

Spring 5-11-2018

# Staying Tuned

Johnathan Welsh

Johnathan.Welsh@Colorado.EDU

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholar.colorado.edu/art\\_mfa](https://scholar.colorado.edu/art_mfa)



Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Welsh, Johnathan, "Staying Tuned" (2018). *Art Practices MFA Theses*. 8.  
[https://scholar.colorado.edu/art\\_mfa/8](https://scholar.colorado.edu/art_mfa/8)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Art and Art History at CU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Art Practices MFA Theses by an authorized administrator of CU Scholar. For more information, please contact [cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu](mailto:cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu).

STAYING TUNED

by

JOHNATHAN WELSH

B.F.A., Kennesaw State University, 2011

A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
Department of Art & Art History  
2018

This thesis entitled:

Staying Tuned

written by Johnathan Welsh

has been approved by the Department of Art and Art History

Date \_\_\_\_\_

---

(Mike Womack)

---

(Alvin Gregorio)

---

(Melinda Barlow)

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above-mentioned discipline.

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the connection of current political outrage and its relationship to the use of social media. The composition of news reporting through media is explored along with the way in which news is consumed in America today. I also discuss observations about the way people behave online and the new languages they are using to communicate with one another. Finally I explain the reason why I chose the specific images I did for my thesis paintings along with the insight I gained from this research as a whole.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. COLLAGE	5
III. STAY TUNED	7
IV. FUD	11
V. DIGITAL SPACE	13
VI. ICONS	17
VII. IMAGES	20
VIII. CONCLUSION	25
IX. BIBLIOGRAPHY	27



## Introduction

“At least two thirds of our miseries spring from human stupidity, human malice, and those great motivators and justifiers of malice and stupidity: idealism, dogmatism and proselytizing zeal on behalf of religious - or political idols.” - Aldus Huxley<sup>1</sup>

You might call me a pessimist because when I look out into the world, I see the idealism, dogmatism, and zeal Aldus Huxley described so often in his books and essays. I see ignorance, irrationality, and conflict everywhere. Riots, protests that turn deadly, mass shootings, and screaming matches are regularly reported on popular news programs. Marxists, fourth wave feminists, postmodernists, and other well-intentioned left-leaning people have embraced the religion of identity politics. On the opposite, right-leaning side of the political coin, there is a renewal of white supremacy and xenophobic nationalism, its version of identity politics. I see dogmatism and hysteria around the issues these warring tribes care most about, driving Americans further away from each other. This narrowing of attention to our own values and failure to recognize our universal humanity has created a more polarized, fractured, and tribal nation. The growing anger and outrage from these groups and the medias' growing role in exacerbating these feelings are what my paintings embody.

These divisions combined with our tendency to avoid discomfort and the new ability to filter what we experience through the use of the Internet and social media has

---

<sup>1</sup> Aldous Huxley, Robert S. Baker, and James Sexton, *Complete Essays. 1920-1925* (2000).

created a nation where every person has the power to create, what the MIT technology specialist Nicholas Negroponte has coined, the *Daily Me*.<sup>2</sup> The *Daily Me* is a term that is used to describe a virtual daily newspaper customized for an individual's taste. I cannot think of a more accurate description of the personalized newsfeeds found on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, or the ability to choose news from providers that cater to our specific values and interests such as Fox News catering to a conservative audience or Huffington Post which appeals to a more progressive demographic. We have created tools that allow us to indulge in a new age of information hedonism and runaway confirmation bias. Even though this new world building tool seems like a fantastic accomplishment, I fear that it comes with a great deal of unintended consequences of which we should all be aware.

The introduction of new, seemingly beneficial, technologies has historically created new problems for humans to solve and the invention of the Internet and more recently social media platforms are no different in that regard. We are just now beginning to measure the effects on our well being from having this powerful new tool and early results paint a bleak future if we continue using it as it currently exists. My goal is to investigate and report back on this issue primarily because of my own personal interest in these technologies but also because I believe in the responsibility of artists to spend their time looking in places many people ignore as any good journalist does.

This feeling of responsibility is what has brought me to focus on current events. I have never been much of a romantic so the historical past never really appealed to me and

---

<sup>2</sup> Fred Hapgood, (November 1995). "The Media Lab at 10". Wired.  
<https://www.wired.com/1995/11/media/> (accessed March 1, 2018).

the future feels too open-ended for me to find anything to grasp onto to explore. This inability to access the past or the future in any meaningful way has left me with the need to always scour the present for my content. The reason that I choose to focus on politics is because I believe politics is where all of the most exciting questions exist that makes' human beings unique. Politics is where we debate the issues about how we should treat each other, organize ourselves, and fundamentally try to reason out how to spend our time so as to maximize human flourishing. Politics connects to every social issue, philosophy, science, and technology. It is the connective tissue that binds all human endeavors together. It is like Pericles said, "Just because you do not take an interest in politics does not mean that politics won't take an interest in you." It is woven into everything humans do and that allows me a great deal of freedom to explore many topics. I like the openness of the space it allows my mind to wander.

In addition to my interest in reporting on the world of the media and its influence on our politics, I also set out to make paintings that describe a world in which humans use visual symbols to speak to one another. Realism, text, and graphic elements intertwine into a complex language of symbols that humans interpret and interact with daily. The combination of styles of visual communication within my paintings is a reflection of the world I see through screens everyday. It is the landscape and setting in which many of the experiences of our modern world are taking place. Practically every screen we interact with regularly mixes text, graphics, natural space and the figure and I wanted my work to reflect that.

The overlap of political interest combined with the style of communication I am describing is notable within the field of journalism and news reporting. News reporting, whether viewed on a television screen, computer screen, or cell phone screen is either actively using all of these elements, provides a space for the viewer to use them as in the case of comment sections, or both. Consider the typical composition of a news report seen today. There is a reporter seated behind a desk so that we see them from the waist up, usually with a small window or box with a graphic illustration in the upper left or right hand of the screen and text boxes, called crawlers, scrolling at the top or bottom of the frame. I wanted to recreate this combination within my work to reinforce its connection to the ways news is presented today.

I wanted the paintings to reflect the composition of the news as well as the components I thought explained the way I view news. The compositions of the paintings are not a one to one recreation but an interpretation of the elements within it such as the representation of a figure. I do not have waist high portraits. Instead I elected to only use the forearm and hand to represent the figure. Another component that is often apart of news reporting is the use of boxes that contain scrolling text. I wanted to give an impression of scrolling text as well and used the device of repetition to try to recreate the effect of movement. Another component I wanted to add is a flat graphic. In news reporting graphics are used frequently to quickly add a visual aid to the story that is being reported on. All manner of images have been used for graphics over the years but I wanted to use one that connected itself to pop culture as well as to how the public interacts with media. This led me to the icon of the thumbs up but because I wanted to talk about the

negativity of reporting and the role of public opinion on what gets reported I decided to flip it into a thumbs down.

## **Collage**

Text, images, magazines, screensavers, posters, television screens, road signs, billboards, etc. all overlap in some combination to create my visual landscape on a daily basis. It is particularly visible among the multitude of screens with which I come into contact, their various windows open to view the cacophony of images and words available at all times. It is almost impossible to avoid screens today.

When thinking about how the world is a massive collage and its representation in the media, I am reminded of this quote from Bruce Conner, himself an assemblage artist who worked across many mediums and is credited as the father of music videos:

"My films are the 'real world.' It's not fantasy. It's not a found object. This is the stuff that I see as the phenomena around me. At least that's what I call the 'Real World.' We have 'Reality Shows' presented to us regularly. The most prevalent one is the five minutes 'reality show' – the five-minute news. If you listen to a news program on the radio, it may report ten events in a row. It's no different than 'A Movie.' Something absurd next to a catastrophe next to speculation next to a kind of instruction on how you're supposed to think about some political or social thing. You know: 'President Bush had lunch with his wife and went to Kennebunkport, Maine, today. Fifty thousand people died in Bangladesh in a horrible disaster. Sony says they're going to

produce a new three-dimensional hologram television set which will be released sometime in the 21st century.' GaGa, GaGa. I mean this is comic book time."<sup>3</sup>

Conner's words mirror my sentiments about the world viewed through media at this moment. It does feel like my visual experience is a collage of random visual events assembled together without reason. I find it more and more difficult to interface with all that the world has to offer up and the options of where to spend my time and attention has only become more strained with the spectacle that is our modern day media.

Along with the explosion of content to view we are also experiencing an explosion of the number of screens with which to view that content further exacerbating the fracturing of our attention. A recent study by the Pew Research Center found that 90% of U.S. households contain at least one of these devices (smartphone, desktop/laptop computer, tablet or streaming media device), with the typical (median) American household containing five of them. And nearly one-in-five American households (18%) are "hyper-connected" – meaning they contain 10 or more of these devices.<sup>4</sup> Screens are here to stay and in all likelihood will continue to dominate more of our visual landscape in the future. Recognizing this eventuality demands that we consider how the architecture of a world of screens that is filled with divisive and untruthful content will impact the well being of human beings.

---

<sup>3</sup> William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York City: Anthology Film Archives, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Olmstead, "A Third of Americans Live in a Household with Three or More Smartphones," Pew Research Center, May 25, 2017, , accessed April 21, 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/25/a-third-of-americans-live-in-a-household-with-three-or-more-smartphones/>.

## Stay Tuned

The media focus on one thing and it is not the well being of its consumers. They try to keep the attention of as many people as possible to sell advertisers space to market their products. Attention is the commodity they trade in. They need their viewers to STAY TUNED. As the media landscape has become more fractured and competitive in the past two decades because of the Internet and the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, the "news" reported on and shared has become more sensational. Many of the headlines are designed to provoke, incense, or anger viewers as a means to create interaction and keep us from surfing over to the next peddler of information.

The websites, blogs, and social media platforms are well aware of the conflict that is sparked by their content. They are counting on it because they know that it keeps our attention. Below is an excerpt from an article published in *Journalism Quarterly* outlining this very situation:

Ratings and circulation are attracted through appeals to banal impulses so that the extent to which news media serve as viable opinion resources for the public becomes suspect. Instead of enlightening the public on issues, television journalists produce a video kaleidoscope of disasters, crimes, accidents, and fires.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> C. R. Hofstetter and David M. Dozier. "Useful News, Sensational News: Quality, Sensationalism and Local TV News." *Journalism Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (Winter, 1986): 815. <https://colorado.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/docview/1290543583?accountid=14503>.

They are not interested in giving reliable, accurate, objective information about the world. Instead, they want to entertain you while you believe you are getting that information. News outlets and Internet conglomerates are fighting to keep your attention because they sell it to other businesses that want to advertise their products to you. What you are getting is advertisements surrounded by stories you want to hear presented to you in a spectacle of sights and sounds.

Consider the visual spectacle of a Breaking News story. Vibrant graphics shoot across 4k screens; alarm bells ring, the word BREAKING flashes on the screen in a super saturated red to alert you to the next thing of which you should be afraid or concerned about. Even while this urgent message explodes onto your screen, other messages scroll across the screen reminding you that there is always more happening than you can keep up with triggering the FOMO, fear of missing out, response. It has become a visual drug that pumps you full of all the fear and anxiety you imagine exists in the world at every moment. It is a depiction of life as a thriller. It is meant to build suspense about what is going to happen next, again asking you to STAY TUNED because they will be the ones best able to inform you of how to respond to this manufactured crisis.

Even knowing all of this I have to admit that I am guilty of falling into these traps. My desire to argue and debate often overrides my awareness of the fact that I am being manipulated to stay engaged with these websites or sensational stories. Some days I find myself "waking up" to realize I have just spent hours online arguing with complete strangers about the "truth" of a whole host of topics that after some reflection I find I did not care that much about in the first place. I just wanted to show them they had not

considered they could be wrong or were in fact wrong. I have a difficult time resisting the urge to test claims of truth and certainty but it turns out I am not completely to blame for this addiction to arguing online says Tristan Harris, a former design ethicist for Google.

Engagement and enagement platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are anything but neutral...By delivering likes and shares one at a time, by limiting options in ways that continually steer you back to the platform, and by showing you whatever it will take to keep you scrolling or watching videos, they are deliberately attempting to get their users hooked, he says.<sup>6</sup>

Recognizing this pattern of seeking out arguments online led me to remove myself from Facebook this past year, which is now one of the largest sites for the consumption of news. The Pew Research Center reported that nearly forty five percent of all Americans get their news from the social media giant.<sup>7</sup>

I found that the constant need to address every uninformed comment or untruth I came across online not only isolated me from strangers, it was also creating unnecessary divisions between the people I care about the most and myself. Friends and family started to avoid conversations I would try to start online. They began interacting with me less and less or not at all. Many I suspect blocked

---

<sup>6</sup> O'Carroll, Eoin. "How Digital Media Fuels Moral Outrage – and what to do about it." *The Christian Science Monitor*, Sep 22, 2017.

<https://colorado.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/docview/1941469664?accountid=14503>.

<sup>7</sup> Shearer, Elisa, and Jeffrey Gottfried. "News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2017." Pew Research Center's Journalism Project. September 07, 2017. Accessed April 25, 2018.

<http://www.journalism.org/2017/09/07/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2017/>.

posts from me, and I did the same in return. Eventually, this led me to remove myself from the social media platform, severing my access to this cycle of reactivity.

This negative experience with the use of Facebook is very common and was recently measured in a study reported on in the *Journal of Epidemiology*.<sup>8</sup> In the study the researchers were able to investigate the associations of Facebook use and of real-world social network activity with self-reported physical health, self-reported mental health, self-reported life satisfaction, and BMI. Although there were some variations in the significance of the different measures across outcomes, a clear pattern emerged. Their results showed that although real-world social networks were positively associated with overall well-being, the use of Facebook was negatively associated with overall well-being with respondents reporting lower mental health, physical health, and overall life satisfaction. This confirms the argument that socializing and communicating with one another is better for our overall well being with face to face interactions instead of the new mediated way we engage each other via screens and keyboards.

## **FUD**

I cannot help feeling that our media culture is, because of competitive and politically divided audiences purposefully employing sensationalism as well as the strategy of FUD to keep us engaged. FUD or Fear, Uncertainty, and Doubt is a disinformation strategy that was

---

<sup>8</sup> Holly B. Shakya, Nicholas A. Christakis; Association of Facebook Use With Compromised Well-Being: A Longitudinal Study, *American Journal of Epidemiology*, Volume 185, Issue 3, 1 February 2017, Pages 203–211, <https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kww189>

widely used in the 1970's by computer hardware companies competing with one another at the time. The term was made popular by Gene Amdahl in 1975 after he left IBM and started his own company to compete against IBM. When describing his struggles with competing against the more recognized brand he stated that, "FUD is the fear, uncertainty, and doubt that IBM sales people instill in the minds of potential customers who might be considering Amdahl products."<sup>9</sup> IBM ran ads telling customers that it was safer to stick with their products instead of taking a risk on the new upstart, even though Amdahl products were shown to be superior in comparison tests. This strategy is also called an appeal to fear, which is when someone tries to create support for a position or idea by increasing anxiety in the competing opinion or belief.

Fear is a strong emotion to exploit when trying to keep someone's attention. "If it bleeds it leads," is an expression often said when asked about the choices of the stories that are reported on by the news media. This is witnessed by examining what the first story often reported on the local evening news will be every night and discovering that it is highly likely that it will be of a negative nature and likely criminal. This choice in programming is because there is an ethic in journalism that encourages journalists to point out what is going wrong instead of what is going right in the world.

Even in my work, I choose to point out the negative aspects of society I see every day instead of the more positive ones. My thinking is that the ills of the world must be observed so that the public will pay attention and work to resolve or correct for it through some action. But why do we focus on the negative as much as we do? Steven Pinker, the

---

<sup>9</sup> Eric S. Raymond, FUD, , accessed April 21, 2018, <http://www.catb.org/~esr/jargon/html/F/FUD.html>.

Johnstone Family Professor in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University, believes this has to do with negativity bias, which is when things of a more negative nature (e.g., unpleasant thoughts, emotions, or social interactions; harmful/traumatic events) have a more significant effect on one's psychological state and processes than neutral or positive things.<sup>10</sup> Here is an excerpt from an interview he gave to the Harvard Gazette when asked about our predisposition to negativity:

There is a strand of human nature that does that, called the negativity bias. Losses are more keenly felt than gains. Criticism hurts more than praise emboldens. We tend to be mindful of all the things that can go wrong, not so much when we are reflecting on our own lives, but when we are opinionating about the world as a whole. People often say, "My neighborhood is perfectly safe, and *my* schools are good. But the country is unsafe, and the other schools are going to hell" — sometimes called the "I'm OK; they're not" bias. When people opine they tend to go negative, partly under the influence of gory headlines and violent images.<sup>11</sup>

As a consumer of these gory headlines and violent images, I have to admit the possibility that I am simply biased to view the world in this way as well because that is what I choose to pay attention too. Many studies have shown that the disproportionate amount of

---

<sup>10</sup> Roy F. Baumeister, "Bad Is Stronger than Good," *PsycEXTRA Dataset*: 323, doi:10.1037/e413792005-154.

<sup>11</sup> "Harvard's Pinker Makes Case for Human Progress in New Book." Harvard Gazette. February 28, 2018. Accessed March 15, 2018. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2018/02/harvards-pinker-makes-case-for-human-progress-in-new-book/>.

attention spent reporting on negative aspects of society such as crime influences the perceptions of how significant the problem actually is.

This negativity bias combined with the competitive nature of journalism has not only created mistrust in the content presented to us but it also gives us an excuse to dismiss contradictory evidence. We want to believe that the news we do not like is fake and by default the news we do like is truthful. It creates opportunities for those with the agenda of keeping our attention to exploit the fact that we want to hear what we already believe. The polarization of our news media has trickled down into the communities they claim to serve and vice versa. They give us what we want to see and in return we pay attention to it. It is a vicious cycle that creates bubbles of confirmation bias instead of truth seeking.

### **Digital Public Square**

Digital space has replaced the traditional public square where political battles used to take place. This shift from a physical location of protest to a digital one has brought with it positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, the conversations have become more democratized, assuming you have access to the Internet. Many more people have the opportunity to engage with conversations they would have been excluded from in the past. On the contrary side though, the discourse has become less reasonable and more hostile in

nature, so much so that we now have an international day of recognition on the problem of cyberbullying.<sup>12</sup>

The way some people behave online reminds me a lot of road rage, whereby the sheer fact that you are in a car you feel safe to act out your most vile behavior towards the outside world. Imagine the difference in how you might feel about saying out loud to the person standing next to you in a grocery store line what you might say given the protection of anonymity and distance the Internet now affords. You most likely would not be as rude or cruel in the grocery store line when face to face with another person and surrounded by other shoppers who are paying attention to your behavior. Anonymity protects you from having to be decent and respectful in your discourse with others with whom you disagree circumventing some of those rules of civility. It has become the car that surrounds and protects you from the other individuals doing the same thing in their cars.

Just like the car protects you on the road during a fit of road rage, anonymity also allows you to be more violent and aggressive in your use of language online as Arthur Santana, a communications professor at the University of Houston discovered when he analyzed the comments of users about immigration from various news outlets that allowed users to be anonymous. He discovered that anonymity made a difference: a full fifty percent of anonymous commenters were uncivil as opposed to the twenty-nine percent that were non-anonymous.<sup>13 14</sup> The clear answer to the goal of civility then should be that online

---

<sup>12</sup> "Stop Cyberbullying Day – Cybersmile." – Cybersmile. Accessed April 23, 2018. <https://www.cybersmile.org/stop-cyberbullying-day>.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur D. Santana (2013) Virtuous or Vitriolic, *Journalism Practice*, 8:1, 18-33, DOI: [10.1080/17512786.2013.813194](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2013.813194)

activity should not be anonymous. It turns out we might need the fear of being judged to keep us from acting reprehensibly and to judge something you first have to pay attention to it.

Even when people are not anonymous they can still act pretty hostile online. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook have become the new battlegrounds for competing ideologies. The sites users are more like combatants who throw out abusive and offensive language as weapons of war. Disagreements on these sites have all the trappings of a spectacle one might expect to see during a gladiatorial match in the Coliseum of Ancient Rome including crowd participation. Similar to the way spectators in the Coliseum could give a life or death vote on the outcome of the battles, websites have created a mechanism of public participation via clicking on the thumbs up or thumbs down icon. This ability for the public to weigh in on every comment shared online is a new form of the age old popularity contest, with the winners, those comments that are liked the most, rising to the top of the visibility mountain, further ensconcing its validity while leaving the losing comments left to wither away out of sight regardless of their truthfulness or utility.

There are of course instances when these disagreements happen to spill outside of the digital realm into real space. One of the more prominent places I see this taking place is on college campuses. There is an ongoing argument about freedom of speech that has become the focus of many people on college campuses. Broadly speaking, what I have witnessed is that one side, typically the political right and libertarians believe in the

---

<sup>14</sup> Maria Konnikova, "The Psychology of Online Comments," *The New Yorker*, June 19, 2017, accessed April 13, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/the-psychology-of-online-comments>.

protection of any and all speech while the political left believes in a more restrictive approach so as to protect any individual from feeling threatened or maligned.

This disagreement can be quite hysterical online but has made its way into the real world leading to the need for excessive amounts of police protection for invited speakers at various universities across the country. One such incident occurred at the University of California, Berkeley On February 1, 2017. Milo Yiannopolous, a political commentator and self-professed provocateur was invited by the Berkeley College Republicans to the campus that is synonymous with the freedom of speech movement from the 1960's. His invitation set off a political firestorm on the campus. Hundreds of faculty members signed a petition to cancel Yiannopolous's visit citing concerns about his use of what they deemed to be hate speech and harassment. Debates on the merits of free speech eventually turned violent when a mob of people dressed in black began setting fires and breaking windows around the campus causing upwards of \$100,000 in damage to school property.<sup>15</sup> This is just one example of many that have occurred in the past year on Berkeley's campus as well as other institutions around the country. FIRE, the Foundation for Individual Right's in Education, who's stated mission is to defend and sustain individual rights at America's colleges and universities, reported thirty-five separate occasions where speakers were disinvited in 2017, a significant increase from the six disinvites reported when they first started tracking such incidents back in 2000.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Katy Steinmetz, "Berkeley College: The Riots Over Free Speech," Time, June 01, 2017, , accessed April 21, 2018, <http://time.com/4800813/battle-berkeley-free-speech/>.

<sup>16</sup> "Disinvitation Database." FIRE. Accessed April 23, 2018. <https://www.thefire.org/resources/disinvitation-database/>.

## Icons

Along with the change in our values around speech we are witnessing a change in the way we speak to each other through these technologies as well. The written word has become intertwined with images in a new form of communication. The messages I see on my cell phone, in my email and online are a mix of text and graphics depicting cartoonish versions of smiley faces, angry faces, high fives, thumbs up, money symbols, hearts, rainbows, sparkles, and even swirls of poop just to name a few. Some of these communications do not contain any text at all anymore. They are entirely made up of these images strung together like modern day hieroglyphs. These hieroglyphs are called emojis. (Figure 1)

Emojis are a relatively new language of digital communication. They were first created in 1999 by Japanese artist Shigetaka Kurita who was at the time working for the mobile phone company NTT DoCoMo. Kurita wanted to design an attractive interface to convey information in a simple, succinct way to solve the problem of the limited amount of characters that were allowed in text messaging at the time.<sup>17</sup> His original 176 emoji are now part of the permanent collection in New York's Museum of Modern Art. Although emojis were created by Kurita in 1999, it wasn't until 2010 after Unicode<sup>18</sup>, a loose organization of Internet enthusiasts who focus on computing industry standards for the consistent encoding, representation, and handling of text expressed in most of the world's writing systems agreed that emojis should be adopted did they become a major form of

---

<sup>17</sup> Arielle Pardes, "The Complete History of Emoji," Wired, February 01, 2018, , accessed April 22, 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/guide-emoji/>.

<sup>18</sup> "The Unicode® Standard: A Technical Introduction," Technical Introduction, , accessed April 22, 2018, <https://www.unicode.org/standard/principles.html>.

communication on digital devices. In a 2016 report by *Emoji*, a popular content platform that provides stickers and GIFs in messaging applications, they showed that nearly ninety-two percent of online consumers use emojis in their communications.<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 1: Emoji examples. Via Google Image search.**

Today, one of the most ubiquitous and persistently used emoji in these communications is the “thumbs up.” Sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Reddit along with most other websites provide some version of it as a tool to interact with the content their users share. It allows for a quick show of approval about the content presented without much effort or engagement on the viewer’s part. I believe people like the convenience and positive affirmation it provides.

---

<sup>19</sup> Emogi, Inc. "Enrich Conversations. Say More and Stay Fresh." Emogi. Accessed April 22, 2018. <https://www.emogi.com/insights/view/report/1145/2016-emoji-report>.

The origins of this gesture are somewhat vague with competing theories about how this common symbol became to be so widely used. Carleton S. Coon, having observed Barbary apes in Gibraltar using the gesture, hypothesized in the anthropological classic *The Story of Man* that it is a mutual celebration of having opposable thumbs.<sup>20</sup> Ancient Roman crowds used the gesture to pass judgment on a defeated gladiator. In Latin this was called *police verso*, meaning “with a turned thumb.” In modern popular culture, it is assumed that “thumbs down” was the signal that a defeated gladiator should be condemned to death; “thumbs up,” that he should be spared but scholars debate this. Anthony Corbeill, the Basil L. Gildersleeve Professor of Classics at the University of Virginia believes instead that the thumbs up signaled killing the gladiator while “a closed fist with a thumb pressing down on it” meant sparing him.<sup>21</sup> Regardless of the historical mistake, today we know the “thumbs up” and “thumbs down” as symbols for “like” and “dislike” respectively.

This new ability to “thumbs up” content strikes me as troubling for a couple of reasons. My primary concern is that it allows the viewer to support ideas or thoughts without much consideration. It strikes me as being too easy. It is a superficial interaction that is predicated on a knee-jerk, emotional response. In addition to the speed with which it can be deployed it also feels like emotional support instead of a thoughtful examination of the content presented. You do not have to describe why you agree or like the material you have given a “like” or “thumbs up” too. This is of course not acceptable at all say

---

<sup>20</sup> Carleton S. Coon. *The story of man*. N.Y.: Knopf, 1969.

<sup>21</sup> Merrill Fabry. "Thumbs-Up, Thumbs-Down Meaning: Where Do Gestures Come From?" Time. October 25, 2017. Accessed March 12, 2018. <http://time.com/4984728/thumbs-up-thumbs-down-history/>.

somewhere like an art critique, where images and ideas are presented to viewers for inspection and discussion about their merits. It is not enough to merely state that one likes an image or object in these situations. There is a demand that you justify your position with some objective reason. That is how we engage with each other and ideas in a way that I believe produces a substantive outcome where all participants are hopefully made wiser. Instead, we now have systems in place that allows content to be shared and validated merely because it is popular or entertaining, not because it is accurate or useful.

### **Images**

When considering what images would adequately represent the rising fear and anger I see among the various factions in conflict with one another I felt it was necessary to use images that were broad in identity but specific in action. For this reason I decided to crop out the majority of the figure leaving only the forearm and hand. I wanted an image that conjured thoughts of the irrationality and fear that mobs of people can be possessed by, instead of any particular individual with whom to identify with this phenomenon. I wanted to make the viewer susceptible to the belief that they could be included in this problem of group thinking by keeping the identity of the figure as broad as possible. The two identifiers I could not avoid with the use of representational painting when it comes to the figure are of course sex and race.

This notion of group thinking led me to the language of riots, witch-hunts, and lynchings. All of these descriptors have the same underlying connection to anger and irrationality which is troubling, but the aspect that scares me the most about these words is

that they embody the belief in the need for violence to remedy whatever has triggered it. I am not a pacifist, but the idea that violence is the solution to bringing relief or a sense of justice to a group of people who feel morally outraged is the last thing I would advocate for when trying to solve the differences we have with each other. I would advocate for the use of honest and reasoned debate to solve these problems, something that has become more difficult with the advent and adoption of consuming news through the Internet and social media platforms as they are currently structured.

While considering this current political climate of outrage and the need to highlight the tribal divisions between various groups, I settled upon the images of a white man brandishing a pitchfork and a black man carrying a torch. The image of a white man with a pitchfork represents the rising anger and hostility I see coming out of the rural, blue collar, undereducated populations of America, which in our last presidential election overwhelmingly supported Donald Trump. During the presidential election of 2016, then-presidential candidate Donald Trump would encourage the attendees of his rallies to use force against his detractors, even going so far as to offer financial support for the legal fees of anyone charged with a crime while doing so.<sup>22</sup> This attitude that violence should be the answer to a dispute coming from the President of the United States influences the behavior of the citizens. I do believe that his calls to action are the reason that specific groups such as the White Supremacist groups who were present at a rally in Charlottesville, Virginia

---

<sup>22</sup> Meghan Keneally. "A look back at Trump comments perceived as encouraging violence." ABC News. July 03, 2017. Accessed March 3, 2018. <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/back-trump-comments-perceived-encouraging-violence/story?id=48415766>.

where a counter-protester was murdered, feel comfortable in expressing divisive and racist points of view.<sup>23</sup>



Figure 2: *Pitchfork*. Johnathan Welsh. Oil on canvas. 2018

The choice of using the image of an African American man holding a handmade torch (Figure 3) is a reference to the anger and frustration, which has existed justifiably

---

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Henderson, "Henderson: What's the Source for White Anger on Display in Charlottesville?" USA Today, August 14, 2017, accessed April 12, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/columnists/stephen-henderson/2017/08/14/white-supremacy/564082001/>.

since the founding of this country, among many within the minority group. That anger and frustration have been provoked more recently by a series of questionable police shootings and a renewed brazenness to express hatred by white supremacy groups in this country. It is this combination that is a major contributor to the anxiety among African American populations today and the response to that anxiety has been the creation of the political activist groups, the most notable being BLM or Black Lives Matter.



Figure 3: *Torch*. Johnathan Welsh. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 2018

I do not mean to equate the various grievances or justifications behind the outrage of individual groups to each other. I am simply trying to point out that grievances of any sort can and are prioritized over another grievance depending upon its proximity of effect to the individuals within that group. There are of course many groups that are angry about a whole host of reasons such as the LGBTQ community, environmental rights groups, feminists, victims of school shootings, animal rights activists, teachers, veterans, coal miners, and on and on the list could go. Everyone has a grievance today, and everyone believes that their specific grievance is the most important one because they can build a digital information bubble that reflects that.

This fracturing and narrowing of concern without consideration of the concerns of others has left us fighting for attention and resources, energy that could be used more efficiently at solving the most pressing matters. If we could combine our resources and agree on what problems we should address with the most urgency we could solve many more problems in a shorter amount of time. This of course would require a reasoned debate that centers on what gets prioritized and why, things that can only happen when people engage in honest dialogue with the most accurate evidence available.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would just like to say that I am not making these paintings to demand an end to outrage by any individual group or outrage period. In fact I believe that outrage is something that can be used for real positive change in the world. I am making these paintings to share my observations about the dangers I see of being manipulated by

the media into giving them your attention by making you angry. They are observations about the ease with which we can and do slip into tribalism and seek out solutions through violence because of the tools we have built to give us the very things we desire.

I set out to make paintings about the irrationality and anger that I observe between many people in the landscape of social media and news sites. Instead, I ended up making images that reveal that it is not just that people are angry and go online to express that anger there but that they are being encouraged to do so by the very architecture of this new technology. The technology is making discourse worse. It has been built to extract attention from its users by allowing us to be our worst selves in those spaces. This revelation of the media manipulating everyone in such a pernicious way has brought me to a place where I feel more sympathetic to the people I see being taken advantage of by it. My hope is that more people will pay attention to this issue and we can begin to demand changes in the way we interface with this new technology so that it can be used for its stated benefits instead of it using us in ways that are detrimental to our well being.

## Bibliography

- Baumeister, Roy F. "Bad Is Stronger than Good," *PsycEXTRA Dataset*: 323, doi:10.1037/e413792005-154.
- Coon, Carleton S. *The story of man*. N.Y.: Knopf, 1969.
- "Disinvitation Database." FIRE. Accessed April 23, 2018. <https://www.thefire.org/resources/disinvitation-database/>.
- Emogi, Inc. "Enrich Conversations. Say More and Stay Fresh." Emogi. Accessed April 22, 2018. <https://www.emogi.com/insights/view/report/1145/2016-emoji-report>.
- Fabry, Merrill. "Thumbs-Up, Thumbs-Down Meaning: Where Do Gestures Come From?" *Time*. October 25, 2017. Accessed March 12, 2018. <http://time.com/4984728/thumbs-up-thumbs-down-history/>.
- Gans, Joshua. "Facebook Is the Largest News Organization Ever," *Harvard Business Review*, July 23, 2014, accessed April 12, 2018, <https://hbr.org/2011/03/facebook-is-the-largest-news-o>.
- Hapgood, Fred. (November 1995). "The Media Lab at 10". *Wired*. <https://www.wired.com/1995/11/media/> (accessed March 1, 2018).
- "Harvard's Pinker Makes Case for Human Progress in New Book." *Harvard Gazette*. February 28, 2018. Accessed March 15, 2018. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2018/02/harvards-pinker-makes-case-for-human-progress-in-new-book/>.
- Henderson, Stephen. "Henderson: What's the Source for White Anger on Display in

- Charlottesville?" USA Today, August 14, 2017, accessed April 12, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/columnists/stephen-henderson/2017/08/14/white-supremecy/564082001/>.
- Hofstetter, C. R. and Dozier, David M. "Useful News, Sensational News: Quality, Sensationalism and Local TV News." *Journalism Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (Winter, 1986): 815. <https://colorado.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/docview/1290543583?accountid=14503>.
- Huxley, Aldous and Robert S. Baker and James Sexton, *Complete Essays. 1920-1925* (2000).
- Keneally, Meghan. "A look back at Trump comments perceived as encouraging violence." ABC News. July 03, 2017. Accessed March 3, 2018. <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/back-trump-comments-perceived-encouraging-violence/story?id=48415766>.
- Konnikova, Maria. "The Psychology of Online Comments," *The New Yorker*, June 19, 2017, accessed April 13, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/the-psychology-of-online-comments>.
- O'Carroll, Eoin. "How Digital Media Fuels Moral Outrage – and what to do about it." *The Christian Science Monitor*, Sep 22, 2017. <https://colorado.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/docview/1941469664?accountid=14503>.
- Olmstead, Kenneth. "A Third of Americans Live in a Household with Three or More Smartphones." Pew Research Center. May 25, 2017. Accessed April 21, 2018. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/25/a-third-of-americans-live-in-a-household-with-three-or-more-smartphones/>.
- Pardes, Arielle. "The Complete History of Emoji." *Wired*. February 01, 2018. Accessed April 22, 2018. <https://www.wired.com/story/guide-emoji/>.
- Raymond, Eric S. FUD. Accessed April 21, 2018. <http://www.catb.org/~esr/jargon/html/F/FUD.html>.
- Santana, Arthur D. (2013) Virtuous or Vitriolic, *Journalism Practice*, 8:1, 18-33, DOI: [10.1080/17512786.2013.813194](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2013.813194)
- Shakya, Holly B. and Christakis, Nicholas A.; Association of Facebook Use With Compromised Well-Being: A Longitudinal Study, *American Journal of Epidemiology*, Volume 185, Issue 3, 1 February 2017, Pages 203–211, <https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kww189>
- Steinmetz, Katy. "Berkeley College: The Riots Over Free Speech." *Time*. June 01, 2017.

Accessed April 21, 2018. <http://time.com/4800813/battle-berkeley-free-speech/>.

"Stop Cyberbullying Day – Cybersmile." – Cybersmile. Accessed April 23, 2018.  
<https://www.cybersmile.org/stop-cyberbullying-day>.

"The Unicode® Standard: A Technical Introduction." Technical Introduction. Accessed April 22, 2018. <https://www.unicode.org/standard/principles.html>.

Wees, William C. *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York City: Anthology Film Archives, 1993).