Flat pyramid

by

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Abstract

'Flat pyramid' is a multi-channel video installation. The project employs appropriated promotional and instructional video from a defunct pyramid scheme as the source material for fictionalized reenactment. The footage primarily consists of presentation documentation, testimonial interviews, and product photography—throughout all of which cutting rarely occurs between takes. Perpetrators and victims are seen moving in and out of their promotional personas, inadvertently making their disquieting intentions apparent. Through performative errors or deliberate rejection, people and things often struggle, fail or resist adhering to the scheme's ideology. 'Flat pyramid' isolates these moments and, consequentially, mimics the trajectory of the scheme itself: inevitable failure and collapse. It asks us to consider why we permit unsustainable inequalities and the fantasies that uphold them.

Keywords: video installation; reenactment; appropriation; found footage; documentary; pyramid scheme

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Defence Statement

Introduction

'Flat pyramid' is a multi-channel video installation that features fictionalized reenactments of appropriated video from a defunct pyramid scheme. Three looping videos are projected in the gallery, each showing a distinct component of the original media: presentation documentation, testimonial interviews, and product photography. "Next Success Group, Inc." (or "NEXT" for short), the fictionalized scheme behind this material, purportedly planned to use it as a means to recruit more members and funnel money into their scam, yet the videos progress towards moments that contradict their intended purpose. Recruitment presentations document people leaving or rejecting the scheme's aggressive sales pitch; testimonial interviews serve mostly as a testament to how participants' statements are altered or fabricated; and products are shown with no perceivable function, only in the act of preparation for display.[1] Through these outtakes, spectators become aware of a widening "intentional disparity"[2] between the footage and its new context, so despite NEXT's best efforts to present itself as a legitimate business it accidentally does the opposite.

Film Historian Michael Zryd calls this technique "ironic recontextualization," in which filmmakers mine the subversive potential of found footage to make visible the ideologies behind their production; although I believe, as do others, that this "found" function is not limited to the medium of film. Many artworks in both analog and digital video apply this technique.[3] When ironically employed outside of its original setting, the appropriated media can take on an ambiguous or figurative quality, but it also opens up to a "wider and fuller recognition of its historical contexts" (Zryd, 52). As a result, "the footage speaks anew as evidence—but less as evidence of an event than as evidence of the folly of the official discourses from which [it] springs" (51). In 'Flat pyramid', with no

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[1] However, this style of ambiguous, vapid product photography is not necessarily out of the ordinary in more mainstream contexts.

[2] "Intentional disparity" is when a viewer recognizes media as appropriated or "archival," through a perceived difference of intent and context within the text. This concept is outlined in Jamie Baron's text The Archive Effect, and discussed further in my appended essay.

[3] Walnes, Tilly. "Story Without End?: Found Footage in the Digital Era." *Movement Journal* 1.1 (2008). Web

means to enact its supposed purpose, the footage initially takes on a more ambiguous quality. As spectators witness more and more scenes that incriminate NEXT and compromise its objective, the irony of the recontextualization is made apparent. Consequently, "the folly of [NEXT's] official discourse" is clear, yet also unsurprising (51). If those not invested in the scheme or vulnerable to its sales pitch were to watch the footage edited as NEXT originally intended—without unflattering outtakes—they would likely still reach the same conclusion. Instead, these bloopers present something else that is arguably more interesting than catching a scam in the act: the people who do not adhere to it, a collection of rejects and protestors now assembled via montage.

Image Spam

Hito Steyerl's concept of "image spam" provides a useful framework to consider NEXT's documentation. Steyerl uses the term to describe the pernicious advertisements that occupy seemingly every available space in our media landscape, and feature near "flawless [individuals]… armed with recession-proof college degrees" (Steyerl, 163). Image spam, as she describes, is meant for most people but most people do not resemble those seen in the advertisements. It, in turn, creates a kind of negative image of the intended audience. Therefore, Steyerl posits the following:

> Let's boldly assume image spam is a negative image of its constituency, because people are also actively walking away from this kind of representation… Thus image spam becomes an involuntary record of a subtle strike, a walkout of the people from photographic and moving-image representation…Rather than a document of domination, image spam is the people's monument of resistance to being represented like this. They are leaving the given frame of representation (Steyerl, 169).

To boldly extend Steyerl's idea to 'Flat pyramid,' the footage from NEXT could be interpreted as a failed attempt to manufacture image spam and, consequently, incidental but direct documentation of the strike she suggests is happening. "Creatures of image spam get treated as lumpen-data, avatars of the conmen who are indeed behind their creation" (171). In the case of the Next Success Group, conmen are definitely behind the production. In presentations and testimonials, they deceptively promote their "revolutionary, new program" as a means for average individuals to achieve an extraordinary lifestyle: a recession-proof job with a 5-hour workweek and limitless vacation opportunities. It is not difficult to imagine closing a pop-up browser window

embedded with a polished "NEXT" infomercial, or an email including a flashy image of the previous success being filtered from your inbox. The spam-able potential of NEXT seems only limited by its technological capabilities.

However, the conmen of NEXT make a critical error in attempting to use average people, those meant to receive their spam-filled sales pitch, as "lumpen-data" (171). The testimonial subjects, being ordinary, cannot embody the spam they are meant to resemble. They seem genuinely uncomfortable in front of the camera and are anxious to leave the spotlight—particularly when they botch a "performance" or are told to lie. Their discomfort is not meant to be canned and is not contained well, if at all. The presentation documentation displays this discomfort at the breaking point. A man refuses the repeated and aggressive attempts to be "welcomed" into the scheme—only responding, "it's not for me." One woman runs off to avoid the camera's gaze when she discovers it actually *is* recording, despite the scheme leader's claims otherwise. These people resist or refuse NEXT and its attempts to document them and, in some cases, they quite literally walk out. In this sense, I believe that 'Flat pyramid' does not just ironically recontextualize the scheme's footage, but also, through post-production, assembles and "rearticulates" the rejects in its midst to celebrate their protest (180).

The Installation

The theatricality of the video installation similarly suggests an abandoned attempt to manufacture image spam and a process that spectators must enter. The videos are half-assembled and spread throughout the room, while the fictional space projected seems to protrude into the gallery. As is the case with many inter-disciplinary video installations, "the images' 'other place' and 'other time' are thus grounded in some way in the architectural space that the work is realized in, and in which the viewer's body also finds itself" (Peterson, 329). Objects and seating reminiscent of, if not exactly like, those on screen are positioned and lit, which makes engaging the space quite theatrical and "suggests that visitors be considered an aspect of the work's presentation, as a witness and interlocutor" (327). Spectators are, in effect, asked to take the physical position of those on screen—which they can similarly accept or refuse—to fully witness the videos and be "drawn into the work's fictional space" (329). The fictional realm of NEXT is active in the gallery, and its intentions still underway, although never realized.

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Consequently, the installation's theatricality creates an emphasis on "liveness," in which spectators "are sensually and socially present and consciously aware of that presence" (330). If visitors are already self-conscious in the gallery, this feeling is deliberately enhanced by the seating arrangement—particularly for those sitting in the area surrounding the dual-projection of presentation footage. While seated, they face an opposing set of chairs and potentially other visitors that are visible just below the screen on both sides. At any point, the spectator could be watched instead of the video. The same applies for the armchairs positioned in front of the product and testimonial videos. In addition to being quite uncomfortable, they isolate and distinguish the spectator, again, to be viewed by others. That being said, at the opening—when the most people were there simultaneously—visitors performed differently than the installation might suggest. As often happens, people felt comfortable socializing throughout the gallery, regardless of the seating arrangement, which, like the failure of the videos' original intentions, could be viewed as a kind of "happy accident."

Reenactment

As seen in NEXT's documentation, some people actively avoid visual representation. Hito Steyerl claims that the overabundance of cameras, microphones, and platforms for rapid digital distribution has lead to increasing skepticism towards recording devices. "Pictorial representation—which was seen as a prerogative and a political privilege for a long time—feels more like a threat…. [People's] instincts (and their intelligence) tell them that photographic or moving images are dangerous devices of capture… they can jail you or shame you forever" (Steyerl, 166). The threat that an image can pose resonates with me: many of the embarrassing fashion choices I made in high school are still emblazoned on the Internet, perhaps forever. As such, I am always much more comfortable behind a camera than in front of one. Reenactment serves as my gesture of solidarity to the anti-spam collective, who never wished to be documented in the first place. Through reenactment, it is possible to witness and support their strike, without crossing the picket line (to overburden the metaphor).

Oddly enough, reenactment in documentary films can, at times, constitute a kind of fraud[4] in itself. If well made, a reenactment can trouble the perceived indexicality of an image, and an audience might "assume authenticity unless told otherwise" (Lanthier). "Viewers must recognize a reenactment as such if issues of deception are to be avoided and if the reenactment is to function effectively, even if this recognition also dooms the reenactment to its status as a repetition of something that already occurred, elsewhere, at another time and place" (Nichols, 73). In 'Flat pyramid'—which engages with some conventions of documentary cinema—the "foundness"[5] of the material and its accompanying effect are simulated, but since the source is not publicly available, its truth-value is unstable (Baron, 49). A spectator has no immediate means to assure that there was, in fact, anything to reenact. They can only trust in my statement—provided they read the project description—or the confirmation from a handful of people who have seen the original videos. Despite the program notes and previous discussions, many friends attending the opening told me they were unsure if the footage was "real or not." Some only knew for certain when they saw an acquaintance appear in a video. Perhaps this confusion can be taken as a sign that the fraud was successfully reenacted? Either way, I hope that 'Flat pyramid' functions as art theorist Sven Lütticken suggests reenactments should:

> The true remake does not treat the past as a store of models to be followed but as a smoldering problem; the true remake is a haunted one (Lütticken, 136).

Flat Pyramid

Even the title for the project was appropriated. "Flat Pyramid" is a website and crowd-sourced marketplace for digital 3D models online I discovered during the research stage of this project. The name appealed to me because of the obvious structural affinity. A flat pyramid could suggest collapse, which also seemed appropriate

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[4] "Unlike the specks of craftsmanship that constitute white lies inherent to the cinematic craft—lighting, invisible post-production image altering, etc.—the deliberate dramatization of a previous event straddles the razor's edge between art and fraud" (Lanthier).

[5] "'Foundness' generates an experience of temporal and intentional disparity in an appropriation film based on the viewer's perception that a document left behind by its maker has been repurposed by another person" (Baron, 49).

considering the inevitable trajectory of all pyramid schemes. The website logo shows a pyramid as seen from above, like a square. Instead of the more typical conical rendering—like the figure NEXT audaciously used in presentation slides to outline the "corporate structure"—this logo provides a perspective not normally possible for land-locked individuals or depicted at all. If we were to apply this new orientation to the "corporate structure" of NEXT, it would suggest a greater power for those previously subordinated by the upper layers: now on the outside, surrounding them.

In a talk on "Photography and Political Agency," Hito Steyerl discussed the "reality" of images. The issues and questions she brought up, like with image spam, felt pertinent to my project. Steyerl suggests that images now alter and are embedded into people's perceptions of reality, stating:

> We cannot understand reality anymore without understanding cinema, photography, 3D modeling . . . all imaging techniques . . . because these constitute reality now. The world is imbued with the shrapnel of former images. It's edited. It's photoshopped. It's cobbled together from spam and scrap. It is post-produced and scripted . . . now we live within the after lives of images . . . The question may no longer be what is represented in images or how do we read images—these remain important. But additional questions are: which images do we want to become real? As makers, and producers, and co-producers of images. How do we change reality by means of post-production? How can it be photoshopped so-to-speak? How can it be edited? (The New School)

I see these concerns reflected in many ways throughout my project. Next Success Group, Inc. clearly understood how imaging techniques distort reality, however crass and exploitative their methods. Video production was one means for it to engage with the continuous churn of imagery and perceptions, which could further manipulate participants (current & future). 'Flat pyramid' is my attempt to intervene in this process using similar techniques of scripting and post-production, cleaving open the gaps in their scheme as a means to reframe and make visible a reality meant to be hidden. Despite controlling the circumstances around production, much of what was captured was still beyond my control. During our reenactments, performers quite often took on intonation, gestures, and overall delivery similar to the people in the source material despite having never seen the footage, only transcripts. These incidental performative reproductions suggest that the after-life of the original imagery and its popular references do indeed pervade public perceptions. My aim with the project is to contest or complicate these perceptions and create space for those that might not otherwise make it into the frame of

representation. I do not feel as though I have adequately answered Steyerl's questions, but pose them more as aspirations and considerations for the future. Images present ever-escalating challenges, particularly in our current moment when fraud is institutionalized and misinformation normalized. Using imaging techniques, how can we combat exploitative distortions of reality, while also presenting and realizing a new, better future? Perhaps assembling, amplifying, and supporting the resistance to exploitation through imaging techniques is a starting point, but there is much more work to be done.

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Project Documentation

Figure 1   *Flat pyramid*, multi-channel installation, video still, 2017

Figure 2   *Flat pyramid,* multi-channel installation, video still, 2017

Figure 3   *Flat pyramid,* multi-channel installation, video still, 2017

Figure 4   *Flat pyramid,* multi-channel installation, video still, 2017

Figure 5   *Flat pyramid,* multi-channel installation, video still, 2017

Figure 6   *Flat pyramid,* multi-channel installation, video still, 2017

Figure 7   *Flat pyramid,* multi-channel installation, video still, 2017

Figure 8   *Flat pyramid,* multi-channel installation, video still, 2017

Figure 9   *Flat pyramid,* multi-channel installation, NEXT logo, 2017

Figure 10   *Flat pyramid,* multi-channel installation, production still, 2017

Figure 11 *Flat pyramid,* multi-channel installation, installation view, 2017

Figure 12 *Flat pyramid,* multi-channel installation, installation view, 2017

Figure 13   *Flat pyramid,* multi-channel installation, installation view, 2017
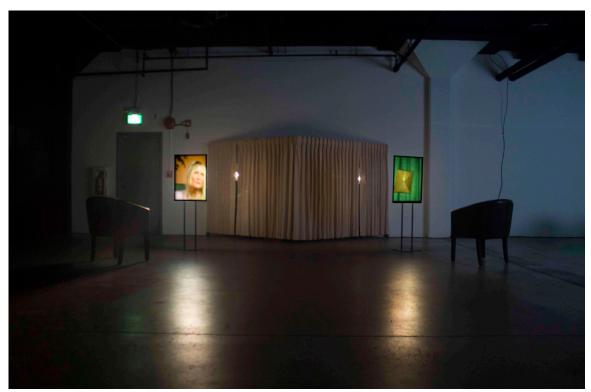

Figure 14   *Flat pyramid,* multi-channel installation, installation view, 2017

Figure 15   Flat pyramid, multi-channel installation, installation view, 2017

Appendix A.

Unfounded Footage

An editing job

In the summer of 2009, when in dire need of employment, my friend set me up with a job editing a promotional video for a health product. As I sifted through the footage I soon discovered the whole thing was a sham; not only the product itself (supposedly described as a placebo by its creator in an off-camera comment) but also the "company" selling it, which turned out to be a pyramid scheme. Initially, what I saw was fascinating: campy, coached testimonials and botched product pitches, all strange and at times funny. However, as I continued editing I felt increasingly discomforted and ashamed of my own complicity, particularly after discovering the testimonial of a stroke victim. After a few days of paid work I backed out of completing the project, but the videos, along with the guilt of being associated, have stuck with me ever since.

Recently, the same friend who used to work for the scheme's videographer discovered a hard drive including all the media they produced and gave it to me. The available footage ranges far beyond what I initially encountered, and includes over 70 hours of video in which cutting rarely occurs between takes—this is thanks to the liberal recording times afforded by inexpensive digital videotape. As such, the footage shows the pyramid scheme's perpetrators and victims as they move in and out of their promotional personas, making their disquieting tactics painfully apparent. After receiving the hard drive, I have felt a need to somehow "undo" the work I had done before, and use the footage or what it inspires to atone for my past involvement. However, any direct repurposing is mired in ethical, let alone legal, quagmires, and I have struggled with how or whether not to employ this footage at all since it could possibly do further damage, against my intentions. This paper explores whether any potential exists in the footage for its ethical and productive usage in an artwork.

Cruel Optimism

The source of this footage, which I will refer to as "NEXT Success Group,"[6] came to prominence after the financial crisis in 2008. NEXT (for short) claimed it was a business by selling "products" with no real market value, while making most of its money through the recruitment of new "sales team" members: the entry free for which was over $3,000 per person. The group toured hotel conference rooms across Canada hosting recruitment presentations, and consequently stole millions from thousands of people. Yet despite NEXT's particulars, it is by no means unique.

Pyramid schemes are ubiquitous in North America and increasingly elsewhere in the world. Through direct recruitment of family, friends, and acquaintances, pyramid schemes quite literally leave no other relation between people "than naked self-interest" and "callous cash payment," resolving "personal worth into exchange value."[7] They function like the bottom-feeders of capitalism, deliberately exploiting people's hopes and desperation. It is easy to make conspiracy-esque or surface-level comparisons between aspects of global capitalism and pyramid schemes, but I feel these schemes allegorically highlight many contemporary absurdities at play on a larger scale. Pyramid schemes are an abbreviated reflection of the exhaustive trajectory of our current economic system. They incorporate a structurally planned obsolescence (collapse), which is maintained through false hopes imposed upon participants. The intentional inequity of these schemes is glossed over by Horatio Alger-like narratives of personal success (or failure) that are entirely dependent on the individual participating.

Affect theory scholar Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" provides an interesting framework to consider how pyramid schemes affectively operate. In her 2011 book of the same name, Berlant defines the concept as a type of relationship that "exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (Berlant, 1). Cruel optimism is then used as a means to understand the consequences of affective attachment to fantasies of "the good life" (not just surviving, but flourishing), which

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[6] This is a fictional name, which was used for the eventual reenactments, and not the actual scheme's name.

[7] Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. 'Communist Manifesto (Chapter 1)'. Marxists.org. N.p., 2015. Web.

developed in post-WWII North America and Europe and are no longer sustainable after the rise of neoliberalism. People invest the possibility of their fantasies into what Berlant calls "objects of desire," which function as "placeholders for a desire to more-than-survive" (Berlant, Rorotoko). The relation to an object of desire can be harmful or self-destructive, and directly prevent the very possibility of achieving "the good life". Yet, letting go of that attachment might be perceived comparatively as even more painful, since it would also mean letting go of an anchor for optimism in life. Consequentially, a person finds themselves bound in a situation where they are emotionally dependent on something that they believe can bring them happiness, although it does precisely the opposite. Berlant claims, "many people read her books to find a language for the affective dimensions of structural inequality" (Berlant, Rorotoko). Considering the unequal structuring of pyramid schemes, this concept could be useful for understanding the wider context behind their success (and inevitable failure).

The pyramid scheme exemplifies a system meant to intentionally exploit cruel optimism for profit. What pyramid schemes really sell is the fantasy of "the good life" and a means for people to supposedly achieve it quickly. However, these schemes quite often prevent or inhibit its actualization for the large majority of participants. The language used by NEXT constantly invokes ideas of "the good life". The distribution system is billed as a kind of labour liberator: participants can achieve "financial freedom," a life outside the normal 9-to-5 routine. A poster they bring to recruitment presentations states, quoting one participant, "do what you have to for six months, and then do what you want the rest of your life." Even NEXT's products, like the travel discount program "Thrive Society," pitch the actualization of these fantasies: "Stop dreaming about a thriving life, and start living it with the Thrive Society!" The good lifestyle extends beyond the self: participants constantly refer to the ability to help others achieve the same, not just by using their newfound funds for charity, but through recruiting others into the scheme. Particularly with NEXT, using the backdrop of "The Great Recession," the good life is framed relatively to a wider landscape of economic disaster. It is a mindset reminiscent of airplane safety drills: when cabin pressure is low (in the case of emergency), you must first put your own oxygen mask before helping others do the same. These schemes manipulate a climate of desperation and vulnerability to lure "investors" against their own best interests, while claiming the opposite.

The good life that's advertised is, for most, not received. "The schemes can yield large returns for those who start them or join early on," and "as long as there are enough people to support the next level of the scheme, people above are safe" (Walsh, 17). However, as the scheme builds level by level, the number of people involved increase while the proportion of people actually profiting gradually decreases, and revenue from new investors is heavily lopsided towards the top of the pyramid. For most new recruits, it is rare to make more than what was initially invested to become a member (or distributor, etc). What they believe will result in guaranteed returns, quite often guarantees a loss. And yet, the schemes are so aggressive with their messaging, that the implication is that you are completely responsible for your failure or success, not the system. According to the organizers, if you are not succeeding, you are not working as hard or as well as you could. And thus, often people become emotionally invested in a system of victim blaming, wherein they see an opportunity to finally achieve "the good life", whether they are struggling or getting by, only by continued work with the scheme. Ultimately, only a handful of people achieve a "thriving" lifestyle.

Cruel optimism is also a useful concept for relating pyramid schemes to the larger affective infrastructure and socioeconomic context in which they arise. It can help "track the affective attachment to what we call the good life, which is for so many a bad life that wears out the subject who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it" (27). The application of this concept is by no means limited to pyramid schemes, but provides a more self-reflexive or empathetic model to understand them.

Unfounded Footage

I believe the media from Next Success Group illustrates this kind of cruel optimism in a very crude, but surprisingly intimate manner. In doing so, it exposes both the falsehood and belief in the fantasies it is meant to produce. The bulk of the footage consists of event documentation (both recruitment & instructional presentations), product photography and testimonial interviews. Even before they began working with a videographer, NEXT's production methods and presentations were already reminiscent of a theatrical production. The touring recruitment presentations followed a set narrative structure (order of events), setting (hotel conference rooms) and a script for both presenters and members in the audience to perform (in order to pressure their guests to

joining). These elements remained consistent no matter the city. Videos were the next logical, efficient step to reproduce this methodology. They also provided a condensed format to proliferate NEXT's own brand of "the good life" without requiring the attendance of the scheme's organizers, and thus could facilitate a more viral expansion of its membership. This mediated phase is necessitated by the scheme's growth, since its doomed structure depends on continual recruitment to avoid collapse.

As mentioned previously, cutting rarely occurs in between takes, throughout the entirety of NEXT's video production. Since all participants are essentially "non-actors," this approach appears deliberate: a strategy to capture any earnest moments, in the off chance they happen. Consequentially, the footage also serves also a sort of behind the scenes look at the scheme itself, and its cruel, hollow production of the "the good life" fantasy. Victims and perpetrators appear in unusually candid moments, which are often in stark contrast to the person they are attempting to present to the camera. This quite literally displays the production of the good life fantasy as precisely what it is, but also at times complicates the understanding of those involved. Many people making claims in their testimonials that are beyond what they've actually achieved, if anything at all. This is another crucial aspect of the scheme, because it depends on a bottom level of 'distributors' selling a "successful system", which they might have yet to succeed in themselves. They "fake it 'til they make it," and willingly depend on a lie for the actualization of their dreams.

The limits of "ironic recontextualization"

One potential strategy for using the footage would be to re-edit selections, specifically including those excerpts not intended for presentation, to ironically highlight the falsehood of the pyramid scheme and their self representation. In his essay "Found Footage Film as Discursive Metahistory," Robert Zryd frames the found footage film as a specific subgenre of experimental cinema, and uses 'found footage' to mean previously shot film material integrated into new productions. He calls this kind of strategy "ironic recontextualization", which is a mode of film montage specific to experimental found footage films that hyperbolizes their malleability and critiques "the discourses behind the image" (Zryd, 48):

Ironic recontextualization mines the subversive potential inherent in much archival footage's source as official discourse, whether located in the sphere of government, corporate sponsorship, or the entertainment/news media industry. The footage speaks anew as evidence—but less as evidence of an event than as evidence of the folly of the official discourses from which the archival footage springs (51).

This strategy could be a means of subverting the original intention behind the production of NEXT's footage, extracting previously hidden footage and ideologies. However, with this footage, there is a very thin veil hiding the ideologies at work. Even if I were to only use the portions that were presumably intended for presentation, the pyramid schemes intentions and beliefs are plainly visible for most outsiders. As such, I don't think that decontextualization, on its own, is a durable enough strategy to employ this footage artistically. However, the footage still has impact because of its intimacy, since it provides a voyeuristic window into a transgressive group. This in itself is subversive, but perhaps unproductive and unethical. Most people already have a basic understanding of how pyramid schemes operate (or manipulate, rather), and presenting the rough footage, particularly the testimonials, might only further ridicule or embarrass victims of schemes. My aim would be to, as Zryd points out, "critically investigate the history behind the image, discursively embedded within its history of production, circulation, and consumption" on a larger scale, which would likely require additional footage and alternative approaches to be effective (41-2).

Archival Trespassing

The work of found footage scholar Jamie Baron is integral for understanding how the NEXT footage might function if repurposed in a new text. In her book, *The Archive Effect*, Baron proposes a definition of "appropriation films" and the "archival" document as dependent on audience reception. In this framework, viewers experience "the archive effect" wherein they recognize appropriated footage as being from another time or another intended usage. Through this new definition, Baron also seeks to eliminate the hierarchical distinction between "archival" and "found" footage—the former associated with institutions and the latter with amateur usage—allowing them the same historical & social value, which is pertinent considering the widespread availability of "archival" documents on the Internet (or otherwise, as in the case of NEXT's media). In this framework, viewers experience "the archive effect" wherein they recognize appropriated footage as being from another time or another intended usage. Accordingly, the "archive

effect" is achieved through two modes of reception: "temporal disparity" and "intentional disparity". "Temporal disparity" is when a viewer perceives a then and a now in a single text—this is noticeable in the NEXT footage, due to the now dated digital video technologies and techniques used in production. More importantly, the concept of "intentional disparity", where the "archive effect" is achieved through a perceived difference of intent and context within the text, is quite apparent in viewing the raw video from Next Success Group.

The vast majority of the NEXT footage was not publically released, and was likely only intended for internal or self-promotional use, so any usage by me outside that context betrays that intention. Baron would call the employment of this type of found footage "archival trespassing": presenting footage intended strictly for private reception in the public sphere. The desire to see these private documents is "necessarily in part a voyeuristic desire—the desire to see precisely what we were not meant to see" (107). Consequentially, the transference from private into a new public "involves a certain amount of violence toward the film subject, who, by definition, did not anticipate this public use" (107). Even if the NEXT's subjects willingly participated in the videos, which is at times questionable, they likely assumed that the footage would only be put towards promotional & "educational" purposes. Most certainly, they did not expect any outtakes to be used.

There are cases in which this kind of filmic violence might be justified, like when documents are unearthed to uncover crimes or "in the service of historical knowledge" (107). However, there are times where this type of usage can feel more like rubbernecking than a productive new angle on an issue, history or institution (96). Although the raw authenticity of NEXT footage may be enticing, historical and present understandings of pyramid schemes are ethically unambiguous, and public presentation might consequentially err more towards this kind of voyeurism. Additionally, the crimes committed by NEXT have already been uncovered and prosecuted, so the public good illuminated by the specificities of this scheme might no longer have the same positive impact.

Beyond this, the actual use of the footage in a new text has its own implications—Baron claims that "the function of irony in appropriation films constitutes an ethics of the archive effect" (38). To formulate this idea, Baron uses the framework of

irony outlined by Linda Hutcheon to demonstrate two types of irony at work with the archive effect: antiphrastic and inclusive irony. Antiphrastic irony operates on a level that distinguishes an 'us' and a 'them' in viewing archival material, wherein the spectator takes on a superior position to those witnessed. Inclusive irony confuses or troubles this distinction, and consequentially produces a more self-reflexive or empathetic reception:

> The difference between these two structures of irony has important implications for how we think about our ethical responsibility toward the people and events depicted in the archival documents within an appropriation film. If we experience 'their' context as wholly different from 'ours' and our position as detached and superior, we may feel we have no moral or ethical obligation to the 'others we see on the screen. By contrast, when a more inclusive form of irony is at play in an appropriation film, we may experience a much more complex and ambivalent relationship between 'our' context and the 'other' contexts from which the archival documents derive. Indeed, inclusive irony, which confounds judgment or refuses to resolve into a final, singular meaning or value, places the viewer in a more complex epistemological and moral position (38).

My intention with this footage is to put it towards a productive aim. I do not intend to exploit or demean anyone, however, my intentions by no means guarantee the same results, as most of us are familiar with the materials that "pave the road to hell". Currently, I do not think I could repurpose this footage as is in good conscience. The implications, both known and unknown, might be too damaging to those involved or even myself. What interests me about "Next Success Group" are not its particulars, but what it exemplifies for all pyramid schemes and the culture in which they come about. The voyeuristic and visceral authenticity of the footage is not something that can be easily replicated, but the consequences of employing might not be worth the cost. If I were to make a work using or based on this material, my challenge would be to create an experience of inclusive irony while preserving the dignity and privacy of those involved.

Inventing Alternatives

Witnessed outside its original intended context, the odd blend of documentation and fictional performances places the NEXT footage in an unstable state between receptive modes of filmic identification. As Vivian Sobchack argues in her essay "Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience", documentary is not only a kind of filmic object, but also as a mode of reception and experience (Sobchack, 241). Her

essay and larger work grounding a phenomenological approach to media studies directly influences the Baron's framework in *The Archive Effect*. Sobchack discusses the spectatorial fluidity of identification between different filmic modes: "if we understand cinematic identification as a general comportment and attentive attitude toward the screen that is informed by personal and cultural knowledge, then one woman's irreal situation comedy may be another's home movie" (247). NEXT's footage slides in and out of being a document and a fiction, but more consistently it seems like the documentation of a fiction. This slippery position proves useful to a phenomenological understanding of how experiencing the pyramid scheme's footage might be alternatively employed.

As an experiment, I made a private video installation integrating the original testimonial videos as well as reenactments of those same testimonials using actors and a similar aesthetic. To my surprise, and without any context or notification, my peers who saw the work still perceived the reenactments as if they were the actual footage—no one noticed the difference. This effect was likely helped in part by the low production quality of the original footage, yet it still showed that the quality and experience of the original footage is, in some way, replicable. Considering this, the footage itself could be used as the source material for a script or text to reenact, distort, and fictionalize. This approach could be a means of circumnavigating the murky ethical waters and privacy issues of direct repurposing. These reenactments would attempt as best as possible to recreate the production values and aesthetic (luckily, relatively attainable with through the little means I have), but would allow for the possibility for inserting new texts, both actual and fictional. I believe that the concept of cruel optimism will come in handy here, as I might be able to incorporate other situations of cruel optimism into that of the pyramid scheme. This in turn might produce an inclusive irony in the work, hopefully implicating the spectator (and myself) in the same processes and ideologies of the scheme's participants. Additionally, since I will likely have to work with others, if I employ a more collaborative and collective means of creation, the process itself could represent a productive alternative to the cannibalistic individualism the scheme promotes.

Ultimately, what I have found is most uniquely apparent in the footage is the difficulty in applying the tactics and "script" of the scheme to actual people. Throughout all of NEXT's footage there is often a struggle, failure or resistance to adhere to its logic and performance. In this struggle, I see some productive potential in the footage: a starting point for creative intervention, which can move beyond just ironic

recontextualization. In writing *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant suggests that her big question is "why do people stay with lives, forms, and fantasies of life that don't work?" (Berlant, Rorotoko). To me, NEXT's footage, which came into being in the wreckage of the 2008 financial crisis, inherently poses this question to those outsiders who watch it: why would anyone be involved in this? And yet, it seems a little unfair to ask, if our society perpetuates much larger inequities. Maybe a more appropriate question is: why do we all tolerate these circumstances? No matter the reasons, we cannot afford to do so much longer, and desperately need to imagine and enact alternatives.

> In scenarios of cruel optimism we are forced to suspend ordinary notions of repair and flourishing to ask whether the survival scenarios we attach to those affects weren't the problem in the first place. Knowing how to assess what's unraveling there is one way to measure the impasse of living in the overwhelmingly present moment (Berlant 49).

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Appendix B.

Flat pyramid - video documentation

Videographer/Editor: Kevin Doherty

File name: Flat pyramid - video documentation.mp4

Description: Video documentation of the installation & opening.