

‘Maximum Irony, Maximum Sincerity’

**What is Metamodernism and how is it reflected in
contemporary art practice?**

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Abstract

The postmodern years of irony and cynicism are over. Artists, writers and filmmakers are returning to attitudes of sincerity, optimism and empathy. This 'emerging structure of feeling' discussed amongst academics and critics during the 2000s has been defined as 'Metamodernism'. A metamodern sensibility oscillates between modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony. This essay will investigate the defining sensibilities of this movement, and how they are reflected in contemporary art. A detailed contextual outline of prior cultural movements will be provided; modernism, postmodernism and the failures of both these movements. From here the work of post-pop American artist Alex Da Corte will serve as a case study to investigate how metamodern tendencies are expressed through contemporary artwork. I will look at his use of metamodern performance and metamodern treatment of consumer objects.

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Introduction

In the recent years that I have been producing art, whilst studying and visiting contemporary art exhibitions, I have noticed an emerging attitude, one that appears to be steadily moving to the forefront of contemporary artwork. I would describe this as coming from artists who are producing scattered, unaffected and playful work, that embraces the everyday in an immensely sincere way. It seems to me that these artists are rejecting cynicism and conceptualism in favour of a search for meaning in our current chaotic surroundings. I also adopt this attitude when producing installations, embracing the everyday with deeply sincere intentions, and so I would like to attempt to unpick this sensibility. The clever 'knowing' conceptual art of postmodernism no longer has the same impact, and it seems that many artists have moved on from an ironic and cynical attitude to instead yearn for sincerity. Having been the predominant cultural force since the mid-1960s, surely over 50 years of a fixed ideological standpoint inevitably has to give way to a new cultural era? A number of art and cultural theorists are sensing such a change and variously theorising it as the 'Altermodern' (Bourriaud), 'Post-Postmodernism' (Turner) and 'Metamodernism' (Vermeulen & Van den Akker). This essay will explore and put to the test ideas of 'Metamodernism,' a cultural theory described as "an attitude tied to a generation

[that] can be conceived of as a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism.”¹

Dutch theorists Robin Van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen’s 2010 paper, *Notes on Metamodernism*, succinctly articulates this new ‘metamodern’ attitude that artists appear to be undertaking. They note a desire to be more sincere, for empathy, optimism and a utopian longing to transcend our surroundings. This position, however, also juggles irony and is informed by postmodernism. It is not a finite or complete ideology, metamodernism oscillates between these two feelings of sincere serenity and knowing irony, and exists amongst this tension. The nature of metamodernism might be understood as a the cultural refit of postmodern values, with contemporary artists advocating this sensibility of “oscillating between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony.”²

Within my investigation I will be utilising key formative texts on modernism and postmodernism to understand the context from which metamodernism emerges. Frederic Jameson’s *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* and Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *The Post-Modern Explained* will help ground my argument proposing that a postmodern vernacular is no longer sufficient

¹ Timotheus Vermeulen & Robin Van den Akker, ‘Notes on Metamodernism,’ *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, Volume 2, 2010, p.5

² Ibid, p.1

for navigating our current cultural surroundings. In discussing in depth Vermeulen and Van den Akker's paper, *Notes on Metamodernism*, I will seek to establish the fundamental ideas and theory behind metamodernism, and these concepts will be referenced throughout the essay. Due to the inherent contemporary nature of this theory, I will predominantly use lectures, peer-reviewed articles and interviews with metamodern theorists to inform and structure my argument.

The first chapter of this essay will establish the context from which metamodernism precedes. In this the key ideas of modernism and postmodernism are outlined, as well as their resulting failures. On these foundations, David Foster Wallace's 'New Sincerity' argument will be introduced, and I will consider some other attempts at defining this new cultural era after postmodernism. Metamodernism's key strategies are also discussed and dissected into five points, in order to clearly locate these tendencies in the examples of contemporary art raised in the following chapters.

Chapter 2 will predominantly focus on the work of American artist Alex Da Corte, and specifically his use of performance in his video *True Life* (2013) to express metamodern tendencies. Chapter 3 will continue this case study on Alex Da Corte to explore how his recontextualisations of contemporary objects in

True Life aligns with various metamodern strategies. I will also seek to offer context for such metamodern sensibilities in a consideration of the work of other contemporary artists.

Chapter One: The Origins of Metamodernism and its response to Postmodernism and Modernism

Modernism

To understand metamodernism's ideals we must look at both modernism and postmodernism's role in informing the metamodern argument. Modernism's primary concern was a quest for truth and absolutism for the expanse and acquisition of knowledge in all fields. Around the late 19th century and early 20th century the structure of values constituted a "belief in rationality, progress and the dignity of man."³ As outlined in theorist Barry Smart's *Theories of Modernity + Postmodernity*, the period was equated with the 18th century "enlightenment and the advent of a tradition of reason."⁴ Scientific developments led a compulsive need for the discovery of all truths for the improvement of human life. The role of this rationalist modernist metanarrative was expressed in many movements of artwork such as Formalism and Abstract Expressionism of the late modernist period. These placed importance on a criteria of "aesthetic innovation, while being

³ TEDx Talks, "Metamodern Values Explained | Dr. Daniel P. Görtz | TEDxTUBerlin," Youtube video, 5 September, 2018, accessed 10 November, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5USomyB3mZQ>

⁴ Barry Smart, 'Modernity, Postmodernity & The Present' in *Theories of Modernity + Postmodernity*, edited by Bryan S. Turner. (London: Sage, 1990) p.16

distinguishable from a set of indicators of 'non art' status."⁵ Any use of popular culture, narratives or realism were excluded from this criteria. Modernist artwork moved away from representation to instead advocate flatness, questioning the limits of the medium itself. Clement Greenberg's 1961 '*Modernist Painting*' essay further exemplifies this process, "The essence of Modernism lies in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to recognize the discipline itself."⁶ Greenberg's ideas of modernism favoured a linear development model and examples of anti-art such as Duchamp's readymades were not seen to align with modernism's call for rationalism and sincerity. Modernism's pursuit of universal knowledge defined this era of artwork and philosophy, yet as it became incorporated into mainstream culture, its traditional ideas were called to be rejected towards the middle of the century. As furthered by writer Barry Smart, "In relation to modernity it has been suggested that there is a need to rethink the modern age."⁷

⁵ David Hopkins, *After Modern Art*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) p.27

⁶ Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting,' 1960, accessed 11 November, 2019, <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/modernism.html>

⁷ Barry Smart, 'Modernity, Postmodernity & The Present' in *Theories of Modernity + Postmodernity*, edited by Bryan S.Turner, (London: Sage, 1990) p.15

Postmodernism

Modernist ideals had become outdated by the late 1960s and began to be deconstructed by American theorists. The stubborn pursuit of truth and order became irrelevant in post-war society. Questioning was enlisted on modernist ideals, its staunch sincerity was now seen as naivety. In the early 1970s, literary critic Ihab Hassan attributed the origins of postmodernism to artistic experimentalists such as Duchamp, his readymade 'Urinal' was seen as a precursor to the postmodern period. Hassan developed a criteria for postmodernism in 1985 that rejected modernism's "surface and indeterminacy" and instead privileged "depth and determinacy."⁸ Postmodernism was predominantly characterised by its disdain for its predecessor, a distrust and suspicion of "most information,"⁹ with the "power to disseminate master narratives."¹⁰ Theorist Mike Featherstone outlined that modernism's "task of establishing universal standards of truth, morality, taste, does not seem important anymore. Unsupported by will, it appears now, misguided and unreal."¹¹ Amongst this postmodern period, Pop art, Fluxus and

⁸ David Hopkins, *After Modern Art*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) p.183

⁹ Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) p.5

¹⁰ Ibid, p.15

¹¹ Mike Featherstone, 'In Pursuit of the Postmodern- An Introduction' in *The Culture & Society*, Volume 5, June 1988, p.220

Performance art rejected modernism's archaic ideals. In Jean-Francois Lyotard's formative 1992 text, *The Post Modern Explained*, a wariness of truth is proposed, an informed scepticism toward "the claims of any kind of overall, totalizing explanation."¹²

Postmodernism was also seen to be synonymous with the age of late capitalism and the integration of high and low culture.¹³ This theory was introduced in Frederic Jameson's *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, wherein postmodernism is described to capture a "senses of an end- the end of ideology, art or social class."¹⁴ Attitudes were in reaction to the "inauguration of a whole new type of society, designated consumer society, media society, information society."¹⁵ Artists of the late '80s responded to consumerist society in differing ways. Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger's authoritarian text pieces reacted to the age of advertising to challenge "nameless adversaries."¹⁶ Whereas Jeff Koon's slick reproductions of consumer items, merged "art objects and commodities"¹⁷ and therefore became absorbed into the culture it was initially responding to.

¹² Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Explained*, (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) p.15

¹³ David Hopkins, *After Modern Art*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) p.183

¹⁴ Frederic Jameson, *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) p.1

¹⁵ David Hopkins, *After Modern Art*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018) p.3

¹⁶ Ibid, p.195

¹⁷ Ibid, p.207

Elsewhere in popular culture toward the 1990s, the tone of television programmes, advertising and films became increasingly ironic and defeatist. Comedies like 'Seinfeld' were self-referential, cynical and avoided solutions to their characters on-going problems. The period of postmodern philosophy and artwork has been described to be "irritatingly elusive to define."¹⁸ Its main characteristics being a distrust of an era master narratives and a complete truth, adopting a confrontational and analytic manner.

The Emerging failures of Postmodernism & David Foster Wallace's 'New Sincerity'

This paranoia started to unravel during the mid 1990s. Literary writer David Foster Wallace was amongst the first critics of the postmodern attitude, deeming its irony "unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks."¹⁹ Irony and scepticism seemed to offer no viable solutions, only unconstructive criticism. The maintenance of a doubtful outlook, meant to Foster Wallace a "fear of being really

¹⁸ Mike Featherstone, 'In Pursuit of the Postmodern- An Introduction' in *The Culture & Society*, Volume 5, June 1988, p.195

¹⁹ "David Foster Wallace interview on Charlie Rose (1997)," Youtube video, accessed 13 November, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GopJ1x7vK2Q>

human.”²⁰ In his formative 1993 essay, *E Unibus Plural: Television & U.S Fiction*, he argued that “irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective and that at the same time are agents of great despair and stasis.”²¹ The new ‘anti-rebels’ would push beyond the limitations of critique and present earnest and deeply sincere work. Foster Wallace’s call for a detachment from irony initiated the ‘New Sincerity’ literary movement in the 1990s which expressed, “a concern with sincerity not seen since modernism.”²² This movement is key to understanding metamodernism’s origins in utopian longing. Adam Kelly’s 2010 essay, ‘*David Foster Wallace & The New Sincerity in American Fiction*,’ outlines that while a return to sincerity is prioritised, it must be “informed by the study of postmodern fiction in order to properly take into account the effects wrought by contemporary media, particularly TV and advertising.”²³ Foster Wallace’s novel *Infinite Jest* attempted to investigate the effects of irony and irreverence that started as a critique of modernist ideals and subsequently reverberated back into contemporary culture with advertising and television. It was clear that at the turn of the millennium, new attitudes were emerging that championed a more heartfelt, open approach to the arts.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ David Foster Wallace, ‘E Unibus Plural: Television & U.S Fiction,’ *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13:2, (1993:Summer) p.171

²² Adam Kelly, ‘David Foster Wallace & The New Sincerity in American Fiction’ in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, edited by David Hering, 2010, Sideshow Media Group Press, Los Angeles/Austin, p.133

²³ Ibid, p.134

Attempts at defining Post-Postmodern movements.

'New Sincerity' is only one of many terms that have been coined to describe a new kind of thinking that proceeds from the ideas of postmodernism. It originally emerged as a literary movement but has come to be regarded as a trend across film, literature and art, which identifies a concern to be more sincere; it has started to outline a new structure of feeling, one that is ineffable – as yet difficult to define. Some critics such as Linda Hutcheon mark the end of postmodernism as an abrupt change, responding to the harshly changing cultural landscape of "climate change, financial crises, terror attacks and digital revolutions."²⁴ Others, such as Gilles Lipovetsky regard this cognitive shift be more gradual and "less tangible," answering to the "appropriation of critique by the market and the integration of *différance* into mass culture."²⁵

Various post-postmodern theories attempt to supersede postmodernism's core ideas, with 'Hypermodernism' and 'Altermodernism' being the closest in values to metamodernism. Gilles Lipovetsky's 'Hypermodern' theory constructed in 2005, attempts to advance postmodern theory by suggesting an "increasingly meaningless" cultural society that leads to

²⁴ Timotheus Vermeulen & Robin Van den Akker, Notes on Metamodernism, *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, Volume 2, 2010, p.2

²⁵ Ibid, p.2

“hedonistic ecstasy as much as existential anguish.”²⁶

Lipovetsky places emphasis on the “logic of the extreme,”²⁷ expressed through hedonism, addiction, consumption, anxiety, and such modern mania is favoured over progress. In Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Altermodernism* (2009), a more globalised approach of art making is considered, this being a “synthesis between modernism and post-colonialism.”²⁸ Both of these theories consider how the conditions of a changing global culture at the 2nd millennium have caused attitudes to move away from a postmodern stagnant cynicism into more energised and at times, manic artwork. However, in *Notes on Metamodernism* by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van den Akker, it is suggested that these attempts to supersede the postmodern merely “radicalise the postmodern rather than restructure it.”²⁹ Vermeulen and Van den Akker are more accepting of the postmodern tendency, acknowledging that this structure of thought is not dead but “taking another shape and more importantly a new meaning and direction.”³⁰

²⁶ Gilles Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2005) p.159

²⁷ Ibid, p.159

²⁸ Timotheus Vermeulen & Robin Van den Akker, *Notes on Metamodernism*, *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, Volume 2, 2010, p.3

²⁹ Ibid, p.3

³⁰ Ibid, p.4

The philosophy of Metamodernism

Altermodernism and Hypermodernism both attempted to articulate this divergence within art making. However, it wasn't until 2010 that the Dutch theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van den Akker published *Notes on Metamodernism* which succinctly theorised certain trends occurring throughout the 2000s. Vermeulen and Van den Akker emphasised that the text was an accumulation of thoughts and observations surrounding changing attitudes and artistic practices, not a vigorous manifesto selecting specific ideals for artists to adhere to. The idea of metamodernism is presented in the text as a 'cognitive shift' as the potency and influence of postmodernism comes to a close. The authors acknowledge and accept that this new era of thinking is informed and grounded in postmodern criticism. Therefore, it does not seek to reject its predecessor but to find new and more expansive and constructive ways of dealing with the current cultural landscape. The essence of a metamodern approach or sensibility is an oscillation between two opposing poles: the staunch idealism of modernism and the self-aware, 'meta' postmodernism. It is detached yet immensely sincere, naive and yet well aware of past failures. Metamodernism exists in and around this tension, never assuming one line of thinking to complete itself. Its nature is inherently hard to define; it's a feeling, a sensibility, a

cognitive shift to desire sincere intentions. It therefore, “moves for the sake of moving,” seeking an “impossible possibility,”³¹ attempting to transcend doubt in the hope of a renewed sense of optimism, naive yet informed and pragmatic.

The Greek word ‘Meta’ refers to three meanings: “with or among, between and after.”³² The term is continually referred to in the text as a “structure of feeling,”³³ a playful and open new language somewhere between sincerity and irony. We must consider the changing societal conditions throughout the early to mid 2000s and how, in part, an emerging metamodern attitude is in reaction to these. Postmodern reasoning no longer seems applicable to understanding and navigating challenges such as climate change, terrorism and social media in the information age. Vermeulen and Van den Akker specifically identify,

“The credit crunch, a collapsed centre, and climate change [which] has the opposite effect as it infuses doubt, inspires reflection and incites a move forward out of postmodern and into metamodern.”³⁴

³¹ Ibid, p.5

³² Robin Van den Akker, Timotheus Vermeulen, ‘Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism,’ in *Metamodernism: historicity, affect and depth after postmodernism*, edited by Robin Van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, Timotheus Vermeulen. (London: Rowan & Littlefield, 2017) p.8

³³ Timotheus Vermeulen & Robin Van den Akker, Notes on Metamodernism, *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, Volume 2, 2010, p.2

³⁴ Ibid, p.5

Artists, writers and filmmakers are simply faced with no other option than to push beyond cynicism into pragmatism, to traverse our doomed surroundings. Metamodernism embraces all paradoxes in its curiosity and inquiry. Yes, we are faced with impenetrable issues and an uncertain future yet we must transcend, inquire and embrace all angles of thinking to move beyond, to fall somewhere “between hope and melancholy.”³⁵ For this generation, knowledge is no longer the most important part of experience.

Emerging cultural examples of Metamodernism

The difficulty of Metamodernism arises from its status as a conflicting theory, making it inherently hard to pin down in its scope and ambition. However, we can dismantle this emerging tone into practical and material conditions of artwork, film and literature. In Jerry Saltz’s 2010 New York Times article ‘Sincerity and Irony Hug it Out’ a new approach to artwork is observed: “an attitude that says, I know that the art I’m creating may seem silly, even stupid, or that it might have been done before, but that doesn’t mean it’s not serious.”³⁶ Saltz found that contemporary young artists included in the *Younger than Jesus*

³⁵ Ibid, p.6

³⁶ Jerry Saltz, “Sincerity and Irony Hug It Out,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 27, 2010, accessed 20 November, 2019, nymag.com/arts/art/reviews/66277/

show at the New Museum, NYC, embraced both irony and sincerity in a vast array of mediums:

“These young artists not only see the distinction between earnestness and detachment as artificial; they grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time, and they are making art from this compound-complex state of mind.”³⁷

Similarly, as pointed to by Vermeulen and Van den Akker, a 2010 exhibition at the BAK gallery in Amsterdam entitled *Vectors of the Possible* evoked these same ideas. The press release for the exhibition stated that:

“The art works in this exhibition can be seen as vectors, reckoning possibility and impossibility in (un) equal measures, but always detecting ways of seeing, and of being in the world.”³⁸

Both exhibitions utilised the tension of impossibility and possibility, or sincerity and irony, to understand and carve a space for a new way of being in our changing world. It was around this time in 2009 and 2010 that emerging contemporary

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ “Vectors of The Possible 11 September–28 November 2010 BAK,” *Former West*, accessed 15 November, 2019, <https://formerwest.org/ResearchExhibitions/VectorsOfThePossible/Images>



Figure 1: Ryan Trecartin, *Re'Search Wait'S*, "Younger than Jesus" installation view. 2009.



Figure 2: "Younger Than Jesus" Installation view. Top: Cory Arcangel, *Photoshop*. Bottom: Chu Yun, *This is XX*, 2009.

exhibitions were implementing the ideas of sincerity and irony, which informed the *Notes on Metamodernism* paper.

Elsewhere in culture during the 2000s, filmmaking started to reflect a sincere and metamodern sensibility. James McDowell's essay '*Notes on Quirky*' outlined a tendency in the films of this era as idiosyncratic and self-aware, yet largely sincere in their characters and overarching lessons. McDowell explains that, "The most distinctive characteristic of the quirky: [is] a tone that exists on a knife edge of judgement and empathy, detachment and engagement, irony and sincerity."³⁹ The popularity of Wes Anderson's highly considered *mise-en-scène*, or Charlie Kaufman's playful scripts, seems due to their ability to juggle the self-aware with a developmental and engaging narrative arc. Consider for example, Paul Thomas Anderson's '*Punch Drunk Love*,' a jerky and restless film that uses off-kilter physical comedy juxtaposed against a sincere and authentic love story. The further we enter into the film, the more the humour reveals itself to be vulnerable, despite its premise of being inherently self-aware and comical. The tone of these films rely on a balance between the cynical and the optimistic, both ideas leaning on each other to create this 'quirky' and disjointed

³⁹ James MacDowell, "Notes on Quirky," *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* 1:1 (2010): p.13, accessed 15 November, 2019, https://www.academia.edu/7754283/Notes_on_Quirky_2010



Figure 3: Paul Thomas Anderson, *Punch Drunk Love*, 2002.



Figure 4: Wes Anderson, *Moonrise Kingdom*, 2012 .

atmosphere. McDowell describes this feeling to be “somehow beyond postmodernism.”⁴⁰

The Five Key Strategies of Metamodernism

Developing on from this, in ‘*Notes on Metamodernism*’ and various lectures and publications over the 2010s, Vermeulen and Van den Akker located five key tropes as exemplified by emerging metamodern arts practices. The first is a return to craft and materiality. It is suggested that “artists have developed a renewed interest in the material process of making things,”⁴¹ a need to be engaged in the present. In his essay titled, ‘*The Cosmic Artisan: Mannerist Virtuosity and Contemporary Crafts*,’ Sjoerd van Tuinen writes: “Instead of a modernist view, the avant-gardist tomorrow and the postmodern End of History, contemporary practice inhabits an “a-synchronous” present that we call metamodern.”⁴² Artists are again engaging with craftsmanship, “drawing, sculpting, using the internet, making something.”⁴³ The medium remains sprawling and overlapping, referring back to the *Younger than Jesus* show, Saltz described it as “leaping from medium to medium in madly unexpected

⁴⁰ Ibid, p.14

⁴¹ Sjoerd van Tuinen, ‘The Cosmic Artisan: Mannerist Virtuosity and Contemporary Crafts’ in *Metamodernism: historicity, affect and depth after postmodernism*, edited by Robin Van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, Timotheus Vermeulen. (London: Rowan & Littlefield, 2017) p.69

⁴² Ibid, p.69

⁴³ ArtEZ studium generale, “Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van den Akker: Notes on Metamodernism,” Youtube video, 17 October 2016, accessed 10 January, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WPYFvB2Dlc>

ways.”⁴⁴ Metamodern artworks show no pretence or formalism in regard to medium, as long as it constructively engages with something. Metamodernism hopes to restore our chaotic and daunting surroundings in scattered and unaffected outcomes.

The second trope we see is a constructive political engagement through artwork. Such a series of heightened political shifts in recent years sees a lurch toward post-truth politics and extremist views, resulting in unstable political ground. Artists are finding a new narratives of myth and metataxis to see beyond this tumultuous political landscape. They almost have no other choice but to engage with the surrounding chaos. Designers, writers and artists are able to carve new narratives of possibility and thereby adopt a renewed sense of optimism through myth and fantasy. This approach is still aware of its provisional and unstable existence, but nonetheless it tries to move beyond literal and cynical reactions to the political sphere.

This leads to the third observation by Vermeulen and Van den Akker, which they describe as, “The idea of affect, empathy, caring for others around you,”⁴⁵ for the ultimate intention of

⁴⁴ Jerry Saltz, “Sincerity and Irony Hug It Out,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 27, 2010, accessed 20 November, 2019, [nymag.com/arts/art/reviews/66277/](https://www.nytimes.com/arts/art/reviews/66277/)

⁴⁵ ArtEZ studium generale, “Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van den Akker: Notes on Metamodernism,” Youtube video, 17 October, 2016, accessed, 10 January, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WPYFvB2Dlc>

instilling positive change within communities. They note that artists are also becoming more socially engaged and oriented toward imagining a better quality of life amongst communities. The metamodern sensibility seems to be less concerned with market value and more focused upon creating space to delve into imagined and optimistic futures.

The “return of grand narrative”⁴⁶ or an emphasis on storytelling is suggested to be another category of the metamodern. This is not to suggest a return of the linear modernist progression model, but something more nuanced and sprawling. 1990s conceptual artists such as Damian Hirst, rejected overarching storytelling for the assumption that it “led to disaster”⁴⁷ and therefore favoured deconstructed and fragmented narratives. The 2000s saw a return to sincerity through grand narratives, yet there has also aware been an awareness of the failure of modernism’s previous ventures.

The last and fifth key trope that Tim Vermeulen and Van den Akker allude to is an oscillation between sincerity and irony, the

⁴⁶ Columbia GSAPP, “Between Irony and Sincerity,” Youtube video, 11 April, 2018, accessed 30 November, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_JtZX6AULw&t=2090s

⁴⁷ ArtEZ studium generale, “Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van den Akker: Notes on Metamodernism,” Youtube video, 17 October, 2016, accessed 10 January 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WPYFvB2Dlc>

fusion and tension of two opposing poles (as already referred to above).

I would argue that metamodernism has inevitably progressed since these proto-ideas were identified in 2010. Contemporary artists in recent years have employed a collapse of distances between artist and audience, an engagement with our age of consumerism and the use of other worldly narratives to speak fantasy to power. These are all themes I will explore further in the following chapters. I will also introduce Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of *Postproduction* and Erving Goffman's 1956 theory, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* to aid the understanding of a metamodern artwork.

I will be predominantly focusing on the work of contemporary artist Alex Da Corte to explore the metamodern sensibilities outlined above. His post-pop installations will be used as a case study to investigate this emerging structure of feeling.

Chapter Two: Metamodern performance in the work of Alex Da Corte

Alex Da Corte is an American contemporary artist who produces large scale multi-media installations. His work invents new worlds and languages which subvert the meanings of typical consumer items. His off-kilter mesmeric spaces repurpose the relics of the everyday and popular culture into nameless and ambiguous items. Da Corte installations cover large spaces in graphic and bright hues, zany, disconcerting and seamlessly alluring. They have been described by critic Jeffrey Kastner, as “psychically disorienting immersive settings.”⁴⁸ Objects of popular culture become subtly unrecognisable in these stage sets, and devoid of familiar context, they reveal new emotions. Labels are often left off popular or “overripe”⁴⁹ commodity products, which are then transformed in scale and colour. Da Corte’s work is rich in artificiality, his shrines of plastic are unnervingly pleasurable to experience, and are described to have an “irresistibly grotesque charisma.”⁵⁰ He has lived and worked in Philadelphia since the

⁴⁸ Jeffrey Kastner, “Alex Da Corte,” *Artforum International*, Volume 56, Issue 9, May, 2018, accessed 11 January, 2020, https://search.proquest.com/docview/2036752101?accountid=14987&rfr_id=info%3Axi%2Fsid%3Aprimo p.233

⁴⁹ ‘Overripe’ meaning exaggerated or overused objects and references in popular culture. Ibid, p.233

⁵⁰ Ibid, p.234

early 2000s, exhibiting internationally, most recently at the 2019 Venice Biennale.

True Life

For me, Alex Da Corte's 'pop' aesthetic and use of consumer items offers a prime example of the metamodern tendency towards sincerity and irony. Da Corte's 2017 show "BAD LAND" at the Josh Lilley Gallery in London combined both sculpture and video in a multi-media installation. It was described by the gallery's press release as follows:

"With an architectural refit of the four gallery spaces and three new films alongside sculptures and wall works in neon, smoke, haberdashery, vinyl siding and blown glass, "BAD LAND" is a narrative about the sliding scale of sovereignty, self-sufficiency and despair. It is both nakedly autobiographical and a portrait of tentative, aspirational coexistence. "BAD LAND" is the third exhibition of a trilogy, initiated in 2013, in which Da Corte appears as the rapper Eminem."⁵¹

One of the key works in this show was a video entitled *True Life* (2013) installed on a monitor on the gallery floor- the

⁵¹ "Alex Da Corte Bad Land, 17 November 2017 - 3 February 2018," Josh Lilley Gallery, accessed 19 December, 2019, joshlilleygallery.com/exhibitions/bad_land_2017

culmination of a series of performances in which Da Corte impersonated and embodied the American rapper Eminem, as promised by the galleries publicity. These performances started as a “funny coincidence” in which Da Corte was sent an image of himself inside the Louvre by a friend. On closer inspection, the man in the image was revealed to be Eminem, which left Da Corte “horrified” and questioning; “how is it that I didn’t know my own face?”⁵² As a result of this confusion, he asked, “can I adopt his persona and live as Eminem lives to better understand him as a misunderstood character?”⁵³

For a year, Da Corte was to embody Eminem’s lifestyle and sensibilities, an exercise in empathy to experiment with aligning with an identity so dissimilar to his own. In the *True Life* video, Da Corte embodies Eminem wearing a baggy white t-shirt and signature buzzcut bleach hair, staring directly into the camera eating ‘Cinnamon Life’ cereal and milk. The pace of the video is disconcertingly slow as ‘Eminem’ holds a seemingly self-aware yet oblivious gaze toward the audience. Da Corte adopts the rapper’s recognisable mannerisms, along with a sense of brash confidence and assurance during such a mundane and elemental task. Most significantly, within these mannerisms is a confusing disparity between humour and candour, sincerity and

⁵² Louisiana Channel, “Alex Da Corte & Jørgen Leth: Eminem and Warhol,” Youtube video, September 13, 2016, accessed 19 December, 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GtM18h5OQQ

⁵³ Ibid.

irony.

The video evokes ideas of reenactment. As Da Corte states: *True Life* was based upon Jørgen Leth's famous 1982 film of Andy Warhol eating a hamburger.⁵⁴ In a discussion between both artists at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Da Corte said of Leth's film that it "reminds you that he [Warhol], is a human and he is uncomfortable."⁵⁵ Through something as basic and everyday as observing somebody eating, Da Corte suggests further characteristics or sensibilities of a person can be revealed. Leth's film of Andy Warhol is direct in communicating this idea: a candid and revealing portrait of an artist. Da Corte's treatment of the same subject adds an additional sheen of irony. The artist impersonates a celebrity in a cartoon-like environment, full of zany colour and pop culture references. Yet, it was initiated with the same intention of emphasising with a misunderstood character, therefore juggling ideas of both pastiche and empathy. Da Corte's impersonation and bright backdrop act as a seductive surface to access something more inherently sincere. While the sincerity in Da Corte's piece is perhaps harder to locate, due to its emphasis on 'surface', the character still appears to demonstrate the same desire to be revealed or looked at differently by the

⁵⁴ This scene is from Jorgon Leth's film *66 Scenes from America*, 1982.

⁵⁵ Louisiana Channel, "Alex Da Corte & Jørgen Leth: Eminem and Warhol," Youtube video, September 13, 2016, accessed 19 December, 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GtM18h5OQQ



Figure 5: Alex Da Corte, *True Life*, 2013.



Figure 6: Jørgen Leth, *Andy Warhol Eating a Hamburger*, 1982.

viewer. In this way *True Life* adheres with the metamodern tendency of juggling two opposing ideals of empathy and irony.

An essay by Nicotine Timmer's, titled 'Radical Defencelessness' was included in Van den Akker and Vermeulen's revised 2017 metamodern critical theory book. In this, it is proposed that in the post-post modern era, it is not just sincerity that is required but "an expression of exposure."⁵⁶ According to Timmer, it is this that "preconditions any form of communication"⁵⁷ within a narrative that is "not necessarily a pleasant state that carries only positive connotations."⁵⁸ By embodying Eminem, Da Corte places a recognisable figure in an elemental set up where he appears to be both defenceless and earnest. Of course, the viewer is not immediately compelled to understand or identify with this character, but we are encouraged to look, and look again, whatever that might reveal. Da Corte states in an interview that he wanted to "understand and empathise with who that heteronormative, middle class white male is."⁵⁹ When stripped of context and power of celebrity, a viewer may ask, "who is this figure and how can I relate to him? Da Corte avoids

⁵⁶ Nicotine Timmer, 'Radical Defenselessness,' in *Metamodernism : historicity, affect and depth after postmodernism*, edited by Robin Van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, Timotheus Vermeulen. (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017) p.113

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ezra Marcus, "Artist Alex Da Corte looks at the world through the eyes of Eminem circa 2001," *Interview Magazine*, October 20, 2017, accessed 29 December, 2019, <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/artist-alex-da-corte-looks-world-eyes-eminem-circa-2001#slideshow> 51624.23

crudely vilifying this character, or performing him as one-dimensional, thereby cohering to the metamodern idea of affect and empathy.

‘Jamais Vu’

Da Corte has referred to the phrase ‘Jamais Vu’ in relation to his work, meaning “when you’ve seen someone you’ve known for a long time as if for the first time.”⁶⁰ The placement of well-known familiar commodities or celebrities in a strange new context allows for our own associations and expectations to shift into something else. With the ability to adopt a fresh perspective, Da Corte’s hope is that the viewer “could understand Eminem too.”⁶¹ This idea can be, perhaps, confusing or disorienting when watching *True Life* as its sheer gaudiness could just imply a tongue-in cheek take on popular culture. A tension is established in these two readings, are we experiencing a truthful analysis of Eminem as an outsider or are we just presented with kitsch artificiality? Maybe such sincere intentions have to weighed down again by an ironic or pastiche exterior. The performance uses this metamodern tension as a strategy, it can function as both trite and sincere simultaneously, obtaining the truthfulness through parody.

⁶⁰ Louisiana Channel, “Alex Da Corte & Jørgen Leth: Eminem and Warhol,” Youtube video, September 13, 2016, accessed 19 December, 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GtM18h5OQQ

⁶¹ Ibid.

Ideas of Reenactment

In Robert Blackson's paper, "Once More...With Feeling: Reenactment in Contemporary Art and Culture," it is suggested that memory is a source of creative agency in reenactment art.⁶² Although Da Corte is not reenacting a specific event in this video, he plays and performs with an existing identity. The 'memorised' or totally familiar mannerisms of Eminem are convincing, yet are not fixed down to the specifics of a narrative or script. In its place, an undefined space of memory and fantasy that is loosely based upon reality is constructed. Within this environment, there is room for ambiguity and poetic occurrences in his portrayal of identity. While looking curiously similar, a subtly experienced discrepancy between Da Corte's representation of Eminem and Eminem himself, allows unexpected potential in the piece. The disconcerting tonality of the video is defined by this tension of truthfulness and deception. We are engaging with a figure re-presented through memory, it is difficult to see what we can decipher as 'real', or what we can decipher as sincere. All this further cements the attitude of this performance in a metamodern state of tension.

⁶² Robert Blackson, "Once More...With Feeling: Reenactment in Contemporary Art and Culture," 2007, *Art Journal*, 66:1, 28-40, accessed 17 December 2019, DOI: 10.1080/00043249.2007.10791237



Figure 7: Alex Da Corte performing as Eminem, 2013.

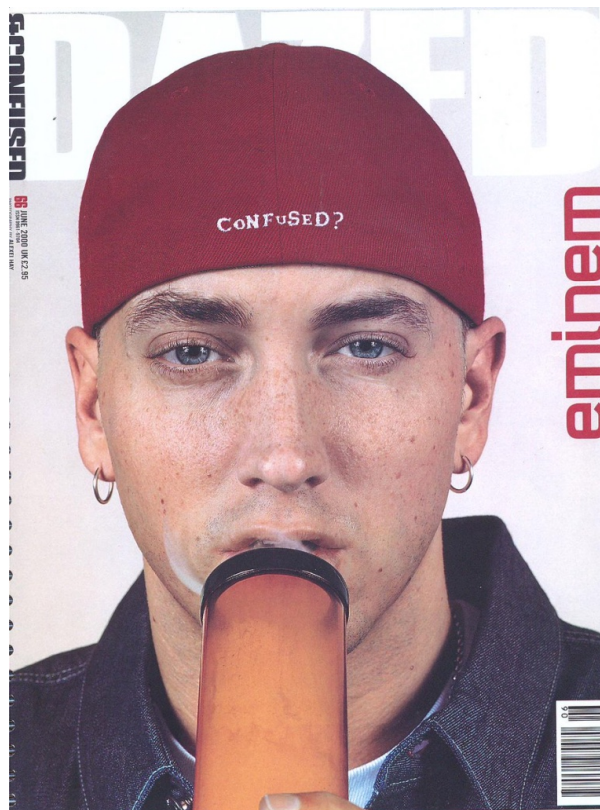


Figure 8: Eminem on the cover of Dazed and Confused Magazine, 2000.

Da Corte's uncanny performance of Eminem in *True Life*, can be understood in terms of Erving Goffman's 1956 theory, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Goffman proposes that life is performed, the individual theatricises themselves in face to face interactions to accentuate desired impressions to an observer. "When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them,"⁶³ Goffman says. In *True Life*, Eminem's is used as "skin and cover,"⁶⁴ Da Corte's embodiment is merely a mask to reveal a greater authentic expression of the character. The camp impersonation is unsettling and surreal, yet it makes us consider where we can locate authenticity within the staged and artificial. Perhaps there is something to be learned from the metamodern desire to empathise towards those you do not understand or relate to. Vermeulen and Van den Akker outline in *Notes on Metamodernism*, that metamodern artworks use "the romantic inclination toward the tragic, the sublime, and the uncanny."⁶⁵ We are encouraged as the viewer to empathise with the uncanny figure in *True Life*, not just in an ironic way but to access beyond his alienation into something more sincere.

⁶³ Erving Goffman, "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life," 1956, *University of Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Centre*, p.1

⁶⁴ Louisiana Channel, "Alex Da Corte & Jørgen Leth: Eminem and Warhol," Youtube video, September 13, 2016, accessed 5 January, 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GtM18h5OQQ

⁶⁵ Timotheus Vermeulen & Robin Van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism,' *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, Volume 2, 2010, p.9

Chapter Three: The Metamodern object in *True Life*

The second chapter of *True Life* sees Da Corte's Eminem surrounded by a collection of handmade bongos, constructed from a plethora of plastic toys and packaging. Eminem locks eyes with the viewer whilst smoking out of the sculptures, which subsequently triggers a bout of manic laughter. These bongos were installed separately as sculptures in the Josh Lilley Gallery, positioned alongside the monitor on a low table. Da Corte chose to construct these props from familiar items typically encountered in a supermarket or a kitchen cupboard. Amongst them are objects such as soda cans, washing up liquid bottles, an oversized tennis ball, large detergent bottles, a Minion toy and a Nike trainer. Most of these everyday products are absent of their labels and become playful curiosities that are both functional and completely fatuous. The objects still retain the vibrancy of their original consumer pull and indulge in a giddy sentimentality. Photographs of the 'Bad Lands' neighbourhood of Philadelphia served as the initial inspiration for the show, focusing upon overlooked narratives and objects on the streets. Discarded soft toys or the entrances to gaudy strips clubs translates the into kitsch visual language of the sculptures in *True Life*. The components of the readymades are accessible and engaging, however, stripped of their original

function and transformed into drug paraphernalia, they are also comical and disconcerting.

Threaded through Da Corte's practice is an engagement with everyday and consumer objects, described in his own words as "cheap, trashy, gorgeous things."⁶⁶ His object obsessed installations seek to find a truthfulness and humanity within the plastic, the mass-produced and the throwaway, to push beyond their surface. Da Corte wants to see underneath the sheen of these glossy relics and investigate the "actuality of what it means to consume the thing that's been sold to you."⁶⁷ In the dreamlike environment of his installations, these objects are newly imbued with a sense of playfulness and delusion. As the veneer of their perfection starts to peel off, the items unravel and reveal themselves in new ways to the viewer, partly freeing themselves of old associations. Da Corte has expressed an avoidance of presenting his objects as a "one liner or a cheap trick."⁶⁸ His 'hot' colours and kitsch imagery may suggest a one-dimensional critique of the fast and throwaway culture of late capitalism, one closely associated by theorists, in particular Fredric Jameson, with postmodernism.⁶⁹ However, Da Corte

⁶⁶ Louisiana Channel, "Alex Da Corte Dancing around Delusion," Youtube video, May 28, 2015, accessed 5 January, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHihCg-Xg-Q&t=296s>

⁶⁷ Louisiana Channel, "Alex Da Corte & Jørgen Leth: Eminem and Warhol," Youtube video, September 13, 2016, accessed 5 January, 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GtM18h5OQQ

⁶⁸ Louisiana Channel, "Alex Da Corte Dancing around Delusion," Youtube video, May 28, 2015, accessed 7 January, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHihCg-Xg-Q&t=296s>

⁶⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (London: Verso, 1991).



Figure 9: Alex Da Corte, *True Life*, 2013.

states that his work is about “slowing down,” and looking objectively at “of our way of seeing, knee-jerk responses and judgmental attitudes to things that are perceived as “bad taste.”⁷⁰ With a love of plastic and acceptance of “bad taste,” Da Corte nods to our collective experience, invites the viewer to both indulge in this illogical and alluring metamodern space and consider how objects and taste define us.

Alex Da Corte and Bourriaud’s Postproduction

The omnipresence of objects within Da Corte’s installations reflects our global consumer culture. This iconography commonly used by so many contemporary artists is detailed in Nicolas Bourriaud’s text *Postproduction*. In this, the shifting aesthetic and approach to art making over the late 90s to early 2000s is said to, “respond to the proliferating chaos of global culture in the information age.”⁷¹ Commodity culture have become the “omnipresent referent”⁷² for contemporary arts practices. The sheer volume and turnover of ‘stuff’ processed within our orbit, makes the job of producing completely original

⁷⁰ Charlotte Jansen, “Alex Da Corte Gives Slim Shady an Art-World Comeback,” *Artsy*, November 20, 2017, accessed 7 January, 2020, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-alex-da-corte-slim-shady-art-world-comeback>

⁷¹ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction culture as screenplay: how art reprograms the world*, (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002) p.13

⁷² Ibid, p.28

material nearly impossible for artists. Such a situation creates an “eradication of the traditional distinction between production and consumption. The material they manipulate is no longer primary.”⁷³ Contemporary artists that engage with this synthesis of production and consumption become the remixers of the mass of objects and references of our daily life. Bourriaud suggests that postproduction artists thereby challenge the communal spectacle by inserting objects into new contexts and therefore “decode and produce different storylines and alternative narratives.”⁷⁴ The postproduction aesthetic is not focused upon formality and instead favours multiple, spiralling outcomes and mediums; artists using the same reference pool create an “infinite chain of contributions”⁷⁵ which bring new potential and concepts to the same material.

These key ideas in *Postproduction* are essential to understanding Alex Da Corte’s practice. I would also suggest that Bourriaud’s postproduction aesthetic has similarities to the resurgence of craft that has been identified as a feature of metamodernism. Included in Van den Akker and Vermeulen’s revised 2017 metamodern book of critical theory is Sjoerd van Tuinen’s essay “The Cosmic Artisan: Mannerist Virtuosity and Contemporary Crafts.” Here, it is proposed that “the question of

⁷³ Ibid, p.13

⁷⁴ Ibid, p.46

⁷⁵ Ibid, p.20

craft now seems to be synonymous with our engagement with matter and everyday life.”⁷⁶ In an era of post-post modern art making, focus is returned to the everyday. Alex Da Corte’s work engages with this need to reanalyse and reclaim the basic objects and references we collectively experience, thereby challenging their commodification and seeking to express something more human and complex. This scattered and honest relationship to ‘stuff’, aligns with the metamodern strategy of engaging with consumer culture in a sincere and curious, and not wholly critical way.

Myth and Metaxis

The question that engages what may be termed as postproduction and/or metamodern artists is: How can we produce meaningful responses to this chaotic age of mass consumption and ownership? In the case of Alex Da Corte, his playful and non-pretentious readymades perform as proposals for fantasy. Take for example, his sculptural bongos used in the *True Life* performance video. They function as props in this performed world of authenticity and artificiality, bordering on the functional and the nonfunctional. Their purpose and logic can

⁷⁶ Sjoerd van Tuinen, “The Cosmic Artisan: Mannerist Virtuosity and Contemporary Crafts” in *Metamodernism: historicity, affect and depth after postmodernism*, edited by Robin Van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, Timotheus Vermeulen. (London: Rowan & Littlefield, 2017) p.70

only be effective and exist within Da Corte's world of dreamlike delusion, shedding their impenetrable beginnings as products. The orange Nike trainer which was once a swish new product, becomes more light-hearted or absurd with a pipe attached to its toe. These objects become almost immune to their outside-world associations, and indulge the viewer as fantasy laden items. Da Corte is able to slow down and look objectively at our insatiable desire and reaction to newness by placing these objects in a 'other' world of fantasy. This notion of favouring myth over cynicism is supported by Vermeulen and Van den Akker in *Notes on Metamodernism*. Our cultural industry after postmodernism is said to be "increasingly abandoning tactics such as pastiche and parataxis for strategies like myth and metaxis."⁷⁷ Whereas postmodernism embodied a strictly pessimistic attitude toward the world, metamodern artists move away from this territory. Metamodern artists utilise myth and fantasy in response to our chaotic culture of consumption, yet are still informed by a postmodern attitude. Postmodern artists still challenged late capitalism's emerging omnipresence in the 80s and 90s, yet often did so in literal and cynical ways. Metamodernists, must therefore understand the failures of this attitude and adopt a more fantastical and sincere way of challenging consumer culture. To create ulterior narratives is

⁷⁷ Timotheus Vermeulen, Robin Van den Akker, *Notes on Metamodernism, Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, Volume 2, 2010, p.5

perhaps more productive in dealing with such a vast, uncontrollable culture of materialism. Alex Da Corte's metamodern sculptures perform within this space of fantasy, imagining their own narratives they gravitate toward more optimistic futures.

The use of myth and fantasy in Alex Da Corte's work and more broadly within the movement of metamodernism can develop into a political strategy; to push against the normative ideological world of master-narratives and politicians. In a recent interview with *The Washington Post*, Da Corte is asked by art critic Sebastian Smee about the political nature of his work;

“Q: You riff on so many things, but especially on TV, including reality TV. Is there a political side to all this?

A: There's comedy in my critique. I suppose I think that if we can have cartoon characters in power making the rules, why not look more closely at the rules in cartoons?”⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Sebastian Smee, “Making magic: Groundbreaking artist Alex Da Corte pulls inspiration from pop culture, poems and a lot of spilled liquids,” *The Washington Post*, May 1, 2019, accessed 9 January 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/entertainment/in-the-studio-with-artist-alex-da-corte/

Da Corte refers to the tumultuous political climate in America and the swing toward right-wing leaders in power. Da Corte could be asking; if we can essentially elect a popular culture figure as president and follow the ups and downs of a comic-book style political landscape, why can't we indulge in the world of cartoons to understand the one we are living in? If we return back to Da Corte's *True Life* performance of Eminem, with him slowly blowing smoke toward the camera or munching on cereal, he might be considered to be inhabiting the surreal and 2D world of cartoons. In all of Da Corte's performances and installations, he reacts abstractly and poetically to a broader political context, perhaps intending to speak fantasy to power.

In a similar vein is the work of London based contemporary artist Louise Ashcroft. Her artist statement details this sensibility: "Speaking fiction to power, artist Louise Ashcroft creates situations and stories which unravel reality, often deliberately misunderstanding or subverting cultural codes and disrupting systems in order to speculate alternative ways of seeing/being."⁷⁹ In her 2017 film, *Unicorns of Westfield*, the artist constructs her own fantastical narrative from filmed snippets of the endless shopfronts, clothes and consumer references amongst Westfield shopping centre. Ashcroft's work

⁷⁹ Louise Ashcroft, Artist Statement, accessed 10 January, 2020, <https://www.louiseashcroft.org/>

is more focused toward comedy, yet her and Da Corte's practice both share an emphasis on the importance of fantasy to unravel systems of power and reveal their inherent absurdity. Da Corte and Ashcroft avoid literal political engagement and instead follow the metamodern tendency of forging new narratives of myth and metaxis. This approach is also supported by contemporary artist Luke Turner in his 2011 manifesto for metamodernism. He explains that a metamodern sensibility embodies a "pragmatic romanticism unhindered by ideological anchorage."⁸⁰ This supplies further evidence that such a variety of romanticism is not airy and unfocused, but is insistent on forging more optimistic storylines to tackle our crisis-ridden times.

No Taste

The final way in which I will discuss Da Corte's *True Life* in relation to the metamodern use of objects is an emphasis on 'no taste.' "Da Corte celebrates vulgarized materials"⁸¹ explains writer Tom Brewer in a profile of the artist for *SSENSE magazine*. A bong made from a can of Sprite or a jar of Marshmallow Fluff appeals to this vulgarity of ephemeral and

⁸⁰ Luke Turner, 'Metamodernist Manifesto,' 2011, accessed 9 January 2020, <http://www.metamodernism.org/>

⁸¹ Tom Brewer, "Smashing Icons with Alex Da Corte," *SSense Magazine*, 30 December, 2019, accessed 10 January, 2020, <https://www.ssense.com/en-us/editorial/culture/smashing-icons-with-alex-da-corte>.

low materials. Da Corte does not hide his inclination toward these pop-style items and instead celebrates them. His acceptance moves towards a levelling of cultural hierarchies in terms of taste. Da Corte, further into the interview, explains his love of dollar-store cheap goods,

“I think I’ve learned to love the big box stores I grew up in, and not in an ironic way, but in a real, earnest way. I do go to Wawa. And I get a cheap sandwich. And it’s fucking good, and I celebrate that.”⁸²

This acceptance of all things labelled as vulgar or distasteful, embraces the everyday and in turn, the viewer. Da Corte approaches these supposedly ‘distasteful’ materials with fondness and a complete sincerity. He goes on to explain, “Having felt like an outsider for so much of my life, I never want to make anyone feel that.”⁸³ Such empathy in regard to objects extends to the acceptance of the viewer and their own taste, whatever that might look like. This point is extended by critic Laura McLean-Ferris who comments that, “equalizing energy is at play in the artist’s treatment of his objects and products.”⁸⁴ As Vermeulen and Van den Akker describe, the metamodern

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Laura McLean-Ferris, “Plastic Spiritualism and Nice Hair,” *Flash Art International*, March 2015, Vol.48, accessed 19 November, 2019, <https://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=79963da4-05ca-45ce-86df-b11bdda13d11%40pdc-v-sessmgr04> p.77

sensibility includes, “The idea of affect, empathy, caring for others around you.”⁸⁵ Da Corte’s metamodern consumption of worldly materials encourages an acceptance of all tastes in order to strive toward greater tolerance. This may not translate to a literal ‘bettering of communities’ but at the very least, the viewer is accepted and not judged. This is an inherently metamodern quality of contemporary artwork that aims for the closing of distances between artist and viewer, an attitude of acceptance and empathy on both sides.

Postmodernism and Metamodernism

To finalise my argument that Da Corte’s practice adheres more to a metamodern sensibility and moves away from postmodernism, I will compare his work to Jeff Koon’s post-pop sculptures. Both artists deal with objects of popular culture to “merge art and commodities,”⁸⁶ they do so however, in differing ways. Koon’s epic scaled consumer objects are meticulously replicated to be flawless reproductions. These relics of consumption glisten in glass boxes, highly polished and

⁸⁵ ArtEZ studium generale, “Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker: Notes on Metamodernism,” Youtube video, 17 October 2016, accessed 10 January, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WPYFvB2Dlc>

⁸⁶ David Hopkins, *After Modern Art*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) p.207

inaccessible. Take for example, his series of works from 1981-7 entitled, *The New*, in which box-fresh vacuum cleaners are displayed in plexiglass cases.⁸⁷ The context of the items is shifted, yet their original consumer pull is left untouched; they are sacred commodities. Nicolas Bourriaud details this in *Postproduction*:

“Koons uses objects as convectors of desire. He arranges objects in glass cases that neutralise the notion of use in favour of a sort of interrupted exchange, in which the moment of presentation is more sacred.”⁸⁸

In Koon’s work, to touch or use the product is to betray its surface, meaning it no longer emanate the same lustrous pull for the viewer. Slickness is favoured over ambiguity and potential. In comparison, Da Corte’s objects, whilst still using the language of consumer desire, do not just express an inaccessible surface; they are not just reductive simulacra. In an interview, Da Corte states: “My idea of a career isn’t to be

⁸⁷ “New Hoover Convertibles, Green, Red, Brown, New Shelton Wet/Dry 10 Gallon Displaced Double-decker 1981–7,” *Tate*, accessed 11 January, 2020, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/koons-new-hoover-convertibles-green-red-brown-new-shelton-wet-dry-10-gallon-displaced-ar00077>

⁸⁸ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction culture as screenplay: how art reprograms the world*, (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002) p.27



Figure 10: Jeff Koons, *New Hoover Convertibles, Green, Red, Brown, New Shelton Wet/Dry 10 Gallon Displaced Doubledecker*, 1981–7

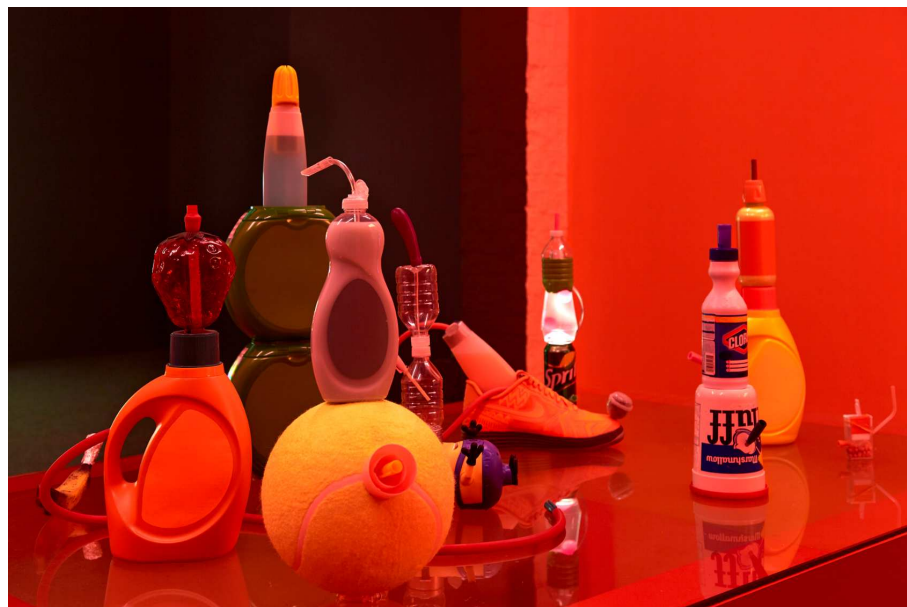


Figure 11: Alex Da Corte, 'BAD LAND' installation view, Josh Lilley Gallery, 2017.

like Jeff Koons, I don't care about being hyper-polished."⁸⁹

Rather the language of Da Corte's objects is mutated and personalised. *True Life's* songs show this transformation; they are lifted into a world of delusion where they can be touched and performed with. Da Corte's objects are latent with ambiguity and reject the idea of being finalised or hyper-polished. Vermeulen and Van den Akker support this concept in *Notes on Metamodern*; they note how the "calculated conceptual art of Jeff Koons"⁹⁰ has been replaced by "sentimental abstractions."⁹¹

More Metamodern artists

It is important to acknowledge a broader selection of contemporary fine artists using metamodern oscillation and romanticism within their work in order to cement Metamodernism's position in the cultural mainstream.

Video and performance artist Shana Moulton explores her modern anxieties through an alter ego called 'Cynthia' who is beset with "hypochondria, agoraphobia and general

⁸⁹ Malcolm Burnley, "Philly's Rock Star of Art," *Philadelphia Magazine*, April 3, 2016, accessed 10 January, 2020,

<https://www.phillymag.com/news/2016/04/03/the-rock-star-of-philly-art/>

⁹⁰ Timotheus Vermeulen & Robin Van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism,' *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, Volume 2, 2010, p.7

⁹¹ Ibid, p.7

helplessness in the face of everyday life.”⁹² Her ongoing series of video installations entitled *Whispering Pines* explore a domestic spirituality, as Cynthia attempts to free herself of the various ailments she has contracted. In Moulton’s video installation, *Personal Steam Interface*, exhibited at the Zabłudowicz Collection in 2019, Cynthia attempts to access a “cyberspace connection”⁹³ through objects. Cynthia’s frenzied dancing aims toward transcendence, with the help of surrounding totemic-like objects: a Slinky, a salt lamp and various figurines and vases (Fig.12). By the end of the video, Cynthia’s transcendence is confused within a kaleidoscopic montage of chaotic and kitsch imagery, her hope of connection pulled back into a routine of panic and worry. Cynthia searches for spiritual meaning amongst her consumer objects, yet this inevitably fails in liberating her anxieties. This oscillation between a strange sincerity pitched against a palpable naivety embodies the metamodern spirit. Metamodernist Luke Turner explains this as “attempting to attain some sort of transcendent position, as if such a thing were within our grasp.”⁹⁴ Cynthia is well aware of the impossibility of transcendence through her own illogical spirituality, nevertheless she strives towards a more connected and optimistic future. Moulton’s romantic

⁹² ‘Shana Moulton,’ Zabłudowicz Collection, exhibition leaflet, 2019

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Luke Turner, “Metamodernism: A Brief Introduction,” January 10, 2015, accessed 13 January, 2020 <https://www.berfrois.com/2015/01/everything-always-wanted-know-metamodernism/>

response to contemporary issues such as ecological disaster and consumerism is described by Van den Akker and Vermeulen to define the metamodern spirit. As stated in *Notes on Metamodernism*; “metamodernism appears to find its clearest expression in an emergent neo-romantic sensibility.”⁹⁵

This neo-romantic sensibility can also be seen in Icelandic performance artist Ragnar Kjartansson’s expansive and experimental performance works, characterised by their oscillation between melancholy and euphoria. His 2011 performance work *Take Me Here by the Dishwasher: Memorial for a Marriage*, performed in the Barbican in 2016, embodies a metamodern tension. Sprawled across the gallery on sofas, beds and on the floor, 10 musicians play guitar and sing in conflicting harmonies. The troubadours mimic and repeat the dialogue in a projection behind them, a clip from Icelandic feature film *Morðsaga (Murder Story)* from 1977, in which two lovers quarrel. The performance is hypnotic with fleeting moments of serene and heartfelt harmonies. At the same time, the repetition becomes humorous, parodic and awkward, the atmosphere continually moves between these two opposing feelings. Also, in this exhibition was Kjartansson’s performance piece *Second Movement* (2016) where in a small boat on the

⁹⁵ Timotheus Vermeulen & Robin Van den Akker, ‘Notes on Metamodernism,’ *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, Volume 2, 2010, p.8



Figure 12: Shana Moulton, *Personal Steam Interface*, 2019, exhibition view Zabludowicz Collection, London.



Figure 13: Ragnar Kjartansson, *Take Me Here by the Dishwasher: Memorial for a Marriage*, 2016.

Barbican lake, two females in Edwardian costumes intermittently enacted a seemingly unending kiss. At first peaceful and theatrical, the performance slowly evolves into feeling that is obsessional and incongruous, as the two figures seem at odds with their modern day, brutalist surroundings. Vermeulen characterizes Kjartansson's melancholic performances as simultaneously alienating and attracting the viewer,⁹⁶ neither fanatically optimistic nor despairingly postmodern; the performers linger between these two poles and engage with the sublime. Kjartansson presents an informed sincerity, unafraid of heartfelt explorations of sorrow and humour. "Like so many metamodern art works," Vermeulen says, "they oscillate between a desire for *sens* and a doubt about the sense of it all."⁹⁷

Elsewhere in metamodern contemporary art, Rachel Maclean's disturbing fairy tales are rich with satirical commentary on 'post-truth' politics. Maclean uses lavish characters and saturated imagery as an ironic and satirical sheen over political metaphors. These surreal analogies reveal the absurdity and corruption in power structures whilst also utilising the suggested metamodern trope of speaking fantasy to power.

⁹⁶ Timotheus Vermeulen, "Ragnar Kjartansson," *Notes on Metamodernism Website*, July 15, 2010, accessed 13 January, 2020, <http://www.metamodernism.com/2010/07/15/ragnar-kjartansson/>

⁹⁷ Ibid.

This uncontrolled or unpredictable quality can also be seen in Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch's collaborative video work. Their frenetic and zany scripts riff off attention-deficient popular culture. Character scripts are often left open-ended and are allowed to evolve and transform in the making process, producing unpredictable, surreal outcomes and language. Trecartin was amongst the group of artists exhibited at the Younger than Jesus at the New Museum in 2009, which marked the beginning of metamodern irony and sincerity expressed in contemporary art.

Luke Turner, who is referenced previously, shares a metamodern collaborative practice with Nastja Rönkkö and Shia Labeouf. The trio practice open-ended dialogues and performances with the public that place emphasis on collaboration and open authorship. Their 2016 performance #TAKEMEANYWHERE, invited the american public through social media to pick them up and 'take them anywhere'. The collective create communal spaces in which engage the public in sincere and exposing way, in search of connection and a metamodern utopian longing.

Conclusion

Through my analysis of Alex Da Corte's *True Life* and a selection of work by other contemporary artists that employ characteristics of sincerity and irony, I have found that these metamodern tendencies described by Vermuelen and Van den Akker seem to be most successful when expressed through performance based pieces. Perhaps the intrinsically open nature of performance allows room for potential and risk, thereby heightening a sense of metamodern oscillation. For example, Ragnar Kjartansson's ethereal and often deeply heartfelt performances are reliant on the erratic and harmonious result of placing two ostensibly resisting sensibilities against each other: the ironic and the sincere. Poetic and meaningful occurrences are born of this tension, and this where the metamodern is most evident and effective.

These ideas are reinforced by writer Adam Kelly who reminds us that, "sincerity has never erased it's theatrical connection to a notion of performance."⁹⁸ There is always duality within performance, in the presumed 'authentic' inner intentions along with an outer more performative presentation. This tension between the inner and outer self in performance plays directly

⁹⁸ Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace & The New Sincerity in American Fiction' in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, edited by David Hering, 2010, Sideshow Media Group Press, Los Angeles/Austin, p.135

into the metamodern oscillation. Metamodern performance finds its poignancy in embracing its sincere, confessional intentions that are characteristically communicated through an ironic exterior. Alex Da Corte's highly artificial performances can be seen to play to this idea. Da Corte's *True Life* experiences an outcast celebrity through a lens of empathy, yet this was presented through a veneer of kitsch artificiality. The medium of performance in this specific case study is able to effectively facilitate both positions of empathy and irony, and therefore a metamodern oscillation. As writer Andre Gide points out, "One cannot be both sincere and seem so."⁹⁹ Metamodern tension comes in the developing atmosphere and unpredictable outcomes of a time-based medium.

Metamodernism's lean toward performance and narrative-based mediums also appears to be borne out by my earlier research into Foster Wallace's 'New Sincerity' movement. Foster Wallace called for a movement in literature that was comfortable with discussing humanity without resorting to sarcasm or cynicism. As he explains, "The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile...to risk accusations of sentimentality."¹⁰⁰ In the 20 years succeeding this proposal, metamodernism has become the

⁹⁹ Ibid, p.140

¹⁰⁰ David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Plural: Television & U.S Fiction,' *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13:2, (1993:Summer) p.170

natural progression of this sentiment, placing sincerity as the dominant cultural mode. This yearning for meaning through sincerity has evolved since the 1990s; metamodern artists understand the impossibility of offering a complete utopian future but nevertheless are intent on trying. Metamodern artists perceive sincerity as a risk willing to take. All the sprawling, contradicting, failed or successful expressions of this thought are embraced. As with postmodernism, metamodernism does not see an end destination, it moves for the sake of moving, searches for truth but never finds it.

However, the established postmodern vernacular no longer offers a sufficient description for our contemporary surroundings. In our current cultural crisis of ecological disaster, divisive political agendas and growing wealth inequality we have found ourselves on increasingly unstable ground. To tackle these irrefutable obstacles, many artists are adopting features of optimism, empathy and sincerity. This worldview is not blind sighted but sharp and informed by previous failures. It seeks to avoid being weighed down by a postmodern, now seemingly redundant default into irony. As proposed by metamodernist Luke Turner, “We must go forth and oscillate!”¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Luke Turner, ‘Metamodernist Manifesto,’ 2011, accessed 9 January, 2020, <http://www.metamodernism.org/>

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