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HARMONY KORINE by Daniel Arnold

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HARMONY KORINE

COSMIC AMERICA

With a career stretching from the pre-9/11 nihilistic hedonism of New York City to the gamified, small-screen fictions of TikTok's psychedelic everyday, American filmmaker and artist Harmony Korine is emblematic of America's aesthetics. His latest film, *Aggro Drift*, combines worldbuilding and AI into a heightened, hyperreal, dreamlike state, pushing narrative cinema to its glitching limits.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANIEL ARNOLD
INTERVIEW BY LIL INTERNET
ALL CLOTHING: GUESS USA

LIL INTERNET First of all, fins up. Rest in peace, Jimmy Buffett. It's very sad.

HARMONY KORINE Wow. Yeah. I was just listening to “Banana Wind,” this instrumental track that he used to play at intermission. It really put me in a good mood. You gotta listen to “Banana Wind.”

LI Yeah I've been in a Buffett whirlpool the past few days. I think we'll come back to talking about him, but I actually wanted to start by asking you about your film *Gummo* (1997). I first found out about it because of its cameo in Hype Williams's *Belly* (1998), which was like high-school viral in the pre-internet DVD era. And I've always wanted to know how that happened—how did *Gummo* end up in *Belly*? You and Hype were both young, unorthodox, New York-based film directors. Did you know each other?

HK I had no personal relationship with Hype at that point. Obviously, I knew his videos, but I didn't know him. And then, one day, I was in my apartment and got a call from Q-Tip from A Tribe Called Quest, and he was like, “Yo, your movie's in this movie.” So I went to the theater by my house, and they were playing *Belly*, and I saw the sequence with DMX and Nas watching *Gummo* in Jamaica Estates or wherever they were—and it felt like such a moment to me. I also just love that movie. I put *Belly* in my top ten of all time.

LI Absolutely, and it's such a “vibes” movie. It built an entire vibes world. Hype improvised a lot, changing the script all the time, which producers hate and most studios can't handle. And *Gummo* is also an improvised “vibes” movie, as are all of your films, really. Any theory as to why your work has resonated so much with the rap world? Hype Williams, Gucci Mane, Rihanna, Travis Scott... Tekashi 6ix9ine even naming his song “Gummo” ...

HK Yeah, I don't know. I think it's just maybe the subject matter—the form of it, the transgression—that embeds itself in that culture, which is a culture I grew up in to a certain extent.

LI I guess, also, you are a Southern film director, and Gucci Mane, Travis Scott, they're Southern rappers. I've read in recent interviews, though, that you're not really feeling inspired by film or cinema lately. Is it a vibes thing? Or can you say why?

HK Yeah, I don't even really know, but, over the past ten years, I've just felt more and more disconnected watching movies. I'm not saying all movies, but, in general, there's this sense of everything feeling so processed and boring. So I started paying attention to other forms of entertainment, and they felt more vital and experimental to me. With tech advancements paralleling dreaming, the world has opened up in a different way. Even the idea of what movies are—linear, two-dimensional—I think we're on the precipice of some type of format change for what constitutes cinema.

LI Yeah, it's like the social sphere is becoming cinema. TikTok is like an endless film edited in real time by the algorithm. And people are increasingly alone in front of a screen; it's like being immersed in a continuous cinematic experience. When *Spring Breakers* came out in 2012, it felt very “internet,” like the first big feature to acknowledge a new internet-driven spirit in pop culture: Disney stars turned into TMZ shock headlines, the rap surrealism of James Franco's character Alien, cameos by the ATL Twins, and the film's endless gif-ability. Your 2016 video for Rihanna's “Needed Me” and your newest work, *Aggro Drift*, seem to expand the worldbuilding you started with *Spring Breakers*. By contrast, *The Beach Bum* (2019) almost seemed like some 20th-century detour.

HK *Spring Breakers* was specifically modeled after pop music—it's elliptical; it has hooks and

a kind of pop processing. The Rihanna video was a continuation of that but also of “Florida” as subject. Florida started to become the most interesting place in the world to me. About a decade ago, I moved to Miami and was gonna do a movie called *The Trap* and spent like two years putting it together, but it fell apart, and so I very quickly wrote *Beach Bum*, which is this kind of stoner Key West comedy, a celebration of checkout culture with its drinking and weed and houseboats. I love the Keys. It's the southernmost point of America; it's the run-off. But, after that, I started getting more into gaming and worldbuilding and gaming aesthetics, which led me to *Aggro Drift*.

LI Watching *Beach Bum* made me think of the documentaries your father made, like *Mouth Music* (1981), which captured American cultures that are at risk of extinction. With Buffett's passing, do you think the dropout culture of Parrothead Boomers is endangered?

HK Jimmy's music is really the rallying cry for that, yeah. But I think it's still politically, psychologically, psychogeographically a part of America. There's still a type of person that sees conventional success as losing to the machine, right? And so, they're like, “You know what? I'm going to just look at the sunset and drink a margarita,” because wearing flip flops and checking out is, in a lot of ways, aspirational.

LI I have hope for a new generation of Parrot-heads. I'd love to see teenagers rebelling against their millennial parents by getting into that subculture—you know, the parents finding a blender, a tequila bottle, and a captain's hat under their kid's mattress or something. But I wanted to ask you, you've often spoken of “Cosmic America”—could you define it? What makes a certain facet of America “cosmic”?

HK I don't know if Cosmic America even really exists anymore—maybe there are pockets? When I was a kid, it was a strange, heady time for the country: a time of isolation and bizarre magic. America was still forming, and people didn't know what everyone else was wearing and doing, so there were still regional subcultures and, like, Southern accents—now things are just Southern-tinged.

LI You've lived in Miami since the early 2010s. As South Florida, in the past few years, has become a hub for the more scammy, more unhinged parts of the tech industry, have you felt a new kind of Cosmic America emerging? Or maybe just a new kind of American decay?

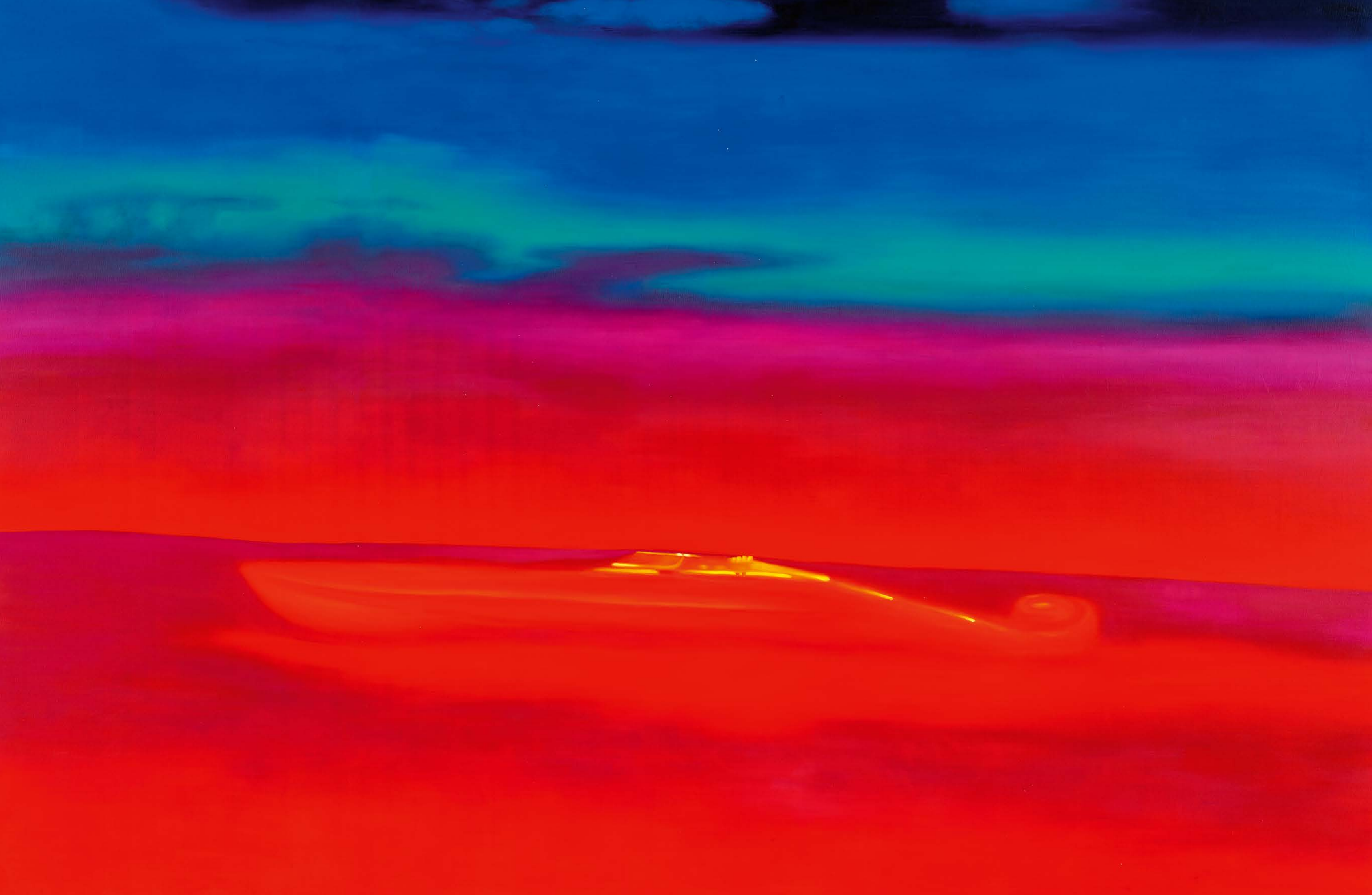
HK I mean, definitely in America in general, but also Florida specifically. Florida is strange; it's like science fiction, and its lack of history allows it to reinvent itself constantly. Like, when you say, “Hey, this is set in Florida,” almost anything could believably happen there. The state also shifts from region to region, but all of it under the guise of sunsets and ocean and palm trees, beautiful weather, scam culture, people checking out and checking in.

LI Sounds like the right environment for your new company, EDGLRD. Can you talk about what it is and why you started it?

HK Yeah, about two years ago, I met with my partner in the company, Matt [Holt], and was like, “I wonder if there's some way to develop tech that's driven primarily by creative desire?” Like, what if we put together something more like a design collective for developing new tools to make the future's media? So we started hiring gaming developers and VFX kids, anime enthusiasts, hackers, designers, and they work together on making all these characters and games, films, filters, everything in between, and







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also things in real life like clothes and masks and skateboards. And then we also have a lab for building the tech that the design collective needs.

LI So you're making both content and the tools to create that media.

HK Yes, also the tools. God, it's just as much tools as anything else.

LI I recently heard an agent from United Talent Agency talking about how fashion, music, film, art, the news, even politics have collapsed into one macro form of meta-media. Listening to your old interviews and reading your "Mistakist Declaration" from 2002, though, it seems like you've been anticipating this forever. Was it only a matter of the right technology coming along that made right now the best time to found EDGLRD?

HK Yes, because I was waiting and waiting for this time to actually arrive: a common idea of there being no delineation between any of the forms, an understanding that everything you're creating is actually part of the same body of work. But then I started seeing people increasingly ingest things in nonlinear ways, like people playing video games or streaming, and there's also music on in the background and some vaporwave clip on YouTube—like three or four things blended into one. It was interesting to me that this hybrid kind of entertainment was finally starting to arrive.

LI In some ways, your vignette-oriented approach to filmmaking—you called it "liquid narrative"—anticipated the liquid time of the internet. Online, things are not linear; they're holographic. But, also, there's a lot of 30-second videos, and *Aggro Drift* is the length of a traditional film. Is there something about this longer duration that attracts you, and will you keep working in it?

HK Yes and no. We're exploring some more fragmented stuff that we're going to put on Twitch or maybe run through video games. But there's something nice about working within this rule—90 minutes constitutes a feature film—but within that 90 minutes, are there really any rules? I don't know, but it's provocative to make something at that length that's outside the box and show it in a mainstream context.

LI Do you see any conflict between the attention span of EDGLRD's audience and the ideal duration for the works you want to make?

HK That's the thing, though, like my own attention span—I mean, if you look at Gummo, which was pre-YouTube, it foreshadowed this feeling of imagery and sequences and sounds and deconstructed narrative coming from all directions, like falling from the sky. Gummo was closer to music—or at least the music I was listening to—than film. And, I mean, my attention span is totally obliterated. It's been that way forever. I find it basically impossible to read fiction anymore.

LI Have you spent any time on the "network spirituality" side of the internet?

HK What is that?

LI It's a kind of transhumanist, vibes-oriented scene of (mostly) extremely online Zoomers, but, in particular, I thought of this writer and filmmaker angelicism01... *Aggro Drift* felt aligned in spirit, acknowledging the repetition and artificiality—even inanity—of video game dialogue and how even the most spectacular violence is ultimately empty. In this internet scene, there's an idea of finding the spiritual through an extremely online, cybernetic, deterministic space. And *Aggro Drift* ends with these lines—I think it's something like, "God is love forever."

HK Wow, I don't know about that stuff, but your description sounds amazing. With *Aggro*, yeah, in some ways, it's even a religious film—I mean, it's not really religious, it is about the complete absence of any type of God or any type of faith, a world so debased and drained of any type of humanity, and yet there's still, like, the vapors of the poetry of the planet. In the end, BO [the main character] says, "All we have is God and the love of our children."

LI Could you imagine EDGLRD operating in the way a church might, where people actually come together for the screenings, where an actual scene or subculture develops around the organizing nodes of the media you put out? Somewhere you spoke about EDGLRD releases being like a rave.

HK Yeah, I said "rave cinema" or something—media that's set up in a way that's meant to wash through you. What I was trying to get at was this idea of, like, gaming bliss.

LI You use the term "gamecore" to describe *Aggro Drift*. Given that your previous films are so much about the embodied experience—people are always wet and kissing in swimming pools in the rain—how do you think of bodies in your EDGLRD-era work? What happens to bodies in this spectacular gaming bliss—or void? You do hint at a way out of it—

HK Yeah, what is it you said, "transhumanist spirituality"? Because there is some kind of strange potion that's forming around this, yeah...

LI I liked how *Aggro Drift* was shot with HD thermal cameras (apparently on NASA?), so viewers, despite the film's "gamecore" computer vision, are continuously reminded that the characters aren't digital avatars but organic, heat-producing, human actors. A fellow Floridian, the artist Rachel Rossin, experimented with the inverse as part of her show "The Maw Of" last year in Berlin, simulating a thermal image of an anime figure.

HK For *Aggro*, the base layer was thermal, and then we integrated a lot of other effects and AI compositing into the image. Thermal was interesting to me, because I've always been obsessed with color, hypercolor, hyperpop, and this let us push into something that was beyond normal color. It's heat-based imaging and heat is, in some ways, like the soul, right? I liked the idea of making a film following souls.

LI Capturing souls. "There's still magic left" was a line in *Aggro Drift*.

HK Yeah.

LI I want to come back to you being a "vibes" director. Online, "vibes" are categorized into distinct, individual "a e s t h e t i c s," -cores, and -waves by the hundreds. But, increasingly, it feels like the vibe spectrum is maxing out. *Aggro Drift* accomplished a "new vibe," partly through the use of pretty esoteric cameras. Do you think we're entering a vibe drought?

HK I think so. I think Hollywood has no vibe.

But, also, it's never been a better time to create vibe-based magic, like taking inspiration from experiential things that have a really specific feeling. For instance, I recently went back to that Nestlé theme song from the 80s...

LI Yes, the Nestlé Alpine White ad that you played on stage at TIFF! It's this massive synth ballad that sounds like flying over the clouds at sunset after a museum heist where you double-crossed your partner. I found that my favorite band since I was a little kid, Faith No More, covered it, which felt like a glitch in the Matrix.

HK Yeah, there's a clip of them singing it in Brazil. I was listening to the original on a loop for the last couple of weeks, and it's like a vibe portal into the past, but also heavily indebted to the future. Listening on repeat, you can really feel there's a trance at work—like a vibe portal

“The question isn’t just, ‘What’s real?’ It’s also, ‘What’s not real?’ Is it all predetermined? Is it a game? If we think it’s a game, then it becomes a game.”









capable of elevating people to this kind of strange bliss state. That's so interesting to me.

LI That kind of epic, bittersweet synth pads seem like a key to an eternal vibe. I don't know if we've innovated anything more sonically affective than these synths, like Tangerine Dream's soundtrack for Michael Mann's *Thief* (1981). It actually makes me worried, like could it be possible to reach some aesthetic maximum, and, if so, could an ultimate vibe pack be decoded and re-assembled mechanically until it's empty, soulless?

HK Yeah, I think that's possible. But there is also the challenge of telling a story within that, right? Or creating worlds where you can dip into that feeling. So creating a moment is amazing, but is there a way to extend it, to make that moment into its own form of entertainment? That's something we're exploring now, actually.

LI So part of EDGLRD is something like a vibe lab?

HK Yeah, because everyone has access to basically the same tech now, right? We all have the same machines. So what separates us? It's like with classical composers all working on piano: the piano has a set of rules, but the emotion, how you play the keys, can separate your work from everyone else's. I think vibes are almost everything now for me.

LI Talking about the vision behind EDGLRD, you asked, "Why make one \$50 million dollar film when you could make 50 \$1 million dollar films?" I totally agree with this; I hope it still stands. After *Aggro Drift*, are you going to direct the next 49 films?

HK No, no, I'm gonna step back and let the kids take over. I need to see what this generation can produce.

LI I've been noticing a kind of Gen X/Zoomer alliance emerging in art and media lately. I don't know why exactly millennials suck, but I'm glad you've found some kindred Zoomers. At the same time, I think about this scene at the beginning of *Spring Breakers* depicting a lecture hall full of teen millennials, where the professor is talking about young people coming back from war totally changed. And all the students are just staring at their glowing laptop screens, which all change color at the same time. It's like they're already in the Matrix. And, a little later, when the girls are planning their first robbery, there's the line, "Just pretend it's a video game," and, towards the middle of the film, when the girls are blissed out together in a pool at the end of the night, "I wish I could click and freeze this moment." Meanwhile, in *Trash Humpers* (2009), there's a reference to life being "all just one long, long game." And, of course, you describe *Aggro Drift* as "gamecore," and it also has life-as-a-game dialogue. So I wonder how you think of the space between the real physical world and the dream or simulated gamespace when making your films.

HK Yeah, because we just don't know what's real anymore. Look at how many people are obsessed with the Mandela Effect [the phenomenon of mass collective false memory]. I mean, it really is a glitch world. *Aggro* is like the in-between, where some rules of this world push into the hyperreal, the dreamlike state where anything within reason can happen. The question isn't just, "What's real?" It's also, "What's not real?" And then there's, "What is identity?" Like, is identity something

you're born with? Or is it manufactured or developed? And how do those things coexist? Is it all predetermined? Is there—is it a game? And does it even matter? If we think it's a game, then it becomes a game.

LI In Miami, do you still see new things on the streets, out in the city, that surprise you and inspire you? Like off-screen cultural developments?

HK Yeah, I mean, yesterday, I was sitting in my backyard—we live on the water—and this guy was riding a car on the ocean. They were having a party on the ocean in this hybrid car-boat that looks like a Formula 1 race car. And they were poppin' bottles, blasting Future, and just, like, driving a car on the ocean.

LI I mean, people used to talk about the "internet of things." But, more and more, it feels like we're headed toward a world filled with "things of the internet." Like, manufacturing is going to get so agile that eventually it'll come the other way around. Stuff you could only imagine online will be easily brought into reality. And then, maybe, there will be some paradoxical merging of the real and simulation, and we'll no longer be trapped in this dualistic world of on-screen and off-screen.

HK Yeah, I mean, it's the death of the old and the birth of the new. I mean, we're definitely experiencing one thing ending now and something else beginning. What that is, I don't know yet, but it's happening.

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Works in order of appearance: *MANTIX FAZE* (2023), *PARADEEZ* (2023), *BBUNNY X* (2023), *UOU* (2023), *DRONE CODES* (2023), *ZION'S LAMENT* (2023). Image courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

Harmony Korine (American, b. 1973) is a multi-disciplinary artist and movie director among the most influential and innovative of his generation. In early September 2023, he presented his latest solo show "Aggressive Drifter" at Hauser & Wirth, Los Angeles, and premiered his new movie *Aggro Drift* at the Venice Film Festival (released under the umbrella of EDGLRD, his new artist-forward design studio).

LIL INTERNET is a Berlin-based writer, lecturer, and music producer working in media and networked culture. In 2018, he co-founded the platform New Models.

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