

ACADEMY OF PERFORMING ARTS IN PRAGUE
THEATRE FACULTY

PERFORMING ARTS
DIRECTING FOR DEVISED AND OBJECT THEATRE

MASTERS THESIS

Politics and Performativity

Bria de la Mare

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Date of thesis defense: June 2019

Academic title granted: M.A.

Prague, 2019

AKADEMIE MÚZICKÝCH UMĚNÍ V PRAZE
DIVADELNÍ FAKULTA

DRAMATICKÁ UMĚNÍ
DIRECTING FOR DEVISED AND OBJECT THEATRE

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Politika a Performativita

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Datum obhajoby: červen 2019

Přidělovaný akademický titul: M.A.

Praha, 2019

Declaration

I declare that I have prepared my Master's Thesis independently on the following topic:

Politics and Performativity

under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

Prague, date:

.....

Signature of the candidate

Warning

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Abstract

Politics and Performativity is an exploration of theatre's ability to act as a tool for socio-political change. The foundations of this text will be laid upon the performance/exhibition Popaganda; the final, thesis project created by a team of students from the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, opening for three days in September 2018 in an empty building in central Prague. Popaganda was a practical experiment which attempted to decipher which conditions might be necessary for a performative act to transform into a agent of socio-political change. Through considering key theories such as artistic activism, ethical spectacle and cognitive shock alongside the results of Popaganda, this text will aim to outline potential conditions for performativity to impact political change. *Politics and Performativity* will introduce the work of Popaganda and then consider three key elements of the performance; it's content acquired through appropriation, the effect on the audience achieved through cognitive shock and its potential to effect change through a /consumer/product relationship. These focused topics will provide an opportunity to consider how Popaganda may have impacted some form of concrete change as well as how these elements may be improved and used in other conditions and situations of performativity.

Abstrakt

Politika a performativita je zkoumáním schopnosti divadla působit jako nástroj pro společensko-politickou změnu. Základy tohoto textu budou položeny na představení/výstavě Popaganda. Jde o projekt diplomové práce vytvořený týmem studentů z Akademie múzických umění v Praze, který v prázdné budově v centru Prahy otevřel na tři dny v září 2018. Popaganda byl praktický experiment, který se pokusil rozluštit, které podmínky jsou nezbytné pro přeměnu performativního aktu na prostředek sociopolitické změny. Tento text se spolu s výsledky Popagandy a klíčových teorií, jako jsou umělecký aktivismus, etické hledisko a kognitivní šok, zaměří na nastínění potenciálních podmínek performativity, které by mohly mít dopad na politickou změnu. *Politika a performativita* představí práci Popagandy a zváží tři klíčové prvky performance, mezi které patří obsah získaný apropriací, kognitivním šokem dosažený účinek na publikum a potenciál dopadu na změnu skrze vztah konzumenta/produktu. Tato témata poskytnou příležitost zvážit, jak projekt Popaganda mohl mít dopad na některé formy konkrétní změny, a také jak mohou být tyto prvky vylepšeny a použity v jiných podmínkách a situacích performativity.

Acknowledgments

This thesis comes as I close the chapter on my time in Prague, studying at the Academy of Performing Arts. The last two years have been profound, I have learnt, done and experienced things which fundamentally changed my outlook on performance and the world entirely.

I'd like to thank everyone at DAMU who has supported me, especially Sodja Lotker and Branislava Kuburović who have mentored me through my final project and thesis.

A special thank you to everyone involved in Popaganda, especially Sorcha Gibson who taught me a great deal about design and was a wonderful collaborator.

An extra special thank you to my family; my Father and Grandmother who, without hesitation, have supported me financially through the last two years, my Mother and Sisters who always cheer me on. To Eva and Sorcha for their friendship in Prague. And finally, to John, who did everything possible to help me reach my goals.

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Introduction

For the past five years I have been trying to negotiate two ambitions; the first being the need to make a 'difference' through some sort of political activism, the second being a need to make art, mostly in the form of performance. Aware of the notion of political theatre from a young age I felt following its path would lead to the mediation between these two desires. However, as I grew older, learning more about the limits of both activism and art, I grew confused and disheartened. In the last year I have been exposed to some hopeful glimmers of possibilities as to how I might begin this mediation again. They have come in the form of performances that have successfully 'achieved' what I had once hoped to achieve. They have also come in the form of books outlying theories and methods that would help me formulate a type of practice that could potentially lead me to my desires. They have also arrived as questions that have pushed me to rethink the boundaries of art and politics that I had kept, offering alternative paths that could still lead me to my goals.

Popaganda was in many ways the first real experiment after having reevaluated my ambitions. An exhibition presenting itself as a new, pop-up shop that had come to Prague for just three days, Popaganda was a self-proclaimed business success dealing in the commodity of lies. It's ambition was to help its customers live in a post-truth world by encouraging them to lie back to those that would try and deceive you. It did this by selling products that would help you lie more efficiently. Popaganda attempted to raise awareness, dialogue and discuss alternative solutions to the post-truth epidemic that seemed to be plaguing society at the time.

Popaganda was an attempt at putting into practices the theories I had read in books; it took inspiration from projects I had admired and it tentatively began to try to answer some of the questions I had been asking myself about the limits of theatre and its alternative applications. This text will help me look deeper into what it was that I discovered from the first experiment

and will allow me to reconsider again how I might want to mediate my two ambitions. Perhaps the ambitions will change, perhaps there will be no need for mediation anymore or perhaps I will discover the path to reconciliation to be just as long as it was when I first started. Consequently, this text will use performative and political theories, examples of other work and the results of Popaganda to formulate a language that will help to answer and ask more questions on the topic of the marriage of performativity and politics.

This text will consider a few key theories that will also serve to inform dramaturgical structures for measuring Popaganda. The chosen theories will help digest what Popaganda was and what it had the potential to become, focusing in on the key mechanisms in play in Popaganda and the results they may have produced. This text will also consider how an audience may react to these methods of dramaturgy and consider their possible applications both inside and outside of a performance context. Furthermore, this text will consider how I might take these dramaturgical ideas into a future outside of education requiring an application that could develop business and career ambitions.

Politics and Performativity is a journey through what was and what could be, a sketch of a potential blueprint for artists and activists who, like me, want to change the way change is made.

Glossary

Below are a list of terms that will appear frequently or significantly within this text. The terms are defined below either in strict adherence to their dictionary definitions or, instead, specified to my own definitions which have been re-contextualised according to the parameters and needs of this text.

Ethics/Ethical

The measure of an act's commitment to upholding moral values and treating their audiences with respect and care. These moral values may be assumed, universal laws/guides and can also be (but not always) related to law and justice.

Reality

A verified state of existence, not one of fiction or representation of the real. Perception of reality can be subjective but 'the real reality' may refer to the normality of the everyday.

Creativity

The use of artistic or inventive practices, structures, ideas, actions and behaviours. Application of creativity can go beyond the parameters of art and be applied to all manners of situations and acts.

Activism

Actions, behaviours and attempts to provoke political-social change through strategic plans and actions.

Progressive Politics

Political agenda that favours change, often radical and for the improvement of the general public rather than the government or business.

Spectacle

A performative display of actions intended to provoke certain behaviours and emotions within its audience.

Cognitive Shock

The interruption of one's pattern of thinking leading to a reconsidering of one's beliefs, dreams, desires and ideals.

Hoax

A fake act which has the temporary ambition to be perceived as real.

Subscription

A declaration of association, exchange or support for another person, group or organisation.

Artistic Activism

As defined by The Centre of Artistic Activism; A practice which seeks to combine creativity and activism. This combination should lead to AEFECT¹; the combination of emotional affect and material effect.

¹ Why Artistic Activism?, c4aa, <https://c4aa.org/2018/04/why-artistic-activism/> 28/04/2019.

Ethical Spectacle

*A term coined by Stephen Duncombe; “The concept of ethical spectacle offers a way of thinking about the tactical and strategic use of signs, symbols, myths, and fantasies to advance progressive, democratic goals. First introduced in a 2004 article by Andrew Boyd and Stephen Duncombe and later expanded in Duncombe’s 2007 book *Dream*, the theory’s premises are: (1) that politics is as much an affair of desire and fantasy as it is reason and rationality, (2) that we live in an intensely mediated age (what Situationist Guy Debord called the Society of the Spectacle), (3) that in order to be politically effective, activists need to enter the realm of spectacle, and (4) that spectacular interventions have the potential to be both ethical and emancipatory.”²*

Ironically Real/ Ironic Reality

*A new reality, only defined as a ‘reality’ due to feeling like a reality or being desired as a reality by a spectator.; “Most spectacle employs illusion in the pretense of portraying reality; ethical spectacle demonstrates the reality of its own illusions. Ethical spectacle reminds the viewer that the spectacle is never reality, but always a spectacle. In this way, **ironically**, spectacle becomes **real**.”³*

² *Theory: Ethical Spectacle*, Beautiful Trouble, <https://beautifultrouble.org/theory/ethical-spectacle/>, 16/04/2019.

³ Duncombe, Stephen. *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*, New York, 2007, pp.151–152.

Chapter I: A Match Made in Hell

An introduction to Popaganda and Post-Truth

*“If we are going to do this,
we would like to be truly honest with you.
We are only 70% original
70% authentic
70% real
70% worth it
We are honest about being dishonest.
We are informed about being misinformed.
We are certain about our uncertainty.
Choose lies and win.
Because remember,
the truth CAN set you free
but not until it is finished with you.”
Manifesto, Popaganda*

Popaganda was the materialisation of over a year’s efforts, striving to create a performative piece of work which could tackle the topic of post-truth. The process involved various different versions of the project prior to the one that opened in September in central Prague. That version, which is the focus of this text, was the largest and most climactic production from the Popaganda catalogue, the most complete materialisation of an idea which had been brewing in my mind over the course of the year. Popaganda was my final practical project of a two-year masters degree course in Directing of Devised & Object Theatre at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. Popaganda was made under my direction but was supported heavily by fellow students and resources from the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague as well as people from further afield⁴, who brought their own knowledge, experiences and skills to the project.

⁴ Popaganda’s Creative Team included Director: Bria de la Mare, Co-Creator/Design: Sorcha Gibson, Graphic Design: Thùy Ahn Vū & Loan Nguyen, Dramaturgy: Lea Kukovicic, Performers: Matej Sumbera, Matous Fendrych, Alyssa Dillard, Adam Panik, Sarah Vosobova, Producers: Adina Hanakova, Prokop Novak.

Popaganda popped up on the 6th of September inside an empty building next to Narodni Divadlo, in the very centre of the city. Students and teachers of AMU visited understanding the context that Popaganda was not the pop-up store it claimed to be, but in fact a performative exhibition. However, many passersby, tourists and locals entered Popaganda without this prior knowledge and were left to decipher the image and message in their own time and in their own way. The following description is an outline of how Popaganda may have been experienced at its face value.

An Outline of Popaganda

Popaganda claimed that it was more than just a store; it was a way of life. Popaganda explained that it believed lying had become a societal epidemic and that telling the truth would no longer work as an antidote. Popaganda suggested that in order to fight back against post-truth, everyday citizens must join in and commit to the lying. However, Popaganda made clear that the lies it promoted were for good; its lies would make its customers creative, happy and powerful. Popaganda housed these claims in a pop-up store that appeared to help its customers first by learning about how lying works, and secondly by providing products that would help them live a better life in the post-truth era. The store was open to the public between 11:00 and 19:00 through the 6th to the 8th of September, welcoming anyone and everyone through its doors.

Customers were welcomed at the entrance by a Popaganda shop assistant, dressed in an alarming amount of orange, and he or she handed customers a flyer explaining the three methods of lying that Popaganda sold. Customers were asked to sit in a waiting room for (a

recommended) five minutes; a darkened corner where they watched a projection of a man being repeatedly pushed to the floor (see image one⁵).

Customers then moved to the showrooms which, as described by the welcoming shop assistants, were opportunities for the customers to experience what the three ways of lying Popaganda was selling were like. Each showroom was designed to materialise the form of lying it represented. For example, The Cover Up represented lying done through hiding information, which was manifested by the presence of a large carpet covering over mystery objects. Customers walked through each of the three showrooms, which were separated by a black curtain. Assistants occasionally appeared, interacting and performing with the objects in the showrooms, which provided a performative, live atmosphere to the spaces (see image two⁶).

Once the customers were finished in the showrooms they proceeded through the one way system to the shop floor. There the assistants appeared in a more natural state, offering their help and advice regarding the products which were displayed on the shop floor (see image three⁷). There were three products for each method of lying, accompanied by an additional display of Popaganda merchandise which included t-shirts, badges and the Popaganda Handbook (see image four⁸). Assistants explained that the products were designed not only to help customers lie, but to lie more efficiently. For example, the Fake Tears helped users add emotional urgency to their lies, and they came in conveniently-sized bottles which could easily be stored in a wallet or purse.

⁵ Attachment 1

⁶ Attachment 1

⁷ Attachment 1

⁸ Attachment 1

If customers wished to purchase a product they could not use money, Popaganda dealt only in its own currency; lies. Customers were told that the only way they can walk away with a product is if they completed one of four tasks detailed in what was known as the Currency System. The task demanded by the Currency System were mostly centered around getting the customers to complete a type of lie. For example, one task was to cover over something in the immediate area⁹ (see image six¹⁰). Other tasks were more connected to the lifestyle and message Popaganda was promoting. For example, one of the more popular tasks was for the customer to publicly declare the Popaganda manifesto into the store's microphone.

If a customer completed one of these tasks, they did not receive the product directly, but instead they were given an instruction manual detailing how they could make the product themselves. This was, as the manual explained, to encourage "... the movement of ideas, don't keep silent or your creation might die."¹¹ The manual was placed in a Popaganda branded bag, often accompanied by freebies such as Popaganda tattoos and postcards.

Popaganda also had an office (see image seven¹²) which housed various Popaganda 'documents' including hate mail, next season plans and special sign-up questionnaires for outstanding customers. The questionnaire was revealed by shop assistants who saw potential in particularly interested customers. The questionnaire was designed to encourage customers to write their allegiance to the lifestyle that Popaganda promoted.

⁹ Two young, British girls had seen the sign outside Popaganda, curious they walked over to the building and began talking. They thought it was 'Just a pop-up store' and believing it really was they entered. They engaged throughout the shop floor and when it came time to decide if they were going to purchase a product, they were more than enthusiastic. A shop assistant convinced them to purchase through the Cover Up exchange and one of the girls asked for some material to use to do the job. The shop assistant handed her a Popaganda shopping bag and she proceeded to pull it over her head. As she stood there, giggling, with a white paper bag with the Popaganda logo branded over her head, I felt very contented. In that moment, the girl unknowingly embodied some of the more complex nuances of the post-truth condition in one, single image.

¹⁰ Attachment 1

¹¹ Attachment 2

¹² Attachment 1

Popaganda and Post-Truth

Popaganda was an attempt to create a piece of political theatre on the topic of post-truth, whilst avoiding political theatre formats that derive its value from its ability to educate an audience on the issues and dangers of its chosen topic (such as documentary theatre). I was anxious that Popaganda might just add to the already saturated conversation on the dangers of post-truth that was prevalent in the media. Instead, I wanted Popaganda to aim to provide a space and an opportunity to *experience* the topic in a way that was *different* from that which already existed in everyday life. I wanted to provide an opportunity for critique rather than directly preach critique. I aimed to present the topic of post-truth as an open experiment, ready to be dissected by performativity and an audience.

Post-truth had entered into my vocabulary two years previous to the opening of Popaganda. In 2016, post-truth became the 'hot new thing', though, in fact, it wasn't the 'hot new thing' but rather an 'old thing' that had reared its ugly head again. It was voted Word of the Year by the Oxford Dictionary after becoming the official buzz word in the run up to the 2016 American Presidential election and the EU referendum in Britain. The "shocking"¹³ events of 2016 led many commentators to deem that we now lived in a post-truth era, while other commentators pointed out that we've been living in a post-truth era for a long time and it was merely the lack of effort to cover up lies that made it seem we were in some new, deluded hell¹⁴. In either case,

¹³ "A wave of shock is reverberating around Europe as countries across the EU and beyond digest the decision by UK voters to leave the European Union."

Brexit: Europe stunned by UK Leave vote, BBC News <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36616018>, 16/04/2019.

¹⁴ "...truth has always been twisted by politicians..."

A philosopher of truth says we're not living in a "post-truth" world after all, Quartz

post-truth began to take form as a modern day monster, that year's number one enemy, the perpetrator of all that was going wrong in the world.

However, this 'bad guy' didn't take form in a tangible body, it didn't even have a stereotypical representation, a stock image that could capture the identity of post-truth. Post-truth feels like an atmosphere of distrust that surrounds and interrupts what we might assume to be the natural order of things (reality). You can find post-truth at your local retailer (misleading detox teas), your medical centre (a nurse that sticks the needle in on the count of two not the promised three) or during your favourite holiday (a parent willing their child to bed with the promise of a present-bringing father of Christmas). There is no single source of origin to point the finger of blame and, as Matthew d'Ancona explains in his book *Post-Truth: The War on Truth and How To Fight Back*, there is no concrete adversary or perpetrator ("Trump is a consequence and not the cause"¹⁵). As the research developed, discovering there was no single adversary to war with, it became clear that there was no use for Popaganda to aim its efforts towards the take down and demystification of post-truth. To do so would be unproductive, knowing that post-truth in itself was neither man, organisation or governmental body, meaning any attempt to directly criticise would be meaningless and essentially impossible (can you directly criticise a non-sentient being?). Instead of warning people about the presence of post-truth, it seemed more productive to have Popaganda act as a lighthouse that could guide people through the fog of the post-truth era.

The objective of this project was to avoid an educational format meaning that encouraging audience to fact check, tell the truth and denounce lying would be against the agenda as well as being a worn out tactic, overused and proven to be an ineffective response to the epidemic.

<https://qz.com/1361505/a-philosopher-of-truth-says-were-not-living-in-a-post-truth-world-after-all/>, 16/04/2019.

¹⁵ d'Ancona, Matthew. *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back*. London, 2017. p. 5.

Popaganda would therefore need to find an alternative way to offer guidance, which would eventually come in the form of a spectacle, one of the key ingredients of post-truth itself. Like ghosts, post-truth is difficult to define; Oxford Dictionary attempts to define post-truth as “Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”¹⁶, its essential component being the reprioritization of emotional beliefs over logical sense. Spectacle shares strong similarities in its definition with that of post-truth. Spectacle is usually defined as “A visually striking performance or display”, but the term has been increasingly appropriated to describe the relationship between image and viewer. Guy Debord, in *Society of the Spectacle*, writes that “The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by image.”¹⁷ alluding to the effect such images may have on an audience. Stephen Duncombe uses the term ‘spectacle’ to refer to the way in which a message speaks to the heart rather than the head, giving a more tangible form to people’s desires, a way to “...frame facts in such a way that they make sense and hold meaning for everyday people”¹⁸. In this sense, spectacle’s definition is very similar to the definition of post-truth in that they share the same emphasis on emotions rather than logic.

Duncombe’s writing on spectacle is part of his theory on the Ethical Spectacle, which he writes about in his book *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*¹⁹. Duncombe argues that spectacle is not something to be avoided because of a fear of manipulating others (“Dreams often make those who are left-of-center nervous. Fantasy and spectacle have been the property of Fascism, totalitarian, Communism...”²⁰). He argues that its ability to speak to

¹⁶ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/post-truth>

¹⁷ Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*, New York, 1994, p. 5.

¹⁸ Duncombe, 2007, p. 10.

¹⁹ A professor of Media and Culture at the Gallatin School of Individualized Study and at the Steinhardt School of New York University Duncombe writes on his website; “I wrote *Dream* almost ten years ago, but for better and worse, it seems eerily relevant today.”

²⁰ Duncombe, 2007, p. 13.

the dreams and desires of people is too valuable to be ignored; "...spectacle is something more. It is a way of making an argument. Not through appeals to reason, rationality, and self-evident truth, but instead through story and myth, fears and desire, imagination and fantasy. It realizes what reality cannot represent. It is the animation of an abstraction, a transformation from ideal to expression."²¹ Duncombe's proposal was thoroughly inspiring to the research progress for Popaganda, not just because it offered a creative way to open political dialogues but also because what he proposed was in many ways an ethical imagining of post-truth. His championing of the use of narratives that spoke to people's beliefs and dreams are in many ways the precise tactics used by post-truth (the favouritism for emotional appeal rather than logical). But what separates Duncombe's ethical spectacle from post-truth is Duncombe's insistence of ethical adjustments to the spectacle. He proposes some key ways in which the ethical spectacle can alleviate the unethical, manipulative traps that the spectacle (and post-truth) usually engage with; "[O]ur spectacles will be participatory: dreams the public can mold and shape themselves. They will be active: spectacles that work only if people help create them. They will be open-ended: setting stages to ask questions and leaving silences to formulate answers. And they will be transparent: dreams that one knows are dreams but which still have power to attract and inspire."²² The Ethical Spectacle, specifically the Transparent Spectacle, would become a blueprint for Popaganda to tackle the staging of a performative piece on post-truth, not by explaining its dangers but by (ethically) becoming a spectacle (and by association, a post-truth) itself.

The spectacle's ability to realise what "reality cannot represent" also promised a solution to the issue of post-truths' immaterial form. Popaganda would choose the spectacle of commerce as its way to materialise the complexities, nuances and the essential systems of post-truth.

²¹ Duncombe, 2007, p. 30.

²² Duncombe, Stephen. *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*, New York, 2007, p. 17.

Hijacking the consumer/product relationship and tactics of desire used to sell products, Popaganda would present post-truth as a market that customers could buy into, offering them a chance to participate knowingly in the exchange of falsehoods, doubts and half truths. Popaganda used phrases such as “lie back” or “If you can’t beat them, join them” to reinforce the message that, by buying into the post-truth era, they were not giving up, but in fact gaining the power of the enemy. The difference between customers of Popaganda and others who had weaponized post-truth is that Popaganda offered transparency. Popaganda was clear about its intentions as a open facing business, its manifesto clearly displayed at its entrance and its agenda clearly stated throughout. It was selling post-truth but with the ethical adjustment that the lies it encouraged were never represented as anything else but lies.

The ethical adjustment of transparency to Popaganda’s spectacle empowered the performance by providing it with an ability to offer an alternative narrative to the one currently being told. This was an important element to offer everyday citizens because it is they who are, in part, blamed for the rise of post-truth. Our use of the internet has aggravated key causes of the post-truth epidemic such as confirmation bias and homophilous sortings; “our impulse to congregate with the like-minded”²³. The increase in access to the readily expressed opinion of social media users has turned the internet into a key food source for post-truth. D’Ancona believes that “The web is the definitive vector of Post-Truth precisely because it is indifferent to falsehood, honesty and the difference between the two.”²⁴ The internet’s encouragement of the indifference to both falsehoods and honesty has allowed (material) adversaries to take advantage of the post-truth epidemic for their own agendas. The situation of post-truth that we find ourselves in today is not simply a cultural evolution but is actually an engineered cultural shift. In his book on Post-Truth, Lee McIntyre suggests that “The real objective (of post-truth)

²³ d’Ancona, 2017, p. 50.

²⁴ d’Ancona, 2017, p. 52.

is not to convince you that something is true. The real point of it is to assert power.”²⁵. Post-truth is power and has the ability to grant those that wield it an ability to govern without accountability with the possibility of being being able to control public opinion. D’Ancona captures this effect well when he writes “...political lies, spin and falsehood are emphatically not the same as Post-Truth. What is new is not the mendacity of politicians but the public’s response to it. Outrage gives way to indifference and, finally, to collusion.”²⁶The idea of a misinformed public colluding with those with more power against their best interest may seem dramatic, but it is in many ways a reality. On the one hand politicians and big business are masking the truth of their governance with stories and emotional logic, but on the other, humans respond favourably precisely because emotional logic is what they prefer.

Popaganda offered customers a chance to collude against their own (accidental) collusion through participating in a branded lifestyle of “indifference”, buying products and sporting merchandise that told the world that you lie, but you do it honestly and openly. This was an alternative to what commentators suggest was currently happening; the public were unknowingly perpetuating the situation. Popaganda did not tell its customers to stop colluding, it told them to do it on their own terms, to collude with their own interest and do it knowingly by buying products and joining Popaganda.

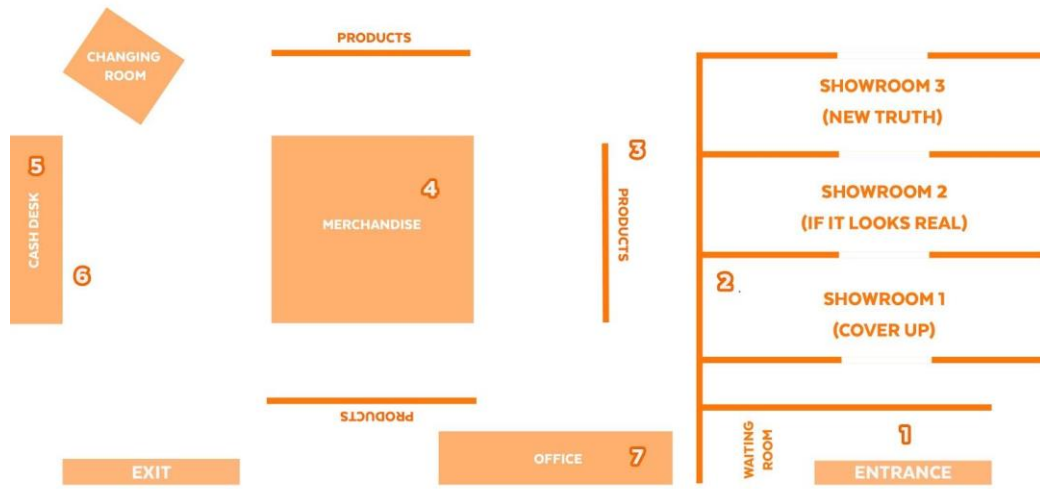
With its concept and key dramaturgical elements in place, supported by Duncombe’s guide to ethical adjustments, Popaganda launched into an attempt to re-package post-truth as a weapon for the everyday customer. Popaganda was an attempt at developing a performance that would tackle the topic of post-truth through embodying the problem rather than preaching

²⁵ *Post-truth, the ultimate form of cynicism*, Boston Globe, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2018/05/18/post-truth-ultimate-form-cynicism/jHR0TbsLmksAlwTKcYHU2L/story.html> 16/04/2019.

²⁶ d’Ancona, 2017, p. 26.

against it. This text will attempt to find more concrete terms that will help analyse Popaganda's attempts, effects and potential as a political performance. Within Popaganda are more sophisticated potentials for dramaturgy, theories and ideas which bring art, activism, reality and commerce into complex relationships. Within the next chapters I will look closely at these potentials, attempting to define them through analysing Popaganda alongside other theories and examples which may illuminate Popaganda's potentials.

Attachment 1



1



2



3



4



5



6



7

Attachment 2

After-Assembly Instructions

Congratulations! You have now successfully lied on your own terms, so what's next? We highly encourage that you document your creation by taking a picture and uploading it to social media, tag us at @shop_popaganda and #popaganda and #posttruth. Documenting and sharing your creation is essential to the movement of ideas, don't keep silent or your creation might die. Inspire others and keep on inspiring yourself, once it is out there it is really out there!

We look forward to seeing your creations and we are honored that you've joined us in our attempt to make the world a fairer place!

P O P A G A N D A

"For civil disobedience to have any meaningful effect, the resisters (you) must appropriate something of value to the state." - Electronic Civil Disobedience

"I think people in this country have had enough of experts..." - Michael Gove

Pre-assembly instructions

-  Please wash your hands before attempting to assemble your product.
-  Do not attempt assembly if this is not what you really want.
-  Two person assembly is recommended.
-  Keep children away during assembly unless product is for children.
-  Keep away from fire.



- 1 Find your reason why?** At Popaganda we highly recommend writing down your reason for wanting to make this product. Our customers like to use their FAKE TEARS in situations where they are telling an emotional lie, and need a little help.
- 2 Firstly,** you will need to make your tear solution, it's very simple, just pour some water into a container and add a pinch of salt!
- 3 Make sure** the container is sealed and stored in a cool, dry place.
- 4 Next,** you will need to find a small, portable container (something that can fit in your pocket is ideal).
- 5 Fill** that small container with your tear solution.
- 6 When the moment comes** for your emotional performance, find a private place to apply the tears - dab some of the solution onto your finger tips and drop into your eyes (do not put the tears on your cheeks, start at the eyes and let them roll down).
- 7 BONUS TIP:** if your Tear Solution is particularly salty you may actually get real tears when applied to your eyeballs from irritation!

Chapter II: Anything You Can Do Art Can Do Better

Tracking the use and effectiveness of appropriation as a method for creative activism and a tool for art to infiltrate reality

In 2004, BBC World hosted Dow Chemical Company spokesperson Jude Finisterra to mark the 20th anniversary of the Bhopal Disaster. The disaster happened in India in 1984, when a toxic gas leak caused the deaths of an estimated 14,000 people with more than 500,000 being impacted by the tragedy. The leak, considered to be the world's worst industrial accident, was blamed on Union Carbide India Limited, a chemical company that Dow purchased in 2001. In his appearance on BBC World, Jude Finisterra announced that Dow was taking what he referred to as 'full responsibility' for the event, detailing unprecedented action such as liquidating Union Carbide and using the twelve billion dollars to pay for the remediation of the site and health care for those whose lives were affected by the leak. The BBC World presenter criticised Finisterra for Dow's late response, and while Finisterra replied that though he agreed, this was the first time a corporation such as Dow had ever taken full responsibility for such a mistake. Shortly after the interview, Dow's shares dropped in value by two billion dollars, predicted by Finisterra but deemed a necessary setback in order "to do the right thing"²⁷.

If it sounds too good to be true then it's because that is exactly what the Jude Finisterra interview on BBC World was; too good and not true. The real Dow Chemical Company were quick to label the interview a 'hoax', and the BBC issued an apology and correction to the story; Dow would not be taking *any* responsibility for the Bhopal tragedy. Jude Finisterra was actually a member of *Yes Men*, an activist group²⁸ who had created a fake Dow website and been

²⁷ *Bhopal Disaster – BBC – The Yes Men*, razorfoundation
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LiWlvBro9eI> 16/04/2019.

²⁸ The Yes Men are an activist group consisting of two founding members Jacques Servin and Igor Vamos. They are largely associated with the culture jamming movement. Their work is mostly governed by the strategy of impersonating powerful entities. Other work includes the creation of a

contacted by a BBC journalist looking for Dow representatives to speak on the anniversary of the disaster. The Yes Men agreed, and appropriated the identity of a Dow representative to deliver its own message.

In 2017, a pop-up store opened in central Prague called Popaganda. Popaganda was open to the public who were often drawn in by shop assistants, handing out flyers claiming a new store had opened that would change your life. Inside customers would be put through a series of strange request (wait here five minutes, take off your shoes, walk through these rooms) before entering a shop floor. Popaganda was selling lies, openly and the only way you could buy them was to pay with your own lies. There was merchandise, business cards even a handbook. A shrine to the founder was in a corner and shop assistants carried mini size images of her in their pockets....

Was Popaganda a hoax? Was it a joke? Was it intended to trick people into thinking such a ridiculous store was real? Did it want its customers to wrestle with their sensibilities before caving in and buying a product by publicly claiming on a microphone that they “Choose lies and win”?

The Yes Men call their hoaxes of corporate identities (such as a Dow Chemical representative) identity correction, using methods of appropriation for “...exposing an entity’s inner workings to public scrutiny...”²⁹, creating situations in which “honest people impersonate big time criminals in order to publicly humiliate them”³⁰. Popaganda, was inspired by the ideas of appropriation

satirical website for George W. Bush and impersonating an Exxonmobil representative at an Oil Conference in Canada.

²⁹ *Tactic: Identity Correction*, Beautiful Trouble, <https://beautifultrouble.org/tactic/identity-correction/>, 16/04/2019.

³⁰ *Yes Men blend laughs, progressive activism*, Houston Chronicle, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/entertainment/arts-theater/article/Yes-Men-blend-laugh-progressive-activism-12195329.php>, 16/04/2019.

after coming across a quote for the Critical Arts Ensemble (CAE). In their 1994 manifesto 'Civil Disobedience', CAE wrote "For CD [civil disobedience] to have any meaningful effect, the resisters must appropriate something of value to the state."³¹ They believed that traditional forms of protest that usually occur in public spaces were no longer effective because "Nothing of value to the power elite can be found on the streets, nor does this class need control of the streets to efficiently run and maintain state institutions."³² I was intrigued by this alternative perspective as it potentially offered a solution to my anxiety that traditional forms of political theatre and activism were limited by its focus on the education of audiences rather than focusing on impacting change. What CAE and the method of appropriation offered (in theory) was a way for artistic or activist content to become a tool to directly negotiate with the "power elites" through its actions, rather than just warn about their dangers. Just as The Yes Men demonstrated by appropriating that which those in power (Dow) deemed valuable (their identity); the appropriator adopts power from their adversary and can proceed to threaten existing power structures with the delivery of a critical and subversive message.

Popaganda followed a similar path with a desire to correct the identity of its adversary post-truth. Popaganda would not create a political performance about post-truth through taking a strict stand against it and educating its audience about its dangers. Instead, it would learn to love post-truth, embracing its identity as its own ("we're only 70% Real"), supporting its cause ("choose lies and win") and hoping to correct the problem from the inside ("We lie for good"). This type of appropriation, exhibited by The Yes Men and attempted by Popaganda, is both creative and, at times, strategic; a performed mimicry of the identity, ways of communication and aesthetics of another.

³¹ McKee, Yates, *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition*, 2016, p. 51.

³² McKee, 2016, p. 51.

This chapter will explore how appropriation can be effective when creating artistic work with an activist agenda or art that aims to influence and initiate socio-political change. It will consider this efficiency in a number of ways, but with particular focus on the ability of appropriation to move creative critique into a conversation that is anchored in everyday reality. It will focus on appropriation, specifically that which looks to appropriate the exact topic, issue or organisation that is the subject of its cause, often meaning that the act will take on the position of its adversary. It will aim to discuss how these methods were used in Popaganda and what future uses it may have for an artistic activist agenda. It will also discuss the ethical value of this type of appropriation, as well as its ability to either create or infiltrate reality.

Appropriation and the work of The Yes Men has been placed within the context of the Cultural Jamming movement, which saw vast and diverse appropriation (mostly of corporate advertisement) in an attempt to criticise consumer culture, globalisation and neoliberalism. Culture Jamming, a term coined in 1984, "... refers to the repurposing, deconstructing, or hijacking of mass culture, using the media as a means to critique the media."³³. Culture Jamming activities range from the alteration of billboards to running global-brand quality campaigns, all with the intention of subverting the original messages of the adverts.

One of the most well-known cultural jamming groups is a Canadian-based organisation called Adbusters. The website displays examples of spoof adverts, the most famous of which is arguably Joe Chemo ("a camel who wishes he'd never smoked cigarettes"³⁴), a culture jam of the Camel Cigarettes mascot³⁵. Also featured prominently on their website is a quote from American author Greil Marcus that reads "The détournement of the right sign, in the right place

³³ *Are They For Real? Activism and Ironic Identities*, Amber Day, <http://www.cios.org/www/ejc/ejcpublish/018/2/01846.html>, 16/04/2019.

³⁴ *More About Joe*, Joe Chemo, <http://www.joechemo.org/about.htm>, 16/04/2019.

³⁵ Attachment 3

at the right time, could spark a mass reversal of perspective.”³⁶ Détournement is a movement largely popularised by Guy Debord and the Situationists, and can arguably be traced as the original inspiration for Cultural Jamming. Détournement is a way to communicate against the society of the spectacle (a term popularised by Debord) by using the spectacle itself; “The two fundamental laws of détournement are the loss of importance of each detoured autonomous element — which may go so far as to completely lose its original sense — and at the same time the organization of another meaningful ensemble that confers on each element its new scope and effect.”³⁷ The appropriation and then recycling of the original source (spectacle) allows for something new to be created, a new message which disfigures the original. The effectiveness of both détournement and Cultural Jamming in part lies in the familiarity of the original appropriated content or frame that provides viewers with enough semiotic information to aid the subversive message in being understood.

In her book *No Logo*, Naomi Klein posits that “The most sophisticated culture jams are not stand-alone ad parodies but interceptions — counter-messages that hack into a corporation's own method of communication to send a message starkly at odds with the one that was intended.”³⁸ The Bhopal Hoax performed by The Yes Men was a literal ‘hacking into the methods of communication’ as their appropriation of a Dow spokesperson, though framed, managed to infiltrate everyday reality through being hosted by the BBC. They didn’t ‘spark a mass reversal of perspective’ through parodying the power of Dow, but by actually, for a moment, becoming Dow. Unlike a cultural jammed billboard, this type of appropriation does not add a subverted message to an existing conversation, but actually rewrites the conversation temporarily. It is a performed appropriation perceived as reality, that (in the

³⁶ *Spoof Ads*, Adbusters, <https://www.adbusters.org/spoof-ads#>, 16/04/2019.

³⁷ *Détournement as Negation and Prelude*, Library of Nothingness, <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/315>, 16/04/2019.

³⁸ Klein, Naomi, *No Logo*, Great Britain, 2000, p. 206.

revelation that is is a hoax) later takes on the identity of a creative attempt to critique. But what weight does that moment in which the appropriation, or identity correction achieves reality status have for the real message of the act? Is the ability to touch reality directly a desirable tool for artists and activist with an agenda to initiate material change?

There are multiple traces of appropriation within Popaganda, including situations in which different forms of media were jammed and/or deformed. Perhaps what is firstly important to note is that the topic addressed by Popaganda (and subsequently the thing which it appropriated) is in itself a sort of culturally jammed phenomenon. There is no universal formula for evaluating the combined elements of post-truth, although Russian organisations that manufactured fake news suggest that a post-truth is 70% real and 30% fake³⁹. Post-truth is not explicitly referred to as lying, because it is not strictly a lie, rather it is a combination of personal beliefs (which are real to individuals, but not necessarily verifiable realities) and the medium of facts. The phenomenon of Alternative Facts, a term coined by Kellyanne Conway, a senior advisor to the Trump administration who defended White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer's false claims as to the size of Trump's inauguration, is a jammed amalgamation of truth and wishful thinking. When Conway was asked why Spicer would "utter a provable falsehood" she explained that Spicer was just providing "alternative facts"⁴⁰. Conway was essentially fulfilling her need to move that statement into reality by framing it as a new type of fact.

Popaganda, taking this already jammed topic, added another layer of appropriation as it repurposed post-truth as a tool for the everyday citizen. What is usually criticized (lying) was appropriated and repackaged as a product that customers could use to turn lying into

³⁹ As reported on the Radiolab episode *The Curious Case of the Russian Flash Mob at the West Palm Beach Cheesecake Factory*.

⁴⁰ *Kellyanne Conway: Press Secretary Sean Spicer Gave 'Alternative Facts' | Meet The Press | NBC News*, NBC NEWS, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSrEEDQgFc8> 16/04/2019.

something productive and perhaps valuable for them (“Choose lies and win”). Within this offer lay the critique that the post-truth epidemic was also partly the fault of the public’s tendencies to only believe (and buy into) information that supports their pre-existing perspective. There is a contradiction in the presence of both this critique and the insistence that Popaganda could offer a positive ‘alternative’ to the current situation of post-truth. The critique was the original driving force behind the decision to appropriate post-truth, but eventually the critique became less important and instead the opportunity to repurpose post-truth became much more interesting and important. Despite this, the critique remained and perhaps weakened Popaganda’s appropriation as just an attempt at satire rather than an actual experiment in offering alternatives to post-truth.

In order to appropriate post-truth and deliver it as an alternative to the current situation of the post-truth epidemic, Popaganda needed to also appropriate a consumer/product relationship. Popaganda had all the traditional functions of a commercial shop including product displays, a changing room and a cash desk. Popaganda adopted a strong brand identity, a must-have in today’s visual and digital society. Taking inspiration from brands such as Supreme and going further by using cult narrative cues, Popaganda created a hyper-obsessive shopping experience by featuring the brand’s logo and signature designs throughout the store (branded uniforms, branded shopping bags, business cards, signs, merchandise). The atmosphere not only created an assumption of desire for the products but also reinforced the obsessive message that “Popaganda was not just a product - but a lifestyle”. Though an interesting and productive way to deliver our appropriation of post-truth, the choice to use consumer culture and a store format for the exhibition was also inspired by the connection between post-truth and consumer culture. Commodities are often sold to a consumer through the manufacture of desire around a product, desire being primarily governed by emotional logic, just as post-truth is too. By adopting the consumer/product relationship in Popaganda, we needed to use this

emotional appeal in order to create desire around products and make sales. Essentially, we needed to use post-truth tactics to sell our post-truth products.

These combined, jammed and appropriated elements were offered to audiences in the hope that they would discover a new perspective of post-truth. Popaganda did not just offer the antidote often written by journalists and theorists that fact-checking and being honest with ourselves was the way to combat the post-truth epidemic. Popaganda subverted this message, instead proclaiming that yes, lies and false beliefs seem to be inherently human and problematic so let's not fight against it and instead find a way to turn that negative into a positive. The importance of the two original sources of this appropriation (post-truth epidemic, consumer culture) are lost, allowing for "the organization of another meaningful ensemble that confers on each element its new scope and effect."; Popaganda's alternative solution was not to fight lying, but embrace it. The understanding of that message depended on the audience, but the layers of appropriation did make that double repurposed message available. At the very least it was a message "...starkly at odds with the one intended." originally by post-truth.

Klein suggests that the Cultural Jamming movement impact on public perception was limited as "...after a while, what began as a way to talk back to the ads starts to feel more like evidence of our total colonization by them..."⁴¹. Klein points to the risk that mimicking the ways of an adversary can actually exacerbate the problem and enhance their agenda. She adds how this issue is only made worse when the targets of cultural jams (advertisers and brands) are able to cut off cultural jammers by producing their own subverted advertising campaigns ("Nike campaign that used the slogan "I am not/A target market/I am an athlete""⁴²). Mark Haven, who takes particular aim at Adbusters in his essay *Privatized Resistance: AdBusters and the*

⁴¹ Klein, 2000, p. 217.

⁴² Klein, 2000, p. 217.

Culture of Neoliberalism, states that cultural jamming "...must be critiqued as not only inadequate for confronting the contemporary global political and cultural hegemony of neoliberalism, but in many ways rehearsing key tenets of neoliberalism..."⁴³. These criticisms allude to the dangers of appropriation as a type of artistic activism that promises to transfer power from the corporations to civilians but is essentially flawed by the hard reality that corporations will always find a way to profit off any attempts of critique.

Was Popaganda guilty of '...rehearsing the key tenets..' of post-truth issues and/or playing into the hands of its adversaries? There is plenty of evidence to suggest that it did. Firstly, it misinformed some of its audience by not stating clearly that it was not a genuine, functioning business. Some members of the public did ask if the shop assistants (played by actors) were really employed and they were instructed always to reply that they were. Taken further, it actually encouraged the audience to be misinformed by willing them to accept that lying was just a part of life, offering them products in exchange for swearing allegiance to the Popaganda manifesto and accepting their status as misinformed individuals. It asked its customers to legitimise Popaganda's lies by promoting its message online or by wearing Popaganda merchandise. It also contributed to the circulation of fake news by creating an entire (fake) business empire that sought to spread a message of dishonesty whilst reinforcing consumer culture, specifically that which dealt in selling socio-political ideas.

However, Popaganda offered more than just a rehearsal of the post-truth era, and arguably what it offered could remedy the pitfalls of appropriation highlighted by Klein and Haven. Haven points to the limits of the 'perspective change' that cultural jamming sought to achieve when he wrote "There will be extremely few who will walk by a jammed ad or billboard...and

⁴³ Haiven, Mark. *Privatized Resistance: AdBusters and the Culture of Neoliberalism*. 2007 p. 86.

reevaluate global capitalism or their life practices. People are probably less stupid and duped and more hopeless and cynical. Being told the enjoyment of their few material pleasures afforded them guarantee their damnation is unlikely to sway many.”⁴⁴ Popaganda did not expect its audience/customers to ‘reevaluate’ their practices in relation to post-truth, nor did it preach what their audience should not do. Popaganda offered a way for people to *continue* on in the post-truth era with more agency and control. From this position Popaganda was able to avoid the type of cynical withdrawal audience often feel when encountering activist campaigns. Popaganda instead offered an alternative to the issue of post-truth, not by encouraging its opposite (tell the truth) but by proposing something entirely different; an opportunity to explore alternatives to being victims, alternatives which were designed to give them back their agency and control. Customers were free to decide how Popaganda’s critique of post-truth worked for them, there was no binary option (buy Camel or don’t buy Camel, for example) but multiple chances to interact with Popaganda and its messages, through speaking with the shop assistants, buying a product or reading the manifesto.

These interactions were not totally limitless as they still existed within Popagana’s own parameters as both a store and performance. Popaganda was transparent about its limitations and not afraid to admit that it too was making a profit from the audience participation. Stephen Duncombe’s ethical spectacle is in many ways a form of appropriation, it focuses on the power of the spectacle which he suggests should be appropriated by progressive activists. With ethical adjustments (such as transparency and openness) it may become a “...spectacle that is understood as spectacle, one that still has symbolic power but lets the audience in on the production.”⁴⁵. One way in which a spectacle can become ethical is through ensuring the transparency of its nature as a spectacle; a transparent spectacle is still enjoyed as a spectacle

⁴⁴ Haiven, 2007, p. 107.

⁴⁵ Duncombe, 2007, p. 47.

but always with an understanding that it is not strictly real, the audience can enjoy and benefit from an 'illusion without delusion'. Popaganda was clear in its position of unabashedly lying as well as its position as a 'business'. A part of Popaganda's manifesto reads 'Like any business we have to make a profit and that profit really has to come from you' followed by the confession 'we are honest about being dishonest, informed about being misinformed, certain about our uncertainty'.

Duncombe touches upon the advantage of applying ethics to an appropriation of spectacle, writing that "Most spectacle employs illusion in the pretense of portraying reality; ethical spectacle demonstrates the reality of its own illusions. Ethical spectacle reminds the viewer that the spectacle is never reality, but always a spectacle. In this way, ironically, spectacle becomes real."⁴⁶ It is with this statement that we can revisit the question of reality's relationship with appropriation and its effect on acts of activism. Like with the Bopal Hoax that temporarily touched reality, does the potential in the ability of appropriation to infiltrate reality provide any antidote for the criticism that cultural jamming is limited by its cynical perspectives?

First we must attempt to understand what exactly is this 'ironically real'? Lehmann (whose seminal work was on Postdramatic Theater) wrote that theater can only be a domain for represented politics and not 'real' politics⁴⁷, reinforcing frustrations an artist may have about the limits of their work in creating real change. Its categorisation as only a 'represented reality' means that when appropriating the real, representation is still the default reception. This can in part explain Haven's belief that attempts at appropriation do little to impact a viewer's perception because it does not co-exist with their reality of actually wanting to enjoy the "few material pleasures afforded them". As the definition of *détournement* suggests, the combining

⁴⁶ Duncombe, 2007, pp. 151–152.

⁴⁷ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, Oxon 2006, p. 183.

of two original sources allows for something new to be created, is it possible that this new thing can become not a subverted representation, but a wholly new piece of reality? The transparent spectacle does something similar - by bringing attention to its own framing, and the spectacle's content, the spectacle is recycled and from it a new 'real' emerges. The real and the possibility for an authentic experience does not necessarily lie in its *content* but in its *form*, and as Lehman states, "...the truly social dimension of art is *form*"⁴⁸.

This focus on form as opposed to content can also be articulated through hypermediacy; "...style of visual representation whose goal is to remind the viewer of the medium...Hypermediacy is an expression of our fascination with the medium itself (or some would say anxiety over it). It is a self-referentiality of the visual..."⁴⁹. Debord writes that spectacle "...is not something added to the real world -- not a decorative element, so to speak. On the contrary, it is the very heart of society's real unreality"⁵⁰. Through this type of self-referentiality as a form of representation, transparency of the spectacle offers a way to turn this 'fascination' with the medium into a platform for this 'real unreality' to be dissected and for authenticity to be pulled from it. As Popaganda was a performance it could also be appreciated and interacted with as an alternative reality. Especially as the format of a store allowed audience members to become customers, moving them from viewer to participant thus legitimising Popaganda's presence as a form of reality. With transparency installed throughout most this process, Popaganda tread the boards between hoax, reality and a pseudo-reality in which it arguably achieved the aforementioned "ironically real". From this position, Popaganda held a position for a stronger relationship between the creativity of its message and its effect on reality that was perhaps not fully seen through but was potentially there.

⁴⁸ Hans-Thies Lehmann, 2006, p. 15.

⁴⁹ Bolter and Grusin, cited in *A Brief Glossary of Remediation*, Kairos, <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/6.1/reviews/blakesley/glossary.html>, 16/04/2019

⁵⁰ Debord, 1994, p. 5.

In an essay titled *From Critique to Mobilization: The Yes Men and the Utopian Politics of Satirical Fake News*, Ian Reilly speaks of how irony is used as a critique; “The satirist’s juxtaposition of the normal (everyday) and the absurd (utopian) makes intelligible an apparent disconnect between current living conditions and future possibilities.”⁵¹ The ‘identity correction’ that The Yes Men performed was exactly that which people wanted to hear and therefore, despite the surprise of the announcement, people believed it. It was reported that some at the BBC felt that The Yes Men’s intervention was ‘fair game’ explaining that “They were happy to hear the announcement that Dow was going to take responsibility for Bhopal. That’s the thing - everybody was happy to hear it. That is what we all want to hear.”⁵² These comments indicate that The Yes Men were able to register their performance as temporarily real which had a specific effect on its viewers. They corrected the ‘normal everyday’ and offered a utopian alternative and audiences were upset when they learned this new reality was not real at all. Ian Reilly states that even though the real Dow cut off The Yes Men’s efforts by explaining the reality of the situation, the damage was already done, the act had facilitated “...the transmission of divergent perspectives in a news media system all too quick to dismiss and disclaim alternative voices. “ and had shown that “... the status quo is not beyond reproach and that corporations should be held accountable for unethical actions.”⁵³ Indeed, The Yes Men had broken a boundary into coveted territory, showing off its cleverness and creativity as it threatened the power of Dow.

Duncombe, in writing about examples of Ethical Spectacles, states: “Without simulation and its attendant appeals to representing the real, there is no manipulation. Nor is there the

⁵¹ Reilly, Ian. *From Critique to Mobilization: The Yes Men and the Utopian Politics of Satirical Fake News*. 2013, p. 1255.

⁵² *Meet the Yes Men who hoax the world*, Vincent Graft, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2004/dec/13/mondaymediasection5> 16/04/2019.

⁵³ Reilly, 2012, p. 1249.

complementary opposite: cynical withdrawal following the recognition that you are being manipulated."⁵⁴ An ironic reality is able to find a way to hold meaning and make sense for an audience, not through an existing reality but a new, hybrid one. Such a reality will never hold the same weight of a traditional reality but arguably it could become part of a normal life, shifting both perspective and actions of individuals, groups and even societies.

Popaganda wanted, through a transparent spectacular appropriation of post-truth, to create a new offering of reality that it hoped would make sense in some way to its audience/customers. It appropriated post-truth with the freedom that post-truth was not an identifiable living individual or group that could argue against what Popaganda posed as an identity correction. Its spectacular makeup was occasionally met with cynical withdrawal but at other times it was quietly considered by others. In this quiet consideration, appropriation bears fruit to become more than just a hacking of an adversary's methods for one's own agenda, the benefits of it not competing with reality, but becoming a stand alone alternative, begin to blossom. Appropriation may allow art to play out in the real world, not only giving it a familiarity that draws attention but a legitimate weight as tool for infiltrating the real with its calls and efforts for material change.

⁵⁴ Duncombe, 2007, p.161.

Attachment 3



Chapter III: Cognitive Shock For All!

Can, should and how might art seek to change people's mind and/or mobilise them towards its agenda?

*"It's a rare occurrence,
like a double rainbow,
or someone on the Internet saying,
"You know what?
You've convinced me I was wrong."⁵⁵*

As I picked up the British Government official leaflets titled 'Animals with a Learning Disability in Court' an overwhelming sense of shame came over me. I kept asking myself the question 'How had I never heard about this before?'. It made total sense, complete sense actually, but I had never heard about an official branch of the justice system that dealt with animal court cases. As I peered into the courtroom I was disappointed that there was no clear signs of animals having been there. No troughs of hay, no dog beds or cages. My disappointment quickly morphed into embarrassment; 'It's not a circus, this is a justice court...'. I sat down in the town hall's cafe, in complete shock and awe of what I had just learnt and thought 'Wow, I really need to brush up on my understanding of animal rights...'

Popaganda had hoped to change the mind of its audience regarding whose responsibility the post-truth epidemic was. It wanted the audience to leave with a new narrative on truth, lies and fake news. If audiences didn't think post-truth was dangerous, Popaganda hoped to change their mind. If they thought it could be solved by fact checking and an insistence on truth,

⁵⁵ *The Good Place*, Wiki Quotes, https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/The_Good_Place 16/04/2019.

Popaganda hoped to change their minds. If they thought post-truth was only the fault of those that dealt it, then Popaganda hoped to change their minds. At the heart of Popaganda was the self-given responsibility that this was a political performance and therefore it must seek to influence political discourse. Conversion to your own beliefs seems to be the first (and occasionally the only) aim political art and activism has had in their agenda to influence change. It is a reasonable ambition, especially if the act is a part of a movement that looks to gain support via the threat of numbers, but is it the most important thing a piece of art or activism can do for political discourse and change?

This text has discussed other ways in which an act may generate change that does not necessarily involve gaining support from an audience. When the act looks to impact change through hacking into a government system or creating fake websites, its success is determined by the effect on the target and not the reaction of an audience. However, art and especially political art relies on an audience to read, interpret and perhaps even act on its message. As Popaganda was a performance based project, it is vital to understand how it looked to deliver its message to an audience, and what were their reactions. This chapter will look to understand should, can and how pieces of artistic activism might change the minds of their audience. It will consider how ethics affects this process and how a connection with reality might impact an audience's desire to mobilize in support of a broadcasted message.

A variety of reactions were recorded from visitors of Popaganda. Some visitors expressed that they thoroughly understood all that Popaganda was trying to say; "This is art, and I'm so ready to consume this art" or "Yes I get it, I see it!", while others were confused and critical; "But I don't want to lie!". However, these reactions do not provide a deep understanding of how Popaganda's message may have been translated. In response to this issue, this chapter will also use an example of another performance/exhibition that I personally experienced and that

shared similarities with Popaganda. The project in question is titled Four Legs Good and was experienced by myself during the Leeds Compass Festival in 2018; a reimagining of “Leeds Town Hall as the site of a fictional Department of Animal Justice...”⁵⁶. Not only will it help to understand how the audiences of Popaganda might have reacted but it will also serve as a point of comparison to debate where Popaganda’s potential was perhaps not met. Though a performance, it is important to note that I experienced Four Legs Good as reality and not a performance. I walked into the exhibition and read its message as fact, that the festival was providing an opportunity for attendees to learn about and witness the Animal Justice Court in the UK. This context of entry played an important part in how I reacted to Four Legs Good and how it affected my mentality towards the issues it presented.

Changing an audience's mind is a difficult task for art. In an 1975 essay titled *On Political Theatre*, Michael Kirby debates theatre’s ability and potential methods to change people’s mind. Kirby concedes that “...political theatre has to be judged ineffective when compared with the political actions of everyday life” pointing out that “If this were not so, we would have fewer speeches by politicians in this country, and the political parties would be supporting extensive theatrical activity.” Duncombe and the C4AA argue that although art often lacks the strategic methods to initiate change (including change of opinions), art and creativity does have the ability to “...surprise us – to show up in unlikely places (e.g. not a gallery) or take on unfamiliar forms (e.g. not a protest march) provides an opportunity to disrupt people’s preconceived notions of art and protest, and their predetermined ideas about the messages we are trying to communicate.”⁵⁷. The ability of art to surprise enables it to initiate cognitive shock, where everyday patterns are interrupted, causing a cognitive ‘knock’ to one’s usual ways of thinking.

⁵⁶ *Four Legs Good*, Compass Live Art, <https://compassliveart.org.uk/festival/events/four-legs-good> 16/04/2019.

⁵⁷ *Why Artistic Activism?*, c4aa, <https://c4aa.org/2018/04/why-artistic-activism/> 16/04/2019.

Despite this tool, which is made possible by creativity, political art has faced growing resistance to its charms. Globalization and the saturation of information through new forms of media have perpetuated issues such as confirmation bias and identity politics in which people are critical of any opinion that is not their own. An art piece that was exhibited in Washington that showed a lookalike model of Ivanka Trump vacuuming crumbs thrown by the audience received backlash, calling it sexist and insensitive. Pepsi's advert featuring model Kendall Jenner solving a riot between civilians and police with a can of soda was brutally taken down by the public. It was deemed an insensitive attempt to encourage peace in light of the seriousness of police brutality experienced by minorities in the United States.

Regardless of whether the message has a clear identity politic or is simply just a call for unification and peace, the prevalent tribalism in current public political discourse has turned situations such as these into opportunities for opinions to be reinforced, not changed. Experts have called on people to stop using on their own opinions as tools to win debates, explaining "When we engage in political debates, we all tend to overrate the power of arguments we find personally convincing — and wrongly think the other side will be swayed."⁵⁸ It is easy to understand why such rhetoric is unlikely to work "...we often go for a 'punch to the gut'. We belittle the other person ("I told you so"). We ostracize ("Basket of deplorables"). We ridicule ("What an idiot")."⁵⁹ These issues were concerns of mine and something I wanted to avoid in Popaganda. I did not want it to become another lecture or attempt to educate an audience through patronising messages to strangers about the topic of post-truth. That dialogue was

⁵⁸ *9 essential lessons from psychology to understand the Trump era*, Brian Resnick, Vox, <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2018/4/11/16897062/political-psychology-trump-explain-studies-research-science-motivated-reasoning-bias-fake-news> 16/04/2019.

⁵⁹ *Facts Don't Change People's Minds. Here's What Does*, Ozan Varol, Heleo, <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2018/4/11/16897062/political-psychology-trump-explain-studies-research-science-motivated-reasoning-bias-fake-news> 16/04/2019.

already tried and tested and as discussed earlier, has had little impact on the resolution of the issue.

So, how might art progress in face of such adversity? Is there a way for art to surprise people without hitting their identifying political nerves? Stephen Duncombe stresses the importance of understanding first why people hold on to opinions and shy away from change rather than "... simply condemning, regulating, and repressing them.". He also adds that "Acknowledging the present passions of people is not the same thing as accepting things as they are. Instead, current desire is the fulcrum on which to leverage future change."⁶⁰. Duncombe points towards theories on sublimation as a first step in understanding how one might get a purchase on such issues. Sublimation involves the redirection of energy, usually energy that is associated with impulsive human behaviour. Originally conceived by Sigmund Freud, Walter Lippmann evolved the concept, recognizing that "... sublimation needn't merely apply to the redirection of problematic human drives; it could be used to think more widely about creating a politics that was responsive to human beings in all their desires."⁶¹. Rather than seeking to change opinions and behaviours, Lippmann suggests allowing those patterns to direct the orchestration of a message that will *respond* to others desires rather than restrict them.

Popaganda made the assumption that visitors would be of the mindset of either not really caring about the issues of post-truth and/or not believing that there was a solution to be found. Rather than facilitate the stagnation of these opinions, Popaganda looked to provide an opportunity where a new narrative could be mentally and physically explored. It provided audiences with an alternative to living helplessly in a post-truth era; a store that sold products that would help you lie back. It enabled audiences to express their opinion on this alternative

⁶⁰ Duncombe, 2007, p. 35.

⁶¹ Duncombe, 2007, p. 36.

narrative by either becoming a customer, participating in the exercise of lying openly, or, not doing anything at all. It channeled disinterest in talking about post-truth into the familiar habit of shopping, giving opportunity for the interest (or lack of) to be expressed through purchasing products.

Four Legs Good similarly managed to avoid the occasionally stagnant (yet highly emotional) debate that surrounds animal rights and managed to redirect those opinions, beliefs and energy into the procedural format of the court system. It reframed any negative or positive connotations around animal suffering/rights into an experience of an established government service. Debates about whether animals deserve those rights did not need to exist in assumptions and predictions, instead the physical manifestation of the animal court provided a stable sounding board for those topics to be discussed. This presentation forced me to consider my own opinions within this new context. Since I read this new context as a reality (and not a performance or representation) my reaction was arguably far stronger than that which could have been achieved by Popaganda. The cognitive shock I experienced was not within a theoretical space, but one which I deciphered as real, something also achieved by The Yes Men who, by appropriating the identity of Dow within a frame of reality, shocked people's familiar perceptions on how big time corporations deal with disaster such as Bhopal. The surprising actions of Dow taking responsibility is unusual and unfamiliar, accepted with shock but also enthusiasm. Later when the shock was contextualised as a result of a hoax, what was previously accepted as reality was turned into a yearning for change to occur that could retrieve what had now been lost; corporations taking responsibility for their actions and doing the right thing.

In both cases audiences needed to adapt first to this new, presented reality before they can begin to bring in and consider their current beliefs and opinions on the presented message. In

this new adapted reality, old points of references disappear, forcing a reconsidering of thoughts, not necessarily under a pressure to change them, but to see how they stand in relation to this new environment. If I disagreed with the pro-animal rights ideas and beliefs, I would be faced with a new reality in which progressive animal rights legislation had been achieved. How do my opinions change or adapt to this new environment? Do I still disagree with progressive animal rights values? Or, now that I can see it's realisation, do I change my mind and accept this new reality as something desirable? In Popaganda, audience members may have first allowed themselves to accept Popaganda as a plausible, consumer option. From there they could begin to reimagine their position as potential handlers of the post-truth weapon, how it might affect them and whether they agree with the proposal or not. This structure could be considered just a redirection of attention, judged as mere diversions that will ultimately lead to audiences expressing their same opinions just within a different context. However, what Duncombe proposes and what was attempted by both Popaganda and Four Legs Good is a more productive and refreshing way in which all logical and emotional dynamics can be explored within the frame of an alternative possibility.

Alternative forms, frames and narratives are the bread and butter of Utopias which have often been an integral part of political messaging. What Four Legs Good provided, and what Popaganda also aimed to do was offer a chance to live out a Utopia for real. Both did this by providing a performance based landscape (of a functioning store, or an operating animal court) that audience members could enter and explore as an alternative reality. The concept of "lived utopianism is defined as "living out some portion of a transformed future in the here and now"⁶² and is an opportunity for messages to be experienced rather than lectured. The impact of temporarily living out a Utopian representation creates a situation in which an audience must

⁶² *Reclaiming Utopian Activism: Part 1*, Kate Meakin, Utopia, <https://utopia.ac/reclaiming-utopian-activism-part-1/> 16/04/2019.

first accept the situation before moving to agree or disagree with the principles it proposes. It is arguable that this may allow for a more nuanced dialogue to occur, where in the process of acceptance, viewers are able to draw on the experience to reference their own opinions.

How might these results evolve from internal dialogues to possible interaction with or even mobilization for the agenda of the act? A theory called Frame Alignment is used to evaluate different ways in which social movements may frame their message to encourage recruitment and mobilization of audiences; “the linkage of individual and SMO (social movement organisations) interpretive orientations, such that some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and SMO activities, goals, and ideology are congruent and complementary.”⁶³. In the essay *Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation* Snow and fellow writers outline variations of frames they identify as the different ways in which a movement may deliver their message. Their study of *frame transformation* provides a theoretical framework for situations in which a social movements’ message “may not resonate with, and on occasion may even appear antithetical to, conventional lifestyles or rituals and extant interpretive frames.”.

What they propose in these cases is that “...new values may have to be planted and nurtured, old meanings or understandings jettisoned, and erroneous beliefs or "misframings" reframed... in order to garner support and secure participants.”. These directions are ideas intended to be adopted by social movements struggling to gain supporters. What Popaganda actually did was plant these directions to be adopted its own audience. If an audience member were to become a customer, they may need to reframe their beliefs and values in order to participate in the pro-lying lifestyle of Popaganda. For example, if an audience member decided to buy a product,

⁶³ David A. Snow., et al. *Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation*. 1986 p. 464.

they might have to publicly recite the manifesto, “dedicating themselves to a life of lying” or post to their social media pages a lie, tagging and associating themselves with Popaganda. They would need to temporarily forget any social restrictions they may have about lying and consider new values in relation to the morality of lying in a post-truth era. The cognitive shock they may have initially experienced is complimented by an exercise in an alternative narrative. Customers don’t need to genuinely believe or agree to anything, but they can at least test what it is like to be on the other side. This process would have been triggered by the appropriation of the consumer/product relationship and post-truth. These two appropriations are mixed together, and like the aims of *détournement*, the audience witnessing are encouraged to organise “another meaningful ensemble that confers on each element its new scope and effect”⁶⁴. The friction caused by conflicting truths may produce a third element which could take form as a new opinion, a new desire or a new idea, different from that which the audience began with.

What is important to note about both the experiences of Popaganda and Four Legs Good is that neither forced a complete change of opinion but merely confronted current beliefs and encouraged them to be re-evaluated. Though it might not have fulfilled Popaganda’s ambition to change minds, it is a much less manipulative way in which an audience can interact with a message. Popaganda did not warn against post-truth, neither did it explicitly take a left or right-wing political standpoint on the issue. It never mentioned names of politicians or organisations but instead created a new world where political identities could not be stimulated by familiar references. Such methods even allow for opposing opinions to be reinforced during this process of cognitive reframing. Despite this initially seeming as a threat, one could argue that it is of equal value. Opinions that have been reinforced are at the very least, opinions that are

⁶⁴ *Détournement as Negation and Prelude*, Library of Nothingness, <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/315> 16/04/2019.

securely embedded in the genuine needs and desires of a person. Although, Duncombe and his ethical spectacle do speak from the standpoint of progressive political agendas, at the core of the proposal lies the importance of speaking to people's beliefs, dreams and desires, regardless of what they might be.

As viewers of Popaganda are placed between the conflicting frames of a positive post-truth message and a subverted consumer system, multiple truths may come up that conflict with each other. Audience may consider that yes "It is nice to lie sometimes" but also that buying into such a system can't be good; "I don't want my children to be encouraged to lie!". Popaganda was an experience of a world that was both enjoyable and frightening. As these two realities fight for position in the mind of the audience, an alternative resolution, a new belief may need to be created to reclaim that space. The success of Four Legs Good in its ability to cause a reframing of my ideas and beliefs, even around a topic I was already sympathetic towards, is a powerful tool, especially in the current climate of confirmation bias and identity politics. Four Legs Good presented a fabricated reality that was far closer to a true reality than Popaganda ever created. I would argue that Four Legs Goods' ability to pull closer to the reality of the everyday made the impact of cognitive shock I experienced more significant and was more effective in mobilizing me towards change. Since the adapted reality was so tangible, a yearning for it to be true grew far stronger.

What cognitive shock has highlighted is the importance of an 'agendaless agenda', an ambition not to change people's mind but to instead give them a cognitive knock without any predetermined plan of *how* an audience beliefs may reassemble once the shock has subsided. If the result of the recovery from a cognitive shock is in opposition to a project's true agenda, then one must consider this to be just as beneficial an outcome to a reaction that favours it. Delivering a message on post-truth should not be about changing people's minds, but rather

instead, bringing them closer to their own cognitive patterns, providing a defence against the traps of everyday normality and the echo chambers in which it keeps us in.

Chapter III: Putting Your Money Where Your Mouth Is

Positing a profit based model for artistic activism

Throughout this text it may appear that theatre and performativity has taken the back bench whereas activism and its ability to infiltrate the real world has been given priority. In its introduction, this text made clear the frustrations I have had with art and theatre and my growing concern that its limited parameters would prevent it from being able to impact material change. These concerns are still valid and still present, but what I hope was also clear is that all the ideas, propositions or potentials that this text has highlighted have been intricately linked to my broader relationship with creativity that has stemmed from my experiences and knowledge of theatre and performativity. These links have also been defined and stressed by Duncombe's inclusion of the spectacle in his proposals for better activist practices as well as the C4AA inclusion of art as the creator of affect, an equally important element of its search for AFFECT⁶⁵; the ability to affect audiences emotionally and effect material political change.

In this final chapter I aim to reiterate why art and creativity is still a vital part of the ambition to impact change but also to suggest some drastic changes in the way art can be used in activism. I now see this as a necessary next step in my quest for a performative act that can still impact concrete and material change in the everyday. I hope to explore and express the reasons why art is still imperative to efforts, but also why and how it needs to change in order for my ambitions to be fulfilled. This change is not only limited to the artistic component in artistic activism. Activism also needs to ensure its relationship with creativity is structured in order to prevent what the activist and author Leslie Kauffman calls "ether activism, an activism so consumed with struggling over hearts and minds that it forgets there is another struggle to win:

⁶⁵ See definition for Artistic Activism.

concrete political power”⁶⁶. It is in the face of this threat that the marriage of creativity and activism must evolve together in order to secure “concrete” change. Concrete change is not limited (though ideally should be complemented) by change which is measured by its ability to touch people’s hearts or raise awareness within an audience. Concrete change is something which can be verified, is perhaps material and directly impacts something outside the event itself.

Artistic movements have shifted cultural perceptions, have been successful outlets to express public opinion and have undoubtedly aided activist campaigns in reaching their goals. This text has explored examples of activism and art that has challenged its own boundaries, often leading to a bleeding of traditional roles where art has entered a temporary state of reality. The term artistic activism has served a great purpose in framing these actions that are neither strictly art nor strictly traditional activism. However, the term activism has occasionally felt like a crutch for the performative and artistic work explored, preventing Popaganda and other works being defined not as something like activism, but as an agent of change within their own parameters. Can theatre, as its own agent, directly impact socio-political change? A change not defined in terms of the quality or amount of activist value they exhibit, but a type of change initiated by the effect of its performance alone?

For example, rather than considering The Yes Men Bhopal hoax as an initiator of change due to the emergence of a dialogue about Dow’s responsibility that occurred in its aftermath, one could define its change also as the millions of dollars of shares that disappeared on account of the hoax announcement. Popaganda might be considered effective not because of its potential in creating an alternative narrative around post-truth, but by the amount of people that bought products and carried a Popaganda branded shopping bag out of the store.

⁶⁶ Duncombe, 2007, p. 157.

It is perhaps a crude and cold way to evaluate change but it is not to be proposed as the only way to define the impact of a project. These parameters are merely being considered in light of a growing frustration and concern that the effort, importance and value of art in socio-political change is slipping in the age of information. In his book *After Art* David Joselit discusses art's position in the globalised world and poses a somewhat controversial suggestion that art should be viewed as a currency and used in exchange for power. Joselit argues that in a society saturated by images, power lies in their "...capacity for replication, remediation, and dissemination at variable velocities."⁶⁷ and that art can benefit from the proliferation of images whilst existing as "...a fold, or disruption, or event within a population of images"⁶⁸. He explains that the value of art in this context is created by the exchange that occurs when it is attached to a circulatory network and that understanding this exchange does not need to be based on monetary value. These exchanges are linked to his idea of art's "searchability", its capacity for connectivity and exchange with other information sources.

What Joselit proposes is an interesting theory to consider alongside an analysis of the way in which Popaganda dabbled in a system of exchange between itself and its audience through a consumer/product relationship and how this might constitute as concrete change. The way in which Popaganda had hoped to initiate concrete change was not through monetary profit but through the profit of audience members *subscribing* to Popaganda's brand as a way of life. This subscription would come in the form of audience/customers purchasing products, not in exchange for money but in exchange for their support and participation in the message Popaganda promoted. The subscription would occur when audience members turned into customers and participated in the currency system, completing tasks that were exercises in

⁶⁷ Joselit, David, *After Art (POINT: Essays on Architecture)*, 2012, p. 15.

⁶⁸ Joselit, David, 2012, p. 89.

the Popaganda, alternative solution to living in a post-truth world. Each time a customer participated in this exchange, their subscription would add to the legitimacy of Popaganda as a viable lifestyle (brand) option. This subscription could then manifest as a type of powerful “currency” had it evolved into a public facing presence. This could be in the form of social media posts that are pledges of allegiance to Popaganda and its manifesto, people walking around Prague with branded Popaganda merchandise or shop assistants being seen with Popaganda-labelled uniforms talking about their love for the Popaganda lifestyle. This subscription would turn into a visible presence, a trend and something to pay attention to, a powerful platform which could be used to negotiate the perception of what people really want in relation to truth and lies. Its presence would transcend the event itself, appearing online, or in new spaces away from the original context of the store, transcending the production of the event and gaining value in its proliferation. If it could reach levels of mass subscription then the *performed* alternative narrative and even lifestyle that Popaganda offers could become a *legitimate* alternative to the post-truth epidemic.

This is why it was important that Popaganda also have its concept encapsulated by things such as merchandise, business cards, a website and a guidebook. They were designed so that the performance of Popaganda could continue creating dialogues post-event and in different formats. They also helped legitimise Popaganda as more than just a performed alternative, it allowed it to become materialised into something that had real (reality based) potential. Placing the concept of Popaganda into a pop-up shop format was an attempt to rebrand its origins as a political performance into something that could be engaged with through consumption. *This engagement is an extension of the performance but also a performance in itself that has leaked out of the parameters of the event and continues on through audience engagement and exchange.*

What actually happened was far from this idealistic ambition but Popaganda did exhibit potential. There were definite interactions that one could call subscription, but they were few. People did post online, they left with Popaganda branded items and enjoyed performing as a customer in this welcoming but surreal new business. Popaganda had the potential value of “searchability”, however there was never enough structure, resources or effort to propel those interactions into something amounting to a trend which could extend the performance beyond the boundaries of the event. Furthermore, much of the participation that did occur in Popaganda was performed and the subscription was an exercise in representation (pretending to be a customer). Does the performed nature of this subscription prevent an action materialising as concrete change?

One of the most exciting acts of activism I have read about is that of Rolling Jubilee, and it is an excellent example of how change can be both concrete and performed, illuminating that these two types of effects actually compliment and rely on each other. Rolling Jubilee is a part of Strike Debt, an organization that fundraises money in order to buy ‘high risk’ debt which is often sold for a penny on the dollar to other debt collectors. Rolling Jubilee purchase the debt but instead of collecting it, they abolish it. Their website claims they have abolished \$31,982,455.76 with only \$701317 money raised since 2012.⁶⁹ Strike Debt is an organisation that emerged from the Occupy movement (“Occupy ultimately amounted to a reflexive protest against the immediate effects of austerity and indignation at official corruption...”⁷⁰). Post-Occupy saw many campaigns and organisations that seeked to extend the impact of Occupy beyond Zuccotti Park; “One year ago, we were evicted from our park; tonight, we evict Wall Street from our lives! The banks got bailed out while we got sold out. Now we bail out the

⁶⁹ *Rolling Jubilee*, Rolling Jubilee, <http://rollingjubilee.org/> 16/04/2019.

⁷⁰ McKee, 2016, p.18.

people!”⁷¹. Strike Debt emerged in response the growing problem of debt with 72% of American households being in debt due to medical bills, student loans or other. With many people using credit cards in order to buy basic provisions such as food in order to reach debt payments the realisation dawned on many that the debt people owed was essentially unpayable. Strike Debt asks not “...if it is moral not to pay, the better question was is it moral to pay? Paying into the system perpetuates it. The only way to stop it is to stop.”⁷². The power of Rolling Jubilee is material in its ability to strike real debt but it is also highly symbolic. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, governments had decided to give vast amounts of money to prevent the collapse of some of the world’s biggest banks. Though this was done in the name of preventing further economic crises, the cause of the crisis had in part come from the irresponsible and inhumane choices of the banks themselves. One example is subprime; “Bankers in the US had developed a lucrative business of buying up the US mortgages of poor Americans (known as “subprime”), packaging them together with better quality mortgages and selling them on as essentially risk-free assets known as mortgage-backed securities.”⁷³ As a result Americans lost their investments, homes and even retirement funds.

The actions of Rolling Jubilee, their siding with the victims and not with the banks essentially shows up the actions of the American government. They become examples of what the right action should have looked like (just as The Yes Men and Jude Finisterra had done on BBC World). They mimic the actions of the governments’ ‘bail out’ but their subjects are different; suffering Americans and not irresponsible banks. Though their actions relieve many of crippling debt, Rolling Jubilee also serves as a beacon of solidarity, “... a solidarity that could throw a

⁷¹ McKee, 2016, p. 186.

⁷² *When Theory Meets Heart: The Rolling Jubilee and Lessons of Occupying Debt*, Pamela Brown, Stanford, <https://arcade.stanford.edu/occasion/when-theory-meets-heart-rolling-jubilee-and-lessons-occupying-debt> 16/04/2019.

⁷³ *Financial crisis 2008: How Lehman Brothers helped cause 'the worst financial crisis in history'*, Ben Chu, Independent, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/analysis-and-features/financial-crisis-2008-why-lehman-brothers-what-happened-10-years-anniversary-a8531581.html> 16/04/2019.

wrench into the system at a critical juncture in the production of inequality.”⁷⁴. This thrown “wrench” disrupts the norm and paves an alternative narrative that has been verified as possible by the successful actions of Rolling Jubilee which can then be inspiring for others. This is what is known as points of intervention, where specific places in a system are targeted in order to “...effectively interrupt the functioning of a system and open the way to change. By understanding these different points, organizers can develop a strategy that identifies the best places to intervene in order to have the greatest impact.”⁷⁵

Popaganda’s point of interest was its attempt to impact consumer and pop-cultural markets by commodifying lying, however at its core, Popaganda didn’t want to simply encourage lying. On a more complex level, Popaganda’s aims were to actually encourage people to do something which is usually considered bad, simply *because they could*. Similarities can be drawn with Rolling Jubilee; it is bad not to pay your debts, but Rolling Jubilee made it possible for people to not pay. What was just ‘doing something because you could’ was actually an exercising in dissenting against the norm. Rolling Jubilee had a clear format for this exercise to be facilitated, but Popaganda’s was less clear and this perhaps confused the message Popaganda was trying to tell.

In an essay titled *When Theory Meets Heart: The Rolling Jubilee and Lessons of Occupying Debt*, Pamela Brown, a founding member of Strike Debt reflects on the dual potential Rolling Jubilee has by having an effect on the financial world as well as the existing narratives around debt. When discussing Rolling Jubilee's ability to crack the system of debt, Brown writes “It would be in the performance of saying “no” that we might simultaneously create the new world,

⁷⁴ *When Theory Meets Heart: The Rolling Jubilee and Lessons of Occupying Debt*, Pamela Brown, Stanford, <https://arcade.stanford.edu/occasion/when-theory-meets-heart-rolling-jubilee-and-lessons-occupying-debt> 16/04/2019.

⁷⁵ *Theory: Points of Intervention*, Beautiful Trouble, <https://beautifultrouble.org/theory/points-of-intervention/>16/04/2019.

new selves, and a new politics.”⁷⁶. The spectacle of the fundraised money, being donated mostly by ordinary citizens such as a single mother, who donated one dollar, who was deeply in debt but “...didn’t realize she was not alone; she just wanted to feel a part of the Rolling Jubilee community.”⁷⁷, being transformed into huge, debt-relieving sums of money is a threat of more than monetary shifts. The Rolling Jubilee managed to reframe the debt narrative by ignoring the “...creditors’ framing of history by struggling to remember a past before debt.”⁷⁸ Popaganda as a product-selling company had similarly hoped to transform its brand appeal and subscription into an active statement that there must be an alternative to the post-truth epidemic. Had customers of Popaganda performed their “no” on the stage of public attention, be it online, in the streets, through pop-cultural trends or through effects on consumer/product markets, the threat may have amounted to a movement of people agreeing that what Popaganda proposed was far better than continuing to be subjected to a society where powers manufacture doubt for their own, self-profiting agendas.

Subscribing to Popaganda was never really about making lying profitable, it was about making a choice that was something other than just accepting. It was never possible for Popaganda to solve any of the issues associated with post-truth, but still there was the desire for art to impact some form of change. From reflecting on these two conflicting notions it became clear that the only solution Popaganda might ever be able to offer was not a cure for the trauma of post-truth, but a respite from it. The experience of being a Popaganda customer could be framed not just as an act or a game, or another capitalist market but a way to express and exercise

⁷⁶ *When Theory Meets Heart: The Rolling Jubilee and Lessons of Occupying Debt*, Pamela Brown, Stanford, <https://arcade.stanford.edu/occasion/when-theory-meets-heart-rolling-jubilee-and-lessons-occupying-debt> 16/04/2019.

⁷⁷ *When Theory Meets Heart: The Rolling Jubilee and Lessons of Occupying Debt*, Pamela Brown, Stanford, <https://arcade.stanford.edu/occasion/when-theory-meets-heart-rolling-jubilee-and-lessons-occupying-debt> 16/04/2019.

⁷⁸ *When Theory Meets Heart: The Rolling Jubilee and Lessons of Occupying Debt*, Pamela Brown, Stanford, <https://arcade.stanford.edu/occasion/when-theory-meets-heart-rolling-jubilee-and-lessons-occupying-debt> 16/04/2019.

individual power by exploring an alternative narrative to that which was currently being told. Instead of being victims of impossible situations, Popaganda's customers could take back control and transform the power that ruled over them as something that could be used by them. As Brown reflects, Rolling Jubilee refusal to payback debt was not meant to "...create an empty, individualized, fragmented terrain..." but was a way to affirm "desires" and "...discover new social relationships."⁷⁹ which is arguably similar to Joselit's proposition of art and "searchability". This is why this type of subscription differs from that which is encouraged in traditional product/customer relationships and why, even beyond the event, it holds on to its performative value even if it enters the markets of consumer trends online and in person. The performance of Popaganda or subscription does become a commodity but not one that is consumed but is in fact created by the relationship between the performance of subscription and the audience.

This process would require that the role of an audience member to be transformed into that of a conscious consumer who ultimately is responsible for shifting the frame of the act from performance to product. The values of transparency and openness should accommodate this transition, allowing it to remain a choice based on the audience's desires rather than a manipulation of those same desires. Profit therefore becomes something generated by the subscription and support of the audience members come customers, and is defined as either the threat they pose on the power elites, or the hope, solidarity and security they may receive from participating in a movement that offers them an alternative narrative.

Is there a danger that the use of consumer culture would poison the progressive intentions of such an act like Popaganda? Certainly, and even the highest endurance to ethical values might

⁷⁹ *When Theory Meets Heart: The Rolling Jubilee and Lessons of Occupying Debt*, Pamela Brown, Stanford, <https://arcade.stanford.edu/occasion/when-theory-meets-heart-rolling-jubilee-and-lessons-occupying-debt> 16/04/2019.

not be enough to prevent abuses from both makers, audience and adversaries. Pamela Brown reflects how divides formed within Strike Debt as questions of who was most deserving of the debt relief emerged, raising issues around how race affects inequality. There are occasions where activist movements have been labelled as sellouts, such as Cultural Jammers Adbusters who decided to take on Nike by releasing their own Portuguese made canvas sneakers. Whereas Adbusters declared that “The idea of pushing your way into the capitalist game ... is one of the strategies that angry people ...have of changing the world for the better ...” critics pointed to this as a step too far; “...not only inadequate for confronting the contemporary global political and cultural hegemony of neoliberalism, but in many ways rehearsing key tenets of neoliberalism .”⁸⁰. Indeed, Joselit’s proposal for art to take on a position of currency has been subjected to criticism of a lack of clarity as to how exactly art can be transformed into such a power ethically.

What Rolling Jubilee proposed (and what Popaganda may have had the potential to achieve) is in line with the ideals of Utopia that have been discussed previously in this text (“...the dominant system does not dominate because most people agree with it; it dominates because we cannot imagine an alternative.”⁸¹). What has been deemed an important part of activism, the offering of an alternative, of strategies and of a narrative that looks to achieve the better tomorrow rather than just protest against the problems of today. Popaganda was unable to genuinely create a market, the exchanges that did occur between the audience and Popaganda were unguided, preventing the performed subscription from amounting to anything concrete. Where Rolling Jubilee (and on a more theoretical note, David Joselit’s “art as currency”) offers more weight in its ability to do this is down to the support of the monetary threat it poses. This is because of the unfortunate yet undeniable fact that money is arguably

⁸⁰ Haiven, 2007, p. 86.

⁸¹ *Lessons From Utopia*, c4aa, <https://c4aa.org/2017/08/lessons-from-utopia/> 16/04/2019.

the biggest influence on power, more so than democratic votes or people's movements. Through dealing in those important, profit markets, be it through money or other valuable resources (including popularity and time) it gains a seat at a table where its threat can be heard far more clearly. Mixing activism, art and a business model is a complex and uncertain proposal, especially when the value of ethics is held so highly. However, if transparency is maintained, this move towards markets usually associated with big business can be seen as a sort of rebranding of performance and activism into a commodity that works like others but that essentially opposes the normalities of the everyday markets.

Conclusion

“Perhaps the ambitions will change, perhaps there will be no need for mediation anymore or perhaps I will discover the path to reconciliation to be just as long as it was when I first started.”

- Introduction, Politics & Performativity

Conclusions are difficult because as the writer, you have to negotiate between your emotional sense and your logical sense. As when you're confronted with information that doesn't support your current beliefs, you have to decide whether you are going to continue on with the same narrative or accept that you actually don't know how the story goes. A conclusion demands some level of decisiveness, and remaining in the grey area of accepting that you do not know feels weak and easy. Should I be objective or honest?

In the introduction, I confessed that I had struggled to find a practice which could marry my ambition to impact concrete, socio-political change with my passion and belief in performance and theatre. I had hoped that this text would provide some guidance as to how to continue the reconciliation of these two ambitions. Through considering the use of appropriation in Popaganda and its wider potential in artistic activism, it became clear that hacking the methods of others for your own agenda can allow a performance to take part in 'real' politics, something which is vital in the quest of concrete change. Through looking at how audiences were treated during Popaganda it became important that acts of performative activism need to make their agendas agendeleless, pulling away from a desire to change people's minds and favouring the opportunity for cognitive shock instead. Finally, this text accepted that though risky, commercialising performative acts might be necessary in order to enter into a popular market where change can occur.

Though I have asked many questions throughout the text, it has not necessarily been answers that I have been searching for, but rather a chance to reflect on what has happened over the past two years, take stock of the successes and failures and identify the next possible turns I might take in this search. What has become clear is that in whichever direction I go next, there are key elements that must go with me:

Reality: A commitment to blurring the boundaries between representation and reality, moving performativity away from the institutions of theatre and the event and into the everyday lives of audiences.

Spectacle: To create a moment, act or event that taps into the relationships between audience and image that produces emotional responses.

Transparency: To be as transparent as possible about my or a project's agenda to anyone that comes in contact.

Popularity: To aim to create something that is accessible and has the potential to become popular, to reach as many people as possible.

In the introduction I wrote that "Perhaps the ambitions will change, perhaps there will be no need for mediation anymore or perhaps I will discover the path to reconciliation to be just as long as it was when I first started". The latter is the closest prediction to the actual outcome, the path is definitely just as long, but it is now more defined, its parameters shortened and my sense of its direction a little more confident. Though difficult to admit, it also seems very possible that the ambition to create art has rescinded, slowly being replaced by the need for change to become more accessible to more people. Though this means a move away from

performative forms of art such as theatre and exhibitions, it does not mean that performativity will not play a pivotal role in my next attempt to impact change. Performativity, spectacle, the ability to “frame facts in a way that holds meaning” will continue to be a top priority, be that working on a campaign for a charity or writing a speech for a political candidate. But, perhaps, performativity for me will no longer be something I associate with theatre but instead a word that reminds me of the guidance creativity can provide for those looking to do some good in a spectacular way.

“If we’re going to do this, we would like to be truly honest with you.

This is in not the right direction, but it is a better alternative.

This is better if you make it better.

This is real if you decide it is real.

This is worth it, because what are your other options?

We are honest but occasionally dishonest

We are informed but not as much as we should be

We are certain that this is an uncertain prospect.

We believe that this is a desperate time

And we are comfortable using desperate measures.

Because remember,

The dominant system only dominates

Because we ask it to.”

- A New Manifesto

Addendum: Popaganda's Top 10

The following is a shortlist of unmentioned details, moments and anecdotal muses from the production of Popaganda.

1. Hasan Piker

Popaganda's first (and only) celebrity interaction

In the run up to the opening of Popaganda, a twelve-week social media campaign was launched. The main thrust of the campaign consisted of tri-daily social media posts covering a number of categories, from behind the scenes footage to re-posting fake news stories. Another avenue was original fake news, where Popaganda created its own fake news stories and posted them in image-form online with accompanying captions. One of the subjects of original fake news content was Hasan Piker⁸², a political commentator known for a progressive agenda that was very much in line with that of Popaganda. Hasan has been subjected to much criticism online in recent times, with much of the criticism focusing on what some claimed was a consistent sexism when attacking Tomi Lahren⁸³, a well-known right-wing media personality. Popaganda exacerbated this argument by doctoring an already-existing news headline in order to perpetuate the 'Hasan is a sexist' argument.⁸⁴

What was unique about this particular post was that the subject responded. Hasan commented on the doctored image pointing out that this was not real, before posting it onto his own page alongside the real image with the caption "lol this is such a reach, I have no control over what publications write but it's not even a real title to begin with, why do this?".

⁸² Hasan Piker is a Turkish-American political commentator and progressive activist known primarily for his show *The Breakdown* that features as part of The Young Turks network.

⁸³ Tomi Lahren is an American political commentator known for her conservative attacks on liberal politics. Her former show *Tomi* received attention due to the controversial segment *Final Thoughts*.

⁸⁴ Attachment 4

Popaganda replied to Piker, asking him to visit the Popaganda Instagram account and webpage in order to understand the context of the post and Popaganda's mission, but Piker did not respond further. It is to be believed that Hasan took the post as a genuine attack, as opposed to the intended impact of imitating an attack. Popaganda's actions were not taken as an exercise in an alternative reality, but instead, mistaken for reality itself. Therefore, it's exercise in 'fake' fake news had direct consequences in everyday reality, the performative exercise bled into the perceptions of the everyday, but not in the way it had intended.

2. Off-White & Popaganda

Stealing ideas on hyper-branding

Off-White is an American fashion label headed by Virgil Abloh, who is now the first African-American artistic director of Louis Vuitton. Off-White has been endorsed by pop-culture powerhouses such as the Hadid's, Kardashians and Beyonce. Around the same time Popaganda began planning its design, Off-White began producing countless garments with a recurring use of an Off-White branded ribbon⁸⁵.

These types of images were everywhere and it wasn't long before high street retailers began appropriating this method of branding for their own products. Popaganda joined in and handmade meters of its own branded ribbon, which was then used to create the uniforms of the shop assistants as well as sold as merchandise.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Attachment 5

⁸⁶ Attachment 6

3. The Popaganda Handbook

An experiment in Legitimacy and Legacy

*The Popaganda Handbook*⁸⁷ was created for the opening of Popaganda. The book encapsulated every element of Popaganda in a short, jazzed up book which looked to legitimize Popaganda as way of life, drawing on inspiration from self-help books and manifestos. It housed the more academic parts of Popaganda; it's post-truth formula, how each strategy worked, the manifesto as well as more inspirational references; doctored quotes from celebrities, memes and graphic designs⁸⁸. We hoped that the handbook would legitimise post-truth pseudo business identity and would also provide a creative form of documentation for Popaganda, extending its legacy beyond the event itself.

4. Kanye West on Repeat

Popaganda's underlying warning

Popaganda's waiting room was a small, cordoned off part of the space, made dark by hanging plastic sheets. There, customers would sit and watch a short clip of Kanye West being pushed by a pair of hands. The clip was perhaps a second or two long and was repeated continuously for around four minutes. As the clip played, text scrolled across the screen, disappearing into the hands that pushed Kanye. The text is taken from an episode of *The Young Turks*, a progressive, independent news show, a sort of rant about how humans are by natural, susceptible to believing ridiculous things;

⁸⁷ Attachment 7

⁸⁸ Attachment 8 & 9

“Go to any country, huge chunks of the country believe in massive conspiracy theories, it’s partly in our nature, you know because we can’t, it’s hard for us to figure out parts of the universe. So by the way there’s a conspiracy theory that a guy walked on water, was born of a virgin and converts water into wine, and billions of people believe that. There’s another conspiracy theory that a guy talked to Allah on top of a mountain and then Allah told him to have sex with everybody’s wives, okay and a billion and 1.6 billion people believe that. So we can’t stop people believing wrong things, and I tell you right now, the minute you allow for that they’re going to come for all of us.”

Accompanying this whole image was the haunting introduction of *Wolves* by Kanye West, a eerie whistled tune which we looped. This was the only music played throughout Popaganda, it was extremely repetitive, haunting and drove the shop assistants and customers a little insane. These combined elements made up the only negative message Popaganda put forward; a warning that if we continue on the way we were, we would fall victims to a future that did not have our best interest and to people that would try and “come for us all”.

5. Agreeing to Disagree

How not to change someone’s mind

Shortly after Popaganda had closed I encountered two charity workers selling raffle tickets on the streets of Chester, England. I got involved, signing up to the raffle and somehow got into a long conversation with the two men. The conversation got very political and it became clear that we had very opposing opinions, they were extremely right winged, pro-brexite, pro-trump whereas I made it clear that I was essentially the opposite. Though their opinions and comments frustrated me we managed to have a civil, interesting and productive conversation. We gave each other suggestions of newsites and books to read and tried to understand each

others point of view, even though we knew we disagreed wholeheartedly. At the end of the conversation, one of the men turned to me and said “This has been the first conversation I’ve had with someone who disagrees with my politics where I haven’t been shouted at or called an idiot”. His comment really struck me, enforcing my beliefs that, changing people’s mind could not and should not be done by forcing opinions and information on each other. That encounter inspired the audience chapter within this text, attempting to understand further how a performance might try and challenge audience perception whilst leaving open the opportunity for mind’s *not* to be changed.

6. Popaganda Radio

Unused Details

Before deciding to only play the haunting tune of Wolves by Kanye West as the only music for Popaganda, there was a fabricated radio station called Popaganda Radio. The pre recorded material featured a catchy introductory jingle, advertisement for products, fan call ins and a long list of carefully selected songs such as ‘Don’t Stop Believin’ and ‘Superstition’.

7. Tattoos

Ritualistic branding

Popaganda branded tattoos were available to engaging customers. Shop assistants offered to even apply the tattoos for them, taking them to an aquarium filled with water and performing the ritual of branding the customer as a Popaganda member.

8.The Onion Meme

Popaganda summed up in a mement

The Onion is a satirical media company, on the 16th of March 2018 they posted an image to Instagram⁸⁹, the meme summed up an essential component of Popaganda; “Facebook plans to combat fake news stories by making them actually happen”. Replace ‘Facebook’ with ‘Popaganda’ and with a few adjustment the sentence still works; Popaganda announces plans to combat fake news stories by encouraging others to make them happen.

9. Manifesto Inspiration

Productive results from time wasted on Instagram

An image found on Instagram which inspired the last line of the Popaganda manifesto⁹⁰.

10. The Origins of Popaganda

Semi-real autobiography

In order to give weight to the illusion of Popaganda being a successful, global business, we created the image of the founder of Popaganda, who was idolized by the shop assistants and featured heavily through imagery and references throughout the store. The founder was called Bria de la Mare and her story is in many ways a true reference to the story of how and why I myself, created Popaganda:

About the Founder

⁸⁹ Attachment 12

⁹⁰ Attachment 13

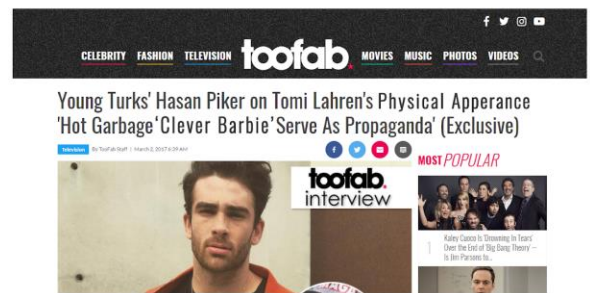
Bria de la Mare was born into a complicated world. Raised as a Christian, Bria understood that lying was a sin. However she understood that you could be forgiven for lying, if you said sorry to God. Even though the option was there to be forgiven, Bria never lied. She found lying extremely difficult, even in situations where she needed to lie the most, she couldn't bring herself to do it. Why? People lied to her on a daily basis, why couldn't she do it back? Her obsession with telling the truth led people call her many things; a good girl, a diplomat, an angel, ethical, too ethical, stubborn, but for Bria, not being able to lie felt like a disease with no cure. That is why Bria made Popaganda, so that others like her could find easy, fashionable solutions that would allow them to find their way of lying in a 'post-truth' world. There are many ways to lie, Popaganda offers you three strategies which will hopefully help you to believe in anything you want to believe in.

Attachment 4

Original Version



Popaganda's Version



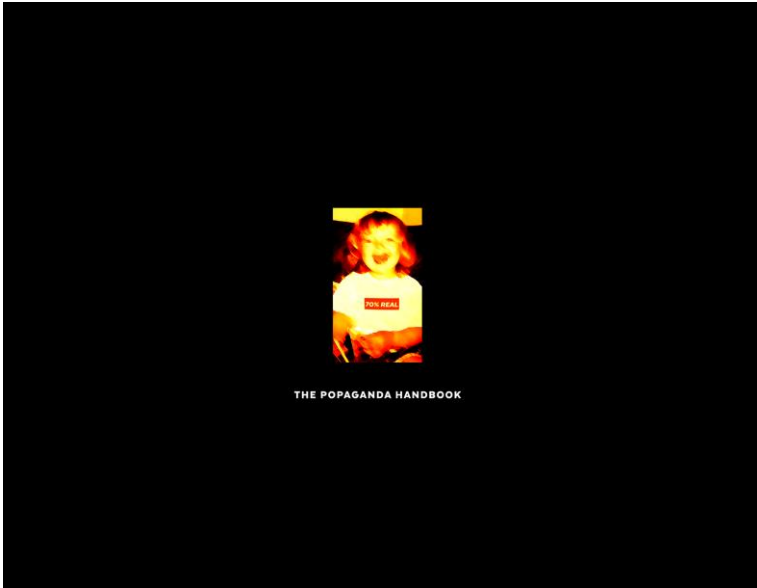
Attachment 5



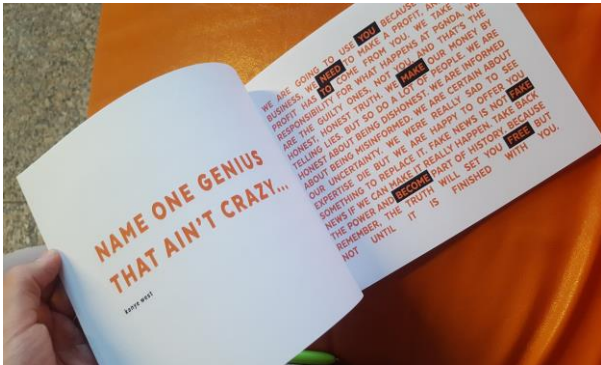
Attachment 6 & 7



Attachment 8



Attachment 9 & 10



Attachment 12



**Facebook Announces Plan To
Combat Fake News Stories By
Making Them Actually Happen**



Attachment 13



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