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MULTIPLE
EXPOSURES:
SEAN FADER'S
#WISHINGPELT
AND HUMOR IN
SOCIAL MEDIA
PERFORMANCE

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It was a laughable premise. Sean Fader staged a performance at a 2014 art fair in New York City in which he invited participants to rub his chest hair and make a wish. And they did. Lots of them. He and I are good friends, and he told me about his plans for *#wishingpelt* in advance. I told him not to do it, and I was worried that it would make his work seem unserious. I didn't get that the joke was the

bait, and the ludicrousness of the situation was a Trojan Horse.

For the past ten years, Fader has been using social media as a photographic and collaborative medium (rather than just a distribution platform), and he designed *#wishingpelt* for the context of an art fair with its saturation of art-related information, commerce, aspiration, and attention-grabbing. Participants queued up for the event, and Fader stood on a spot-lit pedestal in a darkened room, with attendants managing the crowd. As each participant was called, they were asked to hand their phone to the attendant who then directed the participant to ascend the pedestal, rub Fader's ample pelt, and whisper a wish into his ear. The wish was sealed when the attendant photographed the scene and the participant posted the photograph on Instagram with the titular hashtag. In its art fair premiere, the performance went



Figure 1.

Sean Fader, #wishingpelt Instagram image #907 (2014). Digital photograph posted on Instagram from PULSE Art Fair, New York. Image courtesy of the artist.

on every day for five days, with Fader standing motionless on the platform for the full opening hours of the fair—for a total of almost fifty hours. Since its inception, over 2,500 people have posted hashtagged images from the performance.¹

Infiltrating the buzz of the art fair, word of *#wishingpelt* spread fast. The line was long, creating a scene. Photographs of Fader popped up in more and more social media feeds. Instagram had only recently become a major lubricant of the art world, and at this time in the dawn of the age of influencers it was still often used as visual diaries.² A crucial part of Fader's work was the co-option of this social medium as a site of performance. Fader activated the potential of hashtags to metastasize, and soon Instagram feeds throughout the fair (and beyond) were flooded with more and more of these posts. Fader's performance overtook the art fair as his photographs appeared on thousands of hand-held screens. The images seemed earnest to some and, to others, as risible, but their unorthodoxy and consistent visual style drew attention, comment, interest, and more sharing and searching of the *#wishingpelt* hashtag. The absurd premise of Fader's performance acted as lure, with incredulous fairgoers becoming unsure about how to manage (or avoid) this distributed performance. *#wishingpelt* persisted after the fair, but it is important to understand that it was also a live durational performance involving hundreds of participants (both active and passive) that occurred on and through social media across those five days.



Figure 2. Sean Fader, *#wishingpelt* Instagram image #1479 (2014). Digital photograph posted on Instagram from PULSE Art Fair, New York. Image courtesy of the artist.

The performance co-opted the social media platforms with which members of the art world follow trends, present themselves, and decide priorities. In these practices, the individual photographic image is only one component of a larger, exponential circulation of images, hashtags, and viewer comments online. The critical effect of Fader's *#wishingpelt* was to expose the instrumentalization of social media while, at the same time, to offer alternative sites of real-time connection and exchange in the form of the live performance.³

Despite the work's humor, it was not cynical. I've talked to Fader a lot about his experience, and he has repeatedly told me that it was moving and emotional. However ludicrous the premise might have been, the people who came to whisper in his ear sometimes told

him deep secrets, made painful confessions, and shared earnest pleas. Of course, some were frivolous, but the emotions expressed in this *private* component of the performance were often profound. Sometimes a funny situation allows for very unfunny things to be expressed. Fader will never repeat any of the wishes or confessions, but he has talked about how some people have returned months or years later to tell them that their wish was fulfilled. “Their wishes are forever private and their photos were immediately made public,” Fader later explained.⁴

I’ve compared *#wishingpelt* to a Trojan Horse because it was accepted gleefully as a gift, a gag, or an opportunity for humor. But within it, this work also carries unforeseen capacities for intimate confidences, shared connections, and critical views of the circulation of images as social activity. Many participants surprised themselves (and Fader) with their secret confessions. Others later returned to tell of the delayed personal impact of their hashtagged moment. Spectators of the performance on Instagram had the social networks of the art fair visualized by the inescapable *#wishingpelt* photographs that crowded their feeds. For both the IRL performance and the shared broadcast image, humor was the enticement and the decoy. In all its registers from the initial intimate physical contact to the hashtagged dissemination of digital images, the performance coupled connection and spectacle—the paradox that defines social media and that Fader’s artworks often take as their central concern.⁵ With *#wishingpelt*, it is

important to recognize that the performance is manifold, participatory, and extended in its temporal and social reach. It unfolds over time, with its nested connections becoming more widely dispersed with each new hashtag or share. The private performance between Fader and each wisher is imbricated by, but not equivalent to, the public performance of the social media community created around the work.

By the end of 2014, the hashtagged images of Fader and his wishers had circulated widely, and new layers of the distributed performance subsequently began to emerge. As with the initial encounter, humor was the lure. His parody of the earnestness of the art world and performance art had drawn in visitors at the art fair, paradoxically offering an opportunity to be serious. Not everyone similarly got the potential of the joke’s generosity, however. The performance also circulated to another jokester who thought he could make fun of it.

In September 2014, appropriation artist Richard Prince included one of the *#wishingpelt* photographs in his exhibition *New Portraits* at the blue-chip Gagosian Gallery in New York. Prince took screenshots of Instagram posts on which he had written comments (and hidden others).⁶ He then culled from these social media images a group that he inkjet printed on five-and-a-half foot tall canvases, exhibiting them as his “paintings.” These appropriated portraits included other artists (such as Laurie Simmons), popular celebrities (Pamela Anderson), and anonymous (to



Figure 3. Installation view of Richard Prince, *New Portraits*, Gagosian Gallery, New York, 2014, featuring Sean Fader's #wishingpelt at center. Photograph © Sean Fader, 2014.

him) Instagram photographs—all bearing Prince’s own jokey, abstruse, and sometimes creepy comments. A beautiful, and unattributed, photograph of Fader and one of his wishers (Kara Young) was among the large-scale artworks being sold in this supposedly solo exhibition. Prince’s work has long been the subject of debate, and his brinksmanship with copyright and authorship are notorious.⁷ Thinking he had landed a good opportunity for humor, he let Fader’s Trojan Horse into his Chelsea gallery exhibition.

Whether or not Prince was in on the joke, he proved he couldn’t take one. When Fader learned that he was on the walls of Prince’s Gagosian exhibition, he issued a press release thanking Prince for curating him into his first

exhibition at the storied gallery. “Prince, by placing #wishingpelt in his exhibition, now serves as witness to those many declarations, wishes, hopes, and confessions that are the content of Fader’s social media performance,” it declared.⁸ This, in turn, was taken up in the art press.⁹ Fader’s press release did not take the form of a strident critical attack on Prince; rather, it slyly presented Fader as responding in kind by appropriating Prince’s work the way that Prince had appropriated his (and others’). Fader remarked, “#wishingpelt was supposed to be small, digital, and free. [Prince] made it large, expensive.”¹⁰ In response to this event and other widespread criticism, Prince closed his exhibition early, even—as it is rumored—pulling works from the walls. Apparently, the joke went too far for him, and he refused to let

his own authorship be co-opted or questioned. In a final episode in this back and forth (that was, itself, another of Fader's media performances), Fader exhibited a work titled *Backdrop for the Rebirth of the Collective Author* ("There's a Whole Lot of Authorship Going On."—Richard Prince) in the December 2014 exhibition *Share This! Appropriation After Cynicism* at Denny Dimin Gallery in New York. He appropriated Prince's appropriation, showing it alongside a selfie backdrop with the *#wishingpelt* and other hashtags. Prince responded humorlessly by calling Fader a "vampire" in response to his work being included, without his permission, in Fader's exhibition—the complaint frequently leveled at Prince himself.¹¹

Throughout this scuffle with Prince, a distinction can be seen between making fun of others' images (Prince) and using humor to generate and share images of unlikely connection (Fader). Fader used self-directed humor but never made a joke of any of his participants. The performance was about generosity, and he declared, "Remember, our pictures are for each other. Share."¹² Fader mixed deadpan humor with sincerity, recognizing that the seemingly frivolous act of a social media post—however artificial to some—nevertheless exposes its maker to vulnerabilities, misreadings, and appropriations. Fader's work disarmed his participants by its apparent camp and humor, but these were strategies used to establish a rapport with audiences so that more complex affective engagements could unfold. Both photographs and laughs have more potential when shared.

¹ A beta version of the performance was shown at DFBRL8R Gallery in Chicago for a single evening on April 20, 2013. Its final version was performed at two art fairs in New York City in Spring 2014: first, at SPRING/BREAK Art Show in March for five consecutive days and, in May, for four days at PULSE Art Fair, New York. Fader later reprised the performance in Mexico City at the Material Art Fair in 2018 and at Art Omi on July 8, 2018.

² Instagram was launched in 2010 for iOS, with its Android release in 2012. It subsequently gained traction in the art world. See Nina Siegal, "Instagram Takes on Growing Role in the Art Market," *New York Times*, August 4, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/05/arts/international/instagram-takes-on-growing-role-in-the-art-market.html>.

³ For Fader's statement on *#wishingpelt*, see the short documentary he made about the project and its reception: Sean Fader, "Sean Fader from *#wishingpelt* to *Backdrop* on Appropriation and Richard Prince," YouTube video, 4:49, posted by "PhotoArtStar," February 16, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EV8aGUuPkPI>.

⁴ Sean Fader, "For Immediate Release: FINAL WEEK: See Sean Fader's *#wishingpelt* in *New Portraits @ Gagosian Gallery* Organized by Richard Prince," October 18, 2014, <http://www.wishingpelt.com/press>.

⁵ See also David J. Getsy, "Viewfinder: Sean Fader and Queer Visibility in the Age of the Digital Photograph," in *Sean Fader: Thirst/Trap*, exhibition catalog (New York: Denny Dimin Gallery, 2020), 7–23, https://issuu.com/justine-dennydimingallery/docs/sean_fader_thirst_trap_pages-magazine-issuu.

⁶ Prince wrote about his process of writing and masking comments before he screenshot the Instagram images: "My comment, whatever it would

be, would always be the last comment. The last say so. Say so. That's good." As with the comment he added to Fader's image, "Some of the language came directly from TV. If I'm selecting a photo of someone and adding a comment to their gram and an advertisement comes on . . . I use the language that I hear in the ad. Inferior language. It works. It sounds like it means something." Both of these quotations are taken from Prince's aggregating blog "Bird Talk" at <http://www.richardprince.com/birdtalk/>. The segment "New Portraits" from "Bird Talk" was also used as the press release to the London exhibition of *Richard Prince: New Portraits* in 2015: https://gagosian.com/media/exhibitions/2015/richard-prince-new-portraits/Gagosian_Richard_Prince_New_Portraits_2015_Press_Release.pdf.

⁷ For more on the debates about Prince's 2014 exhibition (and the resulting 2015 lawsuit *Graham v. Prince et al.*), see Paddy Johnson, "Richard Prince Sucks," *Artnet News*, October 21, 2014, <https://news.artnet.com/market/richard-prince-sucks-136358>; Tiernan Morgan, "Richard Prince, Inc.," *Hyperallergic*, October 9, 2014, <https://hyperallergic.com/152762/richard-prince-inc/>; Jerry Saltz, "Richard Prince's Instagram Paintings Are Genius Trolling," *Vulture*, September 23, 2014, <https://www.vulture.com/2014/09/richard-prince-instagram-pervert-troll-genius.html>; Peter Schjeldahl, "Richard Prince's Instagrams," *The New Yorker*, September 30, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/richard-princes-instagram>; Andrew R. Chow, "Copyright Case Over Richard Prince Instagram Show to Go Forward," *New York Times*, July 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/20/arts/design/richard-prince-instagram-copyright-lawsuit.html>; and Jacqueline Lefebvre, "Richard Prince: King of Appropriation," *Fordham Intellectual Property, Media & Entertainment Law Journal Blog*, February 1, 2016, <http://www.fordhamiplj.org/2016/02/01/richard-prince-king-appropriation/>.

⁸ Fader, "For Immediate Release."

⁹ For instance, see Benjamin Sutton, "A Young Artist Debuts at Gagosian, Thanks to Richard Prince," *Hyperallergic*, October 23, 2014, <https://hyperallergic.com/157548/a-young-artist-debuts-at-gagosian-thanks-to-richard-prince/>.

¹⁰ Fader, "From #wishingpelt to . . ."

¹¹ In a tweet, Richard Prince wrote: "@RTisman @seanfader @DennyGallery Your pictures are for each other. Yes. That's true. My pictures? They're not mine. Never were. Vampire." Richard Prince, Twitter post, December 15, 2014, 6:37 p.m., <https://twitter.com/RichardPrince4/status/544637446475218944>.

¹² From the label accompanying the work; also incorporated into Fader, "From #wishingpelt to . . ."

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