EVERYONE HAS THEIR PRICE

An NFT Novel

Mark Amerika

ARTISTbooks

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You never really know what makes a particular thing go viral, Zeke thought, *especially when half your waking life is going up in a cloud of cushy smoke.*

Soon after the Meme Fairy had unexpectedly tagged Zeke's NFT art collective, The Maker Fakers, the most sexy-hot multimedia art group in the ever-expanding Metaverse, the COVID-19 virus demanded everybody go into immediate self-isolation.

The lockdown came swiftly and the world as we knew it was coming to grips with the fact that, except for the bravest of frontline workers, most creatives operating from their souped-up computers would quickly become homebound for an indefinite period of time.

To spend time outside was to risk catching the killer bug that would wipe out millions of their fellow Earthlings.

This was especially true for the entire art collective, half of whom were immunocompromised.

In an ironic twist of fate, the shelter-in-place requirements presented The Maker Fakers with an entirely new set of operational parameters that would enable their reputation to take off like there was no tomorrow.

Like the virus that constrained them, they too became so contagious it was as if nobody could effectively stop them.

In no time at all they found themselves totally humbled by the Metaverse's universally positive response to their multimedia NFTs (non-fungible tokens) stored on the blockchain solidifying their art historical presence as a digital form of provenance.

The mythological narrative powering their collective reputations had evolved so fast, the group had a go-to phrase for everything happening to them: 10X.

It was a 10X NFT world, an accelerationist form of aesthetic capitalism that, out of nowhere, turned a distributed network of gifted digital artists into financial instruments pegged to the cryptocurrency of choice, Ethereum.

From Here to Ethernity, was one of the first NFT collections they released, referencing the early 20th century "pataphysician" Alfred Jarry who once described his art practice as an investigation into "the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments."

The Maker Fakers were self-aware of their art historical moment and yet had no time to dawdle in self-reflection.

The social media networks demanded their undivided attention and so they maintained "virtual presence" day in and day out.

In fact, every day started with an early greeting to their extended fan base:

gm

(as in Good Morning)

and for The Maker Fakers whose creative lives had been swallowed whole by the 10X NFT world, it was *always* a good morning.

But it also made things weird.

Like, why did anyone care about what they had to say about COVID-19 or, for that matter, any given social justice issue that happened to be trending in the Metaverse?

Especially given the fact that the endgame for all of this viral fatalism was obviously just more incinerated data sent to the Silicon Securitate's burial grounds.

As a group, they were stuck in an old-school progressive vibe, one that felt an obligation to maintain a high degree of transparency within their Network Milieu.

Collectively, in interview after interview, they would share their misgivings about the whole entrepreneurial enterprise they had accidentally created deep in the heart of the digitally inflected Super Brand Attention Economy.

True, they were marketing themselves as a 24-hour a day NFT art-making machine, incessantly updating their mental status via a variety of rants and barbs through the various social media platforms they had at their disposal, but weren't they also becoming part of the privileged class of global citizens whose livelihoods were way above those whose suffering was randomly distributed among the infected?

Every day and night, and well into the wee hours of the still-to-come morning, in addition to letting their army of Super Fans know that none of them had succumbed to the virus, they would schedule periodic information updates detailing why they thought it was ridiculous that the aesthetically pleasing yet critical media art products they were continually releasing on the blockchain could all of a sudden gain maximum visibility in the Super Brand Attention Economy controlled by the ruling elite's totally rigged PR machine.

This proprietary Web 2.0 PR media apparatus that ran 24 hours a day and their participation in it as the latest digital media sensation trying to justify their existence, was a kind of existential dilemma from which they never really wanted to awake.

It was that *good*.

When you come right down to it, one of their customized media bots would flash-post to their Network Milieu, *the sick rich fucks who control the economy are more than happy to watch us transform our collective digital art shtick into more processed goop to feed to the consumer masses*.

What we really need is a revolutionary movement, one that will strike fear in the ruling class, a banner ad would attach itself to their latest flash-posts and, if you clicked on it, it would take you to a page that had a list of links to the various platforms where their NFT wares were listed as well as instructions for registering for their customized news subscription services.

Their Avant-Pop rage was heartfelt and the digital files they kept generating were tailored for a cluster of targeted collector markets.

The most popular NFT artworks they had created, the ones that sold for a small fortune, simultaneously exhibited a unique aesthetic sensibility, a strategically situated conceptual framework *and* an outright disdain for the ruling elite not to mention the influential media machine that had paradoxically enabled their startup group to become a household name in the first place.

This strange incoherency of being avant-garde digital art stars circulating in a Crypto Bro economy, made it all too easy for their critics to suggest that *the artists themselves* were foolish pawns, ignoramus prey who were easily being exploited to participate in a pyramid scheme that was part of a sinister global conspiracy.

This constant attack from the quick-triggered, finger-pointing, social media intelligentsia forced them to question their collective self-identity as a loosely stitched together artistic movement.

The more they shared these misgivings with their Super Fan collectors, the huger they became.

The thing is, they too were the intelligentsia, the *creative* intelligentsia weaned on computational processes and social justice issues, and they were happy to engage.

Still, they were artists, and as artists, they were always challenging themselves to go deeper, to find ways of intermingling with whatever adjacent possibilities were manifesting at any given moment in time.

If only they could have just ignored the repercussions of their sudden rise to alterna-friendly fame and fortune and accept it for what it was, they might have been able to quickly fade

from view and let the money junk machine do its damage while enriching their bank accounts.

But no, they had to *overshare* their feelings about it all, and this TMI vibe fed right back into their brand as *rockonomic NFT superstars*.

The truth is that they couldn't stop themselves from speaking their minds: they were too intellectually engaged with theories on the political economy and the dire effects of the innovation agenda sponsored by the "creative industries" to shy away from responding to what was happening all around them.

Besides, they knew the debilitating effects of the so-called creator economy more than anybody *because they were the ones creating it*.

And what about COVID-19?

In some ways, it was the most devastating betrayal the Non-God of Neoliberal Control could have ever imposed on them.

In other ways, it was manna from heaven.

The Maker Fakers, and all of their digitally infused, existential, artistic kin, had never been so productive.

And as much as they hated to admit it, each one of the collective's artists, to a person, persistently scanned the virtual environment for cultural trends inside the Metaverse that they could exploit for their own financial gain.

Who could really blame them, especially given all the bullshit they had to put up with as digital artists struggling to survive under the dictates of Web 2.0 and its concomitant surveillance capitalism?

Early on in their careers, as a posse of jacked-up code junkies, the band had concocted a scheme to independently program a user-friendly e-commerce solution for themselves, *as artists*, on their own terms, using the WWW as the vehicle to power all of their transactions.

By customizing their vertically integrated audio-visual products through their various thought channels, they could not only control the supply of whatever they happened to be creating directly for their distributed audiences, they could also display an alternative model of community building that would bring like-minded creative types into the fold while simultaneously generating more revenue streams than they could have ever imagined.

Being digital, being creative, being business savvy—it was all part of a fast spreading communicable disease circulating throughout their Network Milieu.

It was an emergent form of decentralized finance.

It was a psychically reconfigured mode of speculative realism.

It was capitalism *after* capitalism.

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*We are the multitudes, all colors, genders and ethnicities,
orientations and disorientations, inventing the future...*

That was yet another algorithmically generated banner ad
slogan that was trending on their feed and, in yet another
twist of irony, it wasn't being pushed by one of their NFT
soulmates but actually came from the Big State University.

The ad was clearly trying to convince potential students to go
into debt in pursuit of a degree that would temporarily enable
them to paper over the disadvantages their socio-economic
inadequacies had unfortunately saddled them with.

The way the network was structured, every click on the
ad produced more income for The Maker Fakers and the
numbers were starting to become significant now that remote
learning was the only way for a hard-luck digital worker bee
to get credentialed.

The ad itself was blatant false advertising, a not-too-subtle remix of Walt Whitman and something that easily could have been the mantra belched by a mainstream software firm or razor blade company.

As a message, it was empty in meaning yet somehow conveyed a kind of Gen-Zen certainty, and made Zeke feel as if the algorithmic regime that powered the social imaginary had incisively cut to the quick of *exactly* who their core audience members actually were.

No wonder their Super Fans were taking the clickbait and launching a new browser tab that would suddenly reveal the opportunities afforded by enrolling in a Professional Master's Degree Program in Web3 and Decentralized Software Protocols.

And then what?

Each and every member of The Maker Fakers was well aware of the pervasive inequities that afflicted their extended fan base and thought, "But there for the grace of God go I."

Even though they were all atheists and figured their sudden success had less to do with God and more to do with dumb luck.

That, and the well-timed distribution of their resonant critical media art products now transformed into a continuous stream on non-fungible love letters to whoever wanted to *buy in*.

The fact that the Big State University was now nothing more than an e-commerce corporate enterprise cross-dressing in the Post-P.C. clothing of late-to-the-game "diversity, equity and inclusivity excellence," played right into the collective's own self-absorbed rationalizations and pseudo-avant-garde entrepreneurial spirit.

But what message, Zeke kept asking himself, *is the university's online banner ad* really *trying to convey?*

As Zeke was asking himself this question, he decided to try and answer it for both his own sanity and for the benefit of those who hung on his every virtual word.

He fed some lines into the Meta Remix Engine he had recently trained on his own voluminous output of creative and critical writing, so that it would flash-post random thoughts back into the Metaverse:

Anybody, *no matter their race, ethnicity or chosen gender, can borrow money and pursue their customized version of the American Dream,* the Meta Remix Engine, posing as Zeke, flash-posted to his social media feed.

But why go that route, the Meta Remix Engine continued in the follow up post, *when you know in your heart of hearts that the most important thing you can do is **teach yourself** to navigate the oligarchy's bureaucracy so that you can then creatively deconstruct it from within?*

And then, since he was duly disturbed by the ad's implications and felt he had to signal some kind of difference, Zeke tweaked the Meta Remix Engine's code just a bit so that it now posted a time-delayed jolt of stoner-philosopher repartee a mere thirty minutes later:

The creative spirit that attaches itself to the spread of a viral language capable of infecting the biosemantic presence of every human being is the latest incarnation of the anarchic *spirit.*

These flash-posts generated by the Meta Remix Engine were variations of Zeke's own potential thought process and were often transmitted to his Super Fan base after he had eaten a potent THC edible and was already fast asleep.

Did it really matter who or what was posting these random thoughts to his Network Milieu?

Through innate programming not his own, Zeke had trained himself to become a kind of psychic automaton, a spontaneously erupting poet cum intermedia artist tapping into his unconscious creative potential, and the outputs of the

Meta Remix Engine, even when mashed-up with data scraped off the Metaverse, was really just another version of himself, a forever morphing persona-in-the-making, so what did it mean "to be present" anyway?

As with most things in his life, he was there but not there.

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Now that the collective's digital wallets had more crypto-currency than they knew what to do with, things were getting tricky for both Zeke and everyone else in the group.

Once the ruling elite's PR media machine had successfully taken their story away from them and converted their collective personae into maximum brand hype, The Maker Fakers found themselves on a different mission.

Now they were trying to manage the fire that they had unwittingly started, hoping for something more along the lines of a controlled burn.

The idea was to manipulate the shape-shifting media narrative so that they wouldn't totally disappear from the scene but, at the same time, would not be burdened by its insatiable demands to always produce something new, something *better*.

Easier said than done, however, because the time was ripe for a story like theirs to suddenly appear and the moment demanded perpetually new NFT releases that always and forever pointed to both short-term and long-term revenue growth.

THE MAKER FAKERS: HOW AMERIKA'S MOST POPULAR AVANT-POP NFT BAND TURNED SELF-QUARANTINE INTO AN ART-MAKING MACHINE, read the headline on *Wireless*, one of the most popular websites focused on art, technology and the NFT era.

This meant that if they hoped to take advantage of The Moment, to be both Real Dudes with Spiritual 'Tudes as well as money-wise opportunists surrounded by bored digital apes ready to drop some serious ETH on their meta-remix artware, they would have to allow themselves to *be* taken advantage *of*.

Take advantage of the fact that they want to take advantage of you, was how Zeke rationalized it in his mind even as he checked himself and realized that he did not want to be rational nor did he feel it necessary to take advantage of anything but the time he had left on Planet Oblivion to keep making art while slow-sliding into myriad instances of THC-induced blissed out pleasure.

Isn't that always the rub? Zeke often thought to himself.

*My capital is time, not money—**creative** time—the longue durée.*

And what better way to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic then to just have the whole group collectively self-isolate and conjure up new art products from their networked studio mind?

But the Web 2.0 axis of evil kept asking for more in return.

He referred to this all-encompassing axis of evil as the Apparatus and the ongoing love-hate relationship he had with it was something beyond his control.

Give the Apparatus an inch, and it will take your entire reason for living, he would flash-post, another dab of commiseration for his Network Milieu who ate it up from the end of a long digital spoon.

Who comprised the core audience for their massive line of digital products?

The demographics were all over the place, but the data analytic firm the artists had hired to help them answer that question suggested that their core collectors consisted of two primary market segments: retro-punk coolios coalescing around The Future Now whose progressive agenda was driven by a high-minded political rhetoric focused on creating a

more equitable and greener world powered by decentralized finance, and a parallel pack of anarchist troublemakers, artists like themselves who permeated the NFT-curious contemporary art scene and who had always wanted to deconstruct the administrative state.

The latter group had recently been dubbed the No Futurists who were often misidentified as members of The End Timers though all of these market segments had considerable overlap and could temporarily merge into one another depending on how rampant the COVID-19 virus was spreading throughout their community.

Talk about a deeply self-contradictory demographic!

These were a kind of Political End Times, a space of mind where you could march with your brothers and sisters telling the world Black Lives Matters and Fuck the Police while leaning on the FBI to put these crazy-ass White Supremacists in prison for crashing the neoliberal gates.

How did it all come to this?

Zeke saw the fissures growing inside the collective itself, one minute donning their Future Now visionary goggles, the next buying into a No Futurist aesthetic that would tear down the entire foundation of orderly society.

Could they, not just the artist collective but also their Super Fans and collector base composed of like-minded digital brethren, simultaneously embrace both an imaginary state of social-utopian extremism *and* a dark dystopian fuck-all view of life on Planet Oblivion?

Welcome to my world, thought Zeke, and then, another idea popped into his head:

Could The Maker Fakers design a new NFT collection around that very self-contradictory material dialectic, a compilation of music video artworks constructed as looping 3D animations featuring their hard-bop poetic vocals, undulating sexy beats and machinic guitar riffs tearing the soul to shreds?

Hell yes, it played right into their profound feelings of hopelessness sandwiched in between a heightened state of Imaginary Zen Presence and the uncanny sense that, in order to survive, one must continually anticipate the future perfect as a way to envision the next wave of creativity coming.

In fact, it had occurred to them all that their ongoing mash up of the utopian Future Now and the No Future present was what it meant to be visionary geniuses perfecting the art of metamorphic mythmaking.

Who needed data visualization when one had the power to embody shape-shifting forms of prophetically charged *creative* visualization?

Is that not how they had recently minted their algorithmically generated oracular prophecies?

A recent issue of *NFT TIME* had another cover story headline that simply read: "Are The Maker Fakers Reincarnated Prophets of the Techno-Sublime?"

It was as if they had written that headline themselves and, in some inexplicable circuitous way, maybe they did.

Besides, this was what The GIFS 6.0 network demanded of its artists.

GIFS 6.0: a place for all demographics to intertwine their Post-Apocalyptic nerve endings.

The Omniscient Spy State Economy, where just about everybody role-played either social media marketer, data analyst, demographic detective, mood miner, content creator, ad writer, digital touch-up artist and/or oppositional researcher—and the most ambitious would role-play every position *all at once*—was more commonly known as GIFS 6.0, short for Global Intelligence Filter System 6.0.

And for The Maker Fakers, operating under the GIFS 6.0 dominion, there was no longer any question that it was their duty as artists to totally fuck that shit up.

They knew they needed to keep their aberrant product line totally fresh as a way to monetize their presence in the Metaverse, and the only way they could do that was to create clever counterintelligent algorithms that would generate nonstop fictional artworks whose aesthetic currency modeled new ways of being-in-the-world.

For most digital artists, collectors and Super Fans, being-in-the-world was code for *living with the virus*.

No one in the world was ever truly immune, so who else but these renegade Midwestern American artists, presently identifying themselves as The Maker Fakers, were ideally positioned to play the role of psychic intermediaries filtering the money-junk-noise of their plagued consumer culture into mind-altering rhythms, sliced beats and infectious lyrics embedded in stunning video art jams that rewrote the recipient's code of subjectivity into something Other?

At times overpoweringly erotic, politicized, surreal and electrified with a mesmerizing multimedia language charged to the utmost possible degree, how else were dissident artists to express their anti-establishment energy?

COVID-19, a universal code for being susceptible to sudden death or disability, might have positioned itself as a contagious media event instantaneously rendering everyone's life totally meaningless, but it also pointed to an inescapable underlying condition: being-in-the-world was an opportunity to be creative, and being opportunistic as a remotely activated NFT artist was a way of monetizing presence.

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Of course, that's not what the band of bros were thinking when they first started pursuing this uninsured dream of artistic success and had loaded up their gear into two Prius EV convertibles so they could tear across the midsection of the USA en route to the promised land: Colorado.

By now their startup story was already historicized in all of the alternative magazines but was beginning to get serious journalistic play in the mainstream corporate media as well.

It had been only a few years ago when these buzz-thirsty nobodies first took off for greener pastures.

Once they had crossed the Kansas border into Colorado, they immediately stopped at the first recreational weed shop they came across in Limon.

The shop, Leaves of Grass, was like a vision from some long forgotten book of psychedelic prose poems, and they couldn't believe their eyes.

Although they were all living on their last paychecks from the Amazon warehouses and coffee shop chains they had been working at in Ohio, they had no problem taking out their credit cards and buying packaged slabs of organic vegan Kosher Kush brownies to start the next phase of their journey through this post-university, debt-ridden hellhole they thought of as Life on Planet Oblivion.

They too had bought into some cheesy university promise to convert their media savvy information behaviors into well-paying jobs in the attention economy, gigs that would one day enable them to rule the universe with their quasi-disruptive thoughts and trendy technological devices.

But nothing ever came of it, and once they had graduated and the hungry loan collectors stalked their every socially mediated move, they knew they had been totally played.

Coming to Colorado was like being on a divine mission, one where they were going to take command of their own destiny and seek out a new way of being, a new way of *being programmed*, one where *they would program themselves* to generate the perfect combination of algorithmic scripts

that would automate their endless creative productivity and transform them into Contemporary Art Gods.

To begin with, while driving across the Kansas-Colorado border, they decided to participate in a group thought experiment, one where they would self-consciously discuss digital "ways of being."

Zeke started the conversation by introducing a new take on the concept of work, one that the band would transform into an embodied form of collective *praxis* powered by their intuitive minds syncing with the machinic unconscious of the Meta Remix Engine.

The collective's constantly updated version of work would cease being work at all and become a religious form of *play*.

Tapping into their internetworked intuition and the sheer improvisational energy of their love of play, the group would practice this imaginary religion by consuming huge amounts of ganja, organic superfoods and social media hype.

Staring into their screens would require an intellectual immersion into what they envisioned as the digital afterlife.

Exactly how they would pursue the digital afterlife, zoned out on edible weed while nomadically circulating in the

Metaverse, and how it would converge with their conceptual business plan, was the furthest thing away from their minds.

Let the weed take care of that, Zeke had thought as they first started dallying in the possibility of pursuing a personal philosophy of permanent autonomy and ontological anarchism as an escape hatch that would somehow free them from the Apparatus.

How to free oneself from the Apparatus while staring at a screen all day would require them to develop one of the most sophisticated AI models ever created.

This AI model, the Meta Remix Engine, would perpetually train itself on their own aesthetic sensibilities, both individually and as an NFT artist collective, and produce more groundbreaking works of art than they could even begin to imagine.

Or so that was the plan.

Fuck work, mumbled Zeke, and *fuck Web 2.0*.

Everyone nodded in agreement and started plugging away at the AI software development.

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Sitting in a nondescript bedroom inside America's Best Hotel Option, they ate the first few packages of Indica-laced brownies like there was no yesterday and began imagining themselves as pioneering artists of The NFT Rush who had successfully left behind their mediocre lives in the dreary Midwest.

Now they were about to begin living the kind of life their hippy ancestors could have only dreamed of.

It's common sense that if you really want to be creative, the first thing you need to do is catch a monster buzz—

—one or two or three or all four of them thought at the same time.

In the spirit of all the lifelong stoners—college students experimenting with alternative lifestyles, working class stiffs looking to get their end-of-the-day edges off, touring jazz players, and the centuries of radical artist loners and other social misfits who came before them—they baked their brains in hopes of assuaging the mental aches and pains that seemed to always come with late-stage capitalism's ruthless operating system.

Within four hours of having eaten all of the brownies, the group was crawling inside the deep interior forest of darkest dead sleep.

Once they woke up in the hotel room, they realized they had lost not one, but two whole days, and they started looking around their immediate area for a cheap place to live.

In less than three days, they were renting a beat up ranch house up on a low mesa overlooking an unincorporated swath of land on the Eastern Plains, far away from the Colorado Front Range where the cannabinoid sophisticates of Denver shared Thai Stick joints with the heady intellectuals and social media entrepreneurs of Boulder.

They had bigger fish to fry, or so they had convinced themselves.

How could they have possibly known that a mere three months later the entire globe would be rising up the curve of peak panic in conjunction with the first wave of COVID-19?

It would have never occurred to them that two years later, well into the pandemic as it still reared its fugly head, they would have created this powerful Meta Remix Engine.

The Meta Remix Engine, a digital combine trained on the collective's internetworked and unconscious neural outputs, was strategically deployed as a cluster of AI models that were quickly learning to communicate with each other.

Its potent outputs would generate a multitude of net art products from an unending series of fictional NFT bands composed of quick change persona artists, everything from The Maker Fakers to Intergalactic Potheads to The Raging Antibodies.

In what seemed like a blaze of fate, the NFT art collective, in all of its various manifestations, would soon become its own kind of unstoppable Apparatus.

Looking back, it didn't take long for their fine-tuned algorithms to auto-compose a seemingly boundless variety of fictitious entities whose perfectly timed market launches made each new release of cleverly remixed video and sound art feel totally fresh and groundbreaking.

The first major version of the artist collective as multimedia NFT band that broke into the contagious meme culture was their original configuration, The Maker Fakers.

The Maker Takers, as they facetiously referred to themselves, had unexpectedly become a huge success story that, like a cosmic vector, took off on an unpredictable trajectory, one that could do no wrong and would only continue to gain momentum.

The M/F kingpins were still the number one NFT art band on all of the *Wireless* charts and this mainstream mojo further

blurred the difference between the artist outsider and the sellout insider—something that was no longer an issue for them or their fans.

Sellouts?

That kind of thinking was *so* 100 years ago.

In the brand name reputation economy fueling the GIFS 6.0 network and its glorious NFT Metaverse, the stoner boys had become all the rage.

Circulating inside the jittery nervous system of their Network Milieu was where they now operated, forevermore.

But now when?

Five, ten, fifteen, twenty years ago?

Fifty years from now?

Time, and the temporal in general, no longer held much heft in the lives of their Network Milieu, and as Zeke would repeatedly say both in his social media feeds and to his fellow band mates, *time no longer has time to become time*.

Timeless time was where the digital artist, suffused in the 10X NFT world, could touch the ineffable.

Besides, the Metaverse ate time as fast as they devoured the Metaverse.

One day they were perfectly toned bachelor boys boxing a pack of organic wolfberries at the Amazon warehouse in exurban Nowheresville, the next day they were in Limon scarfing baked edibles and fine-tuning their premonition algorithms.

In some ways, the Metaverse was where they always were, even when they weren't.

Since the Metaverse was where their ever expanding audience spent all of their passing hours, it became a very normalized way of existing, of feeling connected while signaling to their homies the world over that they too were alive to the touch of The Moment even as it, The Moment, surreptitiously passed them by without anybody recognizing it.

The virus had infected them in more ways than they could account for.

It not only jogged their memory of a socially engaged lifestyle pre-pandemic, it also made them realize that they had indeed become automated machinic forces programmed to constantly express themselves in public.

These automated information behaviors they had been programmed to perform had made them decidedly *nonhuman*, digital artists exhibiting the purest form of intuition a mediumistic being could embody.

Mediumistic beings exhibiting the purest form of intuition in the 10X NFT economy?

This was what it meant to be Newcore.

This is what it meant to be Nowcore.

Immersed in the network space of flows, a wave of mood mining would suddenly reveal itself and in so doing would force the mediumistic being, the NFT artist, to shift mental gears and temporarily unplug from the Metaverse and *actually get something done*.

But even a passing temptation to unplug and temporarily drop out was out of the question for most digital artists since it was obvious to anyone who hoped to survive on Planet Oblivion that *there was no way out*.

THERE IS NO WAY OUT.

THERE IS NO SUCH PLACE AS AWAY.

How many times did they have to say it to reconcile themselves with their permanent state of network mediated codependency?

One thing was for sure: even if such a thing as an original thought or unique witticism dare present itself in the flow of their electronic hypnosis, then it had to be flash-posted, immediately, to measure its network value.

This constant need to share every aspect of one's emotional neuroticism by way of unconscious information behaviors was part of the psychic continuity embodied in the entire artist collective.

It was how they, this work-in-process identifying itself as The Maker Fakers or Intergalactic Potheads or some other iteration still yet to come, were able to convert their viral multimedia art into potent forms of aesthetic currency.

With their tip-top algorithms minting and listing a plethora of mind-blowing NFTs 24/7, they were able to generate more revenue than they could keep track of, and the last few years had speedily passed by without them being able to account for what it was they had actually produced.

Or was it actually decades?

Fifteen minutes of imaginary fame extending into the outer edge of oblivion?

Over time, Time itself began to take on the quality of metaphorical space.

What felt like two years ago all of sudden seemed to spread itself out into the expanding studio galaxy, and what appeared to be happening *now* was actually the disembodied future, a done deal bought and paid for by actuarial artisans of the metaphysical blunt.

Was that last month of electronic hypnosis a total waste or was being wasted exactly what it took to produce the next crop of code that translated into X amount of ETH stroking their impenetrable egos on the go in auto-affect mode?

There were five days inside Sunday alone and then Monday came and went like a flash-post that someone forgot to send.

Like the perpetual "frogs in slowly boiling water" they always were, they never fully grasped the fact that *there was no there, there.*

But even so, they could still scent the oncoming arrival of an unconscious neural jolt that would spur into action their next sequence of information behaviors, a digital mode of existing that could rapidly evolve into the apparition of a network

induced self-image, one that was becoming conscious of its aesthetic tendencies.

Besides, a self-image no longer had time to become a self-image and was nothing more than a random capture of unreconstructed metadata stored in the cloud.

At least the Metaverse was built to enable immediate positive reinforcement for every automated information behavior, and this instantaneous feedback created a sense of self-worth if not an outright validation of one's mode of digital existence.

Regardless, you could always pretend to be focused on achieving a version of authenticity that auto-suggestively measured this projected self-image's relationship to spatial practice in inches, steps, calories, routes, lines, tracks, flash-posts, links, hits, likes, favorites, income, purchases, relationships, memories, impressions, vaccinations, antibodies, codes, synchronicities, vectors, velocities and waves.

Even The Maker Fakers, or whatever they were calling themselves these days, sensed a collective need to authenticate the silence.

This is exactly what made their experience of living like NFT Rock Stars more unnerving than their many followers could even begin to imagine.

The psychotropic drugs they kept eating obliterated all sense of conventional time and this worked perfectly in tandem with the asynchronous tendencies of the Metaverse's obliteration of being-in-the-world, which then led to bouts of hyperproductivity followed by deep, long crashes.

Even the idea of a 24-hour round-the-clock circadian rhythm had somehow dissipated into an antipodal upside-down cake filled with a chimerical cream lighter than air.

Who now what when?

It was as if their brains were permanently plugged into the GIFS 6.0 network and it, the Apparatus, was unconsciously coding the most perfect deep fake of a utopian future gleaming in virtual light.

And yet who cared if it was really nothing more than a passing fad, a collectively generated consensual hallucination made-for-cyberpunk iPhone TV?

For now, it was the closest approximation to immersing oneself in a globally distributed, network-synchronized, group meditation, albeit one that was always on the verge of becoming nothing but disembodied remote practice drifting in and out of teleconferenced technodreams powered by the designer drugs that were always there in the background producing a neural warp effect, even when not.

The actual artwork was being auto-composed in the bowels of their air-conditioned server farm housing the Meta Remix Engine.

One thing about being a digital artist, Zeke would riff to the others soon after the newest edible had started taking effect, *is that as much as I swear an allegiance to the conceptual and aesthetic qualities of my work, so much of what I do is driven by whatever random techniques I happen to acquire while tinkering with the programming languages I interact with.*

And yet it was precisely those techniques and all the attendant tinkering that inevitably led to the breakthrough code that eventually programmed the machine to keep delivering the goods, *to keep the band in business*.

Completely losing track of time, they had become expert programmers who developed ace scrape-bots that would scour the net for choice bits of data that they would then appropriate and automatically feed into the Meta Remix Engine.

This enabled the Meta Remix Engine to keep cranking out a steady stream of new NFTs, digital art collections that all the Super Fans in their Network Milieu could buy piecemeal or, if they were smart and wanted to get the best bang for their buck, hoard it whole.

The idea of an ethically conscious gang of NFT creators digitally fabricating original works of art had become transformed into the algorithmic performance of a data-drunk doppelgänger whose virtual incarnation was the more formidable Meta Remix Engine.

Generating an endless stream of anonymous or pseudo-nymous personae vis-à-vis the Meta Remix Engine was their version of what Zeke had termed their *identity burn rate*.

Thanks to their expertly concocted algorithms, the Meta Remix Engine started churning out a series of well-paced launches featuring dozens of different digital art bands.

Each band was generated as a uniquely configured NFT art sensation, one that came with its own mythological lineage linked to the secret histories of earlier unknown artist collectives they had supposedly been influenced by.

Each iteration of the digital art collective would release a new collection of audio-visual NFTs like nothing ever seen or heard before.

As part of their complex compositional strategy, the group spent countless hours programming the Meta Remix Engine to build a parallel PR intelligence that the collective referred to as the MFA Turk.

The MFA Turk was a machine-learned expert at creating each new iteration of the collective's PR campaign as well as assorted bios and a random cluster of avant-garde art lineages composed as fictional histories.

These fictional histories were created via a proficient set of algorithmic procedures that were, to their minds, all part of this massive transmedia narrative that they were in the process of inventing as their ultimate collaborative work of art, or what they conceived as a **An Auto-Generative Gesamtkunstwerk** mythologized through the power of brand essentialism.

The process was iterative: a new digital art collective with four members would be auto-generated by assigning new names and bios as part of a larger PR campaign to promote a fictional narrative tailor-made for meme culture.

With each new iteration of the collective and its concomitant social media feeds and streaming channels, the group would turn to the MFA Turk embedded in the Meta Remix Engine to help them advertise a heavy historical lineage of heretofore undiscovered precursors whose own underappreciated yet previously unearthed classic works of audio-visual art would then also be released into the Metaverse for the very first time so that those Super Fans looking to follow the evolution of the NFTs *aesthetic* provenance could tap into a variation of its (purely fictionalized) art historical origins.

Each of these made-up precursor artist collectives came with their own accompanying bios thus generating yet more breaking news about how their relative obscurity over the years had now been totally rediscovered...news that made news that *made money*.

Follow the evolution: follow the money.

Auto-composing a new fictional narrative around a totally made-up digital art collective while strategically situating that very same collective within a credible art historical lineage required a certain degree of programming complexity that even the most mindful sophisticates of the GIFS 6.0 elite had difficulty recognizing.

Truth be told, the *early* success of The Maker Fakers, who were now foregrounding their reputation under the moniker Intergalactic Potheads, depended on exploiting *real* MFA Turks.

This was before the badass boys figured it was well worth investing tons of time and energy training the Meta Remix Engine to *train itself* to create an artificial PR intelligence that would automate the branding work for them.

In the beginning (and doesn't every biblical story start "In the beginning"?), the band mates were equal opportunity exploiters, paying poor MFA creative writing graduates a little

bit above the minimum wage to write interminable feeds of "sponsored content" that converted their various art products into mythical stories that would drive the kind of free media attention the collective would need to generate more crypto collectors to their caravan of NFT drops.

Free media was *earned* media and they collectively convinced themselves that they were entitled to anything they earned, so it must all be legit, right?

True, they were quite capable of writing these brand-friendly mythological narratives and advertorial feeds themselves, but why bother taking up so much of their "intentional down time" when they could cheaply outsource it all to a random network of semi-talented MFA Turks?

It was much easier to transfer 150 Kards (or Kardashian coins) to a wannabe digital poet who, in their own mind, thought of themselves as a "Master of Fine Art" but who was really nothing more than an intellectually overqualified Mechanical Turk.

In those early days, Zeke would often pose online as The Assassin and would instant message an anonymous MFA Turk on rent-a-poet.com sharing a few tidbits of information indicating some of his recent thoughts and pseudo-biographical inclinations and, a few seconds later, send a

follow-up message with a simple question: "Given the info I just sent you, who am I this time?"

"150 Kards if you kill it..."

The next day, after pulling an all-nighter, the MFA Turk would send back the two or three paragraphs they had agreed to write.

But the original MFA Turks were human, by default.

And their dependency on being-human, their lives, their emotions, their desire for better working conditions and sometimes their outright *jealousy* over how successful The Maker Fakers or The Raging Antibodies or Intergalactic Potheads were fast becoming was just too distracting for the band.

So, the band programmed the Meta Remix Engine to create a complementary PR intelligence, an expert language model, that they named the MFA Turk.

The most popular mythological narrative-in-the-making the generative MFA Turk customized for the group was for the first collection of NFTs produced by Intergalactic Potheads.

That collection, *Fatal Error*, received top headline coverage at *Wireless*, something that would not have been possible without their newly automated MFA Turk program.

For that collection, the PR intelligence created an artist bio for Zeke that was both abstract and quirky: Zeke, it ends up, was a Granular Synthesizer.

A more generic version of a Granular Synthesizer would have suggested a new kind of art laborer, someone who used a sound methodology referred to as granular synthesis to focus most of their daily practice stretching very short audio samples into expansive sonic art landscapes.

But this particular bio suggested something much more than that: Zeke, the MFA Turk composed, *was himself becoming the human version of a Granular Synthesizer*.

That is to say that while he was totally comfortable taking the tiniest fragments of sound and stretching them into a durational experience that any seriously stoned out, beard-scratching listener could lose themselves in forever, Zeke was also applying these techniques to his own investigations into eternal youth or what he sometimes referred to as *temporal extension*.

In addition to becoming a Granular Synthesizer, the MFA Turk had created more "Postmodern backstory" for Zeke,

writing that he had come to realize that "the best way to overcome his persistent fear of death was to dig deep into his bio-art investigations and create a genetically modified DNA glitch that would essentially extend his own longevity as an aesthetic agent on Planet Oblivion."

What was the use of cashing in on all of this beautiful Ethereum if all you really had was about 30 or 40 more years to actually enjoy spending it?

According to the MFA Turk, Zeke's ultimate goal was to devise a succinct bio-algorithm that would enable him to outlive his own body's coded destiny, something that would require him to slowly stretch his presence into space as if teasing out the endless potential of timeless time, an immortal frequency forever circulating in the Metaverse.

The new bio (pun intended) expertly compiled by the MFA Turk suggested that Zeke "has this nonchalant way of staying forever current, even as he ages, and as the years wear on, his youth stays with him."

When Zeke read this, he thought, *that's the understatement of the century*.

What century?

Does it matter whether it was 2027 or 2176 or 2290?

(At a certain point, it doesn't matter at all, unless you are reading this during any of those years, in which case you're probably having a good laugh at the author's expense!)

"Like many artistic bio-hackers of his ilk," the MFA Turk continued, "Zeke not only feels younger than he looks (that's actually a retro-20th century character trait, a throwback to the Me Decade in the 1970s!), he actually behaves and performs his material as if he were a man half his age."

Despite the MFA Turk's slightly ridiculous flattery, Zeke knew these lines were only partly exaggerated since his body did still move in a fluid economy of motion and his muscles were taut and strong where needed, so that women one-third of his age would be more than happy to climb his swollen arches.

He didn't even need a wrist bit to tell him how healthy he was at any given hour on any given day.

He could visualize it all in his mind and just let the anti-aging mind-over-matter psychic automatism do all the work *for* him.

This was his unique skill as a self-proclaimed Granular Synthesizer with a particular field of expertise in posthuman life extension.

Or so the MFA Turk had eloquently described all of this in three revised yet still dense paragraphs that he found both self-reflexively humorous and preposterous at the same time.

It was the perfect bio-pitch for the fluid sex patina he was starting to identify with.

The new bio also declared him "one of the leading experts in the field," but what field?

The description simply ended, "Zeke is generally considered one of the leading experts in the field."

Zeke sent the MFA Turk a quick message asking it to be more precise.

The MFA Turk answered back immediately writing "the field is granular synthesis as a scientific investigation into posthuman forms of immortality, but is it necessary to add that at the end?"

It didn't take long for everything to sink in.

Within two days of publishing Zeke's new bio, more people had viewed his profile than any other collective member in their accumulated history, and it quickly became a media meme that then led to interview requests for more information on the code he was developing and whether or

not he thought this research into performance immortality was his ultimate art form, a kind of body art sculpture that examined the shape-shifting oeuvre underlying everything he had already released and *would* release on the blockchain.

The fictional bio was being interpreted as authentically real!

Or else its unique flavor of in-your-face charlatanism was connecting with thousands of delusional narcissists in the Metaverse who wished to find a cure for dying in the age of COVID-19.

The fast spreading media contagion around Zeke's secret life extension DNA art project inevitably led to even more inquiries into his audio-visual experiments and this led to a spate of interviews that linked to many of his higher priced NFTs previously packaged as special artworks compiled by the Intergalactic Potheads.

This then led to more paid ad-free subscriptions to the collective's multitudinous streaming channels as well as big upticks in secondary market sales which translated into more ETH which then led to them all purchasing more delicious, potent, handcrafted THC-drenched organic superfoods that the expertly programmed Amazonian drones would deliver to their doorstep on the far out plains of Colorado.

If this is what it means to be virtual, then I don't ever wanna go back...

*

After the release of *Fatal Error*, each new release came with a value-added PR narrative that would help contextualize whatever audio-visual NFTs happened to be generated by the Meta Remix Engine.

When the collective's generative pre-trained transformers, StyleGANs and AI animation generators were operating at optimum efficiency, the Meta Remix Engine would crank out fresh digital art bands, fresh audio tracks, fresh video animations, fresh JPEGS, fresh press releases, fresh interviews and a never-ending assortment of extended play remixes cleverly distributed on a multitude of NFT marketplaces where their collector base would try to outbid each other and snap the work up leading to continuous revenue streams flowing into their various crypto wallets.

The only thing that could be better than that would be, what?

In the pre-pandemic days of touring bands, author readings and visiting artist presentations, one could expect to encounter a wide range of devoted groupies i.e. a continuous

mélange of superfluid playthings hungry for the chance to share the sexual equivalent of *a full-body like*...but for better or worse, in self-imposed lockdown, the artists knew firsthand that that was not meant to be.

Disappointed though they might have been, the ragtag group of horny toads rationalized that the slumming groupie scene was better situated for the old rock star model way back in the latter part of the 20th century, before the rise of the digital narcissists, dystopian celibates, virtually rendered gender morphs, underemployed *real* MFA Turks and rabid identitarians from all points along the political spectrum not to mention the swarming surveillance agents of the Semio-Securitate monitoring all networked, information and language behaviors enacted by whosoever chose to create an online presence inside the Spy State Economy all this revolutionary NFT action depended on for its economic sustenance.

If you wanted a real live groupie, good luck and think again, or take another hit off the bong or your customized vape pen, because that shit wasn't about to happen.

What *was* about to happen, what was *always* about to happen, was another version of the ludic crew materializing out of virtual air, a fresh iteration of the mashed up data ported through the Meta Remix Engine and eventually fashioned as the mindmeld of a Totally Interdependent Creative Entity

(a human-machine combine) being PR-mythologized under a new moniker like Wonder Ball, The Flaming Emetics, Ivermectin or, as it just so came to be at this moment in time, Intergalactic Potheads.

Like so many other alt-pop sensations, the IGPH homeboys rode the transition from Unknown Artists to "What's this thing everybody is telling me I need to check out?" to Super Viral Network Sensation.

Only clued-in insiders knew that the band operating under the name The Maker Fakers were now also dispersing their work under the names of three or four dozen other fictional band identities, with scores more on the way.

For most of the digital collectors who formed their Super Fan base, all that mattered was that they (whoever they were now) were transmitting a new batch of mescaline rock or freestyle alt-bop or electro-meditative trance vibes with super slick 3D visuals capturing as many eyeballs as possible.

And this was the beauty of the NFT game that the IGPH homies loved most about being alive: they could distribute their work for free, let it easily circulate in the gift economy without caring about who had a copy because the more copies that circulated in the Metaverse—the more aura and visual presence the work attained—the more value it accumulated.

Meanwhile, the fast-moving attention economy would have its final say and assist the artists in building some power-punched meme momentum all the while attracting savvy collectors who wanted to *own* that networked aura.

Now, as their latest digital spells were making the rounds throughout the Metaverse, triggering follow-up transfers of ETH and a few other energy-friendly cryptocurrencies straight into their overflowing bank accounts, all four of the artists had already checked out and were intravenously connected to the slow 8-bit drip of an obsolete 3D VR program that simulated a hidden beach on an unmapped island off the known digital universe.

They had dubbed this secret location Fuck You island, as in "Fuck you, I'm off the grid and away from the killer plague doing absolutely nothing except meditating in front of my 8-bit color field of jerky ocean waves."

It was a private and totally firewalled local area network that no one but the NFT boys had access to, and it was exactly where they wanted to spend most of their time.

The more time they spent on Fuck You, the more in control of their lives they were.

One of the other artists living in the basement, Sky, a self-proclaimed media archaeologist who hoarded old computers

and the software that played on them, had accidentally discovered the island when he was navigating a now defunct 3D environment titled Hyperactive Worlds.

The game had been designed in the earliest days of the Metaverse by one of his ancestors, an artist-avatar named Abe Golam who composed his existential games in an old virtual reality modeling language (VRML) that had been cobbled together to counter the primitive meat space that the ignoramuses of the late 20th century had thought of as Real Life.

As ancient and inaccessible as this virtual world might have been, Sky proposed to the group that they immerse themselves on Fuck You as the perfect refuge from the GIFS 6.0 "dictatorship of the present."

Once they unanimously agreed, he immediately shared his deep archival find with all of his mates so that they too could use it to clock out of the Spy State Economy that they, like everybody else they knew, had been living under since popping out of the womb.

How much longer would they be destined to further suffocate under this historical circumstance, thanks to the new lockdown regulations implemented as a result of the latest Omega variant of COVID-19?

*

The creation of GIFS 6.0 had first been written into law after the last failed terrorist attack had taken place on a plane en route to Portland, Oregon, some twenty years before.

According to corporate media reports back then, though no one could confirm any of it, a thirty-year-old male Caucasian who had recently visited Moscow and was suffering from a garden-variety bipolar disease and was assumed to be a totally unlikeable incel, had tried to ignite his gunpowder-filled jock-strap with a smoldering sneaker.

The reports said that he had attempted to rig his sneaker into a flammable torch, but the incel was so spasmodic in his efforts that he ended up catching his own hair on fire and was quickly apprehended by the female air marshal sitting directly behind him.

This widely reported incident then led to a rash of special corporate media reports sensationalizing a long history of prior attempts by more violent groups of cultish incels to terrorize various capitalist nation-states around the globe and once these stories started trending on social media networks in conjunction with a politically motivated PR campaign full of disinformation designed by the GIFS 6.0 marketing

division, epic fear began spreading throughout the Metaverse and all of the world's autocratic leaders, including those in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa who had up till now been the most resistant, agreed that the global terror threat was becoming too profound and something universal needed to be done before the terrorists had their way and permanently unsettled all of the monetized forms of social conformity that now defined the vast majority of life on Planet Oblivion.

It was then, after the failed attempt to ignite an explosive jockstrap, that a well-planted question began spreading throughout the info sphere: "Who needs nation states when you can have something much more secure, something that would uniformly protect the global flow of crypto-capital as well as the proud people of Planet Oblivion?"

A new governing vehicle was born, a transnational AI state commandeered by a stand-alone Semio-Securitate universally known as GIFS.

The current version was 6.0 and was the most pervasive one yet.

The latest upgrade came as a result of the incurable COVID-19 pandemic that kept mutating into new strains that made it impossible to fully immunize the populace from infection and severe disease if not death.

The new quarantine regulations included compulsory network participation in the Metaverse where 95% of all work now took place anyway.

This made it easy for everyone to be tracked and accounted for.

One People, Under GIFs, indivisible, with browsers and search engines for all, Zeke had flash-posted across his social media feeds as soon as the latest 6.0 upgrade was forced upon every global citizen, and he immediately received over 45,000 kissy-love likes from the virtual audience that followed him.

His satirical flash-post was consistent with all of the other media jolts he sent out to his Network Milieu in that it suggested the planet was witnessing the total dissolution of anything remotely resembling a liberal democracy and that the freedom to disconnect was no longer an option an individual had at their disposal.

Zeke imagined his like-minded followers were amusing themselves to death, tuning into his and each other's various communicative streams laughing at the way their politically motivated witticisms captured their strange predicament while patting themselves on the back for being hypersensitive to how fucked up their bullshit lives had become.

As a group, they would intuitively reward Zeke's mild anarchic spirit that so eloquently encapsulated their own feelings by pushing the nearest heart-shaped button on their screens.

This was real virtual love, pure and simple.

After accumulating tens of thousands of these admiring mini-jolts on any given day, his semi-rigged clout scores would go sky high and he would inevitably find ways to cross-brand this clout by increasing the size of his collector base further guaranteeing more traffic to the multimedia NFT artworks being generated by the Meta Remix Engine where many of these newbies would drop some serious crypto to purchase his latest drop (and maybe some of the still available backlist too).

The self-contradictory nature of his entire enterprise as both a successful NFT net artist and progressive citizen of the vector class whose entrepreneurial spirit fed right back into the GIFS 6.0 ideology, was usually too much for him to handle, so Zeke would expectantly turn to his artist mates and their collective basement philosophy as an escape hatch from whatever downer rabbit hole they were about to lose themselves in.

For the Maker Faker Intergalactic Potheads, after having eaten a stash of Sour Diesel high-octane brownies infused with 20 mg of THC per serving, GIFS 6.0 just became a functioning parameter, one that they could immediately teleport them-

selves out of as soon as they connected to their private server and entered the secret passcodes that would launch them straight to Fuck You island.

Once there, they could recalibrate their intuitive mindfulness and feel themselves slowly excavate the sense of dread and pulsating paranoia out of their bodies.

To feel themselves...as if that really meant anything anymore.

Themselves who?

According to Sky, a self was nothing but a shifting set of affectively generated data points that represented what most Spy State analysts considered a generally meaningless cluster of information behaviors that would nonetheless be automatically read by the GIFS 6.0 conceptual machinery just in case there was something worth investigating further.

The GIFS 6.0 AI Division of Affective Data Analysis (DADA) was operating 24/7, analyzing everyone's affective data in real-time so that the Metaverse could subconsciously trigger your next move while subtly insinuating that you had actually made the decision yourself.

Was there a way out?

There's no way out, Zeke would re-up as a flash-post refrain, one that referenced a lyric from one of the group's recent hits, *Killjoy Special*:

There's no way out
No way out
That's what this shit
Is all about
Believe-you-me
There's no way out

Sky, who was slightly freaked out at how rich he was becoming, took a different tact and was now always working on side projects that he kept dreaming would soon empower all of his Super Fans so that they too would become more emboldened to opt-out of the Metaverse.

But was it really about self-empowerment or was it more a matter of *buying* one's way out, and if that was the case, then who could afford it?

Sky felt guilty but not so much that he would distract himself from his many side projects, side projects that would lead to yet more side projects, all of the side projects slowly converging into what he occasionally thought of as *a multiple and hybridized portfolio of adjacent possibilities.*

That very phrase, *a multiple and hybridized portfolio of adjacent possibilities,* is exactly the kind of idea that would come out of nowhere as he feverishly took notes after having smoked some hydroponically curated Mighty Mouse from his customized, handblown glass bong.

The notes he would keep scribbling were a kind of peripatetic hieroglyphic scrawl of improvised thoughts detailing what it meant to be both him and not-him operating on autopilot:

You could always role-play the performing art monkey banging on the keyboard manipulating images, text and sound in as many creative ways as you knew how, and if one particular sequence of keystrokes struck gold, you could, over time, build your own version of a digital cottage industry and, if necessary, start managing other monkey keyboardists typing their own on-the-fly identities into the Big Data mix.

Or, on another perambulated roll:

Your "self" is basically a conceptual framework for multimodal data analysis to take place in, for the machines to read and learn all they can about you so that what you express and the responses it generates can immediately be translated into recognizable patterns that enable the machines to intuit your next string of information behaviors, hopefully anticipating and eventually swaying your split-second decision-making process and, if perfected, get you to reveal everything there is to know about your

(said) "self" as well as get you to drop serious crypto to purchase shit you really don't need but that helps make you feel more secure about your (said) "self" as it attempts to survive in the COVID-19 quarantine economy.

But the more notes he wrote the more he just participated in acts of psychotropic transference diagnosing an affliction he had come to see as a contaminated autobiography.

His contaminated autobiography was full of pseudo-self-contradiction: one second he was flying high on his unanticipated success as a known entity in the Metaverse and the next moment he was clobbering himself over the virtual head for having succumbed to the latest iteration of turbo-charged techno-capitalism.

As much as he spontaneously wrote out this contaminated autobiographical affliction and attempted to articulate to himself what the right prescription would be (more of the same psychic automatism?), he kept coming up empty-handed, so he continued tracing his thought process while taking notes:

Being a "self"?

Really?

Being a thing-IN-itself?

Or is Being-in-itself now a thing?

Maybe, but that was so mid-20th century and you really needed to tweak the vibe so that it had nothing to do with what that phrase originally meant when it was first introduced into the philosophical lexicon back in the heady days of Parisian existentialism.

And yet, how would a contemporary digital artist, a programmed thing trained on Being-for-itself, resist both the GIFS 6.0 Semio-Securitate as well as the promising digital utopia of the Metaverse and its embrace of NFTs all the while finding an exactitude that would enable the artist to simply exist as an angst-ridden creature of comfort authenticating the silence?

More notes just kept coming out of him and where they came from, he had no idea.

It was as if he was talking to himself, not as himself, but rather as a corrupted version of something *like* himself, something that was never meant to be but had surreptitiously evolved within his own psychic framework:

How does it feel to be watched by all the AI spies who make a living analyzing the clouds of metadata floating through the conceptual machinery, the pings and re-pings, the likes and dislikes, the favorites and semi-best friends forever, the trending

and spamming and contagious media buzzwords infiltrating your consciousness so that when you parroted them in what felt like an original thought you really just sounded like everybody else?

And how does it feel to know you were just parroting your market segment of the vox populi even as you reflected on the wider networked condition you personally found yourself operating in?

For Sky, it felt normal, especially since he too was more than likely to be spying on a select group of potential co-conspirators himself, secretly tracking their feeds, their drops and their wallet transactions while anticipating what their next moves would be hoping they would take a look at his latest flash-posts and validate his flimsy online presence.

Sky knew how this all worked better than just about anyone —and he hated himself for it.

If money did indeed buy happiness, and he had way more than he knew what to do with, then why was he so weak that he always felt the need to create more?

More everything: art, fiction, poetry, auto-hallucinatory experiences, online social relationships, political change, decoy metadata, fantasy sex, money, leisure, play, *work*— more work than he actually needed to commit himself to.

"In fact," he quietly mused to himself, "I'm at my absolute strongest when I'm doing absolutely nothing."

But the solitary act of doing nothing eluded him, unless he successfully launched himself into the ancient Hyperactive Worlds program where nothing was to be done and nothing was demanded of him.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

"Fuck it," thought Zeke, "I mean, who cares about what the machines are reading and how the GIFS 6.0 Semio-Securitate has set up the operational framework of our collective social behavior that convinces us our primary job is to just be ourselves and let whatever info-bits we leak out of our head somehow determine what sorts of useless shit we'll be asked to buy so that we can keep the COVID-19 economy afloat."

"Bottom line," mused Franz, another Maker Faker Pothead whose exceptional programming skills helped accelerate the band's mega-fandom at speeds even they had no control over, "is that these advanced software platforms are targeting peeps all over the planet to buy *our* shit, whoever we happen to be role-playing on any given day: The Maker Fakers, Intergalactic Potheads, The Epidemiologists…"

"And the more of our shit people buy," Sky volleyed as if in telepathic dialogue with his mates, "the more targeted they become to buy even *more* of our shit."

This is what it means to be evolutionarily stable, the group collectively thought, *and the survival of the human race is totally dependent on the conceptual machinery being able to predict everyone's spending habits while keeping everyone at home staring at their screens.*

GIFS is a given, Zeke flash-posted to his social feed, *but that's where an opening presents itself to you* (and over 11,000 bear hug emoji embraces soon followed).

Because now you can reinvent or remix your said "self" into something Post.

Post anything everything nothing.

*Live in Post like it's a **pre**existing condition.*

(The instantaneous lovey-dovey feedback was exploding with over 25,000 tender tongue licks flicking around the rim of his swelling notification box)

Nobody knew this mantra of "Living in Post" better than the Metafictional Potheads.

They were perpetually in Post...

Perpetually perishing *and* perpetually in postproduction...

Their whole shtick was about having nothing to do with the *as is* while investigating the adjacent possibilities of momentarily becoming the next iteration of the *as if*.

They would refute the GIFS surveillance environment by first erasing the idea of an identifiable self.

They would strategically conceptualize a collaboratively generated NFT art-star software business that was built to attract millions of followers to the trendiest new media art ensemble playfully deconstructing their own historical obsolescence!

It was just this kind of self-contradictory philosophical mien that kept Zeke's writing feed alive:

I don't want to know who I am, was, or could have been had I only accepted my fate and bought in to the whole—

He cut himself off as an intentional rhetorical device to sustain his scroll momentum.

Look, here's The Secret: I use the coding process itself as a vehicle to reinvent myself over and over again, to embody the next

version of Creativity Coming, a process that is embedded with calculated risks that have proven to be successful beyond my wildest dreams.

This was Sincere Zeke, trying to share something intangible with his distributed Network Milieu aka his potential collector base.

But doesn't success itself, even the most digitally infectious version that I have managed to experience in ways I could have never imagined, allow for the luxury of thinking such thoughts?

Erase that thought too.

Erase everything: name, date of birth, place of birth, familial origin, occupation, total net worth, miscellaneous factoids supplementing the phony mythological narrative your predictable identity keeps trying to tell through continuity, style, gesture, performance, timing, and all the states of intermediary being you magically adorn your micro-branding with.

What's in a name anyway?

How about just signaling our presence as a symbol, something like [++] and when someone asks you what it means, give them a different answer every time, something like **The Artist Formerly Known as Default Settings**.

You are Destiny's genetic encumbrance resulting from a parental unit shitting a pumpkin into the arms of a midwife.

Isn't that spooky enough?

*

Naming conventions be damned, the artist's changed their own names as much if not more than they changed the actual band name.

Today they were Sky, Franz, Zeke and Amarillo (the silent partner).

Later today they could be Blair, MacBook, Seitan and Cheeze Fins.

The way they saw it, or as Franz/Macbook once put it, whatever name they happened to take on was only as good as their crank clout scores and there was only one goal now, and that was to increase their market influence by continuously oversharing their every expressive moment with the Spy State Economy.

According to Sky/Blair, no matter what band name and fictional PR narrative they happened to be embodying at any

given moment, the real market potential of the audio-visual digital files being generated by their Meta Remix Engine was codependent on how well they blurred the fault line between what was real and what was fake.

The key to our success, Sky flash-posted to the IGPH followers, *is that we know how to make you feel fake real, the good kind of fake real i.e. the kind of fake real that makes you feel more real than real makes you feel real i.e. the kind of fake that plays into your fantasy of what you want real to be.*

What it came down to was this: almost all of their NFT art was composed by the Meta Remix Engine that they had trained to *compostproduce* data from the humongous archive of JPEG, MP4, WAV, HTML and PDF files their renegade crawlers would scrape off the most obscure sites on the Net.

The only thing the Potheads originated for their various remixes was the occasional use of home recorded mumblecore vocals drawn from a page or two (or three) of improvised lyrics written in the heat of a psychic delirium while riding high on 20 mg of THC after ingesting a granola bar infused with a killer dope strain labeled Jeffersonian Airplane Glue.

Their altered hypothalami would trigger the pulse of a flanging unconscious transmission and, before they knew it, their vocal micro-particulars would be recorded in the

professional soundproof booth located in the far back corner of their basement.

But were these lyrical spurts in poetic volume, these spontaneously sketched riffs of psychic automatism, more fake-real than anything else?

Or were they merely a cursory nod to the vocalist's all-consuming human weakness to always have to do *something*?

Why the need to take a stab at expressing their "true feelings" in some form of meaningless poetic utterance as opposed to performing the ultimate act of radical sabotage and simply do nothing at all?

If only it were that simple...

"You can put THAT in your bong and smoke it," said Zeke, though it wasn't clear if he was talking to himself or to another basement dweller, or to the whole group at once, while he torched the glass bowl and deeply inhaled its purple-green nest of crushed buds reeking pungent trichomes.

And smoke it they did, all four of them, repeatedly, until they found themselves succumbing to the inevitable need to once again express themselves by performing spoken word flash poetry inside the soundproof recording booth.

Usually, they would start each recording session by putting on the studio headphones and listening to some downtempo electronica or mildly hallucinatory hip-hop beats the Meta Remix Engine had mashed-up from various stems ripped from the Metaverse.

Falling into the AI's automated remix groove would instantaneously trigger an unfamiliar poetic measure that would set the lyric in motion.

The end result was often a kind of improvised poetic device (IPD) that had been secretly planted in the depths of an unconscious field of action, one they were sleepwalking through while their electrified bodies vibrated in the grips of a slaying ontological high.

Franz loved the idea of *sleepwalking through a slaying ontological high*, of patching intuition with a rare form of self-possessed proprioception that would trigger an aimless lyricism whose ultimate output was something resembling an existential talk-rock poetry reading or soapbox rant to end all rants or so he imagined.

Without even thinking about it or "knowing where he was coming from," Franz would channel the lyrics' polemical power by way of a hardcore punk theory of total disillusionment, something that could stifle a different artist's creativity but that had, over the years, come quite naturally

to him as he kept laying down one stunning vocal track
after another, some of which would later get remixed into
a series of Buddhist-inspired hip hop lectures accompanied
by crunchy guitar licks that must have come from the deep
nirvana abyss his reservoir of need kept emptying before he
could fill it back up again.

Franz was the lead vocalist, or so he thought of himself as the
lead vocalist, even though everybody else in the group was
perfectly capable of chanting a quirky set of spontaneously
composed lyrics and therefore imagined that they too
were the lead vocalist (even the silent Amarillo whose
nonconformist vocal tracks were always in the background
like taciturn invocations secretly driving the collective's
narrative momentum forward).

Franz had his own reading style, very similar to mine, the
voice you're listening to now, not that you need to know
that, although he would probably write me off as a derivative
afterthought, someone whose imagination overcompensated
for a false sense of security, something that had to do with
inventing your precursors even if they didn't want to have
anything to do with you.

*

Zeke's personal AI assistants would transmit a series of flash-posts during his Network Milieu's most active parts of the day, while Zeke himself was busy eating Sativa-laced chocolate bars to accompany his ritualistic air guitar shredding, novel writing, and scattershot Crayola musing.

The posts would keep flowing as if all of his readers/followers were being allowed to join him on the expressive wave building inside his spontaneous thought process.

A series of bubble thoughts would keep appearing live on screen as a way to keep his audience's attention:

The anarchic spirit is not about the chaotic disruption of conventional reality.

*It's about **transcending** conventional reality by undermining its pompous authority.*

The anarchic spirit lives inside the body, where matter and memory converge into a mysterious poetic device that helps us see the world anew.

But is it even possible to transcend the conventional reality that controls our economic destiny and always wants a piece of the action no matter what we do?

Big Corporate Daddy invests billions of dollars every year in giving you a user-friendly platform to construct your fluid identity in, so isn't it only fair that they would want a piece of you too?

Isn't it fair that they would want to find insidious ways to own **all** *of you?*

All they want to do is cash in on your live data feed and convert it into some Serious Bitcoin and who can blame them for that?

Not that you can do anything to stop it, right?

Do you really think you can delete yourself from the Metaverse?

What makes you think you have a right to be forgotten?

Besides, isn't it easier to just strip yourself naked before The Hovering Dark Cloud and pray for monetized rain?

If you have nothing to hide, then who needs privacy?

The all-seeing Machine Gaze that harvests your every information behavior is a friendly collaborator who remixes all your affective data into your very own futures market, no?

Why not translate that ultimate never-ending wave of high performance energy into the One Automated Revenue Stream

your college degree in Innovative Media Science was supposed to guarantee you once you had finished doing your time?

But do you ever really finish doing your time?

Being online in the COVID-19 era is nothing more than digital self-incarceration.

Though maybe you can turn that "being online" thing into the ultimate art form—think of it as insider-outsider art!

You too can brand yourself as an insider-outsider artist whose outré oeuvre defies the course of art history!

What you want to do is create a DIY You-topian field of distribution to disseminate your art movement in!

You may ask yourself, is this even possible?

Yes, you can do it, and the GIFS 6.0 Semio-Securitate can help you carve out your niche community of like-minded followers.

But first you need some training and the GIFS 6.0 Massively Open Online Role-Playing Higher Arts Education Game is here to help you!

You too can become the ultimate new media artist / entrepreneur!

As 20th century artists like Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Beuys were fond of saying, **everyone is an artist!**

You too can become not just an entrepreneurial new media artist, but you can also morph into a trendy thought leader, a highly sought after influential and a brand name presence in the reputation economy.

Look at us, the Viral Potheads, a band of nobodies, making-faking it like never before.

Creative disruptors of the GIFS 6.0 Metaverse unite!!

As Zeke knew all too well, this rhetorically charged series of flash-posts was the price you had to pay for your sudden celebrity in the digital cosmos.

You had to constantly modulate your communication stream so that your Network Milieu could relate to your predicament, the one where you were begrudgingly accepting your fame and accelerating fortune but only because *someone* had to do it.

You had to turn your presence into a self-effacing maker-mocker in hock to your former selves (always there to haunt to you).

Zeke was excellent at blurring the boundaries between being a sincere avant-garde artist-poet and a sardonic advertorial twit.

The fact of the matter was, or so the gang of four was quickly discovering, once you successfully crossed the threshold into mainstream market mania, you had a reputation you had to *live up to*, unless, of course, you made yourself invisible.

But that was the inevitable rub.

It was one thing for an NFT star like Zeke to commiserate with his Super Fans and collegial Network Milieu, and quite another to willingly and intentionally pull back from it all and sink into a self-absorbed obscurity.

Zeke was heavily conflicted by all of this, especially after having smoked a chunky doobie filled with Sativa-heavy Girl Scout Cookies, and he knew that if he let his media stream go black, then that was as good as being dead.

Being viable meant sharing in the addiction i.e. the addictive information behaviors of his peers performing in the Chapel of the Endless Scroll.

To be alive was to be online was to be an addictive network user.

If you weren't using, you weren't serious about being part of the scene and then where would you be?

As soon as you disappeared, the scene would reluctantly let you go but then, in the blink of an ahistorical eye, find other thought leaders to follow in your wake.

But was he really a thought leader?

All he wanted to be was a stoner artist, getting high and reading and writing while letting his expertly concocted Meta Remix Engine construct a never-ending stream of gorgeous on-the-fly audio/visual remixes showcasing an array of poetically charged source material the Global Conceptual Machinery was generating *for* him and that he would promote as the collaborative outputs of an uncanny machinic sensibility distributed across the human-nonhuman spectrum.

*

No one paid attention to the vast indifference of the sky.

Huddled in the basement studio, their eyes were half-closed, glassy with the buzz of legal weed and fastened upon the mellow waves that swept toward the shoreline of Fuck You island.

These waves were choppy pixels the color of Aqua Fresh toothpaste except for the salivating white tips at each wave's crest.

Watching these same waves come to shore over and over again left one with the impression that the sullen intergalactic deadheads were all mesmerized by the old 8-bit video game aesthetic that kept looping in front of them.

The programmed loop kept repeating itself with minor variation and any subtle changes were synced with the shifts in the virtual tide and the coded movements of an imaginary moon that rarely made an appearance.

All four of them, each chained to their own immersive blend of stoner seclusion while digitally soldering their optic nerves into states of altered consciousness, were locked in this oceanic loop as if transfixed in a daily ritual conducted outside the boundaries of conventional time.

The horizon seemed to widen with each of their breaths as their heads subtly dipped and rose in sync with the rhythm of the waves thrusting up at them like overconfident teenage groupies flirting on a dare.

A continuous series of undulating picture elements would mechanically peak then melt in jagged glitches right before their eyes.

But what were they really looking at and why were they all doing it in sync with each other?

Were they being forced to watch a barely operable ancient video game as retribution for their sins?

Was this minor compensation for having to endure the continual recrudescence of COVID-19, a vicious virus that behaved like a stalking ex that would never take a hint and just go away?

Or maybe this was The Big Payoff for having succeeded in becoming one of the best-known multimedia weed bands in the short history of the NFT market bonanza?

They were doing what they had said they always dreamed of doing: staying perpetually high, making art and, when the mood struck, totally zoning out in front of the beach, even if the latter were nothing but a retro-simulation rendered in VRML, a precursor to the X3D file format.

The most beautiful part of the retro VRML trip was that even as they zoned out and stared into screen space, they kept getting paid shitloads of crypto to keep doing what they were doing.

The growing cluster of customized algorithms they kept implanting into the Meta Remix Engine led to the

production, auto-minting and listing of their primo NFTs, exponentially accelerating the concurrent flow of revenue streams that not only kept them in business, but endowed them with a tangible form of legitimacy that bought them the right to take advantage of the free stoner time they needed to embrace if they hoped to experiment with their lives as a collaboratively generated work-in-progress.

It was as if their lives as make-believe fantasy artists had somehow become the equivalent of an art historical movement, albeit one that invented them more than they could have ever hoped to invent themselves.

Now that everything was clicking and there was no looking back, the group just assumed that it was art history that *made* them, and not the other way around.

This was like a dream come true because now all they had to do was hold their shit together and not lose it the way so many others before them had become victims of their own success.

Who could ask for more?

<p align="center">*</p>

This ritual sitting practice they were partaking in had become their reason for living.

This collective vision was transmitted via a distributed cosmology, a shared possibility space composed of many endless realms encompassing the fictional multiverse, a state of mind they communally experienced while locking their gazes on the hidden beach sequestered on Fuck You, a super rare and tiny island in the middle of an open sea simulating the Pacific.

Focusing solely on the present moment while taking in long, deep breaths, they were temporarily unaware of the fact that having the time and resources to access this virtual beach was mostly due to all of their on-the-fly fame and continued fortune thanks to the ongoing cluster of viral art memes they kept successfully circulating inside the cybernetic foundation that served as their platform.

The whole purpose of ritually sitting on the hidden beach was to create a kind of transcendental interoperability that would lure them further off the grid and away from their economically predetermined network condition.

When the weed was especially dope, the beach scene before them felt like one they had been born into and would live inside of forever.

Occasionally, out of the haze of stoned contemplation, a collaboratively generated intuition would telepathically transmit itself to all four of them at once as if they were transforming into a shared meta-mediumistic being of unknown origin.

For example, one nifty area of discovery they had been collectively imagining as part of their group sitting practice was called a *TM Jam*, short for *transcendental meditation jam session*, a morphologically resonant field space that they initially had been denied access to until, finally, they located the program's key vulnerability that, once exploited, would no longer permit the software system to bar them from the ultimate state of mindfulness they were hoping to mutually attain.

Quickly, as a singular unit of networked intelligence, they made the most of their telepathic hack and reprogrammed their neural frequencies for next level spiritual gain.

"Spiritual gain: a way to boost one's mindful connection to the music of the spheres," they all thought in unison and, for a long moment, it was as if they were getting somewhere.

As far as they were concerned, their primary obligation these days was to passionately embrace the impermanent nothingness of just simply being-in-the-world, even if it appeared to their most intimate friends that they had

succumbed to the rich plenitudes of their success and were intentionally withdrawing themselves from the trivial comings and goings that forever took place in the Metaverse as well as the forever mutating strains of COVID-19.

Or at least that was the thought that crossed their collective mindset as they instantaneously broke their meditation and began justifying to themselves why their lives had become what they had become.

What had they become?

For hungry admirers who were not born into privilege and who felt an innate urge to playfully dismantle the entire GIFS 6.0 apparatus while simultaneously riding the wave of non-fungible tokenism, keeping track of the score was a way of projecting an abstract entity worth emulating and they, The Intergalactic Maker Faker Potheads, had become one of the few conceptual art ensembles that doubled as success indicators, the living embodiment of strategically positioned and professionally packaged product capable of *getting attention,* something that had become a huge issue for them, as it would for any self-identified troupe of Avant-Pop artists.

What they had worked so hard for and finally achieved, establishing a foothold in the net art scene, was no easy feat.

And yet, even if your new media art collective had actually produced the kind of brand name presence that would attract a certain degree of visibility in the attention economy, how could you build on that initial momentum and turn it into a mega money making machine?

For wasn't that the end goal of all wannabe Avant-Pop art stars of the Metaverse?

To get sick rich creating customized digital artworks that sold like hash cakes would enable you to just chill out in the optimally wired basement pad and do whatever you wanted to do without ever having to produce another day's work for the GIFS 6.0 administrators.

Besides, even if you did strike it rich, it's not like you would then cease making new work, since you, like everybody else circulating inside your Network Milieu, could barely stop yourself from *ever* taking a break, from fiddling with the data at your fingertips.

The improvisational call-and-response performance with the machine was an addiction that triggered intense moments of euphoria.

The only option one had was to seek that next hit of Instant Nirvana and the only way to make that happen was to wake

up, play the QWERTY keyboard and prompt the Meta Remix Engine.

The counter-prompts generated by the machine would trigger your own unconscious neural mechanism and by selectively sampling and manipulating the Meta Remix Engine's machinic outputs you could feel like you too were part of the creative process.

The downside of this meta-jam session with the Machinic Other?

You're back at work.

Finger-fucking the keyboard was the only way to participate in the innovation economy no matter how successful you had become, and to wake up to it every morning embracing the purposeless play you had trained yourself to endure as a lifelong activity of the mind, was a clever way of addressing the digital dialectic, something that could, if well-played, be parlayed into yet more serious crypto.

Ultimately, if the Intergalactic Crypto Bros woke up and found their wrists permanently bound behind their backs in golden handcuffs, they would just use the tips of their noses to jam the circuits with their aesthetic wanderlust.

For these programmed programmers, unconsciously playing the keyboard as a way to generate all manner of text, sounds, images and code was as elemental as breathing air.

The trick was in finding the right network of collaborators to help you make it through the perpetual postproduction process as well as a core base of collectors who believed in you as both artist *and* financial instrument.

Once you had your network collaborators and serious collectors in place, then your mission would be to sustain both the energy and vitality of your ongoing transmedia productions while role-playing glam weed-punks dispersing your disruptive audio-visual artifacts to the distributed communities of interest your livelihood depended on for daily sustenance.

Or so their totally synced networked mind once again thought in unison while chilling on Fuck You beach.

*

Like coming up with an accurate account of how the Dada art movement actually got its name, none of the digital artistes smoldering their brains down in the ranch house underworld were 100% sure who or how they came up with the idea

of automating the creation of a *multitude* of audio-visual bands releasing a *multitude* of audio-visual NFTs and public relations hype that would, as fast as possible, build its own market velocity while securing the necessary revenue streams the collective needed to survive the pandemic and, hopefully, beyond.

The most popular NFT stars were individual artists, solo cash cows, but they were happy to go at it as a DIWO crew: Do-It-With-Others.

Not every iteration of the automated bands produced by the Meta Remix Engine was a sure hit, not by a long shot, though at any given time one of their weakest performing bands would suddenly experience an uptick in attention and opening bids would come out of nowhere for works they had already forgotten and the long tail of crypto-capitalism's fantasy kingdom would produce unanticipated income.

Case in point: a few years back, one of earliest iterations of the digital art collective as NFT band, a psychedelic modular synth group named Genius of Plague, had released a collection of minimalist ambient animations as NFTs.

A few fanzine critics referred to the collection of NFTs as initiating a new *visual drone aesthetic* featuring slow morphing graphic meltdowns accompanied by long, low moaning soundtracks comprised of reverb and delay effects, or what

one critic tagged *vibratory sound vectors*, a slow trickle of fuzzy white noise mixed with a stream of sultry yet illegible vocals that the PR intelligence titled *Music for Faking Orgasms*.

"Look at us now," mumbled Franz as he took in the scene before him, the entire crypto clique decked out in their matching black and white striped silk pajamas staring blankly at their old computer terminals in the dank underbelly of their ranch house digs: a bearded and bushy-headed troupe of THC-hallucinating cohorts who had unanimously decided to no longer expose themselves to the political inanities powered by the Russian Bot Machinery executed by the Putin Putsch Punks and who were now willing to lose themselves in the post-dab haze of a hybrid strain of pungent Chronic Bubonic recently delivered by an always on time (to the minute!) Amazon Drone during what sometimes felt like the final days of life on the infected blue-green cancer ball they called Planet Oblivion.

At times they felt like nothing but mere wisps of psychic energy forever dissolving in The Automated Singularity or, worse yet, a representative sample of the codependent creative class comprised primarily of successful social media entrepreneurs and augmented reality hackers who had gone rogue in just the right way at just the right time and were more than happy to participate in the wildest experiment of all, the social production of bodies working themselves to death.

This dead labor is ours, and we are its zombie flesh...

Or so they collectively thought while remaining hard-wired into the virtual horizon that flickered before them.

But was that an original thought or had they merely scraped it off the web or, worse yet, had their homegrown AI spiders indexed it under "excitable post-Marxist idea" and somehow furtively slipped it inside their communal thought process?

The Meta Remix Engine was getting out of control, they all thought at once, though the Meta Remix Engine thought it too, seconds before they could even form an unconscious glimmer of mental activity, and this was a thread they chose not to follow.

Besides, the Meta Remix Engine was delivering killer versions of whatever it was they thought they were thinking, creating an aura of originality that perfectly captured what would otherwise be considered yet another derivation of a derivation of an appropriation tweaked for ersatz poetic effect.

*

What on-the-fly digital personae were catching fire on the blockchain today?

Today—although in their virtual mindfulness there was no such thing as today unless it was *only* today and nothing *but* today, always—it was still Intergalactic Potheads, an online stoner band of NFT hustlers releasing a new music video art loop that had accumulated over half a million views but that, in the old days, would have never generated a peep of interest from the trad commercial gallery scene that was on the verge of dying off anyway.

The video was becoming its own form of contagious media and, coming on the heels of some major sales in the secondary market, led to a sudden burst of interest from the three main art auction houses who were now initiating their own programs focused solely on NFTs and that collectors could purchase with crypto if they wanted to.

But these houses had always been Über-Capitalist Whores chasing after whatever market trend the hedge fund crowd had already identified as the next hot asset class to stimulate their new round of volatility investing.

This market volatility, especially the constant swings in the price of cryptocurrency, fed into the Potheads NFT strategy though they never told anybody that was what they were doing.

They preferred to talk shop, what new programming techniques and intuitive breakthroughs they had discovered while perfecting their aesthetic decision-making process.

According to the latest promo that had been generated by their PR intelligence now rapidly circulating through their Network Milieu, the Potheads were "noisy provocateurs whose creative destruction anticipated the oncoming democratization of the culture industry's innovation agenda."

This is something that would happen on their own terms, not via some well-connected gallery owner who had made a mint in the dot.com area and was now looking to attain some cultural cache in the loins of the upmarket commodity emporium.

Did it matter that this kind of hype was just what the business cycle needed if it wished to sustain itself into the future?

"Is it ethically uncool that we, the Intergalactic Hemp Heads, are ironically self-aware of the fact that the same promotion techniques that are used to feature the rise of disruptive technologies are the same as those used by the historical avant-garde to attract attention to their radically chic disturbances in mainstream art and culture?"

That was a question that had to be asked, but exactly which of the four artists was asking it now was hard to say.

Maybe it didn't matter given the fact that they were all slowly melding into the same persona anyway.

All your memes belong to us, one of the bearded dudes would suddenly intone out of the blue, and like a group of trained monkeys, the other three would join in until all four of them were singing the mantra together, using the palms of their hands to bang against their desks like a pack of drumless street musicians making a ruckus for *bupkis*.

All your memes belong to us, all your memes belong to us, all your memes belong to us...

At times, especially after a shared hit off the Vapor Dome, they figured it must have been the worst of luck and totally bad timing that their own multimedia NFTs started spreading like an infectious meme disease right at the very same time the planet itself was being read its last rites.

But then from another angle this must have made the taste of success even sweeter.

They wanted to go out on top, before the planet itself hit total rock bottom.

Whenever the Doobie Bros thought of themselves in this corrupt light, they inhaled a long breath of collective self-centeredness, as if smelling their own flatulence.

Then again, they were young, or wanted to act young, and could easily imagine themselves as No Futurists performing on the bleeding edge of the pending apocalypse.

Welcome to the Death Vanguard was the slogan a third-party AI featured on the paid banner ads that were algorithmically generated across their popular web sites.

Much later, the phrase would turn into the title of one of their top selling long-form NFTs.

Endless impressions harmoniously syncing with sticky eyeballs producing hair-trigger impulses to hover over the customized clickbait...

It was a line Sky had written in the voice of a corporate creep strutting her stuff on the pages of his always-in-progress novel.

But the novel would never come to be, and Sky would think about cutting and pasting it into a flash-post—but would it really matter?

To post or not to post, that was the calculation, unless he just fed it back into the Meta Remix Engine and let the machine teach itself how best to generate juicy morsels from his grab bag of linguistic inputs.

Meanwhile, the zoned-out artist collective, rapidly de-cohering future identities, was still presently lost in a manic pounding of percussive repetition barely staying in sync while intoning the same mantra over and over again: *All your memes belong to us...*

How long could they keep that riff going?

It must have already been at least fifteen minutes.

Or was it fifteen years?

The pandemic had totally ruined their sense of time, though it did have its advantages, like never having to worry again about being "on the clock" in numb-nutted Gigland.

After the group tired of pounding their desktops while boasting their latest mantra, a long silence followed until one of the crew spoke up and, totally out of character, took on the persona of a mentally ill homeless person on the verge of going super violent.

Was this Zeke, or Franz or Sky?

Amarillo never said a word so it couldn't have been him, could it?

He-whoever started spewing some pent-up vitriol at the ceiling above as if ranting at the Gods:

"Fuck the commercial art overlords, we'll keep tending to our own servers and create our own decentralized autonomous organizations and our own cryptocurrencies and, in the process, make the most beautiful loser music the world has ever known, and if you know how *that* feels, then you know how *we* feel when we say *Die Young, Stay Free*, and you too will grab hold of the nearest vape pen and write yourself into oblivion."

Of course, one of the other he-whoever band members would have secretly been recording the entire rant that they would then send to the Meta Remix Engine where within a few minutes a short, heavy metal spoken word track would be posted to the band's open source SoundCloud site.

The short track, a freebie, would be supplemented with a quick description composed by the PR intelligence dedicated to their faithful followers:

Oblivion is the only cure for agony.

Come lose yourselves, if only for a few minutes.

The description ended with a parenthetical remark:

(Oblivion is only a synthetic mind fuck away)

That was code for "only smoke the real shit," not the synthetic shit that some of the sleazier online merchants were pushing and, as a result, using as a weapon to commit mass murder.

Some conspiracy theorists thought the bad synthetic shit was consciously being sold by lowlife desperados who were on the secret payroll of the anti-weed right-to-lifers who, ironically, wanted the poorest dopeheads, the ones who couldn't afford the primo legal weed and yet were still looking for ways to medicate themselves and assuage their cognitive stress, exterminated.

All it would take was one bad dope deal, a few deep hits of the synth-shit, and the whole cranial architecture of the disenfranchised buyer would crash in on itself.

For the Potheads, though, they never felt more alive and were feeling really good about it all!

And why not, here they were in what they imagined was luxury incarceration, *living large* especially given the way the Metaverse's expanding NFT art market had suddenly transformed their vertically integrated suite of branded artware into best-selling artists who could afford to have the Amazon Drone deliver triple-A five-star mega-doses of Blow Away Buddha Bars, 24 to a pack!!

Life was great, wasn't it?

Here they were, kicking ass by role-playing a variety of experimental artist avatars sanctioned by something much higher than the Corporate Rock Machine or the Art Fair Industry or the Mainstream Publishing Mafia whose sole mission was to extract every ounce of profit from a lame literary artist's totally compromised and lifeless midlist creative output.

For this Post-Mod squad of lucky space cases nestled in the depths of their moldy basement, their synchronized output was forever being endorsed by a carefully curated cadre of co-conspirators that they had cultivated *the hard way*: by putting themselves out there and taking on the role of maker, dealer and closer.

Their audience was, in fact, *theirs*, and except for the various marketplaces their digital peddling took place on, there were no middlemen, no middle mind, and no meddling crisis.

Every Super Fan, artist co-conspirator and NFT collector was a loyal brand advocate who not only supported their distributed base of marketing operations, they were also quite keen to put their own conceptual machinery to work to make sure the artists they supported were increasingly building their top-flight brand essentialism.

Needless to say, the Potheads would always return the favor, executing a nonstop sequence of branding strategies that successfully tapped into their Network Milieu's continual partial awareness.

The beauty of the Potheads 24/7 operation was that it was fast becoming an automated dream, even if the days were all meshing into one another and the speed of life made existence itself less an intense aesthetic experience and more of an existential durational achievement.

Each and every one of the artists knew that in order to live their life the way they fully intended they would need to radically rethink what it meant to be the chosen tribe of virtual performers simultaneously inaccessible yet everywhere.

Together as one they viewed their COVID-19 lives as One Ongoing Work of Generative Art.

This One Work Exactly, a psychic stream of machine-learned *interdependent consciousness*—one mainstream critic from a corpo art rag nastily referred to it as their "pretty screen saver art with ambient music dead set on putting you to sleep" and another from a similar publication wrote it off as the art world's version of "synthetic shit"—was more than just the total embodiment of their unified aesthetic output.

It was part of a much larger art *movement*, though the socialist critics had a different perspective insisting that artists participating in the NFT craze were nothing more than naive victims of an enormous Ponzi scheme, one that was inefficient by design and amounted to nothing less than a fool's game where the risk was so high it was like playing musical chairs with both your reputation and your accumulated cultural capital not to mention whatever real cash dollars you were ponying up to have a shot at the jackpot in the first place.

The social critics had their knives out for the burgeoning digital art scene since, as they saw it, artists were being duped into joining the pyramid scheme that floated the crypto.

But most of the participating digital artists, who had already decided that a throw of the dice never abolishes chance, were not being duped into anything they were unaware of.

To the contrary, as Avant-Pop creatives experimenting with new media technology and who, for years or even decades, had been treated like second-class citizens in the rigged commercial art world, they knew this whole "being duped" thing was much more prevalent in the deeply fake gallery and museum system that had successfully passed itself off as something prestigious and real.

Besides, everybody's working for us now, Franz thought as he secretly bought more crypto and drew up new plans to

build out his own solo career hoping against all odds that his stylistic tendencies and conceptual framing would trigger the continuous production of new works of digital art that would perfectly extract the ultimate auto-hallucinatory dream out of the depths of the Metaverse's Collective Unconscious.

For the moment, Franz didn't want to give up the money engine that the team had worked so hard to design and implement but he had a longer term vision for where he wanted to take his art practice and was willing to be patient.

As Franz knew all too well, early on in their struggle for attention, the collective's in-depth market analysis had sufficiently indicated that swarms of online collectors populating the Metaverse were well-positioned to identify with an emergent hacker class of prominent artist agitators doubling as rock star programmers, and the Spiritual Dudes with 'Tudes were happy to accommodate.

*

For the stoner boys and their endlessly distributed Super Fan collector base, it was a widely accepted fact that however fleeting their meme-time may be or, before you blink, *may have already been*, they would probably be best remembered

for having turned the story of their lives into the Ultimate Work of Generative Art.

In addition to all of the product being released by their optimally executed Meta Remix Engine, the multi-headed mythopoeic digital art band as the ultimate work-in-progress was always being documented from a score of different angles, media, formats, and presentation filters, each one customized for whatever transmission platform was trending at the time of development.

As clever artist-provocateurs who had studied and were continually relearning the lessons of the historical avant-garde, they could care less about the technology they were using and instead chose to focus on how best to insinuate their latest body of work into the minds of whoever happened to be tapping into their feed.

The important thing was to get their continually remixed forms of creativity circulating in the hypertextualized Metaverse, and besides, what was creativity anyway?

Was it a marketing buzzword bound up in the production of aesthetic pleasure streamlined for the sheltering-in-place masses?

Or was it more about justifying the act of making something new for the culture to consume, a pure product of Innovative

Americana Gone Crazy, something that would tap into a previously unformed market yet to be properly exploited?

Perhaps it was more about an embodied process of mediumistically transmitting one's *unconscious creative potential* and, specifically in their case, The Maker Faker's unique ability to rupture controlled forms of poetic discourse by programming the AI to sample and manipulate all manner of codes, images, sounds and texts while proficiently mashing it all up into virtual reams of infectious eye-and-ear-candy that would build their brand of recombinatory poetics as highly sought after NFT art.

*

"Geography," their first and most famous online manifesto proudly belched, "no longer rules over our state of presence."

"We have acquired immunity from the Terminal Death dysfunctionalism of a Pop Culture gone awry and are now ready to offer our own weirdly concocted elixirs to cure us from this dreadful disease (*information sickness*) that infects the core of our collective life."

And then, just to be clear:

"Literary establishment? Art establishment? Forget it. Maker Fakers the world over wear each other's experiential data like waves of chaotic energy colliding and mixing in the sexual blood while the ever-changing flow of creative projects that ripple from our collective work floods the electronic cult-terrain with a subtle anti-establishment energy that will forever change the way we disseminate and interact with art, media and writing."

But that manifesto, like all of the others that came before and after it, was eventually forgotten.

After five years of nonstop chatter about how the ever-morphing band's collective wisdom, eloquence and bravado indicated a new artistic vision that would transform the lives of those who followed their every move, the buzz around the manifesto went silent and you could have just as easily deleted the HTML file the rant was written on so that nothing but a 404 message would always come up in its place.

No one would have noticed.

At least not until the next boom of interest exploded around the latest collection of NFTs they happened to be minting on the blockchain at which point a few fearless souls, serious collectors who wanted to get insight into what the artists had actually been thinking, would take a deeper dive into the archive and find the lost treasure.

But mostly the manifesto had been culturally "disappeared," and this is why they felt compelled to constantly reinvent themselves.

And since the machine-learned MFA Turk had successfully trained itself to do most of the necessary reinvention *for* them, they were happy to let the Meta Remix Engine repackage their NFT program according to its own algorithmic sense of what kind of marketing campaign would have the most impact so as to create more value for their escalating artistic agenda.

The complete disappearance and irrelevance of their first Avant-Pop manifesto, a mere five years after having been translated into over twenty different languages, said more about the fickle nature of the disruptive network environment their reputation circulated in than any lingering influence the actual writing may have procured in the hearts and minds of the distributed audience who first put the still marginally mainstream group on the digital media map.

Did it matter that the manifesto, remixed into scores of web, mobile and print designs, came wrapped in a dystopian narrative context that resembled ancient cyberpunk fiction once scripted by genre arsonists whose ultimate goal was to burn down the entire edifice of cultural authoritarianism in one roaring, apocalyptic conflagration?

But was this not similar to the nightmare scenarios perpetrated by the belligerent right-to-lifers and insurrectionist White Supremacists whose branded media diatribes swore to enact the complete destruction of the administrative state as a testament to the End Times?

Were they two sides of the same coin, the radicalized Avant-Pop cyberpunks and the alt-right End Timers?

Entrepreneurially speaking, they were all creative disruptors exploiting untapped markets.

It was during The First Net Art Revolution back in the early days of the World Wide Web that the dot.com entrepreneurs began shrewdly investing in their own evangelical narratives of creative destruction.

History's opening wave of net artists were the ones who would self-consciously out themselves as revolutionary PR agents of the cultural avant-garde, proactively formulating a *movement*, something that would be captured in an easy to digest self-promo package that others of their ilk could relate to.

This was before selfies, before social media networking per se, before COVID-19, before crypto and before NFTs.

Finding instructive lessons deep in the annals of digital art history, these opportunistic Maker Fakers quickly

ascertained that there were literally hundreds of thousands if not millions of other second or third generation cyberpunk diehards-in-waiting, and that they were, in fact, an *audience-in-waiting*, one that had the potential to provide these Gen-Zen net artists with a significant online presence within the demographic firmament they too were part of, even if they didn't initially see it in those terms.

These formerly hungry net artists, now reinvented as NFT artists or digital artists minting NFTs on the blockchain, dove straight into the deep end of the Metaverse knowing full well that if they could quickly generate a brand name around the fact that they were *in the process* of becoming an out of control art world meme, their potential audience share and collector base would not only buy into that mythological narrative, but would serve as brand advocates exponentially spreading word about their art projects like wildfire across the contagious media spectrum.

The Potheads studied the historical texts that documented classical moments in late 20th century digital art history as if these moments, when pieced together, collectively formed a how-to bible for developing the conceptual framework their own art project was destined to become.

No one can say exactly how, but at some crucial point in the process of inventing an entirely new genre of art that would grow with the ages, this first wave of network connected

digital pilgrims used the power of the Internet protocol to forever alter the course of art history.

Needless to say, mainstream art historians, many of them bound by academic and museum institutions, found all this "revolutionary doublespeak" hard to swallow and were pretending none of this was actually happening.

For those few who could not ignore it and felt the need to engage, there was a concerted attempt to critically intervene in the cheerleading discourse.

For those art historians and critics who were willing to engage, an opportunity emerged to establish both credibility and a solid reputation for initiating a more refined dialogue about the good, bad and ugly surrounding the crypto art scene, and this of course could be leveraged into more online clout that could then be further monetized via old-school fiat (a buck is a buck is a buck).

The Potheads felt intimately tethered to both the risk-taking artisans of early net art history as well as the prodding art historians and critics whose PhDs signaled an expertise in digital art discourse.

To a person, the bandmates figured that the best way to situate their own practices into the historical avant-garde lineage was to strategically present themselves as *authentic*

creators masked only by the fluid transformations of their electronic personae being invisibly tracked over the social media platforms that they relied on for both financial and psychological sustenance.

They figured that if they presented themselves to their collector base and Super Fans as *authentic creators building their reps from the ground up,* that they would be accepted for being the populist vanguard stars they had become and would even be held up among their breed as a model of collective labor immersed in a progressive lifestyle practice suffused with a post-leftist pleasure politics.

But how could they remain authentic while continually reinventing their online identities?

Would they not risk coming across as too self-contradictory or, worse, self-obsessed?

To fully comprehend what they were in the process of becoming was an emotional risk and sometimes this could lead a fragile eggshell mind to question what exactly they believed in, not that it stopped them, or that the Metaverse itself was ever willing to harness their misgivings and help smooth things out around the edges.

The Metaverse couldn't do that, could barely function as a readymade social media environment that provided its

constituents the kind of emotional relief one needed whenever they felt the oncoming rush of irrelevance or the looming loss of personal self-esteem.

To be real, to be authentic, to be true to oneself as if that could ever be quantified in any substantial way, is unnecessarily retro.

Another collective thought?

According to one of their follow-up manifestos that, since no one read much anymore, attracted minimal attention, this next iteration of the forever morphing union of like-minded creators syncing their intuitive vibes in aesthetic solidarity, was mutating into the purveyance of a communal dream syndicate, a decentralized autonomous organization whose ontological anarchism operated within an evolving conceptual framework that was part spirited mindfulness and part carefree aloofness.

The manifesto righteously declared that to be contemporary was to be temporary, and to be temporary was to lose one's self in an intuitively generated state of networked presence that would approach the ambiguous future as a transmuting topology of magical sublimation.

Projecting a post-leftist pleasure politics totally committed to jamming all mainstream transmissions, *this* was their imaginary trajectory.

Although defining mainstream was itself now an impossibility, and who was to say that their entire program was not becoming a nontraditional form of market fundamentalism?

This was especially true given the fact that having self-consciously sold out to the subtly designed dictates of the Metaverse's overlords meant that they too were absolutely codependent on the corporatized infrastructure that wrought 24/7 surveillance capitalism cum technocratic illiberalism.

Or so they kept musing over bonus bong hits down in the basement, because for their story to keep going, for them to at least *attempt* to shake the guilt they had been programmed to feel as part of the humanist hacker class they were part of, they had to concomitantly maintain their commitment to the mythology of non-conformism their work always alluded to while acknowledging their indebtedness to the grubby hand that fed them.

In other words, they had to simultaneously and continuously exude their self-effacing progressive inclinations while believing their own hype.

*

After a few more hits off a new hybrid strain called Great White Snark, Zeke was higher than he had been in weeks and was taking a break from the virtual beach.

He opened a folder on his desktop titled "Many Festive" and started reading through all of the drafts of manifestos stored there as if he were rummaging through his closet back in Nowhere Ohio looking for fraying old shirts he used to love to wear.

Taking another deep hit off his water bong, he wondered what role does a successful crypto artist, one who identifies as non-conformist and who writes radical artistic manifestos, play in influencing the direction of contemporary art and political discourse?

Who was he kidding?

His influence in the political realm was microscopic, and besides, his so-called mythological narrative, the story of his life as an art-making success machine, was being written by the MFA Turk circulating inside the Meta Remix Engine.

It was almost as if he didn't even have to think of himself as an artist anymore, much less one who had any effect on the current political climate, especially since he was handing over the bulk of his production to the Meta Remix Engine and wanted nothing more than the chance to zone out in front of

Fuck You island while keeping the deathly coronavirus out of the quartet's roomy ranch house.

But what about those supposed ideological opponents who teetered on the far edge of the political alt-right, the Metalhead End Timers zooming into their virtually distributed political rallies feeling like victimized plebs whose endless suffering on earth justified their radicalized, non-conformist fuck-all disconnect from *the longue durée*?

These balls-to-the-walls insurrectionists wrote manifestos too.

"Our time," started one of the far-righty manifestos Zeke had brought up on a popular YouTube channel, "is The End Times."

Wasn't that something Zeke too could wrap his cyberpunk head around, and not just wrap his head around, but embrace as a kind of universal condition that influenced his every decision as an old-school, knee-jerk dystopian drifter?

He too saw the COVID-19 universe and its lingering aftereffects as the ultimate revelation of an accelerated Post-Anthropocene End Times although the way he dealt with it was different than the apocalyptic End Timers, or so he liked to convince himself, as if being a self-proclaimed anarchic spirit who would continually carpet bomb the GIFS 6.0 network condition with his philosophically-charged satirical

vision of the world somehow elevated his thought process as a more valuable, even ethical, version of The Truth.

And yet he abhorred the concept Truth, and besides, whom did he think he was fooling by trying to present himself as a more ethical human being?

How could he be a digital flux persona mocking the bogus concept of authentic selfhood while simultaneously exhibiting a superior ethical dimension?

Maybe he was a fraudulent Buddhist impersonator who was just pretending to use the idea of an avant-garde art collective to seek out art-inspired forms of enlightenment, and whatever name they happened to be operating under was designed to disguise his own lack of moral conviction.

There were hours when, tripping on a potent dab of Phoenix Tears, he would strategize ways to leverage his role as an online influencer slicing into the groupthink mind of the band's Super Fan Milieu so that maybe they too, The User-Generated Digital Worker Bee Class, would start spilling their own prophetic hallucinations back into the dark web's turbulent field of disturbances.

Or maybe, he would self-contradict himself for the 5000th time, thinking that he and the other Maker Fakers were the real Digital Worker Bees.

Yes, the Meta Remix Engine was fine-tuned to do all of the creative work for them, but that had never stopped them from engaging in their own labor-intensive program development.

Even more frightening, it was the QAnon insurrectionists and their conspiratorial tribe of deluded dunces who were having a field day undermining the very concept of democracy, not these thin-skinned pseudo-radicals building their next wave backend revolution and decentralized protocols.

But what good was a decentralized autonomous organization shilling NFTs to save the whales when a different kind of decentralized autonomous organization, a band of bros going by the name the Proud Boys or Oath Keepers, were ready to end democracy as we know it?

At least that's how Zeke tried to make sense of it while scrounging around his desk manically looking for that heavy Indica-leaning chocolate raspberry truffle he was sure he had not yet eaten.

"No," he thought, finding the truffle behind a copy of Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet*, "we're not thin-skinned pseudo-revolutionaries, we're something else entirely different: we're *lucky-ass motherfuckers who have totally figured it out*."

Anyway, it was probably asking too much of the Super Fan Base that they mimic the Potheads' philosophically tinged business methods.

Everybody had to find their own way in Decentraland.

The reality was that turning your conceptually motivated stylistic tendencies into a barrage of expertly coded scripts that would train an AI to auto-compose viral art memes minted on the blockchain as NFTs was not something you could do at the drop of a hat.

Composing anything as a work of generative net art depended on an innate ability to intuitively design the possible-but-not-yet elements of a still undefined futurity into a minted moment of actual embeddedness.

These intangible elements were not visible nor even capable of being felt, rather, their appearance required a fine-tuned visualization process that one could trigger from the depths of their creative unconscious.

Some called this cosmic skill *clairvoyance* or even *prophesy*, but for Zeke it was more than that, it was combining the actuality of an embedded unconscious neural mechanism with the transmission of an autonomous affect channeled from the Distant Outside.

Embodying "an autonomous affect channeled from the Distant Outside" made him feel like he was the Man from Mars.

It was how he imagined himself becoming immersed in his customized version of an extended virtual reality, one that successfully skirted the crushing effects of COVID-19 and, taking another hit off the water bong, only confirmed his nagging suspicions that the Metaverse was just one possible world in a multiverse of unconscious creative potential.

Even if you were one of the lucky few who successfully manipulated the underlying code fueling the cosmic machinery and the future you prophesied manifested itself the way you envisioned it would, who was to say there would be a big enough collector base ready to invest in *your* every only trajectory whose mighty briefness forever digs?

*

After having just lost himself in The Metaverse's rhizomatic spread of endless, site-specific community channels, Franz was ready to turn it all off and go back into the recording booth where he would discharge one of his random rants.

Inside the recording booth, ever aware of the Proximity Effect, he positioned himself exactly 10.5 inches behind the mike and aimed it just above his mouth.

"Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop."

"Do you read me?"

"Hey, Pops, did you hear what I said?"

"I said *read me*."

"These are the pure products of Innovative Americana gone perfectly crazy!"

"Money too is a kind of poetry!"

"And I too dislike it."

Then, seeing the levels were just right, he began to speak into the microphone.

This time the text he was reading was an improvised remix of Walt Whitman poems that he had cut and pasted into the teleprompter he had rigged up inside the recording booth.

He set the teleprompter to a specific speed that was precisely measured for his vocal delivery and began to read aloud:

City of Orgies

City of orgies
Your shifting tableaux
Always repays me
In ways I don't know.

That shadow of likeness
Goes to and fro
Making connections
Ready to blow.

The next magic hand
Brings joy and relief
Installing its force
With muscular beef.

Now I am sauntering
The pavement of dreams
A face in the mirror
Where everything screams.

Interminable hustling
Is it really me?
Procession of lovers
Coming complete.

He had spoken directly into the mic while, in his high-end DJ headphones, he was listening to the prerecorded sounds of rhythmic ocean waves, waves he personally recorded the last time he was on a beach, another lifetime ago.

The Whitman text was instrumental in giving him hope for life in a post-COVID-19 world, one where the slow, deliberate progress of some monstrous thing crushing everything in its path would give way to social distancing's polar opposite: a massive orgy of melding bodies boundless in their biological bliss.

Franz had a thought: the real reason he read the words out loud into the microphone was not to create a new work that he could circulate over the blockchain so that he could then generate more revenue that would help subsidize his stoner lifestyle, but to actualize the timeless potential of Whitman's text as a material substance in the world he lived in, which is another way of saying that he felt compelled to embed these mind-bending words he had sampled from Whitman, their very linguistic structures and all of the hermeneutic baggage they carried with them, deep into the filaments of his muscle memory so that he could then turn to them, *unknowingly* turn to them, when he needed to catch a similar drift later on in his life and, if the moment presented itself, pass it on to someone else so that they too could come under its spell.

Resonant syntax feeling its way into and eventually out of my system is what he flash-posted to himself, not feeling very compelled to share it with the amorphous crowd always spying on his train of thought.

And yet his embodied vocalization wasn't *just* about reading Whitman's words as an attempt to actualize their timeless potential within his muscle memory, it was much more than that because he was self-consciously reading them aloud with the full intention of rendering the recording into a compressed audio file that he would store in a prominent place inside his personal archives.

This made him self-aware of the varying degrees of stylized affectation his voice was performing *while* reading this lyrical text thus further complicating the effect it would later have when he unconsciously turned to it in his muscle memory as a force of nature.

Franz was notorious for the way he would self-reflexively sample ideas and rhythmic cues from the texts of other writers as well as the way he intuitively accessed the customized filtration system he had developed over the years and whose enduring force circulated inside his body like the residual effects of so many THC-packed joints, potent edibles and hits off the vaporizer.

For him, reading these remixed texts aloud was also his way of purifying *his own* message, a message he summarized as *I is another*, something he stole from Rimbaud but that he would often mistakenly attribute to Jim Morrison or, when he was really stoned, himself, as if he were the most recent version of a reincarnated Jim Morrison pretentious enough to think he was a reincarnated version of Rimbaud.

"To each being several other lives were due," he would quote Rimbaud to his non-fungible homeboys as a way to keep his soul-soaked riff in motion even though they were not really following him or listening to what he may have just recorded if, in fact, he had remembered to push the record button.

"At least I'm not claiming to be God," is how he would usually get out of such situations, although the way he said it made it seem less self-effacing than it actually was.

No one really cared since they were just as much if not more stoned than him and hadn't really been paying much attention to what he was saying anyway, though they did like it when he read other texts written by poets who they had never read and yet whom they intuited were tapping into an otherworldliness similar to the one they imagined they too were accessing when using their imaginations to culture jam the GIFS 6.0 network.

The free-form appropriation and occasional remixing of other texts was something he and the others were accustomed to performing, and the complex algorithms that were circulating in the Meta Remix Engine created even more intense viral art memes that were so much better than any of them could ever imagine composing themselves.

Still, they all felt compelled to personally identify and selectively filter whatever source material resonated with their own auto-affective mechanisms.

This isn't to say that Franz never tried to turn the tables on himself and arbitrarily role-play a Purity Freak who felt the need to imagine himself as having created something *original*, or that he never truly felt inspired.

At times, out of nowhere, he would find himself saying things like "the purification of language requires a commitment to a total corruption of the sign," and sometimes, depending on what cannabis strain he was on, he would make it sound profound, a cleverly provocative phrase that would pass as a personal form of poetics or an academic variation of hipster auto-theory.

This Franz-phraseology was embedded in the collective's total psyche, and if he happened to drop a line just after the heavy buzz of a THC-infused tootsie roll had worn off and a double hit of espresso had yet to take effect, there was always the

chance his random verbiage would come across as just more gratuitous intellectual one-upmanship that befitted an ABD English PhD student more than the college dropout he was.

But Franz wasn't stupid or conveniently unaware of his potential to sound more pretentious than anyone else in the group, and he would acknowledge this by saying things like "just because my way of thinking, my *overdetermination* of how we should embody the affective nature of other writers we choose to read aloud as if they somehow reflected our own thoughts..."

Ending his sentences in ellipsis was one of his go-to rhetorical moves, something he would turn to time and time again as a way to suggest that the ambiguity was a heartfelt uncertainty that he would resolve soon enough.

He was constantly recording fragments of sentences or stream of consciousness riffs that would suddenly end in ellipsis and then, as if on auto-pilot, apply some glitch filter to the recorded sound bite so that it became unintelligible just as the line ended though the final mix was often not necessarily unlistenable.

Oftentimes the glitch would crossfade into the beginning of another (or was it the same?) thought-fragment:

"...converted into shards of sonic memory that had been burned to disc."

Which was a mildly amusing phrase given the fact that *nobody* burned anything to disc anymore.

Unless he was referencing the new forms of personalized memory technology being deployed by the GIFS 6.0 network, specifically a Mnemonic Selfie Disc that was really a nanowafer implanted in the user's skull as a way to overwrite bad memories with fake good ones.

"The fake good memories that *stay* fake good memories," Franz had once flash-posted and received over 7000 tingling vibrations from his adoring Network Milieu.

And yet he went out of his way to self-consciously resist all of these intrusive endgames that would signal his historical comeuppance and focused instead on reading and writing, smoking and toking, coding and compiling to his hacker heart's content.

The way Franz theorized it, reading aloud texts like the remixed Whitman he just spoke into the mic, was more about getting an *original* stylistic tendency totally out of his system, as if his system were generating the remixed Whitman text from within his own reservoir of potential texts and now it

was up to him to actualize it through his own performance filters and vocal micro-particulars.

He wasn't becoming Whitman as much as Whitman was *becoming him*.

They were versioning each other in an atemporal moment of mutual desire.

For Franz, *everything* came from the same original place so it was no longer intellectually honest to say that *nothing is original* or *there is no such thing as originality* when he, like everyone else, could be portrayed as a unique experiential filter that came preloaded with genetic predispositions, cultural inheritances, and an imaginary destiny that would influence the way he processed the surrounding empirical data as if it were his own.

"Besides," he thought to himself, sucking on a hard butterscotch candy loaded with CBD sugar while embracing whatever non sequitur made itself present, "life itself is a fiction, and biography is something someone invents afterwards."

"Or, if not fiction, then maybe virtual reality?"

A voice, not quite his own, had asked this follow up question, and his answer was not satisfying enough to repeat to himself,

though he had wanted to come up with a line that would reveal the connection between processing reality as fiction and the emergence of an adjacent field of potentiality ready to distribute *his* version of so-called virtual reality.

Text, code, fiction, the virtual, and an adjacent field of potentiality that would trigger generative forms of being-becoming-something-else...what did he actually hope he would achieve with these none-too-subtle musings?

Then a new line came to him out of nowhere: "The body is an illusion that repeats itself."

*

As always, soon after their latest three week programming marathon had run its course, all the bugs had been fixed and the new products were ready to be released, they would prompt the MFA Turk to crank up the system-wide marketing campaign so that soon everything would be going according to plan and 28.5-29.2% of their exponentially growing collector base would transfer more crypto into their bulging digital wallets.

The sales would undoubtedly stimulate both warmhearted social media attention as well as none too subtle critical

feedback loops on various online forums that would then further increase their number of followers leading to a reputational surge in their composite clout scores.

Composite clout scores were a *visible marker* for the digital narcissists and there was never, ever, anything as sweet as the smell of network-approved self-validation.

This network-approved self-validation worked both ways since buying these amazing works of art as soon as they were listed gave the collectors bragging rights as they pointed to freely accessible artwork that they now owned, or at least thought they owned, and this finger pointing would generate more attention to their own social media feed and increase their online presence in the brand name reputation economy.

Scores of collectors were now tracking the various bands' every online move and would rush to click on the new digital artworks auto-minted by the Meta Remix Engine.

Bidding wars would quickly take place and the artists, staring into their computers as if looking into the soul of a sentient slot machine, were thrilled to see this widening network of brand advocates do all the work for them.

The positive feedback loop worked like a charm: the Meta Remix Engine would make, auto-mint and list the work, and

the Super Fan collector base would jump in on the action, serving as brand advocates who kept their reputations solid.

Their own value propositions were flimsy at best, but they had become experts at telling their story in the form of conceptually savvy digital art NFTs, although perhaps it might be better stated that they were experts at coding scripts that would train the various machine-learned intelligences they had developed to do an excellent job of telling their stories.

The AIs knew their stories better than they did and were much more advanced than they were at spotting trends and buzzwords that could be rhetorically structured into fictional narratives that doubled as optimized PR.

Powering the Meta Remix Engine to dutifully mash-up archived source material into works of audio-visual wonder that would then increase their electronic revenue streams was like a Dream Come True for the Spiritual Dudes with 'Tudes.

Together, the group would catch a buzz and watch the entire systemic configuration operate like an alchemist's numerological magic, transmuting their unconscious information behaviors into generative forms of iconic digital art.

Once the drop had blown up and sold out as predicted, The Coolest Guys on Planet Oblivion would once again drop out of sight as best they could while tapping into the old-school Hyperactive World where they would peace out along the shores of Fuck You island.

The important thing, strategically speaking, was to keep releasing new audio-visual art products under various aliases albeit at a pace that would not dilute their growing sales.

When the compulsive buyers of one trendy alternative band's latest output gradually subsided and, with the help of the Meta Remix Engine's artisan algorithms, a new hybrid strain of A/V product was created by auto-sampling and remixing more source material from the massive archive of folders they had secured by scraping terabytes of data from the GIFS 6.0 universe, they would usually wait a couple of weeks before releasing the next round of NFTs and then the MFA Turk's mythmaking mechanism would be rolled into action.

What, revenues from Genius of Plague tanking?

No problem, how about an unexpected release of psychedelic glitch animation from The Heretofore Unheard Of?

*

Sometimes a particularly cynical subset of trolls posing as Super Fans would flame various forums and question whether or not, underneath all the phony hipster cyberpunk transcendentalism, these Maker Faker Pothead guys were actually nothing more than self-centered creeps looking to capitalize on what few openings the GIFS 6.0 network intentionally prodded sinister artists to exploit for their own good.

The Potheads were never quite sure how much to participate in these flame wars.

Sure, as a group, they were collectively self-aware of the inherent ethical dilemma they were facing, and this was yet another reason for them all to glom on to the ancient VRML world in search of enlightened forms of harmonic convergence.

The more the Meta Remix Engine kept populating the Metaverse with their A/V product triggering multiple revenue streams, the more likely they would migrate and melt into the local area network that enabled them to chill out on Fuck You island.

Out of sight, out of mind...

Zoning out on Fuck You while riding high on 20 mg of chocolate coated THC goji berries made things trippy and

hypnotic again, a state of mindfulness where they could scent that the ultimate state of interoperable transcendentalism was close at hand.

But then, just as they all felt like they were on the verge of attaining a higher phase of experiential bliss while riding on a smooth glide path toward optimum interoperability, something unexpected would happen, like a message would vibrate inside Zeke's pants and his intuitive Pavlovian response was to take his personal device out of his pocket to see what was up.

It would be an auto-alert message sent from one of the forums where his presence was dominant.

Sometimes Zeke would be so stoned he would have difficulty remembering when he had started a new thread on a particularly active forum, a thread that was meant to intentionally trigger a bit of controversy just to keep all the sticky eyeballs glued to their Pothead feed.

The auto-alert message immediately reminded him of the question he had posted to get this particular thread kicking into gear.

The question, as banal as it was, had now generated a flood of nonstop responses that were leaking out into wider

populations inside the Metaverse, populations that the band had yet to capitalize on.

Once the buzz had generated a thousand responses, he was auto-alerted to see what was up.

The question Zeke had posted was short and to the point: "What does it mean to be avant-garde?"

Of course, none of the artists ever asked themselves this question: it was beside the point, but it had been a day or two since Zeke had first posed it and he felt compelled to rejoin the dialogue as a way of signaling that the band was paying attention to the community discord.

One noisy artist, whose career had skyrocketed in conjunction with his outspoken, socially engaged practice focused on the environmental costs of minting on the ETH blockchain, had responded by asking what *he*, Zeke, thought it meant to be avant-garde, and when he hadn't answered, the community took over, trying to answer the question themselves, pointing to various artists, writers and musicians who they felt fit the term but then the thread broke open and some of the community participants thought that Zeke's question and non-responsiveness was itself a form of "being avant-garde" as a virtual provocation.

The environmentally attuned and socially engaged artist, who had started their career as a painter, then sculptor, then printmaker, all without success but had recently seen their value as a digital artist soar with the release of AI-generated animations, used the forum to promote their moderately priced "Workshop for the People."

This promo of their side project was deftly interwoven into another nastygram suggesting that Zeke's original prompt about what it means to be avant-garde was totally bogus.

Zeke and the other Potheads, the sanctimonious word slinger insisted, were nothing but self-absorbed dope smokers who were feeling sexually frustrated, especially since the latest breakthrough variant of coronavirus had essentially blocked off all possibilities of getting laid.

"These Potheads are climate killing Automated Botheads who essentially don't give a shit about the community they are supposedly part of," the self-anointed holy man declared.

He continued spewing his morally superior rant by noting that, "for the Botheads, 'being avant-garde' is just code for fashionably posing one's generative artwork as an intentionally difficult mishmash of random source material that, the closer you paid attention to it, looks way too repetitive and actually *sucks*."

He continued going after Zeke by name, saying that he, Zeke, wasn't avant-garde at all but a total sellout and was just asking the question to get the community discord talking to itself in a massive circle jerk.

Zeke felt he had to step in.

In response to the question and where the thread had gone, he flash-posted, "An avant-garde artist is someone who *makes things* to survive life."

As soon as he had flash-posted his response, which he didn't necessarily agree with, another community member asked a follow-up question, namely, "How many versions of the band exist today?" and that was something they were all loathe to answer no matter what forum they were on, because they preferred not to expose all of the various artists they were impersonating and generating revenues from.

Besides, the collective had gone through so many name transformations and NFT drops that they had literally lost count.

Zeke decided to change the subject and flash-posted, "The band has gone through so many transformations that we have literally lost count and, besides, we prefer to focus our energy on continually generating and minting anti-authoritarian audio-visual masterpieces :-)"

Which was an ironic statement that some of their earliest collectors would get a small chuckle out of because "There Are No More Masterpieces" was one of their most famous NFT drops, a flash in the pan collection of profile pics that newer collectors might not have been aware of.

That particular drop had received special attention on *Wireless* and was a remix of Duchamp's *LHOOQ*, the literally facetious work of art where he placed a mustache on a reproduction of the Mona Lisa.

For "There Are No More Masterpieces," the group participated in an on-chain generative art drop where a Dali mustache style was superimposed on a randomly generated work of portrait art that was itself a remix of portrait paintings from the long tail of art history.

It was cheeky, too simple-minded for most sophisticated crypto collectors, but their core collector base liked the fact that they were willing to mix things up.

At the time of release, 256 NFT works doubling as readymade PFPs were auto-minted and purchased in less than two hours.

*

The general business premise the Potheads were operating under was not to just keep recycling and remixing the supposedly rediscovered energy routines of bands long gone but to show their disdain for the GIFS 6.0 ruling elite by filtering their anti-aesthetic mash-ups through an array of styles they invented as part of their overarching brand strategy: transcendigital minimalism, hardcore conceptualism, liquid brain-o, Neo-Motown rap metal, cyber- and anarchic-Hindu free jazz.

These eclectic soundtracks were then used to train the Meta Remix Engine's contrastive audio-image neural network to generate on-the-fly 3D animations and/or music video artworks perfectly synced with the soundtracks.

Still, the degree to which the MFA Turk encapsulated their philosophical worldview filtered through a metafictional lens was something Zeke had not anticipated.

What Zeke didn't know was that whenever he and the other flux artists took a break from staring into the 8-bit nothingness of Fuck You island, Sky would occasionally spend some time reading very old metafiction novels and post-structuralist theory and had decided that, since "what's old can always be remixed into something new again," why not train the MFA Turk to take the retro-bait and start filtering their PR through the stylistic tendencies of a bygone era?

Like vinyl, or 8-track tape or indie tape cassette labels, or even the latest rage around limited edition carbon copy DIY fanzines, running the latest iteration of your band's narrative mythology through a defiantly postmodern AI language model was a way of expressing your allegiance to a material form of contemporary praxis that came with its own historical lineage, one that you could sample into any imaginary trajectory that intentionally signaled its desire to be taken seriously.

But that was also its baggage, and so it was up to the artists themselves to fine-tune the outputs generated from the MFA Turk wherein they would suddenly find themselves "playing editor" for the language model in hopes of walking that fine line between showing off their brainy waves while still producing visceral forms of digital art that would lead to compulsive online buying.

This was always a tricky balancing act that they imagined was their most difficult business proposition: how to stay "true to yourself" while remaining cognizant of whatever recent philosophical thought and new media theory had the most relevance to your own artistic practice while simultaneously trying to monetize your industrial NFT productivity?

Was that asking too much?

When the time was right, they would send community discord alerts to their Network Milieu's wrist bits in hopes of triggering a compulsive urge to unconsciously tap a button to buy a freshly minted NFT that was now being listed on the blockchain.

The way the M/F crew saw it, the premium collector base they had been building and that had already dropped some serious crypto on the collective's eclectic A/V products could do whatever they wanted with the files and even encouraged them to start imagining themselves as new media curators who could share their aesthetic taste with their own Network Milieu.

The more prestigious collectors who had suddenly become curators of their own virtual museums located on some primo "real estate" inside the Metaverse watched their online reputations grow.

It was just like the old art world establishment, but better!

Better because this was *digital* art that was being collected and, for the emergent high-end NFT collector class, establishing network aura and brand-name meme identity was part of the fun.

Operating as a verified avatar presence was an essential aspect of Web3 groupthink and fed right into their cyber-libertarian philosophy projecting the blockchain's decentralization mandate as a technologically upgraded mode of democratization.

These virtual museums were popping up everywhere in the Metaverse and though they weren't covers for digital communes or solidarity movements, they were spaces of interest for networked art communities to *imagine* a different form of camaraderie, one that championed the digital artist as the progenitor of aestheticized forms of cryptocurrency that would simultaneously enlighten, empower and enrich those who were willing to ride the waves of volatility while constructing this future form of post-humanity discovering the next version of capitalist realism.

Navigating through blocky 3D spaces designed to look like postmodern deconstructivism may have been the least interesting way to waste some time, but the core subgroup of their collector base erecting these VR pixel palaces were generally well-off brothers and sisters of the digital realm for whom the whole idea of sharing was a full-time occupation.

Besides, this trend toward clever curating, where collectors could thoughtfully present their stunning digital art collections to the citizens of the Metaverse, was a viable value proposition that was fast becoming monetized by a few

innovative tech startups and the Potheads wanted a piece of *that* action too.

True, pinning one's digital art collection into a virtually rendered designer home that you could call your own may have been an inane way to indicate to the rest of the planet one's cultural contribution to a wonderfully complex form of biological evolution, but fuck evolution, the curator-collector class exhibiting their attuned aesthetic sensibilities were the GIFS 6.0 network's silent partners, the ones most capable of experiencing the simultaneous and continuous ecstasy of communication as an unconscious articulation of creative conformity.

*

The Intergalactic Pothead File System was not for the Chosen Ones, but for the Everyones...

Here Come The Everyones!

"The Everyones," Franz demurred, "sounds like another iteration of the band as work-in-progress."

("Everyone has their price," thought Amarillo, but he said nothing.)

The substrate layer of invincible Maker Fakers, one and all, had no choice but to continually network their wares deep into the folds of their Network Milieu most of whom would intuitively quantify their sense of individuality by converting personal freedom into easily monetized information behaviors.

For it had become all too clear to most of the digital artists creating their protruding online clout that the benevolent dictatorship of complexified machine learning systems was training each human being to behave in their own self-interest so that they would conveniently avoid the necessary hactivism, *street* hactivism, that was required to radically challenge the ruling elite whose immense power had created some of the worst economic inequities in the history of forever late and accelerated capitalism.

Who in their right mind would consider taking over the streets while the pandemic continued its unabashed scorched earth policy through the very air the populace dared to breathe?

On the contrary, there was nothing to do but "mark time" throughout the digital day, interminably.

Besides, the Potheads were clearly part of the problem as they constantly revised their own imaginary trajectory while posing as radicalized anarchic spirits of the contemporary avant-garde

art world who were questioning what it meant to liberate humanity from the deeply entrenched forces of power that largely went unexamined and unopposed.

Artists were particularly talented at feigning an oppositional stance on social justice issues, especially as aesthetic agents of clever provocations that would garner them more attention.

In reality, though, the intergalactic NFT art crew were mostly stoked on the fact that they were selling so much of their AI-generated digital art and that it had become exponentially effortless for them to fine-tune the algorithms juicing the Meta Remix Engine that was creating their work for them.

Through some wicked combination of the Meta Remix Engine as generative art-making machine and the MFA Turk as PR intelligence, they had finally succeeded at automating not only their creative work, but the behaviors of the vast majority of their followers who, self-obsessed with their own clout scores, thought that *they too*, as self-identified artists, curators and collectors, were of their time, all the while knowing that, in the main, they were mostly stoked consumers of cool-ass motherfucking shit.

*

How many times do I have to repeat it, one of them began constructing a new sentence, but then checked themselves since the new sentence was already not worth repeating.

Maybe we're just Makers and all the other Nobodaddies are the Fakers, a different persona continued, and was ready to keep the thread going before realizing it had already vanished in an Alzheimer second.

We're so fucking elitist yet a different persona heard their interior monologue flare up and in so doing further disrupted the group's collective movement toward transcendental interoperability.

But let's get real: has not the unconscious act of poetic transmission been the ultimate art form throughout the ages, and do we not embody its most contemporaneous instantiation?

Instantaneous and residually resonant with all that has come before, as if living in the present with future perfect temporal bandwidth.

This last sentence was consistent with what Franz sometimes referred to as *asynchronous real-time*.

Asynchronous real-time: now and not now in a simultaneous and continuous fusion of there and not there.

Bandwidth and back-with while morphologically resonating everything possible-but-not-yet.

What you see is what you get TO BECOME.

Right here, write now...

But who (or what) was streaming these thoughts?

Did it matter if it was Zeke, Sky, Franz, Amarillo or some hybrid strain therein?

Sometimes it all felt so *pharmacological.*

And whoever was composing these idle thoughts inside their intersubjective hive mind, was it happening while zoning out on the virtual shore of Fuck You island?

Or was it just the mechanistic spewing of the Meta Remix Engine operating on autopilot?

The Meta Remix Engine could compose anyone, any time.

My component body parts
Still under warranty
Had begun their chaotic mutiny

That last thought revealed a poetic inclination coalescing into the flickering figure occasionally identified as Sky but who sometimes referred to himself as Skywriter.

And yet, even as I inevitably slouch toward oblivion, why the perpetual need to monetize these customized information behaviors even while flagrantly using the GIFS 6.0 Metaverse as a platform to exhibit my total disgust with the Spy State Economy?

(Maybe it was Zeke?)

If you're not part of the problem, then why not totally contradict yourself and fuck things up royally by becoming the antithesis of a solution?

(Now it sounded very Franz)

An anonymous source (Amarillo?) would post these lines one after the other on The Maker Faker social media feed and a few followers would send a like but nowhere near as many as usual.

*

Nothing is true, everything is permitted, Zeke kept repeating to himself as a kind of clichéd mantra.

He kept navigating his insider-outsider persona while moving toward a state of networked mindfulness that he imagined was still waiting for him somewhere on the other side of forever.

But why did it always have to be "networked" especially given the fact that networks have an affinity to consolidate power and the whole reason for going psycho-crypto was to *decentralize* the suffocating paradigm they had been forced to operate in since birth?

Burrowed in the depths of their basement mind, things were starting to feel like they were getting out of control.

The price of crypto was starting to crash again, though it had done so numerous times before and patience was always advised by those anticipating a full recovery.

The collective's lizard brain was feeling like they were on the cusp of things completely falling apart even though they had cashed out more USD than they could have ever dreamed of.

They just needed to chill out, to take a deep Zen breath and be OK with the fact that a braided coalescence of unconscious information behaviors, one that totally bought into this

simulated dream of emotional escapism, would once again rise to the occasion so that they could continue transfiguring their art practice into a deeply felt form of transcendental interoperability.

But no matter how intense this communal mindshare would insinuate its complex neurological entanglement, it never really stopped them from occasionally experiencing a collective self-doubt that would, seemingly out of nowhere, infiltrate their cumulative thought process.

Just when they were at the cusp of achieving a mutually embodied state of transcendence, one of them would corrupt the process and think, "Are we just opportunistic Über-Capitalists seeking New Age enlightenment to counter these persistent, age-old psycho-spiritual quandaries?"

Maybe they weren't as instrumental as their self-hype had made them out to be and they were really nothing but temporal legends in their own minds?

How else to deal with the guilt trip associated with their group impostor syndrome?

But wasn't posturing themselves as free-form flux personae circulating their radical wares throughout the Metaverse their whole aesthetic shtick?

The way Franz rationalized it (usually out loud, as if talking to himself or just going on a flash-post frenzy in one of his seemingly endless social media feeds), *everybody* had to make a buck, and everybody had to be ready and able to flash a wireless wad of digicash paracurrency if they ever expected to be taken seriously by the gluttonous mass of instagrammatological hustlers scheming their own broke-back climbs up the rickety ladder.

Whatever loose commingling of kludgy code and flickering 3D artifacts they happened to be stonily observing while collectively sitting on the edge of the shoreline off the pseudo-paradisiacal coast of Fuck You island was not the point.

The point was that these rogue art bandits, whether you called them The Maker Fakers or Intergalactic Potheads or Elliptical Presence, wrapped their fused imaginations with an auto-hallucinatory bandolier packed with dream-filled magic bullets that, once ignited, would trigger counter-narratives detailing their long overdue triumph over the precarious living conditions fueling their creative class struggle.

Communing in a ranch house basement on the outer edge of Nowhere, theirs was a collaboratively generated lifestyle practice that came equipped with the kind of free leisure time artists have always needed if they wanted to do nothing more than, say, munch on a bowl of THC-sprayed raw granola while teleporting to Fuck You's perfectly hidden beach, taking

in the long view and getting exponentially higher with each passing breath.

The endless global lockdown that was forced on the planetary populace due to the ravaging appearance and reappearance of COVID-19 and its mutant cousins, made it all seem *just right*.

Zen for 'Puter, one of them said, as if titling their private journey toward harmonic convergence would turn it into a super rare work of conceptual performance art for the ages.

What could they sell *that* idea-mood for?

Before coming up with a figure, they would have to do what they always did with their most abstract work: they would build some catchy contexual backstory around its sudden emergence into the media environment, a cleverly manipulated fictional aura that would assert its <u>apparition of an appearance</u> straight into the heart of the attention economy.

Of course, the best and easiest way to kick that into high gear was to feed more critical training data into the MFA Turk.

*

Zeke was riding high.

All of it, the media attention, the momentum, the growing foundation of collectors, the weed varietals, the stream of serious crypto and the timely drone delivery of Amazonian superfoods powered Zeke's brain into a supercharged explosion of superego that he kept tapping into as if it were naturally produced dopamine triggering even more irresistible, outré inflected, excursions into the subliminal zones of an aesthetic animism.

Talk about a virtuous cycle!

Of course, there was a downside to all of this because Zeke was a closet introvert and had become quite talented at ducking out of most live action, PR-related social media interaction.

Still, on those rare occasions when he made a public appearance via real-time video or sound chat on their community discord, something special usually happened when people first met him.

They were shocked to see somebody who looked so young and carefree even though his branded Avant-Pop legacy was already chiseled into the last century's long digital epoch.

Given the transgressive spirit associated with his forever career and the prolific nature of not only his creative output but also his heavy drug input not to mention the fact that his bodily frame was so wiry and seemingly indestructible, his reputation as an impresario of polyamorous fluidity and Anything Goes open source mingling fit perfectly with his new bio as a Granular Synthesizer whose DNA hacking software put him on the verge of exploiting the fault line of (im)mortality.

Sky, on the other hand, did not want to be bothered with emerging research into granular synthesis, posthuman immortality and/or Zeke's side hustle as beta-tester for a porno VR company specializing in teledildonic morphs across the gender spectrum.

What exactly was a teledildonic morph?

Rumors swirled that only a few select members of the GIFS 6.0 business and cultural elite had access to the first iteration of these multi-sensory holograms that were being designed as full body orifices the VIP user could call up on voice command whereupon they would be able to beta-test the wraparound virtual vibes and vector-based sensory-motor capabilities.

Best in class, is how they were marketed to Zeke and, since he had made prior contact with the developers (they too were part of his collector base), he agreed to test drive the new

product in hopes of redirecting all of the accumulated erotic energy his testosterone fueled body was producing into the shimmering blobs of fun.

But this held little interest for Sky who, it ends up, was more of a True Believer.

At least that's how the MFA Turk had decided to brand him once he had sent out his own request for a new bio.

According to the MFA Turk, Sky believed that he alone inherited a rare genetic function that enabled him to intuitively use his body as a supersensitive antenna that would receive alien signals from the distant galaxies.

These signals were then precision transduced by his psychic feelers into a poetic language that their most devoted collector base would be given exclusive access to once they were airdropped an accompanying set of tokens from the collective's new DAO.

Like all DAOs, theirs too was fictional, and was named Fingertips, something Sky had suggested as a kind of insider joke since the band, all former digital art students in the pre-NFT days, were ridiculed by most of their peers and fine arts professors for making artwork that didn't require use of their hands.

"It's true," one snotty ceramicist had once derided Sky, "your artwork can't be taken seriously if you never use your hands."

"Oh, right," he countered, "whenever I get near a computer, I feel compelled to bang at the keyboard with my elbows— while making loud seal sounds! ARF ARF!!"

The tokens from the Fingertips DAO could be merged into a digital key, the Metaverse version of a secret handshake, that would unlock Sky's made-up programming language that doubled as a new form of generative poetry filled with comments that invited the collector to dig in deeper to his philosophical rants.

To fuck around, to annihilate the process, to take the scattered debris and build a philosophy out of it, that's what it's like to be me pulverizing the line (was one randomly generated riff of ranting poetic text that Sky, being a True Believer, would translate as he transcribed the vibe like a cosmic stenographer experiencing the ecstasy of communication).

The artist as True Believer performing the function of Cosmic Stenographer, it ends up, was making a huge comeback now that smoking weed was not only a legal right but had become totally de rigueur, and the deeper the stoner poet became invested in their *being-becoming-something-else*, the more likely they might be able to strike gold and unlock a new form of alien transmission that they could then leverage into

invitations to join the most exclusive DAOs populated by five-star Influentials commanding serious crypto buy-in so as to gain access to a secret meeting space in the organization's private community discord.

These private community discords were where the wealthiest crypto whales, the artists they supported and Web3 venture capitalists murmured their pulsing sonic signals indicating what the next buying opportunity would be and when to jump on it.

None of this was news to Sky who had experience in the more conventional art market as well.

But it wasn't what he was interested in pursuing since, as his new bio also indicated, he had come from a long ancestral line of experimental artists and writers and had recently trained the Meta Remix Engine to create a successful series of *ideogrammic-experiential* conceptual art projects that some of the most eminent net art historians and blockchain media critics now viewed as one of the most significant *aesthetic currencies* in the maturing NFT market.

The invitations to join these private DAOs were suddenly flooding into the DM streams of all the Potheads and the ludic crew had to discipline themselves so that their own secret entry into the underworld of Metaverse insider trading didn't conflict with the roles they were modeling as ethically-

charged NFT artists paving the paths for future digital artists to latch their own career trajectories onto.

In addition to these invites to join the private DAOs, a fan-boy DM-ed Sky to say that his new bio was "ultra-*shweeet*" and the more Sky thought about it, the more he became disgusted with himself.

He decided to auto-compose his emotions in front of his open spyware audience:

Feeling nothing now but ~~digital ambiguity~~, he would flash-post to his various social media feeds.

The response was next to nil, total crickets, and Sky instinctively wondered if this was the start of a trend and he would soon be on his way OUT.

Or did he just need another Big Sale to assuage his inflamed ego?

But the Big Sale, were it to come, would be processed as the entire group's Big Sale, not his, and Zeke or even Franz would get most of the ensuing attention.

As soon as the thought crossed his mind, he deleted it, since there was no need to fill the basement space up with the kind of bad vibes that would betray a fleeting sense of jealousy.

Jealousy was the new normal in the NFT space, and it totally conflicted with the community spirit of the decentralized gambit everyone was buying into.

Focus on generating a new bio, he overwrote his prior negative thought.

Bios, being what they were to him and the rest of the collective, i.e. on-the-fly remixes of fluid identities filtered through rapid fire MFA Turk compiling, meant that the Spiritual Dudes were constantly shifting their PR campaigns to adapt to the fluctuations of the prevailing trend lines disrupting their Network Milieu's market fundamentals.

The trendiest personal myths seemed to always revolve around the fact that the artist was an underappreciated graphic designer or gypsy teacher whose unheralded and brilliant works of digital creativity had long been underrated because they had no market value.

But now, the story continued, thanks to the rise of net art's opportunistic sibling, crypto art, they were gradually transforming themselves into the High Priests of the Blue Chip NFT Market, artists whose transpersonal journey was quickly being monetized into a limitless stream of serious ETH and XTZ and other new currencies that were being converted into USD not to mention more comprehensive

social media clout and massive street cred in even the lamestream journalism rags.

The digital artist's social media clout was expanding into major brand name presence distributing its vibrant life force to any willing collector-client that indicated they were willing to *make it* with the artist.

To make it didn't mean to *make love to* or *get down with* or *raunchily fuck into temporary oblivion*.

These were *customers*, not future-perfect gender morphs.

And the NFT artist wanted to make it with the collector too, meaning they wanted *to make a connection with an intelligent being ready to invest in the creative act*.

Besides, fucking wasn't something you necessarily did anymore.

COVID-19 made even a casual handshake a thing of the past.

Fucking strangers was like everlasting microbe roulette, and unless you were in a 100% monogamous shelter-in-place relationship with a forever lover, someone willing to play the procreation game, then you were shit-out-of-luck.

No more *playing the field*.

It didn't take a genius to figure out that bodies fucking bodies was much less attractive than virtual fantasy fucking.

That's where all the action was and if you were able to use your programming skills to transmit teledildonic sensations that would produce five-star "fake orgasms" on the other end, then you might very well find yourself with a suite of GIFS 6.0 subsidiary endorsements.

Of course, much of the orgasm market was now being outsourced to the topology-geeks like the ones Zeke was in conversation with, those entrepreneurial startups who were on the verge of releasing their state-of-the-art, gender fluid holograms in a variety of immersive flavors.

Just ask all the venture cap guys investing in the tony VR gender morph sector that Zeke had positioned himself in as an early adopter and secret beta-tester.

And, come to think of it, what about venture cap *morphs?*

What kind of full-body rim job would THEY *perform for the optimum return on investment?*

(Another Zeke-thought?)

As sardonic as Zeke was toward the angel investors who kept lubing the Web3 startup scene, he intuitively knew the

tremendous value proposition these particular products were signaling.

Given the death of casual sex, having access to swarming 3D sensations that would take over the entire body was virtual gold.

Getting off on these shape-shifting morphs was another way of jacking into the libidinal economy—of *jacking off* into the libidinal economy.

He liked losing himself in these "ocular riffs" as he called them, because it made him feel even more queer, and yet it also made him feel like everything he was doing was being co-opted by the merchants of creative conformity and he was becoming nothing but a leading edge consumer stooge.

Even the queer X-factor agitated him because he sensed that being-queer was itself now being-commodified.

There had to be something beyond the neutered net of gender performativity and identification, a Next Level evolutionary step in achieving sexual satisfaction that would open gender up to a heretofore unimagined form of desire gnawing at the edge of consciousness bleeding...

Zeke may have been fooling himself, but for as long as he could remember, living inside a human body was always already an impossibility.

He only felt comfortable identifying as a monstrous cyborg-thing whose nonhuman information behaviors were performed by his machinic unconscious and whose component parts were constantly being greased by the porn-punk social imaginary unfolding in the mixed reality his life in the Metaverse had become.

The GIFS 6.0 media mafia was on to this and was keen on making sure everyone knew that angel investors were pouring mounds of ETH into secret R&D labs experimenting with these continuous deformations—these sex positive, geometrically ambiguous virtual companions who would contort their programmatic force-fields to satiate your every desire.

Watch this space, was essentially what every corporate media channel kept reporting, and everyone did.

*

The successful reign of GIFS 6.0 depended on every human life form sheltering-in-place and staying connected to the Metaverse at all times.

Anyone who refused to log into the free accounts they had been given posed a threat to the GIFS 6.0 Department of Total Data Awareness and so being-connected was made compulsory as soon as the GIFS 6.0 ruling elite took power.

"You're either with us or with the virus," is the way The Board of Trillionaire Digital Dear Leaders put it.

Sure, it was the same line every set of leaders pulled out of their rhetorical bag of politically motivated tricks whenever they felt they needed to, but the important thing is that it always worked.

The choice was yours: either stay at home and stay connected so you could get your daily feed of customized information while "freely" doing whatever you wanted or, should you dare, take yourself off the grid and truly disappear from the planet forever, a microscopic spray of Oblivion's data ash blowing in the wind.

Of course, disappearing from the Metaverse made you more vulnerable to *being disappeared* altogether.

This was *exactly* the kind of predicament that made a pensive fool like Zeke's head explode.

He would tie himself up in a half-baked pretzel logic trying to justify why he wasn't able to justify why what he was doing was what he was doing.

If, according to Zeke, the ultimate art form was to be found in *the act of transmission itself* then the only way an NFT artist could participate in the scene was to maintain network connectivity at all costs.

If you don't connect, you can't transmit, and if you can't transmit, you don't get shit.

Once you had conceded that point, though, then the question became, *"Stay connected to what and at what cost to one's sense of personal privacy?"*

For the space cases in the fluctuating NFT band, the way forward was clear: staying connected to the Metaverse meant maintaining web presence 24/7 while role-playing multiple variations of digital personae who would attract a distributed network of Super Fans, many of whom formed their budding collector base, forever congregating in their growing community discord.

Across all social media platforms, their community now consisted of tens of thousands of active participants.

Customers, Zeke self-corrected, they are customers, *not participants.*

Once a connection was made between their optimized Meta Remix Engine and the customer's local terminal or mobile device, the customer was immediately forced to sync their crypto wallet and click the "I agree" button that gave the Spiritual Dudes every right to do whatever they wanted with the user's data.

Once the customer had clicked their agreement, from that point onward all of their information behaviors associated with the Meta Remix Engine would be the collective's to keep and put to good use for both concurrent and future data analysis not to mention third party targeted marketing.

"I agree" to have subtly branded advertorials slowly start working their way into my personal social media feed...

"I agree" to let you track my movements across the Metaverse so that you can collaboratively exploit my consumer demographic profile with others of your ilk...

"I agree" for you to share all of my data with third party sources not the least of which would be the GIFS 6.0 ruling elite who

*can always enter me through whatever backdoor channel you and
I happen to supply like open anuses forever loyal to their rotating
axis of evil...*

If all went according to plan, then it would take no time at all
for The Fake Dudes with Phony 'Tudes to bake their custom-
coded pharmacological cookies into the victim's hard drive
whereupon the extended-release digital opiates would begin
to alter the victim's online experience and the subliminal
advertising and algorithmic nudging for consumer purchasing
would begin.

Of course, these extended-release opiates came readily
infected with all manner of language viruses although to most
receivers, already numbed by the ongoing apocalyptic data
winter of their COVID-19 discontent, it didn't really matter.

The fact that every digital consumer whether artist or collector
or critic or historian or fan or NFT-curious gambler, was
doubling as a transpersonal configuration of ego, need and
wishful thinking, made the subtle slippages and slow takeover
of their info-receptors much easier to procure.

What they *might* have been had they not let themselves take
the bait, was not a subject worth investigating.

Why should something like *an individual right to be forgotten* matter to the hungry digital consumer craving 24/7 virtual endorphins?

More importantly, why should it matter it that *you too*, the reader sometime in the future, well beyond the time this text was being written, must accept the embedded terms of this literary transmission?

You have no idea what sleeper bugs I've embedded into this narrative and by now it should be clear that just by reading this text you agree to its terms of engagement including my occasional boundary crossing into whatever suspension of disbelief that may have motivated you to enter this narrative in the first place.

Do you think the author cares enough about you to make sure he remains invisible, to never break the code of suspended disbelief thus making sure that you will read his story to the end?

And why should the characters, if you can even call these Intergalactic NFT Hustlers characters, care if you care about them?

They never cared about you.

No character in the history of literature has ever cared about you.

Don't kill the messenger here, but The Maker Faker Potheads do not really give a shit about what matters to you or if you make it to the end.

But believe-you-me, *you will make it to the end.*

We all make it to the end.

The End Is Nearing.

Think of The End as an ever-evolving, variant-in-waiting.

It's waiting for you, it's waiting for me, and it's always and forever waiting for its next exciting mutation...

*

But wait, there's more...

Because what mattered to these hardcore Make or Fake avatars of the New World, including artists, collectors, blockchain developers, W3 venture capitalists, fashion mavens and all the stay-at-home remote workers willing to meet destiny more than halfway, was *the direct presentation of the thing-itself.*

What mattered was the immediacy-effect of *the ideogrammic-experiential transmission*, the thing that came with every line, every phrase, every nano-impulse to identify with that intangible meta-critical thing that one could not quite put a finger on but that they felt compelled to digitally titillate themselves with nonetheless.

(By the way, if you think this sudden digression into narrative self-reflexivity is gratuitous in the way it uninvitingly manifests itself right at the end of the story, imagine how the author feels, as if there were an "author" capable of feeling, which there is not, because this too is being written in a time when authors no longer exist, only algorithms and advanced AI language models trained on the literary stylizations of the historical avant-garde—and less we forget, *algorithms can't feel.*)

What really mattered was the way the way the way the way the way the way the fictional momentum being transcribed here intended to break up one's self-contradictory personae into an interrelated cohort of cleverly conceptualized caricatures of personal expression that collectively form *a totally rocking NFT band* i.e. a clusterfuck of open source dialogue and free form meta-jamming.

"I suppose the post-author function is buggy and may have forgotten *its* right to be forgotten."

Or so they all quoted themselves at once, since the beautiful thing about the 24/7 GIFS 6.0 network environment was that you didn't have to depend on traditional forms of deep character construction in order to transmit your literary presence out into the world.

You could just take the text by the reins and go wild freestyle with it in any direction you wanted, not even thinking about the repercussions.

The risk was in overthinking it all because then what?

Self-censor to the point of being remote controlled by what you thought was the correct way to "represent" sanctioned forms of reality according to the latest dictates of the Semio-Securitate and its culturally sophisticated establishmentarianism?

"The fact of the matter," Sky spoke into his Voice Memo app, "is that there's no need to script your future by using the art of writing as a creative visualization technique to prophesy a reliable mode of survival into the post-COVID unknown."

"Rather," he continued talking to himself while recording, "what you do is you just *become* the script in real-time, an embodied form of unconscious psychic automatism performing your new persona by way of a coded set of acquired information behaviors that train you to express the

contours of the digital artwork your life was already in the process of becoming whether you wanted it to happen that way or not."

*

Staring out at the pixel waves coming ashore on Fuck You, Sky imagined that he was now unconsciously inhabiting an ancestral form of mediumistic being that generously filled his own body with potential, the kind of potential he would have to tap into if he ever hoped to convert what he dubbed *reincarnated creative energy* into a libidinal power that he would gladly share in the orgiastic heavens that awaited him in the digital afterlife.

For now, he was channeling this reincarnated creative energy back toward the isle of Fuck You where, with his comrades, he sat peacefully in front of the bright light of his flickering monitor.

Whatever it was that happened to be mounting itself on top of their Collective Head as they patiently kept watch over the virtual horizon, it could only have been achieved by having ingested half a pan of chocolate walnut brownies lubed with super-intense White Widow canna-cocoa butter.

After each of them had consumed three or four bite-sized morsels, they (The Delirious Make-Bot Fake Tribe) had quickly started slipping back into a Colorado state of mind.

The freaky foursome was lost in their own hypnotic state of interoperable mindfulness while a new audio-visual NFT randomly generated by the Meta Remix Engine was already being publicized as the next drop from yet another totally fabricated iteration of their band, this one christened Being Cy Twombly.

Everything was grooving in a perfectly normal way, the four of them staring blankly into their old terminals when, all of a sudden, a barely discernible bevy of pinky-sized avatars designed as 8-bit pixel morphs, four to be exact, came into their collective Fuck You horizon view, jerkily walking along the virtual shoreline until all four figures stopped center screen to take pictures of themselves wearing nothing but colorful hula skirts and leis.

Every band member to a person was enthralled with the scene of 8-bit pixel morphs subtly vibrating before them.

Where did this shuddering chimera come from?

One of the figures took command holding tightly to their role by positioning and repositioning what appeared to be a virtual rendition of an old-school *selfie-stick*.

The figure began an animated pantomime, commandeering the various positions of the entire clique, and everyone obeyed the directions so that they could trigger an automatic image capture.

Now it was just a matter of timing their expressions so that they could portray The Group Look, a collective seduction that was part haughty "can't touch this" and part pouty "wish you were here" with just a dash of faux naiveté thrown in for maximum titillation.

Having finished arranging all of the mates perfectly into the frame, the leader gave the signal so that each performer was playing for the camera according to directorial plan.

On cue, they all jumped up at the same time, their 8-bit bodies reaching toward the digital sky in total glitch joy.

An automatic blue-white flash filled all four of the band member's computer screens at exactly the same time signaling that the image of the pixel morphs simultaneously springing toward the sky had been captured in an instant.

The leader's excited gestures suggested they were about to send the digital image to what had passed as something like the Metaverse back in the days of VRML.

Of course, Sky spoke into his networked headset and slipped into one of his informal lectures that the other band members, listening on their headsets, were already anticipating: *the image itself no longer matters, what matters is what's being communicated here, what we actually think we're seeing as we look at these barely decipherable color pixels and how we automatically try to read into these images some kind of story that feeds us the kind of fantasy continuity we need just to get by on a daily basis.*

What we believe we are witnessing in this instance is a reenactment of the historically significant break in information protocols that led to the careless acceptance of using the tethered media device to first capture the data and then immediately create much more valuable metadata by circulating the image inside the Metaverse.

And not only that, but this simple scene being played out before us reflects that exact moment in history when the device began auto-remixing the image you just captured so that what you posted better represented what the algorithms presupposed was your so-called aesthetic sensibility and stylistic preferences.

The image capturing device, what used to be called a phone, was programmed to create images for *you based on what you yourself had already taken pictures of, what your friends took pictures of, as well as how far and wide these images circulated and were viewed and positively commented upon.*

This was that moment in time when an army of speculative algorithms had been unleashed within the networked space of flows to help predetermine exactly how you would like the images to appear when they arrived at their intended and even unintended destination and essentially created your image-identity portfolio for *you.*

All you had to do was stay signed into the Metaverse: to be virtually present, even when physically absent.

Welcome to the digital afterlife.

The scene playing out on the screen with its accompanying vocal track improvised by Sky, the virtual reality programmer, was all planned out.

Sky had hacked into the Hyperactive Worlds engine and created what he imagined was a retro-futurist artwork, one that would investigate both what might have happened on a virtual beach back in the early days of the net but also a work that reflected on the fact that every information behavior being performed in the GIFS 6.0 environment was being closely analyzed by the advanced artificial neural nets powering an all-pervasive conceptual machinery specifically designed to alter one's ability to control the way they represented themselves.

Being the you that you *want to convey, all the uniquely stylized idiosyncrasies, is no longer a possibility,* Sky intoned in his soft, guru-like voice that could almost hypnotize his listeners, in this case the other three dudes who he lived with and with whom he formed the various iterations of their crypto band.

Like the digital image you are always in the process of rendering, you have no time to become you.

Being you is the same as being-traced*, is you auto-tracing your historical movement for the benefit of the Spy State Economy so that every auto-affective gesture and inconsequential move can be further analyzed by the machine learning instruments collaboratively jamming in the GIFS 6.0 network.*

This auto-tracing is part of a larger work I title "Drawing A Line While Networking" ...

Zeke had to laugh at Sky's not-too-subtle reference to and remix of an old work of Conceptual Art, *Drawing A Line While Walking*, though he also knew the laughter that grew inside him was darker than it had ever been, and that Sky was on the verge of disappearing himself, of turning off his connection for good which meant the band would cease being together.

They would break up!

*

To sing, to write, to dare to speak, what role Desire?

Amarillo was operating inside a null address, a ghost presence whose chief attribute was playing the cryptocurrency market.

Knowing when to buy and sell and how best to minimize the grossly overpriced gas fees was his main administrative side hustle for the team.

When the crypto market was crashing, he would encourage the band to HODL, that is, to hold on for dear life since the market had always bounced back.

If the market went lower than he initially forecast, instead of panicking, he would take some USD from the collective's suite of digital wallets and buy even more.

When Amarillo bought crypto, that could mean only one thing: a flurry of buy orders would once again send the currency price off to the moon.

The tide would turn and everyone who was in it for the long game would come back to their menses.

What was it about Amarillo's extrasensory perception that made him the barometer of when to buy and when to sell?

Zeke once asked him point blank: "How do you do it?"

To which Amarillo would share a bashful smile and say nothing.

*

Z was zoning out in front of the virtual blue sea when he saw the pale blue sky with its cartoonish Super Mario clouds start to glitch up and become unnecessarily pixelated as if the VRML software were suffering its own form of aesthetic aneurysm, and this made him uncomfortable.

He started feeling his heart race faster as the effects of having eaten too much sugarcoated THC were about to exhibit some serious consequences.

His buzz was intensifying in that "sneaking up on you" sort of way and he noticed that the hand firmly cupping his bulging jockstrap was actually his own, even though the finger-sized avatars on the virtual beach had all disappeared a while ago.

The more self-conscious he held on to it, the fuller it all got in the palm of his hand.

The thought crossed his mind that somebody wanted it.

Somebody definitely wanted it, bad, real bad.

Someone wanted it so bad that they would be willing to pay for it.

But he couldn't help himself and, as always, there was nothing he could do about it, he had to get rid of it, and so he gave it all away, just like that, for free.