

Return to the Far Side,
Virtual. Or: what
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— Peter Chambers

RUPC #8

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Introduction: how do we to live together;
what do we tend to build with one another;
what does this say about 'where we're at'?

In this document I revisit an exploration of End of Year (EoY) listmaking dynamics.¹ This piece began life in September 2013 as a research note developed while working as a research assistant, alongside my other responsibilities at RUPC.² The 2013 context of the research note is crucial to note. First of all, at that time the note was intended as a way of bringing my earlier experience as a blogger and music critic to bear on questions of distinction making and the accumulation of social and cultural capital.³ As composed — very quickly, over a few feverishly caffeinated hours — it was a way of explaining Bourdieu via a practice I was familiar with from one corner of electronic music culture. It was offered as an example to aid in understanding the circulation and attribution of value in street art economies, based on the striking commonalities I observed between the two fields after a week's work transcribing interviews for Professor Alison Young.⁴ In both fields, actants engage in mediated processes of evaluation, through which distinctions are produced and different forms of capital are accumulated and circulated. Although the cultural objects are quite different, the mechanisms were strikingly familiar. At heart, what I was trying to explain is how values emerge from a culture that produces itself *in* its own imaginary web of self-reference.⁵

At the same time, I was building the epistemological underpinning of my book on border security's emergence in

Australia as I completed a paper on the same topic,⁶ pushing my underlying Foucauldian approach into an encounter with Luhmann's systems theory.⁷ It was not clear in 2013, but as of re-writing in 2017 I see very clearly how what were intended as treatments of Bourdieu's key *topoi* — field, distinction making, and the accumulation and distribution of different forms of capital — are also early attempts to grapple with Luhmann's insights. Most notably for our purposes: the world-building power of distinction making; the logical way circularity produces paradoxes through recursive operations; and the emergence of metastable values through observing systems — where the latter have an agency not amenable to sociological accounts grounded in action, or even supple accounts emphasising co-production or bringing in non-human actants.

In this sense, the note is also an unwitting dialogue with two major strands of postwar European sociology and their living lineages and adherents, which actually pursue parallel and sometimes overlapping questions, but with very different epistemologies, normative commitments, and presentational styles. Though I don't wish to foreground this dialogue in a paper whose re-worked purpose lies in sketching out how values emerge online in a specific internet conjuncture, theory nerds are welcome to notice these contentions — with their intersecting insights and their mutual blindspots — at work in the background. What I do wish to say, however, is that Bourdieu's sociology gives us an account of how the social field is visible to and played by individuals who regard one another as such, via their assumed understanding of one another's actions, meanings and agency. This does not invalidate the sense in which, on another level, we are also the environment of communication, opening onto a worldview that gives agency to systems, as well as the nonhuman. This ultimately builds toward arguing that systems are central to the operation of society — indeed, that they tell us how social order is possible, which shows us why things don't just fall apart.⁸

By documenting a field-sensitive knowledge built over more than a decade's daily engagement with electronic music,⁹ this document also has an archival purpose. It contains moments or elements that may be useful — or bemusing, or jarringly and productively anachronistic — to current and future readers working in and thinking about sound, music, recording and evaluation: artists, musicians, critics, fans. I've redeveloped it to foreground those elements that use Luhmann's systems theory that help us think about online-mediated social practices and their cultural effects, but without taxing the reader by importing too much of Luhmann's syntax and style, building earlier intuitions into something more definite and, I hope, clear. I've chosen to do this so it might recall the kinds of things Alex Lambert and I actually talked about at RUPC daily in our shared office as its postdocs, and often over coffee in the shadows of the John Medley buildings with other RUPC members. We were asking each other: *how do we do tend to live together through our interfaces and our evaluations of one another's evaluations? What do we tend to build with one another online (and how)? And what does this say about 'where we're at'?*¹⁰ The developed points may also be used as the opening elements of a constructive rejoinder to insights from post-situationist critical theory,¹¹ media theory,¹² and psychoanalytic social theory¹³ which RUPC members were using at the time to understand 'what we (thought we) were going through (and how we talked about that)'.

By way of concluding this introduction, I also want to emphasise that the elements re-described here are *highly* time sensitive shifting constellations of thought, practice, and culture, with their own materiality. Ironically, this is a central consideration of James Ferraro's work, which puts *Far Side Virtual* into a strange dialogue with what I'm attempting here, one I did not at all intend at the time. In re-writing, I've made a conscious choice to foreground these time-sensitive choices, in light of the fast-changing culturo-socio-technics of

ICT to the time of writing, and because this aligns with the fundamental commitments of many RUPC members' major works. It also reflects my wish to understand the political present and social change, pursuing a basic commitment to critical theory through the problems and symptoms of a moment, the moment of EoY mania of the blogosphere, which has already passed. What emerges repeatedly, by way of a few key interjections, is that I didn't quite grasp how right *and how wrong* I was about some of my strongest assertions. This shows us back to the folly of any kind of predictive futurism, the unavoidable impossibility of being a free subject and agentic individual in a world of systems, as well as the necessity of trying to think critically about what we're involved in together, now, online.

Reflecting on rise of End of Year listmaking
in 2013: emergence and change of a niche
online cultural practice in the rich West,
between 2006 and 2011

Over the past ten years, it has become common practice for music writers to formulate and publish end of year lists (EoY) of their favourite recordings. These lists were formerly only those of music critics in the print media they wrote for. Between 2006 and 2008, as a music hack writing for street press, I was asked by my editor to compile a list¹⁵ and respond to a number of questions that were sent to all the paper's writers.

As it appeared in print on a compiling page, the aggregated lists gave an instant way of viewing and comparing the favourite recordings of the people whose interviews and reviews you'd been reading all year — mostly other writers. For the writers, the methods and motives shaping compilation were mixed. For some, it was a way to display knowledge; for others, it was a way to communicate passion; for still others, it was something of what an editor friend of mine called 'a stupid yet seemingly unavoidable pissing contest', a way to

dominate in a competitive insider game. In print, in the context of street press during the first eight years of the twenty-first century, these lists were simultaneously timely and ephemeral: they worked in relation to a zeitgeist that lasted only as long as people kept their street press, which was typically no more than a week.¹⁶

As the privilege of those whose writing appeared regularly in print, compiled once a year, right near the end of the year, that ‘lasted’ only as long as the print media they were published in, the street press lists were the co-relative effects of a whole CD-mediated habitus of reviewing and its materiality and logistics. That is, the days — until 2006–8 or so, *then sharply declining* — when music fans would physically travel to bricks and mortar record stores for an advance copy of a tastemaking magazine or street press, whereupon they would devour every word of a review — made by a small group of trusted writers whose names were reputation and currency — of a recording *which they had not heard yet*, and in many cases had no access to without a special order and an expensive purchase.

This world died so quickly, and nearly all at once.¹⁷ By around 2009, neither the obtaining of CDs, nor their review in print, made sense as a proposition worth agreeing to, even for money (if any had been forthcoming), let alone physically travelling for. To be sure, reviewing had always been the lowliest task of music’s ‘critical’ remediation, the first bone thrown by the editors of magazines and websites to the greenest and keenest of would-be ‘music writers’.¹⁸ But in the ‘(g)olden days’ — which seemed to last until the very day when suddenly the entirety of what had passed as normal until yesterday was revealed as useless, worthless and redundant¹⁹ — reviewing albums was still seen as a welcome privilege and an entrée to writing features, doing interviews, even having one’s own column and radio show. Several music writers I’ve spoken to in the past few years (to 2013) recall that travelling halfway across town to pick up a pile of promo

CDs was a great treat, or at least something worthily evocative of nostalgia. Yet from around 2008 or so, I remember the begging emails from editors asking anyone and everyone to 'please come in and help clear the pile'; and by 2009 *at the latest*, editors were struggling to get anyone to take promo CDs at all. Within a year or so of this, promos began to be distributed as mp3s, delivered as .zip and .rar files, often via locked down proprietary interfaces that required a login and password, with watermarked files.²⁰ If you were on a promoter or label's email list, new releases would be brought to your attention via an email, either as recordings were released, or weekly/monthly.

From around this time, I noticed that the CD itself became a tragically redundant object. One or two people were already using their promo CDs as beer coasters; one new parent festooned his fruit tree with promo CDs to ward off fruit bats. The further time sensitive socio-cultural fact was that you could no longer even flog your promo CDs at second-hand record stores, a tidy stream of beer money for prolific reviewers and corrupt editors well into the early 2000s.

As the social processes denoted by the shifting valence of the CD unfolded, the authority of reviews and reviewers evaporated. By internet boosters, this was treated as some kind of awesome democratisation,²¹ the levelling of a playing field that had been wrongly skewed in favour of gatekeeping elites for too long.²² But in hindsight it's better described as the destruction of a metastable social field *and* a set of improvised tactics to re-constitute and re-stabilise one through informal social practice: of which EoY listmaking became key. Importantly for reviewers and reviewing, the office of 'music critic' was no longer worthy of aspiration, or even possible to be as somehow with a literal office attached to an actual salary and fixed address. Save for a handful of trusted voices,²³ many of whom had accumulated their position of respect and influence in the older reviewer ecology, there were no critics, really. To be sure, younger wannabe writers and would-be

tastemakers continued to emerge, but by 2010 or so they emerged online as ‘digital natives’ socialised into a scene where the distinction between enthusiastic consumption and critical reflection was not widely observed, or even considered by many as worth observing: the world of ‘promo’.²⁴ Promo itself was nothing new, the difference-making difference was that suddenly the promo mentality seemed as ubiquitous as it was regarded as unproblematic, while what was formerly clearly visible (to some) as conflicts of interest were now embraced as perks.²⁵ You boosted the promo of the people you were trying to curry favour with, and in return you got laminates, which meant you never paid for gigs, or had to queue with Joe Public, and you got the chance to hobnob and do lines with DJs, musicians and other ‘journalists’ backstage.

One notable effect of the changes named by the rise of promo and perks was that a percentage of opinionated music consumers suddenly began to observe their discursive authority as roughly equal to (or greater than) that of online reviewers, while the recording in question had usually been accessible to all parties long before the review is produced. As with the evaporation of reviewers’ discursive authority and its domination by promo, this was likewise offered up as a ‘democratising’ levelling.²⁶ In practice, it did mean a brief period where the blogosphere thrived, and for us this did mean we no longer had editors telling us what we could and couldn’t write, or editing the harsh bits out of our reviews to appease or avoid the wrath of powerful promoters. But within a few years, this ‘democratisation’ also produced the strange spectacle of music consumers reviewing the reviews of the reviewers — often unfavourably and with poor syntax, typos, and accusations of Nazism (Godwin’s law) — all because the reviewer’s opinion differed from that of the consumer, because the reviewer had ‘got it wrong’ by not agreeing with the consumer (who’d already purchased the commodity), who ‘knew’ that this particular recording was a work of genius, rather than the disposable mediocrity the reviewer was

wrongly suggesting. There was an implicit normativity to all this, as strong as it was undeclarable: the ‘reviewer’ was supposed to serve promo by boosting new content; if she didn’t, the rightful response was: flame and troll.

The temporalities of this brave new ‘democracy’-cum-trollspace were incredibly strange: an artist might take a year or two to make a record, and a reviewer might take a dozen or more hours to listen, reckon with, and write about it in a clear and polished way. If you were writing for one of the prominent websites, this would then go three rounds with a fastidious editor, in zip lipped thrall to email flak from label owners and promoters owed favours and unhappy fans, as well as their own ego, rep and ambition; if you were blogging, you avoided all of this unhappy entanglement, but the pressure to ‘nail’ each review was fierce. After this laborious process, a review went online, at which point a consumer might trash the reviewer’s review with their angry thumbs while finishing up on the toilet; if you were particularly unlucky, a flamewar would start in the comment boxes, willfully misunderstanding your intentions, giving shit reads, and degenerating into an argument that was about something else, or nothing, or how the other comment boxer was not only wrong, but also a ‘fucking cunt’, &c.

The thing to recall in this strange melee is that — somehow — all these endeavours were accorded *prima facie* commensurability, as if all of it were a comparable and valid engagement with recorded music. The rise of online ‘democracy’ was actually very quickly the hegemony of purely subjective opinion. This was governed by two inter-active premises, which I think can be generalised and applied to any corner of the contemporary internet where people are invited to interact and feedback by commenting:

1. all opinion was accorded equal *a priori* status as valid (‘everyone is entitled to their own opinion’); yet
2. every opinion was always open to denigration as mere opinion (‘that’s just your opinion’).

Dean's phrasing of this key point, and its implication, is apt:

As multiple-recombinant ideas and images circulate, stimulate, they distract us from the antagonisms constitutive of contemporary society, inviting us to think that each opinion is equally valid, each option is equally likely, and each click is a significant political intervention. The deluge of images and announcements, enjoining us to react, to feel, to forward them to our friends, erodes critical-theoretical capacities — aren't they really just opinions anyway? Feelings dressed up in jargon? Drowning in plurality, we lose the capacity to grasp anything like a system. React and forward, but don't by any means think.²⁷

At precisely this conjuncture, in a dynamic such as described here, and with perks and promo on the rise and the seemingly terminal decline of CD-facilitated print media reviewer culture, informal online EoY list making, comparison and aggregation became a manic hobby and a source of intense anxiety, attention and scrutiny — especially among bloggers and their publics, of which I was one. Like many of the people most invested in this niche music remediation economy, I began to spend the final two or so months of each year bending my attention toward what would go on my list, eventually sweating over their final composition over many days' discussion and reflection, while making, having, sharing and being very precious about one's own, though hardly mandatory, became common fare. In the blogosphere, and also on the main tastemaking websites, listmaking became a thing.

We were dealing with a disgusting abundance: piles of files.²⁸ Whole folders of it were promo crap, much of the rest was pirated, or shared between friends using one click download services. You *had to* pirate: unless you worked in banking or finance, you had no other way to keep on top of the pile, which was the only way you could maintain relevant opinions. The breakdown of 'traditional' venues and temporalities of

critique and authority noted above, and its devolution into the tyranny of opinion, sat alongside the hyperabundance of digital music files provided via online ‘sources’,²⁹ which — just quietly — gave everyone access to everything all at the same time.³⁰ Though hardly or simply causal, these too are factors contributing to a social dynamic in which it became very appealing, if not socially necessary, even seemingly coercive, to make *and disseminate* one’s list. From being something where small groups of people became heavily invested insider-participants, as websites, forums and blogs became people’s primary means of discursive engagement with the music they were passionate about, EoY listmaking became a mandatory annual exercise for anyone aspiring to crossing the boundary into the hermeneutic circles of the tastemakers. It was also, to be honest, a way to get a handle on the deluge of zip files just mentioned, because you could always go back to the people you trusted, in January, read through their lists, and pirate all the albums you’d missed from the year before. All this meant that in half a decade or less, EoY Lists had gone from being kind of a thing to being a big deal proper; a way of demonstrating deeper passion and superior knowing, as well gaining hard-to-win traction in an all-too-slippery field of knowing and influence. The compounding point, which is important because it indicates how listmaking was entrenched and perpetuated, was that, having won some influence, credibility could be won or lost, based on the credibility of one’s list — each year.

To intervene from the time of re-writing in 2017, we can summarise all this by underlining a fact that appears obvious now, but would have seemed strange to my twenty-something music hack self, even as late as 2006: between 2007 and 2012, a whole political economy and its reviewer culture — that lasted nearly fifty years — broke down. Whatever its other contradictions and monsters, reviewer culture was a field capable of producing and distributing a set of values that were both metastable and enjoyed a degree of legitimacy, however

contested. The practice of reviewing, the figure and office of the reviewer, and the disseminated archive of reviews were more-or-less accepted as capable of doing what they in fact managed to do: routinely producing and distributing evaluations via a modicum of critical engagement, yes, contested case by case, but overwhelmingly accepted as a form and practice. The way this ‘melted into air’ offers a strange moment to reflect on, one with the following twist. The cultural distinctions, social distances and temporal intervals between production, distribution, consumption and critique really were scrambled, eroded or destroyed during this period. But although this upset a whole political economy that supported it *and we knew this to be the case as it was happening*, the sum total of this disruption was greeted as a blank inevitability and with a big fat shrug. It was as if currency, the bearer and cash itself had disappeared, yet aside from the small population of expropriated reviewers and their critical publics, most people were totally indifferent. And, to set up a key point in the following section, most of those most involved professed no agency in any of it *while* being deeply involved in a set of social practices that contributed to the erosive dynamic’s intensification.

In sum, to transition, and with this section’s focus on zeitgeist back in focus: EoY listmania took place *online* as part of a very particular moment that I now observe as an interesting interregnum, in which all the distinctions that had attended the evaluation of recorded music became — briefly — blurred to the point of virtual indistinction. The co-emergence of social media and smartphones were surely notable here,³¹ as is the (by now clear) eclipse of all this by the cold convenience and controlling clarity of Web 2.0. The personal was immediately legible as the political to us in this space. As the co-author of a blog during this interregnum (that is: between 2007 and 2012), we noticed a drastic change in people’s engagement with the comment boxes, where by 2011 or so they turned to shit, so quickly and so completely,

that this fed in to our decision to cease blogging less than a year later. In a very short time, our little corner of the ‘blogosphere’, a fairly respectful and often very engaging ‘public sphericle’ of sorts,³² became a space to fight a futile battle against its morphing into the hypertext waste receptacle that the comment box remains to 2017. In hindsight it’s *almost* funny that it all became so toxic and so common so quickly. But this leads to the final point in the social changes and effects I’m tracking, which is by far the most important. 2011 EoY listmania, and *The Wire*’s #1 pick of *Far Side Virtual*, is important to rescue precisely because it signifies and performs the nth ‘point of indistinction’ of the interregnum. It provides a fertile, fickle contextual ground from which EoY worked socially to cultivate distinctions within this field, distinctions which became all the more important to make because they were everywhere all broken down.

The Wire: my 2013 evaluation of it as a tastemaker in 2011, my incorrect assumptions about the mechanics of its evaluations, and James Ferraro’s *Far Side Virtual* as its #1 EoY pick for 2011

For decades, *The Wire* had been tastemaker for sound art, avant-garde and minor music, and electronic music. When I began to become obsessed with electronic music in 1998, *The Wire* sat behind the counter or featured in the store window of the ‘good’ record shops, who kept their street press near the door on the ground. As nineties teenagers, we would endure hour-long commutes, dauntingly aloof muso staff, very limited stock, and incredibly high prices,³³ for the exorbitant privilege of enjoying its riches, which we would consume with those noble and rare wonders, import CDs.

The Wire’s monthly print edition contains dozens of reviews. It had always produced lists, both month to month, and after the end of each calendar year, with its rewind editions. In line with passages in the previous section, these lists

had sat snugly in the political economy of print media and physical data carriers and its culture described in the previous section. *The Wire* offered its niche public the most in-depth, high-brow treatments of self-understood avant-garde music, an invitation coined through the tagline ‘adventures in modern music’, and cashed out through dense features on people like Alice Coltrane, Iannis Xenakis, Oren Ambarchi, and Merzbow, but placed side by side with serious considerations of people I’d loved as a high school student, like Björk, Mouse on Mars, and Tortoise. It’s impossible to know how much this was me projecting based on my own insecurities, but back then *The Wire* was snooty, aloof and unapologetically imperious in its decisions about what counted as worth featuring or discussing, and for precisely these reasons — to people like myself who had been schooled in the nineties cultural value of ‘indie’ music and the inherent shilling of all major label music — the love-hateable unassailability of its cultural loftiness gave its judgment enormous sanctity. It seemed it would be an impossible dream to write for them; their writers’ commanding erudition meant that their evaluations appeared to come from on high; and although they had their own tics and pet artists (some listed above), the view I took was that their evaluations existed in a glacial realm of slow, purposive movement and definite shapes, far away from the promo and novelty-hungry content monster and the widening gyre of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch it produced downstream. *The Wire* was a paragon of symbolic capital, in other words.

Here are the top ten entries from *The Wire*’s Top 50 Releases of 2011:³⁴

1. James Ferraro, *Far Side Virtual*
2. Rustie, *Glass Swords*
3. Eliane Radigue, *Transmorem – Transmortem*
4. Hype Williams, *One Nation*
5. The Beach Boys, *The SMiLE Sessions*

6. Michael Chapman, *The Resurrection and Revenge of the Clayton Peacock*
7. DJ Rashad, *Just A Taste*
8. Laurel Halo, *Hour Logic*
9. Lou Reed & Metallica, *Lulu*
10. John Wall & Alex Rogers, *Work 2006–2011*

The 2011 list was fascinating to me at the time, for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it appeared inter-referential: I had never seen an end of year list that appeared to state itself in relation to a large number of lists, and indeed, if I recall correctly, its being interpreted in our circles as a kind of ‘list of lists’, or a list generated by looking at other lists, then adding a few Wire ‘no brainers’, became an online discussion point. It was a document that seemed to say: ‘we know you nerds have read heaps of lists in the torturous process of compiling your own, and here’s ours, which as you’ll see challenges yours while knowing it in a way that shows that *we get it*’. But this ‘seeming to say’ in turn appeared to show that the serene position of slow, high judgment that I’d imagined *The Wire* dealt out from the high shine of its symbolic capital had been corrupted by listmania. If they’d chosen James Ferraro as #1, a hipster choice from the hippest label of the year, Hippos in Tanks, that had also been the darling of *FACT* magazine, this means they were just as enthralled by the list-making BS as we were. More: they were probably reading our lists as closely as we were reading theirs and everyone else’s. Maybe they didn’t have to pirate as many of their albums, but they were still enmired in the pile, enslaved to the tyranny of opinion, and ensnared by the contradictions of promo and the content monster.

At this point I interject from 2017 for a second time. The above observations, all developed from the 2013 note, make a number of strong assumptions about the process of conceiving, noting, compiling and aggregating EoY lists, assumptions based from my own listmaking practices and what I

knew from other websites and blogs I'd worked for or was in contact with. It was only brought to my attention around 2015 that these assumptions are totally false. In fact, *The Wire's* #1 choice for 2011 was apparently so contentious in *The Wire's* office that Tony Herrington, *The Wire's* publisher, issued a strange kind of mea culpa on Far Side Virtual's #1 placement, one that attacked the #1 pick by giving it a kind of dud review after the fact. Having done so, Herrington then described in detail the mechanics of the voting process (never disclosed before, nor since) and evaluated the whole affair critically as the regrettable social effect of 'consensual realities', or 'suffering through suffrage'.³⁵ I'll return to the surely essential set of points raised by this in the conclusion, while noting that I'm leaving the 2013 passages more or less on their thought trajectory. Although my assumptions were totally wrong, my intuition about the way the pick 'sticks out' was correct, and the broader contours of my analysis are valid enough to warrant your critical reading even in light of their false premises, especially because Herrington's own analysis misses the agency of systems at play in the emergent reality. It's for this last reason that I'm suggesting we might use Luhmann to help us understand systems-relevant aspects of the process,³⁶ their relation to our own subjective assumptions and evaluations, in order to pinpoint the fundamental point phrased as this question: *who or what has agency capable of providing evaluations or generating values online?* Did Ferraro or *Far Side Virtual's* release generate the #1 value, did *The Wire*, did its contributors, or did the internet? The answer is not simple, but it can tell us a lot about what we're involved in online. But first, back to my 2013 account of *The Wire's* #1 pick for 2011.

By around 2010–11, after a few years of sustained favourable critical attention, James Ferraro's status as an important contemporary artist stabilised.³⁷ As I hear it, *Far Side Virtual* is an audible commentary on the detritus of consumer culture,³⁸ referencing nineties dotcom signifiers

and their re-presentation in Web 2.0 formats and platforms. His work is more akin to audible contemporary art than music. His albums are made from the digital cast-offs of a disintegrating America — much of the time, it actually sounds like the disintegration of America. In 2017, this just seems like a sensible if gritty realism, but several years ago, under Obama, and during the US's shaky re-emergence from 2008, Ferraro's style was a carefully calibrated combination of commentary on the contemporary, nod/wink nostalgia, and gestural speculative fiction. To sum it up in a sentence, *Far Side Virtual* is an album of deliberately shitty digital muzak, with knowing nods to dotcom and iCulture: in hindsight, we can add, released one year after the iPad, the year *Game of Thrones* first aired — but three before it became the most pirated file in history thus far — two years before we learned about presidential assassination by drone and the NSA's surveillance of everyone by default, and six years before Facebook hit two billion monthly users. These points of reference not only locate the work; I mention them because they're also cryptically lodged within its world.

Artistically, *Far Side Virtual* may and may not be a triumph. I'm still wrestling with this, and like so much of Ferraro's output and commentary, this all folds neatly back into his representation of his artistic intentions.³⁹ But what I am trying to pinpoint via the paradoxical fact that *The Wire*'s #1 pick might be well chosen *and* unlistenable, or garbage, and that therefore nothing is more attuned and economic than picking a recorded work that comments — in a critique-resistant way — to an entire capitalist music culture that it also involves itself in, negates, and receives accolades for, with the same compact gestural set. *Far Side Virtual* could be a perfectly accurate and very neatly deployed commentary on the state of recorded electronic music's remediation in 2011 and (as such) a really shitty record to listen to, precisely by performing, ironising and negating this whole state of affairs by bringing it into its bounded totality as a

titled work.⁴⁰ This could all be true, and leave listeners with a lot to think about. But for *The Wire* to put *this* — to gesture with this gesture — as its #1, in 2011, in the midst of ‘all of the above’, what did that mean, what did it signify, what did it do, and how can we begin thinking about this as a social process?

My 2013 grapple with *Far Side Virtual* as
The Wire’s 2011 #1: Keynesian beauty contest,
seeking sanctification, fearing social death

One way in to thinking about this social process is through the Keynesian beauty contest, which Keynes originally intended as a way of describing price fluctuations in equity markets. In Keynes’s metaphor, readers of a hypothetical newspaper are invited to compete in a competition where the winner picks the ‘beauty’ who most competitors pick as the most beautiful. That is, competitors are invited to pick ‘those faces that he thinks likeliest to catch the fancy of the other competitors, all of whom are looking at the problem from the same point of view...’ As Keynes cashes out the metaphor, competitors can just make a first-order pick, their #1 pick, above all, in isolation. Or, they can make a second-order pick, and try to pick ‘the pick of the picks’. But his real genius is to observe how we reason beyond this, and, in so doing, Keynes recognises how all comparable endeavours quickly reach to and beyond a third degree of reasoning, where, as he puts it, ‘we devote our intelligences to anticipating what average opinion expects the average opinion to be.’⁴¹ This is a constitutively social process, enacted via a media platform that, as it circulates in a geographically limited space, creates a public sphere, a culture, nation. The view from Luhmann’s systems theory adds that competitors may regard themselves as individuals, but the game is a social practice embedded in the culture generated by the political economy of a certain kind of news media in circulation, and the ensuing competition is a social reality *sui generis* that can produce values that transcend any individual involved in their production, and social

facts that stubbornly resist the effort of any individual or group agents to deny or negate them.⁴² Hold on to this final observation, because it will become a crucial analytic key in the following section.

In newspaper beauty contests and finance market speculation, every participant enters a game logic that enjoins them to observe ‘the problem from the same point of view’.⁴³ This generates an observer-dependent field and nascent social reality, one which exists in and between the participants, positioning them as a set of observers sharing a world they then build together as they interact, though in ways that need specifying on a case by case basis. In a socially-constituted field such as this, distinction-producing evaluations can be made and traded, and ‘fortunes’ of social capital can be accumulated and, for the skilled and fortunate, transformed into symbolic capital. The field also offers the satisfying challenge of picking who everyone else will pick *and* the competitive reward of naming the chosen ‘beauty’ — or, in the case of the equity markets the metaphor seeks to explain, predicting *with greater accuracy than anyone else* where the price will walk before it ends up there, or betting successfully against where nearly everyone else wrongly ‘knew’ it would. As in the beauty contest, so in the market, this adds in the futurity inherent to prediction-based social economies, which ‘presses’ sociality toward a horizon that can only be stabilised by mutual observation of expectations, not knowledge: those involved play and ‘win’ by guessing more accurately than their peers *before* the result can be known, based on ‘reasoning through the reasoning through of others’ reasoning through others’. Who is better than their peers, in other words, at guessing objectively uncertain future outcomes, by devoting their ‘intelligences to anticipating what average opinion expects the average opinion to be’?

The Keynesian beauty contest offers a powerful metaphor that begins to understand the socio-political embeddedness of all markets, their reliance on a web of expectations

that proceeds in the absence of truth or knowledge, and the basic human appeal of speculative competitions — from jelly bean counting competitions through to horse racing and hedge funds. It's therefore especially instructive for those who missed systemic risk in 2008 and Trump's victory in 2016. All the same, returning to the above in 2017, I see that the metaphor is not fully applicable to EoY lists, for the following reasons.

As mentioned in my recollection of compiling them while working at street press, with EoY lists participants aren't supposed to be guessing 'the fastest' (simple), 'the prettiest' (fraught and complicated), or 'most commonly incorrectly priced' (truly complex). Listmakers are ostensibly trying to demonstrate passion, or they're supposed to be involved in something which is 'about' sincerely ranking the recordings they actually thought should be accorded the highest value for that year.⁴⁴ In this sense, then, the economy of list making was a way of showing respect, displaying, accumulating and *donating* social capital through the same displayed set, a set with a cultural legibility that only gathered at a specific point for a moment, and that wouldn't make good sense — or be able to distribute those values and distinctions — to any other group of people at any other conjuncture. To wit: as a release of that year, *Far Side Virtual* could only have been #1 in 2011; and it was only likely to have been the #1 pick in a definite and limited number of niche outlets who were paying attention. All the same, likewise as introduced, many people involved in the general cultural practice of listmaking are trying to display a list that is an accurate guess of what the 'top X' should rightly be regarded as by their field, and it's this 'level of play' that can be regarded as comparable to a Keynesian beauty contest. However, where cultural production such as music and sound are concerned, the regimes of value are fractional, multiple, and inter-active: we're not just dealing with 'the fastest racehorse', the 'most beautiful beauty queen that most people would pick', the best performing stock

(or the person most able to accurately predict its unpredictability). Rather, to repeat a little: the #1 work of that year (in that milieu). Getting to grips with all the factors shaping the picking of the #1 work requires specifying the following five key complications: the first three deal with general social conditions; the second two deal with how these general conditions are screened by particular outlets and their tics and postures.

Those involved in listmaking are reckoning with a multifactoral evaluation which has to screen social complexity using frames like aesthetics, mechanics, quality, artfulness, innovation, artist intention, critical reception and time-sensitive affects and effects. Secondly, listmakers are involved in nebulous judgments about the contemporary and the near future: how 'important' the work is in relation to its context, what it says about or does with socially available materials of the time in which it was produced, what this says — or how it relates to — the broader world it's a part of, and how 'the future', or posterity, should regard it, as it embeds itself into 'history'.⁴⁵ Bookmakers and stock pickers can study the form and seek insider knowledge, just as hedge fund managers can develop mathematical models to hedge one risk against another. But in the context of EoY listmaking, the future as a cultural totality is impossible to know *and* necessary to represent, *with distinction* — which brings us to the third complication emerging from general social conditions. From the perspective of online music remediation, circa 2011, 'all of the above' had to be dealt with as an aspect of routine work, year after year, but this undeniable routine was — and is — even harder to deal with in a time when the canons and their evaluative hierarchies are all totally busted, when you're working for a website that barely pays, or pays in kind with VIP access to artists and tastemakers and festivals, or doesn't pay, the list was needed yesterday, and you're already slammed with paid work and other life commitments. It's at this point, speculatively, that listmakers perform some

creative circularity by outsourcing a lot of the distinction making to the distinction makers and the distinctions they've made: the definite set of outlets with the reputation and cool to be relied upon to give an individual a constrained set of picks from which to draw out their own tops. This leads on to the two more points we need to add to this already very complicated picture, conditions screened by particular outlets and their tics and postures.

Any list appears in the context of a particular publication and its public (niche or broad), and this carries an implicit normativity about what counts as top *for those audiences*, who are always of a certain class and place and of course tend to be hyperspecific in terms of race and gender. Finally, list-makers also display their lists with their names attached in these milieus (where they're seeking sanctification), which means that they're also trying to pick a point of distinction that marks out their list — both their individual picks, and the putative totality of 'the list' as a set of picks — as the best, or notable, or exemplary in its ability to 'show knowing', to give a convincing demonstration of one's commanding interpretation of a field. Because, don't forget, lists themselves are discussed, evaluated, and ranked online.

These factors, put into play, go some way toward rendering intelligible the specific choice of *Far Side Virtual* as *The Wire*'s 2011 #1. Ferraro was:

- known to be worthy of close attention in these niche cultures (a point reinforced by *The Wire*'s piece on hypagogic pop in 2009);⁴⁶
- young enough to be novel and relatively unmined, yet so prolific (and often on limited-edition cassettes in the late 2000s) that it took dedication to get to grips with his oeuvre;⁴⁷
- associated with arguably that year's coolest label (in that niche!),⁴⁸ and placed approvingly on the pivot between 'hypagogic pop' (2009) and 'vapor wave' (2011);

- makes achingly knowing, culturally hypersensitive music which skewers the detritus of the very same political economy in which his works appear-to-be-judged (as described above); and
- is simultaneously beneath and beyond appreciation in ‘conventional’ terms, thus defying or resisting conventional critique of things like rhythm, melody, timbre, composition, production (as described above).⁴⁹

This final point speaks to how artists like Ferraro get traction in social complexity. *Far Side Virtual* is about how ‘a sound’ captures the atmosphere of a certain kind of capitalism and its detritus, which in turn is chosen, I’ve argued, because it offers Ferraro a posture that can comment in a knowing and distanced yet involved way about its own milieu — and still accumulate value and reputation for doing so. This critique wouldn’t have played well to *Rolling Stone* in 1985. But in an interregnum where critiquing artists became untenable, Ferraro offered his audiences the appeal of the artist as uncritiqueable critic, producing a work that was about mere opinion, the promo pile, and the comment box, but that sat just out of reach of the grubbing touch of its consumers’ complaints about it. The cover art even performs this, depicting a tablet interface you can’t touch as an interface, but that can be displayed by your interface, and having done so, critiques you and your rapt engagement with your interface. Perfect.

Symptomatically, ironically, or just perfectly (for Ferraro), *Far Side Virtual* epitomises a low risk high value pick for the publics invested in *The Wire*’s *EoY* lists. *Far Side Virtual*’s #1 place was less a bold and counterintuitive choice in light of the times and the evidence — like giving Obama the Nobel Peace Prize (2009) — than it displayed a precarious niche public’s fear of social death in the face of a deluge of unlistenable content, an indigestible pile of files that were impossible to know and judge by any concrete and durable measures.

Afterword: returning to my 2013 evaluation of 2011, with what I know in 2017

As mentioned earlier, my reasoning about the mechanics of *Far Side Virtual*'s choosing were predicated on assumptions that were manifestly false. Above all, they impute agency onto an entity called 'The Wire', on the assumption that it denotes a group of human individuals who sat around, disagreed with one another, went off and made their own lists, submitted them for comparison, talked about and tweaked the aggregated picture using good sense, then agreed on who was number one.

Herrington's clarifier is at pains to explain that this — wearily and worryingly — is not the case. No such agency exists; *The Wire* are a kind of spectator in their own list-making, gawking at the unfolding horror without any way of denying the result, and only capable of publishing a clarifying *mea culpa* — which I now return to — that explained and excused this after the fact without being able to alter or retract this. The piece opens by decrying *The Wire*'s lists as a 'a composite of multiple, often conflicting individual realities', a 'consensual reality projecting an image that doesn't exist'.⁵⁰ But Herrington also closes the piece by saying, disapprovingly yet excusably, that 'I have it on good authority that many alt.music operations out there, from high-profile independent retailers to print and online magazines, compile their end of year charts via a form of tyranny, imposing the corporate will on their respective electorates via repressive dictats and vote rigging (at least *The Wire* doesn't actually tell anyone what they can or can't vote for). But in light of all of the above, can you blame them?'

This is a very strange *mea culpa*: it condemns its chosen reality as somewhat unchosen, not quite one's own, and indeed deficient for lacking the reality that reality was before it was consensually produced.⁵¹ But it does so in the course of remaining committing to it with a tired shrug and sigh; yet it can't do so without having a bit of a swipe at its competitors

(presumably *Pitchfork* and *FACT*). To me, it says: ‘our listmaking process is the worst form of government, except for all the others; there is no alternative; once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more’. In all these ways, it is, as Herrington deeply describes it: a consensual reality and a suffrage to be suffered through, but upheld and pursued, in spite of everything.⁵²

By disclosing its mechanics, Herrington seeks to disavow the responsibility of *The Wire* office staff for its effects. Something like: ‘you might think we were stupid and wrong for picking *Far Side Virtual*, but this is only because you don’t know how crazy our system is — get a load of this’. In describing *The Wire*’s kooky collating mechanics and how they load picks with value they may not otherwise have (and perhaps should never have been given in any context), Herrington tells a story about how a system, having been introduced to bring order to the pile and produce defensible value from mere opinion, became especially controlling and repellent for those who you’d expect had the greatest ability to stop it, but in a way that transcended the ability of any of them, either as individuals or as a group, to stop it. Here’s where we are confronted by the system reality of media,⁵³ which produces an undeniable social reality capable of stabilising an unstable reality, but that we always suspect to be manipulated and manipulative, yet cannot prove, and will not abandon.⁵⁴ At heart, Herrington’s *mea culpa* seeks to claim that the quirks of ‘what is a mutated form of first-past-the-post’ system that *caused* the pick. *Far Side Virtual* wasn’t *The Wire*’s #1 for 2011 because of the work’s undeniable greatness, nor because the heartfelt passions of *The Wire*’s 60 contributors necessitated this. But nor is it #1 because senior individual office staff like Herrington used their symbolic capital to coerce their subjective greatest out of the cosmoses of the pile. It wasn’t us; the spreadsheet did it. And it’ll do it again.

What makes this claim quite bizarre though is that Herrington runs through a few different permutations of the list, by tweaking the variables. The results are not that different. Thus, Herrington's *mea culpa* not only relies on disavowing individual agency and human responsibility (which, in spite of everything, still exists), it also quite falsely pretends that *Far Side Virtual* wasn't a hyped pick of the broader milieu at that precise moment, which it was. As a way of saying 'we know it seems crazy that such an outlier, that so many people hated, came in at number one, but this is because of how our pick mechanics work', Herrington's excusing explainer relies on disavowing the entirety of the cultural context in which it marinates, on which it feeds.

Let's conclude by returning to the five complicating factors I elaborated and re-list them — with all due irony, but to clarify and distill — now that we can add in the correct assumptions about how the list was made, and how Herrington understood his and *The Wire*'s role and agency in mediating all this. Listmakers are dealing with:

1. **social complexity:** listmakers are reckoning with evaluations far more complicated than 'fastest' or 'prettiest', though not as complex as 'most commonly incorrectly priced';
2. **time as zeitgeist:** listmakers are involved in nebulous judgments of the contemporary and near future, objectively unknowable and inherently unpredictable, yet enigmatically more reliably intuited by some than others (which is what cool is);⁵⁵
3. **a political economy and the way it compels attention:** listmakers are making lists to a deadline as part of a competitive and precarious work practice with few resources, where everything's suddenly mediated by online files and platforms, in a time in which canons and older evaluative hierarchies and authorities are faded, broken, or gone;

4. **niche cultures, with their styles, pets and ties:** lists are produced for hyperspecific venues with definite audiences who have known tastes and styles, which are agentic and interact with points 1–3, and, finally;
5. **the individual and her reputation, ‘live and at stake’:** listmakers attach their names to their lists, which means that at the level of the anxious human subject, working in a field of competitive individuals, ‘all of the above’ is aligned toward accumulating social capital and reputation, which can only be gained by being risked.

Herrington’s *mea culpa* is highly attuned to social complexity, and his critical points give voice to the madness — regrettable, yet necessary — of using a flawed technique to handle it. But what’s missing here is how we hand over control to that which we have in fact built together, contribute to and benefit from, instantiated in a cultural practice we could amend or cease at any moment, but that we don’t, because we are seeking to build, or in this case defend, our reputation, in the niche culture co-produced by the precarious political economies of the interregnum. This brings us to the role of disavowal.

As I’ve argued in this piece, these ‘niche’ factors attending the milieu are *never* mere context: environs provide socially available materials, but they’re also agentic, and draw their fuel from the way ‘all of culture’ is filtered by the niche through the constraints of a particular time, political economy, and media culture, as it circulates in communication. But as agentic as they are — thus as much as they constrain what counts as a good and proper selection for a list — they’re also the aspects most disavowed in the course of denying that the list is or could be anything but one’s own top picks, or just ‘actually the best ten albums of the year (in my opinion)’, or a pernicious social fact produced by the way spreadsheets order complexity by spitting out a value based on how we’ve programmed them. They’re disavowed because

without them, our *illusio* crumbles, and we realise we're merely consumers, pirates and parasites, trying to eke out an office from the detritus of internet culture.

This gives the final word to zeitgeist, here, and thus to cool. *The Wire* blew its cool in the 2011 list: telling us about their idiosyncratic methods after the fact doesn't diminish the extent to which *The Wire* were embarrassed enough by their own 'best in show' to have to publish an excusing explainer. It doesn't make me want to listen to *Far Side Virtual*, but with a poetic irony it would be impossible to make up, it offers a perfect demonstration the deep and timely insight of Ferraro's work.

- 1 In my circles we used the above abbreviation, but more recently AoTY has become a very common abbreviation, which now finds unity and practice at: <http://www.albumoftheyear.org/>
- 2 Responsibilities which included: the preparation of a book proposal and manuscript and the preparation of a paper on surveillant uses of smartphones (both now out); the early parts of a DECRA application (undertaken primarily to build skills); the organisation of collaborative workshops in the Research Unit; and the collation and editing of a working papers series from Unit members.
- 3 See: Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Harvard University Press, 1984.
- 4 The accumulation of social and cultural capital were foreground questions of Professor Alison Young, then formulating a book on the political economy of street art based on fieldwork done just as street art moved from 'the street', into gallery spaces, and onto Royal Doulton china sets. This built on her earlier works in this field, and abuts research enquiring into the relations between street art and gentrification that emerged from that time. See: Young, Alison, *Street Art, Public City: Law, Crime, and the Urban Imagination*, Routledge, 2014; and on the latter see also: Dovey, Kim, Wollan, Simon and Woodcock, Ian, 'Placing Graffiti: Creating and Contesting Character in Inner-city Melbourne', *Journal of Urban Design*, 17:1, 2012, 21–41, and McAuliffe, Cameron, 'Graffiti or Street Art? Negotiating the Moral Geographies of the Creative City', *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 34:2, 2012, 198–206.
- 5 Luhmann, Niklas, *Theory of Society, Volume 1*, Stanford, 2012, 53.
- 6 Chambers, Peter, 'The Embrace of Border Security: Maritime Jurisdiction, National Sovereignty, and the Geopolitics of Operation Sovereign Borders', *Geopolitics*, 20:2, 2015, 404–437.

- 7 Borch, Christian, *Niklas Luhmann*, Routledge, 2011; Luhmann, Niklas, 'The Paradox of Observing Systems', *Cultural Critique*, 31, 1995, 37–55; Luhmann, Niklas, 'Globalization or World society: How to conceive of modern society', *International Review of Sociology*, 7:1, 1997, 67–79; Luhmann, Niklas, 'What is Communication?', *Communication Theory*, 2:3, 1992, 251–259; and Pottage, Alain, 'Power as an art of contingency: Luhmann, Deleuze, Foucault', *Economy and Society* 27:1, 1997, 1–27.
- 8 Luhmann, Niklas, *Theory of Society*, Volume 1, Stanford, 2012, 190.
- 9 I wrote for Melbourne's *Inpress* (2006–9), *Resident Advisor* (2006–8), *Beats By the Pound* (2007–8), and co-ran a blog, *mnml ssgs* (2007–12), which became somewhat influential in its tiny corner of the internet: <http://mnmlssg.blogspot.com.au/>
- 10 The following are highly provincial events that were cultural markers to 'us' (rich Westerners in our global enclaves) at that time; these are landmarks from a peculiar post-GFC cultural moment in wealthy corners of the Web 2.0 Anglosphere. The Global War on Terror was winding down (Osama bin Laden was assassinated on 2 May 2011), but people were suddenly concerned by drones, though not yet ISIS. The Global Financial Crisis had morphed into quantitative easing, and Greece had been destroyed by authority, but Golden Dawn had not yet made it into parliament. The Japanese tsunami and nuclear meltdowns in Fukushima had just happened (3 March 2011), as had the Occupy protests (2011); the Arab Spring was unfolding, but it was still possible for Western commentators to claim it as a 'Twitter revolution', (without seeing the Syrian Civil War or Islamic State). However shakily after the revelation of targeted assassination via the disposition matrix and Snowden's mass surveillance disclosures (both in 2013), this was

- still an era of Obama-style ‘hope and change’, when Jon Stewart was still sufficient satire and people believed in the West Wing, or, at least, enjoyed watching it without irony. It’s quite different to a Western world whose landmarks became clear with the critical reception of Piketty (2013–) and the recognition by broader publics of the structurally imposed nature of inequality, the commensurate political need for fairness (2014) and the coercive nature of the ‘efficient market hypothesis’, the parliamentary presence of Golden Dawn (2015), the European Migrant Crisis (2015), Brexit and Trump (2017), the widely visible rise of the alt right and xenophobic nationalism (2017–18), and increasingly coherent socialist responses from Sanders and Corbyn (2018).
- 11 Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Zone, 1995; Debord, Guy, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Verso, 2010; Self, Will, ‘Guy Debord’s The Society of the Spectacle’, *The Guardian*, 15 November 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/nov/14/guy-debord-society-spectacle-will-self>; and Wark, McKenzie, *The Spectacle of Disintegration: Situationist Passages out of the Twentieth Century*, Verso, 2013.
 - 12 Bratton, Benjamin H., ‘iPhone City’, *Architectural Design*, 79:4, July–August 2009, 90–97; Galloway, Alexander R., *The Interface Effect*, Polity, 2012; and Grusin, Richard, *Premediation: Affect and Mediality After 9/11*, Palgrave, 2010.
 - 13 Dean, Jodi, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*, Polity, 2013.
 - 14 Among many others, see: Papastergiadis, Nikos, *Cosmopolitanism and Culture*, Polity, 2012; McQuire, Scott, *The Media City: Media, Architecture, and Urban Space*, Sage, 2008.
 - 15 The Melbourne-rooted (print only, then as now) street press was rockist in orientation, which made things

tough: my electronic-based lists didn't make sense without the inclusion of 12" EPs, tracks and remixes, but their proforma asked for albums and songs.

- 16 My thinking around the importance of zeitgeist for critical theory has been shaped by reflecting on the following, from Adorno: 'I believe that, if you want to understand what I am saying and what I think of as the real task of these lectures, you should not start thinking about such independent embodiments of the spirit separate from human beings, but quite simply about what is meant by the spirit of the age. What I mean by this is that if you travel around Franconia or elsewhere in southern Germany or Austria you will be able to see how in the seventeenth century all the surviving Romanesque and Gothic churches and chapels were suddenly given a baroque facelift.... Or think for a moment of the way in which every little cafe suddenly becomes ashamed of its cosy atmosphere and tries to update itself by installing neon lighting so as to give itself a more functional look.... It is as if they were all under the same spell...'. Adorno, Theodor, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–1965*, Polity, 2006, 26.
- 17 Interestingly, in 2006 I wagered that vinyl, unlike CD, would survive. See: Chambers, Peter, 'Sounding off: Vinyl will survive', *Resident Advisor*, 23 August 2006, <https://www.residentadvisor.net/features/757>.
- 18 Knausgaard's descriptions of his time as an amateur teenage record reviewer captures something exquisite of an earlier meeting of adolescence, ambition, passion and vanity: Knausgaard, Karl Ove, *My Struggle: Book 4*, Farrar Straus Giroux, 2015, 150–193.
- 19 See Adorno, op. cit.
- 20 Some of which even contained audible interjections 'you are listening to a promo', which, of course, made pirating undesirable at the cost of making immersive listening and enjoyment impossible.

- 21 Jodi Dean's explanation of the democratic 'promise' of access and publicity captures this earlier internet dynamic well. Dean, Jodi, 'Communicative Capitalism: The Ideological Matrix', *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes Democracy*, Cornell, 2003, 1–15.
- 22 Emblematically, see: Shirky, Clay, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, Penguin, 2009. And in a kind of critical rejoinder, see: Lanier, Jaron, *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto*, Vintage, 2011.
- 23 In my niche corner, the two most respected were — and are — Simon Reynolds and Philip Sherburne. See: Reynolds, Simon, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*, Faber and Faber, 2011.
- 24 This came into sharp focus for us by 2010: Chambers, Peter, 'Pomo Promo Giveaway Bonanza! Get one get more free! [house music is controllable desire you can have for free]', *mnml ssgs*, 26 May 2010. <http://mnmlssg.blogspot.com.au/2010/05/pomo-promo-giveaway-bonanza-get-one-get.html>.
- 25 The low-level corruption engendered by all this promo meant boosterism was pervasive, and because it was seen as normal practice by ambitious up-and-comers — with no alternative frame of reference — it was almost totally un-opposable. How can you recognise anything as problematic when your entire engagement with recorded music takes place in a way that, because 'pro promo', is constitutively anticritical, that is about gaining access to the privileged company of artists and their promoters, delimited by the VIP laminate, instantiated at summer festivals, and remediated in tagged images on social media platforms? When, in 2014, a reviewer friend of mine was invited by a senior online reviewer to 'come to the VIP tent so we can put pills in our asses' (as if this were the magic prize of the whole endeavour and the

- thing that separated the insiders from Joe Public on the other side of the laminate rope), he knew something had changed, changed utterly.
- 26 See: Dean, Jodi, 'Communicative Capitalism: The Ideological Matrix...'
 - 27 Dean, Jodi, 'Blog Settings', *Blog Theory*, Polity, 2010, 2–3.
 - 28 Chambers, Peter, 'Dysconnect, April 2009: Deterritorialising Piles [as files]', *mnml ssgs*, 12 May 2009, <http://mnmlssg.blogspot.com.au/2009/05/dysconnect-may-2009-deterritorialising.html>.
 - 29 The greatest/most decadent of these was the private tracker, OiNK's Pink Palace, a private BitTorrent tracker where membership was a coveted, limited invitation; in order to stay on it, you had to contribute significant amounts of data, which had to be uploaded in lossless and with full liner notes. Not only that, but you had to try to upload *rare* releases that added something considered to be of value. For these reasons, the cost of retaining access to this more or less complete discography of recorded music was the work it took to find, rip, scan and upload your rarest CDs, and you more or less had to have an old laptop dedicated to remaining online so people could torrent off you, to keep your ratio good — otherwise you'd get kicked off. OiNK's Pink Palace ran 2004–8.
 - 30 In the same way that radio DJs in the 60s and 70s cultivated connections with people working in the airline industry.
 - 31 MySpace was still big in 2006, but Facebook (launched 2004) really took off in 2007–8, and by 2013 had hit 1.23 billion users (by their measures). Apple launched the iPhone in 2007; by 2013, more than half of cellphone users had switched to smartphones. As of re-writing in 2017, the figure is around 75% in the US, and hit 84% in Australia in 2016. See: 'Mobile

- Consumer Survey 2016 The Australian Cut Hyper Connectivity: Clever Consumption', *Deloitte*, 2016, <http://landing.deloitte.com.au/rs/761-IBL-328/images/tmt-mobile-consumer-2016-final-report-101116.pdf>; and Sedghi, Ami, 'Facebook: 10 years of social networking, in numbers', *The Guardian*, 5 February 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2014/feb/04/facebook-in-numbers-statistics>.
- 32 Cunningham, Stuart, 'Popular Media as Public "Sphericules" for Diasporic Communities', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4:2, 2001, 131–47.
- 33 In 1998, we were earning about ten dollars an hour at casual jobs, and import CDs were often around 40 dollars — during a period when a coffee was two dollars and a beer was five dollars.
- 34 The full list is available here: <http://yearendlists.com/2011/12/wire-best-albums-of-2011/>
- 35 Herrington, Tony, 'Suffering through suffrage: Compiling The Wire's Rewind Charts', *The Wire*, 9 December 2011, https://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/thewire/20831/suffering-through-suffrage_compiling-the-wire_s-rewind-charts.
- 36 Interpolating Dean's thought, quoted above, the ability to think critically about systems is precisely what I wish to recover here, in order to show their work in stabilising value: 'Drowning in plurality, we lose the capacity to grasp anything like a system. React and forward, but don't by any means think'. Dean, Jodi, 'Blog Settings', *Blog Theory*, Polity, 2010, 2–3.
- 37 This coverage began with *The Wire*'s feature on hypnagogic pop, which included coverage of Ferraro in his duo, Skaters. See: Keenan, David, 'How James Ferraro, Spencer Clark, Poca haunted, Emeralds, et al are floating beyond Noise to a dream pop hallucination of the 1980s', *The Wire*, issue 306, August 2009. Less than eight months later, *FACT Magazine* released this

album review/editorial by Kiran Sande (also owner of label Blackest Ever Black), which referenced *The Wire*'s hypnagogic pop feature: Sande, Kiran, 'James Ferraro: Last American Hero', 23 March 2010, <http://www.factmag.com/2010/03/23/james-ferraro-last-american-hero/>. As for *Far Side Virtual* itself, *The Quietus* followed *FACT* in referencing back toward hypnagogic pop, commented on the strangeness of the release as an object of positive critical attention (in the course of giving it some), and compared its intentions to one of the masterpieces of Detroit techno, *Lifestyles of the Laptop Cafe*, which is a meditation on loneliness and alienation: <http://thequietus.com/articles/07342-james-ferraro-far-side-virtual>. See also: <http://www.factmag.com/2011/11/22/10-best-labels-of-2011/3/>, and <http://www.albumoftheyear.org/artist/2006-james-ferraro/> (lots of info).

- 38 Ferraro's work is closer to sound art than music, for me. The distinction is important to me, because it gets us closer to a set of intentions and context organising the work from the artist's point of view. Also: music remains within a spectrum of listenability and immersion, with melodic, rhythmic, timbral and formal limits it continually approaches, breaks or breaks out of, yet returns to. These tend to be grounded in cultural traditions that educate, reference and play with community norms — and the sum total of recorded music its makers have heard and loved. Music should still be good *or interesting* to listen to or play, or it should be unbearable or astonishing because of the creative withdrawal of these norms and/or creative playing with these forms. What follows from this is not only canon formation, but also a set of socially agreed parameters by which 'we' might judge a work as successful, exemplary, etc. In contrast, sound art waves away a commitment to musical norms and forms in order to focus on critical communication about time,

space and the audible. To parse the distinction, however much they push into the 'difficult' territory where forms break down, Schoenberg and Cecil Taylor are still making music committed to their lineages; Eliane Radigue's *Transamorem – Transmortem* (*The Wire's* #3 2011 pick) is sound art. As a hunch, perhaps the further implication is that sound art sits within its hermeneutic circle, insofar as it expresses a commitment to the norms of sound art it's conversing with.

- 39 We can now add that these have not only been very consistent, but that they also have an increasing clarity of critical concern, here remediated through visual works focusing gluten intolerance and the fidget spinner. 'James Ferraro Talks Phases, Fads and Fidget Spinners', *Sleek Mag*, 8 August 2017, <http://www.sleek-mag.com/2017/08/03/james-ferraro-interview/>.
- 40 *Far Side Virtual* became associated with vaporwave, a subgenre of intentionally shallow electronic music that played with vapidness and nostalgia for eighties signifiers. As a performance-critique encapsulating the soulness-irony of this set, see: FrankJavcee, 'How to Make Vaporwave', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyt_87yCyNw.
- 41 Keynes, John Maynard, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965, 156.
- 42 Luhmann, Niklas, *Theory of Society*, Volume 1, Stanford, 2012, 57, 257–8.
- 43 Keynes, John Maynard., op. cit.
- 44 Although we professed no comparable influence, as street press hacks and bloggers we were imitating earlier practices of reviewer-critics for whom a #1 pick, like a Grammy, Mercury, Pulitzer, or Booker, would mean sales, recognition and opportunities for the artists, in recompense for their efforts, and as an indirect way of offering gratitude and respect.

- 45 Luhmann: '[w]here recursions refer to the past (to tried and tested, known meaning), they refer only to contingent operations whose results are presently available and not to substantiating origins. Where recursions refer to the future, they point to an infinite number of possibilities for observation, hence to the world as virtual reality; and we cannot know whether observational operations will ever feed this reality into systems (and into which ones). Meaning is accordingly a thoroughly historical form of operation and only its use bundles the contingent emergence and indeterminacy of future uses'. Luhmann, Niklas, *Theory of Society*, Volume 1, Stanford, 2012, 20.
- 46 Keenan, David, 'How James Ferraro, Spencer Clark, Poca haunted, Emeralds, et al are floating beyond Noise to a dream pop hallucination of the 1980s', *The Wire*, Issue 306, August 2009.
- 47 Sande, Kiran, 'James Ferraro: Last American Hero', *FACT Magazine*, 23 March 2010, <http://www.factmag.com/2010/03/23/james-ferraro-last-american-hero/>.
- 48 *FACT*: 'It's simple, really: Hippos in Tanks simply put out more good records than anyone else in 2011. Hype Williams and Autre Ne Veut cemented their status as two of the underground's most exciting acts with *One Nation* and *Body*, while Laurel Halo's *Hour Logic* took any remaining boundaries between alternative pop music, IDM, house and techno and completely dissolved them. d'Eon and Grimes's *Darkbloom* and Sleep Over's *Forever* were the weakest releases to emerge from the Hippos camp this year, which speaks volumes — both are intriguing records that promise much for the future. To cap off the year, they signed madcap hero James Ferraro, and coaxed out perhaps his most brilliant, demented yet immediate album to date in *Far Side Virtual*. Salute.' '10 Best Labels of 2011', *FACT Magazine*, 22 November 2011, <http://www.factmag.com/2011/11/22/10-best-labels-of-2011/3/>.

- 49 Ferraro explicitly eschews or rejects these. See: ‘James Ferraro Talks Phases, Fads and Fidget Spinners’, *Sleek Mag*, 8 August 2017, <http://www.sleek-mag.com/2017/08/03/james-ferraro-interview/>.
- 50 Herrington, Tony, ‘Suffering through suffrage: Compiling The Wire’s Rewind Charts’, *The Wire*, 9 December 2011, https://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/thewire/20831/suffering-through-suffrage_compiling-the-wire_s-rewind-charts.
- 51 Weirdly slotting in with Adam Curtis’s two recent treatments of technoculture and the contemporary, *All Watched Over By Machines of Loving Grace* (2011) and *Hypernormalisation* (2016).
- 52 See: Fisher, Mark, ‘Reflexive impotence, immobilization and liberal communism’, *Capitalist Realism: is there no alternative?*, Zero Books, 2009, 21–31.
- 53 Luhmann, Niklas, *The Reality of Mass Media*, Stanford University Press, 2000.
- 54 Try looking away from the Trump Show, or cancel your Facebook account, to see what I mean.
- 55 Liu, Alan, *Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information*, University of Chicago Press, 2004.

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About the author

Peter Chambers is senior lecturer, criminology and justice, at RMIT Melbourne. Peter does work on space and power, change and conflict that brings the insights of social theory to bear on empirical problems at the heart of the political present. Over the next five years, he is co-authoring a book examining the deeper roots of conflict between modes of transport, ways of life, and the future of global city Melbourne. His other collaborations look at securitisation, criminalisation and vulnerability, as well as ideologies and conspiracy theories of the far right. He teaches Global Crime, Border Security, and Critical Criminology.

Acknowledgements

The Research Unit in Public Cultures is based in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. It focuses on transformations in public culture produced by new intersections of knowledge, media, space and mobility, within Australia and internationally.

It brings together scholars from four faculties at the University of Melbourne who are collaborating on projects with a wide range of industry partners. The Research Unit's agenda is to develop projects that address four fundamental trajectories:

- how cultural knowledge is shaped by and against the global forces which articulate Australia's place in the world;
- how developments in digital technologies alter the protocols for inclusion and exclusions within public cultures;
- how new practices of mobility impact on the constitution of public knowledge and cultures; and
- how public space is created, managed and accessed, specifically within networked urban environments.

The Research Unit plays a role in facilitating scholarship, enhancing research opportunities and enabling collaborations between creative industries, cultural institutions, research institutions, academic research centres and public communities. It houses a number of collaborative research projects across various disciplines, such as: education for a multicultural society; digital networks and participatory public space; art as a platform for global culture; transnational cinema practices; aesthetic cosmopolitanism; mediated public spaces; and cultural citizenship.

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Return to the Far Side, Virtual

Peter Chambers

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This piece distills Chambers's earlier experience as a blogger and music critic to bear on questions of distinction-making and the accumulation of forms of capital. It seeks to explain how values emerge from a culture that produces itself in its own web of self-reference, in this instance through the imbroglio around the evaluation of James Ferraro's *Far Side Virtual* in Album of the Year lists in 2013.

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