

Facebook Is Celebrating Its Astonishing Two Billion Users With a New Video. Here's What It Means for Art.

The social media giant gives you a customized celebration of empathy that is really a celebration of narcissism.

Ben Davis, June 28, 2017



Mark Zuckerberg delivers the keynote address at Facebook's F8 Developer Conference on April 18, 2017 in San Jose, California. Photo by Justin Sullivan/Getty Images.

Facebook has hit two billion monthly active users. That's two billion souls united in sharing inspirational memes, stalking their exes, and engaging in nasty arguments with people they have never met. There are now more people active on this 13-year-old social network than *were even alive* on planet Earth a century ago.

In the heady, utopian early days of the world wide web, techno-evangelists used to argue that it would lay waste to all media centralization, liberating us from corporate control. Facebook is the dialectical reflux that came to crush that naïve hope, giving us

a level of centralization more baleful than anything one could have imagined in the age of big top-down media. Websites big and small are fatally dependent on Facebook to reach an audience.

Mark Zuckerberg's little project has grown fat and rich by vampirically sucking the life out of the business model for journalism, while making the spread of wild conspiracies profitable.

Facebook makes high-minded noise about the sacred principle of "net neutrality," that there should be no pay-to-enter "fast lanes" to give anyone unfair advantage. But guess what? Facebook itself has built a business offering "fast lane" access to its audience, padding its bottom line by incentivizing media to "boost" posts.

"We're getting to a size where it's worth really taking a careful look at what are all the things that we can do to make social media the most positive force for good possible," Facebook chief product officer Chris Cox told TechCrunch.

Just *now* it occurs to these guys that with great power comes great responsibility? Any teenager who's read an issue of Spider-Man can tell you that!



Mark Zuckerberg delivers the keynote address at Facebook's F8 Developer Conference on April 18, 2017 in San Jose, California. Photo by Justin Sullivan/Getty Images.

Somehow, I think that Facebook's ethical turn is less the result of any sudden revelation that the common good exists, and more about the fact that Facebook is, despite its seemingly unstoppable growth, deeply unpopular. As a company, the public distrusts Facebook more than "Large Corporations" in general or "Congress," which these days is itself a pretty impressive feat.

With all this in mind, let us turn now to the personalized little video that Facebook dropped today into your stream to remind you how much you love the big blue social-media company. It is executed in the cutesy style favored by terrifying internet monopolies, with peppy music, animated cartoon characters, and balloons, all seamlessly stitched together with photos harvested from your Facebook posting history.



Still from my personal Facebook "Good Adds Up" video.

Oh look! There's me smiling with my family! There's me smiling with my ex-fiancé! There's my face peeking out from the crowd at some kind of press conference! There's me looking sad on a panel! There's an overhead shot... of a table... at some kind of activist meeting? I'm not sure. It must have been very much "liked" at the time.

This is all intercut with title cards, which when you break out the text reads like a Hallmark card written for the Borg:

*IT ALL ADDS UP
WHETHER SHARING A MOMENT
BEING A PART OF SOMETHING
OR GIVING SOME LOVE
THOSE LITTLE THINGS BECOME NOT SO LITTLE
TODAY YOU ARE PART OF 2 BILLION PEOPLE ON FACEBOOK
BUT IT'S NOT REALLY ABOUT THE NUMBER
IT'S ABOUT WHAT WE CAN DO TOGETHER
RESISTANCE IS FUTILE*

OK, I added that last line. It's implied.

The landing page where you find this video love letter is titled "Good Adds Up." Scrolling down, you will find a series of well-produced, inspirational videos about how different communities use Facebook Groups.

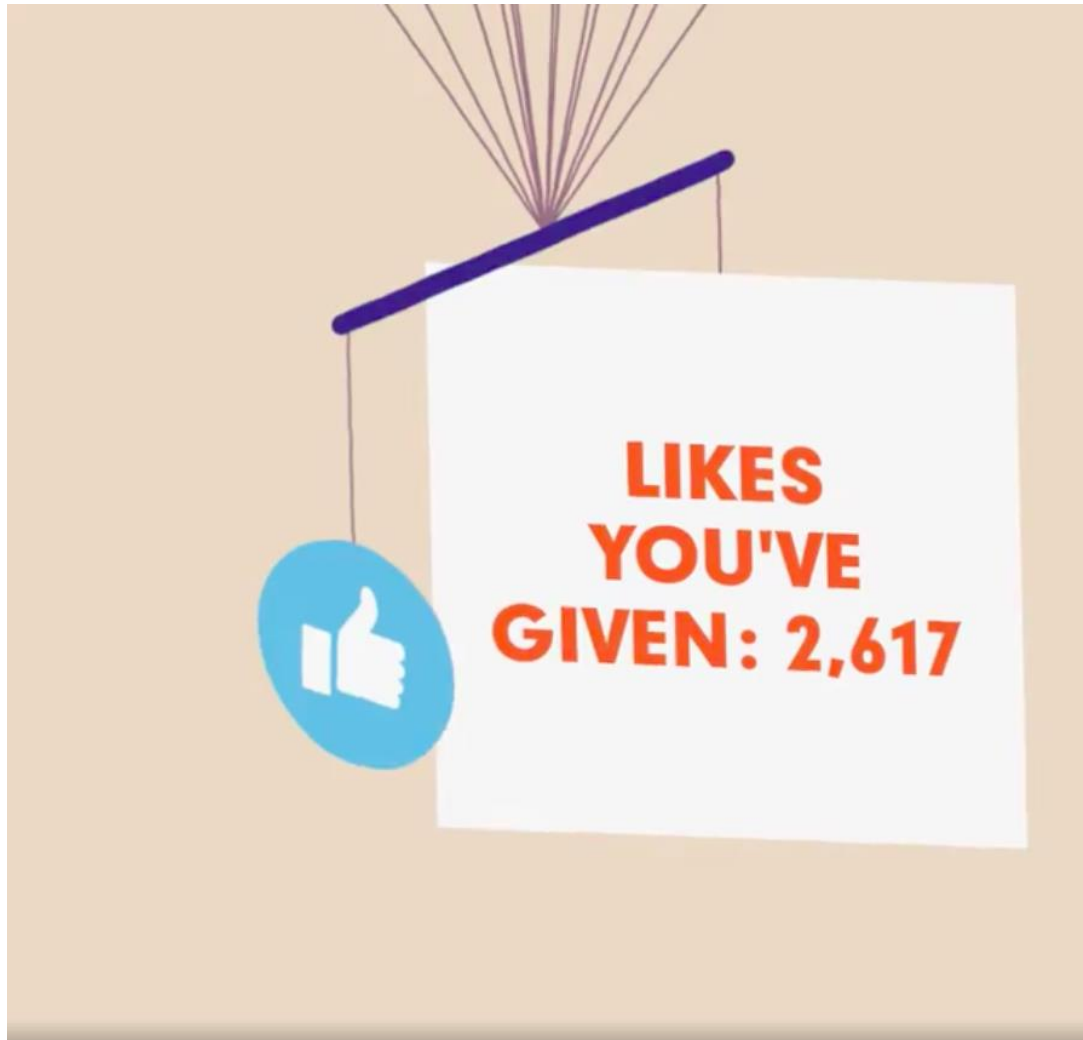
Curiously, these do not mention Marines United, the 30,000-strong Facebook Group where male soldiers gathered to share nude pictures and rape fantasies about their female colleagues, which caused a national scandal just three months ago.

In any case, back to that important personalized message, which is, after all, at the top. Let's put on our art-critic hats to look at what it's doing as a piece of 21st century visual culture.

First: What a great metaphor for Facebook's whole MO! It is, essentially, my own personal photos used for purposes that I can't control and didn't ask for, manipulated by goofy animated avatars that are trying *desperately* to make it all look somehow both deeply meaningful and comfortably harmless.

Second: I love the part of the video where a jaunty card attached to an animated child's mobile comes up to tell me how many things I have "liked" (2,617!). This number gives me the thrill of some kind of hidden data point about myself, while

actually telling me nothing.



Screenshot from personalized Facebook promo video.

It mainly provides a reminder of the ease with which Facebook data-mines its two billion monthly users. Essentially, the gesture takes the lurking, ever-present reality of Facebook's quantification of your social life and dresses it up as a cute and fun feature.

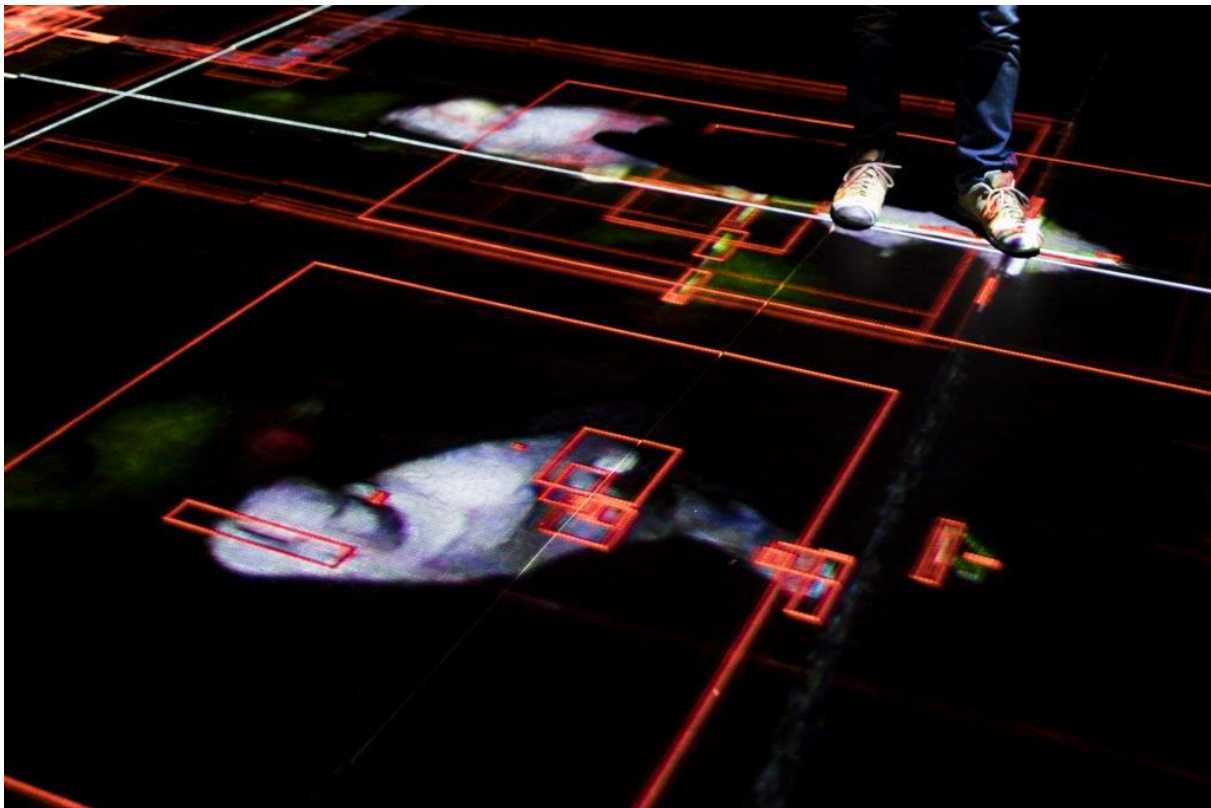
Third, and most important: TechCrunch says Facebook's new corporate mission is trying to boost "empathy," presumably after all the negative press about how social media just encourages people to lock themselves into a prison of their own preconceptions. So logically they are kicking off that noble work of outreach by feeding me... pictures of me!

Well, thank you very much, Facebook, *I am* very empathetic, aren't I?

Diagnosing the human condition, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan once said that “man's desire is the desire of the other.” This aphorism may be phrased in the opaque and probably sexist language of his day, but if you want an illustration of what it means, you need only look to Facebook's triumph, which proves that what people really, really, really like is to see other people liking them.

This kind of desire, Lacan argued, is unquenchable. In the shadow of Facebook's commercialization, it has also become ever more visible. It has become the starting point for engaging with everything—very much including art, to the point of slowly devouring the conversation about it.

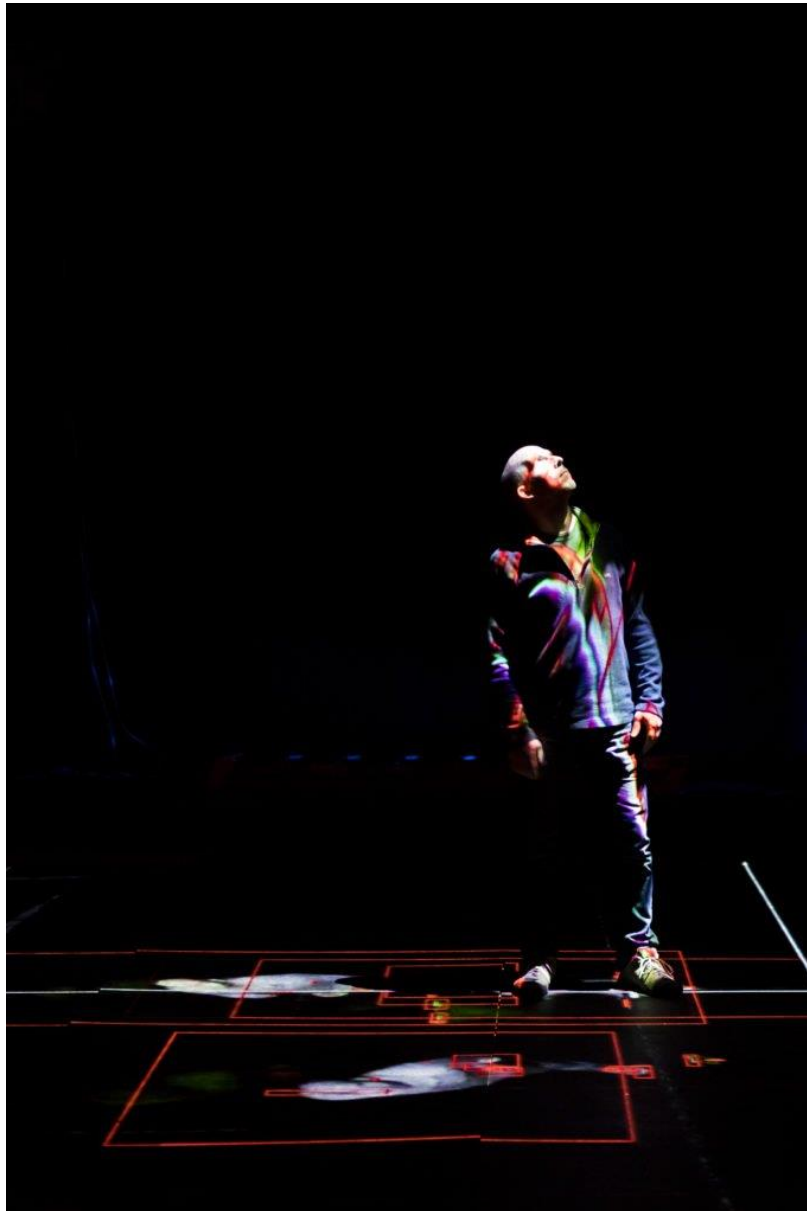
Here's an instructive example: the artist Ai Weiwei's current, hugely popular team-up with the architects Herzog & De Meuron at the Park Avenue Armory, “Hansel & Gretel.” which purports to have something to say about surveillance. It offers a very expensive surveillance-themed playground where drones fly overhead and infrared cameras repeat the ghostly images of your movement on the floor.



Mockup of installation detail of “Hansel & Gretel” at Park Avenue Armory. Photo by James Ewing.

But based on the way the crowds actually interact with it—using the reflected images to create “variations on the snow-angel selfie” for social media, in Roberta Smith’s turn of phrase (#aiweiwei #bigbrotheriswatching #surveillancechic)—the whole thing falls flat as an educational experience meant to expose high-tech invasion of privacy.

Instead it becomes something else: an unintentional illustration of how willing people are to particulate in surveillance if you frame giving up your data as a fun and social experience.



Installation detail of “Hansel & Gretel” at Park Avenue Armory.

Photo by James Ewing.

It recalls a classic *Onion* headline: "CIA's New 'Facebook' Program Dramatically Cuts Agency's Cost."

Facebook these days is at once indispensable and loathsome. If that tells us anything about the direction of culture, it's that you can expect the aesthetics of the reflected self to take over the museum and gallery experience more and more and more, whether you like it or not.

Which is too bad, really, because I might argue that art's weird, difficult, local parts are more relevant than ever as a counterweight to all of that.

Going to the museum as a prop to see yourself being seen is quite the opposite of going to the museum to learn about another culture or an artist's personal symbolic universe. The latter are much less fun, and much less popular, but do involve actually cultivating "empathy" by getting into another world. Art, in that sense, is a real revolutionary technology.

As for Facebook itself and its inane little promo video, it seems less about promoting some new movement of "empathy" in general, and more about trying to get me to empathize with it, Facebook, a rapacious globe-spanning company. Corporations out to mask what they are up to have always tried to put on a human face. Facebook just has the ability to make that face my own.