God Shaped Hole - Slides Script
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SLIDE 1 - TITLE SLIDE

This paper will focus on three painting series that highlight religiosity in digital culture and social media communication. To give context to this presentation, this paper has come out of a wider curatorial and research project of the same title, *God Shaped Hole*, which is borrowed from a piece of work by the artist Ralph Darbyshire. Our intention is for this project to culminate in a group exhibition, bringing together artists whose work explores manifestations of the quasi-religious in the contemporary everyday, presenting artworks whose subjects intersect with, or function like, religious objects, such as votives, veils, shrouds, hymns, prayers, fetishes, and icons. The project's title underscores the uniting theme of the exhibition which explores practices and objects that perhaps fill a space left by religion in secular life. In this paper we will focus particularly on how these painting series elucidate intersections between religious practice and digital cultures through themes of presence and participation.

Paintings by Caspar White, Dawn Woolley and myself draw on traditional religious artforms to explore our actions and interactions on and with social media. The paintings function like and make connections between digital culture and votives in the work of Woolley, or icons in the work of White and myself. The connection between religious practices and social media cultures has already been observed by the likes of Byung-Chul Han, who remarks that smartphones are, '*devotional objects of the digital*', and, '*Likes* are the digital *Amen*. When we click *Like*, we are bowing down to the order of domination. The smartphone is […] a mobile confessional' (*Psychopolitics*, 2017, p. 12). In a manner akin to the 'opulent accumulation' of votive offerings in shrines, we confess, pray, and give thanks on social media, accounting our lives through the number of steps we have walked, where we've been, the food we've eaten, the things we've Liked, and the setbacks that we've experienced. Recording ourselves online we create an immaterial mass, frequently referred to as an online presence which is experienced as both self

and as other. The on- and off-line are no longer distinct, the digital's, 'fluid media space' has seeped into reality; transitioning into other forms of matter. As Hito Steyerl observes, 'Far from being opposites across an unbridgeable chasm, image and world are in many cases just versions of each other. They are not equivalents however, but deficient, excessive, and uneven in relation to each other. And the gap between them gives way to speculation and intense anxiety'. White, Woolley and myself each work in these spaces of speculation and anxiety between the digital and physical.

SLIDE 2 - TREAT YOURSELF (every little helps portion control)

The smartphones which provide a ground for my 'Treat Yourself' painting series would be colloquially viewed as 'dead objects'. Broken and defunct, no longer usable as smart, networked devices; they cannot function as a physical threshold to an immaterial online space, and as dead objects recall the anxiety alluded to by Steyerl through their failure to bridge the space between the on- and off-line. Absurdly, the paintings cover the screen, further distancing the object from its original functionality, and feature imagery found through online searches for #health, #fitness and #wellness hashtags, yielding content expressing often contradictory ideas about indulgence and self-care, referencing online wellness content which is itself recognised as a source of anxiety for many users.

SLIDE 3 - TREAT YOURSELF (transform yourself)

The paintings recall votives, hinting at how online interactions and self-tracking practices evoke confession, prayer, and gratitude. Through the painting process, the thing that made this object lively - its connection to an immaterial space which exceeds the physical boundaries of the object - is reinscribed as a static image. The humour of the work lies in the tension between the object as transmitter and receptor. Now the object is static, opaque, isolated, and decontextualised; disconnected from the changeable and luminescent stream of content being generated constantly by unseen online communities.

By representing imagery appropriated from online spaces on objects which no longer have the capacity to connect to those spaces, these paintings draw out a subject which is no longer accessible through the device turned ground. In doing so, they illustrate a common thread linking smartphones, painting, digital imagery, and additionally, religious icons, in how they operate through absence. In Jean-Luc Nancy's *Portrait,* Nancy describes how the portrait gives presence to absence. He says, 'The portrait does not recall a distant present; rather, it brings absence closer, so close that its call is silent.'[1] As Nancy sets out, the portrait's promise of the imminence of, 'a presence equal to its absence',[2] is at the heart of Western monotheism and thereby the icon can be likened to the portrait through how both types of works of art can be characterised through 'nonappearance'.[3] We would like to extend Nancy's comparison between the icon and the portrait, and argue that the social media profile on a smartphone can too be characterised by this, 'nonappearance' - a tension created by, 'the simultaneous birth and death of the subject'.[4]

Discussing social media Marwick describes presenting the self online as a 'neoliberal technology of subjectivity': to be business-like and authentic, the individual cannot act in way that is 'unbusinesslike, illegal, or controversial in any way'.[i] She continues: 'If the Web 2.0 self is one that must be both entirely transparent and entirely business-oriented, the self cannot logically exist'.[ii] Personal traits that do not correspond to those idealised by capitalism are eliminated and the full subjectivity of the individual is erased. Marwick's designation of the individual's erasure of subjectivity is reminiscent of Nancy's explanation of the subject encountering themselves as other in the portrait as a result of the absence of presence.

SLIDE 4 - Portal paintings

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[1] Nancy, J-L. (2018) *Portrait,* Fordham University Press. p.34
[2] *ibid.*
[3] *Ibid.* p,35
[4] *ibid.*

The paintings from my installation titled hashtag #*Portal* explore this connection between religious icons, the portrait and social media profiles on smartphones. Created using imitation gold leaf gilded onto semi-transparent polythene, the paintings synthesize a range of decorative motifs, forms and gestures appropriated from the compositions of religious icons and Instagram selfie-filters. However, it is what the painting's exclude which is significant - as the subject of the reference image is omitted, leaving a central void in the composition around which the gilded forms orbit. The nonappearance that Nancy describes is made literal in #*Portal*'s paintings - the subject is literally absence and absent. By combining forms from these two genres parallels are drawn between their communication of an absent presence or the presence of absence, be it heavenly or human.

SLIDE 5 - Study of a Neapolitan Creche Figure & TikToker and a lost painting

White's Diptychs make more literal comparisons between religious imagery and portraits derived from social media content. White creates pairs of portraits referencing classical religious paintings and TikTok videos with visual similarities. In each diptych the expressions and gesticulations of the central figures are reminiscent of each other, despite their seemingly disconnected original contexts. Just as Steyerl describes the relationship between the digital and the physical as uneven, in White's diptychs the digital and religious images are not made equivalent but are clearly related. White's paintings of Tik Tok images echo both their digital reference images and the religious imagery with which they are paired.

The repetition of gesture found in both visual media point to a universality of body language made legible by its art historical continuity. Finding the gesture in art history provides precedents for the tropes of gestures and images common to social media and derided as a sign of inauthenticity and lack of creativity in social media content creators. Resistance to recognition of the significance of these repeated gestures being performed and reproduced on platforms like Tik Tok and

Instagram may lie in snobbery towards forms of co-production of aesthetic tropes which sit beyond the control of the academie.

SLIDE 6 - Crying on TikTok

It is not White's intention to mock or critique these contemporary icons through this juxtaposition, but to find beatific beauty in unexpected, everyday places. The series give equal standing to the religious imagery and social media content, with White's sheer painting style and melancholic colour palette evoking a pervasive sense of loss that perhaps pertains to the absence through temporal and spatial distance, and the fast changing nature of digital content.

SLIDE 7 - Casper White 4 Crying Faces (two angels from Neapolitan Creche with Bunnyt33th and phatcookerkat from TikTok)

White allows for the layering of his painting process to be conspicuous in the final work. The layers in his paintings evoke the accumulation of imagery online, as well as replicating the language of digital image creation through applications such as photoshop and VSCO, and filtering technologies which enable users easily to superimpose elements of media and create complex composite images and videos.

SLIDE 8 - Zara's tracing paper sketches

Likewise, a literal process of layering occurred in the creation of #Portal's paintings. Using ink on tracing paper, elements appropriated from selfie-filters and religious icons were isolated from their reference images and then re-mixed to create new compositions sans the original subject. Whilst I could have used photoshop to extract and create these compositions, I instead chose to hand render the appropriated elements. In photoshop the process would have been one of erasure of a subject in order to isolate the surrounding forms, whereas the process of hand drawing the selected forms was one of drawing out and illumination. The question becomes, what is being

illuminated when the subject is absent and the transparency of the works' ground creates a vacuum?

SLIDE 9 - People with Portal

The nonappearance of the subject and transparent ground in my paintings invites participation. The paintings formed part of a larger installation for the art festival LINZ FMR 2021: Art in digital contexts and public spaces in Linz, Austria. Located at a busy intersection between pavements, bus routes, cycle paths, and roads, passersby would wander through the frames of the installation and wrap themselves up in the paintings. Draping them over each other they would take photos of themselves and each other as they interacted with the installation, using the same mobile devices and applications to record and share these interactions as the work's themselves refer to. Derived from images which have established protocols for participation, the work itself also functioned as an image and thing which people could participate with. As Steyerl says, 'To participate in the image as thing means to participate in its potential agency—an agency that is not necessarily beneficial, as it can be used for every imaginable purpose. It is vigorous and sometimes even viral. And it will never be full and glorious, as images are bruised and damaged, just as everything else within history.[5]' #Portal extends the thingness of the images to which it owes its forms, through its exaggerations it opens up opportunities for participation with images both on- and off-line. Online participation with images is facilitated by social media platforms' mechanisms for image editing, sharing, reproduction and other forms of engagement; allowing images to be reappropriated and reproduced endlessly and subjectively.

SLIDE 10 - Portal on Social Media

The searchability of images through hashtags and account tagging on social media platforms allowed access to some of the interactions which took place with #Portal over the course of the festival. Hashtags are an important aspect of social media posts, as they have multiple functions:

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[5] https://www.e-flux.com/journal/15/61298/a-thing-like-you-and-me/

they build communities of like-minded social media users; they enable posts relating to a particular topic to be grouped and archived; they can anchor the meaning of a photograph and serve a political function (Olszanokski, 2015).

SLIDE 11 - Treat yourself (New Immortal)

However, hashtags can also perpetuate gender stereotypes. For example, unhealthy body ideals such as #ThighGap are popularized and perpetuated because the hashtags function as so-called 'branded nicknames' for those ideals and spread virally (Drenten & Gurrieri 2017). Viral hashtags tend to be simple and believable, they co-opt existing online communities and generate controversy (Drenten & Gurrieri 2017). The ideals of #fitspiration and #wellness cultures on social media platforms, such as #futureproofyourself, also function like branded nicknames that link with existing health, fitness, and beauty related groups online.

Patterns of behaviour and interaction on social media platforms are reminiscent of religious call and response; whereby there are expected patterns of exchange between participants which are imbued with significance. For example, hashtags such as 'likeforlifeback' often are used to sparingly spell out the user's values through direction to others on how to behave, whilst also serving to affirm allegiances with virtual communities of devotees bound by these shared values through incantation like repetition of use.[6] #likeforlikealways is not a phrase that you would use out loud or in conversation; the pulling together of the words, bound by their hashtag, gives the phrase the quality of an incantation. Thereby, #likeforlikealways might be considered as a movement within a ritual as well as evidence of a ritual occurring; as it indicates and dictates a set of expected actions, specific to the virtual space in which it is used, which have meaning beyond their literal enactment. The repeated use of the phrase (at the time of writing there are over 12 million Instagram posts using the hashtagged phrase), further implicates the hashtag into

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[6] Zara Worth, 'Shared Meals: Instagram as a space for virtual feasting and rites of incorporation', *FEAST Journal,* 2018, Available at: http://feastjournal.co.uk/article/shared-meals-instagram-as-a-space-for-virtual-feasting-and-rites-of-incorporation/#note-34

a system where selfies, photos of shoes and food are more than just repeated behaviours. Such posts and their accompanying phrases are part of new social rituals of which #likeforlikealways is one of many unuttered incantations. These rituals serve to on one hand perpetuate the cycles of appreciation bent on gaining social and cultural capital, but more importantly, they are rituals of incorporation: whereby individuals can align themselves and hope to be accepted into Instagram's many subcultural, virtual communities.

The profiles of Instagram influencers might be regarded as functioning like sermons for ways of living. As a synonym of 'disciple', Instagram's designation of users as 'followers', coincidentally draws parallels between digital micro-cultures and religious movements or cults. Followers adopt and share particular practices and ideologies, such as online wellness culture, then replicate its aesthetics and language in their own posts. Like disciples or missionaries, Instagram users who have converted to "wellness" practices become the new proselytizers. These micro-cultures spread in a chain reaction as their ideologies and aesthetics are introduced to the personal networks of each user that adopts and replicates its practices. Again, this repetitive process of reproduction, replication and reappropriation of images in online cultures is a form of participation with images as described by Steyerl.

CONCLUSION

In all of the works discussed in this paper, social media as a subject is elevated by the painting process. Although as a result of this process these images have lost their connectivity, they have gained a new sense of weight and permanence which they lacked when they were still transient glowing images within a never ending stream of content creation. In the painting process itself, translation from digital to physical in some instances resulted in opaque and dense paintings which resisted the idea of the screen as a window to online space, and prevented the participation that the smartphone demands. Whereas in the work of White and myself, the style of painting and

the choice of materials evoke the luminosity of the screen and the sense of an immaterial presence given to absent subjects which smartphones manifest.

As physical objects, these paintings recall Steyerl's observation that image and world are not, 'opposites across an unbridgeable chasm'; rather these paintings are the shrapnel of former images from both the on- and off-line world, and they themselves will have further on- and off-line lives.

SLIDE 12 - Treat Yourself Insta Account

Each of the artists discussed in this paper frequently return their images to the spaces from which they have borrowed by uploading photographs of their work to social media profiles. This is not the only way that these images can escape back to the online spaces from which they originate. With 8 in 10 adults in the UK owning a smartphone, nearly anyone can join in with the participation of these images. Onlookers and participants with the works can create and share subsequent images of the paintings, circulating them using account tags and hashtags; participating in the images and subjecting them to the possibility of accumulating ever more of the glitches and bruises along the way that Steyerl tells us to expect of images which circulate in today's fluid media space.

The paintings in 'Treat Yourself' are decontextualised again, when the photographs of the painted phones are cropped to remove the edges of the mobile phones. They are reduced to 2-d images and placed back on instagram, masquerading as their reference images and reinscribing in the paintings the hashtag connectivity that the original posts possessed. On the Instagram page they appear as absurd, bruised copies: heavy and lifeless painted versions of bright, positive, aspirational images. The contrast is distinct between the lightness of the reference images and their hashtag messages.

The circulation of images between off-line and on-line in all the works discussed in this paper recalls Steyerl's discussion of circulationism. Steyerl says: 'What the Soviet avant-garde of the twentieth century called productivism—the claim that art should enter production and the factory—could now be replaced by circulationism. Circulationism is not about the art of making an image, but of postproducing, launching, and accelerating it. It is about the public relations of images across social networks, about advertisement and alienation, and about being as suavely vacuous as possible.'

By variously resisting and recalling the layering of physical and digital spaces, these works speak to the ways in which icons, portraits and social media profiles on smartphones give presence to absence through the nonappearance of a subject who we experience as imminent. Which begs the question of whether these digital cultures to which the artworks discussed in this paper respond, have come to occupy a void left by religion in secular life; a space which they easily fill since they already echo the forms and promises made by devotional objects and practices, and respectively offer transcendence and transcend their materiality.