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Sincere Depth: On the Sincere Character of Depthiness in Metamodernism.

It is the end of March. Days become longer and the cold is on its retreat. Although the signs are there, life is still very much in hiding. Trees are leafless and the flowers are still underground. Nevertheless, in a relatively short amount of time the world changes. The world becomes beautiful again and brings with it an unfounded feeling of happiness. Time brings change. People can change jobs, houses or relationships and opinions. However, there are shifts that lay beyond direct, personal, choice. They are unwritten rules, multi-layered and interwoven into society. Just as the unfounded feeling of happiness that returns in the summer, they are structures of feelings. These structures of feelings, a notion proposed by Raymond Williams, are not merely limited to emotions. They can be described as the relationship between oneself and the world, a *Weltbezug*. Some scholars notified a significant change in these feelings around the turn of the millennium. Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, scholars in cultural theory and philosophy, published a paper in 2010 entitled *Notes on Metamodernism*. The paper and their book from 2017, *Metamodernism: History, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism*, aims to provide a new lens in which contemporary culture can be perceived. Both scholars have registered new sensibilities in the arts and cultures around the world. They have perceived a naive longing for utopias, an oscillation between irony and

hope and the rise of a new form of sincerity and depth. Many of these ideas are a continuation of Fredric Jameson notions of the postmodern condition. In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson discusses the waning of effect and the depthlessness of postmodern art. Vermeulen applies the same terminology to describe the metamodern. He sees a return of depth or rather “depthiness” (Vermeulen Depthiness 8). Vermeulen’s depthiness can be described, in short, as the tendency to bend the facts to fit a program, to simulate, to be performative. This means that depth only exists in its enactment and that metamodern depth is always a “‘depthing’ - a making, actual or virtual” (4-11). In his conclusion in the essay *The New Depthiness* from 2015, Vermeulen states “that, just maybe, we are seeing the first stage in another history of another kind of deepening” (11). This thesis will elaborate on this premise. By analysing a significant event that signalled metamodernism, the new network logic, I will emphasise that the new depthiness is not so much an unconscious tendency or sincerity. I will argue that the artistic practice in the digital age is required to take on this new form of depth because of the rise of the notion of cultural entrepreneurship. The thesis will take an even stronger stance on depthiness then proposed by Vermeulen, that the push into depthiness is less innocent and more radical. The research question, therefore, will be: “How sincere is the new depthiness as proposed in metamodernism?” The first chapter will focus on a notion of depth as proposed by Jameson and Vermeulen. The second chapter will connect the question of justification in the digital age to the notion of sincerity. The last chapter will re-examine, through visual and discourse analysis, the artworks produced by the artist Jesse Littlewood whose work was previously submitted and reviewed by Luke Turner on the website *Notes on Metamodernism*.

These two methods will provide the necessary means to question Turner's written essay as well as Littlewood's visualisation of sincere depth. Littlewood's artworks and Turner's analysis will form a case study on which a new understanding of depthiness and its sincerity will be discussed. This research will provide a renewed theoretical perspective on depth in metamodernism and will create a more accurate understanding of a post-postmodern world and at the same time, aims to contribute to the construction of a common language for scholars and society at large.

1. The New Depthiness

Metamodernism is, in Vermeulen and van den Akker's understanding, fundamentally a structure of feelings. The term, introduced by Raymond Williams in 1961, describes a certain dominant tendency or sentiment in a given culture (Van den Akker et al. Metamodernism 6). The structure is not a singular, clearly defined arrangement but a form of social character, consisting of patterns of cultural values, behaviour and attitudes. Williams sees this pattern as a means to analyse how specific interests and activities are valued. It constitutes a mode of living or a "way of life" (Williams 30, 31). These patterns of interests are not explicit but are often carried out unintentionally and delicately. For Williams, the arts have the ability to, mostly unconsciously, embed these patterns and outlive their authors and, therefore, form a means in which we can reconstruct a once lived experience (6). With the new millennium, Vermeulen and van den Akker have seemed to recognise a shift in the structure of feelings. Departing from value patterns from the period often identified as postmodernism, metamodernism has established a new dominant cultural logic. Vermeulen and Van den Akker explore the new cultural sensibility on three axes: history, affect and depth. The three axes are not an arbitrary choice; they are the same

axes with which the American literary critic Fredric Jameson defined the postmodern cultural logic. Discussing metamodernism on the same three axes allows for a clearer image of metamodernism in its similarities and differences when compared to its postmodern predecessor (Van den Akker et al. *Metamodernism* 7, 18). This chapter, however, will concentrate largely on the axes of metamodern depth as perceived by Vermeulen.

In many ways Vermeulen's and van den Akker's metamodernism sprouts from ideas put forth by Fredric Jameson. Jameson's essay, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, became crucial to our understanding of the postmodern period today. Jameson proposes at least two relevant notions. First, Jameson introduces the notion of "flatness or depthlessness" (Jameson 18). Jameson places great significance on this concept, presenting it as possibly the most distinguished principal feature of postmodernism (18). However, in order to fully understand depthlessness, it is necessary to clarify what Jameson means when he introduces the notion of the "depth models" (20). Jameson states that modernity brought forth at least five fundamental hermeneutic tendencies and arranged them as separate forms of depth. For example, the idea of an essence and the notion of authenticity, followed by the Freudian concept of the unconscious and its repression mechanism but also the more recent notion of the signifier and the signified (20). The last model, the idea of an inside and outside, is accompanied by Jameson's example of Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream*. The painting, in Jameson's eyes, is the pinnacle of modernist expression and is a symbol of a time characterised by anxiety (19). At the centre of all five hermeneutic models lies the notion that truth and progress have the individual as their source. That one can only reach these meanings by endless internal reflection and by reaching deep into one's emotions or essence.

An example of this depth, apart from Jameson's analysis of Van Gogh's painting *Shoes*, is a form of expressionism resonating in the Dutch art group De Ploeg.

Located in the north of the Netherlands, some say that the group operated with no hard set aesthetic rules and that the group was only loosely bound together because of a shared passion for art. (De Wolf). However, when observing *De Rode Boerderij* by Jan Altink or *Danspaar* by Jan Wiegers they both share the same aesthetic values.

The raw materials of the paintings allow for an emotional recreation of a once lived context. Just as Van Gogh's *Shoes*, the artworks display a way to get back to the circumstances of the world with the ability to hint at something better (Walton 165).

These depth-full artworks can be seen as symptoms or a sign of a greater, vaster reality (Jameson 17).

Postmodern art, however, is characterized by a lack of depth. Andy Warhol's representation of a pair of shoes does not allow for the same hermeneutic quality. Jameson describes Warhol's shoes as "a random collection of dead objects" (18). Where paintings from Van Gogh and artworks from De Ploeg had the ability to criticise the world and its status, postmodern art had replaced it with commodity fetishism. Jameson regards this fetishisation as fundamental to the social formation of late capitalism. Postmodern art had lost its critical and political potential and replaced the depth models with new facades of depth such as intertextuality, the endless referencing to other artworks. In short, postmodern art had become an extension of capitalism and had lost the capacity to place itself outside the dominant social formation (Walton 165-6). This leads to a second important notion introduced by Jameson, namely "the waning of affect" (Jameson 18). The waning of affect describes the fading away of feelings and emotions in postmodern art and culture at large. The embodiments of expressions and feelings are sparse in postmodernity. Theories such

as post structuralism had made the hermeneutic ideas of essence invalid and had replaced them with the notion of appearance (Walton 167).

In his essay *The New Depthiness* from 2015, Vermeulen builds on and develops Jameson's notion of depthlessness to fit, in what he describes, the metamodern. Vermeulen observed that a new generation of artists started to hint at a form of depth once again. However, it is not the same modern, hermeneutic depth as described by Jameson. Vermeulen's "depthiness" (Vermeulen Depthiness 8) is identified by the performative revaluation of depth. Performative, a term Vermeulen borrows from Judith Butler as he states in his essay signifies that depth is *applied* rather than excavated or *given* instead of found (8). Depth then only exists in its enactment. Depthiness, therefore, combines Jameson's depthlessness "with the performative possibility of depth" (8). To illustrate his point, Vermeulen draws upon an example from Italian novelist Alessandro Baricco. Baricco lays out two personas, the diver and the surfer. The diver dives deep into the ocean in search of meaning, looking for encounters with specific fish or experiences with the vast void of nothingness. The diver has, so to speak, the deep hermeneutic "experiential register" (6). The postmodern surfer, in contrast, looks for meaning at the surface, riding the waves in different directions. The surfer lives the moment, moves for the sake of moving and always in anticipation of the next experience. Whenever the surfer is tempted to stand still he will fall over and sink (6). Vermeulen desires to add a third persona or experiential register to the analogy, the snorkeler. The snorkeler lays belly down in the water, obtaining his required air intake through a short tube surfacing just above the waterline. With his large clear swimming goggles, he looks down and perceives the depths beneath him. However, the snorkeler will never encounter it, he stays close to the waterline imagining and intuiting depth. Depth does theoretically

exist for the metamodern snorkeler but at the same time, it does not, since he cannot engage with it (8). “Van Gogh’s surfaces were marked with traces of a behind. The surface of Warhol covered these traces up. Contemporary surfaces [...] haven’t uncovered them, exactly, but instead simulate them” (9). It is important to repeat here that Vermeulen, as well as Jameson, explicitly state that not all artworks have lost depth or have applied a depthiness sensibility, it is a sensitivity that is more evident than others.

The new depthiness, as introduced by Vermeulen, is thus merely a simulation of the depth proposed by Jameson. However, if the arts once again desire depth, is it then possible to call its current performative form truly sincere? Why is depth only theoretically present for the metamodern artist and why does he not engage with it?

2. The Logic of Cultural Impact

The new depthiness is a product of several events that occurred in and around the 2000s. See, for example, the wave of terror attacks beginning with the assault on the American World Trade Centre, which rapidly escalated into the conflict in Iraq, as well as the rise of right-wing populism in the United States and Europe. At the same time, the multiple protests initiated by a more or less connected shared frustration for the political elite that maintained a neoliberal mindset even after the financial crisis of 2008 (Van den Akker et al. *Metamodernism* 15). However, Vermeulen does not mention how these events have led to a significant emphasis on the idea of cultural entrepreneurship, which has determined the sincere character of a return to depth in metamodernism.

In the 1970s the world became fully aware of the endless possibilities of the Internet. It paved the way to the infamous dot-com bubble, which started in 1999 and

popped approximately a year after. It symbolically functioned as a prelude to the global financial crisis that erupted almost a decade later. The two crises meant a reconfiguration of investments and consumer behaviour resulting in the network culture we see today (Van den Akker et al. *Metamodernism* 15). Exemplary here are the social media networks and their business models such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter but also more artistically focused venues such as Tumblr or Artsy. These platforms are all defined by their desire for reach and impact. It is impact that determines revenue, the more clicks, likes or views the higher their value. In contemporary culture, the spectacular or impactful has become a proxy for pecuniary value as Eleonora Belfiore, an associate professor of cultural policy pointed out in her essay *'Impact', 'value' and 'bad economics': Making sense of the problem of value in the arts and humanities*. She describes this phenomenon as a “cultish obsession with ‘the economy’” (Belfiore 106), which mainly flourishes on a distinct type of instrumental rationality. Belfiore directs her criticism of impact and value principally to the financing of the arts in western societies. However, her remarks do not solely apply to art funding’s, but also to the appreciation of culture as a whole.

To explain this, Belfiore refers to the concept of monoculture put forward by F.S. Michaels, which she introduced in her book *Monoculture: How One Story Is Changing Everything* from 2011. Michaels determines that ever since the twenty-first century, the neoliberal economic discourse and their values have shaped our feelings, thoughts and actions. They offer a single perspective on how society should behave. We can speak of a monoculture when this perspective is established in such a way that criticising it becomes nearly impossible (106). This mono approach to culture has brought with it the problematic question of justification, translating almost always in a question of impact. This idea is represented in contemporary art policies. For

example, the Dutch Mondriaan Fund is one of the biggest subsidisers of various Dutch cultural projects. The foundation has a special grant for recently graduated or beginning artists called “Young Talent work supplement” (Mondriaan Fonds). Before an applicant is eligible for the 19.000-euro grant, a commission will assess the artistic functioning of its candidate. The assessment is based on two extensive criteria. First, an applicant is expected to develop an artistic product that will transform into a meaningful contribution to the Dutch cultural field. The second and most significant criteria involve the artist’s cultural entrepreneurship. The candidate is expected to try and find an appropriate audience for his work and is actively searching for possibilities to maintain this audience. In addition, the artist must be capable of translating artistic activity into (artistic) recognition and needs to be able to tie his artistic practice to some form of economic return (Mondriaan Fonds). The Mondriaan Fund, in this case, not only commands a meaningful work of art from its artists but further demands that the artworks must also have meaning for as many people as possible. The fund is thus directing its destination to the public, transforming the artwork into a product that can be subjected to marketing-like techniques.

These techniques and methods can have a considerable influence on the sincere character of the artistic practice as Xavier Greffe, a professor of economics, indicates. He points to several studies to describe as to why an overemphasised economic approach to culture is so problematic. Greffe sees a fundamental difference in the economic and artistic logic. Where the former is governed by a pre-established code, the artistic logic is always in a state of flux. Greffe understands this artistic logic in a similar manner as Jameson’s hermeneutic approach; “The experimental artist bases himself on his earlier work [...]. He proceeds slowly, introducing marginal changes and does not hesitate to return frequently to the same theme by making small

adjustments as though he were groping his way forward” (Greffe 90). However, this approach is quickly doomed to failure when the economic emphasis becomes too significant. It will render the method too weak, as consumer acceptance will be low. In these scenarios, art will quickly fall back onto other options such as pure entertainment. The fact that a dynamic hermeneutic approach to art does not correspond with the “logic of economic capitalization” poses a significant dilemma according to Greffe (90). Greffe, however, makes a distinction between the hermeneutic approach and a more conceptual method. The latter is determining in forehand which message needs to be conveyed, even before any work is accomplished. In contrast, this approach does not depend on time as a factor in order to gain acceptance and will, therefore, fair better with a notion of cultural entrepreneurship.

Debates around how to responsibly fund the arts with public money and the friction between art and the markets are nothing new. However, the digital revolution, perceived by Vermeulen as a major component of metamodernism, has amplified the concept of impact through maximum engagement. Today, the network logic, particularly the Internet, defines an artist in terms of content and in terms of social and economic value. (Greffe 24, 26). This has brought forth an interesting dynamic; it tries to uphold an individual artistic standard and at the same time seeks to extend its engagement. Art in this form demands to be relatable for everybody, expanding its meaning instead of deepening it, resulting in a metamodern value system that has disassembled the hermeneutic artistic practice but is still demanding its properties. This is to say that, although the new network logic may not be perfectly suited for the hermeneutic approach, it is still deemed valuable.

This oscillation, as Vermeulen aptly describes, has generated an ability that causes metamodern, performative, depth to bend the facts to fit a program. An important question then appears; for whom does it perform? Is depth used to prolong the development of the artist or only to engage with its audience? In the former, it functions as a source whereas in the latter it is nothing more than an element. It then raises the concern if the new depthiness by Vermeulen can be perceived as a sincere tendency to truly go back to a modern, hermeneutic approach to art as described by Jameson. Hence, when approaching metamodernism, we should be careful to employ a concept such as sincerity, as it is challenging to distinguish if what is put before us is sincere or artificially imposed. Vermeulen expresses that the metamodern sensibilities contain a “(often guarded) hopefulness and (at times feigned) sincerity” (Van den Akker and Vermeulen *Metamodernism* 2010). Perhaps it is more reasonable to be suspicious of metamodern sincerity by default or disconnect the two entirely since depth has found a way of becoming controllable and most of all, useable.

In short, the rise of the new network logic amplified the idea of impact as a proxy for value. Through an entrepreneurial approach to the arts, ideas about impact have shaped the artistic practice to such an extent that their outcomes or products can be affected. The metamodern artist, therefore, is operating in a contradicting dynamic; does he serve himself or society at large? This oscillation has implications on the question if the new depth proposed in metamodernism can be called truly sincere. A closer look at an artwork that contributed to the concept of metamodernism can, therefore, shed more light upon this question.

3. Case study: Depth as applied by Jess Littlewood

The metamodern logic has thus resulted in an interesting oscillation between the creator and the receivers. This new understanding of sincere depth invites a re-reading of several digital photo-assembly's created by the artist Jess Littlewood. Luke Turner, an author and artist himself, has previously defined the works as a genuine utopian desire in his analysis from 2012. In his analysis, Turner never questioned the sincere character of depth in Littlewood's artworks, as a discourse analysis on his writing, points out. This case study aims to highlight how sincerity can be examined using visual and discourse analysis, while at the same time seeking to provide insight into how depth is practised and why its sincerity is questionable.

In and around 2012, the artist Jess Littlewood produced a number of digital photo collages. The most engaging artworks of this period are those depicting a dark and looming atmosphere. *Failure* (fig. 1), for example, portrays an abandoned landscape. The mountains covered in darkness almost disappear against the backdrop of the night sky, apparently dimly illuminated by some low-resolution stars. The lightning of the scene is strange and mysterious. It creates sharp silhouettes, emphasizing the different planes within the image. The mystic digital landscape evokes a surreal experience, it functions as an invitation to seek not only literal but also metaphorical meaning. It is in this atmosphere that the human-made structures present themselves. The geometric shapes were presumably once part of a larger whole, perhaps even in a place outside this image. Its components lie defeated and spread out over the beaches and in the hills, scattered and taken away by the wind. There is, however, yet another element in the picture, a triangle. Hovering in the sky is a triangle textured with a depiction of the aurora borealis. Another artwork by Littlewood, *Commune* (fig. 2), shares the same visual aesthetics. Once again are the

dark silhouettes of mountains copied and pasted against a darkened sky. The foreground includes several geometric buildings on a beach. Whether these structures are under construction or are being dismantled is challenging to ascertain, in any case, all efforts to establish something for humankind have failed, the site is completely abandoned. Hovering above the sea and the constructions is yet again a triangle. This time, however, the triangle displays a less monotone colour resulting in an extra appealing contrasting element (fig. 3).

The artist Luke Turner wrote about Littlewood's works on the webpage *Notes on Metamodernism*, a website dedicated to metamodernism founded in 2009. In his analysis, Turner describes that Littlewood's artworks perfectly "encapsulate the current atmosphere of hope and disquiet, of the desire for a better future amidst the decay of recent ideologies" (Turner). There is indeed evidence around a notion of decaying ideologies. Turner points out the references to Drop City, a community of hippy artists in Colorado, who saw their desire of communal living and free love lead to nowhere. Like a destroyed dream, carried away with the wind and smashed on the rocks. Turner also notices the colourful triangles, in which he seems to recognize the return of faith in an era in which truth and beauty were not separated, something achievable but still mystical. Herein lies the underlying essence of Littlewood's artworks for Turner. The digital pictures convey a shared preference for "clarity, unity and direction" (Turner).

However, Turner's analysis thus far is not as clear-cut as one might think. For instance, he does not mention which technique Littlewood has employed to produce his artworks. Above all, Littlewood's images are digital assemblies, an image composed of other smaller images, each representing its own reality from which the origin is lost. Littlewood does not hide this loss; he emphasizes it with the hard-cut

lines of the mountains and the structures, as well as with the deliberate, uncorrected lightning. It is what confuses the image; it makes what Turner calls “otherworldly and familiar, eerie yet alluring” (Turner). There is also no sense of unity reflected in the technique. Each part is forced into a position, resulting in a directed and composed whole. Since each separate photoshopped element represents another reality, the image invites a response that contrasts the concept of unity. For example, one could experience the digital image as a blending of elements that do not naturally belong together and should therefore not be merged into one image. Additionally, Turner points out in his analysis that the image is partly created by chance and serendipity since Littlewood uses Google Images as a source for his artwork (Turner). However, Turner seems to forget that every search on a search engine needs an entry in the search bar thereby already directing the outcome of the results. A term like *search* in and of itself might already suggest that one is actively and thoroughly looking for something. Furthermore, the nature of the assemblage brings up the question of manipulation. Littlewood could have transformed any image to fit his plan even if he did not find a fitting image by chance. This renders Turner’s notion of Littlewood’s “act of trawling through endless web images” as a “Sisyphean task [...], as one searches for the fulfilment of some unknown end” (Turner) by all means misleading. In fact, Littlewood searched the Internet with an intended purpose in mind.

Turner’s analysis of *Failure* and *Commune* so far reflects a rather postmodern attitude. The nature of the photo collage produces a mixture of various forms and contexts that resemble postmodern architecture in an aesthetic sense. See, for instance, Charles Moore's internationally known *Piazza d'Italia*. The square is constructed by blending multiple styles. By taking the best in history, Roman columns Greek facades and Italian triumphal gateways, Moore erected the square by only

using references to other styles but without developing his own. The references in Moore's square are accessible; the column is Roman or the facade is Greek. It is, however, impossible to trace the references in Littlewood images, the observer is unaware of their source and context. Littlewood makes this possible by lingering only in one genre and thus keeping all the photoshopped parts in the same aesthetic realm. He does not blend styles but instead, very gently, only mixes contexts. This approach is the opposite of what has been often displayed by other artists when using the collage as a technique. See for example Raoul Hausmann's *The Art Critic* from 1919–20 or *Meet the People* by Sir Eduardo Paolozzi from 1948, here the mixture of context *and* style is very characteristic. Littlewoods deviation emphasizes a question of doubt, are the images genuine or manufactured; is it real or perhaps just a dream? Furthermore, the destroyed buildings that were once constructed with capitalist or socialist ideologies reflect the destruction of meta-narratives. However, this is not the first time the notion of a building has been placed in a metamodern context. Rob Voerman, a Dutch installation artist, also incorporates the concept of the structure as a metaphor for ideology in his art. Vermeulen describes Voerman as an artist who builds new communities with recycled materials (Radboud University). Voerman elaborates on this premise by declaring in his artist's statement that declining democracies, dangerous capitalist systems and the vital ecological threat are the main sources of inspiration in his quest to build a different structure, a different society. Voerman is therefore not merely deconstructing; he is also reorganising. Major influences on Voerman's work are the ecologically motivated geodesic domes by Richard Buckminster Fuller (Voerman). His dome (fig. 4) also appears to be a source of inspiration for Littlewood as his structures are similar in style. Does this then imply that Littlewood too is attempting to build a better world, or may his pictures suggest

otherwise? Littlewood has placed his buildings strategically on the beach many times, a site considered to be a bad place to build a structure. The sand is too weak for its foundations, as the water will wash it away and thereby demolish the building. It is a metaphor that has been used before in the Bible, Matthew 7 reads; “And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it” (New International Version, Matt. 7. 26-27). And foolish man we are as Littlewood cleverly points out in the title of an image called *They Built on Sand* as a prelude to the display of the ruined domes. Littlewood seems to use this analogy to indicate that ideologies may seem so perfect, but they will crumble if their fundamentals are weak.

It is the hovering triangle, however, that draws Littlewood’s artworks to the notion of metamodernism. The apparent seriousness of the triangle adds a layer of depth for Turner. The triangle signifies a sense of belief in something better propelled by a certain optimism. The artworks do no longer dwell solely on the ruins of failed utopias but are looking over the horizon for something new. It is in this perspective that Turner turns to terms such as an “unknown end”, “direction” and “faith” (Turner). These phrases lead again to a religious intertextual link and once again fill the collages with spiritual discourse. The glowing triangle seems to resemble the star that guided the three wise man from the east to the place where Christ was born (Matt 2. 7-11). They too were on a journey with an unknown end, but by having faith in the guidance of the star, they found the man that would bring salvation. The triangle seems to fulfil that same purpose for Turner. It should act as a guide in which mankind could trust to find the perfect world in a time where society feels endlessly lost. However, Turner acknowledges that this is not just blind faith. The artworks, and

metamodernism as a whole, are well aware of the ruins on which their direction is based. As Turner himself puts it: “Whilst the northern lights above may not guide us to the promised shores, the trajectories of failed utopias retain the capacity to inspire, and to enrich our continued pursuit of unreachable horizons” (Turner).

Turner’s reading of Littlewood’s works is initially quite compelling. Nevertheless, his analysis strongly depends on the sincere character of depth as presented in the form of the geometric shape. It is the assumption that by pointing to some vaguely defined greater good, the artist himself has applied depth out of sincerity. This idea becomes apparent when examining depth in Littlewood’s photomontages from a different perspective. For Turner, the geometric triangle is a thoroughly integrated part of the artworks. He points out in his description that the geometric shape is “a beacon of light in the night sky, [...] gently illuminating the remote shores below” (Turner). However, it turns out that the triangle has no effect on the lightning in the pictures when studying the artworks carefully for a second time. If Littlewood were to pursue a fully integrated, realistic and immersive light source, which Turner seems to suggest, then we would not see the different levels of illumination in the photo-assembly’s various snippets. For example, the structures in *Failure* have a different luminosity than the rocks around it. It is also noticeable due to the lack of shadows under the structures and the rock from which the waterfall springs. The triangle is thus not an inherent component of the photo-collage but merely yet another element of its whole. Not a guiding star, but another ideology that awaits destruction.

Depth, therefore, is also just another element and is applied by Littlewood almost as a sticker that can be placed on any artwork at any time. In all artworks analysed in Turner’s essay, this suggestive element of depth reoccurs. This form of

depth is not confined by its shape however, in *The End of Now* (fig. 4) depth is depicted in the form of a black and white depiction of what seems to be the galaxy and is not placed upon but rather placed underneath, as a form of foundation. These characteristics demonstrate that, far and foremost, depth is not only applied but can also be strategically placed. This quality has made depth a means that can be demanded and situated at will at any time and is no more an uncontrollable source of the subconsciousness. It is this property that makes an idea of metamodern sincerity problematic. Indeed, real sincere depth still theoretically exists for the metamodern artist; however, it can also be used as a tool (Vermeulen Depthiness 8). A tool not only to serve the artist himself but also to answer to the demands of others. This perspective casts doubt on, for example, the sincere desire for a new utopia that Turner seems to recognise in Littlewood's artworks. By incorporating this trope, the images create the illusion of finally contributing something meaningful and essential to society. However, in this case, a reference to "an imagined place or state of things in which everything is perfect" (Oxford), could merely be a justification of the artwork's presence, an attempt to maximise public engagement by responding to the metamodern tendency of getting involved with something, of giving for something. (Van den Akker and Vermeulen, *Een Verlangen*).

Littlewood's application of depth is thus not essential for his own development but functions rather as a display for its audience, as a means of providing some added, simulated, meaning to his artwork. He seems to turn his images into a product with attached depth as a new taste because the consumers did not like the postmodern flavour any more. As such, depth in metamodernism functions as a sweetener in bitter black coffee and echoes an important question; who drinks the coffee? Is it the artist himself that consumes and processes his own works

of art, an idea that reflects the notion of Jameson's hermeneutic depth models, or is the public its ultimate destination? Vermeulen accurately describes this approach when analysing Aleksandra Domanović's artworks. He states: "She asks us not to look at her looking at the surface, or even at her back; she asks us to look with her" (Vermeulen Depthiness 10). The metamodern artist is no longer asking to investigate with him, but merely points in a general direction and is asking to look at it collectively.

4. Conclusion

With the emergence of a new structure of feelings, the sensibilities in the arts have changed. Instead of the postmodern irony and the deconstruction of meta-narratives, metamodernism has brought forth a sense of a renewed purpose.

This new *Weltbezug* also led to a change of experience of depth in the arts. The postmodern depth was defined by the notion of depthlessness as introduced by Fredric Jameson. Depthlessness, according to Jameson, does not adequately concentrate on the individual expression of the artist and the hermeneutic models that accompany them, which was the case in modernity. Instead, postmodern depth is characterised by a form of commodity fetishism resulting in intertextuality and the waning away of feelings and emotions. Vermeulen prefaces the next phase of depth in his notion of metamodernism: depthiness. In metamodernism, depth is no longer a facade of intertextuality but longs once again to a depth that can hint at a greater or vaster reality.

The turn of the millennium, however, not only brought a change in depth but also started the network culture. This development contributed to a cultural logic that takes impact as a proxy for value. For this reason, the arts must justify their existence

increasingly through economic means, exemplified by the notion of cultural entrepreneurship as introduced by The Mondriaan Fund. Ideas around impact and the entrepreneurial approach to the arts have formed the artistic practice to such an extent that their outcomes can be influenced. The metamodern artist, now more than ever, has to serve two consumers; himself and the public. In the former, depth is used as a highly individual, hermeneutic and sincere source whereas in the later depth is reduced to no more than a tool to maximise public engagement. For example, a visual analysis of Jess Littlewood's digital photo-assemblies reveals a form of depth that is not essential for the development of his own artistic practice. Instead, his applied and sticker-like approach to depth manifests itself in an element that answers very specifically to the greater metamodern tendency of getting involved with something. This oscillation is at the foundation of a metamodern, simulative, form of depth and makes the question "How sincere is the new depthiness as proposed in metamodernism?" at the same time challenging to answer. It has become increasingly necessary to examine an artwork's apparent destination to determine its suggested sincere depth. This does not mean that it is impossible for the two to coexist; things are never simply black and white. However, it is to say that we should not take sincerity in metamodernism for granted and need to be more careful when employing such concepts.

The application of the discourse and visual analysis method has proved to be very helpful in connecting Turner's essay with the artworks of Littlewood and at the same time enabled an understanding of Turner's characterization of the notion of sincere depth. The two methods, however, will always create only one, subjective reading. More readings of metamodern artworks and their sincerity are required to reinforce the notions put forth in this thesis. Furthermore, although the research into

metamodernism is still in development, it has already proven itself to be potential in creating a common language for scholars to get a better grasp on contemporary culture. However, more research is necessary on the nuances and the aesthetic translation of these new sensibilities. For example, the utopian trope in metamodernism still feels somewhat one-sided and flat and can, therefore, use even more fundamental analysis. In addition, a closer examination of the events leading up to metamodernism could shed more light upon the nature of certain metamodern expressions. This research is essential in creating an even more refined toolkit with which we can analyse the contemporary world around us.

Appendix



Fig. 1. *Failure* by Jess Littlewood from "Geometries of Utopian Desire." *Notes on Metamodernism*, 8 Dec. 2012, www.metamodernism.com/2012/11/08/geometries-of-utopian-desire/.



Fig. 2. *Commune* by Jess Littlewood from "Geometries of Utopian Desire." *Notes on Metamodernism*, 8 Dec. 2012, www.metamodernism.com/2012/11/08/geometries-of-utopian-desire/.

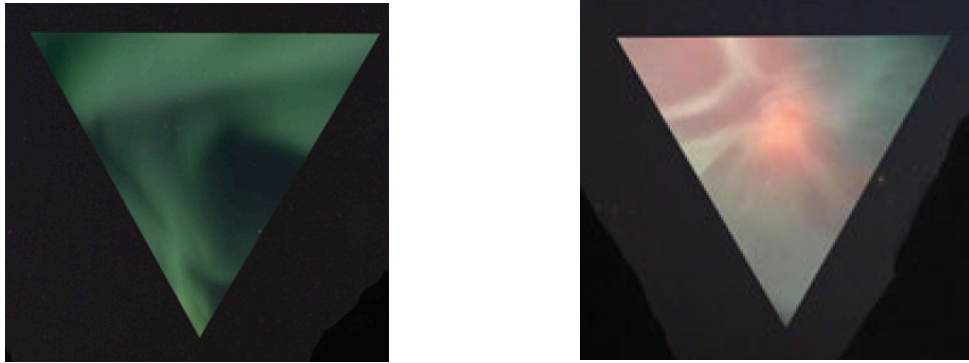


Fig. 3. Left side: the triangle in *Failure*, right side: the triangle in *Commune* by Jess Littlewood from "Geometries of Utopian Desire." *Notes on Metamodernism*, 8 Dec. 2012, www.metamodernism.com/2012/11/08/geometries-of-utopian-desire/.



Fig. 4 Fuller's dome embodied in his home in Carbondale, USA by Fuller, R. Buckminster from *Wikimedia Commons*, 16 July 2015, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Preserved_R_Buckminster_Fuller_and_Anne_Hewlitt_Dome_Home.jpg.



Fig. 5. *The End of Now* by Jess Littlewood from "Geometries of Utopian Desire." *Notes on Metamodernism*, 8 Dec. 2012, www.metamodernism.com/2012/11/08/geometries-of-utopian-desire/.

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