RELA TIVE DIST ANCE

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In recent years, labor—in an immaterial form—has become a thematic rallying point for those concerned that even white-collar recreation and leisure can be unwittingly co-opted. As ever more daily activities have moved into the immaterial realm, their translation into visual form has kept pace. And the movement of this information, it's been said, possesses the potential to engender value, as information is seen, responded to, re-worked, and re-formatted. So it's only logical that people want to know who's capitalizing on their absentminded efforts and online activity. Going hand-in-hand with this vision is one describing the fate met by conventional forms of critique, quite immaterial ideals, when confronted with the dominant ideology they intended to differ from: Creativity, spontaneity, and autonomy ended up serving accidental ends. They were subsumed easily enough by power structures no longer tied to a material foundation; they could be adapted—both the endpoint of those ideals and the power structures themselves—as it suited the latter's interests. Petty as it may seem, some would insist that the only rational question left is how to tweak the circulation of value in the immaterial realm so that we can profit from the labor we all perform on our time off—buying and networking and diverting our attention online—regardless of whether it serves the ends we aspire to.

These are the conditions that will determine "who owns the future", argues computer scientist Jaron Lanier in his recent, eponymously titled book. The mainstream attention that the book has received is in part due to Lanier's wholehearted acceptance of the way that information is collected and used on the Internet. He suggests that users should become more active participants, acceptant of the way they're tracked and targeted as a basis for receiving micropayments when their information's value is realized by an interested third party: "Actually you are owed a significant royalty on the use of your information once it is put to a profitable use, even if that purpose is to manipulate you." [1]

Lanier's speculations regarding a laissez-faire online market for information support not only comprehensive target marketing and cloud-style data aggregation, but also as yet unforeseen forms of brand advertising extending beyond the touting of mass-market goods and services. Given that he identifies one of digital networking's powers as the capacity for corporations to determine "who would buy what, and when and for how much," [2] his revelation comes as no surprise that "spying on you is, for the moment, the official primary business of the information economy." [3] Seen through a lens of information's value both financially and socially, individuals are perfectly reducible to their capacity to consume, produce, and perpetuate the status quo.

[1] Jaron Lanier, *Who Owns the Future?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), p. 312.

[2] Ibid., p. 72.

[3] Ibid., p. 107.

At the same time, though, political bodies have helped create the online marketplace for information so as to have access it. If "digital information is really just people in disguise,"[4] then judging by the information collected, people aren't all that complex in the Information Age. Still, this can't be entirely true given a pesky obstacle preventing third parties from lulling users into complacent consumers and producers within Lanier's ideal of an innocuous online middle class. Citing former Google CEO Eric Schmidt's expression of "creepiness", Lanier describes the point at which "information systems undermine individual human agency."[5] He explains, "It happens when you feel violated because the flow of information disregards your reasonable attempts to control your own information life."Clearly, both choice and a sense of context motivate how we behave—at least online—as well as how we're identified.

[4] Ibid., p. 29.

[5] Ibid., p. 295.

Of course, the question remains as to what choice really consists of, what expression signifies within a framework where it's merely one of many forms of information exploited for gain by parties with controlling interests in the framework itself. Already in 1997, in an anthology of the literary magazine *The Baffler*, Thomas Frank, one of its co-founders, wrote about the future that he envisioned for corporate-dominated culture: "Denunciation is becoming impossible: We will be able to achieve no distance from business culture since we will no longer have a life, a history, a consciousness apart from it [...] It is putting itself beyond our power of imagining because it has *become* our imagination, it has *become* our power to envision, and describe, and theorize, and resist."[6] In Frank's view, not only choice, but also difference, had been evacuated by culture's complete saturation with the priority of consumption. The totality of this project was complete with the bells' tolling the death of radical ideology, from late-60s radicalism to punk. His taxonomy of corporate slogans from "Sometimes You Gotta Break the Rules" (Burger King) to "This is different. Different is good." (Arby's)[7] illustrated his understanding that "'popular culture' [...] offers us a rebel fantasy world in which to drown out never-to-be-realized frustrations with lives that have become little more than endless shopping trips, marathon filing sessions."[8]

While Lanier fantasizes about the financial ennoblement of a middle class through micropayments incentivizing users to reinvest their immaterial labor to the benefit of the parties in control, Frank imagined that "the advent of the Information Society seems to have accomplished the rosiest middle-class dream of all: It has freed us at last from the filthy grasp of the city and its teeming, huddling, criming, union-joining, welfare-cheating, liberal-

[6] "Dark Age", in: *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from The Baffler*, eds. Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland (New York: W. W. Norton & Company), p. 274.

[7] "Why Johnny Can't Dissent", in: Ibid., p. 41.

[8] "Alternative to What?", in: Ibid., p. 158.

electing masses. With the final perfection of the global computer net, place [has] become simply irrelevant: It [is] as easy to transmit 'information'—meaning all those human activities we used to call thought and culture—across three thousand miles as it [was] to meet a client for lunch [...] Distance doesn't matter."[9] Frank was hardly the first to consider digital networks' effect on their users' perception of space. Networks were supposed to (or already did, depending on who you ask) cause a tectonic shift in the relation between cultural centers and peripheries. Curiously, though, with the supposed collapse of physical, social, and cultural distance in the Information Age, a desire has cropped up for a countervailing distance: between users and the parties which, alongside them, populate online networks in order to mine data. While advancements in online commerce have changed how we perceive our online activity, learning about the ways we're spied on has provoked a reaction of self-preservation. From add-ons disabling third-party cookies, to IP blockers, to Tor—some users are trying to prevent the capture of their data through firewalls and strategies of anonymity, obscuring either their identity, their activities, or both.

[9] "Twentieth Century Lite", in: Ibid., p. 210.

As strategies of anonymity have proliferated within the realm of digital networks, they have also spread within society and culture at large: While it's possible to mask oneself and one's activities, another option is to get lost in a crowd. To be a nameless and faceless member of a group, to sacrifice individual autonomy to a collective identity—this path leads back around to a sense of license. What ultimately occurs, though, is that the collective develops an identity of its own, even if it's referred to as "anonymous". In some cases, anonymous collectives have contextualized themselves with some form of cultural background or mock biography, but here the power of fiction has made it possible for anonymous authors to talk about their surroundings without implicating themselves. Authors of fictionalized identities who simply adopt an alter ego (assuming they choose to mimic a human subject at all) might do so to take some degree of critical distance—whether their reflections are ultimately critical or not. For those who choose to identify with a subject—that is, an ideology and a set of behaviors—unlike their own, the question of perception is located largely on the side of whoever is evaluating their activity. By mimicking behaviors that are abnormal for the context in which the anonymous author acts, the degree of critical distance is instead transferred to recipients who might either be affected by those behaviors or be in a position to interpret their meaning.

This problematic takes center stage in the case of those who internalize a logic like what's encapsulated in the title of the *The Baffler*'s

anthology *Commodify Your Dissent*. In light of a critique of cultural radicalism's assimilation to corporate interests, like the one developed by Frank, the practice of commodifying one's behavior and beliefs is as good as submission if it can't be perceived as either creating or expressing distance, insisting on difference. Of course, such is the dystopian essence of Frank's vision, which postulates the effective impossibility of dissent given the neutralization (some might say "failure") of the counterculture. Today, as it's often said that subcultures are just as much a thing of the past, it would seem naive—if not old-fashioned, traditionalist—to insist on conventional models of difference. But then how might a position of relative distance hope to function?

In the field of contemporary art, the increased significance that contextualizing networks—from social relationships to an exhibition's textual apparatuses—have gained lately reflects a belief in context's ability to add layers of meaning to the core of the work, if not be a site for the work itself. Marlie Mul's use of text in connection with her recent series of low-lying sculptures should help illustrate this relationship: The puddles, as she calls them, are elliptical plates of hardened resin and fiberglass speckled with gravel and assorted pieces of plastic trash—like large-to-medium-sized puddles transported from a country road or a city street into an art gallery. The titles, though, that Mul gave to two exhibitions of the works introduce narratives not concretely referenced by the objects themselves: *So We Came Anyway, in Barrels* took place at Fluxia in Milan in 2012–2013. Its title refers to Project X Haren, the nickname given to a party that occurred in a small Dutch town in 2012.[10] After a girl's sixteenth birthday party was posted as a public event on Facebook, suddenly 30,000 strangers were invited, and approximately 3,000 people descended on the day of the event. The night ended in looting and rioting, and several arrests were made. As Mul has written, "The situation created, in its visual appearance, lived up to the looks of more clearly politically motivated 'riots' in other European countries around the same period."[11] She goes on to consider who's to blame for such destruction in the case of a prank that grew violent and what the motivation of the participants could have been besides a misplaced lust for destruction. She concludes, "Moving in a hoard serves as a way to perform and feel alive while covered by the protective cloak of collectivity. This hoard's motivation, like dark grey brown grit sloshing down a gutter of aimlessness, appears fruitless. They stand with their feet on our dead previous culture, with their collective action and the aftermath thereof contributing to the encrustation of the culture we live in." These puddles, then,

[10] Email correspondence with the artist (April 7, 2013).

[11] From a text written by the artist in an untitled publication accompanying the works.

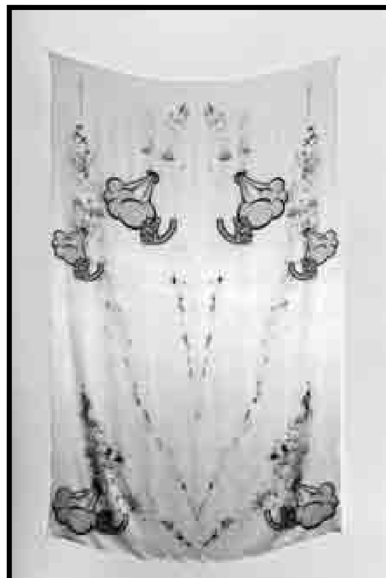
serve as an allegory for the listless slide of culture into a state of entrapment that not only contrasts with but also counteracts the progressive initiatives of new social movements. Perhaps exactly because such movements struggle for largely immaterial changes to contemporary experience, their successes are more fragile, forever relative.

It's no accident, either, that the events Mul focused on occurred in a suburban context. Suburbia connotes a life of normalized complacency aspiring largely to its own preservation and the assimilation of inhabitants to predominant social practices. This narrative was extended by the title of the puddles' second exhibition, *Boneless Banquet for One*, named after one of the 'meals' on offer at KFC. In referencing an excess of processed food intended for just one customer, Mul sought to thematize the belief that experience is largely predetermined in contemporary society and culture. Thus, against the narrative of collective activity contained in the first title, this later textual layer casts all activity as ultimately doomed into alignment with prevailing behavior and ideology—"a pre-processed, pre-digested set of choices, actions, materials, information."[12]

Like *The Baffler*'s observation that ostensible critics of the culture in place had been tending to "commodify [their] dissent", Mul gives both context and form (as an artwork, a luxury commodity) to her dissatisfaction. After all, the objects are the core of the work, formal expressions that stand largely for themselves—though they don't look like traditional, retail commodities. Far from it. Mul ossifies pools of detritus, gravel and used plastic bags, rather than contributing to the commodity production of high-end fashion accessories or enshrining totems of revolution. Mul visualizes flatness, generality, and world-weariness, the face of the circumstances as she perceives them.

Extending her attention into another dimension, Mul's wall-mounted works focusing on the pastime of smoking cigarettes pin scores of ashen butts to the gallery's clean, white walls. The metal plates that pin them there are of indeterminable origin, but they're reminiscent of things you've seen hanging off a skyscraper in an urban plaza or bowing off the walls in a subway station. These curiously ugly (or bizarrely beautiful) accessories of the urban landscape are a fact of life. And so is the age-old habit of smoking tobacco. Mul isn't judging one way or another, she's just commenting on the fact that it's something people do. Her formalizations don't really reveal much about the smokers that they narrativize—just that they smoked and then stuck their cigarette butts in more or less out-of-the-way places. But, then, isn't that the type of information that third parties are after? Isn't that exactly how

[12] Email correspondence with the artist (April 7, 2013).

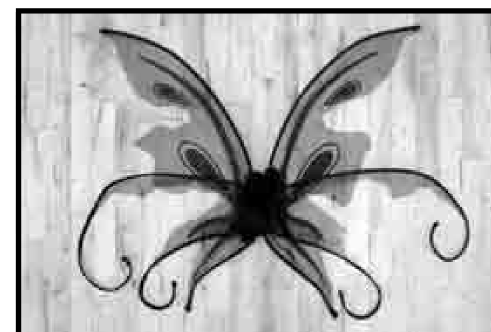


Marlie Mul
Cigarette Ends Here (Do-Gooders),
2012
Digital print on silk

Marlie Mul
Boneless Banquet for One,
2013
Installation view,
Croy Nielsen, Berlin

Marlie Mul
Air Vent / Butt Stop (Lucifer Match), 2012
Burnt steel, cigarettes, glue,
chewing gum, spit

Nicolas Ceccaldi
Wearables, 2012
Installation view, Real Fine Arts, New York



Nicolas Ceccaldi
Wearable, 2012
Synthetic fabric, metal, glitter

Charlotte Prodger
*:-** (detail), 2012
Found video on monitor, color, sound

Nicolas Ceccaldi
Keep Calm, 2013
Giclée and acrylic on canvas

Charlotte Prodger
*:-**, 2012
Installation view, Intermedia, Glasgow

Works by N. Ceccaldi: courtesy the artist and Real Fine Arts, New York, except *Keep Calm*: courtesy the artist.

M. Mul: courtesy the artist, Croy Nielsen, Berlin & Fluxia, Milan, except *Air Vent / Butt Stop (Lucifer Match)*: courtesy the artist.

C. Prodger: courtesy the artist & Kendall Koppe.

they see people, as consumers first and foremost? Mul considered smoking in the same way that information accumulates in a cloud: in need of filtering given its vastness. Later, through its formalization and display, she was able to connect viewers (via their associations) to a parallel network of social and historical influences that have always determined an individual's position on the practice.[13] Thus, smoking had no specific biographical significance for Mul; the digital prints on silk accompanying the sculptures attest to this: The uncanny illustrative eyes and other disembodied appendages, legs and arms, which float among digitally rendered clouds of smoke speak to the fact that bodies—all bodies, not particular ones—are implicated in Mul's frame of reference. Following scientific discoveries in the late 1970s regarding the dangers of second-hand smoke, the behavior that had previously related solely to the body, gestures, and accessories of the smoker reached through the ether to connect to non-smokers.

Concerning the body as a metaphor: In "The Problem of the Head" in Tiqqun's second issue, from 2001, an anonymous member of the collective wrote, "The innate defeat that determines a collective enterprise like the avant-garde is its incapacity to *make a world*. All the splendors, all the actions, all the discourses of the avant-garde unceasingly fail to give it a body; everything happens in the heads of a few."[14] The essay describes the motto "Transform the World" as one of three express initiatives of the avant-garde that have gone unfulfilled, resulting in a sense of vertigo, an irreconcilable gap between its aspirations and the indifference, the "insolent happiness", of the uninitiated.[15] Said in another way, this vertigo is the failure of members of the avant-garde to realize their presence in the world. As described in the text, the avant-garde challenges all other members of society to view the circumstances surrounding them as separate from themselves, to take a position of aesthetic objectivity. But by always distinguishing itself from the masses first, the avant-garde positions itself as a symbolic head for a disconnected body. It thus sets itself in opposition to, and separate from, an enemy that never existed in such a form. As the text argues, the work produced by the avant-garde perpetually falls away from the world that it intends to transform because a work of art is "but the melancholic remains of something that once was lived."[16] Given its argument concerning the avant-garde's misapplication of critical distance, "The Problem of the Head" is a helpful reference for several recent works by Nicolas Ceccaldi, which relate to the embodiment of distance in various ways.

[13] It's only fitting, too, that Adam Curtis, in 2002's *The Century of the Self*, so pointedly traced the rebellious significance of women smoking cigarettes to a corporate interest in diversifying markets.

[14] This is a hybrid of two different translations from the French original: one by user Iron Column (online at: http://libcom.org/library/problem-head) and another by anonymous (online at: https://headproblems.jottit.com/). All subsequent citations derive from the latter translation.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

In June 2013, Ceccaldi's exhibition *<life> masqueradeofperfection [dot] tumblr [dot] com </life>*, at New Jerseyy in Basel, opened amidst the festivities of Art Basel. And it translated the fair's decadence into despair, perhaps even turning viewers' thoughts to a narrative of self-harm: Some of the inkjet prints on canvas were stuck with razor blades, and others were painted over with words like "broken" or "KEEP CAL"—a variation on the famous British motivational poster from the beginning of WWII, which here trailed off and never arrived at the urge to "CARRY ON". (Did the person being addressed give up, or give in?) Whether intentionally or not, the sole canvas in the exhibition covered only with paint—a green cross like those that hang outside pharmacies in Europe, set against a black background—also recreated one of Ad Reinhardt's famous, near-monochrome compositions. In fact, the melancholy of Ceccaldi's exhibition was at once a bittersweet eulogy for "the old world", the historical avant-garde, as well as an aestheticization of the mythology and social drama perhaps best associated with post-WWII American painting. The psychological turmoil and tendency toward self-destruction so eagerly considered the romance of Abstract Expressionism actually led to the demise of some of its protagonists: Rothko took his life with razor blades and anti-depressants. In courting such a narrative, Ceccaldi appeared to implicate himself in it, inviting viewers to misread trauma into his own biography. Perhaps, too, the gesture could be read as Ceccaldi's attempt to 'lop off his own head'—leaving him and the dominant romantic legacy to fall, lifeless and entwined, at viewers' feet.

Already in 2010, Ceccaldi tampered with viewers' perception of how he can be identified. By transcribing anonymous rants with a prototypically alpha-male tone posted on 4chan—without deconstructing them in any way—he drew himself into alignment with the voice he appropriated. And he turned the berating messages toward viewers, distancing them. What these works show, by extension, is that the contemporary art world's high tolerance for critical distance ultimately allows the reification of aggression and misogyny within a socio-political atmosphere where such behavior is supposedly inexcusable. While that's an important fact to note, this work of Ceccaldi's accomplishes it somewhat irresponsibly. Also around that time, Ceccaldi made *Untitled*, which sets that problem in relation to an outlying interpretation of the crucifixion of Jesus. Onto a box of Frosted Mini-Wheats, he pasted excerpts from the Gospel of Judas, which derives from the second century AD. (A codex of the gospel resurfaced in the 1970s and was released in English translation in 2006.) It portrays Judas as a knowing conspirator of

Jesus's, insisting that the former's betrayal was actually a sacrifice agreed upon by the two. Ceccaldi combined this with a short, unidentified text taken from an interview with the lead singer of the French black metal band Peste Noire. The lead singer's personal writings and the band's lyrics are known to be at least borderline xenophobic and nationalistic. This later work then, as much as reassessing viewers' perception of the distance between Ceccaldi and the text—perhaps casting it as self-sacrifice to bring it to our attention—is also an aestheticization of the ideas expressed in the text—in the vein of assuming objectivity toward the surrounding world. But here again, Ceccaldi doesn't use this distance to "transform the world", to offer an alternate vision. His position of relative distance is perhaps best understood in light of his recent use of what's referred to on 4chan as a "beta" tone, or even an "omega" one, meaning the polar opposite of "alpha"—defensive, depressive. Ultimately, in these works at least, Ceccaldi dispossesses himself to the extent that the voices he assumes sometimes contradict each other; they amount to a mass of signifiers whose subsequent meaning is not readily accessible, but rather intentionally evasive.

To put the problematic inherent in these early works of Ceccaldi's into perspective, it's worth taking a look at Charlotte Prodger's *:-** from 2012. The multipart installation consists of a film splitter, a text referring to Tony Conrad's 1965 experimental film *The Flicker*, a Sharp GF-767 boombox playing spoken reflections on electronic music and nights spent clubbing as well as the user comments of two Youtube videos, which are screened simultaneously on two monitors. The videos, uploaded by the user NikeClassics, depict home videos of fetishistic rituals he performed with his Nike sneakers: In one, he slices his shoe down the middle, a violent attempt to achieve a kind of intimacy with it. In the other, he and his boyfriend swap shoes in a playful, erotic game. Each is framed so as not to reveal the protagonist's faces or identifying features.

Prodger was drawn to these videos not for the strangeness of their content, but for their ability to take "the extreme distance and anonymity of the situation" and turn it into "extreme intimacy."[17] As for the specific content, she explains, "A lot of my work is about men, and, as an extension of that, my masculine identity is an important part of my queer experience. I'm interested in NikeClassics' subjectivity, for the same reason I'm drawn to displays of extreme masculinity."[18] Clearly, Prodger is not alone in her experience of an uncanny affinity with something, or someone, different from her. When she represents that relationship, she explores what is familiar to her—and perhaps simultaneously

17 Charlotte Prodger and Isla Leaver-Yap, "Re: Homos and light" in *Mousse Magazine* (Issue 35, October–November 2012), p. 251.
18 Ibid., p. 252.

what is a familiar aspect of society and culture at large. That is, in part, a society in which extreme masculinity maintains its dominance through exclusion. One conventional method to combat such rigid structures is to disparage them, attack their integrity. This is one of the effects of *:-**'s component parts, to construct new readings through juxtaposition: For example, the parallel created between Conrad's late Modernist deconstruction of the filmic medium and NikeClassics's eroticized destruction of athletic wear sets the former in uncomfortable relation to the latter's patently masculine fetishization of mass-produced commodities.

Ceccaldi has also created works in the legacy of dismantling high art's sovereignty by contaminating it with referents from low or popular culture, such as with his exhibition *Wearables* at Real Fine Arts in 2012. Depending heavily on the interpretive framework of the readymade, Ceccaldi displayed fifteen costume-shop sets of fairy wings lying flat along the gallery floor. Viewers felt invited to try them on—and thus partake intimately in the artwork's aura as well as a narrative of transcendence—but the protocol of art viewing prohibited such interaction; viewers wouldn't allow themselves to touch the work. The objects remain as poor and simple as they appear: cheap, cheesy, store-bought goods gathering dust at our feet. While this work doesn't deal directly with questions of information or identity, it does call on distance—both physical and metaphysical, along a spectrum from the lofty to the debased —as a frame of reference for our experience with cultural products. Specifically, it takes the body as the crux of experience, denies it, and thus releases it. The work refuses to aestheticize viewers' relations to it, but it retains an infinite sense of potential that compensates for the objects' utter lack of use value.

Wearables was inspired by the beliefs expressed in Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace*,[19] which describes a path to exaltation through redemptive suffering: "Gravity makes things come down," Weil wrote, "wings make them rise [...] Grace is the law of descending movement. To lower oneself is to rise in the domain of moral gravity."[20] In her own life, Weil sought out suffering through a kind of self-imposed exile, menial labor, and impoverishment. In solidarity with WWII soldiers, she would severely ration her diet, and she died because she refused medical treatment for tuberculosis. This is, of course, in keeping with her belief that: "The self should be destroyed in us from within by love. But its destruction can also be brought about from without by extreme suffering and degradation."[21] Weil's thoughts about getting rid of the self coincide to a significant degree with the process of relativizing information and

19 In conversation with the artist (September 3, 2013).
20 Trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 45.
21 Ibid., p. 24.

identity: After all, in Weil's opinion, anonymity is a quality possessed by all great artworks.[22] What's more, some of Weil's words relate to the conception of critical distance here described in connection with radical ideology—and to the possibility of creating and maintaining a position of difference: "We should seek," she insists, "neither to escape suffering nor to suffer less, but to remain untainted by suffering […] To suffer while preserving our consciousness of reality is better."[23] Although Weil inhabited a different historical moment and aspired to a different endpoint, the model she describes may be a universal inevitability.

When faced with the question "Is there any hope for us?" —posed in a 1993 video interview following his statement that seeking rebellion in the products you buy just makes you a pawn in the machine—Thomas Frank responded, "Cultural production should be in your own hands. Obviously, the only thing that's ever going to solve this is people thinking for themselves."[24] These are curious words to hear from Frank, if only for their optimism. What's more, they're not so different from Jaron Lanier's. Toward the end of ***Who Owns the Future?***, he addresses a question that concerned Internet users apparently ask him on a regular basis: Should they quit Facebook? His conservative sage advice: "It's crucial to experience resisting social pressure at least once in your life. […] It is exactly when others insist that it's a sign of being free, fresh, and radical to do what everybody's doing that you might want to take notice and think for yourself. […] My suggestion is, experiment with yourself."[25] This sentiment of individual accountability—here expressed in two different ways, two decades apart—raises doubts regarding the nature of the self in relation to an information economy seemingly dead set on reducing people for the sake of anticipating them. If there is a problem with the nature of choice today —peoples' ability to know themselves and think freely—or the way that information constitutes identity, proof of it is the myriad ways that people, cultural producers among them, have responded: relativizing who they are, how they behave, and what they believe in. Although this strategy has existential promise, it's riddled with communicative problems: Stepping beside oneself may be a method of self-preservation, but what exactly are we protecting if we become completely disassociated? As distance has been transferred ever increasingly into the province of the recipient, visions that are critical of the present as well as expressions of difference have become difficult to perceive.

22 Ibid., 190: "A work of art has an author and yet, when it is perfect, it has something which is essentially anonymous about it."
23 Ibid., p. 122.

24 Online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7o8BKxbN3QM.

25 Lanier, p. 351.

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