KRIS COHEN

NEVER ALONE, EXCEPT FOR NOW

Art, Networks, Populations

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As this book argues, finding language for collective form isn't just secondary to the labor of forming collectives, groups, communities, publics, counterpublics, mobs, gangs, marches, subcultures, cliques, bands, masses, listservs, fan cultures, groupies, gaggles, audiences, troops, comment sections—it is part of the work of collectivity itself. This means that gratitude expressed in an acknowledgments section is a group form. First thanks go to my teachers: Lauren Berlant, Darby English, and W. J. T. Mitchell. Even now, many years later, you make it impossible to feel as though I'm doing any of this on my own.

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INTRODUCTION

It is often said, in both popular and academic contexts, that neoliberalism, or whatever it is we call the present tense, has ushered in the age of the individual: the narcissist, the independent contractor, the temporary laborer, the web surfer, the entrepreneur. But this is only part of the story of contemporary life, which I refer to here as networked life. To speak, in periodizing terms, about the rise of individualism makes it sound as though the problem is a paucity, a dearth of viable models for conceptualizing and inhabiting the social. But if anything, there are too many competing social models for people to sort out, let alone inhabit or organize. Too many, too inchoate, too volatile, all underdescribed. This book takes up two in particular that are especially prevalent and that come into tense alignment to complexly overdetermine the spaces and atmospheres of networked life: one I call the "population form"; the other takes the more familiar, idealized form of a public, or public sphere. Individuality and other forms of personhood that feel solitary aren't just caught in the space between publics and populations. They are actively constituted by the logics of those forms as well as people's attempts to adapt to them. In other words, individuality is itself a form of collectivity. This book began with an interest in the forms of collectivity being imposed and invented in networked life and in the art of networked life. Because all vocabularies of collectivity are freighted (not least "collectivity" itself), I will conceptualize this problem, more generally and encompassingly, as one of *group form*. This is a story, then, of the forms of relation and personhood that emerge when social encounter is routed through circuits of technological

mediation but it is no longer clear which is the social portion and which the technological portion of the encounter.

Because this book locates itself primarily in the United States—where social invention, whatever else it becomes, often just *is* commodity invention—this is not a new but an ongoing story of the routing of relation and personhood through the commodity form. This history does not simply reside in or on the World Wide Web, although particular group forms of networked relation such as trolling, emoticons, and search queries are what I will ultimately be concerned to describe and will form the foundation for the more overarching account of networked life offered here. Nor for that matter does this history reside in the art world, as style or trend or movement, although Sharon Hayes's "love addresses" (2007–9), Felix Gonzalez-Torres's candy works (1990–93), William Gibson's novel *Pattern Recognition* (2003), and Thomson & Craighead's BEACON (2005–) will provide some of my key historical cases. *Networked life* is meant to signal that media and medium in what follows will be understood primarily as questions of personhood, whatever their extensions in and through specific materialities. In this framing, neither the individual on one side nor the collective on the other can be privileged or primary. One way to characterize networked life is that it fundamentally rewires the relationship between the individual and the group, the person and the collective, the one and the many or just the two. But this means that networked life is constantly rewiring this relation—this constancy is key, because what new media hasn't rewired this relation? In a Web 2.0 milieu, the invention of new commodities has become coextensive with, practically the same as rewiring the social itself. The syllogism "social media" hints at this conflation or collapse. This is why I will refer to *group form*, a placeholder phrase meant to be neutral while suggesting that the aesthetics of collectivity as constituted in the space between populations and publics is key to understanding the logics of networked life. It will be the task of the next chapter to more fully describe *group form* as an analytic term. The book's title, *Never Alone, Except for Now*, begins to suggest the affectively and technically contorted relationships between individual personhood and group life that obtain in networked contexts. These contortions are my subject.

My study, in other words, is contiguous with and extends out of the period in the United States and its spheres of influence in which many forms of collectivity have been lived to a great, and so far only ever increasing, extent in and through mediating technologies: the period, in other

words, wherein the interactions that constitute groups that are both idealized (e.g., liberal publics) and occasional (e.g., ham radio networks) are not primarily face-to-face and synchronous but are rather lived through a screen or mediator of one sort or another, one that fragments and rearranges both the space and time of encounter, and concomitantly, the fantasies, norms, and forms of belonging that structure encounter.

This, of course, is one way of telling the story of the public sphere, which was always a strictly mediated relationality and which is a key point of departure for this study (see chapter 2). In this sense, my interests are premodern. But think too of the U.S. postal network, radio, television, network news, presidential addresses, pulp fiction, a particular brand of clothing (see the section on William Gibson's novel *Pattern Recognition* in chapter 4), or any market for a particular commodity—including, not coincidentally, artworks. These, too, are mediated relationalities, though they do not bear the usual markers of technological mediation (or collectivity for that matter).

I don't depart much from standard accounts of modernity, then, if I understand it as the period in which group life has been lived in and through media, lived therefore to greater and lesser degrees representationally, even while the technologies that now undergird those mediations rarely operate on a representational logic (I take up this question of representation in chapter 5). Over the course of this period, as we approach the real-time connections of electronic networks, the time between the creation and the reception of a re-presentation (e.g., of oneself) dwindles to nothing, the "re-" eventually etiolating in favor of something thereafter more easily called life itself, something felt in its liveness and immediacy rather than in its mediations and lags.[1] In other words, the setting for some of the most significant changes to the form of collective life, ones that are closely and importantly associated with the history of modernist art and art making—providing their primary materials, their logics and codes, their drive to transformation—has been mass market capitalism and its demographic clusters of goods and services in and through which people come into, and fall out of, relation.[2] I expect this claim to be neither surprising nor controversial. The history of the mediation of social relation through commodity forms is (unfortunately) what predicates and motivates the conversation, for me, about group form and aesthetics in the context of networked life.[3]

In all of the artistic cases I will assemble here—including the ones that

seem, by the logic of artistic intention or manifest content, to reside far outside electronic networks—the form of the artwork embodies the collectivizing logics of the distributed network. In those logics, group form is constituted, but also riven by parallel processes: one predominantly liberal in spirit, based on an idealized form of reciprocal exchange, the other predominantly algorithmic (affectively illiberal, technically nonliberal), an automatic protocol that is indifferent to all content and all ideals, that simply tracks and aggregates. Group form in distributed networks, my argument runs, gets assembled in the space between automatic data production and self-conscious group production. In this space, the feeling of sovereignty, of surfing and connecting and networking, produces, *but in a parallel realm of activity*, data aggregates, or in the language I will be adapting, populations. This idea of parallelism is a pervasive theme of the chapters that follow and a structuring claim of the entire book. It is as close as the book comes to an overarching periodizing claim. In this sense, the idea of parallelism as a structure and the population form as a determinant of that particular structure works with but also against some of critical theory's existing roster of structural relations, each of which is, in its own way, a recondite thought about group form. I refer primarily to Debord's spectacle and its extension into various theorizations of "the image" and image culture, which continue to be so useful to art histories trying to come to grips with the influence of networks on contemporary conditions of art production;[4] co-optation and appropriation in all of their recuperative guises;[5] as well as to virality, parasitism, and the metaphorics of infection.[6] All of these figurations rely on a language of contact which is pessimistic while setting the terms for what will become legible as redemptive or subversive accounts: the image blinds; the spectacle deceives; the virus infects; the market appropriates. I don't deny that such processes continue into the present day (and are even amplified and accelerated). But the geometry of group form in electronic networks—which is predicated on nothing so stable as an image, so totalizing as the spectacle, nor so discretized as what David Joselit calls a "population of images"—is not that of the intersecting line but of the parallel, that which proceeds together but does not touch.[7] Chapter 5, the final chapter, contains the most concerted discussion of parallelism, a discussion which tries to gather together threads of a thought that builds from chapter to chapter. There I make the claim that the parallelism of the population form estranges us from representational politics. It makes a certain kind

of compensatory sense, then, that questions of representation and identity are so prevalent, even dominant, in both ordinary and specialized discussions of the Internet.

As the language of populations is meant to suggest, with its references to the longer twentieth-century trajectory of economic and informatic management, such logics were in formation long before there was a thing we could confidently single out as *the* web. This is the primary reason that not all of my artistic cases deal explicitly with the Internet or electronic networks or even technology, and why my artists aren't all Internet or new media artists. Neither Sharon Hayes nor Felix Gonzalez-Torres likely thinks of today's Internet as one of their express subjects or interests.[8] This would, in fact, be perfectly in keeping with what I believe networks are, as subjects of study: that is, not literal things to which we can confidently point, and in pointing hope to contain, but an expanse or net of virtual relationality with extensions in technical invention but also in far more distributed and amorphous social, cultural, and economic adaptation.[9] One thought that consequently guided my selection of artworks was to assemble cases that worked across a wide range of media and materializations—performance, media art, installation.

"Never alone, except for now," the phrase that stands as the book's title, describes the contorted form of togetherness being sketched here, one whose always-conditional absolute (never . . . except) registers the basic, but jarring fact that togetherness in electronic networks can never simply be the effect of willed acts of world building. It is built through parallelism rather than just through contact, impact, or intention. It also gestures toward the set of technical constraints innate to the network form itself, the way that networks connect while being indifferent to what happens in and through those connections. The title's phrasing tries to place those constraints in contact with the affects of their habitation. Once one is working in a distributed network, this form of togetherness—automatic not willed, indifferent not motivated—cannot be unchosen. On a network, one is, in a technical sense, never alone, even while in an affective sense there is often no lonelier place. At the same time, what happens at individual computers is, in an affective sense, isolated even while in a spatial sense, that anonymous troll in a chatroom might well be one's neighbor. In any case, the most important point is probably that one never knows, so both togetherness and aloneness exist in a permanently snarled and bewildering temporality: never but always. Every utopian dream undercut

by a dystopian nightmare; every act of unexpected kindness dogged by a seemingly random and senseless act of cruelty; every important political invention online attached, in a parallel but extremely lucrative relation, to a means of data accumulation, a relation that runs on an older logic of co-optation but where co-optation isn't hindered by the structurally and affectively parallel relation—by whatever distance there might be between, say, art and commodity—but is now constituted precisely in that parallelism.

The central argument in what follows is that much networked collectivity, in the most ordinary settings, messily and unpredictably cross-breeds the form of the public sphere (seen within its history of reconceptualizations and updatings) with the population as a collectivizing form endemic to the biopolitics of Internet data collection and informatic personhood. In short, we can say that in networked life populations crowd publics, creating a cramped and disorienting space in between that becomes a space of habitation, adaptation, and negotiation. This fact isn't insidious and secretive; it's the manifest structure of how networked sociality works.[10] I play out this argument by way of deaccelerated descriptions of the intimacies and forms of contact invented in the folds of the overlay, populations upon publics.

Many of my cases therefore emerge from these folds, from ordinary scenes of networked sociality that improvise modes of relationality in that space. Specifically, I take up emoticons and other invented diacritics, as well as trolling, and searching. All such improvisations (thus, proleptic) are also artifacts (thus, retrospective) of attempts to adapt to the space between populations and publics. But the three artworks and one novel that comprise my central aesthetic cases also inhabit, self-consciously or not, the same historical conjunction. Being scenes of mediated collectivity that are in retreat from commodity form while always being dogged by that form—now parallelistically rather than appropriatively—these works share and reveal (as bruises reveal other forms of violence) various facets of this layered structure, of its experiential nature, its logical structures or codes, its affects, its effects, its economies and technologies. In the present context, the works that I attend to closely have served as a way of sounding out the processes, residing far outside the Internet (or so deeply inside it that there can be no effective distinction), by which populations came into such close proximity to the structure and affect of publics, creating a distinctive space of mediated encounter. This has eventuated in a great diversity of group forms and styles of coming to that encounter that

can be seen as responses, as reactions to this graft and the work of living inside of it.

To say "group form" is to invite, even require, further elaboration. But the problem can't simply be solved by good, clear explication. The problem of vocabulary and description is contiguous with the problem of group form itself in networked contexts, as it is whenever rapidly changing technological and economic conditions force improvisation in the folds of new or new-ish conjunctures. We find this thought in Fredric Jameson's work on the political unconscious of postmodernity, in Ulysse Dutoit's and Leo Bersani's work on queer relationality and what they have called the "correspondence of forms," and in Lauren Berlant's work on the intimate public sphere.[11] I discuss these three references at length in the following chapter. In the meantime, we see description and life come into conjunction relentlessly, even desperately in the following kinds of questions, each indexing a vexed debate in and about web cultures: is Facebook a commodity or a social forum? Is file sharing theft or the free use of common resources? Is networked life virtual and supplemental to life, or do we just call it all life? Is political debate online public discourse 2.0, or is it trolling interrupted by a few calm, on-topic responses? All of these questions have a moralistic, even a polemical dimension. But the answers they invite also actively and literally set the social as well as, in many cases, the legal terms and conditions under which people come to encounter one another online. For this reason, the method by which I pursue these questions might be called ekphrastic.[12] Ekphrasis, in its variable relations to the scene it narrates, generates a vocabulary of experience or encounter. It builds slowly but always asymptotically to its objects rather than presuming their coherence. *Ek-*: out. *-phrasis*: to speak. To speak out. The tense here is key. Ekphrasis, as a critical methodology, generates a present tense, a tense in its ongoingness. Ekphrasis is a way to situate our histories with and thereby within the problem at hand, rather than pretending to get out in front of it with a name we hope the events in question come to inherit, as if it were their destiny to do so, as if History seen by the Historian should run in reverse, in synoptic retrospect.

If one feels that the problem characterizing the period I call networked life is, in some fashion, the simulacrum, the spectacle, a flood of virtual images drowning the world, then one might well worry about an aesthetic ploy like ekphrasis that is itself imitative, rendering an image in speech. But what if we admit we don't really know the problem from the start, that

we haven't seen or can't see its full image but only some of its symptoms, and so must grope our way toward it? In that scenario, where not even the ekphrast knows or has *direct* experience of the originating image, ekphrasis would be less an imitative art than a descriptive one.[13] Ekphrasis then *could* not totalize or simulate, categorize or otherwise situate the thing that it takes as its goad.[14] Instead, it would inscribe itself alongside, and in that untouching adjacency, we might imagine any form of transaction between the two: collusion, parasitism, interference, or hardly any relation at all.[15] There's no reason to presume, in other words, the form that the ekphrastic relation will take before the fact. The ekphrasis itself—in its particularities, its style, its obstacles and stutterings—brings that form into being, both its own description as well as, concurrently, the relationship it has with its inciting object or event. Its attempts to conceptualize its objects are therefore partial, haltingly iterative, experimental, improvisatory. Ekphrasis is, in Eve Sedgwick's sense, a weak theory: driven by curiosity rather than an aversion to surprise; moving along with its objects rather than encompassing them; open to incoherence as a form of knowledge and not just knowledge's obstacle or absence; moving at the pace of groping adaptation rather than confident, expeditious critique; affectively varied rather than oriented around monolithic affects like anger, trauma, crisis, and anxiety.[16] I don't mean, as indeed Sedgwick didn't mean, that the paranoid structure of what she called "strong theory" (critique, totalization), is wrong or misplaced.[17] I mean there are distinctive qualities of networked life—its pace, its recalcitrance to knowledge-gathering procedures, its ambition to remake the forms of personhood that would be our foundation for gathering knowledge about the world, the way networks alter the world as an artifact of people's movements through the world—that need the slower, iterative, exploratory nature of weak theory. In Internet research, strong theory abounds.[18] Before we need new names, new brandings of group life (a task we might leave to the Facebooks of the world), we need descriptions of the actions, gestures, words, events, and affects that are constituting, but never from scratch, the new forms of group life, of sociality invented in relation to networks.[19]

So the chapters that follow each started with an instinct about the particular pressures brought to bear in a networked milieu on the aesthetic interface as a medium of intimacy, affiliation, and belonging. In this vein, each chapter explores a particular aspect of the warped space between publics and populations and tries to be attentive to the invention of group

form within that conjunctive space. The first chapter proposes *group form* as the placeholder rubric under which to explore questions of networked life, where the individual and the group are both isolated and bound together within what I call a parallelistic relation. And it is precisely in that configuration—that of the distributed network that is now monetized and made possible by converting loves, likes, labor, life into a parallel stream of data—that individuals and publics or self-conscious collectives are made to effect the building of populations. Populations themselves then become deeply constitutive of personhood in both its actualities and its potentials. Which is to say, the group forms I explore will not always be heroic or revolutionary, even if they are inventive and resourceful; mostly they are bargainings with newly reconfigured conditions for collectivity and belonging. The second chapter historicizes and conceptualizes the disorienting overlay of populations upon publics as the scene for ordinary exchange as well as the remediation of such scenes in and through artworks.[20] The three succeeding chapters then describe three specific aspects or qualities of life as lived between publics and populations. Taken together, these constitute places to start an investigation, not a field totalized metonymically.

Central to each of the final three chapters are artworks that inhabit, present, and perform scenes of mediated collectivity. The third chapter considers violent or violating behavior online, exemplified by trolls and trolling, modes of encounter that limn liberal speech but without the reciprocity idealistically presumed to constitute scenes of liberal deliberation and debate. Such actions reveal one of the most disorienting affective structures of communication and politics in the populations of electronic networks. This I call the "broken genre." Sharon Hayes's performance *I March in the Parade of Liberty, but as Long as I Love You I'm Not Free* (2007–8), from which I learned so much about broken genres of speech and politics, is the central aesthetic case in this chapter. Chapter 4 then addresses affective diacritics such as emoticons and "LOL" (laughing out loud) that compensate for and adapt to this broken genre by asserting or curating the affective tone of interactions in populations. Such affective diacritics are adaptations to, and so are acknowledgments of, a particular feature of networked life, lived between populations and publics: a pervasive tonelessness. Here, Felix Gonzalez-Torres's candy works (1990–93) are central, as they have much to say about tone, tonelessness, and diacritics in relation to the politics of participation in networked life. Finally,

chapter 5 looks to the search engine industry and the ways that people search for something in order to orient themselves in the space between publics and populations. From within this broad activity of orientation—the search and that relatively new form of inquiry, the ordinary language search query—the question of personhood again emerges. Thomson & Craighead's multisited, multiplatform work *BEACON* (2005, ongoing), unlike the previous two chapters, explicitly thematizes its subject, namely search engines and specifically search queries. It allows us to see how personhood can be a distillate, an effect of the kinds of queries people formulate online. Search queries, which is what *BEACON* presents to us, are violently partial, a slight and exceedingly weird thing to know about someone, while also being emblematic of new forms of knowing and sensing others. Sometimes the radically partial is all we get in a networked environment and so might be best described as not partial at all. In this, search engines are part of an array of technologies and practices, evident in all of the proceeding chapters, that force group form into a parallelistic relation with the activities that might seek to learn about it, intervene in it, change it. The book ends, then, with a discussion of the difficult terrain on which we come to confront problems of networked life, something I refer to as parallelistic aesthetics.

Through all of these studies, I engage with the question of relationality and aesthetic form that has been so important in recent art history and art criticism. In a networked milieu, almost any object of study entails a problem of group form. And so each chapter also stands as an experiment in how to describe modes of relationality in light of the disorienting conjuncture of forces that now intersect at the site of the group: networked publicity and the metastasis of the population form, liberal and nonliberal forms of relation, ordinary intimate social life and the massive forms of data collection and commodification that are the technical and financial concomitant of lives lived online. The elements of the problem are familiar; their particular configuration presents challenges to analysis, to intervention, and to aesthetics, but first of all to description and so to life's habitability.

In a sense, what's being staged across all of the chapters is a particular arrangement of media theory with queer theory, all within a broadly art historical theater in which artworks and commodities, aesthetic form and commodity form, face each other not as enemies and not as opposites, but as anamorphic distortions of one another (more on anamorpho-

sis below). These fields of inquiry meet when mediation is understood not as a middle, and not as a distantiation, and not as technology, but as an organization of life in proximity to fantasies of belonging and togetherness. This understanding results from my attempt to hold together a number of discrete, disciplinary ways of defining mediation. Cybernetics would describe mediation, dryly but not misleadingly in the current context, as communication. Media theory would, perhaps, describe it as an interface. Queer theory has taught us to understand mediation as a variant of desire, a conventionalized or generic form of encounter that might always become more queer. Critical theory would probably have us simply call it commodity form, the ongoing subsumption of life as labor and then as value always for someone else. And art history has often subsumed broader questions of mediation under the more delimited rubric of medium specificity, the material and/or phenomenological specificity of an aesthetic encounter that might, under certain conditions, become self-reflexive (might, that is, become a site of pedagogy about the material bases of encounter, their arrangements, and the conditions under which one might come to encounter them).[21] But art history might equally refer, especially now, to various forms of participatory practice within the art world. I refer here to an accumulation of disciplinary discourse that in many ways only now discovers an explicit vocabulary for the questions of group form that have long concerned modernism and modernist art practice (and before).[22] The trick today is not to choose among these resources, as so many sites of disciplinary expertise which might then, later, be connected via collaboration, outreach, multi- and transdisciplinarity. To study forms of togetherness and belonging now—that is, to study mediation—is to study a commodity form that is a scene of (often frustrated) desire and fantasy that must operate in proximity to, if not be entirely encompassed by, various technologized interfaces that are themselves always changing according to the relentless progressivist logics of the commodity market. For such problems, the art world is not context enough; but neither are scenes of ordinary exchange and mediation, taken on their own terms (whatever those terms might be) adequate to the questions being asked.[23]

I said previously that in this book art and commodity face each other as anamorphic distortions of one another. In anamorphosis (Greek for "re-formation"), distortion occurs because one format is given within the delineations of another. Commodity form and aesthetic form are not equivalents, but are often forced to take one another's shape, most ag-

gressively within an economic discourse.[24] Instead of continually decrying this structural condition of capitalist circuits, I try to learn from those distortions while forcing my own bad fits in the pacing and arrangements of my descriptions. Bersani and Dutoit, in a different context, might call this a "correspondence of forms," where analysis need not privilege autonomous units (persons, artworks, objects) and distortion might more neutrally be called "difference."[25] The first chapter will elaborate this conjunction of media theory with queer theory in the context of what I call "group form."

The disciplinary implications of this thought partially informed the selection of my artistic cases: it was important to me to try to expand what art history on the one hand and media theory on the other consider to be their purview, especially with regard to technologies of social mediation. In this light, the inclusion of Thomson & Craighead—who are most often labeled, when a label is needed, as new media artists—is not because new technology is self-evidently *in* their work, but because in their work media and technology are deliteralized in pursuit of larger questions of personhood and encounter. Stated in those terms, where technology is deliteralized and we are much less sure about the boundaries of the term let alone the objects of inquiry, I could and do say the very same thing about the work of Sharon Hayes and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. In this more atmospheric or disbursed understanding of technology (a weak theory of technology), Hayes's and Gonzalez-Torres's works are just as much about technological mediation as Thomson & Craighead's.

The inclusion of Felix Gonzalez-Torres in a book about networked life might make some worry that we're proceeding ahistorically. But to start with an open analytical category (not new, but open), to accumulate formal detail ekphrastically toward better descriptions of networked group form, doesn't preclude historical thinking. Rather, it requires that historical thinking begin with formal descriptions that do not take as their presumptive model the familiar relational forms and discrete technological commodities that already so dominate thought as to make improvised, nonce, and queer forms either invisible or forever the bad example that bolsters, *a contrario*, the legitimacy of the existing vocabulary.[26] In other words, in what follows, ordinary life—the sites and scenes in which networked life is materialized—isn't the debased, lifeless site of expropriation against which critically resistant art stands out, and in relation to which it asserts a redemptive ethics. Ordinary life, like art, is a site for the

negotiation of historical forces in and as the development of new skills, new anxieties, new optimisms.[27] So, while the ultimately and immanently capitalist logics of networked life being explored here are increasingly totalizing, dire, and hopeless, life is not fully subsumed or determined or for that matter best or only described by those logics. *Never Alone, Except for Now,* in other words, aspires to be not a description of the inescapability of those logics so much as a description of how people negotiate with them. The tone of the book therefore is not hopeless, but neither is it optimistic or redemptive. It tries, more simply, to be curious, to assume that we don't know what a radical or critical aesthetics looks like in the folds of networked life.[28]

So my chapters move between specific artworks and specific cases of Internet sociality, accumulating evidence toward the description of group forms that, because of their dense intercalations of technology, economy, personhood, and collectivity, are fully experienced neither in artworks nor in ordinary life. The gambit is that perhaps such group forms can be sensed and described formally by attending to the anamorphic distortions involved when one realm is read in light of the other. In other words, for the cases assembled here, aesthetic form *is* a site of ordinary life, and ordinary life *is* a site of dense aesthetic mediation.[29] This is especially the case at the sites or scenes where someone comes into contact—through willful acts of world building, but more often within my cases, through automatic technical procedures or protocols—with the edges, the boundaries, blurrings, and expansions of one's own individuality.

If the previous discussion has seemed purely methodological, we will begin to see in the next chapter that it is also a nascent description of the practical problem of inhabiting group form in networked life.[30] There is, in other words, an ekphrastic aspect to networked life itself when world-building actions, consciously undertaken in ordinary and minor settings, are returned by way of a population logic. When the data of our own ordinary lives are returned to us as suggestion, as personalization, as self-elaboration, the network can be said to speak *us* out. In the space between populations and publics, personhood itself becomes the ekphrastic quotient of networked life. We should therefore ask about the group form not just of populations and not just of publics, but of the individual in networked life.

NOTES

Introduction

1 This conjunction of presentation and representation, of production and reproduction, is precisely what's at stake—for different but, as I'll elaborate in the next chapter, convergent reasons—in Fred Moten's important work *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

2 As I'll describe below, Lauren Berlant's trilogy tells an important part of this history: Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, Series Q (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). But here I am also broadly in agreement with Shannon Jackson and her desire to "remember the dimensions of this kind of work ['social works,' in her terms] that induced infrastructural avowal, that is, that understood 'heteronomy' as a socio-political but also as an aesthetic-formal openness to contingency." Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2011), 32.

3 It is not the only motivation, of course. Anticapitalist work, anarchist movements, and science fiction all provide differently motivated accounts, although ones that are no less concerned with mass market capitalism and its transformations.

4 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994); McKenzie Wark, *50 Years of Recuperation of the Situationist International* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008); McKenzie Wark, *The Spectacle of Disintegration: Situationist Passages out of the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 2013); McKenzie Wark, *The Beach beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glori-*

ous Times of the Situationist International (London: Verso, 2015); David Joselit, *Feedback: Television against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Helen Molesworth, *This Will Have Been: Art, Love, and Politics in the 1980s* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

5 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000); Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005).

6 To take just three prominent examples: Joselit, *After Art*; Mark Seltzer, "Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere," *October* 80 (1997): 3–26; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

7 "Populations of images" is Joselit's phrase in *After Art*, a way for him to reference image culture not in its spectacularized instances but in its massified effects.

8 But even as early as 1990, Gonzalez-Torres was thinking about "Internets" and "new technologies of information" in the context of the U.S. government's withdrawal of the social safety net and "charged symbolic images of homosexual acts." Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "The Gold Field," in *Earths Grow Thick: Works after Emily Dickenson by Roni Horn* (Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, 1996), 65–69.

9 "Virtual" here refers to a potentiality, not an immateriality. This understanding is indebted to Brian Massumi's version of what was a Deleuzian concept. The virtual, in this sense, deflects attention away from any particular aspect of a given technological environment and toward a potential yet to come into being. Virtuality is not about digital immateriality or irreality but is immanent, proleptic, and not unique to the digital age or any such periodization. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

10 Alexander Galloway calls the technical infrastructure that makes such a relation possible "protocological," referring to the Internet protocols, archived in Request for Comment documents, that quite literally govern the movement of data in distributed networks. I will address this concept in more detail in the following chapter. Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

11 It is also a version of the central argument in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

12 When, for instance, description only knows how to recognize what is familiar, adaptation is often taken to be atavism. This isn't always wrong; just partial. All sorts of confused moralizing happens in Internet literatures as a result. See, for instance, Nicholas G. Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, vol. 1 (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010); Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together:*

Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other (New York: Basic Books, 2011). More evidence of the contiguity of description and life in networked scenes, the way that problems in one realm cause direct and immediate problems in the other, can be found in the tortured debates around participatory art. In those debates, there has usually not been a very clear line drawn between description of the key artworks, let alone their political, social, and cultural referents, and an avant-garde reflex to correct the scenes of life that would or should animate such descriptions.

13 In its original Greek context, as one of the rhetorical arts, ekphrasis always referred to an encounter with an originating image that the audience to the ekphrasis hadn't seen or experienced firsthand. But as an art of rhetoric, of fiction and fabrication, of eloquence, the possibility was there from the start, immanent in the very practice, that no one in the exchange had seen the originating image. In the most famous ekphrasis in the Greek context, that of Achilles's shield in *The Iliad*, this possibility is embodied as a material artifact, the shield itself, that could never, on its own, yield such descriptive richness. Homer, *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 409, beginning line 478.

14 Shadi Bartsch and Jas Elsner, "Introduction: Eight Ways of Looking at an Ekphrasis," *Classical Philology* 102, no. 1 (2007): i–vi.

15 "There is a sense in which ekphrasis, therefore, is *always* disobedient" (emphasis in the original). Bartsch and Elsner, "Introduction," ii.

16 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

17 In fact, it was important to Sedgwick to discuss strong theory and weak theory as "interdigitated." Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 145.

18 I'm thinking of screeds such as Carr, *The Shallows*; Nicholas G. Carr, "Is Google Making Us Stupid? What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains," *The Atlantic*, August 2008, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/; Turkle, *Alone Together*. But see also more nuanced critique, such as Galloway, *Protocol*; McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

19 On the conflation of naming and branding, see Fredric Jameson, "Fear and Loathing in Globalization," in *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007).

20 J. David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

21 I provide the citational networks for these thoughts in the following two chapters.

22 This is just a sample of some of the major citations: Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Collection Documents Sur L'art (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002); Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Co-*

operation (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995); Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012); Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio's Secrets* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998); Nato Thompson, *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991 to 2011* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

23 Three prominent art history books have recently taken "the art world" as a kind of analytical resource for generating better understandings of (if not better resistance to) networked economies. Lane Relyea, *Your Everyday Art World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013); Pamela M. Lee, *Forgetting the Art World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); Joselit, *After Art*.

24 For a very recent example, see Nathan Eisenberg, "Abstracting Art," *Hypocrite Reader*, November 2015, http://hypocritereader.com/58/abstracting-art.

25 As Bersani describes it in one interview: "It's a correspondence where you realize that there is a mode in which *your* moving through space coincides with the circulation of something entirely different to you, which is language, and that there was a junction, something happened, there is an intersection which is extremely peaceful because you're out of yourself at the same time" (italics in the original). Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 195.

26 This is not, in other words, a book about avant-garde group form, even while it does see inventive negotiations with convention and other limiting structures as important, as worthy of close description, even as importantly aesthetic and thus as formalistically load-bearing.

27 This understanding of "ordinary life" emerges, many years later, from a Lauren Berlant seminar at the University of Chicago entitled "Ordinariness."

28 For a different kind of debate about the politics of our reception of "new" technologies, see Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics and the Media*, ed. and trans. Michael Roloff (New York: Seabury, 1974); Jean Baudrillard, "Requiem for Media," in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos, 1981).

29 In this, my work has much in common with Patrick Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

30 In Jameson's work, an encounter with the limits of one's own methods for sensing and describing the present tense becomes a way of studying the specific conditions of the longer period that encompasses one's own particular present tense. This is what Jameson calls "metacommentary." Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).