RESPECT YOUR SELFIE

by

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS
RESPECT YOUR SELFIE

by

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Date
“The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.”

–Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*

“By resisting the temptation to engage from the apparent safety of anonymity, we remain accountable and present—and much more likely to bring our humanity with us into the digital realm.”

--Douglas Rushkoff, *Program or be Programmed*

“And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you.”

–Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*
PREFACE

Upon entering the Kennedy Gallery in a far corner of the Georgia Museum of Art, one is confronted with a monumental structure vibrating with the pastel colors of pink and green (Figure 1). This is a manipulation—a billboard advertisement, a shop window. It has been meticulously painted to mimic two key sources: a traditional method of inking known to printmakers as “split-fountain” and the color gradients of early digital aesthetics. The former speaks to my origins as a student of printmaking, while the latter serves as eye-candy nostalgia for my generation and our warm familiarity with 1990’s computer graphics. As one draws closer to the soft-hued monolith, the symmetrical line of Apple iPhones comes into focus. These devices are presented through the language of minimalism—the standard of modernity—the non-aesthetic aesthetic that took decades to develop and perfect. And it is here that one realizes nothing is without careful psychological deliberation—everything one does has taken a lifetime to develop.

I.

“You will be able to read entire books on the Internet!” My mother explained the Internet in this fashion to me in 1996. It is unlikely that she was aware of the history and legacy in her prophetic words, evoking the sentiments of Internet pioneers J.C.R. Licklider and Vannevar Bush. What is more likely is
that I was a young bookworm, unsatisfied with what was available to me in my rural Louisiana town, and my mother was sought to remedy this for me by connecting to the Internet. I was brought up by evangelical Southern Baptist parents but nurtured on the dystopian fiction fed to me by my paranoid, politically liberal, “Age-of-Aquarius” grandmother—the woman keeps an AM radio carefully wrapped in tin foil locked inside her oven. This ideological clash—with the help of TV’s Mulder and Scully—succeeded with creating a singular cautionary admonishment: trust no one.

With Armageddon seemingly looming on the horizon—literally, the Bruce Willis feature would be released the following year—the Internet appeared to be another move towards the Orwellian Brave New World of which my grandmother forewarned. Absurd media representations of the Internet portrayed it with this sort of exploitative glee—cyberspace is cool, dark, and full of eccentrically dressed hackers (Figure 2). This representation of net-savvy youth as a kind of emerging intelligentsia prompted my elementary school to alter its gifted and talented curriculum from liberal arts focused to that of computer science.

We were expected to learn HTML—writing simple code and then plugging it into the one computer in the library connected to the Internet (through Netscape Navigator). By middle school, I had several personal
websites, all developed on free web hosting services such as Geocities and Angelfire (Figure 3). This time period can be classified not only by the low quality web graphic aesthetics, but also by its experimentation, the willingness for the net user to “get lost”—follow the webrings—and explore cyberspace. By the time I had reached high school, personal blogs created by use of a singular template were the dominating web presence. Livejournals, Myspace, and Xanga promised a more polished homogenous web experience in comparison to the badly aging Geocities-type web hosts. Blogging evolved further into microblogging—short bits of web content—with Facebook and Tumblr, prompting an abbreviation that sums up our current Internet needs and experiences: TL;DR. That is to say, “too long; didn’t read.”

II.

“I forced Google Maps to draw penises and then made screen-capture gifs from it.” This is how I described my initial foray into tumblr art in the Spring of 2013, to New York-based art critic and founder of blog Art Fag City Paddy Johnson serving as a guest speaker at the Lamar Dodd School of Art. Earlier that month I had been struck with a particularly virulent strain of the flu, which left me unable to get out of bed for over a week. Fretful, bored, and isolated, I wondered how I could “make art” without leaving my sickbed. In an attempt to cheer my doleful state, I entered several coordinates into Google Maps, which I
believed would create a directional path akin to a penis (Figure 4). Truthfully, this is the sort of base entertainment, alongside 4chan and reddit, which fills the Internet. And with a name like chodetrip.tumblr.com my experiment definitely resides within the territory of dick jokes, memes, and one-liners. I was warned that Paddy Johnson was humorless and cold as a studio visitor but this surprising tumblr log of Google Maps penises made her laugh, which led to a larger discussion about the tumblr aesthetic and the “rules” of net-based work.

Coincidentally, around the same time as my discussion with Paddy, art blog Hyperallergic and Tumblr teamed up to form the “World’s First Tumblr Symposium.” This event served as a public discussion of tumblr as a medium and a platform for projects such as artist Brad Troemel’s thejogging (Figure 5). My first experiments with art that belonged solely on tumblr began with holdmelikeababy.tumblr.com (Figure 6). This work served to pair the familiar imagery of the Macintosh program TextEdit with a suitable image. Each piece is also coded with a QR code, transporting the viewer to another tumblr. My next tumblr set allowed me to develop my gif-making skills, attaching digitized footage from my personal collection of home movies and overlaying it with text (Figure 7). For example, the gif—which sadly loses its livelihood printed static on a page—is of my long-divorced parents as teenagers making out on a couch. I attached the quote “DIVORCED: I’ll cut your dick off” as a glimpse into the
couple’s (and my own) future. Once I exhausted my personal life experiments, I made a vast move to investigate Google more fully.

III.

“Why does my stomach hurt?” Begin typing the words “why does my…” into the Google search box and this is the first suggestion the search engine offers for completion (Figure 8). “Autocomplete” is a function of the Google search engine that intuitively predicts the user’s intent before they have finished typing based on popular results. For example, as you type “alice’s adventures in wonderland” you may see other Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland-related searches. This predictive application is meant to save time for the person searching—an attempt to find the correct information quickly. This has been the sort of online function that has blended so seamlessly into the user interface that it is seldom noticed. I have always thought of the feature as a convenience. However, last year I began noticing peculiarities in the autosuggestion results. Typing “why does my” into Google’s search bar is auto completed with “anus itch,” “vagina itch,” “urine smell,” and “nipple itch.” I was struck by these embarrassing questions. It seemed as though people were more willing to give the Google corporation intimate details from their personal life rather than consulting a friend or professional.
I decided to test more sample phrases. “Why am I so” was completed with “tired, ugly, gassy, lazy, hungry, depressed, sad, fat, emotional, and cold.” What I gather from the search suggestions is that a high percentage of Google users are coping with undesirable situations, unable or unwilling to seek outside assistance. However, it must be noted that this experiment is not impartial as I added the “so” positing the question in a negative tone—not many Google searchers are asking “why am I so intelligent?” After searching “am,” I figured I ought to further conjugate “to be” by searching “why are…” When people are considering the why’s of this world, they begin with the curiosity of a child, querying “why are barns red” and “why are flamingos pink?” Then they progressed to “why are people gay?” and “why are we here?” This led to a series of tumblr gif sets. I replaced the letters with birthday banner-type lettering, spelling out each query at the speed one might type into the Google search bar (Figure 9). These gifs each belonged to its own tumblr—why-are, why-am-iso, whydoesmy, etc.—and each image was clickable, linking the viewer with the actual Google response.

The queries about humanity led me to ask about people and what I noticed were the stereotypes propagated in the Google search. I began searching using specific genders and races. “Why are black women” autocompleted with “single, so angry, so rude, so mean” (Figure 10). What
surprised me was the negativity of the descriptive adjectives. The list read like a fear mongering news report on the dangerous “black woman,” rude, angry, and, perhaps the most unforgivable sin, single. Google prioritizes its suggestions in terms of frequency and “single” was the top suggestion.

Hispanic men received similar negative treatment (Figure 11). This is the fascination with the autocomplete. People are not afraid to reveal their secret racist thoughts to the Google Corporation. These are not the kinds of questions people feel comfortable asking aloud. The paradox of this nation is that people as a whole, feel safe when hidden by anonymity of the glowing screen. The moment of illumination comes when a large population that is similarly searching is recognized by Google as a consensus. I documented this phenomenon as a series of 10 prints. The men and women are chosen from a Google image search, each being the first result of that particular search. Their eyes are obstructed by the search results, further removing their identity as an individual. Interestingly enough, several months after I completed this series, I saw an image from a campaign against gender inequality utilizing a similar technique by covering the woman’s mouth with a Google Autocomplete search (Figure 12). The aim of their operation, as well as my own, is to draw attention to the unspoken opinions and damaging stereotypes lingering into the 21st century.
IV.

“Snapchat with me. Let’s get ‘creative.’” Those vague instructions were posted in the “women seeking men” section of the New York and Los Angeles Craigslists. Within the span of twenty-four hours, I had received literally thousands of Snapchat responses. Snapchat is a popular photo-messaging app in which users can send photographs, video, drawings, and text to another user. The appeal of Snapchat is that media received may only be viewed for a maximum of 10 seconds before it is permanently deleted from their device—or so they would have users believe. For every program, there is a weakness, a vulnerability that allows users to “beat” the system. If mirrored to a computer, all Snapchat photos and videos may be recorded with screencapture technology. My objective was simple: record the anonymously sent image, reply to each “snap” using the visual language of what I had been given. I hoped that when played side by side, the aesthetic connection would become clear.

The application is well known for its use in “sexting” as it is anonymous and seemingly temporary, preventing the act of “revenge nudes.” Armed with this knowledge, I expected to receive sexual content from 75% of the Snapchatters. This number was arbitrarily decided upon, without any knowledge of a proven percentage. In reality, only one/fourth of the snaps I received were sexual in
nature (Figure 13). My replies were often purposefully aggressive, replacing the male genitals with phallic eggbeaters and butter knives for example. This allowed the sender to understand the confrontational nature of a “dick pic.”

Whenever I was presented with a snap—whether through image or video—I sought to reproduce the size, angle, message, etc. My intention was to show the sender that I was paying attention to their non-aesthetic. Their lack of visual planning would become the blueprint for the appearance of my response (Figure 14). I would acknowledge the male gaze, filling the role of the antagonist, refusing the return what was expected and only replying with what was given.

In my studio space, I created a vibrant yellow Snapchat room while encouraging two strangers to enter the space together in order to view the dual display of response and reply (Figure 15). The iPad videos were placed side by side on a yellow podium and were synced to play together. I did not anticipate that people would touch the iPads to pause the video (to take Snapchat selfies of themselves in the Snapchat space). This threw off the careful sync and thus the people in the room had a different experience than what was intended. Regardless of the “message” one may want to portray with a given work of art, the true message in any work is the response of the audience. With the Snapchat room, I had hypothesized that the viewers to be shocked by the
personal nature of anonymous chatting. Yet the biggest response was literally squeals of disgust towards the male genitals, followed by the irresistible desire to touch the digital device. This notion of desire and gaze fed directly into my thesis installation.

V.

“Whenever the intensity of looking reaches a certain degree, one becomes aware of an equally intense energy coming towards one through the appearance of whatever it is one is scrutinizing.” –John Berger

Like billions—literally billions—of other connected individuals, I have spent hours and days and weeks and months intently gazing into a screen. I purposefully choose my words when I state that I stared “into” it rather than upon it. It is no coincidence that computer software corporation Microsoft chose to name its operating system “Windows.” When illuminated, the computer screen serves as an open window through which to view other worlds. When the computer has been powered down, it is an article of metal and glass and plastic, not unlike any other physical object in our homes. The function is removed, as is one’s willingness to gaze.

The exchange between human eye and digital screen does not exist in the mind of the user until the computer itself participates—that is to say, until the
camera (an eye’s surrogate) is activated. As the consumer realizes they are being observed, they perform—posture is straightened, angles are adjusted for a more flattering projection, eyes are bright with engagement. When we are unaware of this observation, we have the potential to see ourselves as though from the device’s perspective. To see one’s reflection suddenly in a darkened screen of a Netflix binge, is to see oneself as one exists for many hours each day—transfixed.

With the digital gaze in mind, I proceeded with my thesis—the iOpen. The work was conceived as an interactive piece, one that could be experienced in at least three environments. The first of these existed as a wall constructed in order to create a narrow interior space that could be entered from both sides. A floating table separates the constructed room; iMac computers facing the exits, forcing the curious audience to intuitively move around the monumental wall.

The iMacs serve a dual function. As a display screen, they utilize the looping nature of gifs to mimic mindless time spent online (Figure 16). Monochromatic abstract forms morph in a cyclical manner, hinting towards hypnosis and psychedelia; simultaneously voyeuristic home videos capture vulnerable women, unaware of the camera’s gaze. There is a moment when the screen goes black for several seconds while a makeshift loading icon counts the passing time. The
iMac screen is purposefully tilted upwards in the direction of the viewer’s face, providing that shocking moment of mirror-like reflection as the screen’s light goes dark (Figure 17). This particular operation of the computer serves the interests of the viewer. The second function of the iMac attends to the gaze of the computer itself. While the screen is being looked upon, it is actively looking through the camera lens, livestreaming the viewer to a second audience on the exterior.

The row of iPhones lining the exterior acts as both mirror and window (Figure 1). The inner devices have been turned off, allowing the blackened glass to serve as a reflective surface. The outer devices play the livestream video from within the narrow room. There is a fifteen second delay in the streaming process that allows viewers to see themselves as they appear from the iMac’s unflattering gaze. This also allows outsiders happening upon the installation to experience the interior secondhand, to watch the colored glow of the screen change the appearance of the firsthand viewer and to witness their emotions (or lack there of). The third viewing experience comes from outside the Georgia Museum of Art. I created a Facebook event, linking everyone to the Ustream feed. People at home were soon screencapturing photos whenever they spotted a familiar face (Figure 18). The iOpen is about capturing and comprehending this moment in the 21st century. Topics it comments upon are
the ubiquity of Apple products, the digital gaze, selfie culture, millennial laziness, relational aesthetics, voyeurism, digiphrenia—how technology allows us to exist in multiple locations at once, and internet nostalgia. I set out to create an experience that could be enjoyable for all levels of comprehension.

On the lowest level, it is pretty; a feast of glowing pastel color. More complex amusement is given to those who “play” with the cameras. Once some viewers realized they were being watched, they felt the need to perform in various ways, some going as far as to flash the camera. Others see the iOpen as a prophecy for our present and future. On the night of the iOpening an older gentleman came up to me and told me this story:

“When I was a kid, they used to say that TV was going to rot our brains out and turn us all to zombies. Now I never believed that. To tell you the truth, radio just wasn’t exciting anymore now that you could see the stories and the news. I felt like my brain was working more than ever, was even more stimulated from watching television! I do believe that’s what happening with your generation and the internet. Y’all are going figure a lot of things out. Great things are coming for you.”
EPILOGUE

Art was the only means by which I could become a scientist. Each installation is an opportunity to study a sample set of individuals and make assessments as to its meaning and relevance. I began my academic art life as a printmaker, intoxicated-perhaps literally-by the chemicals, the machinery, and its significance in history to human development. As such, my decision to work digitally arose organically without a distinct intention. I saw digital art, gifs, social media, blogs, etc. as the next step in the printmaking tradition of disseminating information, of reaching a wide and willing audience. However, this is not widely accepted by the printmaking and art community at large. When I publically worked on tumblr art, people would often comment, “must be nice to get away with not making any work.” This archaic Renaissance myth of artist as tireless production factory still abides in some circles.

Visiting artist Hasan Elahi once succinctly outlined my philosophy as “lazy as a fox,” the Occam’s razor approach to art in which one does as little as one can, as clever as one can, with the hopes of maximum impact. This is how I feel most comfortable as an artist. I never felt fulfilled spending hours working in the studio. Rather I have achieved satisfaction in the hours spent in meditation analyzing the vulnerabilities in a given system. This hacker mentality, this mindset that “there has got to be a better way” informs my art practice for the
better. In keeping with this sentiment, I do wish this very paper could have existed in a relevant form to my own work. Only an artist without integrity would write a traditional outlined thesis paper in support of collapsing traditional forms. A mostly unread 26-page thesis paper gathering dust is an irrelevant document today. Yet my pride invades these thoughts and I can only hope anyone reading this in the future will not feel drawn to say: “TL;DR.”

“You don’t like those ideas? I got others.”
–Marshall McLuhan
Figure 1. iOpen (installation view), 2014

Figure 2. Hackers, 1995
Figure 3. One Phat 'N Sync Page, 1999

Figure 4. Chode trip, 2013

Figure 5. Cooking an egg with the heat of my Macbook Pro charger, 2013
Figure 6. *are you there god?*, 2013

Figure 7. *I’ll cut your dick off: DIVORCED*, 2013
Figure 8. Google Search for “why does my?”, 2013

Figure 9. From whydoesmy.tumblr.com, 2013

Figure 10. “Why are Black Women…?” 2013
Figure 11. “Why are Hispanic Men…?” 2013

Figure 12. “Auto-Complete Truth,” 2013
Figure 13. *The Snapchat Project*, 2013

Figure 14. *The Snapchat Project*, 2013
Figure 15. The Snapchat Room, interior, 2013

Figure 16. The iOpen (pink), 2014
Figure 17. *The iOpen (interior)*, 2014

Figure 18. *iOpener* screencapture, 2014