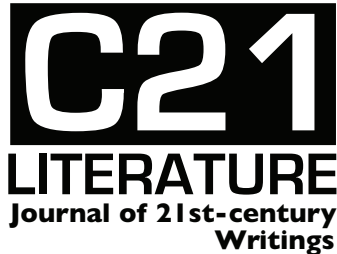




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ARTICLE

Archived Bards: Platformalism, Hollie McNish & YouTube

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Platformalism, a descriptive approach to texts published on online platforms, attends to authors' translations of platform affordances into textual poetics. This article uses a platformalist approach to suggest that, by uploading her performance poetry to YouTube, Hollie McNish emulates the live dynamics of performance on the multimodal webpage. YouTube is often the first port of call for anyone looking for audio-visual resources, be it a music video, film clip, educational how-to or homemade footage. The platform's multimodality enables a participatory poetics, best exemplified by McNish's use of external visual material and comments sections. However, whilst McNish may be able to reach a larger audience on a more egalitarian, intimate and collaborative level, the inevitable cost is the commodification of this very authenticity in viral video advertising. This article suggests Hollie McNish remains ambivalent about these metrics to instead foster a community-based liveness between herself as poet, and the audience on the other side of the screen.

Keywords: archive; performance poetry; YouTube; liveness; Hollie McNish; multimodality

Over the past decade, authors have begun to explore the potential of platform literature, an emergent genre of electronic literature that is devised for, published on and distributed through online platforms, most commonly social media. These multimodal literary works translate the structural affordances of the platforms on which they are published (including the 280 characters of the tweet; the phatic communicative potential of interacting with Facebook statuses; the participatory forum of the YouTube comments section) into strict textual poetics that delimit the potential meaning of a piece of writing. The *raison d'être* of platform literature is to explore the expressive potential of these rigid digital forms; therefore, we as critics

must develop a suitably media-specific approach to reckoning with them. This article proposes platformalism, a descriptive formalist analysis of platform-instantiated texts, as a method of approaching these new texts. The article begins to answer James O'Sullivan's call for a 'quasi-structuralist' turn in studying electronic literature, and systematic scholarship 'almost artificially conscious of the instruments and technicalities by which digital artists achieve representation' (2019: 50). A platformalist approach draws from sociology and new media studies to describe the poetics of platforms and the extent to which their themes and content add to those poetics; in particular, whilst being replicable and applicable to other author-platform relationships (for example, recent "Twitterature" and, as will be suggested later, "Instapoetry"), platformalism offers useful insights into the methods and effects of performance poets' use of YouTube.¹

Performance poetry, a type of verse specifically composed for oral delivery and open to improvisation emulates its live dynamics on the multimodal webpages of YouTube. Through this site, a massive audience separated across time and space can have a shared experience that, in its affective ability to constitute a community, emulates physical liveness. YouTube pages facilitate online liveness by being multimodal, with plural modes of expression, visual, textual, audio or otherwise. However, while poets may use YouTube to reach a larger audience on a more egalitarian, intimate and collaborative level, the cost of doing so is often the commodification of this very sense of authenticity in viral video advertising revenue. This reflects Jean Burgess and Joshua Green's (2018) idea of a tension between two competing YouTubes: one geared towards professional production, and the other toward scale and near-ubiquity.

Over the past decade, scholars have examined the feasibility of applying the term "archive" to YouTube. The platform has been labelled an accidental archive, a broad depository, a Borgesian Library of Babel, and an illusory collection suggesting

¹ Such an approach can be situated within discussions of literary criticism's growing synonymy with a hermeneutics of suspicion, symptomatic reading style and paranoid mood, and a call for an opposing, more affirmative notion of postcritique (Latour 2004; Sedgwick 2004). As Rita Felski observes on the first page of *The Limits of Critique* (2015), 'texts do not willingly yield up their meanings [...] apparent content shrouds more elusive or ominous truths' (Felski 2015: 1, my emphasis). On online platforms, content is king and the limits of critique's depth-based methodology are made manifest.

its own mythic completeness that irrevocably changes how users collect media (Benson 2017; Burgess and Green 2018; Elsaesser 2009; Lundemo 2009; Snickars and Vonderau 2009; Strangelove 2010). Yet these affirmative interpretations overlook the many flaws of the site as an archive. YouTube is far from complete: the use of Content ID (an algorithm that compares pre-existing intellectual properties such as clips and music with new uploaded content) allows media conglomerates to scan and automatically flag videos impinging copyright, leading to vast archival lacunas. Moreover, assuming YouTube preserves its content in electronic files that do not deteriorate like a physical codex or manuscript ignores the physical servers and electronic infrastructure required for the platform to operate at great environmental cost. In addition, the user practices that shape the archive after the initial upload are hidden: the utopian ideal of an egalitarian democratic online community masks YouTube's exploitation of users who structure and taxonomize media artefacts. Any logic of the digital archive identified on the platform may, in fact, be a disguised 'logic of capitalist competition,' as ultimately YouTube is a 'machine for market research' (Schröter 2009: 343). Robert Gehl (2009: 45) labels YouTube a 'digital *Wunderkammer*,' where artefacts are exploited by entrepreneurs as much as exhibited to the visiting public. It is an archive of 'disaggregated classification[s] awaiting reassembly into something new' where users are 'powerful curators,' yet their attention is exploited by the platform through the tagging that structures the system and by external bloggers or commercial parties that link to the video (Gehl 2009: 47). This access to the archive also requires expensive computer equipment, precluding many disadvantaged people from becoming users.

The divide between seeing YouTube as either a democratic platform or a commodifying marketplace mirrors similar critical debates about performance poetry. In early 2018, poetry journal *PN Review* published Rebecca Watts' excoriating review of Hollie McNish's poetry collection *Plum* (2017), receiving international media attention. McNish reposted the article on her personal blog, responding to each of Watts' critiques in detailed paragraph-by-paragraph commentary (McNish 2018a). McNish is a performance poet who uploads digitized and digital performances on YouTube, alongside publishing print collections such as *Plum* and performing in person.

Watts (2018) bemoans the idea that 'the medium of poetry reflects our age, where short-form communication is something people find easier to digest or connect with,' as the ephemeral forms of online platforms jar against a definition of literature as enduring and timeless. The aesthetic project of poetry is often to reclaim emotive communication from the realms of cliché and meaninglessness. Yet the behemoths of Twitter, YouTube and Instagram have quashed the writer's desire to be innovative, alongside the reader's desire to read innovative poetry: 'the reader is dead: long live consumer-driven content and the 'instant gratification' this affords' (Watts). The implicit logic of these platforms to sell both products to users and configure users as products, commodifies any cultural consumption into a market exchange. In this system, short and straightforward evocations are favored as they can circulate easily via likes, shares, and retweets in social networks where attention is promiscuous. Watts, however, simplifies the politics of poetry on these platforms as either condoning or resisting their social media setting. Rather, YouTube, if it is an archive, 'is at once *insti-tutive* and *conservative*. Revolutionary and traditional' (Derrida 1998: 7). This article argues that performance poetry on YouTube does not condone or resist its commercial platform: instead, by using platformalist reading, Hollie McNish's texts are seen as ambivalent, compromising their economic subsistence in order to use YouTube's archival and multimodal poetics to create a collaborative community-based liveness.

Watts proposes that honesty and accessibility have become buzzwords for the subordination of poetry and the fetishization of the poet themselves. Hollie McNish's YouTube poems use the first-person confessional lyric and anecdotes to address social issues such as gender inequality, female objectification, race hate and immigration, reflective of the specific political enquiry and liberal ideals of performance (in particular, slam) poetry (Somers-Willett 2009). In her videos, the poet dominates the *mise en scène*, standing in the centre of the frame and lit from behind the camera. She talks directly down the lens to the viewer with a plain background referencing the vernacular aesthetic of webcam vlogging, a 'genre of communication [that] invites critique, debate and discussion' (Burgess and Green 2018: 81). The video resolution is low (360p), and the grainy picture suggests that the clips may have been filmed

on a webcam, reinforcing an authentic aesthetic of amateurism.² The positioning of honesty as an aesthetic priority leads to the assumption that poetry is a 'naturally occurring phenomena,' rather than something deliberately crafted (Watts 2018). According to Watts' reading, this befits the underlying neoliberal politics of social media reflected in this new poetic movement. Marketplace competition precipitates a fetishization of the individual and the breakdown of the boundary between artwork and artist, rearticulating Dana Gioia's (2003: 41) observation, made two years before the creation of YouTube, that 'the amplified bard' is symptomatic of a 'celebrity culture based on personalities'. McNish's decision in *Plum* to juxtapose poetry from the present with juvenilia from her past is seen by Watts as a calculated tactic to cultivate a marketable persona of the creative genius, as 'she curates her self-image as a writer in possession of her full talents from the start' (Watts 2018). McNish is a member of what Watts labels the personality poets, all of which publish and promote their poetry on social media platforms. These personalities skew young and female, with Lang Leav, Rupi Kaur, Kate Tempest and Hollie McNish listed as examples.

However, despite Watt's unifying classification, each individual poet has a distinct approach and aesthetic. Lang Leav and Rupi Kaur developed an ardent following on Instagram, an online platform for image-sharing (Kaur started on Tumblr, before migrating to the Facebook-owned site). Their work is strongly influenced by the visual culture of Instagram, where the 'limited confines of an Instagram post incentivize the bite-size lyric, the tidy aphorism, [and] the briefly deliverable quote' (Hill and Yuan 2018). Kaur's uploads often consist of a few lines of text with a line drawing beside. On the other hand, British poets Kate Tempest and McNish have backgrounds in performance poetry. Watts' generalization that both developed on YouTube ignores the key differences that set Tempest and McNish apart. Tempest's

² After July 2013, the production values of McNish's videos increase as the recordings start to be filmed in 720p HD quality. Uploads in this period, such as 'Breasts' and 'Anyone's Anyone' are readings from her book *Nobody Told Me* (2016), McNish moving away from the poetry performance and towards the marketed poetry reading. Two professionally produced videos for McNish's poems 'Embarrassed' and 'Pink or Blue' are uploaded in June 2016 and August 2017 respectively, both directed by Jake Dypka.

poetry has gravitated towards the music industry, with *Everybody Down* (2014) and *Let Them Eat Chaos* (2016) both earning Mercury Prize nominations for best music album. Tempest's centrally administered YouTube channel is categorized as an Official Artist Channel in line with other musicians and bands. It is, therefore, inaccurate to suggest that Tempest has any developed artistic and personal relationship with YouTube. Tempest's record label Fiction licenses music videos to the video-hosting service Vevo, which then syndicates music videos to YouTube. Straddling this line between music and poetry, Tempest's online videos show how digital uploads may not necessarily encourage an audience's intimacy with the artist. They refute Watts' suggestion that social media encourages hastily uploaded, underwritten and underdrafted poetic sketches.

By contrast, McNish's use of YouTube is similar to what Andrew Flinn (2010) labels a community archive. Communities can form around identifications such as ethnicity, faith, and sexuality, as well as shared cultural identifiers such as tastes. A community archive attempts to 'actively transform and intervene in otherwise partial and unbalanced histories,' as well as 'preserve and make accessible material that is usually not available elsewhere' (Flinn 2010: 40). The young and female social media poets seek to circumvent and counter the predominantly male gatekeepers, institutions and canons of print publishing. The impulse towards accessibility is manifested in McNish's removal of the restrictive physical obligation to attend a performance poetry set at a given time and place. In her pointed blog commentary of Watts' *PN Review* article, McNish describes how she

only put my poems online at the request of a teacher attending one of my gigs who wanted to know how he could share a particular piece with his class, many of whom would not be able to – afford to/be too intimidated to/have no transport to enable them to – get to a gig.

(McNish 2018a)

The YouTube user "Hollie McNish" has over 21,000 subscribers to her channel, with accumulated views across the channel's uploads of 4.5 million. McNish's uploads

closely mimic physical performance, although there is only one instance of a recording of an actual live performance on McNish's channel, the poem "Megatron (Transformers)". The performance is filmed as part of the event "Bang Said the Gun: Pagematch" at The Roundhouse in London. McNish describes it as a 'word wrestling show, so excuse the lycra and joke aggression,' reflecting the historical practices of competitive slam poetry (McNish 2014). These practices are influenced by Anglo-European vaudeville, televised wrestling, and punk performance (Hoffman 2013; Somers-Willett 2009). The role of the audience in generating a convincing performance is important as 'audience members [are] brought closer together through their common understanding of the events transpiring in the ring' (Hoffman 2013: 202). Additionally, the punk influence on slam poetry sets it against the literary establishment, and the gatekeepers of print culture.

Such mediatized performances are cultural objects circulating in forms based on the technologies of reproduction, yet with a similar cultural cachet as live performance (Auslander 2008). Symbolic capital is accrued by being co-present with the artist at the point of the artwork's delivery: the evanescence of the live performance that supposedly resists commodification translates into a form of symbolic capital through the cultural prestige of the immediate experience (Auslander 2008: 66–67). This resistance is futile, however, as the ephemerality of live performance can only exist in opposition to the replayability of its mediatized forms. Repetition facilitates more opportunities for commercial exploitation than ephemerality, as 'by being recorded and becoming mediatized, performance becomes an accumulable value' (Auslander 2008: 28). The potential for repetition is also the potential to stockpile future encounters with the audience, conceived of as a group of consumers. Yet the forms of participation and collaboration that YouTube offers in its multimodality are used by YouTube performance poets to return to the authentic and the auratic, in order to mitigate against the importance of metrics and commercialisation. If the individual YouTube page is a micro-level community archive within the larger macro-level archive of the platform itself, participation and collaboration are vitally important to sustaining it. Online community archives '[allow] individuals to upload

content but also to comment, enhance and correct the content and description shared by others,' encouraging the reader to have more agency and to collaborate with other users with shared interests; uploads therefore become communal videos of affinity (Flinn 2010: 43; Lange 2009). Texts in digital media are founded on the dual nature of sharing online as both a communicative and distributive act, whilst also encouraging the reader to reciprocate narrative flows (McCracken 2018; Page 2018). For example, user comments differ from print paratexts like readers' letters as the YouTube poem is always inextricably situated alongside and in association with its participatory webpage. YouTube's multimodal architecture encourages textually mediated social interaction, to the point that '*participatory culture is YouTube's core business*' (Benson 2017; Burgess and Green 2018: vii). The agency of the audience in co-constituting the text, facilitated by its multimodality, is an intrinsic part of performance poetry on YouTube.

Two of McNish's poems on YouTube that make the most of the platform's multimodality can be situated within an ekphrastic poetic tradition alongside Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" and John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Both "A Poem on Flo-Rida Blow my Whistle video" (March 2013) and "Merida from Brave" (May 2013) describe pre-existing media objects, imbuing them with meanings beyond being 'just a song' or 'just a drawing' respectively (McNish 2013b; 2013c). "A Poem on Flo Rida Blow my Whistle video" relies on the ability of the viewer to use YouTube to simultaneously access multiple videos. The audience is directed to watch the official music video to American rapper Flo Rida's 2012 single "Whistle" on mute, whilst simultaneously listening to the audio commentary provided in McNish's poem (McNish 2013b). Among other observations in her close reading, McNish remarks on the feeble eroticism of Flo Rida's central conceit of the whistle, described by the poet as a 'tiny pocket thing' (McNish 2013b). It is up to the viewer to use YouTube as an archive to search for, locate and play the original Flo Rida video in an adjacent browser tab, and then start the videos without lag. Despite McNish's assertion in the description that Flo Rida's video is more real than her own, the effect of this double-viewing is equalizing. Two videos with vastly different viewing figures (McNish has approximately 58,000; Flo Rida's is approaching 438 million) are afforded the same

space within YouTube's archive, and subsequently share the attention of the viewer equally. The primary purpose of Flo Rida's video – to promote music as a product to be bought or streamed – is negated by the act of muting, and the video becomes remixed into something new. In "Merida from Brave" (May 2013), McNish compares the animated character Merida from the film *Brave* (2012) with an image designed for the character's induction into the Disney Princess Collection. The latter looks like a 'shampoo ad,' 'standing still cos she can't move in her tighter dress' (McNish 2013c). On the other hand, the character portrayed in the film 'couldn't give two ticks how her hair looked' (McNish 2013c). McNish reflects on how Disney 'had a whole new audience of Merida loving mummies but your weird need to sex her up has lost you all our money' (McNish 2013c). In order to provide evidence for the argument in her poem, McNish provides supplementary visual material in the video player. By juxtaposing the conflicting Meridas side by side, the listener to McNish's voiceover can follow the audio comparison with their eye: for example, whilst McNish speaks of 'sexy eyelined eyes,' the listener can see the difference to which the poet refers (McNish 2013c). This multimodal poetics is an intrinsic aspect of affirmatively using YouTube as a medium, and McNish's ekphrasis is rendered more pointed by the viewer's ability to read across the site's features.

The social topics of McNish's videos often provoke audience responses, and the majority of these are positive affirmations: responding to "Merida from Brave," one user reveals 'I would have pressed like but I felt I wanted to let you know how much i loved this:) [sic]' (McNish 2013c).³ However, some comments voice disagreement with the poet. In "Cupcakes or Scones" (February 2013), McNish observes the double standard in condemning paedophilia and sexual harassment towards young girls, whilst simultaneously sexualising youth in adult women. McNish is 'tired of every female fad telling me I should still be a child,' an axiom indicative of a 'little girlie

³ YouTube comments will be quoted verbatim, with all erroneous spelling or syntax left intact. The role of trolling in performance poetry on YouTube is outside the scope of this article. There are very few instances of trolling in McNish's videos, and whilst it may be attractive to link virtual trolling with physical heckling, the former often references a context outside of the video whereas the latter addresses the poet themselves.

culture' that encourages infantilizing behaviour (McNish 2013a). Rather than ignore these dissenters, McNish replies to them in order to add more nuance to her own argument, and sometimes even intercedes in arguments between commenters. One commenter argues that 'there's nothing wrong with nostalgia,' and that dressing as a schoolgirl can be an escapist exercise: McNish agrees that fantasies and nostalgia can be positive, but she wants to tackle the myth that 'there's no fun in being older.' (McNish 2013a). Similarly, a commenter suggests that cutesy and sexy looks should be equally desirable: McNish responds by admitting that 'I don't think it's weak or submissive [to be cute] and completely agree [sic] with what you say' (McNish 2013a). Returning to Flinn's conception of community archives, authority is shared between all contributors regardless of being the original poster or a subsequent commenter (Flinn 2010). McNish draws these comments back into the text's totality by acknowledging them to refine her own argument, a participatory poetics afforded for by the platform's participatory nature.⁴

Users often link to another video on YouTube to justify an argument in an act of intertextuality. One user responds to "Cupcakes or Scones" with another example of infantilization: 'I only wish you'd included Brazilians [...] another way to make women look like little girls' (McNish 2013a) McNish replies to the comment, saying 'Yeah, pubic hair is a huge issue' before linking to the video "Shaving Grace," a poem about unrealistic pubic hair standards by McNish's fellow performance poet Leanne Moden (McNish 2013a). Not only does YouTube create an audience community, but the ability to link enables poets to share each other's work and reveal allusions, influences and inspirations and forms an online coterie. Commenters also use the archive to convey a reaction with intertextual humour. In response to a user's misreading

⁴ Critical discussions also occur between commenters. A user takes umbrage with "Merida from Brave," suggesting McNish's poem maintains an unhelpful binary between 'badass rough and tumble princess' and 'kickass glory winning queen' (McNish 2013c). Two different users then respond, the second beginning a lengthy correspondence with the original commenter about Merida's character arc in the film. Observing the lengthy discussion in retrospect, McNish herself offers a postscript opinion: 'she's not real [...] the author of her character is the best one to look at for this' (McNish 2013c). Again, the comments section is important in reinforcing McNish's poetics of persuasion and affectively constituting a community in conversation.

of McNish's poem "Hate" (June 2013), one such post links to the video "You are so dumb, you are really dumb, for real," a three second clip taken from the musical remix "Bed Intruder Song" (McNish 2013d). The clip is an example of a meme, a term derived from Richard Dawkins' concept of a cultural unit of transmission analogous to a gene: it is an intertextual digital item that circulates and is transformed online by many users (Shifman 2014). Whilst the nonsensical meme lacks meaning in its qualitative content, it carries affective meaning in how it constitutes a community of shared tastes, and 'the citational qualities imbedded in memes (as all instances refer to a shared core) make them a powerful social glue' (Katz and Shifman 2017: 837). The use of the ubiquitous "Bed Intruder Song" constructs a sense of community between viewers who are digitally literate enough to understand what is signified in its intertextual allusion.

When applied to YouTube's comments section, it is possible to see how the participation of users digitally instantiates the audience-artist dynamic of performance. This is also the case on McNish's blogpost response to Rebecca Watts, with commenters using the participatory affordances of the blog page to enter into a multivocal discourse on Watts' critique (McNish 2018a). The comments section is indicative of online liveness, and the ubiquity of digital technology in cultural consumption means liveness should be reconceived as an affective experience (Auslander 2008; Couldry 2004). Alongside the separate temporalities of diegetic narrative events and the textual narration of those events, the transparent visibility of digital narrative interfaces introduces a third axis: user interface time (Punday 2018). UI time can be measured through embodied interactions with hardware that are manifested through application programming interfaces and programming languages, the poem further accreting content as it is affected by users. This explains how a text can continue to accrue external links, views and comments in a self-perpetuating cycle for years after its original posting online. By being a user on a similar level to the users of the audience, poets such as Hollie McNish can communicate with the audience on a more generous level than in a physical performance space, due to the extended user interface time beyond the performance and its repetitions. This is equally true of the creation of community in an audience. YouTube comments digitally and textually mimic the

physical co-presence of the artist and audience, whilst also providing new and larger scales for that interaction.

Whilst this close relationship between audience and performer can be affirmative, it also masks the positioning of the viewer as a potential consumer, or product themselves. In her *PN Review* article, Rebecca Watts compares McNish's poetry to the fictional Alan Partridge's ode to the working classes. Whilst Watts uses the comparison to point to McNish's supposedly fetishized and overly didactic representation of the working class, using a platformalist approach with the Alan Partridge example highlights a tension in McNish's YouTube oeuvre. Partridge's poem, titled "The Working Class", is uploaded to YouTube under the guise of a poem 'by Alan Gordon Partridge' (Sky Atlantic 2017). Partridge, played by Steve Coogan, walks around the Salford Quays area reciting his poem direct to camera. The poem is essentially a list of derogatory stereotypes about the working class: 'knuckle-busters, ASBOs, car park fights, Poundland ASDA, bingo nights' (Sky Atlantic 2017). The uploading account, however, is the television channel "Sky Atlantic," with the Sky Atlantic banner adorning the top left corner of the frame, and a button on the bottom right asking the viewer to subscribe to the official corporate channel. At the end of Partridge's catalogue of harsh generalisations, he offers a single perfunctory line of reflection, stating 'I see people with dreams, with hopes' (Sky Atlantic 2017). The final screen reveals the video to be an advertisement for "Alan Partridge's Scissored Isle," a special one-off programme available on Sky Atlantic. Despite it being itself an advert, the clip satirises the use of performance poetry in viral video advertising to seem authentic or honest, obscuring a barely-hidden commercialism in the process.

Hollie McNish emerges as a dependable source of this authenticity. In November 2013, a 34-minute set by McNish at Abbey Road Studios was uploaded to YouTube by the official channel for British audio equipment company Bowers & Wilkins, with McNish performing her poetry into a vintage microphone from the 1940s. The video does not advertise a particular product: rather, it implicitly connects ideas of the company, authenticity and nostalgia to sell an appealing brand image. McNish's brand of authenticity was utilised again in 2017 when Nationwide Building Society began an advertising campaign called "Voices Nationwide." The creative agency behind

the campaign VCCP describe how 'each film features a UK-based spoken word poet candidly addressing the viewer on issues of community, security and family – values shared by Nationwide' ("Nationwide – Voices Nationwide"). This candid address to the viewer renders implicit the appeal for their investment. Whilst the Bowers & Wilkins and Nationwide examples are found on their respective official channels, Hollie McNish's personal channel has become a site of corporate patronage too. Three short poems – "Intimate Talking," "Screen Sex" and "Winter Mornings", uploaded in February 2018, each implicitly or explicitly are themed around sex. The videos were produced in partnership with condom manufacturer Durex as part of their #winwinorgasm advertising campaign. McNish sits in a bedroom (presumably her own), addressing the camera directly: "Intimate Talking" concerns a reluctance to communicate specific sexual desires; "Screen Sex" critiques film and television representations of sex as 'airbrushed lust'; and "Winter Mornings" obliquely equates preparing one's car for an icy road trip to using a condom ('probably best just to do these things properly') (McNish 2018b; McNish 2018c). In particular, "Screen Sex" supplements McNish's performance with a montage of humdrum domestic tableaux. A bathroom, a washing machine, and an unemptied sink all appear as McNish describes 'couples all across the country with our sweaty skins, imperfect bodies watching sexy packaged up' (McNish 2018b). These poems allude to McNish's 2016 publication *Nobody Told Me*, 'a diary of poems written during the first few years of [McNish's] parenthood' drawing together ideas of familial responsibility and frankness regarding sex in McNish's works that are commercially valuable to Durex's brand (McNish 2017a).

From the Victorian era, through the mid-twentieth-century to the digital age, poetry has been employed in advertising to aestheticize the banal commodities of consumer living and make them seem essential (Blair 2018; Chasar 2010; Harris 2019; Hayakawa 1946; Monllos 2018). Collaboration between advertisers and poets (in particular, performance poets) encourages the creation of patronage networks between creative agencies, commercial bodies and creatives themselves. In order to maximise exposure to the market, corporations design video advertisements that aim for virality and shareability: one aspect of this is to upload them to YouTube, where they can be repeated endlessly and linked to from other platforms. A+E

Networks' advertisement "Look Closer: Across America", produced with Samsung in August 2017, is a performed poem by former National Poetry Slam champion IN-Q. Set against a montage of clips of different people and landscapes across the United States, the poet earnestly intones that 'behind every stranger is a person' and 'if you stop and look close enough you might just see yourself' (A+E 2017). Viewers can access additional information about the cast of the video via a supplementary website where detailed profiles of the video's stars can be clicked on and read. The idea of looking closer, while ostensibly about dismantling egocentrism and fostering empathy for others, also serves as a manifesto for A+E programming, which is predominantly in documentary forms: for example, they operate the History Network and Viceland.

Similarly, Coca Cola's advertisement "The Wonder of Us", which aired during the final quarter of the 2018 Super Bowl, centres on a poem written by ad copywriter Becca Wadlinger, who holds a PhD in Poetry and Creative Writing. Wadlinger's poem is performed by a diverse group of readers alternating line readings. The poem concludes:

We all have different looks and loves,
likes and dislikes, too—
But there's a Coke for we and us,
and there's a Coke for you.

(Coca-Cola 2018)

The 2018 ad is firmly in the tradition of the iconic 1971 TV advert "Hilltop," in which a chorus of singers – an ethnically diverse group of different ages and genders – sing that they would like to buy the world a Coke and keep it company. Wadlinger 'wanted to work in that tradition, but to do something that would feel special, really bright and positive, and would again bring to life Coke's long-held values of inclusiveness and optimism' (Moye 2018). The result is a poem that offers a commercial product (a Coke) as both an object around which a community of shared tastes can form (as opposed to having different likes and dislikes), and as an individualistic identifier of

preference and personality.⁵ The apostrophic address to the viewer hailed as “you” in both the A+E and Coca-Cola advertisements, reflects how literature on online platforms remains generic enough to appeal to a wide audience, enabling circulation. Rupi Kaur’s poetry on Instagram has been criticized for precisely this: it is ‘just vague enough to appeal to the widest possible demographic’ (Giovanni 2017). The presence of demographics in critical treatments of “Instapoets” such as Rupi Kaur illustrate the extent to which poetic authenticity (art) and the personal branding of social networks (content) are intertwined.

Button Poetry, a Minnesota-based poetry publishers, distributes videos of performance poetry on YouTube and has over 1 million subscribers. In light of how ‘YouTube has begun blocking many videos from monetizing at all due to pressure from advertisers,’ Button Poetry ‘refuse[s] to be beholden to commercial ideas of what’s “safe” (“YouTube FAQ”). YouTube pays 55% of a video’s ad revenue to the video’s channel, which Button Poetry suggests has averaged to around \$1.50–\$2.00 paid per thousand views, varying widely across the channel. The majority of Button’s income ‘goes toward paying camera operators, editors, curators, and the other staff who help create the final videos’: each video costs approximately \$75–\$100 to produce (“YouTube FAQ”). For redistributing the remainder, Button has established a tiered, view-based policy. This supplements the Button Poetry Patreon page, where in September 2016 the editors of Button Poetry asked: ‘if a hundred random people can see these performances and fall in love, what if we could show them to a thousand? To ten thousand? To a million?’ (“Button Poetry,” *patreon.com*). All patrons (or Buttoneers) have the opportunity to join the community advisory board giving feedback on projects. Patreon is an online membership platform that enables fans to patronize their favourite artists, podcasts or content producers for a regular

⁵ Alongside Jay Moyer’s explanatory article on the official Coca-Cola branding website is a photograph of a handwritten copy of Wadlinger’s poem, sitting on her desk. Yet on closer inspection the manuscript pictured is actually the campaign’s print advertisement, a mocked-up script of the poem’s text where each line is written in a different hand visually articulating the spoken performance’s multivocality. The precise, pointed intention of the poem’s promotional design is obscured by the manufactured aura of authenticity.

donation. The platform reinterprets systems of literary subscription-based patronage for the digital age: it allows smaller and repeated payments rather than one-off pledges; there is no goal or limit that has to be reached before the transfer of funds to the artist; and the process is not reward-centric, as the content supported exists for free whether the patron invests or not (Swords 2017). Artists themselves take on the role of intermediary and serve a range of functions, and whilst bonus rewards may be offered, the core product is still available without charge.⁶

The act of signing up to the email newsletter is rewarded with Button Poetry's first ebook, *Viral* (2013). *Viral* anthologizes the nine poems that – in 2013 – received more than 200,000 views on YouTube, alongside new original work from their authors: Javon Johnson, Dylan Garity, Neil Hilborn, Rachel Rostad, Kyle “Guante” Tran Myhte, Pages Matam, and Lily Myers. Gathering together a series of texts that cumulatively has over 14 million views on YouTube at the time of publication, the book was seen as a riposte to ‘article after article offering autopsies of some small, misshapen thing the author called poetry’ (*Viral*). Yet, for this argument to have authority, the new forms of viral poetry that were being created were petrified within the confines of an eBook, distributed as a portable document format (PDF) file. Rather than existing as democratic live performances on YouTube, these spoken poems are raw material to be published in the rarefied, fixed and distinctly archival medium of the downloaded instruction manual, the eBook, and the academic article (Auslander 2008; Gitelman 2014). The viewing figures of the audience are economized in assigning aesthetic value to poetry and subsequently creating a representative mass-produced cultural product.

Preceding Hollie McNish's own collection *Plum*, a self-deprecating poetic epigraph describes an opposing editorial strategy: ‘as if a million views on YouTube/ means those poems are the best.../ if I'd shat into a bucket/ I'd have ten million views instead’ (2017b). The number of views is not directly correlative to the quality of the

⁶ However, Button Poetry's use of YouTube as an intermediary may be set to change after the announcement of Button TV in October 2018. Their content will be hosted on a closed subscription-based service akin to Netflix and Amazon Prime, and not rely entirely on the unreliable income of YouTube advertising.

poetry; rather, I argue that McNish uses the poetics of YouTube to instantiate the intimacy of live performance in digital form. A platformalist approach enables us to correlate the affordances of the participatory platform with the poetics of liveness they precipitate, emulating slam performance online. By developing a multimodal text over time, a singular video can draw together an audience community, all with common passions, affinities and interests. Conceiving of a YouTube webpage as a literary work, it is simultaneously a performance and the performance's transcription, constantly retranscribing itself as the video accretes interactions over user interface time. McNish does not, however, completely resist YouTube's propensity to economize every encounter with the platform. Her poetry remains ambivalent about the role that corporations and pecuniary interests play in a far-reaching and accessible medium that is, in itself, a subsidiary of a multinational company.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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