“Preservation and Permanence:” Digital Contemporary Anxiety

On a frosty November 7th, artists Enna Kim, Lauren Marsden, Sophia Oppel and Blair Swann, Jessie Sheng, and Jasmeet Sidhu debuted digital and multimedia artworks at InterAccess, all examining how we use digital technology as a personal archive. In his 2006 essay, “What is the Contemporary,” philosopher Giorgio Agamben explains that being “‘contemporary’” is simply experiencing “a state of proximity with one’s temporality.” While “Preservation and Permanence,” failed to convince me that I should be fearful of the immortality of my online material, it made me think more deeply about my dependence upon social media as a time capsule, demonstrating the artists’ and audience’s acute proximity with the 21st Century.

*How does a .jpg feel against your skin?* asked Toronto artists Sophia Oppel and Blair Swann. The pair’s 2018 multimedia installation combined video and acrylic wall sculptures to embody their concerns about the Google search engine algorithm and how its choices affect our lives. Media critic Alejandro Diaz explains that search engines are the “gatekeepers” to cyberspace and we expect them to disseminate a “broad spectrum of information.” Diaz defines a democratic media as being a “[forum] where the debate isn’t dominated by corporations, politicians, or privileged groups.” This is clearly not the case for mega-sites like Google, considering corporations can pay search engines to rocket their page to the top of the search results, leaving less “privileged” pages invisible.

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1 Agamben, Giorgio. “What is the Contemporary?” *What is an Apparatus?* 2006 p. 39 - 54
Oppel and Blair manifest this regrettable fact by laser cutting popular Google search queries into white and clear acrylic sculptures, about the size of a loaf of bread, spaced out on the East wall of the gallery. As I entered from the North side, it was not the work closest to the entrance, but it was certainly the one I noticed first. The phrases on the sculptures were difficult to make-out, as though they were coded. The two fragments of sentences I could discern were “…ed friendship,” and “does the woman.” Between and on top of these sculptures were four equally distorted video channels on loop showing various images and videos found on the internet. One channel flipped between a rhombus shaped video of a woman in a one-piece bathing suit on a red-hot beach to a still shot of two folded hands with the watermark “Shutterstock,” indicating it was stock footage. The artists imaginatively illustrated how the information search engines provide to us has been manipulated, showing us some things and hiding others.

Lauren Marden’s installation on the opposite wall brought a personal narrative to Walter Benjamin's theory about how copies destroy the aura of the original. Waves of Nina (2018) used a low quality image of Marden’s grandmother “engulfed by a wave” while swimming on the north coast of Trinidad. Nina’s body language and facial expressions are ambiguous – is she floating or drowning? In pain or ecstasy? The uncertainty in the image presents the snapshot as being an unreliable narrator, only showing us what we think we see. The original image was captured as a film still but now only exists as a .jpg file on Marden’s computer. Marden alludes to Benjamin's theory of the aura from The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction through her process: she copies the .jpg file to a VHS format, to a digital still, to a film still. The

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5 Low, Amanda and Tommy Truong. *Preservation and Permanence: an essay by Amanda Low and Tommy Truong*. InterAccess Exhibition Text. November 7th, 2018
film still is then shown in a Kodak carousel on a plinth at InterAccess. Marden repeats this transformation an additional time for each slide, slowly eroding the image quality until the picture is nothing but white light; the only "copy" we are left with is a version our memories retain. This process not only demonstrates how digital copies are eroded when we download and upload them, but how stories and memories are lost throughout familial generations.

Hannah Black mentions in her 2016 review of the 9th Berlin Biennale that artists are demonstrating how life is slipping into an omnipresence of media. It is virtually impossible to recall an event or place without the aid of photography or video. This is enforced by the democratization of video and image making — we are all capturing our own and each other's existences all the time. “Preservation and Permanence” shows us not only how media is present in our lives, but how our personal devices have become an extension of our psyche. Now that a part of our self is tied to these machines, what happens when these machines become outdated? When they lose our memories, do we lose ours as well? Emerging curators Amanda Low and Tommy Truong brought us truly contemporary works to discuss our anxieties surrounding online social networks as an archive and exploring from where these agitations might stem.

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https://q.utoronto.ca/courses/77315/files/folder/Week%204%3A%20Contemporary%20Art%20in%20the%20Age%20of%20the%20Internet?preview=1485987 accessed Nov. 13th, 2018.