# Parafictions and Contemporary Media Art 2008-2018

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This article traces the shift of parafictional artistic practices post 2008, demonstrating how these strategies have adapted and evolved in contemporary art to align themselves to the current experience of technology and anti-politics. For this article, Carrie Lambert-Beatty's definition is used where a parafiction is a fiction experienced as fact. Since the 2008 global financial crisis, which led to ten years of austerity in Europe and the United States, the use of social media has become ubiquitous, with 2016 epitomising the rejection of mainstream politics and culminating in 'post-truth' named as the word of the year. These events have opened up polarising chasms of opinion, where users are separated into self-reflective silos by seemingly unseen forms of algorithmic governance. Works such as Ian Cheng's *Emissaries* (2015-2017), Rachel Maclean's S*pite Your Face* (2017) and Suzanne Treister's *HFT the Gardener* (2014-2015) and *Survivor (F)* (2016-)*,* demonstrate how parafictions have become less plausible and less real - a shift which is mirrored in politics - and ultimately unconcerned with replicating truth. This article examines why we often choose to accept a narrative over a truth by discussing how artists have created forgotten pasts, potential futures and alternate realities with digital media.

*Parafictions, Contemporary Media Art, Technological Infrastructure, Politics, Internet*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Considering current technological infrastructure in relation to the web's past, this article traces the lineage of parafictions in net art, demonstrating how these strategies have adapted and evolved in contemporary art to align themselves to the current experience of technology and anti-mainstream politics. For the purpose of this research, Carrie Lambert-Beatty's definition is used which defines a parafiction as a fiction experienced as fact (2009). This article uses a diachronic format of parafictive case studies to demonstrate the shift in parafictive practices. Using the historical trajectory of tactical media David Garcia categories parafictions as forms of 'what ifs' and 'as ifs'. Garcia suggests that what ifs 'lead to satirical acts designed to unmask workings of power' and as ifs 'are more utopian, leading to forms of activism that act "as if" change has already occurred.' (2017: 82-83) Here, I will use these terms but diverge from Garcia to suggest that what ifs are how parafictions are currently functioning. Frequently they are not satirical in nature and can be utopian. With net art and early forms of digital art, parafictive works were often

accepted as real and defined as activism although in both the instances referenced here the artists object to this categorisation. Their work functions as a form of disruption and as an exploration of the limits of the web's infrastructure as a then avant-garde medium. I argue that these are forms of as ifs but are satirical.

## 2. PARAFICTIONS AND NET ART

This is apparent in UBERMORGEN.COM's *[V]oteAuction* (2000) - a website that offered citizens of the USA the opportunity to sell their votes to the highest bidder – and 0100101110101101.org or Eva and Franco Mattes' *Vaticano.org* (1998) - a direct copy of the Vatican's official website for the Holy See. *[V]ote-auction* (2000-04), aimed to bring 'democracy and capitalism closer together'

(UBERMORGEN.COM 2000a). The website, which was active during the 2000 Presidential election between Al Gore and George W. Bush, offered American citizens the opportunity to sell their votes to the highest bidder and was deemed an act of

illegal voter trading. Eight states passed short-term restraining orders and injunctions against the two vote-auction websites for alleged illegal voter trading, which consequently led to all websites associated with the project being shut down and taken offline. The case was investigated by the FBI, the NSA and Federal Attorney Janet Reno to prevent corruption of the voter process and ensure that no votes had been brought or sold. *[V]oteauction* (2000-04) culminated in numerous news reports on an international scale, this includes Hans Bernhard's interview on CNN's *Burden of Proof* (UBERMORGEN.COM 2000b) alongside lawyers, politicians and professors. The media attention received by the project illustrates that this parafictive act was experienced as real and lead to debates on free-market exchange, exploring the murky differences between bribery, donations and the actual act of selling votes.

In 1998 Eva and Franco Mattes purchased the domain www.vaticano.org, on which they published all content from the official www.vaticano.va with some critical amendments. This included outlining the church's 'Total Domination Plan', absolving sinners via email and appropriating popular culture for papal ends. The interface of the Mattes' site convinced many, remaining active for a year with over 200,000 views and 50,000 hours of user navigation (Quaranta 2011: 15). These pieces acted as if within the structure of the internet, reflecting the existing content and structure of websites to deceive their audience.

Since the 2008 global financial crisis, which has led to over ten years of austerity in Europe and the United States, the use of social media has become ubiquitous, with 2016 epitomising the rejection of mainstream politics and culminating in 'post-truth' named as the word of the year. These events have opened up polarising chasms of opinion, where users are separated into self-reflective silos by seemingly unseen forms of algorithmic governance. Parafictions still exist but have changed significantly during this time due to social, political and technological factors reconfiguring to suit the ubiquitous nature of the internet.

Parafictive as ifs of the late 1990s and early 2000s used the possibility space of the internet's infrastructure whereas the current use of what ifs act as a strategy that eradicates the value placed on truth as seen politically in the practices employed by Donald Trump. Vid Simoniti asserts that politically the difference with disinformation in the present age is that:

> [t]hese new forms of disinformation are [...] not simulating truth (lies), avoiding truth (bullshit), or rendering truth unintelligible (simulacra). [...] they [are] ask[ing] the viewer to sacrifice any pursuit of truth. (2018)

Following Simoniti, if the desire for truth is sacrificed this then renders truth as irrelevant. This is true for parafictions, which have adapted post 2008 to reject the pursuit of truth all together.

## 3. CONTEMPORARY CASE STUDIES

The contemporary case studies can be seen as forms of world building or what Ian Cheng refers to as 'worlding' (2015). Initially, parafictions acted in and interacted with the world that already existed as a challenge to what was, rather than proposing what could be.

### 3.1 Ian Cheng

Ian Cheng's *Emissaries* (2015-17) uses computer game design to examine the mutation of human consciousness and progress through an endless possibility space enacted by nonhuman users. *Emissaries* (2015-17) is a trilogy of interconnected stories that encompass past and future worlds. The episodes occur in the ancient past of preconscious, thousands of years into the future and in a place where AI is sentient. The simulations follow one emissary as they interact with the world. To produce these live computer-generated simulations Cheng uses software traditionally associated with video games combined with a variety of artificial intelligence models. The nonhuman agents are programmed with behavioural drives but evolve organically without external influence. Cheng therefore acts as initiator rather than controller where his organisms act and perform in their own narrative with unpredictable outcomes. Cheng states that he

> wanted to push thinking of behaviour as a volatile material. Unlike a physical, sculptural material, behaviour is inherently subject to sudden change and influence. In turn behaviour puppeteers or possesses whatever physical material it is hosted in. (Evers 2015: 107-108)

His simulations examine human consciousness, mutation, the principles of emergence and systems of logic through the production of open-ended narratives contained within these virtual ecosystems. Luciana Parisi suggests that '[s]imulations are both manifest appearances of human culture and the scientific images of computational processing.' (2015: 131) The simulations offer the possibility to explore the potential for what could happen if this tethering of biological and computational systems became the conditions of reality.

### 3.2 Rachel Maclean

Rachel Maclean's *Spite Y our F ace* (2017) examines the political tactics used in the 2016 campaigns of Brexit in the UK and the presidential

election in the USA. The protagonist, a Pinocchioesque character gains power through lying. This mobilises him from his low social status, whilst his growing exaggerated nose is widely celebrated.The work examines ethics and morality with the characters becoming disinterested in the binaries of right or wrong. Set between two worlds the lower and upper, where the lower is poor and dark whilst the upper is rich and materialistic. This portrays clear class divides to comment upon patriarchal power, capitalist deception, and the pitfalls of wealth and celebrity. The thirty-seven-minute looped video does not have a distinct beginning or end although it follows a narrative structure as if history is destined to repeat itself.

The aesthetics of Maclean's dystopian future, a reoccurring characteristic of her practice, disguise its challenging and difficult themes. This appealing, cute and zany world is filled with gaps through which the grotesque appears. Maclean states that,

> [s]o much of our existence in this moment of late capitalism, dominated by powerful companies like Google, is about the surface of things. When we go online, for example, we're presented with infantilised, cartoony images that are a cover for all that is going on underneath. (Ruiz 2018)

Donald Trump also uses these tactics of deflection by bombarding people with information and denouncing everything as fake news. Removing the value or need placed upon truth or 'honesty' under the guise of being an authentic, so-called 'normal' and relatable 'guy'. Denial and deceit are a part of human nature, which enable us to navigate human interactions and live in a complex world. However, when denial is used as a strategy to avoid truth it becomes dangerous. Conventionally denialists offer alternative truths to deny established facts or events such as the denial of climate change and the Holocaust. Denialists also offer alternative theories to support their denials, such as those known as 'flat Earthers', or those who subscribe to the discredited belief that the Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) vaccination causes autism. What all these claims have in common is their ability to detach the world from its established narrative and create a culture of distrust.

To echo Keith Kahn-Harris, self-deception becomes dangerous when it becomes public dogma and therefore, denialism (2018b), which has become all the more frightening as Kahn-Harris suggests we have progressed to a new phase of post-denialism that functions alongside the posttruthers. He defines post-denialist discourse as assertive, instinctive and anarchic as opposed to denialist discourse that is explanatory, considered and disciplined (2018a). Denialism has paved the way for post-denialism, acting as an incubator of doubt. Instead of offering new theories or opposing

existing accepted truths, this arena of doubt has enabled the New Wave of post-denialists to do away with existing narratives all together and remake the world to fit their own view or agenda. As Kahn-Harris explains:

> [w]hile it is still based on the denial of an established truth, its methods liberate a deeper kind of desire: to remake truth itself, to remake the world, to unleash power to reorder reality […] and stamp one's mark on the planet. (2018a)

Perhaps this can be conceived as a customisation of the truth. This is where parafictional practices in art become useful as they teach us ways of recognising these tactics; this is reinforced by Lambert-Beatty, who comments '[p]arafictions train us in scepticism and doubt, but also, oddly belief' (2009: 78).

### 3.3 Suzanne Treister

Suzanne Treister's *HFT the Gardener* (2014-2015), tells the story of a high frequency trader who uses psychoactive drugs to create an algorithm based on the gematria – an alphanumeric code assigned to Hebrew and English letter - of psychoactive plants that predicts the value of stock. *HFT t he Gardener* (2014-2015) is a fictional construct but the material is based upon facts. The protagonist Hillel Fischer Traumberg, is a high-frequency trader, both Traumberg and high frequency trading can be referred to by using the acronym HFT. Erik Davis proposes that HFT also functions as a contemporary version of HCE, the main character in James Joyce's *Finnegan's W ake* (1939), who cannot wake from a dream-like state of conscious in the face of the blurred reality of modernity (2016: 4-5).

HFT is constructed through 'layers of authorship' (Treister: 2016a), these layers apply to both human and nonhuman agency found within the work. HFT is an incredibly complex issue, which many know very little about. The diverse connections offer an alternative way to understand how HFT works or could be understood, whilst this may be experienced as fiction, potentially it has the ability to alter the understanding of facts. By exploring psychoactive plants and their effects this appears reflective of the experience of technology which can be defined as hallucinogenic, where it is hard to distinguish between what is true or false and the many layers of perception, which are now experienced due to the effects of technological infrastructure and algorithmic governance.

The ongoing project *Survivor (F)* (2016- ) contains Treister's projections for the future in an undisclosed space and time. Constructed as the examination of a sole survivor's hallucinogenic visons, the project explores a new sublime, which aesthetically radically differs from current visions of

reality and addresses projections for human and nonhuman agency. The origin of the survivor are unclear, they may be human or nonhuman, on this planet or another, in a parallel universe, in space or take the form of artificial superintelligence or ASI.

*Survivor (F )* (2016- ) is not rooted in fact but its content reveals how current modes of perception are inadequate and unprepared for the future of planetary scale computation, the rise of ASI and nonhuman agency. The artwork is about the everchanging, imminent and chaotic future the world is facing. By echoing and absorbing present online experience and algorithmic prevalence Triester then projects what after internet existence may be through iterations of alchemic drawings and paintings, digital imagery and videos. Maggie Roberts and Lucy A. Sames suggest that the sensitive outcomes 'gather sentience and materiality through their obsessive repetition and shifting perspective, building a pragmatic web of fictions in a cosmic hallucinatory elsewhere.' (2017)

*Survivor (F)* (2016- ) is a speculative fiction, which is set after the death of the internet in a space and time unfamiliar and distinct from our current perception, where time has become abstract and white noise prevalent. This future is full of data clouds, mists and storms, algorithmic governance, teleportation and telepathy with museums dedicated to the history of our present world. One significant reference to the inception of the internet and the notion of cyberspace is evident in the watercolours *The Sky Was The Colour of the Death Of The Internet_01 and _02* (2016). This statement is drawn from William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and the following line, '[t]he sky above the port was the color [sic] of television, tuned to a dead channel.' (2016 [1984]: 3) This referential approach entrenches the rich heritage of sciencefiction imagery within *Survivor (F)* (2016- ), historically contextualising the project whilst providing new unknowns, such as the colour of the sky after the death of the internet.

The lack of control in Treister's projected future reflects contemporary social and political polarised positions and the frustrations harnessed to result in the seismic events of 2016. The other or scapegoat in this instance for Treister is the capacity for nonhuman agency and capabilities of ASI as a purely hallucinogenic prospect.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This article positions parafictions as a legacy system, that was significant as a mode of practice within net art and digital art and that has become part of contemporary art in its most expanded sense. Parafictions therefore inform the contemporary digital media landscape and function to reflect how mis-information spreads through society. Parafictions have adapted from encounters with humans in digital and non digital spaces to incorporate interactions with both human and nonhuman users. These forms of speculative fiction have shifted from as ifs to what ifs, that reshape the past and as David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan suggest bring forth the future (2019). As ifs use the existing constraints of vertical linearity. Current parafictions use diachronic truths that become realised through configurations of what ifs. What ifs are horizontal entities, they inhabit a nonlinear time and space and seek to draw out the past, present and future.

The specific case studies demonstrate how parafictions have altered, becoming less plausible and less real - a shift which is mirrored in politics - they have become unconcerned with replicating truth. This lack of plausibility reflects the fractious nature of the real world and the dark affects and aspects of the internet and technological infrastructure. This has subsequently led to the growth of artists engaging in parafictive acts, which exploit, reject and replicate the so-called era of post-truth and fake news. This article examined why we often choose to accept a narrative over a truth by discussing how artists have created forgotten pasts, potential futures and alternate realities with digital media and the structure of the web both that was and is to be.

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