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The Challenge of Discerning Relational Authenticity in a Digital Age

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Abstract

In a world where so much of our daily interactions and processes are being adopted by or translated to the digital realm, it’s no wonder why I am confused about the state of reality and its role in my relationships. Questions surrounding authenticity or genuineness pervade my experiences as I wonder what it means to be close to someone, what it means to be genuine, and even what is real.

To cope with these questions, I turn to my art practice, bringing physical form to the virtual, exposing myself through stereotypically impersonal media, or breaching the lines of appropriate interaction in a way similar to many advancements in technology.

While these projects and practices reveal the complexities of the topic as opposed to solving or answering any of the problems or questions, I attempt to engage in discussion and prompt conversation that can lead to a coping or acceptance of the state of relationships in the midst of these colliding digital and physical worlds.
On a wintry evening in France, a projected train hurled toward a startled audience. The viewers, frightened by the threatening image before them, fled from the theatre in panic and horror. A bit over a century later, I sit in my bedroom staring down at a screen in my lap and write this, and I’m distracted by my phone buzzing next to me. It’s my friend Andy, and he’s telling me that he posted a video on my Facebook wall but forgot that I am not going on Facebook this month, so he wanted me to know. It’s his way of making sure I know that the argument we had yesterday doesn’t matter and we’re still friends. We’re still close.

I can’t help but see a connection between the confusion of this horrified audience and my confusion when it comes to dealing with the relationships in my life. What is close? What are friends? What does it mean to be genuine? These questions surround me and the answers evade me each day.

Although there is speculation about the trustworthiness of the story related to the 1896 theatrical debut of *L’Arrivée Du Train En Gare De La Ciotat*, a 50-second documentary by Auguste and Louis Lumière, it was notable enough to eventually reach the status of legend. The truth is that this was not the first ever film in the theatre, as it is often stated when the story is told. In fact, the Lumière brothers had shown a set of films a year earlier, which causes some scholars to doubt the validity of the myth of the fleeing audience and the extent to which they were truly affected by the moving image on the screen.
It’s easy to discount this myth; the idea that people would run in horror from a film of a train seems preposterous. Although I can understand the confusion that comes with new technology, it’s also easy to see the reason critics are skeptical of the story. As I watch the film today on YouTube, it’s everything I expect: it’s black and white, spots flicker across the image, the camera shakes, and the grainy movement of the figures doesn’t seem quite natural.¹ It’s obviously not a real train hurling toward me. Although a definite dramatic leap in technology, it’s easy to look at the quality and assume that we have moved beyond this sort of confusion. After all, media and digital technology saturate our world and daily experiences. Right now I see four screens in the room with me.

It initially seems that due to the pervasiveness of digital media we might be a little more prone to the nuances between fiction and reality; after all, I have grown up with these technologies, these modes of communication; I should be a professional at distinguishing between what is real and what is not. However, it seems with constant exposure we are becoming less skilled at these distinctions as opposed to more familiar with them.

(I should probably admit that there is a distinction between digital technology or culture and mass media in general, as I use the two almost interchangeably for my purposes. Although they are obviously separate entities, they do go hand-in-hand. As digital technologies become more available and integrated into our lives, exposure and consumption of media becomes easier and easier. In terms of my preoccupations with their saturation of my life, they are nearly synonymous.)

The validity of the Lumière brothers’ story is not what is important, because we see this same image repeatedly illustrated in contemporary life. The line between reality and fiction is a blurry one, and becomes increasingly blurrier each day. In a world where webs, links, bookmarks, windows, folders, viruses, and countless other things (even Home itself) have been taken out of the physical world and adopted by a digital one, there’s no wondering why I am confused about what is real and what is not. I am surrounded by masqueraders everyday. Things pretending to be other things. Impostors.

Although these questions of the reality of reality are particularly pressing in my day-to-day experiences, they are not new or unique to me. They have been pondered by everyone from the great philosophical thinkers of the past (remember Plato’s shadows?) to children that are drugged from the dentist. David, a 7-year-old boy returning from the dentist in the viral YouTube video “David After Dentist” sits in the back seat of the car
while his dad films him. “Is this real life? [...] Is it gonna be like this forever?” he asks.\(^2\)

Although I bring up this example facetiously, it serves as an example of the state of my thoughts: I can’t think about philosophies of reality without thinking of YouTube (and I don’t submerge myself in these media nearly as much as many of the people around me). As I consume media, it consumes me.

I make no judgment – positive nor negative – on the pervasiveness of media and
digital technologies. I am merely observing the way that growing up in world surrounded by
these constructs has affected me. Studies have been done about the idea of a digital native.
The term itself is fascinating to me. The idea that someone is native not to a physical place –
not Denver or Colorado or the US – but to a digital world, is haunting and intriguing, and
the implications of this possibility are immense. Someone who has grown up not in a
physical place, but instead a digital one, would no doubt have some trouble or confusion
acclimating to the physical world around them in their day-to-day experiences. Culture
shock.

A digital native is usually considered as a generational designation: anyone born after
1980 is a digital native. This date is chosen because of the moment when digital social
technologies became available, such as digital bulletin boards. I not only am a digital native
by definition (having been born in 1988), but I feel like one. As I interact more and more
with people from the physical world (my parents, professors, and some of my older friends),
I am reminded that I do, in fact, speak a different language, think differently, come from a
different culture. Although I don’t go around conscious of this heritage during my day, the
fact remains that I grew up secretly venturing into chat rooms to talk to strangers, the
Internet mediates many of the relationships I have, and my mind has even begun to
compress my thoughts into 140-character snippets, ready to be tweeted.

This state of confusion is not as broad as a generation, though. To say that this
situation is confined to a date of birth is simultaneously too broad and too specific: people
born before 1980 might face this, while some born with the title of “digital native” may not.

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Every new generation, to some extent, speaks a different language, interacts with new technologies, and thinks differently, but what I am concerned with is something more specific to today. Perhaps this problem isn’t local to digital natives, or perhaps one of the other several definitions of what a digital native is should be examined. Mark Meadows, software developer and author of *I, Avatar*, gives credibility to two other definitions: one defines a digital native as anyone born after 1934, the year transistors were invented; the other claims that a digital native is anyone who has “spent the majority of their waking hours in front of a screen”.  

Although the 1980 definition is the most widely accepted, the number of hours in front of a screen seems to certainly be a factor. Nonetheless, this is not a rigid category, but a mental shift.

The way I have begun to think in tweets is not uncommon. I have had friends delete their Facebook accounts because they began to think with the same conciseness and style of a status update. Kevin Kelly, founding executive editor of Wired magazine and digital culture theorist has studied this idea:

“We already know that our use of technology changes how our brains work. Reading and writing are cognitive tools that, once acquired, change the way in which the brain processes information. When psychologists use neuroimaging technology, like MRI, to compare the brains of literates and illiterates working on a task, they find many differences, and not just when the subjects are reading.

If alphabetic literacy can change how we think, imagine how Internet literacy and 10 hours per day in front of one kind of screen or another is changing our brains. The first generation to grow up screen literate is just reaching adulthood so we don’t have any scientific studies of the full consequence of ubiquitous connectivity...”

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Although this topic is too new to really be studied, I feel the effects of it. Not only do I think in tweets, but I have tried to Command + Z (Undo) a brushstroke on a painting (or even a conversation with someone). I have friends who have faced similar moments of shock when they realized that they were attempting to use their tools from the digital world – whether they are Search, Save, Record, or Copy – in the physical world.

Many people have become topic in the news for confusing their digital and physical realities to great consequences. Video games have been related to many deaths in the past decade because of the realities of these digital worlds: one man murdered his friend with an actual blade after his friend sold his virtual sword on eBay. There have been multiple cases of suicide linked to video games, including one 13-year-old boy that directly referenced the popular World of Warcraft game in his suicide note, saying he wanted to “to join the heroes of the game he worshipped.” The creators of Grand Theft Auto, a popular role-playing game known for its violence and criminal mischief, were sued after a teenager seemed to practically live out a scene of the game he loved as he took a police officer’s gun, shot him in the head, continued to kill two more people nearby, and then drive away in the officer’s police car. A 28-year-old man died in an Internet cafe from heart failure after playing a

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video game for 50 hours, forgetting to eat and sleep.\textsuperscript{10} And just last year, a couple pleaded guilty to negligent homicide after their 3-month-old child died of malnutrition because they were playing a game called Prius Online where their task was to instead nurture a virtual daughter.\textsuperscript{11} As one of the media that most easily and intensely fuses life and fiction (with advents like Second Life, where users literally have an alternate – and very real – second life), the blurred boundaries are especially evident.

A different example is of a Japanese man named Nisan, who is currently in a relationship that has outlasted any of mine.\textsuperscript{12} He and Nemutan, his girlfriend, have been together since 2006. Everything about their relationship is standard: they go to dinner together, take road trips, get their photo taken together and he thinks of her while at work, awaiting the time when they can be together again. It sounds like most relationships I have had. The only difference is, Nemutan is a two-dimensional image of a teenage anime character, printed on a large pillowcase. Nisan and Nemutan’s love story gained recognition in 2009 when Lisa Katayama, a Japanese pop culture writer, wrote a story for \textit{The New York Times}. However, Nisan is just one of an entire movement of people who have expressed romantic feelings for these illustrated characters. According to Katayama, “these 2-D lovers, as they are called, are a subset of otaku culture – the obsessive fandom that has surrounded anime, manga and video games in Japan in the last decade.”

Although this phenomenon in Japanese culture is called “2-D Love,” as it is based in


being in a relationship with the representation of a character (not necessarily an object like Nisan’s pillow), the invention of silicone love dolls, also called real dolls, has brought a version of this situation into three dimensions. Real Dolls, which cost over $6,000, are companion to about 3,000 people worldwide. In Guys and Dolls, a BBC documentary, several of these relationships are documented, and it seems every man (only men consumers and female dolls are documented) has made these purchases for a different reason. The trend is attributed to the difficulties of romantic interaction that people face. According to Matt McMullen, the inventor of Real Dolls, “Not everyone has social interaction problems, but some people do.” It seems to me though, that this embarkation on romantic relationship with fictional characters has been a long time coming. After all this time having relationships through and about media, it does make some sense to cut out the middleman – or date him, rather – by becoming intimate with the media itself.

Although these examples are extreme, they reflect a confusion or blurring of two worlds – virtual and physical, factual and fictional, genuine and artificial – that I think is closer to me (and those around me) than meets the eye. To write these people off as insane or even merely quirky is to ignore symptoms or manifestations of the very culture shock that is relevant to the many people that are considered digital natives and are therefore faced with the task of fusing or collapsing these two worlds into each other.

I concede that this may all be coming off as a bit melodramatic, using terms like culture shock and comparing myself to negligent parents and a man who loves a pillow. The image of these people that we read about is one of awkwardness or even mental instability. The fact is, I do have social skills and I’m not anxious about interaction with people IRL (in real life): I can carry on a conversation with someone at an exhibition opening or a wedding

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without appearing like a being from another world. This is not a matter of social skills or awkwardness though. (My proficiency at conversation may even be a byproduct of my social networking-obsessed culture.) Still, the problems remain: how can I know what it means to be close with someone when I spend so much time in a world where proximity or spatial relationships do not exist? Am I correctly understanding what friends are when I associate the term with the 963 avatars listed on my Facebook page? How can I distinguish what is genuine or authentic when I do so much personal interaction through these digital forms that are copies – perhaps even perversions – of what is “real”?

I try to make sense of all of this.

I use my artistic practice to explore these tensions, contradictions, and intersections. The politics of intimacy and relationships in this digital-physical hybrid world are complex and extremely relevant to my day-to-day experiences. Mediators of interaction, both digital and physical, pervade my experiences – govern them, even – and yet their mysteries continue to elude me. As I navigate my relationships, I am left in a state of confusion, ambiguity, and even loneliness as I grasp for something that may not even exist: something real.

Jean Baudrillard discusses the impossibility of reality in a world full of symbols in his treatise *Simulacra and Simulation*. He discusses the idea of the perfect map that Jorge Luis Borges romantically presents in his *On Exactitude in Science*: a map made so exactly that it is drawn to scale and covers the land, eventually becoming tattered and torn and even part of the land itself. Baudrillard claims that we live in a world where the map, in fact, precedes the territory. We instead see shreds of reality rotting across the map. “...It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the

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Although written before the creation of much of the technology that makes these topics so pressing to me, it seems Baudrillard was dealing with an issue quite contemporary to today. I can’t imagine a more symbol-laden world. Symbols have come to represent symbols that represent symbols. A heart shape, for example, represents love, as well as refers to the life-giving organ in my chest, the sort of region where the love is supposedly felt. All of the intense and abstract material of “love” is packaged into that one symbol.

Now, in a digital realm, that symbol is abstracted even a bit more, into “<3,” a less-than sign followed by the number three. These two characters now stand in as precious sentiment.

Everywhere I look I see symbols, but finding something that seems real is a bit more difficult. I deal with these “signs of the real” everyday in the digital realm that I am part of, and sometimes wonder if they have replaced the very entities they were supposedly made to represent. When I log in to Facebook (or, let’s face it, when I click the tab; I’m already logged in), I see discrete icons of calendars, wrapped presents, speech bubbles, messages in envelopes, and even friends. All the people in my life are summed up by a small blue icon of a silhouetted man and woman. When I click this symbol, it elaborates upon itself, revealing a small, 50 by 50 pixel (less than .75 square inches in the physical world) image of each of my Friends. When I select one of these Friends, the symbols become more specific and elaborate, showing a larger image of Aaron Benavides and telling me that he studied music, lives in Boulder, Colorado, and was born in August. And then it gives me an opportunity to talk with him, poke him, or introduce him to people. Somewhere in the short process of explaining this, the icons have already gone from representing something else, to replacing that something completely. “Poking” Aaron with a click of this button no longer serves as a
reference to the actual process of touching him with my finger, but is the act itself: it is the touch that my digital culture is familiar with.

Baudrillard writes about how these fictional versions of reality are meant to reinforce that there is a reality, but that, in fact, they become a symbol of the loss of realness overall.

“Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the ‘real’ country, all of ‘real’ America that is Disneyland (a bit like prisons are there to hide that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, that is carceral). Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.”

I can’t help but replace “Disneyland” here with “Facebook” (or any other number of digital mediators in my relationships). Although it would seem that these digital symbols and tools would be a reminder of or a reference to the “real” thing, a distinction that causes me to believe in the reality of the interaction outside of these forums, I can’t help but think that they have become one in the same. According to Baudrillard, “the real is no longer possible.” It seems that the state of all the interaction I take part in – whether digital or physical – is equally real: it is not that one is more or less real than the other, but that they are both confusing and complicated realities that exist as part of my life. Although often viewed in binary opposition, two ends of the spectrum, “real” and “virtual” are really much more similar than usually thought.

These worlds are constantly being collapsed into each other, and I use my artistic

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16 Ibid., 12
17 Ibid., 19
practice to amplify or exaggerate this fusion. As I merge them, the digital doesn’t become more real (it’s already a reality), but instead the two are flattened into one: everything is virtual.

In *Suggestions*, an ongoing project where I am acting based on the Suggestions column that existed in one of Facebook’s incarnations (for lack of a better term), I follow recommendations like “Reconnect with him. Write on his Wall” and “Share the latest news. Send her a message,” but bring them into the physical world. When asked to send a certain person a message, I write them a message on paper, put it in an envelope, stamp it, and mail it off; when asked to write on someone’s Wall (the public message portion of Facebook), I create large, hand-written text that I adhere to their home or other personal space. By making these things physical, I hope to not only begin to merge these worlds, but to make these sentiments more genuine or special through their physical quality. Although the physical world is not more real, there is a certain authenticity associated with tangibility or being in the physical presence of an object, confirmed by the reactions I receive when someone receives a physical piece of mail from me. By executing these suggestions in an unexpected way, they are transformed from banal to significant, from hasty to thoughtful, and return the physical presence to sentiments that are now seldom expressed in a “real” way.
This project illustrates, in part, why my work is not more digital overall. I often attempt to bring form to the formless, to make these very real digital entities seem more real. There is something very powerful about things that encapsulate multiple senses that the digital world does not provide. The paper that the messages are written on have a specific smell, a texture of the grain, a color that reacts to the light around it. Even the subtle sound it makes when it is touched (and the fact that there is possibility for it to even be tasted),
lend to its authenticity, in some way. The old adage “I’ll believe it when I see it,” should really be “I’ll believe it when I touch, smell, taste, hear, and see it.” (Marketers have figured this out, attempting to create experiences where every sense is engaged. Walk in to a Starbucks and as you become aware of the music playing, the smell of the coffee, the visual design of the space, the textures of the seating, and finally, the taste of your beverage, it becomes clear that this experience was not accidental.\textsuperscript{18}) This richness of the sensory experience is, in part, why we believe in these physical things a bit more than the digital ones.

The letters and postcards I send out become tattered, yellowed, and decay over time, which is something humans can relate to, despite the digital age’s tempting offer of ageless immortality. We seem to emotionally connect with things that are governed by the same laws of physics that our own bodies are.

For this reason (as well as my interest in conversation and correspondence as it relates to human interaction), many of my practices incorporate mail, and I opt for physical mail as opposed to the electronic form. In \textit{You Were In My Dream Last Night}, I bring yet another intangible world into the physical as I write postcards each morning that are sent to people that appeared in my dreams, explaining what happened. The postcards, meant for one specific person and yet exposed and open to readings by bystanders much like a post on a Facebook wall or a comment on a blog, have a physical presence that is very unlike the Internet. When the recipient receives a dream postcard, a direct artifact of my subconscious thoughts, they are faced with an infinite number of options as to how to deal with the somewhat invasive gift. Some cards get thrown away, some get put in a box or on a fridge, and some people have begun to acquire a large collection over time that becomes framed or displayed proudly. One recipient appreciated the card as an art object, but, not being

comfortable with the strange dream, duct taped over the text.

In *Come Spend The Night With Me*, I once again use the postcard, this time to invite people to do just that. In the midst of so much interaction via various devices, where attention is divided and time is rushed, I make a big request: to sacrifice a night of sleep to stay up with me in my bed, making collaborative drawings.
Because of our attachment to the physical world, my work often embraces the physical materials, while still clinging to the digital processes (including digitally typesetting, designing, and editing components of my work, or sometimes counter-intuitively emailing someone to get their address). This fusion in my practice reflects the overall fusion of being part of both of these places.

This practice of merging these two worlds I live between by bringing physical form to these digital, Internet-based objects appears in several of my other projects as well. In View Photos of Me, I printed out each of my 80 Facebook profile pictures and framed them. By bringing these things into the physical hallway they are installed within, an element of translation was elucidated: they are no longer the same objects. Presented as homely artifacts, a sort of egotistical perversion of the traditional cluster of family photos, they have a physical presence that makes obvious the pervasiveness of the personal image or avatar in
the digital age. While these specimens go uncritiqued in the online social network (or critiqued in a much different way), by making them physical they confront the viewer with their presence, begging examination. Introducing these photos to this new environment allows the public – and not only those I have allowed entrance by deeming “friends” on the social networking site – to participate in an assessment usually reserved for certain people. What results is a breach of the line between public and private, an embarrassing exhibition of things that I am already exhibiting online everyday.

Each of these photos has been selected at one point or another to identify myself; as profile pictures, the photos are representations of an identity that is projected to the public. I took many of these photos, but they do not exist as a photography project, but as an exhibition of ready-mades. Although once chosen by myself to represent my persona or identity, each photo was discarded or pushed back to make room for the most accurate update of my identity. With the virtual and physical being so intertwined in my life, as I
construct and alter these identity signifiers, the way I am perceived – both by myself as well as by others – is transformed as well.

Another work that directs attention to digital artifacts that are so engrained in my life that they become portraiture is portrait + (adammilner OR “anyone else”); SafeSearch: Off, a series of 26 text-based digital prints that contain my Internet search history. The word “google” has been a household verb for much of my life. I was twelve when I was first introduced to the brand and action, about half my life ago. Since that day it has only become more ingrained in my daily rituals, a commonplace practice that happens constantly but is seldom given attention.

With portrait + (adammilner OR “anyone else”); SafeSearch: Off I aim to expose myself to the viewer. By bringing attention to this bank of words that I have searched for over the past few months, I reveal something that is not usually seen. Presenting a sort of intimate journal of every topic or word that I have recently investigated online, I reveal a log of my interests and inquiries. This list is very personal, in the sense that nobody has searched for this exact collection of terms. Some of the words or names are so specific that only I would recognize them. It’s a self-portrait, in that sense.

Inversely though, because Google has permeated our culture to the extent that it has, the colors and font used in the work are immediately recognizable, relatable, and familiar.
Further, some of the search terms themselves are recognizable. In this way, through relating to the act itself as well as specific entities, this very tailored and personal collection of words becomes accessible to the viewer. In this sense, it becomes a portrait of society as a whole.

Our individual realities are created by everything we take in; what we perceive is what is real. “[...] the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images,” Socrates says in Plato’s “The Allegory of the Cave.” When the shadows we see are cast by digital entities like Facebook and Google – when these websites are playing such a large role in the development of our perceptions – it makes sense that our realities surrounding ourselves (these self-portraits that I have created) would be so based in the digital sphere. These digital technologies have become so much a part of our identities and experiences that we even have a cultural rift of people claiming, “I’m a Mac” on one side, and “I’m a PC” on the other. These subtle but powerful word choices, started by advertisers to market these products, have taken on a life of their own and have startling implications: we have become the technology we use. It makes sense, then, that we have this confusion as to what reality is, as these websites and other media inform so much of our perception of the world around us.

In 1996, Byron Reeves and Clifford Nass from Stanford wrote *The Media Equation*. The subtitle sums up the research perfectly: *How People Treat Computers, Television, and New Media Like Real People and Places.* (Here we see their bias that these digital media are somehow less real than the things they represent. At some point it does come down to semantics, but what is important is that their research shows confusion between the two.)

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Their account starts with an anecdote from a study involving preschool children:

“The screen shows a bag of popcorn on a table. Several kernels have fallen from the bag. An adult [...] asks a question about the picture: ‘What will happen to the popcorn if I pick up the television set and turn it upside down?’ A lot of kids say that the rest of the popcorn will spill out of the bag.”

The implication with this test is that the confusion can be corrected with experience, age, and education. I know that the kernels won’t be affected, because I’m not four years old. And yet, I’m reminded again of the story of the Lumière Brothers’ projected train. Reeves and Nass’ studies go on to show that this confusion does, in fact, remain with us. Their conclusion is that “media experiences equal human experiences” (and therein lies the “media equation”, a simple equals sign). Their studies show that fictional characters on a screen – or someone’s avatar online – can even make us uncomfortable by invading our personal space, in the same way a physical human could by getting too close. Because our technology and media are evolving so quickly, our brains haven’t been able to keep up, leaving us ill equipped to distinguish the differences.

Meadows and I discussed this idea via email.

“[…] it seems almost self-evident to me now. Why do we gasp in a horror movie when the boogieman jumps out? Why do we cry during sad scenes? These all seem justified when we consider that the screen is (in terms of how we see, hear, emote, and think) intended to be as real as possible,” he said.

Even since the stage was invented, they have been designed to bring the audience

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21 Ibid., Introduction.

22 Ibid., 251.

closer and closer, making the experience as real and enveloping as possible. Now we live in an age where reality in media is easy for consumers to come by. Films are increasingly being offered in 3-D (and now even “Real 3-D”), and graphics and cinematography are becoming so lifelike and engrossing that people are being affected long after they leave the theatre. Many have experienced what is being called “Post-Avatar Depression” after watching James Cameron’s popular film because of having trouble coping with the intangibility of the lush land of Pandora that the film illustrates. Filmmakers (and makers of all sorts of media) are becoming professional reality fabricators, creating images that are so real that it is difficult to remember their fictional quality.

When the image on the screen doesn’t look “real” at all, the distinction should be easier. And yet I engage in so much digital interaction where the image is of such poor quality – interaction through video chatting, for example – but where the entity on the other end is, in fact, a living, breathing, physical thing. Here an interesting swap takes place. Instead of viewing fictional things in such detail that I believe them to be true, as is the case with so much of the media we consume, I am interacting with something factual through such a blurry lens that I am able to forget its realness. Such is the case with formats like Skype, a program that allows the user to participate in a video phone call with people they know, and Chatroulette, a website that allows one-on-one video chatting with complete strangers. While similar, Skype is in the lineage of the telephone, while Chatroulette comes from the idea of a chat room, which is a pivotal difference.

Upon visiting Chatroulette, an immediate uniqueness is noted, reminiscent of Internet art: there is no logging in, no screen name, no agreements: simply two small

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rectangles, one, reflecting back the user’s image through their camera, and another, black. A button with the word Scan invites the user to begin. And then, the black rectangle changes to someone else. The process has already begun, and two strangers stare into each other’s faces for a moment. Suddenly, the stranger is gone – he has hit Next – and a new stranger is present.

Because of the combination of visual sensory, anonymity, and immediacy that is offered, Chatroulette is able to really expose the state of the confusion regarding the way we interact with people. On Chatroulette, all rules of propriety are gone. Because it does not rely on the usual symbols that ground users in reality – constructs like home, friends, even photo albums – and instead exists in a purely abstract realm where the only reference to the physical is that of a roulette, a symbol of chance, rotation, and opportunity, it allows viewer to abandon inhibition, forget consequence, and act primally.

Visitors to the site use it in a variety of ways, but the common thread is a sort of voyeurism and exhibitionism that meet hand-in-hand in a unique manifestation of loneliness that I believe is the state of our interaction: we desire to be close to someone, to make a connection, to touch, but are no longer quite sure of how to do this. This confusion manifests in people masturbating, people laying in bed and staring back without saying a word, and people simply desiring to have a conversation with someone.

I have participated in this venue for over a year now, and have documented and
archived images that I have come across. Video Chatting With Strangers, my archive of snapshots (screenshots, really) of these interactions, has been segmented into three categories: candid portraits of people I have had conversations with, voyeuristic images of masturbation, and empty rooms. The empty rooms are a startling reminder that through this anonymous, impersonal situation, people have granted me access to their very specific, personal spaces. Through the digital format (and a quality that constantly reinforces the idea that I am conversing with pixels, not people) it is easy to forget the authenticity of the emotions and situations on the other end. When I hit Next and an empty bedroom is revealed, however, I deal with the mystery of whether the person is just off camera watching back or if they have left the room entirely, and I suddenly become very aware of myself and my potential aloneness. All that exists in that moment is their empty space and me, and I remember how they have granted me such personal access to their home.

In Convergence, I attempt to put myself in their spaces by using the “Drag backdrop here” function of Apple’s Photo Booth. By attempting to photograph myself in their spaces, I attempt to bridge this gap in an immediate way. The defects and mistakes made by the novelty feature reveal the impossibilities of this goal.

This digital saturation I experience leads to an interest in these personal physical spaces, and my own bedroom often appears as the subject of my work. In room, I present my bedroom as a readymade installation. By borrowing the tools of the white cube, I cast the sheen of the institution over my personal space without moving it to the gallery, as is the usual protocol with readymades. Incorporating wall text, booklets, an opening reception, exhibition announcements, posters, an artist talk, and a catalogue allowed me to offer a very exposing entrance to my personal space. This direct display of this very complex artifact from my life reflects both the exhibitionism that the Internet fosters as well as an interest in
physical spaces that the Internet stifles.

My merging of life and art is much like the connection Nisan must feel with his pillow. Although obviously an inanimate object – and he admits this – the emotions he feels are very real. My relationship with the objects I make, the viewers of them, and the art institution as a whole, is not much different: I feel somehow extremely connected and romantic with this things that are, in practice, impossible to be intimate with. I have always been so enamored with the art institution that the attraction is nearly physical, a sort of fetishism. In this same way (although my work spans different media and materials), I view myself as a painter, not based on my area of emphasis and background, but based on an emotional response I have for the medium, a sort of romance.

These romantic feelings for the institution overflow to other objects in my life, as I overcompensate for the lack of interaction with the physical world. Intimate, physical
objects like beds are very interesting to me in light of the amount of time I spend in impersonal, digital realms. I photograph the place I awake every morning in Beds, and in Bed Drawings I use pen and paper to document the movement of my body as it falls asleep, almost like a seismograph.

My interest in these personal physical objects is taken to a new level in The One Under My Head, The One Between My Knees. Taking the pillows that I sleep with at night, I have made oil paintings on their surfaces as a way of investigating each fold and nuance of the objects.
The act of painting the pillows is a sort of petting them, a very personal and delicate act of reaffirming each part and fetishizing them. By using this medium for which I have such romantic connotations on top of these objects that I have such intimate interaction with each night, I love them to death or spoil them rotten as they become useless art objects, and therefore even more romantic. By treating these three-dimensional objects from the physical world as paintings, they are metaphorically flattened, becoming less tangible – and in some ways more virtual – as I formalize them and make them off limits.

The One Under My Head, The One Between My Knees, 2011

The world we live in is complex. Rather, the worlds we live in are complex. When faced with the daunting task of navigating relationships in these territories that are already so complicated, I face difficulties. As I interrogate each thing and question its realness, as I discover that my idea of closeness sometimes differs quite a bit from someone else’s, and as I misunderstand the roles of people in my life, I can’t help but look to the compulsion and
obligation of reconciling these two worlds as part of the source of these dilemmas.

As I mesh these worlds in my artistic practice, I attempt to get close to people or at least better understand the idea of closeness. Whether I am presenting a private artifact that exposes myself or I am initiating some sort of immediate interaction with another person, my artistic practice is an ongoing lifestyle that serves as an opportunity to simultaneously investigate these constructs as well as facilitate interaction that would not normally occur (or be acceptable).

In line with the old cliché “Want to come up and see my etchings?” (which has now, to my chagrin, become coffee-related instead), I use art as an excuse to interact a bit more closely with someone. Just as the digital and physical world are so overlapping and yet so separate, so are my personal relationships and the art institution I am part of. As all of these entities fuse and collapse into each other, the confusion doesn’t become clearer, but my projects open up the types of conversation – conversations about vulnerability, physicality, manipulation, media, sexuality, voyeurism, distance, and the role of the art institution – that can hopefully lead to some clarity.

Bibliography


