

Motherboard:

An Exploration of Masculine Vulnerability through New Media Art

by

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PARTS IN THIS TEXT MAY BE TRIGGERING TO SOME READERS
(Depictions of emotional abuse, drug abuse, mental health disorders)

An Analysis of Masculine Vulnerability within New Media Art Forms

The struggle of traumatized people is often the basis of compelling art. To transform an incredibly strenuous situation into a digestible form of media is frequently the result of creative effort. When a creative person is placed into a media based society that suppresses and discourages the skills necessary to cope, the options are to adapt or implode. Examples of this exploration into trauma and coping through the arts are important to understand the health and wellness of humankind. We will be delving into the topic of masculinity¹ within the creative world. This is an often fragile and touchy subject because the topic of men's mental health isn't a mainstream point of discussion. More specifically, this will be an analysis of

¹ **Masculinity** (also called manhood or manliness) is a set of attributes, behaviors, and roles associated with boys and men.
"Masculinity";

how trauma may be coped with within the scope of male new media art forms such as CGI². This is not to say that good art cannot be made without trauma. The goal here is not to dismiss any sort of method of creation, rather to look at many forms to better understand how the masculine can effectively express and work through traumatic events.

The behaviours that society's media instills into males can limit one's ability to cope with mental illness and trauma. "In addition to external sources, boys and men learn conventional gender roles from family and friends. In most homes, boys are told that "boys don't cry" and to "man up."

³ This inherently suppresses connection to masculine vulnerability – a disconnection which separates men from properly empathizing with themselves and with others.

The most dominant form of manhood is called "hegemonic masculinity" which is characterized by several key tenants: 1.) distance oneself from femininity; 2.) restrict emotions; 3.) be tough and aggressive (avoid vulnerability); 4.) be seen as highly sexual with women; and 5.) prove one's heterosexuality via homophobia.⁴

² **Computer-Generated Imagery** (CGI) is the application of computer graphics to create or contribute to images in art, printed media, video games, films, television programs, shorts, commercials, videos, and simulators. "Computer-Generated Imagery";

³ "Men and Masculinities";

⁴ "Men and Masculinities";

Take, for example, any form of machismo⁵ media from the last fifty years. Impressionable, younger members of society have been exposed to overly-masculine figures in all forms of media – such as the Paul brother’s⁶ YouTube channels. Jake and Logan Paul are brothers who have come to hold a massive online presence. They often make online content with themes that are not suited for their mostly young audience.

...Paul’s collaborations with family channels and the use of kids ages seven or younger for content and merchandise promotion. Most damning, however, is how Paul — whose target audience skews young, anywhere from ages eight to 18 — markets to children.⁷

There has been much backlash due to the controversial things that they have done, which in turn has only catapulted them further into fame – to name a few: the “suicide forest”, Team 10 house, ‘The Financial Freedom Movement’ and YouTube boxing controversy.⁸

All men are influenced by their upbringing, experience, and social environment which play a big role in determining one’s view of masculinity and manhood. This means that masculinity is going to be different for everyone. Some particularly

⁵ **Machismo** is a form of masculinity that emphasizes power and is often associated with a disregard for consequences and responsibility. Virility (from the Latin vir, "man") is similar to masculinity, but especially emphasizes strength, energy, and sex drive. “Masculinity”;

⁶ Chen, Joyce;

⁷ Farokhmanesh, Megan;

⁸ “Jake Paul”;

influential factors in shaping one's idea of manhood are race, class, ability, sexual orientation, and gender.⁹

Jake and Logan seem to have no regard for their impressionable, mostly young audience – exhibiting violent and inappropriate themes, dangerous behaviors/activities, and manipulative marketing tactics.¹⁰ Acting in these ways is one thing but to have a target audience of eight to eighteen year olds is when this becomes particularly dangerous. How this affects these people is subjective in nature – but one can be certain, under the right conditions, this could have long-lasting effects on the expressive behaviors in young men.

Art has always been a way to communicate an idea in a more impactful, relatable way and technology can be an important tool for male artists. These artist's negligent use of technology can sometimes mirror society's deep-rooted sexism if they are not mindful, and in some cases it may even be purposefully malicious. When this art is about mental health – this lack of consideration for ingrained male behavior can inhibit the art from addressing real mental health issues. This paper will explore a process that allows for exploration while being aware of innate male behavior.

⁹ "Men and Masculinities";

¹⁰ Chen, Joyce;

One such artist who performs this balance of creative coping is Ed Atkins. He produces work in a sort of subconscious frame of mind according to a quote from this interview with Ssense.

I hope to make work that does not necessarily know what it is. At a certain point I became less and less interested in producing meaning—but instead a kind of uncertainty. I was always more interested in how something feels, rather than what it means.¹¹

With Atkins' performative and personal nature, he checks all the boxes of a vulnerable male working in the scope of new media art forms. He has command of the medium in which he works – he knows the process and this allows for room to play within the work. In his own words, “I map the movement of my own face to that of the CGI model. It’s my face contorting, performing behind this immaterial mask—attached to my traumas and losses, whatever they are...”¹² Atkins does not shy away from things being difficult to look at or talk about.

It is important to mention that Atkins also comes from privilege, and to consider how that may reflect in his work. Atkins is a white male who was able to receive a masters degree in fine art and is currently receiving a

¹¹ SSENSE;

¹² SSENSE;

grant to stay in Berlin. With this in mind, Atkins has the ability, time, and money to explore these themes in his work – a luxury that some may not have.

Atkins' work provokes thoughts about trauma and assessment of one's feelings through art. He often aims to be autobiographical but in a way that is not directly related to himself – this ambiguity allows space for the viewer to place themselves within the work and relate with his character. Since the character that he plays is overtly vulnerable and performative, this could be a transformative experience for men who are closed off from these personal assessments. Of course, for the viewers who are not yet ready to deal with the weight of their own trauma relating in this way could also be a very devastating or triggering experience. "... this reality occasions a dilemma: work like Atkins's may be opening a window onto a deeper understanding of normative masculinity's profound fucked-up-ness."¹³ This 'fucked-up-ness' could potentially be discouraging and push a man even farther from wanting to tackle these issues in oneself.

On the other hand, it's important to consider artists who bring issues like mental health up in a stagnant way or with no resolution. Bringing the

¹³Speed, Mitch;

issue to light in a relatable way – this may be helpful for the artist to express himself, but poses the question of if they are glorifying and perpetuating unresolved issues. The virality of work such as this is concerning.

Impressionable people who may see pretty art that glorifies mental illness may encourage behavior of acceptance around mental health. This can be productive or detrimental depending on the person. If someone was in a very hard mental space and should be seeking help, adopting that ‘this is just the way they are’ mindset is very far from what they need. Although, someone who may have a lifelong struggle could find peace in knowing that there are other people out there like them. This complicates the topic of this form of art because this train of thought implies that it is the artist’s responsibility to solve or cure the audience from their trauma – which it may or may not be.

Instagram is plentiful with artists such as this – chasing that viral relatability. This so-called ‘aesthetic’ culture stemmed from internet art, ‘Vaporwave’¹⁴, and ‘Sad Boys’¹⁵ styles of the 2010s. It has become a cliché to some and for others has even become part of their lifestyle. The point of this analysis is not to talk poorly about these artists, rather to maybe spark a

¹⁴ “Vaporwave”;

¹⁵ “Yung Lean’s Style”;

thought process about how chasing this heavily commercial form of work might have effects they have not considered.

This commerciality sometimes takes on less ‘problematic’ structures, such as the work of David Stenbeck also known as Dovneon¹⁶ on Instagram.

Stenbeck works within 3D rendering software such as Cinema 4D, he typically creates pastel landscapes and seascapes filled with realistic smoke

or cloud particles, which often includes

minimalist neon lights and words

casting light onto the clouds. He often

references youth and love within his

work, bringing forth an aspect of

nostalgia. His work evokes feelings of

vastness and isolation and is never

overtly about mental health, but these

phrases that he chooses to use are directly on trend with the same sort of

word choice that popular online stores use. Stenbeck’s expression feels

emotional, but the struggle with this work is that it is also very commercial



¹⁶ David Stenbeck on Instagram;

and marketable, which feels at odds with the legitimacy of the message.

These relatable topics sell very well, especially to impressionable teens.

Should he stop making art? Should he feel guilty? The answer to the latter two questions are obviously no, and as far as the first goes, it seems wise to continue working until something new happens, and interrogate the reasons it hasn't yet. It might behoove an auto-cannibal to paint in blood every once in a while.¹⁷

It is important to question this morality – is it okay to market these topics to impressionable people? Could this be construed as taking advantage of people with these vulnerable topics? There is no easy answer, but when considered in this light it begins to feel less like Stenbeck is being vulnerable, and is just trying to relate to an audience. The difference here is that Stenbeck is not glorifying mental illness in any way and his work is harmless.

Unlike Stenbeck, Urban Outfitters clothing brand is one very good example of this culture surrounding mental health popularized by the internet. They have had a fair share of controversy surrounding their brand and have done little to change these ideals. There is currently a men's t-shirt being sold that has the text "mentally gone" written across the chest.¹⁸ This

¹⁷ "What Is Masculinity In Art, And Do We Have To Care?";

¹⁸ "Mentally Gone Embroidered Tee";

is not to mention the controversy surrounding their women's "depression" t-shirt.¹⁹ It's insensitive to those who face these mental battles, that someone who may not be battling these similar issues could buy and wear these t-shirts. Whether problematic or not, this form lacks substance.



Though these exemplified artists differ greatly from one another, they still encourage a relationship between themselves and their audience. Whether it is Atkins having his viewer empathise with his pieces or 'Dovneon' posting a new composite to his Instagram. Somewhere between artists like Stenbeck and Atkins there must be a sort of 'sweet spot' to encourage self-reflection through new media art in males. This area is wonderfully complicated and relatively new, exploring it may even be more complicated than trying to land between these two artists. But, maybe this balance of relating to your audience and inserting one's own heavy baggage is the answer to encouraging masculine vulnerability within new media art.

¹⁹ Peterson, "Urban Outfitters Pulls 'Depression' Shirt After Outcry";

About the Artist



Daniel J. Heinley is a New York born media based artist. His background involves a focus in photography and videography.

Daniel's almost unhealthy obsession with technical processes provides a unique skill set – this allows him to take aspects of different media and combine them with photo and

video. Through topics of trauma mixed with crude humor – Daniel's artistic vision hopes to provide insight into the self reflective, critical side of art making. Taking aesthetics from being raised witnessing punk DIY culture, drug abuse, poverty, and escapism – while growing up in the Upstate New York suburbs.

A Reflection on *Motherboard*

Motherboard is a time based narrative project where I aim to traverse a vulnerable side of my emotions – a culmination of the struggles I have faced with my biological mother. I hope to share a side of myself that will be relatable and digestible for all, but not belittle the emotionally intense nature of this topic. It's not easy to look at or talk about. But, hopefully exhibiting this behavior could encourage more men to be in touch with their emotions. I explore how years of manipulation and emotional abuse reveals itself and through this exploration focus on breaking down walls within my own masculinity.

My choice of medium for this project was video through various three-dimensional rendering softwares. These videos were to be displayed in an environment that would invoke a domestic feeling; a seating area with a comfortable chair that one might see in someone's living room, allowing one person at a time to sit and watch this video on a screen opposite to the chair, and audio would be routed to a modified telephone on a small end table next to the chair.

During the first semester of my senior year of college my biological mother was arrested. For context, I had not had contact with her for many years prior to this unfortunate turn of events. Before this, I chose to distance myself from her situation, for my own mental health after many intense years of emotional manipulation. But I couldn't help staying away any longer for the sake of my two younger siblings. Thinking that they may have to go through the same things that I witnessed was one of my biggest struggles while distancing myself. I decided to confront my mother about her drug abuse issues and allegations from family members about child neglect and abuse towards my younger siblings. My cellphone was flooded with a barrage of hate-filled text messages from my mother, but years of therapy and coping with this situation has taught me that this hatred isn't about me. It is fueled by her own inability to cope with her lack of control over the situation.

This event sparked the idea for this project – once the gears got turning everything came easily in the beginning. Fueled by my passion to let this pain out, I began mapping out all of the unfolding events. I developed the idea to personify the internet as a maternal figure raising a child that would symbolize myself, comparing my mother to the internet.

This concept represents my generation – the ‘digital natives’,²⁰ the youths that grew up in the age of internet and electronic media. We were, in a sense, raised by electronic media; plopped in front of televisions as children, exploring the internet at young ages, and skewed by these behaviors that we had witnessed in the earlier days of the internet. Or even this younger generation of the late 2000s and 2010s, with parents using iPads and cellphones as a means of distraction. My mother is this entity, at best fun and distracting – at worst manipulative, opinionated, hypocritical, and exhibiting addictive tendencies.

While exploring work from artists creating with similar processes, I found Ed Atkins. With his dark and intense approach to this medium, he has hit all the bases for me – almost edgy, dry humor, obsession with process-driven artforms, and expression and representation for content about mental spaces that aren’t typically easy to talk about. I realized that I want to be fully transparent with this situation and push myself to be as vulnerable as I could comfortably be. His philosophy inspires my want to create art in a way that the meaning informs the process. The struggle with this is that I usually discover something new and become obsessed with how it works – I

²⁰ Bennett, Sue;

don't often start with an idea and plan how that would affect the processes.

This idea: concept first and process later, was a welcome change of pace for me.

With this idea in mind, I began thinking of the struggle of control between myself and my worries. I began to compare this to my control within the software. I would be in charge of where the viewer looks, what is within the frame, what is heard, and I would be building a world for my viewer. All of the power is then shifted into my hands. Thus, my trauma was no longer an intangible thing that I couldn't control, and this was a very healing realization for me.

My decision to implement the telephone as a symbol came from this idea of an inadequate connection between my mother and I. The phone, traditionally, is used to simulate an intimate conversation between people over long distances. This was my only possible form of connection to this side of my life that I had tried so hard to distance myself from. I have had a hard time letting go of feeling guilty for this distance – thoughts of 'abandoning' my siblings was one of the hardest things to work through during this process. Something that I realized was that the phone was used as a tool by my mother to gain leverage in our relationship and place guilt onto

me. This guilt was perpetuated by my mother's manipulation. So, I modified a telephone, allowing it to playback sound from the piece itself. By using this as a symbol, I am allowing the viewer to connect intimately with the piece – this tactile feeling of holding a phone to your ear is far more effective than playing the audio through a traditional device such as headphones.

After all this progress with the project, the situation got progressively harder to handle. With barely enough time to process the situation at hand, my mother was arrested a second time, eventually resulting in her losing custody of her children. I pushed through these feelings and developed a 'b plot' for my video series. This plot for the narrative was conceived solely on my worry for my siblings' wellbeing. While my character is being raised by this volatile entity, he would be introduced to a digital sibling that he becomes the caretaker for. The internet will become corrupt and lock this sibling behind a 'paywall', similarly to how internet hackers may install ransomware to a personal computer. Ransomware locks all files on a computer and requires you to pay hackers to get it back.²¹ This leverage was something my mother always had with my siblings, trying to get what she

²¹ "Ransomware";

wanted through them and emotionally manipulating me in this way. The character representing me wants nothing but to find a way to save his digital sibling from the horrors it may be exposed to on the internet, and will stop at nothing to save them.

I started dwelling on past situations, such as the times I have caught my mother in several elaborate lies to hide the fact that she was struggling with her addictions. I remembered the times that I had confronted her when I was a teenager, when she felt cornered and knew she could no longer hide it. How she would break down – placing blame on everyone but never taking accountability for her actions and lashing out at me for not understanding what she has been through. I hope that one day she might find mental clarity, but until that day I will continue to distance myself from her – luckily with no more ties to her since my siblings are safe with their father now. These details were fuel for my narrative at this point – I wanted to let these things out because I know that if I can bounce back from these events, then the least I can do is provide insight to other people who may be experiencing similar things through my art.

During the beginning of the second semester, I was having issues with the software that I chose to use. What I thought to be a student trial for a 3D

rendering software that would give me enough time, turned out to be much shorter than anticipated. Me, being the hard-headed person that I am, subjected myself to more responsibility than I could handle and took on another job. I was busier than ever but could finally afford the software that I thought I needed. With my own mental health on the backburner I pushed forward, experimenting with this software. This proved to be far more difficult to understand than I thought it would be, and I realized that there may be an easier route for me to take. I switched software, and came to the conclusion that paying was a waste of my time and money. The situation with my mother was more complex than it first seemed, and some of my family members stepped up and tried to take matters into their own hands – involving child protective services, and getting my siblings removed from the situation. This only gave me more stress on top of working on this project.

I started to struggle with my physical health as well as my mental health, but I couldn't admit to myself that I needed to slow down. I tried to power through this time period – which ironically is exactly the type of masculine behavior that I was trying to break down during the course of this project, and in self-reflection now, I realize that this is very similar to my

mother's power struggle issues. These realizations are important to have through these processes, becoming aware of learned habits is a part of growing through trauma. It was as if years of built-up emotions that I wasn't quite ready to deal with were all hitting me at once. Giving up would be absolutely devastating to me at this point because of how far I had come working through this trauma. I made the mistake of continuing to push myself when I should have just admitted things were a bit too much for me to handle.

My health continued to degrade until I started to develop what I thought was a respiratory infection, as it turns out COVID-19 was steadily on the rise in New York State. I thought it was unlikely that I had it and made my way to Urgent Care, they told me I had a respiratory infection and prescribed me some medication. After a few days of rest, I started to feel better and continued on going to work and class, only to become twice as sick as I was before. After a week of struggling with this illness, I woke up one morning barely able to breathe. I ended up back at urgent care and received another diagnosis of bronchitis, accompanied by a chest x-ray, and more medication. It was that same night that I came down with an

aggressive fever and worse breathing issues than I had already been experiencing.

I decided that I didn't want to go back to Urgent Care and that I would be making the five-hour drive back home to see my doctor. At this point, once I was home I was completely bedridden. My doctor was concerned about COVID-19 and as per protocol, sent me to the hospital via ambulance. There, I spent three days and was diagnosed with atypical pneumonia. I finally accepted that my health was more important than my project and even more important than the current situation with my mother. I asked to be tested for COVID-19 but was denied because they did not even have tests in New York hospitals yet and even though I exhibited all the symptoms I could not be tested.

After my hospital visit I took the time I needed to heal, and there was a very pivotal moment with my project. After much discussion with peers and SUNY Purchase faculty I decided to abandon my original project to pursue one that would cause much less mental strain. Though I am still planning to continue *Motherboard* when I am ready.

A Reflection on Inappropriation Project

A close friend and peer, Jewel Slade helped me through a lot of this struggle. When the fear of COVID-19 shut down our college we decided to collaborate on our final project for our senior show. Jewel and I have a very similar outlook when it comes to dealing with trauma through art, we also have similar upbringings as we both grew up in Syracuse, New York. After being forced by our college to move out, with nowhere else to go, we found ourselves back home. We worked through grieving losing the ability to finish our original project ideas and decided that we needed to make something that would make us both happy. After discussing with our professors we came up with the form that we wanted this project to take. We wanted a fun photography based project that we didn't have to take too seriously and since distance has become a major overarching theme for everyone from all walks of life, we wanted to incorporate this into our work.

Due to a typo in one of Jewel's emails to our professor, the term 'inappropriation' was born, which eventually became the title of our project. We both deal with mental strain through humor – this coping through humor

is something that, by some, would be considered inappropriate. The appropriation part fits into how we decided to create work, we chose to work with photos from family archives. Taking from our families old photos, meme culture, and previous projects allowed us to give these images a new context. Along with this, we created new work together; this new work was made to push the narrative of being home during this devastating time that COVID-19 had forced upon the world.

We began by doodling on top of images within photo editing software, which slowly evolved into adding objects and words to subvert images similar to how memes develop. It was also in agreement that we wanted to keep the themes of our original projects semi-intact – for me, that was maintaining this form of masculine vulnerability.

As the Inappropriation Project was beginning to take a form, Jewel and I began to discuss how we might want to display this project for our senior new media show, *SOCIAL DISTANCE*. It was agreed upon that we were going to use Instagram as a virtual gallery to showcase these images that we created, it was at this point that we also decided that this project wasn't going to end at our senior show. We want to continue to work on the Inappropriation Project as a form of therapy for as long as we feel necessary.

In Closing

I would like to close with a statement about sharing this personal experience and how it relates to the research I have done thus far. Showing this struggle that I've worked through this past year isn't me trying to evoke any sort of sympathy from the situation. Though this process has been extremely taxing, I am grateful to have the opportunity to learn and grow while exploring these topics. The purpose of this paper is to educate and spark conversation surrounding mental health in males and to also inspire more people to tackle these inner struggles. I'm sharing these difficult situations for other men to analyze and become aware of how they manage their own unique situations. Using the research from the formative process of these projects, I was able to utilize this information during my struggles. This helped me better understand what coping mechanisms work for me. Without this knowledge I would have struggled much more. I know more about what my mind is capable of handling and I have learned that it is okay to admit when things are too much to handle.

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