

The Trump is Present

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THE DAY PERFORMANCE ART DIED

On the day of the US presidential election, the daily literary humour website *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* published a transcript of the 'concession speech' that Donald Trump would give that night upon his anticipated loss to Hillary Clinton. The failed presidential candidate would there reveal the secret that his election campaign – and even his entire life – had actually been a work of performance art.

(Over chants of 'Donald!' and 'Lock her up!' Trump pauses to smile and hold up his hand).

I, Donald Trump, hereby concede ... the impossibility of meaning in the context of intertextual hegemony. Who's with me?

(Awkward silence, murmurs of confusion.)

...

When I was five years old, my father took me aside and explained that everything he had – his riches, his power, his influence – it could all be mine. But on one condition: I was to privately commit my life to philosophy, feminism, and postmodern critiques of American culture. But only in private. Publicly, I was to cultivate a persona of an entitled, narcissistic demagogue, formed as a decades-long act of performance art that reflected our nation's grotesque sublimation of its own basest desires.

Once I reached the apex of this performance, my father said, I must leverage the full attention of the electorate to once and for all let the veil be lifted. Now is that time. (Richards 2016)

The contention that Trump's campaign could be a work of fiction – a hoax, a pseudo-event, a calculated PR stunt – pervaded mainstream news sources, the Internet and social media during the 2016 presidential campaign.

YouTube even hosted videos that 'proved' Trump's campaign to be 'the greatest prank in the history of the world', 'the work of a gay scandanavian [sic] performance artist' or 'Andy Kaufman in disguise', while one post-election website announced Marina Abramović 'to be the mastermind behind "Donald Trump", her most controversial art project yet' ('mastermind' 2017). The construct 'performance art' expressed the desire of many *not to believe* in the actuality and resilience of Trump's campaign, characterized by outrageous and offensive statements, willingness to encourage white nationalism and violence and boasting about sexual assault, let alone his fantastical policy proposals. That Trump's campaign – and now, presidency – could be *for real* has often simply seemed too impossible to believe. 'Performance art' emerged as a way to discount this reality by proposing an alternative fiction: that his campaign, itself, was a fiction.

The last time performance art was so prevelant in American political discourse, it was in context of North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms and other Republicans' attacks on the NEA Four¹, the performance artists whose National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grants were vetoed in 1990 for their 'immorality'. With images of Finley and her yams dancing in our heads, the very idea of referring to a *Republican* US presidential campaign as 'performance art' seems preposterous. Certainly, American electoral campaigns have long been derided as 'theatre', campaign events as 'spectacles' and even acts of governance as 'kabuki theatre'. The rise of the celebrity politician from Ronald Reagan onward dissolved the boundary between politics and entertainment, exemplifying capitalism's triumph of spectacle and simulation as theorized most famously by Guy Debord and

¹ Karen Finley, Tim Miller, John Fleck and Holly Hughes.

Jean Baudrillard. But with performance art's long legacy of demonization by the Right, that even *The Wall Street Journal* would seek to describe Trump as a performance artist is nearly as hard to believe as his election (Henninger 2016). However, a demonstrable shift in the popular understanding of the term 'performance art' has occurred in recent years – away from the moral hazard that the religious Right had so successfully cast it as in the 1980s, to a merging of celebrity and art to form what the pop star and Marina Abramović acolyte Lady Gaga terms 'pop performance art' (Auslander 2016: 182). Largely due to Abramović's adoption of the once unimaginable role of 'celebrity performance artist', as well as her packaging of 'presence' as a commodity, 'performance art' has come to signify the artistic hoaxes staged by such celebrities as James Franco, Shia LeBeouf and Joaquin Phoenix. Nonetheless, as Philip Auslander says of Lady Gaga's coinage of 'pop performance art', describing a major presidential candidate as a performance artist 'would be impossible if it weren't formulated today' (2016: 184).

While the anti-theatrical trope of deriding a politician's 'acting' maintains the stability of the symbolic economy of representation, the figure of Trump-as-performance-artist represents a fundamental conceptual shift. It expresses the crisis of representation that Baudrillard describes as the collapse of belief in the 'reality principle' precipitated by capitalism (Baudrillard 1994). With the loss of belief in the symbolic economies of both representation and representative democracy, 'performance art' promises to circumvent both political and symbolic distance in each of the seemingly incongruous worlds of the celebrity politician's claims to '@realDonaldTrump' and the performance artist celebrity's claims to 'raw presence'. In what follows, I theorize the relationship between reactionary populism and celebrity performance art in terms of what I call neoliberalism's compensatory 'pseudo-aura', whose inadequacies produce the conditions for both populism's and performance art's claims to unmediated reality. I then turn to two cases that entwine the figures of Donald Trump and Marina

Abramović in discourses of belief: the conspiracy theory Pizzagate and the faux documentary film trailer *The Nominee*.

MIND THE AESTHETIC GAP
(FROM POPULIST PERFORMANCE ARTIST
TO BULLSHIT ARTIST AND BACK)

Walter Benjamin posed fascism's threat as, fundamentally, a representational crisis, in that the aestheticization of politics enabled society to 'experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order' (1968: 248). Trumpism's destructive march emerges from what may be called the aesthetic pleasures of the *second* order. In the contemporary context of neoliberal capitalism, this second order of aesthetic pleasure, I suggest, is to be taken in the 'pseudo-aura': the more proximate reality of the spectacle, which complements and compensates for what Benjamin calls the 'cult value' of aura's 'distance' (1968: 222). In response to the loss of that distance, neoliberalism offers pseudo-auratic closeness, fulfilling what Debord describes as the spectacle's function as 'a shared acknowledgement of loss, an imaginary compensation' (1994: 20).

Fantasy though the 'realness' of @realDonaldTrump may be, the suffering it has already effected and the global danger it portends are horribly real. While some critics in the press have turned to Debord to explain Trumpism as a triumph of image over reality, what is perhaps even more critical to reckoning with Trump's success is Debord's description of the spectacle's logic of authoritarianism: 'the ruling order discourses on itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise' to support 'the age of power's totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence' (Zaretsky 2017; Debord 1994: 19). Donald Trump's quite literal 'uninterrupted monologues of self-praise' dispense with even the proximity of the pseudo-aura by offering, instead, the aesthetic pleasure of a politician expressing openly and explicitly the raced, gendered and brutal truth of neoliberalism. In his willingness to speak to the reality that neoliberal capitalism follows

the exploitative and exclusionary logic of plutocracy, Jodi Dean contends that Trump is 'the most honest candidate in American politics today' (2015). Unlike the mystifications uttered by neoliberal centrists, Trump expresses the fundamental ethos of capitalism: 'Those with money win. Those without it lose. Winners get to do whatever they want. Losers get done to' (ibid.).

Trump's campaign adopted the style of contemporary populism to redirect widespread frustration with neoliberalism's failures into anger towards 'elites' and racialized Others. Hillary Clinton, meanwhile, promised a continuation of the neoliberal order initiated by Thatcher and Reagan and continued by centrist Labour and Democrat politicians. While Trump's inherited wealth and real-estate profiteering make him an unlikely populist, he nonetheless adopted what Benjamin Moffitt calls the 'performative political style' of populism as the operative mode for his campaign (2016: 4). Moffitt argues that populism, rather than being an ideology, is a performative *process* characterized by three key practices: (1) making an appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite', (2) enacting 'Bad Manners' and (3) dramatizing, instigating and perpetuating a sense of crisis. A populist leader enacts each of these practices in collaboration both with their audiences and mass (and social) media. Together, they respond to what Ernesto Laclau calls a 'crisis of representation', which he describes as a 'necessary precondition for populism' (2005: 137, 177).

Indeed, neoliberalism's most recent crises – the 2008 financial crisis, the jobless recovery, increasing wage disparity and the concentration of wealth among the top 0.1 per cent – provided the conditions for Trump's popularity. Such economic crises can precipitate a decline of belief in what F. R. Ankersmit calls the inherent 'aesthetic gap' between democratic citizens and their political representatives, which structures the symbolic and political order of democratic government (1996). Populist leaders such as Trump portray the aesthetic gap as itself a cause of those political and economic crises, claiming to be able to bypass that distance altogether

through the direct and unmediated relation to 'the people'. However, Trump's performance, like that of other populist leaders, is no more able to evade its condition as a representation than is performance art. Drawing on Derrida's theorization of the performative, Joseph Arditì argues that populist performance cannot fulfil its promise of direct *presence* of 'the people' but rather depends upon acts of 'rendering-present' that not only signify 'the people' but also produce them (2007: 64). This presence is but another 'effect of representation', an 'absent presence' that the populist leader alleges can resolve the problematic distance of political representation's aesthetic gap by eliminating it altogether (64–5). While 'mediations remain in place, denser than ever,' populist leaders claim to

short-fuse the distance between representative and the represented by presenting themselves as having an extreme immediacy or intimacy with 'the people,' or by going so far as to present themselves as actually *embodying* the expression of the popular will. (Moffitt 2016: 100)

The real (re)presented by @realDonaldTrump functions, then, by 'veiling the gap between the people and those who act for them' with the production of the 'virtual immediacy' of what I am calling the pseudo-aura (Arditì 2007: 68).

With his experience as a reality TV performer, Trump trades on a dis/belief in the populist performance of virtual immediacy by willfully collapsing fact/fiction, signifier/signified and representation/presence through his spectacular deployment of what the philosopher Harry Frankfurt calls *bullshit*. As Frankfurt describes it, bullshit differs from the lie, which depends on the liar's credence in the non-truth status of the lie (2005: 32-3). In this way, Trump exemplifies the figure of the bullshitter because, it seems, he 'often just doesn't care, per se, about what is true and what is not' (James 2016: 31). Trump's 'post-truth politics' enacts what Frankfurt calls 'the essence of bullshit' – the abandonment of the reality principle, its 'lack of connection to a concern with truth – the indifference to how things really are' (2005: 33–4). Trump is, perhaps, best understood as a classic *bullshit artist*, as he is freed from the 'austere and rigorous demands

of lying' to allow his 'expansive and independent post-truth performance of 'improvisation, color and imaginative play' (53). Trump's bullshit artistry now so characterizes official statements of the White House that comedian Jon Stewart has recently joked that one of Trump's forthcoming Executive Orders would proclaim, 'The new official language of the United States is "bullshit". I, Donald J. Trump have instructed my staff to speak *only* in "bullshit"' ('The Late Show with Stephen Colbert' 2017).

BENT FACTS AND RAW PRESENCE:
WILLFULLY HORNSWAGGLED BY
PERFORMANCE ART

This is actually Trump. This is not performance art.
Michael Moore, October 2015 (Silman 2015)

He's a performance artist. I enjoyed him until the
Muslim ban.... I am not entertained anymore. Too
many people are being inspired by his bigotry.
Michael Moore, December 2015 (Roston 2015).

Possibly first used by journalist Mark Singer in a 1997 *The New Yorker* profile of Trump, the now-ubiquitous 'performance art' trope circulated widely before, during and after the 2016 election. In December 2016, *The Wall Street Journal's* Daniel Henninger, for example, wrote that Trump 'is' both Lady Gaga and Andy Warhol, and that his performative subversions are akin to the 'crazy serious' practitioners of contemporary performance art (Henninger 2016). Henninger's reading of Trump as performance artist hinges on a critical point: that his supporters are not duped by any kind of theatrical artifice on Trump's part. Rather, Henninger claims that they fully know that 'the truth' is 'only one of several props he's willing to use to achieve an effect' (ibid.). Thus, in their willingness to suspend their *belief* in the truth of Trump's actual statements, his supporters expect the payoff of him actually making America 'great'. The imagined future of American greatness will be nothing more than a re-making, a simulation of the past, in which one can only 'Make America Great *Again*'.

However, Henninger's view of Trump's performance art marginalizes the participatory role of Trump's audiences. Conservative writer

Kurt Schlichter makes the more radical claim that Trump's 'genius' is to make 'performance art out of his fans' (2016). For Schlichter, Trump's performance art is constituted not only in his spectacle, but also by the actions of his audience and their suspension of *disbelief*:

[W]hile Trump is making art out of his fans, they are doing the same to him. The Trump tsunami is itself a collective performance art piece by the disenfranchised and left-behind. Trump is their blank canvas upon which they paint the answers to all their (largely legitimate) fears, concerns and hopes. Though they are willfully hornswoggled, consciously choosing to ignore the truth, his supporters are mostly decent American patriots sick of being used and abused by an elite that holds them in utter contempt and considers their concerns for their economic well-being and physical safety to be selfish, short-sighted obstacles to progressive change. (Schlichter 2016)

To be 'willfully hornswoggled' could be construed as a theatre audience's willing suspension of disbelief, rather than a performance art audience's ostensible belief in the actuality of presence. However, Trump supporters' willful hornswaggery represents a shift from theatre into performance art for Schlichter when these 'mostly decent American patriots' stage Trump's performance as a participatory, immersive theatre piece of which they are both artist and audience.

This dynamic understanding of performance art addresses not only performance art's claims to the real but also its operation of a 'feedback loop' between performer and audience (Fischer-Lichte 2008). As such, Schlichter shows a surprisingly sophisticated understanding of performance art, particularly as it is embodied in the work of the self-described 'Grandmother of Performance Art', Marina Abramović. Abramović has secured her canonical status through work that claims to produce a form of 'real presence' that eludes (and is even in opposition to) theatre and its taint of representationality. Yet, in her evolution into a celebrity, even a 'brand', Abramović has consciously propelled the commodification and marketing of 'presence' (Eler 2013). Abramović's defenders claim that her transformation into

a celebrity-commodity is actually a reflexive element in her work. Critic Sharon Marcus, for instance, describes Abramović's landmark work *The Artist is Present* (2010) as a 'metacelebrity event that made its creator a celebrity because it was itself about celebrity' (2015:46). In this view, the commodified distance of Abramović's celebrity-presence both ironically comments on and enacts contemporary celebrity's deceptive promise of the pseudo-aura, which would bring 'fans and publics closer' even as it reproduces a 'gap of status and renown' (38). However, the direct experience of the real on offer by Abramović does not elude representation, but rather – like the populist leader's claims to direct access to the people – is an effect of it. And, in framing (and commoditizing) itself as real presence, it announces the very impossibility of its claim to bypass the aesthetic gap of artistic experience. Abramović's performance functions as a 'rendering-present' that allows its audience to be willfully hornswaggled: 'by delivering Abramović to us, *The Artist is Present* ended up exposing the lie of the promise of live art to secure presence' (Jones 2011:26). The claim to produce authentic experience actually manufactures 'presence' as Abramović's 'brand', leaving her to be 'no more or less a commodity than the Big Mac' (Cesare Schotzko 2015:78). The critical reflexivity that Marcus ascribes to Abramović must be taken as a matter of faith, which requires her audience's willing suspension of disbelief. As Carrie Lambert-Beatty describes,

I want to believe that its location at the beginning of this show, billed as MoMA'S [Museum of Modern Art's] first performance retrospective and titled 'The Artist Is Present,' is an acknowledgment that the genre of 'performance art' has always been compromised from within, producing spectacle and personality cult even as it generates authenticity and intersubjectivity. (Lambert-Beatty 2010:210)

However, for Lambert-Beatty, the scenes of petitioners waiting in line to sit with Abramović unironically evoke 'either grandiose (the pope) or absurd (shopping-mall Santa)' encounters as they present the performance artist as both 'martyr and superstar' (Lambert-Beatty 2010:213). While Abramović claims to offer to

the viewer her presence in the present, their proximity is actually to that of the pseudo-aura. That is, her performance offers as presence what Benjamin calls 'the cult of the movie star ... the phony spell of the commodity' (1968:231). If we are unable to believe that Abramović may be 'doing a send-up of the art star as saint and celebrity', we are left with the likelihood that this work is best understood as the 'unabashed celebrity worship' characteristic of spectacular capital' (Lambert-Beatty 2010:213).

THE JOY OF SPIRIT COOKING

Abramović's celebrity led to a rather strange turn in the final days of the presidential campaign as she found herself embroiled in an elaborate conspiracy theory promoted by (among others) Trump's hapless first son, Donald Trump, Jr. Throughout the campaign, Trump's performance (bullshit) art brought together the 'logic of populism and that of conspiracy' (Andrejevic 2016:130). Trump has frequently engaged in an 'unabashed use of conspiracy narratives' such as those that questioned President Obama's birthplace, or posited that the father of Republican presidential candidate Senator Ted Cruz had conspired in the assassination of President John Kennedy (Uscinski 2016). All manner of conspiracy theories proliferated on pro-Trump media outlets like InfoWars, as well as in the Twitter feeds of Trump advisors. They reached perhaps their most outlandish point with the conspiracy theory known as 'Pizzagate', which involved Hillary Clinton, her campaign director John Podesta, a Washington, D.C. pizzeria, Satanic child sex-trafficking and, eventually, Marina Abramović.

'Pizzagate' remains one of the most notorious (and far-fetched) conspiracy theories to have emerged from WikiLeaks' October 2016 release of hacked Clinton campaign emails. The theory alleges that Podesta's email references to the pizzeria Comet Ping Pong were actually codes for paedophilia, human trafficking and Satanic ritual child abuse. Although widely and quickly debunked by the mainstream news outlets, belief in the story resulted in online

■ Figure 1. Portrait of the artist and/as a performing object on the 4 April 2016 cover of *New York* magazine. Photo-illustration Bobby Doherty. Photos Smallz & Raskind/Contour by Getty Images (Trump heads).



harassment, death threats to the restaurant’s owners and staff and even a shooting at the restaurant by a North Carolina man who had come to ‘self-investigate’ and rescue the child sex slaves he believed to be held there (Goldman 2016). As seen in (fig.2), a survey taken nearly a full month after the election showed a whopping 46 per cent of Trump voters to have answered either ‘yes’ or ‘unsure’ to the question, ‘Do you think Hillary Clinton is connected to a child sex ring being run out of a pizzeria in Washington DC?’ – even as InfoWars’ Alex Jones (one of the most frequent and impassioned promoters of Pizzagate) later released a post-election, six-minute video (under threat of a lawsuit) that acknowledged that the conspiracy theory was ‘based on what we now know to be an incorrect narrative’ (Farhi 2017).

On the Friday before the election, however, Pizzagate was in full swing and the country reached what may be called ‘Peak Abramović’. A single email from Abramović to the lobbyist Tony Podesta was cast as the greatest new ‘revelation’ of the Clinton campaign’s Satanism: a request from Abramović for Podesta, to invite his brother, Clinton campaign director John Podesta, to her 2015 ‘Spirit Cooking’ dinner party. Drawing on the ‘evidence’ that Tony Podesta had forwarded his brother the email, InfoWars, the Drudge Report and countless Twitter feeds proclaimed that Clinton’s involvement in Satanic

■ Figure 2. Polling of voters’ opinion as to ‘whether Hillary Clinton is connected to a child sex ring run from a Pizzeria in DC.’

Clinton connected?	All voters	Trump voters	Clinton voters	Johnson voters	Stein voters	Other
Yes	9%	14%	5%	2%	N/A	24%
No	72%	54%	90%	57%	57%	69%
Unsure	19%	32%	6%	41%	43%	7%

Survey of 1,224 registered voters conducted 6-7 December 2016, margin of error 2.8%
Source: Public Policy Polling

ritual was proved by her third-hand association with Abramović’s ‘occult’ performance art. John Podesta did not even attend the ‘Spirit Cooking’ dinner, which was a reward for \$10,000 donors to the Marina Abramović Institute’s Kickstarter campaign (Olheiser 2016). The name ‘Spirit Cooking’ is a reference to what Abramović biographer James Westcott describes as her ‘rather throwaway’ 1996 performance piece *Spirit Cooking*, in which Abramović used pig’s blood to paint instructions on the walls of an Italian gallery (for example: ‘with a sharp knife cut deeply into the middle finger of your left hand eat the pain’) (2016). However, as Abramović describes the 2015 event, it was simply a (\$10,000 per plate) ‘normal dinner’ (Russeth 2016).

However, InfoWars’ article, ‘Spirit Cooking: Clinton campaign chairman practices bizarre occult ritual’ describes the email exchange between Abramović and Tony Podesta as ‘easily one of the most disturbing WikiLeaks revelations’ (Watson 2016). The article manufactures its own evidence through what Mark Andrejevic calls conspiracy theories’ logic of ‘strings of correlations that carry an affective charge’, as it points to the evidence of ‘the fact that her campaign chairman is *apparently* into spooky occult rituals involving menstrual blood and semen’ (2016: 133; Watson 2016, my emphasis). This performatively constructed insinuation concerning Podesta quickly propelled the story through social media and pro-Trump websites, generating some 400,000 Tweets in 24 hours and news headlines during the weekend before the election, with even Donald Trump, Jr. retweeting the video *Spirit Cooking Scandal* on the story’s first day (Olheiser 2016; Hananoki 2016). In her article debunking the story in *The Washington Post*, Abby Olheiser explains that the Spirit Cooking story had become so ‘hot’ on the Internet because ‘it fits into the broader conspiracy theory that Clinton herself has some link to Satan’ (2016). So well did it fit that Abramović’s Spirit Dinner and Pizzagate continued to be linked with paedophilia on Twitter even after Trump’s inauguration. In February 2017, as Lady Gaga was set to perform in the Super Bowl halftime show, Twitter feeds

included photos of Lady Gaga with Abramović as evidence of the pop star's corruption by the Satanic forces of performance art. In a further twist, during Alex Jones' recent failed attempt to retain custody of his three children, his lawyer claimed that Jones should not be judged by his maniacal on-screen persona. Jones was, he argued, 'a performance artist' (Borchers 2017).

MAKING PERFORMANCE ART GREAT AGAIN

In the case of #SpiritCooking, performance art is read as being doubly secret: (1) the Clinton campaign concealed its secret performance art, and (2) performance art concealed its secret occult rituals and child sex rings. However, the figuring of Trump-as-performance artist alters this logic by suggesting that Trump's secret is that he *is* performance art. In July 2016, four months before the Spirit Cooking 'revelations', a YouTube posting of a trailer for a faux documentary entitled *The Nominee* cast Abramović as the orchestrator of performance art's secrets, this time to give authority to its suggestion that Trump's campaign was a 'secret performance art piece'. *The Nominee* invites the viewer to believe that this seemingly impossible scenario is 'for real', as evidenced by the text that accompanies the posted video:

I probably shouldn't be posting this but my friend who works at a movie studio sent it to me and it's too crazy not to share. I can't tell if it's a real doc but my friend says it is so be on the lookout, I'm definitely gonna watch it when it comes out. I think this was one of the final drafts of the preview. (Drake 2016)

The Nominee incorporates interview footage of Abramović to invite the viewer to believe in a different kind of conspiracy: the 'fact' that reality is performance art.

Posted with the heading, 'Insane Trump documentary – Trump is a performance artist???' , *The Nominee* convincingly mimics the style of contemporary documentary film. Title cards frame footage of Trump announcing that the 'Truth Behind His Campaign is Even More Shocking' than his political rise. The film is



■ Figure 3. InfoWars' Alex Jones and the Unholy Trinity of Abramović, Clinton and Podesta. 'Occult Expert Breaks Down Clinton Satanism, Spirit Cooking' (2016) *InfoWars: The Alex Jones show*. <https://youtu.be/uIeP5xojlGk>.

'narrated' by Abramović, whose interview footage has been intercut with Trump's. As the 'narration' for footage of violence at a Trump campaign rally violence, Abramović's seemingly describes Trump as a master performance artist of the unmediated real:

Performance is real material. In the theatre, you can cut with the knife and there is the blood. The knife is not real and the blood is not real. In performance, the knife and the blood and the body of the performer are real.

A short audio clip of a Trump interview suggests that the endgame of his performance is, like Abramović's, not deception, but rather the 'real' and 'truthful': 'There are two Donald Trumps. There is the public version and the personal Donald Trump. And I know it from the real side. Look, we're at a point where we have to start being truthful ... with our country.' As the final title cards advertise the 'Documentary of the Year About the Secret Performance Piece That Went Too Far', Abramović intones, 'It's very hard to make a strong, illuminating, you know, work of art.' The video concludes by advertising the release date of the film as 22 July 2016, the day after the Republican National Convention would conclude the ritual that would transform Trump, the candidate, into the actual Republican presidential nominee.

By casting Trump's campaign as a 'secret performance art piece that went too far', *The Nominee* portrays Trump's campaign as a performance art hoax in the manner of much 'celebrity performance art'. But the incorporation of Abramović into the film (and thus into Trump's performance art piece) frames performance art as driven toward the real that it may produce. As with #SpiritCooking, performance art functions

as a secret – but in *The Nominee*, performance art is the act of concealment that constitutes it, and its secret is the act of its own concealment as performance art. *The Nominee* employs Abramović to authorize Trump’s campaign as performance art – as if it were performance art. While the video allows viewers to suspend their belief that Trump’s candidacy is for real, it also insists that, as performance art, it leads inextricably to the reality of its violence. By casting Trump’s secret performance-art piece as one that ‘went too far’, *The Nominee* re-performs Trump’s campaign up to the moment of viewing, fictively exposing the reality of Trump’s fictive production of an Abramovićian real. Watching the video after the election, the viewer hurtles towards the future (and now present) moment when Trump’s secret performance-art piece finally achieves Abramović’s promise – ‘the knife is real and the blood is real’.

ARTIFICIAL HELLS

The imagined future in which Trump may expose the fiction that his is a performance art, rather than an incompetent authoritarian’s bullshit art, is of course a fantasy. There is nothing left to expose – the threats to immigrant and Muslim communities, to women’s right to choose, to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights, to affordable health care, to the environment and to global stability are as real as it gets. If Donald Trump’s presidency is a work of performance art, then it is what Claire Bishop calls much participatory art: an ‘artificial hell’ (2012). And, yet, I continue to find myself returning to the performance that might have been. While I cannot suspend my belief in order to indulge in this fantasy, I want so desperately to (dis)believe.

Finally, in keeping with my father’s original grant proposal to the National Endowment for the Arts, it’s time to take my final bow. I wish Hillary Clinton the best. She’s a class act, let me tell you. All those things I said or tweeted about her – about anyone, really – please let history look back on all of that as ironic commentary. My whole life should be in quotation marks, really. No, no, really! It’s

unbelievable what I’ve accomplished here.

So having said that, I will now fulfill my final obligation to this performance by bursting into a thousand evanescent particles of light. I’d like to thank eminent theoretical physicist Michio Kaku here for helping me pull this off. It’s gonna be spectacular, believe me.

Everyone ready? In three, two, one ...

(A blinding flash of light. Where Mr. Trump stood looks now like a cloud of fireflies. They fly into the audience, swarming above their heads. With tears in their eyes, the crowd drops all signs, hats, and banners to the ground. The sparks of light spiral up and up into the night sky.)

(Richards 2016)

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Figure 4. A November 2016 Instagram posting by 'politicallyerectdesigns' with the caption, '@hillaryclinton loves her some Blood'n' Cum soup'. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BMfw3yHjIA/>

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