The Trump Affect: Considering Donald Trump's 2016 Presidential Campaign as Found Art

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Abstract
Found art is an artistic movement that appropriates non-art items to challenge traditional art and stimulate public discourse. While this concept has been applied to aesthetics and socio-political movements, we argue that Donald Trump's rally performances throughout his 2015–2016 U.S. presidential campaign employed similar strategies, transferring affect and eliciting audience participation. Using elements drawn from literature examining found art and the Happenings during the 20th century, we conduct an aesthetic criticism of various spectacles during Trump's presidential run to understand how his campaign communicated with audiences, despite its appeal to the negative sublime.
Keywords: found art, Donald Trump, spectacle, sublime, affect

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In 2015 and 2016, American celebrity Donald J. Trump managed a victorious presidential campaign that was unprecedented in contemporary politics. Although Trump ran under his popular slogan "Make America Great Again," the former reality television star and real estate mogul appeared to outwardly contradict this feel-good maxim, making headlines during the 2016 presidential primary season for what former presidential candidate Mitt Romney described as "the absurd third grade theatrics" (Politico, 2016, para. 22). At best, Trump's political discourse and conduct was unconventional. Others' condemned his apparently calloused wielding of Twitter as a tool for promoting a "politics of debasement" through his "dark, degrading, and dehumanizing discourse" (Ott, 2017, pp. 59, 62). The unconventional grandeur of Trump's persona was derived, in part, from his personal history as a real estate mogul turned reality television star with his hit show The Apprentice. As

one journalist put it at the time of his first presidential campaign, "his claim to fame is not politics. It's reality television. So he's running his campaign as if it were the 15th season of 'The Apprentice'" (Bennett, 2015).

The staged representations of reality television share performative characteristics with the early 20th century aesthetic movements of found art and the Happenings. Both of these art styles challenged the rules of art, subverting the division that philosophers had assigned between everyday life and art. Found art appropriated everyday objects (e.g., flowers, mass-produced urinals) as exhibitions (Berleant, 2009); the Happenings inserted art performances into everyday life and abandoned the notion of a predetermined objective (Drucker, 1993). Both movements owed their potency to the use of the sublime, an aesthetic means of evoking affect within the spectator, ranging from the extremes of awe to those of terror (Berleant, 2009; Morley, 2010). Still, found art and the Happenings also contained a communal element, in which "both the artist and the beholder attain[ed] their sense of having discovered something significant" (Parkinson, 2010, p. 61). Hence, found art illustrated the merging of art, affect, social movements, and communication.

Our study aims to use this 20th century aesthetic movement as a heuristic to shed light on the inexplicable political communication of Donald Trump in his presidential campaign during 2015 and 2016. This essay will draw upon representative examples of Trump's performances along the campaign trail that illustrate the Trump campaign's affective potential. Primarily, we examine Trump's 2015 public mocking of Serge Kovaleski, a physically impaired reporter for the New York Times. Our examination of Trump's campaign through its parallels with aesthetic theory will offer scholars in media studies a novel vantage point through which the cultural implications of Trump's presidential campaign may be illuminated. We will first discuss the function of affect in political discourse and art movements. We then describe the hyperreal patterns of reality television that Trump exhibited during his campaign and how his spectacles compare to transgressive art forms.

Affect and the Sublime

Unlike feelings or emotions, Brian Massumi (1987) stated that affect "is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another" (p. xvi). Affect is "purely transitive" and "experienced in a lived duration that involves the difference between two states" (Deleuze, 1988, p. 49). In this sense, affect is a physiological response to one's immediate environment. Certainly, political information can evoke personal feelings within the voter, be that anger, anxiety, or enthusiasm (see MacKuen et al., 2010). However, to study the material experience of politics, the critic should account for the pronounced ability of the political spectacle to transmit affect—first to the audience and then back at the politician.

In regards to political spectacles, Papacharissi (2015) suggested that affect has been an overlooked aspect of spatial politics because it disrupts democracy's main tenet of an informed public and informed decision making. Nevertheless, she argued that even if information were processed cognitively in environs of high affect, "how we feel about things may give shape to how we process information" (p. 12). In other words, despite intentions in a democratic society to place emphasis on rationality, affect has an inexorable role in political decision-making. Persuasion and subsequent decisions are influenced by affective energy present in distinct public spaces of communication (Papacharissi, 2015).

In art and politics, the nature of the spectacle is contingent on its ability to help the audience feel like it is a participant. "Persuasive discourse works when it can efficiently tap into the tacit knowledge held by the audience" (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007, p. 10), communicating social knowledge through both image and discourse. To enact the spectacle in the context of political discourse, the politician provides his or her audience with a backdrop of familiarity through entertaining and possibly lurid content, even if the underlying message is terrifying. It is the surprise and drama within the spectacle that carry viewers into the unknown (Edelman, 1988). An overabundance of uncertainty derived from an aesthetic experience can push rational comprehension within the viewer to its limits; this aesthetic phenomenon is called the sublime.

Kant (1790) argued that the sublime occurred when aesthetics breaks the limits of numbers, enabling the object of contemplation to essentially surpass the viewer's rational faculties. Traditionally, the term "sublime" refers to that which is beautiful and divine, alluding to either religiosity, art, or nature. Kant, nonetheless, proposed that the sublime moves beyond the borders of mere beauty. Morley (2010) argued that because the sublime occurs when "when we are faced with something we do not have the capacity to understand or control", it was ultimately a negative experience of limits (p. 16). Uncertainty regarding the unknown paints the darker side of the sublime. Berleant (2009) envisioned similar psychological anguish as the result of the aesthetics of

terrorist demonstrations; terrorism, which relies completely on chance and the determination of time and location, powerfully infuses spectators with fear, magnified by media coverage. The tremendous potential of terrifying and troublesome responses result from what has been seen as the negative sublime (Berleant, 2009). It is this interpretation of found art that we will use in analyzing examples of the negative sublime in Donald Trump's presidential campaign.

Found Art-ists

The artistic movement of found art emerged in the early twentieth century as a method for redirecting the spectator's attention away from traditional art and toward something besides the object (Parkinson, 2010). The experience of found art was enhanced by the level of credibility the audience gives the work, which "rest[s] on the external similarity between found works and traditional works of art" Fowkes, 1978, p. 164). In other words, found art assumes that a piece of driftwood placed on a mantle must be analyzed as possessing aesthetic characteristics comparable with more traditional artwork.

Among the first works of found art was Marcel Duchamp's Fountain (1917), a defaced and unusable urinal that, when placed side-by-side with the esteemed art works in the museum, sparked immediate confusion and outrage among the audience (Lanham, 2006). In this manner, experimental artists challenged the notion of traditional art, while focusing their audience's attention on the unusual experience taking place before it. Because their art was aggressively unorthodox, Lanham (2006) has called these artists economists of attention, individuals with a knack for knowing how to capture the attention of the audience (p. 42).

This "abuse" of the traditional arts continued with the Happenings of the late 1950s and early 1960s, public spectacles poised between the threshold of protest and art by Western counterculture (Berleant, 2009). Unlike conventional art, Happenings were not product- or object-oriented; they took a clear stance against the autonomy of traditional art and, as a consequence, had no preconceived goal (Drucker, 1993). The Happenings used transgressive methods involving audience interaction and space in which it was performed to entertain and elicit a reaction from the audience (Drucker, 1993). Among the most prominent examples of these spectacles was Allan Kaprow's 18 Happenings in Six Parts (1959) which required his audience to perform certain tasks over a period of time, thus focusing its attention on the ephemerality and discontinuity of the events taking place. Like the economists of attention above, Kaprow and his cohort set out to make the case that "Art is whatever the artists wished to call to our attention." (Lanham, 2006, p. 43).

Found artists appropriated existing systems, then exploited them for the performative spectacle. Berleant (2009) even compared found art to the acts of worldwide terror organizations, arguing that a terrorist act engages viewers at a highly visceral level, providing an affective experience that complicates the current reality and political system. Although certainly rejecting civic or ethical values, terrorist acts retain an aesthetic value, much like disturbing artistic depictions of nature or destruction.

It is imperative here to consider the spatial politics that enable transgressive performances to transmit affect and elicit audience collaboration. The instrumentation of found art, Happenings, or deviant uses of technology depends on how audiences rely more on affective experience than on informational sources or ideological agreement. With this affective orientation in mind, Trump's rally-like speeches and events take on a new type of significance, becoming examples where campaign support could be harnessed in unprecedented methods within a liberal democracy via the level of spatial affect present during Trump's campaign spectacles. From this viewpoint, the anti-establishment of the Happenings and destruction by terrorists are equivalent, as the negative sublime is comprised of highly dramatic acts that consume the spectator by their affective potency. Found art exploits the affective elements of spectacle in the service of its ultimate objective.

Reality Television

Reality television predated the Web 2.0 participatory culture that we now occupy and was for many growing up during the 2000's the closest thing they got to media involvement. RTV's supposed real nature allows viewers the opportunity to experience the reality of others (Lundy et al., 2008). Although viewers may actively participate in their exposure to RTV, many are able to detect unreal moments and even find the content to be "staged" (Lundy et al. 2008; Hall, 2006). But that stagedness is exactly what they are seeking. Early research indicated that audiences most liked the genre for the contradiction of real and unreal circumstances (Rose & Wood, 2005).The "staged-ness" of reality television makes it a highly accessible hyperreal venue. According to Jean Baudrillard (1994), hyperreal representation, or the simulacrum, was not something completely devoid of reality, but rather like some forms of mental illness in which symptoms once simulated (i.e. losing one's temper, obsessing about an event) had

developed into a "real" illness.

The reality TV program The Apprentice was launched upon a similar hyperreal premise. Like many competitive reality television programs, The Apprentice featured a cutthroat environment where Donald Trump expected aggressiveness juxtaposed with sound business reasoning to succeed. The competition was all within the authoritative control of Trump, as each episode ended with him firing one (sometimes multiple) contestant/s from their apprenticeship. The "real" element of the Apprentice became blurred with educational models for real life scenarios shortly following its original hype, when the University of Washington offered a course entitled "Management Lessons from The Apprentice" (Gyenes, 2004). Comparatively, Hearn (2006) comments that the Apprentice was its own branded commodity, not only selling more traditional marketable goods but selling its own culture. In other words, the Apprentice, like many other reality television programs, made a commodity of itself. These qualities can also be attributed to Trump himself, whose prominence in the business world and entertainment has long been represented as the enviable embodiment of both fame and fortune, interspersed with elements of spectacle. Trump's campaign shares this quality, dependent on the essence of his original reality television show and behavior, in order to resonate with his audience and persuade them to be satisfied with a revered substitute of reality.

While making this claim it is important to remember that, like any other found art, the figure's existence must rely on extant material, or a system of established norms. Consequently, Trump's political platform was akin to the contemporary hyperreal programming of reality television from which he emerged; his objective in politics, however, appeared to be more than to merely entertain. Rather, it was to challenge his audience's perception of traditional American politics.

Method

The purpose of this paper is to laterally compare key elements derived from found art and transgressive art forms (e.g. Happenings) to Donald Trump's presidential campaign. In particular, we will examine spatial politics (e.g. immediacy of the event) and audience collaboration of Trump's spectacles. Drucker described the collaborative thesis of the Happenings as being "performative, ephemeral, and transient, and aimed not at any produced outcome or even specific effect, but at a multisensory situation" (p. 53). We use these same elements of transgressive art to apply to our own analysis as well as Berleant's (2009) conceptualization of the negative sublime to describe not only how Trump's performances transferred affect and elicited collaboration, but did so in such an incomprehensible fashion with American political rhetoric.

These concepts will be employed to specifically examine Trump's comments about The New York Times reporter Serge Kovaleski. According to an August 2019 Bloomberg poll (Carmon, 2016), this incident was considered by a majority of voters to be Trump's worst offense. We chose this event from his campaign as a representative case of Trump's aesthetic tactics because of Trump's visual performance of Kovaleski's impairment and his audience's visible reactions. By observing this case, it is not our intent to present Trump as an aesthetic savant, but rather as a (perhaps unwitting) conduit of these artistic elements. Moreover, this event set a precedent for future controversial occurrences throughout Trump's campaign, where Trump allegedly humiliated other marginalized individuals in front of an engaged audience. We must emphasize that this analysis is not an attempt to examine Trump's inflammatory communication as the current U.S. president. Rather, we focus our analysis on his campaign's unconventional rally performances, which appeared to anticipate his controversial methods for attracting attention employed later during his presidency.

Trump's Rallies as the Negative Sublime

On Tuesday, November 24, 2015, while speaking to his supporters at a rally in South Carolina, Donald Trump attempted to defend his debunked claims that thousands of Muslim immigrants celebrated in the streets of Jersey City, New Jersey, immediately following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centers on September 11, 2001. Trump referred to a Washington Post article, printed a week after the attacks, co-authored by Serge Kovaleski and Fredrick Kunkle, indicating that local authorities had investigated suspicious behavior by several Muslim residents. The original article stated that local law enforcement had "detained and questioned a number of people who were allegedly seen celebrating the attacks and holding tailgate-style parties on rooftops while they watched the devastation on the other side of the river" (Kovaleski & Kunkle, 2001, para. 3). Although there is no mention of extensive numbers of celebrators in the article, Trump cited the article as evidence of his professed witnessing of Muslim-intiated celebration and ridiculed Kovaleski's alleged retraction.

By this time in his campaign, Trump's defiance of the press had become a well-established norm. What was shocking about this spectacle was Trump's mimicry of the physical limitations

of Kovaleski, representing the reporter as physically disabled. The event was followed by an immediate reaction from Trump's audience, some of whom appeared to enjoy Trump's representation of the reporter (BBC News, 2016). During the rally, Trump said the following:

> So, what happens is The Washington Post writes an article, and one of the paragraphs it says, and by the way this was right after September 11th, this was September 18th, and right after, sort of an amazing thing, right after, a couple of good paragraphs and it's talking about 'Northern New Jersey Draws the Probers' Eyes'. Written by a nice reporter. Now the poor guy, you gotta see this guy, 'Uhh I don't know what I said! Uhh I don't remember!' He's going like 'I don't remember!—aww dohh— Maybe that's what I said!' This is 14 years ago— he's still— they didn't do a retraction! 14 years ago. They did no retraction! (Transcribed from BBC News, 2016).

Among the more striking visual elements of Trump's mimicry of Kovaleski was his imitation of Kovaleski's right arm and hand disability, in contrast to his frequent left hand movements with the palm visibly open. Before Trump's impersonation, he freely uses his right hand in the open position when explaining the Washington Post's article, but quickly changes position when impersonating the reporter. This representation is at odds with Trump's subsequent statements that he had never met Kovaleski but was depicting a "groveling" reporter (Phelps, 2015). Furthermore, Trump imitated the reporter with a bewildered face, eyes wide open and mouth agape, apparently to connote mental incompetence.

While the implications of Trump's representation of Kovaleski may not have been initially recognized by his audience, the video coverage reveals an affective transference between Trump and his supporters. In observing the audience reaction, facial expressions of his supporters visible through the unfocused background complement Trump's freestyle attempt at ridicule. As Trump mocks Kovaleski, one woman smiles and laughs. An older man above her seems to be smiling or laughing. Additionally, a man on the bottom left of the screen smiles, laughs, and turns to a companion at his side in apparent bewilderment. While among the more mild audience responses that Trump evoked throughout his campaign, these reactions provide a pattern of standard engagement during Trump's rallies. Instead of focusing on his own conduct in the moment, Trump's audience is fixated on his visual cues, both verbal and nonverbal, thus becoming the recipients of his profuse affective transfer. These highly affective conditions cultivate a persona for Trump that draws its political power from its shared experience.

We contend that the immediacy of the event was essential to its affective potency. Unlike typical American political events of the time–more often decorous events designed to look good for the media–Trump deviated from standard political practice, appearing to relish the moment as one that existed distinctly (and exclusively) in that time and place. In other words, Trump's rally performance depended on the affect derived from the temporal nature of the event; it exploited the irrationality that accompanies the sensory reception of messages rather than a rational, intellectual understanding of a situation that can be viewed apart from the rally itself. This rally, and Trump's campaign in general, derived its communicative power from the messages being felt, not heard.

To illustrate, the immediate experience of the audience is most apparent when considering the reaction of the aforementioned laughing woman. As Trump begins mocking the reporter, the woman's gaze is diverted away from the presidential candidate. As Trump continues his mocking portrayal, the woman noticeably fixates her attention on Trump, laughs, smiles, then returned to her aimless search. Her scattered attention, and subsequent attraction of that attention, appears as a result of a visceral response from the audience, reacting to the present spatial affect of Trump's delivery. It is a fleeting reaction that exists only within an environment of high affect. Trump's performance functions similar to found art, which "invite[s] and encourage[s] the viewer to attend…without any concern for the presence or absence of an inner meaning" (Fowkes, 1978, p. 159)

The raucous tone of the event was derived from its status as a political spectacle. Trump was entertaining and ostensibly humorous (based on the visual reactions of his audience). The absence of deeper concern on the part of the laughing woman and the rest of Trump's audience was partially driven by Trump's go-to mechanism of humor, which is effective at distancing audiences from the more repressive nature of the political spectacle (Edelman, 1988, p. 128). Trump employed humor regularly to stimulate his audience and as an avoidance mechanism from critical issues. An impromptu example of Trump's off-hand humor took place at a town hall rally in Rochester, New Hampshire on September 17, 2015. When asked by one young man how he would bring back the American Dream, Trump replied:

> Look. We can bring the American Dream back. That I will tell you. We're bringing it back. Okay? And I understand what you're saying. And I get that from so many people. 'Is the American Dream dead?' They are asking me the question, 'Is the American Dream dead?' And the American Dream is in trouble. Okay? It's in trouble. But we're going to get it back and do some real jobs. How about that man with that beautiful red hat? Stand up! Stand up! What a hat! (transcribed by author; C-SPAN, 2015).

While his audience had a good laugh, they were distanced from the deeper meaning of a sincere question. If Trump intended to implement these ideals for a greater America, they remained at great odds with the reality of his campaign rhetoric. For example, among the visual components of Trump's mimicry of Kovaleski was everyone's determination to "Make America Great Again", evidenced by individual audience members holding small MAGA posters. The mantra is literally upheld while they laugh at Trump's representation of the reporter. Trump's dependence on humor and humiliation are defining characteristics of the political spectacle conceptualized here. Yet it is uncertain as to what this interpretation of the American dream could imply for future generations when the beacon of American prosperity, the office of president, can target even the most vulnerable at such a personal level.

In addition to evoking an affective reaction from his immediate audience, Trump's mimicry of Kovaleski was rewarded with much attention by the press. As has been suggested, affective responses may validate negative events, such as terrorism, as art, while audiences struggle to process the unexpected nature of the experience at hand of the experience. Trump's success in pushing his audience past the limits of what they were previously hesitant to condone is evidence of the negative sublime in action. Much of the same could be said for his political opponents, establishment politicians that could not adequately cope with Trump's dissention from candidate protocol or his own party's values.

Many of his attacks and insults, as in the case of his mimicry of Kovaleski, were accompanied by cheers and laughing, such as when he made threats to hostile protesters in January 2016, telling his supporters, "Knock the crap out of 'em, would you? Seriously, OK, just knock the hell. I promise you I will pay for the legal fees, I promise, I promise" (Bump, 2016). During a March 2016 rally, a Trump supporter, John McGraw, acted on this plea, punching a protester who was being led out by police. When media asked McGraw if the protester deserved to be hit, McGraw responded, "Yes he deserved it. The next time we see him, we might have to kill him" (Bump, 2016). It is this violent behavior and audience collaboration, incited by Trump, that qualifies his rallies as the negative sublime, stunning visuals that grab the public's attention via negative qualities rather than through the divine and beautiful.

The negative sublime was most noticeably exhibited through terror (Berleant, 2009), and for our argument Trump's performances do not cease to provide examples of destructive evocations. Despite the turmoil the United States has experienced during the last several years from domestic terrorist actions and gun violence, Trump bombastically claimed during a rally in Iowa in January 2016 , "I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose voters," which generated audience laughter (Diamond, 2016). While these statements were shocking, Trump stood correct in his assumption that his followers were loyal to him. His transgressive political behavior emulated the negative sublime of found artists and for that he became an experience of negative qualities that continued to push voters to new limits of consideration and collaboration.

Conclusion

Though much hand-wringing and opinioneering has been spent on this fact that Trump was ultimately elected president, we believe that this question goes beyond partisan ideology, strength of competition, or even verbal and mediated incivility. Throughout this analysis, we have examined how found art and the Happenings effectively transmitted affect and feelings related to the negative sublime. The affective exchanges facilitated by Kaprow's ephemeral Happenings events are comparable to the calls for violence exhibited in Trump rallies, whether physically or verbally. Relating Trump's campaign events back to aesthetics, the driving force behind the negative sublime's effectiveness is its concentration of affect, which may circumvent the rational message receptors within the spectators, thus allowing the magnitude of the spectacle to drop their defenses. In like manner, Trump's rally performances promoted a mutual exchange of affect with his audiences, allowing him to evade immediate scrutiny for his political transgressions. Much like the parallels between the Happenings movement, the affective potency of Trump's rally spectacles is not solely generated from the object, whether that be Trump or the physical space in which he operates. Affect is driven by the lived experience enjoyed (or suffered) by the viewers as participants in the spectacle. This observation is most readily apparent through a visual

analysis of Trump's public mocking of a disabled reporter.

In this way, Trump's campaign was more of an aesthetic spectacle than a political one, harnessing the power of the negative sublime to disrupt perceptions of traditional American politics. Like the affective environments cultivated by found art exhibitions, Trump's presidential campaign employed the negative sublime for disruptive purposes. These affective environments could be observed in his campaign's calls for violence and attempts at humiliation to transform anti-establishment behavior into a sensual affective experience for his audience.

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