

“ Public Art in the
Post-Truth Era ”

Atomized human experience
and its reflection in art

Kehkashan Khalid
KHA17537424
MA Fine Art Digital
kmhassan2009@gmail.com

Abstract

The Oxford dictionary drew attention to the word ‘post-truth’ in 2016, but in reality, the phenomenon of ‘yellow journalism’, fake news and their use in political manipulation has been around for much longer. Political and corporate entities have always used mass media to disseminate misinformation and manufacture doubt. The cognitive biases inherent in human psyche leave us vulnerable to this misdirection. Appeals to our emotions or our desire for group acceptance, outweigh the influence of hardcore facts. These ‘alternative facts’ create a ‘Rashomon effect’ obscuring an objective view of reality.

With the advent of social media, a worldwide platform accessible to every individual, there was a proliferation of unverified, emotionally charged opinions. It paved the way for digimodernism and a potential revolution in public art, blurring the roles of the audience and the artist. It offered an innovative interconnectedness mediated by transient images, turning the world into a global village. However, it also exploited our innate narcissism. Meticulously curated identities surfaced, derived from the reactions of the audience, craving ‘likes’, ‘comments’ and ‘follows’. Social media compounded perspectivism, creating an atomized and isolated human experience where we could selectively interact with information that corroborated our worldview.

Public art has the potential to offer up satirical or introspective critique of society. Literature such as Orwell’s ‘1984’ recognized the destructive potential of a post-truth era before social media was even a possibility. Kusama’s public art performances and installations compelled the

audience to consider the repercussions of the obliteration of the self. Cindy Sherman's photographs are an emphatic reminder of the highly edited appearances of ourselves we project on social media platforms. Public art has the capacity to dismantle the post-truth world and revitalize critical thought, if we allow it to.

Keywords: *Social media, digimodernism, public art, post truth, human psyche.*

Introduction

We live in an “era of instant information gratification” (Tidor, 2018). The ability to access and propagate information is, quite literally, a click away. While this has positive implications concerning freedom of speech it also results in the production of “bullshit” (Frankfurt, 2005) because a person’s “opportunities to speak about some topic are more excessive than his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic” (Frankfurt, 2005, p.19).

Social media presents us with a flood of atomized snippets of personal opinion leading to an “exhausting and constant absorption in a transitory but completely overwhelming media cycle” (Martinez, 2018) where we selectively and addictively interact to define our own versions of the truth. “In our new media reality, everything is in a Rashomon effect” (Martinez, 2018) since points of view abound and often overwhelm reality. Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook allow us to post episodic highlights, constructing our own contexts and chronology, recorded permanently in an online database, and becoming a version of the truth.

Stephen Colbert invented the word ‘truthiness’ in 2005 (Colbert, 2005 cited in McIntyre, 2018, chapter 1) to illustrate a reliance on what feels true as opposed to what is factually correct. Some theorists believe that this has political ramifications. They believe fake news can function as a tool in the hands of political ideologies that can pander to a crowd’s mentality in order to sow doubt or misinformation (Oreskes and Conway, 2010, cited in McIntyre, 2018, chapter 2). This is a significant characteristic of the post-truth era.

Truthiness is evident on social media, where digital personas are curated to garner the most reactions, regardless of reality. Viewed from the lens of ‘digimodernism’ (Chapman, 2018) the evanescent interchange of text and photographs on social media, temporally and spatially boundless, could revolutionize contemporary art. The digital age has sparked a dynamic dialogue with “reverberating cycles of communication, dissemination and interpretation” (Guggenheim, 2018). Instead of the age-old demarcation between artist and audience, the viewer now has the ability to not only impact the art but also reformulate it. In his novel ‘1984’, Orwell (2017) uses allegories to exemplify this power of art and creativity against a fascist government, which seeks to eradicate creativity, art and critical thought by restricting language to ‘newspeak’.

According to Lee McIntyre (2018), however, our cognitive composition dictates our inclinations and diminishes the potentially constructive impact of digimodernism, leading us into the post-truth era instead. A simple and selective google search can lead us to the information that supports our predisposition, and we can reject counter-evidence as if it does not even exist. Still others refer to digimodernism as evoking an ‘eternal present’ (Martinez, 2018) where word-of-mouth holds sway and little is verifiable. Debord (2011) dramatically refers to it as:

The manufacture of a present ... achieved by the ceaseless circularity of information, always returning to the same short list of trivialities, passionately proclaimed as major discoveries.

(Debord, 2011)

Artificially constructed realities are perpetuated on social media, seeking attention and evolving on the basis of others’ reactions, trivializing society and gratifying our vanity.

In the subsequent sections this paper will examine and comment upon these dichotomous theories in light of art and literature and attempt to arrive at a conclusion. In a world where our reactions trump reality can art help us subvert our inherent cognitive biases and encourage critical, analytical thought?

Defining post truth

‘Yellow Journalism’ was a term coined in the 1980s to describe “salacious, over-the-top scandal driven journalism that had more interest in attracting readers than in telling the truth” (McIntyre 2018, chapter 5). This is reminiscent of many of today’s news channels as well as the prolific, unverified information spouted on the internet. According to Christopher Woolf (2016), fake news is not a novel concept, nor is its use for political manipulation. Even in the 1980s truth was discarded in favor of profit and this muckraking had an impact varying from bringing attention to good causes, to exposing corruption to fueling wars (Woolf, 2016). It begs the question; what sets this 21st century phenomenon of post-truth apart?

The “informational model” (McIntyre, 2018) of journalism took root in 1896 and revolutionized media, overriding yellow journalism, all the way until today, where we expect objectivity in the media as a matter of fact. “Our sense of entitlement eroded our critical thinking skills” (McIntyre, 2018) and we conceded the drive to “ferret out the truth” (McIntyre, 2018). With the digital age and the barrage of information, yellow journalism was reignited but the undiscerning viewer presuming objectivity, swallowed it whole creating a fertile ground for the obfuscation of truth.

In 2017 Times Magazine reinvented its striking 1966 cover, replacing ‘Is God Dead?’ with ‘Is Truth Dead?’



(Tweeton, 2017)

The minimalist design was not chosen because of a lack of visual options (Pines, 2017). The stark red typeface on black was a deliberate and thought provoking contrast to our convoluted post-truth reality.

Gibbs' (2017) cover story reflected profoundly on the question in light of Trump's utter disregard for truth, his use of misinformation as a strategy and his belief in his own lies. During the 2016 campaign PolitiFact reviewed 70% of Trump's statements as false and almost two-thirds of voters agreed that Trump was untrustworthy, yet, they voted for him (Gibbs, 2017).

A perfunctory belief in truth belies our actual treatment of it.

When Trump disregards unfavorable yet proven news items as fake news and makes unwarranted claims, such as about winning the popular vote had there not been illegal balloting, it demonstrates his belief that “the crowd’s reaction actually does change the facts about a lie” (McIntyre, 2018). ‘Science denialism’ is another example of this. Doubt is openly perpetrated about empirically established issues such as climate change or vaccines (McIntyre, 2018). The hoopla created, results in the media feeling obliged to report both sides of an issue rather than objectively stating the truth. The issues are deemed ‘controversial’ and the viewer is left skeptical and confused. A significant characteristic of the post-truth era, then, “is a challenge not just to the idea of *knowing* reality but to the existence of reality itself” (McIntyre, 2018). Essentially, post-truth is a deceptive form of authoritarianism; “who needs censorship when you can bury the truth under a pile of bullshit” (McIntyre, 2018).

“What you are seeing and what you are reading, is not what’s happening,” (Trump, in Goldhill, 2018). Upon first study, Orwell’s ‘1984’ appears more paranoid than prophetic. But when you hear statements such as the above, which mirror Orwell’s writing, from the president of the most powerful country in the world, you are forced to wonder if our technological growth and evolution has led us straight into an era where concrete events can be replaced by manufactured truth:

“Spectacular government which now possesses all the means necessary to falsify the whole of production and perception, is the absolute master of memories.” (Debord, 2011, p.6)

“The party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears,” Orwell (2017 p.62) writes. The 2016 election, among other instances (McIntyre, 2018), proves that even recorded truth can be

treated as inconsequential. More importantly, incidences like the unsolved murder of Jamal Khashoggi (Jones, 2018) establish that “the simple fact of being unanswerable has given what is false an entirely new quality.” (Debord, 2011, p.7)

‘The Rashomon effect’ (PsycholoGenie, 2018) of these so called ‘alternative facts’ leaves the viewer misinformed, which is more dangerous than being uninformed. “Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four; everything else follows” (Orwell, 2017, p.63). The people relying on facts to generate their worldview are then left in an uncertain minority.

Some theorists argue against the existence of post truth. Blackburn (2018, p.7), agrees that a lack of accountability and the anonymity on the world wide web allows for shameless proliferation of unsubstantiated opinions. However, despite all the fake news, today’s digimodernist world also affords every person a platform to voice their dissent.

He also argues that the truth can never truly be eclipsed; even the use of the word post-truth implies a concern for the truth. (Blackburn, 2018, p.9) Objective facts will always remain true (such as, the human anatomy) and the rest of ‘truth’ is in a constant process of evolution and discovery (Goldhill, 2018). “You don’t get to the truth in one big jump” (Blackburn, cited in Goldhill, 2018).

The Rashomon Catalyst

In 2016, Oxford Dictionary selected ‘post-truth’ as the word of the year. It is defined as an adjective describing “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). However, hasn’t that always held true? (Blackburn, 2018, p.10) Throughout history and in representations of art and literature we see that emotions have always had a greater impact than objective fact. In Shakespeare’s ‘Julius Caesar’, Marc Antony’s emotionally charged oration will always fuel the mob that ignores Brutus’ careful pondering of the facts.

The difference lies in the abundance of atomized and transitory, often unsubstantiated information evident in the digimodernist 21st century. Every participant is equally capable of contributing to the flood of information. Viewers exist in a silo picking and choosing from a vast array of information, that which conforms to their expectations or sways their emotions (Blackburn, 2018, p.8). With the truth blatantly sidelined, everyone has the opportunity to ‘bullshit’ and lying under the guise of contextualising becomes routine (Keyes, 2004).

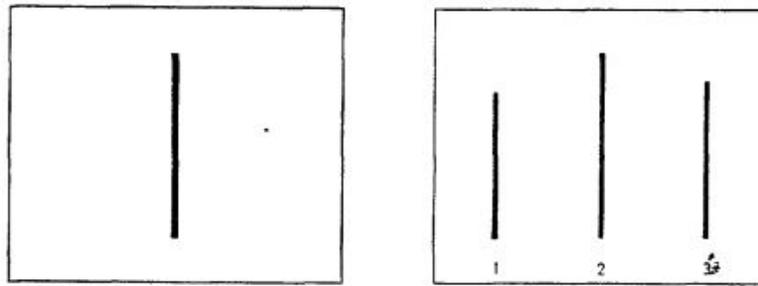
Akira Kurosawa’s 1950 film pioneered multiple, plausible, unverifiable interpretations of a single event, labelled the Rashomon effect. The rise of social media along with our inherent cognitive biases fueled a plurality of truth, i.e. they have served as a catalyst for this effect.

Understanding the human psyche

“A central concept of human psychology is that we strive to avoid psychic discomfort”, Freudians refer to this as “ego defense”. (McIntyre, 2018, chapter 3). Gabriel Tarde (cited in Asch, 1955) even went as far as to say “social man is a somnambulist” to describe our tendency towards group acceptance. Social psychologists have conducted experiments to delve into our behavioural motives and concluded that humans have a tendency to preserve their sense of self-value by identifying that a particular belief is wrong rather than themselves (McIntyre, 2018, chapter 3).

Leon Festinger (cited in McIntyre, 2018, chapter 3) describes this as cognitive dissonance. In an experiment he asked subjects to perform menial tasks, awarding them either \$1 or \$20, and required them to tell the next person that their task had been enjoyable. He recorded that people who received \$1 were more likely to describe their task as enjoyable (to reduce the dissonance of doing a boring task for \$1) and salvage their ego.

Cognitive dissonance and our rationalization of our actions can be amplified under peer pressure. This is exactly what Solomon Asch (1955) observed in his line experiment. The sole subject of the experiment was placed at the end of a table full of confederates. The group was presented with two sheets of paper and asked to identify a line of equal size on either paper. Everyone on the table was asked to unanimously agree on a wrong answer to observe the effect of social pressure on the subject (Asch., 1955).



SUBJECTS WERE SHOWN two cards. One bore a standard line. The other bore three lines, one of which was the same length as the standard. The subjects were asked to choose this line.

(Asch., 1955)

It was observed that “the dissenter becomes more and more worried and hesitant as the disagreement continues in succeeding trials” (Asch., 1955). The correct answer was obvious and yet, social pressure could confound and distress an intelligent subject.

In accordance with Asch’s experiment, “irrational tendencies tend to be reinforced when we are surrounded by others who believe what we do” (McIntyre, 2018, chapter 3). With the selective nature of internet interaction, people can always find support for their illogical beliefs.

When we selectively search for information on the internet we are driven by ‘motivated reasoning’ (McIntyre, 2018, chapter 3), i.e. we are defending our initial intuition rather than objectively exploring. This results in a “confirmation bias” (Wason, cited in McIntyre, 2018, chapter 3), sometimes to the detriment of our moral and critical reasoning.

The only way to mitigate this is to employ the “interactive group effect” (Sunstein, cited in McIntyre, 2018, chapter 3). The interactive group effect occurs when we come into contact with a diverse group of people and an exchange of information and ideas occurs. This leads to a

process of reflection after which new theories may emerge and be accepted. Exposing our thoughts to the scrutiny of others prevents the ‘Dunning-Kruger effect’ of inflated self-assessment (Dunning, Kruger, cited in McIntyre, 2018, chapter 3). The interactive group effect is nullified when we selectively search the internet or turn to social media for information. Despite access to a global village we are now more isolated than before. Clickbait ads rope us into fake news and Twitter feeds confirm our proclivities. Social media has made us more vulnerable to post truth by showing us exactly what we want to see.

The rise of social media

Facebook may have started off as a networking site, but it has evolved into so much more than that. A recent pew poll reports that 62 percent of US adults turn to social media for news, out of which 71 percent rely on Facebook (McIntyre, 2018, chapter 5). Other social media platforms have similarly morphed into all-encompassing entities. Whatsapp has overridden traditional telecommunication, Twitter has become a bantering ground for political entities and businesses rely on Instagram to reach their target market.



Infinity Mirrored Room—Love Forever (1966/1994) at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2017.

(Carver, 2017)

It may sound futuristic, but our lives are now curated by algorithms. Individuals post on social media and wait anxiously for likes and comments, while scrolling through news-feeds designed to generate articles that conform to opinions they already hold. Similar to Kusama's "Love Forever" in her "Infinity Mirrored Rooms" series, individuals on social media are infinite and atomized. Social media allows us to peer into what appears to be an infinite interconnectedness while leaving us thoroughly isolated in an echo chamber of our own beliefs.

Social media and its audience are in constant vicissitude, and have no qualms in forgetting something that has not been reiterated daily. It ropes the user in; they bask in the admiration of a responsive audience and then feel obliged to participate daily in order to keep ‘trending’. Unknowingly, we move from documentation to representation until everything becomes simulacra. Digimodernism “*engineers* our behavior. It reduces our lives into a daily series of commodity exchanges” (Morgan and Purje, 2016). The irony is, that even when we stop to reflect upon this emphasis on appearances over reality, the only way to draw attention to our critique is to post it online.

Postmodernism is the predecessor of this current digimodernist (and post-truth) era (McIntyre, 2018, chapter 6) evident on social media platforms. The idea of deconstructing literature (Derrida in McIntyre, 2018, chapter 6) and art to explore different perspectives is an admittance of there being no absolute truth. Any person professing a particular truth, then, is simply furthering their own ideologies (McIntyre, 2018, chapter 6).

The emergence of social media, may have compounded this Rashomon effect but it also created a unique opportunity for public art. It dismantled the boundaries between people, creating the possibility to engage a massive amount of people at once. Art transcends notions of truth and falsity (Blackburn, 2018). It is capable of erecting reflections of our society, actively engaging the viewer and provoking thought. Social media is the quintessential public art platform, as long as it does not overwhelm us.

A Reflection in Art

“Life imitates art far more than art imitates life.” (Wilde, cited in Pilkington, 2018)

Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat all invite us to document our life, opinions and thoughts. This documentation simulates authenticity but is not a snapshot of our real lives. We learn to curate the social media images of ourselves based on the reactions of others, turning it into a form of art:

“The spectacle is a social relation between people that is mediated by an accumulation of images that serve to alienate us from a genuinely lived life.” (Debord and Jenkins, 2009, chapter 2)

We may be viewing the world through a smartphone screen or a camera lens, yet the personas that garner most favorable reactions are the ones that present humanity and display vulnerability. In the murky world of post-truth politics people cope by using social media to encapsulate a personal narrative. It provides a fertile ground for creative expression and unchecked exchange of thoughts. One of the pitfalls is that it fundamentally alters the way we experience reality, leaving us, circuitously, more vulnerable to the post-truth world.

Kusama Infinity

She discovered that she (like all of us) was “one of the dots among the millions of dots in the universe.” (Boxer, 2017)

Yayoi Kusama’s dream of a world connected by her ideas of infinity was made possible by social media. As a Japanese female artist in 1960s New York, she embodies the ability of social media to transcend barriers.

Even before Instagram catapulted her to fame (Loughrey, 2018), Kusama’s work was representative of the digimodernist world. It depicted the atomization of individuals in a vast

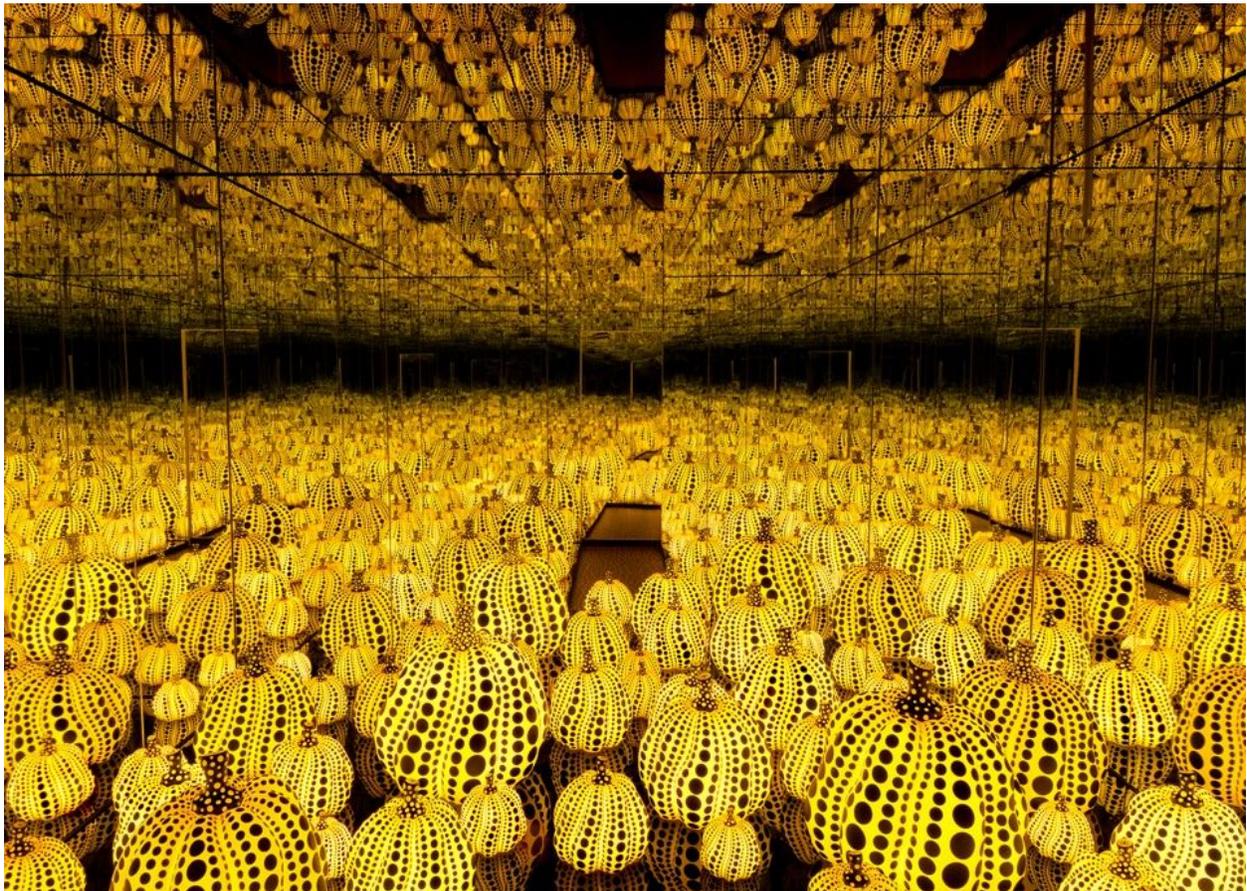
space, and sought to bring art into the space of daily life. In 1966 at the Venice biennale she stood amidst 1500 mirrored orbs with a sign proclaiming ‘Your Narcissism for Sale’ (Taylor, 2015; The Art Story, n.d. (b)). It was a presciently insightful critique of our contrived social media personas. With features such as ‘boosting’ posts to reach wider audiences we literally pay for our narcissistic need for ‘likes’.

Kusama’s raw public art performances were reminiscent of Allan Kaprow’s ‘Happenings’ (Cole, 2012), intentionally unscripted and aiming for authenticity. Social media is the ultimate tribute to the ‘Happenings’.

Kusama’s art was rooted in her personal, traumatic narrative (Adams, 2018), yet it held public appeal. She had put her vulnerability on display and it resonated with her audience. More importantly, her “Infinity Rooms” compelled the audience to take photographs and share them. The hashtag #InfiniteKusama swept across Instagram inciting crowds of people to flock to her exhibits until a limit of one minute had to be placed on every person per room (Boxer, 2017; Loughrey, 2018).

Selfies against the backdrop of Kusama’s work became all the rage. Kusama created art from her trauma and allowed an audience to access it, encouraging existential self-reflection. The Instagram audience, steeped in the post-truth ‘spectacle’, turned it into an opportunity for narcissistic indulgence. Ironically, in an attempt to capture the perfect photograph an audience member even damaged a pumpkin in the “All the Eternal Love I have for the Pumpkins” room

(Boxer, 2017). Kusama's work sought to obliterate the 'self' (The Art Story, n.d. (b)). in an infinite universe, and the audience sought to defy that. Whether posting a selfie amongst millions of other similar selfies achieves that objective or not, is questionable. It is certain, however, that digimodernism has amplified the audience's ability to complete or complicate the artist's intention.



All the Eternal Love I Have for the Pumpkins (2016) at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2017. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo/Singapore; Victoria Miro, London. © Yayoi Kusama. (Carver, 2016)



Installation view of Yayoi Kusama's The obliteration room. Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art / (QAGOMA Photography, 2015)

“The Obliteration Room”, the last room in the “Infinity Rooms” exhibit invited people to adorn it with colourful sticker dots (The Art Story, n.d. (b)). It began as stark white, and at the end was a visual representation of the atomized human experience.

*Fourth Plinth Project**David Shrigley*

The work is both ironic and sincere at the same time. (Shrigley, in Mayor's Office London, 2016)



David Shrigley's Really Good in The Times Literary Supplement (Leal-Olivas, 2016)

The Fourth Plinth project, allowing a public platform for artistic voices, literally mirrors the potential reach social media platforms afford to every participant. The unusual nature of many of exhibits draws crowds inspite of, or perhaps because of, negative comments about some of the art displayed (Eating Europe, 2013).

Shrigley's phallic, ominously black thumbs up titled 'Really Good', which adorned the Fourth Plinth in 2016, is a succinct and satirical comment on the paradox of the post-truth world. The thumbs up, or 'like' reaction, on social media has become a comic and tragic reflection of our alienation from reality. Surrounded by a vortex of information, we wade through, clicking a thumbs up when we encounter information that confirms our cognitive biases, or affects us emotionally. We fail to realize that, lost in a sea of similar emoticons, that click had no impact on reality whatsoever.

Outwardly an optimistic gesture, there is something manifestly amiss about the striking black appendage (Jones, 2016). It provokes thought about the digital reality we have immersed ourselves in, and invites us to reflect on the false celebratory vibe we imbue in the social media representations of ourselves. Amidst the delusive post-truth world, with limited ability to alter it, we have surrendered critical thought in favor of affirmative newsfeeds and Instagram galleries where we covet 'likes'. This deformed thumbs up is an aggressive parody of the false reassurance of the transitory digimodernist era, forcing us to introspect.

Imitation of life

I didn't want to make 'high art'.... I wanted to find something anyone could relate to.

We're all products of what we want to project to the world. (Sherman, in *The Art Story*, n.d. (a))
Sherman's self-portraiture, featuring an unrecognizable version of her, captures the zeitgeist of the social media world, permeated by concocted identities. The effects that we forge using filters and photo editing softwares were created manually by Sherman. Deliberately imperfect,

authentic and vulnerable her work reflects the identities we create to connect to an audience in an image saturated database. Her mimicry of famous works forces us to think about the underlying pretense in post truth mass media and culture.



Untitled Film Still #13 (MoMA, in Vasquez, 2016)

Featuring in every single photograph, yet not precisely there, Cindy Sherman forces us to consider whether we lose ourselves in circular, transitory and continuous creation of highly edited self portraits.

Conclusion

Whether or not truth is dead, the post-truth phenomenon of clickbait journalism, fake news, and evanescent digimodernism is real. Years before the advent of the internet and the formation of a global village, art such as Sherman's and literature such as Orwell's and Debord's had begun to reflect upon the potential of the government to create 'spectacular society' and the human psyche to succumb to our cognitive biases to the detriment of critical thought. When the digital age reignited yellow journalism and social media proffered every individual a chance to publish their opinions whether they were 'bullshit' or fact, it resulted in the creation of multiple realities.

The grand narrative escapes us, and we choose to encapsulate ourselves in fervent proliferation of a personal narrative we consider authentic. Social media isolates us, but that isolation gives us the courage and anonymity to be honest. The post-truth phenomenon, however, has infiltrated this honesty as well and we shape our digital reality based on reactions. Likes and comments determine how we curate our Instagram galleries, Facebook newsfeeds and SnapChat conversations. The give and take of social media platforms is a revolutionary new form of art, and it holds us captive.

Art has the ability to transcend post truth. From the impactful cover of Time to Shrigley's 'Really Good' and Kusama's 'Narcissus Garden', public art offers us a chance to introspect. It is up to us whether we use the minute we have inside the exhibit to post a meaningless selfie and become obliterated as a dot amongst millions of dots, or critically reflect on the possibilities digimodernism presents.

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