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EXHIBITION REVIEW: Toward Our Digital Futures, a review of @socialdistancegallery

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Matthew K. Limb

Our engagement with art has fundamentally shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic. As museums and galleries shut down or severely reduced the number of visitors to contain the spread of the virus, the in-person viewing experience of art was but another halted aspect of daily life. Increasingly, the art-viewing public turned toward Instagram and other visual social media platforms. Long used by artists for networking and to reach a wider audience for their work, Instagram has emerged as a pivotal resource (especially for young artists) to connect in a time of limited in-person interaction.

For graduating BFA and MFA art students, this has meant the loss of their thesis exhibition. This event is a rite of passage in one's career, and the culmination of years of work. To alleviate this loss, Professor Benjamin Cook of the Art Academy of Cincinnati created the Instagram account @socialdistancegallery. Boasting over eighteen thousand followers, the Social Distance Gallery has hosted hundreds of BFA and MFA thesis exhibitions from institutions around the globe during the pandemic.

Although imperfect, digital platforms provide a plethora of positives in our current moment: accessibility, giving the viewer autonomy for engagement, and greater ease in collaboration and feedback. For Cook, although the inability to translate an object's physicality is among the app's drawbacks, Instagram's algorithm is yet more problematic. By favoring engagement and connection, Instagram has "the potential to amplify the already unbalanced social structures that exist within the art world today. There is gamification, which creates a new economy of visibility through likes and comments."[1] Cook does not think these drawbacks should dissuade artists (or the public) from using the platform for art-

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[1] Benjamin Cook in discussion with the author, November 2020.

viewing experiences, but rather advocates for greater digital literacy so that viewers can make informed choices and use the platform effectively.

Cook would like to see a fundamental reunderstanding of the digital and our experience thereof. The digital landscape was a central part of our lives prior to the pandemic. However, working remotely, the dependence on online shopping, and social gatherings hosted on Zoom have all made it more apparent. There exists a push to return to 'normal life', or 'IRL '(a common internet term, *in real life*). But both terms imply that our current experience is somehow lesser, fetishizing" digital and physical media as a hierarchical binary system with physical as the paramount experience."[2] By readjusting our experience and understanding of digital media and the way it is used in our lives, Cook believes we better reflect contemporary culture and can better understand the importance of algorithm transparency and lack of neutrality in computer code.

In addition to greater digital literacy, Cook would like artists and audiences to adjust their expectations and intentions when engaging with the digital. When I write an exhibition review, my approach is oriented around the object's physicality and the use of space. These attributes do not translate well to the digital sphere, and digital viewing is likely to leave viewers like me disappointed as a result. Cook argues that artists must understand their work, not as a singular object, but in a state of duplicity—there is a physical version and a digital one. If an artist approaches their physical art object only through the lens of sharing information, inevitably information will be lost. Rather, by understanding that the experience of physical and digital objects are separate, the artist can exploit these aspects of their work that best translate to a digital medium during the documentation process.

Cook sees the documentation process as crucial to effective engagement with a digital object. This, he says, is a key area in which young artists need more education and institutions are lagging. He would like to see a more robust digital literacy education within art programs that takes into account not only the many aspects of digital documentation (location, cropping, lighting, animation, sound, etc.), but greater discussion about" how physical marks on the surface will translate to a digital image and how digital languages ' protocols alter our relationships with physical objects." [3] For Cook, students require an understanding of the fluidity between digital and physical spaces to operate effectively in our current landscape. But this teaching must go beyond specific digital platforms—to continue innovating, students must critically engage with the effects of digital protocols.

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[2] Benjamin Cook in discussion with the author, November 2020.
[3] Benjamin Cook in discussion with the author, November 2020.