JOSHUA CITARELLA:
FORWARD-FACING POLITICS

Artist

Joshua Citarella

Joshua Citarella is an artist currently based out of New York City. Investigating digital spaces in an era of post-conceptual, post-internet art, his interdisciplinary work investigates the effect social media has on cultural production. Citarella has independently published Untitled (Politigram & the Post-left) and has written essays for New Models, Artsy and others. His work has also been reviewed in several major publications including Art in America, Artforum, Artspace, The New Yorker, the Huffington Post, and he has spoken at a Rhizome panel in New York as well as the Carroll/ Fletcher gallery in London. His work has been exhibited internationally– including at Museum of the Image (MOTI) in the Netherlands, The New Museum in New York City and Chelsea College of the Arts in London. Upcoming group exhibitions of his work will be shown at Avalanche in London and Light Factory in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Opening Reception:
Monday July 8, 2019 // 6:00-8:00 pm

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July 8 - August 2, 2019

Online Discourse and Rendering the Gen-Z Imagination: A Conversation with Joshua Citarella

Interviewed and edited by Liz Pigott, Chief Curator

for Crypto-anarchists, 2018, C-print, 20 x 16"

Joshua Citarella: Forward-Facing Politics is Gallery 102's second 2019 summer solo show in Washington, DC from July 8–August 2. Published in conjunction with the exhibition, the interview supplements the themes of Citarella's work including the cult of personality professed by Generation Z (those born after 1998), the visualization of dystopian beliefs via social media, and how these ideologies are reflective of the world Gen Z observes and the media they consume. In May of 2019, I met with Joshua at his apartment in New York City to discuss his current work and what prompted his research for the past few years which tracks these various online, political communities.

A lot of your artistic practice that you're doing right now relates to tracking Gen Z's cultural and political ideologies on Tik Tok and other forms of social media. Would you mind talking about how you got interested in that, and maybe how that

stemmed from your collaborative project with *Jogging*[1] in 2012 or where your interest started with this type of work?

I guess I would describe it as I'm following a story, because if you would have asked me ten years ago when I graduated school what I would be doing, and I answered that I would be hanging out with fifteen year olds in chat rooms, I would probably not believe you (laughs). But I think the genesis of this story starts with being active on tumblr and being on *Jogging* and learning that a lot of the big, popular viral accounts who followed *Jogging* were run by tweens – they were kids. So *Jogging* was 2012, and I would have clearly been outside of their age range, but the point is that my teenage years were not the social media years. For me, in my generation, using the internet consisted mostly of going on video games and stuff like that. But realizing early on that the landscape of social media was composed of people much younger than you'd expect leads you to interpret internet content in a different way. The kind of juvenile antics that you get up to as a teenager could be read into some

of what these accounts would do and say. Obviously that is not a unilateral assessment, it was not all of these accounts. But niche, longtail accounts really sprung up around then.[2] There was something that people watched around this time on Tumblr which was the rise of things like 'pale goth' and 'C-punk' (cyberpunk). Those are the examples that immediately come to mind. That was part of a process of cultural nichification that was kind of unique to the internet. Whereas in the age before the internet, you would have an underground music scene that someone would then put a name on – they would brand it – and eventually it would go mainstream, but this required a kind of 'boots-on-the-ground' IRL commitment of people who went to the shows and the different venues to support this band. What was happening online is that people would invent a genre of music, a following would come to it URL, and then they would play an IRL show where these fans would show up.

This underground culture started functioning in a different way, it was kind of like a Baudrillard hyper-market where you build the Walmart and than the town grows out around it rather than the Walmart going to service the needs of the town that doesn't

1. *Jogging* (2012-2014) was an art collaborative that included an active tumblr, editorial spread, gallery show, and published book. It focused primarily on post-conceptual, post-internet art. The project was co-founded by Artie Vierkant and Brad Troemel, with Joshua, Jesse Stecklow, Norman Wilson, Rachael Milton, Spencer Longo, and others as active, contributing artists. The name 'jogging' refers to the artists' work flow of not concentrating on one project at a time; it's a constant movement forward. In a 2013 essay published in *The New Inquiry*, Troemel refers to this process as "athletic aesthetics."

2. Long tail accounts on Tumblr and other social media platforms prioritize art, music, and other creative endeavors that could not previously fit the mold of mass media – for economic reasons – in pre-internet distribution networks. Thousands of content-specific users in long tail forms would produce content for a smaller viewing audience in the ever-reaching medium of the internet. Long-tailing allows unlikely subcultures to thrive and expand their 'niche-ifed' communities online.

have access to goods.[3] And so, I started to see this teenage political activity as being something similar to all of these things. They were cherry picking ideas and putting prefixes and suffixes together without having spent years in academia, in the institution, and they were kind of bringing this identity play to their political ideology. So the inroads for my work were from the first people I started following, which were the teens who controlled the anarcho-capitalist accounts.[4] They mainly grew out of the

Youtube skeptic community of early new-atheist stuff – Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchen – and I guess by following them I watched the evolution of what later became known as the alt-right. These kids were generally shitposting teenagers that had right-wing views but they were the kind of right-wing individualist views that had a strong emphasis on civil liberties. They were right-wing in terms of property law but pro-diversity. One of the popular memes goes something like "I want gay-married couples to protect their marijuana plants with unregistered firearms they bought with bitcoin" (laughs). Right, it's that obscured idea of freedom, the right-wing libertarian idea of freedom. And so in watching this rise of the ironic, new-right, I started to look for what a left-wing version of what this would be and that brought us to the

3. Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) wrote *Simulacra and Simulation* in 1981, and Chapter 7, "Hypermarked and Hypercommodity" discusses the concept of the "Hypermarket." Essentially, this online marketplace mimics an original, physical marketplace. Through this process, physical human contact decreases and all interaction filters through technology and this hyper-real online world.
4. Anarcho-capitalism is a branch of political philosophy that prioritizes private property, free markets, and individualism while eliminating the state or central governing body of a society.

Vampire Cocktail with Smart Speaker at San Franciso Bay Seascape, 2017, C-print, 16 x 20"

Politigram and the Post-Left book.[5]

Generally, what I kind of pieced together now going through this arch of a few years – spending a really deep engagement in these spaces, making connections with some of the people in it, getting interviews with them to layout their intimate and personal view of the world – is that I'm trying to theorize these online Gen-Z political spaces as a space that young people go to try and imagine a different future. In the post-Reagan era, with Fukuyama's *End of History*,[6] with Thatcher's slogan "There is No Alternative,"[7] it seemed that neoliberalism was the only way that you could organize a society; it was based around the individual, the rational, economic

actor. And these kids, by virtue of their age, happened to be born on this other side of history. So for them, they see no future, and they gather in these spaces to try and imagine what that could be like. Their politics shift or skew extremist in one direction or the other by virtue of juvenile antics and the hyperbole that is just a product of age. These kids recognize that we are living in a time of political crisis and cultural crisis that I think everyone is aware of. We are kind of on this rapidly approaching deadline of climate catastrophe or financial collapse or social collapse. I'm not sure if they would be able to tell you this specifically, but they really are envisioning their own outlook of society when it feels like they were born at the end of the world. That's what they are trying to do.

You also said you reached out to a bunch of people on politigram and people in these spaces – was it helpful to gain any insights of their home life or where they grew up? Did that impact how you saw their work and the work that they produced? Do you think it's important to have that type of grounding in the work that feels very anonymous and 'context-lacking' when people see these posts on social media?

Yeah, I think there's two parts to this – The quick first one is like the verified identity on Facebook and the millennial approach to using the internet which is building a creative brand where you are an entrepreneur and everything is under your name. You don't platform hop because your intention is to accumulate

5. *Politigram and the Post Left* is a self-published artist's book released in September 2018 by Citarella that was intended to be a handbook for members of the art community interested in these spaces but unsure of where to start. Around sixty copies were sold at cost. One copy was purchased by a member of politigram in the East Village of NYC and began to circulate online the night after it was purchased. Citarella produced an abbreviated PDF of the book online, and it can be found on his website at http://joshuacitarella.com.
6. Francis Fukuyama is an American political economist and political scientist who held the position of deputy director of the US State Department's Policy Planning staff and analyst at the RAND Corporation around the time this work was published. He released the book, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), after expanding upon his 1989 essay similarly entitled "The End of History?" Between each publication, he signals that liberal democracy under free-market capitalism may subsequently become the final form of global government. Post-2001, his views have been co-opted by the neoconservative movement. He has claimed, to some extent, to have distanced himself from these views today.
7. "TINA" or "There is No Alternative" is a slogan coined by Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013), the former, conservative British Prime Minister who held office from 1979-1990. Among many of her right-wing beliefs, she claimed that the market economy is the only successful system that works under global capitalism.

followers and later monetize your creative vision by selling products or some sort of creative direction to a brand. The Gen Z way of using the internet is something like being anonymous, platform hopping, being there to make interpersonal connections. Something like the FYRE festival is kind of the nail in the coffin of the millennial, influencer economy.[8] Everyone knows these are people who are famous for being the lowest common denominator, not values that we want to promote. They end up selling you a bill of goods which is a fema tent instead of a private island.

 The other thing is, in presenting this research, I allowed usernames to be seen because the usernames are very important in how politigram users identified themselves with each other. You could find a username like "ego.comm.anti.civ" or something like that and you would announce your ideology through your username but you would very rarely find a picture of the person that was behind the account. They call it "admin reveal" or "face reveal" and it would usually be in a story that was very quickly deleted. From these, you could piece together a picture of who most of these kids were or their general demographic. It's mostly white men between the ages of 12-17 because it

8. Billy McFarland, founder and CEO of Fyre Media Inc., spearheaded this failed luxury music festival, scheduled to occur from April 28-30 and May 5-7 of 2017 on the island of Exuma in the Bahamas. Social media influencers and models were paid to promote the event months before on Instagram, and a tremendous amount of fraud and logistical problems developed resulting in attendees receiving almost none of their promised accommodations. McFarland was sentenced to six years in prison and forfeited over $26 million for defrauding attendees, among other charges.

seems once people get into college they have more interesting and fun things to do (laughs). Certainly those numbers drift once you move platforms and certainly now its a whole different situation because these places have gotten so much more extreme since when they started. But when I released the book, there was one copy at a bookstore in New York and someone from politigram went and bought it, put it on discord that evening, and I got a bunch of messages and got to chat with many of these users at length. So now they kind of know who I am and I've forged some really strong, meaningful connections with leftist politgram users.

For my next work, it involves interviews with people who are agenda setters in these communities. These people can announce a kind of ideological change and I would see that ripple throughout. Whether it be the zeitgeist or the influence of these individuals, it's impossible to determine. You really just have to wait in the community and than really infrequently – once a week or once a month – you would get some kind of insight into who is behind the thing.

What's been happening recently is that with the crackdown on hate-speech and more broadly politically dissident speech, people generally post less, and they do stories and they do DMs more. It's all of the same characters but the content is less accessible; it's behind various walls whether that be a DM or all of the accounts are pretty much private now because they were being banned or reported like crazy. But they've been doing these hundred person DM's where

you get thousands of messages a day.

But how do you go about tracking all of these various, different social media accounts? Are you locked into instagram or reddit for the day or do you have your own system for tracking these hundreds, thousands, of political users?

I guess I should preface why I became so curious about these accounts in the first place. It was part of an evolving conversation that myself and artist Brad Troemel had during Ultraviolet (UV) Production House.[9] This was when filter bubbles on social media, specifically facebook and generally anything that has algorithmically prioritized content. One way of breaking filter bubbles is to intentionally follow accounts that had diametrically opposed political views. So you follow people from outside of your filter bubble and than when it tries to feed you content that you like, its constantly at odds with each other. Following liberal accounts and conservative accounts is just the tip of the iceberg. Than its anarcho-primitivism[10]

and transhumanists[11] and it gets really out of hand very quickly. Part of this research was to let the algorithm guide you. You could start with one account. A big one was 'teenagelibertarian' and than 'teenagelibertarian' would recommend 'three other similar accounts you could follow.' I did that for a little bit but in the early side of politigram because it felt like these memes had some power, that they were influencing the public, and I think they were in a real way at that time, in the lead up to 2016, even though this is much less true now. People of different world views were in contact with each other and debating these things in the comments and it really felt like they were doing discourse in a very real way. If not deciding the agenda for the rest of the world they would at least be deciding an agenda for their community, and you would see people switch. 'Like oh, I was influenced by Yasha and Yasha made this post and that's what made me turn from anarcho-syndicalist to left-communism' and they would state this. So I would start to follow the people they mentioned in the comments than understand the sociological, birds-eye view of what these users looked like. I don't know if there's a set strategy for how to do this but my strong inclination is that users are both guided by the social aspect of it and the algorithmic aspect of it so I try and incorporate both of them. At this

9. UV (Ultraviolet Production) House is another collaborative project and online store by Troemel and Citarella that gives art collectors "do-it-yourself material kits and pre-fabricated works. Works on the store are initially advertised as digital composites of advertising images sourced from just in time online retailers, presenting a hypothetical view of what the completed artwork will look like after assembly."

10. Anarcho-primitivism is a critique of anarchy that claims the rise and stratification of society began under labor specialization in agrarian societies rather than from industrial capitalism. Anarcho-primitivists advocate for deindustrialization and a return to nomadic, hunter-gatherer livelihoods. The few, unironic accounts that exist on politigram are usually the butt of the joke among many of its users.

11. Transhumanists believe that through the expansion of science and technology, humans can evolve beyond their current physical and intellectual limits. In 2013, Zoltan Istvan wrote a novel, *The Transhumanist Wager*, which advocates for these philosophical ideals. In 2018, he ran for governor of California and sincerely aimed to implement some of the extreme transhumanist views to fund UBI.

point, I'll probably review different feeds for about an hour a day. It's not chronological. Usually the 'best stuff' is at the top like whoever had a comment thread war that day you'll get very early in the feed, and than discord servers – at this point I really had to take a step back because the mental toll of being in these spaces are so –

Draining, to say the least.

Yeah, it involves a lot of scrolling and I had to move away from it a little bit. This is also important to mention – when I see them [the politigram users] mention a thinker, philosopher, writer, whoever it is in their content, I open up a tab so I can listen to that person's audiobook, read their articles, and take in their youtube content. So I'm consuming the references that they are consuming and I can go down the rabbit hole with them as much as possible. It's a whole separate news feed to keep track of the events in their community, the podcasts that report on these things, and then the news in the real world. It's already too much.

Ha yeah, I've been having those similar feelings these past couple of months to keep up with everything because it feels very important to me. And I don't know, I grew up in a household that felt very apolitical – simply meaning that my family and I would *never* discuss politics. Today, I don't think anything is apolitical, and obviously looking back I grew up in a home that would have Fox news on in the background during dinner and than it would flip to Jeopardy. I would

never be the type of person who goes out and seeks to watch the news or read the paper or be part of that because it felt so separate in middle class suburbia. But yeah, once I got to college in DC and Trump was elected in my first semester of freshman year, understanding politics felt very important to me. It's a very privileged thing to say, that I didn't need to understand politics growing up, but I think that's part of my truth.

The thing is, I don't think these things started as politics, that's what's so peculiar about it. My general feeling is a lot of these users grew up in a household similar to what you did and similar to what I did. Generally up until 2016, if you were going with an obscure third-party candidate, that's where the ideology stakes were. There wasn't a mainstream candidate that was going to potentially map it hard to the left or hard to the right, but what happened in the arch of 2015/2016, all of pop culture became politicized because the debates and generally Trump's persona garnered such high ratings and social media had taken such a hold that these debates snowballed. With people who you previously considered your close friends, you now realized you had deep ideological riffs with them and this whole confluence of things merged all of pop culture into politics. It became clear that "oh, everything is ideological" so for these white, young, alt-right politigram users, coming out of internet conspiracy culture a bit – flat-earthers were not so far removed from the skeptic community and the pop culture of obscure political candidates. It's a confluence of different

things.

Yeah, and I think a large part of that in post-2016 is the recognition that culture has never been strippped of the political, but it has been more easily hidden away, if that makes sense. Do you think a lot of these users on politigram are all bound up in the idea of accelerationism? Is it a common theme? Or is this privileged in certain communities over others?

Accelerationism[12] is definitely a

12. Accelerationism, in its most broad sense, calls for capitalism to be expedited instead of overcome in order to bring about radical social change. As Citarella describes above, there are left and right-wing variations of accelerationism. Typically, left-accelerationism aims to fashion a technological evolution beyond the current restraints of capitalism to allow social, emancipatory ends; right-accelerationism desires the continued intensification of capitalism and a technological singularity.

contested term, at the moment, especially after the recent attacks in Christchurch, and there's people that use that word in different contexts and has different meanings. I guess to relate this to the title of the show, generally everyone in these communities are aware that we are facing some kind of imminent crisis – social, financial, ecological. They feel a need to create a politics for this post-collapse or catastrophic future; they need to mentally, aesthetically, emotionally prepare themselves – potentially politically organize and prepare themselves – but at least take care of their individual needs. They feel labor organizers and trade unions or any hope for a greater material well being have been so thoroughly destroyed in America after the New Deal and certainly after Reagan and Thatcher. This was
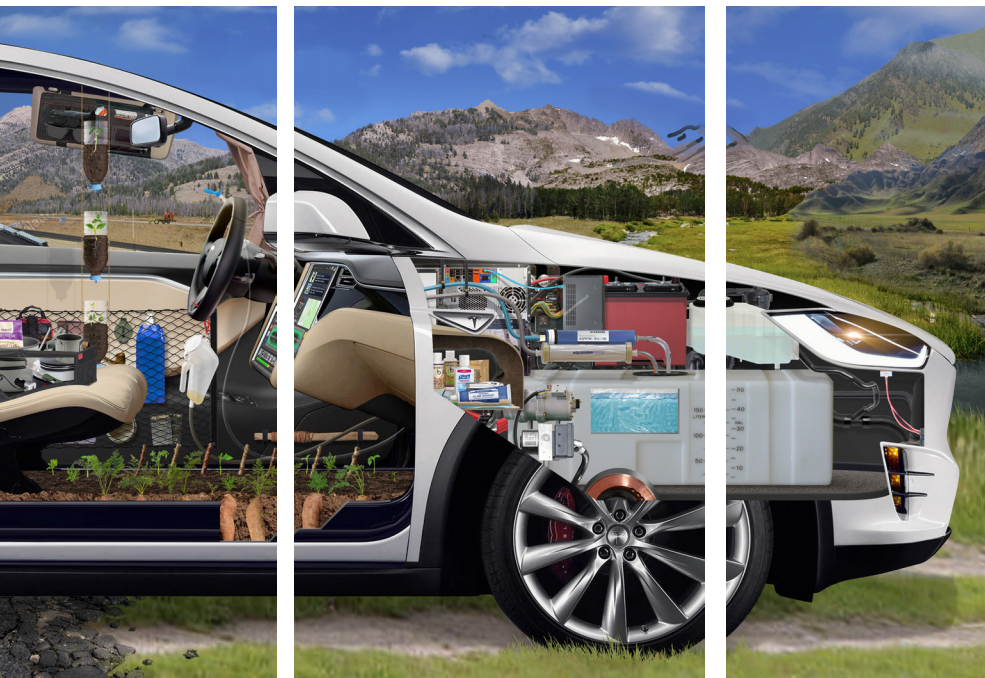
Bio-weapon Defense Mode, 2019, C-prints, 204 x 72.25"

then carried on by third-way Democratic candidates like Clinton and Obama and Blair that find market-friendly solutions that undermine labor and security.

I think there are right and left-wing versions of people who will call themselves accelerationists. I guess the question that I might answer is what politics today aren't accelerationist?

Even if you are a progressive or a reactionary, the reactionaries want to accelerate our current decline so that they can steer it in a certain direction towards traditionalism, but all of these spaces have come to the consensus that we are approaching a crisis that needs to be planned for and will be presented an opportunity to steer it in a certain direction.

I guess the one other thing to mention is that this was all written and predicted for in 1863 when Marx wrote *Kapital*. Accelerationism is premised on the fundamental Marxian idea that the contradictions of capital will create boom and bust and collapse that will eventually lead to its own demise. So it's kind of funny that there is an implicit agreement from some of the crazy right-wing dudes here.

Yeah – that is all very, very true. And on a more serious note, how do you go about looking at memes on these servers following completely horrible incidents like in the shooting at the mosques in Christchurch?[13] Is there a way you filter through this content and moderate things on your own?

13. On March 19, 2019 during Friday Prayer, two

What are the limits and successes of content moderation on these websites as the result of this online radicalization that have these violent, real world implications?

I think the week after the New Zealand attack was maybe the worst week in this specific corner of the internet because the content that was being distributed was so absolutely abhorrent and gruesome. I tried to consume as much of that content as I could, but at a certain point I couldn't watch it anymore. I had to log off because there is a tendency to get locked into these places, and you can do this. You can consume this content as a form of self-harm, of inflicting

consecutive terrorist attacks took place at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. With 51 dead, they stand as the deadliest mass-shootings in New Zealand's history and are inextricably linked to the global rise of alt-right extremism.

psychological pain on yourself. I think it becomes an addiction for people who are deep in this tunnel or pipeline of the alt-right.

In reference to content moderation, generally the content producers are ahead of the moderators. I consider moderation to be bandaids that we can do the best that we can. I'm speaking with a few people to set up a primer on how to approach these spaces and advise the policy for the people who write the policy for content moderation because obviously the people who carry out content moderation are the precarious workers who work off the wifi of a Starbucks or McDonalds. Eva and Franco Mattes did this incredible project with a content moderator who was living out of his car and goes and sits at a McDonald's to do his work reviewing the worst dregs

Genetically Modified Rose with Vacuum Bot and Sandy Footprints, 2017, C-prints, 16 x 20"

Air Quality Bot with Nootropic Stacks and Bird Flying, 2017, C-prints, 20 x 16"

of the internet.[14]

I think these things have political solutions. There's unfortunately a wide-spread misconception that the rise of the alt-right on social media is somehow formed from this unplanned loop-hole in how content moderation is executed. People think if we could just find the individual bad actors in the system we could flush it out entirely, but I think we have to take a larger historical lens to this. As material conditions decline, as people are downwardly mobile in society, then these ideas of returning to traditionalism, taking on reactionary ideas, and scapegoat narratives become much more appealing. People think there has to be someone to blame, someone to get mad at, and even in the abstract, diffuse process of capitalism content moderators could do a better job at it, certainly. There are things that we could advise them to stop inadvertently signal boosting content that they wanted to suppress which creates this "Streisand Effect" that Daniel Keller does this incredible job in outlining in his lecture *The Basilisk*.[15]

14. *Dark Content* (2015) is a series of video installations – currently posted on the dark web – about content moderators, and it calls attention to the way offensive-material is removed from the internet. This process is not done by algorithms but by thousands of anonymous individuals. In *Dark Content*, Eva and Franco Mattes interview one hundred moderators, and computer-generated avatars are designed to digitally recount stories of what these moderators have come across.
15. Keller's lecture and research presented in 2017 delves into The Alt-Right's "Cult of Kek," a semi-sarcastic 4-chan religion around Pepe the Frog, Donald Trump, and the frog-headed Egyptian god of chaos, Kek. The Kekist's memes function much like the basilisk, harming the viewer with mere exposure. Keller's research questions whether these tactics can be applied to subvert the chaotic nihilism of the Alt-Right.

Do content moderators look out for keywords in a post? Is that how they generally block the content and erase it from the platform?
Yeah, it's literally based on the word. Sometimes there is subjective interpretation of an image so those things are pretty easily evaded. People will say a word in place of what they were going to say and then avoid the stringent interpretation of the criteria. With this, you get the rise of these characters like Nick Fuentes on social media who will essentially deny the holocaust through some sort of allegory talking about Sesame Street characters. It's clear what he is talking about to *absolutely* everyone who is listening to it, but he hasn't triggered any of the keywords. Part of this struggle is that alt-right provocateurs on social media are trying to poison symbols that were otherwise apolitical, and when someone takes down a post by a susceptible, young white man, this then reifies the idea that 'maybe people like me are under attack by the government, social media, hollywood, what have you,' and they kind of want to accelerate that process so that content moderators have to take down everything and bankrupt legitimacy in the process. So I generally think fighting this war for content moderation is kind of a losing strategy, and we have to tredge further upstream and find political solutions to all of this. The digital dualism of the IRL /URL divide all have material and historical origins that you can trace.

Obviously your work is focused on this radicalization of individuals within these platforms. Do you ever find a consistent "center" of any of

these spaces, or is the periphery now the center? Has the center ever even existed?

I don't think there has been much of a center other than our "modern idea" of the center today with the Clinton/Blair third-way.[16] Most of history is violent revolutions and competing ideologies, and I don't think there is much of a center to be gained. Everything is ideological.

Yeah, I think the center has always been this absent creation of politics. For instance, there is no legal or economic definition of the middle class but politicians always point to this American cultural imaginary in so many different political speeches. The poverty line for a household of four sits just above $22,000, and the income of the "middle class" can stem up from that number to slightly below six figures. In different regional and socio-political spaces of America, these amounts can dramatically impact and alter livelihoods. But, really, the center just feels fake and it will always be on the periphery.

The center is a moving target as well. I think what these spaces do – and I'm pulling a bit from Dan Keller's research here – is create a "metapolitics," and I think that narrative fits for me. So the objective of these spaces is to create a forum to discuss something outside of the acceptable limits of discourse. Say in 2014, if you brought up the idea of a border wall, there would be a very slim majority who were aligned with you and wanted to see you make this a political reality. This then became a rallying cry of a large portion of the Trump space. So these spaces want to do a similar thing where they create a kind of grassroots small scale version of it and than through memetic-indoctrination try and push these ideas out there to trickle into the mainstream. This is maybe something similar to the transhumanist party and what Istvan did with Universal Basic Income (UBI). Andrew Yang is now the mainstream candidate for it.[17] Very generously, the definition of the center under capitalism is where labor and capital would meet in their agreement; the union sits down with the guy who owns the business and then they hash out what are the terms of our negotiations. Under the political economy of neoliberalism, that center begins to drift deeper toward capital and away from labor. So our definition of the center in 1960 is very different from the center in 2019.

If you want to talk about the divide between millenials and Gen Z, I think that's pretty potent in your work, too. In the article about Tik Tok that you wrote, I like how you commented that millennials are more self-identifying and entrepreneurial in nature while Gen Z is all about identity-play and

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16. "The Third Way" is a centre-left political position propelled by former president Bill Clinton and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair who wanted to implement policies that were left and government-interventionist in nature while still adhering to the neoliberal policies that grew in popularity decades before.

17. Although redacted for length, Joshua and I discussed the abundance of Yang memes on politigram, and how the libertarian-right has supported Yang's campaign agenda of a $1000 / month UBI policy and how his slogan "Not Left, Not Right, Forward" is bound up in a right-wing idea of accelerationism.

Stone Knife with Car Adapter and Boxed Rations, 2019, C-print, 20 x 16"

Bow Drill with Compass and Electric Engine, 2019, C-print, 20 x 16"

have a drive towards anonymity.[18] We go about performing our identities in very different ways. Do you think this is still the main divide between millennials and Gen Z? Are these two generations bridged together by the global catastrophe we're all heading towards?

It's funny because the terms of "Gen Z" and "Millennial" are contested in and of themselves. You'll see things in the media like "Millennials show huge support for Bernie," or "60% of people under the age of 35 would support

18. Citarella's article, "Welcome to TikTok, the Wildly Popular Video App Where Gen Z Makes the Rules," was published in December of 2018 and it outlines the peculiar rise of the Chinese video-music app, the structure of this social network, how various Gen Z subcultures interact with one another, and how memetic (and often misogynistic) cultural forces drive these users' "video duets."

socialism because they are no longer afraid of the word." So I think part of what I'm doing in trying to drive that wedge between the millennial and Gen Z interpretation is, one, it's prefaced by my general assumption and ideological forecasting research that a lot of these users on politigram live in red states. These are not mostly kids who live in New York and LA or other coastal elite cities. A lot of them are in flyover country in the midwest and that's part of what spurs them to get active online because they don't have access to a lot of diverse views in their own immediate community. In the Tik Tok article, there's also the context that I know I'm writing for an artworld audience. My peer group is millennials, they're all educated at elite universities, and many of them coming from very wealthy backgrounds. I'm trying to provoke them a little bit and

see who they have left out of their vision of the world.

The biggest difference that comes to mind for me between the Gen Z downwardly mobile experience and the millennial downwardly mobile experience was the mass adoption of social media. Millennials being on the ground floor of this was sort of like buying bitcoin early. Early 2000s millennial Youtube celebrities and social media celebrities that made one stupid video that went mildly viral, over years, could cobble together an enormous following that they were able to monetize. When Gen Z comes into the picture, all of the things that you could have bought into early had already been so thoroughly sanitized, verified by your name, and written in stone. There was not the same social flexibility that millenials had on social media; algorithms became crisp and efficient, it essentially became a steep race to the bottom. I feel like I'm drawing an analogy to the marxist term of "primitive accumulation."[19] Social media had not been properly commodified at the time that millennials adopted it in mass, so they had the opportunity to "divide up the land" (laughs) and charge rent to those who would farm on it, or something like that. The forces of irony definitely factor into that divide too.

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19. "Primitive Accumulation" is a term which references the act of accumulating capital under pre-capitalist modes of production. While the capitalist logic of Adam Smith calls attention to primitive accumulation happening through "peaceful transactions," Marxian economists underscore that most of this amassment of wealth occurred through violent enslavement and colonialism (i.e. chattel slavery and feudalism).

How do we work through irony as a culture? I think the way millennials deal with irony is by seeing and understanding an economic system that has failed us, so they'll commodify culture in a real, material time. Gen Z seems to be approaching the politics of irony and culture in less of a material way. Do you think the way millennials have purchased and repurposed irony is different from the way Gen Z is approaching it?

I think it's still up for debate with Gen Z, and it's hard to paint an entire generation with different places and different experiences of people with one brush. Let's take it one step at a time. There's this first generational divide with Gen X. 'They' claimed that 'once the band sells out, their old stuff is better; now that they're on MTV they're no longer cool.' Gen X would hold it against you if you went corporate. Millennials than realized that how you get an audience is by selling out. They kind of took the mantle of irony and ran it into the ground. Irony became a "pass" to not be responsible for your actions in society. If something failed it was kind of a parachute cord and you could just say "yeah, it's okay that the candidate I supported or that specific protest had no effect because I never cared about it anyway. I'm a nihilist." It's a very easy thing for white millennials to take on and let yourself off of the hook. So Gen Z is on the receiving end of that.

The millennial nihilism that did not want to push for further reforms because everything is beyond fixing makes Gen Z have to inherit that world. By the time they exit college, New York will be

underwater! So there's not much room for irony there. I think what I noticed when I was writing the *New Models* piece is that cringe is in some way a response to work through irony. The way I came to this is very silly, but I was watching a Bernie Sanders talk and I was like "oh my god this is so embarrassing to just say exactly what he thinks." It's kind of the same feeling of watching someone embarrass themselves on Tik Tok where they are belting out their favorite song being so exposed and vulnerable. We've been so indoctrinated by this millennial irony that we have just dehumanized people into viral characters. Generally the cringe content that you see in these youtube-Tik Tok compilations are almost exclusively poor people singing and embarrassing themselves in some way through a lack of sophistication which is just a lens of class you can put onto it – "this person is not as culturally fluent as I am, let me watch them embarrass themselves in front of the camera" and get some schadenfreude from it or whatever.

In a very zoomed out sense, I started to think what the social utility of a cringe compilation on Youtube would be. It's one to have the misanthropic gaze to look down at these people, but once you put it into a ten hour compilation, I couldn't maintain my misanthropic gaze. I started to empathize with the people in a very deep way, and I started to become very moved by their content even though they were just singing some silly pop song. I realized in one specific video – it was a breakthrough for me – where a bus driver was doing her song and dance in a Tik Tok video while the bus was

empty. She was wearing her uniform and it looked like she was on a break or just gotten off of work. The labor she has to do everyday is pretty miserable, and she is not paid well enough to do it, so this is like the one moment of joy where she gets to express herself, and it's actually a pretty powerful video to take that journey with someone. I think that people expected irony to be resistant to commodification because it contained both an endorsement and negative view to what it was wrought on. When you can start to sell people ironic t-shirts saying "here's the thing you don't like," there is still real money being exchanged. The vendor doesn't care if you like the t-shirt or not, he's just happy to get the money either way. So irony happily lends itself to this commodification, but I think cringe is going to be much more resistant than anyone thinks to this.

So this kind of cringe Tik Tok content, is different from the "cringe influencer" which I do see as another millennial version. I don't think the cringe influencer is emblematic of the vast majority of people who use Tik Tok. Even if they have a million followers, I'm not interested in that one content producer; I'm interested in the millions of people who follow them because if you are only focusing on the influencer you are missing the forest from the trees. An overall majority use Tik Tok to vulnerably express themselves.

Besides observing different sects of internet culture and doing more writing based practices, how do you think all of these practices translate onto your digital work in Photoshop? Do

you put more of your own particular vision of the future into these works, or are they all kind of bound to things you observe and witness through content online?

It's partly my vision since I get to choose where the photoshopped items go, but I stick really, really closely to the source material. I'm taking photographs of a lot of these survivalist prepper things on Pinterest or taken directly from these online communities themselves, and then my own lists that I create will then populate these photoshopped scenes. So I mean it's my vision of the future, in a way, but I'm trying to visualize their idea of the future, mostly. I have taken the quiz of "What is your vision of the future?" but the work is really concerned with the political imagination of politigram users, of this "other side of history." The games that they play in these spaces have a classic example like "okay you are an anarcho-capitalist, who is going to build the roads if you don't have a state?" And they erect this elaborate argument that every single roadway will be privately paved, you have an individual to administer a toll, and once you get onto this person's property you can take the road but you have to pay for every single segment you use along the way (laughs) – and there's many elaborate examples like this. In each, they are trying to create a really, fully, fleshed-out world that you are immersed in; it's kind of like a fantasy role playing game.

For me to visualize these images in high-resolution, in life-size scale, is to try and incorporate that level of detail for when I build out the city, the logistics, and the infrastructure. Relating to an appropriate analogy with anarcho-capitalism it's kind of like a market – an irreducible complex system. So we can sit here and visualize our utopia or future society but we are never really going to miss something until you get to that corner of the image and find out what is the plant or the pot that sits in that window. Forcing yourself to go into high-res forces you to go into high fidelity and answer all of these really detailed, nuanced questions. So, for the earlier images, it was in large part me trying to learn their worldview in some way. So I would end up searching Reddit for a thread of "how are people going to get around in a privatized road system?" There's this one example in this town in the Netherlands that has canals that go through every other house so people can just get around on boat and there's no need to pay for any roads and that's the anarcho-capitalist utopia, right, because the infrastructure already exists. In *SWIM a Few Years From Now* (2017), I adopted that in how you get around in the New York infrastructure. I guess it's just a process of visualization. That would be the easiest description.

GALLERY
102

Special Thanks

Special thanks to artist Joshua Citarella, the Student Exhibitions Committee, Gallery 102 Interns, Corcoran School of the Arts & Design, and The George Washington University.

Gallery 102 is committed to the exhibiting of contemporary art, including work from GW & Corcoran students, DC-area artists, & nationally recognized artists of all media. The gallery provides practical curatorial experience to the student body. Students have the opportunity to exhibit work, curate shows, and install exhibitions. The Gallery 102 Committee consists of GW & Corcoran students–undergraduate and graduate, majors and non-majors, artists and art historians–who both develop innovative, original, and thought-provoking exhibitions and invite a select group of guest curators to present exhibitions each semester.

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