

@richard hawkins01

“I no longer considered objects from the point of view of their usual purpose but rather from that of friendly anxiety they offered me.”

Jean Genet¹

On March 2, 2017, Snap Inc., parent company of the image-messaging application Snapchat, went public and experienced an unprecedented first day market capitalization of \$28.4 billion.² While some of the frenzy soon fizzled, Snapchat’s upshot evaluation serves as a reminder of society’s current obsession with social media. Snapchat stands apart from other apps in that it allows its users to share images and videos that self-delete, providing them with a liberated—and in some cases, delusional—sense that what is being transmitted is impermanent and untraceable after having been consumed. It should come as no surprise, then, that one of the reasons for Snapchat’s ascent was its capability of transmitting nude selfies and other explicit material “free” from the policing and supposed permanence of other platforms.

Instagram, unlike its ephemeral competitor, is a supremely visual library, in which every post is catalogued along with its relevant comments and likes. As such, it demands that a fabricated persona surround each user, with each post adding to the patina of his or her particular brand of cyber-personality. More specifically, such a trove of sustained visibility enables artists to navigate Instagram’s decidedly image-centric universe, with certain artists employing the app as a

legitimate extension of their studio practice. Indeed, the uses and abuses of lasting social media have been explored by all manner of artists, not least of whom is Los Angeles-based artist Richard Hawkins.

Materially and conceptually, Hawkins is a collagist. Though he often ventures into painting and sculpture, his practice is foundationally collage-based: an organization of surfaces via the layering of disparate elements as a means of creating a synthesized and outlined whole. The driving force behind such activity can be described as the aura of mediation. The spirit that mediated imagery emanates—its inherent pull, its production of desire, the unattainable ideal it often evokes—is perfectly suited to the channel of collage, as the coalescing of such imagery forges “an undeniable experience of syntax.”³

Richard Hawkins’ idiosyncratic and direct approach to collage is refreshing in its simplicity: a cleanly trimmed pic of David Bowie taped to a reproduction of Francis Bacon’s *Two Seated Figures* (1979); an image of a Japanese male model tacked onto an inked abstraction; cut-outs of Greek and Roman sculptures that reside alongside the artist’s Romanesque lettering. Such succinct yet fleshed-out relationships translate seamlessly to Instagram, wherein their imagistic strata can be constructed not only statically but also animatedly via gifs and videos. Beginning in 2015, Hawkins regularly produced Instagram work under the handle @richardhawkins01. On January 3, 2017, after reaching 137,000 followers, his page caught the attention of the app, and was abruptly deleted.⁴

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1

Richard Hawkins, *technology, arousal* (2010). Acrylic, ink, and collage on paper, 21 x 16.5 inches.

Image courtesy of Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles.

Photo: Fredrik Nilssen.

Hawkins had knowingly (if not stridently) been pushing the boundaries of Instagram's guidelines for indecency, as his posts almost exclusively incorporated images of virile (frequently nude and less often aroused) young men, many of them self-promoting social media narcissists. A typical @richardhawkins01 contribution utilized techniques of layering and superimposition similar to those evident in Hawkins' material collages. For instance, *2016-05-02 20.57.36*⁵ features a shirtless man angling for a selfie surrounded by four Nick Jonas gifs with the word "moist" spelled out in rotating green capitals at the bottom (a spilling white liquid also makes a cameo). Though this relatively straightforward composition echoes the artist's physical collages *RRSPS* and *SJJSS* (both 1993), most entries employed a more intense chromatic bravado coupled with a saturated use of web linguistics such as gifs, emojis, and stickers whose animated and obfuscating tendencies maintained the artist's penchant for giving and withholding at once.

In his catalogue essay contribution to Hawkins' 2010 traveling retrospective, *Third Mind*, art historian and critic George Baker states, "The primary act of collage, for Hawkins, is one of *occlusion*—covering something up, laying something over, the superimposition of parts and pieces onto a readymade ground, indeed, the translation or transposition of one ground, one image, or one surface into another."⁶

If such obstruction in Hawkins' studio work is a twinned source of syntactic image generation and desire production, it is doubly so in his Instagram output, in which animation plays a key role. Take *2015-12-02 05.29.32*, wherein a white rabbit jackhammers its head against the groin of a tattooed dude, whose semi-erect

penis is revealed only when the rabbit rocks its head back in preparation for another blow. Similarly executed is *2015-12-01 15.15.51*, which makes use of a muscled bro from thebananablog.com who is not indecent until the Akita concealing his junk winks and slides out of frame only to reappear a second later. (Similar to how dissecting a joke drains it of humor, detailing these posts belies their rampant LOL hilarity.)

Here Hawkins is disrupting the source imagery's original erotic intent while retaining its apparent provocative qualities. It seems at times the artist genuinely lusts after these men while in others he overtly ridicules them, making it unclear if he wants to humiliate or fellate them—or both. This mirrors the multivalent effect of mediated desire—a distanced yet spectacularized hybrid of magnetism and frustration. As writer Bruce Hainley posits, "Hawkins has come to refer to this coexistence as 'syncretism,' which he defines as 'an attempt to reconcile disparate and even opposing beliefs and attributes of previously separate gods or practices into one, both existing simultaneously.'"⁷ This ambiguity, this performance of two tasks at once, is a thread throughout Hawkins' work. Indeed, the title of his 2007 retrospective at de Appel in Amsterdam was *Of two minds, simultaneously*.

With all the potentials such technology affords an artist, it's worth pausing to focus on an aspect of Hawkins' relationship to Instagram that fundamentally sets him apart from another artist, Richard Prince, whose use of the platform has raised many an eyebrow. Prince, for his part, monetized his account by taking screenshots of other users' pages and then having them printed on canvas. Despite being squarely within the artist's signature appropriative

1. Jean Genet, *The Thief's Journal* (New York: The Grove Press, 1964), p. 127.

2. Caitlin Huston, "Snap IPO: Six things to know about Snapchat parent company as it goes public," *MarketWatch.com*, Mar 3, 2017, <http://www.marketwatch.com/story/snap-ipo-six-things-we-now-know-about-snapchat-parent-company-2017-02-02>.

3. Rosalind Krauss, "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image," *October Files: Robert Rauschenberg* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 40. Originally published in *Artforum*, December 1974.

4. Richard Hawkins, e-mail message to the author, March 29, 2017.



2

Richard Hawkins, *Loiterer 7* (2009). Acrylic and collage on paper, 23.5 × 18 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

methodology, Prince's social media appropriations were fabricated solely for circulation within the art market as luxury good signifiers of his participation within contemporary culture.

Conversely, Hawkins' artwork was the medium of Instagram *itself*, and was therefore a reflection upon of the very conditions of its own making—the only manner in which one could “acquire” the work was within the confines of a screen. A Prince-style commodification of social media was apparently never Hawkins' goal, but rather Instagram served as just one of the many outlets the artist has employed to further his career-spanning investigation of mediation. Whether worked through collage, ceramics, painting, or social media, all mediums are equally privileged within the network that is Hawkins' art; it is the forum of eventual consumption that dictates in what manner his work should be manifested.

Well after realizing @richardhawkins01 was blocked, I foolishly continued to check Instagram to see if the account had somehow been reinstated. Like bygone Snapchat posts, Hawkins' catalogue had left the realm of tangible experience to enter into the ether of memory. Though each and every one of his works is stored on some server somewhere in the world, their current inaccessibility suggests the ephemerality of the internet; it is more like a pencil than a pen.

Hawkins recently launched another Instagram handle, @richardhawkins02. Interspersed between new and old erotic collages are quick snapshots of his cats, a couple awkward selfies, and suggestive imagery framed with texts on current gay rights abuses. In all, its tenor has some of its predecessor's flair, though it's quite clear that the

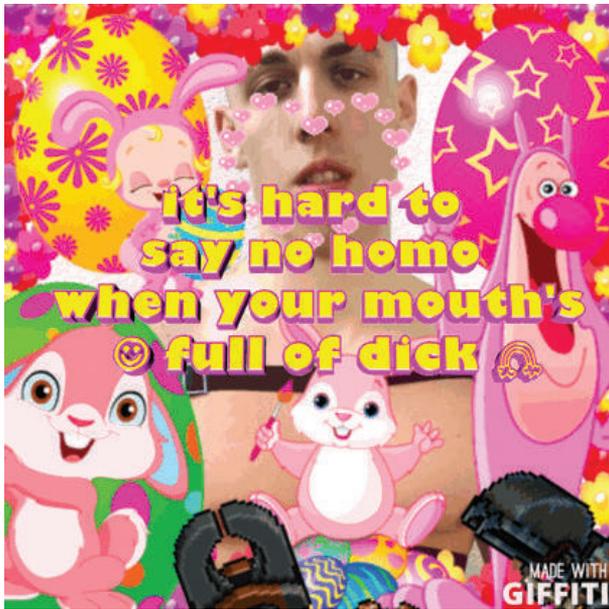
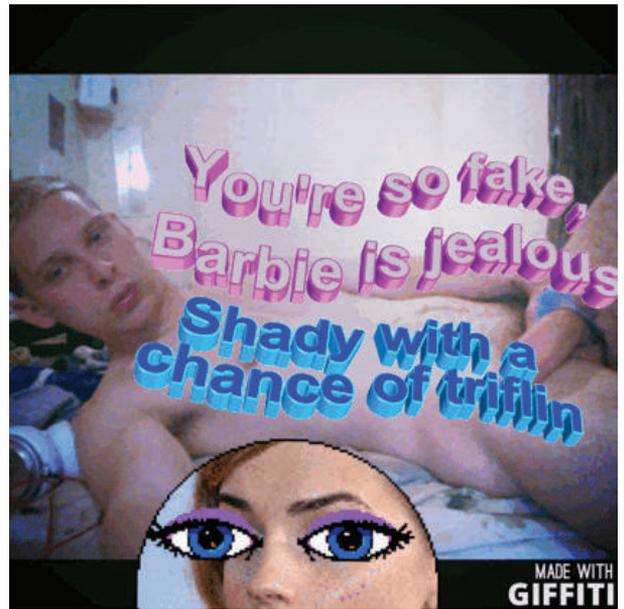
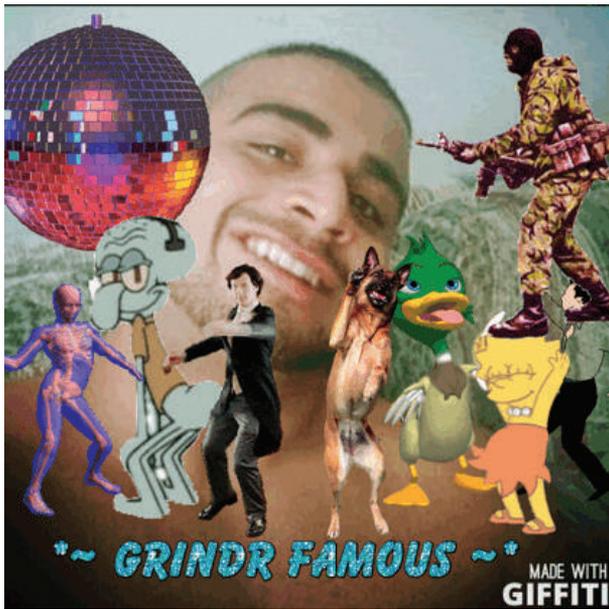
objective is not at all the same. When asked if he ever thought of trying to get the original reinstated, Hawkins simply replied, “Rather than fighting to get it back I'm enjoying the idea that it's just a used-to-be.”⁸

5. Due to the original posts' lack of proper titles, the author and the artist agreed they would here be referred to here by their file names as kept in the artist's digital archive.

6. George Baker, “Viva Hate,” in *Richard Hawkins: Third Mind* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2010), p. 45.

7. Bruce Hainley, “Slowly (2nd Draft),” in *Of two minds, simultaneously* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König), 2009, 17.

8. Richard Hawkins, e-mail message to the author, January 27, 2017.



3
 @richardhawkins01 Instagram
 post. Animated gif (still).
 Image courtesy of the artist.

4
 @richardhawkins01 Instagram
 post. Animated gif (still).
 Image courtesy of the artist.

5
 @richardhawkins01 Instagram
 post. Animated gif (still).
 Image courtesy of the artist.

6
 @richardhawkins01 Instagram
 post. Animated gif (still).
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