

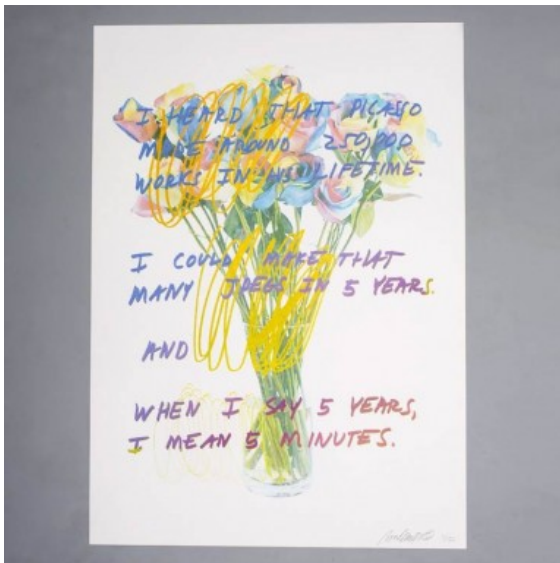
ART BLOG ART BLOG

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Brad Troemel: Athletic Aesthetics

Athletic Aesthetics

By BRAD TROEMEL



Parker Ito, *America Online Made Me Hardcore*, 2013

A new species of hyperproductive artist flooding the Internet with content invites audiences to complete their work by loving their brand, making the artists themselves the masterpiece

Visual artists, poets, and musicians are releasing free content online faster than ever before. There is an athleticism to these aesthetic outpourings, with artists taking on the creative act as a way of exercising other muscle groups, bodybuilding a personal brand or self-mythology, a concept or a formal vocabulary. Images, music, and words become drips in a pool of art sweat, puddling online for all to view. The long-derided notion of the “masterpiece” has reached its logical antithesis with the *aesthlete*: a cultural producer who trumps craft and contemplative brooding with immediacy and rapid production.

Athletic aesthetics are a by-product of art’s new mediated environment, wherein creators must compete for online attention in the midst of an overwhelming amount of information. Artists using social media have transformed the notion of a “work” from a series of isolated projects to a constant broadcast of one’s artistic identity as a recognizable, unique brand. That is, what the artist once accomplished by making commodities that could stand independently from them is now accomplished through their ongoing self-commodification. This has reversed the traditional recipe that you need to create art to have an audience. Today’s artist on the Internet needs an audience to create art. An aesthlete’s audience, once assembled, becomes part of their medium.

Posting work to the Internet without a network of viewers in place raises the same questions as the proverbial tree falling in an empty forest. If a Tumblr post has no notes, is it art? Does it exist? For young artists using social media, the answer is no. If an audience for their work isn't maintained, it loses the context necessary for regarding it as art. Facing dim employment prospects and precarious conditions (not to mention massive debt from higher education), such practitioners aggressively seek to exercise clout in the online attention economy through over production.

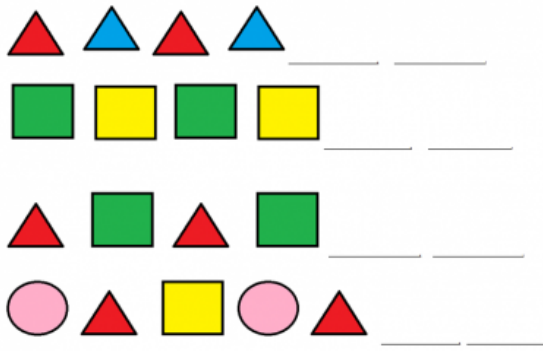
Just as conditions have changed for artists, they have also changed for audiences. The refresh rate of information in social media alters viewing habits. When looking at a screen, we don't fixate on a single status update, image, website, or work for long. Part of this is because the interfaces militate against it: 140 characters is a light reading load. In the cases of Tumblr and Facebook, the information piling up in a newsfeed flows past viewers almost automatically into a virtually bottomless well.

But attention spans are also constrained because each bid for our attention on social media can prompt an endless hunt for a more complete understanding of its context. An endless cascade of tabs can arise from a simple friend request, far beyond "Who is this person, anyway?" Little can be meaningfully understood about any given person based on an isolated Tweet or profile picture. Mutual friends need to be investigated, personal website links in the About Me section need to be opened, geotagged restaurants need to be Googled and their menus canvassed for the kinds of ingredients favored. And to get satisfactory context for the work of a single person, viewers may have to go through all of that person's online folders, scrolling all the way back to when they first joined whatever service they're using. Caring too much about any one item to the exclusion of the others readily available now seems to jeopardize the viewer's ability to understand the whole.

Even if you don't go on winding quests for context and allow information to passively wash over you through your feed, you ultimately arrive at the same place: recognizing patterns amid flow rather than shutting the floodgates. As Marshall McLuhan claimed in [The Medium Is the Message](#):

Our electrically-configured world has forced us to move from the habit of data classification to the mode of pattern recognition. We can no longer build serially, block-by-block, step-by-step, because instant communication insures that all factors of the environment and of experience coexist in a state of active interplay.

The idea of memorizing art-history slides to demonstrate a mastery of the canon now seems like a quaint reminder of a time when individual works somehow meant more than the always fluid relationships between them. Audiences no longer have the luxury of imagining that there is a static regime of aesthetic stability dictating quality and meaning. Passive viewers, who consume at the same pace as those they follow produce, and context hunters, who compress that process in time, end up with the same hermeneutic, finding meaning in the lines drawn from one bit of information to the next.



To maintain the aerial view necessary for patterns to emerge, one must cultivate a disposition of indifference. To be indifferent is to believe that any one thing is as important as any other. Social media anticipate and reinforce this attitude, presenting, say, news from Afghanistan and a former high school friend's lunch in the same format, with the same gravity.

Athletic aesthetics inverts this indifferent disposition, using it to produce as well as view content. Instead of creating a few, thoroughly worked pieces, the aesthlete produces a constant stream of work in social media to ride atop the wave in viewers' newsfeeds, or else become the wave itself, overwhelming them with material. The tacit agreement between the aesthlete and the viewer is to be mutually indifferent toward quality understood as slick production value or refined craft. For aesthetes, the point of their work is not only what it expresses but the speed at which it's expressed. The ideal presentation of their work is the constant broadcast.

With the constant broadcast as goal, editing oneself becomes a waste of resources. Time spent on anything is time worth being redeemed in attention by sharing it. A private process of refinement is simply lost time. For aesthetes, the studio as a site of self-reflection and craft goes public; no middle ground or time lapse between production and publicity is necessary. For the audience, what's missing in production value is supposedly recouped in honesty and personal connection with creators, whose every image, poem, song, video, or status update becomes a chance for direct interaction. Viewers need not hope for a momentary glimpse of the artist at an opening or await the chance to see musicians onstage. The artist's aura has been leveled and spread across dozens of daily opportunities to comment, like, and reblog. The privacy of the studio starts to be perceived as a form of censorship, and even oversaturated celebrities like Beyoncé must have a Tumblr now.







The underlying promise of Rate/Comment/Subscribe! culture is that viewers can engage in a more direct form of fandom, in which their tributary comments and reblogs are directly acknowledged by artists and eventually become an element in their creative process. Audiences can now believe they are co-creators, collaborating with artists by appreciating them. The upvoted commenter who distills and wittily articulates the general sentiment of an audience's reaction to social-media works is hailed a kind of hero, the voice of the people, as with Patton Oswalt's Thor83 character in *Portlandia's* season three Evite [episode](#).

Of course, this was once the artist's claim to heroism — being sensitive to the times and other people's affect so as to express a general sentiment or zeitgeist in a unique, compelling way. Aesthetes' self-editing is now outsourced to the audience, who carefully pick over the barrage of content with unprecedented zeal. Their eagerness to assess and evaluate artists' work lies somewhere between being volunteer market researchers and a wish to bend artists to their will and "democratize" their art.



While that kind of direct democratization may be wishful thinking, aesthetes certainly rely on decentralized audiences to perpetuate their virality, which is the essential content of their work. It's

impossible to imagine [Steve Roggenbuck](#)'s practice apart from his commenting, poking, and liking his viewers every step of the way. This interaction, and the compounding attention he receives for it, is not peripheral to his work but integral to the messianic nature of his delivery. Roggenbuck's calls to self-improvement, creative ambition, and ethical living are nothing without the interplay of an audience whose widespread response serves as a marker of affect for the message of his videos and writing, which verge on art-as-self-help. For Roggenbuck, going viral doesn't spread his work so much as complete it.

Uploader Comments (steveroggenbuck)

-  **SS100Successful** 2 weeks ago
You are amazing Steve!! I love your shit! *MAKE SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL BEFORE YOU DIE*. Thanks and keep up the good work
Reply · Like · Retweet
-  **steveroggenbuck** 4 days ago
thank u so much :)
Reply · Like · Retweet · In reply to SS100Successful
-  **simplystatic** 2 weeks ago
I can't be the only one who cried while watching this. Inspired to stay up all night, workin on something I love. I've only got 1 year of college left and I'm gonna make so much fuckin art. YES.
Reply · Like · Retweet
-  **steveroggenbuck** 4 days ago
heheh i love your comment, thank u :) so glad u boosted off this video
Reply · Like · Retweet · In reply to simplystatic
-  **LiNinjaxoxo** 4 weeks ago
WHY ARE YOU SCREAMING????!!!! LOVE THIS :)
Reply · Like · Retweet
-  **steveroggenbuck** 4 days ago
heheh
Reply · Like · Retweet · In reply to LiNinjaxoxo

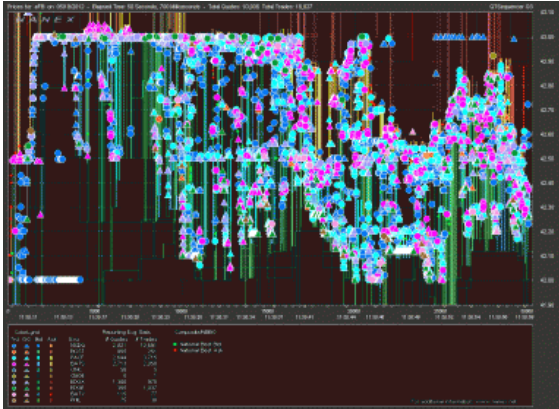
Top Comments

-  **steveroggenbuck** 2 months ago
mhaha thank u so much for this coment :) im gona screenshot this and have it for later as a BOOOOST.. i hope u been feing better. i love u
Reply · Like · Retweet · In reply to Mhala Bagley (Show the comment)
-  **Shayne Mulaney** 1 month ago
Now, we need more people like you in this world. Steve. I've only watched a few of your videos so far, but man! This has really snapped me out of the crappy mood I've been in lately. These videos make me wanna get off my ass and live! Thank you so much.
Reply · Like · Retweet

This dynamic of the audience self-screening for their favorite content makes the risks associated with releasing undesirable content fairly low, while enhancing the potential rewards of releasing beloved content. The opportunity costs for *not* releasing work quickly rise as audiences becomes less discriminatory and more participatory. Thus athletes rationally adopt a lottery-like gambit of releasing as much work as possible: The more they release, the more likely one will become a hit. And even less successful posts will serve to strengthen the bond between artist and audience, giving each a chance to reinforce the existence of the other — “I’m still here!” they say in unison.

Athletic aesthetics amounts to the supply-side gamification of the art attention economy. Notes, likes, and reblogs serve as the quantitative basis for influence in an art world where critics' written word has been stripped of power. Art making becomes a fast-paced, high-volume endeavor analogous to the universe of automated high-frequency stock trading. This mode of trading supplants floor traders with unmanned computers responsible for moving fractional sums according to complicated if-then sequences programmed by quantitative analysts. The speed of trades are central to their strategic functionality, so much so that companies in New York and London have lobbied for new fiberoptic cables across the Atlantic to ensure maximum velocity. [Critics argue](#) such trading methods fail to create “true” economic value: Rather than prompt companies to become more efficient or make better products, algorithmic trading merely capitalizes on rapid capital shuffling and micro-arbitrage. Others worry that vast automation leaves the market vulnerable to a single digital glitch generating systemic market crashes, as in the case of the “flash crash” on May 6, 2010, and again on August 1 that year, when software at [Knight Capital Group](#) malfunctioned, setting off unintended trades and leading to a \$440 million loss for the company.

Such criticism of algorithmic trading echoes complaints leveled at aesthetes. Proto-aesthlete Soulja Boy — propelled to fame by the “glitch” of his online audience’s inexplicable obsession with “Crank That (Soulja Boy)” — was vilified as unoriginal, in light of his prodigious, Fruity Loops–driven output of music on Myspace. Aesthetes are often criticized on the basis of individual works, whereas viewers must engage as much of their catalog-in-process as they can to find the patterns necessary for its meaning to emerge.



While firms have given over stock trading to vast warehouses of black boxes with blinking lights, the aesthlete merely emulates machine-like modes of creativity. Among the most famous of these semiautomated modes is the improvisational spoken-word format of “Based” freestyling, created by alpha aesthlete Lil B. His Based delivery, a DIY deskilling of hip-hop’s oxymoronic conservative freestyle format, emphasizes absurdity, incoherence, and chance verbal collisions rather than the traditionally valued characteristics of fluid delivery and cohesive narrative wordplay. Based freestyle opens the sluice for any vocal effort — no matter how poor by traditional standards — to be accepted as a completed track. Doing another take would defeat the purpose of the Based style’s aesthetic of chance, thus setting up a procedural pattern that buoys any supposed shortcoming in content.

Since honesty is redefined as directness, the customary checks and balances of studio editing become a kind of dishonesty or trickery. The most incoherent, poorly timed, and narratively abstract Based freestyles thus appear as the most successful, perpetuating a perception of Lil B as a bold creator unwilling or unable to censor himself in any way. On a practical level, this stream-of-consciousness mode of production also allows Lil B to release a much larger amount of music at a faster rate.

Albums

- 2009: *I'm Thraxx*^[3]
- 2009: *6 Kiss*^[3]
- 2010: *Rain in England*^[22]
- 2011: *Angels Exodus*^[22]
- 2011: *I'm Gay (I'm Happy)*^{[22][24]} (R&B/Hip-Hop Albums #56, Heatseekers Albums #20)^[25]
- 2012: *Choices and Flowers*^{[22][26]} (under the alias "The BasedGod") (New Age Albums #6)^[27]
- 2012: *Tears 4 God*^[28] (under the alias "The BasedGod")

Mixtapes

- 2007: *S.S. Mixtape Vol. 1* (with Young L)^[29]
- 2009: *S.S. Mixtape Vol. 2* (with Young L)^[30]
- 2010: *Pain*^[31]
- 2010: *Dior Pain*^[32]
- 2010: *Base World Pt. 1*^[33]
- 2010: *Roses Exodus*^[34]
- 2010: *Pretty Boy Millionaires* (with Souja Boy)^[34]
- 2010: *Everything Based*^[34]
- 2010: *MF Based*^[34]
- 2010: *Blue Flame*^[34]
- 2010: *Gold Dust*^[34]
- 2010: *Where Did The Sun Go*^[34]
- 2010: *Red Flame*^[34]
- 2010: *Red Flame: Evil Edition*^[34]
- 2010: *MM...Christmas*^[34]
- 2011: *Red Flame: Devil Music Edition*^[34]
- 2011: *The Myspace Collection*^[35]
- 2011: *Illusions Of Grandeur*^[33]
- 2011: *Bitch Mob: Respect Da Bitch Vol. 1*^[34]
- 2011: *I Forgive You*^[33]
- 2011: *Black Flame*^[33]
- 2011: *The Silent President*^[33]
- 2011: *BasedGod Vall*^[33]
- 2011: *Blue Eyes*^[34]
- 2011: *Goldhouse*^[34]
- 2012: *White Flame*^[33]
- 2012: *God's Father*^{[33][34]}
- 2012: *#1 Bitch*^[34]
- 2012: *The BasedPrint 2*^[34]
- 2012: *Trapped In BasedWorld*^[34]
- 2012: *Water Is D.M.G. Pt. 1*^[34]
- 2012: *Green Flame*^[34]
- 2012: *Rich After Taxes*^[34]
- 2012: *Based Freestyle Collection*^[36]
- 2012: *Task Force*^[34]
- 2012: *Obama BasedGod*^[34]
- 2012: *Based Jam*^[34]
- 2012: *Frozen*^[34]
- 2012: *Illusions of Grandeur 2*^[34]
- 2012: *Halloween H2O*^[11]
- 2012: *Crime Fetish*^[34]
- 2012: *Glassface*^[34]
- 2013: *Pink Flame*^[34]
- 2013: *Pretty Young Thug*^[34]

In the art world, [Nick Faust](#) sticks out as a prime example of an aesthetic approach to curating art on Facebook, posting 20 or so new albums of art and art-related images every day. The type of work posted adheres to no specific formal or conceptual interest, ranging from Byzantine works to contemporary textiles to PVC stock photography, just as Lil B's wide-open interests range freely. (As he [says](#), "I can do 'Swag OD' but then my favorite musical artist right now could be [Antony and the Johnsons](#).") Faust's immense outpouring of content upends the traditional understanding of curatorial practice by overwhelming his audience rather than providing a concise selection. Like other aesthetes, Faust becomes a wholesaler of content, allowing his Facebook friends to pick through and engage with the images they find most relevant. Ignored photo sets serve only to reinforce Faust's commitment to sharing as much as humanly possible, whether that material is popular or not.

Wide nets are cast by those who, like Lil B and Nick Faust, are young and/or energetic enough to overshare. Perhaps the most athletic aspect of these individuals is their unmistakable embrace of competition, which their efforts unreservedly respond to and foster. This social-media-induced competition is not without its detractors. Media theorist Geert Lovink has [recently argued](#) in *Adbusters* that

Today psychopathology reveals itself ever more clearly as a social epidemic and, more precisely, to be a socio-communicational one. If you want to survive you have to be competitive, and if you want to be competitive you must be connected, receive and process continuously an immense and growing amount of data. This provokes a constant

attentive stress, a reduction of the time available for affectivity ... If we bring this analysis to the internet we see two movements — the expansion of storage and the compression of time — making online work so stressful.

Like the athlete who lives to perform for stadiums and television audiences of millions, the aesthlete basks in the stress of overproduction. While competition exists between the aesthlete and the slower-moving, perfectionist artists of the previous generation (as evidenced in the Lil B vs. Game feud), the main competition for aesthetes comes from within themselves. At the risk of romanticizing a potentially self-harming practice born of precarity, there is a certain euphoria, like the endorphin-fueled exhaustion of a runner's high, in depleting your mental and physical faculties to the greatest extent possible, especially when this exertion drives the expression of an expanding creative vision. Just as in weightlifting, in which mass is gained from strenuous reps that destroy and prompt the enlarged rebuilding of muscle fibers, athletic aestheticism promises that artistic progression will come more surely from the stress of strenuous making than from contemplative reverie. What separates the aesthlete from the overworked intern or sweatshop worker is that the aesthetes' labor serves themselves; it's self-exploitation rather than exploitation at the hands of other capitalists.



To demand payment for these self-imposed ventures of overproduction, one must first ask the following questions, posed by Andrea Fraser in her essay [How To Provide an Artistic Service: An Introduction](#):

Fees are, by definition, payment for services. If we are, then, accepting payment in exchange for our services, does that mean we are serving those who pay us? If not, who are we serving and on what basis are we demanding payment (and should we be demanding payment)? Or, if so, how are we serving them (and what are we serving)?

By serving themselves, most aesthetes provide their content for free. The ease of access to their work reinforces the low-risk/high-reward dynamic of their overproduction, as Pitchfork contributor Mike Powell notes:

Ultimately, my take with Lil B is that he keeps the price of entry to his world so low that complaining about him is a waste of energy. He offers himself to his audience for nothing — giving him nothing shouldn't be hard. Furthermore, I don't even know what "ironic" means in the context of Lil B. If he really didn't think that the world was a beautiful and endlessly amusing place, where does he find the energy to keep rapping about it for free?

Most aesthetes secure artistic freedom only by working in the precarious space outside the governing institutions of their field. Lil B remains unsigned, and aesthetes practicing visual art are far more of a presence on the Internet than in physical galleries. Even if the contemporary art world accepts

challenges to received notions of *quality* — deskilling has been widely debated at least since Duchamp's time — it has maintained a less flexible approach toward *quantity*, upholding relatively conservative restrictions about how many exhibitions an institution should have per year, how large an exhibition space should be, and how many works are appropriate to stuff in a certain square footage per show. The same goes for artists: There still are (rarely spoken) rules as to how many works an artist should produce in a series for it to be financially viable and how often an artist should release new work without making previous work seem obsolete or a career mistake the artist is eager to repudiate. In other words, from the conventional art world's perspective, appropriating mass-produced goods is a legitimate artistic gesture insofar as the goods are not appropriated and serially exhibited en masse.

Release schedules for work were once fully orchestrated by culture-industry institutions, tailored to the market-researched demands of a buying audience. In the case of television, shows would be edited so to anticipate commercial breaks in the narrative. Time and space imposed limits on these institutions: a white room can fit only so many paintings without overflowing, a CD can fit only so many songs without become a bulky boxed set, a magazine column can have only so many words before it crowds out the advertising sold to support it. The internet-induced stress that Lovink refers to is born from the infinite expanse of storage the internet opens up. Without a clearly defined limit on content, where does a creator start or stop? The aesthlete's answer is to continuously sprint up Mario's infinite staircase — it's the journey, not the destination.

In an attention economy, there is more value in being ubiquitous than scarce, especially when there is no added cost to publicizing more works and no depletion of digital content's aura, given that it permanently exists only as a copy for all. The waiting period between releases that once structured the market and assigned a price to each work does not suit online content. There is now simply not enough time for a single assessor to explore an aesthlete's full catalog, or for the market to price it all. The aesthlete is outrunning them.

Instead, the artist's personality becomes the sellable good. Attention acquired in new media can be leveraged to sell more inherently scarce goods and services, like teaching, lectures, concerts, and books. Aesthetes' work becomes inseparable from the theatre of their own excessive labor.

If the value of the masterpiece was found in its timelessness and material specificity, the aesthlete's ambition is to exist most fully in the limited time and infinite space to which they can lay claim.

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JOSHUA ABELOW at 2:02 PM



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