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A Manifestation of our User-Generated Internet

The Internet has rapidly become a ground for creativity and collaboration amongst its users. Through social networks, blogs, and other open source/content projects, information is produced not only by an authority, but also by everyone. What the Internet is slowly becoming is a database of its users.

It is appealing to see the web becoming a democratic world, where interactive data lives. There is also the opportunity, for the first time, to be seen and to show. This is our opportunity to proclaim our own fame, however, there is another side to it that completely entices our narcissistic behavior.

As we progress into the second year of the user-generated Internet, not only should we be celebrating the new democratic shift of user-generated content on the web, but we should also acknowledge how the drive to actually being on the web contains a heavily narcissistic approach. What users are acting upon are not only the opportunity to voice their thoughts and ideas, but also enjoying the opportunities of allowing themselves to gain some sort of celebrity-like status. In my final project, I wanted to create an art piece that spoke of us such ideas- both the good and the bad of the user-generated Internet. I wanted my piece to both celebrate the fact that the content on the Internet is becoming more and more a reflection of the user's thoughts and identity, but also to become aware of the narcissistic nature that mediates our identity through this technology.

In 2006, TIME Magazine, named the person of the year as “you”, where the magazine commemorated the Internet revolution:

... we didn't just watch, we also worked. Like crazy. We made Facebook profiles and Second Life avatars and reviewed books at Amazon and recorded podcasts. We blogged about our candidates losing and wrote songs about getting dumped. We camcordered bombing runs and built open-source software.¹

Grossman looks at the evolution of the Internet with enthusiasm. He tells us that we are working diligently to build the web. He mentions various ways users engage in getting they're ideas and reflections onto the virtual world. He is hopeful for the Internet, and is appreciative of the fact that data is user-driven. He points the spotlight to the users.

This same idea of celebrating the user's rights extends not only in the Internet world, but also in the art world. Several art installations today use processing and other means of digital and non-digital communication, which ask for the user's input in order to function properly. In Golan Levin's piece, *Interstitial Fragment Processor*,² for instance, the piece only works when the users themselves draw upon closed shapes with their body onto the plane. In other words, the installation is enabled once there is proof of user-generated content to the screen.

Installation art in its very essence celebrates the user and gives them control of the art. It's the users that interprets and functions the art, and there is a relative interaction that is taking place between the object and its audience. As Bishop suggests that, "...installation art presupposes an

¹ Grossman, Lev. 2006. TIME PERSON OF THE YEAR: You. *Time Magazine*.168, 26. (December 25).

<http://web.ebscohost.com.libproxy.newschool.edu/ehost/detail?vid=1&hid=6&sid=f1821917-9056-4852-98ef-f5720f486cd6%40SRCMS2>

² Exhibitions. "Golan Levin: Interstitial Fragment Processor, 2007." Bitforms gallery website. http://www.bitforms.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=category§ionid=9&id=21&Itemid=58&lang=en#id=97&num=3

*embodied viewer*³, meaning that installations seize to exist without the presence and the participation of its audience.

Both these uses of media and art give the user more control through a more sophisticated kind of programming and back-end technology. If looking at it in this perspective, there is reason for the excitement.

As fun and as enlightening as this may be, one must realize that all of these advancements are methods to entice the user to be able to see a reflection of themselves or to have a presence in digital media contains a sort of narcissistic appeal to this behavior. In the same issue in which Grossman celebrates the Internet revolution, Brian Williams writes another article with a different angle and points out our self-absorbed world and states:

*Americans have decided the most important person in their lives is ... them, and our culture is now built upon that idea. It's the User-Generated Generation.*⁴

Brian Williams notes an important observation of this Internet revolution, in which the drive behind these sources is the decision to give importance onto yourself; its drive is narcissism. In other words, what fuels this user-generated generation are themselves.

Another blogger on WorldNet Daily notes:

We're all Narcissus, staring at ourselves in the pool. From shallow entertainment to shallow religious leaders to shallow ideologues to shallow talking heads to shallow authors, actors and artists. It's not because these individuals are shallow. No, in fact, they are quite intelligent and educated. But maybe it's because the

³ Bishop, Claire *Installation Art a Critical History*. (New York: Tate Publishing, 2005), 6.

⁴ Williams, Brian. "But Enough About You..." *Time Magazine* 168, 26. (2006), <http://web.ebscohost.com.libproxy.newschool.edu/ehost/detail?vid=1&hid=14&sid=061fd11c-1565-4202-b9e6-cb7d75ced0e8%40sessionmgr8>

self-interest of capitalism will inevitably and eventually degrade into meaningless discourse, just like self-absorbed politicians demand flattery. So, I'm wondering these days whether the "New Media" revolution is all its cracked up to be.⁵

Kyle Williams points out that the fact that the Internet as it is changing today, is an entity of self-capitalism.

As my research began to unfold, I began studying more on elements of narcissism. What is its etymology and what does it mean to be narcissistic? Maybe looking deeper into the meaning would help me unveil several other observations of interest.

Narcissism, defined in the Merriam Webster dictionary is derived from the Greek God Narcissus who is described as *a beautiful youth who rejected the nymph Echo and fell in love with his own reflection in a pool. He pined away and was changed into the flower that bears his name.*⁶

The idea came from the same context when Freud used it in his theories, of ways in which humans themselves fall in love with their own reflections.

Freud describes that there are two behaviors of narcissism. The one most common to my argument is one described as “narcissistic object choice”⁷ where an adult falls in love with versions of things that are LIKE themselves, such as parents to their children, and homosexuals loving humans of the same kind.

For the Internet and computer screen, the phenomena of things such as social networks, would apply to this theory. What we fall in love with is the visual, or the reflection, of ourselves that

⁵ Williams, Kyle. wnd.commentary. “New Media Narcissism.” *WorldNetDaily*. http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=43056

⁶ *Merriam Webster Dictionary*. s.v. “Narcissus”

⁷ Freud, Sigmund, *On Narcissism*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) 18.

seems most like us. What we enjoy is the opportunity to broadcast our voices, our faces, and our reflections onto the screen.

This same theory of narcissism has been used to apply to other forms of art, which I used as my precedence. Damien Hirst uses this philosophy to relay the message in his piece entitled *Contemplating a Self-Portrait as a Pharmacist*⁸ in which he places a mirror that reflects a painted self-portrait of himself. The mirror in this installation piece signifies his undying love for himself and his narcissistic drive. To even deepen the meaning he writes, in red lipstick, the words, “I love you” to trigger these emotions in a visually specific way.

Yet another piece, Picasso’s *Girl Before a Framed Mirror*⁹, the mirror is used as a mechanism to distinguish one’s behavior. The mirror serves as a line between the beauty and the disgust of a being. This same message is what I would like to get across in a similar manner. Another inspirational idea, in terms of media theory that came to mind was a reading on online spaces.

Kristin Arola, in her thesis writes:

*...that composition bring design to a discursive level by considering how design elements make meaning and create spaces into which we enter and experience ourselves and each other.*¹⁰

She argues that the space on the Web is a “framework” of our reflections. Meaning, that although we do experience ourselves in whichever manner we would like society to perceive us in, there are certain parameters from the idea. There are frames that enclose and limit our reflections, much like my piece did with the mirror being framed within the computer’s physical dimensions.

⁸Lury, Celia. “‘Contemplating a Self-Portrait as a Pharmacist’- A Trade Mark style of Doing Art and Science.” *Theory Culture & Society*. 22:1. (2005).

⁹Paglia, Camille. “Looking at art.” *ARTnews*. 95:1. (1996), 93.

¹⁰ K. Arola. “Invitational listening: Exploring design in online spaces” (Ph.D. diss., Michigan Technological University, 2007) 1.

The same applies for the user. He or she can reflect upon himself however they chose, but the Internet, the space that the laptop provides, limits the users.

Using these ideas as precedents, I started to work with an idea of combining these messages using the mirror as a means of the user reflecting all of these ideas upon themselves. The idea that they're reflection is on screen, that users are on screen, and that there is a narcissistic means behind this.

My initial areas of interest, which were built off of subjects in a venn diagram, were: media, installation art & sculpture, mirrors, and the psychoanalysis of media.

From these ideas and precedence for research, I began thinking about how I really wanted to make a piece that was reflective of this theory. I wanted to turn this piece into a social awareness project.... I knew at least one material I wanted to use (the mirror), I knew the theories and messages that I wanted to be said (the psychoanalysis of the Internet revolution), and I knew in which form I was wanting to present this in (art form).

My original idea was to place a concave mirror onto a television screen and capture the experience of the audience onto a camera, which would generate the experience onto another screen.

I wasn't, however, speaking towards movement in television as much as I was on the web.

Several classmates of mine pointed this out. The object that I was thinking of was and is a laptop and not a television, and that my messages might be mixed up in the process. I completely agreed, and began following those suggestions.

As far as portraying narcissism and reflection, I knew a mirror would be the best choice. I wanted to encompass elements vanity and narcissism, much like Hirst's piece. I also wanted to induce a message of self-reflection and self-awareness both of which a mirror is great at doing,

as seen in Picasso's paintings. The mirror was helpful in several ways because it prevailed several messages into one. Many of my classmates questioned what the difference between this experience and seeing yourself on the web cam? And people started suggesting I even use a web camera for this piece.

I think there would be an underlying message of surveillance and an emphasis on the lens of the camera. I also didn't want the user to think they were being observed, because that's not exactly what the message was about.

I realized then, that a camera would not be necessary. The message would be completely different were that the case. It reminded me more of Name Jun Paik's piece, *TV Buddha*, but I knew there was an underlying message that was being called from the camera.¹¹

Going with the idea of the camera, my instructor also questioned; "How is this experience any different, again, than a web cam experience on Circuit City, where you are on multiple screens?"

I thought about it more, and the experience of the Internet, as a social network, is much like the experience one has when they are going out. You look in the mirror to make sure you are presenting yourself in a suitable manner. Your thoughts and the photos and ideas you put up on social networks, or the movies that you upload onto YouTube are quite similar. In both, you are making sure that you are "fit" and all right to be seen in "public" or to society.

I began to realize with this original idea was that there were several mediums involved, all of which were not necessary and useful to convey the simple message that I needed for it to convey.

Everything changed, and the more and more I thought about it, the more basic my idea became.

I thought about objects that were synonymous with the Internet, and of course, a computer or laptop would be the object of choice. So that was my first step in finding such pieces.

¹¹ Smith, Walter. *Name June Paik's TV Buddha as Buddhist Art*. *Religion & The Arts* 4, 3 (2000): 359-73.

My initial intentions and beginning prototypes included a concave mirror in the laptop, but I realized several flaws almost instantly: first and foremost, placing a concave mirror does not make my piece look or feel organic. It would almost look displaced and unnecessary. What I want to reveal is an experience as close to reality as I could. I want to recreate the experience of being on the Internet, sort of an identical experience, without having actually having to point it out.

I decided to invest in several mirror sizes that fit as closely to the screen as possible. It seemed with every purchase, the mirror was uneven, or that the mirror was a centimeter or two off. I took it to show my classmates, and instantly, the first thing they said was to try to get the mirror to look as precise as possible.

After I went to a professional mirror cutter who helped me frame this right, I returned a second time to the class. Only this time, I was asking them, what they thought the message of the art piece was. The message was clear almost instantly with just the mirror. Flynn Murray, a classmate of mine mentioned how just by seeing a mirror outside its context makes you instantly become “aware of your presence.” Daniel Kaplan, another classmate looked at it in a more obvious way and reacted to it with narcissistic enthusiasm: “Look! It’s me on the computer...oh, and you in the background.”

I also saw another message unfolding, one of the framework of the mirrors. The limitations of the reflection were the parameters that the laptop had set. What I was also aiming to prove was that in this democratic world, there still existed some sort of boundaries and controls. This went perfectly with the theory of online spaces as noted by Arola.

I also asked a couple of my friends to tell me what they thought of the piece. Their first reaction to it was how they didn't really read art, but once they saw it, it was comfortable for them to read.

Possible suggestions for the piece were then discussed. A Philosophy grad major suggested I write a quote about narcissism on the keyboard, while others suggested I paint it and write "ME ME ME..." extensively. At the moment, it seemed like a brilliant idea, but I knew my 'palette' was a bit permanent, so I tested on a computer keyboard at first to see the results.

It was an absolute disaster, and I was so thankful to have thought to paint it onto another keyboard beforehand.

The more complete the piece became, the more interpretations I kept getting. Most people said how they loved how the computer was almost like a resemblance to a compact for make up.

Others enjoyed the idea that by replacing the buttons on the keyboard you could interpret the way the use of the Internet was in your hands in your creative power.

In the end, I asked the class another time, and they all believe that the best way to use the keyboard was to keep it subtle. Simply rearranging the keyboard buttons would be message enough. I tested it out and found, through several days of non-stop eBay searches and numerous stops in old computer stores an extra keyboard that was similar to the keys of my laptop. I took additional letters that were needed and added an "a", "e", "n" and "t", which resulted in the keyboard being read as "Build fame & content."

I'm sure the look of the keyboard would be something I'd like to work on, as well as maybe investing in a nicer, more up-to-date laptop. Financially and time-wise, this was beyond my means.

The biggest challenge for me in the process of prototyping was figuring out ways to turn my idea into a reality, and the discomfort I felt of being so simplistic. There was lots of legwork that needed to be done, in terms of gathering the material. I went to several places to find old, inexpensive laptops, I had to find factories uptown to find professional mirror cutters to get the exact dimensions I needed for the screen to seem real... I also had to investigate and attempt to find more keyboard buttons for the message to be relayed. The material and my canvas that I was using was quite expensive, and for financial purposes, as well as the fear of not being able to reconfigure the appearance onto another screen was difficult for me.

In the end, however, I truly do believe I made a strong statement and really intriguing art piece. I also enjoy how I used elements of Design to create art and used the face of Technology to display it. Aesthetically, it looks pretty believable and I can almost see this being an extension of The New Museum's "Unmonumental Objects" exhibition, where artists celebrate materials that one sees in everyday life, and how the construction of art was analogous to DIY projects at home. Today, it seems that the paintbrush can be a glue stick and your canvas can pretty much be anything else.

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