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### There's Enough For Everybody: User Generated Content Post-posting

Rebecca Forstater  
*Syracuse University*

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## **Abstract**

Experiencing the evolution of the contemporary digital space has led to an inevitable awe and skepticism of technology that penetrates through my bodies of work. Wonderment is usually succeeded shortly after by a contemplation of how this shiny newness will potentially change the way we experience everyday life. This point of view and gravitation towards the digital as an artistic material is specific to being born in the late 1980's, where there are glimpses of early memories before computers and a corresponding growth of technology with personal cognitive development. It is an active and learned inclination to engage with new technology with excitement and a native understanding of the evolution of Internet culture.

Lowbrow Internet aesthetics that reference the early home computer's visual capabilities have had a nostalgic resurgence in the realm of social media's meme culture. This trend is indicative of Internet culture, where there is a desire to quickly make altered visual imagery to share. Altered, by means of appropriating found imagery on the Internet and viewing it as an open source platform while drawing cartoonish figures and/or adding text that carries inherent cultural meaning. Lowbrow Internet aesthetics are, above all, accessible to anyone with a smartphone and arguably the most prevalent aesthetic sensibility (whether intentional or not) of the current moment.

THERE'S ENOUGH FOR EVERYBODY:  
USER GENERATED CONTENT POST-POSTING

by  
Rebecca Forstater

B.F.A, James Madison University, 2012

Thesis  
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts.

Syracuse University  
May 2019

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## I. **TBT** - “Throwback Thursday”

My first experience with the Internet was in 1996, when I was in kindergarten and my Dad set up my first email account. He set my password to “star123” because I was barely literate and the printer logo right next to the keyboard spelled out “star.” As an amateur computer builder he made sure to add the “123” because even then he felt it important to teach me the need for a secure password. These were the early days of the Internet, when it was dial up and you could not be on the phone and checking your email at the same time. Then a few years later AIM came out. Do you remember it? Internet slang became a thing and I was all “ttyl” and “brb.” And away messages and how sometimes you would leave them on even when you were there just to receive messages. And chat rooms and how that is how anyone born between 1989-1993 learned about sex. And how your font color and choice said a lot about your personality, I was pretty into the rainbow color you could download as an extension, called “EXTREME Messenger.” And your username. I was “rebeccarific.” I remember that took a few hours for my sister, “woatheretiger,” and I to come up with. Remember SmarterChild? She was a bot you could talk to on AIM. She lacked social skills but she had Encarta Encyclopedia loaded into her algorithm, so she was useful for facts. I think of her as a child version of Siri, pure and innocent, and treated everyone nicely. Then she grew up and got a job at Apple and learned how to work a room. I did not get

Facebook until I was sixteen and my first smartphone until I was in college. The Internet and I essentially grew up together.



*Figure 1.* Rebecca's first computer art made in her Dad's office in Washington, D.C..  
1996.

I know it is frowned upon to show pictures of yourself as a child in a serious professional setting, but I have something I would like to show you. I found a printed copy of my first Microsoft Paint drawing (Figure 1) that I made at age six. It might be one of the nicest drawings I have ever made. Look at those rough finger movement lines I was creating before touch screens existed! What a cool fucking filter I put over my face! Nice subtle use of red, baby genius Rebecca, I cannot believe you knew then that statistically people click "like" more often on images containing that color. In relevance to this thesis, the image very much encapsulates my unavoidable interest in the screen experience and the aesthetics of Internet culture as the digital is my oldest



and most frequently used medium. Experiencing the evolution of the contemporary digital space has led to an inevitable awe and skepticism of technology that penetrates through my bodies of work. Wonderment is usually succeeded shortly after by a contemplation of how this shiny newness will potentially change the way we experience everyday life. This point of view and gravitation towards the digital as an artistic material is specific to being born in the late 1980's, where there are glimpses of early memories before computers and a corresponding growth of technology with personal cognitive development. It is an active and learned inclination to engage with new technology with excitement and a native understanding of the evolution of Internet culture.

## **II. *IMHO* - "In My Humble (Honest) Opinion"**

As the Internet has evolved over the past three decades, the quantity of content could be considered increasingly inversely related to the actual technical quality of the content. We can attribute this to technical capabilities evolving faster than human progress. The slickness of today's easy to craft websites and glossy filters on sharing platforms create a veil of quality distant from the original source.

Lowbrow Internet aesthetics that reference the early home computer's visual capabilities have had a nostalgic resurgence in the realm of social media's meme culture. This trend is indicative of Internet culture, where there is a desire to quickly

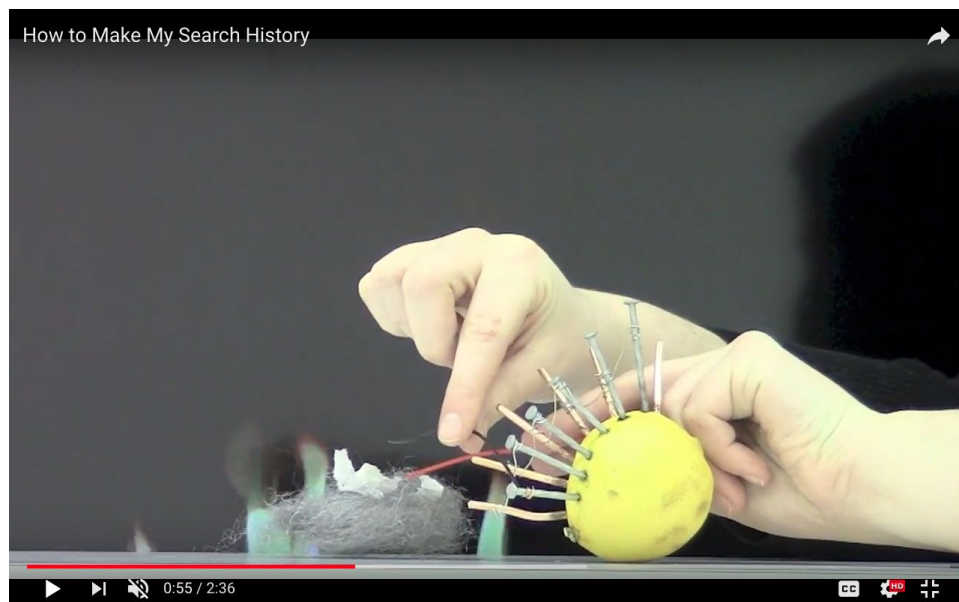
make altered visual imagery to share. Altered, by means of appropriating found imagery on the Internet and viewing it as an open source platform while drawing cartoonish figures and/or adding text that carries inherent cultural meaning. Lowbrow Internet aesthetics are, above all, accessible to anyone with a smartphone and arguably the most prevalent aesthetic sensibility (whether intentional or not) of the current moment.

I choose to use this aesthetic in my work because the overarching goal of my practice is to make in method that is in relationship to the way are actively observing in everyday life. Material choices in my work are decided upon after the idea, working with what is the most suitable in visualizing this. Material can be anything and everything; cardboard, apps, paper, tape, computers, phones, actors, audio. I use them without hierarchical value. They are materials of everydayness, they are ordinary and readily available to consume. In my practice, these materials are extracted from mundane daily interaction, manipulated, and rearranged to be re-presented to the viewer.

According to reddit user TheWarmGun (2016), “TIL That the terms 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' come from Phrenology, a pseudoscience which determines intelligence based on the shape of one's skull.” I double checked this fact with their cited source, and Wikipedia does indeed confirm this fact. Wikipedia further goes on to describe its use in a contemporary context, generally referring to a connotation of high culture (Wikipedia, n.d.). “Lowbrow” is used in opposition to define “forms of popular culture that have mass



appeal.” My middle school teachers told me that Wikipedia was not a valid source material for research. Well look at me now Minnie Howard Middle School teachers of the early 2000’s, citing Wikipedia in an academic research paper for a terminal degree! Reddit did not exist then, but if it did, I surely could have found a copy of the textbook I forgot to bring to that one U.S. History class and subsequently got detention for. If smartphones were invented then, I also would have been able to google what the fuck was going on September 11, 2001 when lots of kids’ panicked parents picked them up to go on a rumored “field trip.” Instead I waited until I got home eight hours later to find out that a plane crashed into a government building located two miles from my school.



*Figure 2.* Still from Rebecca Forstater’s video “How to Make My Search History”. 2017.

The proof is in the pudding, middle school teachers, I can learn anything on the Internet. In my video “How to Make My Search History” (Figure 2), I visualized the perceived potential of user generated content (UGC) that is causally restricted by the corporate algorithmic gaze. This piece began by typing into the YouTube search bar, “How to make.” The search was linked to my Google account that I created in 2014. I began watching the first videos that were suggested to me through the algorithmic gaze of Google LLC and made the items exactly as they were described to me. These items ranged from “How to make a incredible grater for chips” to “How To Make A Fully Automatic Paper Ak 47 That Shoots” to “How to Make DIY Mini Pinatas!.” Many of the resulting objects did not work as they are advertised for two reasons: either they assume prior technical knowledge and do not explain important steps in their tutorials or they are hoax videos. The goal for YouTubers is to get a lot of views and followers, as they can make an incredible amount of money from advertisements and sponsorships. All objects resulted in the DIY aesthetic of the web 2.0; think shoes made of hot glue and a million ways to “reuse” a plastic bottle. They mimic functionality, without ever really being truly functional. The objects I made were then reinserted into this digital world, where the promise of purpose existed originally. In front of a DIY green screen (aka a large television with the backdrop of found videos and the original YouTube video audios), the objects were performed and recorded from actuality back to perceived reality.

### III. AMA - “Ask Me Anything”

From 2009 to present, image based social media has gained popularity and become deeply intertwined with consumer culture. As a direct result, a new social hierarchy has emerged among people under thirty-five in developed capitalist countries. Status and success are based firstly on an individual’s popularity digitally. It has less to do with initial monetary wealth, and more to do with playing the game of the Internet right. Below, I have provided a visual of the social structure of Instagram for your reference. It is called “The IRL Hierarchy”:

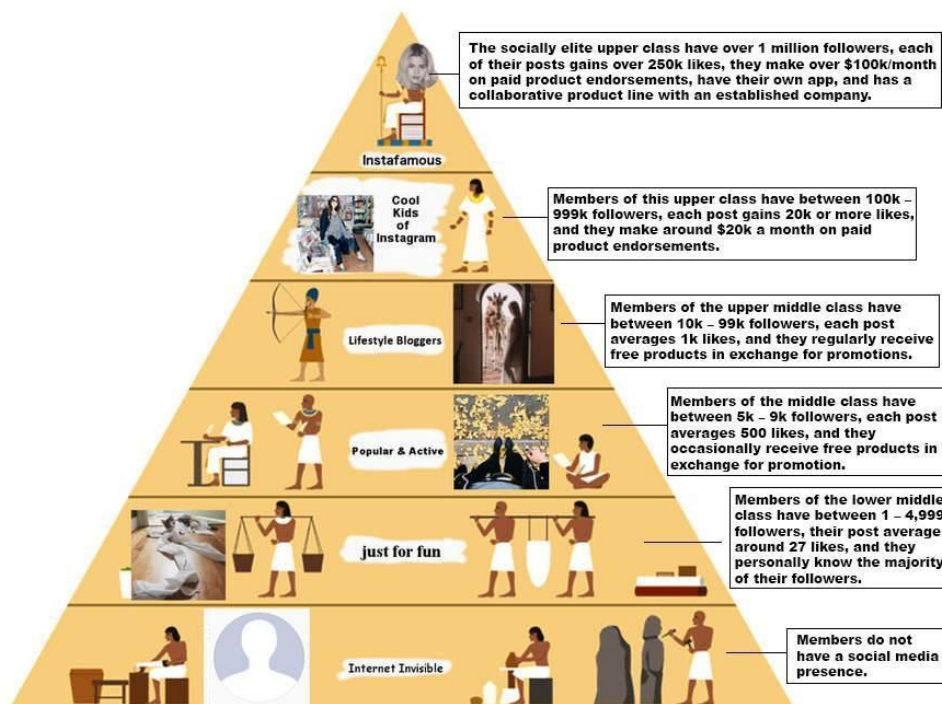
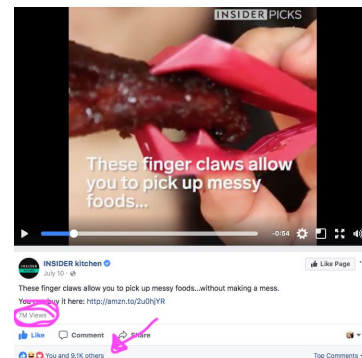


Figure 3. IRL Hierarchy developed by Rebecca Forstater. 2018.

In Figure 3, I have created a visualization of the social order of Instagram, detailing the inverse relationship between population and success, both monetarily and socially. The IRL Hierarchy has led to the FOMOTBFAMM (Fear of Missing Out to Become Famous and Make Money) phenomenon. This is a relatively new and obscure theory, and you may not fit the age bracket to have experienced it, so I have a real-life example for you:

EXAMPLE A: A few years ago, I walked in on my partner's roommate shooting an infomercial for Trongs™ in their living room. Trongs are essentially gripped gloves for your fingers while you eat finger food, their logo says “Get the fork outta here.” I thought, “Wow, that is dumb.” Earlier this year I saw that Trongs went viral. I shared the link on my Facebook page (Figures 4 and 5). I'm a little upset I threw out the free ones they gave to me and that I doubted the possibility for success in the viral Internet age.



*Figure 4 (left).* Screenshot from Trongs infomercial. 2014.

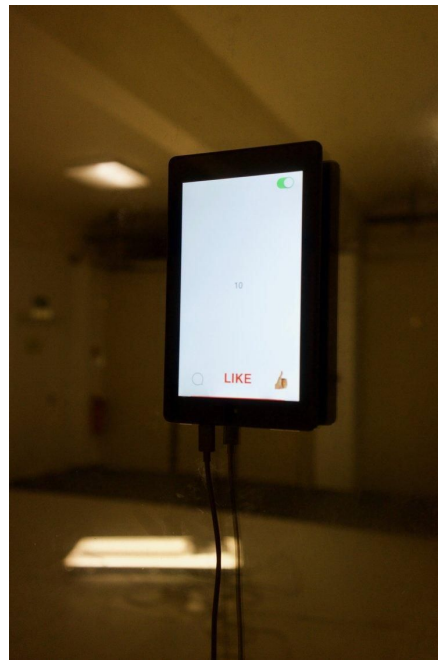
*Figure 5 (right).* Screenshot from Facebook of viral Trongs infomercial that I posted on Instagram. 2018.

Because of *Example A*, I believe it is possible that I could have more success in life as a YouTuber who unboxes chewing gums from around the world and gives reviews on its elasticity, stickiness, and bubble blowing potential (I actually might do this, so please don't steal it from me). The earning potential for a notable YouTuber far surpasses most well-known contemporary artists. You can find me at [https://www.YouTube.com/channel/UCCege5zLhPUblx-8ra\\_kVbg](https://www.YouTube.com/channel/UCCege5zLhPUblx-8ra_kVbg). I only have 38 views on my two videos as of writing this, so if you and the person sitting next to you could view it and subscribe to my channel, that would really help me out in getting Bubble Yum™ to sponsor the jump start of my career.

My bubble gum idea may seem dumb to you, and I am not offended, mainly because I thought that same thing when I saw the Trongs IRL (in real life) for the first time, but also because before seeking the approval of the respective you (the academic institution for the purpose of this writing), I suggested it to my friends on Instagram and I got a lot of positive DMs. According to Wikipedia (which for the purpose of this writing and topic, I will ask you to continue to view as a legitimate reference), UGC is “any form of content, such as images, videos, text and audio, that have been posted by users of online platforms such as social media and wikis.” UGC is an example of the potential democratization of cultural production, but with the format of the web 2.0, it has not established itself as possible with the interference of corporate and governmental interest.



Researchers have linked the sociological effects of current social media usage to an increased diagnosis of the Wolf-Schmidt Syndrome, also referred to as LMS (Like Me Syndrome). According to WebMD, LMS is a compulsive desire to check one's phone for social interaction. It is caused by dopamine surge that occurs when an individual receives a text, "like," answers an email, etc. The dopamine surge subsides after a few seconds, causing the brain to desire another. Common symptoms include anxiety, giddiness, muscle twitching (painless), compulsive behavior, delusions, difficulty concentrating, impaired social skills, and repetitive behaviors.<sup>1</sup>



*Figure 6.* Installation image of "Like Like Comment" in Berlin, Germany. 2017.

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<sup>1</sup>WebMD does not endorse this writing and has no known knowledge of Wolf-Schmidt Syndrome, LMS, or FOMOTBFAMM.

My “Like Like Comment” piece (Figure 6) is an app presented on an Amazon Fire Tablet that's goal was to visualize Wolf-Schmidt Syndrome. The single page interface has five components: an on/off icon, a comment icon, a “LIKE” icon, a thumbs up icon, and a numerical counter. The four icons resemble buttons, phrases, and imagery that one interacts with on social media, but they do not function in an expected or rewarding way as each press of any of the four icons increases the number on the numerical counter.

If you have not realized it yet, this writing so far is like everything I have been telling you about. It's somewhere between fact, fiction, reality, actuality, virtual, Instagram, Amazon, Herbalife and made up bullshit. We can all be pseudo-scientists and create fictional diseases and present them as fact on this marvelous platform. We can take any visual information, wherever it started in the realm of what we consider reality, and curate it into perfection. That is the dichotomy of the Internet today, it simultaneously is full of casual violence and possibility for vast connectivity. This is precisely the aims of my work.

#### **IV. Squad Goals - “The Friends/Group You Want”**

At this point, I could reference some statistic written for a tech website that hopes to go viral on Facebook about how many average hours Americans spends on their

phone, but I am sure you know from personal experience that we stare at little screens a lot. Phone screen, tablets, and computer monitors are immersive despite scale, because of the seductiveness inherent in the digital and in their accessibility/familiarity as a way to consume visual information. They have served as a primary material source and conceptual instigator in my practice during my MFA studies.



*Figure 7 (left).* Image of Ally Shapiro, copyright BFA Images Matter. 2018.

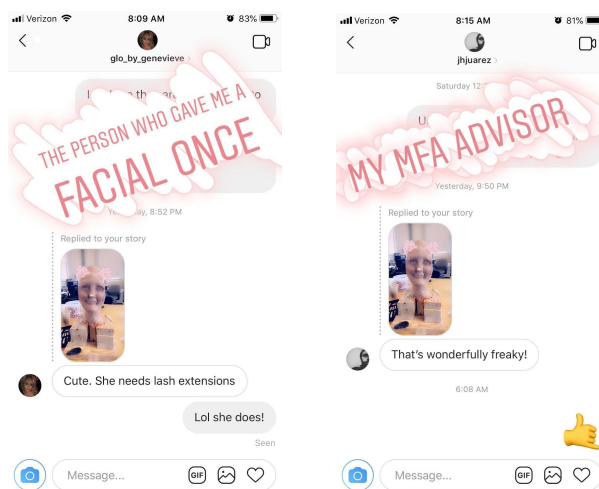
*Figure 8 (center).* Digital image of print titled “Self” by Victoria de Lesseps. 2012.

*Figure 9 (right).* Still from Rebecca Forstater’s video “The Longest Infomercial.” 2018.

My dream show would be curated by Ally Shapiro who is the daughter of *The Real Housewives of New York* original cast member, Jill “Zarin Fabrics” Zarin. The show would feature my own work and the work of Victoria de Lesseps, the daughter of Luann de Lesseps, formerly known as Countess Luann de Lesseps, who is a costar of Jill Zarin on Bravo TV. Andy Cohen would be at the opening! Luann would tag my work in a

picture and I would get at least 1,000 new followers on Instagram! This would be awesome for my career because of the absurd culture of Internet fame. I have provided you the tryptic above to visualize the show, you can find an image of Ally on the left at fancy art gala (Figure 7). The image in the center is of an unclear edition number of prints Victoria is selling on her website for \$2000 a pop (Figure 8). On the left is a still from one of my videos where a d-list reality TV star takes the place of Donald Trump in the infomercial for ACN, a corrupt multi-level marketing telecommunications company that he was a spokesperson for in the early 2000's (Figure 9). The slow burn of reality TV starts as entertaining escapism of people having nonsensical fights and making up, and trickles out into social hierarchy, consumer culture, and political capital.

My audience functions at both ends of the burn, as I do myself: people who are truly immersed in this popular culture and people who see the nihilistic actuality of it.



*Figure 10 (left).* Screenshot from an Instagram message between Genevieve and Rebecca. 2018.

*Figure 11 (right).* Screenshot from an Instagram message between Juan and Rebecca. 2018

The images above are two screenshots of messages I received after posting a photo on my Instagram stories of a mask of Real Housewife of Orange County, Vicki Gunvalson, that I am making for a mokumercial to be displayed in my thesis exhibition. On the left you see the response from Genevieve, who gave me a facial once and during the treatment revealed to me that she was a Bravo TV super fan. She travels to see the reality TV personalities perform and do club appearances. She is my biggest fan on Instagram. On the right, you see the response from Juan, who is either reading this paper or is your colleague. I do not think he has ever watched The Real Housewives of Orange County, but I have been able to semi-successfully convince him and the rest of you that we are living in an existential hell and Andy Cohen is partly responsible.



*Figure 12.* Screenshot from Instagram Stories displaying image of President Obama and Senator Tim Kaine delivering UberEats donuts to democratic campaign headquarters on the day of the 2018 midterm elections. 2019.

This existential hell of my work is, or what I like to refer to as “The Digital American Dream,” is the way the digital experience rhizomatically protrudes from the screen into every aspect of life. It is not just the absurdity of reality TV, it is how the reality TV stars seduce the viewer into commitment, then share their Uber promo code on Instagram that the viewer uses to get a discount, to refer another person who will get a discount, and will then follow Uber, that had a spokesperson five years ago who is now holding political office, and how the gestures of the images from their political rally look exactly like the gestures of a contestant who just won *The Voice*, and the audience from both the finale of *The Voice* and political rally look just like the audience in a mega church, whose pastor is in talks with TLC to have a reality show about him and his twenty-three children and endorsed Trump for presidency, and the pastor is posting photos of his vacation on a yacht because nothing screams “I’VE MADE IT” like five thousand likes of a picture of you on a fancy boat. I am aware that was a run on sentence, but that is how it is functioning in real life (see Figure 12). I am also aware that I sound like a conspiracy theorist, but it is all connected in a way that is complicated and inextricably violent and so easy to overlook. It is easy to overlook because there is a glossy crispness to technology that is alluring, and there is a distance formed in awe that makes it unapproachable to investigate. My work over the course of my time here, and the work I am presenting to you in my thesis, subverts this at an aesthetically basic level. The work is made with immediacy, trashiness, and clear humanness in its construction. It is flawed and rough. In its concept and formula, it has moments of

believability in the crudeness that is interjected with absurdity, converging sentimentality with fear.

## **V. TIL - “Today I learned**

The role of the artist is shifting in the same ways the cultural objects are now being created and consumed. The shift began in parallel to the Post-Internet art movement that coincided with the widespread adoption of the Internet. The Post-Internet Art Movement is radically different than any of its historical predecessors, for reasons of authorship, the rapid pace in the creation of new technology, distribution networks, blurred lines between artist and spectator, and most importantly, an accessibility in material and platform to any person, regardless of artistic merit or skill, to participate in creating artworks. Artworks can be created and/or shared quickly on social media sites such as Instagram to a larger audience than ever before. These shifts in creation, function, and reception have filtered down through artists working in non-digital mediums to people who do not consider themselves artists (Vierkant, 2010). The term “Post-Internet” was coined by artist Marisa Olsen and brought into popularity through Gene McHugh, Katja Novitskova, and Artie Vierkant (Johnson, 2014). It is important to acknowledge that the term is referring to a period that is ongoing. It is also an out of

fashion word to describe one's work if you are artist actively engaged in it. I believe this to be because the term has been adopted, commodified, and commercialized through corporate institutions, creating an ironic existence for a pedagogy that aims to critique and disrupt their very existence.

Despite the arguable use of "Post-Internet", artist themselves have created a distinct pathway for the evolution of the role of the artist to occur as they began to create content specific to certain social media sites to attract attention and share their ideas with the largest possible audience. This can be seen through Brad Troemel's Patreon project where he has created a subscription service for his art (similar to the way that Birchbox functions). Subscribers sign up to contribute a minimum of five dollars a month to Troemel, in which they receive access to his contributor only Instagram account, @aurora60506, and a monthly lottery ticket to win a physical piece of work. His content to promote this piece of work and his contributor-only account flood Instagram with three to five posts a day. Troemel is an extreme example and his work is a critique of Internet, but his engagement and the continuous engagement of other artists using these platforms has set a precedent for these spaces to be ones of cultural consumption.

As artist have established social media as a valid location to create and present artwork, it has opened up the possibility for outsiders to create with the same materials. In Eva Tompoulou's essay, "Dissecting the critic in the Digital Age; Jerry Saltz and



contemporary art writing”, she states,

The Internet has given new life to the different approaches people take to articulating their views. Conversely, what becomes interesting is how all the already existing mechanisms of these Internet social platforms are used to lend their power and directness to this cause. Everyone is to an [extent] a graphic artist creating memes and composite of images on their profiles, expressing their thoughts in humorous or aggressive short paragraphs. (Tompoulou, 2017)

The potential for everyone to be an artist on the Internet is in part due to the role of traditional artist and their use of the Internet as outlined by Troemel’s practice, and also in part due to what Tompoulous describes as the structure of the platforms themselves. Within the programs, there is a designed accessibility to create quick, aesthetically appealing imagery, that when utilized in a specific way can provide incredible circulation of questions and ideas. The aforementioned circulation of questions and ideas is what I define in my practice as art, and what I find to be the most effective method of producing cultural objects in this contemporary moment.

The aesthetics that are so appealing on Instagram, the filters, the drawing on top of stories, meme culture, emojis, and Internet slang, are infused with authority of affect in art that Paul Chan discusses in his lecture “Second Nature”. Chan states,

This is when we are so struck by the appeal of something or someone that their very presence makes available in us thoughts and desires that seem apt or fitting in a way that silences any demand for justification. (Chan, 2016)

Imagery that flourishes as it circulates through on the Internet, and what we can consider makes a successful piece of artwork on the Internet, incorporates this. Chan goes on to further state,

These notions are being deployed aesthetically to play to the hearts and minds of listeners....and the greater the affective power of the appeal, the more political cover it provides. (Chan, 2016)

The power of imagery is available to all users of social media platforms. Anyone with a smartphone runs in parallel in production to an established artist as Dena Yago states in her article “Content Industrial Complex”,

Today, everyone is a culture-producer, producing culture for every other culture-producer. This breakdown in the cultural division of labor is reflected in the emphasis not on images of artworks themselves, but on images (especially selfies) of people posing in front of artworks, probing both the authenticity and presence of the photographed person. (Yago, 2018)

The content of these cultural objects is wide ranging, from selfies to drawings. A successful cultural object on the Internet is one that questions and shares ideas, but

also one that circulates and is consumed.

The argument that everyone who has an iPhone can be an artist is theoretically possible because popular materials being utilized in art today fall outside the traditional canon of art and reject the notion of mastery. However, we do not live in a utopian world where anyone can be anything because we exist in a societal structure that entraps the majority of people. The American dream was never really a possibility for 99% of people, and the digital American dream is just a new version of the impossible.

My current work situates me in the role of a curator of the average Internet user, picking out moments that question the social and political implications of the digital experience and arranging them into bodies of work through extraction of pieces, recreations, and mashups. This runs through concept, material, and display choices. This methodology, and the body of work that this writing is in support of indicates potentials of technology that are both inhibited and exploited by the overwhelming failures of society.

The work presented in the thesis exhibition in New York City and in Syracuse is a direct result of my practice based on consuming and creating in the broad sense to create visuals of the uncertainty and absurdity of an unbounded digital culture. Crude silicone masks of Real Housewives face swapped on Snapchat with a photo of their face, mimic the uncanniness of DeepFakes as they join talking cats and animated sculptures in a chorus of screens to pitch multi-level marketing schemes. In the midst of the chaos of muffled sound, user generated content of idealized house plants of

Instagram influencers are taken out of the digital and made into three dimensional objects. These objects serve as triggers for the narrative video game, where through user choice, my cat could become Elizabeth Holmes pitching Theranos technology, Kelly Bensimon from The Real Housewives of New York could recite to you an excerpt from a Ronald Reagan national address on the Cameo App, and an actor playing Bethenny Frankel could teach you how to murder someone while lying in a hotel bed. A personalized great American play is created for the consumer who wants to be consumed, because after all, there's enough for everybody!

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**Vita**

Rebecca Forstater was born and raised in Washington, D.C., where she got her first email address in 1994, and spent most of the early 2000's crafting away messages for AIM. She has exhibited her work internationally at CLAY Keramikmuseum Denmark, Botschaft Berlin, Germany, Das Giftraum, Berlin, Germany, and in 2017 received an Artist-in-Residency Fellowship where she received a studio at the Axel Haubrok's Fahrbereitschaft Collection. Forstater's work focuses on the liminal states of truth in the digital experience and how this mediates our perceptions of reality, working across various digital mediums, sculpture, and performance.