THE EMPEROR'S NEW ART:
AN ANALYSIS OF JIMMY COYOTE'S MANIFESTO
AS IT CONCERNS THE STATE OF CONTEMPORARY VISUAL CULTURE
BY JIMMY COYOTE

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the state of visual culture through the lens of Jimmy Coyote's manifesto *Running List of Good Ideas*. The manifesto exists in the structure of a *listacle*, a numbered/ or bulleted visually-punctuated *list-like article* one finds on a site like BuzzFeed. Coyote's manifesto is composed of a series gifs and ends with a long user comment. The manifesto calls into question the relationship between visual culture, consumerism, feedback loops, and absurdity as they exist and fluctuate in a house built by and for consumerism. The manifesto puts forth the idea that, because of self-made and self-perpetuating social feedback loops, we are living in a post-postmodern and post-truth society. Postmodernism's emphasis on the elusiveness of meaning and knowledge has become hyper-real and the stress on language in an aesthetic era of communication only exposes more deeply the failures (more accurately *the absence*) of objective communication in a post-net world. The linguistic structures that define meaning and cultural significance are now irreparably exposed.

Coyote's manifesto, as an art object and a battle cry for art, calls for a new form of art/aesthetic responsibility by means of curating and intellectualizing life (commonplace objects, the mundane, the everyday) and revels in absurdity. Perhaps one final attempt and refuge for the production and sharing of meaning. The largest contributing factors to this new state of visual culture are the democratization of the Internet, the rise of user generated content, the need for curation as control, and art's timeless attempt to emulate a state of purity and perfection, or to be a state of purity in of itself.

This paper is an analysis of a manifesto that is completely absurd. This paper is an intellectualization of an absurd (and, at face value, a meaningless) text object. This analysis and the manifesto as an art object cannot exist without each other.

To be sure, the relationship between the ideas in this paper, the content in the manifesto, and the institution of art is the thesis*. This relationship will be interpreted and intellectualized differently by different people. This exchange of audience and author(s) both real and fabricated also poses a new form of art and analysis.*

Please find a link to the listacle manifesto 'Running List of Good Ideas' here.

'Running List of Good Ideas'
and Contemporary Visual Culture

THE LARGE DEMURE ROCKS WE MUST ADDRESS

As Jimmy Coyote likes to say: *art as we have known it, from the Renaissance up until this century, is over.* Any object, concept, affect, process, or aesthetic relating to a work of art is now completely beside the point. The mode of art now is its intellectualization, its inception via language: the academia and critique imposed upon a work during or after its creation is the essence of the work. Art [work] is casual and has nothing inherently art-related in its existence. Art is not art until a specific relationship or association with the institution of art is fabricated by artist, curator, critic, and/or academician (i.e. the ready-made), the institution dictates the work a soul. More broadly, all things are in fact absurd and inherently empty of meaning until associations and relationships are created, tethering any object/idea/happening to a central "institution." (Later, we will refer to this as "branding.")

In this digital age, we are swimming in a sea polluted with endless and toothless user-generated content, between which there is but a thin fluid of associations and relationships keeping all the content we consume afloat in "truth". This sea has become so saturated by a vast breadth of content that there is simply not enough depth for substantial "association" to exist. Thus the absurdity and the inherent meaninglessness of the world and its content are being exposed like large demure rocks at the bottom of a cliff revealed by a low tide.

JIMMY COYOTE and THE MANIFESTO

These ideas are presented in artist Jimmy Coyote's debut manifesto, "Running List of Good Ideas." Jimmy Coyote is a branding artist, using and shaping identities as her medium. These identities are typically documented in the form of video but often make live "appearances" and act as stand-ins for Coyote herself. Coyote is never present, only the crafted characters walk about the world, but it is understood that Coyote is the artist performing them.

Some of Coyote's most notable characters include Charlotte Stehr, a pedantic sixty-year-old woman who has interests in modern dance, jewelry from the Southwest, and Japan; another noted character is Melissa Moore, an advocate for super market accountability and believes organic food is for luddites. Coyote has also been known to appear as a used fire salesman, a gardener, a fine dining connoisseur and a tennis instructor.

Coyote also plays other characters in which they are essentially the identity of Jimmy Coyote except for one defining character trait that makes for a separate identity. These characters include a guy who doesn't know what denim is (who, for example, might pick up a pair of jeans and say, "Wow I love these silk jeans"), a person who thinks every book with mountains in it is about rock climbing, a person who isn't sure if buses are real (he is pretty sure, but not one hundred percent sure). Coyote's work focuses on the subtleties of identity and how, collectively, these nuances if tweaked slightly can expose the absurd in everyday life and people.

The manifesto is Coyote's final say on the absurd in everyday life. The form of the manifesto is not a traditional one, but it does however conform to contemporary content consumption. The structure of the manifesto is that of a *listacle*, meaning that it emulates list-like article that one might find on a site like Buzzfeed. It relays information in the form of numbered, but not inherently hierarchical, *items*, each item most likely being an image object or it is a text or *social object*[1] that has been *transformed* into an image object (this *transformation* varies and is key). All items in a *listacle* must be presented ultimately as image objects, regardless of origin, as this is ideal for efficient consumption.

This has become the vernacular in information consumption. In Coyote's manifesto, each *item* is a reconstructed nonfiction moment from Coyote's personally life. For example, one *item* is a gif of two girls in blonde wigs and pink shirts lying on a bed looking at their devices. One girl looks up and asks, "What the fuck even is mesothelioma?" Another is a professor standing with a transparency projector in front of an almost empty room, replacing the transparencies and asking the room over and over,   "Is *this* a forest? …Is *this* a forest?" By isolating these moments and forcing the viewer to watch them repeated, Coyote is attempting to at once invite us to revel in every minute reality of each moment and also to revel in the absurdity of its undeniable familiarity.

At the end of the manifesto, in the comments section, is a comment by Jimmy Coyote herself giving her own definition of the absurd. This is where the bulk of the meaning is relayed.The manifesto was "boosted" on Facebook as an advertisement from Jimmy

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[1] A *social object* is like an image object or a text object, except its essence is not necessarily visual and not necessarily text-based, it does not inherently communicate anything. Rather, a *social object* is itself an object that is inherently a platform for 'exchange' (I will talk about the currency and value of what is being exchanged later in this paper). *My best example*: The New York Times made a livestream *social object* during the Golden Globes this year. It was, as a creative labor alone before ever being entered into the socialsphere, exactly what you know who was talking about when he wrote about the simulacrum. Essentially, they had a bird's eye view camera live-streaming a table that had atop it glittery cut-out letter spelling out the words 'Golden Globes' (and other decorations). And each time a winner would be announced, the social reporter would place a printed out 8x11 inkjet image of the winners face into the view of the camera, adding no commentary on or concerning said winner or said awards. The only singular thing about the stream that is in any way functional or at the very least interesting is that it is a platform that allows for "social" exchange (people can comment, like, interact with the *social object* in the usual ways to create user-generated content/feedback).

Coyote's Facebook page. It was advertised not as a product or something being sold, but just as content to be consumed as many companies do, contributing the now completely blurred lines between corporate content, user-generated content, news, life events, art, etc. The publisher is now also the advertiser.

There are two important declarations suggested in the manifesto that require some further defined vocabulary and contextual discussion as related to the social arena in which this piece exists, specifically the social arena. The manifesto asserts first and foremost that all things are absurd and it is the weak structures of language and curation that we summon to exert any control over the meaningless. If one accepts this, and one accepts this manifesto as an *art work*, there are certain implications about the state of contemporary art. The most direct of these implications is one we can all get behind I think: that contemporary art works, as in fruits of creative labor specifically for, by, and within the institution art for strictly aesthetic consequences, *too* are absurd and nonsensical.

A contemporary art object, having none or weak (linguistic) relations to past traditions of creative labor, exists within nothing but itself. The only necessary association an artwork needs is one with the institution of art, which is at once excessively democratic and organically inaccessible. This being the case, any other association the artwork makes with any other happening/ object/institution/person/process *is* the essence of the work. The mode of art now is the intellectualization of art. Artworks themselves are casual and embody nothing inherently art-related. A fine example would be that of Kinetic Sculpture, or *cup art*:

> *If I take a cup and allow it to fall off a table, the way it fell off the table is the art…because I say it is, because the artist says it is, because the critics say it is. There is nothing that really happened and nothing that can be seen or properly existentially documented except for its discussion and its accepted association with the institution as art. One could discuss kinetics and energy and space and time and humanity and installation and documentation and mortality, but at the end of the day, there is not only nothing there, but nothingness that was random and, without me someone else, meaningless.*
> ("Why Cup Art Is Actually A Disaster Worth Reconsidering," 2015)

Whereas during other aesthetic eras, the essence of art has been (in no precise order) an ode to: deity, lifelikeness, shock, individual perception, the absurd, materials and medium, redefinition, social practice, synthesis, etc. And the essence of contemporary art today is its intellectualization, its induction into its own institution, *its ode to itself*. The value lies in a work's associations and relationships and discussion. The difference, however, between this idea and relational aesthetics, social practice art, performance art, etc., is the fundamental understanding that everything consumable today is in fact absurd, stained by

its own consumability and regurgatitatability, and we are each living within individual and isolated realities that we are attempting to connect and associate and curate into mass consumability because globalization told us this is the one true path.

DEFINING THE ABSURD

The word absurd here needs further clarification. Unlike the philosophy of dada, Coyote is not suggesting that people are making absurd works on purpose for the sake of the absurd as a statement. Rather, everything we do and make is inherently absurd if one ignores any attached association or contextual details ("branding") of the complex social systems in which they exist. The absurd is not a tool or subject matter or medium, rather it is the core beneath the shallow surface of language upon which we build meaning and value in attempt to bury that core and exercise control. An easy exercise would be to imagine yourself living in a world where every business is a person and every person is a business. In this world, there is nothing that people won't do or say to sell you something to consume, and since this kind of communication is ontologically transactional its actual meaning or manifestation does not matter as long as the transaction is successful. Thus, in the extreme version of this world, all communication and messages are absurd at face value. In Coyote's manifesto, she defines the absurd in the following 'comment' on her own manifesto:

> *LET ME EXPLAIN SOME BASIC SHIT TO YOU. By absurd, I mean strange in a meaningless way, inherently empty of meaning. We give rituals and activities and things meanings via some degree of intellectualization of those activities. This definition of absurd relies on the acceptance that the fact that we do anything at all that requires some kind of complex social structure to give it value is absurd. And I think for the most part it comes down to brand loyalty.*
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> *My best and most specific example would be several thousand people gathered outside in Grant Park all standing up watching a jumbo TV screen steaming the USA v Ghana soccer unanimously chanting USA when the USA team scores by kicking a ball into a net. We have all decided, because of something primitive or natural maybe, that we want to associate with a team because we are from the same region or state or place or school or country and that is our brand and we have pride in that brand and we want that brand to be better than other brands because it is OUR brand. We want to display our support of our brand even if there are no representatives of the other brand to whom we display our pride. We physically and audibly react (we clap and chant) so that our brand knows we are proud even if they can't hear and do not know. (Yes, this is maybe a unique situation and not all sporting events are like this. But it will underscore the details of my point more clearly.)*

Imagine then, that ALL branding is taken away, all details are gone- Grant Park, Soccer, USA, Ghana, the idea of SPORTS in general- and you just have the raw ritual – a group of people gathered to audibly and physically support THEIR brand/their thing as they compete with someone else's THING to see who has the better thing. And in this case, the supporters are essentially doing this supporting in a vacuum in which both their THING and their rivals are not present, it is all a virtual simulacrum-esque experience and relies on the understanding there is an existing relationship and social system in which they are participating.

My argument, and my definition of the absurd, is that the bare boned elements of these structures and systems are absurd and rely on a complex and mediating interpretation/intellectualization in order to be at all comprehensive and in order for all the combined elements to make any sense together. The combined elements rely on branding and theory and a rolling history of that theory for us to continue understanding any kind of relationship between them and between each other in order to keep participating in the social systems/structures they create.

An important aspect that cannot be ignored is that some of these systems, especially sports, are maybe more about entertainment than anything else and this level of analysis may seem unnecessary. To relate it all back to art and critical studies, I think that's absolutely true. There is an aspect in art that may not be what we traditionally think of as entertainment, but definitely some version of it. Art needs to have a sense of humor about itself or it will continue failing to be anything that exists outside of its own institution. For example, we watch a video of performance art piece where a woman is making an abstract expressionist painting, and, while she is throwing paint on the canvas another woman is singing a cappella jazz. As an initiated viewer OR uninitiated viewer, the piece is funny to a) watch b) understand that this nontraditional, animated performance is intended to represent somewhat serious and traditional subject matter and c) that this idea even came together in someone's mind at all. However, if the artist and the academicians/ critics who support the piece's integrity fail to recognize that HEY AT FACE VALUE THIS IS ACTUALLY FUNNY (and a little ridiculous) than the institution is out of touch or, more likely, in touch but reluctant to accept that theirs too is an absurd institution that heavily relies on the interpretation (intellectualization) of relationships between non-inherently connected elements of life that then form a social structure/system/phenomenon.

(from "Running List of Good Ideas," 2015)

Coyote is explaining the way we use "branding" and associating to give value and meaning to events that, without said branding, are nonsense. At face value, life is composed of ritual and spectacle that appear so random that, if starting from scratch, it is not certain that we would associate it all again the same way.

This too, along with any discussion of this piece as it speaks to the state of contemporary visual culture, requires further explanation of the absurd as it relates to the singular and isolated realities of each person. The grasping of the incredibly complex singular realities within which each person lives (and the relentless attempt on behalf of our contemporary consumer habits to connect these realities) are critical to Coyote's definition of the absurd.

Those like Baudrillard and Clare Bishop, who most notably discuss relational aesthetics and parafiction, have called our state of contemporary art the *new Avant Garde*. I would argue that this is not like the Avant Garde, or any *new* era at all, because it lacks a defined critical opposition to or transcendence of the Avant Garde. Rather, it is a Renaissance: a total rebirth. It is the rediscovery of the individual, not just in people, but in everything. Everything and everyone is an isolated reality, a niche target demographic that is being perpetually stuffed inside larger niche target demographics.

To accept this, we must assume the end/irrelevance of postmodernism post-Web 2.0 and in the era of the *social object*. Postmodernism can only account for the "coming together" of the world as we know it (the blossoming of neoliberalism, globalization, information and technological revolutions), but it cannot account for the world as it has settled in light of those influences. First, postmodernism created the foundation for intellectualization by creating an intellectual landscape in which it was for some reason assumed that everyone knew everything in this age of "lost innocence" (discussed by Umberto Eco (1994)). Secondly, and contrary to ideas of postmodern theorist Barthes, Coyote's manifesto argues for the *rebirth* of the author; there can only singular realities and performances of those realities. There is only the author. As I argued in an essay on the subject of the end of truth and postmodernism a year prior:

> *"Globalization and technology have allowed us to view and demonstrate infinite human experiences and that there is no correct experience or truth yet we continue to accept the documentation of one photojournalist attempting to capture experience that are not their own as truths. If postmodernism meant a global explosion of culture and technologies that brought the world together, the death of postmodernism means accepting that after the universalization of the world and the fusion of a global community that postmodernism fomented, it has only become more clear that there is an absence of anything truly universal. The absence of universal truth means there are only personal, one-on-one relationships that exist and nothing can be relevant on a global scale. There should be… a glorification of not only the individual but also the individual as a singular isolated reality. We see examples of this emerging in a literature and memoirs today. For example, Geoff Dyer writes in the introduction of his book Yoga for People Who Can't Be Bothered to Do It, "Everything in this book really happened but some of*

> *the things that happened only happened in my head; by the same*
> *token, all things that didn't happen didn't happen there too."*
> (*Artist as Predator*, 2014).

In essence, everything only happens in everyone's head. There is no omniscient third party reality: there are only creations and interpretations of those creations and interpretations of those interpretations. Every individual's experience is a new, singular reality that only happened to that one person. The same is true for images: each image is not documentation of its subject. The image is its own narrative and its own reality. (Yet, again, we are presented with image objects in *lists* that are *articles* and these image objects are presented as bulleted facts or points.)

The final distinctive note marking the irrelevance of postmodernism or any linear trajectory of art eras today is that there is no relationship between today and the past except for that relationship maintained by language (i.e. *roll down the window*, *call an Uber*). Postmodernism hinges on synthesis and connections to the past and between the past. The recontextualization and curation seen today is not one of postmodern synthesis where people are "remixing" old content. Rather, its essence speaks to an attempt to navigate through content of indiscernible origin and significance and assign some kind of value to it. It is an attempt to combat and abbreviate an intimidating breadth of content that is mostly meaningless. I am speaking mostly about the internet. Now, accepting the failure of the postmodern mission, we can more accurately see through this refined lens the nature of curation and association and its relationship to the internet and its influence.

LANGUAGE, THE INTERNET, and *SOCIAL OBJECTS*

The internet is composed almost completely of language. Its aesthetic is communication, whether this is through words or imagery. Yes we have become more visual here in the world of Web 2.0 (Tim O'Reilly, 1999) but this visual literacy is only a compromise we make to balance out our inability to be completely literate when presented with so much content. In "Digital Divide," Claire Bishop discusses our attempt to process vast amounts of content in terms of Zoe Leonard's work *You see I am here after all* (2008), composed of four thousand postcards from Niagara Falls. "It is impossible to take in all 4 thousand postcards so our eyes just scan the surface." Bishop explains that Kenneth Golds calls   this new legibility: we "parse" texts instead of read them.

Because of this inconsumable breadth of content, this need for scanning foments a need for 1) curators and a natural inclination towards 2) association in order to exercise some kind of control and make some kind of sense of it all.

In his cultural theory book *Bowling Alone,* Robert Putnam explains that Americans, as a living in democratic nation, were inclined to associating with each other in ways that no other "civil" society did. He quotes Tocqueville and explains:

> *"When Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s, it was the Americans' propensity for civic association that most impressed him as the key to their unprecedented ability to make democracy work. 'Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition:' he observed, "are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types--religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute.... Nothing, in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America.'"* (pg. 2).

He then goes on to explain America's associative nature in a contemporary society:

> *"Few ever attend any meetings of such organizations, and most are unlikely ever (knowingly) to encounter any other member. The bond between any two members of the Sierra Club is less like the bond between any two members of a gardening club and more like the bond between any two Red Sox fans… Their ties, in short, are to common symbols, common leaders, and perhaps common ideals, but not to one another."* (pg. 6).

With the spread of (at least the spread of *the idea*) democracy throughout the world via globalization and the Internet, it is only natural that the Internet itself has undergone democratization. It is a seemingly flat landscape in which everybody is allowed to participate. Everybody is allowed to share his or her comments and feedback, critical or not. Today, all of thoughts and feedback (even neutral and somewhat primitive reactions like 'liking' something) are shared instantaneously and without criteria. This feedback is then available for others to consume and feed back into, and on and on. An endless loop of nonsense and non-critical dialogue is being swallowed and spit back out (with the vast amount available, there is no time for critical digestion). And during this loop, as Lev Manovich explains in *The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life*, factual content, opinion, conversation are no longer separated and "forums or comments below a website entry in which an original post may generate a long discussion that goes into new and ongoing directions…" the original item long forgotten.

This source confusion and user-generated content is exposing the absurd. We cannot extract the original meaning of a content object thus we must perpetually rewrite and refabricate associations, which generates more nonsense and exposes the weakness of the prior value of the item. We use curation and association and weapons against the absurd and to assert some control over our identities (this work is usually done online). If we can tell the stories of our lives, we feel as if we have some control over them. Because

of this, *selection* has become valued. Bishop explains that "authorship is no longer the point, instead the emphasis is on meaningful recontextualization" ("Digital Divide," 2012).

The democratization of the web (and thus essentially the communicating world) has allowed free association and re-association to flourish. The Internet is a perpetual opportunity to assign and re-assign meaning, and often times *truth*, to content when it seems there might not be any.

COMBATING THE ABSURD THROUGH SHARED EXPERIENCES

Considering the way Coyote utilizes common content structures found on the Internet, she demonstrates several ways the absurd can be exposed. The first of those being isolation and repetition. The way Coyote isolates the single moments in the manifesto by using the gif format, allowing the viewer to watch the moment endlessly, the viewer then has the opportunity to unpack the moment. Similarly, Paul Pfeiffer's *Fragment of a Crucifixion (After Francs Bacon)* (1999), is a looped digital video isolating a single moment in the NBA where a player is celebrating. However the video is silent like a gif, so after watching it repeated for several minutes, the celebrations become seemingly violent and insane. As the viewer continues watching even longer, the gesture seems even more alien and the viewer begins to struggle matching the gesture to any reality in which it might exist or be reacting too. When given the opportunity to actually digest content thoroughly, the viewer can begin to question the circumstances in which it was generated and whether its meaning and values holds water or is weakly resting at the surface level.

As a final consideration of the effects and attempted combat against the absurd in the state of contemporary art, we must discuss *why* we are making these kinds of works that hinge on their intellectualization and *why* we relentlessly seek this kind of control over the absurd. We curate and perpetually tell and retell the story of our own lives in order to exercise some kind of control over it because the only thing that exists is *you telling that story*. Without the narrative arc, we are lost in nonsensical content. Art has always been an attempt to reach purity/perfection- whether itself as a pure expression of life or as a pure transendence of life- either through communication/worship of a deity or perhaps the modernists' focus on medium and process.

By telling and retelling our stories, by intellectualizing, we are making the same attempt. Our experiences only exist in language, and now too they are preserved virtually and made available for feedback and curation, thus available to have new meanings assigned to them. By "curating" our stories and fabricating associations that did not necessarily occur naturally, we can retell our stories over and over, giving them new value and new meaning. We have control more now than ever over the narrative arc of our lives and the absurd can simply be dismissed.

Contemporary artists are now creating experiences to be intellectualized for this same reason. Projects like Theaster Gates' *Dorchester Project*, Rirkrit Tiravanija's *FREE*, Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* and many, many other contemporary art projects are, though diverse, created to exist as (good) *experiences* for people and present the *experience* as an object. Baudrillard places these kinds of works in a "friendship culture" ("Art of the 1990s," pg. 32).

We are now manufacturing "good experiences" because in fact we are all alone/ postmodernism failed/ nothing is really related to anything/ everything is an isolated existence and all we have is the relationships between those things that we make up to feel in control. We are isolated in the absurd. The reason we make art that attempts to create a good experience, *the reason we are now manufacturing experiences as products*, is because the relationships we hope create inside a space during shared experiences keep us from being lost in the abyss of the absurd.

This is why intellectualization is the mode right now: if we recreate the experience with language, it's as close as we can get to what we wanted to happen (perfection/ purity/ happiness). Instagram does this, curation does this, Jerry Saltz's review of Kanye West's *Bound 2* does this. We want to create this world and make connections with language and academia and critique because control in this way is the only way to combat the absurd and ultimate insignificance of art, the institution of art, all institutions, all realities.

I would argue, however, that in spite of the potential bummer in accepting the total insignificance and innate meaningless of one's life, it can be quite liberating. We should all laugh at everything all the time because everything is absurd. Jimmy Coyote is trying to tell us that contemporary art (and, by extension, *life as we know it*) is a joke, a *joke* not a *prank*. She is not saying that anyone is being deceitful or that no one is being serious. Most of the best jokes are funny because they are true.

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