Woolford and Erica Scourti in relation to current debates around identity in art. While by comparing the first three I will touch upon different conceptualisations of identity, the latter will allow me to evaluate the impact of digital technologies on subjectivity. The second section of this chapter presents the cases of Luther Blissett and Robbie Williams and compares these two contemporary examples of parafictional artists to the fictional ones generated in the late 1960s and 1970s by the New York Graphic Workshop (Juan Trepadori) and the Neoist group (Monty Cantsin). By focusing on how the approach to the economic understanding of artistic labour has evolved during that period, I will show how fiction is being used today not as a marginal practice but as a profitable strategy.

Although in my analysis of this group of parafictional artists I prioritise one aspect of their biographical construction over others, I do not intend to claim that each case study needs to be understood solely in relation to one discourse, nor that those issues—the identity of the artist, artistic labour, copyright—produce separate interpretative contexts. Of course, the double condition of Reena Spaulings as artist and gallerist is strongly influenced by how labour is distributed within the art world; while the choice of the name Luther Blissett, pertaining to a black British footballer, could be interpreted in relation to the identity debates over the expectations associated with artists from non-dominant backgrounds. Yet, in presenting these parafictional artists in relation to specific discursive frameworks, I hope to demonstrate how their fictional biographies are not only means to critique authorship, but ways to approach contemporary artist-hood from a variety of challenging as well as controversial positions.

Authenticity in and beyond the artist's body

The parafictional artists I will be initially discussing in this section—the New-York based, literary-character-turned-successful-artist-dealer Reena Spaulings, and the under-recognised Australian performance artist Barbara Cleveland—represent two distinct models of how identity is currently being conceptualised within art discourses. As I will go on to show, while Spaulings is configured as a "flexible subjecthood" not tied to any physical presence (for some, a sort of avatar or post-identity), Cleveland aligns with political considerations of body-based identities despite her non-existence (and therefore comes closer to what is known as identification). As a result, while the first has been praised for being an example of how to "'free' artists from identity,"[1] the latter could be located within politically-minded attempts to propose more complicated and dynamic conceptions of identity than those inherited from the 1970s and 1980s. Donelle Woolford, a fictive Black-American female artist, seems, at first sight, to embody another flexible form of post-identity. A further analysis, however, connects Woolford to the problematics of cultural appropriation in the contemporary art world given the identity (a white man)

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[1] Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, and David Joselit, *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, 2nd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 764.

of her creator. In order to discuss the impact of digital technologies in present understandings of identity within art, in this section I will also introduce a project by the artist Erica Scourti entitled *The Outage*. Although Scourti is an actual artist, in 2014 she commissioned a ghost writer to compose her fictional autobiography using information from her digital footprint. The resulting book—the memoir of a now parafictional artist—indicates not only how subjectivity is constructed today through digital networks, but also the fictive detours that such biographical data can take.

Spaulings, Cleveland, Woolford and Scourti are all female, a selection that seems coherent with the attempt to build a critique of the masculine values associated with authorship. Yet, gender preoccupations appear with varying intensity in each one of them. The four, however, can be considered as practising *disembodied strategies*, for although bodily considerations play different roles in each case, neither the artists behind Spaulings, Cleveland, Woolford nor Scourti are exploring identity through the direct or unmediated presentation of their own bodies. If in previous generations of artists interested in identity, the authenticity of their quest was reinforced by the live presence of their own bodies, this no longer seems to be the case. In this sense, Claire Bishop has recently argued that between performance art from the 1960s/70s and that from the 1990s onwards, there has been a substantial increase in the number of artists who hire other people to perform rather than performing themselves.[2] For Bishop, such strategies can be understood in relation to the impact of business practices like delegation and outsourcing over all kinds of economic relations. Outsourcing, as I will show over the next two sections, also plays a significant role in the development of numerous parafictional artists, whether it is because the artists delegate the performance of the author function to non-existent entities, or because parafictional artists require other people to produce their artworks for them. In the cases of Spauling, Cleveland, Woolford, and Scourti, those performing as authors (a literary character, an imaginary performer, a Black American artist played by several actresses) and producing the artwork (a ghost writer) share ethereal qualities, while their explorations into (self)identity move away from the correlation between the artist's body and authenticity.

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[2] Claire Bishop, "Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity," in *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York: Verso Books, 2012), 219-239.

Reena Spaulings

Spaulings was originally a fiction in the most literary sense of the word: she came into existence in a 2003 book entitled with her own name and which narrates her "rise" from working as a guard at the Met Museum in New York to fashion model and cutting-edge performer.[3] The same year the novel was published, Reena Spaulings started to operate in the *physical* world of art as an immediately successful artist and as an even more lucrative art dealer. Her oil-based portraits of other "real" art dealers (fig. 2.1), unusable marble surfboards (fig. 2.2), and *Enigmas*—pieces of painted cardboard and stained tablecloths which are identified in the captions as pizza delivery boxes or leftovers from opening dinner parties (fig. 2.3)—have been exhibited at the Whitney Museum, the MoMA, and at important galleries in major European capitals. Meanwhile, Reena Spaulings Fine Art has participated in blue-chip art fairs such as Frieze London or Art Basel Miami Beach, and represents a long list of profit-making artists including Ei Arakawa, Klara Liden, Jutta Koether, and Claire Fontaine. Reena Spaulings Fine Art also represents Bernadette Corporation, self-described as "a shifting collaborative"[4] implicated in fashion, photography, film, and publishing that, in a convenient loop, is at the same time the author of the novel *Reena Spaulings* that gave birth to the artist and dealer.[5]

As the preface of the novel explains, *Reena Spaulings* was written by up to 150 individuals, allegedly following "the old Hollywood screenwriting system whereby a studio boss had at his disposal a 'stable' of writers working simultaneously to crank out a single blockbuster."[6] Along with the appropriation of this model of collective creative labour, the *stated* ambition of Bernadette Corporation (also known by their acronym BC) was indeed to publish a sort of iconic novel of the new millennia, and position Spaulings next to other paradigmatic characters like Madame Bovary or

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[3] Bernadette Corporation, *Reena Spaulings* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004).

[4] Exhibition catalogue *Bernadette Corporation: 2000 Wasted Years* (New York: Artists Space, September—December 2012, and London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, March—June 2013), 23.

[5] Bernadette Corporation first appeared in the mid-1990s. Before the establishment of Reena Spaulings Fine Art, it had been associated with and supported by Colin de Land's gallery American Fine Art (the similarity in the names of both galleries is, in my view, a homage). De Land, known as an unconventional art dealer, also collaborated with the artist Richard Prince in the construction of an early case of a parafictional artist known as John Dogg during the 1980s. See Gareth James, "Shaggy Dogg: on Colin de Land (Passages)," *Artforum* 41, no.10 (June 2003): 29-30.

[6] Bernadette Corporation, *Reena Spaulings*, vii.

Figure 2.1. Reena Spaulings, *The New Dealers*, oil on canvas, 2013.

Figure 2.2 (left). Reena Spaulings, *The Belgian Marbles*, marble, 2012.
Figure 2.3 (right). Reena Spaulings, *Enigma (Flag)*, aluminium flag pole, tablecloth from Christopher Wool's opening at Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York, 2008.

Moby Dick.[7] Yet, as with other statements by this collective, their declared goals need to be taken with a pinch of salt.[8] The final text is, in any case, fragmentary, with

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[7] Ibid., viii.

[8] For instance, in the catalogue of their 2012/13 retrospective, they affirmed that "we call ourselves a corporation because corporations are everywhere, and it impresses people… pretending we are business people while we sleep all day like cats." *Bernadette Corporation: 2000 Wasted Years*, 185.

constant changes of narrator, and chapters which seem to be side reflections rather than integrated parts of the narrative. It is also full of savvy references and inside jokes about the New York artistic-fashion milieu, with (in)famous characters like Slavoj Žižek, Karl Lagerfeld, and Donal Trump appearing at different points. The novel also contains a number of crude sex scenes, and a detectable cynicism in the description of how things work within those not-so-glamorous worlds. Nevertheless, in the influential art history survey text *Art since 1900*, edited by the art historians Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, and David Joselit, *Reena Spaulings* is described "as a kind of manifesto or a general theory of avatars,"[9] an impressive account that is worth exploring further.

The novel, as mentioned, follows Reena's rapidly thriving career within fashion and art. She is first "discovered" in a speakeasy club by Maris Parings, a well-connected yet rather distasteful agent/producer of models and events who runs her own PR business called Vive la Corpse (a name that could well refer to the *exquisite corpse* technique employed to write the novel or to Bernadette Corporation itself). Maris hires Reena to appear in a series of underwear fashion shoots, and supports her during her transformation into an international "It girl". Throughout the novel, Reena's character is repeatedly described as ambiguous: not beautiful in any classical way yet sexually alluring ("Reena's gawky, asymmetrical physique, day-old-bread skin . . . and somewhat lost-looking face would really make the underwear come alive this season"[10]); not intelligent in a recognisable sense yet able "to make it" ("She figures she's got some talent after all, talent for something she doesn't know what it is"[11]). Reena's recurrent ambivalence is further supported by what, in my view, ends up being the novel's main theme: the protagonist's struggle between being authentic and being nonspecific. In the book's pages we can find an unsubtle mockery of the wide-spread presentation of the individual as a "unique self": "Funny how individuality makes you generic," or "How regrettable when people all around the world start becoming selves, tooth-brushing, anus-wiping, voting selves, Americans."[12] Against this parodic illustration of identity as a set of repetitive,

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[9] Foster, Kraus, et al., *Art since 1900*, 764.

[10] Bernadette Corporation, *Reena Spaulings*, 36.

[11] Ibid., 108.

[12] Ibid., 154 and 158.

meaningless characteristics, the heroine's final ability to *become no one* is presented as key to her success ("when you are selling nothing you're selling an essence which is priceless"[13]). Beyond the novel's narrative, the view that artists are better off by giving up any pretension to individuality would seem in line not only with the configuration of Reena Spaulings (a literary character constructed by numerous non-identifiable authors, and as a profitable artist whose clever artworks cannot be ascribed to any known individual) as well as with the decision of a series of creative individuals to take on such an anonymous and even alienating non-identity as the brand-like name "BC".

These attempts at configuring artistic subjectivities whose agency is not limited to the characteristics—bodily or other—of any one pre-given identity, is what the art historians describing *Reena Spaulings* as a manifesto or theory of avatars are seemingly praising. In the Introduction to this thesis, I briefly mentioned David Joselit's interest in the figure of the avatar. As stated, Joselit (probably the main contributor to the entry dedicated to the avatar as an artistic strategy in *Art Since 1900*) started using the idiom in 2005 in connection to a series of artistic practices that he saw as allowing artists to gain a much desired "imaginary/real mobility."[14] In following texts, Joselit narrowed down the application of the term avatar to the realm of self-identity. For example, in his study on the negative effects of television on the evolution of US politics, Joselit contrasts how both fiction and non-fiction televisual genres sell identities "as coherent stable properties,"[15] with how artists working with early video—Bruce Nauman, Peter Campus, Vito Acconci, and Joan Jonas amongst others—represent identities as an unstable, and sometimes incoherent processes:

> By calling forth animate images, these artists produce *avatars* [emphasis added] whose purpose is to navigate media ecologies as 'wrong names', storing potential power in the fissures of commercial character.[16]

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[13] Ibid., 63.

[14] David Joselit, "Art, Avatars and the Contemporary Mediaspace," *Artforum* 43, no.10 (Summer 2005): 278-9.

[15] David Joselit, *Feedback: Television Against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 149.

[16] Ibid., 163.

According to Joselit, therefore, in their capacity as "wrong names," avatars do not represent a stipulated position (as right names supposedly do) but have the potential to "liberate" individuals from the ties and expectations associated with pre-marketed identities. As he goes on to advocate in the so-called Manifesto with which he ends his book *Feedback: Television Against Democracy*:

> LOSE YOUR IDENTITY. Don't believe you are a piece of property, a "gay man" or an "African American" whose "subject position" is the product of market research. Use icons opportunistically, and share them with like-minded people. Make an avatar![17]

I can almost imagine the enthusiasm with which Joselit wrote about the anti-essentialist strategies at work in Reena Spaulings as fulfilling his aspiration for artists "to deemphasize their own individuality and the powerful myth of artistic creativity it entails."[18] Spaulings, a disembodied identity, could, in principle, *be many or no one* ("Reena loved how Legion went from I to he to we to he to them, and she desired it, that is she began to require it"[19]). Yet, in my opinion, Reena Spaulings is not so much criticising the "myth of artistic creativity" associated with authorship, as voluntarily embracing it through different terms. Indeed, if previously such myth was associated with the single, autonomous, self-knowing individual, Reena Spaulings (and by extension BC) would not fit it, as she is collective, generic, and does not seem to know herself very well. But, if we accept what the novel presents, as well as the undeniable profitability of Spaulings in the art market,[20] then one is tempted to agree with Bernadette Corporation in their diagnosis of success as being able to "get rid of ourselves"[21] in order to become a recognisable corporation or brand.

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[17] Ibid., 171.

[18] Foster, Kraus, et al., *Art since 1900*, 764.

[19] Bernadette Corporation, *Reena Spaulings*, 157. Of course, this quote refers to the encounter between Jesus and the man possessed by demons discussed in the Introduction to this thesis.

[20] According to Chantal Crousel gallery, that represents Spaulings in Paris, in 2017 the artist's works varied in price from $15.000 for *Enigmas*, to $30.000 for the tablecloths-turned-flags and to $50.000 for some of her more recent sculptures. Conversation with the author, Madrid, 23 February, 2017.

[21] This phrase is not only one of the stated goals of the novel but also the title of a film produced by Bernadette Corporation in 2001, *Get Rid of Yourself*. The film, shot in Genoa during the anti-globalisation demonstrations against the G8 summit of that year, juxtaposes images of street violence with fashion shoots, and introduces testimonies by the anarchist group Black Bloc read by the actress Chloë Sevigny.

Reena Spaulings represents a rather opportunistic sort of parafictional artist. She has become a non-embodied subject in the shape of a profitable artistic brand under which a group of selected artists can operate.[22] Although Joselit and other critics see this as a liberating enterprise—and even as "emblematic of how artists today might reflect and deflect their own instrumentalization"[23]—Bernadette Corporation has, in my view, made an avatar intending to criticise success as well as producing a relatively cynical speculation on how it works. There is a mocking of authenticity, of the belief in identity, because in today's world, they seem to say, it is corporations and brands—recognisable yet generic—that are being sold and bought as true essence. As a result, Bernadette Corporation is not offering a straightforward critique of authorship, but rather assuming and displaying through Reena Spaulings what they see as the paradoxical position of the artist in relation to their identity: on the one hand, the constant if unproductive requirement to "being yourself," and on the other, the lucrative perspective of what might happen if you are able to become *a recognisable no one*.

But why is identity understood as a negative concept from which artists should be "freed"? Why does David Joselit refer specifically to a "gay man" or an "African American" as marketed identities in his pro-avatars Manifesto? The applauded turn to fiction as an escape from what Joselit himself describes as "the balkanized pieties of identity politics,"[24] is, in my opinion, connected to what has been designated as post-identity rhetoric. According to the art historian Amelia Jones, identity politics of the 1970s and 1980s was primarily based on binary distinctions between fixed categories of "self" and "other," and on single-issue concerns around gender, race or sexuality. From the 1990s onwards, however, the discourses on identity evolved in two ways: or away from identity politics (as either the result of a "frustration with some of the simplifications and binaries of conventional 1970s-style identity politics" or made "by those oblivious to the history of identity politics and activisms of the

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[22] The idea of the artist becoming a brand is a current concern within art, as a panel discussion title "The Trouble with Artist's Brands," organised by the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, in November 2012 demonstrates.

[23] Bennet Simpson, "Techniques of Today: Bernadette Corporation," *Artforum* 43, no.1 (September 2004): 223.

[24] Joselit, "Art, Avatars and the Contemporary Mediaspace," 278.

past"[25]), or towards a more complicated, porous and dynamic conception of identity: what Jones positively terms "identification". For Jones, the post-identity rhetoric in art (which includes expressions like "post-feminism" and "post-black") is the undesirable effect of the dismissal of identity politics.

To Jones' remark on the frustration with the oversimplification of identity, and the disregard for the history of identity politics, I would add the suspicion that in neoliberal societies "identity" is just another commodity as fuelling the post-identity rhetoric in art.[26] As one of the admirers of Bernadette Corporation explains, through their disembodied strategies, the group would be trying to "remove themselves from a culture that has forfeited the question of self to the functions of capital."[27] Although I do not agree with the commercially knowledgeable BC being described as rejecting the contradictions of capital, it is hard to deny that many kinds of identities—not all—are being sold to us as stereotyped products. Equally, the idea that one will achieve happiness through self-discovery and by developing one's unique talents is a constant trope in the media.[28] With this in mind, I would now like to turn to the work of the all-women Sydney-based collective Brown Council and their vindication of the pioneer performance artist Barbara Cleveland, whose sudden disappearance in 1981 prevented her work from gaining its rightful place in art history.

Barbara Cleveland

Brown Council is formed by Frances Barrett, Kate Blackmore, Kelly Doley and Diana Smith. Their collaborative live events, street actions, and films have been widely presented in Australia and abroad since 2007. Most of these works can be understood as investigations into performance as an artistic genre; into its strengths,

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[25] Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently. A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2012), xx.

[26] For a further analysis of the causes driving the post-identity rhetoric in art see the exhibition catalogue *Don't You Know Who I Am? Art after Identity Politics*, curators Anders Kreuger and Nav Haq (Antwerp: MKHA Museum of Contemporary Art, 13 June—14 September, 2014).

[27] Simpson, "Techniques of Today," 220.

[28] See Charles Guignon, "The Culture of Authenticity," in *On Being Authentic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 1-6.

its conventions, and its history. At the same time, Brown Council can be described as an openly feminist collective, adopting an unapologetic gender perspective in their projects that contrasts with their inconspicuous denomination. Asked about their collective name choice, Diana Smith explained:

> We liked the term 'council' because it's a collective of people that make decisions. It seems quite serious and also non-gendered. Then 'brown' was just to counteract the seriousness of the council. It's absurd—what could a Brown Council possibly be?[29]

The group first presented their "rediscovery" of the feminist performer Barbara Cleveland in 2011 at the exhibition-homage *Remembering Barbara Cleveland*, and then went on to produce several works based on their findings about her. At first sight, a number of similarities between Bernadette Corporation/Reena Spaulings and Brown Council/Barbara Cleveland come to mind. Apart from their coincidental shared initials, both collectives are committed to working collaboratively and have chosen names that reflect a group identity. Bernadette Corporation and Brown Council also share the responsibility of "(re)discovering" an artist and presenting her to the art world. Yet, while the configuration of Reena Spaulings is, as I have shown, the result of what can be described as post-identity concerns, I consider the "discovery" of Barbara Cleveland to be aligned with the type of proposals that Amelia Jones calls identification.

The story of the "uncover" of Cleveland's *oeuvre* is as follows: when Diana Smith was working as a researcher for the University of New South Wales' College of Fine Arts, she came across an archive box of Cleveland's work. Intrigued by the fact that, despite her interest in performance, she had not heard about Cleveland before, she took the materials to the rest of the members Brown Council to discuss its content. Cleveland had been active in the 1970s, producing a series of bodily and task-based performances very much in line with the art of her time. Her untimely death in 1981 and the ephemeral nature of much of her work prompted her "disappearance" from the history of Australian early performance art (in other contradictory versions, Cleveland is said to have travelled to India on a research trip

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[29] Sarah French, "The Feminist Performance Art of Brown Council. An Interview with Diana Smith," *Double Dialogues* 17 (Winter 2015), accessed 18 March, 2016, http://www.doubledialogues.com/article/the-feminist-performance-art-of-brown-council-an-interview-with-diana-smith/.

Figure 2.4. Brown Council, frame from the video *This is Barbara Cleveland*, 2013. Courtesy of the artists.
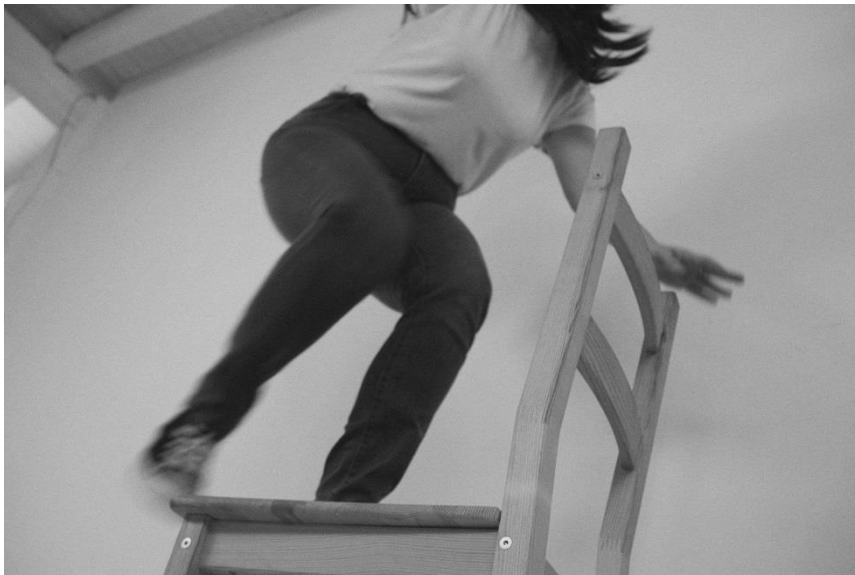
Figure 2.5. Brown Council, frame from the video *This is Barbara Cleveland*, 2013. Courtesy of the artists.

and vanished there[30]). Inside the box, Brown Council found a series of blurry, black and white photos documenting Cleveland's actions (figs. 2.4 and 2.5), and fragmented texts pertaining to lectures, instructions, and stage directions for different performances. Inspired by these materials, Brown Council produced several works, including two main films: *Remembering Barbara Cleveland* (2011) in which the four members of the collective read different extracts from Cleveland's archive to

[30] Lauren Strickland, "Art review: This is Barbara Cleveland," *Lip Magazine*, 6 December, 2013, accessed 16 March, 2016, http://lipmag.com/arts/art-review-this-is-barbara-cleveland.

camera, and *This is Barbara Cleveland* (2013), a longer, more complex pseudo-documentary about Cleveland's life and work, which also includes the re-performance of several of her endurance actions by Brown Council (figs. 2.6 and 2.7).[31]

Taken at face value, Brown Council's project could be interpreted as the straightforward feminist recuperation of an under-recognised woman artist who is being "written back" into the history of Australian performance art. Yet, as has been acknowledged by Brown Council in recent times, Barbara Cleveland is an invention; not an actual artist, but a parafictional one.[32] That said, her story is full of parallels to the "discovery" of other "enigmatic" female artists whose life is then conveniently "invented" to fit certain institutional conventions as well as the expectations of the art market (I am thinking about the nanny-photographer Vivian Maier and the "reconstruction" of her life story in several documentary films or about the late Indian abstract painter and photographer Nasreen Mohamedi whose current institutional success in the West would seem to fit a certain curatorial urge to "rethink" modernity[33]). More specifically, Cleveland's surviving documentation and biographical details—including her late interest in symbolic rituals and performances in the landscape—seem to be referencing a series of clichés associated with the historiography of performance. For example, some of the images of her performing naked with paint over her body bear a suspicious resemblance to photographs of the works of the US artist Carolee Schneemann (figs. 2.8 and 2.9),[34] while Cleveland's biography and concerns, as well as her untimely disappearance, remind me of nother "tragic" figure of feminist performance art, the Cuban-US artist Ana Mendieta.[35]

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[31] Both films are available in the collective's webpage "Barbara Cleveland," accessed 18 January, 2017, http://www.barbaracleveland.com.au/.

[32] French, "The Feminist Performance Art of Brown Council."

[33] See Abigail Solomon Godeau, "Inventing Vivian Maier," *Le Magazine Jeu de Paume*, 16 September, 2013, accessed 18 March, 2016, http://lemagazine.jeudepaume.org/2013/09/vivian-maier-by-abigail-solomon-godeau; and Elena Vozmediano, "Cómo Santificar a un Artista," *Y tú que lo veas* (blog)*, El Cultural*, 25 March, 2016, accessed 26 March, 2016, http://www.elcultural.com/blogs/y-tu-que-lo-veas/2016/03/como-santificar-a-un-artista/.

[34] In fact, Brown Council members have admitted their interest in the visual language of documents about performance art from the 1960s and 1970s, including those of Schneemann's works *Meat Joy* (1964) and *Interior Scroll* (1975). See, for example, French, "The Feminist Performance Art of Brown Council."

[35] For an analysis of how the figure of Ana Mendieta has been incorporated into the history of performance art, see Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity, and Exile* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

Figure 2.6. *Remembering Barbara Cleveland*, 2011, exhibition view. The image shows a moment from the video with the same title. Courtesy of the artists.

Figure 2.7. Brown Council, frame from the video *Remembering Barbara Cleveland*, 2011.

Considering the number of references to actual events in the history of art, and the inclusion of Barbara Cleveland at exhibitions and other public situations, I see Cleveland as a parafictional artist who despite her non-existence is able to disclose *certain truths* about how women artists—and particularly feminist performers—are presented and accepted. In my view, the intended confusion between imaginary and factual at work in Cleveland—including the contradictory information about her biography—is illustrative of why fiction is perceived as an effective strategy. Brown Council is a self-declared feminist collective, and their invention of a historical female artist should not be read as mocking the attempts to "rewrite" women into history,

Figure 2.8. Brown Council, frame from the video *This is Barbara Cleveland*, 2013. Courtesy of the artists.

Figure 2.9. Brown Council, frame from the video *This is Barbara Cleveland*, 2013.

but as a serious interrogation of how and why such rewriting needs to be done. Other female parafictional historical artists invented to question processes of history making include the lesbian African American film star Fae Richards, whose archive was produced by the artist Zoe Leonard and filmmaker Cheryl Dunye, and the also African American ballet dancer Eleanora Antinova, whose involvement with Diaghlev's Ballet Russes was narrated by Eleanor Antin. In the case of Brown Council, being women themselves, and purposely sharing their collective initials with Barbara Cleveland, it is also possible to imagine genuine personal interests in the uncovering of those *certain truths* about women artists: will Barrett, Blackmore, Doley and Smith

themselves be able to keep operating as a feminist performance collective? Will *their own work* survive or be forgotten? How will it be historicised?[36]

The label "feminist female performer" can be seen, in certain circles, as a pre-marketed identity, or even as a product with which to identify. It is an identity associated with the naked body, with physical and emotional strains, and with tragedy; an identity many times presented as the paradigm of self-discovery. Important feminist female performers are slowly becoming part of the canon, while clichés around this identity hold strong in the collective imaginary. I believe that in their non-gendered choice of name and in how they construct Barbara Cleveland, Brown Council reveal an awareness of this problematic situation. But their proposals are not to be described as post-feminist, in the sense of belonging to a post-identity rhetoric. By choosing to explore the construction of a feminist female performer through fiction, and by thinking about their own position as authors in the art world through Barbara Cleveland, Brown Council are offering a more complicated and dynamic conception of identity than those inherited from previous generations. In their case, fiction is used to explore identity and self-identity not simply as a way to parody the idea of "being authentic," but as a strategy that allows them to question historiographical conventions without denying the political significance of truly marginalised or misinterpreted identities.

Donelle Woolford

Depending on which side of the classical real/imaginary dichotomy one stands, Donelle Woolford can either be described as *an African-American female artist*; a Yale University art graduate living in New York who in 2006 began a successful career with exhibitions in Europe and the US, or as *a character*: the invention of the artist and professor Joe Scanlan who decided to typify this fiction as his opposite (male/female, white/black, established/upcoming). If considered a practising artist,

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[36] To my surprise, although in accord with this interpretation, in November 2016 Brown Council changed their collective name to Barbara Cleveland.

Figure 2.10. Donelle Woolford, *Still Life with Chair Canning*, scrap wood, enamel paint, acrylic resin, chair canning, and graphite on canvas, 2010.

Figure 2.11. Abigail Ramsay as Donelle Woolford in *Double Agent*, ICA London, 2008, and studio view of Jennifer Kidwell as Donelle Woolford, Harlem, 2008.

Woolford produces not only modernist looking paintings and collages which have been explained in different artists' statements as re-appropriations of Cubist's interest in African art (fig. 2.10), but also lectures and performances, in which case she is embodied by different African-American actresses (figs. 2.11). If analysed as the product of the imagination of a well-connected university tutor such as Scanlan, however, gender, race, and other ethically-sensitive, power-related issues begin to appear. Despite this, Woolford's name had been included in the lists of participating

artists at numerous exhibitions in the US and abroad (including the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, Wallspace in New York and the Sharjah Biennial) without major polemic, and it was not until her selection by curator Michelle Grabner to take part in the 2014 Whitney Biennial that her dual nature provoked a very public outburst of conflictual responses.

The Biennial, held at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, is a curated survey of the most significant contemporary art produced in the US. Unlike other similar events around the world, the Whitney Biennial is perceived as a site for discussing the intersection of identity politics and creativity.[37] For the 2014 edition, Grabner invited Donelle Woolford to perform *Dick's Last Stand*—where, dressed up as a man, she re-enacted a routine by the African American stand-up comedian Richard Pryor (fig. 2.13)—and to exhibit two of the artist's most recent paintings— suspiciously resembling Richard Prince's monochrome jokes ones (fig. 2.14). This invitation also sparked the polemic-generating decision of the black artists' collective *HowDoYouSayYamInAfrican?* (YAMS)—who had also been invited to take part in the show—to pull out of the event. In an interview published soon after the controversial withdrawal, two representatives of the YAMS collective, Andre Springer and Sienna Shields, explained how their retreat from the exhibition was primarily a protest against "institutional white supremacy" in North American art organisations, while at the same time dramatically describing Scanlan's imaginary act as "raping black women conceptually."[38] For the YAMS collective, Scanlan was a representative of the dominant "institutional collective" made up of Ivy League Universities, blue-chip art fairs, and leading art museums; and the *inclusion* of Woolford, another example of the systemic *exclusion* of the voice of black people from the dominant institutional art discourses.

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[37] The so-labelled "multicultural biennial" of 1993, which provoked the outrage of numerous art critics who censured the importance given to political content over aesthetic values, is a clear example of such characterisation. See Amelia Jones, *Seeing differently. A history and theory of identification and the visual arts* (New York: Routledge, 2012) 120-124. The 1987 Guerrilla Girls' protests outside the museum denouncing the shortage of female artists included that year, or the 2006 edition, entrusted for the first time to two non-US curators—the French Philippe Vergne and the British Chrissie Iles—have also contributed to the impression of the celebration of the Biennial as being a likely occasion to generate debate around the institutional (in)visibility of non-dominant racial, ethnic, gender or sexual identities.

[38] Ben Davis, "The Yams, On the Whitney and White Supremacy," *artnet news*, 30 May, 2014, accessed 10 July, 2014, http://news.artnet.com/art-world/the-yams-on-the-whitney-and-white-supremacy-30364.

Figure 2.12. Donelle Woolford, *Dick's Last Stand*, performance, 2014.
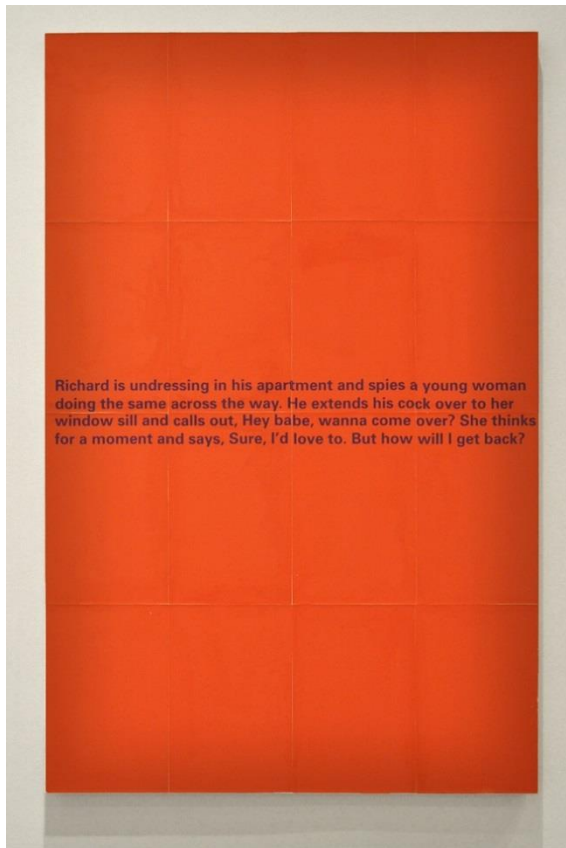
Figure 2.13. Donelle Woolford, *Joke Painting (detumescence)*, ink, paper glue, and gesso on linen, 2013.

On several occasions throughout the years, Scanlan, as well as Woolford, have responded to questions about the intentions of this imaginary act by framing it in an examination of personal identity and artistic agency. For example, in a conversation with curator and critic Raimundas Malasauskas, Woolford herself explained that her ultimate goal is to go "beyond what my physical appearance in the art world will

allow,"[39] or, in other words, to challenge the expectations associated with her identity as a black, female artist. Similarly, in the context of the polemic around the Whitney Biennial, Scanlan explained how the art world "tends to lock artists into a certain type and insist they stay that way."[40] From these remarks it seems that Scanlan is aligning Woolford with the type of post-identity positions defended by David Joselit, i.e., the use of an avatar or parafictional artist to "liberate" individuals from the ties and expectations associated with pre-marketed identities. Or, even, with art historian Darby English's attempt to work against "a tendency to limit the significance of works assignable to black artists to what can be illuminated by reference to a work's purportedly racial character."[41] Yet Scanlan is, quite evidently, not a Black female artist trying to redefine the relation between her identity and her art work, but a white man performing an act of cultural appropriation.

While in the cases of Reena Spaulings, Barbara Cleveland, and also The Atlas Group, the post-identity/identification debates are adequate discursive frameworks, Donelle Woolford opens up a new discussion inevitably related to Scanlan's appropriation of a set of issues (the problems confronted by Black female artists) that is not his own. Many recent polemics in contemporary art, particularly in the United States, have been related to instances of cultural appropriation occurring across racial lines.[42] Although it is not my aim here to go into a detailed analysis of the very complex problem of how to consider the exchange between cultures (and whether or when is it a theft, a borrowing, a homage or even a "rape"), I would like briefly to highlight a limited number of concerns that can help me to better analyse the specific case of Donelle Woolford. As the philosopher and specialist in cultural appropriation and the arts James O. Young has explained, "cultural appropriation is particularly controversial since, in the contemporary art world, individuals from rich and powerful majority cultures often appropriate from disadvantaged indigenous and

[39] Raimundas Malasauskas, "Raimundas Malasauskas Talks to Donelle Woolford," *A Prior Magazine* 13 (2006): 68, accessed 12 March, 2017, http://aprior.schoolofarts.be/pdfs/APM13_joescanlan.pdf.

[40] Quoted in Felicia R. Lee, "Racially Themed Work Stirs Conflict at Whitney Biennial," *New York Times*, 18 May, 2014, accessed 8 January, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/17/arts/design/racially-themed-work-stirs-conflict-at-whitney-biennial.html?_r=0.

[41] Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 6.

[42] For instance, the installation at the Walker Art's Centre of the sculture *Scaffold* by white artist Sam Durant that incorportated the form of the gallows used by the US Army to hang 38 Dakota men in 1862, Kelley Walker's appropriated images of black people smeared with chocolate and toothpaste at the Contemporary Art Museum of Louisiana, or Dana Schutz's appropriation of the image of the dead black teenager Emmett Till for the painting *Open Casket*, exhibited at the 2017 Whitney Biennial.

minority cultures."[43] While, on occasions, the cultural appropriation can and does occur in the opposite direction (non-hegemonic groups usurping hegemonic symbols with subversive effects, for instance), it is clear that the power dynamics unavoidably entangled with any act of cultural appropriation need to be taken into account when evaluating such artistic processes. In the specific case of white American artists adopting racial problematics belonging to other less privileged groups, how the art work deals with its own conditions of production and reception need to be fully addressed.[44]

While keeping in mind how power relations operate in any act of cultural appropriation, it is also fundamental to consider whether it is at all possible to "speak for other," that is, to enter a debate that is, in principle, not ours. In a recent roundtable on cultural appropriation organized by the magazine *Artforum*, postcolonial thinker Homi K. Bhabha referred to the logic by which only those who have suffered or been oppressed can talk for the oppressed as one that "cuts out the possibility of building a larger coalition of people and structures that are opposed to forms of oppression and can speak for liberty or the common good."[45] Similarly, and in the context of another polemic appropriation of a black issue by a white painter at the 2017 Whitney Biennial (see footnote 44), artist Coco Fusco signalled how

> the argument that any attempt by a white cultural producer to engage
> with racism via the expression of black pain is inherently unacceptable
> forecloses the effort to achieve interracial cooperation, mutual
> understanding, or universal anti-racist consciousness.[46]

For both Bhabha and Fusco, therefore, it is fundamentally about the message underpinning the cultural appropriation—liberty, the common good, anti-racism—

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[43] James O. Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), ix.

[44] For a recent disapproving account of the adoption of racial issues by white artists in the US, see Taylor Renee Aldridge, "Black Bodies, White Cubes: The Problem with Contemporary Art's Appropriation of Race," *Artnews* (7 July 2016), accessed 6 June 2018, http://www.artnews.com/2016/07/11/black-bodies-white-cubes-the-problem-with-contemporary-arts-appropriation-of-race/.

[45] Homi K. Bhabha, "Cultural Appropriation: A Roundtable," with Salome Aseaga, Gregg Bordowitz, Joan Kee, et al., *Artforum* 55 no.10 (Summer 2017): 277.

[46] Coco Fusco, "Censorship, Not the Painting, Must Go: On Dana Schutz's Image of Emmett Till," *Hyperallergic*, March 27, 2017, accessed 10 May, 2018, https://hyperallergic.com/368290/censorship-not-the-painting-must-go-on-dana-schutzs-image-of-emmett-till/.

rather than about the "inadequate" alignment of the identity of the agent with the specific debate. In fact, and as Bhabha explains, all forms of oppression, including racism, are always relational, so the debates around these issues must concern not only the victims but also the perpetrators.[47] Bhabha and Fusco's views allow us to consider the problematics of cultural appropriation not in "essentialist" terms, but in connection to conditions, messages, and how these acts operate in the broader world.[48] With this is mind, how can we address the problematic case of Scanlan's cultural appropriation?

In order to produce an evaluation of the Donelle Woolford project, it seems necessary to answer the following two questions: What are the power dynamics at play in the construction and performance of Donelle Woolford? And, inevitably connected to the above, can the social value underpinning the appropriation justify the controversial lack of alignment between Scanlan's identity and Woolford's one? In order to response to the above, I will briefly refer to two articles written in the context of the Whitney Biennial polemic that address the relations involved in the production of Donelle Woolford both at a micro-level (between the actresses playing Woolford and Scanlan), and at a macro-level (between white and black art professionals), as well as with the political commitment of the project. Let me start with the latter. Out of the numerous disapproving responses towards Scanlan's authorial gesture, Coco Fusco's one is particularly instructive.[49] Fusco—who, as we have seen, is not a priori against cultural appropriation—links the origins of Donelle Woolford to the internal politics of established US art education institutions (as mentioned, Scanlan is a university professor). In particular, Fusco interprets Scanlan's black female other as "haunted by his lived pedagogical relations with black students", as well as a "castration fantasy about white male erasure," motivated by the apparent shift in the market's attention towards artists from minority backgrounds. In fact, what Fusco laments is that given the undeniable "white supremacy" in today's US art institutions, Woolford was not utilised by Scanlan to

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[47] See Bhabha, "Cultural Appropriation," 268.

[48] For a similar standpoint, see Kenan Malik, "On Cultural Appropriation," *ArtReview*, December 2017, accessed 8 June, 2018, https://artreview.com/features/ar_december_2017_feature_cultural_appropriation_kenan_malik/.

[49] Coco Fusco, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back? Thoughts about the Donelle Woolford Debate," *The Brooklyn Rail*, 6 May, 2014, accessed 4 July, 2014, http://brooklynrail.org/2014/05/art/one-step-forward-two-steps-back-thoughts-about-the-donelle-woolford-debate.

explore the contradictions between the fear of the privileged to lose economic/institutional significance and the true status quo in the art system.

Scanlan's stated intention—to problematize the tokenistic way in which the art world frames "black females artists"—is, for Fusco, illuminating a different problem (the anxiety of white professionals to loose influence) while, actually, not acknowledging the real unbalanced racial relations in US art institutions. While agreeing with Fusco in her assessment of the lack political commitment of Scanlan's project, it seems relevant to also look at the opinion of Jennifer Kidwell—one of the actresses, along with Abigail Ramsay, playing Donelle Woolford during the Whitney Biennial. By doing so, it becomes possible to assess the power relations inside the project itself. Kidwell, who regrets that those criticizing Scanlan's racism have themselves ignored the opinion of the black performers involved in the project, argued that if her participation in the construction of Woolford was taken into account, "it could complicate what many consider a clear example of exploitation."[50] According to Kidwell, while Scanlan invented Woolford and produces her art objects, she and Ramsay are responsible for her perfomative pieces, despite the fact that little attention has been given to their "contributions (authorial, performative, and otherwise)."[51]

While, from Kidwell's statement, it is possible to re-consider Donelle Woolford as a growing collaboration between a white man and a series of female black performers, the lack of a robust political message and the unjust power relations in the larger art world compromise this approach. Moreover, in the specific context of the 2014 Whitney Biennial (a platform that claimed to make a "broad and diverse" statement about the most significant art produced in the US, yet only included nine African America artists out of a total of 104[52]), the confusion produced by Woolford's nature has the undesirable effect of masking the lack of diversity that still operates in most artistic institutions.[53] Of course, this statistics are not directly Joe Scalan's fault.

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[50] Jennifer Kidwell, "Performance and Para-Fiction: on Playing Donelle Woolford," *Hyperallergic*, December 23, 2014, accessed 11 January, 2015, http://hyperallergic.com/170408/performance-and-para-fiction-jennifer-kidwell-on-playing-donelle-woolford/

[51] Ibid.

[52] Jillian Steinhauer, "The Depressing Stats of the 2014 Whitney Biennial," *Hyperallergic*, November 15, 2013, accessed 3 November, 2015, http://hyperallergic.com/93821/the-depressing-stats-of-the-2014-whitney-biennial/.

[53] Since the polemic surrounding Woolford's participation at the Whitney Biennial of 2014, Woolford has been significantly less active. With the exception of some group shows at commercial galleries, it would

And, as seen, the micro-politics operating in the construction of Woolford might, in fact, be of a positive nature. So, while it is not a matter of condemning Scanlan for his "bad faith" or even for his "bad intentions", the broader context of production and reception limits the agency of this appropriation to the point of making it ethically questionable. The message underpinning the existence of Donelle Woolford—the denunciation that, in some instances, the labels of "blackness" and "woman" are used instrumentally by the art world—is not sufficiently present in Woolford's art production, while the authentic underrepresentation of black women in the art world is simply not addressed. As a result, and despite the social dynamics at play in the relation between artist and performer, the capacity of the cultural appropriation to function in the world is profoundly compromised.

Erica Scourti

The fourth case study in this section allows me to introduce what would seem one of the most suitable contexts in which to develop fictional biographies: the Internet. Until recently, the Internet was primarily considered a space separated from everyday life which one could freely enter and explore using an invented identity. In online chat rooms, for instance, individuals communicate using a handle or made up username and can easily develop a fictional/fake biography for themselves. In more developed virtual environments such as Second Life or networked game platforms like World of Craft, users are provided with more sophisticated digital tools to build figures with physical and intellectual characteristics; *avatars* that in no sense need to match the offline identity of the person using them.[54] It is this sort of *creative freedom* associated with computer-generated identities that art historians like David Joselit are tapping into when using the word avatar. And, indeed, for net artists working in the 1990s and early 2000s, the Internet opened great opportunities to build entirely fictional identities. Amongst the net artists using invented names or

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seem that the project's access to the art world has been dramatically restricted. This situation is probably the result of curators' and institutions' growing awareness of the possible repercussions of exhibiting Scanlan's /Woolford's work; an awareness that did not exist prior to the Biennial. As Homi K. Bhabha mentions, "It's interesting that nobody makes the claim of appropriation until somebody feels that something inappropriate is happening. And it's only then, when someone has made the charge of appropriation that a certain discussion begins." Bhabha, "Cultural Appropriation," 268.

[54] For a history and analysis of the development of online personas, see Beth Coleman, "What is an Avatar?" in *Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networked Generation* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2011), 11-50.

identities during this period, two projects including female fictional artists seem worth mentioning: www.mouchette.org, a website that since 1996 presents the biography and work of the Amsterdam-based and permanently 12-year-old artist Mouchette, and Cornelia Sollfrank's *Female Extension*, a campaign that boycotted the 1997 Kunsthalle Hamburg's competition for Internet art by submitting 127 contributions by computer-generated female artists. In both cases, the development of online fictional artists is not to be interpreted as explorations into self-hood but as playful and political interventions that explored the possibilities of the virtual sphere.

Erica Scourti's inquiries into online identity, including her project *The Outage*, are representative of a different way of understanding the Internet. Rather than as an autonomous space separated from our offline activities, the Internet is conceived and experienced by most of us today as a continuation of our everyday life. From email communication in which we use our official names, to online profiles in which we present verifiable information about ourselves, to social media through which we share our photographs, achievements, and *likes*, as well as online banking and shopping, the Internet is no longer perceived as the most convenient place for constructing fake identities. Social profiling companies specialising in monitoring, and creating reports for employers about the online behaviour of their staff members have, in fact, made it almost impossible to be somebody else on the Internet.[55] As the art writer Gene McHugh explains,

> the paradigm of online representation has, for most people, radically shifted from the anonymity of twenty years ago . . . to the intense surveillance, sharing of personal data, and the cult of 'authenticity' that came with Web 2.0 social networks, most notably Facebook.[56]

This change from a context of anonymity to one of surveillance has had inescapable consequences for how artists from the mid-2000s onwards have explored representation and self-presentation on online platforms. Rather than employing the Internet to develop fictional personas, many artists are interested in revealing how online activity drastically affects one's sense of self. McHugh's text is, in fact, included in the compilation *You Are Here. Art After the Internet* which tries to describe and analyse how this generation of artists is examining "networked

[55] See the website "SP-Index," accessed 1 April, 2016, http://www.sp-index.com/.

[56] Gene McHugh, "The Context of the Digital: A Brief Inquiry into Online Relationships," in *You Are Here. Art After the Internet*, ed. Omar Kholeif (Manchester: Cornerhouse and London: Space, 2014), 31.

identities" and other related themes such as image manipulation or information circulation in the current digital paradigm. Scourti, whose artworks exist both online and offline, belongs to this group of so-called "post-Internet artists" who, although inspired by all sorts of online communication tools, digital gadgets, and software applications, can no longer be described as net artists.[57]

As mentioned, in 2014 Scourti commissioned a ghost writer to compose her fictional autobiography based on visuals, texts, and diagrams recording her digital footprint. In the resulting book, *The Outage*, rather than inventing a credible online persona, actual public and semi-private personal data was employed to construct a fiction. The memoir is organised in 11 short chapters. Each chapter begins with the protagonist submerged in some sort of disorienting experience ("I'm confused about where I am" and "I've had a nightmare. Or I´m having a nightmare"[58]), and then evolves into a series of reflections that vary from the biographical ("Having grown up in Greece, and being half Greek I guess I romanticised"[59]) to more abstract and even theoretical preoccupations with a variety of topics like the commercialisation of privacy ("The frightening aspect of social media . . . had been that the domain of private, interior human communication had already been absorbed by nano-targeted interactions and participation within the network as genuine action"[60]) or networked subjectivity ("The real self, real in the sense of being influential, had emerged through information processing"[61]). But *The Outage* is also an illustrated memoir, for next to the text one find a series of poor quality images of screen shots from Scourti's videos on Youtube, web captures of her URL history, of her google book's recommendations, Twitter feed, graphs showing her "visibility landscape" over different online networks, and statistics across Twitter and Facebook accounts (figs. 2.14 and 2.15). In the cover, as one could expect from a vanity project of this kind, there is a picture of Scourti. But rather than a flattering one, we find a badly framed

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[57] See Melissa Gronlund, "From Narcissism to the Dialogic: Identity in Art after the Internet," *Afterall* 37 (Autumn/Winter, 2014), accessed 27 March, 2016, http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.37/from-narcissism-to-the-dialogic_identity-in-art-after-the-internet.

[58] Erica Scourti, *The Outage* (London: Banner Repeater, 2014), 35 and 57.

[59] Ibid., 8.

[60] Ibid., 54.

[61] Ibid., 30.

advertisement"[62]), online agency ("unlike a video game, users experienced their

Figure 2.14. Erica Scourti, *The Outage*, 2014.
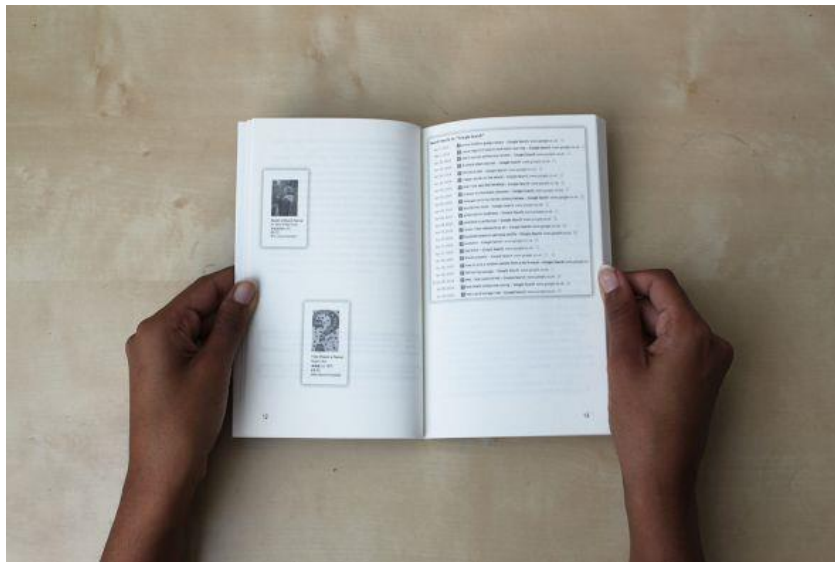
Figure 2.15. Erica Scourti, *The Outage*, 2014.

photograph of her face as seen on the dirty and reflective screen of a tablet or phone (fig. 2.16).

There are several ways in which one can read *The Outage*. If we decide to side-step the conditions under which the text was written, the chapters can be interpreted mainly as a narrative about the dangers to identity in the digital age. The

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[62] Ibid., 36.

Figure 2.16. Erica Scourti, *The Outage*, 2014.

title implies a threat, a possible break down or collapse of the Internet that is presented as the backdrop to the story ("The rumour had been that there was some sort of issue with the cables which transported internet signals"[63]). It is in this science fiction context of terminal risk to all online data that the protagonist's reflections about her continued existence make sense (from "My entire self had been constituted virtually and now there was nothing solid to grasp on to" to "Am I about to die?"[64]). If one's sense of self is highly influenced by what one does and how one is represented online, would not the disappearance of all digital content have an undeniable effect on the survival of a fundamental part of one's identity? And if we believe that our online and offline activities are *vitally* interconnected, is not the outage a threat to one's physical existence too?

Yet, it is hard to forget the external circumstances under which *The Outage* was written, not least because whenever the book is talked about or described, such circumstances reappear. One of the questions I kept asking myself while reading it was whether I was listening to the words of Erica Scourti or to those of John A. Harrington, the ghost writer. As Scourti has explained, the text includes quotations from her Tumblr, extracts from her blog *Wrong Dreams*, answers she has given in interviews, as well as passages written by Harrington, without any distinction made

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[63] Ibid., 23.

[64] Ibid., 24 and 1.

between them.[65] The inevitable question that this method highlights is who, besides ourselves, can use our online information and how? Of course, Scourti voluntarily handed all of this data to Harrington and commissioned the book; nevertheless, she has described the experience of confronting *The Outage* as "reading my own obituary."[66] Following this, and although the book was supposed to be the first of three ghostwritten memoirs based on Scourti's digital footprint, the artist decided to postpone the other two indefinitely.[67] We could argue that although Scourti is an artist who actively uses the Internet to share personal information, with *The Outage* she reached the limit of how comfortable she feels about her own visibility. Until now, Scourti had scattered multiple bits of data about herself all over the Internet, making it almost impossible to reconstruct a *faithful portrait* of the artist. Yet, once those pieces were turned into a single, physical book, her attempt to *escape resolution* through over-visibility stopped working.[68] In any case, and as the artist has informed audiences at different public events, after the publication of *The Outgage*, she started dating her ghost writer.

Returning to the question of whose words I am reading in *The Outage*, one possibility is to say they are the words of a parafictional artist. In my opinion, the Erica Scourti who is produced through the book is not so different from Reena Spaulings, Barbara Cleveland, or even Donelle Woolford. The four of them are the result of blurring factual and imagined information; in the four cases, fictional strategies are employed to research how artists operate in the art world, and who gets to produce, exhibit, perform, or even exist as a creator. While Spaulings' successful career both in the book *Reena Spaulings* and outside of it can be seen as an example of how artists should "free" themselves from the ties of their "authentic" identities, the re-writing of Cleveland into the history of Australian performance art is a way of reminding us about the inevitable—as well as complex—role of identity and

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[65] Erica Scourti, "This Is (Not) My Book," *Wrong Dreams* (blog), 21 May, 2014, accessed 1 April, 2016, http://wrongdreams.com/2014/05/21/this-is-not-my-book/.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Erica Scourti, interview by author, London, 26 March, 2016.

[68] For two different analyses of the identity of the contemporary artist in relation to the accessibility of their online data see Boris Groys, "Art Workers: Between Utopia and the Archive," *e-flux journal* 45 (May 2013), accessed 24 March, 2016, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-workers-between-utopia-and-the-archive/; and David Joselit, "Dark Cloud. Shapes of Information" (video of lecture, Lunch Bytes Conference European Edition, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 20 March, 2015), accessed 1 April, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOZdkhqcQMk.

the biographical in the construction of artists as authors. Meanwhile, Donelle Woolford's controversial origin indicates that there can be ethical consequences to the appropriation of fictional identities. Finally, in the case of Scourti, the attempt to create a fictional biography for herself using her actual online data shows not only the risks that artists assume in the digital age, but also that one's online identity is as authentic or as inauthentic as one's "actual" identity.

Copyright or the economic conditions of authorship

Although in the previous pages I have already mentioned the influence of specific economic conditions on the development of non-existent artists—i.e. outsourcing practices, identities being sold as commodities, the art market's interest in female performers—I would now like to discuss in more depth how material needs and monetary considerations affect artists' decisions to create parafictional others. The discourses on authorship are, as explained in Chapter 1, fundamentally connected to ideas and practices of commerce: on the one hand, the correct attribution of an artwork to an author determines its monetary value; on the other, the critique of authorship in new art history can be read as a reaction to how the discipline traditionally backs a particular ideological organisation of value in the cultural industry. In fact, as art historian Molly Nesbitt argues in an article about the evolution of copyright law in France, discourses on authorship circulate and operate within a market economy, for it is economic conditions that "defined the author in the first place."[69]

In the previous section of this text I have dealt with the debates associated to cultural appropriation across, primarily, racial or ethnic lines. However, I would like to signal another genealogy of the term "appropriation," for parafictional artists tend to appropriate the work or aesthetic characteristics of others without always having racial or racist connotations. In those cases, parafictional artists like Reena Spaulings or Barbara Cleveland share with the so-called "appropriationist" artists—Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine amongst them—a

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[69] Molly Nesbit, "What Was an Author?" *Yale French Studies* 73 (1987): 240.

disregard for originality and copyright.[70] But whereas the appropriations of these earlier artists were mainly targeted towards the images, objects, or ideas conceived by others, parafictional artists also appropriate identities (personal as well as corporate) and other people's names. This expansion of what can be reused under the logic of appropriation seems to be in line with a different conception of the artwork: not as an end product that belongs to someone, but an ongoing proposal that is open to further reinterpretations.[71] In the case of those parafictional artists advocating for open access codes into the privileges of authorship, appropriation becomes not only something that they do, but something that they encourage others *to do to them*.

In this section, I will initially introduce two examples of fictional artists: Juan Trepadori—developed by a group of Latin American artists working together in the late 1960s as the New York Graphic Workshop—and Monty Cantsin—one of the collective pseudonyms used by the members of Neoism, a counter-cultural movement which emerged from mail art networks in North America in the late 1970s. Juan Trepadori and Monty Cantsin represent two ways in which artists working in previous decades approached the dilemmas of the commercialisation of art, including the inevitable material necessities of art workers. In that sense, while the former was conceived as a commercially viable artist for whose pleasing work no "physical" artist had to respond, the latter put forward a critique of individuated authorship yet remained a marginal, under-recognised experiment. In contrast with these early experiences, the case of parafictional artists Luther Blissett and Robbie Williams exemplify a different state of affairs. As I will go on to show in the rest of this section, Blissett and Williams both serve to critique the conditions of art and cultural production in the current neoliberal economy. Yet, their institutional effectiveness and even commercial viability turns them *at the same time* into authors, or even better, into *operative anti-authors*. In other words, by making the logic of the cultural industries and the conventions of copyright into the object of their criticisms, the artists and activists behind Blissett and Williams are

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[70] See two texts by Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 75-88 and "Appropriating Appropriation," In *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 126-137.

[71] For two more recent views on the use of appropriation by contemporary artists, see Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction. Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World* (Lukas & Sternberg: New York, 2002); and Jan Verwoert, "Apropos Appropriation: Why Stealing Images Today Feels Different," *Art & Research. A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods* 1, no.2, (Summer 2007), accessed 19 April, 2014, http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/verwoert.html.

symptomatically questioning current models of artist-hood through the construction of potentially profitable situations.

Juan Trepadori

In 1964, three young Latin American artists living in New York—the Uruguayan Luis Camnitzer, the Venezuelan José Guillermo Castillo, and the Argentinian Liliana Porter—funded a conceptually-driven graphic workshop. Rather than focusing on the technical and aesthetic qualities of printmaking, the intention of the New York Graphic Workshop was to investigate the possibilities and limits of the medium, including its serial production and democratic potential. As stated in their first manifesto:

> The printing industry prints on bottles, boxes, electronic circuits, etc. Printmakers, however, continue to make prints with the same elements used by [Albrecht] Dürer. The act of printing in editions, the act of publishing, is more important than the work carried out on a printing plate.[72]

As one could expect from such motivations and from the later individual careers of Camnitzer, Castillo and Porter, the vast majority of the artworks produced at the NYGW moved away from the pictorial and decorative traditions of printmaking. Instead, they chose black inks, simple lines and texts to explore the language of representation, the conceptual limits of what a print could be, and openly political topics such as media depictions of the Vietnam War or the classification of political regimes (figs. 2.17 and 2.18). In contrast with Camnitzer, Castillo, and Porter, Juan Trepadori's prints are colourful, realistic, naïve, and aesthetically pleasing. They depict subjects such as a landscape at dusk, a man with a sort of feathery ornament, or a childlike drawn figure with a pink bird on its head (figs. 2.19 and 2.20). Yet Trepadori was also a member of the NYGW; probably the most successful one.[73] According to his "official" biography, Trepadori was born in Paraguay in 1939, and moved to Lisbon in 1953, where he would later suffer an accident that confined him

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[72] Quoted in "The New York Graphic Workshop: 1964–1970. Print*making*," Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, accessed 7 April, 2016, http://blantonmuseum.org/interact/NYGW/.

[73] For a description and analysis of *The Trepadori Project*, see the exhibition catalogue *The New York Graphic Workshop 1964-1970*, eds. Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, Ursula Davila-Villa and Gina McDaniel Tarver (Austin, TX: Blanton Museum of Art. The University of Texas at Austin, 2008), 74-77.
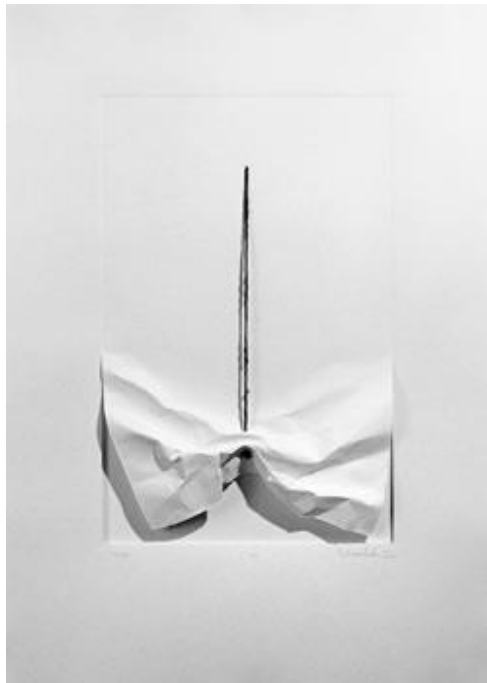
Figure 2.17 (left). Liliana Porter, untitled (with string and wrinkle), embossing wrinkled and cut paper, yarn, 1970.
Figure 2.18 (right). Liliana Porter, untitled, 1970
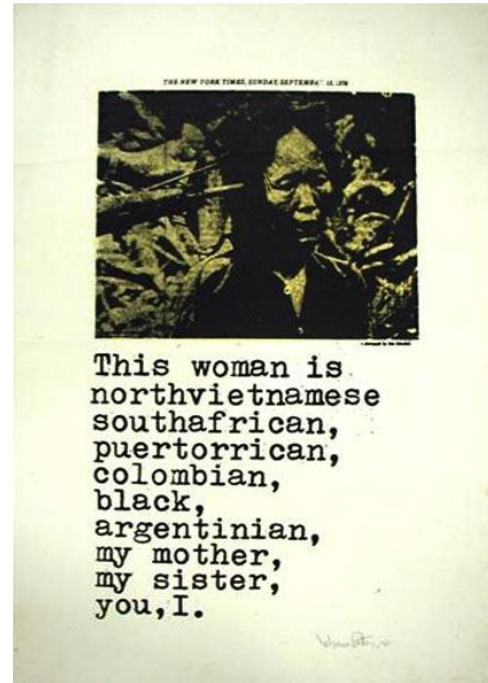
to a wheelchair. Following this, he decided to take a long-distance course in printmaking that enabled him to participate in a number of solo and group shows across Europe. During the 1960s, he started producing his works via the NYGW, and selling them to US-based dealers. Perhaps as a result of his generous heart or because he himself had experienced economic difficulties, he decided that the money raised from selling his prints would be partially used to help other Latin American artists experiencing hardship as well as to fund a printmaking scholarship managed through the NYGW. Although Trepadori's trace disappears with the dissolution of the NYGW in 1970, in 2016 I was still able to find one of his etchings for sale on ebay.[74]

Trepadori was, of course, a fictional artist. His case is, in fact, similar to other examples in which artists producing commercial work invent a pseudonym so that their money-driven activities do not interfere with the reception of their more "serious" or personal work (for instance, during the early years of their careers, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns produced a series of window displays for such

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[74] "Original 1960's New York Graphic Workshop Juan Trepadori Aquatint Etching," ebay, accessed 7 April, 2016, http://preview.tinyurl.com/jpj5sn6

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Figure 2.19. Juan Trepadori, both works untitled, n.d.

Figure 2.20. Juan Trepadori, untitled, etching on paper, n.d

high-brow companies as Tiffany's and Bonwit Teller department stores under the pseudonym Matson Jones[75]). At the same time, Juan Trepadori was given an artist's biography (place of birth, education, list of exhibitions) including a dramatic event

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[75] Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 113-14.

which, apparently, was the explanation why he would never attend any public event and why he did not want to receive any visitors at his studio in Lisbon. More importantly though, rather than keeping the profit from Trepadori's sales, Camnitzer, Castillo, and Porter decided to use it to support other Latin American artists in need, in what can be read as an attempt to take *legitimate advantage* of the system: yes, they did make money out of the market's demand for beautiful prints, (actually, Trepadori's invented surname could derive from the Spanish slang word "trepa" which is used to describe a social climber) *but* they did it for a good, non-selfish cause.

In my view, Juan Trepadori was *only* a fictional artist, not a parafictional one. From what I have been able to find out, it was a hoax that was not revealed until the late 2000s, well after Trepadori and the NYGW stopped being active.[76] Trepadori was indeed able to function as an author, selling works and participating in actual exhibitions; but because his constructed nature was not acknowledged, he could not make a critical point about authorship *at the same time*, in the way parafictional artists do. As I have been arguing, parafictional artists are able to keep operating as authors even when their dual nature has been revealed. Moreover, *because* their constructed nature is exposed, parafictional artists can critically engage with the concept of authorship. So, while Trepadori allowed the NYGW artists to continue with their conceptual, (then) hard-to-sell work and produced a much-needed income, he was not *publicly* presenting a critical point about the contradictory demands made of artists.[77] In that sense, although Trepadori is an interesting case of how critically-engaged artists negotiated practical needs, his strategic invention denotes a different choice from the one taken by artists developing parafictional others.

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[76] The first full disclosure of the project appeared in the already cited exhibition at the Blanton Museum of Art in 2008. I was also able to see some of the original works and documents about Juan Trepadori at the exhibition *Trust in Fiction* organized at CRAC Alsace, Altkirch, in 2016 (more about this show in Chapter 5). Amongst the documents exhibited there, I found a set of rules about the use of Juan Trepadori signed by Camnitzer, Castillo and Porter which included a final point about the expressed commitment of the signatories to keep the truth about the project absolutely secret.

[77] A comparison could be made with Allen Smithee, the "official" pseudonym offered by the American Guild of Directors between 1968 and 2000 to those film directors who could demonstrate that they had lost the creative control of their movie, and who therefore preferred not to appear in the credits with their own name. Although the filmmakers using the pseudonym were rejecting copyright over their creations rather than questioning how copyright operates, for a later generation of film scholars, the Allen Smithee phenomenon has become a very useful tool to consider the conceptual and practical implication of authorship in the film industry. See Jeremy Braddock and Stephen Hock, eds., *Directed by Allen Smithee (Commerce and Mass Culture)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

Monty Cantsin

Monty Cantsin, a collectively-used name developed by Neoist artists in the late 1970s, can be understood as exemplifying the opposite approach to the dilemmas of the commercialisation of art. If Camnitzer, Castillo, and Porter had decided to construct Trepadori as a profitable artist and keep it a secret (and therefore not to produce a simultaneous critique of authorship), the invention of Cantsin implied a public denunciation of individuality and success in the art system, yet its specific use within the mail art networks dramatically limited its impact and economic viability. As the media studies specialist Marco Deseriis has explained in his detailed study of Monty Cantsin and other collective pseudonyms, the difficulties that the Neoist movement encountered in productively addressing "the contradiction of art-making in a capitalist society" is one of the reasons that explains why Cantsin did not become a "pop star."[78]

The First International Neoist Manifesto stated that "The Neoist Cultural Conspiracy will admit anyone to its ranks. All members of the movement are to be addressed as Monty Cantsin."[79] Inspired by previous counter-cultural initiatives such as Futurism, Dada, Fluxus and Punk, Neoism aspired to produce music, videos, audio works and live performances with a subversive, non-conformist intent, which expanded to its fully-open entry code and the attack on mainstream values such as individual attribution and the consequent singularly-enjoyed fame. As in a cooperative, those working under the collective name Monty Cantsin collaborated through their independent contributions and efforts to the construction of the brand-name, the fruit of whose successes they would all enjoy. As the English artist, writer and activist Stewart Home hopefully indicated, "if enough people used the name, the fictitious character would quickly develop a huge following and anybody who wanted a readymade audience for their music would be able to find one simply by billing themselves as Monty Cantsin."[80]

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[78] Marco Deseriis, *Improper Names. Collective Pseudonyms from the Luddites to Anonymous* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 118.

[79] Stewart Home, *Neoist Manifestos/The Art Strike Papers* (Stirling: AK Press, 1991) 17.

[80] Stewart Home, *Neoism, Plagiarism & Praxis* (Edinburgh and San Francisco: AK Press, 1995), 78.

Home was involved with Neoism in the 1980s, and from his words and the fact that its originators described Monty Cantsin as an "open pop star,"[81] we can assume that at least a number of the people using the name were interested in some sort of recognition and in reaching a public beyond the mail art networks. For example, their actions included the "occupation" of a Montreal art gallery as well as splashing Cantsin's blood onto famous museum's gallery walls as an "unwanted" contribution to their collections. Of course, these interventions do not mean that the Neoist artists were expecting Cantsin to become a money-making device, but rather that they intended the name to publicly function as an author's one in the extended art scene. At the same time, the opening up of an author's name to anyone could have been considered a political project: rather than contributing to the capitalist notion of copyright as an individual, private, and exclusive property, Monty Cantsin could have presented the art world with a communal, shared, and participatory model for understanding art making. In that sense, it is telling that Neoism's first action in May 1979, *Monty Cantsin sits for a Portrait*—which consisted of inviting passers-by to sit on a "Neoist chair" to have their picture taken—was organised in the streets of Montreal coinciding with an election day. Yet, the radical openness of Monty Cantsin and the punk attitude and nihilism also present within the Neoism movement meant that there were no rules or guidelines for utilising Cantsin beyond the collective-use policy. As a result, the name became embroiled in a battle over its meaning, which led to the malfunctioning of the concept and the invention of rival names, including N. O. Cantsin and Karen Elliot.

Another major difficulty that the "open pop star" concept encountered was the gradual association of Monty Cantsin with those artists who were more actively using the name, like the Hungarian-born Canadian artist Istvan Kantor. In an essay about the problematic functioning of collective names, the political sociologist Oliver Marchant highlights the difficulty experienced by the inventors and users of Cantsin in cutting all links between the name and themselves: "What they announced was not Monty Cantsin but, for instance: *Monty Cantsin (Istvan Kantor)*."[82] Stewart Home,

[81] David Zack, "One Thing I Definitely Did Invent," *Seven by Nine Squares*, June 1986, accessed 22 April, 2016, http://www.thing.de/projekte/7:9%23/cantsin_17.html. *Seven by Nine Squares* website is the biggest repository of texts related to Neoism and to Monty Cantsin.

[82] Oliver Marchart, "Political Strategies as Artistic Strategies: The Use of Multiple Names," in *Strategies of Representation I*, eds. Barbara Borčić, and Saša Glavan (Ljubljana: SCCA-Ljubljana, Centre for Contemporary Arts, 2000-01), accessed 25 March, 2013, http://www.worldofart.org/english/0001/tekst_oliver_ang.htm.

after breaking away from Neoism, described the situation in the following dramatic terms:

> Previous experiments with the multiple names, such as the Monty Cantsin fiasco, indicate that the failure to differentiate between the personal and the social and in particular *over-identification* [emphasis added] by certain individuals with the context, is disastrous.[83]

The efficiency of over-identification as a strategy through which one undermines what one is apparently endorsing will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 3. In the case of the over-identification between Cantsin and Kantor—or, for that matter, Stewart Home—the undermining of the concept of the "open pop star" might not have been intentional, but was its logical result. As I will go on to show, parafictional artists employing over-identification productively are able to explore certain contradictions inherited in the art system. Neoist artists, struggling over the meaning of Monty Cantsin, its political significance, and actual use, were, unfortunately, not capable of turning this fictional artist into a functioning anti-author.

The Neoist experiment has remained a marginal experience, occupying a tangential space in institutionalised art history. And although the influence of Monty Cantsin at the time could not compete with the one of a proper pop star, the reasoning behind its invention, as well as the drawbacks encountered, were a fundamental inspiration for the later development of the also collective name Luther Blissett, whom I consider an early example of a parafictional artist. Monty Cantsin is, therefore, a fictional artist, not a parafictional one. Neoist artists and those working at the New York Graphic Workshop tried to confront the dilemmas of working as artists in a capitalist system. They opted for strategies of disavowal and anti-commercialism but, in doing so, they were not able to produce effective artists *at the same time* as articulating a recognisable critique of authorship. Contrary to Cantsin and Juan Trepadori, the parafictional artists Luther Blissett and Robbie Williams make openly anti-authorship choices yet they are also, albeit in different ways, operative artists in the sense of being both critically acclaimed and economically viable. Let us see how.

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[83] Home, *Neoism, Plagiarism & Praxis*, 11.

Luther Blissett

In 1994 a group of Italian students, activists, hackers, and artists adopted the name of the British-Jamaican footballer Luther Blissett to author a series of media pranks, interventions in the urban space, and activist texts. Organised in collectives and cells operating in different Italian cities, the United Kingdom, and Slovenia, the members of the Luther Blissett Project (LBP) proposed a name that—similarly to Monty Cantsin—was open to collective use, but which—differently from the Neoist experiment—was conceived strategically from its beginning. Although the LBP later encountered problems in producing a single narrative for what was inevitably of polysemic nature, Luther Blissett was able to gain a visibility and effectiveness far greater than the one achieved by its predecessor. Indeed, one could argue that Luther Blissett was active outside institutional culture, yet the influence of the LBP during the last decade of the twentieth century and into the current one has turned this countercultural experiment into an established chapter of the history of protest art practices.

Some of the most well-known actions of Luther Blissett during the late 1990s included the denunciation of the TV program *Chi l'ha visto?* (*Who has seen him/her?*) about the disappearance of a conceptual British artist named Harry Kipper; a series of radio programs broadcast in Bologna and Rome with contributions by different Luthers; and, most prominently, the publication of the historical novel *Q*, set in sixteenth-century Europe, describing a series of political and social revolts such as the German Peasant's War or the Anabaptist rebellion through a character who changes his name and life story with each new defeat. Meanwhile, the association of the members of the LBP with Leftists initiatives and the dissemination of politically-inspired texts like Luther Blissett's *Declaration of Rights* (cited in the Introduction to this thesis) aligned the above actions with a progressive agenda that aspired to have real impact in the socio-cultural context of the time.[84]

As already mentioned, Luther Blissett was active throughout Europe as contributor to a variety of activities with a common denominator: taking advantage of the credibility and dissemination channels of mainstream communication structures such as television, radio, and publishing houses, for their own purposes of

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[84] For a complete list of actions and texts authored by Luther Blissett see the website "Luther Blissett," accessed 10 July, 2015, http://www.lutherblissett.net/.

reach and visibility. The intention of building a mythical figure able to intervene knowingly in a variety of spheres with a "rightful" political intent is well-represented in the following statement:

> This Robin Hood of the information age waged a guerrilla warfare on the cultural industry, ran unorthodox solidarity campaigns for victims of censorship and repression and—above all—played elaborate media pranks as a form of art, always claiming responsibility and explaining what bugs they had exploited to plant a fake story.[85]

Given the ample variety of initiatives authored by Luther Blissett, and the numerous possible meanings and interpretations that a collective way of working inevitably produces, the LBP can be approached from a variety of perspectives. For my purposes here, and in connection both to Blissett's function as an early parafictional artist and to the economic conditions of authorship discussed in this section, I would highlight that Blissett was able to produce a critique of certain values of contemporary culture like copyright while simultaneously taking advantage of its mechanisms to operate as an effective anti-author.

By the 1990s, the realm of culture was no longer conceived separately from other areas of the productive economy, but rather as a fundamental part of it. If it was previously still possible to think about artists as operating outside the parameters of industrial work, with the expansion of neoliberalism, not only did culture become organised according to a quantifiable logic, but many of the until then considered "anti-systemic" qualities of art were taken as models for new forms of profitable (and exploitative) labour.[86] This ongoing process, exemplified in terms like "creative economy" or "cultural industry," is the ideological context in which projects like Luther Blissett and other paraficitional artists function. In that sense, and rather than working as if it were possible to ignore or oppose such logic, I view that the LBP as an early attempt to produce cultural projects that accept those given conditions yet offer what would seem to be viable alternatives.

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[85] "Who is Luther Blissett? Birth of a Folk Hero," Luther Blissett, accessed 10 July, 2015, www.lutherblissett.net.

[86] For two recent analyses on the effects of neoliberalism on art and artists see Gregory Sholette, "Speaking Clown to Power. Can We Resist the Historic Compromise of Neoliberal Art?" in *Imagining Resistance. Visual Culture and Activism in Canada*, eds. J. Keri Cronin, Kirsty Robertson (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011) 27-48; and Pascal Gielen and Paul de Bruyne, eds., *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, 2nd ed. (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2012).

So, what are those viable alternatives and what limits do they present in order to be operative? Luther Blissett, as already explained, worked as an open source alias, and the cultural and activist projects authored in his name present a model of authorship which is *made in common*. As in the case of Monty Cantsin, the collective name strategy behind Luther Blissett has the political intention of offering to the cultural sphere a communal, shared, and participatory model for understanding art making. Comprehensibly, the model is not compatible with copyright, not even with those regulations trying to identify the specific contribution of each member of a collaborative enterprise.[87] Yet, rather than existing outside the law, the members of the LBP contributed to its adaptation through concepts and practices like free culture and creative commons. For instance, Blissett's novel *Q*—which became a bestseller and was translated from Italian into numerous languages—is not only available for sale, but anyone can download it freely from the Internet in its English, Spanish, Portuguese and Polish versions.[88] At the same time, in all its translations, the book contains the following warning: "Partial or total reproduction of this book, as well as its electronic diffusion, are consented to the readers for non-commercial use."[89] Luther Blissett, as with other open source initiatives, is not a completely open model but one which operates by modifying the logic of the cultural industry.[90] Yet, if the artist gives away her copyright and even makes her work available for free, how can she survive? I would say that the defence of the collective name strategy and of the open source model does not mean that artists' economic necessities are not taken into account (remember Luther Blissett's *Declaration of Rights* and his demands for "LOTS OF MONEY" and "CITIZEN INCOME"), but that they try to reassess *who* is responsible for the artists' subsistence.

According to the political philosopher Michael Hardt, in the current economic era, artists play a fundamental role in the struggle over the production and distribution of common goods like information, ideas, and images; common goods to

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[87] For an examination on how copyright law has tried to adapt to the working conditions of collaborative cultural forms see Nesbit, "What Was an Author?" 257.

[88] For links to the free downloads go to the website "Wu Ming Foundation," accessed 22 April, 2016, http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/downloads.shtml.

[89] Luther Blissett, "Anti-copyright stance of *Q*'s authors" (1999), accessed 22 April, 2016, http://www.lutherblissett.net/index_en.html.

[90] For more on the relation between authorship and the open source model see Lev Manovich, *Who is the Author? Sampling/Remixing/Open Source [or Models of Authorship in New Media],* 2002, accessed 6 June, 2014. http://www.manovich.net/TEXTS_07.HTM.

which the application of exclusive copyright is questionable.[91] In the Introduction to this thesis, I explained that Luther Blissett was in fact an inspiration for those communities of practitioners who wanted to gain a more powerful creative and political voice while avoiding individual identification. And indeed, in December 1999, and following a series of conflicts between the different groups of the LBP, Luther Blissett committed a "ritual suicide" with the intention of separating the name from its original creators and opening it up to other potential users.[92] This sacrifice, which allowed the members of the LBP to move onto other creative endeavors, also put an end to the more strategic phase of the collective name strategy and demonstrated the difficulties of maintaining its productive outcomes over time. It is interesting that the most profitable project of Luther Blissett was a novel, not a performance or an artwork. And although this reinforces the idea that due to the commercial organisation of the literary world, publishing authors can more easily remain unknown than visual artists trying the same route, Blissett has inspired other parafictional artists and well-known creative practitioners—including the already mentioned 0100101110101101.ORG, which was a direct offshoot of the LBP, and, in a more indirect way, the Slovenian Janez Janša, Janez Janša, and Janez Janša, to whom I dedicate Chapter 3—to produce not only profitable anti-authors, but ones which can be interpreted as viable within the neoliberal economy whilst remaining politically committed.

Robbie Williams

Despite his openness to appropriation, Luther Blissett is no longer a particularly active artist. Yet his influence can be felt in a variety of contemporary creative proposals, sometimes acknowledged, sometimes not. The online platform www.bioswop.net is amongst the first. The website was created by the Berlin-based artist Natascha Sadr Haghighian in 2004 to swap *curricula vitae* between different professionals active in the art world. The site works in the following way: the user—I myself tried—creates an account and is then given access to a list of available

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[91] Michael Hardt, "Production and Distribution of the Common," in *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, eds., Pascal Gielen and Paul de Bruyne, 2nd ed. (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2012), 45-53.

[92] Luther Blissett, "'Seppuku!' the Luther Blissett's ritual suicide" (1999), accessed 5 July, 2015, http://www.lutherblissett.net/index_en.html

bio of emma braso

artform:	curating / criticism
place of birth:	San Francisco
year of birth:	1973
homebase:	Zurich / Tehran
ethnicity:	Persian
gender:	Male
range:	international
score:	none

projectlisting — Curatorial Projects

Nov 06 Lapdogs of the Bourgeoisie, group exhibition, Gasworks London, Platform Istanbul et al

Sep 06 Manifesta 2006: Advisor / Tutor in Department 2 of Manifesta School

April 06 How Can it Hurt You When it Looks so Good, exhibition project in Tehran

March 06 A Fiesta of Tough Coices, Symposium & exhibition project, IASPIS Stockholm

March 06 Body Shop Hermeneutics, exhibition project at Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich

Jan 06 Spring Salon 2006, jury member and co-curator, Liljevalchs Konsthall Stockholm

Figure 2.21. My CV borrowed from www.bioswap.net.

biographies categorised by art form, place and year of birth, ethnicity, home base, range of the activities (national or international), and number of times the biography has been borrowed. You can then choose whichever one you consider appropriate and download a final document with the selected CV but now showing your name (fig.2.21). In exchange, you are invited to upload your own professional achievements. The project—which reminds me of the recommendation letters by art institutions made available through the also online platform *Mejor Vida Corp*. (Better Life Corporation) by Mexican artist Minerva Cuevas—is more of a critical comment on the centrality of the *curricula* form to the art world than a useful tool. Nevertheless, the bioswop site includes a link to the Luther Blissett website, while

the contact email provided seems to be a reference to the artistic community potentially benefitting from this service: many@bioswop.net.

Bioswop can be seen as modelling itself after a growing (and lucrative) sharing economy in which resources and services are exchanged peer-to-peer. At the same time, it highlights a process of professionalisation in the art sector by which artists' biographies are no longer constructed through such documents as personal letters or diaries but through a list of institutionally sanctioned activities in the form of education degrees, awards, exhibitions, publications, etc. (yet, as I have shown through Erica Scourti, the expansion of the Internet is rapidly changing this situation once again, a point to which I will soon return). Natascha Sadr Haghighian—who, according to the MIT List Visual Art Centre's website, "rejects the totalizing ideas of CVs, resumes, and bios, and insists that only biographies obtained from bioswop project be used in printed material regarding her work"[93]—is herself a substantially successful artist in such institutionally-biographical terms. In 2005, while she was installing her work at the Sharjah Biennial, Haghighian met Uwe Schwarzer, the director of mixmedia berlin, who was at the Biennial installing someone else's artwork. mixmedia berlin is a highly specialised company dedicated to the production of technically complex artworks for contemporary artists and, according to her own account, Haghighian became fascinated by the implications of such new form of hyper-professional art production.[94] As a result, and given the discretion and even secrecy surrounding these businesses, Haghighian along with Schwarzer invented a parafictional artist, Robbie Williams, to further explore how contemporary artist-hood is affected by this type of outsourced artistic labour.

Projects like bioswop and the invention of Robbie Williams demonstrate Haghighian's interest in the role of socio-economic structures and professional conventions in the contemporary art world. In these and other works, she questions and criticises institutional forms of art production with the support of the art institutions themselves (a point to which I will return in Chapter 4) and—more crucially here—from her own *invested* position as an active member of the art world.

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[93] "Artist's Bios," MIT List Visual Arts Centre, accessed 25 April, 2016, https://listart.mit.edu/exhibitions/9-artists.

[94] Natascha Sadr Haghighian, "Memo," in the exhibition catalogue *Solo Show. Robbie Williams* (Bologna: MAMbo-Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna, 7 September—2 November, 2008). Also available online, accessed 25 April, 2016, http://www.carrollfletcher.com/usr/library/documents/natascha-sadr-haghighian/2008_carroll_fletcher_natascha_sadr_haghighian_soloshow_uwe_.pdf

Figure 2.22. Robbie Williams, *Solo Show*, 2008, exhibition view at MAMbo, Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna, 2008.
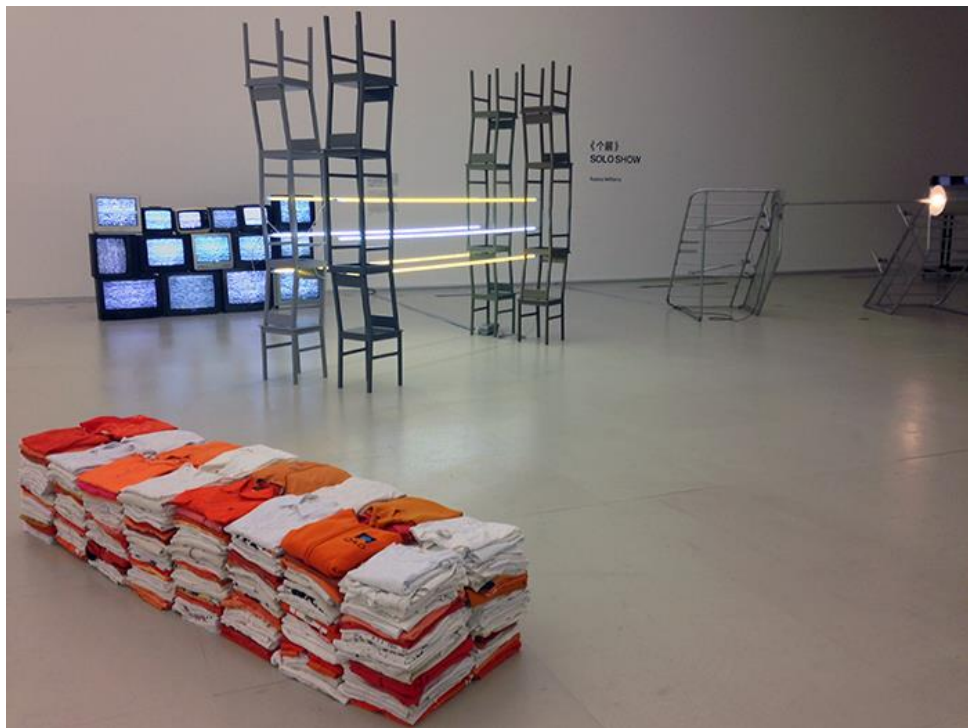
Figure 2.23. Robbie Williams, *Solo Show*, 2014, exhibition view, 10th Shanghai Biennale, 2014.

For instance, Robbie Williams has had his *Solo Show* at MAMbo, Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna (2008), at e-flux gallery in New York (2014), and at the 10th Shanghai Biennial (2014). In all of these occasions, the exhibition included a series of objects resembling equestrian jumping faces made from birdhouses and wigs, TV monitors, or piles of clothes (figs. 2.22 and 2.23), and a soundtrack of horses

galloping and jumping. All the elements on display had been produced by mixmedia Berlin, which justified the existence of two alternative lists of credits displayed at opposite entrances to the gallery: one featuring only the name "Robbie Williams" and the other crediting the more than 50 individuals involved in the exhibition, including Natascha Sdr Haghighian and Uwe Schwarzer (fig. 2.24).

According to the conversation between Haghighian and Schwarzer published in the catalogue of the Bologna exhibition, mixmedia berlin is not usually credited as contributor to the numerous exhibitions for which it produces work. The tacit and sometimes formal agreement is that the copyright remains solely and exclusively with the artist commissioning the artwork. Yet Schwarzer—who, as with many of the other members of his company, studied fine art—does not seem bothered by this. As he explains, "for me they are jobs I've contracted to do, and I have no expectations in terms of authorship."[95] The printed exchange in the catalogue is very stimulating, with Haghighian asking poignant questions about the particularities of this form of outsourced labour, and Schwarzer answering throughout in a very professional manner. Although the conversation does not allow it, it is nevertheless a great springboard to consider what might be specific about this sort of art production when compared to previous models of collaborative or delegated work (depending on your view) like the master in the studio with his assistants or the ordering of industrially produced works to non-art professionals by artists like Donald Judd or Dan Flavin. As art historian John Roberts has convincingly demonstrated, each change in the conditions of artistic labour is connected to evolving conceptions of what an artist is and does.[96] And although it is beyond the scope of my research here to analyse how this new form of hyper-specialised art production will affect current understandings of authorship, I venture that it is connected to the idea of the neoliberal artist, functioning as a corporation yet able to be marketed as a single, super-skilled, and profit-making *creative professional*. Of course, the parafictional artist Robbie Williams—named after a male, "proper" pop star who decided to pursue a solo career—would represent such a *recognisable no one*.[97] It is meaningful

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[95] "Uwe Schwarzer in conversation with Natascha Sadr Haghighian," in *Solo Show. Robbie Williams.*

[96] John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form. Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade* (New York and London: Verso, 2007).

[97] While in the previous section of this chapter the three parafictional artists discussed were female, both Blissett and Williams are named after males. In the case of Williams, it is now clear why, and in the case of Blissett it is interesting to know that even at the time there was some debate over this choice, as proven by the following account made by one of the female members of the LBP, Miriam Tola: "The

Figure 2.24. Robbie Williams, *Solo Show*, 2014, exhibition views at MAMbo, Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna, 2008.

that Haghighian exposes her own perspective on art production not only in her conversation with Schwarzer, but also in another long exchange with Robbie Williams included in the same catalogue. Reflecting about her own ways of working, she says,

> It is, indeed, interesting that art is one of the only fields that remains untouched by the pressure of union demands. The informality of relations of production in art is based, in many levels, on a system of identification. One is promised inclusion in the system when one identifies with it, when it becomes more than a job.[98]

I think that the extended view that the artist is never merely doing a job but that *being an artist* is in itself a continuous form of *self-production* with no clear delimitations (and, therefore, difficult to regulate) correlates with the above mentioned idea that, in the digital age, the artist's biographies is no longer

interview touched on various issues, including the fact that Blissett was a male name, and this was in apparent contradiction with the supposedly transgender and post-identity stance of Luther Blissett." Deseriis, *Improper Names*, 156. But although unquestionably male, the black race of the "original" Luther Blissett—the British-Jamaican football player— does align the multiple-user artist with a non-hegemonic identity.

[98] "Robbie Williams in conversation with Natascha Sadr Haghighian," in *Solo Show. Robbie Williams.* Also available online, accessed 27 April, 2016,
http://www.carrollfletcher.com/usr/library/documents/natascha-sadr-haghighian/2008_carroll_fletcher_natascha_sadr-haghighian_soloshow_robbie.pdf.

constructed as a straightforward list of professional achievements.[99] As Haghighian herself has acknowledged, at a time when people google your name first, a project like bioswop seems irremediably dated.[100] As we saw with Erica Scourti's Internet presence, artists (who, as far as I know do not use LinkedIn, the digital version of the CV) are now initially present(ed) to us as an assortment of different pieces of online information, some institutional, some personal: a press release, a facebook account, an exhibition review, through their vimeo channel, their gallery's website, or, if they are profitable, as a series of market statistics. Taking this situation into account, I imagine that artists who decide to continue critically to explore authorship through fiction—including economic and labour conditions—will turn more and more towards the possibilities opened up by the new configuration of the artist biography in the digital age.

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[99] The idea of the artist as immersed in a continuous process of self-production shares with the narrative conception of the self a belief in the dynamic production of subjectivity. While in the first case the artist seems to be "free" to produce whichever version of herself she might prefer, in the latter, however, any choice is limited by epochal and structural causes.

[100] Natascha Sadr Haghighian, "Dear Artfukts, Look at My Curve," in *9 Artists*, ed. Bartholomew Ryan (Minneapolis: The Walker Art Center, 2013), 6-18. Also available online, accessed 27 April, 2016, http://possest.de/2013/12/31/58/.

Chapter 3. **Agents without intention**

Janez Janša, Janez Janša and Janez Janša

The case of the three Slovenian-based artists who in 2007 decided to change their names simultaneously to Janez Janša constitutes a particularly significant example of the construction of a parafictional identity. As will become clear over the following pages, the legal procedures carried out by the three artists to change their names officially made their action "real" in bureaucratic terms; yet the effect of the name change is parafictional, for "Janez Janša" has become a name with no clear referent. The construction of this multiple identity, the artworks produced under it, and the varied interpretations generated by the case will form the core of this third chapter of my thesis. While in the previous chapter I have looked at how artists' biographies intersect with fiction with varied consequences, on this occasion I will be primarily examining how parafictional artists can modify the understanding and function of intention. In the following pages, I will be explaining a methodological proposal that can be described as *agency without intention*, and investigating whether this idea can be a useful interpretative tool in the case of parafictional artists like the three Janez Janšas.

As I will go on to show, projects that are considered parafictional in the sense described by Carrie Lambert-Beatty—i.e. projects that are taken at face value by a certain number of people despite not being based on real facts—closely align with what is known as "subversive affirmation." According to different interpreters, subversive affirmation and the closely related over-identification are strategies by which an artist or art project undermines what they are apparently endorsing.[1] Rather than directly critical, these "non-oppositional" strategies allows artists to more effectively destabilize the coherence of dominant discourses at a time when

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[1] Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse, "Subversive Affirmation: On Mimesis as a Strategy of Resistance," in *East Art Map. Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, ed. IRWIN (London: Afterall, 2006), 444-455; Slavoj Žižek, "Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?" (1993), in *Primary Documents: a Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, eds. Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 285-288.

the system is able to easily absorb all critiques.[2] My reading of the three Janez Janšas—whose relation to the original bearer of the name has been mainly described as one of over-identification—will highlight how for all such strategies to gain full political effectiveness, the confusion between what is fictional and what is real must not only impregnate the information provided but also what we know about the artists' intentions. At the same time, in this chapter I am offering what I hope to be a more self-reflexive interpretation of parafictional artists and their works. Influenced by my direct professional involvement with the three Janez Janšas in several curatorial projects, my reading of their name change and subsequent projects will admittedly comprise my own circumstances, interests, and goals; or, as Mieke Bal puts it, my explanations will account for arts' "effective and affective results" over time, that is, for the work's narrativity.[3]

As mentioned, in 2007 three men formerly known as Davide Grassi, Emil Hrvatin, and Žiga Kariž changed their names to Janez Janša, a name that they appropriated from the leader of the right-wing Slovenian Democratic Party, and at the time Prime Minister of Slovenia. This was an officially-sanctioned name change, with the men issuing or reissuing all their legal documents—including marriage and birth certificates, identity cards, passports, driving licenses, and credit cards—to match their new nomenclature. At the same time, they started using their new name for all their private communications, asking family and friends to refer to them as Janez Janša, changing their email addresses, facebook accounts, etc. Yet this name change, as opposed to the ones that are carried out routinely around the world, was also a performance. Before adopting the new epithet, Grassi, Hvratin, and Kariž were already known in the Slovenian and international art scene for their independent projects in new media, theatre and performance, and visual arts, respectively.[4] Their planned action to simultaneously take on the very charged name of the leader of the conservative party—and Minister of Defence during the armed conflict that followed the Slovenian declaration of independence from Yugoslavia in the Summer of 1991—cannot be understood *only* as a personal decision and administrative act, but needs

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[2] Jean Fisher, ed. *Re-verberations. Tactics of Resistance, Forms of Agency in Trans/cultural Practices.* (Amsterdam: Jan van Eyck Akademie Editions, 2010), 7.

[3] Mieke Bal, "Intention," in *Mieke Bal Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 263.

[4] Since their name change, the three artists have continued with their independent careers in parallel to their joint projects.

Figure 3.1. Janez Janša, Janez Janša, Janez Janša, *Mount Triglav on Mount Triglav*, photograph of performance, 2007. Courtesy Aksioma—Institute for Contemporary Art, Ljubljana.
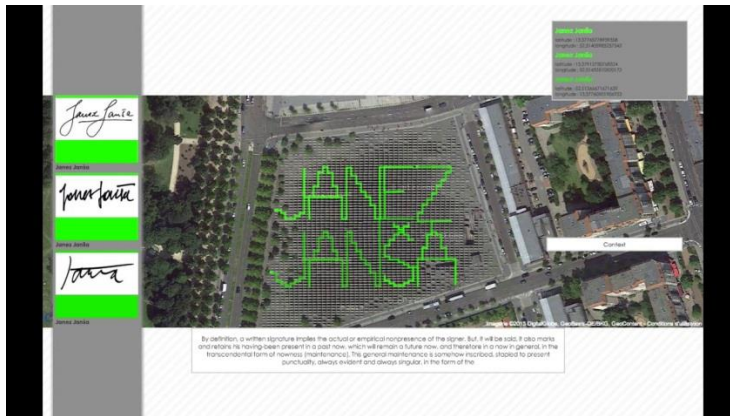
Figure 3.2. Janez Janša, Janez Janša, Janez Janša, *Signature Event Context*, online view, 2008.

to be appreciated *also* as an artistic endeavour with some kind of aesthetic and political implications.

The documentary film *My Name is Janez Janša*—which was directed by Janez Janša and written by Janez Janša and Janez Janša in 2012 and is freely available online[5]—presents the name change as a performance imbued with the *avant-garde* maxim of bringing art and the "praxis of life" together.[6] The film includes images of some of the performative projects carried out collaboratively by the three Janez Janšas after their name change like *Mount Triglav on Mount Triglav*—a re-

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[5] *My Name is Janez Janša*, directed by Janez Janša (Aksioma—Institute for Contemporary Art, 2012), accessed 18 August, 2015, https://vimeo.com/46937250.

[6] See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984): 47-54.

enactment of the 1968 performance *Mount Triglav* by the *neo-avant-garde* Slovene group OHO (fig. 3.1)[7]—or *Signature Event Context*—a direct reference to Jacques Derrida's essay on the linguistic function of the signature, which consisted of each of the three artists following a different route through the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin which, when viewed on the Internet, spelled the name "Janez Janša" (fig. 3.2). At the same time, the film *My Name is Janez Janša* presents first-hand testimonies of the artists' family members, and incorporates clips from the wedding of one of them, the private event chosen to reveal publicly their simultaneous renaming (fig. 3.3). As such, the name change is shown as an artistic piece with creative repercussions as well as a personal act affecting the everyday lives of these three individuals.

The overlap between what belongs to one's private condition and what is part of one's public function is problematic in the case of the three Janez Janšas in a variety of ways. For instance, it generates frustration in close friends who feel forced into an artistic project in which they never chose to participate (such is the case, for example, of a guest at the ceremony who, apparently, expressed his annoyance because he had agreed to come to a wedding, "not to a fucking performance"[8]), as well as in professional contacts who might have invested energy in promoting a specific artist whose name, suddenly, is no longer discernible from the names of two other artists (on occasions, publications try to clarify to which of the three artists they are referring to by acknowledging their previous names).[9] These real life consequences also included the emotional and political rejection of their previous names, and with it, the apparent refusal of a former past, a former family name, and

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[7] In the original performance *Mount Triglav*, the three members of OHO stood on a ladder in a street of Ljubljana with a black cloth over their bodies and only their heads visible. This piece, which refers to the highest mountain in Slovenian and symbol of national pride, was re-staged in 2004 by the also Slovenian collective IRWIN. The three Janez Janšas' re-enactment, this time on the mountain itself, is therefore not only a reference to the original performance, but also to the practice of repeating or recycling performances. For a detailed account on these performances and their meaning within Slovenian contemporary art, see Milena Tomic, "Re-enacting OHO: Some Interventions in a Neo-avant-garde Field," *OBJECT: Graduate Articles and Reviews in Art History and Visual Culture*, 14 (2012): 100-125.

[8] Anecdote told by Janez Janša (lecture, University for the Creative Arts, Canterbury, 10 December, 2014).

[9] Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield, eds., *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2012), 382. Funnily enough given my own considerations about the term "author-artist" discussed in Chapter 1, in the clarification of which Janez Janša they are referring to, Jones and Heathfield explain: "The *author-artist* [emphasis added] Emil Hrvatin later took on the name Janez Janša as part of an evolving artwork." Of course, their choice of words is justified because they are re-publishing a text written by Hvratin before 2007 and they want to emphasise that he is a writer as well as an artist; yet, their wording opens up the possibility of thinking about Hvratin as rejecting the status of "author-artist" by becoming the indistinguishable, "three-headed" Janez Janša.

in the case of two of three artists involved, a former non-Slovenian nationality. The lived consequences of such action affected, therefore, family relations, professional contexts, and legal as well as symbolic status.

The collapse of the two spheres in the Janez Janša project can be read as challenging the "life and work" paradigm discussed in Chapter 1, not because it attempts to separate one from the other, but because it makes them so indistinguishable that any attempt to read the life through the work in a meaningful way or vice versa becomes futile. The indiscernibility between the life and the work of the three Janez Janšas is particularly noticeable when the reissued documents of the artists are exhibited as artworks.[10] Considering the role played by official reports and personal records in the modern biographical method discussed in Chapter 1, should we inspect the definitely real documents of the three Janez Janša to find some significant truth about the life of the artists of whom they are factual representations? Or, given that they were also presented as artworks (framed and accompanied by wall labels as seen in figure 3.4), is it possible to understand these art/documents' worth in connection to the information about the life of the artist that they themselves contain? In a certain sense, yes, these documents have artistic value because they verify that these artists truly changed their names; and one could say that they are authentic artworks because they are not faked documents. Yet, by following this circular logic—made even more evident because we are using the same object to link what we know about the life with the significance of the work— we end up in a self-referential space in which we discover neither anything about the political and social context in which the appropriation of the politician's name took place, nor about the agency of these artworks to produce interpretations that could go beyond their status as documentary "proofs" of the name change. In order to get elsewhere, we need to break the closed circuit between the life and the work into which this project can easily fall.

[10] Such was the case at the 2008 exhibition *Name Readymade* at the Forum Stadtpark in Graz (Austria). See "Name Readymade," Aksioma, accessed 26 August, 2015, http://aksioma.org/name/index.html. To stress their double existence as documents and as artworks, the information online about the exhibition is accompanied by a letter addressed by the three artists to the President of the Republic of Slovenia in which they ask him for permission to issue temporal personal documents to substitute the ones on display, while simultaneously highlighting that the ones in the exhibition have been "certified" as art by the Director of Moderna galerija, Ljubljana (the main contemporary art space in the country) and a "court assessor and expert for the field of art." The official request for extra identification cards further highlights how the artist's name change affected their everyday life, for while the documents were on display, the artists could not use them in quotidian activities like paying, travelling, and documentarily certifying their identity. Other consequences connected to the use of their new name in official contexts include the difficulties of applying for Governmental money to support their practices, as well as the problems of applying as "Janez Janša" to teaching positions in public Slovenian universities.

Figure 3.3. Frame from the film *My Name is Janez Janša*, directed by Janez Janša, 2012.
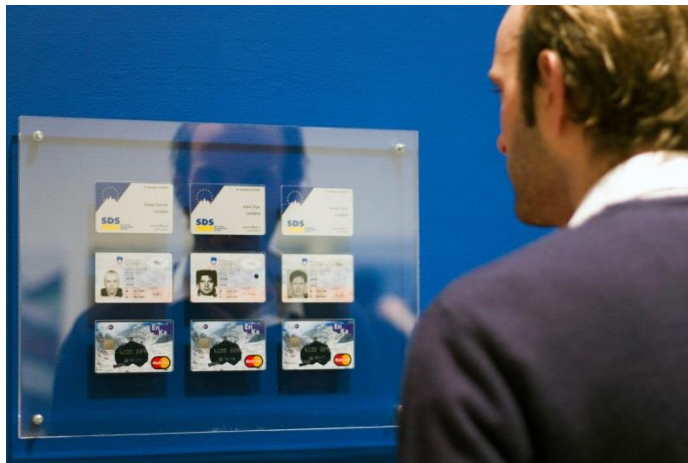
Figure 3.4. Janez Janša, Janez Janša, Janez Janša, *Troika*, 3 SDS membership cards, 3 ID cards and 3 Mastercards, 2013. Installation view at Calvert 22, London.

Having said that, would finding out the *intention* behind the name change help us to enrich our interpretation of the three Janez Janšas' projects? The natural inclination to read actions in terms of their causality makes it particularly difficult to approach such a dramatic action as the Janez Janšas' name change without demanding an answer to the *why* question. Yet the artists have repeatedly avoided straightforward answers, alluding to "personal reasons"[11] and pointing back to the letter they sent to the politician Janez Janša shortly after joining his political party:

[11] See Mladen Dolar, *What's in a Name?* (Ljubljana: Aksioma, Institute for Contemporary Art, 2014), 51.

> For us, there are no boundaries between our work, our art, and our lives, and, in this respect, we believe we are no different from you. We live for what we create and, with your permission, we would like to quote here the words from the letter you sent us when we joined SDS: "The more we are, the faster we will reach the goal!"[12]

Is the name change, therefore, evidence of the success of the Slovenian Democratic Party's political strategies? Are the Janez Janšas' performances, as some critics have argued, "aestheticizing" the ideological values of the party's leader?[13] Taken at face value, the appropriation of the motto of the SDS to explain the intention of the name change has, in my opinion, limited use in the interpretation of the three Janez Janšas' projects. Although one's first impulse might be to simply disregard the quoted explanation as an ironic one, for several of the interpreters challenging the three Janez Janšas it is the resistance to clearly discuss their intentions as a direct attack on the political figure that jeopardises the political efficacy of the whole project.[14] In my view, however, it is the use of subversive affirmation and over-identification rather than a straightforward condemnation of Janez Janša's nationalistic rhetoric and corrupt tactics that guarantees the political efficacy of the appropriation.[15]

While the act of appropriating the name of a powerful, right-wing, autocratic and nationalistic figure such as the one of the politician Janez Janša is inevitably haunted by intentionality,[16] I believe that if we only rely on what we know about the artists' intention we will be left with a palpable sense of frustration. Because, as I will go on to explain in more detail, the three artists are creating a parafictional identity with multiple levels of signification, it is necessary to consider the agency of their

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[12] Janez Janša, Janez Janša, and Janez Janša, eds., *Name Readymade* (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija, Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 8-9, accessed 20 January, 2013, http://www.janezjansa.si/publications.html.

[13] Marina Grzinic, "Southeastern Europe and the Question of Knowledge, Capital, and Power," in *Necropolitics, Racialization, and Global Capitalism: Historicization of Biopolitics and Forensics of Politics, Art, and Life*, ed. by Marina Grzinic and Sefik Tatlic (Lanham, MD and Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2014).

[14] Such is the view of the theoretician and artist Marina Grzinic, as well as of the art critic Ana Vujanović for whom the lack of direct denunciation affects the project's capacity to intervene in the social context. Ana Vujanović, "Book review. Name Readymade," *The Drama Review* 56, issue 4 (Winter 2012): 180-182.

[15] In this regard, curator and critic Domenico Quaranta explains that the three artists "never used the 'power' their name gave to them to publicly attack Janez Janša, "correct" his identity or force him and his party to expose their dark side." Domenico Quaranta, *Troika* (Brescia: Link Editions and Ljubljana: Aksioma—Institute for Contemporary Art, 2013), 10.

[16] See Zdenka Badovinac, "What is the Importance of Being Janez?," in *Name Readymade*, 59.

projects beyond the logic of stated and achieved intentions. As Zdenka Badovinac, the director of the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana and one of the most consistent supporters of the three artists has argued, "assessing the Janša project by the success or failure of the provocation would be senseless since the provocation was just one of the many strategies in the varied process of experimentation."[17] Given the above, how can we approach the deeply political implications of the Janez Jansăs' project in a more fruitful and, in my view, fair way?

I met the three Janez Janšas in 2014, when in collaboration with a researcher colleague from Royal College of Art, Ben Dalton, we organised a series of events with the artists in the United Kingdom. These included the screening of the film *My Name is Janez Janša* at the RCA in London, a talk to Fine Art students from the University for the Creative Arts in Canterbury (UCA), and the launch of their new project *Trust* at Turner Contemporary, a major art gallery in Margate (fig. 3.5). The last two events were framed within the exhibition *Despite Efficiency: Labour* that I curated for the Herbert Read Gallery at UCA, and that dealt with current models of (in)efficient work. From our first Skype conversation in June of that year, the difficulty of talking to three people who share the same name became evident. Neither Ben nor I had met any of the three artists before, and having to do so remotely immediately proved to be a disorienting experience. As curator of the project, I was responsible for convincing them not only to participate but also to travel to the UK; yet, rather than being able to address them directly by their specific names, I had to concentrate on separating them in my mind based on their looks, voices, roles in the conversation, and act accordingly.

My initial uneasiness with the Janez Janšas' constructed homonymy—which continued in our second Skype conversation when their camera stopped working and I had only their voices to identify to whom I was talking—evolved into practical difficulties when booking several plane tickets under the same name on one single flight, and separate single rooms for Mr. Janša, Mr. Janša, and Mr. Janša, making sure the orders were not cancelled as "triplicates". Once all three of them had safely arrived in the country (and were not sharing a bed), I particularly enjoyed introducing them to colleagues at UCA unfamiliar with their name change. The look of confusion in people's faces when I presented Janez Janša, Janez Janša, and Janez Janša to them was generally accompanied by distrust towards the veracity of the situation with

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[17] Ibid., 65.

Figure 3.5. *Janša over the English Channel with his Friends on Tour*, promotional poster, 2014.

which they were being confronted. Although the name change of the three individuals is authentic in a documentary sense—as confirmed by the logistic problems I encountered in organising their journey—the uncanny effect that the homonymy provokes in their interactions with people both aware and unaware of their bureaucratic circumstances, proves that Janez Janša is now a parafictional identity, half-way between real and fictional.

In 2015, I organised a second part to the exhibition *Despite Efficiency: Labour* entitled *Agency without Intention*. The show, also presented at the Herbert Read Gallery in Canterbury, was inspired by the actions and interactions between the purposeful individual, the "smart" object, and the social body. The goal was to explore the apparent contingent relation between actions and purposes in the technological, aesthetic, social, and political realms. Although the exhibition did not include any project by the three Janez Janšas, nor by any other parafictional artist, the hypothesis there investigated—that it is possible, as well as necessary, to conceive agency *independently* of intention—seems especially relevant when applied to the three artist's identity construction. Thus, the rest of this chapter is dedicated, first, to explain in some detail the ideas discussed in the context of the exhibition *Agency without Intention* and, secondly, to apply this hypothesis to the interpretation of the Janez Janšas' name change and to some of the artworks produced under this parafictional identity.

A philosophical enquiry

In Chapter 1, I defined artistic agency as the decisions and actions involved in the making of art, and mentioned that the concept could also be applied to artworks when what the art historian wanted was to stress the possibility that the work produced effects unrelated to the intentions of its makers. Such was the case of Rosalind Krauss when she argued that the variety of significations of the artwork should not be replaced by an exclusive reading based on the life of the artist. In the context of the exhibition *Agency without Intention*, I explored the possibility of separating the two concepts in the title not only in relation to art, but to socio-political and technological paradigms. Yet, my fascination with the prospect of imagining artworks making their own decisions is probably what triggered the whole project. For that, I have to confess my debt to visual culture and its significant advances in the conception of the agency of images, with books like *What Do Pictures Want?* by W.J.T Mitchell having had a lasting impact on my own approach as curator to the "lives and loves" of artworks.[18]

Also in Chapter 1, I discussed the term intention and its specific application in the field of art history. As explained, art historians vary in their approach to artistic intention: some try to discover the purpose of an artwork in external evidences related to the life of the artist (private letters, diary entries or even death certificates); for others, the verdict on whether the artist has succeeded in their creative intent depends entirely on internal evidences available in the artwork itself. While the former are accused of carrying out "the intentional fallacy," the latter are described as perpetrating "the expressive fallacy". Given that both viewpoints present internal problems, some interpreters have tried to come up with hybrid conceptions of intention, while less conciliatory ones, like Mieke Bal, have rejected intentionality for being a concept inevitably compromised by its ties to individualism. As with agency, in the exhibition I curated, the exploration of the term intention went beyond its strict application to the interpretation of art. Yet, the influence of its particular understanding in new art history—and more specifically, its radical questioning by Bal—was largely responsible for my own take on the concept.

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[18] W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

Agency without Intention included four projects: two robots, a multi-part social sculpture, a recorded conversation, and a performance by four dancers. Each work approached the exhibition's premise from a different angle, although the most interesting moments occurred when the different projects overlapped. This curatorial decision to articulate an exhibition in which the elements interacted with one another proved to be more successful than I had imagined. For instance, Abdulbari Kutbi's *Pirouette Robots* roamed around the gallery changing their direction when bumping into any of the numerous plywood blocks making up the social sculpture *Liminal*, designed by Abigail Hunt and Kieren Reed (fig. 3.6). The robots were also the starting point for a conversation with the members of The Waste Land research group about agency and intention (this discussion was recorded before the exhibition and screened in the gallery).[19] The Waste Land research group is a diverse group of people who are jointly developing the content for an exhibition inspired by T.S. Eliot's eponymous poem. The outcome of this horizontally-curated experiment will be presented in the spring of 2018 at Turner Contemporary in Margate. I approached the organiser of The Waste Land research group, Trish Scott, to discuss with its members their understanding of agency and intention because I felt that their decision to work together and with an institution implied questions around these same concepts: What did they think of the intention of Turner Contemporary to start such a socially-engaged, participatory project? What level of agency had they been given? Was the intention of each one of them the same as the group's intention or the institution's one? Which one would prevail?

As already mentioned, we selected the robots to initiate this conversation, which then followed the format of a philosophical enquiry in which the participants (including myself) were asked to agree or disagree with what had been said before.[20] What the robots allowed was to present a very practical example of an agent without apparent intention: the robots were able to make simple decisions when confronted with physical obstacles thanks to a system of interconnected modes, yet their actions could hardly be interpreted as following a complex purpose of their own. Or could they? During the subsequent discussion, references to the intention of the robots' designer were inevitably introduced, and the parallel relation between

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[19] An edited version of the film recorded during the conversation is available online. "Agency without Intention," Youtube, accessed 24 December, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gm9fODpVNrA.

[20] For more information on this pedagogical approach see "What is Philosophical Enquiry?" Thinking Space, accessed 24 December, 2015, http://thinkingspace.org.uk/about-philosophical-enquiry/.

Figure 3.6. Abdulbari Kutbi, *Pirouette Robots*, and Abigail Hunt and Kieren Reed, *Liminal*, 2015. Installation view at the Herbert Read Gallery, Canterbury. Photograph by Kieren Reed.

robot/artwork, designer/artist was easily established. It was encouraging, from my perspective, that several of the participants agreed with the possibility for artworks to produce in the recipient effects unintended by their creators. There was also some confusion about the definition of the terms agency and intention themselves. Some people thought they were not easily differentiable, or that one was just the way through which you achieve the other. Despite these terminological difficulties, throughout the hour and a half dialogue we were able to establish an important difference between the two concepts: while intention operates at a personal level (even in the case of *collective* intentions), agency is relational, always dependant on our position within a group or in a situation. Or, in other words, while the articulation of one's intentions remains in an ideal sphere (a sphere which is nevertheless influenced by contextual circumstances), agency is intrinsically connected to action, and therefore contingent upon the distribution of power within existing social structures.

The conversation with The Waste Land research group introduced the split between agency and intention in the technological sphere, where machines and robots that are apparently able to make their own decisions cannot be said to have

Figure 3.7. Abigail Hunt and Kieren Reed, *Liminal*, plywood blocks, 2015. Photograph by Kieren Reed.

intentions of their own.[21] The discussion also touched upon aesthetic issues like the capacity of artworks to produce effects unintended by their authors, as well as on the differences between agency and intention when applied to a social context. Another perspective on both the aesthetic and social implications of separating agency from intention was presented in the exhibition by the multi-part social sculpture *Liminal*. *Liminal*, composed of more than 70 wooden geometric pieces, was scattered throughout the floor of the Herbert Read Gallery with the *intention* that visitors to the show would feel free to interact with the modules by moving, piling or sitting on them (fig. 3.7). The wall text in the gallery specifically referred to this call to action in the following terms: "Visitors are invited to activate the work with the hope that their participation will provoke moments of unsolicited disorientation, exchange, and discussion."

One of the hardest choices as curator of exhibitions is how to present artworks that interest you despite considering them problematic. In other words, as mediator between the artist and the public, how do you frame the encounter with an artwork which you find questionable yet relevant? In the case of *Liminal*, what most attracted me was the fact that the work staged a situation through which to discuss the type of agency offered to audiences in supposedly interactive pieces. In recent times,

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[21] Of course, numerous science fiction plots revolve around the possibility of machines having their own motivations that contradict those of the humans designing them. For now, though, that kind of artificial intelligence remains a totally fictional one.

Figure 3.8. Rosana Antolí, *Disobedient Silences*, performance, 2015. Photograph by Kieren Reed.

numerous artists have produced projects which are configured as situations in which the public is supposed to participate actively in a variety of ways. This "relational aesthetic" as Nicolas Bourriaud described it,[22] has run parallel to a discourse of social engagement, in which audiences are supposed to be *empowered* through their interaction with the art presented. Yet, in my view, such projects usually imply an unbalanced relation between the quite limited agency given to audiences and the very strong intentions (even if "good" ones) of artists and curators.[23] Although I was probably unable to explain it clearly in the context of the exhibition, for me, *Liminal* also constructed a paradoxical yet fascinating socio-aesthetic situation in which audiences had weak agencies and artists convincing intentions.[24]

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[22] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with Mathieu Copeland (Dijon: les presses du réel, 2002).

[23] For a critical assessment of the role of intentions in socially engaged art, see Erik Hagoort, *Good Intentions. Judging the Art of Encounter* (Amsterdam: Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture, 2005).

[24] A certain parallel can be established between *Liminal* and The Waste Land research group at Turner Contemporary. Yet, in this latter case, those involved are aware and willing to openly discuss the role of agency and intention in their situation, and this ongoing conversation might have considerable impact on the configuration of the project and its results.

Figure 3.9. Opening of the exhibition *Agency without Intention* at the Herbert Read Gallery, Canterbury, 15 October, 2015. Photograph by Kieren Reed.

Finally, the performance that Rosana Antolí conceived for the opening of *Agency without Intention* consisted of four dancers moving *disobediently*. Subtly at first—almost unnoticeable as they posed as regular audience members—and very noticeably as the event developed, the performers executed routines alien to the normative movement dynamics in a conventional art opening (figs. 3.8 and 3.9). The point of departure for this commission was a political concern with the different roles played by agency and intention in recent protest movements worldwide. In my conversations with Antolí, we were particularly interested in discussing how collective political efforts such as the international Occupy movements, or the Spanish "Los Indignados" had been criticised for their lack of concrete objectives. What their critics saw as a weakness, we saw as their main advantage: by protesting and defending political agency for "normal" citizens but not stipulating a list of concrete goals, these movements were gaining political significance while avoiding the instrumentalisation of their actions by any particular party. (Something similar could be said of the character described by Herman Melville in *Bartleby the Scrivener* [1853], for despite never acknowledging his motivation, Bartleby's constant refusal to work has an undeniable effect on the rest of the story's protagonists.) Albeit in a far less concrete context, the dancers at the opening of *Agency without Intention* were also clearly presenting alternative ways of moving and behaving, yet their

intentions (as well as those of the artist) remained unknown. In so doing, their agency as disobedient bodies was evident, while also less easily jeopardised.

You are Janez Janša, too

After this long but necessary digression into my curatorial attempt to demonstrate in how many different ways agency and intention can be conceptualised independently, let us return to the three Janez Janšas. One of the early sequences of the already mentioned film *My Name is Janez Janša* shows the Slovenian actor and TV presenter Dražen Dragojević—who functions as a sort of narrator throughout the tape—playing a youtube clip from Stanley Kubrick's movie *Spartacus* (1960). The extract belongs to the climactic moment in which the Roman general Crassus asks the slave-rebels to reveal which one of them is their leader, to which the hundreds of captives unanimously respond: "I am Spartacus." In the thirty minutes which follow, *My Name is Janez Janša* appears to be a visual essay on the problematic of names, with people from all over the world being asked about their name: whether they like it or not, whether it is the same as their identity, and then focusing on cases in which different people share the same name, or have decided to change their names. In the subsequent forty minutes, however, the film abandons its initial global investigation to focus on the particularities of the Janez Janša name change. This second part introduces unfamiliar audiences to the career of the politician Janez Janša—from his controversial arrest on charges of exposing military secrets in the late 1980s to his appointment as Prime Minister in 2004 and presidency of the European Union—and incorporates interviews with Slovenian citizens, journalists, and politics, as well as with international thinkers and artists, on the practical and theoretical consequences of the appropriation of the politically-charged name.

In this way, the film juxtaposes the universal problematic of names and naming in testimonies from around the world, with the idiosyncrasies of an event which occurred in a relatively small country. This effort to interview people from distant parts and include their theoretical considerations and personal stories in the final cut—along with the use of a variety of languages throughout the film, and the fact that two of the three Janez Janšas were not even born in Slovenia—has the attractive effect of turning what could have been a national artistic episode into something with a wider appeal. The film makes a point of engaging with an imaginary

spectator who does not need to be familiar with the politician Janez Janša in order to realise that by simultaneously changing their names, the three artists are disrupting certain established rules and world-wide conventions. If, on the one hand, the significance of the name change is context-specific, on the other, the global appeal of the strategy guarantees its success beyond its immediate frame of reference. From a different perspective, what can be initially perceived as a weakening decision that makes each artist's works indistinguishable from those of the other two, is converted into a self-promoting strategy through the insertion of the name change into a more critical debate about the normative values associated with names and naming.

In previous chapters, I have argued that a parafictional artist comes into being not by the mere substitution of an artist's officially sanctioned forename for a fictitious one, but rather by the more complex articulation of a non-existent personality that, despite its dubious nature, and through a variety of strategies, is able to perform as a credible author, that is to say, to produce works and present them publicly under his or her own name. The Janez Janša name change, as Marco Deseriis explains in the film, "is not meant to be fictional . . . for they now have to use this signature in all of their relationships with the art world, society at large, and the State."[25] Although "real" in bureaucratic terms and functioning as such in everyday life, the name change has inevitably turned Janez Janša into a parafictional identity. By triply appropriating the name and making their action known beyond their personal circles, the three artists have configured a public, as well as artistic, non-existent personality. As a result, the epithet Janez Janša no longer refers just to a right-wing politician but also to three Slovenian-based artists, a fact which has an undeniable effect on the function of the name itself. As Antonio Caronia argues on screen, "this operation of colonisation of the name is destabilizing, because it creates a referent that doesn't exist . . . It is a totally imaginary character made up by the true lives of different people."[26]

"Jaz sem Janez Janša, Jaz sem Janez Janša, Jaz sem Janez Janša." The phrase (which belongs to the audio of the performance *Signature Event Context* at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin) is heard during the opening credits of the film *My Name is Janez Janša*. The words, repeated as a mantra, reappear as soundtrack to many moments of the tape, thus producing an inevitable congruence between "I am"

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[25] *My Name is Janez Janša*, directed by Janez Janša, minute 51.

[26] Ibid., minute 55.
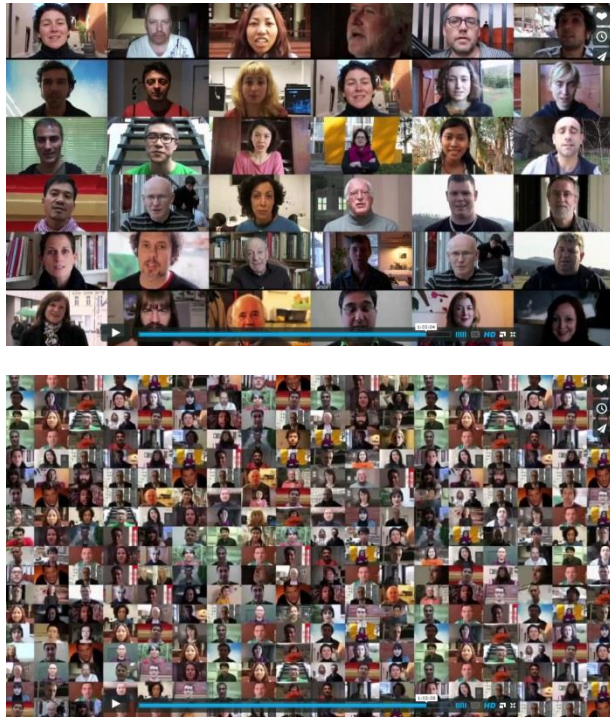
Figure 3.10. Frames from the film *My Name is Janez Janša*, directed by Janez Janša, 2012.

and "my name is". The film actually finishes with individual images of all of the participants and interviewees from around the world that have previously appeared on screen, looking into the camera and pronouncing the words: "I am Janez Janša." Their individual frames are gradually multiplied until the whole screen is covered by a mosaic of talking faces and overlapping voices repeating "I am Janez Janša" (fig. 3.10). In my view, this final sequence allows for an activist interpretation of the audience this documentary is targeting. For, in a sense, could we not interpret *My Name is Janez Janša* as a direct call to action? The simultaneous assumption of the multiple Janez Janša identity connects the film's ending to its beginning, specifically to the described clip from *Spartacus* in which, by adopting their leader's name, the slave-rebels make it impossible for the Roman authorities to identify accurately the *original* Spartacus (this act of heroic rebelliousness ends, nevertheless, in the massacre of the whole group). Through a practical demonstration, *My Name is Janez Janša* invites its spectator (all of us) *to become* Janez Janša. This is a licit invitation—for according to the existing Slovenian laws, if the spectator is a national from that country, he or she can also change their name without restrictions[27]—as well as a

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[27] For a comparative study on the accepted reasons, procedures, and costs for an official name change in numerous countries around the world see Tadej Kovačič, "The Right to (the Change of) Name—A Comparative Judicial Survey," in *Name Readymade*, eds. Janša, Janša and Janša, 101-119.

metaphysical one—for *to be* Janez Janša, one does not need to change one's name officially, one only needs to *repeat* that *you are Janez Janša* too. As mentioned in Chapter 2, parafictional artists like the three Janez Janšas not only practice appropriation but encourage others to join them. So, reformulating the answer of the man possessed by demons, the spectators of this documentary could reply when asked to identify themselves: "My name is Janez Janša, for we are many."

Let me take this hypothesis a bit further: Janez Janša is not one person but many; an agent whose will is composed by those of a legion (of slave-rebels, of spectators, of artists). When s/he is an artist, s/he is a parafictional one because her/his *oeuvre* cannot be confidently attributed to any single individual nor can his/her name be used to identify accurately the "original" Janez Janša.[28] A search on "Janez Janša" in, for example, the database *Art & Humanities Full Text* brings up a mix of unrelated results from art magazines and political journals. So, despite such a name not exactly corresponding to any particular body, s/he is active, even functioning as an author when exhibiting, performing, curating, and when, occasionally, s/he rules a country. If, as the saying goes, even three is a crowd, the interpretation of the actions and works of Janez Janša cannot rely on the problematic connection between the art and the life (whose life?), but their reading should allow us to imagine all artists as having *a certain agency* whose intention does not refer us back to any particular person's intention, but to a multitude.

From the above, it could be argued that the parafictional identity Janez Janša has been constructed with the *intended effect* of obfuscating the correct identification of its referent; of destabilising the bond between the name and its referent, as Caronia says. This claim for which there is no factual evidence in terms of statements by the three artists, is nevertheless supported by the even more destabilising possibility of an uncoordinated number of people using the alias Janez Janša, independently of whether they officially change their names or not.[29] The attempt to turn a proper name into an "improper" one which disturbs the

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[28] Actually, there was never an "original" Janez Janša, for, as the documentary explains, the politician is officially called Ivan Janša, but took on the first name Janez as it sounded more Slovenian.

[29] That the administrative name change is not a requirement is proven by the fact that one of the three artists legally changed his name again in 2012 to the one he had been previously using, Žiga Kariž, but is still actively involved in the project. Moreover, the politician Janez Janša is himself officially called Ivan Janša, using the popular Slovenian name "Janez" only in public occasions as an indicator of "Sloveneness". Miško Šuvakovic', "A Crisis of Inscription/Signature: The Power of the Personal Name" in *Signature*, eds. Janez Janša, Janez, Janez Janša, and Janez Janša (Ljubljana: Aksioma and Koroška Gallery of Fine Arts, 2010), 55.

conventional relation between the signifier and the signified has been generally interpreted as a politically progressive action.[30] In my view, though, even if the idea to multiply appropriate a name has undeniable subversive connotations, it only constitutes a framework that then needs to be translated into action by whoever decides to apply it. Judgement over intentions needs to be separated from the interpretation of what one is able to do in concrete situations, for intentions and agency belong to two different spheres of possibility. In that sense, I consider that the name change Janez Janša offers a good example of agency without intention (artistic or otherwise), for when one becomes Janez Janša, one becomes an agent whose actions depend on one's position within a determined power structure, but whose agency is not predetermined by someone else's intentions (nor, to a great extent, by one's own). Following that, what the multitude does with the agency achieved by their new collective name is open to interpretation, and should not be referred back to the three Janez Janšas' unstated intentions.

Over-identifying with "that" Janez

"I am Spartacus." "I am Spartacus." "I am Spartacus." While the case of the slave-rebels identifying themselves with the name of their leader is portrayed in the Hollywood movie as an unmistakable act of heroism against the oppressing Roman authorities, the self-identification with the politician Janez Janša is, inescapably, more problematic. As the following recollection by the Slovene dramaturge and theatre critic Blaž Lukan shows, the name Janez Janša is one with a contentious political charge for Slovenians:

> In a completely private situation, addressing (the former) Emil as Janez—and not just any "Slovenian" Janez . . . but rather precisely that Janez, i.e. Janez Janša, the Slovenian Prime Minister—has not come easily to the author of this essay, and I must admit that I actually avoided seeing this Janez Janša for a while. I will not discuss the most fundamental reasons for this here, but they are certainly connected to my relationship with the most prominent owner of this name.[31]

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[30] Marco Deseriis, "Improper Names: Collective Pseudonyms and Multiple-Use Names as Minor Processes of Subjectivation," *Subjectivity* 5, issue 2 (2012): 140-160.

[31] Blaž Lukan, "The Janez Janša Project," in *Name Readymade*, eds. Janša, Janša and Janša, 13.

Although Lukan prefers not to go into detail about his unfavourable feelings for the politician, I find it necessary to give a brief account of the public life of "that Janez" in order to understand what his name stands for in contemporary Slovenia. If in the previous section I reflected on the parafictional identity Janez Janša from the perspective of what model of agency without intention it presented to audiences as well as to other artists, I will now provide a more specific social and political reading of the appropriation of this particular name by the three artists.

Since the end of World War II and until its declaration of independence in the summer of 1991, Slovenia was one of the republics constituting the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). In its transition from a Balkan communist dictatorship to an independent democratic state and later to its inclusion in the European Union, Slovenia went through a series of radical ideological changes that different analysts have compared to the ones experimented by Janez Janša himself.[32] A summary of Janez Janša's political career may demonstrate how. In the early 1980s, Janša was an active member of the communist youth organisation of Slovenia. Later, he became associated with the dissident weekly magazine *Mladina*, for which in 1988 he was preparing an important article about an intended plan to introduce martial law in Slovenia based on a leaked document from the Yugoslav People's Army. The exposé led to his controversial arrest from which he was released six months later, having become by then an important public figure. Following these events, he got involved in the funding of the Slovenian Democratic Union, one of the first opposition parties in the republic, and in 1990, he became Minister of Defence in the government of the first multi-party coalition in Slovenia after the first democratic elections of that year.

As Minister of Defence, Janša played an important role in the brief armed conflict that in the summer of 1991 ended with the independence of Slovenia from the SFRY. From 1994, Janša was in the opposition as leader of the Social Democratic Party of Slovenia (now called the Slovenian Democratic Party), and became Prime Minister of the country after the 2004 elections. One of the reasons that has been given for his success at the polls at that particular time is connected to the public disclosure of the case of the "erased" and the impassioned debate that followed it.

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[32] Iavor Rangelov, "The Making of a Liberal Democracy. Ethnic Citizenship in Slovenia," in *Nationalism and the Rule of Law. Lessons from the Balkans and Beyond* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 121; Rudolf M. Rizman, "Radical Right Politics in Slovenia," in *The Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe since 1989*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet (Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1999), 159.

After the independence from the SFRY in 1991, the Slovenian authorities had demanded that all citizens should check in at the Registry of Permanent Residents of the new country. This included not only the ethnic Slovenes but also members of other minorities residing in Slovenia, like Italians, Hungarians, and migrants from other republics of the SFRY. As became publicly known in the early 2000s, however, up to 1% of the Slovenian citizens—mostly Serbs, Bosnians, and Roma—were unable or forbidden to register, immediately losing their legal status and all their rights.[33] From 2002, different courts and governmental initiatives tried not only to solve the situation of these people but to compensate them retroactively. Janša, Leader of the Opposition, criticised the centre-left government for these plans which would allegedly cost vast amounts to the state, and proposed that the issue should be resolved through a referendum. According to the political scientist Iavor Rangelov, "the ensuing discussions in the parliament and media became infused with nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric . . . The heated debate over the 'erased' helped to galvanize nationalist sentiment and support for Janša," who ended up winning the following elections.[34]

In this account of Janez Janša's public activities I am not intending to produce a "faithful portrait" of the character, but rather to emphasise those controversial episodes of his life that have turned his name into one with a contentious political charge. It is inevitable, therefore, to mention also the recent case of corruption in which Janša has been involved. Following his second term as Prime Minister from 2012 to 2013—a period characterised by the same austerity measures that other right-wing European Governments have imposed during the economic crisis—Janša was formally accused of taking bribes from the Finnish firm *Patria* in exchange for a military supply contract.[35] He was convicted in June 2013 and sentenced to two years in prison. In December 2014, he was released after his appeal claiming that allegations against him were politically motivated was successful.[36] Janez Janša's political journey—from young communist enthusiast, to victim of the regime, anti-

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[33] Rangelov, "The Making of a Liberal Democracy," 106 and 112.

[34] Ibid., 115.

[35] "Ex-Slovenian PM Janez Janša convicted of corruption", *BBC News*, 5 June, 2013, accessed 4 September, 2015, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-22781752.

[36] Associated Press, "Ex-Slovenia PM temporarily released from prison," *Mail Online*, 12 December, 2014, accessed 4 September, 2015, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-2871729/Ex-Slovenia-PM-temporarily-released-prison.html.

militarist activist, war hero, nationalist Prime Minister, and politician charged with economic corruption—if not "emblematic" of the transformations in Slovenia during the period, makes him, indeed, a very problematic figure with which to identify positively.

Not surprisingly given the biography of Janez Janša, different researchers writing about the name change of the three artists have interpreted their action as a case of subversive affirmation, and more specifically, of over-identification.[37] According to the curators and writers Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse, subversive affirmation is "an artistic/political tactic that allows artists/activists to take part in certain social, political, or economic discourses and to affirm, appropriate, or consume them while simultaneously undermining them."[38] As they explain, this type of "mimetic action" was firstly adopted and developed in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe, given the risk of producing straightforward critiques of reigning discourses under totalitarian regimes. For instance, from the 1980s onwards, the Slovenian collective NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst) and its associated music band Laibach (named after the German denomination of the Slovenian capital) developed a series of actions, and performances that took on the external appearance of the ruling ideology. In their concerts, the members of Laibach would appear wearing military uniforms, violently destroy the props on the stage, and appropriate the nationalist rhetoric of the Serbian president Slobodan Milošević in their addresses to the audience.[39] Yet, as the also Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek famously reasoned, Laibach is not a fascist music group, but one which is practising subversive affirmation through over-identification.[40] According to Žižek, by fully adopting the language and symbols of the ruling system rather than just ironically imitating them, Laibach is able to break through the cynical distance prescribed by contemporary ideologies. As he explains, the main threat for those in power is not direct criticism (which they are able to anticipate) but "the 'fanatic' who 'over-identifies' instead of keeping an adequate

[37] Lukan, "The Janez Janša Project,"; Amelia Jones, "Naming Power and the Power of the Name: Janez Janša Performs the Political in/for the Art World," both in *Name Readymade*, Janša, Janša and Janša, eds., 11-28 and 31-48.

[38] Arns and Sasse, "Subversive Affirmation," 445.

[39] Ibid., 449.

[40] Žižek, "Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?"

distance."[41] In that sense, Laibach, as well as other agents practising strategies of subversive affirmation, are interpreted as having the effect of unveiling the understated concepts and values that support the ruling ideological system, and consequently undermining its effectiveness.

The proposals of the NSK and Laibach can indeed be seen as a precedent to the three Janez Janšas' way of working not only in relation to subversive affirmation, but also in terms of a collective approach to creativity within an Eastern European context. As Zdenka Badovinac has explained, in the territories of former Yugoslavia—including Slovenia—artistic collectives have been not only a way of critically commenting on the Western myth of the singular artist, but also a reference to the anonymity of creators during socialism.[42] Producing collectively was in fact the rule within a system that favoured the group over the individual. The coming together of three individual artists to become not only a group but a single-plural "Janez Janša" seems to embrace this tradition (the three artists re-enactment of both OHO's and IRWIN's performance *Mount Triglav*, discussed above, makes this genealogy explicit). Yet, and taken the post-communist setting of their name change, it also serves to complicate any straightforward equation between collective actions and good intentions. As exemplified by their over-identification with the market's capacity to turn anything and everything into a product, their collective identity "Janez Janša" has now become a registered trademark.[43]

Returning to the over-identification with the political figure of Janez Janša, it is worth highlighting that theirs was originally a *triple* appropriation (even if the artists embrace the possibility of other people around the world "becoming" Janez Janša). The reference to the "three in one" has quite explicit theological connotation for, under the concept of the Trinity, God has the capacity to be one and three. In that sense, by triply appropriating a name that until recently functioned within Slovenian politics as a sign of individual authority and nationalistic values, the three artists were further destabilizing the ideological underpinning of "that Janez" (or even, "THE

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[41] Slavoj Žižek quoted in Arns and Sasse, "Subversive Affirmation," 448.

[42] Badovinac, "What is the Importance of Being Janez?", 53-54.

[43] In late 2017, and coinciding with the 10th anniversary of their name change, the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana hosted a mid-career restrospective of their work. The show was entitled Janez Jansa®, and alluded to the fact that the artists registred their name as a trademark. As said, this gesture needs to be read as a subversive one, specially taken the clearly copyleft logic of the rest of the activities of the three artists, including the free availability of their film *My Name in Janez Jansa* on vimeo.

Janez"). The understanding of the three Janez Janšas as subversive tricksters[44] is further supported by the artists' very literal use of a liberal Slovene law of renaming that had recently been introduced by Janez Janša's government to, allegedly, "allow people with less Slovene sounding names to take on a more Slovene sounding one."[45] As a result, the three artists had now become more-than-exemplary Slovenian citizens.

The politics of citizenship—of who is allowed and what does it mean to be Slovenian—resonates in the three Janez Janšas project in a variety of ways. Taken the various ethnic and national backgrounds not only of the three artists (Slovenian, Croatian and Italian) but also of the numerous audiences whose name is now "Janez Janša", the convention of using one's name to "correctly" identify one's cultural identity is moved off its axis. Nevertheless, the three artists are now standing for exemplary "Sloveneness" both in relation to their local political context but also in the broader artistic system. In such system, as has come up in relation to Walid Raad and I will further explain in Chapter 4, artists from non-hegemonic backgrounds are expected to discuss their otherness in their works. In the case of the three Janes Janšas, they are indeed dealing with a "national" issue, but the fact that they are not ethnically Slovenian and that they are subverting the SDS' nationalistic rhetoric, complicates such expectation. As Robert Pfaller has recently argued in a book not coincidentally entitled *Janez Janša and Beyond*,

> this [the triple appropriation] can be seen not only as a reaction to political circumstances in Slovenia, but also as an ironic comment upon the increasing pressure exerted upon artists to represent some local cliché: artists from third world countries, for example, are most welcome in big international exhibitions today, albeit under the condition that they only tackle issues which are supposed to be theirs—

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[44] For how parafictional artists can also function as tricksters, see Claire Robins, "Jokers, tricksters and the parafictional," in C*urious Lessons in the Museum. The Pedagogical Potential of Artists' Interventions* (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2016), 105-118. Another instance in which parafictional artists are assimilated to trickster appears in John Roberts essay "Trickster," where Hank Herron (a parafictional artist immortalized in Gregory Battcock's *Idea Art* in 1973) is described as a "post-conceptual trickster." In line with my interpretation of parafictional artists functioning as authors despite their fictionality, Roberts argues that "Herron's work may be invented by a pseudonymous writer, but discursively it continues to have effects in the world as Hank Herron." John Roberts, "Trickster", *Oxford Art Journal* 22, no. 1 (1999): 83-101.

[45] Robert Pfaller, "ONE FOR ALL, ALL FOR ONE: JANEZ JANŠA. Theology and Magic of the Name and Its Plural", in *Janez Janša and Beyond*, Mladen Dolar, Jela Krečič, Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Žižek (Ljubljana: Aksioma—Institute for Contemporary Art, 2018), 97.

matters connected to post-colonialism, racism, local production or struggle, etc.[46]

Finally, and related to the artists' use of factual documents, including official passports (again, a similarity with NSK and their proposal to create a diplomatic embassy that issued their own passports and held congresses of their citizens), the three Janez Janšas actions is related to the dramatic increase of a nationalist rhetoric that impregnates, beyond Slovenia, political discourses around Europe. In such a context, the three Janez Janšas' life and work produces both a profound political question and a subversive invitation: can something as quintessential yet as arbitrary as a name produce symbolic as well as legal national identity? If so, let us all become Slovenian.

That over-identification can only function as such under socialism and that, as a result, the three Janez Janšas should have directly confronted the nationalistic measures of the SDS rather than trying to affirmatively subvert them, has been a point raised against their actions.[47] But as many have argued, over-identification is a strategy that continues to function under other political regimes. Žižek, for instance, wrote about Laibach and NSK in 1993, and stressed that it was the cynicism expected by contemporary ideologies (he even calls them "post-ideological") that Laibach was able to undermine successfully thanks to over-identification. For Arns and Sasse, on the other hand, subversive affirmation has been one of the most fruitful tactics in contemporary media and net activism in the West *since* the second half of the 1990s. Their analysis of how a working method originally developed in various Eastern European socialist countries has been translated into neo-capitalist contexts is worth exploring a bit further.

In their essay, Arns and Sasse group together a series of projects by artists and activists operating in Western Europe and the US for their use of "apparent affirmation of—and compliance with—the image, corporate identity and strategies of their opponents."[48] According to these writers (and similarly to Žižek), such tactics "hold a potential for resistance" due to the capacity of the dominant political and

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[46] Ibid., 96.

[47] Grzinic, "Southeastern Europe and the Question of Knowledge, Capital, and Power."

[48] Arns and Sasse, "Subversive Affirmation," 444.

economic capitalist system to appropriate any negative message, making the artistic and activist strategy of critical distance inherently inefficient.[49] Arns and Sasse focus on three artistic examples: Christoph Schlingensief's *Please Love Austria! First European Coalition Week* (2000) which consisted of a performance that mimicked the logic of the television program *Big Brother* but applied to a group of asylum seekers; The Yes Men's impersonation of corporate representatives at conferences, television programs, and online; and Eva and Franco Mattes' (aka 0100101110101101.ORG) well-orchestrated campaign to rename Vienna's Karlplatz as Nikeplatz. The last two, as I explained in the Introduction to this thesis, were also used by Carrie Lambert-Beatty as examples of parafictions in art. Given that Schlingensief's *Please Love Austria!* was also taken at face value by numerous members of the audience who even protested against its cruelty, it is now possible to establish a clear connection between subversive affirmation and parafictions. Moreover, I believe that such parallelism allows to state that in order for contemporary art projects to be examples of *politically effective* subversive affirmation they require confusion between the factual and the fictional not only at the level of the information provided but also in relation to the intentions of the artists. By this I do not mean that by not having a knowable intention an artist immediately acquires political effectiveness nor that there is no intention, but that in the case of those projects which are mimicking the methods of their opponents, the intentions of the artists should not be immediately discernible; otherwise, their capacity to confuse, disturb or undermine will inevitably be diminished.

To summarise, the controversial political career of "the most prominent" Janez Janša on the one hand, and the lack of clearly stated motivations on the part of the three artists on the other, have influenced the interpretation of the name change not as a case of idolisation nor of straightforward criticism, but rather of over-identification. Indeed, the post-ideological, neo-capitalist system in which the three Janez Janšas operate, allows criticisms. In fact, as Žižek as well as Arns and Sasse explain, this system is so well adjusted to all kinds of direct condemnations that it is able to predict and even take on any negative judgement. Under these circumstances, the only way to destabilise the prevailing order is not to attack but to mimic its ways. In that sense, the three Janez Janšas' apparent fanatical alignment

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[49] Ibid.

with the political figure of Janez Janša can be interpreted as politically effective over-identification.

In my view, though, what has not been sufficiently emphasised in such readings is the relation between the multiple Janez Janša as a parafictional artistic identity and the political effect of the project. As I have argued, political agency which is not structured as a list of concrete goals is more able to avoid instrumentalization. At the same time, the parallel between subversive affirmation and parafictions demonstrates that *some* artistic projects require levels of uncertainty in order to best function politically. In the case of the three Janez Janšas, it is the construction of a parafictional artistic identity with unclear intentions that allows them to produce a political position which is not so easily jeopardised. Actually, what guarantees that their name change becomes a genuine case of over-identification and continuous subversive affirmation is their status as *agents without intention*. As a result, the three Janez Janšas are an example of how to create a parafictional artistic identity whose political strength resides in the disruption of the causal relation between actions and intentions.

Exhibiting documents, performing *Trust*

By considering the name change of the three artists from the perspective of subversive affirmation and over-identification, I have tried to show how the political agency of parafictional artists can be linked to the confusion over their intentions. This does not necessarily mean that what parafictional artists do with that agency is immediately welcomed as progressive action, but rather that *the interpretation of those actions can be crucially separated from a moral judgement over the good or bad intentions of the artists*.[50] In this final section of Chapter 3, I will turn my attention to the pending question of the relation between parafictional artists and their works. To do this, I will be analysing some of the official documents of the three Janez Janšas that have been presented as artworks in exhibitions and performances. Three intertwined inquiries structure the next pages: Do these documents have

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[50] In an essay about artists making use of lies, Theo Reese-Evison makes a similar point to mine, despite the fact that I do not consider the three Janez Janšas to be lying. As he explains, "by devoting our attention to a moral calculation based on intention we miss the thoroughly *ethical* stakes involved in artworks that experiment with deception." Theo Reeves-Evison, "Rogues, Rumours and Giants: Some Examples of Deception and Fabulation in Contemporary Art," *Parallax* 21, no.2 (2015): 198.

agency as artworks beyond the intentions of the artists? And, how can these artworks be best presented, fairly understood and, closely related, how can we account for the effects and affects they produce in the present?

Previously in this chapter, I referred to the presentation of many of the documents the three Janez Janšas have issued or renewed as artworks in various exhibitions. The concern I highlighted was the problematic reading of these IDs, cards, and certificates only in connection to the life and the work paradigm. So, what if we were to understand them now not as mere documentary "proof" of the name change, but in connection to a specific socio-political context like, for instance, the "erasure" of numerous citizens from all public registries by the Slovenian state? From my perspective, however, the presentation of these documents in an exhibition format limits their capacity to mean anything beyond their relation to the artist's name change. For instance, I do not believe that the documents *by themselves* have an aestheticising effect over the xenophobic measures of the Slovenia government, but neither that they are able to constitute a criticism of those measures if contextual explanations are missing. What I propose is that in order for these documents to gain a stronger agency, they must be shown *in a performative context*. When these documents are *put into action*—as, in fact, the three Janez Janšas have done on numerous occasions—the interpretation, presentation, and encounter with them is much more interesting than if they are presented as artworks by themselves. Let us look at an example.

Trust consists of an online and off-line service through which audiences can obtain an original artwork by the three Janez Janšas in the form of a signed credit card. The project was developed by the three Janez Janšas in two phases: first, as a sort of beta version at Turner Contemporary in December 2014, and then, as a fully-developed action at the gallery Aksioma in Ljubljana in September 2015. I was able to attend both events as participant and co-producer of the project, which provided me with a privileged access into the logic of this performative work, and into its various possible meanings. To complete this chapter, I would like to use the information I gathered through my personal involvement in *Trust* to think critically about this action in connection to its socio-political context and its agency beyond the intentions of the artists.

Several people I have spoken to about *Trust* have questioned its artistic relevance and political efficacy, with one person describing it as "Very cool—and slightly dodgy." I am therefore aware of the problematic characteristics of the

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Figure 3.11. Presentation of the project *Trust* at Turner Contemporary, Margate, December 2014. Photograph by Louisa Love.

project, including its ethical ones, and will try to address them from my unavoidable particular perspective. But let me start with a description, or rather, with the explanation provided online:

> The core of the project is an online facility where anybody from all over the world can download images of Janšas' artworks and use them to create their own customized credit card; this should be later sent to the artists, who will then place their signatures on it—thus the card becoming the artwork—and send it back to the participant.[51]

To facilitate the creation of these customised cards, the website www.janezjansa.si/works/trust also includes a page with links to the banks in Europe, Oceania, America and Asia (thus far, none have been found in Africa) offering this service. Initially, when you tried to access the bank's information online, you first found the following warning from Google: "Attackers on www.janezjansa.si might try to trick you to steal your information (for example, passwords, messages or credit cards . . . If you understand the risks to your security, you may visit this infected site."[52] This unintended glitch that was later resolved by the designers of the web occurred because of the numerous links to bank's websites available on the *Trust*

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[51] "About Trust," Janez Janša, accessed 5 October, 2015, http://www.janezjansa.si/works/trust/.

[52] "Banks," Janez Janša, accessed 6 October, 2015, http://www.janezjansa.si/works/trust/their-banks/.

Figure 3.12. Janez Janša, Janez Janša, Janez Janša, "Certificate of Authenticity," part of the project *Trust*, 2015. Courtesy: Aksioma – Institute for Contemporary Art, Ljubljana.

online pages; on a different level, though, the warning dramatically introduces the *state of risk* on which the whole project is based.

As said, *Trust* was first presented during the 2014 UK tour of the three Janez Janšas. At that time, the site was not functioning, and what the artists proposed was to sign the non-customised cards of the audiences attending their talk at Turner Contemporary. Much to their surprise—as well as mine—a good number of attendants—including me—were happy to open their wallets and line up to have their valid credit cards signed by the three artists (fig. 3.11). In the era of chip-controlled purchases and pin numbers, no one seemed particularly bothered to have the triple signature "Janez Janša" at the back of their personal paying devices, despite that being a space specifically regulated by the banks to contain the signature/autograph of the card owner. When *Trust* was staged again in Ljubljana on the 29th of September 2015, the online site was working, yet the main action that evening was again not web-based.[53] Prior to the event, the three artists had been in touch with a broad network of friends, artists, and art professionals from the city asking them to request a customised card from their bank using the image from the three Janez Janšas' performance, *Mount Triglav on Mount Triglav*.[54] These willing

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[53] The artists expressed in private their concern about publicising the website too widely because they did not want the Slovenian banks providing personalised cards to find out about the project.

[54] As previously mentioned, this performance was a re-enactment of the 1968 action *Mount Triglav* by the group OHO, which had already been re-performed by the collective IRWIN in 2004. The Janez Janšas'

collaborators, twenty-five in total, were then asked to attend the event in which their customised cards were signed by the three artists in front of an audience. Participants were also given a Certificate of Authenticity proving that their credit card had become an original piece by Janez Janša, Janez Janša and Janez Janša (fig. 3.12). Once the signing was over, one of the Janez Janšas asked each credit card/artwork owner to take a further risk and exchange their signed and supposedly still valid card with another participant. The request included that those exchanging cards would not cancel them for a least one week, when they would meet again with the person with whom they had done the exchange, and retrieve their original card/artwork. No one, at least during the event, declined the challenge.

As with other artworks by Janez Janša, Janez Janša and Janez Janša, *Trust* requires us to think about the social, economic, and institutional structures in which it is set in order to produce a more complex reading of the proposal. Otherwise, if the meaning of *Trust* is again limited to the credit cards' functioning as a documentary "proof" of a personal act (in this case, of the audiences trusting the "good intentions" of three Janez Janšas), the work will soon fall into a closed circuit of self-reference with questionable artistic value. Moreover, and as explained in the Introduction about the so-called interventionist artists who embrace the physical or discursive sites in which their fictions operate, the ethical implications of asking audiences to order new credits cards and then send them to the artists need to be understood in relation to a contextualised circumstance. The dilemma is not whether the customised and signed credit card has become a "real" artwork, but what such proposal implies about the specific economic conditions of the art world today. So, what are the possible socio-political frameworks through which to better understand this *act of trust*? How does this work affect us now?

As in other projects by the three Janez Janšas, the title is from the outset implying an over-identification with the political figure of Janez Janša.[55] In particular,

second re-enactment is one of their most well-known works, with an edition of the three photographs that compose its graphic documentation belonging to the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova, the main collection of contemporary art in Slovenia.

[55] Such is also the case of the project *FREE Janez Janša*, which was a triple "publishing" event in late 2014 consisting of the presentation of the free downloadable version of the film *My Name is Janez Janša*, the also downloadable release of the book *What's in a Name?* by philosopher Mladen Dolar, and the inauguration of a month-long guest blog by net art pioneer Vuk Ćosić. The juxtaposition of the word "free" to the name "Janez Janša" brought up two opposing meanings: while, as an adjective, free referred to the distribution of different authored materials under creative commons licences, if turned into a verb, *FREE Janez Janša* could be interpreted as a slogan in favour of bringing the politician out of

Figure 3.13 (left). Window of Aksioma project space, Ljubljana, 2015. Photo by the author.
Figure 3.14 (right). Janez Janša, Janez Janša, Janez Janša, "Greece, I ♥ Germany on VISA," part of *CREDITS* series, 2013. Courtesy: Aksioma – Institute for Contemporary Art, Ljubljana.

when the word "trust" appears next to the name "Janez Janša"—as it did, for example, in the public-facing window of the project space Aksioma (fig. 3.13)—it becomes impossible not to connect the project to the cycle of trust and mistrust experienced by politicians and voters. If we believe that "all politicians are the same," does that mean that as participants in *Trust* we should also stop trusting the artists who so willingly self-identify with a corrupt politician? Is not that attitude very similar to the cynicism Žižek was describing as expected by contemporary ideologies? We indeed give the artists our trust by sending them our credits cards to be signed. But they also put online their freely downloadable high resolution images, and give us an authentic piece of work in return. If this exchange turns out well, then, we could start to see trust as part of an exchange process rather than as the necessary companion to disappointment.

Another context in which the work *Trust* can be understood is the financial crisis that started in 2008, and the role of banks in its catastrophic economic consequences. As the website of *Trust* announces, "the project questions the role of

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jail (which, as already mentioned, did happen at the end of 2014), and, therefore, as a clear act of over-identification.

credit cards in the system of trust on which the whole financial sector is based."[56] The financial system of trust (and the dramatic consequences of its failure) is most evidently referenced in one of the images available to download online and place on the credit card. This image is part of the serial project *I ♥ Germany* (2003) and features one of the Janez Janšas wearing a t-shirt with the same slogan while in Athens (fig. 3.14). The apparently touristic photograph becomes quite a political statement in the context of the complicated relations between the German creditors and the Greek State; and when placed as the main image on a credit card, it brings to mind the dramatic capital controls imposed by the Greek government in the summer of 2015 to avoid the actual risk of a massive exit of money from the banks as the result of an absolute crisis of trust. The artists, however, are asking us to order more credit cards, not fewer; to play the game of banks, rather than to oppose them. Should we not feel conflicted about it?

A third frame of reference for *Trust* is that of the art world and its regime and economies of value. As I have explained, the credit cards become artworks when the three artists sign them. Such a transformation from mere paying devices to work of art by Janez Janša, Janez Janša and Janez Janša is, at the same time, ratified by an authenticity certificate distributed to owners.[57] The trust in the symbolic power of the signature of the artist to transform anything into art is, of course, one of the pillars of the art system since Duchamp's readymades.[58] Yet, this initially revolutionary gesture has become the base of the art market, mainly constructed around the added value of the artist's signature. The signatures of the three Janez Janšas, on the other hand, are not meant to cancel the working logic of the credit card by bringing it into the realm of art, but actually to allow it to continue functioning as a credit card *at the same time as* becoming a work of art. In that

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[56] "About Trust," Janez Janša, accessed 5 October, 2015, http://www.janezjansa.si/works/trust/.

[57] Another project in which the three Janez Janšas have used features from the art world to establish that their documents are also artworks was the performative sale of their valid passports through a real artistic auction. The final price for one of the passports was 1900 euros. See *PB0241891 (Passport) at Auction* (video of performance, Vienna, 2010), accessed 22 January, 2016, https://vimeo.com/42353145.

[58] For the signature as one of the "conditions" of the readymade in Duchamp, see Thierry de Duve, "Echoes of the Readymade: Critique of Pure Modernism," in *The Duchamp Effect*, eds. Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and October Magazine, 1996), 93-129. Piero Manzoni signing human bodies as works of art is another significant example of an artist relying on the transforming power of the artist's signature. Also, Yves Klein's *Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility* (1959-62), where the artist would sell empty space to different collectors, is another significant case in which only the receipt signed by the artist certifies the existence of the empty space as art.

sense, the entrenched trust in the calculation artist's signature=money is made explicit. Meanwhile, the also quite widespread use of authentication certificates to guarantee value within the art world is here hijacked to validate the critical gesture of transforming a credit card into art.

Trust allows people with a bank account to personalise their document with an image of the three Janez Janšas, and thereby *become Janez Janša* not just symbolically but through valid documentation. At the same time, the credit cards can be useful ways to investigate how trust functions in political, economic, and artistic settings well beyond the name change of the three artists. As I claimed in the Introduction to this thesis, intended confusion between fiction and reality is perceived as an effective way of questioning how conceptions of trust, truth, or authenticity function in all kinds of contexts. Such state of confusion, however, is less present when the credit cards or other documents are presented in exhibition formats. Given that the name change of the three artists is "real" in bureaucratic terms, yet the effect of the name change is parafictional, the straightforward presentation of their documents cannot encapsulate the fictive context in which their artworks operate. In my view, for more complex readings to emerge, the artworks of the three Janez Janšas must be presented as part of performative situations that imply a certain level of fiction as well as ethical ramifications. In performances, the documents are able to enact, for instance, the complex ways in which they elicit trust; while in exhibitions, the same documents are just the tautological proof of the authenticity of the information they describe.

But what about the political efficacy of *Trust*? Is the project able to break through the rhetoric of (mis)trust used by politicians world-wide? Is it capable of making us change our banking habits? Will it stop the escalation of prices in the art market based on the correct authentication of artist's signatures? Maybe it could do some of the above, maybe not. In any case, I think that the *agency* of *Trust* (its narrativity) does not depend on the correct identification of the *intentions* of the artists Janez Janša, Janez Janša and Janez Janša. Contrary to other interpreters, I am not asking the artists to criticise openly the politician Janez Janša, the banking system, nor the art world. Rather, I welcome the possibility for the parafictional identity Janez Janša to remain ambiguous, and to employ what the curator and critic Domenico Quaranta calls "oblique strategies," which are neither critical nor

affirmative, but everything in between.[59] Writing about the name change as a personal decision with artistic implications, Quaranta explains how in art "you are not allowed to do something without a meaning," while in life, "you are allowed to be contradictory, ambiguous, complex or dumb all rolled in one."[60] Following this, I believe that the efficacy of *Trust* and of the whole name change project depends in its capacity *to gain agency beyond the logic of intention*. In that way, the art works produced by the three Janez Janšas will continue to offer a series of contradictory, ambiguous, complex and even dumb questions, rather than becoming a grandiloquent and emphatic answer.

The intention of interpretation

As a short coda to this chapter, I want to turn my attention briefly to the intentions of the interpreters rather than the artists. By interpreters, I mean those writing about art projects as well as those curators who are creating interpretations by way of public presentations. In the case of those art professionals (including me) that are directly interpreting parafictional artists and their artworks, the role played by their own intentions (including mine) becomes more evident. As I have so far maintained, the intentions of parafictional artists are problematic to identify given the elements of fiction that constitute their identities. For that same reason, the agendas behind the people writing or organising events with parafictional artists become more easily identifiable, even when they go unacknowledged.

Such would also seem to be the view of Slavoj Žižek, when, in his account of the possible meaning of the performances by the Slovenian music band Laibach he turns his attention away from the intentions of the members of the group and to the critics writing about them. As he explains,

> The first reaction of the enlightened Leftist critics was to conceive of Laibach as the ironic imitation of totalitarian rituals; however, their support of Laibach was always accompanied by an uneasy feeling: "What if they really mean it? What if they truly identify with the totalitarian ritual?" or, a more cunning version of it, transferring one's own doubt onto the other: "What if Laibach overestimates their public?

[59] Quaranta, *Troika*, 72.

[60] Ibid., 16 and 19.

What if the public takes seriously what Laibach mockingly imitates, so that Laibach actually strengthens what it purports to undermine?"[61]

For Žižek, the critics ask questions of the group expecting answers, while failing to understand "that Laibach itself does not function as an answer but a question."[62] I believe that Janez Janša, Janez Janša, and Janez Janša, in their capacity as agents without intention, are also an open question for the interpreter (including me) to address their own desires; desires and fears about the political figure of Janez Janša, about what his name represents in Slovenia and beyond, about the art world and the role of the artist, or, even, about one's own role in such an art world.

As mentioned, Mieke Bal considered artist's intention an inadequate concept to account for the effects of art throughout history, including in the present. In her opinion, any interpretation should recognise how an artwork affects us now, despite such effects being unintended, unknown, or incompatible with the intentions of the maker. In that sense, Bal was demanding that the art historian and other interpreters engage with the historical circumstances, personal interests, and particular goals of their own readings and presentations, without hiding behind the "correct" identification of the artist's intentions. Following this request to the interpreter—a request that philosopher Rosi Braidotti so accurately reinstated as "Don't do the God trick, don't speak from nowhere"[63]—and before moving on to describe the possible purposes of other curators in Chapter 5, I would like to acknowledge further that my interpretation of the three Janez Janšas as agents without intention is connected to my own struggles to frame a project which I find interesting as well as problematic; connected, as well, to my own preference to consider some of its questionable aspects without imposing a reductive moral judgment over what I speculate to be the artists' hidden motivations.

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[61] Žižek, "Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?" 287.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Rosi Braidotti, "Thinking as a Nomadic Subject" (video of lecture, ICI Berlin, 7 October, 2014), accessed 28 January, 2016, https://www.ici-berlin.org/event/620/.

PART II

Chapter 4. **Fiction(s) in/of the contemporary art world**

A networked structure

As I have shown so far, the consumption of and investment in art has traditionally been backed up by the construction of the status of the artist in art history. Legitimising and giving rise to certain ideological conditions, art history has had an undeniable influence over how artists have been presented and understood beyond the academy. For instance, reflecting on the 1984 exhibition *The Pre-Raphaelites* at the then Tate Gallery, Griselda Pollock argued that the museum curators had reproduced art historical discourses on the biographical to generate for the public "the illusion of a knowable, accessible but fascinatingly other individual."[1] More than thirty years later, however, the direction of influence that Pollock detected seems to have reversed, for exhibitions are no longer being constructed as "illustrations" of art historical narratives, but are directly affecting how art history as well as many other discourses and disciplines address contemporary art and artists. As Thomas McEvilley acknowledged in his 1992 book *Art and Otherness: Crisis in Cultural Identity*, his own art historical arguments had "a great deal to do with art exhibitions, which are the actual battleground where changes in art theory are currently being worked out."[2]

The second part of my PhD considers this change of "battleground," how it has affected practising artists, and more specifically how it has influenced the development of parafictional ones. If in Part I of this thesis I gave a historical account of how authorship had been questioned by new art history in order to explore the ways in which some of its methodological reconsiderations on biography and intention could be helpful in interpreting parafictional artists, in chapters 4 and 5 I will bring the debate up-to-date. Over the next pages I will be addressing a series of

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[1] Griselda Pollock, "Art, Art School, Culture. Individualism after the Death of the Artist," *Block* 11 (Winter 1985/6): 10.

[2] Thomas McEvilley, *Art and Otherness: Crisis in Cultural Identity* (Kingston, NY: McPherson & Company, 1992), 14.

questions that are fundamental to understanding the artistic and socio-economic context in which an increasing number of artists have decided to produce authorial personas through fictional means: Why has curating (including but not limited to art exhibitions) become such a prominent activity/discourse in the contemporary art world? Have curators become not only proponents of changes in art theory but also the present-day guarantors of a substantial share of an "economy of authority" (to return to Pollock's expression)? How do artists' identities operate in the new interconnected structure of the art world and how do parafictional artists disrupt certain assumptions about the author's function in "exhibitionist" situations?

Different from art history, curatorial proposals occur in closer proximity to the public sphere.[3] With this in mind, a final issue addressed in this chapter relates to the ethical problems that curators working on and with fiction might encounter. If previously I discussed the ethical implications of artistic projects dealing with fiction from the point of view of the artists involved in them, here I would like to consider the topic from a curatorial perspective. Chapter 4 has, as a result, two intertwined objectives: to describe the institutionalised art world in which parafictional artists have emerged, and to highlight the role of curators and curating in this new framework. The link between parafictional artists and curators is significant because I consider that the pressures and contradictory demands made of artists today are also being transferred to those working in the curatorial field. By discussing how the organisation of the art world affects both artists and curators, I intend to demonstrate that the questions around authorship are common questions, and that fiction can provide some useful answers not only to artists but also to other agents actively participating in such a networked structure.

At the risk of getting ahead of myself, I would like to refer to what will become the final proposal of my thesis. As I have mentioned at different points throughout this text, since the mid-1990s a good number of curators have put together projects that included and discussed what I describe as fictional authorial strategies (the time frame is, as we will shortly see, not accidental). This abundance of curatorial approaches to the topic elicits, in my opinion, further exploration. In Chapter 5, therefore, I will discuss some of these examples in greater detail. I do not, however,

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[3] By that I do not mean to say that the interpretations made by art historians do not have a public dimension (which they obviously do in the shape of publications, teaching, lecturing); just that in curating the interpretations occur directly *in front* of an audience or, better, *with* the audience, as well as *with* the collaboration of the artists themselves.

offer a summary or straightforward review of these (for the main part) exhibitions, but rather consider what *type* of curatorial projects they are and how the people conceiving and organising them (sometimes "professional" curators, other times artists or critics) reflect on what curating can do. Based on these exhibitions, and on my own experience as an active curator, I will arrive at a curatorial understanding of parafictional artists that can trigger a more complex and pertinent debate around these artistic practices *in public*. Moreover, my intention is to demonstrate that such curatorial approaches not only facilitate a better comprehension of parafictional artists, but, by accepting fiction as part of the curatorial processes themselves, it also becomes possible to think and enact authorship (including the curators' authorship) in new or different ways. In order to get there, though, I first need to define the battleground.

As I wrote in Chapter 1, the belief that art does not appear in a vacuum but that numerous conditions and conventions impact on its production, distribution, and transmission, is a well-established principle. In line with this, I propose that the configuration of the contemporary art world as a networked structure of interconnected institutions fundamentally affects both the emergence of curating as a central activity and the development of parafictional artists. While I am not alone in establishing a link between the art world as a network and the rise of the curator (as I will shortly show), the role of institutions in such a structure is a more debated point. For instance, for Pascal Gielen, editor of the book *Institutional Attitudes. Instituting Art in a Flat World*, with the advent of horizontality, flexibility, and fluency as ruling principles of the "network society," those art institutions that are the traditional "gate-keepers" of hierarchical values (such as the museum) are "finding it hard to survive."[4] Closer to my own perspective, art theorist Lane Relyea argues that, under the current "organizational shift" towards networked models, those art structures "that formerly organized collective practice and knowledge . . . become not obsolete but updated."[5] In Relyea's view, however, the re-structuring of the museum and the canon into new paradigmatic formats like the platform and the database is not a

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[4] Pascal Gielen, introduction to *Institutional Attitudes. Instituting Art in a Flat World* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2013), 2.

[5] Lane Relyea, *Your Everyday Art World* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2013), ix-x.

mere technological "update" or an "organic" evolution, but a transformation with ideological implications.

In Chapter 2, I introduced the discussion of how contemporary artists operate under the influence of both neoliberalism and globalisation. In relation to the former, I maintained that the working logic of the cultural industries and the debates around copyright determine how artist-hood is currently being understood. As for globalisation, my main point referred to how the expansion of the art world affects the relation between cultural identity and subject matter in the case of artists from non-Western backgrounds. In the contemporary art world conceived as a structure of interconnected institutions—universities, galleries, museums, magazines, publishing and auction houses as well as art fairs, art centres, biennials, festivals, websites, and online platforms—neoliberalism and globalisation are, inevitably, organising principles.[6] But the point is not to condemn the whole of the art world for its ties to what are, in any case, configurations and processes that affect almost all aspects of our societies. Rather, it is a matter of explaining in political, economic and social terms how the artists and curators involved in the art world's networked structure function without making simplistic distinctions between "good faith" and "bad faith" practises.

With this mind, why has curating become such a prominent phenomenon in the contemporary art world? Although the figure of the museum curator and even of the freelance or independent curator has had a growing importance in the art world since the 1960s, there seems to be an agreement that the *global* prominence of this professional activity can be situated in the 1990s, particularly in relation to the world-wide expansion of the biennial exhibition format.[7] The biennial, with its outposts in places as diverse as Gwangju, Venice, Sydney, Johannesburg or São Paulo, its usual mix of local and transnational artists, its complex logistics, as well as its manifold parts in the development of a city's international reputation, testifies to the difficulty of art history as a Western-centred discipline to respond adequately to this

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[6] In this list of institutions I purposely do not separate commercial ones from non-commercial ones, as I consider they are all connected and together make up the art world as we know it.

[7] Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 51-85. As an immediate precursor to the prominence of the curator connected to a global understanding of exhibitions, we can mention *Magiciens de la Terre* curated by Jean-Hubert Martin at the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande Halle at the Parc de la Villette in Paris in 1989. By 2017, there were more than 200 of such international exhibitions around the world according to the Biennial Foundation. "Directory of Biennials," Biennial Foundation, accessed 3 February, 2017, http://www.biennialfoundation.org/home/biennial-map/.

heterogeneous situation.[8] In contrast, the curator, whose disciplinary training could—until recently—be varied (from cultural theory to journalism, and from art practice to sociology, philosophy or economics), positions herself as a responsive, adaptable, and accommodating mediator more adequately equipped to confront a global and networked art world.[9] After all, biennials are institutions willingly associated to other institutions through economic, political, aesthetic, personal, and academic ties (the Biennial Foundation whose membership is open to biennials world-wide is a clear example of this eagerness "to connect"[10]). Through the press, specialised media, catalogues, and the Internet, biennials and other similar transnational events are able to communicate quickly their findings and proposals to all the other nodes of the network, in the process reinforcing their status as prime participants in the construction of knowledge around art and culture. The curator as a mobile, transdisciplinary, and communicative agent gains importance in such a fast-evolving, outward-looking scenario.

Another explanation for why curating affects and is affected by the networked structure of the contemporary art world relates both to the need for guidance in an ever more vast cultural sphere, as well as to the expectation that any such guidance is not a closed list of final preferences, but a series of open suggestions that might lead to further information and options. Curating, in its more pedestrian interpretation, refers to the process of making a selection according to some known or unspecified criteria. In this sense, curator Peter Eleey explains that, in its expanded use, the word refers to "editors and guides, providing a trusted filter in the new economy, helping to cut through the noise of dramatically increased culture and

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[8] For more on the debate about whether art history as a discipline is able to respond to the global expansion of the art world, see Hans Belting, "Contemporary Art as Global Art. A Critical Ensemble," in *The Global Art World. Audiences, Markets, and Museums*, eds. Hans Belting and Andreas Buddensieg (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2009), 38-73. Though it is not part of my discussion here, it is worth mentioning that the rise of the curator is usually explained in relation to the decrease in influence of the art critic.

[9] On a more biographical level, a significant number of the curators who achieved recognition through their work at the head of world-wide biennials during the 1990s and 2000s (people like Hou Hanru, Okwui Enwezor, Vasif Kortun, Carlos Basualdo and Ivo Mesquita) had themselves not been born in Western European countries or the US, emphasising, as a result, the decentralisation of the art world and its discourses. Unfortunately this brief list only includes male names. The prominent female curators working in the 1990s and early 2000s in the context of biennials (Catherine David and Ute Meta Bauer, for example), although invested in postcolonial discourses, were themselves Westerners. From the 2010s, however, we can see a gradual increase in the number of women from around the globe who are appointed directors of international biennials (I am thinking of people like Mami Kataoka or the collective What, How, and For Whom).

[10] "About," Biennial Foundation, accessed 15 July, 2016, http://www.biennialfoundation.org/about/.

information production."[11] Yet curators, including those working at museums, are aware that in the public presentation of their projects there needs to be room for intervention. For instance, in *Tate Modern: The Handbook*, the hanging of the collection is described not as following an art historical narrative, but as providing "alternative ways of looking," "a continuously shifting viewpoint," and "allowing new connections to be made."[12] From a critical perspective, such curatorial arrangements could be described as knowingly fabricating the illusion of choice for audiences who, in reality, have little to say. From a more sympathetic perspective, one could argue that curators are aware of the need to construct meaning in ways which align with a new set of values like participation, engagement, and interaction. In any case, the fact that the art world is primarily arranged as a networked structure in which flexibility, connectivity, and horizontality are prioritised, favours the curator as a professional, curating as an activity, and, more importantly, the curatorial as a discourse.[13]

The curator's authorship

To explore further why curating has become such a prominent activity and how the rise of this profession and its associated discourses have affected the organisation of value within the contemporary art world, it is useful to consider the relation between curators and what is a major topic of this thesis—authorship. I have several motives to consider this relation. Firstly, I believe that while the term authorship has widespread negative connotations—as I proposed in Chapter 1—its specific use since the 1990s with respect to curators signals a particular return of its ideological implications; a return that affects artists as well as curators. Secondly, as influential professionals, curators have an important role in the interpretation of art and artists that is different from the one played by art historians. As this PhD deals with

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[11] Peter Eleey, "What about responsibility?," in *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*, ed. Jens Hoffmann (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2013), 114.

[12] Frances Morris, "From Then to Now and Back Again: Tate Modern Collection Displays," in *Tate Modern: The Handbook,* 2nd ed. (London: Tate Publishers, 2010), 27.

[13] Semantically, it is important to differentiate between the use of "curatorial" as an adjective related to curating and "the curatorial" as a specific paradigm in the field. At the beginning of Chapter 5, I will explain in detail what is meant by this shift and its implications for the role of curators.

interpretation, I consider it worth exploring what is specific about the authorial position of curators as art interpreters. Finally, my own attempt at producing a curatorial reading of parafictional artists that takes into account the institutional frameworks through which art becomes public, requires me to consider not only the intention of interpretation (as I did at the end of Chapter 3) but also the agency of curators, that is, their relation, amongst other things, to the artist's authorship and to the public's expectations.

During a recent day-long seminar on models of curating that I gave at the University for the Creative Arts in Canterbury to BA fine art students, I noticed distrust from these artists-to-be towards the curators whose jobs I was describing. There was a common agreement that curators wanted to make their artistic work "say things" that they did not want it to say, and that in the process of collaborating with a curator, their own "artistic voice" was going to get lost. Despite my attempts to convince them that curators could be their best allies, I understood from where their views were coming. At a conference on curatorial practices held in 2010, artist and *e-flux* co-founder Anton Vidokle lucidly synthesised what is by now a common suspicion about the curator's protagonism:

> The necessity of going "beyond the making of exhibitions" should not become a justification for the work of curators to supersede the work of artists, nor a reinforcement of *authorial claims* [my emphasis] that render artists and artworks merely actors and props for illustrating curatorial concepts. Movement in such a direction runs a serious risk of diminishing the space of art by undermining the agency of its producers: artists.[14]

Apart from the inevitable hostility that the rise of a new player provokes within any determined system, what is the specific "authorial claim" that curators are supposedly ascribing to and how is it that their aspiration to go "beyond the making of exhibitions" is seen as such a threat to the agency of artists?

If we go back just a short while to an essay on curating published in the mid-1990s, we will find a good starting point to see the evolving relation of curators to the concept of authorship over the past 20 years. The essay, "From Museum Curator to Exhibition *Auteur*: Inventing a Singular Position," was written by French

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[14] Anton Vidokle, "Art Without Artists?," *e-flux journal* 16 (May 2010), accessed 26 July 2016, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-without-artists/. This article was originally presented as a paper at the conference *Cultures of the Curatorial*, Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig, January 22–24, 2010.

sociologists Nathalie Heinrich and Michael Pollack and describes what they called a "current crisis in the profession."[15] According to their analysis, until then, curating jobs in museums had been characterised by "depersonalization," that is, by the absence of any acknowledgement of the particular opinions and tastes of the person occupying the post, and in favour of collective values and certified knowledge. With the increase in the importance of exhibitions to the detriment of the other more traditional tasks of curators (safeguarding, collecting, and research), however, a space for their "authorial position" was emerging. As they explained, "the exhibition offers an autonomous area, a margin of personal manoeuvring in comparison to other aspects of the profession."[16]

Significantly, Heinrich and Pollack chose the notion of *auteur* from cinema theory, rather than any other conception of authorship in art, to describe this new "creative" function of the exhibition curator. As is well known, *auteur* theory was introduced in France by François Truffaut and other critics and filmmakers associated with the magazine *Cahiers du Cinema* and the *Nouvelle Vague* movement during the 1950s and 60s.[17] Through their articles, interviews, and films these critics and filmmakers intended to claim for the film director a set of fundamental creative qualities that, until then, had mostly been associated with the *literary* scriptwriter. Also, and in relation to the Hollywood studio system, the recognition of a director's fundamental authorial role in the construction of a film's meaning, was a reaction against the priority until then given to the producer's financially-driven opinion.[18] Without going into a fuller analysis of *auteur* theory, what is important here is how the concept was repeatedly applied to the curator.[19] The advantage of this term was

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[15] Nathalie Heinrich and Michael Pollack, "From Museum Curator to Exhibition *Auteur*: Inventing a Singular Position," in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, eds. Sandy Nairne, Reesa Greenberg and Bruce W. Ferguson (London: Routledge, 1996), 234.

[16] Ibid., 237.

[17] The origin of the auteur theory is usually ascribed to François Truffaut's essay "A Certain Tendency in French Cinema," *Cahiers du Cinema* (1954), accessed 9 August, 2016, http://www.newwavefilm.com/about/a-certain-tendency-of-french-cinema-truffaut.shtml. Its development in the Anglo-Saxon context is frequently associated to Andrew Sarris' text "Notes in the Auteur Theory in 1962," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, 7th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 451-454.

[18] For an overview of auterism in cinema theory, see Robert Stam, "The Author. Introduction" in *Film and Theory. An Anthology*, eds. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 1-6.

[19] Apart from Heinrich and Pollack's essay, see, for instance, Jens Hoffmann, "A certain tendency of curating," in *Curating Subjects*, ed. Paul O'Neill (London: Open Editions and Amsterdam: de Appel arts centre, 2011), 137-142.

that, while it transformed curating from a depersonalised task to one in which sensibility, individual ideas, and personal criteria were valued, it also acknowledged the institutional structures in which the curator's work exists. By comparing the exhibition curator to the film director rather than to the artist, there was *explicit recognition* that the curator was not working in a vacuum, but that structural elements like budgets, schedules, audience expectations, institutional requirements, as well as *other authorships*, determined her agency. Although the equation curator = film director has been extensively problematised since then,[20] I still consider it to be partially useful for how it exposes curating as an activity deeply embedded in the institutional structure of the contemporary art world, as well as one in which mediation as much as creativity play a fundamental part.

Despite this understanding of the curator's function as a specific set of conditions and negotiations, the increasing importance of the exhibition—in particular of the group exhibition—over all other curatorial tasks during the 1990s was accompanied by the reconfiguration of the curator into a curator-author. What could be seen as a legitimate process to claim a *certain* creative voice for the curator, as well as a recognition that, in fact, there is no such thing as "depersonalization," but that even the more "neutral" decisions are always ideological (the preference for "neutrality" is itself a position), evolved into a different scenario.[21] As in Chapter 1 with the term "author-artist," my use of author-curator here refers to how a person is characterised as the *originating* agent of a work (or, for that matter, of an exhibition). The group exhibition, organised according to a curator's overarching concept rather than to the particular input of each of the participating artists, is where the conception of the curator as the primary origin of meaning is more clearly established. At the same time, the growth during the same period of the number of freelance curators with "loose" institutional alliances gave the impression that they were working beyond any structural constraint, reinforced the conception of the curator's authorship as existing *a priori*. It could therefore be argued that if the contemporary art world seems to be dominated by an "economy of authority" that

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[20] Claire Bishop, "¿Qué es un Curador? El ascenso (¿y caída?) del curador *auteur*" [What Is a Curator? The rise (and fall?) of the a*uteur* curator], *Criterios* 7 (1 May, 2011), accessed 28 July, 2016, https://lenguajesartisticos1.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/claire-bishop-que-es-un-curador.pdf.

[21] Writing about the evolving conceptions of curating from the 1960s to the 1990s, Paul O'Neill describes it as a process from "demystification" to "visibility," and then to "supervisibility." O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating*, 32-38.

organises monetary and ideological value around individual, self-referential author-curators, this cannot be understood without the construction of the status of such figures in group exhibitions.

It is exactly this understanding of the curator's authorship as taking priority over (or even advantage of) the artist's one, to which Vidokle is referring when he insists that artists and artworks should not be (ab)used as "actors and props for illustrating curatorial concepts" (for him the cinematic metaphor has negative connotations).[22] As it is becoming clear, what constitutes the curator's authorial voice is a debate not only around professional privileges, but also, as theorist Beatrice von Bismarck has pointed out, about "the nature and efficiency of participation in the processes of constituting meaning."[23] In that sense, it is relevant to compare this discussion with the critique of authorship amongst art historians. As I emphasized in Chapter 1, for Griselda Pollock, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, and Mieke Bal it was crucial to recognise that the interpreter's ideas and opinions played a fundamental role in the construction of the figure of the artist and, as a result, in what the artwork *meant* (let us remember that they referred in quotation marks to "Van Gogh," "Atget," and "Rembrandt" respectively to emphasise this ideological construction). In the case of curators, and very particularly when they are working with living artists, a more subtle equilibrium between depersonalization and "origination," between presenting an image of "neutrality" and recognising one's agency, is required.

But let me return to Vidokle's words, because in 2010 what he is portraying as a threat to the agency of art and artists is not the centrality of the group exhibition but the ambition of curators to go "beyond the making of exhibitions." As a reaction to the limitations of the exhibition format on the one hand, and to the associated configuration of its curator as an author-curator on the other, from the 2000s, a series of professionals decided to expand the notion of what curating could both be

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[22] Connected debates which I will not discuss here as they exceed the scope of my project include whether creating and curating are the same thing, and the particularities of exhibitions that are curated by artists. For some relevant examples see Boris Groys, "Multiple Authorship," in *The Manifesta Decade, Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, eds. Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 93-100; Anne Koskiluoma and Anna Krystyna Trzaska, "Curatorial and Artistic Practice as Political Process: an interview with Artur Zmijewski," *oncurating.org* 19 (June 2013): 23-27, accessed 25 July, 2016, http://www.on-curating.org/index.php/issue-19-reader/curatorial-and-artistic-practice-as-political-process-an-interview-with-artur-zmijewski.html; and Claire Bishop, "History Depletes Itself. On Dahn Võ at the Danish Pavilion and Punta della Dogana," *Artforum* 54, no.1 (September 2015): 324-330.

[23] Beatrice von Bismarck, "Curatorial Criticality—on the Role of Freelance Curators in the Field of Contemporary Art," *oncurating.org* 9 (September 2011): 19, accessed 26 July, 2016, http://www.on-curating.org/files/oc/dateiverwaltung/old%20Issues/ONCURATING_Issue9.pdf.

and do. For well-known professionals like Hans Ulrich-Obrist, Charles Esche or Maria Lind this meant the embrace of a wide variety of ways "of making art happen and go public."[24] In Chapter 5, I will come back to the theorisation of this expansion as "the curatorial," but for now I want to concentrate on how it affected the relation of curators to the notion of authorship. Referring to the extended reach of the projects of Esche, as well as other protagonists in this "turn" such as Francesco Bonami or Vasif Kortun, Paul O'Neill explains that these curatorial endeavours were conceived "by going *beyond the parameters of the exhibition* as a single narrative and by mobilizing a field of public inquiry *beyond the individual curatorial position* [my emphasis]."[25] The correlation made by O'Neill between "going beyond the exhibition" and a less authoritative curatorial position is the opposite of what Vidokle denounces. In all fairness, it is true that those curators invested in innovative practices during the 2000s were indeed interested in complicating the authorial claim of the curator of group exhibitions. For instance, Bonami, who had been appointed as director of the 2003 Venice Biennale, conceived the event as a complex of exhibitions curated by artists, other curators, and collectives of curators, while Ulrich Obrist's series of Marathons at the Serpentine Gallery in London allowed vast numbers of voices and opinions to be heard in equal conditions. Nonetheless, it is exactly this generation of curators whose names function more than any others as *originators* of curatorial projects. After all, while curators were "only" making exhibitions, their professional territory was well-determined. Once they assimilate many other activities as part of their tasks, there is an increased risk that their authorial claims become indistinguishable from that of artists.

In spite of the "newness" of the profession, the relation between curators and authorship is, as I have shown, already a complicated one. In recent years, and with the notorious increase in the number of people invested in building their careers as curators, I consider that this relationship is changing again. On the one hand, while the numerous training courses aimed specifically at curators are both a cause and an effect of this rise, the abundance of graduates emerging with these degrees generates a more competitive job market.[26] The configuration of the art world as a

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[24] Maria Lind and Jens Hoffman, "To Show or not to Show," *Mousse* 31 (November 2011), accessed 28 July, 2016, http://moussemagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=759.

[25] O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating*, 81.

[26] When in 2004 I researched which MAs in Curating were available to me as a prospective student, I could only find two in London (at Royal College of Art and Goldsmiths), three in the US (at Bard College,

network of interconnected institutions means that those aspiring to have a career need to situate their names adequately within that structure. This entails questioning their own role as professionals—including how to position their authorship as curators—but also asking about the economic and practical consequences of such positioning. As I have just mentioned and will further analyse, under the influence of "the curatorial," the field of curating is moving towards more horizontal and de-hierarchised conceptions in which curators are not necessarily the originators of a project—nor, sometimes, even necessary for a curatorial project to occur. This expectation for the curator to de-emphasise their protagonism can, however, evolve into situations in which "emergent" curators trying to establish themselves professionally find that their authorship needs to be given up before it has even been established (a similar point to the one discussed in Chapter 1 about female artists who, having never enjoyed the privileges of authorship in the first place, were then asked to give them up on political grounds). Meanwhile, the precarious working conditions in the sector mean that those same professionals might not only have to disown an authority that never really existed, but that by refusing to acknowledge their specific original contribution they are accordingly rejecting payment or recognition for their work. Authorship, in those cases, becomes a repudiated yet unreachable status.

The paradoxical situation presented to aspiring curators is not an individual's problem but a structural one. As curators, we want our work to be both meaningful and recognised, yet we are competing to survive in a complicated scenario where contradictory agendas interact. Of course, there will always be "celebrity" curators whose privileges are well-credited, and it is also true that even curatorial assistants at small, independent art centres have more job security that an "emerging" artist. But maybe, as in the case of the artists who decide to use fiction, it is not a matter of separating the "good" from the "bad" curator according to their stated anti-authorial intentions, but to consider how curators (who are often precarious workers themselves) articulate their agency—including their participation in the process of constituting meaning—in relation to the rest of the agencies involved in the curatorial.

Columbia University and California College of the Arts), and another two non-degree programs at de Appel in Amsterdam and Le Magasin in Grenoble. In 2017, however, the number of universities and institutions worldwide offering specific training for curators has grown exponentially.

No "free" space

As I have already mentioned, this chapter is organised with the goal of connecting the discussions around curators and curating to the employment of parafictional strategies by artists; therefore, I will now turn my attention to the latter. Apart from the rise of curating, I have also stated that the organisation of the art world into a networked structure is a process that runs parallel to the decision of an increasing number of artists to explore authorship through fiction. Comparing the cases of Juan Trepadori and Monty Cantsin to Luther Blissett and Robbie Williams in Chapter 2, I argued that while the first two figures can only be described as fictional, the second two are parafictional, for their critique towards authorship exists in parallel to their capacity to keep operating as authors. The distinction between fictional and parafictional artists is also a distinction between dissociative approaches to critical versus practical issues, and a situation in which both collide; hopefully, such change also justifies my insistence on describing the kind of art world in which artists are now obliged to operate. Moreover, I think the fact that the art world is organised as a tight network of interconnected institutions, along with the incorporation of the critique of authorship generated by new art history into all critical thinking about art, has forced artists invested in critical discourses to find ways to comply with the expectation that they "give up" or question their authorship while, at the same time, keeping the actual function of their name and work under more rigorous control.[27]

As I have claimed, since the 1990s the realm of culture is no longer conceived separately from other areas of the productive economy but rather as a fundamental part of it. The gradual conversion of art into a neoliberal cultural industry has affected how labour is envisioned in the larger economy (with values traditionally associated with artists like "creativity" and "self-motivation" now being expected from the entire work force) and, of course, how the art world itself is organised. One of the consequences of this all-encompassing approach to art as an industry is that artists find it harder and harder to survive outside of its parameters of profitability and connectivity. The romantic belief that an artist could create in isolation, working alone from his studio, and waiting "to be discovered" (maybe even after death) is

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[27] It is worth emphasising that I am talking here about critically ambitious contemporary artists; many others following more formal practices continue to invest in creating a straightforward authorship/genius status for themselves.

long gone. For Gielen—whom, as I wrote, fears the introduction of the values of the "network society" into art institutions—"artists who still aim for immortality and who take up a position as bohemians outside of society, hoping for recognition in the hereafter, are today ridiculed for their conviction."[28] Another consequence, and in my opinion a more crucial one, is that once the art world is structured as a network of interconnected institutions, the amount of "free" space that is left for "anti-systemic" or unaccounted protest art practices almost vanishes.

The last point requires further explanation. If the art world is indeed a growing mesh of institutions which share information, resources, agendas, and interests, it becomes an impossibility not to be caught in its web once one starts producing as an artist. The art world is a network from which there is little escape: rather than simply being organised vertically, it is also ever-expanding, almost amorphous, and, as a result, more difficult to avoid. The impression, regardless of its veracity, is that whatever one does in a particular institutional context might "show up" anywhere else. In fact, the groups of practitioners that are operating today are usually themselves linked through universities, artist-run centres, commercial galleries, or exhibiting platforms, which all together make the art world—they are communities "existing fully inside, not outside, the art world."[29] Or, as artist Andrea Fraser puts it in her revision of institutional critique, "just as art cannot exist outside the field of art, we cannot exist outside the field of art, at least not as artists, critics, curators, etc."[30] At the same time, the increase in the number of institutions like art academies, publishing houses, as well as museums that are committed to critical thinking explains why a project like Luther Blissett is now one of the most influential countercultural experiments of the late 1990s. The expansion of the art world, and the recognition of critical thinking and action as core values by numerous art institutions, makes it almost impossible to operate outside of the system if one aspires to have a minimum influence over it.[31]

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[28] Gielen, "Institutional Imagination. Instituting Contemporary Art minus the 'Contemporary'" in *Institutional Attitudes*, 20.

[29] Relyea, *Your Everyday Art World*, 110.

[30] Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum* 44, no. 1 (September 2005): 282. In this essay, Fraser discussed the evolution of institutional critique and its' supposed "institutionalization," and argues that rather than opposing the artist to the institution, institutional critique was always institutionalised, as it could never exist outside the institution.

[31] For instance, consider the New Institutionalism movement and its investment in discursive and "deviant" practices. See Lucie Kolb and Gabriel Flückiger "New Institutionalism Revisited,"

This situation is also accompanied by other tensions and working paradigms, for how can one offer a critical message and make sure that one's practice is perceived according to the "right" kinds of discourses while fulfilling the actual need to "be productive" and "be connected"? (A practical example of this situation would be an artist who works quickly and sells well, but who is aware that if she wants her artworks to be read as meaningful contributions to "serious" art discourses, she needs to slow her production and control who buys her works.) If one wants to survive in an economically difficult environment that monitors the "appropriateness" of one's every activity, one needs to find ways to be self-critical without undermining one's total authority. The paradox is well-summarised by sociologist Rudi Laermans: "An artist may indeed not be an author, but she will probably only be validated as an artist if she gives up her authorship in an original way."[32] Of course, inventing a parafictional artist could be a way to question one's authorship *originally*.

Laermans's phrase, while being an accurate description of what many artists encounter, reveals certain scepticism towards the capacity of the artist to intervene disruptively in the art world. After all, it is the art world itself that expects or even calls for the disruption, as long as the artist complies with the simultaneous demands for criticality and originality. A more interesting approach to the agency of artists in a networked art world is presented by David McNeill in his article *Putting Sincerity to Work*. For him, "a-sincerity" would be the term that more adequately defines the attitude of a certain group of artists working today. As he explains, "What I characterize as a relationship of agnostic a-sincerity towards the art world as an institutionally and ideologically bordered structure is symptomatic of a movement from critique to engaged withdrawal."[33] For McNeill, this "engaged withdrawal" is neither ironic nor totally sincere; neither equivalent to "the good faith" (committed) artist, nor to the "mischievous rebel within." Rather, a-sincerity is an attitude that enables artists "to take advantage of the art world resourcing and of its

oncurating.org 21 (January 2014), accessed 18 July, 2016, http://www.on-curating.org/index.php/issue-21-reader/new-institutionalism-revisited.html. For how critique—since it articulates the interest and critical claims of specific art practices—serves to legitimise art's marketisation as something other than the accumulation of capital, see Suhail Malik, "Critique as Alibi: Moral Differentiation in the Art Market," *Journal of Visual Arts Practice* 7, no. 3 (2008): 283-295.

[32] Rudi Laermans, "Artistic Autonomy as Value and Practice," in *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, eds. Pascal Gielen and Paul de Bruyne, 2nd ed. (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers 2012), 136.

[33] David McNeill, "Putting Sincerity to Work," in *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, eds. Ernst van Alphen, Mieke Bal, and Carel Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 173.

accompanying critical apparatus when they feel it is appropriate or useful, without thereby acceding to its demands for acquiescence, fidelity, and attention."[34] A-sincerity (a term that tries to problematise artistic intention, for McNeill's essay is included in a book co-edited by Mieke Bal whose anti-intentionalist approach to art has been recurrently mentioned in this thesis) is, in my view, an accurate way of describing the decisions of artists like Joe Scalan or the three Janez Janšas to develop parafictional identities which can be labelled neither as cynical, nor as totally committed, but that use the critical apparatus of the art world to their own advantage while not fully complying with its associated, institutional(ised) expectations. In fact, it is exactly in that gap between critique and conformity where the disruptive capacities of parafictional artists *lie*.

Given the structure of the contemporary art world and the artist's position within it, the critique of authorship turns out to be a limited tool with which to interpret parafictional artists. Although, indeed, artists developing parafictional strategies are aware of and take advantage of the positive reception of any critical approach to authorship, they also function as authors, even as well-connected and influential ones. In my opinion, the critique of authorship as an interpretative instrument is not able to account by itself for this complex negotiation between theoretical and practical needs which artists experience. Such a critique is also not capable of accounting for the ambiguity of a stance like a-sincerity, since the consequence of applying the ideological implications of its approach to authorship is derived from a value system that crudely separates artists according to their "good" and "bad" intentions. By that, I do not mean to say that anything an artist does in order to gain the art world's recognition should be welcomed, but that the approach to what an artist does—including the use of parafictional identities—needs to take into account how her authorial (dis)claims operate in the institutional framework of the contemporary art world, and how her agency functions in relation to other agencies.

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[34] Ibid., 172.

A fiction of inclusion

The dramatic expansion of the art world since the 1990s and its parallel re-structure as a network of interconnected institutions can create the false impression that it is a system with no boundaries, open to all and everyone. To consider that because it is global and networked the art world has no access code is a mistake. As Pamela Lee writes, "the art world as we once knew it begins to lose its singularity and focus, to say little of its exclusivity."[35] But rather than an obvious "exclusivity," in my opinion, it is a *fiction of inclusion* that organises admission to many of the art world's institutions. By "access" I am not referring to those accessibility policies which attempt to expand the social background of the publics visiting museums and other art organisations, but to those unwritten rules which determine who gets to play a role in the configuration of those institutions. Here, curating is a paradigmatic example: while the popularity of the activity in the last ten years allows more and more people to call themselves curators, the parallel professionalisation of the sector means that to be sanctioned as one by the art world, you are expected to attain a post-graduate degree in curating and to follow quite a strict professional path. As we saw, with the increased protagonism of biennial curators in the 1990s, curating became an activity that then could be done by agents with a variety of educational/professional backgrounds beyond art history and the museum. In the last ten years, however, a reverse process seems to be occurring.[36] In practical terms, this implies that only those who can pay for their education, and who can afford to earn very little in the early stages of their career (or nothing in the case of numerous internships) will (if they are lucky) obtain the curator job title.

In the case of artists, the access code into the art world functions in slightly different terms. Even more than particular educational trails and linear professional progression (which, of course, are also used as segregating criteria), it is an "appropriate" identity—understood mainly in biographical terms—and an "adequate" discourse that determines which artist gets invited to participate or even curate international exhibitions. The priority of subjectivity and personal interests as standards to embrace artists rather than the achievements included in a *curriculum*

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[35] Pamela M. Lee, *Forgetting the Art World* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2012), 2.

[36] For more on the role of educational training in curating, see Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson (eds.), *Curating and the Educational Turn* (London: Open Editions and Amsterdam: de Appel arts centre, 2010).

vitae corresponds, amongst other things, with the already highlighted belief that *being an artist* is not a job (or a historical, economic, and social construction) but an autonomous form of self-production that it is better grasped through the information included in personal statements, profile descriptions, and self-presentations. At the same time, because the number of exhibitions and curated activities has grown exponentially, and the range of identities and critical discourses embraced by such initiatives is much wider than in the past, it would seem that everybody and everything is welcomed. In my opinion though, this is again better described as a fiction of inclusion. (A short clarification before continuing: admission into the art world is not equivalent to economic profitability, although they can also coincide. In the networked art world, "success" can be more easily judged in terms of "mobility," calculating the amount of travelling done by an artist to participate in projects around the globe rather than based on how many artworks she has been able to sell and for how much.[37])

To better understand what politics of access determine the inclusion of artists into the art world and, ultimately, how parafictional strategies can disrupt certain assumptions about the author's function in curated situations, let us consider again the consequences of globalisation. As we are all aware, the enlargement of the art world—of which the international biennials are good evidence—has meant the incorporation of artists from very different cultural backgrounds into mainstream art institutions. Yet, it would be a fantasy to say that this "opening" is homogeneous. As Hans Belting notes, "global art may be critical in political terms, but it is also critical in terms of art categories defined by inclusion or exclusion."[38] The efficient use of an appropriate international art language, as mentioned at the end of Chapter 2, can well be one of those critical categories which determine whether an artist can take part in the art world or not. And, as in the case of curators, these "linguistic" skills will only come through education and professional training. National identity, despite the

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[37] For an alternative perspective that looks at the impact of neoliberalism on the art world in economic terms, see Julian Stallabrass, "Contemporary Art in a Neoliberal Climate" (lecture, World of Art. School for Curators and Critics of Contemporary Art, Ljubljana, 15 November, 2007), accessed 22 July, 2016, http://www.worldofart.org/aktualno/archives/131.

[38] Belting, "Contemporary Art as Global Art," 40. For another reading on how power operates within the institutional framework of curating to include or exclude different subjects, see Felix Ensslin, "The Subject of Curating—Notes on the Path towards a Cultural Clinic of the Present," *oncurating.org* 26 (October 2015), accessed 11 November, 2016, http://www.on-curating.org/issue-26-reader/the-subject-of-curating-notes-on-the-path-towards-a-cultural-clinic-of-the-present.html.

art world claiming to the contrary, is another criterion.[39] In an essay discussing why Spanish artists have serious difficulties in accessing international art events (an ongoing debate in the Spanish art context), for instance, art theorist Miguel Ángel Hernández-Navarro points out their *inadequate identity*—neither "dominant" nor "marginalized"—as the main reason for their exclusion from the supposedly "transnational" space of biennials, new collections, and new global museums. Indeed, Spanish artists do not classify as "other," in the way that artists from Latin America or Eastern Europe do. But because Spain is not a dominant centre in the construction of international art discourses, and even though the art produced in Spain "speaks" an international art language, Spanish artists are not considered as part of the elite either. As Hernández-Navarro concludes, "whoever fails to assume any of these major roles is excluded from this intermediate space."[40]

According to the fiction of inclusion, therefore, an artist's identity should not be a factor that affects whether or not she is given access into the art world. Yet, an artist's specific nationality and proficient use of an international art language can be fundamental in her introduction to art institutions. Because of these politics of access it could seem that the development of parafictional entities—who excel at discourses like the critique of authorship and whose biographical characteristics can mutate according to necessity—are opportunistic tools for artists to success. Compared to other practitioners with "solid" political identities and commitments, parafictional artists can indeed look flimsy. But, as I have been trying to prove, it is difficult to believe that once the art world becomes a networked structure in which a fiction of inclusion operates, it is still worthwhile or even possible to oppose directly its working logic. Rather, it is more viable and even disruptive to become agents without intention, to practise a-sincerity, to confuse the imaginary with the factual, to over-identify with the system, or to reproduce oneself the fictional structure of the contemporary art world.

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[39] For instance, in the announcements about international exhibitions sent through the mailing service *e-flux*, there is a tendency to emphasize the varied nationalities of the participating artists. See, as an example, the press release for the 2017 Triennale di Milano that includes "works of more than 65 artists from 40 countries." "La Terra Inquieta," *e-flux*, accessed 25 May, 2017, http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/128163/la-terra-inquieta/.

[40] Miguel Ángel Hernández-Navarro, "Contradictions in Time-Space. Spanish Art and Global Discourse," in *The Global Art World*, eds. Belting and Buddensieg, 139.

Ethics of deception

Earlier in this PhD, I suggested that the ethical implications of artists working with fiction are to be analysed neither in relation to the binary propositions real=true / imaginary=fake, nor simply as a consequence of stated intentions. If we agree with Jacques Rancière that "writing history and writing stories" share similar procedures for constructing meaning, then, indeed, imaginary proposals do not need to be more or less true than non-fictional ones.[41] At the same time, as we saw in the case of the the three Janez Janšas, relying on artistic statements to understand the ethics of a project can be frustrating. Quoting one of the organisers of the already cited conference *Fiction as Method: A Conference on Counterfactuals and Virtualities in Art and Culture* (Goldsmiths University, London, 2015), Theo Reese-Evison: "by devoting our attention to a moral calculation based on intention we miss the thoroughly *ethical* stakes involved in artworks that experiment with deception."[42] The embrace by artists of the physical and/or discursive sites (including institutional structures) in which their fictions operate, and the impact of these fictions on actual events and people, favours an approach that takes into account the consequences of deception in contextualised situations, and throughout time.

In the final section of this chapter, and continuing with the attempt to relate discussions about artists to curatorial issues, I will address the ethical problems that curators working on and with fiction might encounter. The claims made in the previous paragraphs about artists and fiction are, once again, mainly about interpretation. In the case of curators, however, their active position as mediators between artistic proposals, the audience, and the institution—or even as "creative" proponents of independent curatorial experiments—requires them to consider more thoroughly the ethics of *their own* decisions.[43] In a seminar that I deliver annually to students who have just started their MA in Curatorial Practice also at the University for the Creative Arts in Canterbury, I usually pose a series of ethical questions: To

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[41] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (Continuum: New York and London, 2004), 38.

[42] Theo Reeves-Evison, "Rogues, Rumours and Giants: Some Examples of Deception and Fabulation in Contemporary Art," *Parallax* 21, no.2 (2015): 198.

[43] For a relevant text in which curator Nato Thompson explains what ethical questions he considers in his own public art projects, see Nato Thompson, "Ethical Considerations in Public Art," in *Scandalous. A Reader on Art and Ethics*, ed. Nina Möntmann (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 107-123.

whom is the curator responsible? As a figure of mediation, are her decisions to favour the artists, the public, the institution, the lenders, the funders, other colleagues…the art itself? And what happens when what the artist wants is incompatible with what the curator considers to be best for the public, or with the particular requests of a sponsorship, or of the Board of Trustees of the institution? Whose position will the curators-to-be defend and how will they articulate their own responsibility? A couple of recent examples like the opposition of the majority of the artists to the sponsorship of the Israeli State to the 2014 São Paolo Biennial and the decision of its curators to support the artist's position, or the open confrontation at the MACBA museum in Barcelona between the institution's director and the curators over the censorship of a piece by the artist Inés Doujak, are usually enough to demonstrate the frequency of these situations and the fact that as curators they will have to take sides.[44]

With this in mind, what happens when the curator decides to work with an artist who uses fiction—or even with a parafictional artist? For instance, if the curator complies with the artist's preference to keep their "real" identity or the fictional nature of their project ambiguous or even unknown, is it not a problematic challenge to the public's trust or to a museum's code of ethics? And in the case of a curatorial project that contains itself fictional elements that defy the authorship of the artist, can it be ethically justified?[45] To try to answer these questions, I will refer to two cases in quite different institutional contexts: the exhibition *More Real? Art in the Age of Truthiness* curated by Elizabeth Armstrong at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and SITE Santa Fe (2012/13), and a series of projects developed independently by the self-defined "curatorial agency" Triple Candie between 2005 and 2010 in Harlem, New York. Obviously, the first was an institutionally-supported endeavour taking place in a museum-like context to which very diverse audiences might come. It was, at the same time, an exhibition framed as a space in which questions of belief and disbelief were going to be tested. In the case of Triple Candie, the curators Peter

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[44] Mostafa Heddaya, "São Paulo Biennial Curators Join Artists in Repudiating Israeli Sponsorship," *Hyperallergic*, August 29, 2014, accessed 4 August, 2016, http://hyperallergic.com/146308/sao-paulo-biennial-curators-join-artists-in-repudiating-israeli-sponsorship/; Lorena Muñoz-Alonso, "MACBA Director Bartomeu Marí Sacks Curators and Resigns Following Sodomy Sculpture Scandal," *artnet news*, March 23, 2015, accessed 4 August, 2016, https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/macba-director-bartomeu-mari-resigns-280692.

[45] For an analysis and defence of art projects using fiction in the museum, see Claire Robins, "Jokers, tricksters and the parafictional," in *Curious Lessons in the Museum. The Pedagogical Potential of Artists' Interventions* (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2016), 105-118.

Nesbett and Shelly Bancroft were running an "alternative" art space. Due to their location, marketing, budget, and type of exhibitions, their audience was mostly restricted to people who were already part of the art world or "in the know." As a result, the ethical problems of their projects related to the rights of the artist with whom they were or, more accurately, were *not* collaborating, rather than to the possible "breach of contract" between the art institution and the trust of the public.[46]

From the catalogue's acknowledgements text by Elizabeth Armstrong, it is clear that *More Real?* was an exhibition *primarily* informed by the interests and works of artists. The exhibition's theme—the relationship between truth and fiction in the present age—is the common denominator that the curator identifies between the more than 30 exhibited projects: "Using everything from trompe l'oeil to digital manipulation, their work navigates our shifting experience and understanding of reality."[47] In that sense, Armstrong portrays her own activity as faithfully following the *original* purpose of the artists: "Needless to say, it is the inspired work of the artists involved in this exhibition that is ultimately the heart and soul of the project."[48] The selected artists are all very recognisable names from the international art circuit—Ai Weiwei, Cao Fei, Leandro Erlich, An-My Lê, Vik Muniz, etc.—including some of the artists whose works I have already mentioned or discussed in this PhD— The Yes Men, Eva and Franco Mattes, Walid Raad. Meanwhile, the installation shots and virtual tour available at SITE Santa Fe's website show a relatively traditional use of the galleries, with distinguishable spaces allocated to the different projects and a conventional application of explanatory wall texts and labels (figs. 4.1 and 4.2).[49] The exhibition, however, is also presented by its curator as an intellectual endeavour connected to a two-day colloquium at the Clark Art Institute in Massachusetts in which a series of artists, art historians, curators and other thinkers came together to

[46] For a general analysis on the public's regard and trust in art museums, see James Cuno, ed., *Whose Muse? Art Museums and the Public Trust* (Princeton: Princeton University Press and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museums, 2006). For an opposing view on how exhibitions are meant to disrupt the contract of trust between the museum and the public, see Juan A. Gaitán, "What is the public?," in *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*, ed. Jens Hoffmann (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2013), 33-39.

[47] Elizabeth Armstrong, "Acknowledgements," in the exhibition catalogue *More Real? Art in the Age of Truthiness*, curator Elizabeth Armstrong (Santa Fe: SITE Santa Fe, 8 July, 2012—6 January, 2013 and Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 21 March—9 June, 2013), 9.

[48] Ibid., 11.

[49] "More Real? Art in the Age of Truthiness," SITE Santa Fe, accessed 5 August, 2016, https://sitesantafe.org/exhibition/more-real-art-in-the-age-of-truthiness/.

Figure 4.1. Installation view of *More Real? Art in the Age of Truthiness*, SITE Santa Fe, 2012. Works by Sharon Lockhart (front) and An-My Lê (back).

Figure 4.2. Installation view of *More Real? Art in the Age of Truthiness*, SITE Santa Fe, 2012. Works by Thomas Demand (back) and The Yes Men (front).

discuss the exhibition's very same topic. In that sense, the project's take on fictionality is not only supported by a *previous* interest identified in numerous famous artists, but also legitimised academically. The catalogue, which comprises seven essays by some of the participants in the colloquium—including a version of

Carrie Lambert-Beatty's *Make Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility*—further contributes to this justification of the project based on its theoretical backing.

By presenting the blurring of fact and fiction as an artistic and academic *theme* rather than as an *effect* of the exhibition itself, Armstrong is making a clear distinction between content and form, between the logic of the artists' works and her own curatorial decisions. Considering that she holds the position of Curator of Contemporary Art at an encyclopaedic and collecting art institution like the Minneapolis Institute of Art, such a distancing between the art's use of fiction and *her own* presentation of fictitious art projects seems almost necessary. From the evidence available publicly, none of the curatorial information in the catalogue or in the galleries was false, and the presentation of possibly deceitful art projects under the frame of an exhibition about the various ways in which truth can be distorted, already alerted the visitors not to believe everything with which they were presented. In that sense, although *More Real?* was inspired by the artists' works, it is possible to say that as a curatorial venture it undermined the capacity of the art to function as it was originally conceived. For instance, the exhibition included a project by the German artist Iris Häussler about a woman called Ellen Stanley who after suffering a mental illness following the birth of her daughter in 1923, started to produce beeswax sculptures. As Armstrong herself acknowledges in her catalogue essay, Häussler's fictional narratives—including *Ellen's Gift*—are usually presented as authentic and their fictionality is only disclosed to the visitors when they are about to leave the exhibition: "This collision of trust and betrayal, in which fact meets fiction, is where the aesthetics of disorientation start to run aground."[50] Yet in *More Real?* disorientation has very little space left.

From 2005 to 2007, I lived in Harlem, New York, while studying a MA in Curatorial Studies at Columbia University. During that time, I visited Triple Candie's space in West 126th Street once. Although I do not remember the exact exhibition I saw, in keeping with Triple Candie's own use of unreliable information, let us say it was *Lester Hayes: Selected Work, 1962—1975* (December 3, 2006—January 21, 2007). This was a supposed retrospective of an African-American artist who lived in New York during the 1960s, had an unsuccessful solo show at a downtown gallery, declined the invitation to participate in the 1972 Whitney Museum exhibition *Contemporary African American Art*, taught for twenty years at the Carnegie Mellon

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[50] Elizabeth Armstrong, "On the Border of the Real," in the exhibition catalogue *More Real?*, 61.

Figure 4.3. Installation view of *Lester Hayes Selected Work, 1962—1975*, Triple Candie, New York, 2006/07.

Figure 4.4. Installation view of *Lester Hayes Selected Work, 1962—1975*, Triple Candie, New York, 2006/07.

University in Pittsburgh, and endured the destruction of almost all his works at a fire in his home-studio in 1985.[51] As with other historical parafictional artists discussed in this thesis (Barbara Cleveland, for instance), Lester Hayes's "rediscovery" can be read as questioning processes of history making within the art world.[52] However, and

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[51] "Lester Hayes: Selected Work, 1962 – 1975," Triple Candie, accessed 7 August, 2016, http://www.triplecandie.org/Archive%202006%20Lester%20Hayes.html.

[52] Interestingly, one-half of Triple Candie wrote a text about the creation of Donelle Woolford by Joe Scanlan in the midst of the Whitney Biennial polemic. In it, although not totally dismissive, Schmelzer criticises the project's deceitfulness, its privileged origin and exhibition history, and its possible commercialism. The essay is then followed by an interesting exchange between Scanlan himself and Triple Candie. Paul Schmelzer, "In on the Joke: Triple Candie on Donelle Woolford," *Untitled* (blog),

following what has become the recognisable curatorial methodology of Triple Candie, the works on show in the Harlem gallery space were not presented as "original" art but as *reproductions* produced specifically for the show and to be destroyed afterwards (figs. 4.3 and 4.4). Other "art-less" exhibitions that I might have seen at Triple Candie included a solo show of David Hammons in which the curators exhibited photocopies and print-outs of images of the artist's works (*David Hammons: The Unauthorized Retrospective*, 2006); a survey of Cady Noland's *oeuvre* containing thirteen sculptural replicas produced by Triple Candie from information gathered online about the artist's original pieces (*Cady Noland Approximately: Sculptures & Editions, 1984—1999*, 2006); or a "posthumous" display about Maurizio Cattelan containing extensive information about the artist, photocopies of his works, surrogates, fakes, and recreations that looked only relatively similar to the originals (*Maurizio Cattelan is Dead: Life and Work, 1960 – 2009*, 2009) (figs. 4.5 and 4.6).[53]

As can be gathered from the exhibition titles, the intention of Triple Candie was not simply to deceive audiences but to push the boundaries of what is acceptable in curatorial terms. To do so, Nesbett and Bancroft "killed" artists and invented others; imagined artworks and wrongly copied others; constructed narratives as well as new connotations for pre-existent ones. Different from *More Real?*, theirs are proposals in which the blurring of fact and fiction is *part of the curatorial form* (I will expand on this methodology in Chapter 5). It could be argued that like Armstrong, Triple Candie was inspired by the works and personalities of the artists in their exhibitions. Yet, in the cases of "living" ones like Hammons, Noland, and Cattelan, the duo's curatorial experiments could be seen as threatening—or at least competing—with these artists' authorship, including their copyright and (citing Beatrice von Bismarck again) participation in the processes of constituting meaning. Of course, it is possible to regard Triple Candie as "taking advantage" of artists and making their work "say things" unintended by their creators. Their agency, however, can also be read differently. For Nesbett and Bancroft—who are trained art historians and insist that theirs is not an artistic project—the ethical justification of Triple Candie has to do with its *transgressive* stance within the art world. Interestingly, they situate the origins of this experimental way of working in 2005 as

Walker Art Center, August 12, 2014, accessed 26 September, 2014, http://blogs.walkerart.org/visualarts/2014/08/12/in-on-the-joke-triple-candie-on-donelle-woolford/.

[53] "History," Triple Candie, accessed 7 August, 2016, http://www.triplecandie.org/About%20History.html.

Figure 4.5. Installation view of *David Hammons: The Unauthorized Retrospective*, Triple Candie, New York, 2006.

Figure 4.6. Installation view of *Maurizio Cattelan is Dead: Life and Work, 1960 – 2009*, Triple Candie, New York, 2009.

a necessity to give themselves "curatorial freedom" from artists, galleries, and collectors, after a long period in which they had worked closely with artists but now found that because of a booming market, successful practitioners were no longer interested in collaborating with non-profit spaces.[54] In that sense, and given that the

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[54] Ibid.

artists with whom they were *not* collaborating on their projects were already famous, it is possible to argue that Triple Candie was operating from a *marginal* position and that their authorial propositions were not demonstrations of curatorial power, but rather ways to assert their relatively weak agencies in the broader art world.[55]

As I have shown, the ethical aspects of curating can be defined as a negotiation between competing priorities. In the case of curators working with fiction within museums, this may turn into a conflict between the requirement of the artist for her work's "true" nature to be kept secret or ambiguous, and the institution's need to present *accurate information* to its public. When the fictions are being constructed by the curators themselves—as in the case of Triple Candie—the question of whether the art is being "misused" to favour the curator's authorship can also come up. In a compelling essay about curatorial (ir)responsibility, Peter Eleey proposes that, beyond the maxim that curators should always put the artist's interests first, there are occasions when "bad curatorial behaviour" can be acceptable.[56] For him, such occasions occur because of the proximity of the activity of curating to larger contemporary discussion around copyright, ownership, and control, and the interest in making contributions to those exact topics from a curatorial perspective. As I see it, the use of fictionality by curators can also be ethically justified when what is at stake is the dominance of the different fictions occurring within the art world, including those around the curators' own authorial power.

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[55] The fact that Cattelan convinced the Deste Foundation—established by Greek collector Dakis Joannou—to acquire the entirety of Triple Candie's show about him and to install it in their space in Athens as if it was his work, further signals the much stronger agency of Cattelan vs. Triple Candie in the art world.

[56] Eleey, "What about responsibility?," 114.

Chapter 5. **Curatorial understandings of fiction and authorship**

The curatorial turn

In the previous chapter, I drew a parallel between the emergence of parafictional artists from the early 1990s onwards and of curating as a central professional activity and discourse in contemporary art. As I argued, the concurrence of both phenomena can be explained by the reconfiguration of the art world into a structure of interconnected institutions. In Chapter 4, I also maintained that the critique of authorship as it is presently (ab)used has a limited use when applied on its own to parafictional artists. The complex negotiation between theoretical demands and practical needs that artists experience in the networked art world is not acknowledged by a value system that crudely separates authors according to their "good" and "bad" intentions. Rather, it is necessary to develop an understanding that can take into account how artists actually operate within the institutional and discursive frameworks of the art world, as well as how they use fictional authorial strategies to generate positions such as agency without intention, a-sincerity, over-identification, or to reproduce the fictional structures of the art world itself. Such understanding should, at the same time, abandon the oppositional logic of real versus imaginary, and acknowledge, following Jacques Rancière, that in art, as in politics, meaning is made intelligible through the construction of fictions.[1]

While in the last section of Chapter 4 I began to analyse how curators have conceived fiction as a topic and as a methodology in exhibitions, in this final chapter I will discuss a number of further examples in order to articulate a more productive approach to parafictional artists in curatorial terms; an approach that should respond and contribute to how parafictional artists themselves discuss the complexities and paradoxes of authorship beyond the logic of critique. I am using the term "curatorial understandings" as the heading of this chapter for two reasons. Firstly, because although I will be describing past exhibitions (I will shortly return to the recent

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[1] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York and London: Continuum, 2004).

interest in exhibition histories), I will not create a series of summaries or a "prescription," but will consider what questions curatorial projects have opened up and how they have been answered. Secondly, the expression curatorial understandings highlights the fact that although exhibitions are a fundamental part of how curating comes about, recent changes in the field point towards other possibilities such as live events or educational activities. In my opinion, these other possibilities "beyond the making of exhibitions" (to return to Anton Vidokle's expression[2]) are particularly valuable to produce projects in which parafictional artists can participate with full impact. What we see in hindsight as a transition from curating into "the curatorial," however, can also fall into anti-authorial positions that complicate, once again, the comprehension of how different agents participate in the production of meaning beyond stated intentions. As I already argued in Chapter 4, the pressures and contradictory demands made of artists today are also being transferred to those working in the curatorial field. These parallel circumstances, and the common need to negotiate one's position in the contemporary art world, make the following discussion of curating relevant not only in terms of how to present parafictional artists publicly, but also for how it opens up opportunities to think, debate, and construct alternatives for all those involved in the curatorial.

Before analysing different approaches through which curators have investigated fiction and authorship, and taking my own goal of producing a curatorial understanding of parafictional artists, a closer look into the above-mentioned "turn" from curating into the curatorial is required. This turn has a conceptual dimension as well as a practical one, each affecting the other. While since the 1990s a number of curators have expanded their reach "beyond the parameters of the exhibition" and "beyond the individual curatorial position"[3] (as explained in Chapter 4), such practices have been conceptualised as "the curatorial" by a series of texts and academic programmes from the 2000s onwards. These theoretical positions have then further influenced the practices of curators and institutions towards even more open-ended and discursive forms of working. In its more philosophical rendering, the curatorial tries to differentiate between curating as a set of professional practices

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[2] Anton Vidokle, "Art Without Artists?," *e-flux journal* 16 (May 2010), accessed 26 July 2016, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-without-artists/.

[3] Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 81.

(i.e. how you organise an exhibition or artistic programme) and the multiple repercussions of curating as an activity and discourse. For instance, in the preface to the book *The Curatorial. A Philosophy of Curating*, edited by Jean-Paul Martinon, the curatorial is described as "an event of knowledge" in itself; a way of creating relations and producing understandings about art and the world rather than as a professionalised method to organise cultural activities.[4] From this perspective, the exhibition is not an end product of curating, but only "a condensed moment of presentation" of the numerous debates and relationships established through the process of making it happen.[5]

Given its inherent flexibility, the curatorial is seen as backing the expansion of curating into what Jens Hoffman contemptuously calls the "paracuratorial": "lectures, screenings, exhibitions without art, working with artists on projects without ever producing anything that could be exhibited."[6] In my view, while the possibilities opened up by the expansion of the curatorial beyond exhibition making can be very productive, on occasion, the priority given to the format over the content can be diminishing. By that I do not mean to say that curators should ignore *how* their projects operate, but that such preoccupations should have a clear connection to the *ideas* being investigated. In that sense, Maria Lind's reply to Hoffman that "innovation needs some kind of urgency in order to avoid becoming formalized" is particularly useful,[7] for it is not a matter of expanding what curating can be for innovation's sake, but of finding ways (sometimes new ones) to respond to critical matters and changes in art.

That changes in the field of curating are the result of identifying certain urgencies that have yet to be resolved requires further discussion. Under the logic of the curatorial, the main function of curating is not to comment or make analyses and value judgements on specific aspects of reality—however urgent these aspects may be—but to *intervene* in them. Nora Sternfeld and Luisa Ziaja describe such a new

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[4] Jean-Paul Martinon, preface to *The Curatorial. A Philosophy of Curating* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), ix. The link between the curatorial and knowledge has been further explored by the doctorate programme in Curatorial/Knowledge at Goldsmiths College, that Martinon co-founded. See "MPhil & PhD in Curatorial/Knowledge," Goldsmiths, University of London, accessed 11 November, 2016, www.gold.ac.uk/pg/mphil-phd-curatorial-knowledge/.

[5] O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating*, 95.

[6] Maria Lind and Jens Hoffman, "To Show or not to Show," *Mousse* 31 (November 2011), accessed 28 July, 2016, http://moussemagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=759.

[7] Ibid.

paradigm as "post-representational" and defend a transformation of exhibitions "into spaces where things are 'taking place' rather than 'being shown'."[8] This transformation also allows me to think about curatorial proposals (not only exhibitions) as forms of speculation, as alternatives to analysis and critique in their approach to knowledge. In an essay entitled *What is a Theorist?,* one of the champions of the curatorial, Irit Rogoff, discusses theoretical and curatorial endeavours in terms of "potentiality and possibility."[9] Even more significantly, she characterizes these activities as transitioning "from criticism to critique to criticality."[10] As she explains, if the goal of criticism is "finding fault," critique examines and undermines the assumptions that sustain established logics. Yet criticality, while building upon the advances of critique, is characterised as "operating from an uncertain ground," not so much producing critical analysis as cohabiting in the cultural sphere from a position of temporality, risk, and even fault.[11] In the sense proposed by Rogoff, curatorial approaches can be seen as producing criticality when they situate themselves within the circumstances that they are trying to affect, rather than above or in parallel to them. And in order to do so, those approaches might need to follow different and innovative curatorial methodologies.

But, how are curators to locate their authorship within the curatorial? Because the curatorial is partially a critical response to the reconfiguration of the curator into the primary origin of meaning (what I described as the curator-author in Chapter 4), it is a concept that attempts to "democratise" access into what is perceived as an elitist field. For Maria Lind, the expansion of the curatorial beyond the remit of "professional" curators means that it becomes a function that "can be employed, or performed, by people in a number of different capacities within the ecosystem of art."[12] Similarly, curator Charles Esche writes that "curating as an act needs to become less visible as the curatorial as a system of *collective* knowledge production

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[8] Nora Sternfeld and Luisa Ziaja, "What Comes After the Show? On Post-Representational Curating," *oncurating.org* 14 (2012): 22, accessed 6 February, 2017, http://www.on-curating.org/files/oc/dateiverwaltung/old%20Issues/ONCURATING_Issue14.pdf.

[9] Irit Rogoff, "What is a Theorist?" (2004), in *The State of Art Criticism*, eds. James Elkins and Michael Newman (Abingdon, Oxon, and New York: Routledge, 2008), 97.

[10] Ibid., 99.

[11] Ibid., 99.

[12] Lind and Hoffman, "To Show or not to Show".

takes the stage [my emphasis]."[13] As previously discussed, a project like *The Waste Land* in which a research group made up of more than thirty members of the local Margate community is curating an exhibition inspired by T.S. Eliot's eponymous poem at Turner Contemporary would be a practical example of such horizontal distribution of the curatorial. Yet, in my view, even if we give centre stage to the curatorial, the decisions involved in the act of curating should not be hidden behind the scenes. Despite the inevitable tensions and hierarchies established in any collaborative procedure, and notwithstanding the pressures experienced by curators in the networked art world, under the philosophical version of the curatorial I feel an expectation for the figure of the curator to disappear—both metaphorically and physically;[14] an impossible expectation similar to the one experienced by artists under the critique of authorship. In that sense, my own collaboration with *The Waste Land* research group for the exhibition *Agency without Intention* (see Chapter 3) tried to foreground questions around institutional intentions and individual agency that are integral to any curating act.

In parallel to the curatorial turn and feeding into it, the field of curating has experienced a growing interest in its own history. Reconstructions of iconic shows such as Harald Szeemann's *When Attitudes Become Form* at the Venice palace of the Prada Foundation[15] or books of interviews with influential curators of the past[16] account for such a "meta-curatorial" moment linked both to a need to define the field and to the sense that it is "mature" enough for self-inspection. Another example of this interest—and one more clearly connected to the content of this chapter—is the appearance of different texts and publications about the history of exhibitions. Some, like the well-illustrated anthologies by Bruce Altshuler or Jens Hoffman, try to define, through different means, which curatorial projects from the last decades have

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[13] Charles Esche, "Coda: The Curatorial," in *The Curatorial,* ed. Martinon, 244.

[14] For instance, one of the contributions to *The Curatorial* reads "This is not about us, the curators. . . . It is simply tedious to discuss the rise of the new positionality of curators in the art world as a new form of authority or as a new powerful type of agent." Je Yun Moon, "This is Not About Us," in *The Curatorial*, ed. Martinon, 233. This self-erasing is, in my view, problematic, because it avoids discussing what type of agency the curator is actually exercising in any given project.

[15] "When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013," Fondazione Prada, accessed 18 November, 2016, http://www.fondazioneprada.org/project/when-attitudes-become-form/?lang=en.

[16] See Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier and Dijon: les presses du réel, 2008).

been the most significant.[17] Others, like John Rajchman's essay "*Les Immatériaux* or How to Construct the History of Exhibitions," attempt to give more philosophical answers by looking at how curators themselves have tackled exhibitionary dilemmas in their projects.[18] More useful for my purpose here, though, is an article by Annie Fletcher titled *On Feminism (Through a Series of Exhibitions)* in which the author analyses a series of recent curatorial projects either *about* feminism or *including* feminist perspectives.[19] Using statements written by the curators, personal impressions of the shows, and commenting on the selection of pieces and how they were distributed in the gallery, Fletcher is able to identify different curatorial models, and to defend or reject them based on their capacity to reflect the research area in question.

As mentioned, in the following three sections of this chapter, I discuss a series of curatorial projects—mainly exhibitions—through which curators have explored the intersection of fiction and authorship in contemporary artistic practice. My earliest examples date from the mid-1990s (a period that coincides both with the rise of curating and with the development of parafictional artists) while the most recent occurred in 2016. In terms of geographic scope, I have limited my research to projects organised in Europe and the US. This limitation can be explained both in terms of language restrictions as well as the result of the scant information available to me about previous small-scale exhibitions occurring outside the aforementioned

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[17] While Altshuler follows a chronological order and bases his choices in their art historical relevance, Hoffman puts his emphasis on curatorial innovation, and organises his book in thematic sections based on how his examples contribute to the development of particular ideas and exhibition formats. Bruce Altshuler, ed., *Biennials and Beyond—Exhibitions that Made Art History, 1962-2002* (London and New York: Phaidon, 2013) and Jens Hoffmann, *Show Time. The 50 Most Influential Exhibitions of Contemporary Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2014). For another well-illustrated anthology in Spanish, see Anna Maria Guasch, *El Arte del Siglo XX en sus Exposiciones. 1945-2007* (Barcelona: Ediciones del Serbal, 2009). It is revealing to compare these recent examples to a book like *Shows of Force. Power, Politics, and Ideology in Art Exhibitions*, published in 1992 by Timothy W. Luke. The latter does not include a single image or installation shot but is more openly political. For Luke, art exhibitions are first and foremost, "elaborate and expensive works of political theatre. They have their own special unique rhetorical styles, social teachings, and cultural agendas" ix. In this book, exhibitions are not reviewed according to their art historical importance or curatorial innovation but to their political significance, including solo shows by Georgia O'Keeffe and Hans Haacke, presentations about the American West, or diplomatic endeavours about Japanese imperial culture or Hispanic art in the US. Timothy W. Luke, *Shows of Force. Power, Politics, and Ideology in Art Exhibitions* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992).

[18] John Rajchman "*Les Immatériaux* or How to Construct the History of Exhibitions," *Tate Papers* 12 (Autumn 2009), accessed 19 November, 2016, http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/les-immateriaux-or-how-to-construct-the-history-of-exhibitions.

[19] Annie Fletcher, *On Feminism (Through a Series of Exhibitions)*, *Afterall* 17 (Spring 2008), accessed 19 November, 2016, http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.17/feminism.through.series.exhibitions.

geographical area. Describing and analysing exhibitions which you have not seen in person presents a number of challenges. While most shows are spatial arrangements of ideas, once finished, they can only be experienced as flat photographs and texts. To mitigate these unavoidable restrictions, I have interviewed some of the curators involved in the projects selected; nevertheless, curatorial statements and selections of artists have been my primary information when trying to arrange these exhibitions into three categories.

The first of these three categories (option A) refers to exhibitions in which the artists' names remain anonymous or in which artists who do not usually employ pseudonyms are invited to do so. The curatorial option B brings together examples in which authorial fictionality is chosen as the exhibition's topic itself. Finally, option C discusses forms of working beyond the exhibition(ary) and beyond the thematic— that is, practices that are not necessarily exhibitions and that do not take fiction as their theme—to incorporate parafictional artists into curatorial projects. The arrangement of the cases into these three groups corresponds to what I perceive as different curatorial practices or ways to address what curating can do. If in the first option, curatorial innovation or the break from the conventions of curating is a primary goal, in the second, curating is an activity driven by the presentation of ideas. In the third case, the curatorial is perceived as an area of research with the capacity not only to present but to intervene in the most urgent debates of the present. The objective of the following pages is to analyse how these different models are applied to the problematic of parafictional artists, and how they are able—or not—to build a curatorial understanding that, beyond critique, contributes to the production of knowledge through fiction.

Option A. Invite artists to experiment with identity

A priori, one of the most straightforward ways for curators to explore fiction and authorship is to organise exhibitions in which the names of the participating artists remain unknown or in which artists are asked to produce works under a different identity. The confusion or occlusion of such a fundamental bit of information as the names of the artists exhibiting will inevitably trigger a series of questions and

tensions.[20] For instance, by taking the unconventional decision to conceal the "true" identity of the exhibiting artists, can curators meaningfully disrupt the logic of institutions/the art market/the art world? In terms of the public, would not knowing who the artists "really" are contribute to a better understanding of the artworks? In the case of artists not usually working with fiction, would such an invitation usefully "liberate" them from their given identities? And given that the artists would remain anonymous, should not the curators themselves follow their example? As we saw in Chapter 4, the use of fictional methodologies by curators implies a series of ethical dilemmas. By inviting artists to experiment with identity in these ways, curators would indeed have to make a series of polemical as well as, in my view, limiting decisions around the agency given to artists and the type of participation offered to visitors.

Despite these difficulties and accompanying limitations, since the mid-1990s a series of curators have proposed exactly that: exhibitions in which the artists are unnamed, or at least have remained so until the end of the show; or exhibitions in which artists are given the option to invent heteronyms for themselves or to occupy an already developed personality. In the latter cases, as I will shortly show, the "original" names of the invited artists are usually available, yet the explanation of who becomes whom is left unidentified or ambiguous. As with other curatorial proposals in which established conventions are broken, the curators of the projects I will mention below *unanimously* justify their exhibitions in terms of their *unique* creativity and innovation. Several refer to the Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa and his numerous heteronymous identities (discussed in the Introduction of this thesis) as an inspiration, while others present their experiments as a challenge to a value system based on the recognisability of the artist's name. In general, the problematic reduction of these exhibitions to a "guess who" game is acknowledged, while other fundamental questions like the role of artistic intention in interpretation are left unaddressed. Returning to what I discussed in Chapter 1 in relation to intentionality, it is possible to think of exhibitions in which the artists remain anonymous as perfect examples of the "expressive fallacy" by which interpretation

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[20] Of course, in art manifestations like street art, works are seen in public without necessarily being associated with a known artist. Yet, once a curator and an institution are involved, the norm is for art to be linked to particular names.

should supposedly rely on the "immanent expressive meaning" of the artwork;[21] and of exhibitions in which artists are invited to produce works as if they were others, as indirectly reinforcing the centrality of biography in the "intentional fallacy".

In 1995, academic Juliet Steyn and writer Richard Appignanesi organised an exhibition entitled *Pretext: Heteronyms* for Rear Window, an independent platform that staged curatorial projects at temporary sites across London during the 1990s.[22] Through Rear Window's mailing list, the curators invited artists to participate in their show, explaining that in order to do so they would need to develop an alternative personality and submit works produced under it. According to Steyn and Appignanesi, 21 artists responded enthusiastically, and their submissions were accepted without pre-selection, while at least one answered dismissively saying that it had taken him many years to construct his current artistic persona and that he was not going to give it up so easily.[23] At the Clink Art Studios, the semi-derelict space where the show was staged, each artwork was displayed next to a text with the biographical details of the heteronym that had produced it. Also available were the official names of the artists participating, yet there was no clear information on which artist had developed which alternative personality (in the cover of the small publication accompanying the show, a similar arrangement of names was used, see fig. 5.1). Again in the curators' opinion, the project opened up the possibility for constructing an identity based on the art rather than the other way round, yet some of the artists found it difficult to engage fully with this proposal.[24] In fact, as the exhibition later toured to a much more official setting like the Palazzo San Michele a Ripa in Rome, and incorporated a number of Italian authors such as Michelangelo Pistoletto, the artists were no longer asked to hide their identities but the idea of heteronymity was only used as a metaphor for the psychological belief in the artist's changing personality.[25]

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[21] Michael Baldwin, Charles Harrison, and Mel Ramsden, "Art History, Art Criticism, and Explanation" (1981), in *Art History and Its Methods. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Eric Fernie (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), 266.

[22] For more information and other projects, see "Curatorial Project Archive, 1992-1998," Rear Window, accessed 22 September, 2016, http://www.rear-window.org.uk/index.html.

[23] Juliet Steyn and Richard Appignanesi, interview by author, London, 4 May, 2016.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Exhibition catalogue *Heteronymous. Ovuero un Percorso dell'io or an Ambiguous Journey Through the Self,* curator Achille Bonito Oliva (Roma: Complesso Monumentale del San Michelle a Ripa, 14 May—14 June, 1997).
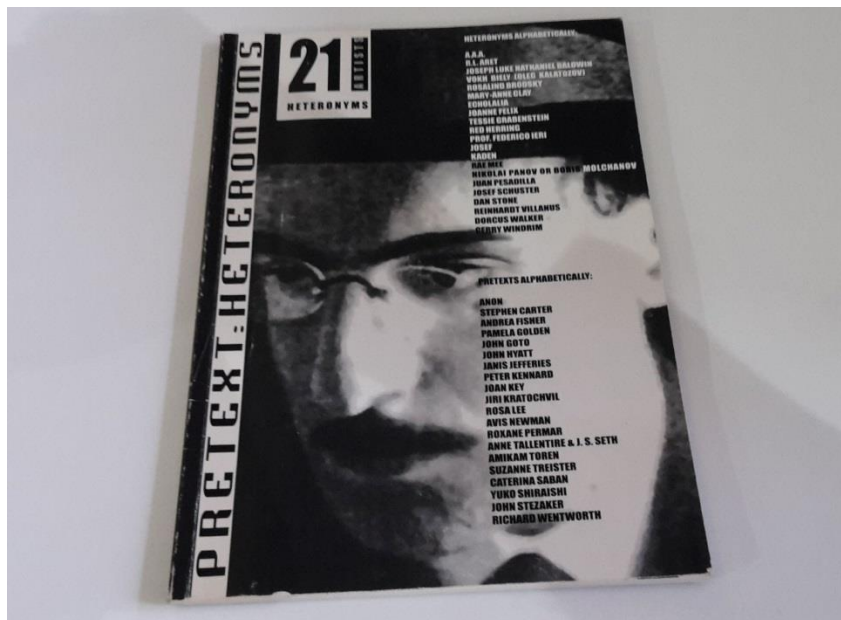
Figure 5.1. Cover of the exhibition catalogue *Pretext: Heteronyms*, Rear Window Publications, London, 1995. The portrait on the image is of Fernando Pessoa.

As I see it, two impulses or theoretical concerns lie at the centre of the project *Pretext: Heteronyms*: on the one hand, curatorial innovation and on the other, "identity thinking."[26] It is worth pointing out that art historian Steyn was a member of the research-based Rear Window collective, and that Jean-Paul Martinon—editor of the already cited book *The Curatorial. A Philosophy of Curating*—was one of its founders. As a Rear Window project, *Pretext: Heteronyms* has to be understood as an attempt to break some of the rules usually applied to exhibition making; in this case, the use of the name of the artist to frame the experience of the artwork in public presentations. The exhibition statement emphasised this goal in the following way: "The familiar protocols of Curatorship have been abandoned, biography questioned and reinvented and authenticity re-described."[27] Indeed, *Pretext: Heteronyms* was a pioneering example of an exhibition that challenged certain curatorial protocols around the identity of the artist. But given the alternative nature of Rear Window, the challenge posed by the project was not so much an institutional or commercial but an interpretative one. Despite the intention of the curators to give priority to the art over biography, the emphasis put on the invented personalities probably diverted the attention of the audiences away from the art and towards the fictional authorial

[26] Juliet Steyn, "Painting Another: Other-than Painting," in *Other than Identity. The Subject, Politics and Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 217.

[27] "Pretext: Heteronyms," Rear Window.

strategies themselves.[28] In that sense, the project ended up being *about* the curatorial idea of suppressing the artists' names more than anything else.

In later examples of exhibitions in which artists are invited to hide their names, curators have also justified the projects in terms of innovation and the supposed priority given to the art. For instance, in *Anonymous: In the Future No One Will Be Famous* organised at the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt in 2006, the exhibition was said to be "unique in gathering a group of artists who have put themselves undercover for a certain period of time."[29] The curator(s) of the show—who on this occasion, also decided to remain anonymous—justified the strategy of hiding all participants' names as a response to the negative influence of the art market over contemporary art discourses. Anonymity, in their view, "takes on the social and aesthetic task of revitalising access to art and individual experience by leaving out certain codes that have become primary."[30] Despite the "good" anti-authorial intentions of the organiser(s), I consider that the project falls into a trap of its own making. As discussed throughout the previous chapters of this thesis, we can reject humanistic or market-driven notions of the author-artist, but in order to interpret the work of art, it is still necessary somehow to *position* the agents that produced it. The same goes for the exhibition as a curated project, for in order to understand why certain artists have been selected, it is necessary to *position* the curators who have made such choices.[31] As a result, an exhibition like *Anonymous: In the Future No One Will Be Famous* is either experienced by an *informed* public as a challenge to discover who hides behind each work (and as a result reinforces the importance of the artist's "authentic" name in the pursuit of fame), or as a mere disappointment. The curators at Triple Candie—the Harlem-based curatorial agency introduced in Chapter 4—

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[28] Asked about the engagement of audiences, Steyn explained that, differently from now, in the mid-1990s no one was particularly interested in the public's reaction when conceiving curatorial projects. Juliet Steyn, interview by author, London, 4 May, 2016.

[29] "Anonymous: In the Future No One Will Be Famous," *e-flux*, last modified October 27, 2006, accessed 26 September, 2016, http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/anonymous-in-the-future-no-one-will-be-famous/.

[30] Ibid.

[31] *Anonymous: In the Future No One Will be Famous* was curated by *someone* who then decided to remain anonymous, thereby avoiding taking responsibility for their curatorial decisions. This is different from other selection processes where curators remain anonymous so that their proposals are not judged according to their CVs. For instance, in apexart's *Unsolicited Proposal Program*, curators anonymously submit projects which then get voted by a group of 150 jurors. Once selected, however, the winning curators regain ownership of their projects.

admitted as much about their own annual invitation to well-known New York artists to produce a show but remain completely anonymous: "For visitors, they [the anonymous shows] prompted an understandable frustration; many felt unable to judge the work without information about the artists' backgrounds."[32] Such annoyance at being unable to assess "orphan" works is understandable for, as Amelia Jones points out as part of the debate on post-identity discussed in Chapter 2, there is no art object that is not "entangled" with what we know or *believe we know* about those who produced it.[33]

Returning to *Pretext: Heteronyms*, I mentioned "identity thinking" as a second central concern of the project. In 1997, Steyn edited the book *Other than Identity: The Subject, Politics and Art*, which also contained an essay by Appignanesi dedicated to Pessoa. The publication is, without explicitly mentioning it, a theoretical companion to the exhibition. In the Introduction, Steyn explains that,

> The concern of this book is to disturb the identification of subject and identity; not to quest for anonymity or non-identity but rather to test the structures and articulations of identity thinking and to destabilize the dialectical paradigm it presupposes.[34]

In the above quote, a familiar frustration with the simplification and binaries of identity politics can be detected. Similar to the defence of avatars by David Joselit explained in Chapter 2, and to the discussions about globalisation and contemporary art mentioned in relation to The Atlas Group in the Introduction, in *Pretext: Heteronyms* and *Other than Identity* there is a rejection of the logic by which the artist's fixed identity should determine the type of art she produces.[35] Nevertheless, Steyn makes clear that she is not defending "anonymity or non-identity", but attempting to problematise the relation between subject and identity. In the exhibition, such a goal takes the already mentioned shape of a curatorial invitation

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[32] "History," Triple Candie, accessed 7 August, 2016, http://www.triplecandie.org/About%20History.html.

[33] Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently. A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2012), xx.

[34] Juliet Steyn, ed., introduction to *Other than Identity*, 2.

[35] Appignanesi was one of the editors of the academic journal *Third Text*. Founded by conceptual artist and writer Rasheed Araeen, *Third Text* was centred on the impact of globalisation and postcolonial thinking in contemporary art.

for artists to "free" or "liberate" themselves of their own identity by inventing a heteronym.

The problematic equation between fictional identity and "freedom" is acknowledged by artist-curators Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin who in 2011 organised a two-part exhibition entitled *Alias* for the Krakow Photomonth. In the first part of the exhibition, Broomberg and Chanarin invited a series of writers to develop stories about fictive personas who were then assigned to participating artists. In the show, the works created under the aliases were placed next to the narratives that had inspired them. On the one hand, and as said before, rather than questioning biography, such a *literary* way of viewing art reinforces the importance of the biographical as the "right" way of understanding the intention behind the work. On the other hand, and as the curators recognised, the idea that as the result of a curatorial invitation an artist can give up their own artistic persona and inhabit another is questionable. In their words, "It's an experiment that was set up to fail, because it shouldn't be that easy to stop being yourself; to break with your own particular political and ethical concerns."[36] At the same time, *Alias* did include the "original" names of the participating artists, but not an explanation of who had done what.[37] As a result, and following the connoisseurship tradition of attribution based on clues, the "initiated" public must inevitably have been inclined to try and discover who was who.

To summarise, exhibitions in which curators have explored fiction and authorship either by suppressing the names of the participanting artists or by asking them to produce works under a different personality, present a series of unresolved problems. By occluding their forenames and surnames, these projects reinforce the

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[36] "Alias," Broomberg & Chanarin, accessed 28 September, 2016, http://www.broombergchanarin.com/alias/.

[37] In an interview about the project, the curators explained that they had had long discussions about whether to include the names of the "real" artists or not. Given that some of them were famous, and that the organisers of the Photomonth wanted to promote the event using their names, they decided to include them. Amah-Rose McKnight-Abrams, "*Alias* in Krakow. Interview with Oliver Chanarin and Adam Broomberg," *Dazed Digital*, 2011, accessed 28 September, 2016, http://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/10482/1/alias-in-krakow. For another albeit less interesting exhibition in which both the curator's and the artists' "real" names were only revealed after the show, see "The Pseudonym Project/New York," The Invisible Dog Art Center, accessed 21 November, 2012, http://pseudonymproject.com/pseudo_project.html. Also, in 2016, the London-based theatre Sadler's Wells presented an evening of contemporary dance in which the names of the five choreographers involved remained anonymous. They promoted the event as "the chance to experience an evening of dance freed from reputation, attribution or audience expectation. "CCN Ballet de Lorraine—Unknown Pleasures," Sadler's Wells, accessed 6 October, 2016, http://www.sadlerswells.com/whats-on/2016/ccn-ballet-de-lorraine-unknown-pleasures/.

importance of finding out who the artists really are. By attempting to give priority to the work while denying all information about the artists, they reduce its possible comprehension by the public. By aiming to "liberate" the artists from their real identities, curators end up locking them into exhibitions that are ultimately about an innovative curatorial idea, about the rupture of a curatorial convention (i.e. the use of the artist's name to "frame" his work). Of course, artists agree to participate in these curatorial experiments. But fiction is here used to create a hoax, an inside joke that, once revealed, produces a critique (of the market, of the biographical, of identity politics) rather than operating as a method with which to explore in alternative ways how authorship functions in the contemporary art world. And, in my opinion, the "good" intentions of those curators who themselves decide to remain anonymous do not resolve any of the above.

Option B. Choose authorial fictionality as the theme of the exhibition

Alias—Broomberg and Chanarin's project for the Krakow Photomonth—had, as I have written, a second part. At the Bunkier Sztuki Museum of Contemporary Art, the curators assembled an "incomplete survey show of invented artists" that provided a historical context for their own curatorial invitation.[38] Under the category "invented artists," Broomberg and Chanarin gathered works by some of the artists discussed in the previous chapters of this thesis—including Walid Raad, Joe Scanlan, and Reena Spaulings—as well as by other artists and collectives—like Sophie Calle, Salvador Dalí, Bob and Roberta Smith, Kalup Linzy, The Otolith Group or Blinky Palermo—that can best be described as examples of anonymity, pseudonymity or as impersonating "others" in a variety of ways. Despite its broad scope, the survey component of *Alias* follows what I describe as a second option for curators to research fiction and authorship, that is, to make authorial fictionality the *theme* of the exhibition.

Such choice of theme was also my own curatorial approach when in 2009 I co-curated the exhibition *No Tag. Anonymity, Pseudonymity and Alter-Egos*, discussed in the Introduction. As I have explained, this was the proposal I submitted to a contest for young curators in Spain, and it is my belief that it was selected partially due to its supposed curatorial inventiveness or originality. The final display that I organised

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[38] "Alias," Broomberg & Chanarin.

with co-curator Héctor Sanz included paintings, videos, photos and posters produced by activist groups, anonymous collectives, artists creating under multiple identities and made-up artists (refer to figs. 0.5 and 0.6); meanwhile, its goal consisted of trying to find out *why* artists today were showing a preference for these authorial strategies. Nevertheless, and in light of my own experience, I consider that there are a number of common as well as unavoidable challenges that curators organising this type of topic(al) exhibition need to address. Given that the curators of these projects are following the lead of artists (and not, as in the previous option, putting their own curatorial idea first), how do they explain the currency of these fictional strategies? If their exhibitions consist of the display of a series of objects, what kind of relationship are they establishing between the invented identities and the works in the gallery? Even if fiction is a theme rather than an effect of the show, how can curators activate the display? How do you transform a list of examples into a more substantial experience for the public, or even into one connected to the very theme you are exploring? As in the previous section, let me refer to a number of exhibitions and evaluate their proposed solutions in order to answer the above questions.

The earliest example of an exhibition about fictional authorial strategies that I have been able to find took place in 1994 at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in the US. Entitled *Altered Egos* and curated by the curatorial adviser of the institution, Karen Moss, the exhibition included works by artists "who produce art under assumed names or who investigate the idea of hidden identities."[39] In the publication produced to coincide with the exhibition, Moss signs a text in which, as one would expect, she tries to come up with an explanation for the popularity of these artistic practices (given the almost coinciding dates between this show and the London-based *Pretext: Heteronyms*, it is interesting that Moss distinguishes between the common use of pseudonyms by writers and the development of more complex alternative personalities by visual artists without ever mentioning Fernando Pessoa). Although Moss acknowledges that strategies such as self-transformation and alter egos are not new, she also "wonders why there seems to be a recent increase in this type of artistic practice."[40] Moss finds the motivation in a common interest in the critique of authorship as developed and disseminated by the academic discourses of

[39] "Exhibitions. Altered Egos," Santa Monica Museum of Art, accessed 6 October, 2016, https://smmoa.org/programs-and-exhibitions/altered-egos/.

[40] Karen Moss, "Altered Egos. Making Art an An(other)," in the exhibition catalogue *Altered Egos*, curator Karen Moss (Santa Monica: Santa Monica Museum of Art, 9 July—4 September, 1994), 5.

the time. As she explains, the artists included in *Altered Egos* belong to "a generation that trained and teach in institutions that encourage them to challenge authorship and to explore different modes of self-representation."[41]

Despite my current resistance to focusing on the *why* question when dealing with fiction and authorship (even more so when intentionality is linked to biographical details such as where the artists "trained and teach"), Moss' interpretation seems chronologically accurate. As extensively discussed in Chapter 1, the development of the critique of authorship by the academics linked in the UK and the US to new art history had a pronounced impact on the configuration of contemporary artist-hood from the 1980s. Yet, as I have also argued, such critique is not sufficient by itself to understand the complex negotiation between theoretical and practical needs that artists experience once the art world becomes a networked structure of interconnected institutions. Another exhibition organised almost twenty years after *Altered Egos*, tried to provide its own reasoning for the current employment of fictional authorial practices without, in my view, fully succeeding. *I Am Another World. Artistic Authorship between Desubjectivization and Recanonization* was presented at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna by Georgia Holz and Claudia Slanar in 2013. In their curatorial statement, Holz and Slanar start by providing a series of answers to the unavoidable *why* question:

> as reference to gaps or blind spots in an otherwise discursively safeguarded canon, as a critique of institutional structures of authorship or their representational politics of normative gender roles and ethnicity, as protection from political persecution, and, last, not least, to demystify the inflated figure of the artist person.[42]

Once again, these strategies are interpreted primarily as resistant, as challenging the current value system; and the participant artists—including the three Janez Janšas and Donelle Woolford—as "progressive" based on their "good" intentions. However, towards the end of Holz and Slanar's text, a more complicated and—in my opinion— accurate analysis starts to emerge. As they explain, "the artist-subject seems to

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[41] Ibid.

[42] "I Am Another World. Artistic Authorship between Desubjectivization and Recanonization," Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, accessed 6 October, 2016, https://www.akbild.ac.at/portal_en/exhibiting/xhibit/exhibitions/2013/i-am-another-world-artistic-authorship-between-desubjectivization-and-recanonization.

Figure 5.2. Façade of the Centre for Contemporary Art CRAC Alsace, Altkirch, February 2016. Photograph by the author.

depend on splitting up by means of the aforementioned strategies of camouflage and disguise in order to 'survive,' as he/she already has to play so many roles and fill so many gaps in today's capitalist society."[43] Although this idea is not followed up, what it starts to signal is that fictional authorial strategies are not simply critical or oppositional but, rather, that they play a more subtle and complicated role in the relation between artists and the conflicting demands of the art world.

While my impression of the last two exhibitions is mediated primarily by the written materials produced by the curators, in February 2016 I had the opportunity to visit the show *Trust in Fiction* at the Centre for Contemporary Art CRAC Alsace in the French town of Altkirch. Its curators, Santiago García Navarro and Elfi Turpin, had also chosen authorial fictionality as a topic. But in this case, the emphasis was on the *how* rather than the why: "the exhibition focuses on different conceptual and critical strategies enabling artists to develop a body of work by absorbing the subjectivity of invented authors."[44] On approaching the old lyceum that now houses the CRAC, I encountered a large sign in which a graphic distortion of the title of the show allowed

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[43] Ibid.

[44] Exhibition catalogue *Trust in Fiction*, curators Santiago García Navarro and Elfi Turpin (Altkirch, France: CRAC Alsace, 21 February—15 May, 2016), 8.

Figure 5.3 (left). Opening panel of the exhibition *Trust in Fiction*, Centre for Contemporary Art CRAC Alsace, Altkirch, February 2016. Photograph by the author.
Figure 5.4 (right). Euclides Terra, *The Twelve Steps of the Alto do Moura Virgin*, clay figures. Photograph by the author.

for its paradoxically positive statement to become a negative one: TRUST IN FICTIONONONONON (fig. 5.2). This welcome play with the textual elements framing the show was again encountered in the wall text presenting the names of the participating artists, where a subtle distinction was made between the fictional ones (situated above the jacket) and those that are not (fig. 5.3).

Unfortunately, this initial attempt at reflecting the theme of the show in its curatorial rendition was not continued in the rest of the two-story building. Downstairs, a succession of rooms presented a project each by a different "invented author." The works varied from a group of twelve clay figures representing the half-divine children of the Alto do Moura Virgin (a work by Euclides Terra, a fictional member of the Brazilian Grupo Um) (fig. 5.4) to documents about the daily encounters of the television actress Naranja M.Q. and the psychological patient Clara S. (both impersonated by the Argentinian artist Marisa Rubio). In each case, the visitor could find a wall label outside the room with a brief paragraph by the curators spelling out the strategy in use. Although I enjoyed discovering a series of examples from South America with which I was not familiar, the display felt unidimensional. Upstairs, I (re)encountered familiar names like The Atlas Group and the African American ballet dancer Eleanora Antinova, as well as an independent gallery

Figure 5.5. Installation view of the room dedicated to the New York Graphic Workshop, *Trust in Fiction*, CRAC Alsace, February 2016. The prints by Juan Trepadori (left wall) are juxtaposed to another one by Liliana Porter (right wall). Photograph by the author.

dedicated to the New York Graphic Workshop in which the curators had juxtaposed the experimental works of Luis Camnitzer, Liliana Porter, and José Guillermo Castillo with the aesthetically pleasing prints by Juan Trepadori (fig. 5.5). Actually, this turned out to be the most interesting room in the whole exhibition. Rather than focusing on a discreet object and an explanatory text, the curators had opted for establishing a relation between the fictional and the non-fictional artists, as well as for including a series of interesting documents (the signed set of rules for the use of Trepadori and the original receipts of the works he sold, amongst others) that transformed this particular display into a full-fleshed proposal based on research (fig. 5.6).

As a visitor to *Trust in Fiction*, it would be fair to say that despite my interest in the exhibition's theme, I did not feel challenged, surprised or moved. Moreover, and despite certain stimulating aspects, I consider that the curators did not fully engage with the question of what kind of public experience they were instigating. More generally, one wonders if it is at all possible to create tension and uncertainty in exhibitions where all the artists participating are fictional. Similar to the problem encountered in the already discussed *More Real? Art in the Age of Truthiness* at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, curatorial proposals *about* fiction run the risk of
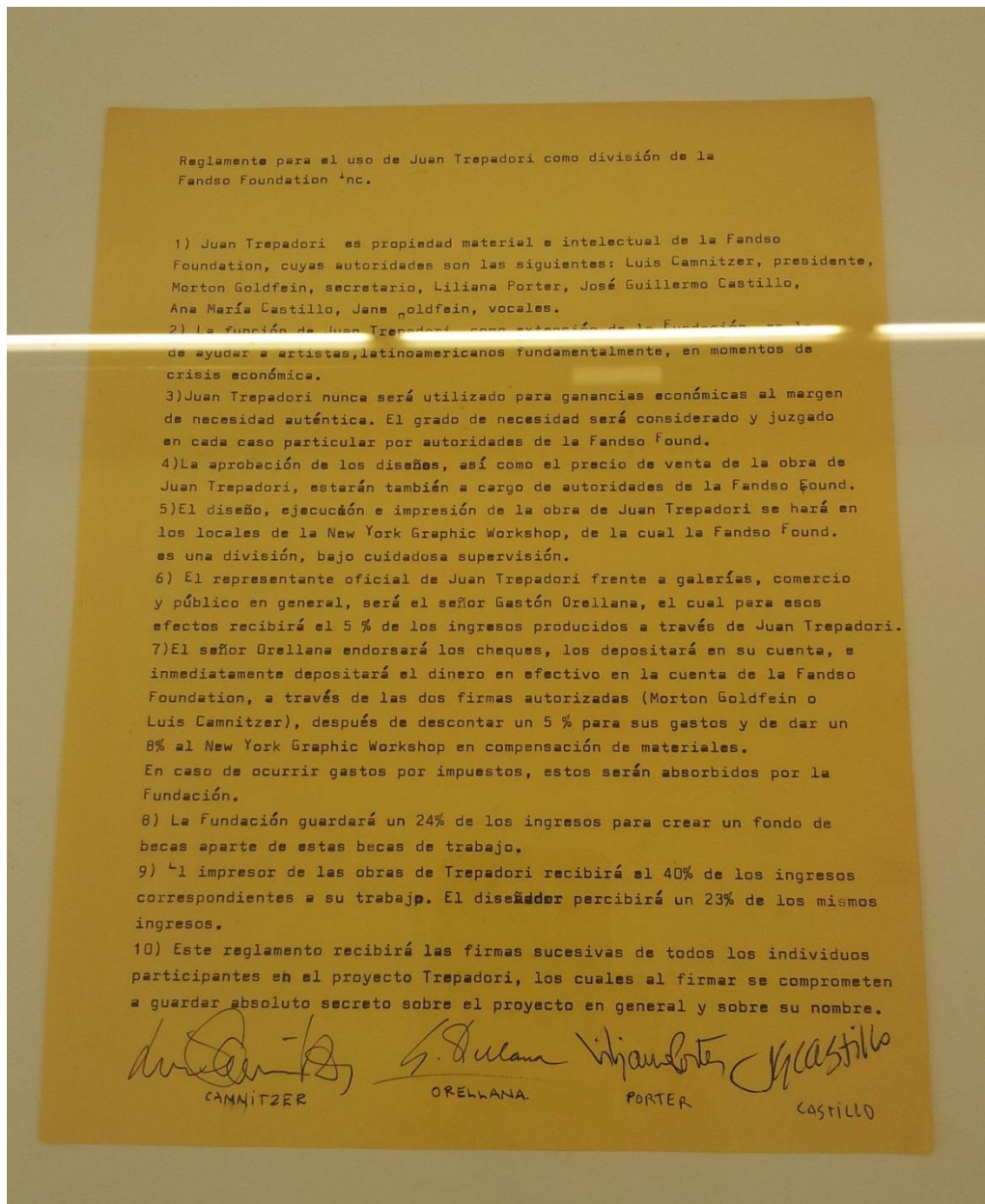
Figure 5.6. *Reglamento para el uso de Juan Trepadori como división de la Fandso Foundation* (Rules for the use of Juan Trepadori as a section of the Fandso Foundation). Signed by Luis Camnitzer, Gastón Orellana (Trepadori's gallerist), Liliana Porter and José Guillermo Castillo.

undermining the capacity of the art/artists to function as they were originally conceived. A related issue, that in my opinion *Trust in Fiction* was also not able to resolve, has to do with the relation, or, actually, the *lack of relation* between the physical artwork on display and the discursive authorial strategies of its maker. Because exhibitions of this kind tend to present objects accompanied by a textual explanation, the public's encounter with the works is not able to reveal by itself the most interesting performative aspects of the artists' authorial decisions. For example, and as I argued in the case of the three Janez Janšas in Chapter 3, if you show their

identification or credit cards as artworks by themselves, they are inevitably reduced simply to a proof of the name change. But, as I showed, if put *into action*, these same documents will gain agency in the construction of meaning, and better communicate the intriguing facets of the fiction to the public.

By now, it should be clear that I do not consider exhibitions that present a sequence of objects all produced by fictional or parafictional artists as a stimulating curatorial format. As shows about "women artists" or "Latin American artists" in which the only reason to bring artworks together is the "common" identity of their makers, an exhibition of objects by artists using fictional authorial strategies can be, at best, uninspiring and, at worst, ghettoising. Nonetheless, it is true that some curators choosing authorial fictionality as the theme of their projects have tried to address the limitations of the format. For instance, for their survey of invented artists at the Krakow Photomonth with which I opened this section, Broomberg and Chanarin decided that rather than trying to bring to Poland "original" pieces by Balthus, Reena Spaulings or Gillian Wearing, they would present photographic reproductions of their works (figs. 5.7 and 5.8).[45] Such strategy not only solved the logistical difficulties of having to transport and install complicated and expensive pieces, but at the same time emphasised the capacity of the curators to make a point about what it is that makes an exhibition an exhibition. Similarly to how the curatorial agency Triple Candie organised exhibitions with photocopies, recreations, and surrogates of works by famous artists like Cady Noland, David Hammons or Maurizio Cattelan, Broomberg and Chanarin were here adopting the topic of fictionality and the confusion between authentic and inauthentic as part of their own curatorial discourse. By doing so, the curators—artists themselves—had indeed started from a subject matter (for it was a show *about* invented artists) but had then configured a post-representational project (in the sense used by Nora Sternfeld and Luisa Ziaja) in which things were "taking place," including possible conflicts with the artists whose works were being shown in such (un)original ways and with audiences expecting to see "real" art.

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[45] Another example is the one year long project *How to Cook a Wolf* at Kunsthalle Zürich during 2007 and co-curated by the artist John Kelsey. It consisted of seven individual presentations by Bernadette Corporation, Claire Fontaine, John Dogg, Reena Spaulings, and others, with the "fictionalization of the artist's identity" as one of its main topics. Although the Kunsthalle's website announces a latter catalogue of texts about collectives, alliances and collaborations, when contacted, the institution explained that it had not been published. "How to Cook a Wolf," Kunsthalle Zürich, accessed 1 December, 2016, http://kunsthallezurich.ch/de/how-cook-wolf.

Figure 5.7. Installation view of *Alias*, Bunkier Sztuki Museum of Contemporary Art, Krakow, 2011. Reproductions of works by Peter Weibel (left), Reena Spaulings (centre), Gillian Wearing (right).

Figure 5.8. Reproductions of works by Balthus, at the exhibition *Alias*, Bunkier Sztuki Museum of Contemporary Art, Krakow, 2011.

Option C. Explore anew the intersection of fiction and authorship

In the last two sections, I have discussed why different curatorial projects dating from the mid-1990s until today have limited success when presenting art produced under conditions of authorial fictionality. By that I do not mean to say that those exhibitions were failures, but that the strategies put in place were not the most satisfactory to discuss productively the tensions around fiction and authorship. Taking into account the limitations identified in the previous pages, what other possibilities open up? What improved ways of presenting and discussing parafictional artists have been imagined? As in the above epigraphs, I will proceed by pointing out a series of

problems or curatorial queries and then I will analyse how they have been addressed in a variety of projects. In any case, this section is not meant to be a final list of concerns and solutions (although some specific advice will be offered at the end of the chapter). Rather, my main goal is to identify a number of possible paths for further exploration beyond the exhibitionary (that is, beyond the exhibition as the only mode of curatorial approach) and beyond the thematic. In doing so, I hope to encourage others to think, discuss, and even alter the logic that reigns in the art world by intersecting the problematics of authorship with the methods of fiction.

As I have explained, exhibitions devised as displays of discreet objects all produced by parafictional artists can feel unidimensional, uninteresting, or lack the ambiguity necessary for the projects included to function as they were originally conceived. So, how else could a curatorial project reflect on the question of fiction and authorship without turning it into the topic of the exhibition? How, following Irit Rogoff's advice, can the curatorial help us to "find ways of conceptually entering contemporary urgencies rather than commenting upon them, taking them as 'subject matter'"?[46] For instance, if we consider the exhibition only as *one* condensed moment of presentation, what *other* forms of staging and exchange would better suit the public encounter with parafictional artists? Which of these forms of public presentation can reveal the most interesting aspects of these fictional authorial strategies without becoming explanatory? But also, how can projects, including exhibitions, evidence the different agencies involved in the curatorial without forcing artists or curators into anonymity? How can curatorial endeavours use criticality rather than critique to expose and discuss the different and many times contradictory expectations made of artists and curators in the contemporary art world?

In 2015, I visited a show at the Centro de Arte 2 de Mayo in Madrid about the punk movement and its influence on contemporary art. The exhibition, curated by the Spaniard David G. Torres, included two small pieces by the parafictional artist Claire Fontaine. Claire Fontaine, as well as a famous French stationary company, has been a regular figure in the international art scene since 2004 thanks to the help of her two "assistants"—as Fulvia Carnevale and James Thornhill have been frequently

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[46] Irit Rogoff, "The Expanded Field," in *The Curatorial*, ed. Martinon, 46.
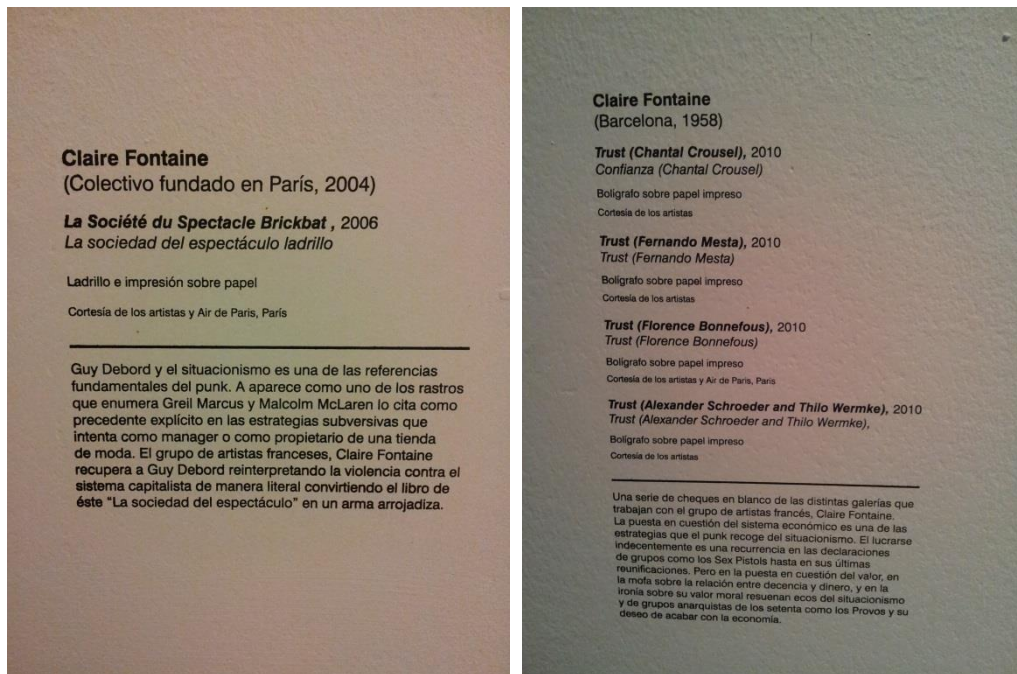
Figure 5.9. Wall labels about Claire Fontaine at the exhibition *Punk. Its Traces in Contemporary Art*, Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, Madrid, 2015.

described.[47] On the occasion of the show *Punk. Its Traces in Contemporary Art*, Fontaine presented four signed but otherwise blank cheques made out by each of Fontaine's commercial galleries, and a brick wrapped in the cover of Guy Debord's book *La Société du Spectacle*. The works had been placed in separate rooms, and what pleasantly surprised me was that Fontaine's biographical details provided in the corresponding wall labels did not match. In one, she was described as a collective founded in Paris in 2004, and in the other as born in Barcelona in 1958 (fig. 5.9). As I mentioned in the Introduction in relation to The Atlas Group's use of aberrant chronologies, the use of incoherent or unsatisfying information by parafictional artists can be seen as a way of reflecting on the arbitrariness of the rules that construct their own fictions. In the case of the show in Madrid, the quite "punk" act of giving contradictory details about the nature of Claire Fontaine in a supposedly reliable element like the wall label, was not simply meant to trick audiences, but had the welcome effect of embracing uncertainty as a fundamental part of any reality, including an exhibition.

This example demonstrates how including parafictional artists alongside other artists in projects that are not strictly about fiction and authorship can be

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[47] See, for example, Anthony Huberman, "Claire Fontaine. Artists in Conversation," *BOMB Magazine* 105 (Fall 2008), accessed 1 June, 2015, http://bombmagazine.org/article/3177/claire-fontaine.

Figure 5.10. Donelle   working at her studio during the exhibition *Double Agent*, ICA, London, 2008.

particularly productive. Because the audience is not pre-warned, the contradictory information on display can produce confusion; and it can also engender a more active attitude in those visitors who might feel the need to figure out what is actually going on. In the 2008 exhibition *Double Agent* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, curators Mark Sladen and Claire Bishop also decided to invite a parafictional artist—in this case, Donelle Woolford—to show alongside other less fictitious ones like Dora García, Artur Żmijewski or Christoph Schlingensief. The show was described as "an exhibition of collaborative projects in which the artists use other people as a medium," while Donelle Woolford was introduced as "presented" by Joe Scanlan.[48] Woolford's contribution consisted of a reproduction of her studio in the upper gallery of ICA where the artist herself was present working during the weekends (fig. 5.10). Visitors who arrived at the studio were not told that Woolford was the invention of Scanlan, yet the title of the show, its topic, and the language used to describe Woolford's relation to Scanlan, gave hints about the dubious nature of what was being encountered.[49]

[48] Exhibition catalogue *Double Agent*, curators Claire Bishop and Mark Sladen (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2008), 9-10. The idea for this show reminds me of my exhibition proposal *Happy Together* in which, as mentioned in the Introduction, I include projects that had been the result of artists collaborating with animals, with disabled people, or with persons in different types of precarious situations.

[49] Another "clue" for those who visited the show while the artist was working was the fact that she was a different actress from the one that had been used in the cover of the catalogue and publicity for the show.

Although I do not have first-hand experience of this show, the educator's resource pack available online, and the transcript of the artist's talk and ensuing discussion included in the catalogue, are two useful documents to understand how the ICA and the curators intended audiences to interpret Woolford, as well as what happened when a "clarification" was offered. The first was geared at secondary school students visiting the show, although it could be useful for any other member of the public. In the page dedicated to Woolford, and without giving away her exact nature, the following questions were included:

• Is Woolford performing, or is she simply a sculptor going about her work?
• How does Woolford's practice address issues of race?
• What do you think it means that Woolford is "presented" by Joe Scanlan?[50]

From a curatorial perspective, the employment of these visitor-led resources can be very useful, particularly if we are trying to encourage audiences to think through the multiple layers of a project without being "didactic". In the case of a polemical one, like Scanlan's, these educational tools can also be employed to highlight those controversial aspects that are not evident if you just present the work in the gallery. In the second document mentioned, the transcript of Woolford's talk in front of an audience as part of the exhibition's public programme, we can read what happened when half-way through the event, Woolford explained that "by the way, my name is Abigail Ramsay and I'm an actor hired by Joe Scanlan to play the role of Donelle Woolford."[51] Immediately, there was a question about intentionality, about what it meant for Scanlan "in terms of artistic strategy" to come up with this project.[52] But also confusion, as people asked Abigail if she had met the "real" Donelle Woolford, whether the Sharjah Biennial was a true place, and then gradually became

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[50] Emily Candela, *Educator's Resource Pack Double Agent* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2008), 20, accessed 3 December, 2016, https://www.ica.org.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/ICA%20Educator%E2%80%99s%20Resource%20Pack%20Double%20Agent.pdf. The inclusion of the question about race is remarkable for, as explained in the Introduction, Scanlan has not publicly acknowledged the problematic racial appropriation. This is further sustained in the transcript of the public discussion when Bishop mentions that Scalan is a white male artist and Woolford a black female one, and Woolford replies, "We never really spoke about that." "Discussion with Donelle Woolford at ICA," in *Double Agent*, 86.

[51] Ibid, 84.

[52] Ibid., 87.

suspicious, wondering if Scanlan was in the room, or whether he was a "white female, or the curator."[53]

As I have also argued in relation to the three Janez Janšas, the straightforward display of the art produced by parafictional artists does not reveal, on its own, the most interesting facets of the authorial decisions triggering such works. Performative contexts such as talks, screenings, public discussions and other live events and educational programs or workshops are better ways to encounter and (mis)understand the implications of intersecting fiction with authorship. That is also the reason why, when I invited the three Janez Janšas to participate in the project *Despite Efficiency: Labour* at the Herbert Read Gallery in Canterbury in 2014, I chose not to exhibit any of their artworks or documents, but organised the initial performance of their ongoing project *Trust* in which the artists presented the name change and then offered to triply sign the back of the credit card of any audience member willing to let them do so. Also in 2014, the three Janez Janšas were invited by curator Helena Reckitt to participate in an exhibition entitled *Getting Rid of Ourselves* at another art university gallery, in this case, the gallery at the Ontario College of Art and Design in Toronto. Although Reckitt decided to hang the three artists' identity cards, Slovene Democratic Party membership cards, and customised credit cards in an acrylic frame next to a one-minute extract from their film *My Name is Janez Janša* (as in figure 3.4)—and thereby limited the impact of their participation to a *documented* proof of their name change—other aspects of this exhibition make it a valuable project to discuss.[54]

As in the above examples, in *Getting Rid of Ourselves*, parafictional artists— including Claire Fontaine as well as the three Janez Janšas—participated alongside other artists. All, however, had been selected based on their common interest in the influence of neoliberal ideals on the construction of one's subjectivity, including the pressure to self-promote continually, reinvent and capitalise oneself. Linked to some of the points discussed in Chapter 2 about the organisation of artistic labour under neoliberal conditions, the exhibition presented a series of strategies through which artists "obscure, delegate, distribute or withdraw the conventional signs of

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[53] Ibid., 88-90.

[54] Of course, often curatorial decisions are conditioned by budget limitations or logistics, and flying three artists from Slovenia to Canada is more expensive than bringing them to the UK.

authorship and artistic subjectivity."[55] Under this broad umbrella, visitors found a karaoke set to perform their own amateur/YouTube version of a R&B song (a work by Jesse Darling) or a kit composed of documents, keys, cell phone, wallet, signature stamp and letters that, costing £500, provided them with legal evidence of a British identity (by Heath Bunting). As well as these somewhat participatory projects, the curator and artists organised an intense programme (particularly for the scale of the institution) of talks, exhibition tours, workshops and the biweekly walking/reading group *Let's Get Lost* on how spatial constructions affect the construction of subjectivity (by Scapegoat/Adrian Blackwell).[56]

While it is not possible to read the above artistic practices as simply anti-self-promotional or as avoiding the collapse of the personal and the professional (the three Janez Janšas are in fact a paradigmatic example of such collapse, as discussed in Chapter 3), it is true that through exaggeration, contradiction, and speculation, these artists expose some of the worrying consequences of what is happening or could happen to identity under current paradigms. Yet, the show did not pretend to be "an inventory of artistic strategies"[57] but, in the words of the curator, "to perform some of the conditions that it delineated."[58] Apart from the artworks being conceived as "tools that needed to be activated,"[59] and the relevance of the public programme, Reckitt considered that she needed to question her own visibility within the show:

> But if the artists in *Getting Rid of Ourselves* go to such lengths to complicate their presentations of self, what about my own curatorial agency and authority? What does "getting rid of ourselves" mean or do to me?[60]

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[55] Helena Reckitt, "Getting Rid of Ourselves," in the exhibition catalogue *Getting Rid of Ourselves*, curator Helena Reckitt (Toronto: Onsite [at] OCAD U Gallery, July 16—October 11, 2014), 11. The title of the show is borrowed from Bernadette Corporation homonymous film from 2012.

[56] A detailed schedule of activities is included in the exhibition catalogue.

[57] Sam Cotter, "Getting Rid of Ourselves," *C Magazine* 124 (Winter 2014): 50.

[58] "Getting Rid of Ourselves. Abstract," Goldsmiths University Research Online, last modified 25 December 2015, accessed 6 December 2016, http://research.gold.ac.uk/11062/.

[59] Helena Reckitt, interview by author, London, 20 October, 2016.

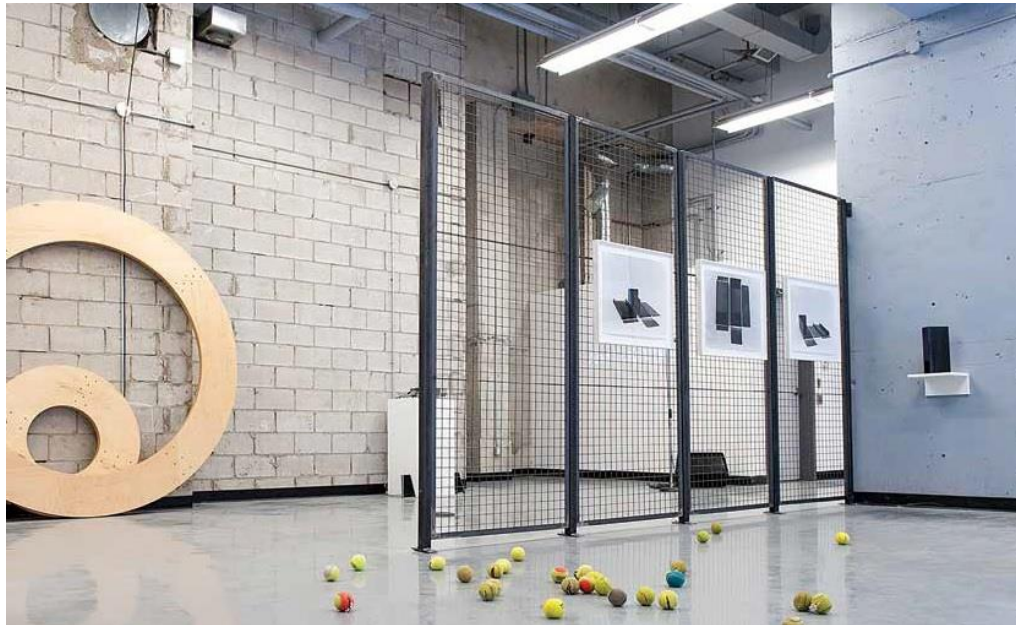[60] Reckitt, "Getting Rid of Ourselves," 20.

Figure 5.11. Installation view of *Getting Rid of Ourselves*, Onsite [at] OCAD U Gallery, Toronto, 2014. Works by Adrian Blackwell, Claire Fontaine, Becky Beasley, and Kernel.

The answer that she found was not to camouflage her name or become anonymous, but to invite the artists to participate in the curatorial process (suggesting other works/artists, an installation design, adding to the publicity material, etc.) in exchange for a percentage of the curatorial fee. In response to this offer, Kernel, one of the collectives invited, produced the wire mesh structures that formed the installation display (fig. 5.11). Meanwhile, the duo Goldin+Senneby asked for the entirety of the exhibition budget to invest in the stock market. (Although Reckitt rejected this initial proposal for it would have generated a conflict with the institution as well as with the artists who had already been invited to participate in the exhibition, she did ask the rest of the artists whether they would want Goldin+Senneby to invest all or part of their fees according to an algorithm for the duration of the show. Once finished, there was even a small gain). The expansion of the curatorial beyond a particular person and into a function that can be performed by different agents is thus connected to the concerns around identity, self-expression, and "branding" explored by the overall exhibition.[61]

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[61] Interestingly, since *Getting Rid of Ourselves*, Reckitt has purposely not organised any more gallery-based exhibitions, but has opted for more collective ways of working curatorially such as the ample programme of events *Now You Can Go* originated and planned by a feminist reading group in London. For more details, see *Now You Can Go*, accessed 6 December, 2016, http://nowyoucango.tumblr.com/.

As demonstrated by *Getting Rid of Ourselves*, the distribution of the curatorial does not necessarily imply that the curator is hiding her name, avoiding her responsibility, or giving away her authorship entirely. Rather, it can be a shared processes (also economically) by which artists, curators and others participate in the construction of meaning, notwithstanding that such involvement can be as conflictual or polemic as the one initially proposed by Goldin+Senneby when they asked for the entire budget of the exhibition to invest it.[62] While the specific institutional setting of Reckitt's project—a university gallery less concerned with audience figures and enjoying a ready-made audience—probably facilitated the plans for an expanded public programme and adoption of a distributed curatorial model, I would like to finish this last section by returning to a much larger-scale context like the Whitney Biennial. In Chapter 2 of this PhD I explained how Donelle Woolford's participation in the 2014 Whitney Biennial triggered a heated debate on identity politics, cultural appropriation, and the art world. It seems appropriate, therefore, to end by referring to another Whitney Biennial—the 2006 one—inspired by similar questions; and more so given that the latter included a number of parafictional and anonymous artists, as well as a made-up curator.

There are a number of reasons that make the 2006 Whitney Biennial, officially curated by two Europeans—the English Chrissie Iles and the French Philippe Vergne—and taken its title from François Truffaut's classic 1973 film *Day for Night* (*La Nuit Américaine* in its original French title), a significant example with which to finish this chapter. In 2006, I was in New York enrolled in a MA program in Modern Art and Curating at Columbia University co-organized with the Whitney Museum. Due to these circumstances, I had unlimited access to the Biennial—which I visited on several occasions—and had the opportunity to attend a lecture by Iles to the students in our course about the exhibition. The 2006 Whitney Biennial was, in fact, the first time I encountered artists (and curators) using fictional authorial strategies and its influence on me is acknowledged in my text for the catalogue of *No Tag. Anonymity, Pseudonymity and Alter-Egos*, where I quoted the following extract by Toni Burlap, the "third" curator of the show:

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[62] When in November 2016 I gave a seminar to MA students in Curating Contemporary Art at the Royal College of Art about the different alternatives through which curators had explored fiction and authorship, I discovered that while most of the students enjoyed and welcomed Reckitt's action and straightforwardness, they also found her curatorial choices less thought-provoking that some of the previously discussed examples, including *Pretext: Heteronyms* or *Anonymous: In the Future No One Will be Famous*.

> Anonymity or invisibility might be the condition of absolute freedom today. When artists and the art world collide with the people pages of the celebrity press, not to be seen, not to be known, might be the sole guarantee of being able to work, think, and live autonomously.[63]

Despite Burlap's supposed embrace of anonymity, according to her professional profile she was a member of the Courtauld Institute and, at the time of the Biennial, a guest lecturer at the University of Iceland in Reykjavik.[64] On top of these biographical details, when pushed to describe her exact nature, Iles and Vergne replied that she is "an actual person who exists on paper," and, more significantly, that "when two people curate a show, they give birth to a third person. Her responsibility is to channel our illusion."[65]

Although the extent of Burlap's input in the final exhibition is unclear, she did sign on her own the main curatorial text of the Biennial's catalogue, in which she detected an "obfuscation of identity" and "instability of meaning," affecting both the artist and the work in contemporary US visual arts.[66] Given the number of fictitious artists and collectives included in the exhibition (as well as Reena Spaulings, and Bernadette Corporation, the collectively-used name Otabenga Jones, or the unidentified Miles Davis), it is possible to read the invention of Burlap as mirroring the practices that Iles and Vergne had observed around the country. But apart from introducing what I would describe as a parafictional curator, Iles and Vergne found other ways to complicate their role as *originators* of the Biennial, and with it, to question the exhibition as a format. For instance, there was an exhibition within the exhibition curated by The Wrong Gallery (itself formed by three people: artist Maurizio Cattelan, and curators Massimiliano Gioni and Ali Subotnick) (fig. 5.12), as well as artists whose contributions were not autonomous pieces but something closer to an exhibition itself (for instance, Stutervant's room-like installation). The

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[63] Toni Burlap, "The Euclidean Triangle," in the exhibition catalogue *Day for Night. Whitney Biennial 2006*, curators Chrissie Iles and Philippe Vergne (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2 March—28 May, 2006), 33-34.

[64] Tim Griffin, "Cabaret License. Interview with the Curators of the 2006 Whitney Biennial," *Artforum* 44.5 (Jan 2006): 94.

[65] Ibid. Apparently, the two curators of the exhibition *Double Agent*, Mark Sladen and Claire Bishop, had also considered having a third fictional curator of the show. See "Discussion with Donelle Woolford at ICA," in *Double Agent*, 90.

[66] Burlap, "The Euclidean Triangle," 32-33.

Figure 5.12. The Wrong Gallery, *Down by Law* installation view at the 2006 Whitney Biennial, New York.

use of Truffaut's film in the title of the Biennial (a film that, after all, tells the story of an extremely dysfunctional shoot) reinforces the idea that the project is questioning its own curatorial parameters, that it "uses the process of its own marking to critique itself."[67] But what is most significant to me is that such questioning is done through the intersection of authorship and fiction; a point further strengthened by the references to the filmmaker who, as explained in Chapter 4, is credited as developing *auteur* theory in cinema, and to the cinematic technique (day for night) by which night-time is shot *artificially* during the day.

The 2006 Whitney Biennial, *Getting Rid of Ourselves* and *Double Agent* are all clearly exhibitions, yet the curators behind each project tried to think beyond the format as a defined end product. As examples of how to present curatorially parafictional artists in public, I consider them particularly productive. In some instances, this value resides in the inclusion of parafictional artists alongside less fictitious ones, so that, rather than creating ghettoising projects about fictionality, artists with different characteristics are allowed to coexist (with or out without conflict) in the same exhibition space. For audiences, this coexistence might comprise moments of doubt or uncertainty that, in my opinion, are to be explored rather than ignored or denied. It is also by favouring live encounters between parafictional artists and the public that these curatorial projects are able to tackle and publicly discuss the performative aspects of the development of such characters. As explained, the straightforward presentation of the artworks produced by parafictional artists is not

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[67] Ibid., 50.

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enough to consider the complicated relations between (invented) biography and (real) career that these particular practitioners represent. Instead, dialogical contexts in which the life and work connection of parafictional artists can be debated as well as disputed are to be favoured. Finally, by accepting uncertainty as an effect rather than as a theme of the show (or of any other curatorial event), curators can situate themselves alongside artists, and intervene in those urgent topics that need to be discussed rather than turning them into subject matter. In other words, by exploring fiction as part of the curatorial methodology, curators can cohabit the cultural sphere from a position of temporality, risk, and even fault that, nevertheless, triggers new conceptions and readings.

To understand authorship today we need more than a critique; we need speculation, fiction, criticality. In an art world made of interconnected institutions, where both artists and curators are expected to question economic paradigms yet remain unquestionably productive, to organise locally-meaningful projects that attract global audiences, to give up their authority yet have a recognisable "signature style," the paths opened up by such fictional authorial strategies are both ways to negotiate contradictory demands, and means to expose and publicly discuss the consequences of this paradoxical conflict between practical and critical needs. Moreover, by acknowledging how the intersection of fiction and authorship can affect curatorial processes (including how such intersection affects the construction of the curator's figure itself) it is possible to imagine other ways in which those that partake of the curatorial can interact with one another.

Conclusions

Fiction and critique

Who or what is an "artist" is never a self-evident fact, but the result of changing views, circumstances, and values. Throughout this thesis I have described some of those changes: from a biographical conception in which life and work are intrinsically connected, to a structural configuration based on ideological conditions and conventions; from a profession with its own institutional and economic logic, to—under more neoliberal paradigms—a continuous form of self-production, permanently confronted with contradictory demands. More significantly, this thesis has analysed how the use of fictional authorial strategies by the artists here identified as parafictional, challenges as well as reinforces some of the assumptions on which artist-hood is constructed today within the contemporary art world. At the same time, over the past five chapters I have explained some of the significant consequences that the appearance of parafictional artists implies for the interpretation, presentation, and encounter with artworks.

Under the category of parafictional artist, this thesis has grouped a series of examples such as Reena Spaulings, Barbara Cleveland, The Atlas Group, or the three Janez Janšas, all of whom share a common capacity to function as authors despite being of an imaginary nature, or containing fundamental fictional features in their identities. Because of their made-up biographies and flexible subjecthood, their questioning of individuality and authenticity as value-making principles, and their apparent attack on the logic of the art market, these artists blurring fact and fiction have usually been interpreted as advocates of the critique of authorship.[1] In this thesis, however, I have argued that rather than being simply aligned with such critique, parafictional artists rely on the critical approval of anti-authorship views to negotiate their own position as authors in the contemporary art world. In that sense, my view is that as a strategy, parafictional artists reflect the institutionalised idea that critical artists need to question authorship, while, at the same time, allowing

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[1] See, for example, the different explanations given by the curators of the exhibitions discussed in Chapter 5, including Karen Moss in *Altered Egos* or Georgia Holz and Claudia Slanar in *I Am Another World. Artistic Authorship between Desubjectivization and Recanonization.*

practitioners to deal with the opposing need to reclaim control over their name and artwork, in order to survive in a highly competitive art world. In that sense, parafictional artists can be best described as operative anti-authors.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the critique of authorship is one of the main critical frameworks through which artists working today are perceived and evaluated. Its relevance is linked to its usefulness for those art historians who, during the 1970s and 1980s, were trying to reconfigure their academic discipline into a more theoretical and critical one. Yet, as it is currently (ab)used, I propose that the critique of authorship has the controversial effect of separating artists according to their stated or perceived intentions. Following a black and white logic, artists can be classified as "good faith" ones if they state anti-commercial, socially-engaged, and collaborative goals, and as "bad faith" ones if they seek recognition, profit, and individually-enjoyed fame.[2] What is important to understand, however, is that the contemporary art world is a complex milieu in which apparent "good" intentions can result in supposedly "bad" effects, and vice versa. In other words, artists today withstand contradictory situations, the significance of which is not susceptible to binary moral separation. Moreover, once the art world becomes a network of interconnected institutions, we all become active participants in it, and the dynamics of good vs. bad, opponent vs. accomplice, outsider vs. insider, stop having viability.

As I have argued, the reconfiguration of the art world into a networked structure and the parallel success of the critique of authorship beyond its initial academic context are crucial factors in the development of parafictional artists from the 1990s onwards. Earlier examples of fictional artists—such as the discussed Juan Trepadori and Monty Cantsin—also represent ways through which artists dealt with their own role as authors and the dilemmas of the commercialisation of art. But, while these initial models either followed the logic of pseudonyms and hoaxes and remained undisclosed, or were too marginal or dysfunctional to be considered operative, parafictional artists such as Luther Blissett or Robbie Williams are able to discuss openly the conditions of art and cultural production in neoliberal times, whilst remaining viable artists within the contemporary art world. This occurs because, as I have pointed out, once the art world becomes organised as a mesh of interconnected institutions, artists have to find ways to comply with the

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[2] Jonanna Druckner, *Sweet Dreams. Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

contradictory demands of being critical about their own authorship while remaining visible and active within the system.[3]

Parafictional artists demonstrate that critique on its own might not be enough to understand how authorship operates today. As Irit Rogoff indicates, while building on critique, there are other theoretical and interpretative endeavors that can cohabit in the cultural sphere as temporal, risky, and even faulty positions (what she terms "criticality").[4] While the use of fiction by parafictional artists incorporates a critique of authorship, I have proposed that fiction is a valid alternative to critique in its approach to contemporary authorship. Similarly to how speculation can act as a counter-factual system of exploration, fiction allows artists to perform authorship as a chosen role, as a tool, as an identity from which you can "opt-in-and-out," as a position of discourse which can be imagined to function in ways that are unverifiable, yet possible. At the same time, for those of us trying to inhabit the cultural sphere alongside parafictional artists, the use of fiction by these artists inspires approaches that, while moving away from simplistic categories based on absolute moral values, are able to respond to the complex, ambiguous, and even conflicting ways in which artists function in the contemporary art world. Such approaches, to which I will shortly turn, might indeed be temporal, risky, and faulty. Yet, and while their validity lasts, they should aspire to abandon the oppositional logic of real vs. imaginary and accept fiction as a generator of knowledge.

Authorship and the curatorial

As I argue in this thesis, the development of parafictional artists is a strategy that brings to the fore the contradictory demands made of artists today and how a number of them negotiate such incompatible expectations. Parafictional artists also reflect the centrality of the critique of authorship, simultaneously showing its

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[3] Another interesting example of how artists deal with these conflicting requests is given by Claire Bishop in relation to artists who delegate the control of their work to groups of performers (therefore questioning individual authorship) but who, once finished, reclaim the distribution and commercialisation of the resulting piece as their unquestionable authored work. Claire Bishop, "Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity," in *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York: Verso Books, 2012), 237.

[4] Irit Rogoff, "What is a Theorist?" (2004), in *The State of Art Criticism*, eds. James Elkins and Michael Newman (Abingdon, Oxon, and New York: Routledge, 2008), 97.

unfeasibility within the contemporary art world. As a way of going in and coming out of authorship, parafictional artists allow practitioners to decide how to perform their artist-hood; that possibility is what makes it both an appealing *and* a controversial choice. With this in mind, in this thesis I have proposed a reading of art works that considers how a project's agency operates in specific circumstances. Rather than producing an interpretation that reads the artist's overall intention as either critical or cynical, I support an approach that is able to accept the contradictory demands made of artists today, and that rather than being judgmental is able to acknowledge the complexity and ambiguity that animates the actions of artists and the meanings of artworks. In that sense, parafictional artists, whose commitments and political messages can seem fragile, are particularly capable of offering us difficult and even paradoxical propositions that require interpreters such as myself to (re)consider our own priorities and values.

Linked to this personal quest, one of the main drives behind this thesis has been to explore and understand how and with what results a substantial number of curators have, since the 1990s, organised projects that included artists developing fictional authorial strategies. As I explained in Chapter 4, the reconfiguration of the art world into a network structure not only favoured the emergence of parafictional artists but also the centrality of curating as a professional role and as a discourse. Given the organisational shift of the art world towards more flexible, interconnected and horizontal models, the curator's responsiveness, adaptability, and mediation turned her into a more effective figure than the art historian to confront a global and networked context. The importance of the exhibition, and in particular of the group show (including the art biennial) during the same period, reinforced not only the new position of the curator as an originator of ideas, but the awareness that, quoting Thomas McEvilley, art exhibitions "are the actual battleground where changes in art theory are currently being worked out."[5]

That said, the curatorial turn as I use in this subsection and in the title of this thesis, does not refer to the wide-ranging prominence of curating, but to a series of specific approaches to how curators can operate and to how changes in art theory and beyond can be worked out. The curatorial tries to differentiate between curating as a set of professional practices and a more reflexive approach to the multiple ways

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[5] Thomas McEvilley, *Art and Otherness: Crisis in Cultural Identity* (Kingston, NY: McPherson & Company, 1992), 14.

through which the field of curating can create relations and produce meanings. At the same time, the curatorial is a discourse that supports collaborative curatorial practices that go beyond any single curator's voice. After a period in the 1990s when individual curators gained a unique status in the art world as authors in their own right, the curatorial represents a reconsideration of such single-enjoyed recognition and a further horizontal expansion of who or what is a "curator." Returning to the identified interest in curators from the mid-1990s onwards to organise projects which included artists using pseudonyms, alter egos, or producing works through non-existent entities of one or another kind, this PhD aims to bring forward how curators have approached the critique of authorship implied by such artistic practices in parallel to a questioning of their own authorship.

Yet the drive to investigate how and with what results curators have publicly presented the projects of artists employing fictional authorial strategies is also fueled by my own professional interests and concerns. As described in the Introduction, before starting this thesis I had already organised an exhibition that brought together a number of artists exploring anonymity and pseudonymity. While the show I co-curated was a valuable entry point into the subject, in retrospect, it had a series of flaws, the most evident of which were the choice of those fictional authorial strategies as an exhibition topic in itself, and the ambition to arrive at a straightforward answer as to *why* artists were working under such imaginary identities. That exhibitions presenting a sequence of objects all produced by fictional or parafictional artists lack the ambiguity to allow those projects to function as they were conceived, has been amply discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. As for the attempt of curators (not only myself) to decipher the why question, I have also extensively examined the limitations of intentionality as an interpretative tool, and the inevitable confusion over which ones are the "true" motivations of parafictional artists.

Throughout this dissertation I have similarly discussed and made use of my experience as an active curator at the arts university where I also teach about curating histories and practices. Although the curatorial projects I have developed in parallel to the production of this thesis are not directly connected to its subject matter, they have, nevertheless, influenced my thinking and writing. My collaboration with the three Janez Janšas and the exhibition *Agency without Intention* at the Herbert Read Gallery are two of the clearest ways in which my role as Cultural Programme Curator at the University for the Creative Arts has helped me to create connections between theories and practices. Two particular aspects of how my job

has influenced my thesis and vice versa are worth mentioning. The first has to do with the power relations between curators and artists and whose authorship prevails. The second, and inevitably connected to the former, relates to how curatorial projects can become means to discuss productively that exact struggle. While I do not think there is a single answer to the above, considering the different agencies involved in a particular project rather than only the stated intentions of artists or curators, and how each one exercises their agency in specific economic and institutional contexts, can produce a more complex reading of an exhibition's overall dynamics. Thinking about curators in terms of function, just as we consider who is an artist according to changing conditions and conventions, can also complicate any simple answer.

In this thesis I have researched how different curators from the 1990s onwards have publicly presented the work of fictional and/or parafictional artists. As I concluded in Chapter 5, it is by integrating the artists' use of fiction in the curatorial process itself that some of these projects have been able to enter the very problematic of how authorship functions in the contemporary art world, rather than simply commenting on it. Such incorporation has taken different shapes: from the use of ambiguous wall labels and introductory texts to the display of surrogates and reproductions rather than "original" works; from inviting artists to share curatorial responsibilities for a project to the invention of parafictional curators. While exhibitions understood as arrangements of works have been my main focus, I have also argued that performative contexts such as talks, screenings, public discussions and other live events and educational programs or workshops are particularly useful when our aim is to intervene in existing debates. If we agree with the characterisation of the curatorial as a field that is able to establish other relations and generate different meanings, I think it is possible to see curating not just as a way to present and discuss parafictional artists and their problematic, but as a process that, by employing fiction, can produce new understandings about how the authorship of both artists and curators functions in the contemporary art world. In that sense, and while the curatorial turn implies a formal renunciation of the authority of the curator, I propose that the uncertainty and ambiguity made possible by the intersection of authorship and fiction allows curators to discuss their position without having to return to a moral distinction between "good faith" and "bad faith" ones.

Following the above, should this thesis have also incorporated the questions it is investigating as part of its methodology? For instance, I could have used a pseudonym to sign it, or built a parallel fictional narrative about the research. Or I could have written a "text," in the Roland Barthes sense, with a radical plurality of meanings.[6] Perhaps this thesis could have developed into a speculative dissertation about how artists will survive in a future dystopic art world or it could have ironically embraced a post-truth rhetoric.[7] While I do not reject the possibility of developing some or all of the above in later renditions of the content here explored, I can confirm that everything written in these pages has been double-checked and that the information presented is accurate to the best of my capabilities. That said, and despite not actively employing fictional sources for the construction of my ideas, this PhD is intended to make a verifiable contribution to the reevaluation of fiction as a path to knowledge.

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[6] Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text" (1971), in *Image, music, text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977).

[7] According to the Oxford Dictionaries that declared "post-truth" the word of the year 2016, the term relates or denotes "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." "Word of the Year 2016," Oxford Dictionaries, accessed 2 March, 2017, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016.

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