

# **Bravo, Bravo, Fucking Bravo: An Exploration Into the State of Reality**



**We thought reality was the last of the commons, the last thing everyone shared. Turns out, we were wrong. Post-social media, everyone has become something of a conceptual artist. Concerned with framing, displacement, narrative, irony, and, most importantly, appropriation, we've all had to learn how to construct reality through media. We've all had to create our own reality distortion fields.**

**Call it branding, call it activism, call it Bravo. We are all performing a story of who we are, what we want, why we matter.**

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## Part 1: ROMAN HOLIDAY

The ladies have just landed in Rome. This little romp is less eat, pray, love—more *not* eat, shop, gossip. Their Mercedes vans pull into a peach palazzo that splits the difference between rejecting modernity and embracing tradition. The innocuous exterior feels at home with the nearby dome of St. Peter's Basilica, while the interior has a chopped and screwed internet aesthetic: a giant head copied off a Greco-Roman sculpture is pasted above the concierge desk, canvas prints of cropped Renaissance angels adorn the walls. It all makes sense somehow with the fussy euro-minimalist interiors. The first of the ladies to arrive, they "ooh" and "aaah" about the decor but also keep muttering "fuck, fuck, fuck" under their breath. T and K just told L a rumour. Now, it's only a matter of time before it's revealed.

Distracting themselves from the gathering storm, they rush up to their rooms, keen to see if the hotel closets can accommodate four or five suitcases of clothes. Planning their evening attire, the ladies gush: "Italy is the place to dress up!" Casual dress code for drinks is Moschino, black and gold, cheetah fur coats, pearl-adorned edges. Cheeseburger sliders sporting little Italian flags are accompanied by soft cheese and a dollop of caviar. G and D had their flight delayed. They call when they land. It's straight to the hotel for

them: "See you tomorrow!" You can feel the women breathe a sigh of relief. Is it because they can avoid confrontation for one more day? Or is it the penicillins and pink margaritas that arrive in crystal tumblers? Off-screen, a producer asks: "Are you subconsciously steering clear of D?" Behind the terrace, the Coliseum looms.

The next day, the girls wander the streets. E has decided to strike a solemn pose in straight-legged white pants, hair up in a pale silk scarf, and a movement-constricting Chanel hat. The other girls snicker. She's going for Anita Ekberg, but ends up looking like Little Eddy. At the Trevi Fountain, E thinks about jumping in but decides against it for health reasons. Little D does Spice Girls kicks in a yellow moto jacket and humps the railing instead. K is conscripted into photographing her, despite being mortified.

The ancient architecture has a memento mori effect on the women. West Coast woo-woo meets Italian evil eye. L discusses how papal disapproval of *The Exorcist* premiere caused lightning to strike a church in 1973. An obelisk inspires E to disclose her past lives. She was once a boy kidnapped from Spain who lived in the bottom of a ship. She was once a Roman citizen who fucked gladiators.



DIS

They meet S, the final member of their group to arrive, at the Spanish Steps. On their way to La Maison Fendi, she explains. Passport issues: "I did get my passport so I could fly commercial. If I had to charter a plane... We're talking a dress of two... It would've hurt. I still would've come, but it would've hurt." She's in high spirits until they get to the store. Her friends pressure her to try on clothes and give them a little fashion show, but she doesn't want

The ladies gush: "Italy is the place to dress up!" Casual dress code for drinks is Moschino, black and gold, cheetah fur coats, pearl-adorned edges.

to. The anxiety of it all reduces her to tears. She would really rather try on the clothes alone in the privacy of her hotel room.

Now that everyone has arrived, they can finally do a group dinner. "Rome: go big, go home!" The ladies shout and scurry upstairs to their glam squads. It's Versace '90s drag night: big, teased, and blonde. Hair texture: crunchy. Belts: three. Airways: constricted. It's Y2K "Slave 4 U" Britney wig night. Paired with: shoulder pads, leopard print, trout-pout lips four sizes too big. It's Cinecittà cat eyes, black tulle veil, 5-inch spike heels, tits out night.

Is it a fashion show or dinner at the hotel? Who knows? Who cares? The ladies are an hour late for their reservation after photographing each outfit in excruciating detail. Captions are crowdsourced, debated, and have at least two rounds of edits. Final image selection for the posts gets three.

They order off-menu. *These Californians with their food allergies*, the waiters must be thinking. It's all a bit pro forma. As soon as drinks and entrées arrive, the girls get down to business.

K turns to D: "B is very upset about what happened between you at the podcast."



**She simply can't take it anymore: "I'm not going to torture you any longer. She said you two had sex."**

It's vague what exactly is being litigated. Only three out of the seven have heard the rumour. As the rest of the group presses for more details, L cites past precedent: when you repeat the story, you own the story. These ladies always shoot the messenger. (Remember the Munchausen's debacle?)

"Why are we beating around the bush and not saying what she really said?"

"Because it's really bad."

"I'm warning you because there's going to be more."

"There's no truth to it."

"So you already know what it is!"

Finally, the dam breaks. T is pregnant and the only sober one at the table. She touches the small life swimming underneath the elastic-blend black lace. She simply can't take it anymore: "I'm not going to torture you any longer. She said you two had sex."

A hush falls over the table. D mutters her vigorous, quiet denial.

"Was your husband there? She said you two have an understanding. And when she found out that wasn't true, she flipped out!"

"It has nothing to do with us! It has nothing to do with the show!" Tears are welling up in D's eyes. "And: Bravo, Bravo, fucking Bravo!"

This is an ancient mariner's trick. When a ship is on fire, bravo is yelled to alert the crew, but not the passengers. The number of bravos signifies the intensity and danger of the fire. "Please do not air this! Please!" D breaks the fourth wall addressing a producer in a last-ditch effort to smother the inferno. But sensing it's useless, she turns back to the group: "I am a *very* married woman and I love my husband to death. And anything I've felt, I have said."

"I don't think that's true," L demurs. "You know we can't wrap any of this conversation up in a bow. There's no closure from this night." Her eyes flash, reminiscent of Maria Callas as *Medea*.

Dinner is finished and the ladies head toward the exit. Their voices drop to whispers as they crowd up the stairs.

"They're not going to cut it," someone whimpers.

"No, if they ever want me on this show, they're going to cut it!"



Andy Warhol





Sam McKinniss

Post-colonial, we realized *Nanook of the North* was a fiction. Post-Epstein, we learned *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) was a documentary. In retrospect, fact and fiction are always more fluid than once thought.

## Part 2: LIFE UNSCRIPTED

When we started this project, we spoke with the creator of *The Real Housewives* franchise, Scott Dunlop and asked him to comment on his creation. Initially, he was eager to chat. He told us the show was a satire of American domesticity. At the end of our call, he emphasized that he was not beholden to Bravo, but would touch base. "Just as a formality." But a week later, he was in a similar predicament to D. The network said no. At the end of the day, they always have final cut.

The history of reality TV, including ostensibly 'nonfiction' and 'unscripted' content, dates back longer than most people realize. In an art history class, you may learn that *Nanook of the North* (1922) was the first documentary film. This is a half-truth. Some elements could be called documentary film-making, but others were clearly fictionalised scenarios. There was no 'Nanook,' only a hunter named Allakariallak. He didn't hunt with a spear, but a gun. And his on-screen wives were actually the common-law partners of the American filmmaker, Robert Flaherty.

Even in the 1920s, the central tension of media was already omnipresent. A film could serve as a replacement for a traditional staged drama. It could also serve a documentary purpose, transporting audiences into places and scenarios far beyond the possibilities of their own personal experiences. Movie magic or the grandeur of nature: media has given us the tools to ratchet up the saturation of reality, to abandon the everyday for the more reel than real. The latent fictionalising aspect of film has always been there. "The medium is the message."

The first time the public had a sense that these might not be two separate tracks, but instead a tangle of contradictions, was with the PBS special *An American Family* (1971). Embracing the '70s vogue for cinema verité, the documentary set out to reveal an average (read: upper-middle-class) Santa Barbara family experiencing the consequences of the tumultuous '60s. The Loud family served up more than producers expected. An unravelling marriage, a sexually confused child—was this the American everyday? Or something else...

According to famed anthropologist Margaret Mead:

I've been thinking over *An American Family* ever since the viewing last week. It's an extraordinary series; nothing like it has ever been done and I think it may be as important for our time, as were the invention of drama and the novel for earlier generations/a new way to help people understand themselves.

I apologize for this typing: I am writing on a typewriter coded for Indian languages, and it's not my typewriter.

Sincerely

Margaret Mead





Julien Ceccaldi

Gay son and future *The Advocate* columnist Lance Loud commented, "This series was the fulfilment of the middle-class dream that you can become famous for being just who you are." Lance, a former teen pen pal of Andy Warhol, understood the possibilities reality TV contained. It was Warhol's promised fifteen minutes of fame. He started a rock band called The Mumps, moved to the Chelsea Hotel, and did late night interviews on *The Dick Cavett Show* where he inevitably pitched Levi's on letting him become a brand ambassador.

The idea of being famous for being famous would take time to catch on though. Even Lance felt the need to start a band as an alibi for his randomly acquired renown. It would be the Y2K celebutantes that finally perfected the formula: 1) Become a club rat, 2) Scandalize the gossip rags, 3) Land a reality TV deal, 4) Leak a porn tape, 5) Create a sponsored product empire. Paris Hilton is clearly the template for all that followed. (Her après moi le déluge quip about Kim Kardashian—"You mean that girl that used to clean my closet?"—is so brutal Kim had it scrubbed from Google.)

Though Kim reigns as queen today, Hilton's self-performance remains something of legend. Despite numerous mask-off moments where her ditzy blonde act slips and reveals the calculated baritone beneath, breathless reports that her personality 'is all an act' continue to generate clicks. She was the first celebrity to approach life with the mind of a conceptual performance artist.

Paris' life has an uncanny synchronicity. She's everywhere, connected to everything. In her documentary, an animated sequence recreates her stay at a reformatory school. Locked in solitary confinement, Paris focuses on her future: she will make a name for herself, build her brand. Paris wants to be so successful that her parents can never control her again. Hilton has manifested that desire for herself. She is the Big Bang of reality TV. Her star is the gravity well around which so many other subplots and minor characters orbit.

In 2003, head bitch of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, Kyle Richards, can be spotted in the pilot episode of *The Simple Life*. Seeing her niece off as she heads into the wilderness of Arkansas. In 2008, her home was burglarized by Calabasas aspirant Alexis Neiers while she was filming her own reality series *Pretty Wild*. The police investigation and *Vanity Fair*

coverage of Neiers' gossip-optimised crimes end up folded into her single-season cult hit.

In 2013, Hilton's pink-washed shrine of the self (her mansion) performed double duty as both crime scene and set for Sofia Coppola's adaptation of the Nancy Jo Sales' bestseller, *The Bling Ring*, itself a book-length treatment of Neiers' thirsty thefts. It's this ouroboros of media objects that supercharges Hilton's aura and overwhelms luxury and brand. The Bootsy Bellows rejects weren't looking for cocaine or cash or clothes. They were looking for Paris. And once embroiled in the infamous scandal, they finally found her...

Paris more than anyone understands how the sausage is made. She more than anyone understands there is no authenticity, only media.



Mark Peckmezian



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# AN AMERICAN FAMILY

An original series produced by WNET/13, 304 West 58 Street, New York, New York 10019 (212) 262-4200

## An American Family

### Background Production Information

Bill and Patricia Loud live in Santa Barbara, California. They have five children -- three sons and two daughters -- now ranging in age from 15 to 21 years old. Individually and collectively, they are the principal subjects of An American Family, a series of 12 one-hour films, produced by WNET, which will be broadcast nationally over the Public Broadcasting Service Thursday, January 11 at 9 p.m.\*

The way we live today is vastly different from the way we lived a half century ago. Social, cultural and technological changes have been staggering in number, degree and rapidity -- and each has been investigated by social scientists to assess its impact on us. Rarely does a week go by without a new study revealing that, as a nation, we have altered, rearranged or dispensed with some traditional pattern or belief.

What is the cumulative effect of all these changes? How has the aggregate of change transformed the way we live, the way we act and react to each other, to our parents, to our children? Television has shown us video families: situation comedy families, soap opera families, families caught in dramatic conflict. What is a real family like, not as glimpsed by a news program in a moment of tragedy or accomplishment, but in everyday living?

An American Family records one family living its everyday life over a period of seven months. It chronicles the routine and the humdrum, as well as the major and minor crises which arose during this period. The series' aim in focusing on one specific family was to illuminate and reflect facets of behavior, feelings and attitudes common, in varying degrees, to all American families.

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\*Please check your local PBS station for area broadcast time.

## The Loud Family





Anne Imhof

### Part 3: PERFORMANCE ART

At the 2017 Venice Biennale, Anne Imhof won the Golden Lion for her work *Faust*, a performance piece installed at the German Pavillion. Industrial wire fencing, Dobermann Pinschers, iPhones, punk rock, a glass floor, and Berlin club kids assembled as a schematic of bodies in space. Its redacted quality gave off that shiver of the uncanny valley. What does the opera of the everyday look like when it isn't camouflaged by context?

We all think in framing now. Composing our days like photos, posts, tweets, little updates. We treat our surroundings as UX prompts and choose our activities accordingly. Our fear, of course, is that if we didn't follow the little prompts, if we didn't use the format as an alibi, we would look mad. Félix Guattari said: "A schizophrenic out for a walk is a better model than a neurotic lying on the analyst's couch." When we choose to use social media to narrate ourselves, we are choosing the analyst's couch.

It was 2013, a long time ago, when Phoebe Philo said: "The chiciest thing is when you don't exist on Google." *Gawker* still existed as a real-life approximation of *Gossip Girl*, Instagram face was just a flicker in a Miami surgeon's eye, and authenticity had a more complex meaning than acting natural on Live. Paparazzi still existed. The panopticon, the all-seeing surveillance eye of capitalism, hadn't yet conscripted a volunteer army. (Foucault, the most cited academic of our era, popularized the idea of the panopticon in the '70s: famously pointing out that you don't have to spy on other people if you can teach them to spy on themselves.) Few people claimed to be creative directors. Fewer still claimed to know what one was.

It was the last age of minimalism—or something like it. Philo's Céline was a total study in tremendous restraint. It kicked off a decade of sans-serif supremacy. Luxury brands

launched redesigns: dropped spurs, hairlines, and flourishes for sturdy strokes. Monochrome for high-end brands, and an adapted colour-blocked iteration for the DTC start-ups percolating in Lower Manhattan. (Creative studios Gin Lane and Red Antler masterminded brands such as Casper, Birchbox, Sweetgreen, and Warby Parker.)

It was a consolidation and narrowing of what being a brand meant—perhaps in response to the escalating incoherence of everyday life and the bleeding of marketing logic into unconquered domains. Civic government became the city brand. Geopolitics became the national brand. Reputation and career became the personal brand. Implicit though never acknowledged, behind all these new design fictions was the belief that image could manifest new realities, or at least advantageous new misperceptions of reality.

Truly no one was spared. When whistleblower Chelsea Manning became an influencer it was clear that there was no opting out. Not even the United States government can disappear a truly compelling story.

A real opportunity was lost in *Wall Street 2* (2010) to coin the phrase: "Grift is good." After Fyre Festival, Theranos, and Anna Delvey, the grifter became something of a folk hero—a Robin Hood stealing from the VCs and giving to the over-educated proles. The public looks on with a mix of admiration and disgust. With imposter syndrome becoming somewhat of a meme, you can't help but wonder—is my job really real? How much of my career is my output and how much is my Instagram?

In a post-productive economy, consumer acquisition costs outstrip profit margins and the goal of every random meal kit start-up is acquisition—not growth. Most career paths feel more like bullshit jobs. Why work for a publicly traded corporation that will gut your department when McKinsey gets its hands on it? Your boss' job in all likelihood won't even exist by the time you're 40. Better to bet on yourself...

In a viral TikTok from the Honey House, we're introduced to the clouhouse residents as they all explain their 'real jobs.' There's a couple making workout videos for YouTube, two brand strategists, a mindset and meditation coach, a mindset and personal development coach, three fitness instructors (two want to be models





Nicole Eisenman

**It was 2013, a long time ago, when Phoebe Philo said: "The chicest thing is when you don't exist on Google."**

and one wants to be an actor). Are these 'real jobs'? Maybe. My broader point is that everyone is clearly angling to be some flavour of an influencer or a media personality. A 'real job' is simply another branding opportunity, another way to categorise content.

Even celebrities are tempted by this new paradigm. There's been a collective realization that the lowbrow brilliant quadrant of The Approval Matrix is by far the best paid. The Jake Pauls of the world out-earn the Timothée Chalamets. Zendaya is an ingenue. She stars in the generation-defining series, *Euphoria*. Meanwhile, her former Disney co-star Bella Thorne is crashing the OnlyFans servers. Zendaya's standing invitation to the Met Gala implicitly precludes the digital gentrification of sex work. The Hollywood A-List are the bourgeoisie, clout is just buttoned-up reputation for digital natives. The B-List may be tacky and petty bourgeois, but what they lack in status, they more than make up for in experimentation. Hype and spectacle allow the shameless to nip at their better's heels.

The first to realise the performative possibilities of social media were artists. Amalia Ulman moved to LA and scandalized New York's mandarins by proclaiming she had become a sugar baby. The pièce de résistance was convincing half the downtown scene she had gotten breast implants. Brad Troemel's recent Instagram carousel fooled even me. Scanning through, the idea that street artist Alec Monopoly might become a disciple of Q and begin tweeting about adrenochrome and mole children just seemed very this year. That the Guggenheim might find themselves at the centre of a controversy after an ill-advised clout chase also just seemed... very this year.

Trolling as an art practice can seem like somewhat of a political act. It points to the

inherent unintelligibility of the present. Is Akon founding a crypto-city in Senegal? Is Kanye West founding a home for wayward teen mothers at some place called Birthday Lake? Who knows. Information comes at us as a screengrab of a screenshot of a screenshare. A press release, a hasty render, a tweeted note: these are all just tears in the rain. Artists don't have the plastic earnestness that accompanies so many explicitly commercial acts. But maybe artists just have lower self-esteem than celebrities? Maybe we'd be better served with a few less martinis at Lucien and a few more visits to the Juvaderm clinic. Is our cynical take a result of our incisive wit or something else? As they say in *The Truman Show* (1998): "We accept the reality of the world as it's presented to us." In 2020, that means we accept the reality of the world as we construct it for ourselves.

There's some dialogue in the second season of *Bojack Horseman* that encapsulates the difficulty we all have facing up to the fact that we are the product. Two agents, one a rabbit, the other a cat, gaze across a stormy Pacific from 100 Wilshire. They're talking on the phone despite only being separated by a single floor. Rutabaga Rabbitowitz is consoling Princess Carolyn after a disastrous 40th birthday: "Hey. Do you need the movie star speech?" "Yeah," she replies.

"Okay. Carolyn, you are the star of a movie. This is the part of the movie where you get your heart broken. Where the world tests you, and people treat you like shit. But it has to happen this way. Otherwise, the end of the movie, when you get everything you want, won't feel as rewarding. There are assholes out there, but in the end, they don't matter. Because this movie's not about them. It's never been about them. All this time, the movie's been about you."





Issy Wood

## Part 4: PLAY-DOH'S CAVE

A meme page incredulously asks if the Travis Scott x McDonald's collab is real. True, the idea of McDonald's selling a Travis Scott-branded McNugget body pillow seems absurd. But ultimately it's not so much a glitch in the algorithm as a glitch in the simulation. There are so many scams and deepfakes floating in the feed. When you make a risqué joke about period panties, Thinx replies. One subtweet and you've elicited the attention of a bored social media manager. They're desperate to loop you into a post-relevant conversation about a forgotten brand from 2015.

These little micro-viral moments remind you that no one is in The Loop anymore. There are simply too many loops going on at once. You get this feeling most intensely when you're somewhere like Dimes Square in New York or Soma in San Francisco—hot little brand crucibles. “You don't listen to X podcast?” “You don't get ads from this brand?” The people that populate these little scenes are incredulous because you, a visitor, have if only for a moment popped their little reality distortion field.

On a road trip to see Cher in Vegas some years ago, I started complaining about Allbirds. I had been working at an ad agency in Playa Vista and the sustainable and washable wool sneakers were all but ubiquitous. Strategists loved them, because strategists love these succinct little brand stories. Sustainable wool farming in New Zealand. My friends, both fashion industry veterans, were unnerved by the ungainly orthopaedic forms. They were even more unnerved by the immediate introduction of Allbirds ads into their carefully curated feeds. Our little educational conversation had created a chink in their armour and exposed them to the unfathomable desires of others.

Back in Los Angeles, I pitch an idea for a new research study: Red, Weird, and Blue. In my mind, this is a rough schematic of America. It's not one culture, but two duelling

megaplexes. CNN and the *New York Times* tag-team Fox News and *Breitbart*. They're locked in an existential battle to create a 21st-century monoculture. Meanwhile, a variety of subcultures percolate in between. This is what Joe Biden means when he says the election is about “changing the channel.” He's asking America to cancel its cable subscription to Fox News.

Politics is probably where the effects of our democratised reality distortion fields can be most immediately identified. The popular idea that social media is to blame for all the craziness is somewhat true. It has broken down the barrier between our inner lives and outer selves, theoretically making us porous to nefarious influences. QAnon, Russiagate, and all manner of other conspiracy theories posit there is some evil nexus—someone, somewhere pulling the puppet strings—which exactly is of course what the conspiracy theorists most like to debate. Are things being controlled by the Kremlin? An anonymous conference room filled with Bilderburg attendees? That kitsch Egyptianate temple in the Virgin Islands?

The answers are probably a bit more banal than flat Earthers would like. It's the Facebook campus in Menlo Park. Everyone is a bot on someone else's timeline, a fly in someone else's ointment. Our celebrity politicians are merely participating in the greatest reality show on earth. The famed descent down the golden escalator was a publicity stunt for an NBC show, *The Apprentice*. He was following in the footsteps of Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger, La Cicciolina, Beppe Grillo, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, and Meghan Markle. A storied history that dates back to JFK trouncing Nixon in the 1960 Presidential Debates. Nixon refused to wear stage make-up and suffered dearly for it.

They say that in ancient Rome, prostitutes and actors were not allowed to vote and hold public office. Today, everyone knows that those who can't entertain, can't campaign. The media eyes Yeezy's LARP presidential bid warily. “Vision 2020” walks the line between fake it 'til you make it and, well, just faking it. Social media made all the world a stage, making the conversion of everyday life into a reality TV complete. Thus, we're all a bit fake right now. Playing our bit parts in the grand drama of life, dreaming of being upgraded to an understudy, and maybe, if we play our cards right, scoring a leading role.





**Thomas Demand**



**Ilya Lipkin**





Martine Syms

## Part 5: GAME OF TELEPHONE

It's child's play. Quite literally. Remember the game we used to play in grade school. You sit in a circle and one child begins, whispering something into the ear of whoever is sitting next to them. They repeat it to the next person, and so on until the circuit is complete. At the end of the game, the final person to receive the secret announces it to the group. The fun of course is that even the simplest message gets garbled and warped in transmission. "The sky is blue" turns into "Why are we screwed?" Even the obvious devolves into nonsense.

Pope Francis proclaimed, "Gossip is a plague worse than Covid." A half-truth that acknowledges the old model of reality has broken down. For a century or two, we had a public and a private version of reality. One said INFORMATION + AUTHORITY = TRUTH. The other said INFORMATION + INTIMACY = GOSSIP. As much as everyone insisted gossip was trivial, it was the most important part of most people's everyday lives.

Is Karen a slut? The high school wants to know. People halfway around the world, not so much. In another age, the petty interpersonal conflicts that expose humanity at its most base and cruel remained private traumas. But is Denise Richards an adulterer? Well, the internet wants to know. People halfway around the world are on the edge of their seats, refreshing Twitter, waiting to find out...

In that other age, public reality was more high brow. It was either scarce like a CIA intelligence briefing or mass-produced like the BBC. Like Heinz ketchup, newspaper editors thought they had refined their product to the pinnacle of perfection. It hit all the taste buds. Salty, sweet, sour, bitter, savoury or in newspaper land: politics, sports, opinion, special features, human interest...

Like food, public reality was an industrial operation. The only reason this didn't seem blatant (and creepy) was that our private lives

remained shielded by our own little Dunbar Number. Humans max out at somewhere between 150 and 300 personal relationships. When your business trip took you to Dubuque, you never presumed anyone would know about Karen. But you took it for granted that everyone consumed roughly the same national news.

But then sometime in the 2000s, we privatized public reality and publicized private reality. Karen grew up and did something racist. She became a meme victim of her own pathologies: viral on YouTube and (importantly) covered in the *Wall Street Journal*. Kompromat became a redundancy. Who needs cameras in the walls when everyone has a camera in their hands? Blackmail ceased to even be a very effective weapon. The president was happy about his pay-off to porn star Stormy Daniels being leaked—"my fans will think it's cool."

In the old world, there was a certain cachet to "being informed." In 2020, it's unclear what that even means. On phone calls, over texts, in group chats, memes and links and tweets ping back and forth. It's this ephemera that constitutes "current events." But what's missing is the through-line—"The Narrative" as a political operative might say. Perhaps that's because "The Narrative" only works when it's invisible. Our choose-your-own-adventure-social-media-optimized present offers everyone too much agency to trust what's staring them in the face is actually real. Or as Joseph Campbell once put it: "There is no way you can use the word 'reality' without quotation marks around it."

**"Who needs cameras in the walls when everyone has a camera in their hands?"**





Sturtevant

## Part 6: THE DESERT OF THE REAL

Jordan and I booked the wrong hotel for the Fourth of July. It was an honest mistake, both were branded with a generic word salad of 'spa,' 'spring,' 'desert'. They had identical sun-bleached architecture, mid-century modern buildings with palm trees, hot tubs. But ours leaned harder into the whittled, emaciated aesthetic popularized by *Breaking Bad*: shadeless air hot and heavy like an anvil, gas station sunglasses peaking over Big Gulps filled with ice and a splash of soda, sucked through teeth. Outside 7/11, schizophrenics do their best imitation of Shakespeare in the Park amid the rubble and the xeriscaping. The desert noir atmosphere is an escape from Los Angeles, but not quite the one we wanted.

We flee to Palm Springs for lunch. The flat heat is constant, but the clientele has a filler-and-Equinox-plumped faggy vibe. White Chuck Taylors. Short shorts. High and tight fades. We pass through the cooling mist of a Starbucks outdoor seating area, decide to eat at the Tommy Bahama café, tempted by the orchid themed happy hour cocktail menu, the artisanal hot dog special, the gays in American flag jorts. It feels festive in a way the West Coast never does on summer holidays. Memorial Day, Labor Day, the Fourth—these are foreign imports in seasonless California.

But then in 2020, the vibe isn't quite Yankee Doodle Dandy. The (official) fireworks have been cancelled. No one's told the guests at our hotel though. Sparkler displays spin in the courtyard, while Bruce Springsteen booms on linked Bluetooth speakers. We flee to our room, hoping to watch the unauthorised fireworks from our balcony's view of the Coachella Valley, only to find shirtless dads in calf-length cargo shorts shoot fireworks into the dry brush across an access road. A stray roman candle ignites a church. We call 911, anxiously awaiting the comforting sirens of a fire truck, but get a busy signal. Another house lights up in the distance. Happy birthday, America!

The formlessness of pandemic America was mirrored on TV. Hiding from the wayward fireworks, we turned on Bravo. Reruns of *The Real Housewives of New York* were playing—only this time with Countess Luann giving colour commentary from a tiny screen within a screen. For a franchise built on repackaging old

ideas in new ways, this was par for the course. (Many forget that *The Real Housewives* was initially pitched as an unscripted version of ABC's *Desperate Housewives*.)

I haven't kept up on the franchises for years. But I'm struck by how dark RHONY had gotten. Seemingly everyone had become a functioning alcoholic and was using the scheduled outings as public group therapy. Dorinda Medley had a psychotic break during a wine tasting upstate. Former Upper East Side darling Tinsley Mortimer fled Dorinda's wrath into the adjacent apple orchard. On the chartered bus ride back to the city, Sonja Morgan vomited into a bucket. What was the inner life of a Real Housewife like we pondered? How much do they understand about the product they are creating?

Certainly the image-conscious housewives of Beverly Hills have a more nuanced take. They're too close to the studios to not understand the stakes of the show. The pink ladies clearly see themselves as producers. For former child actors, courting public opinion is something of a sixth sense. Their under-served vibe could be read as part and parcel of LA wellness culture, but I think they remain sober so they can be at peak performance should an airing of grievances commence.

Perpetually over-served New York takes a different tact. Little Luann's rambling commentary seems to reveal they fulfil their contractual duties to Bravo in a state of semi-permanent brown-out. RHONY contestants play a harder game. Google reveals that just miles away from our roach motel, Sonja Morgan has been hiding out at a 'wellness clinic' in Palm Springs for the duration of the pandemic. (Wellness clinics are the polite rebranding of the derogatory midcentury term fat camp.) We imagine Sonja so close, yet so far, wandering the Carrara marble halls in fuzzy slippers, wearing nothing but a revealing linen robe, no doubt terrorising the immiserated essential staff with flirty flashes as they deliver cardboard-flavoured low-cal vegan snacks in N95 masks.

We head back to Los Angeles early, exhausted by our unexpectedly dire vacation. But as we zip past the wind farms on the 10, my mind drifts back to Sonja. She remains in the desert, indecent and single-minded. She's training for next season: touching up her fillers and sharpening her claws.





Tobias Spichtig

## Part 7: POWER TRIPPING

Delusion is a helluva drug. You see people leveraging it everywhere. Go to Spring Studios in TriBeCa or Beverly Hills. Can you pick which Tesla-driving, Patagonia-vested white dude self-seriously clacking away on a MacBook is a legitimate tech founder? And which is just playing at entrepreneurial drag? In all likelihood, they can't tell either. Every business starts with a dream they say. Every empire was founded with a pitch deck. It's all a design fiction until a product is attached. But what is the secret sauce that transforms vaporware into apocalypse-grade tech? Delusion.

There's a Russian roulette element to this strategy of course. Your chances of success increase if you are talented or beautiful, though sadly both of these attributes tend to exist beyond our individual control. The one variable within earthly grasp though is leveraging group delusion to your benefit. Chosen families, educational pods, creative scenes, nightlife cliques, and stan armies are all collective reality distortion fields. When one person believes in a crazy idea, they're a schizophrenic—but get five, six, or more to play along and outsiders may begin to wonder if your delusion contains a kernel of sense. As Lacan always knew, the Real is not synonymous with reality.

Friend groups, like cults, are suicide pacts. Admission to the inner circle requires that certain nonsense be treated like gospel truth. James Charles' Sisters have to agree that he totally made "long nails" a thing. The cast of *The Real Housewives of New York* have to play along that "skinny" is totally Bethenny's. Employees at Anheuser-Busch must all nod along when Budweiser insists the "American Dream" is their brand. Sometimes, there is disagreement within the group. In *Mean Girls* (2004), Regina George made Gretchen Weiners get rid of her earrings, because gold hoops were "hers"—fracturing Gretchen's group allegiance and ultimately leading to Regina's downfall. Real life tends to lack dramatic catharsis though. Friendships just implode in slow motion as girlfriends squabble for years about who got into astrology first. There's no big airing of grievances like on TV. Someone just gets left out of the wedding party.

needs to be delegation. Like any business, everyone needs a role with clearly defined responsibilities. Look at the Kardashians. Kim is the sexy entrepreneur. Kourtney is the sexy homemaker. Khloe is the sexy late bloomer. Kendall is the sexy it-girl model. Kylie is the young sexy entrepreneur. And Kris of course is the momager. Where are Rob and Caitlyn, you ask? They're cancelled. They didn't play by the rules. And besides, their names don't even begin with K.

The Kardashian Kool-Aid is the same inebriating fiction Lance Loud was once drunk on: it's the American Dream to be (upper) middle-class and famous for nothing. There's an episode from season four of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* called "Weekend from Hell". Kendall is maybe 14. Kylie is maybe 12. Kendall has decided she wants to be a model. Kris is very excited by this development and happy to begin calling agencies. Kylie, feeling left out, decides she wants to be a model, too. Kris has to break it to her: she's just not tall enough.

Looking back, it seems the episode contained a teachable moment. The Kardashians are chameleon queens. You can change your husband, your face, your skin tone, your body—you can even doctor your tax returns and dupe *Forbes* into giving you a magazine cover as the youngest self-made billionaire—but you can't change your height. Delusion is a superpower, just so long as you keep at least one foot on the ground.

This is why group dynamics are so important. Without their momager, the Kardashians almost certainly would've imploded by now. Stepping into the spotlight is like lighting a stick of dynamite for most. It's always just a matter of time before they fuck up and blow up. Watching from her perch in Calabasas, Kris took notes on Caitlyn Jenner's Olympic sponsorship deals, the O.J. Simpson trial that dragged so many of her close friend's names through the mud, the failed reality TV endeavours of her stepson Brody on *The Princes of Malibu*, and the successful reality TV endeavours of her stepson's friends, Spencer Pratt and Heidi Montag, on *The Hills*. It's a crazy world out there, she concluded. Best to always have final cut.

After twenty seasons, the Kardashians have called it quits, realising reality is redundant. As Kim says in the series finale of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*: "Reality is for those who cannot sustain the dream." ●



The core of Kant’s idea of Enlightenment is that it is up to each one of us individually, not anyone else, to ascertain, to the best of our abilities, what in fact is truly the case and what in fact is the right thing to do, through rational deliberation in this double-barreled sense. The importance of rational deliberation is that it determines the answers to these questions solely according to the facts of the matter and the logical criteria we apply in organising them—not through power, persuasion, popularity, or politics. So although these answers are always subject to rational revision, they are not purely

subjective, arbitrary, or perennially susceptible to Cartesian doubt. They have objective validity in the only sense of “objectivity” Kant approves of. This means that even if we are forced by circumstance to speak or act in a way that violates these objective principles, no external power can make us betray our rational recognition of what is in fact true or right. Only we ourselves can do that, when we allow our individual interests and desires to blind or distort the disinterested, rational analyses and conclusions at which we arrive by thinking calmly, clearly, and impartially about the facts.

**Adrian Piper**



**Reena Spaulings**

### Image credits

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p200: Julien Ceccaldi, Excerpt from the comic *Divine Judgment*.

p201: Mark Peckmezian, Courtesy the artist.

p202: Buck Ellison, *Untitled (Gibson Dunn Collage)*, collage on paper, 8.5 x 11 inches, 2018.

p203: The Loud Family, Courtesy Grant Loud.

p204: Anne Imhof, Eliza Douglas photographed by Anne Imhof, Courtesy the artist.

p206: Nicole Eisenman, *Anonymity, Personal Branding, Reality Television*,

*Celebrity Culture, Performativity of Social Media, Inner Live vs Public Life, and Alternate Realities*, 2019. Photograph by Ryan McNamara.

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p219: Reena Spaulings, *Fan*, 2020, Tyrian purple on canvas, 218 x 109 x 2.5 cm, Courtesy the artist and Galerie Neu.

pp220-221: Felix Gonzalez-Torres “*Untitled*” (*It's Just a Matter of Time*) 1992  
Billboard  
Dimensions vary with installation  
Installed at 10th Avenue between 18th and 19th streets, New York, NY. 1 of 15 international outdoor billboard locations, with 2 indoor locations, as part of the exhibition *It's Just a Matter of Time*. Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, NY. 30 Mar. – 4 May 2002. [Simultaneous exhibitions at: Sadie Coles HQ, London, England, United Kingdom. 20 Mar. – 20 Apr. 2002. Galleria Massimo De Carlo, Milan, Italy. 8 Apr. – 5 May 2002. Shown under the exhibition title *È Solo Una Questione di Tempo* (*It's Just a Question of Time*). Image courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. © Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Courtesy of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.



*It's just a matter of time*

