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## ***Aesthetics of the Impasse in Modern Family***

### **INTRODUCTION**

This past fall, Chisenhale Gallery in London presented Ed Fornieles first solo London exhibition, *Modern Family*. The exhibition was live from 18 September - 9 November 2014 and included an installation environment within the gallery space, a website based on freely available, aggregated live social media content (from sites like Pinterest, Tumblr, Twitter) and a free eBook. Fornieles transformed the gallery into surreal scenes of Los Angeles suburbia with large- and life-scale sculptures and trending lifestyle paraphernalia and truisms (such as “BE YOURSELF” and “WE ARE ONE”), accompanied a collage of pop movie soundtrack hits of the early 2000s, overlapping lifestyle trend-images from the website displayed on monitors, intermittent performers (who were easily missed due to their slight and casual enactments such as texting while lounging on a bench), and paintings portraying a version of the artist’s life that never was (such as portraits spanning notable phases of a family of five with a past girlfriend). As articulated in the exhibition artist sheet, these elements

... evoke a distorted ‘Pinterest reality’ derived from the aspirational online image-sharing platform, which, along with home decor magazines, has come to present a contemporary definition of the American ‘good life’. The installation plays with scale and spatial perspective to create a cartoonish landscape of sculptures, combining high-spec finishes and new technology with breakfast cereal, DIY home tiling techniques and a ‘living room materiality’ (Chisenhale).

I believe much of what makes this show possible is its creation during a time of what Lauren Berlant calls crisis ordinary, in which, quite literally, the mode of crisis is enfolded into everyday life, a perpetual feeling of potential doom hanging overhead.

*Modern Family*'s narrative can be read as attempting to navigate the perpetually overwhelming. In this paper, I consider what happens in Fornieles' use of the good life through the lens of Lauren Berlant's concepts within and related to her book, *Cruel Optimism*. I argue that *Modern Family* is a physical realization of an impasse and may serve as a "surrealistic affectsphere" that points to the present, aesthetically framed as the outdated American dream. I aim to consider what may come from the exhibition environment's simultaneous embodiment of and reflection on this narrative. Does *Modern Family* act as an "...[empowering] nod to a global, collective consciousness" (Warner)? Might this gesture enable a confrontation, an opening for "detachment from our anchors," and/or "...optimistic projections of a world that is worth our attachment to it..."(Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 263)?

First, I explain Berlant's terminology from *Cruel Optimism* used in this paper and develop its dialogue with *Modern Family*. I then describe the experience of the on-site exhibition and visual, auditory, and lighting details and position it as an affective environment. Following, I address two localizing frameworks: the American TV series *Modern Family* and family as a normative constructs, and how Fornieles' distorted aesthetics of such are the representation of a globalized locality. I continue with an examination of the aesthetic and habit of social media as aspirational communities and its sustainability. Within this social media examination I provide a brief look at commodities as transformational objects. I follow with Fornieles' use of big data as a creative resource: moving from the local to the general, as a method for response to relations of cruel optimism.

## **I. IN DIALOGUE: CRUEL OPTIMISM and MODERN FAMILY**

Berlant defines impasse as

a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things, maintain one's sea legs, and coordinate the standard melodramatic crises with those processes that have not yet found their genre of event (*Cruel Optimism*, 4).

*Modern Family* is in some ways a recreation of this stalemate, but also an

acknowledgment, a possible exploration, examination, and digestion of it. Fornieles points to and sits with the scene of deflated fantasies of the good life in which we still invest, and positions viewers to do the same. The distorted scenes, sculptures, digital collages, and the exhibition's atmosphere indicate that these objects of our desire, suggestions/gestures/elements of the good life, are relations of cruel optimism. It is important to note that *Modern Family*'s objects, like Berlant's in *Cruel Optimism*, may or may not be a physical object: "...it might involve food, a kind of love, a fantasy of the good life, or a political project...it might rest on ...a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being...[or] a cluster of promises...a scene" (1). Our relations to these objects are optimistic, and become cruel when the "...the something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1).

While it may have various interpretations, one of the ways in which I believe Berlant means flourishing, the way I will use it in this paper, is in reference to something very basic: knowing that your life is valued whether or not you may be an exploitable subject (and ideally not as exploited subjects, but whether or not this is an achievable situation politically has yet to be realized). While, arguably, we always maintain attachments and move from one or many objects/ideas/fantasies/ to another throughout our lives,

the object[s]/ scene[s] that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2). The *Modern Family* scene includes, captures, and responds to some of these objects and our relations with them, creating a charged environment.

## **II. EXHIBITION EXPERIENCE: PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT**

At Chisenhale, the *Modern Family* environment lies beyond a closed door. Upon entering, a large-scale-painting of Fornieles and his imagined future family greet you, positioned at an awkward angle and blocking the majority of the scene behind it. You must walk left, through a sort of slit of an opening that feels more like sneaking through a backyard rather than entering an art exhibition. This entrance suggests an immediate sense of private space, sneaking into a life. The first sculptures you see once having gone through the entrance are hanging monitors featuring a flow of collaged social media images.<sup>1</sup>

The lighting shifts at a slow pace from dark to bright and catchy, only-slightly-outdated pop music carries you along as you walk slowly through the disturbed scenes and objects of the familiar, objects of suburban life morphed together in playful, funny, and traumatic ways: colorful cereal and discarded apple pies are embedded into a solidified trilogy of dirt-like concreted arches; see-through prosthetic limbs are embedded with buy-in-bulk after-school snacks that make a body with a cinder block lounging on a patch of grass; other pairs of prosthetic limbs integrate with objects like a fish tank and

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<sup>1</sup> Video references of social media content monitors: <http://youtu.be/3AG7kSm5dNw>, <http://youtu.be/JEdtz4U6tP4>

outdoor grill; giant baguettes wrapped in foil and plastic like a body-bag knotted with classic gingham are crushed by a pile of hay, fruit, and ivy on top of a collapsing picnic table as a huge unrecognizable cylinder form moves into it. Pillows are strapped tightly to the wooden benches and columns, as if they must hold on or must protect their owners and passerby from running into their edges. Large, pastel-colored Styrofoam boards feature negative-spaced children playing and walking hand-in-hand with shadowed parents. A little girl tutu-dress is crystalized and staged around cinder blocks with discarded potatoes lying around it and signature dad-khakis are hang from the ceiling in huge proportion. Giant thunderbolts, gingham, and other “cute” fabrics, umbrellas, water hose tubing, Ethernet chords, wooden fencings, and bouncy-wire shapes hang from the ceiling. Plastic wrap suffocates objects, fruit and vegetables are molded precariously. These objects are worn out- the fire pit is burned, and our bodies are embedded within them, as a sort of impassivity- we are in an “animated suspension” – there is not a way out, no alternative to look towards, and we aren’t even sure we want to look to another life anyway.

The intermittent actors in the exhibition, referred to by Fornieles as “human gifs,” move slowly and casually, easily mistakable for an exhibition guest. She inhabits this space the way in which we inhabit our fantasy: embodying our response to the affective attachment to this good life, these objects, representing an impassivity, holding onto these objects despite their distortion. The bed is still king-sized, on a platform like the one we imagine in our large master bedroom (large enough for a feature-fish tank!) and private bath in our oversized cookie-cutter house- we can still feel that oversized SUV parked outside. The human gif reinforces to guests that they too may inhabit the space as she

does- lounge on the bed, sit on the fake grass, text from the picnic table bench. In observing her we feel our own motions like an “intensified present...another sensorium” (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 85).

### **III. EXHIBITION EXPERIENCE: SOUNDTRACK and LIGHTING**

The exhibition’s soundtrack and lighting are both important elements within this atmosphere. The flow of the past decade’s favorite feel-good hits is fun and induces affect- you are carried through the environment on a boat of excitement from recognition yet their outdated-ness reassures a disjointed-ness in the experience. There are rises and dips as the music shifts, and lighting darkens, lightens, flickers. This is an important part of experiencing this fantasy- it feels dreamlike, induces an immediate physical response, the visuals of the everyday we are reminded of in stores, online, in media, in TV, in movies...accompanied by the top movie soundtrack songs we already experienced, like a déjà vu- we can watch ourselves in it while being in it. The constant shifting in the lighting also suggests a lived-movie experience, like you are held in bowl of jelly of a known yet distorted world, a narrative not completely clear. Berlant states that,

As sound, ambience provides atmospheres and spaces in which movement happens through persons: listeners dissolve into an ongoing present whose ongoingness is neither necessarily comfortable nor uncomfortable, avant-garde nor Muzak, but, most formally, a space of abeyance. As an atmosphere induced by sonic diffusion it is a habitation without edges, a soft impasse. (*Cruel Optimism*, 230).

For those who did not grow up in America, are not familiar with recent American pop-culture, or anyone simply not apart of this particular locality, these songs may not register this experience. It can be imagined that other, specific sounds/music from nostalgic experiences, cultures, communities, may register affect for others though. For the sake of this particular examination, I offer some references of some American pop

movie sonic moments that stir the kind of rise, charge, felt from songs used in *Modern Family* personally, and possibly on a larger scale within a particular locality considering these cinematic sonic moments were immediately accessible as the first search result through the most basic Google and YouTube keyword search. For example, the search “bittersweet symphony cruel intentions,” results in a YouTube video of the moment of the song in the movie, uploaded in 2011, with over 562,116 views: the video description is “Everyone that ever saw this movie will remember this song. Trust me.. The best movie ending ever!” (Youtube.com). Among the many cinematic-sonic moments, two others from ’00 and ’99 that may evoke similar rises- “Tiny Dancer” in *Almost Famous* (with a whopping 4,984,906 views) or “Kiss Me” in *She’s All That* (Youtube.com).<sup>23</sup>

#### **IV. EXHIBITION EXPERIENCE: AFFECTIVE COMPOSITION**

In recognition of the songs, attachments to these moments, memories, associative emotions, are sure to surface. But in the collage of the songs they become more like content rather than singular associations- affective sound. A blurring takes place within the context of the dramatic and odd lighting shifts, the disrupted, discarded, juxtaposed, animated, oddly-positioned objects, and the abundance of consumables, the feeling of a private entrance into a state of the infinitely replicated. Walking in this space you feel intrigued, occupied- you can look endlessly and feel a sense of satisfaction yet disturbance from seeing the recognizable, things that make up everyday lives. As stated

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<sup>2</sup> Links: Bittersweet Symphony - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2xCLOjOWco>, Tiny Dancer - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Qn3tel9FWU> and Kiss Me- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_3r2Ih1-mVs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3r2Ih1-mVs)

<sup>3</sup> I would argue that there are hundreds more meaningful cinematic sonic moments, but tried to stay within the time period, locality, and theme of *Modern Family* with the few references here. Pitchfork and sister site Dissolve address this topic and may be one fun place for reference beyond this exhibition: <http://pitchfork.com/thepitch/507-pitchforks-great-pop-music-movie-moments/> and <http://thedissolve.com/features/the-dissolve-canon/761-the-movies-50-greatest-pop-music-moments/?page=all>.

in the exhibition eBook, “It’s an installation of a domestic interior and a website ripping data from social media to create affective compositions — twin assemblages of discrete” (Droitcour, 75). The distortions, the oddness of these compositions, are a visualization of the tension during a transitional moment- a waning genre, where a fantasy of the good life is no longer achievable but we cling to it, and its signifiers, as we struggle in the in between – the impasse.

These are scenes of an outdated, no longer achievable life for the general population as retirement funds are being used to support unemployed adult children- our lives have been devalued by our state, and yet, this is the still-fantasized American good life. It is captured in commercials, TV programs, movies, social media, magazines and catalogues, stores. This has been the world that multiple generations [have] know[n]. The exhibition points to but distorts this world. The humor, confusion, and familiarity stirs in exhibition guests, and it is the pointing-to yet not being able to process in full, on account of the distortion, that creates the charge in the environment, what I believe to be an affective environment. As stated, there is some processing of affect through emotional or cognitive placement, but the physical response that cannot be placed remains- there is a “structure of a feeling, a punctum in the historical present without becoming event in any narrative sense” in the experience of the on-site exhibition (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 85-86). Fornieles exposes the present as mediated affect within this environment, and in doing so creates an affectsphere in which he plays with the constructing material content.

“Play allows a sense of normalcy...while risk tries to make some headway in the impasse: play is the performance of an interruption without risk. Yet it takes place as barely enjoyed comic relief from the risk that must be borne” (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*,

170-71). Fornieles' other works are expanded upon until later in this essay, but I now would like to consider that while his other "...events tend to elicit an aversion to, or at least reflection on, the values of the communities they inhabit through carnivalized play, "Modern Family" wants its audience to find reassurance in those values." (Droitcour, ebook, 77-78).

Through the play of these sculptures, staging, soundtrack, and lighting, Fornieles appears to have visualized an impasse. It almost could be read as the actualization of the artist "knowing how to assess what's unraveling...[as] one way to measure the impasse of living in the overwhelmingly present moment" (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 50). Here, *Modern Family* is an affective zone that reflexively situates viewers. What are some of the localized normatives by which this affective zone first functions?

#### **V. LOCALIZATION: TV-SERIES *MODERN FAMILY* and FAMILY**

Two immediate frames are within/of the exhibition title itself: the popular American TV-series, also titled *Modern Family*, and family. The mockumentary sitcom, while lauded for being one of the first pop-programs to feature an "alternative" family structure, inclusive of an immigrant and male gay couple (hence the title), its characters are far from pushing the envelope:

...its mechanistic storytelling, cobbled together from stereotypes, is a reminder that the narrative forms of popular culture treat human beings as composite sets of traits in order to neatly show which characteristics are desirable or undesirable. The fiery Latina could easily have been swapped for a sly Asian. The sassy teen daughter could have been a dumb jock. The show would have had a different flavor, but the structure would be the same because it supports the same ideology (Droitcour, eBook, 77).

This sitcom, though, is not of specific importance or inspiration to this installation or this exploration. While family is important for Fornieles, as family roles are scripted,

something lost, something esteemed to- an infinite array of potential objects of attachment through which the good life may be fantasized- it also is not of specific importance to my exploration. Instead, it is the idea of dropping existing, ubiquitous, systems and narratives and keeping the “the interior furnishings, the keyworded emotions and characteristics — that are used to generate them,” to generate scripts that nurture activity, environments, scenes (Droitcour, eBook 79). The immediate localizations are broadly recognizable and can easily be understood as simply American. But the exhibition does not solely derive from those localizations- Fornieles transforms information, content, from the Internet, no longer specifically attached to the West Coast or America. While these places may be apart of the aesthetic history, the content, exists as distortions of this aesthetic history through its movement to a web-based, global locality via social media sites, and Fornieles materializes, plays with, and further distorts this content, showing and embracing a transition in how localities formulate in a transnational and immaterial space- virtual neighborhoods (Appadurai, 195).

In Fornieles’ approach we see the idea of a composition being crafted from anonymous people, together, within a waning of genre- “whose conventions of relating fantasy to ordinary life and whose depictions of the good life now appear to mark archaic expectations about having and building a life” (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 6). When speaking about his participatory work, which include non-actors receiving role prompts whether at live events, not performances, such as a benefit for Rhizome at the New Museum or on a network on Facebook, like *DormDaze*, Fornieles says he feels most successful

...when I lose complete control of something... when my directions cease to

matter to the unfolding narrative, when each participant (aware or not), becomes responsible for the overall outcome... the environment becomes self-perpetuating, self-replicating, far outside the original intentions... This is also true of the studio, there is a moment where there is just so much stuff, so much of a certain kind of material that it's less a matter of design than doing what makes sense in that environment (Fornieles and Vickers, eBook, 99-100).

This idea is also practiced in this exhibition. Fornieles uses data incoming from some of the most popular social media sites globally. In the exhibition eBook, writer Lucy Chinen describes a shift in analyzing consumers based on their demographics to their lifestyle preferences – that is, their choices, movements, decisions, made more common practice thanks to big data. This also marks the opportunity for the formation of new localities in this space based on those preferences, no matter your location. So, the more specific, local, detailed, social media participants are, the more specific, local, detailed, *meaningful* the projections of aspirational anchors become, and the more easily shared, and more likely to constitute new and overlapping localities, transnationally. Our attachments deepen, like a Chinese finger trap, like cruel optimism.

This is not to say the content is evenly distributed or representative of diverse cultures, but rather it is representative of one pop-aesthetic moment, that is the generalization of lots of singular online entities, representative of the meeting, disjunctures, and melding of local aesthetics and ideals. It is worthwhile here to consider that Fornieles is British and has only resided in Los Angeles for less than 2 years (and possibly with only partial residence), as well as that a London gallery commissioned the work. To expand on Fornieles' use of social media and big data, the collected social media content that is on the monitors, the lack of control/loss of narrative/anchors as crisis and to move within crisis, I consider them as necessary for garnering “different

kinds of potential openings within and beyond the impasse of adjustment that constant crisis creates” (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 6).

## **VI. SOCIAL MEDIA and SUSTAINABILITY**

The social media content seen in this exhibit function as a few things, one of which is that they are the results of a habit developed from a relationship of cruel optimism. That is, in a period (post-stock market crash 2008) and place (the US) where esteeming to have a home of plentitude, a life full of commodities in which commodities often serve as anchors within the good life fantasy, is also the period in which (free) social media enraptures masses with sites for aspirational living- for example, Pinterest and Instagram. Alongside these product- and visually- oriented platforms are crafted social media identities and formats that inevitably seem “...designed to create social anxiety for anyone that exists outside of the family unit, relationship status, a million likes for your baby photos;” for example, Facebook (Fornieles, eBook, 121-122).<sup>4</sup>

These sites may suggest arenas for exploring identity, self-expression, unique creativity, personal lives, meaningful social relations, casual social relations, business connections, a way to bring the world into a more diverse moment of coexisting community, sites of activism, and so on. They could be considered sites of sovereignty: where “BE YOURSELF” and “WE ARE ONE” are able to simultaneously resonate with a mass.<sup>5</sup> These simultaneous messages are not new resonations- in his exploration of supermodernity’s non-places, Marc Augé describes advertisement images as making a system that “...outline[s] the world of consumption that every individual can make his

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<sup>4</sup> It could be addressed here how these sites not only reinforce existing normatives and objects, but also are sites of opportunity for shifts in those normatives, but think this topic is best suited for another essay.

<sup>5</sup> I use “mass” to reference large amount of people not of a specific location, as these websites reach to many, although certainly not all, locations in the world with Internet.

own... [where the] common law [is]: do as others do to be yourself” (106). He continues to describe that lost foreigners feel comfortable and reassured when coming across recognizable products, brands, logos, in unfamiliar places of that country. I would like to consider the sensation/state of the lost foreigner as those in the state of crisis ordinary, and the social media content Fornieles’ uses as the comforting familiar—a highly accessible, cross-category (consumptive + social), and sustainable resource for treading water.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not it is known/obvious to participants that social media websites are in fact sites of exploitation, considering that user data is collected, sold, deciphered/manipulated to sell products (and lifestyles, modes of being, politics, and more) back to users/ the public, we continue to use. Because it’s fun. Because it’s helpful.<sup>7</sup> Because it is comforting, reassuring, confirming— something so beautifully self-propelling and sustainable, in a world that is entropic— the frenzy about which we also face constantly. Social media sites are spaces where we are able to maintain our relations to our fantasy objects, as well as sites for the management and instruction of ways in which we can approach with without digesting the horrors of our increasingly unstable world (one recent example is #jesuischarlie).

As you may post/pin/tweet endlessly, and without spending money (just your time), a comparison of online aspirational living to hoarding may be enlightening: If consumption promises satisfaction in substitution and then denies it because all objects are rest stops amid the process of remaining unsatisfied that counts for being alive under capitalism, in the impasse of desire, then hoarding seems like a solution to something. Hoarding controls the promise of value against expenditure, as it performs the enjoyment of an infinite present of holding pure potential. The end, then, is the story’s tableau of the structural contradiction that shakes, stuns, and paralyzes its protagonists. Under capitalism, being in

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<sup>6</sup> Possibly worth considering in relation to sustainability used for future-planning— see Davies’ “Sustainable Nostalgia.”

<sup>7</sup> The reasoning for social media use is not this simple, but for the parameters of this exhibition I will leave this as-is for now.

circulation denotes being in life, while an inexhaustible hoard denotes being in fantasy, which is itself a hoarding station against a threatening real, and therefore seems like a better aspirational realism (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 42). Fornieles' use of social media content reflects a resulting aesthetic of this as practice-through similar distortions as his sculptures (see reference eBook reference photos), as inspiration for the disjunctures in sculptures, the introduction of their aesthetic into their own objecthood (ex. lightning bolt), and also their ever-moving presence and overlapping. While a scroll instead of flash transition on the monitors may have been more referential, we see (digital) circulation as an indication of participation, of belonging, to an aspirational life- the fantasy- through the inexhaustible practice of sharing, collecting, reproducing, that is threatening within its inevitable collection and use for maintaining a system based on exploitation, a relation.

In response to the *Public Feelings Salon with Lauren Berlant* at NYU, professor Patricia Ticineto Clough looks at the object as specifically transformational, and through a capitalist lens- where commodities are our anchors, through which we seek transformation, an “energy for living” (2). We pin images we like/love and esteem to, our instagrammed meals are beautified and prove to ourselves that particular everyday life we desire. These are sites for such transitional-object-commodities. Social documentation and presentation, our Facebook profiles and newsfeed- they too are constructed items for consumption, the platform equitable to more personalized magazines. Clough goes on to reference Christine Harold's use of Steven Shaviro's term, “aesthetic capitalism,” in which the function of the brand shifts from being about representation, “...or the aura of the circulating sign, to the commodity itself being designed, seemingly by a known or knowable designer, to model a user's future manipulation of it...[it] is designed to

sensually transmit a "creative juice" that will be transformative for its user, bringing a not-yet-lived or future experience into the present" (3).

This practice, a mode of living, has become habit, sustaining anchors in and commodity- and social- life fantasies. This habit is marketed and creates human transactions out of new localities based in a sustainable floundering through the desperate, infinite hoarding these sites offer. As indicated by the flow of digital collages in *Modern Family*, this habit may also be understood as the development of the attention economy, quite literally, in which our attention is the currency. We want it and we give it and it is tracked and used to sustain our aspirational living that hinders our ability to move past this circulation- we are paying for the "free" fantasy/objects/ with our exploited social and personal movements. Fornieles turns to the secretion of this sustained relation, a pool of social media metadata, and transforms this habit and relation of cruel optimism into a source for self-reflexivity and creation.

## **VII. METADATA as CREATIVE RESOURCE and RESPONDING TO CRUEL**

### **OPTIMISM**

In *Modern Family* and other projects, Fornieles engages with "the intensity of metadata, the relationships between individual content, individuals and how that flows within group dynamics... it's the manipulation of relationships between things that defines the experience" (Fornieles and Vickers, ebook, 101-102). How, then, should we read the monitors, digital collages, and such-informed sculptures? In the eBook, both Fornieles and Chinen suggest different ways that this data is enlivened, with unrealized potential. Could Fornieles' use of data, where patterns in behaviors are aestheticized not for appeal, be read to as showing, legitimizing, the bizarre breath of the amalgamated

social data in the exhibition? While it could be argued that as an artist who was commissioned to do this work that Fornieles is equally exploiting this data for the profit of his own brand-as-artist, I would like to consider the visual realizations of this practice as an explorative engagement that presents to us a reflective holding space, that is not safe yet not dangerous, "...as the traditional infrastructures for reproducing life— at work, in intimacy, politically— are crumbling at a threatening pace" (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 5).

In *Cruel Optimism*'s first chapter, worlds crumble, and Berlant explores "...conceptually the question of how people maintain their binding to modes of life that threaten their well-being..." (16). The first and last piece you see in the exhibition is the painting of Fornieles' with his ex-girlfriend and three children. This piece captures that "a break-up puts you in mourning for a future you will never have" (Fornieles, eBook, 128). Here too, a world has crumbled. Fornieles talks about how in this crumbling, and facing normative frameworks of being in your early 30s, life becomes more real, possibly through death becoming more real, and/or simply feeling the shift between genres (Fornieles and Vickers, ebook, 118-130). The exhibition captures Fornieles', and the many who share these fantasies, incoherence in these desires (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 16). *Modern Family* shows us living on, and the development of habits as adjustment, as complacency, and settling into crisis ordinary.

## **CLOSING**

What does this mean in a global landscape? *Modern Family* seems to specifically encapsulate an American fantasy, within a global situation. This fantasy is broadly recognizable, even if not apart of one's own fantasy. It has been perpetuated in media,

and can be pointed to in numerous forms of disjunctures globally. What Fornieles does in his practice, moving from general conceptions, including the tracing of active strands/practices of these concepts (social media data), to create reflexive, affective compositions, is a gesture similar to Berlant's, "...the becoming general of singular things, and to give those things materiality by tracking their resonances across many scenes" (*Cruel Optimism*, 12). The exhibition objects, content, and environment are undoubtedly Western, but their aesthetic derives from a web-based locality, which embodies global disjunctures and condition. Fornieles plays with the attributes and functions of this condition. I feel as though he is not trying to make sense of it but rather legitimize the resulting confusion and its exploration. A recent Radiolab story, a radio show aired through American National Public Radio station (NPR), helps me further evoke my own position as an American.

The story aired the same month of the exhibition opening and is about the surfacing of Eugene Thacker's book, *In the Dust of this Planet* in pop culture: on the cover printed on a t-shirt worn by a fashion icon, as inspiration for HBO TV-series *True Detective*, and printed on the back of Jay-Z's black leather jacket in the fake movie trailer used for the promotion of his and Beyoncé's recent tour.<sup>8</sup> The book is "...an academic treatise about the horror humanity feels as we realize that we are nothing but a speck in the universe" (Abumrad). As the radio host explores these connections and their potential meanings, he contacts the fashion stylist that identified that particular jacket, and not any of the thousands of other articles she considered, as *the* object for that shot. They describe what the screen capture of Jay-Z in the jacket, looking like he is about to shoot the sun,

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<sup>8</sup> Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INcJg5svv9A>

feels like: “like something menacing, the aftermath... the end of an era... ‘what now?’- you can hear it in the music...these are the whispers that you hear” (Abumrad). What they settle on what this all translates to is quite simple- “the end of the world is literally on his back...but, in other words, he wasn’t afraid- that is [the whisper]...[it’s] not so much ‘I don’t give a shit,’ it’s ‘I’m not afraid’ (Abumrad).



While this is of course generalizing, I think that this is an American attitude and conclusion: a sort of maturity in the accepting of inevitability with some tangible sass to the suggestion of stoic-badassness. I feel some resonance here in what I took from Fornieles’ method and aesthetic. He frames our reactions to the crisis ordinary and uses the products of our sustaining relations that are holding us back, legitimizes their aesthetic, and presents them back to us. He is not making sense of anything, but does not suggest a fear of it. *Modern Family*, as an affective experience of this practice, could be positioned as an arena for recognizing and feeling the need for risk, a push to shift objects, to readjust to not, or less, cruel attachments. Fornieles suggests a potential in big data, a movement that is inevitably a part of the foreseen future globally, and maintains a local yet community-sourced approach. *Modern Family* exposes tensions of an impasse

and does not posit a radical response, but points to a materialized recognition and practical response for the time being.

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