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Post-Internet Art and the Alt-Right Visual Culture

***This paper is accepted, uncorrected version of the chapter for Mara Kölmel and Sarah Hegenbart (eds.)* Data Dada: Art and Politics in the Digital Age*, Bloosmbury: London, 2023.***

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**Draft date: 29 June 2020**

‘Life appears as a simultaneous muddle of noises, colours and spiritual rhythms, which is taken unmodified into Dadaist art, with all the sensational screams and fevers of its reckless everyday psyche and with all its brutal reality.’[[1]](#footnote-1) These words, from the Dadaist Manifesto (1918) by the Berlin branch of the Dada movement, might also be used to describe the work of digital collagists of the twenty-first century, some hundred years after the words were written. The collagists of today draw the ‘sensational screams and fevers’ from our online culture: from the memes, videos, status updates, upvotes, and other debris of our digital existences. Yet, there are two competing ‘Data Dada’ traditions currently operating, or so I will claim: one that exists in the realm of contemporary art, and another, which proliferates in the space of neo-fascist visual culture. Both, I suggest, can be better understood by drawing comparisons with the historical Dada.

By the label ‘digital collage in contemporary art’ I mean to designate the work of artists such as Jennifer Chan, Jon Rafman, Ryan Trecartin, Lizzie Fitch, Hito Steyerl, Cory Arcangel, the DIS collective, Amalia Ulman, Martine Syms, Andrew Norman Wilson, Helen Marten and others. A more commonly used term that has been used to describe some of these artists is ‘post-Internet art’, art that may exist in a physical gallery setting but which is in some sense *about* our online experience.[[2]](#footnote-2) I find such a definition a little unwieldy: firstly, because Internet is hardly *over,* as the term ‘post’ might be taken to imply, and, secondly, because *all artistic production* is in some sense or other affected by the Internet, even, say, traditional oil paintings that can be now shown on Instagram. I will instead use the term ‘digital collage’ to draw attention to the specific *technique* that characterises the work of this narrower group of artists, and which also allows us to compare contemporary digital artists to both earlier avant-gardes and to other contemporary cultural producers who have used the collaging technique.

A video artwork by Jennifer Chan, Boyfriend (2014), is a representative example of the technique. Chan’s work typically incorporates material from internet subcultures, which are pervasive, but remain largely hidden from the mainstream public discourse. In *Boyfriend* she collages together excerpts from videos by young, male, Asian-American YouTube diarists (vloggers). The collage technique is present not just in the sequencing, but also in the visual field: Chan overlays the confessional musings of her YouTubers with various GIFs, stock images of chocolate bonbons, adverts for smartphones and manga cartoons. In one excerpt, a sepia-tinted video shows a young man complaining that ‘some Asian girls with white guys seem whitewashed, they don’t really give Asian guys any time.’ Chan presents the boy’s video as a picture-in-picture, juxtaposing it against a background showing a blond manga schoolgirl. The schoolgirl is made to shimmer and stretch, the boy’s head tumbles across the screen, and then the music switches to a maudlin medley of K-pop boy band songs. The boy’s wounded pride explodes in a firework of too many special effects, and as the viewer we can easily flip empathy and derision.

We might broadly define the digital collage technique, utilised by Chan, as that of finding digital content, modifying it, and juxtaposing it with other digital content. As with traditional forms of collage, the line between different elements is often deliberately left visible. In video works, such as Chan’s *Boyfriend,* Ryan Trecartin’s *P.opular S.ky (section ish)* (2009), Jon Rafman’s *Still Life (Beta Male)* (2009) or Hito Steyerl’s *How Not To Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013), an especially popular mode of creating that visible juxtaposition is the picture-in-picture (PiP) video overlay: a smaller screen that appears within a bigger one. Such editing techniques give the digital collage work a distinctly amateurish feel, reminiscent of content channels with no editorial gatekeepers, like YouTube or 4chan. Artists will often also use garish colour filters, text overlay, logos, pixelization, corporate branding, text-to-speech software and other elements redolent of our online experience: we can find some or all of these elements in the four video works mentioned above. There are, of course, several stylistic differences between these artists too: for example, while some works (Chan’s *Boyfriend,* Rafman’s *Still Life*) almost exclusively rely on found content, others (like most of Trecartin’s and Steyerl’s videos) make use of shot footage, or utilise computer-animated graphics (Rafman’s *Dream Journal,* 2016-19). And while the most interesting of such digital collages tend to be videos, other artists create still work that references online culture: such are the giant cut-outs of Juan Sebastián Peláez’s *Ewaipanoma* series (2016) or Helen Marten’s jumbles of objects produced through digital manipulation (*Plank Salad* solo exhibition, Chisenhale Gallery London, 2012).

While digital collagists might use such diverse media, what their works share, then, is a distinct phenomenology, one that mimics the bombardment with ‘content’ that we have become inured to in that spectral space between the laptop, the phone and the tablet. The feel of these works is that of scrolling, swiping, or clicking through twenty tabs on the Internet browser, which might concurrently display news, emails, clickbait and/or pornography. If we were to invent a contemporary technical term for the discombobulated aesthetic of these artists, it should probably be ‘mindfuck.’ But we might also cite directly from the Dadaist manifesto again: here is a ‘simultaneous muddle of noises, colours and spiritual rhythms.’[[3]](#footnote-3)

This cutting-and-pasting of digital collagists, this controlled explosion of online experience, might, then, be quite naturally compared with the destructive impulse in the Dada, particularly to the work of collagists like Hannah Höch, John Heartfield and George Grosz. (Indeed, the title of one digital collage, the video *Dadada Ta* (2017) by Jakes Elwes, explicitly invites the comparison). In a work like Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany (1919), Hannah Höch was similarly cutting-and-pasting, even if her tools were glue and scissors rather than Photoshop and Final Cut Pro. Höch’s usage of incongruous elements, of course, had clear political aims; Berlin Dada collage was used routinely to attack the pomposities of the bourgeois society and especially the military.[[4]](#footnote-4) Contemporary digital collagists, on the other hand, are not a coherent political movement in any corresponding sense. For example, both Helen Marten’s *Evian Disease* (2012) and Hito Steyerl’s *Factory of the Sun* (2015) contain a sequence of high-definition, hyper-realistic, computer-animated but incongruous materials in a way that seems to parody corporate promotional materials, but Steyerl is an artist who regularly theorises her practice as a critical response to contemporary techno-capitalism,[[5]](#footnote-5) while Marten writes about her work in an idiom so obscure that we can only guess at what her political position might be.[[6]](#footnote-6) The work of both Jennifer Chan and Jon Rafman shares the feature of recycling imagery from male-centred online subcultures, but Chan explicitly proceeds from a feminist critique of online social spaces,[[7]](#footnote-7) while Rafman casts himself into a more neutral role, that of a ‘very amateur anthropologist’.[[8]](#footnote-8) There is a variety of political positions here, rather than a unified political front.

Due to these variform approaches I do not mean at all to suggest that there is anything like a ‘movement’ uniting the digital collagists described. These artists cluster around certain aesthetic affinities and artistic techniques, which seem to me to have proliferated in the biennials from the late 2000s to now: the cutting-and-pasting of materials referenced from the Internet, the use of amateurish video overlays (such as the picture-in-picture), the referencing of corporate visual cues and of recent digital technologies, the use of computer-animated graphics, and the sequencing of materials in a fast-paced, disjointed, ‘mindfuck’ manner. If we conjoin these variform approaches into the style of ‘digital collage’, we must of course do so guardedly; just as those notoriously loose art historical labels like ‘Pop’ or ‘Conceptual Art’ at best open conversations about a particular artist rather than finally designate her or his practice, so ‘digital collage’ is at most a heuristic label. The label, however, allows us to ask a question about the political meaning of this style of contemporary art. Does collage technique itself still carry a certain critical potential, just as it did for the original Dadaists?

One of Hito Steyerl’s critical terms, ‘digital debris’, from her 2011 article ‘Digital debris: Spam and scam,’ perhaps gestures towards just such an understanding of digital collage. Discussing ‘spam’—an overload of textual or visual information sent by e-mail or another communication channel—Steyerl writes: ‘[t]o become spam—that is, to fully identify with its unrealized promise—means to spark an improbable element of commonality between different forms of existence, to become a public thing, a cheerful incarnation of databased wreckage’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Though Steyerl’s writing here is teasingly suggestive of the ‘unrealized promise’ of spam rather than a systematic explanation of it, her enthusiasm for ‘databased wreckage’ might well remind us of the Berlin Dada’s wilful destruction of the visual world. To cite the Dadaist Manifesto again: ‘The highest art […] has been visibly shattered by the explosions of last week, which is forever trying to collect its limbs after yesterday’s crash.’[[10]](#footnote-10) The same cruel treatment, we might say, is unleashed onto our culture by the ‘spamming’ style of the digital collagists. In Jennifer Chan’s video *Boyfriend,* toxic online masculinities are made to explode in a mess of random visual references. The fast-paced rhythm of Hito Steyerl’s *Factory of the Sun* sends up the gamification of capital that the work thematizes. Trecartin’s videos, such as *P.opular S.ky (section ish)* (2009), typically show the life of contemporary party kids, but the entire script consists of incomprehensible catch-phrases and the visual field is crowded with random graphics, perhaps to mock this generation’s self-representation through social media. Considering these works we might say: just as the original Dada collage lampooned the bourgeois state by eviscerating the images printed in its press, so this contemporary ‘Dada Data’ reveals something about our contemporary online culture by heightening its frenetic spectacle. To reiterate, the various artists I have mentioned can only be provisionally grouped together (there is, to my mind, a world of difference between a politically astute artist like Hito Steyerl and a largely ornamental one like Helen Marten). Nevertheless, I think something like this logic explains the prevalence of digital collage on the biennial circuit, and its leading status within contemporary art of the last decade. Digital collage is so popular because, as an aesthetic choice, it has become shorthand for a critical, quasi-Dadaist attitude towards the broader digital spectacle in which we find ourselves.

There are at least two reasons why we might be suspicious that such digital collages are still a valid artistic idiom today, though. Firstly, the fact that our online lives are mindless and incoherent is by now hardly something that we need to be reminded of. But secondly, the challenges facing the would-be Data Dadaists, it turns out, are rather different from those that faced the historical avant-gardes. In the 1910s and 1920s, when the Dada avant-garde collagists created discombobulated nonsense, a nationalistic Europe flattered itself with delusions of coherence and grand narratives of imperialist expansion. By contrast, the political forces that seem most threatening today operate precisely within the *incoherence* of our online lives. Our online lives are already, if not quite Dada, then certainly gaga.

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In 2015, a video called *With Open Gates: The forced collective suicide of European nations* was uploaded onto YouTube. The video is a collage of different scenes of public unrest, showing racialized bodies of migrants, often moving in groups, which the openly racist voiceover describes as scenes of ‘invasion’ of Europe by non-Europeans. The video also contains anti-Semitic conspiracies, airing the view that the 2015 refugee crisis was a Jewish plot to ruin Europe. Before being removed from YouTube for copyright infringement (for improper use of music), the video amassed half a million views and got endorsed by the far-right blog Breitbart.[[11]](#footnote-11) Copied to various servers (and still visible on YouTube), the video then went viral, spurred by the panic following the November 2015 Paris attacks.

This harrowing video relied heavily on irrelevant footage and false data. The clips in the video are cut together in quick succession, showing scenes of violence and movement, backed up by a dramatic soundtrack. As investigative commentators have pointed out, the clips pasted together had mostly very little to do with the migrant crisis.[[12]](#footnote-12) Footage was taken from various contexts, including from a clash between Kurdish rallies and ISIS supporters in Germany in 2014, or from protests in Italy that followed racist murders of six African men in 2011. As important as such efforts at debunking the video are, however, they also demonstrate that veracity is not what is at stake for the intended audience here. The Breitbart writer, for example, emphasised the aesthetic rather than factual qualities of the video—describing it as ‘slick’ and ‘hard-hitting.’[[13]](#footnote-13) The author of the video also stressed not the accuracy, but the labour of editing so many clips together, asking for donations, which netted him about $1400 worth of bitcoin.[[14]](#footnote-14) The video, we might speculate, was supposed to be seen not as a documentary, not simply as ‘fake news.’ Rather, it was intended to be a form of exaggerated, explosive, subversive art.

The unimportance of facticity is even more evident in another genre of neo-fascist digital collage, the alt-right meme. The word ‘meme’ was coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1973 *The Selfish Gene,* to denote any unit of culture that successfully proliferates, but the term has more recently come to be used almost exclusively to denote online digital objects (videos or images), which are co-constructed and shared by many anonymous users around the same visual template.[[15]](#footnote-15) The ‘collaging’ aspect of memes, then, does not derive from a combination of diverse elements in a single work, but rather from the way in which different users will juxtapose two elements: the original visual template and a new, often incongruous element. The alt-right memes work exactly in this way; and here Pepe the Frog is the best-known example. Pepe was a cartoon character initially appeared in a comic created by Matt Furie and by 2014, it became perhaps the best-known online meme, often used to express a kind of jokey randomness. By 2015, however, Pepe was appropriated by anonymous, geeky forums like 4chan (later 8chan), which had by then become the breeding ground of neo-fascist ideologies: it became combined with Nazi and white supremacist symbolism to create ‘evil Pepe’ memes. Curiously, at around the same time, the Trump campaign endorsed the Pepe image, in a famous retweet by Donald Trump Jr. A year later, in 2016, the Anti-Defamation League proclaimed Pepe to be a hate symbol. In light of this event, alt-right memes such as Pepe have been the subject of increased journalistic attention and scholarly research.[[16]](#footnote-16)

As these two examples begin to suggest, the burgeoning neo-fascist visual culture shares much with the aesthetic of digital collage employed by post-Internet artists. The fast-paced, high-impact editing of *With Open Gates* might remind us of the frantic energy of Ryan Trecartin’s videos. The alt-right memes drink from the same source as the ‘anthropological’ work of Jon Rafman or Jennifer Chan (4chan and 8chan channels), and therefore exhibit a similar preference for absurd juxtaposition of content. And while these examples are now approximately five years old, some contemporary content producers on the far right have perhaps come even closer to the aesthetic of digital collage. In 2017, a gallery in London attempted to mount an exhibition of ‘alt-right art’.[[17]](#footnote-17) In 2020, producers like Paul Joseph Watson now create video collages, which combine unflattering footage of Black Lives Matter protests with contrasting, quasi-satirical insertions. So, while the digital art world of the 2010s dreamed its avant-garde dreams of post-Internet art, another, evil twin to Data Dada formed in the internet’s underbelly. Whether on non-mainstream forums or simply on YouTube, the makers of such alt-right contests exult in what Hito Steyerl called the ‘cheerful incarnation of databased wreckage’,[[18]](#footnote-18) or indeed in what the Berlin Dadaist Manifesto called ‘the sensational screams and fevers of its reckless everyday psyche and with all its brutal reality’.[[19]](#footnote-19) Where these alt-right makers do differ from their contemporary artists, however, is in the former’s uncompromisingly clear (and frightening) political vision.

Some qualifications are in order before we pursue this suggestion further. By ‘alt-right visual culture’ I am here referring primarily to visual culture that openly advocates for neo-fascist positions, such as white supremacy, misogyny, xenophobia, racism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, or some combination of these, as can be seen in both Pepe and *With Open Gates* examples. This family of extremist positions has been dubbed ‘alt-right’ in the American context, particularly since the online resurgence of such positions in the 2010s.[[20]](#footnote-20) In fact, the term ‘neo-fascism’ might be just as apposite here, especially when we consider that there are clear genealogical links between such extremism and attempts by far-right movements to proselytise online.[[21]](#footnote-21) There are, of course, many slippages between such *openly* neo-fascist positions and what has been called the ‘New Right’: the populist, socially conservative, anti-environmental and nativist political movements, which, however, do not openly describe themselves as fascists (e.g. Donald Trump in America, Marine Le Pen’s rebranded National Rally in France, Mario Salvini’s Lega in Italy, Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Narendra Modi in India and so forth). The interesting slippages between the alt-right and New Right can be seen precisely in the shared visual culture: the Trump campaign can retweet the Pepe images, and the Breitbart blog can endorse *With Open Gates*, without either Trump or Breitbart *explicitly* affirming the white supremacist messages that these visual materials promulgate. Finally, my (provocative) comparison between Dadaism and alt-right online visual culture is not meant to exhaustively define the latter category. There are many items of alt- or New Right visual culture that do not bear any meaningful resemblance to Dadaism. Some non-Dadaist examples of far right visual culture, which aesthetically flirt with Netflix and Hollywood rather than with 4chan, include Steve Bannon’s documentaries like *Clinton Cash* (2016)or the Pure Flix Productions anti-abortion feature film *Unplanned* (2019).

There is, though, something decidedly curious about the ‘Dadaist’ elements in contemporary alt-right visual culture, and to make sense of that oddity it is important first to recall the complicated relationship that the fascist movements of the 1920s and 1930s had to artistic avant-gardes. The complexity of this relationship went far beyond the two best-known examples: the symbiosis between Futurism and Fascism in Italy, and the National Socialists’ denunciation of modern art as ‘entartete Kunst’ in Germany. As Mark Antliff has argued in his study *Avant-Garde Fascism,* we may speak of multiple, sometimes competing, fascisms in the early twentieth century, and these formed a variety of attitudes towards modern art.[[22]](#footnote-22) The various fascist avant-gardes included the espousal of primitivism by Italian Strapaese artists like Carlo Carrà and Giorgio Morandi and by the German Expressionist Emil Nolde;[[23]](#footnote-23) adaptations of Bauhaus functionalism into Nationalist Socialist architecture by former associates of Walter Gropius;[[24]](#footnote-24) and Mario Sironi’s use of pictorial fragmentation to inspire a subliminal spiritual conversion to the fascist cause.[[25]](#footnote-25)

While many aspects of the early-twentieth-century avant-gardes have been thus appropriated by Italian fascism and even by German Nazism, Dada perhaps stands as the obvious exception. Due to its intense anti-militarism and total irreverence towards any political or aesthetic order, Dada was completely inimical to all forms of authoritarianism. It is true that Dada, especially Berlin Dada, advocated for a *violent* conflagration of the bourgeois way of life; indeed, Hans Richter, a Dada sojourner who wrote up the first comprehensive first-hand account of the movement, described Dada’s ‘violent manifestoes’ as having ‘a Nazi ring to them.’[[26]](#footnote-26) But we should not confuse those Dadaist evocations of violence—of discordance, of antagonism, of nonsense—with the cult of war adhered to by such groups as the Futurists. It would be absurd to imagine a fascist version of a Hugo Ball-style performance, complete with nonsense poetry, cacophonous sounds and mooing; or a jingoist fanatic like Marinetti posing in coy drag in the style of Marcel Duchamp’s Rrose Sélavy. A fascist Dada historically never existed, and it also *could not have existed:* the ideology and the aesthetic simply did not match. For this very reason it is all the more interesting that we may detect some of the aesthetic strategies reminiscent of Dada within the far-right visual culture of today, while they also exist within the (self-declaredly critical) biennial-based contemporary art.

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What can this stylistic parallel tell us about how both contemporary artworld and contemporary neo-fascists understand themselves; what space does each of these distinct fields occupy in relation to the digital ‘culture at large’? As a provocation for further reflection, I would suggest at least three lines of inquiry that the parallel suggests.

As several commentators have noticed, transgressive humour is one defining of the alt-right aesthetic.[[27]](#footnote-27) This type of humour derives directly from the puerile, trolling subculture gathered around platforms like Gab, reddit and 4chan, which is where many of the alt-right memes originate before they are pushed into other Internet communities.[[28]](#footnote-28) Commenting on such transgressive tactics in her survey of online culture wars *Kill All Normies*, Angela Nagle has already noted a similarity between certain avant-gardes such as the Surrealists and the alt-right memes,[[29]](#footnote-29) where the transgression of the former was aimed at bourgeois morality, and that of the latter against the (supposedly oppressive) regime of ‘political correctness.’ One cornerstone of this rhetoric is, of course, the ambiguity that humour offers its users. Is the anonymous maker who decorates Pepe with a swastika really supporting murderous racism, or are they merely testing the boundaries, playing it for lulz? Aside from ambiguity, however, Nicholas Michelsen and Pablo De Orellana have argued that the willingness to transgress also plays an important ‘truth-teller’ role. In the populist epistemological paradigm, characterised by the mistrustfulness of the ‘mainstream media’, the ‘truth-teller’ role in politics is conceptualised not by the speaker’s expertise or reliability, but by their willingness to breach the hegemonic liberal discursive limitations.[[30]](#footnote-30) The more one offends the public sense of propriety, the more *honest* one is felt to be. And telling transgressive, offensive jokes is certainly a straightforward way of upsetting the received sense of what is permissible. Indeed, transgressive humour is exploited not only by memes, but also by buffoonish populist leaders, such as Donald Trump or Beppe Grillo, whom George Monbiot has memorably labelled ‘killer clowns’.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Another, perhaps surprising, facet of transgressive humour becomes visible, however, when we consider these populist antics in relation to both the historical Dada and contemporary digital art. While Dada humour was certainly transgressive, it was rarely crude; it rather traded in stupefaction and absurdity. Hugo Ball’s magical bishop performances at Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich consisted of the artist wearing a rigid costume and claw-like gloves while solemnly reciting nonsense verse; one of the New York costumes by Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven famously consisted of two metal tins for a bra and a canary cage suspended between them. Dada was eccentric and odd. Within contemporary digital collagists, that oddness has become calculated whimsy. In this way, Helen Marten’s *Plank Salad* exhibition presented a room of incongruous juxtapositions: doughnuts, pictures of Mozart, Nivea bottles, cans of oil. The gallery text emphasized the ‘slapstick narrative’ and ‘infinitely dumb, yet comic possibilities.’[[32]](#footnote-32) Marten materialises that Internet aesthetic of *randomness:* ‘how fun! how *random*!’, we might say of her installation of Mozart with beer bottles. It seems to me, though, that it is precisely this infatuation with whimsy that we also find within new populisms and the alt-right. The appeal of ‘killer clowns’ is not only that they are transgressive, but also that they are prone to ‘randomness.’ Jair Bolsonaro accidentally tweeting a sexually explicit video, or Donald Trump offering to buy Greenland: these are moments of *absurdity* as much as moments of offense. Might it be that it is this willingness to appear unhinged that endears such leaders to their followers; that it is whimsy, ‘randomness’ and *clownishness*, which enhance their truth-telling credentials, much like they, oddly enough, enhance Helen Marten’s art status?

There is a close correspondence between the kind of jokes someone finds funny and the more general idea of subjecthood they subscribe to. Dada artists often showed the human subject as disjointed, as an internally contradictory jumble of drives, influences and elements. But, as art historian Matthew Biro has argued, such compositions may have been doing much more than just attacking the bourgeois ideal of propriety. The Dadaists may have been also offering an alternative vision for what a human subject is, constructing a subjectivity that would be open to libidinal impulses, to anarchic drives and that could feel at home in a world with no fixed rules or values.[[33]](#footnote-33) This may be noted in Hannah Höch’s collages, such as her *Indian Dancer: From an Ethnographic Museum* (1930), which combines the tranquil, eyes-closed face of an actress with parts of a wooden mask from Cameroon, as if quite different drives came to inhabit a new, disjointed personality. In the 1930s, such (late) Dadaist subjects would certainly contrast sharply with the fascist conception of the focussed, single-drive subject, represented in the neo-classicist sculptures emphasizing youth, strength and masculinity.[[34]](#footnote-34)

If transgressive humour is the first parallel between Dada and the digital production of our own day, then construction of subjecthood is the second. Indeed, the portrayal of the subject in alt-right visual culture today seems much closer to Dadaist disjointed subjectivity than it does to the old fascist one. When the 4chan alt-right trolls represent themselves they do not tap into old fascist tropes of virility or masculinity, but instead offer a view of themselves as strange techno hybrids. In one meme that begins ‘Dear conquered peoples…’, a white supremacist message is shown as being spoken by Christopher Columbus whose head has been replaced by that of Pepe the Frog.[[35]](#footnote-35) From the viewpoint of 1920s and 1930s fascism, such an image would appear degenerate: how could a figure that is clearly held up as the ideal from the white supremacist perspective (the European colonizer) be simultaneously undermined with the face of a frog?Even in the space of elections, in the campaigns for Brexit, for Trump or for Lega Nord, there is little there that glorifies youth, coherence or beauty. Even the humble red hats of ‘Make America Great Again’ offer little in terms of a visual *positive ideal* of what such greatness would look like.

Without positive visual ideas, what is the vision of subjecthood that such political positions present: is it one of coherent resolute autonomy, of disconnected drives and desires, or something else altogether? While much attention has been paid to how alt-right and populist visual producers represent their opinions, less thought has been given to how they represent *themselves.* In this respect, one of Jon Rafman’s ‘anthropological’ artworks is highly informative. *Still Life (Betamale)* (2013) presents the world of the antisocial computer-game nerds, the self-declared ‘betamales’, whose subculture strongly intersects with that of (alt-right) trolls and that strange world of online masculinity known as the ‘manosphere’.[[36]](#footnote-36) Rafman’s video shows computers covered in cigarette butts and scraps of junk food; video PiPs show computer-game violence and people in furry fetish costumes. Meanwhile, a seductive female voiceover narrates a transformation: ‘As you look at the screen, it is possible to believe you are gazing into eternity.’ The physical body self-destructs, but the digital self embarks on a journey of unbridled wish fulfilment. The ideal subject of the alt-right visual culture, as represented in Jon Rafman’s video, is not so much a subject of resolute action, but a jumble of drives searching for a limit-experience, which seems interestingly close to the subjectivity explored by the Dadaists or the Surrealists. Curiously, however, even those of Rafman’s works which purport the artist’s own internal world (his *Dream Journal* of 2016-19) follow an analogous aesthetic form.

Finally, the third parallel between historical Dada and alt-right visual production is the participatory, collective authorship. As evident in the Berlin Dada journals, such as *Neue Jugend* or *Der blutige Ernst,* the Dada artists often abjured individual authorship; they favoured the collective making that revealed internal fractions and antagonisms. Individual contributions to journals could be anonymized, but presented as opposed to each other.[[37]](#footnote-37) Within the online visual culture of our own day, social, community-based, sharing, interactive and grassroots aspects are similarly often emphasised.[[38]](#footnote-38) The production of memes and similar cultural outputs thrives on mutual *antagonism*, on a violent clash of positions, on ‘trolling.’[[39]](#footnote-39) This bears resemblance to the Dadaists’ emphasis on internal conflict, on ‘un-community’ as Hans Richter called it.[[40]](#footnote-40) The visual traces of such conflict are comparable too. A Dada magazine like *Der blutige Ernst* (1919) attempted to create a sense of conflict by violent images, by mixing of different typefaces and by overlaying of text. That same sense of cacophony exists on 4chan and 8chan boards (and, indeed, even on mainstream platforms like Twitter). Within this final comparison, however, we must acknowledge a heightened disanalogy with contemporary digital art. Within contemporary digital art collage, the mode of production remains highly individualised and non-antagonistic, as befits these works’ status as commercially viable contemporary art.

We may summarize our three-fold comparison into the following table:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Original Dada | Alt-right visual production | Contemporary art digital collage |
| Transgressive humour | Enacted | Enacted | Enacted |
| Disjointed subjecthood | Enacted and represented | Enacted and represented | Represented |
| Antagonistic, ‘un-collective’ mode of production | Enacted | Enacted | Not enacted |

Of course, such comparisons must be thought of as provisional, especially since the production we are describing is very much still developing. Contemporary art changes styles as quickly as the market demands; and the visual culture of the alt-right is a fast-changing beast as well, and may have already supplemented the nonsense aesthetic of memes with more hard-hitting propaganda. Nevertheless, the overarching point here is that investigations into any contemporary digital art must always also take stock of the broader cultural movements, lest of all the new fascisms and polarisations that the digital revolution has nurtured. In the early 2010s, Helen Marten’s mumbo-jumbo installations and the cacophonic posturing of Ryan Trecartin might have appeared as harmless, madcap reflections of just how ditzy and stupid the new digital age is making us all. Today, an art practice that embraces the randomness and irreverence of the Internet has a much darker reference point to contend with.

**Some of the analysis in this paper has appeared in two previous, shorter articles: ‘Digital Art and the Alt-Right’ in *The Point* magazine (September 2018), and ‘Dada Data, the Alt-Right and Scepticism’ in the catalogue to the *Reality Machines* exhibition, curated by Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra at CRASSH, University of Cambridge in June 2018.**

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