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Material Antagonisms; Melancholia, Undeadliness and Performance.

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Abstract

Christine Ross argues that the subject within liberal democracy is expected to conform to prevailing identity norms “personified by the model of the entrepreneur.”ⁱ Ross claims that contemporary medicine effectively understands depression as the subject’s inability to ‘perform’ this normalisation of economic productivity as part of her social identity.

Melancholia was previously recognised as a “subversive force”ⁱⁱ within the psyche that was able to refuse the hegemony of the status quo. However, this term has been replaced by the contemporary condition of depression which is understood as the subject's failure to assimilate the normative identifications determined by late Capitalism.

The zombie rejects these configurations of identity; it refuses to be laid to rest within ordered categorisations of subjectivity. Instead, through its internalisation and inhabitation of death, the zombie can be understood as a melancholic body that resides within the “symbolic collapse”ⁱⁱⁱ of the Real. It is precisely the zombie’s evacuated materiality – its status as a mindless corpse – that positions it as a subversive presence outside the constraints of human identity. Undeadliness becomes a haptic texture that transforms the subject’s body into a site of abject and transgressive materiality.

I propose that the zombie might encourage the contemporary practitioner to reclaim the materiality of melancholia in order to trouble the ‘exclusionary systems of identification’ enforced by contemporaneity. Instead of being framed as depressive failure, the practitioner's melancholia might post-critically collapse the identity-based protocols of a live situation with a performance of zombie-like affect. The practitioner would harness melancholia as an embodied and haptic objectivity beyond the constraints of subjective identity. This melancholic performative practice might then be recognised as a glitchy material antagonism to the economic identity norms perpetrated by the dominant cultural hegemony. I claim that my paper would itself *perform*, rather than simply describe, this post-critical melancholic practice.

Keywords: Zombie, Melancholia, Haptic, Materiality, Performance.

Material Antagonisms; Melancholia, Undeadliness and Performance.

This paper initially consults clinical medical vocabulary to set up a conceptual difference between melancholia and depression. I then explore how the condition of contemporaneity fixes the identity of the artist as either 'independent entrepreneur' or '*depressive* failure'. I claim that both of these normalised and hegemonically determined identities deny the possibility of the artist operating in opposition to the status quo. I then give a detailed reading of the haptic quality of zombie films. This enables me to claim that undeadliness resurrects the notion of an oppositional melancholia that sidesteps the restrictive identity norms authored by contemporary culture. Crucially melancholia is reconstituted not as a subjective state but as a performative materiality that collapses the symbolic protocols of the dominant status quo.

From Melancholia to Depression

In her book *The Aesthetics of Disengagement* Christine Ross explores how the term melancholia has been superseded and replaced by the clinical notion of depression. She claims that the melancholic refuses to consent to the absence of, and her separation from, that which she has lost – a refusal that disavows the reality principle with a hopeless yet libidinal attachment to death. Melancholia becomes an internal conflict in which the psyche refuses to accept and assimilate the inevitable mutability of entropic existence. However painful this conflict is for the melancholic, it attempts to keep *alive* that which has been lost to death – that which has been deemed unobtainable by the hegemonic status quo. As such melancholia acquires an oppositional criticality.

Ross then describes contemporaneity as a cultural/political climate in which the very notion of melancholic opposition is rendered obsolete, and this collapse of psychoanalysis as a “subversive force”^{iv} heralds the shift from melancholia to depression. The status of melancholia as “a potential form of critique of social rules”^v is subsumed by the notion of depression as a failure to integrate a process of identity normalisation according to values of economic independence and productivity. Dekoven describes these overarching and socially determined identity categories as:

“norms of independence based on generalised individual initiative (personified by the model of the entrepreneur), self-sufficiency, and pluralism of values (exemplified by the dictum “It’s my choice”).”^{vi}

So whilst the melancholic might have wilfully *refused* this normative homogeneity, depression is cast as the *failure* to assimilate these values. The potential of the melancholic psyche to operate as an oppositional force *outside* the status quo is neutered, becoming instead a depressive inability to assimilate the consensual values of economic self-determination. The dissenting antagonism of melancholia is normalised as depression – as a disempowered identity contained *within* the hegemonic ubiquity of contemporaneity.

Undead Modernism

One of the key procedures associated with the emergence of the postmodern is the erosion and erasure of oppositional cultural spaces that might resist the operations of the dominant status quo. The resulting homogeneity – typical of late Capitalism – collapses radical opposition from the *outside* by assimilating dissent *within* its own operations. Mark Fisher claims that the ‘success’ of the current status quo stems from its ability to present its own highly ideological systems and processes as the inevitable mechanisms of a ubiquitous reality to which no alternative exists.^{vii} As such the Modernist aspiration for an autonomous, critical and oppositional avant-garde is eradicated by the homogenous operations of contemporaneity.

I propose that this condition of contemporaneity creates in turn a practitioner who yearns to inhabit the alternative and counter-cultural position that has been rendered obsolete by the machinations of

contemporaneity. This practitioner refuses to assimilate the normative values of economic productivity, but within the prevailing cultural lexicon there is no *critical space* for her refusal to manifest oppositionally. She suffers under the burden of the schism between her intentions as an artist and the lack of opportunity for this criticality to have any oxygen within the stifling homogeneity of the contemporary climate. Her refusal to consent to a commercially viable identity norm can only be understood by late Capitalism as depressive – as a suffering caused by her failure to integrate the figure of the entrepreneur within her role as a practitioner.

We can now equate melancholia's capitulation to depression with modernism's acquiescence to the prevailing ubiquity of postmodern homogeneity. The oppositional yet superseded qualities of melancholia become synonymous with the obsolete critical aspirations of modernism.

The figure of the zombie in George Romero's films is a body that confounds the categories of human existence. Instead of being *either* alive *or* dead, the zombie is *neither* alive *nor* dead. If the fictitious conceit of undeadliness is collided with the understanding of melancholia sketched out above, we might speculatively say that the liminal status of the zombie would afford the melancholic an opportunity to be reunited with the death that she craves, without having to succumb to total annihilation. The melancholic would find in undeadliness that from which she was barred in life – namely, a union with death.

The fiction of undeadliness, as a fantastical inhabitation of death that transgresses the hegemony of life, mobilises the oppositional qualities of melancholia that have been snuffed out by contemporaneity. The transgressive liminality of undeadliness can be understood as a melancholic introjection of a lost modernist strategy that has been deemed outmoded and obsolete. The zombie thus resurrects melancholia as an anachronistic critical discourse that has returned to haunt the contemporary system of classification that decommissioned it. I do not claim that the fiction of undeadliness actually resurrects modernity, but I *do* propose that the zombie evokes an anachronistic and haunting spectre of this discourse – an *undead* modernism – that might critically examine the contemporary condition's ubiquitous tactic of assimilating dissent and collapsing opposition by means of cooption and normalisation.

But of course, undeadliness is but a fiction. It is no more than a fantasy of melancholic criticality that is in no way helpful for the contemporary practitioner. She remains stuck between the stifling identity norms of either entrepreneurship or depressive failure. The oppositional space opened up by the zombie's violation of the life/death dichotomy is a purely theoretical space only that can only facilitate dissent within its own fictitious conceit.

But might the zombie yet inspire the practitioner to operate outside these contemporary identity norms in more *real* terms? Could the operations of undeadliness prompt a tangible and pragmatic cultural practice of some kind? To answer these questions I am now going to investigate undeadliness and the mechanisms of zombie films from an initially psychoanalytical perspective.

The Undead Thing

Numerous texts within psychoanalysis claim that biological death is a separate event to symbolic death. A person may die physically, but this death is not automatically fixed within the Symbolic; it continues to press upon the living as a haunting and unprocessed affect. The dead must therefore be subjected to a second demise in which they are reified as that which has definitively gone. The registering of this second death within the Symbolic allows the process of mourning to proceed.

The second death typically *makes* sense – it is a strategy that generates meaning around death; the zombie on the other hand makes no sense whatsoever – it refuses its second symbolic death through its outrageous and undeadly perambulations. The zombie collapses the mechanisms of meaning that frame death and keep it at a distance.

Julia Kristeva claims that the melancholic subject yearns to be reunited with her "Thing"^{viii} – an archaic sense of self that eludes representation and dwells in the Real beyond the parameters of symbolic life. The Thing is the part of the subject that holds on to a sensation of supreme wholeness and connectivity

that precedes the arrival of language. Kristeva claims that this yearning to re-establish links with an archaic and lost sense of self plunges the melancholic into a “battle with symbolic collapse.”^{ix}

Kristeva’s melancholic refuses the compensation offered by meaning and symbolic consistency. She chooses instead to fixate not on the substitute for her loss – language – but on the initial loss itself. She is drawn to the Real death of suicide precisely to escape the stultifying ossification of the Symbolic that prevents her from reuniting with her Thing.

Within undead fiction we can understand the subject’s encounter with the zombie as the moment at which the melancholic becomes one with her own Thing. We might say that within the conceit of undeadliness, the zombie that bites her is not *her* Thing, though it figures a more general Thingness. However the zombie that *she turns into*, presuming that she is not devoured completely, is *her* particular Thing – *herself* without language. Whilst Kristeva’s melancholic perishes in the void of meaning beyond language, the zombie melancholic, as a nonsensical body that is neither alive nor dead, proliferates there – in the vertiginous territories of the Real.

The Haptics of Undeadliness

In zombie fiction, the corpse is animated and active; it is a lump of inert matter with a weird and headless drive – a body with purpose but without personhood – that refuses to be contained by the symbolic armature of language. It is precisely the zombie’s embodied and objectified Thingness – its anomalous and nonsensical mobilisation of the corpse – that makes it so horrifically Real.

So the challenge posed to the Symbolic by the zombie is engendered specifically by its animation of material death. The unfathomable void of the Real breaks out on the surface of the undead body as a transgressive *texture* – a corrupting plane of glitchy flatness amidst symbolic space – that collapses the normative distance of signification with a deathly closeness.

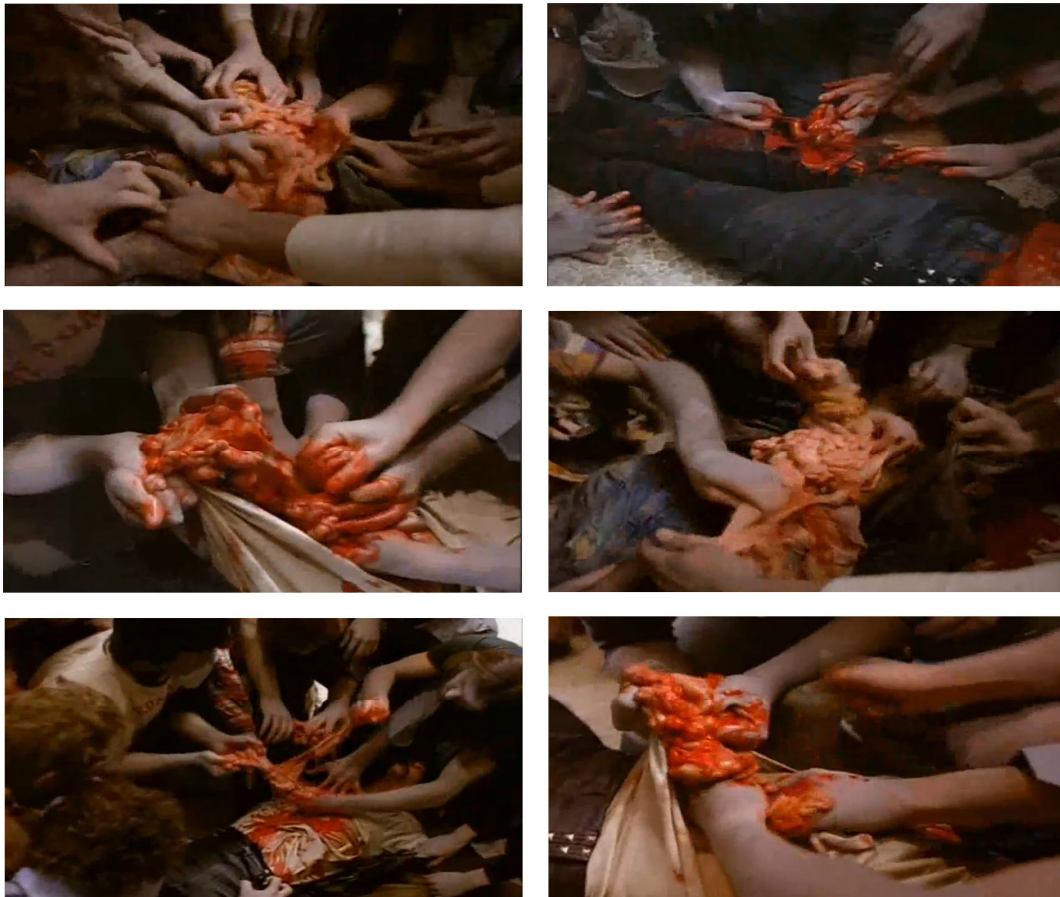
The zombie corrupts the *striated* space of stabilised symbolic functionality and plunges the subject into a viscerally haptic encounter with the *smooth* space of undeadliness whereby meaning gives way to pure materiality.^x The walking corpse demands an abject proximity, instigating a vile embodiment of the subject until she is *no more than* a body – until her subjectivity collapses altogether onto the surface of undead Thingness.

Only the subject who is not entirely devoured – who is plunged into smooth space by the zombie bite but then escapes back into the striated space of symbolic meaning until the fatal contagion takes hold – is able to arrive at a state of undeadliness. She has become a corpse, yet she is not completely inert and retains *the look* of the subject she once was. There is a tension here between the opposing registers of the smooth body and the striated body – i.e. the body as material Thingness, and the body as recognisable and categorised subjectivity. The zombie still looks like the living person that it once was, even though it retains none of her subjective identity. It is instead a weird mixture of material Thingness and symbolic familiarity – the Real with a residual whiff of evacuated meaning still hanging around it. Undeadliness is not a single point along the spectrum of smooth and striated space, it is simultaneously smooth *and* striated; two separate points folded in on one another. The symbolic function is totally decommissioned in that this body can no longer sign towards the subject, and yet the hollowed out shell of that same subject – the structural surface of signification – still remains on a visual and striated level. The crucial point to remember at this point is that the zombie’s melancholia is not an oppositional or transgressive subjectivity, it is an abject *undoing* of subjectivity altogether. I will return to this point in my final section.

The Analogue Zombie vs. The Digital Zombie

So that was a brief account of what the zombie does to subjectivity *within* a fictitious conceit. But the allure of Romero’s early films owes a lot to his ability to create for the spectator riotous and frenzied set pieces – gory tableau of artificial excess – that privilege visceral thrill over narrative cohesion. In these moments Romero does not try evoke a hermetically sealed fictitious conceit in which a drama can unfold; rather he displays the materiality of an explicitly artificial diegesis.

In one particular feeding frenzy from *Dawn of the Dead*, we see a close up of zombies' toying with a pile of freshly exposed human innards. However, the zombies do not shovel the flesh immediately into their mouths. They rummage through the fake entrails and prod the miscellaneous viscera. These are only fleeting shots, but Romero is proudly asking us to enjoy the gory set piece as a self-contained phenomenon in its own right. The probing hands that we see cease to be those of a ravenous undead mob; they become instead the hands of Romero's extras who have obviously been asked to show off the oozi-ness of the props as much as possible. These brief moments become a spectacle of material surfaces that are temporarily divorced from their representational function within the narrative. Romero is not bothered here with maintaining the illusion of a self-contained fictitious world; he wants us to revel in the playful artifice of his invention.



In *Day of the Dead* a pack of zombies decapitates a screaming soldier. They carry out this procedure with a serene gracefulness and lightness of touch that is fascinatingly incongruous with the act itself. One particular zombie pulls the severed head away from the body in a very deliberate manner, then slowly backs away as if in awed reverence to the special effects. The other zombies fervently pat and push at the soldier's abdomen without exhibiting any real urge to plunder the newly exposed flesh. They add texture to the visceral scene and frame the gory manoeuvre; they become a stage-managed and static feature rather than a hungry hoard of zombies within a narrative trajectory. Again this is a momentary and highly choreographed set piece that revels in, and invites us to enjoy, its own artifice.

This playful subversion of filmic protocols might be understood as an eruption of thingness – a moment of haptic materiality – staged not between the zombie and the human *within* the diegesis but between the zombie and the spectator. We witness a glitch in the hegemonic language of the cinematic Symbolic – a moment of nonsense that complicates diegetic meaning with a material texture of artificial and gory excess. As spectators we are seduced by the *mechanics* of the moving image as opposed to the *meaning* of the moving image. The notion of a normalising cinematic Symbolic that

demands representative consistency is undone by Romero's haptic texture of artificiality that refuses to coalesce to the celluloid illusion of fictitious integrity and cohesion.

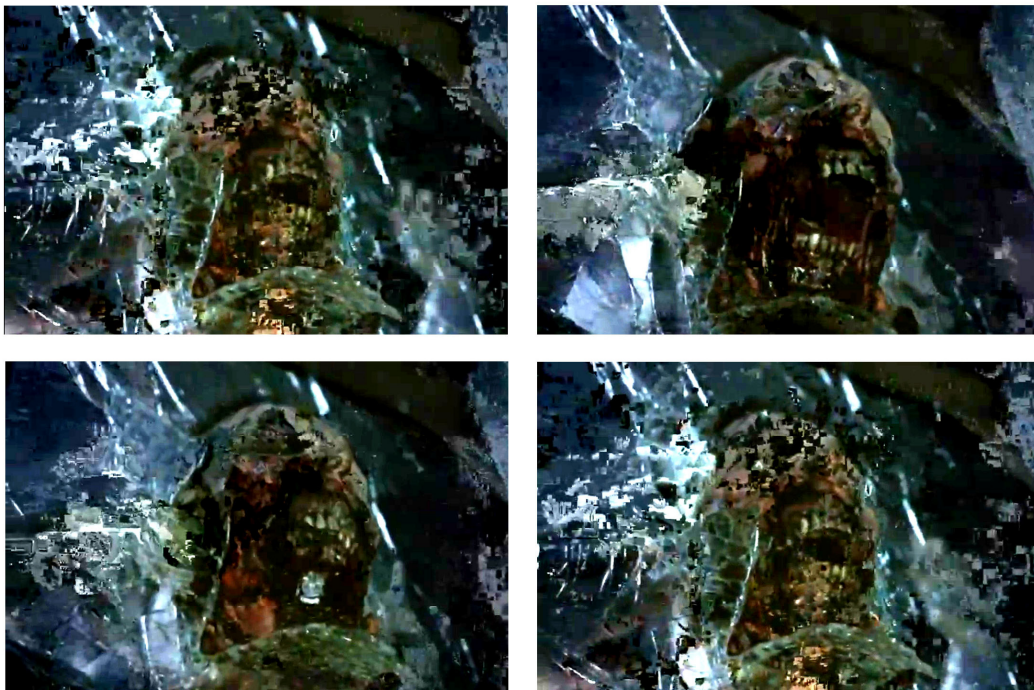
Steven Shaviro claims that these moments in Romero's oeuvre undo the process of figuration. The zombie – in these instances of affective excess – does not stand for anything other than itself. It ruptures its own diegetic continuum by making direct and unmitigated overtures to the viewer's visual pleasure. Undeadliness bleeds beyond the constraints of the horror genre that contains it, becoming, for a moment at least, a subversive, grotesque and slapstick comedy instead.



In contrast to this analogue rendition of undeadliness, contemporary zombie fiction now uses a lot of digital imagery as its prevailing means of representation. In series 2 episode 9 of *The Walking Dead* we see a car crash victim lying unconscious in her upturned vehicle as a zombie tries to gnaw its way through the cracked windscreen. As the undead corpse strives to push its head through the window, the skin on its face is increasingly lacerated by shards of broken glass until bloody patches of its skull starts to become visible beneath its shredded features. The effect is impressive, but at the same time the gore remains faithful to the diegesis; by looking so 'realistic' the effect heightens the integrity of the hermetically sealed narrative. But because of this, the cinematic Symbolic retains a prevailing consistency at the expense of the playful irreverence that Romero brings to the genre.

This *digital* attempt to masterfully represent the zombie as a symbolically stable figure destroys the affective materiality of Romero's *analogue* zombie. And this is symptomatic of a larger stagnation within the genre. Generic zombie fiction now reproduces a range of over saturated tropes that belong to a highly commodified and ubiquitous brand. Further more, the protagonists within contemporary zombie fiction are now readily accepting of undeadness as the condition of their apocalypse. So the zombie no longer makes nonsense; it has lost its thingy haptic closeness and become part of the normative language of cinema.

This sense of assimilation is symptomatic of the condition of contemporaneity that I discussed earlier. However, when I was looking for the example of the car crash zombie on youtube I found a low-resolution clip in which the surface artefacts of the image – the glitchy and grainy pixels – interfere with our ability to read and decipher the content. The illusion of filmic space is flattened in places by abstract visual noise. The moving image, that, in the original footage, supports a hermetically sealed diegesis, now appears as a haptic surface. The flatness of the glitch collides a smooth and affective texture with the striated space of the cinematic Symbolic. This image effectively becomes more zombie-like than the zombie figure itself. It bears the trace of signification, but is emptied of its associated meanings. The image therefore appears to the spectator in the same way that the zombie initially appeared to its victims in Romero's early films; it evacuates the sign of its content, leaving a haptic material trace – a surface without symbolic substance.



Undead Melancholia as a Haptic Methodology

So both Romero's early zombie and this corrupted digital image create a textured flatness that infects the weave and the fabric of the cinematic Symbolic. They trouble the notion of diegesis without actually being exterior to it. This manoeuvre would appeal to the contemporary practitioner who yearns to make work, but refuses to consent absolutely to the operations of the ubiquitous homogeneity that she inevitably inhabits. I claim that the figure of the haptic zombie performs on the surface of the screen the very manoeuvre that the practitioner aspires to in her own practice. Undeadness offers an insight into how the practitioner might make work without consenting to the identity norms of either the entrepreneur or the depressive failure.

Haptic Undeadliness allows the practitioner to conceive of a material glitch – an *artefact* of melancholia – that flattens the illusion of normalisation specific to late capitalism. This proliferation of haptic melancholia would not be *outside* the structural mechanisms that support the ideological conceit of the prevailing symbolic reality; rather it would play across the surfaces of these mechanisms as an affective texture that infects the cultural diegesis with a dose of thingness.

But how might the practitioner actually trigger this haptic glitchiness in her own work? Mimicry will not suffice; she cannot simply *pretend* to be a zombie, because the image of undeadliness as a collapse of meaning has now been recouped and reinstated within the machinations of capitalist homogenisation. As I claimed earlier, the zombie no longer reads as a collapse of meaning precisely because it has become so ubiquitous within popular culture.

Instead the melancholic practitioner needs to understand undeadliness as a methodology that she can *replicate* in her own practice without literally copying it on a visual level. The zombie invites the practitioner to harness melancholia as a material interruption – a glitch of affective weirdness – that breaks the ubiquitous seamlessness of contemporaneity. This melancholic practice would not *resemble* undeadliness, but would operate *like* undeadliness in its efforts to flatten the ostensible realism of the ideological status quo.

Rather than asserting the interiority of her subjective experience, I propose that the practitioner might adopt haptic melancholia as a performative strategy. Her melancholia would still speak to a loss, but this loss would no longer manifest subjectively; it would reside instead on the haptic surface of her body that she has evacuated of its symbolic function. Her melancholia – as a material antagonism – would confound the *look* of cultural production that has coalesced to Capitalist homogeneity; her haptic performance would instead invite the spectator into a proximity of surfaces that do not yield to familiar categorisation.

Like the zombie, the melancholic practitioner would attempt to hollow out and evacuate dominant socio-political protocols in an effort to trigger a haptic texture within her immediate environment. Learnt from both Romero's early zombie and from YouTube's digital corruption of *The Walking Dead* – her melancholia would swamp the live occasion with a formal dose of excessive affect that does not *make* sense. This melancholic performance, as a haptic texture, might be apprehended by the spectator as a cringe-worthy, awkward, joyous, humorous or embarrassing moment; the practitioner would decide on the intervention that most effectively derails the hegemonic uniformity of the given situation.

Her melancholic performance, devised from watching zombie films, would eviscerate the normalised event, collapsing its prevailing protocols with a sudden texture of affective proximity and haptic unfamiliarity. This tactic would not amount to a cultural insurrection or an oppositional *détournement*. However, it might manifest as a wilful refusal to coalesce absolutely to the status quo, and remind us that the ubiquitous procedures that determine our socio-political identities are contingent negotiations rather than essential conditions. As such the practitioner's performative rejection of cultural entrepreneurship would manifest not as a depressive failing but as a (post)critical melancholic materiality that refuses identity norms, without claiming to be *outside* the system that authors then.

Biography

Simon is a PhD candidate undertaking practice-based research in the Art department at Goldsmiths, University of London. His research explores how the figure of the zombie within popular culture might politicise mental health issues, and his practice straddles visual art, music and performance. He has performed at art venues around the world including: Tate Britain, London; New Wight Biennial, Los Angeles; Museo de la Ciudad, Ecuador; Sonar Festival, Barcelona; Articule, Montreal; The Banff Centre, Canada. He is also a member of the Leeds 13 – the group of students who in 1998 alleged to have spent a public art grant on a boozy holiday in Malaga. He has published essays in *The Undead and Philosophy*, *Texte zur Kunst* and *Incognitum Hactenus*. He currently teaches Art Writing at the University of Kent.

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- ⁱ Christine Ross, *The Aesthetics of Disengagement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) p. xxiii
ⁱⁱ *Ibid* p. xxiv
ⁱⁱⁱ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun; Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) p. 24
^{iv} Christine Ross, *The Aesthetics of Disengagement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) p. xxiv
^v *Ibid* p. xxiv
^{vi} *Ibid* p. xxiii
^{vii} Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Ropley: 0 Books, 2009)
^{viii} Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun; Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) p. 13
^{ix} *Ibid* p. 24
^x Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2004) p. 474