Hashtag Community

Thesis Presented

by

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to

The Department of Art + Design

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Art in

Interdisciplinary Arts

Northeastern University

Boston, Massachusetts

August, 2018
Abstract

This thesis paper uses *Hashtag Community*— an installation art project—to reflect on human relationships under the control of computer algorithms. The project explores issues of consumption of images and controls over personal data in the internet age by visualizing and fictionalizing a world based on our online environment. It also probes the connection between online and offline relationships through a merging of physical and virtual elements: flags printed on vinyl, hand-silkscreened bags and an iPad with an Augmented Reality (AR) app. In the space, the characters — Unicorn People: a group of genderless cartoon characters who have horns on their head — are designed as a general avatar for everyone. This paper starts with the discussion of the relationship between the Unicorn People and visitors, which is analogous to that between users and avatars. It further argues our digital functionality online as an object instead of a subject. This paper also explores how human relationships have become manipulated as a digital product and how art can address this issue in an interactive and immersive way.
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I. Introduction

*Hashtag Community* is an installation that investigates human relationships in the context of the rapid distribution and consumption of images on the internet (Figure 1). A hashtag is a familiar internet element that helps to increase exposure of images to the public. People use various hashtags to define and promote posts, which makes online activities more searchable. On Instagram, people can follow a hashtag to see its updates on their home pages. By using or following a hashtag, people contribute to the image distribution. In my project, I select some popular hashtags on Instagram and create a hashtag community. The Unicorn People—a group of genderless cartoon characters who have horns on their head—always appear with the hashtags, namely the hashtags gather them together into a community, which mirrors the online use of hashtags.

Figure 1. “Hashtag Community” installation view
The hashtag is an entry point for people to experience the space. In the app, the hashtag is designed in the shape of a price tag, suggesting its commercial functionality (Figure 2). In an era when our online social activities are described as information exchange: bidirectional information transfer in telecommunications and computer science or communication, the currency circulated in the internet market is our personal information. Like all kinds of capital flow, the information flow is also regulated by power.

Figure 2. Participants playing with the “Hashtag Community” AR app

In this project, there are multiple layers of power relations. The first lies in-between the Unicorn People and visitors. Viewers have different degrees of control over the characters. The 50 hashtag flags with the face of Unicorn People hung in parallel rows above the heads of viewers announce their sovereignty in this space, and people can only passively look at the flags. People can play with the interface to increase the number of characters by touching the screen of
the iPad in the AR app. Participants can wear the bags emblazoned with prints of the Unicorn People and even possess a bag. The second is my control over my audience: I design the interactive process and frame their behaviors. At the same time, my own agency is limited: I also have to observe rules of the gallery and the Apple App store when I program the AR app.

In the “world” represented by the installation, the relationship between the viewers and Unicorn People is analogous to that between users and avatars online. The Unicorn People are created as a general avatar for everyone to symbolize the uniqueness that we view ourselves as subjects and the functional sameness that we are consumed for data as online objects. Gregory Ulmer thinks that “an avatar is a part of you that inhabits the cyberspace” and that it obtains its own digitality within the internet system. From this lens, the Unicorn People are designed as digital elements in the internet apparatus instead of a self-representation form. Visitors are positioned as spectators of the avatars. A Chinese proverb says that the person watching the game rather than the one in the game knows the way out. Namely, outsiders know better about what is going on because they are not involved in the issues.

However, viewers become more involved when they interact with the Unicorn People. In games, an avatar is created as a functional element. When a user chooses an avatar to represent him in the game, the avatar becomes a part of him that enables his activities in the game world. Similarly, participants in this project add humanity to the avatar when they wear the bag (Figure 3). The participants’ exploration in this space makes the project complete: from spectating at the avatar within its own system to attaching the “self” to the avatar. Without users or participants, the Unicorn People (like game avatars) are just one of the elements in their own systems. But the
question is: do we exploit avatars for online experience or do they use us to bring value to the whole online system.

Figure 3. Participant adds humanity to the character

In the section State of the Field, I explore three key concepts supporting my project. First, I explore the history of the avatar as an extension of the “self” into the virtual world. And I introduce Gregory Ulmer’s electracy — a theory that describes the kind of skills and facility necessary to exploit the full communicative potential of new electronic media — to understand the avatar as an experience to explore the online world. I also discuss that the avatar enables us to go beyond the limits of “self” and analyze it in terms of its functionality by studying John Craig Freeman’s work. I then turn to the operations of power and control as they function both on the internet and in the design of interactive art. In both instances, power facilitates the working of the whole system and enables the interactive experience in the system that is designed by people who endow the power. While the materiality of interactive art analyzes three
forms of materialization that works as bearers of meanings in interactive art: interface and hardware, everyday object, and atmosphere.

In the discussion section, I apply the concepts described above to my creative project. Specifically, the Unicorn People become a general avatar for everyone, and the design of it is related to the avatar’s essential function as a digital element. Power and control are not only the topic but also the method I exploit in my interactive artwork. Finally, I analyze my use of physical and digital materials to create an aesthetic experience for my audience, for instance, the canvas bags or the programming I do for the app.

The chapter entitled Paradoxes provides analysis of the key paradoxes that inspire this project. The offline presentation of online issues results from the fact that the internet itself is a paradox of online and offline issues. I analyze Trevor Paglen’s Autonomy Cube to help understand that paradox. Instead of discussing its political meaning, I view it as a practice that he creates a venue of the internet situation where “there is no longer any here, everything is now.” Another paradox is being a subject and object meantime, which is a common status of us online. I discuss how and why this paradox is expressed in Hashtag Community.
II. State of the field

A. Avataric Identity

With the development of social media, avatar is now understood as the image of our online social account. In the early 2000s, the word "avatar" referred to the figure that represents us in the game *Second Life*.

“Avatar is essentially a verb: ava, meaning ‘down’, and, tarati, indicating the ‘base of’. In Sanskrit, the language of origin, ‘avatar’ held the basic meaning of ‘descent’, lending the word spiritual meaning; ‘the god crosses over.’ In Hindu mythology, avatar originally indicated an action taken by a deity to incarnate in earthly form as animal or human.”

In the book, *Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networked Generation*, Beth Coleman introduced the reason for using a virtual character in a game: it helps to create a more noticeable online identity by using graphic figures due to the shift of computer simulated virtual worlds from the text-based to the graphic. In early video games, we can choose one from attractive characters that enable our activities in the game world. Recently, we have Bitmoji (an accompanied app with Snapchat) that enables us to make avatars based on our looks and chat with self-like emojis. It suggests that avatar no longer represents a singular person. Avatars represent different states and ideas of you and pass these things to others.

Avatars exist as online expressions of identities, but they expand as another self on social media as the internet becomes another venue of human communication. Particularly, when images are easy to make, circulate and access, we build our online lives through images, which reflects what kind of online selves we are. The avatar image of our social account can be changed a hundred times a day, and it is no longer a simple representation of our real identity. It
can be any image we like: our pet dog, a kind of food, or a place we have been to. In this context, an avatar is not attached to a specific image that we present ourselves as; instead, the avatar presents an archive of our emotions, ideas and states. The history of our posts and the online communities we are a part of makes our online-self recognizable.

From 2006 to 2009, John Craig Freeman worked on the project: *Imaging Place in Second Life*. He implemented versions of *Imaging Place* — an ongoing virtual-reality project since 1997 that combines panoramic video, and three-dimensional virtual worlds to document situations where lives of individuals in local community are influenced by globalization — in the platform of *Second Life*. In this project, an avatar based on John Craig Freeman’s appearance can walk in the *Second Life* world and enter a higher-level platform made of high-resolution aerial photograph of different cities all over the world. Mapped to the aerial images are networks of nodes constructed of primitive spherical geometry with panoramic photographs texture mapped to the interior. The avatar can walk into the center of the nodes and have a first-person view to these images, with audio telling the stories by the people present in the images. This project is a huge archive of real memory at various locations embedded into the virtual world of *Second Life*. The avatar walks between the game world and communities built on real locations.

John Craig Freeman views this project as an investigation of electracy⁵, a term coined by Gregory L. Ulmer to describe the skills that “to exploit the full communicative potential of new electronic media”⁶. He says that “electracy is to digital media what literacy is to print.”² In today’s digital world, we are not only limited to verbal or written communication. Instead, we communicate through emojis, images, videos, avatars, reblogs/retweets, hashtags, tagging others in the content and so on. But do we exploit the full communicative potential of electronic media? Ulmer thinks that we are undergoing an immediate transition from a culture of print literacy to a
culture saturated with electronic media. The rapid pace of such transition leads to our lagging behind in being “electrate”.

*Imaging Place in Second Life* is an attempt to create an electrate form of artistic expression, in other words, a logic (apparatus) native to new media. The project presents the avatar as an exploration of the world through digital elements instead of a simple form to represent you. Your avatar is the part of you that inhabits the internet. The avatar experience enables “you” to access other nodes in this networked media, and also makes “you” one of the nodes. Ulmer writes that the avatar “may be augmented within the digital apparatus (electracy) as a prosthesis of decision.”7 Namely, the avatar, as a part of us and an element in the digital apparatus parallelly, knows more than us. The internet mechanism decides how the avatar is operated and how to make it functional. In fact, the avatar leads us to follow the rules of the internet. In this context, an avatar is not a simple form representing us online, instead, it adds an avatars identity digitally to us that makes communication functional between nodes. Avatars exchange ideas, information and emotions of users from one to the other. Users are the nodes transferring personal data in the social network. The avatar is a functional element that connects to us and involves us in the network. This claim, as Ulmer believes, is not only an idea, a theory, but an experience.

In the project, there is one scene displaying the issue clearly discussed above: John Craig Freeman’s avatar stands in front of his panoramic photo. His avatar seems to be separated from him as only a digital medium, but also a digital self who has a first-person experience of viewing all the immersive images. The separation from the real self emphasizes the avatar’s independent digitality that is decided by the internet system. The knowing of it as a digital self adheres its digitality to the real self. Because the experience of understanding and communicating in the
networked media as an avatar already makes it part of our life, but it also enables us to go beyond the limits of “self” to experience the world.

B. Power and Control

Control societies on the internet

Michel Foucault’s power-knowledge is a dyad: control elicits knowledge, and knowledge is used for control. Foucault’s argument is that the ruling power in society ultimately decides and develops the knowledge systems for managing and controlling people: e.g., in different periods, power creates or changes the way people are managed using the knowledge that provides the tools of control. In the contemporary world, despite that information is not a substitute to “knowledge”, it is commonly believed that filtering large quantities of information will yield knowledge. Moreover, the way information functions on the internet resembles the knowledge. We are provided with information that are decided by power. Namely, the ruling power in society creates a system of information distribution to manage and control people in the society. In this context, the internet is a new venue of power system, just like family, school, factory that are analyzed as “disciplinary societies” by Foucault.

However, the venue is different from the “places of enclosure”\(^8\). Deleuze raised the idea of societies of control to describe the power system in electronic media. “The ‘disciplinary societies’ are characterized by the signature and the document, while the societies of control are characterized by the password and the computer.”\(^9\) It suggested that power no longer individualizes and masses together. Instead, “individuals have become ‘dividuals’, and masses, samples, data, markets, or ‘banks.’”\(^10\) Now, on social media, this dispersion is more obvious: our posts, images, videos or comments are all embedded with the coding that bears the control.
Deleuze thought this technological evolution must be a mutation of capitalism: from a capitalism of concentration for production to one for product to be sold or marketed. It became dispersive: “the family, the school, the army, the factory are no longer the distinct analogical spaces that converge towards an owner—state or private power—but code figures of a single corporation.”\textsuperscript{11}

Galloway critically discussed both Foucault’s and Deleuze’s theories and raised that the protocol—a defined set of rules and regulations that determine how data is transmitted in telecommunications and computer networking—shapes a new control after decentralization. “The digital language of control is made of codes indicating where access to some information should be allowed or denied. We are no longer dealing with a duality of mass and individual from the modern era.”\textsuperscript{12}

In my former research project: \textit{I live here}, I post images of Unicorn People with particular hashtags and then I visited all the recent posts on the hashtag page to get screenshots of the Unicorn People’s and other people’s images (Figure 4). The Unicorn People in the image have mimic or complete gestures in another image in the hashtag's display grid, thereby creating a relationship with other users' images. But that intention is not achieved all the time, for the order of how pictures are placed is decided by algorithms. Sometimes, I cannot even access a particular hashtag archive of images, because the algorithms may deny some posts under the hashtag and make the whole archive inaccessible (Figure 5). It can be an example of how the control works on the internet: the power we have on the internet is controlled by the codes embedded in the system. That is what Deleuze described as “the numerical language of control is made of codes that mark access to information.”\textsuperscript{13} This control is after all decided by capital. Corporations occupy people’s information online as they grab control of the market. They target
at the service of exchange information not the production of information. In other words, the control of information exchange is capitalized.

Figure 4. “I live here”, 2018.
Figure 5. The denial of access to a hashtag

With networked media, we are all nodes that connect multiple nodes by exchanging information. The power thus is delegated to everyone, but the premise to have that power is that you are giving others power to access you. Accepting participation in this system is both to exercise agency and to have that agency always already subject to and mediated by the controls of computer protocol. It seems that our society is more transparent. But that transparency also leads to more control over us. This argument is based on two ideas. First, the growth of electracy
lags behind the development of new digital tools. Second, the mechanism of the internet (the protocol) decides where the power goes and how much power we have. For users, it is a passive power that is delivered by the digital apparatus: a kind of power we cannot control. We have the power for online activities: accessing other people, distributing images or information, but the power is just the function of the digital elements that are controlled under the protocol of computer.

Power in interactivity

Interactions in art emerged in the late 1950s in parallel with artists’ desires to find less alienating and exclusive environments in which to show art. In the late 1990s, Nicholas Bourriaud defined a specific artistic movement as relational aesthetics. Bourriaud described relational aesthetics as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.”

For Bourriaud, this particular kind of interactivity has political connotations, as he came to see:

“artists as facilitators rather than makers and regarded art as information exchanged between the artist and the viewers. The artist, in this sense, gives audiences access to power and the means to change the world.”

In this context, the artist’s work is not limited to creating work by using his or her technical skills to provide an aesthetic experience. It is also about designing the interactive process or even frame the possible behaviors of the audience. According to Ernest Edmonds, the author of *Interactive art* published in 1966, interactive art relies on the participation of the spectator, which is different from participatory art or socially engaged art that calls for a larger
portion of participation during the creation of the work. In conclusion, interactive art delegates power to the audience but maintains the artist's control over the whole system.

Caitlin Foley’s and Misha Rabinovich’s interactive installation work *Worries Bash* (2018), collected worries from hundreds of people through a website. The artists created interactive sculptures that, when tapped or touched, would play one of the recorded worries. In this work, there are both participants who contribute to the creation of the work and spectators invited to interact with the work. The artists gave power to the spectators to activate their experience, but the activation is still determined by the artists. The audience’s power is relative: they can do more than spectating as traditional painting or sculpture enable them to. Also, their participation is important to the concept and the function of the whole system that the artists designed.

In this context, the power in interactive art actually functions in a similar way as the power in the networked media: they all facilitate the working of the whole system and gain experience in the system in an expected way by the artists or the app developer. Similar to programmers who are constrained by the computer protocol, artists also have to follow the rules of the art market and institutional art.

C. Materiality of Interactive Art

The book: *Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art* by Katja Kwastek provides the theoretical and methodological tools for understanding and analyzing digital art in an art-historical perspective. It also makes comparison with non-digital works, which is helpful for me to support my project as a merge of both digital and non-digital elements. An important argument in this book is that the medium we use carries a context that contributes to the whole
work in various ways. I will discuss three that relate to my work here: interface and hardware, everyday object, and atmosphere. According to Kwastek, even though interface is purely a functional medium that enables actions and delivers information, it still must be addressed as a potential bearer of meanings. In fact, the functionality or the process of exploring the functionality can encourage interaction. In Tamiko Theil’s recent site-specific Augmented Reality (AR) exhibition — *Augmented Landscape* — visitors have to download an app to see the virtual content at Salem National Park. The familiarity with the interface on their own phones makes the interaction easier. It also conveys subtext to the overall configuration of the aesthetic experience. The mobility of their phones is considered as means of expression. Tamiko Theil’s augmented work shows huge Chinese and Western figure heads haunting in the air while many opium plants grow from the ground, which suggests the Opium Wars that the Western brought opium to China. In this context, the mobility of viewers’ own phones carries a subtext of traveling which resonates with the work’s content.

The context can be framed intentionally even for a mass-produced device:

“Even if individual constructions are more likely to be perceived as aesthetically effective elements than (replaceable) serially produced devices, intentional signification or “only” contextual interpretability is possible in both cases.”

In the exhibition — *Before Projection: Video Sculpture 1974-1995* — old, heavy and black-white TVs are even more important as a contextual element than a functional device. (Figure 6) Because they bear the historical context which reflects a culture at that specific period. Software works in a similar way. In an artwork, the app or the browser that is provided to use can be a bearer of meaning whether it is programmed by the artist or supported by known technology
company. Its brand, history or even the coding system behind it all contributes to the work’s context.

![Image](image.png)

Figure 6. Takahiko Iimura, “TV for TV”, 1983, video art

An everyday object also carries meaning in an interactive artwork. It provokes a strong desire in the users to touch it, because viewers have enough knowledge of how to use it. Despite the objects are often incorporated or converted into interfaces, familiarity still facilitates understanding. Viewers bring their daily knowledge of the object which can be the main source of the context that it brings. Kwastek analyzed Lynn Hershman’s *American Finest* to prove this argument. Lynn Hershman builds a camera-gun that historical war images can be seen when people pull the trigger of the M16 Rifle placed in the gallery. In addition, the participant periodically sees a picture of himself and is thus staged as his own victim. First, people’s familiarity with the firearm enables them to operate the interface system in the project. Second, despite the artist alienated the rifle from its original use, people can aesthetically perceive the
alienation with the premise of understanding the everyday object: instead of aiming at and shooting someone else with violence, firing a weapon shows pictures of what happens in the past and pictures of the shooter. It even promotes the aesthetic experience for the audience by rendering the everyday object in an opposite direction from its original use.

When discussing atmosphere, Kwastek starts with immaterial materiality: visual or acoustic information transmitted via screens, projections, speakers or headphones, but essentially, she introduces it as an important spatial quality based on the arguments of Gernot Böhme, a German philosopher and author who studies the relationship between culture and environment. This discussion also applies to non-digital materiality. According to Böhme, the primary object of perception is atmosphere, which he defines as an “intermediate quality of feeling poured out into the space”\(^\text{17}\). He views atmosphere as the first received thing, which is always spatial. Different from the interface and everyday object, atmosphere is a more emotional bearers of meaning, but still central to the aesthetic experience of interactive art. The immediate notice of the presence of things or human beings radiates a “thereness”. It also characterizes the exhibition space. That can be seen in Hito Steryel’s *liquidity Inc*, a video installation that uses water as a metaphor for capital and information flows. The whole exhibition room is dimly lit in a blue color without exposing the lighting source. Visitors’ emotions can be evoked by the spatial atmosphere, and the content of the video determines what kind of the atmosphere is. The atmosphere or the resulting mood is not represented mimaetically or semiotically but is created by the work. Atmosphere and emotion thus represent a link between materiality and interpretability.
III. Discussion of Hashtag Community

A. “Avatar” and “Unicorn People”

The protagonists of Hashtag Community are the Unicorn People, which function as avatars in the online experience. The relationship between the participants and the unicorn people is the lynchpin in this project. It is analogous to that between users and avatars online. It emphasizes Gregory Ulmer’s understanding of avatar as an element beyond a self: it has its own digitality which makes the game or the social media platform functional. Before visitor’s participation, the space is a world of the Unicorn People. They live in this hashtag community and chase hashtags. They have their own system of lives. Participants enter the system and begin to also be a part of the system. It seems that they obtain control over the Unicorn People, but participants also make the whole interactive system functional. By participating, they realize the function of building relationship with the Unicorn People, a key part in this project. Participation links the characters and visitors together which resemble our online experience: the avatar is not a self-representation but a functional element in the internet system waiting for our exploration.

One key problem in this relationship between the Unicorn People and participants is how people know that the character is a representation of their avatars. As mentioned above, avatars in this project are separated from users and designed to present it as a functional element in a system. It means that the Unicorn People are elements that already functions this hashtag community before participants come to realize other functions. The Unicorn People consume the hashtags in their own community: they have their hashtag flags, they chase and try to steal hashtags in the augmented scenes, hashtag on the bag can be a sentence that is said from them based on their gestures. But via exploration of the space, visitors begin to be more related to the character: from only spectating to simply operating the interface of the AR app that they can
control the number of the characters and to a more closed relationship with their body. That is a way for people to perceive their changing relationship with the character. When the bag is worn, the character and the participant’s arm work together to make the bag meaningful, which resembles our online experience that the disappearance of either the user or the avatar makes the online activities less meaningful. That is a way for people to feel that they and Unicorn People become an entirety. Besides, the similarities between Unicorn People and people — using hashtags and flags, having their communities — suggest that the characters resemble humans. Although people may not understand that the Unicorn People work as avatars for them, their participations that makes the whole system functional are already enough to make this project meaningful.

The digital functionality of avatar decides the iconography of unicorn people. I use simple lines and design it in a cartoon and comic style that can be easily accepted by anybody. I draw them first and mass produce them digitally either by coding or rendering them in software. The sameness of all unicorn people is a way to present the functional sameness of our avatar—the part of us that inhabit the internet—as nodes in the networked media. However, the iconography also plays with the unicorn as a symbol of uniqueness. It is a response to how we view our online selves. Personally, the online self is attached to the real self who has his own stories; generally, the online self is attached to the avatar who stores his information and distribute or exchange with others to make the social media function. Interestingly, in recent years, the unicorn has developed another meaning as a start-up valued at more than a billion dollars in the software or technology sector. It therefore suggests both consumerism and capitalization—themes that I address in more detail later.

B. Power and control
As I have discussed in the former chapter, the power in interactive art and networked social media operate in analogous ways. The first expression of control is my role as the artist framing the expected behaviors of participants. Like users who are nodes that contribute to the functionality of the internet, participants are also key functional elements in my project. The most direct power relations can be seen in the app that I created for the project. The algorithms in my coding decide how people can interact with it: the viewer can increase the number of the Unicorn People and find them by moving the screen. This work is inspired by the relationship between users and avatars. We can control our avatars online, but the power embedded in avatar’s functionality is determined by programmers. In this project, participants have power over the Unicorn People, but the control ends in an ambiguous way that is designed by me as the artist.

The three elements of the work indicate different degrees of interaction and therefore different degrees of power. For the flags, people can only passively view them; while for the app, people can have the power to increase the number of the Unicorn People; for the bags, they have more control over the bags. But, the unicorn people have ambiguous power relations with participants: the control is bilateral. There are several layers of power relations here: one is the changing control that participants have over the unicorn people; the other is my control over the participants to make them complete my artistic expression by interacting with the work. When the Unicorn People chase the hashtags, people interrupt their world and consume them for playfulness, and I consume the participants as the functional elements of my work. Another layer of control comes from the gallery: I am not allowed to sell the bags in the gallery which temporarily prevents the extending lives of the Unicorn People. Because it is a university gallery,
and it shows how different “protocols” institutions have can influence artists’ control over their own works.

However, unlike the digital apparatus and protocols governing the internet, I don’t have a mature mechanism that makes the whole system function as I expect. I am exploring how to frame the behaviors of my audience at different kinds of spaces. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to display my thesis project twice at two different spaces during the writing of this paper. The first, most frequently discussed in this paper, occurred in the university gallery where I mounted by MFA thesis exhibition. While the bags were displayed on metal rack stands that are usually placed in tourist shops, people still hesitated to get it from the rack and wear it. In the gallery space, they had a sense that the bags should not be touched. The other venue displaying the work is the Boston Women’s Market’s event—a pop-up market for women entrepreneurs to sell their hand-made products. In the atmosphere of market, more people tried the bag. Also, instead of placing them together on the rack, I hang those bags separately in the middle of my installation space at a range of heights that most people could raise their arm to wear it directly and take a picture with it (Figure 7). I also drew signs and put it with each bag that reads “try me”. My second edition of thesis project displays a progress in my control over the participant’s behavior. Meanwhile, since the Boston Women’s Market (BWM) is an organization mainly being promoted on Instagram, it brings people coming from the Instagram community and also circulates my work to the Instagram which contextualize the project differently. (Figure 8)

Besides the different atmosphere, I also dealt with different “protocols” of non-commercial and commercial art market. I changed the interactive process according to different rules. In other words, I am also passive while I have the power to frame the behaviors of
participants. Even though the power is decentralized, but there are still hierarchies of power. And the power is always related to capital.

Figure 7. A person wearing the bag
Figure 8. The Instagram story promoting of BWM

C. Materiality in Interaction

Interface and hardware

According to Katja Kwastek, the medium used in artworks carries its context and can be a potential bearer of meanings themselves. This relates to the interface of the AR app of Hashtag Community. It is common for artists to highlight the concept in digital art and hope viewers can
forget the technology. On the contrary, in my project, “the exploration of the system’s functionality often plays a significant role in the aesthetic experience.”18 The interface for starting an app on a mobile-device is familiar to most people. That familiarity encourages people to interact with my AR app. I have seen many people directly heading to the digital device before they view other elements in the project due to a daily reliance on their own mobile devices. I also notice that participants sometimes tell each other how to explore the app, which I expected as a connection to the real world: in-person sociability in support of online sociability. By opening your Instagram or Facebook on your phone, you interact with other people in the online world; with my AR app, you interact with the unicorn people or even people around you in the gallery.

Different from Tamiko Theil’s site-specific work discussed in the former chapter, the device I provide is my personal iPad that can be moved in a certain range of space since its safety cable is fixed on the pedestal holding the iPad. Its back side is fully covered by a safety case. A set-up like this may seem not welcoming people to interact, especially when people can also see the unread message and email sign. (Figure 9) However, guidelines are put to strongly encourage people to use the iPad. (Figure 10) Just as the personal iPad is accessed by strange people, the space of Unicorn People is also interrupted. As the owner of the iPad, the artist creating this installation and the programmer making the app, I am the person having the most control in this interactive system. However, as a programmer for the app, I am under control. It is hard for me to submit my app to the app store, because there are many terms that limit the submission even if I have already payed an annual fee to have the membership of Apple developer. My app has to meet all the requirements of the protocol which discourage me from submitting for a long-time inspecting on the app. It influenced my choice of showing the app with my personal digital device.
Everyday objects as bags

The bags are viewed as interactive objects. They take the form of everyday objects that serve as bearers of meaning. Its functionality as a wearable object encourage people to interact with it, but its artistic presentation in the gallery prevents people from wearing it. It is alienated from our daily life by being put in an art space. However, the common and affordable material of canvas encourages people to inquire about the price and how to purchase it. By this means, the bag not only has an after-life beyond the gallery, but also returns to an everyday object that reminds the artist experience in the gallery. Hashtags and the unicorn people are printed on the bags, for I intend to materialize the hashtag as a product that people can wear (consume) by rendering them in a commercial-style display. Meanwhile, the screen printing reflects both mass production while maintaining individual personality, reinforcing the functional sameness.
Barring the alienation of the bags by putting it in an art gallery, the bags are also alienated from its original meaning with its design. Similar to the incorporation process of Hershman’s camera-gun, the bag is turned into an interface that people have to fit their arms with. A bag is seen as an object or a possession of the person wearing it. But the bag here presents an ambiguous relationship. Who is whose possession/object? Both the arm and the character make this bag’s meaning complete by being a functional element. (Figure 11)

Figure 11. The alienation of an everyday object from its original meaning

Atmosphere

In my project, I explore the atmosphere with quantities and positions of small flags, while expecting viewers to notice their presence in the space. It is an experience of noticing the existence of both the works and visitors themselves. I standardized the color to only black and
white and borrow the context of flags that declare the power of a group or a community or advertise for a community. I explore visual expressions to create the atmosphere of a Unicorn Man world and play with positioning and distance to create a feeling of being surrounded. I also enhance that feeling by playing with the shadow of the flags. (Figure 13) The size comparison between the characters and viewers hint at an unconscious intrusion of the viewer. Viewers are already participating in interrupting the community by being present in the space where the character lives on hashtags: where there are hashtags, there are Unicorn People who steal or produce hashtags.

![Figure 12. Shadows of flags on the wall](image)
IV. Paradoxes

A. Online and Offline

Internet has become a metonym of digital technologies and new media that rapidly replace the literate apparatus that serves as the support for the language function in society. The internet “accident”\(^{19}\) occurs everywhere simultaneously due to a global reach of digital media. Paul Virilio, a French cultural theorist, urbanist, and aesthetic philosopher, introduces the neologism *dromosphere*, referring to the pollution of dimensions that follows from electronic augmentation of human thought and language.\(^{20}\) We are now undergoing an instant communication which contracts the time. Ulmer writes that “If the oral apparatus ran on cyclical time, and literacy on linear time, electracy operates within the moment of Now.”\(^{21}\) In the internet world, we are always already arriving at the venue of our communication with others. However, the paradox is that this experience of Now is separated from place.

“It is now the immobility of all possible journeys or paths. The time-light barrier then blocks off — along with the horizon of appearances — the horizon of action, the very reality of a space where all succession dissolves, where it is as though hours and days had ceased to flow; surfaces ceased to extend; what cropped up yesterday, here or there, now happens everywhere at once. The accident to end all accidents spreads in a flash and the center of time — the endless present — leaves behind the center of fixed space for good. There is no longer any here, everything is now.”\(^{22}\)

That is a main paradox of the internet itself that drives this offline artwork presenting the online environments. Instead of being trapped within Now, the project limits its content in this place. It works in the reverse way of our online journey does by creating a particular venue. It is
a practice in dialogue with Trevor Paglen’s *Autonomy Cube*, a sculpture built in gallery space that provides secure Wi-fi for visitors and make their information untraceable. Instead of analyzing the political intention in this project, I view it as a practice that he creates a place for the situation: “there is no longer any here, everything is now.” The internet experience that everything happens in a flash is subject to a place. People who share the Now-time on the secure internet may also have the geographical similarities as they are or have been in this gallery.

The internet has been compared with the classical public sphere as idealized in 17th century café in Europe. Coffee houses were important social places where political debates, talks or reading gatherings happened. People can pay for a cup of coffee and get information by joining the gatherings in various coffee house. Without particular venues, the internet is another social place where you don’t need to pay for a cup of coffee, but you pay with your personal information. Coffee houses are commentated as even more democratic places than the internet for there’s less surveillance and control. Paglen’s work is a practice of rebuilding the café-like democracy where information is free and untraceable.

In this context, building internet-related artworks offline is incredibly important as a critique of online consumption and control. Online activities are based on our offline lives. Our personal information is stored, processed and rendered online and we get the influence offline again: we may meet people that we know online or we are interrupted by people who know us online. The paradox is not that artists build offline places about online issues, but that internet culture itself is a mix of both. The online system connects people’s offline lives everywhere. We post images, texts or videos about our offline issues: politics, environments, crimes and even privacy. Then our participation in this distribution influence our offline lives: we may solve environmental issues by raising money and awareness online, we may even be interrupted due to
a leak of personal information online. The offline and online activities are extremely entangled. In my work, I start with a venue first and bring an evident internet element: hashtag with a mediation about the self and avatar embedded in this space. Expectedly, the materialization of the internet issues starts with a place and is circulated back again via people’s posts of unicorn people with them to social media. (Figure 13)

![Figure 13. Screenshots of participant’s Instagram story that tag me about the unicorn people](image)

B. Subject and Object

In the Unicorn People world, they are subjects, but they are objects fashioned by humans who have control over the unicorn people, as I have mentioned, when they enter the space. I render the text next to the graphics of unicorn people on the bag as a pun: it speaks in the tongue of the character but can also be interpreted as being spoken by the person wearing the bag.
(Figure 14) I intentionally render the character as a subject in that space by writing guidelines for how to interact in a first-person tone as if written by the unicorn people. (Figure 16) But obviously they are also the object that can be consumed both in the augmented and real world. Who is the object in the relationship between the unicorn people and participants can be a key question, since it is also a question for the avatar and the self (player, user). The blur of unicorn people’s status between subject and object is a mirror of our online avatar’s (self) dilemma that we are unique subjects from our point of view, but functionally, we are all the same accessible object. After all, in this interactive project, the participants have their own answers of whether they are the personal possession of the unicorn people or vice versa; in other words, who is the object, in their relationship.

Figure 14. The person wearing the bag showing the ambiguous relationship
The subject-object paradox also emerges in the formal installation exploiting the architecture of Gallery 360: the wall towards the hallway is made of clear glass through which passer-by can see through. Participants use the screen to find and peep into the lives of the
unicorn people, who are distanced from the viewers by a screen. In the gallery space, the glass wall also functions as a screen onto the project. People can have a glimpse of what the participants look at through the digital screen. In this sense, the whole space is separated into a performing and spectating place by the glass wall, which hints that the spectator inside the gallery is part of the display. The body positioned in the space connects the works and the participant and even makes the passer-by a potential participant. (Figure 16) Therefore, the unicorn people are the object observed by the participants, while the participants can be the objects observed by a passer-by.

Figure 16. Multiple layers of spectating in the work
V. Conclusion

Hashtag Community is a technology-based interactive and installation artwork that explores the relationship between self and avatar in terms of functionality by materializing the internet with flags, canvas bags and digital device. It is also a way for me to tease out all the ideas mentioned above through the participation of viewers. It blurs the subject and object in a relationship and positions the viewers as people having power towards the characters. I pose the question of power and consumption to the audience and pour my characters into this world. The character is born with a fictional world based on internet culture. The ambiguous relationship between the character and the viewer may be the only thing that can extend this three-week exhibition. As I have previously explained the physical importance of a digital work, the bags will continue bring this context of consumption into people’s daily lives just as social media does.

Hashtag Community addresses issues of internet culture in a personalized expression. The hand-made quality of the bags and the cartoon style of the character represents my observations and mediations about consumption. In the real world, there is an integration of the real self and the virtual self. With our avatar online, we also have another self that can be spectated by us, so the character may be interpreted as another self. The Unicorn People world is the epitome of the consumption of human relationships.
Notes


5. John Craig Freeman, “Imaging Place in Second Life.”

https://john craigfreeman.wordpress.com/imaging-place/imaging-place-in-second-life/


Bibliography


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