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## **The Meme and The Dream: Circulation, Aggregation, Representation**

I Madeleine Hepner hereby declare that the material presented here is the outcome of the outcome of the Honours research I have undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated and that I have fully documented the source of ideas, quotations or paraphrases attributable to other authors.

I hereby declare that all versions of submitted exegesis (regardless of submission type) are identical.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized, overlapping letters that appear to be 'MH' followed by a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Madeleine Hepner

## Abstract

With large Silicon Valley social media platforms dominating discussions surrounding 21<sup>st</sup> century photographic representation within the digital sphere, questions are raised about how the role of the circulated image feeds directly into shaping political viewpoints through memetic interventions. Specifically regarding the conceptual ideals of the American Dream, these images that users encounter daily have become editable, individualistic interpretations of this Dream with the operation of fascistic iconography and cynical humour. Through photographic investigations, I sought out to unpack the concept of the American Dream in the contemporary United States as well as understand the role of the “networked image” with reference to the online distribution and propagation of this Dream. Questions that were being asked over my Honours year project was: What has happened to the American Dream? And What has happened to the photographic image? My project spans from how the American Dream is represented pictorially in popular culture to later utilising artificial intelligence technology to allow the digital machine to speak on the political content it is ingesting daily. Along the way I’ve investigated the paradigms of the American Dream through Route 66 on Google Street View, researched the political power of the digital image and the Dream, and immersed myself into the American alt-right Internet to comprehend the influence of memes and participatory culture in fringe online spaces. From this project, I have come to the conclusions that a 20<sup>th</sup> century photographic mindset is unfit to understand these “fragmented images” and that the image and the American Dream are analogous in the ways of their initiation, growth, lapse, and dissemination throughout virtual platforms. The works I’ve created confronts the fragmentation of the image, the fragmentation of the American Dream, and showcases new ways of working with digital images and networked systems to examine the rupturing of both concepts.

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## Introduction

As I write this text, the former Facebook data scientist and whistle-blower Frances Haugen is testifying before U.S. Congress stating that “Facebook’s products harm children, stoke division and weaken our democracy.”<sup>1</sup> While statements like these are not surprising for some, the testimony is still shocking to read due to Facebook’s denials of the divisions they create, in order to avoid real change to their platform. As Haugen goes for CEO Mark Zuckerberg’s jugular, the critical discussion is brought up yet again about the role those large social media platforms have on our lives and how these platforms use our ‘engagement’ for profit. The questions about how “good” Facebook really is and how much connectivity is too much arise, and users are left to their own devices, literally and figuratively, to fend for themselves in the digital space.

This anxious awareness into the democratic yet anti-democratic power of social media feeds directly into my Honours work and my areas of research within a 21<sup>st</sup> century understanding of the circulated image. With Facebook estimating 2-3 terabytes of photos uploaded per day to the platform in 2021,<sup>2</sup> roughly 620,000 to 750,000 images, these Silicon Valley platforms and icons of corporate America dominate image production today. My work researches and unpacks the historical concept of the American Dream in relation to the contemporary United States as well as understanding the role of photographic representation in propagating this Dream. Over the past year, I have explored the fundamentals of the American Dream, what that term means in today’s United States, how the American Dream played out physically and infra-structurally through the road of Route 66, how found images aided in the circulation of the preservation of the Dream, and ultimately how this circulated image showcased the Dream’s downfalls through political memetic interventions. The flight of the American Dream from the 20<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> century aligns closely with the trajectory of the photographic image in terms of its creation, conservation, circulation, and re-imagination.

The questions that I have been asking myself through the entirety of this project have been: **What has happened to the American Dream? And What has happened to the photographic image?**

Through a series of photographic investigations, I have been seeking to understand how circulated images in today’s digital context have subsequently broken down the ideals of the American Dream into individualistic interpretations of this Dream. The image is no longer the image it once was and equally the American Dream is no longer the Dream that one was promised previously. The American Dream was initially circulated through the media, cinema, and advertising, showcasing visually what this Dream could entail for those who wanted to obtain it. As my research unfolded, I became interested in how this iconography is

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<sup>1</sup> “Facebook Whistleblower Frances Haugen Testifies before US Congress, Saying the Social Network Hurts Kids, Fuels Division.” *ABC News*, October 6, 2021. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-10-06/facebook-whistleblower-frances-haugen-testifies/100516542>.

<sup>2</sup> Facebook Engineering. "10 billion photos." Facebook. Last modified March 13, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/notes/10158772763222200/>.

propagated and mutated on social media platforms. I began to understand the American Dream as being an editable, distributed opinion in which each digital user can construct their own version and therefore disseminate it back into the digital sphere. These plural versions of the Dream are then employed as hyper-targeted, post-truth advertisements scrounging the digital space to create fear that socio-economic liberation will destroy it, and in its place, promote fascistic iconography and employ cynical humour.

I have come to understand both strands of my project, the image and the Dream, as interwoven subjects that both hold great relevance to my overall project. The circulated image in this project cannot be held without the understanding of the American Dream and vice versa, both work together in a balance to complement each other and likewise break each other down and reimagine themselves. In this project, I worked towards uncovering and understanding this balance more competently. My aim with this project was to comprehend what this American Dream pictorially looks like and how the photographic image, from its genealogies of modernist pictorialism to digital data, upholds these concepts as well as obliterates them. I wanted to understand the American Dream, to understand the photographic image, and therefore understand first-hand how the combination of the two equates in parasitic destruction.

Through a variety of experiments, I sought out to recognise how the circulation of digital images, found images, and later alt-right political images, broke down the archetypes of the American Dream through a digitally connected interface. Some may say that the Dream is still alive and courses heavily through the United States currently, yet from this year-long project, I have come to understand that the Dream has altered, disfigured, and corrupted the earlier version of itself. No longer is it an idealistic notion of freedom and equality yet a virus-ridden, jpeg-saved, pixelated-beyond-belief image that stalks and swirls the Internet. My work over this year has resolved these thoughts into solid conclusions whilst generating new questions and directions for my future practice.

## Chapter 1

### CONTEXTUAL RESEARCH

#### The American Dream/Myth/Mystique/Nightmare

The American Dream today might be summarised as a concept, an ideal, and a template for all Americans to strive for; the ability to work hard and therefore achieve ultimate happiness through the understanding that one had worked hard enough to gain what they rightfully deserve. Yet this concept was not always as materialistic and onerous as it once was when the term was initiated. The term “The American Dream” was coined by American writer and historian James Truslow Adams in his book *The Epic of America* from 1930. He states multiple times and in a multitude of ways that, “the American Dream [is] the belief in the common man and the insistence upon his having, as far as possible, equal opportunity in every way with the rich one”.<sup>3</sup> The concept was built on the understanding and hope that no matter where one came from or what their upbringing, that they would have equal pathways to success. Adams also acknowledged that this American Dream was not going to be constructed and therefore upheld without the consensual understanding of all that wanted to uphold it, stating that:

...if the American Dream is to come true and to abide with us, it will, at bottom, depend on the people themselves. If we are to achieve a richer and fuller life for all, they have got to know what such an achievement implies.<sup>4</sup>

This was possibly the first mistake in the idealisation of the American Dream, that society was to be held responsible for its creation. While the fundamental notions of this American Dream are solidified in writing amongst various seminal texts of the United States, such as the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and more, it was a large risk to place this ownership into the hands of the people that would adjust, modify, ultimately question, and kill its fundamental, idealistic roles it once held.

This notion of the American Dream morphed from a generally equal opportunistic understanding, upheld by American society to ensure that it is fulfilled, to a concept of materialistic gain where one is working for themselves to obtain what they want rather than being aided by their greater community. Writing later in 1999, Dr. Alfred Hornung, a research professor of American Studies, argued that there is “a discrepancy between the American ideals of the Founding Fathers and the Un-American realities of an industrialised modern nation at the beginning of the twentieth century.”<sup>5</sup> This conceptualisation of the Dream revolved around objects and people that could be obtained, such as a house, a car, a steady well-paying income, and a nuclear family. Migrants and overseas citizens saw the United States as a place where they could build themselves up and raise a family under

<sup>3</sup> Adams, James Truslow. *The Epic of America*, 135. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1931.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 410.

<sup>5</sup> Hornung, Alfred. “The Un-American Dream.” *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 44, no. 4 (1999): 545. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41157972>

idealistic guidelines that were not necessarily achievable in the countries where they originated from.<sup>6</sup> But truthfully the odds were already stacked against these migrants due to the already cracking American Dream and the political, economic, and social downfalls that the U.S. was and still is undergoing.<sup>7</sup>

This change of the fundamental concepts of the American Dream were paralleled by changes to the representation of the United States in wider cultural production. Photography in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century was central to this myth making because of its ways in which it disseminated a picturesque and wild frontier of vast landscapes and natural resources. Photographers sent to document the American West utilised photography to attract people to move and settle there, showcasing the vast landscapes and untapped wealth that the country promised. Frontier photography of the 19<sup>th</sup> century depicted picturesque mountain ranges, large areas of (so-called) uninhabited land and represented an area where American settlers from the industrialised East Coast could start society afresh in the vast expanses of the West frontier.<sup>8</sup> Author and curator Janet E. Buerger states in 1992, “Art of the nineteenth century maintained a vision of the ideal. One such ideal was the American Myth, which glorified the nation as a place of freedom and equality.”<sup>9</sup> Buerger’s conceptualisation of the ‘American Myth’, rather than ‘American Dream’, is helpful because it foregrounds the Dream as constructed, or a kind of story, rather than an immutable ideal.

Frontier photographs also held scientific significance in society’s understanding of landmarks and ecological life that lived within the spaces that were captured. Buerger also states that, “the new frontier of the American West assumed the dual role of scientific laboratory and potential Utopia,”<sup>10</sup> giving even more developmental power to the photographers that were capturing these images. She argues that if the frontier had a dual role of laboratory and utopia, the photographer held a tri-role as artist, scientist, and discoverer, possibly even a fourth and fifth role as surveyor and salesman to those that would be witnessing the images produced. Crucially, the images made were used to attract, showcase, unearth, surprise, and convince those that saw them into understanding the power that the American West held. Later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century America’s canon of modernist photographers such as Ansel Adams and Edward Weston continued to reinforce these ideas of almost utopian space of nature and conquest.<sup>11</sup> In the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century literature such as *The Great*

<sup>6</sup> Schudson, Michael. “American Dreams.” *American Literary History* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 2004): 567. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3568068>

<sup>7</sup> Prieto, Greg. “Conclusion: American Dream, American Hypocrisy.” In *Immigrants Under Threat: Risk and Resistance in Deportation Nation*, 153–54. Latina/o Sociology. NYU Press, 2018. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvwr5b2.9>

<sup>8</sup> Hirsch, Robert. “Chapter Seven: Standardizing Photographic Practice: A Transparent Truth, The American West: The Narrative and the Sublime.” In *Seizing the Light: A Social & Aesthetic History of Photography*, 152–54. Routledge, 2017. [https://learning.oreilly.com/library/view/seizing-the-light/9781317371823/14-9781315671994\\_chapter-chapter7.xhtml](https://learning.oreilly.com/library/view/seizing-the-light/9781317371823/14-9781315671994_chapter-chapter7.xhtml)

<sup>9</sup> Buerger, Janet E. “Ultima Thule: American Myth, Frontier, and the Artist-Priest in Early American Photography.” *American Art* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 83.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>11</sup> Carville, Justin, and Sigrid Lien. “Introduction: Concurrent Histories.” In *Contact Zones: Photography, Migration, and the United States*, 11–15. Leuven University Press, 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1qdqzmr.4>

*Gatsby* (1925) pivots to more materialistic gains, only to be critiqued in later cinema through films such as *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *American Beauty* (1999).

During this initial phase of my research, I was not just investigating the history and genealogies of the American Dream but undertook my own visual research online. I began exploring how the Dream had been represented in popular culture, photojournalism, and social media. I gathered over thirty images and generated a slide show to visualise and understand the contemporary visual language of America, entitled *Pledge Your Allegiance* (fig. 1). I decided to subvert these images through writing and performance. This resulted in an experimental performance where I played a PowerPoint presentation whilst reading out the Pledge of Allegiance, which I had altered by tangling the words of the Pledge until the entire speech became nonsensical and broke down the utopian intentions of the original Pledge (fig. 2). Writing quickly became a method through which I was trying to make sense of these images of ambitious nuclear families, gleaming infrastructures, and iconic landmarks that signify hope and unity within the country. For the duration of the project, I have turned to writing small essays about my impressions of the American Dream and my experiences collecting and exploring the remediation of this Dream through imaging technologies (fig. 3). Writing has become a way of dealing with these unclear spaces and overlapping boundaries of the American Dream and the image.



Figure 1: *Pledge Your Allegiance*, 2021, video work with audio.  
[https://youtu.be/LSWDDEbZ\\_hg](https://youtu.be/LSWDDEbZ_hg)

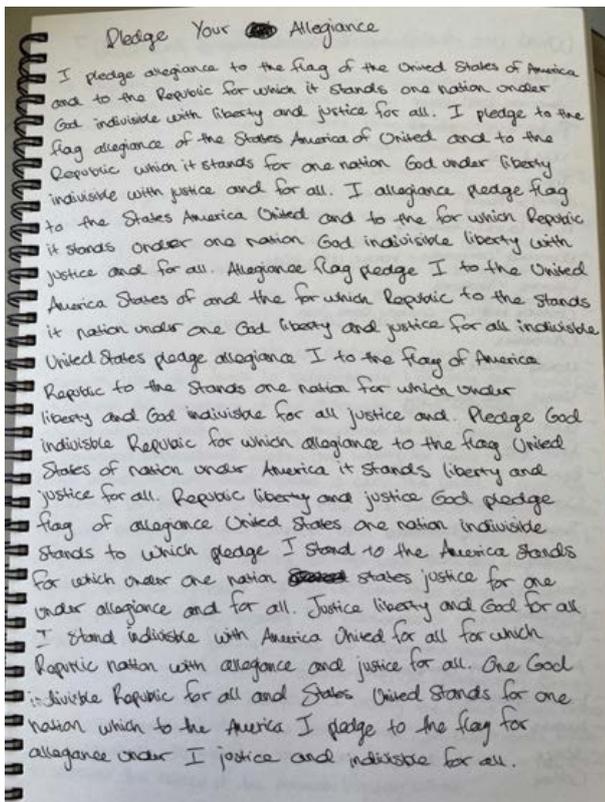


Figure 2 (left): Photo of written jumbled speech from *Pledge Your Allegiance*, 2021.



Figure 3 (right): Screenshot of small essay written in March 2021.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century idea of the American Dream paralleled with the 20<sup>th</sup> century idea of photography in ways such as modernist models of authorship, representation, and critique.<sup>12</sup> Researcher Kathryn Humphreys states in her appraisal of American photography that, “for the past 150 years, photography has been a focal point for concerns about the nature of subjectivity, authenticity, and representation itself.”<sup>13</sup> She observes there is a direct relationship between the photographic image and the myth of America, stating that “The American nightmare ... [is] but a postmodern hallucination whose very conditions are constructed largely by the possibilities of photographic representation.”<sup>14</sup> This quote could then be inspected under the context of today’s digital era and how the digital photographs we encounter every day aid in supporting this claim. A question that arises from this statement is: is American history shaping the photographs that are being produced or are our photographs, constructed and flawed, shaping and creating our American history in the same ways that the digital image is being created?

Since Humphreys’ quotes were written in 1993, the nearly thirty years separating them to now, in 2021, have only separated the photographer and the photograph further apart and have brought up even greater conversations around representation and authenticity, particularly within the context of the digital, circulated image. Images were initially tangible objects, and the progressions of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century photography were the ability to reproduce multiples through a single negative. Later with this digital shift, the lines of creator and spectator blurred; the once clear-cut indications of where photography stood and what its motives were have been muddled with the introduction of the digital screen, the virtual image, and the readily-available software that puts any user in the driver’s seat of customisation.<sup>15</sup> With this dizzying understanding of what importance the image holds today comes the blurring of the concept of the American Dream. This lineage of this Dream has turned from equality for all to materialistic gain to now an even more noxious sibling who is a constant 4chan user and creates political memes to troll the users that are witnessing them.

We have come to the photographic, and generally historic area of post-truth, through both the American Dream and the digital image. History aids in augmented truth that is seen visually through photographs online and therefore these digital images rewrite history in such a way that is beneficial to the users that are creating them; a knotted cycle in which one is unable to untangle.

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<sup>12</sup> Guimond, James. “Chapter 1: Dreams and Documents.” In *American Photography and the American Dream*, 3–12. University of North Carolina Press, 1991.

<sup>13</sup> Humphreys, Kathryn. “Looking Backward: History, Nostalgia, and American Photography.” *American Literary History* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 686. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/490042>

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 697.

<sup>15</sup> Manovich, Lev. *Software Takes Command*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. [https://www.academia.edu/542750/Software\\_Takes\\_Command](https://www.academia.edu/542750/Software_Takes_Command).

## Chapter 2

### EARLY INVESTIGATIONS

#### Passive Robot Eyes: Google Street View to Found Image

With a greater understanding and formulated research into the origins of the American Dream and the photographic image, I began to experiment with various methodologies that would start to grasp the encapsulation of this concept through a visual medium. I recognised I needed to narrow my focus, given the historical and cultural scope of my research. I saw a direct correlation between this conscious, society-wide understanding of the American Dream and the cultural connotations the physical road of Route 66 in the United States had and still has to this day. Route 66 spanned over eight states and allowed Americans to travel from Illinois to California more easily with an expedited route to the West Coast. This is underlined by the following description from the U.S. Park Service:

Like other highways of its day, Route 66 reflects the origin and evolution of road transportation in the United States. The often romanticised highway represents an outstanding example of the transition from dirt track to superhighway. Not only does Route 66 underscore the importance of the automobile as technological achievement, but, perhaps equally important to the American psyche, it symbolised unprecedented freedom and mobility for every citizen who could afford to own and operate a car.<sup>16</sup>

Showcasing this convergence of cultural nostalgia and geography, the road of Route 66 allowed Americans who had the economic means to travel the ability to feel and live out this mental concept of the American Dream through physical journey. Still today, there are people that tour the road and live out their own fantasies of freedom, stopping along the way to visit the tourist destinations and heritage listed sites to envision themselves in the 1950s and 60s when the road was in its hey-day.

I became interested in this subconscious understanding of the American Dream and how that played out in Route 66 and began to traverse the road through the digital platform of Google Street View (GSV). I was fascinated in how this myth could still possibly be upheld visually through the road today and started capturing screenshot images of engaging compositions along the sides of the road that challenged these idealistic notions (fig. 4). Wanting to take these moments captured by the passive robot eyes of GSV out of the context of the digital screen, I created a small photobook entitled *Get Your Kicks* (figs. 5 & 6), the title of the book taking inspiration from the song “Get Your Kicks on Route 66” written by American songwriter Bobby Troup and later made famous by Nat King Cole and Chuck Berry.<sup>17</sup> This book enabled me to see how the digital images would read as physical prints

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<sup>16</sup> “History and Significance of Route 66.” National Park Service: US Department of the Interior. 2021. <https://ncptt.nps.gov/rt66/history-and-significance-of-us-route-66/>

<sup>17</sup> Croce Kelly, Susan. “Chapter 6: Boomtime.” In *Route 66: The Highway and Its People*, 148–50. University of Oklahoma Press, 1990.

and how the small series worked together to showcase the trip I had undertaken thus far, almost as small souvenirs from my journey on the virtual road. While the book was a good experiment to undertake, I felt that the images in this process were paradoxically placed back into an older documentary tradition which I analysed earlier and did not grasp the complexity of the fragmentation of photographic representation and the mythology of the Dream that I was aiming for.



Figure 4: Screenshot of Google Street View image folder, 2021.



Get Your Kicks



Figure 5 (left): Cover of *Get Your Kicks*, 2021, photobook.

Figure 6 (right): Digital scan of two pages from *Get Your Kicks*, 2021, photobook.

During this time, I also produced large-scale prints of other roadside images to understand how they would translate to larger photographs on a gallery wall and how the quality of the digital images would react to being blown up to ten times their normal scale (fig. 7). Similarly to the photobook, I felt that the larger prints were not getting to the crux of the disjointed American Dream/Myth. I was stuck in the mindset of creating modernist documentary style compositions and trying to conform this current day technology within the confines of 20<sup>th</sup> century photographic practices. Writer and art critic Joanne McNeil comments on these critiques of the heroic documentary photographer on the Internet stating, “The Internet rejects traditional notions of ownership; it is comprised only of things available to share.”<sup>18</sup> I felt that the photographs created were echoing critiques I had understood earlier in my research regarding modernist understandings of 20<sup>th</sup> century photographic authorship.

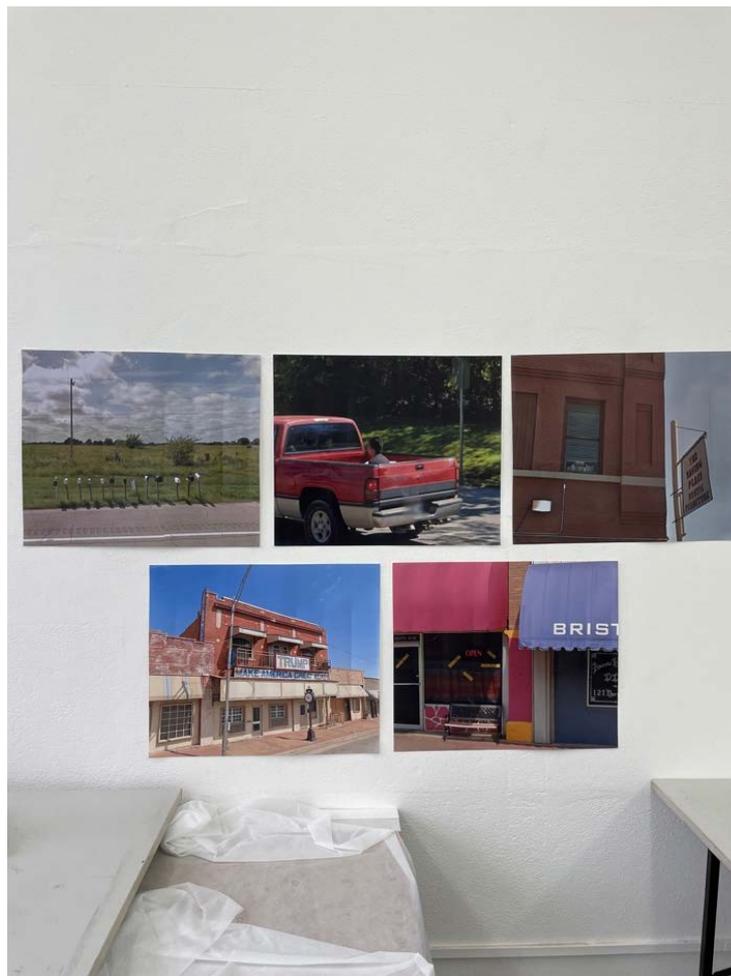


Figure 7: Photograph of larger Google Street View prints in studio.

<sup>18</sup> McNeil, Joanne. “Endless Archive.” *Collect the WWWorld*, September 2011, 42.  
[https://monoskop.org/images/6/6b/Quaranta\\_Domenico\\_ed\\_Collect\\_the\\_WWWorld\\_The\\_Artist\\_as\\_Archivist\\_in\\_the\\_Internet\\_Age.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/6/6b/Quaranta_Domenico_ed_Collect_the_WWWorld_The_Artist_as_Archivist_in_the_Internet_Age.pdf)

It was clear I needed to explore other methodologies for working with this material. I continued to experiment with GSV, which led to a body of work I exhibited at the end of Semester 1. These included a series of horizon works which depict my virtual travels on Route 66, using screenshots taken every few kilometres. Writer and curator Gene McHugh speaks about the peculiarities of the digital platform as “a world in which the simulation of a street on Google Street View is often more real and accessible than the actual street.”<sup>19</sup> In this instance, I felt that McHugh was correct in this statement due to my rapid and flexible ability to traverse Route 66 in order to obtain the source material that I felt could strengthen my views on understanding the concept of the American Dream and thus my ability to break it down and critique it.

With these horizon images, I compiled them together to create both a collage, entitled *Just Over the Horizon (still)*, later exhibited in the ANU Photospace as a single horizon line, and a moving video piece, entitled *Just Over the Horizon (moving)*, to further showcase the movement that I was encountering on my virtual journey (figs. 8 & 9). The single line photo-works allowed the viewer to move through the space in a similar fashion to how I was moving through the virtual space, constantly looking for what was to come over the horizon and achieve a similar sense of longing to those who are longing for their own form of the American Dream. Sociologist and historian Michael Schudson comments on this American longing through the road stating, “[In the United States] the dream is the road itself more than anything at the end of it, the unfetteredness and unattachedness of the road, and the enjoyment of sheer unpredictable experience...”<sup>20</sup> In the video piece I included audio of then President Donald Trump speaking on how “this time”, being the time he was in presidency, was the best time to “start living the American Dream”. This audio accompanied the same images that were used in *Just Over the Horizon (still)* yet were shown as a slideshow where every image was held in the same ratio and position in the video. The slideshow rapidly transitions from one image to the next, building in speed as the audio crescendos and echoes a similar movement to how one would witness the road if they were driving it physically, continuously searching for the next big town or site to appear on the horizon.

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<sup>19</sup> McHugh, Gene. “Jon Rafman’s Collection.” *Collect the WWWorld*, September 2011, 53. [https://monoskop.org/images/6/6b/Quaranta\\_Domenico\\_ed\\_Collect\\_the\\_WWWorld\\_The\\_Artist\\_as\\_Archivist\\_in\\_the\\_Internet\\_Age.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/6/6b/Quaranta_Domenico_ed_Collect_the_WWWorld_The_Artist_as_Archivist_in_the_Internet_Age.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Schudson, 567.



Figure 8: *Just Over the Horizon (still)*, 2021, digital photcollage, 42 x 59.4 cm.

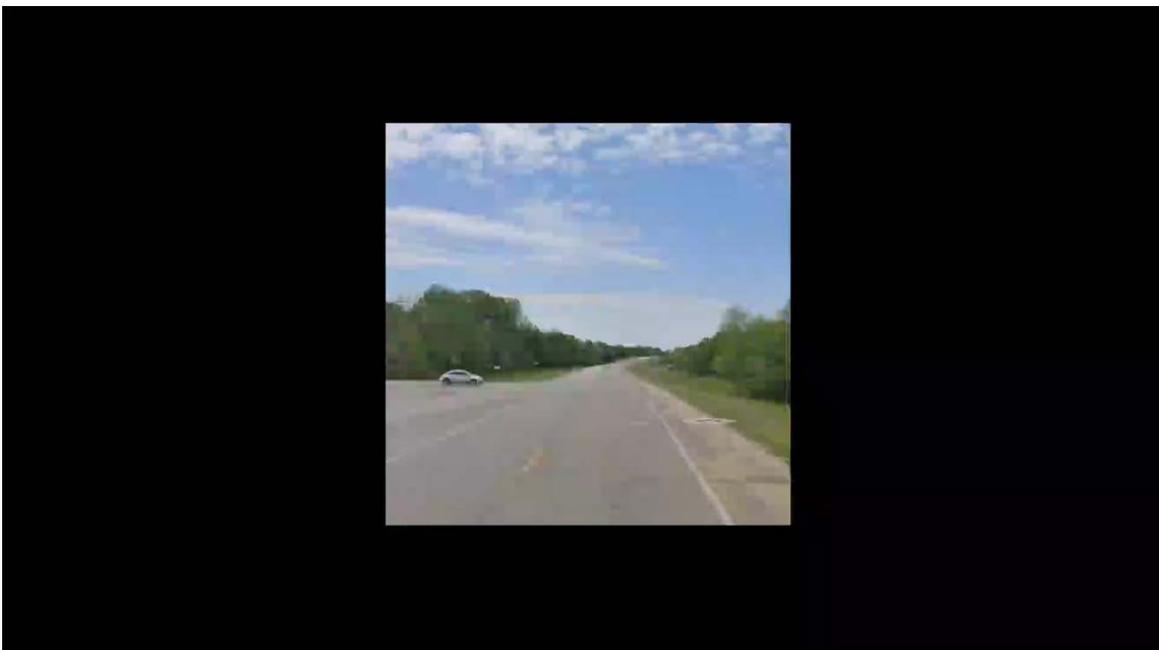


Figure 9: *Just Over the Horizon (moving)*, 2021, video work with audio.  
<https://youtu.be/kzfsmH51jjY>

During this stage of my project, I was aware that I was exploring new methodologies and genres of post-photographic practice. I took inspiration from artists including Eva & Franco Mattes, Evan Roth, and Brad Troemel, from *Collect the WWWWorld*, a project curated by Quaranta in 2012, which highlighted artists who utilise found Internet content to respond to the topic of participatory culture in the digital sphere<sup>21</sup> (figs. 10, 11, & 12). I also immersed myself in the methods and strategies of many artists working with GSV, including Michael Wolf, Jon Rafman, and Mishka Henner (figs. 13, 14, & 15).

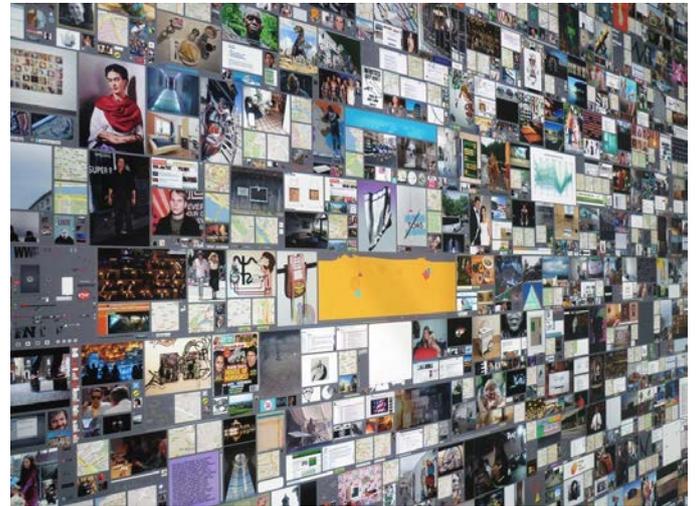


Figure 10 (left): Eva & Franco Mattes, *My Generation*, 2010, video installation, broken computer, video collage, at *Collect the WWWWorld* exhibition, 319 Scholes New York.

Image from <https://collecttheworld.tumblr.com/page/5>

Figure 11 (right): Evan Roth, *Internet Cache Self Portrait*, 2012, Latex saturated wet strength wallpaper, 12.16 x 9.34 ft., at *Collect the WWWWorld* exhibition, 319 Scholes New York.

Image from <https://collecttheworld.tumblr.com/page/4>



Figure 12: Brad Troemel, *Art Smells Why Wait Grab An Unusually Decadent PINE air freshener with a HOTTOPIC pink to black hair extension attached*, 2012, BSTJ Etsy item, various materials, at *Collect the WWWWorld* exhibition, 319 Scholes New York.

Image from <https://collecttheworld.tumblr.com/page/5>

<sup>21</sup> "Collect the WWWWorld." LINK Art Center. <http://www.linkartcenter.eu/events/collect-the-wwwworld>.



Figure 13: Michael Wolf, *9251*, 2010, digital image from the series *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.  
Image from [photomichaelwolf.com](http://photomichaelwolf.com)



Figure 14: Jon Rafman, *Nine Eyes*, 2008-ongoing, digital image from the series *Nine Eyes*.  
Image from <https://9-eyes.com/page/2>



Figure 15: Mishka Henner, *SP227d, Cisliano Milan, Italy*, 2011-2013, from the series *No Man's Land*. Image from <https://mishkahenner.com/No-Man-s-Land>

A major artistic reference for me during this time was Doug Rickard's 2010 series *A New American Picture* (figs. 16 & 17). Our projects overlap in the understanding of the American Dream through the utilisation of GSV, yet I reference this project in terms of critique. He employs the digital platform to traverse impoverished streets of America to capture scenes of homelessness and decay that he feels contradict the ideals of the American Dream. However, it could be argued that this work ignores the socio-cultural issues of the camera apparatus, as he captures these images from an exploitative standpoint. Rickard aims to embody this notion of the heroic documentary photographer through this body of work with his reference of 20<sup>th</sup> century photographers in his artist statement<sup>22</sup>, yet does not grasp that the trade-in of a camera body to a nine-eyed GSV van "raises issues associated with using the new technology: surveillance, voyeurism and virtual realities,"<sup>23</sup> states critic Kristin Wilson. Artistic collaborative COLL.EO comments on the insensitivities of Rickard's project with their counter project *A New American Dream*, 2014-ongoing, which comprises of hundreds of images taken in the same digital platform (figs. 18 & 19). In a video made by the group (fig. 20) the audio ridicules Rickard by stating:

I am giving visibility to invisible individuals and that makes me feel good. Look! These people camp on the sidewalk. They have tents and carts. They are a new metropolitan tribe. Look at this guy in front of the designer store! Looking at this guy sitting next to the alternative art gallery in Potrero Hill. All these images truly resonate with me and with my upbringing. I remember the first time I saw Google Street View. It was truly an epiphany. I was elated. I was floored. And the wheels were turning. I took my iPhone, designed in Cupertino, and I started taking snapshots at my screen, moving around the cursor to find the best possible angle, composing these amazing scenes. I have captured the sense of claustrophobia and decay of the American Dream. And it is really happening. And I find it really poetic.<sup>24</sup>

Through an engagement with Rickard's work and its respective critiques, I felt the utilisation of GSV was not the best method to approach my concepts. I felt I was reaching the end of the road with my GSV works, figuratively yet not virtually, as I had only trekked a small portion of the virtual route in roughly three months. I was reflecting on the kind of photographer and artist I had envisioned myself being, with my undergraduate schooling heavily focused on the canonical 20<sup>th</sup> century white male photographers and therefore my motivation to photograph in a similar modernist perspective. With these investigations, I began to break down this mindset and follow my intrigue into pushing the boundaries of what photography and digital media could do.

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<sup>22</sup> Rickard, Doug. "A New American Picture." Doug Rickard. <https://dougrikkard.com/a-new-american-picture/>.

<sup>23</sup> Wilson, Kristin. "Google Street View: New Technology, New Approaches? New Connections?" Kristin Wilson. November 2015. <https://kristinwilson.com/2015/11/29/google-street-view-and-documentary-photography/>.

<sup>24</sup> COLL.EO. *A New American Dream*. 2014. Digital Video. <https://vimeo.com/88377826>.



Figures 16 & 17 (left and right): Doug Rickard, *A New American Picture*, 2010, digital images from the series *A New American Picture*.

Images from <https://dougrikkard.com/a-new-american-picture/>



Figures 18 & 19 (left and right): COLLEO, *A New American Dream*, 2014-ongoing, digital images from the series *A New American Dream*.

Images from <https://colleo.org/a-new-american-dream#/artwork-20202021/>



Figure 20: COLLEO, *A New American Dream*, 2014, video work with audio from the series *A New American Dream*. <https://vimeo.com/88377826>

I began to reflect on pieces of writing I had created at the beginning of the year in which I wrote about my thoughts about the American Dream in relation to my early research. I picked out phrases that I felt contradicted the ideals of the Dream and overlaid that text on found Google images of iconic American landmarks, including the Statue of Liberty and the Golden Gate Bridge (figs. 21, 22, 23 & 24). Some phrases included “You are not the ideal candidate”, “Unobtainable goals”, and “It’s a fantastical world when you are not residing in it.” These posters resembled those of propaganda works and I gained inspiration from the artistic works of Mark Titchner’s *The Courage to Say No* (2018) and *Beacon* (2016) (figs. 25 & 26), and more vernacular genres, such as Instagram Affirmations (fig. 27) to gain insight into how disjointed text and images can create interesting dialogues and open new conversations around the subject matters they are speaking on. My project had already started to shift into more overt political territories with the appropriation of Donald Trump speeches in the horizon video work as well as my own political views coming into play with the poster works. I began to become more interested in the politics of the found image when working with these posters and felt that the GSV works no longer held my interest when trying to insert my own thematic context within the passive images.

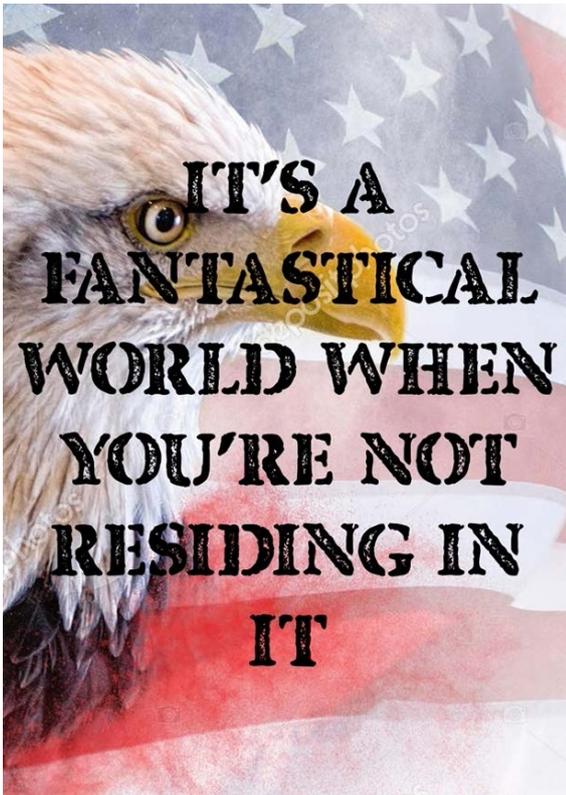


Figure 21 (left): *Fantastical World*, 2021, digital inkjet print, 42 x 59.4 cm.



Figure 22 (right): *Unobtainable Goals*, 2021, digital inkjet print, 42 x 59.4 cm.



Figure 23 (left): *Land of Opportunity*, 2021, digital inkjet print, 42 x 59.4 cm.

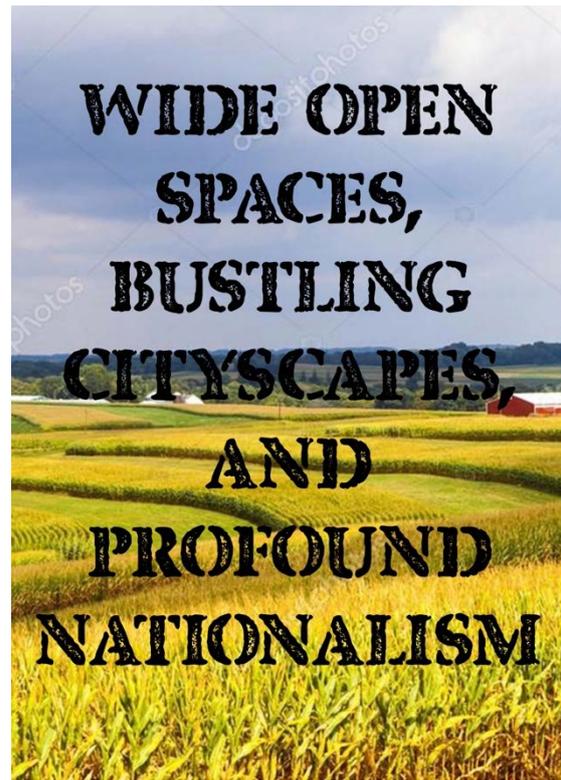


Figure 24 (right): *Wide Open Spaces*, 2021, digital inkjet print, 42 x 59.4 cm.

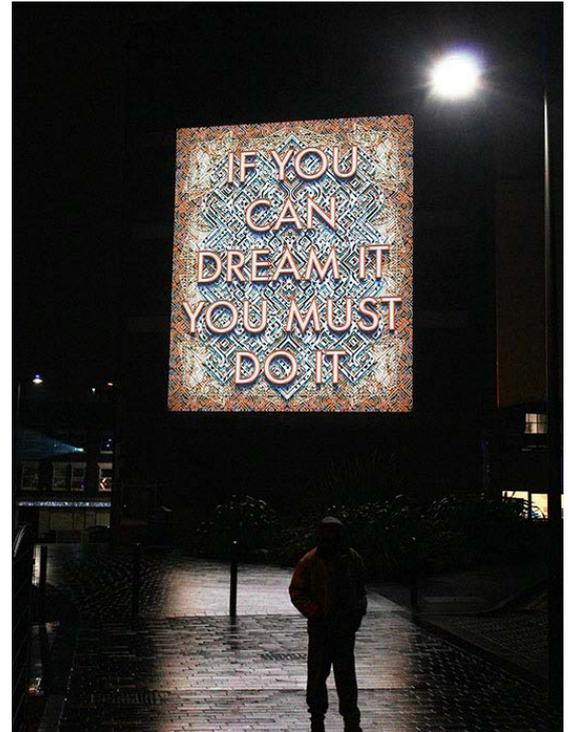


Figure 25 (left): Mark Titchner, *The Courage to Say No*, 2018, digital poster print. Image from <http://marktitchner.com/work/the-courage-to-say-no/>

Figure 26 (right): Mark Titchner, *Beacon*, 2016, digital print on vinyl and LED lightbox. Image from <http://marktitchner.com/work/beacon/>



Figure 27: Screenshot of the Affirmations Instagram page, 2021.

Image from <https://www.instagram.com/affirmations/>

## Chapter 3

### The Alt-Right and Beyond

After the first semester and during the break, I continued to ground my practice in an engagement with the visual culture of the Internet. During this time, I became increasingly interested in the politics of the circulated image in relation to the alt-right Internet sphere. I leaned more into the politics of this American Dream concept through the polarisation of American politics seen through these images. I wanted to uncover and discover what “poor images”<sup>25</sup> were circulating in these spaces and how they aided in the overall communication of political ideas throughout this fringe community. Media artist and researcher Andy King states in *Weapons of Mass Distraction*:

In the digital era, anyone with access to a computer is a graphic designer, and anyone with access to the Internet is a propagandist. It takes less time to manufacture an endless stream of far-right symbols than it does to identify, analyse, detect, and remove them.<sup>26</sup>

As curator and meme researcher Valentina Tanni suggests, by blurring these lines between author and spectator, creator and observer, it ultimately makes participatory culture in these virtual spheres unstoppable and unbreakable.<sup>27</sup> I became fascinated in traversing this digital space to take the time to identify and analyse these images as well as to detect and remove them. Disentangling the images, not in the ways of censorship as King states, but in the context of removing them from their constant circulation to unpack them on a micro level, as if they are small cogs aiding to the movement of a larger, more sinister digital machine. I started collecting and collating found images, memes, and tweets to use as source material for experiments as well as a reference to these digital journeys I was undertaking (fig. 28).

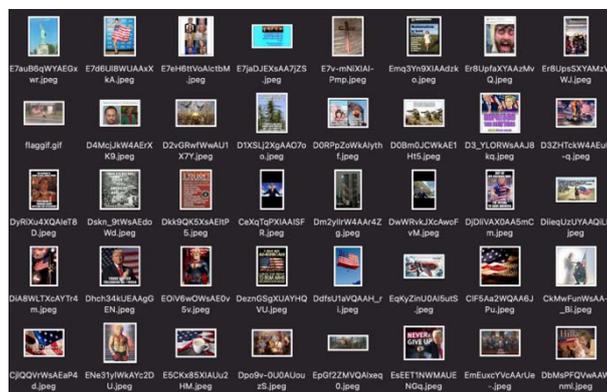


Figure 28: Screenshot of found Facebook, Twitter, and Parler images folder, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Steyerl, Hito. “In Defense of the Poor Image.” *E-Flux*, no. 10 (November 2009). <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

<sup>26</sup> King, Andy. “Weapons of Mass Distraction: Far-Right Culture-Jamming Tactics in Memetic Warfare.” *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, Amsterdam: Institute of Network Culture 2021, 232. <https://networkcultures.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CriticalMemeReader-1.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Tanni, Valentina. “Valentina Tanni: MemesteticA [talk] - The Eternal September of Art.” Lecture presented at MemesteticA, Ljubljana, Slovenia. Video, 49:34. YouTube. Posted by Akisoma - Institute for Contemporary Art, May 21, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHASPBisZvk>.

I undertook a variety of small experiments with this found digital content to unpack the politics of these ‘fragmented images’<sup>28</sup> and started to grasp how these images directly correlated with the division of the American Dream and therefore the political division of the United States. A repeated motif that I observed was the American bald eagle and the American flag within the same picture plane, usually accompanied with text stating, “Freedom Rings” or “America First” (figs. 29, 30, 31, & 32). I wanted to remove these images from the constant digital circulation and bring them into a physical space to be re-assessed, made visible, materialised, and interpreted as such. In August 2021 I created a full wall installation in the ANU Photospace, consisting of more than 200 A4 images of eagles and flags, to see how these images would operate in physical space and how they would be read outside of the digital context (fig. 33). At this point I was no longer operating as a photographer trying to represent the world, I was trying to understand how to ‘represent representation’ – and as such, my practice was developing synergies with an altogether different community of artists engaged with the worldwide web as a cultural form, such as the works of Oliver Laric, Joshua Citarella, and Hito Steyerl (figs. 34, 35, & 36).

#AmericaFirst  
#fact



A little bird joyous tweets  but when the Liberty is under attack all little birds roar together, like lions and eagles 



Freedom Rings   



 GOD BLESS THE USA 



Figures 29, 30, 31, & 32 (all above): Screenshots from found tweets including an image of a bald eagle and an American flag, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Rubinstein, Daniel, ed. *Fragmentation of the Photographic Image in the Digital*. Taylor & Francis, 2019.





Figure 34: Oliver Laric, *Versions*, 2010, video work with audio. <https://vimeo.com/17805188>



Figure 35: Joshua Citarella, *Bravo's Gallery Girls' Angela Pham as Sorority Girl wearing a 'Whole Foods flexfit hat with Hot Topic Hair Extension'* (2012) taking a selfie while burning a Rainbow Crayon protest sign at Occupy Wall St. (Part 1), 2013, digital image.  
Image from <http://joshuacitarella.com/>



Figure 36: Hito Steyerl, *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV file*, 2013, video work with audio. <https://www.artforum.com/video/hito-steyerl-how-not-to-be-seen-a-fucking-didactic-educational-mov-file-2013-51651>

Reflecting on this experiment, I was happy that I undertook this installation but felt that the project needed more curation and artistic intervention, as the images I had collected were printed and hung in a random order. I understood from this project that I needed to have a better grasp on the large digital archive that I was working within and that, similarly to the Google Street View photographs, I needed to put my own context within them even if they already had their own sinister motives. With reifying these forms of online propaganda, I was questioning the motives of online users in their constant circulation of similar forms of imagery. Researchers Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniël De Zeeuw speak on the formulaic intricacies of the “networked image”,<sup>29</sup> stating, “The single meme ... has a concealing function wherein horror is sublimated into humour, and we only become aware of this process when it fails.”<sup>30</sup> Questions arose regarding why it was crucial to extract these images from the digital screen and how that extraction changed the fundamental interpretations of the images themselves, uncovering these politics and intensification of representation.

Having installed these works in the ANU Photospace on the day Canberra suddenly went into lockdown, I found myself returning to questions that I had asked at the initiation of this project: Am I more interested in *making* or *taking* an image? Why is photography the best mode to explore these themes? How is this myth of the American Dream sustained through these politically loaded images and how is the constant circulation of these images keeping the idea of the American Dream equally circulated?

I was finding synergies in the emerging literature around meme culture. As the introduction of the *Critical Meme Reader* suggests:

Does it still matter *what* the image says, or merely *how* it circulates, e.g., how it is effectively operationalised in an informational milieu? But perhaps we should put the question differently: is there *jouissance* in asignification?<sup>31</sup>

I saw, and still see, my practice-led research as a method for understanding this incomprehensible circulation through comprehensible artistic experiments, breaking down the methods of the image and therefore its method of circulation. From this installation, I researched more heavily into memetic culture and the circulation of these images to have a more solid foundation to build upon in my next alt-right Internet journeys. Artistic and contextual research included the online lecture series of Valentina Tanni’s *Memestetica*, including the interviews with artist Joshua Citarella and political subculture researcher Marc

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<sup>29</sup> Rubinstein, Daniel, and Katrina Sluis. “A Life More Photographic: Mapping the Networked Image.” *Photographies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 9–28.

<sup>30</sup> Arkenbout, Chloë, Jack Wilson, and Daniël De Zeeuw. “Introduction: Global Mutations of the Viral Image.” *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, Amsterdam: Institute of Network Culture 2021, 12. <https://networkcultures.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CriticalMemeReader-1.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

Tuters, and the documentary films of *The Great Hack* (2019), *Feels Good Man* (2020), and *After Truth: Disinformation and the Cost of Fake News* (2020).

With more contextual research into how these images and memes worked within a digital context, I dived back into the alt-right Internet sphere to collect more source material to move forward with. I became interested in not only the people that were distributing these political images and text but also how the machine, the computer, was ingesting this information that it was given constantly. Researcher and professor of Communications Jennifer Marmo states in her essay *The American Flag and the body*, “to act against the [American] flag is to act against a virtual body.”<sup>32</sup> Marmo quoted this in 2010, when the likes of Facebook and Instagram were on an upward trend. The topics of digital media were not referenced alongside this quote as she was speaking about the American body as a whole and how the American population acts towards its flag. Yet upon reading this quote, I could not help to draw correlations between this reference of the virtual body with the human body and therefore the digital body. I saw every digital artifact as a piece of the human body that was producing it and ultimately publishing it to the digital world, a souvenir or memento of each user’s deep psyche. This, in turn, starting to trigger interest in understanding the digital body, mentally pictured as some robot body in a similar structure to humans, and how this digital body was understanding the information that it was being fed. What did this digital body look like? Was it evilly gluttonous in receiving this information or was it wounded, bleeding, and yearning for some form of medicine?

With this curiosity into how the machine was reacting towards the digital material it was being given, I created a Twitter bot, named Patriot Chuck, who would take the text materials I had found from my alt-right journeys and create new, disordered tweets that would be put back into the alt-right circulation (figs. 37 & 38). Understanding the political and cultural histories behind the utilisation of bots to sway online users’ views,<sup>33</sup> I was interested in how my Patriot Chuck bot could critique these ideas surrounding digital representation of the online content it was encountering. There is an emerging community of artists working with automated media through bots from Matthew Plummer-Fernández, Shardcore, and Everest Pipkin (figs. 39, 40 & 41). I saw Patriot Chuck as this virtual body that Marmo mentioned, trying to make sense of the information and code that it was given yet still being equally confused by what it had seen. While I understood that Patriot Chuck was not necessarily an artistic experimentation for this project and more like another form of contextual research, I moved forward onto more experimentations that I felt could aid in the deciphering and comprehension of this source material that I was amassing.

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<sup>32</sup> Marmo, Jennifer. “The American Flag and the Body: How the Flag and the Body Create an American Meaning.” *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research* 9, no. 4 (2010): 48. <http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/kaleidoscope/vol9/iss1/4>

<sup>33</sup> Loh, Wulf, Anne Suphan, and Christopher Zirinig. “Chapter Six: Twitter and Electoral Bias.” In *Big Data and Democracy*, 89–103. Edinburgh University Press, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv1453jcx.10>.



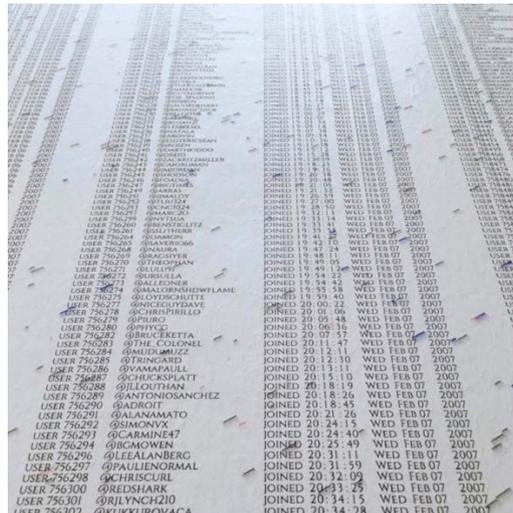


Figure 39: Matthew Plummer-Fernández, *Every User*, 2014, custom software (bot), Twitter API, mural. Image from <https://www.plummerfernandez.com/works/every-user/>



Figure 40: Shardcore, *NK Markov Bot*, 2015. @nk\_markov  
Image from [http://www.shardcore.org/shardpress2019/2015/02/17/nk\\_markov/](http://www.shardcore.org/shardpress2019/2015/02/17/nk_markov/)



Figure 41: Screenshot of Everest Pipkin’s *feelings.js* bot, 2018. @feelings\_js

I started experimenting with the web application of Generative Engine, an artificial intelligent (AI) machine that produces a series of images from text written into the interface. I created multiple video screen recordings, entitled *You Turn Me On I'm a(n Alt-Right Clusterfuck) Machine* (figs. 42, 43 & 44). The title of the work takes inspiration from Joni Mitchell's song of *You Turn Me On I'm a Radio* from 1972, and alludes to the power the machine has over the users that circulate in it as well as the users' influence on corrupting the machine. A contextual reference for these investigations was the Microsoft AI bot Tay, a Twitter bot created in 2016 to ingest the content of online users and compose its own tweets<sup>34</sup>, not dissimilar to my Patriot Chuck bot. Instead of being an optimistic perspective into daily online communication, users intentionally went out of their way to pollute the bots mind with degrading material. This project relates to my video works by showing both the force of the machine and the users who understand and ultimately abuse the machines capabilities.

The videos I've made comprise of the Generative Engine responding to found text and tweets from my alt-right journeys where I would repeat, renew, slice, and echo certain words or phrases that were in a single sentence. The engine would build upon each image that it had created in the same way that I would build upon each word or phrase that I was inserting into it. As media scholar Martin Lister argues:

Instead of focusing attention upon the photograph as the product of a specific mechanical and chemical technology, we need to consider its technological, semiotic, and social hybrid-ness; the way in which its meanings and power are the result of a mixture and compound of forces and not a singular, essential and inherent quality.<sup>35</sup>

I played with these ideas of repetition and stagnancy in the text in a similar fashion to the eagles and flags installation, wanting to pull this material from the constant circulation of the screen. Yet this time, instead of the audience or viewer ingesting the material, the machine was re-ingesting it and reacting. The machine and I were equal collaborators in these video pieces and I was enabling the machine, the virtual body, to speak upon the material that it had been given over and over again when previously it had not been given the platform to do so.

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<sup>34</sup> Lee, Dave. "Tay: Microsoft issues apology over racist chatbot fiasco." *BBC News*, March 25, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-35902104>.

<sup>35</sup> Lister, Martin. "Introductory Essay: Photographic Meanings." In *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, by Eugene C. Lister, 11. edited by Martin Lister. Routledge, 1995.

There sho



Figure 42: #COVID Mandates, 2021, from the video series *You Turn Me On I'm A(n Alt-Right Clusterfuck) Machine*, video work with audio. <https://youtu.be/xQhNMCPk0>

Is that t

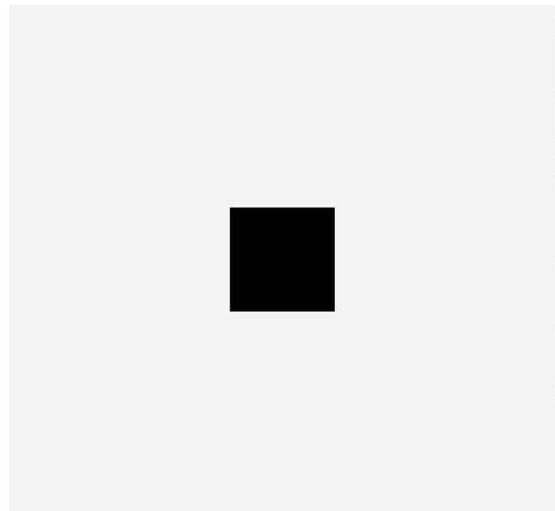


Figure 43: *CNN*, 2021, from the video series *You Turn Me On I'm A(n Alt-Right Clusterfuck) Machine*, video work with audio. <https://youtu.be/ROkJetOiQDc>

Mass non compli

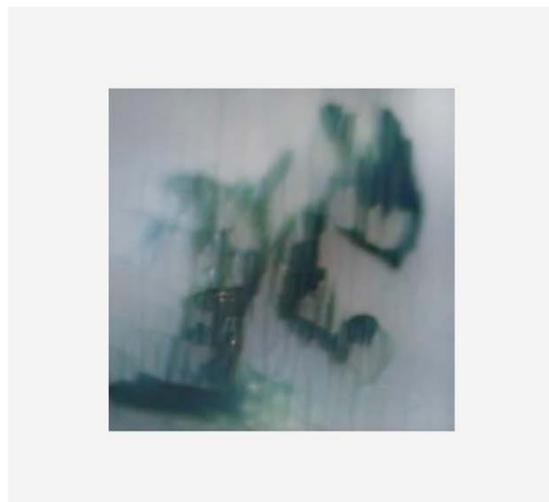


Figure 44: *Mass Non Compliance*, 2021, from the video series *You Turn Me On I'm A(n Alt-Right Clusterfuck) Machine*, video work with audio. <https://youtu.be/rxAtzAPpgVQ>

## Conclusion

At this point, it is worth tracing back to the journey I have taken over the course of this year. I began in the world of 20<sup>th</sup> century representation grounded in ideas of cinema and modernist photography and have travelled to a point now where I have shed old ideas about my practice to confront new methods to engage with contemporary image culture more broadly. I was first relating my work to 20<sup>th</sup> century canonical photographers and Google Street View documentarians and now am working amongst artists who work within understanding media culture such as Joshua Citarella and Matthew Plummer-Fernández. I began the project anticipating that the American Dream could be grasped through the virtual navigation of Route 66, and that all I needed to do was uncover it through a screenshot. Having undertaken this body of theoretical and practice-based investigations, I am beginning to conclude that fracturing of the photographic image parallels the fracturing of the Dream and all its naive standpoints.

My Honours project, over this year, has shifted from idealistic photographs which combined traditional models of documentary practice with digital environments. My practice has shifted radically by engaging with the contemporary landscape of the political meme in the same ways in which the concept of the American Dream has transformed from idealistic to parasitic. My project has investigated two distinct areas of research, being the fragmentation of the image and the fragmentation of the American Dream in relation to the United States today. The fragmentation of the image began with my exploration into the contemporary visual language of America and was ultimately resolved with my investigation into memetic culture and the use of AI technology. The idealistic boundaries in which Frontier photographs and the likes of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston built up have slowly been teared down with the incorporation of the digital image in relation to screen, algorithm, and the ability to manipulate and circulate images, rendering an equally seductive image-world which is colonising Facebook and other platforms.

The significance of this work is that it opens new questions regarding how political disjunction is represented through memetic networks and how these networks can shape political viewpoints, it considers new ways of working with digital images and networked systems, and it confronts this fragmentation of the image by exposing its rupturing. In the process I have had to learn how to adapt with the ever-changing circulatory Internet-sphere and its fast-paced production of images, comprehend how to showcase this production through physical investigations, and learn to work with and against the virtual machine. Reflecting on this process, I now understand that there are a multitude of ways in which one can showcase this fracturing of both the image and the American Dream as well as understanding the power that the digital image holds in today's physical and virtual society. With the storming of the U.S. Capital, rapidly growing anti-vaccination movement, and political radicalisation fuelled by Trump, images in this circulatory system hold egregious contextual meaning whilst generating vast political transformations. Moving forward, this work has changed my practice due to my ability to shed my modernist viewpoints on

photography and embrace into the peculiarities of the poor, bastardised, ubiquitous networked image. I remain interested the alt-right Internet's utilisation of the circulated meme further and specifically how the digital machine interacts and reacts with the content that it is being fed. New questions which are emerging are: What power does this circulated image truly hold? Does the image itself understand the conceptual weight that it brings? How can I showcase either the acceptance or the submission to its power that the image is undergoing?

This synthesis of the concept of the image and the concept of the American Dream has become evidently clear throughout my practice-led research project with their simultaneous rise and fall. When the image is built up so is the American Dream and when the American Dream is brought down and altered into nothing more than a capitalistic template that is not exactly one size fits all, so is that of the image. Although the image can be altered and shaped to one's own personal liking, the notion of the American Dream, in which it has had centuries to be conceived, does not seem to have the same malleability. The American Dream is still rigid in its process; the only change in its timeline has been the alterations from pure and splendid equalities to materialistic billboard advertisement and now, in today's current climate, possibly nothing more than an engraving on a headstone.

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