

# **Portfolio of Creative Work**

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## ***Abstract***

This portfolio of creative works consists of four projects dealing with the concepts of nostalgia, desire and kitsch in late capitalism. The projects are composed of two films, *Rex* and *I?*, and two interactive installations, and *Information Superhighway* respectively. *Rex* explores the cultural icon of the dinosaur and its use as a simulacrum in contemporary society. It does this through a soundtrack composed of sound bites from various documentaries from the past contrasted with a video displaying images of the dinosaur from the past and present, accompanied by generative spoken word poetry. *I?* delves into the history of consumerism and examines the link between identity and emotional well-being in postmodern culture through the genre of cyberpunk. Madonna's *Material Girl* is nested between a soundtrack created using gritty synths and accompanied by a video using commercials from the past, commercial-like footage of the present and 3D animation. *Listening Machines* comments on the use of anthropomorphism and cuteness in product design through an interactive installation where participants engage with anthropomorphised speakers with unique personalities. *Information Superhighway* investigates the surreal nature of the internet and the disconnect between cyberspace and the physical world. It explores this through an interactive installation which uses a twitter bot that generates random sentences based off databases of recent tweets, the use of sculptural devices such as an interactive cloud and ambient sounds generated from early computer start up noises. These works have been realised through the use of SuperCollider, MaxMSP, Blender, Logic Pro X and Final Cut Pro X. In this commentary I will expand on the theory that inspired these projects and explain the realisation of each of them.

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## ***Author's Declaration***

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

## ***Introduction***

This portfolio of creative works consists of four projects dealing with the concepts of nostalgia, desire and kitsch through the critique of late consumer capitalism in contemporary society. It aims to showcase issues of identity in the postmodern world created by consumption and the use of images to promote a consumer based and damaging lifestyle. These works explore images which are mediated in popular media, how these shape the postmodern world and how people relate to these images in return. They also explore the idea of technology and how this has been used to shape the contemporary consumerist world and the social elements that drive the production of images and information through the use of internet spaces. Given the conceptual importance of the history of consumerism and postmodern thinking since WWII, I have also taken a particular interest in the concept of nostalgia, the past, how this is related to images of the future and how the future was perceived by those before us. To display these concepts, I have created a series of contrasting but conceptually and aesthetically related digitally realised installations and films. My aim for these works is to influence people to question their own identity in an image saturated world which revolves around consumers and the mediation of images through technological means. I want to encourage the audience member to think about what those images mean to us and how we can use these to decipher the postmodern web that is contemporary society. I have developed the aesthetic properties of these works to be easily recognisable and resemblant of the aesthetics properties of popular online art, aesthetic subgenres and mediated images of the past.

The vast majority of visual content within all three visual works is composed of found footage, contrasting images of the past with those of the present. *Rex* is composed completely of found footage whereas *I?* uses a mixture of found and original footage. Found footage was the obvious choice of medium for these projects as they rely heavily on the concept of

displaying the past as pastiche and use the found media to reference both the present and the future through simulacrum images. When creating original visual content for *I?*, the found footage was always used as a direct conceptual and visual reference which I aimed to reproduce. This gave me an opportunity to mix the two mediums to be coherent and almost indistinguishable, displaying the content under a specific conceptual and aesthetic lens. Similarly, when creating the endless loop for the screen in *Information Superhighway*, I used images and colour schemes seen in countless Vaporwave style art pieces on the internet, whilst trying to reflect the conceptual idea of the internet as a physical space. Although *Listening Machines* didn't contain visual content in the same way as the other projects, the facial expressions for the robots was directly inspired by images in popular media, such as those perturbed by the likes of Henry Hoover and films such as WALL-E, demonstrating their important anthropomorphic role of emotional attachment and empathetic response to inanimate products.

When creating the sounds for the robots, these were also directly inspired and act almost as an imitation of existing sounds in previous popular media which were able to elicit an emotional response from audience members, particularly ones of cuteness. For the audio of all other three products, similarly to the visual elements were composed of almost entirely found audio samples from media, including adverts, films, documentaries and technology, demonstrating the image based concepts and their footing in the theory of postmodernism. Both *Information Superhighway* and *Rex* contain no original synthesised sound and instead rely on the rehashing and arranging of sounds of the past with nostalgic connotations, such as the old windows start up sounds found in *Information Superhighway* and the fragmented sounds of old documentaries and the iconic Jurassic Park theme in *Rex*. *I?* features Madonna's Material Girl to carry the conceptual and aesthetic notation of saturated consumerism to the point of identity loss, whilst the original sounds at the beginning and end of the film were directly inspired the

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sounds of synths used in 1980s science fiction. These contrast with the 1950s commercial audio samples used in the track to create an aesthetic representation of the Cyberpunk subgenre, exemplifying the dystopian connotations of pervading consumerism and corporate control. In this commentary, I will discuss the theory of the concepts behind each project in detail, and will provide a description of methods, overview of artistic inspirations and a critical reflection on the final realisation of the works.



## *Rex*

*“The projections of dinosaurs have become more ‘real’ than the bones themselves. They are products of the creative imagination”<sup>1</sup>*

Watching *Jurassic World: The Fallen Kingdom* was the start of my journey into the cultural icon of the dinosaur. What began as a compelling and magical science-fiction horror with scientific references penetrating its core (no matter how incorrect these may have been), had matured, only in the chronological sense, into a hubris trilogy demonstrating the corporate and consumer need to constantly be bigger, better, flashier and scarier, disappointing lifelong Jurassic Park fans who had witnessed the evolution of the franchise over the course of twenty-five years.<sup>2</sup> The parallels between the main storyline, which included park management having to manufacture dinosaurs which did not exist in order to satisfy customers, ironically manifested in reality of the film itself. It is clear that the in the Jurassic World trilogy priorities lie in creating a world of action and spectacle whilst the intimate and personal plot lines seen in the original trilogy exploring the divide between man and man-resurrected beast, were lost. One thing is clear: you don’t have to enjoy any nuance of narrative or indulge in any scientific reference to enjoy Jurassic World. The dinosaur which entered our homes through our screens in the original Jurassic Park trilogy twenty-five years and placed wonder in our minds is dead. The genetically modified pastiches of ‘scientific’ dinosaurs including the Indominus rex (a hybrid created from the DNA of Velociraptor, Giganotosaur, Rugops, Majungasaur, and

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<sup>1</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 50.

<sup>2</sup> Joe Hall Hall, “Jurassic World: Why fans may be disappointed but Hollywood will certainly be happy”, *City A.M.*, 12 Jun, 2015, accessed Sep 7, 2018, <https://www.cityam.com/star-wars-episode-vii-and-jurassic-world-trailers-why-fans-may-be-disappointed-hollywood/>

Carnotaur) and the Indo-raptor (a double hybrid combining the base genome of Indominus rex with that of Velociraptor - which doesn't make that much sense given the genetic makeup of the Indominus Rex, but at this point, who cares?) beg the question: Is the concept of the dinosaur no longer enough? Why do we constantly need bigger and better? What can the cultural icon of the dinosaur tell us about postmodern society? *Rex* explores these questions through sound, video and spoken word whilst taking a dive into the aesthetic world of the dinosaur in modern popular culture.

The word 'Dinosaur' conjures up images of paleontological digs and dusting bones at museums, but is more detached from the scientific object than we think. The word 'dinosaur', unlike 'mammal', is vague and unsubstantial. It doesn't group together a type of animal with coherent and derived characteristics but is instead an arbitrary construct that groups together two widely different groups of animals – Ornithischians (bird-footed dinosaurs like the Triceratops and Stegosaurus) and Saurischians (lizard footed dinosaurs such as the Velociraptor and Tyrannosaur.)<sup>3</sup> John Noble Wilford explains in *The Riddle of the Dinosaur*, "As the names suggest, saurischians and ornithischians have quite different anatomies that mark them as being perhaps no more related to each other than they are to other members of the reptilian family tree, such as crocodiles and pterosaurs."<sup>4</sup> Here, a whole ecosystem of animals has been reduced into one recognisable postmodern pastiche. The mediated image of the dinosaur has become so saturated in culture that one can easily forget that no human has ever actually seen a dinosaur. W. J. T. Mitchell theorizes in *The Last Dinosaur Book* "There are probably more dinosaur images on the earth during the late twentieth century than there were real creatures in ancient times."<sup>5</sup> What we know as the 'dinosaur' today is purely a product of the creative imagination. Though it has some basis in published science through the analysis

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<sup>3</sup> Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book*, 23.

<sup>4</sup> John Noble Wilford, *The Riddle of the Dinosaur* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 60.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book*, 5.

of fossils and bones, the familiar image of the dinosaur wouldn't be complete without huge assumption of how it moved and sounded. Even the outline of a dinosaur is immediately identifiable, with its simplistic design having the ability to serve a multitude of uses. Mitchell explains, "Many dinosaur images make no effort to be convincing or realistic. They simply evoke one of the prominent stereotypes (gigantism, ferocity, reptilian features) and provide a recognizable summary, a generalized image. That is why the dinosaur image can be evoked by very minimal details and serve as a corporate logo, a cartoon character or a cookie cutter. It is a stereotype in the most exact sense of the word, with a small repertoire of familiar subtypes (T. rex, Brontosaurus, Triceratops, Stegosaurus, Pterodactyl and Velociraptor)." <sup>6</sup>

On the subject of dinosaur categorisation, he states that due to the fantastical creation of the modern dinosaur image from our imaginations, categorising the images of dinosaurs that permeate pop-culture and dinosaurs that are used in scientific study is inadequate due to the large amounts of images migrating back and forth across this border. He states that contemporary dinosaur images are neither just popularizations of scientific understanding but are imperative for the construction of palaeontological discovery. He explains "The moment of scientific intuition is often a vivid insight, a daring projection of a visual or spatial model, and not merely a summing up of empirical data. This is especially true for palaeontologists who must turn fragments into wholes, skeletal structures into living, breathing, flesh-and-blood animals. Perhaps more than any other of the historical sciences, palaeontology requires the aid of artists and illustrators to depict in concrete, visible form what the scientist conceives in the imagination." <sup>7</sup> He suggests instead, that the most useful and reliable categorization of dinosaur images would be under each individual artist. <sup>8</sup> The artists

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<sup>6</sup> Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book*, 50.

<sup>7</sup> Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book*, 55.

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book*, 53.

individual style would likely denote more similar characteristics between dinosaur images to join them into part of a ‘family’ than purely scientific or popular images would.

The use of the pastiched dinosaur image with purpose for consumption is the most important reason for its success as a cultural icon. Toy dinosaurs have graced toy shop shelves for over a century due to children’s endless fascination with them. The manipulability of the image to act as a metaphor and its ability to be immediately identified in its simplest of forms has further contributed to the dinosaur’s commercial victory.<sup>9</sup> The dinosaur simulacra’s commercial permeation into twentieth century culture was led by corporations such as Sinclair Oil, who used the outline of the non-existent Brontosaurus to promote its expensive gasoline. Sinclair Oil utilised the image of dinosaur to represent a large number of years, suggesting that the ‘mellowing’ period of the oil makes their gasoline somehow premium compared to their contenders, likening the advertising of the product to a fine wine or cheese. The famous dinosaur logo also symbolises grandeur, huge monsters with sharp claws and glistening teeth, expressing Harry Sinclair’s philosophy of corporate gigantism.<sup>10</sup> The notable McDonald’s advert of 1994 ‘Fossil Fuel’<sup>11</sup>, depicts a terrifying Tyrannosaurus skeleton bounding through a museum before turning into a puppy-like creature on the presentation of McDonald’s French Fries, turning the leviathan giant into a kitsch representation of itself in order to sell fast food. Even the use of the word ‘dinosaur’ as something that has become obsolete because of failure to adapt to changing circumstances has been advertised products and events, such as one Science Museum advert to promote an exhibition on vintage cars.<sup>12</sup> Scott L. Montgomery says of this advertisement in his essay *Science as Kitsch: The dinosaur and other icons*, “Here the dinosaur

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<sup>9</sup> Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book*, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Randy Moore, *Dinosaurs by the Decades: A Chronology of the Dinosaur in Science and Popular Culture* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 2014), 126.

<sup>11</sup> Leo Burnett & Co. for McDonalds, “Fossil Fuels” (TV commercial, 1994)

<sup>12</sup> Scott L. Montgomery, *Science as Kitsch: The dinosaur and other icons*, *Science as Culture*, 1991, 23.

icon operates in reverse, as it is symbolized by technological obsolescence: an 'enormous finned monster' whose excessive size and appetite literally drove it into a 'natural' extinction."<sup>13</sup> Though responsible for the widespread obsession and saturation with the image of the dinosaur, the cultural icon dinosaur is not singularly associated with consumerism, but is, as Mitchell suggests, "a figure of collectivity, a group or series of species whose differences may be mapped onto any parallel set of differences in human society."<sup>14</sup> The manipulability of the image of the dinosaur makes it a symbol that can be used in all factions of society to represent whatever the user needs it to. He says later: "The dinosaur is the perfect totem animal of modernity because, like the traditional totem, it is a shape shifting transitional figure that can seem to mean almost anything one minute and almost nothing the next. There is always a moral lesson to be attached with the dinosaur, some homily about gigantism, violence or extinction."<sup>15</sup> This can be said for different tropes of extinction and destruction stories told through the populous both as scientific truth and fictional storytelling over the past few centuries. Scientifically, the Victorian era scientific 'truth' that the dinosaurs died because God wiped them out continues to survive into modern contemporary culture, with a number of independent schools in the USA still teaching creationism as part of the curriculum.<sup>16</sup> The Alvarez theory that a meteor wiped out the dinosaurs resonated with the people of the cold-war era fearing an Alvarez like destruction of their own.<sup>17</sup> One Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament poster showed Tyrannosaurs poisoning weapons at each other with the overlaying text "FORTY YEARS OF NATO: Do we have to go on like this?", In Montgomery's words "Symbolizing

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<sup>13</sup> Montgomery, *Science as Kitsch*, 23.

<sup>14</sup> Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book*, 78.

<sup>15</sup> Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book*, 145.

<sup>16</sup> Javier Espinoza, "Creationism still taught in schools despite Government funding threat" *The Telegraph*, May 5, 2015, accessed Sept 4, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/11578432/Creationism-still-taught-in-faith-schools-despite-Government-funding-threat.html>

<sup>17</sup> Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book*, 145.

both danger and historical obsolescence, here the dinosaur icon becomes a substitute for understanding the veritably modern social forces served by nuclear weapons,”<sup>18</sup> using the dinosaur as a method of kitsch critique. In fiction, Godzilla was used to embody the atomic bomb and the destruction that came with it whilst the original Jurassic Park aimed to show in Mitchell’s words that “the chief threat to the pursuit of happiness is not an old framework of dry bones – the archaic oedipal structure of white male supremacy – but a new form of living dinosaur based in new technologies of “restoration” and new forms of capitalisation.”<sup>19</sup> It is clear that we are not fascinated by the dinosaurs themselves but to the relation of them to the images we consume.

Every dinosaur story ever told is less a story about dinosaurs, but more about human beings. In fiction, they are portrayed as one of two things. The first is as an outside species trying to maim the human lead characters as they go on an action filled emotional journey, in which dinosaurs are just an accessory to a story about people and the lessons they learn on the way. The second is as an anthropomorphised creature. A dinosaur’s body with the brain, mannerisms and voice of a human, such as in the 2000 Disney film *Dinosaur*. Here the dinosaurs serve as an aesthetic surplus to a story whose main purpose it to tell a tale about humans.

Due to the fact that dinosaurs face stigma for being juvenilia and kitsch, they have been somewhat prohibited, bar from a few cases, from entering the world of modern art. Mitchell states that this is partly because paleontological illustration has to operate within the canons of pictorial realism which doesn’t correspond to the contrasting and primarily anti-realist art movements during the times of dinosaur proliferation. An example of this are Charles’ Knights

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<sup>18</sup> Montgomery, *Science as Kitsch*, 30.

<sup>19</sup> Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book*, 181.

renowned portrayals of dinosaurs during the Victorian era rise in dino-mania. The contrasts between the realist interpretations and the art movements of the time such as Art Nouveau, Post Impressionism and Symbolism, is stark. A realist image of a dinosaur in this sense has little artistic value for members of the art world. The most famous case of dinosaur art to be included as part of a canon however, are the works of postmodern artist Robert Smithson, from whom I've taken inspiration from in this work. Smithson's fascination with dinosaurs followed him through childhood into his life as an artist. Dinosaurs for him did not symbolise something ancient to be contrasted with modern life – rather as Mitchell suggests “an image of the modern seen as dialectically equivalent to and turning into the archaic.”<sup>20</sup> In Smithson's own words regarding his work, he states: “the tools of technology become a part of the Earth's geology as they sink back into their original state. Machines like dinosaurs must return to dust or rust.”<sup>21</sup> In his 1970 film documenting the construction of *Spiral Jetty*, Smithson juxtaposes the dinosaurs of a natural history museum with the diggers dropping concrete into the Salt Lake.<sup>22</sup> In the process of documenting the machines, he has made them archaic, likening them to the dinosaurs he is trying to mirror. He states “The movieola becomes a “time machine” that transforms trucks into dinosaurs.”<sup>23</sup> Though dinosaurs have been on the spectrum of public interest for the past century and a half, whenever there has been a boom in dino-mania, there has always been a later crash. What can be said for the reason of the rise and fall of interest of dinosaurs in the general public? Particularly over the past fifty years the interest in dinosaurs, both scientifically and in popular culture has grown enormously.<sup>24</sup> Mitchell suggests that

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<sup>20</sup> Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book*, 272.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Smithson, “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects”, *Artforum*, Sept 1968, accessed Nov 8, 2018, <http://theoria.art-zoo.com/a-sedimentation-of-the-mind-earth-projects-robert-smithson/>

<sup>22</sup> Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty* (Museum of Modern Art Circulating Film Library, 1970), film.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996) 150.

<sup>24</sup> Montgomery, *Science as Kitsch*, 29.

growing and declining interest in dinosaurs, occurs with the economy, more-so in bountiful times and less-so in times of hardship.<sup>25</sup> This suggests that interest in dinosaurs is that of surplus and excess, an ‘extra’ interest in society that we can indulge in should we have the money to do so. Though not in a period of economic upturn currently, it could be said that the easy accessibility to dinosaur media through the internet allows us to indulge in this pleasure through means we didn’t have available to us before.

Montgomery however suggests a polarising and more sinister reason for the return of the dinosaur obsession in the 1990s. He states “Certainly there is the phenomenon of 'nostalgia', for example, baby boomers seeking to re-create for their own children the fascinations they once enjoyed. But this only begs the question in another way. When, under what social and historical circumstances, did the dinosaur loom for them with such an ambient presence? What has truly returned from the 1950s, beneath all the hoop-la of celebratory imitation? First, a deepened unease and palpable sense of impending 'crisis', for example, cold war terror, fears about nuclear threat, contagious disease, drugs and violent crime, economic failure, immigrant influx, and any number of other issues gargantuan in scale.”<sup>26</sup> Could the same be said for the recent rise in dinomania? We are once again, faced with fears of nuclear war, immigration and disease on a world-wide scale, with the added colossal fear promoted by climate change. For the latter, the modern day Alvarez topic of world-wide extinction through environmental destruction seems closer than ever. Can we use the most popular extinction story to reflect on retrospectively and make changes to our lives? Mitchell hauntingly asks “Do catastrophes have to be perceived as such when and while they are happening? Or do they sometimes only become relevant in retrospect?”<sup>27</sup> In contemporary media is not hard to find news of situations

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<sup>25</sup> Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book*, 156.

<sup>26</sup> Montgomery, *Science as Kitsch*, 29.

<sup>27</sup> Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book*, 212.



which seem almost catastrophic. Stories of disease, hunger and war darken our newsfeeds daily, yet in western culture the reaction to these publications is inconsequential. Ira Chernus, a professor of religious studies at the University of Colorado Boulder says in ‘Frederic Jameson’s Interpretation of Postmodernism’ “Yet for most of us these images of catastrophe are only fantasies. They are detached from everyday life or any kind of historical reality. So they more easily become simulacra, devoid of meaning. They come so thick and fast, along with all the other changes of postmodern life, that nothing can shock us anymore. We have learned to live comfortably in our disintegrating world—as long as we don’t have to contemplate any basic change in the system as a whole.”<sup>28</sup> Here, the modern image of the dinosaur and its insufficiency as a leviathan giant can be perfectly mirrored in our view of trivial catastrophe. Could it be that we are in an Alvarez comparable catastrophe right now, and just not see it?

Jameson suggests that when portraying the past, we do so in hollowed out pastiches which doesn’t authentically represent the past we are trying to depict. He says of nostalgia films, “it being understood that the nostalgia film was never a matter of some old-fashioned “representation” of historical content, but instead approached the “past” through stylistic connotation, conveying “pastness” by the glossy qualities of the image, and “1930s-ness” or “1950s-ness” by the attributes of fashion.”<sup>29</sup> Rather than using singular artists or art styles to differentiate between categories of dinosaur like Mitchell suggests, I have taken inspiration from Jameson’s theory and categorised the changing dinosaur images and sounds used in *Rex* into stereotypes of different aesthetics from the time periods in which were taken. Whilst I am

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<sup>28</sup> Ira Chernus, “Frederic Jameson’s Interpretation of Postmodernism”, accessed 4 Sept 2018, <https://spot.colorado.edu/~chernus/NewspaperColumns/LongerEssays/JamesonPostmodernism.htm>

<sup>29</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London, Verso, 1991), 19.

representing the modern past as pastiche in *Rex*, these eras also in turn turned the image of the dinosaur into a stylistic connotation through popular media, showing the inauthenticity of both mine and their representations of history. Though there are major differences in dinosaur images between now and sixty years ago, mostly due to perpetually improving technology, there are still some surprising similarities between the images of the past and the present. Given advances in palaeontology over the past decades it would be logical to think that the changing images of dinosaurs naturally progress in truth, but this largely not the case, even in media which searches for scientific truth, such as documentaries and museum exhibitions. With the recent discovery that almost all dinosaurs were feather coated, it is surprising to see that with very few exceptions, no recent dinosaurs are being portrayed to show this. For example, the new Jurassic Park film, made twenty-five years after the original hasn't shown any recent paleontological discoveries in their creation of dinosaurs. Even the Natural History Museum in London has only updated one of their many models to demonstrate this fact. The contrast of past images with the current images mediated of the dinosaur in *Rex* aims to show the permeation of dinosaur images in contemporary society and its different applications as simulacrum throughout modern history.

*Rex* has been inspired by several existing works which deal with dinosaurs or natural history in an artistic way, though these proved hard to find and appear to be few and far between. As previously stated, due to their status as kitsch or juvenile, dinosaurs appear to be somewhat neglected in the art world. Stu Pond, scientific associate at the Natural History Museum in London defends the use of paleoart as part of an artistic canon, stating 'No art exists in a vacuum – paleoart sits in an uneasy position between science and art and by definition consists of both in terms of technique and philosophy.'<sup>30</sup> He calls for a change in contemporary

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<sup>30</sup> Pond, Stu, "Paleoart or Scientific Illustration?", *Paleo Illustrata: Adventures in Vertebrate Palaeontology* (blog), 10 April 2011, accessed 2 Feb 2020, <http://paleoillustrata.blogspot.com/2011/04/art-or-science.html>

arts perspective towards dinosaurs saying, ‘I would suggest it would even be desirable in paleoart to have some real left-field artist representation, something more abstract that might communicate in more speculative aspects of ancient life via emotion, intuition and the other influences artists have always brought with them to their work.’<sup>31</sup> As discussed previously in this commentary, Roberts Smithson’s work deals with the concept of dinosaurs both in concept and method. I particularly resonated with his conceptual ideas of using old machinery as a way to shape earth in *Spiral Jetty* (1970)<sup>32</sup>, demonstrating these metal beasts to be archaic and antiquated – a representation of modern day dinosaurs, changing the landscape. I find this imagery extremely powerful and have attempted to reproduce similar ideas in my own works with found footage of antiquated machinery and energy technology. Another set of works which have inspired my own come from *Surreal Science*, an exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 2018<sup>33</sup>. The exhibition consists of a range of objects from the George Loudon collection intertwined with the art of Salvatore Arancio, created in response to the scientific artefacts. Arancio uses the scientific specimens for the purpose of art, decoupling them from their scientific intent and turning them into simulacrum of themselves. *The Fluorescent Host* (2018)<sup>34</sup>, is a scaled up model of a small ancient obsidian American hand axe (c. 6000 BC), made from ceramic and pigmented in fluorescent colours, changing shade when looked at from different angles. This work pulls the hand axe out of prehistory and into the contemporary, changing its use from something archaic and obsolete in the present age, to a work of art, situated in a popular London gallery. Similarly, with much of his film work, such

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<sup>31</sup> Pond, Stu, “Paleoart or Scientific Illustration?”, *Paleo Illustra: Adventures in Vertebrate Palaeontology*” (blog), 10 April 2011, accessed 2 Feb 2020, <http://paleoillustrata.blogspot.com/2011/04/art-or-science.html>

<sup>32</sup> Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty* (Museum of Modern Art Circulating Film Library, 1970), film.

<sup>33</sup> *Surreal Science*, The Whitechapel Gallery, 2018, London, UK, exhibition.

<sup>34</sup> Salvatore Arancio, *The Fluorescent Host*, (The Whitechapel Gallery, 2018), sculpture.

as *Dedicated to the Blue Soul* (2018)<sup>35</sup> and *Reactions in Plants and Animals* (2018)<sup>36</sup> shown in the same exhibition, and separate works such as *When the Same Organ is Rigorously Compared in Many Individuals, I Always Find Some Slight Variability...* (2014)<sup>37</sup>, displayed on Vimeo, Arancio uses found educational footage and reworks them into something whose purpose is for artistic expression. I have been directly influenced by the process of using educational footage for artistic purposes and also the types of editing and artistic ideas used to manipulate these videos. These techniques include the use of RGB splitting and overlaying videos to mask their origins yet to keep them as recognisable scientific images.

A large part of the process for the development of *Rex* was the sourcing of visual and audio components from the internet. *Rex* is composed entirely of found footage and audio samples from over 50 different sources. Most videos were sourced from YouTube, and the mediums featured in *Rex* include documentaries, vlogs, commercials, film snippets, governments PSAs and art films, among others. The sound samples used for the audio components of the film were sourced both from the found footage used for visual purposes and from royalty-free websites such as freesound.org. They include both musical samples and non-musical effects which are woven into a generative track. The concept for this piece was clear to me from the beginning of the project. When selecting footage, I watched and listened to over twenty hours of sourced videos and could easily identify the content I wanted to display in the work. The visual components for the film were edited in Final Cut Pro X and Max MSP, using a variety of effects to unify video clips and express concepts. The specific effects and methods used to achieve this are similar to those utilised in *Information Superhighway* and *I?*. These include RGB splitting and video side-chaining to create filters from other videos to blend the

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<sup>35</sup> Salvatore Arancio, *Dedicated to the Blue Soul*, (The Whitechapel Gallery, 2018), film.

<sup>36</sup> Salvatore Arancio, *Reactions in Plants and Animals*, (The Whitechapel Gallery, 2018), film.

<sup>37</sup> Salvatore Arancio, *Rigorously Compared in Many Individuals, I Always Find Some Slight Variability...*, Vimeo, 31 Dec 2014, accessed 4 Jan 2020, <https://vimeo.com/115719852>

found footage and create something coherent and similar in aesthetic properties. As with other projects, the audio components of Rex were designed and created in SuperCollider. The main technique used to create the soundtrack was the use of patterns integrated in SuperCollider's object-oriented system. Patterns enable the user to sequence sounds in a generative manner with as much or as little control over variables as they'd like. For my work with sound in Rex, I kept a certain degree of randomness within some boundaries for several variables, but ensured I had control over those boundaries with the use of a midi controller, so I could control some aspects of the evolving sounds in real time as they were generated. With the use of patterns, I developed the soundtrack for each section separately. For each section, a combination of sounds was selected that would suit the concepts and aesthetic feel of the segment. The SuperCollider script was instructed to play a random sound every  $x$  number of seconds, with a choice of random effects and filters. After creating the sounds for each section, I moved the recordings into Logic Pro X for mastering and blending with other sections and voice samples to create a linear and coherent soundtrack which aligned with the film. Originally, I intended to have a spoken word poem as a voice-over to the film, explicitly setting out concepts for audience members to be aware of. Eventually, I decided that setting out concepts so unambiguously left little room for audience creativity in their exploration of the work, so decided on another method in which to describe the concepts in a more abstract way. I therefore chose to use Markov chains to generate the text seen as subtitles in the film, not because the method is related conceptually to the project in any way, but as an artistic tool to create a more abstract demonstration of the concepts. The source text used for the poems which overlay the videos are from numerous documentary and film scripts which relate to dinosaurs. I was surprised at the coherence and relation of the outputted text to the concepts, and structured sentences into larger poems to accompany each section in the film.

Rex questions the cultural icon of the dinosaur and explores its use as a simulacrum in contemporary society alongside wider issues such as warfare and climate change, which relate to the simulacrum of the dinosaur in various ways. Having a lifelong interest in dinosaurs and feeding said interest with a plethora of museum visits, documentaries and textbooks, I began to question the classic image of the dinosaur through educational means and why the dinosaur is such a popular choice in a range of adverts, films and logos. I thought about the crude Sinclair logo and its slight morbidity, given that oil is formed from the decomposed bodies of dead dinosaurs and plant matter, alongside the choice for Godzilla to represent the atom bomb that fell on Japan in 1945. These thoughts led me to research postmodern theory regarding pastiche and simulacra, the theory used as the base inspiration for this work. Given the concept of this project to display postmodern ideas about simulacrum in the context of the dinosaur and to discuss the use of dinosaur images throughout contemporary history, the choice to construct the film from a plethora of found footage and audio seemed an obvious choice. I chose to use somewhat vintage style clips and images from old documentaries and films to mimic the general essence felt in the outdated museum exhibitions that I had visited as a child, smelling of dust and filled with faded images. Although I considered it, I felt the choice to emit modern footage of dinosaurs was contradictory to the concept, given their evolution and transformation in the modern-day. To view the changing icon of the dinosaur throughout contemporary history, I decided to arrange the videos somewhat linearly, featuring most of the older videos at the beginning, and newer ones at the end. There are however exceptions to this as the main concept was to encapsulate the dinosaur within certain frames of reference to illustrate the use of dinosaur simulacrum around different topics. After some time to reflect on the finished piece, I would be interested to see the difference in the project if less modern footage was used in the film. I feel as though the aesthetic qualities of the later part of Rex are not as coherent or provocative as those in the beginning and rely more on the spectacle of high definition images

and how these can be edited, as opposed to conceptual substance, as in the beginning of the project. I would like to develop the project to be able to demonstrate the impact of the dinosaur in the contemporary day whilst remaining in line with the aesthetic qualities of past dinosaur images and media, either by editing modern footage differently to display these aesthetic qualities, or to not use it at all. The choice of music was less systematic than the choice of video. Whilst trying to maintain the old-style educational feel within the soundtrack, I chose sound samples to fit the aesthetic qualities of the film. For example, in the first section of the film, the soundtrack is composed entirely out of the first ten seconds of the Jurassic Park theme tune, mirroring the evolving and minimal images displayed on screen. Having shown the piece, I now realise the excessive extent of audio, visual and conceptual content shown in one film and wonder if it is perhaps unsuitable for both gallery viewing, as well as being unsuitable and for a full length showing given its lack of linearity. I also realise that the volume and text is sometimes overbearing and could use some more breathing space in-between points and specific video clips to give audience members an opportunity to reflect. A solution to this could possibly be to split the sections of the video out onto separate screens, elongate the length of the content and give spaces between important clips and texts. This would leave the audience member with moments to think in more detail about the work and may enable the viewer to get a better overall idea of some of the concepts and how they relate to each other.

## ***Listening Machines***

*Listening machines* consists of three anthropomorphic speakers each with their own unique robotic voices, giving the illusion they are living beings with personalities. The installation encourages people to interact engage in conversation with the speakers, pushing them to see the robots as characters rather than objects and therefore being able to feel empathy towards them. The theory which inspired this work came from both cultural theory and business studies exploring consumer culture and anthropomorphism. Notable sources of inspiration for this work include Sianne Ngai's theory of cuteness as an aesthetic category in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Cute Zany and Interesting*, Dwinita Laksmidewi, Harry Susianto, and Adi Zakaria Afiff's study *Anthropomorphism in Advertising: The Effect of Anthropomorphic Product Demonstration on Consumer Purchase Intention* and the use of anthropomorphism in Disney films, particularly in the 2008 film WALL-E.

Anthropomorphism in consumer culture has been shown to be effective in a number of ways. In *Anthropomorphism in Advertising: The Effect of Anthropomorphic Product Demonstration on Consumer Purchase Intention*, the authors demonstrate increased likeability of a product when consumers can identify human like features in them. They state, "The anthropomorphic appearance of a product, such as an apparent smile in the grill of a car, leads to increased liking of that product (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Landwehr et al., 2011), reduces the desire to replace the product (Chandler & Schwarz, 2010), and affects consumers' risk perception (Kim & McGill, 2011). These researchers found that presenting products with human-like physical features led to consumers' positive response."<sup>38</sup> Though only a recent area

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<sup>38</sup> Dwinita Laksmidewi, Harry Susianto, and Adi Zakaria Afiff, "Anthropomorphism in Advertising: The Effect of Anthropomorphic Product Demonstration on Consumer Purchase Intention", *Asian Academy of Management Journal* 22(1):1-25, (2017), 5.



of business study, anthropomorphism isn't a new commercial idea. Disney for example has been at the forefront of anthropomorphism for commercial purposes for almost an entire century, with their depictions of anthropomorphised animals and objects still firmly grasping the market of today. Other notable anthropomorphised products which became household names are Henry Hoover, and the Roomba robot vacuum, the latter of which I will expand on later. Household items which used to be inanimate have been increasingly anthropomorphised due to the rise of AI in 'smart' products. An extreme example, designed with the intention of envision the future of technology in cars, Toyota's much-hyped autonomous car, the Concept-i, was billed as "Less of a machine. More of a pal."<sup>39</sup> Some suggest that the heavy amount of anthropomorphism seen in today's tech products is meant to relieve some of the friction that people may feel introducing this level of technology into their homes.<sup>40</sup> A study titled *Increasing anthropomorphism and trust in automated driving functions by adding speech output* by Yannick Forster, Frederik Naujoks and Alexandra Neukum suggests that by anthropomorphising automated machines with speech, the level of trust in them to carry out their role becomes stronger. They state "By adding speech output to an existing audio-visual Human-Machine Interface (HMI), the level of trust in automation was suspected to be increased due to semantic information and the application of anthropomorphic features such as voice and gender."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Daniel Albert, "Less of a Machine, More of a Pal", *n+1 magazine*, Apr 14, 2017, accessed May 22, 2019, <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/less-of-a-machine-more-of-a-pal/>

<sup>40</sup> Meg Miller, "The Rise of Anthropomorphic Gadgets", *Fast Company*, Sep 1, 2017, accessed May 23, 2019, <https://www.fastcompany.com/3067013/anthropomorphic-gadgets-are-back>

<sup>41</sup> Yannick Forster, Frederik Naujoks and Alexandra Neukum, "Increasing anthropomorphism and trust in automated driving functions by adding speech output", *Conference: IEEE Intelligent Vehicles Symposium*, June, 2017, accessed May 22, 2019, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317586657\\_Increasing\\_anthropomorphism\\_and\\_trust\\_in\\_automated\\_driving\\_functions\\_by\\_adding\\_speech\\_output](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317586657_Increasing_anthropomorphism_and_trust_in_automated_driving_functions_by_adding_speech_output)

People have gone so far not to just trust an anthropomorphised product, but feel on some level that they really are in fact a living being, forming emotional attachments to them and thinking of them as part of the family or a beloved pet. Roomba, an autonomous robotic vacuum cleaner, is a prime example of this. The study “*My Roomba is Rambo*”: *Intimate Home Appliances* by Ja-Young Sung, Lan Guo, Rebecca E. Grinter, and Henrik I. Christensen suggests that a large number of Roomba users have grown emotionally attached to their machines and treat it as a living being. Of the participants, all Roomba enthusiasts, two thirds had named their devices and assigned them a gender.<sup>42</sup> One user even got rid of a rug because she described her Roomba as being “frustrated” with the length of the shag.<sup>43</sup> The study found that emotional attachment to products is useful in maintaining customer retention with participants stating “I can never not have one” and even “I will always have one until I die”. Furthermore, they add “a strong bond with the technology is possible even in the face of technical issues, and further might lead people to persist in adoption despite problems.”<sup>44</sup>, implying that emotional attachment to products is also useful in products control, as users were more likely to think of its flaws as aspects of the robot’s personality rather than a malfunction.

We have established that people are prone to forming attachments to anthropomorphised products, but what is it about these objects that seemingly brainwashed us to trust them, get attached to them and want to bring them home in the first place? In her book *Our Aesthetic Categories: Cute, Zany and Interesting*, Ngai talks extensively about the cute aesthetic and how it is utilised in media and production. She says of the link between the two, “In addition to its close ties with kitsch and the pleasures of easy consumption that Adorno referred to as ‘culinary’, cuteness is an aesthetic much more evidently rooted in material

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<sup>42</sup> Ja-Young Sung et al. “*My Roomba is a Rambo*”: *Intimate Home Appliances* (Georgia: GVU Center & School of Interactive Computing, 2007), 5.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

commercial culture.”<sup>45</sup> With reference to the stated material commercial culture, she analyses in great detail what constitutes cuteness in products and why this is so effective in persuading us to consume them. She argues that the simplicity of cute products is the defining characteristic of the cute aesthetic, using a bath toy in the image of a frog as an example. She says, “With its enormous face (it is in fact nothing but face) and exaggerated gaze (but interestingly no mouth), the bath toy underscores the centrality of anthropomorphism to cuteness. Yet what is striking is how crudely simplified the sponge’s features are, as if cuteness were a commercial as opposed to high-modernist primitivism.”<sup>46</sup> The primitive features of cute objects could be said not to work just because of their design but also as a method to create a simplified and exaggerated character for the object. The bath toy’s longing eyes implies that it’s only thinking of you, it is there to wash you and be cute and that is its only purpose. The overtly simplistic characters created through aesthetic means in cute objects is comparable to that of a child. They exude an air of helplessness, much like a child they cannot think for themselves and need us there to protect them. Ngai says of this matter, “The cute commodity flatteringly seems to want us and only us as its mommy, as Merish underscores; conversely in a perfect mirroring of its desire, as if we had already put ourselves in its shoes, we as adoptive “guardians” seem to “choose” it.”<sup>47</sup> It is this powerlessness in its simplicity that forces us to create emotional connections with the product, compelling us to take it home.

The characteristics of the cute aesthetic, which manipulate us into feeling instinctually protective over anthropomorphised products mirror the response that humans have to babies. Furthermore, the features of a cute product with similar attributes to what Ngai described in the frog bath toy parallel in some ways the looks of an infant baby’s disproportionate body

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<sup>45</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012), 59.

<sup>46</sup> Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 64.

<sup>47</sup> Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 60.

with eyes and a head too big for its face. Their smallness and the soft texture of their skin give them the aura of extreme fragility; one could easily harm them if they so desire. Exemplified by the phrase “you’re so cute I could just eat you up”, cute aggression is superficially aggressive behaviour in response to seeing something cute. At the same time that adults fawn and coo at babies, they also can’t resist pinching or squeezing their flesh, even going so far sometimes as to bite a fat arm or leg. Psychologists theorize that this strange response to stimuli could be a way of regulating overwhelming emotions in reaction to the cuteness of babies and animals. An *Association for Psychological Science* article, ““Tears of Joy” May Help Us Maintain Emotional Balance” states, “people who showed higher expressions of aggression while looking at the babies tended to show a bigger drop-off in positive emotion five minutes after viewing the images, suggesting that the negative emotions helped them moderate their intense positive emotions, bringing them back to emotional equilibrium.”<sup>48</sup> Just like in helpless humans, Ngai also notes that the cute aesthetic not only elicits feelings of protection but also those of aggression or disgust. She states “cuteness might provoke ugly or aggressive feelings, as well as the expected tender or maternal ones. For in its exaggerated passivity and vulnerability, the cute object is as often intended to excite a consumer’s sadistic desires for mastery and control as much as his or her desire to cuddle.”<sup>49</sup> Though written before the studies into cute aggression were conducted, Ngai’s theory about aggressive or hostile emotions towards cute objects could also partly be due to the instinctual reaction triggered by an overwhelming response to cuteness outlined by the *Association for Psychological Science* article. Daniel Harris makes a point of this in his essay *Cuteness*, stating, “the process of

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<sup>48</sup> ““Tears of Joy” May Help Us Maintain Emotional Balance”, *Association for Psychological Studies*, Nov 12, 2014, accessed 5 May, 2019, <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/releases/tears-of-joy-may-help-us-maintain-emotional-balance.html>

<sup>49</sup> Sianne Ngai, “Cuteness”, *Critical Inquiry* Vol.31, No.4, pp 811-847 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 816.

conveying cuteness to the viewer disempowers its objects, forcing them into ridiculous situations and making them appear more ignorant and vulnerable than they really are<sup>50</sup> suggesting that products which have already been depicted as being injured or hurt only emphasises their lovability. There are similarities between Ngai's theory of aggression towards anthropomorphised objects and the psychological findings on cute aggression, implying that encounters with an anthropomorphised object can elicit similar responses in humans as encounters with human infants, just through the simple methods of applying personality and character to an arbitrary assortment of mass produced materials.

It is natural to conjure up images of soft objects, such as Ngai's example of a bath toy when talking about loveable anthropomorphised objects but it is also apparent to see the same overt simplistic and powerlessness characteristics in sturdy products, particularly in AI smart products which have been designed to evoke certain personalities. Smart products use anthropomorphism as a feature to make people feel more at ease with advanced technology in their home whilst some high tech products like the Roomba use anthropomorphism to push people to form attachments to the smart items they consume. It feels like a natural step to anthropomorphise the most modern of smart products due to their almost human way of automating tasks and micromanaging affairs of the home such as heating, lighting and security. The Omate Yumi is a drastic example of anthropomorphism in smart objects, taking a humanoid form with a dynamic face, arms and even buttons in the place of ears. Though most anthropomorphic features in products aren't as acute as this example, the presence of anthropomorphism in tech commodities is felt on the market in varying degrees. For example,

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<sup>50</sup> Daniel Harris, "Cuteness", *Salmagundi* (New York: Skidmore, 1992), 179

the Withings Aura Smart Sleep System has a large oval plane, appearing as an almost expressionless face which watches over while you slumber, using its technology to track your sleep patterns. Likewise, the Nest home security camera appears as standing alert, almost like a meerkat, with a large extruding eye keeping watch for intruders. Though smart in a sense, they still adhere to Ngai's criteria for cuteness. Regardless of design, which could also be said to be cutely simplistic, these devices exude an aura of powerlessness, and therefore cuteness – they only have one very specific job and are completely incompetent at everything else, eliciting a certain innocence and naivety. It isn't just visual design that can invoke simplicity, naivety and cuteness in products. Words and sound have a similar effect. When the Opportunity rover (affectionately named Oppy by the scientists who worked with it) ended its mission after 5000 days on Mars, both NASA scientists and science enthusiasts around the world mourned. A tweet by Dr Tanya Harrison, the mission operator for the Opportunity rover stated that there were both silence and tears in the control room as they lost contact with it.<sup>51</sup> Jacob Margolis, a science commentator for KCPP translated the final digital messages sent out from the rover before it 'died'. The poetic translation read "My battery is low and it's getting dark".<sup>52</sup> The innocence and loneliness invoked by the simplicity of the message from the rover evoked a powerful response of empathy for the robot. These feelings were amplified when it emerged that Billie Holliday's 'I'll Be Seeing You' was played on the rover to 'sing it to sleep' as its battery died.<sup>53</sup> Even though individuals were completely aware logically that the rover was not in any way alive, the image of an anthropomorphised bot, alone on a planet 34 million miles

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<sup>51</sup> Dr Tanya Harris (@tanyaofmars), tweet, 12 Feb, 2019, 11:07pm, accessed 7 May, 2019, <https://twitter.com/tanyaofmars/>

<sup>52</sup> Jacob Margolis (@JacobMargolis), tweet, 12 Feb, 2019, 1:38pm, accessed 7 May, 2019, <https://twitter.com/jacobmargolis/>

<sup>53</sup> Rachel Leishman, "Didn't Think You Could Cry Over the Opportunity Mars Rover More? Well, Get Ready!", *The Mary Sue*, 15 Feb, 2019, accessed 7 May, 2019, <https://www.themarysue.com/didnt-think-you-could-cry-over-the-opportunity-mars-rover-more-well-get-ready/>

from home, singing to itself as it died, memorialised by its helpless last message, was too much to bear. The response to the ‘death’ of the Opportunity rover included an abundance of artworks and poems dedicated to the robot<sup>54</sup>, exemplifying a huge cultural response to an anthropomorphic object.

In addition to the rover, it is easy to see examples of simplicity and naivety in spoken anthropomorphised products closer to home. Even though home assistants such as Alexa and Google home use voice in a very developed way, there is still a certain primitiveness evoked from their incomprehension of human nuance and emotion when engaging in general chit chat with their users. The sadistic aggression felt towards simplistic personalities in objects which Ngai spoke of is apparent in even the most developed of smart products, with 10-15% of all home assistant interactions being abusive.<sup>55</sup>

Ngai elaborates on further negative consequences to anthropomorphised products. She talks about the attractive feeling of domination over a powerless cute object, quoting Marx in *Das Capital*. “Commodities...lack the power to resist man. If they are unwilling, he can use force; in other words, he can take possession of them.”<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, she notes the paradoxical nature of powerless objects, stating while we are dominant to them, they also have power and therefore a certain dominance over us; “The cute commodity, for all its pathos of powerlessness, is thus capable of making surprisingly powerful demands.”<sup>57</sup> Barbara Johnson expands on this in *Persons and Things* stating, “It is though the purchaser is seduced into

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<sup>54</sup> Tibi Puiu, “These tributes to the Opportunity Rover will break your heart”, *ZME Science*, 14 Feb, 2019, 2:34pm, accessed 5 May, 2019. <https://www.zmescience.com/space/tributes-opportunity-0423423/>

<sup>55</sup> Daniel Faggella, “Calling Siri Names? You’re Not Alone – A Closer Look at Misuse of AI Agents”, *Emerj*, 4 Feb, 2019, accessed 7 May 2019, <https://emerj.com/ai-podcast-interviews/calling-siri-names-youre-not-alone-a-closer-look-at-misuse-of-ai-agents/>

<sup>56</sup> 178 (Check ngai for proper source)

<sup>57</sup> Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 64.

feeling that buying the product is, in fact, carrying out the wishes of the product itself.”<sup>58</sup> With both the product and the consumer exerting power over each other, they find themselves in an endless feedback loop, lessening the gap between them and forcing the consumer to purchase the product, they need the product, and the product needs them in return.

The 2008 film WALL-E tells of a dystopian future caused by overconsumption, relayed through adorable anthropomorphised robots, providing inspiration for *Listening Machines*. The robots in this film adhere to Ngai’s criteria of cute characteristics and are composed of simplistic and naïve features. Many of the movies fondest characters are entirely two dimensional, created for the audience to fawn and laugh at their facile and juvenile demeanours. An example can be found within the character M-O, a cleaning bot who is defined through his aggressive desire to clean up contaminants on the spaceship. His aversion to dirt is shown through bright narrow eyes, a garbled assortment of sounds mixed with the words ‘foreign contaminant’ and increasingly frustrated physical language in his tiny, exaggerated body. The anthropomorphism of this bot plays entirely on his innocence whilst his almost pathetic obsession to clean renders him naïve of any other issues. Anger and distress are M-O’s sole character traits and combined with his aggression inhabiting a tiny body with accentuated features makes his fury seem so powerless that it becomes cute, mirroring a toddler sticking out their bottom lip when they want something they can’t have. Other anthropomorphised bots noted as fan favourite cuties consist of the broken and injured rogue robots which WALL-E encounters in the robot repair ward such as a sneezing vacuum cleaner and a malfunctioning massage robot who has the inability to control the speed of his arms. The uselessness of these characters and the pathetic aura they exude enhances their likability.

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<sup>58</sup> Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010), 20.



The autopilot AI for the Axiom spaceship (or Auto, as he's named in WALL-E) was a direct influence for the persona and sounds which define Angry in *Listening Machines*. Auto is a spaceship assistant gone rogue, with many of his attributes based off the renowned HAL in 2001: Space Odyssey. What I find interesting about Auto and HAL is that they weren't to be blamed for their actions. They have been designed to zealously follow orders, those of which in WALL-E are in place to represent the errors of past humans. This separation between morality and orders in these bots, particularly in Auto alongside combination of his monotonous robotic voice and movements, renders them also naïve and simplistic, and therefore cute.

The message that the robots represent in Disney's WALL-E is somewhat paradoxical. The movie presents a futuristic representation of Earth which through the control of the all-encompassing corporation Buy & Large, has been destroyed by overconsumption and overproduction. The anti-consumerist message is polarised with the ethos of the company that portrays it. Ironically, the warnings the film shows through a dystopian, junk filled future hasn't stopped Disney from releasing hundreds of different toys, t-shirts and other merchandise relating to the film, a large amount of which are plastic or made with non-biodegradable fibres, separating the message of the film with Disney's actions even further. This is itself demonstrates that while Disney may hide behind progressive messages of anti-consumption, its real reason for anthropomorphism and the creation of cute characters is to maximise profit, as exemplified succinctly in WALL-E. Booker gives further examples of Disney utilising anthropomorphism to promote consumerism in his book *Disney Pixar and the Hidden Messages of Children's Films*. He says, "magically animated objects (including a candelabra, a teapot, and a clock—all of which turn out to be humans transformed by magic) play a very large role in the film, once again conveying the notion that objects can have magical powers and thus reinforcing a consumerist worship of commodities (while effacing the reality that

these things can only come into existence through the agency of human labour).”<sup>59</sup> In addition to promoting a consumerist lifestyle, he also theorises that popular films shape children’s tastes rather than being inspired by them, “moulding young viewers into ideal consumers not only for children’s films but for the other products produced by our consumerist society.”<sup>60</sup> Could it be that Disney’s consumerist depictions of robots as anthropomorphised characters in WALL-E have not only had an influence in the market with the products and merchandise that are available for consumption, but have also had an effect on the design of market products, in particular encouraging the wide spread anthropomorphism we see in home related tech and smart products?

*Listening Machines* has been inspired by other art pieces which use anthropomorphism to bridge the emotional gap between humans and things which are not alive, and to question the use of technology and AI in the present world, along with its potential impact on the future. *Listening Machines* was heavily inspired by *ShyBot*<sup>61</sup>, a Norma Jeane art piece in which a self-driving robot, programmed to avoid humans was left to roam the California desert. *ShyBot* was inspired by the rovers on Mars wandering the extra-terrestrial plains alone. Jeane imagined for them, a mission which was not scientific but of emotional significance for the robots, stating on her website “What if, instead of an information-gathering emotionally-neutral mission, the Rover had an emotional mission? What if the robot chose to wander the desert because it wanted to be left alone, and the desert was a place where it felt most safe? What if the robot was...shy?”<sup>62</sup> In giving the robot the human characteristic of shy, and leaving the ankle height rover to wander the Coachella valley alone, she fulfils Ngai’s criteria for cuteness (overt

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<sup>59</sup> M. Keith Booker, *Disney, Pixar, and the Hidden Messages of Children’s Films* (Greenport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2009), 55.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>61</sup> Norma Jean, *ShyBot*, (Desert X, 2017), various mechanical and digital gears.

<sup>62</sup> Norma Jeane, “ShyBot”, *Norma Jeane Contemporary*, Accessed 8 May, 2019, <http://www.normajeane-contemporary.com/index.php/portfolios/shybot-2017/>

simplicity and naivety), and elicits an emotional response for the robot. Ironically, the robot went missing and was presumed to be stolen or destroyed by humans. Following this, missing posters were placed along the Californian highways, calling for the robot's safe return, further implying its intention as an anthropomorphised emotional being. *Future You*, a work by Universal Everything<sup>63</sup>, shown at the Barbican as part of its AI: More than Human<sup>64</sup> exhibition, is an interactive installation which uses the Xbox Kinect to track body movements and map them to generative figures displaying futuristic qualities, mirroring the participant's movements. Universal Everything's website page for this project contains various pictures and text implying the processes and inspirations used to create the work, including photos of industrial robots bearing resemblance to parts of human bodies<sup>65</sup>. By using inspiration of human mimicked machines, Universal Everything creates images of anthropomorphic technological beings as a way to imaging what humanity could look like in the future. *Future You* was inspiring in the making of *Listening Machines* as it suggested a way to directly connect and interact with a robotic installation which uses parts of you as its process, as with the vocal analysis used to generate a varying output in *Listening Machines*. Artist duo !Mediengruppe Bitnik's work, *Ashely Madison Angels at Work in London* (2017)<sup>66</sup>, shown for the first time in their solo exhibition *Are You Online Now?*<sup>67</sup>, was inspiring for this project in the way that it discusses interactions with online bots, the persuasiveness that they can have on us, and their contribution to online consumerism. The work uses information released from the Ashley Madison data breach in 2015, where information about its members and staff was released to

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<sup>63</sup> Universal Everything, *Future You*, (Barbican, 2019), digital installation.

<sup>64</sup> *AI: More than Human*, Barbican, 2019, London, UK, exhibition.

<sup>65</sup> Universal Everything, "Future You", accessed 5 Feb 2020, image 12, <https://universaleverything.com/projects/future-you>

<sup>66</sup> !Mediengruppe Bitnik, *Madison Angels at Work in London*, (Annka Kulty's Gallery, 2017), digital installation with five screens.

<sup>67</sup> *Are You Online Now?*, Annka Kulty's Gallery, 2017, London, UK, exhibition.

the public by anonymous group The Impact Team<sup>68</sup>. The breach showed that near all human members of the site were men, conversing with one or more of the 75,000 female chatbots created to draw men into costly conversation. !Mediengruppe Bitnik uses the data from the breach to give spatial and personality embodiment to several of the fembots which were active in London at the time of the breach. Here, they anthropomorphise sets of data from anthropomorphic bots and question the current relationship between human and machine, and how anthropomorphism is used in online sex consumerism.

When designing the work, I tried to base the characters' personalities according to Ngai's criteria for cute inanimate objects, simplicity and naivety. I made the sounds, the range of variation with different vocal tones and the way the speakers were dressed in the space overtly simple in hope of achieving this. I also tried to make the personality of each speaker entirely one-dimensional, with one emotion defining their entire personality, from the sounds that they make to the way they were dressed - exemplified in their names, Happy, Sad and Angry. In doing this, I aimed to demonstrate that we could feel an empathetic response to inanimate objects if they displayed minimal elements of cuteness that made us feel attached to them. Working on the robots at home, I developed emotional responses to their responses as I built them, but after the final realisation of the project, I am aware that I didn't manage to capture the full empathetic response from audience members to the robots that I was seeking to obtain with the installation. Retrospectively, I think this could be improved in a number of ways. Firstly, there were limited prompts to push the audience to interact with the speakers by using different vocal tones, such as shouting, and furthermore, in a gallery setting, audience members are perhaps not comfortable to do this around other attendants. Moreover, due to the speakers being placed in the open in the space, there wasn't the opportunity for people to

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<sup>68</sup> Ward, Mark, "Ashley Madison: Who are the hackers behind the attack?". *BBC News*, 20 Aug, 2015, accessed 10 Jan 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-34002053>

interact with them in an enclosed and quiet space to enable exploration within the installation fully. To improve this aspect, I would like to make the experience more intimate, by perhaps placing the robot installations in alcove areas, enabling people to interact with them on a one to one or small group basis, making the interaction feel more relevant on a personal level. It would also be interesting to see how interaction between audience members and the speakers is affected by the experience being directed through headphones equipped with a microphone. If worn by the participant during the installation, this could create an enclosed and personal environment where they wouldn't have to raise their voice to be picked up by the microphones, which can behave differently in different settings, making it harder to process accurately. Although I was trying to emulate the very simple visual characteristics of anthropomorphised objects talked about in this commentary, such as the Henry Hoover or Roomba, I appreciate now that the decoration of the speakers was perhaps too flimsy and unrefined to be a convincing face for the robot. To rectify this, I would like to take an approach using screens to generate animated faces forming part of the robot structure, similar to how robotic dog toys for children display different expressions through the use of screens displaying eye movements. I chose speakers to be the body of the robots initially as I was intending to demonstrate how sound is used in anthropomorphic objects. However, I now feel that this choice is rather redundant due to the wider connotations of the concept used to inspire this work. I would like to reconsider the sculptural aspect of the speakers and explore using imitations of household devices which create anthropomorphic responses as a sculptural tool, relating the body of the robots to the concept in a way which is more clear.

## ***Information Superhighway***

*“You sit almost motionless, relaxed, your eyes focused on a glowing screen - the only source of light in an otherwise dark room. Your fingers tap lightly as your mind converges on the words and images that float before you. At times it seems like there is no difference between your thoughts and those images. At times it seems the distinction between inner and outer worlds almost disappears. At times, time itself evaporates. You are a computer user immersed in cyberspace. All melts into a new reality that transcends the rules of conventional reality. Like a Zen master in meditation, you have become one with the virtual universe.”<sup>69</sup>*

Not even twenty years ago, the internet, a commonplace in the lives of the vast majority of the west, was viewed through a lens which shrouded the intangible technological feat in a veil of science fiction wonder. Referred to as the ‘Information Superhighway’<sup>70</sup>, the internet was portrayed as a limitless world of information situated on an ethereal cyber plane, destined to change the world forever. Though a product of science fiction only a few decades ago the concept of the internet doesn’t seem in any way strange to most people despite the fact that it allows us to exist as a copy of ourselves on a parallel cyber plane, however this copy is not always reflective of our physical selves.

Anonymity online encourages individuals to share their ‘true’ minds on the internet with people of similar ideas due to the lack of backlash in communities they are part of. The

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<sup>69</sup> John Suler, “Cyberspace as Dream World; Illusion and Reality at the “Palace”, *The Psychology of Cyberspace*, July 1996, 1, accessed 2 Dec 2018, <http://truecenterpublishing.com/psyber/cybdream.html>

<sup>70</sup> Josh Dzieza, “A history of metaphors for the internet”, *The Verge*, 20 Aug, 2014, accessed 3 Dec, 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2014/8/20/6046003/a-history-of-metaphors-for-the-internet>

differing social rules of the physical world make it hard for certain people to be candid about their views without judgement and criticism in real life whereas on the internet the same comments would be praised by far away people with similar viewpoints. In an age of Photoshop and Instagram influencers, where the quality of our lives is judged by our Facebook feeds, the difference between our online personas, portrayed through a series of images and handpicked comments and opinions, and our physical selves is wider than ever. The personas we create for ourselves on the internet are completely handcrafted, whether intentional or not. Even if one is not participating in the art of ‘catfishing’ (leading someone to think you’re a different person through an online persona), there is still a discrepancy between one’s physical self and one’s cyber self, due to the latter of which being carefully mediated through selected images and text, providing small simplistic snapshots into individuals lives whilst filtering out unwanted content.

Given the enormous populations of social media sites, it is not surprising that a huge amount of individual lives have been massively influenced by different online relationships and communities that have shaped their identity. For many, the internet provides a way to be a more confident, more outspoken, cooler, better version of their physical selves. With the increasing time people spend online, some find that the cyber-world and individuals online personas living within them can feel more authentic and desirable than their physical counterparts. For example, the online game *Second Life* allows people to construct their own digital self without the constraints of their social and physical limitations. These communities and platforms which people communicate through in the world of the internet are as complex and detailed as physical versions but due to the solo experience of interacting with people located far away geographically online through a screen, whose only tangibility is through pixels and ASCII characters, our highly individualised experience of the internet exists only in the cyber-world we have created for ourselves in our own psyche.

The intangibility of the internet makes it appear that it is operating on a separate plane of existence, incompatible with the restrictions of the real world. Though an idea that two decades ago could only be made sense of through bad CGI and topological metaphors, in the modern day, how do we make sense of cyberspace, and how do we utilise cyberspace to make sense of the happenings of the physical world? *Information Superhighway* aims to outline the nonsensical nature of the internet as something which feels separate from the physical world due to its immaterial nature and the massive differences in community and self, compared to the physical world.

It is no secret that the breadth of information on the internet is incredibly vast. We could find out anything we ever possibly wanted to know, to the point that one could learn to fly a plane just from watching YouTube tutorials. Most of us, however, tend to stick with what we already know and love, forming online communities on different media platforms. With over four billion users of the internet there are communities and subcultures dedicated to any hobby, interest or set of ideals conceivable, no matter how bizarre or perverse. In a world where we are just one click away from each other, it could be assumed that we would be brought closer together through shared interest. However, the opposite appears to be happening, and we are increasingly being pulled apart by our own interests by groups of like-minded people sharing information that we all agree with, creating echo-chambers in online communities and making it hard to accept other information that doesn't agree with our own set of ideals. This is particularly noticeable among political subcultures and communities, though a large number of supposedly non-political groups still have political ideas penetrating their core and a large amount of their users aligning to similar political orientations. Richard Khan and Douglas Keller state in their essay "Internet Subcultures and Oppositional Politics", 'While there is a plethora of alternative cultures at work on the Internet today, it would of course be a mistake to categorize them all as concerned strictly with either democracy or progressive politics.



Rather, akin to the complexity of the postmodern era at hand, the subculture of the Internet would be better represented as multiplicitous, with the Net being used for both progressive and reactionary causes by an abundance of groups whose politics range from the far-left to the extreme right.”<sup>71</sup> Fathali Moghaddam, professor of psychology at Georgetown University notes that political online echo-chambers play an instrumental role in radicalising groups of people, stating “It’s a slow process sometimes, but it can also be rapid. The key issues are that individuals feel that they are being mistreated, that there is injustice in the world. Particularly nowadays, through the internet, an echo chamber has developed and isolation takes places, so this group radicalises.”<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, he points out that not only are individual groups the cause of radicalisation within their communities but the responses between opposing groups actually leads to the further separation of ideals, in effect radicalising each other. Expanding this idea, Angela Nagle states in her book *Kill All Normies*, “Every bizarre event, new identity and strange subcultural behaviour that baffles general audiences when they eventually make the mainstream media, from otherkin to far right Pepe memes, can be understood as a response to a response, each one responding angrily to the existence of the other. Trumpian mememakers ramped up their taboo-breaking anti-PC style in response to gender-bending Tumblr users, who themselves then became more sensitive, more convinced of the racism, misogyny and heteronormative oppression of the world outside of their online subcultures. At the same time, the ‘deplorable’, from the Trumpian trolls to the alt-right, view the Hillary loyalists – the entrenched identity politics of Tumblr and the intersectional anti-free speech campus left – as evidence of their – equally bleak view of a rapidly declining Western civilisation, as both sides

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<sup>71</sup> Richard Khan and Douglas Keller, “Internet Subcultures and Oppositional Politics”, *The Post Subcultures Reader*, pg.303-310 (New York: Berg, 2003), para. 7, accessed online 2 Dec, 2018,

<https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/internetsubculturesoppositionalpolitics.pdf>

<sup>72</sup> Molly Wood, “How internet “echo-chambers” lead to faster radicalization”, *WHYY*, 20 Mar, 2019, accessed 13 Apr, 2019, <https://whyy.org/articles/how-internet-echo-chambers-lead-to-faster-radicalization/>

have become increasingly unmoored to any cultural mainstream, which scarcely resembles either bleak vision.”<sup>73</sup> Especially on Twitter, where due to the high number of politicians and other high profile individuals sharing their opinions and interacting directly with their audiences, echo chambers are rife. Unlike a newspaper, Twitter users are able to cherry pick the news and opinions that appear on their feed, often leading to a one-sided perspective on issues. This bias of information available to users can separate opposing groups even further, making the gap between so vast that it seems unlikely that there will ever be any middle ground between the two. *Information Superhighway* aims to show the nonsensical and absurd results that could arise if polarising groups or subcultures were ever to come together. It does this through the use of a twitter bot which generates sentences based off a database of recent tweets relating to key words which participants send to the handle @serena\_speaks.

Even though these online communities are felt to have a huge presence online (particularly the intimidating ideals of far-right communities), it is rare to see direct action from internet radicalisation bleed out into real life, making the world of the internet seem even more separated from the physical one. There are several reasons why this occurs. The first being the aforementioned idea that rules of society would not permit extreme ideas to be met without harsh criticism in real life, when people log off they would be unlikely to mention their online activities or ‘true’ set of ideals formed out of internet radicalisation to people in the physical world not among the same internet circles. This is called the ‘disinhibition effect’ among researchers.<sup>74</sup> Secondly, people often feel like they can get away with more online since their actions can face little consequence when hidden behind an anonymised persona. John Suler says of the disinhibition effect “Whatever they say or do can’t be directly linked to the rest of

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<sup>73</sup> Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, (Hants: Zero Books, 2017), 12-13.

<sup>74</sup> John Suler, “The Online Disinhibition Effect”, *CyberPsychology & Behaviour*, 321-326, July, 2004, accessed 2 Feb, 2019, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/8451443\\_The\\_Online\\_Disinhibition\\_Effect](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/8451443_The_Online_Disinhibition_Effect)

their lives. They don't have to own their behaviour by acknowledging it within the full context of who they 'really' are. When acting out hostile feelings, the person doesn't have to take responsibility for those actions. In fact, people might even convince themselves that those behaviours 'aren't me at all', acting as a form of psychological dissociation."<sup>75</sup> Whilst people don't equate their online personas as being a part of their true self, similarly they may not view the avatars they are talking to as 'real' people. When individuals talk to others online, it has been shown that it is common to apply different characteristics to them such as a voice or an image, leading us to believe that the conversation with individuals online is actually happening with an imaginary character inside our head.<sup>76</sup> Suler also points out that the asynchronic method of online conversation further contributes to the disinhibition effect and the psychological dissociation between our physical selves and cyber selves. He says, "Immediate, real-time feedback from others tends to have a very powerful effect on the ongoing flow of how much people reveal about themselves. In e-mail and message boards, where there are delays in that feedback, people's train of thought may progress more steadily and quickly towards deeper expressions of what they are thinking and feeling. Some people may even experience asynchronous communication as "running away" after posting a message that is personal, emotional, or hostile. It feels safe putting it "out there" where it can be left behind. In some cases, as Kali Munro, an online psychotherapist, aptly describes it, the person may be participating in an "emotional hit and run."<sup>77</sup> With the different elements that create cyber-dissociation in mind, *Information Superhighway* aims to show this feeling of disconnect between the physical self and the cyber self through its use of different audio, visual and sculptural devices, intending to create a dream-like world which exists between the physical and the digital.

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<sup>75</sup> Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect", para. 5.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 8.

*Information Superhighway* demonstrates its concept through the use of several audio-visual and interactive techniques designed to imitate the essence of internet through the style of online art - in particular art which is inspired by the surreal nature of dissociative cyberspace through aesthetics of the past. The installation is designed to work as a reverse time capsule, something which if placed in the time when the internet was still referred to as the 'Information Superhighway' and seen as a science-fiction like discovery could give participants an insight into the future. The art styles I have been inspired by in the making of this project include vaporwave and 'surreal memes', a genre of nonsensical meme which has since been theorised to be a form of Neo-Dadaism, an escapist method which reflects the nonsensical and bleak happenings of both the cyber and physical world, in the subject of online think pieces and blog posts by members of niche internet communities. It is worth nothing that while this theory doesn't have any academic literature attempting to verify the claims it is still useful as a reference point for attempting to understand the absurd nature of corners of internet humour. This is internet culture discussing itself. Tumblr user inrealityadream says of their personal thoughts on the links between and modern nonsensical memes "from my perspective - there's serious intellectual continuity between the absurdity of attaching a bunch of tacks to the bottom of an iron, rendering it useless, and say...bath bomb posts. Put a fucking MacBook in a bath. It's useless now. Nobody fucking cares anymore. You want something funny? You want a punchline? Gun. That's your punchline. Take it. I am laughing."<sup>78</sup> Millennials make up a large portion of the people creating surrealist art of the internet and from their perspective there is much to be disillusioned by in the contemporary world. Millennials are the first generation since the 1800s to do worse off than their parents<sup>79</sup> - the planet is dying, no one can

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<sup>78</sup> Inrealityadream, "tumblr meme culture is really just a form of neo-dadaism", *inrealityadream.tumblr.com*, accessed 4 Apr, 2019,

<sup>79</sup> Jim Edwards, "Millennials: Britain's first generation since the 1800s to do worse than their parents: An economic trend that ensured British prosperity for the last 136 years just went into reverse", *Business Insider*, 13 Feb, 2017, accessed 4 Apr, 2019,

afford homes and there is nothing that the younger generation can do about it. Furthermore, they are called lazy and self-interested by the generations that created these problems in the first place. It is not surprising that these issues could lead to a similar mind-set which inspired the first Dada artists, who as a reaction to a fragmented and senseless world during WWII made senseless art which rejected the conventions that initially created the global absurdity. Stephanie Tikkanen, an assistant professor in communication studies at Ohio University has said on the matter, “I feel like when the world is that bleak and there’s so little hope, I think millennials are really suffering a lot from that. Why not escape to this absurdist viewpoint of the world?”<sup>80</sup>

Many of the surreal memes coming from this generation are situated in a parallel animated world where nothing makes sense and warps physical limitations such as time and space. *Information Superhighway* aims to make the participant question the layer of reality they are on, attempting to make the installation appear like is it somewhere between cyberspace the physical world. Like Dada art, a visual style of surreal internet memes is hard to pin down, though some subcultures making styles of art and music, such as Vaporwave have a definite aesthetic style with retro computer imagery, pixelated graphics, Grecian statues and a pastel pink and purple colour scheme.

Information Superhighway draws inspiration from works that deal with the internet as a topographical location and the overwhelming amount of information that comes with that. Molly Soda is a digital artist and internet personality who is well known for her webcam performances that she posts on websites such as Tumblr, Instagram and YouTube. Her work deals with internet social culture and the idea of an individual’s place in the cyber world. She

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<https://www.businessinsider.com/millennials-uk-first-generation-1800s-do-worse-than-parents-resolution-foundation-2017-2?r=US&IR=T>

<sup>80</sup> Logan Pasqual, “Neo-Dadaism: Why absurd memes relate with millennials”, *The Post*, para. 4, 30 Jan, 2018, accessed 4 Apr, 2019, <https://www.thepostathens.com/article/2018/01/memes-neo-dadaism-millennial-humor>

has made reference to her thoughts on the internet working similarly to physical social spaces saying “Everyone’s sort of like always repping a place where they’re from. I’ve sort of realised that the internet is that space for me.”<sup>81</sup> Her work *Inbox Full* (2012)<sup>82</sup> is an eight-hour performance art piece of her reading her messages on Tumblr, showcasing the overwhelming amount of interaction and information gained from online communication. Similarly, her work *Me Singing Stay by Rihanna* (2018)<sup>83</sup>, demonstrates the somewhat counter-intuitive social aspect of the internet and the masses of people longing to be part of an online community. By using found footage from YouTube of young women posting videos of them singing to a backing track of Stay whilst alone in their bedroom, Molly Soda creates a lonely and melancholy choir demonstrating the togetherness, and yet not, of internet sociality, alongside showing the breadth of similar videos online of young people seeking social interaction online. Another inspiration for *Information Superhighway* is *Listening Post*<sup>84</sup> by Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin. I had the chance to see it on multiple occasions at the Science Museum from its installation in 2008 and it has remained as a source of inspiration for me ever since. Listening post is an artwork that mines thousands of conversations from chat rooms and displayed on a grid of 2231 vacuum fluorescent text displays. Like *Information Superhighway*, *Listening Post* uses a text-to-speech synthesiser to voice some of the phrases shown on the screens as part of an accompanying sometimes ambient, sometimes noisy soundtrack. For me, the triumph of *Listening Post* lies in its ability to spatialize the conversations from around the world and submerge the listener in the chaos of the internet, weaving them into the matter of cyberspace. Peter Eeley says of the audible aspects of the installation in a review for Frieze magazine,

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<sup>81</sup> American Masters PBS, “Molly Soda, Digital Artist”, duration 5:36, Posted Dec 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9F2tk7rxkSA>

<sup>82</sup> Molly Soda, *Inbox Full*, (YouTube, 2012), film, accessed 7 Feb 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdfIXkwwU1Y&t=646s>

<sup>83</sup> Molly Soda, *Me Singing Stay by Rihanna*, (Annka Kulty’s Gallery, 2017), film.

<sup>84</sup> Mark Hansen, Ben Rubin, *Listening Post*, (Science Museum, 2005: object number 2014-47), digital installation.

‘Appropriately, the timbre and tone of their sounds give one the feeling of being inside a tiny submarine, with the weight of an unspeakably vast ocean pushing in on the space where one sits listening. In places this sonic landscape flips and expands to suggest a huge and sonically wet room: one can imagine a billion droplets of sound overhead, engorging and waiting to fall and be heard.’<sup>85</sup> I have been directly inspired by Hansen and Rubin’s choice to use an ambient soundtrack with small aspects of noise to create a spatial feel and immersive aspect in demonstrating online social culture. Finally, I was inspired by Ed Devlin’s use of Markov chains in *Poem Portraits*<sup>86</sup>, a work which devises a large collective and generative poem through the use of Markov Chains to show collectivity through the use of. The algorithm uses user donated words to generate lines of poetry using over 25 million words from 19th-century poets as the source text. These lines of poetry are then joined to create a collective poem. Ed Devlin says of the inception of the work, ‘We wanted to find a way to fuse the voices of the 1,500 guests who were at the Serpentine Summer Party. We wanted everyone leaving to be able to leave the gallery taking their own piece of the collective work in the form of a personal portrait.’<sup>87</sup> Though much of what the computer puts out is nonsensical, there are many accidental coherent sentences which provoke emotions even though not written with that purpose, which I aimed to reproduce in my work.

Of all the projects presented for this portfolio of creative work, *Information Superhighway* has the most numerous components, both artistic and technical. The installation is interactive in more ways than one and contains both visual and audible aspects which are both scripted to ensure that the installation is constantly moving and never the same twice. The

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<sup>85</sup> Elee, Peter, “Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin”, *Frieze*, May 2003, accessed 20 Feb 2020, <https://frieze.com/article/mark-hansen-and-ben-rubin>

<sup>86</sup> Ed Devlin, *Poem Portraits*, (Barbican, 2019), generative digital art.

<sup>87</sup> Ed Devlin, Ross Goodwin, IYOIYO, Google Arts & Culture, “PoemPortraits”, *Experiments with Google*, May 2019, accessed 20 Feb 2020, <https://experiments.withgoogle.com/poemportraits>

ambient sounds to accompany the installation are composed of a number of start-up sounds from old computers, slowed down by around 20 times. The script which plays these sounds was written in SuperCollider. The programme chooses a sound sample and the speed, pitch, filter and envelope with which it is played, at random. This process happens every five to eight seconds to ensure that there is never a gap in the sound produced. The accompanying video shown on the CRT monitor in the background of the generated text was made in Blender as a never-ending loop and uses a VHS glitch royalty-free video as a filter to give it a retro feel. The text overlaying the video and spoken by the text-to-speech mechanism is generated from a bank of tweets, using search words tweeted to the account to create the database. To do this, I wrote a Python script to both data scrape from Twitter and generate the tweets. I used a plethora of Python libraries to assist with this, including Markovify – a simple Markov chain generator which builds Markov models of large corpora of text and generates random sentences from this. I gave the script instructions to generate a sentence with a random length but less than the character limit of 280 that Twitter enforces. The sentence also had to include the word which was used to mine the collection of relevant tweets for the database. The result was then tweeted to the Twitter handle @serena\_speaks, displayed on the CRT television overlaying the looped video and spoken by the text to speech feature of Mac OS and amplified to participants. When the cloud in the installation is squeezed, a contact microphone within its structure measures the amplitude created by the sound of the plastic and balloons, and uses this to generate a glitch effect for both the visual and audio components. The sound processing was achieved in SuperCollider by a script which stutters sound, using live input for the trigger and variable values. For the glitch effect in the visual components, I used Vsynth modules in Max MSP to split the clip's RGB channels, and apply a noise filter to the video which was changed in strength by the amplitude values registered by the contact microphone in the cloud sculpture. The final interactive component was a retro-style telephone which could be picked up and



listened to. The sound through the telephone was a convoluted version of the latest generated tweet to be heard over the speakers. This was made through the use of patterns in SuperCollider with an applied high pass filter to mimic the sound of old telephones.

A large part of the concept for this installation revolves around the idea of the similarities and differences of cyber and physical space. I chose for *Information Superhighway* to occupy a physical space in the installation, building the space to mimic a living room. The generated tweets occupied visual and audible space on both the monitors and through speakers, attempting to create an immersive environment in which the audience member was enveloped by the words of the internet. I specifically chose a living room for the set up as it is a place of familiarity and comfort in a home, similar to how some people may feel about online spaces. The looped video on the CRT television features a never-ending road leading towards a pastel moon across neon geometric structures. I wanted to create a clear link between the antiquated idea of an ‘information superhighway’ and the structure which this phrase conjures up in our minds. The neon structures are intended to be potentially conflated as both imitations of technological structures and fitting with the general aesthetic theme of Vaporwave, an art style born out of the internet which uses nostalgic and futuristic elements alongside pastel colours and surreal images and text. The text-to-speech component of the installation and twitter account @serena\_speaks displaying the generated tweets is supposed to represent a single character who in turn represents the internet as a whole. Serena is named after one of the voices featured in the OS voiceover utility which is used to speak the generated sentences. The medium of sentence generation through Markov chains was chosen to create nonsensical yet occasionally seemingly sentient sentences, which intend to represent many voices and conflicts between internet communities as a whole – nonsensical, often hard to tap into and full of conflicting information and views. The input for the generated tweets was created by the use of several search words taken from user tweets to @serena\_speaks, creating a cross-over of

content for the sentence generation script. This led to conflicting and interesting results which are often funny, weird or offensive. In the showing of this installation to an audience, I tied cut out birds with the twitter handle displayed on them to the cloud sculpture in the middle of the installation. However, I felt that the prompt to interact with the twitter bot wasn't strong enough for a number of reasons. The installation is programmed to be infinitely running and continual without interaction, never giving a technical or artistic prompt to participants to interact with it. Secondly, I feel as though the level of interaction wasn't rewarding enough as it was not clear how participant's interaction affected the work. As multiple search words were used, no direct links could be made between audience tweets to the bot and generated tweets. Participants also tweeted full sentences such as 'who are you and what do u want with my species'<sup>88</sup>, which indicates that there was not sufficient information about how the process worked, leading to tweets which weren't helpful or impactful for sentence generation. A possible modification to improve this would be a way to directly interact with the bot through an interface in the installation, perhaps on a computer or iPad, which uses the words typed in to generate the tweets for the installation, creating a direct interaction which would enable the audience member to have more control over the substance of the tweets. I originally intended for the speech and text on screen to be unclear so the audience only heard snippets of the generated sentences and text, but realise now that the concept would be more powerfully demonstrated if this was clearer, perhaps through the use of a streamed twitter feed on a separate screen or more delicate processing of the text to speech voice to make it more clearly audible.

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<sup>88</sup> Owen, Maya, twitter post, 29 Aug, 2019, 5:54pm,  
<https://twitter.com/mayaceliaowen/status/1167118213920034817>

## *I?*

*I?* is an audio-visual short film which aims to give a brief glimpse into the consumerist wave that gripped the world post WWII, inspired by Jameson's theory of pastiche in recreating images of the past. It aims to offer a creative interpretation of the implications of consumerism on identity and wellbeing in the future through the aesthetics of Cyberpunk, in which the commodification of the past for nostalgia purposes is a pillar in the genre. This project was originally created as a neo-burlesque number to be performed at MakeMore Festival with Invisible Cabaret in 2018. After the festival, I made the decision to turn the project into a short film using the soundtrack I created for the burlesque piece to better display the intrinsic link between advertising and the effects of consumerism. Marshal McLuhan stated, "Historians and archaeologists will one day discover that the ads of our times are the richest and most faithful daily reflections that any society ever made of its entire range of activities"<sup>89</sup> (1964, p. 14). Since postmodern society is completely saturated with different products and images through which we identify ourselves, it's easy to see how this can be so. Marx (1887) describes advertising as a purpose to create 'commodity fetishism', mystifying and exaggerating product value, showing how advertising can dictate the way we operate our lives and the image of ourselves.<sup>90</sup> Jameson states of postmodern culture, "(it's) a periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order-what is often euphemistically called modernization, post-industrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism. This new moment of capitalism can be dated from the post-war

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<sup>89</sup> Marshal McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The extensions of man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 14.

<sup>90</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1* (Moscow: Foreign Language Publicity House, 1887), 47-48.

boom in the United States in the late 1940s and early '50s".<sup>91</sup> *I?* explores the implications of past present and future postmodern consumption through stylistically pastiched images of the past contrasted with those of the present.

The end of the second world war brought with it an age of economic flourish in the US.<sup>92</sup> During the 1950's the economy continued to grow, expanding by 37% over the course of the decade whilst the average American family gained 30% more purchasing power.<sup>93</sup> Whilst waste was once regarded as a sign of sin, it followed a progression to a sign of status in the fifties.<sup>94</sup> Historian Lizabeth Cohen explains of the era, "The new postwar order deemed, then, that the good customer devoted to "more, newer, and better" was in fact the good citizen, responsible for making the United States a more desirable place for all its people."<sup>95</sup> Not only did the consumer in 1950s America satisfy an indulgent material desire that hadn't been exploited before, consumption was praised as a patriotic act, further encouraging the purchasing of commodities.

Marketing tactics in the 1950s were drastically different from those of today, explained by Paulie Boutlis in *A Theory of Postmodern Advertising*. "In all, advertising techniques of the post-war period were based on a patronising view of consumers. (And those like Packard, Galbraith and Ewen, who criticise advertising as a manipulative practice, perpetuate this

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<sup>91</sup> Frederic Jameson, "Postmodern and Consumer Society" *Whitney Museum* (lecture), 1982, 5, accessed 2 Aug, 2018,

[http://art.ucsc.edu/sites/default/files/Jameson\\_Postmodernism\\_and\\_Consumer\\_Society.pdf](http://art.ucsc.edu/sites/default/files/Jameson_Postmodernism_and_Consumer_Society.pdf)

<sup>92</sup> Paulie Boutlis, "A Theory of Postmodern Advertising", *International Journal of Advertising* 19:1 2001, 4.

<sup>93</sup> "Economy in the 1950s", *Schmoop*, 4, accessed 14 Nov, 2018, <https://www.shmoop.com/1950s/economy.html>

<sup>94</sup> Jonathan Patrick Diggins, "A Decade to Make One Proud", in *Major Problems in American History vol:II*, ed. Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, Edward J. Blum, Jon Gjerde (Boston: Cengage Learning, Inc, 2011), 347.

<sup>95</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, "A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America", *Journal of Consumer Research* 31(1), 2004, 236.

demeaning view of people as simple fools.)”<sup>96</sup>. Women in particular, he notes were the target audience of consumption, due to the fact that were perceived by the time to be naturally “frivolous and exhibitionist”.<sup>97</sup> Boutlis continues, “In turn, women were seductresses of men, leading them astray from their rational defences. Psychoanalytical studies in the 1950s claimed women baked cakes because they wanted babies; men drove convertibles because they represented mistresses.”<sup>98</sup> Advertising in the 1950s entrenched traditional gender roles, offering individuals a comfortable way of buying into them. This was not due to capitalist conspiracy, as Boutlis points out, but due to self-fulfilling prophecy with advertising and social norms stuck in a feedback loop, informing and reinforcing self-limiting conceptions.<sup>99</sup>

The social revolution of the 60s brought with it a myriad of new marketing opportunities which drastically changed consumer culture. Consumer products during the 1950s were predominantly aimed at a group of wealthy, middle-class families, living ‘the good life’. Groups excluded from this band of consumers, including the African American people of the civil rights movement fought to be included in American society opening up a new consumer market full of untapped potential for US businesses whilst baby boomers expanded the leisure, fashion and entertainment markets.<sup>100</sup>

The concern for social justice that penetrated culture during the 1970s was replaced by the need for success and material goods among many baby boomers by the time the 1980s came around. Madonna’s “Material Girl” topped the charts in 1985 providing an ode to material consumption and branding the decade as the material world in which Madonna, the ultimate material girl lived. It was the age of the Walkman, microwave and the Rubix Cube,

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<sup>96</sup> Boutlis, *International Journal of Advertising*, 6.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

one of the most iconic toys of the time. Adverts would often use futuristic elements to highlight products, suggesting that in some way or another, the era was already in the 'future'. Emergent glossy magazines encouraged people to identify themselves through brand image and material goods. Dominic Sandbrook says of the British publication, *The Face*, "For me, what *The Face* absolutely captured was the one of the defining characteristics of the advertising crazed 1980s. The idea that consumerism isn't really about the stuff, it's about you, the consumer. It's about who you are, what you want to be and look like. It's about the image."<sup>101</sup> *I?* uses the advertising and aesthetic styles of the 1950s and 1980s to display the past due to their recognisability, differentiating styles and relation to Cyberpunk, which I will expand on later.

In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson talks extensively about displaying the past as pastiche and how these images represent a "loss of historicalness" in media. He says of historical pastiche in film, "it being understood that the nostalgia film was never a matter of some old-fashioned "representation" of historical content, but instead approached the "past" through stylistic connotation, conveying "pastness" by the glossy qualities of the image, and "1930s-ness" or "1950s-ness" by the attributes of fashion"<sup>102</sup> He notes that these hollow stylistic connotations of history, which he labels as "pop-history", is a history of eclectic aesthetic styles founded on images mediated from commercial culture.<sup>103</sup> Jameson explains the fragmented nature of temporal postmodernism as "emblematic of the disappearance of certain relationship to history and the past"<sup>104</sup> (Stephanson 31). Postmodernism has ensured that the present is all there is. David Harvey states of the temporal

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<sup>101</sup> Dominic Sandbrook, "How did the 80s change us?" video, posted by *BBC iWonder*, n.d, accessed 13 Apr, 2019, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/zcy4bk7>

<sup>102</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London, Verso, 1991), 19.

<sup>103</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 25.

<sup>104</sup> Anders Stephanson and Frederic Jameson, "Regarding Postmodernism—a Conversation with Frederic Jameson", *Social Text*, No. 21, *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism* (Durham, California, 1989), 31.

experience of postmodernism in *Conditions of Postmodernity*, “the history of capitalism has been characterized by speed-up in the pace of life, while so overcoming spatial barriers that the world seems to collapse inward upon us. As time horizons shortens to the point where the present is all there is, so we have to learn how to cope with an overwhelming sense of compression of our spatial and temporal worlds.”<sup>105</sup> Due to the fragmentation of time and eternal present demonstrated in postmodern culture, we no longer have access to our own past and instead use an idealised construction of it to produce a sense of nostalgia. This nostalgia however, is an inauthentic representation of the past in which we lose our ability to recognise the truisms of history. This cycle continues into postmodern culture, recycling styles of the past into simulacrum, “the identical copy for which no original has ever existed”<sup>106</sup>. In *I?*, I have aimed to demonstrate the stereotypes of pastiche images of the past through the use of stylistic effects in video over modern film and commercials, contrasted with advertisements of the same era. As the film progresses and the videos move towards the style of Cyberpunk, a genre defined by the neon aesthetics of a gritty commodified future ruled by corporations, the same types of videos used to portray the aesthetic of the 1950s and the 1980s are used under different stylisations to represent the future, showing the distorted temporal perception of time through stylised pastiches in postmodern society. Though stylised pastiches from their respective eras, these two aesthetic connotations are also heavily used the genre of Cyberpunk. Though Cyberpunk issues had been discussed in the works of authors such as Phillip K. Dick since the 1960s, such as the 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, it wasn’t until the 1980s when the release of Gibson’s ‘Neuromancer’ and movies such as *Blade Runner* and *Akira* that the genre’s aesthetic was solidified.<sup>107</sup> Cyberpunk is hugely inspired by the commercial

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<sup>105</sup> David Harvey, *Conditions of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 240.

<sup>106</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 18.

<sup>107</sup> McKenzie Wark, “Cyberpunk, from subculture to Mainstream”, *21\*C*, n.d, accessed 13 Apr, 2019, [http://project.cyberpunk.ru/idb/cyberpunk\\_from\\_subculture\\_to\\_mainstream.html](http://project.cyberpunk.ru/idb/cyberpunk_from_subculture_to_mainstream.html)

aesthetics of the 1980s due to the style emerging in that era<sup>108</sup>, which placed in the future and mediated through many new forms of media today creates a temporal dissonance between the past and the future, fusing them into one eternal postmodern present. The subject of nostalgia is rife in Cyberpunk, often using hollow images of the 1950s and 1960s to show this alongside stylistic elements of imaginations of the future during these eras,<sup>109</sup> thus fitting Jameson's criteria of pastiche.

In postmodern advertising, the product is almost completely lost in favour of image. Current advertisements rarely show a straight demonstration of a product in their commercials, instead favouring the display of an idea, aesthetic or feeling, seducing individuals into buying into an intangible concept or feeling which can never be delivered by the product. An example of this includes the 2009 global marketing campaign by Coca-Cola 'Open Happiness'. The campaign spanned two years and included an assortment of TV commercials and a marketing song which went on to be sung a collaboration of high profile musicians including Cee-Lo-Green, Brendon Urie and Janelle Monáe. Pauli's Boutlis explains, "In the postmodern situation, advertising, as rhetoric and appearance, is no longer regarded as subordinate to production. Instead, it is a mirror to consumer society - to the constant turnover of superfluous cultural commodities or fads. The dialectic between 'truth' (production) and 'appearance' (advertising) is radically subverted. 'Appearance' becomes the only 'truth'. Advertising becomes inseparable from production (the production of fads); branding becomes just as, if not more, important, as the 'substance' of the product."<sup>110</sup> What is being sold here is not a product whose value is held

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<sup>108</sup> Paul Walker-Emig, "Neon and corporate dystopias: why does cyberpunk refuse to move on?", *The Guardian*, 16 Oct, 2018, accessed 13 Apr, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2018/oct/16/neon-corporate-dystopias-why-does-cyberpunk-refuse-move-on>

<sup>109</sup> Elana Gomel, "Recycled Dystopias: Cyberpunk and the End of History", *MDPI* (2018), accessed 12 May, 2019, <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0752/7/3/31/pdf>

<sup>110</sup> Boutlis, *International Journal of Advertising*, 12.



in its use, but a product with intrinsic value centred in its existence as a consumable item and its purpose as an arbitrary image which mirrors the desires of consumer culture. Adorno says “information promotes the decay of aesthetic image”<sup>111</sup>, arguing that what has become important is not the aesthetic creation itself, but the consumer’s ability to recognise it as culturally significant without adopting modes of critical evaluation and instead being seduced by the image and by others who consume the image. Enforcing this point, Adorno states. “Even the entertainment film becomes a newsreel and extension of its own publicity: We learn what Lana Turner looks like in a sweater”<sup>112</sup>, highlighting the use of celebrities as mediators of falsely promised images in advertising.

The postmodern consumer defines themselves through “a series of abstractions, through which their desires, sense of identity and memories are replicated and then sold back to them as products.”<sup>113</sup> The postmodern consumer’s identity is crafted completely out of these arbitrary abstractions, adopting brands as symbols of self and identity. In turn, commerce inserts itself to design every aspect of our being through changes style, feeding the cycle of commodity and consumer. Boutlis says of the postmodern consumer “Instead of seeking validation of self and social position, postmodern consumers seek the systematic obliteration, erasure of 'self through consumption - where consumption is the ceaseless process of shedding and re-invention.”<sup>114</sup> Our identities are constantly being defined by the images mediated to us, creating a lack of continuity of self and therefore the loss of individual identity. Postmodern consumers seek identity through commodity and image to the point of ‘obesity’, Baudrillard’s term for extreme self-parody, where the line between internal and external identity become

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<sup>111</sup> Theodore Adorno and J. M. Bernstein, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 2001), 82.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>113</sup> Larry McCaffery, *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk & Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham, California, 1991), 7.

<sup>114</sup> Boutlis, *International Journal of Advertising*, 18.

blurred, erasing the internal self and presenting individualism as a manifestation of evolving commodities.<sup>115</sup>

The destruction of identity and abstract ideas mediated to us through postmodern advertising can have a damaging effect on an individual, associating feelings with a product which can never be obtained by purchasing it. Common tropes of arbitrary publicized goals in advertising in which we define ourselves include happiness, status and friendship. Since the 1950s consumption has grown exponentially. Whilst mental health awareness has only recently become an area of focus among the general populous, there is evidence to suggest that it has also been a growing problem, with more people experiencing severe mental health symptoms than 25 years ago.<sup>116</sup> Postmodernism promotes consumers to use extrinsic goals to define themselves - focusing on the building of wealth and working inherently against intrinsic self-care. Focusing on our exterior image rather than interior goals and relationships leads to a decrease in emotional well-being according to several psychological studies. An excerpt from “Intrinsic and Extrinsic Goals: Their Structure and Relationship to Well-Being in German and U.S College Students” explains this. “Recent work in the United States has suggested that some of the goals proffered by free-market economy cultures as worthwhile are actually associated with lower levels of well-being when they are highly valued. For example, Kasser and Ryan (1993, 1996, in press) have shown people whose system of goals is strongly focused on financial success, attractiveness, and popularity have relatively low levels of well-being and happiness. In contrast, people oriented toward goals such as self-acceptance, affiliation,

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<sup>115</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, tr. by Philip Beitchman and W. G. J. Neisluchowski (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990), 65.

<sup>116</sup> “Mental Health & Wellbeing in England, Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey 2017”, *NHS Digital* (England, 2017), accessed online 5 May, 2019, <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/adult-psychiatric-morbidity-survey/adult-psychiatric-morbidity-survey-survey-of-mental-health-and-wellbeing-england-2014>

community feeling, and physical fitness generally have higher levels of well-being.”<sup>117</sup> Another study from 2016 found similar findings in Chinese students with extrinsic goals stating “Results of hierarchical linear modeling analyses indicated that undergraduate students with low levels of intrinsic goals reported greater depressive symptoms following the occurrence of social and academic hassles than did those with high levels of such goals.”<sup>118</sup> In a world where we define our being through images, particularly those with the promise of happiness or community we are only setting ourselves up for failure and paying into a system which perpetuates extrinsic goals and therefore the decline of mental well-being with it. The future looks bleak, the images in which we define ourselves and those mediated to us through advertising run in vicious circles making it impossible to break free of the postmodern consumerist world - a cyberpunk like future of our own therefore doesn't seem far off. Perhaps it is already our present.

I? Draws inspiration from other works which deal with hyperreality and postmodern identity, both in concept and aesthetic. I have been inspired by artist Signe Pierce, who frequently explores themes of gender and identity in hyperreality. For this work, I found her piece *American Reflexxx*<sup>119</sup> to be a useful demonstration of the destruction of identity through images. Although Pierce's work surrounds the destruction of identity through internet images, while mine focuses on this through consumerism, I found the way she stages her piece, the costume she wore and the way she edited the piece to be very powerful, and inspirational in the making of my work. In this piece, Pierce brings a condensed image powered persona of the

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<sup>117</sup> Peter Schmuck, Tim Kasser and Richard M. Ryan, “Intrinsic and Extrinsic Goals: Their Structure and Relationship to Well-Being in German and U.S College Students”, *Social Indicators Research* 50: 225-241 (Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 225.

<sup>118</sup> Ling Y et al., “Intrinsic and extrinsic goals as moderators of stress and depressive symptoms in Chinese undergraduate students: A multi-wave longitudinal study”, *BMC Psychiatry*, May 2016.

<sup>119</sup> Signe Pierce, *American Reflexxx*, 2013, film, accessed 12 Feb 2020, <http://www.americanreflexxx.com/>

internet into real life. The character dresses in classic ‘sexy girl’ trope clothes, a common pastiche of woman which is prevalent on the internet. She wears a reflective mask, showing the lack of need of identification when she appears as a simulacrum of a human, perpetuated only through online images. She gauges reactions from the ‘real world’ as she walks along Myrtle Beach in South Carolina and then in turn makes it part of the internet image through the showing of the art film on YouTube. She chooses to film in front of heavily sloganized shops, exemplifying her destruction of character through images, whilst using the neon lights and mirrored shop floors for aesthetic value. In the film, she has chosen to feature members of the public following her and taking videos, with the quote ‘I’m putting this on Instagram’<sup>120</sup> audibly heard in the background at one moment. Here, she is demonstrating the real world internet cycle - everything in our world is inspired and related to the images we perceive online and then in turn is filmed and documented and put back online to continue the perpetual cycle of images, getting further and further away from an authentic experience each time. Pierce explores similar themes of digital identity in her solo show *Digital Streams of Uploadable Consciousness*<sup>121</sup>, shown at Annka Kulty’s gallery in London in 2019. Pierce shows a selection of video work using feedback in the app PhotoBooth, which inspired me to use technology interfaces in my own work. Other notable works which have inspired this project are the self-portraits of Cindy Sherman throughout her career, also examining the unrecognisable self. Sherman renders herself unrecognisable both using digital and analogue photographs with heavy editing and a particular attention to costume and makeup. Sherman often depicts herself in scenes of the past, mimicking the idea of self under pastiches of history. Some favourites of mine are her *Untitled Film Stills* (1978)<sup>122</sup>, which depict unnamed women whose identity is

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<sup>120</sup> Ali Coates Signe Pierce, “American Reflexxx”, YouTube, April 2015, accessed 5 Feb 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXn1xavynj8>

<sup>121</sup> *Digital Streams of Uploadable Consciousness*, Annka Kulty’s Gallery, 2019, London, UK, exhibition.

<sup>122</sup> Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Stills*, 1977-1980, photography.

secondary to the aesthetic they are surrounded by. Here, the aesthetic of black and white films within the photographs appears as a pastiche snapshot of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, reducing the identity of the character to an immediately recognisable cultural image. *I?* Seeks to expand on the themes of pastiche explored by Sherman and Signe by placing it under a consumerist lens whilst referencing both the past and the future.

As previously stated, *I?* was originally created as a burlesque number to be performed live with Invisible Cabaret at Make More Festival in 2018. Invisible Cabaret is a cabaret and burlesque group who perform acts on the topic of mental health and the stigma surrounding it. My cabaret name within the troupe is Blue Monday (given my general disdain towards consumer capitalism), and I wanted to create an act that encompassed both mental health and the effect of consumer capitalism upon it. The original act featured a narrative of a character who indulged in consumerism through the images and adverts that were mediated to her, only to become overwhelmed and realise that identifying herself through the tangible things that she consumed had led to a loss of identity and therefore, a decrease in her mental health. After the performance I decided that I wanted to take the project further and apply more conceptual focus on the grip that consumer capitalism has had on the world since the end of WWII and how this affects identity in the contemporary age. Ultimately, I decided that film would be the best medium in which to do this as I could show several different aspects of the concept and include found footage and images of consumer culture, which would be vital in demonstrating the concept. In the film, I still wanted to keep the narrative of the singular character, which I did by using the same character in each time period. However, I found that without costume changes and other performative measures, I had more freedom to think about the characterisation of different time periods and enjoyed creating a product of advertising in each eras whilst defining the character in the film more deeply. I found that most of my definition of characters and style came with the costumes and in post processing. When filming, I tried

to imitate the movements, costumes and hair and makeup of characters within adverts from found footage to remain true to the mediated images from each time period. When processing material in Final Cut Pro X, I tried to match the colour scheme and quality of filmed footage to that of the adverts. I wanted to blend the filmed and found footage so it was hard to tell which was which. I side-chained videos so that one video would be the filter for another, meshing their colour schemes and overlaying their content. I used Blender to create the 3D footage seen in the 80s, cyberpunk and end sections, thinking about texturing and materials as the most important aspect of the 3D models to demonstrate the different eras and styles. For the movement of the animated replica of the character seen beforehand in the film, I used the Xbox Kinect in conjunction with blender to track my movements and map them onto the model. I then captured the movements on the skeleton capture armature and rig to use in the film to further demonstrate the destruction of identity. When creating the soundtrack for the film, I used a MicroKorg to create the gritty synths used in the beginning and end sections, and the more experimental sound used to degrade Material Girl after it begins to glitch. For the glitch sounds, I created a script in SuperCollider that tracks amplitude from a live source and uses the numbers generated from this to stutter and change the frequency of an input, in this case, Madonna's Material Girl, and later the repeated audio samples from adverts.

*I?* deals mainly with the concept of the loss of identity under consumer culture and the reduction in emotional wellbeing that comes with this. It shows a story of a character throughout the evolving consumer culture from post WWII to present day and how she identifies herself under these circumstances, eventually leading to the loss of her identity. I chose to use the aesthetics of cyberpunk and retrofuturism as a means to tell this story and explore the concepts due to their use in popular literature and media, and relation to the topics I wanted to discuss. Cyberpunk is a subgenre of fiction which focuses on a combination of low-life and high-tech, displaying corporate control and dystopian social order. With the rise of

corporate saturation and mediation into every aspect of contemporary life, particularly through technologies, cyberpunk lends both aesthetic and conceptual qualities to this piece. In Cyberpunk, society is governed by the release and oversaturation of products and consumables, leading people to live their whole lives through them, thus losing their identity. I wanted to demonstrate that while the world of Cyberpunk appears to be something out of science fiction, the concepts of the world are not too far off our own. The aesthetics of Cyberpunk are widely varied but predominantly feature dark, rainy hyper-dense cities with neon advertisements and technological machines and gadgets saturating every point of view, particularly in pink, red and purple. For *I?*, I was inspired mostly by the colour scheme and advertising saturation aspects of Cyberpunk's aesthetic qualities, whilst the technological aspects of the genre still make an appearance in the work. Though I attempted to show these aesthetic qualities within the film, I realise that the scale of worldwide consumer culture saturation was perhaps lost. True to Cyberpunk, I would like to include more footage which shows the effect of consumer capitalism on society as a whole by displaying advertising and images in cities, bringing the outside world into the film. I was inspired by retrofuturism's nostalgia for a future which never came to pass and the idea of the future as imagined by people of the past. I loved the idea of mixing media of technology with that of the 1950s and 60s. Inspired by this idea, I dressed the character in *I?* in a recognisable copy of 1950s clothing and took screen videos of the character in the Mac OS interfaces of Photo Booth, meshing the past and present/future together, creating an idea of retrofuturism in the footage. In the continued development of this project, I look forward to stretching this idea and possibly creating new interfaces and imagine the role of technology in the future, with the use of computer generated art programmes such as Blender. When creating the soundtrack, I wanted to use the idea of meshing past and present together in a retro futurist way that also contained the aesthetic qualities of Cyberpunk. I choose to compose the theme of gritty synths and arpeggiator generated sequences, mimicking the sounds

of science fiction soundtracks such as 'Blade Runner' made in the 80s, which in turn were aiming to create the sounds of the future. Over this, I laid sounds taken directly from commercials dating from the 1950s, making a *mélange* of past, present and future. The choice of the computer animated figure at the end refers to the core concepts of hyper-technology in Cyberpunk, and how we might identify ourselves through this. Having realised the project, I realise that the concepts would be supplemented with the use of other original works alongside the film. I would like to develop some other installations related to *I?*, including an interactive installation where participants can control the animated figure from the video with the use of an Xbox Kinect.



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