

FACEBOOK, THE IMAGE, AND THE VIRTUAL CEDAR BAR

By early 2009, the art world migrated away from the waning excitement that once swirled throughout galleries, cafés, and bars, only to continue more cohesively within the new, alternative social networking website Facebook. During the last six months of 2008, there was a 267 percent increase in Facebook members between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-four.¹ Founded in 2006 by former Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook became a free, image-based utility that relied upon users' thumbnail portraits to secure online social connections. It also embraced multi-media, similar to MySpace, but set itself apart in an attempt to achieve a sense of authenticity within a highly pirated, dishonest, and potentially ominous online environment.

Members of Facebook are prohibited from creating multiple identities. Facebook represents every contact within one's network as a "friend," an association that immediately triggers nostalgia. Individual networks also renew acquaintances, reviving personal histories which had been forgotten, or in Peggy Orenstein's words, "the undead past."² For others, Facebook is less progressive because "it changes our relationship to the past [and] allows people to leapfrog back instantly to a former you."³ With small thumbnail portraits juxtaposed with a series of personal facts, users are able to pick and choose their associates with ease. In addition, the use of web-ware applications further permits users to perform digital "random acts of kindness" toward one another.

This popular social networking site has thus far avoided the dark, gothic look seen across many creative-based websites such as Artinfo.com, Ubuweb (Ubu.com), and personal pages found throughout MySpace, and instead, has maintained a bright white background that is offset with blue borders. Utilizing colors that tend to signify trust, security, and honesty, Facebook is far more than a platform from which to express one's individuality. It also brings together people who have either never met or would not normally meet in daily circumstances. As this site becomes the newfound agora for artists, curators, gallerists, and critics, the role of the image becomes far more complicated. Granted, digital reproductions are either used by dealers to sell works of art or by teachers in classroom settings. When used as an index of truth within the multi-layered environment of Facebook, however, the art world is suddenly less complex and far more transparent through its seemingly open exchange of communication, proving that the image is still a revolutionary phenomenon that has, in this case, spawned the proliferation of a virtual society.

ALTERNATIVE SPACE

The reality of Facebook has appeared more ideal than the actual art world since there are no extraordinary qualifiers needed to become

"friends," beyond one's personal vocation of either an artist, curator, collector, or critic. Contemporary art stars such as Matthew Barney, Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons, and Vik Muniz are easily accessible even though their Facebook networks consist of more than one thousand members. However, each friend, in these instances, is thereby assured the atmosphere of depersonalization guaranteed by the untouchable, celebrity artist who has long characterized the hierarchy within much of the contemporary art community. Barney's profile, in particular, has been rumored to be a hoax, like that of filmmaker Werner Herzog, which quickly closed down as soon as the impersonator was discovered. Other artists, like Tracey Emin, April Gornik, Hans Op de Beek, Catherine Opie, Cordy Ryman, George Stoll, and Andrea Zittel, manage their pages more closely and choose members of their networks with care. Quite similarly, museum director Maxwell Anderson and curators Connie Butler, Laura Hoptman, and Maura O'Reilly tread carefully within the large population of Facebookers.



However, with performances by artists such as Brainard Carey and Rachel Welty "juxtaposed" with lengthy and inspiring discussions by art critics such as Jerry Saltz and Ken Johnson, the art world has transformed itself within this alternative environment into the equivalent of a virtual Cedar Bar. Johnson most recently used his status update to disagree with another critic's assessment that genius no longer exists. While the topic itself has been discussed repeatedly throughout time, it offered several users the chance to assert their own opinions about the evolution of this elusive subject. Saltz, in contrast, opines on exhibitions ranging from "Younger Than Jesus" at the New Museum to Picasso's "Mosqueteros" at Gagosian Gallery. His page elicits countless comments giving users the impression that rigorous feelings of disagreement are still possible within an art community that has felt isolated from itself throughout the last decade, as members of the art community continually attended different openings, parties, and after-parties that, in sum, never created a single "art scene" and thus led to an overall sense of complacency. Some responses on Saltz's site have been subject to Facebook's automated control of human exchange and have routinely been deleted once the number of responses amounts to more than 100, despite Saltz's efforts at re-posting his status updates so that all responders will have an equal chance at participation.

Arthur Danto became a member of Facebook and has been amazed at the proliferation of the art community within the setting of this particular website: "Almost immediately, I began to notice how many people from the art world were joining, many of them seeking to be my friend. I find Facebook fascinating, not that I use it for anything. People who belong seem very open to one another."⁴ Ross Bleckner, however, had built up a significant network of friends, but decided to delete his profile.

ART GOES ELECTRIC

In each of these cases, the image serves as a critical communication device that establishes relationships primarily on a psychological level since the thumbnail portrait of one user functions as a prosthetic and communicates the ambiance of one's personal identity to another user who physically views others' profile pages from his or her computer screen. A few days after the annual Armory Week concluded on March 8, 2009, in New York City, Welty opened up her Facebook profile for a one-time performance piece titled *Rachel Is* (2009). By adjusting her status every sixty seconds over a sixteen-hour time period, Welty not only wanted to answer Facebook's probing question, "What are you doing right now?" but also sought to expose the complexity and monotony of the immediate moment while living her daily life at home in Massachusetts. Once *Rachel Is* went viral, the artist found herself fielding hundreds of friend requests: "I ignorantly thought I would be toiling alone, as we artists mostly do, but the community was very encouraging as I discovered through the comments and messaging functions in Facebook."⁵ And yet, Welty considers the site itself as another way to present an image, particularly a self-portrait, that depicts what she would like others to see.

However, the short timespan between each status update served to generate a layered picture of the artist. With only one minute at hand, Welty established a routine that documented her actions: "I typed the update, made a screen shot to save as an image and used a timer that would notify me about when I had to add a new one. I found that I didn't have a lot of time in between each update; however, I did get some things done such as a couple of loads of laundry and making soup from scratch for dinner."⁶ With the help of two iPhones, Welty put Facebook's phenomenological software aggregate to the test. Although *Rachel Is* was met with success over the internet, Welty does not have any plans to make another artwork on this site in the future.

Brainard Carey regularly performs with his wife as a collaborative art-duo called PRAXIS; however, he participates on Facebook as a single-user, investigating the concept of gift culture as well as the phenomenology of image-based communication, in an application titled "Box that opens when you close your eyes." This involves one user selecting the representation of a concept, such as the Self-Eating Cake, and sending it to another of his or her choice. Gift-receivers are then encouraged by the application to send a similar gift on to as many friends as possible. He states, "The most interesting thing is the way gifts start to exponentially zoom out to the network. Passing something around and around is amazing since it ends up going to people who have not the remotest idea of one another."⁷ As a result, the visual content of any image immediately creates a wide range of associations within the mind of the viewer. Facebook's application programs allow artists to distribute their imagery to a large populace, and yet, computer programmers for Facebook have been able to convincingly supplant the cognitive process of personal association by integrating the image with the concept of the social graph, the web-like nature of people's relationships. Like so many of its users, Carey stumbled across Facebook at the recommendation of a friend and had no intention of using it as a creative platform. But as his network of largely unknown friends grew, Carey began uploading photographs that would be considered blurry, off-center mistakes by professionals of landscape and portrait

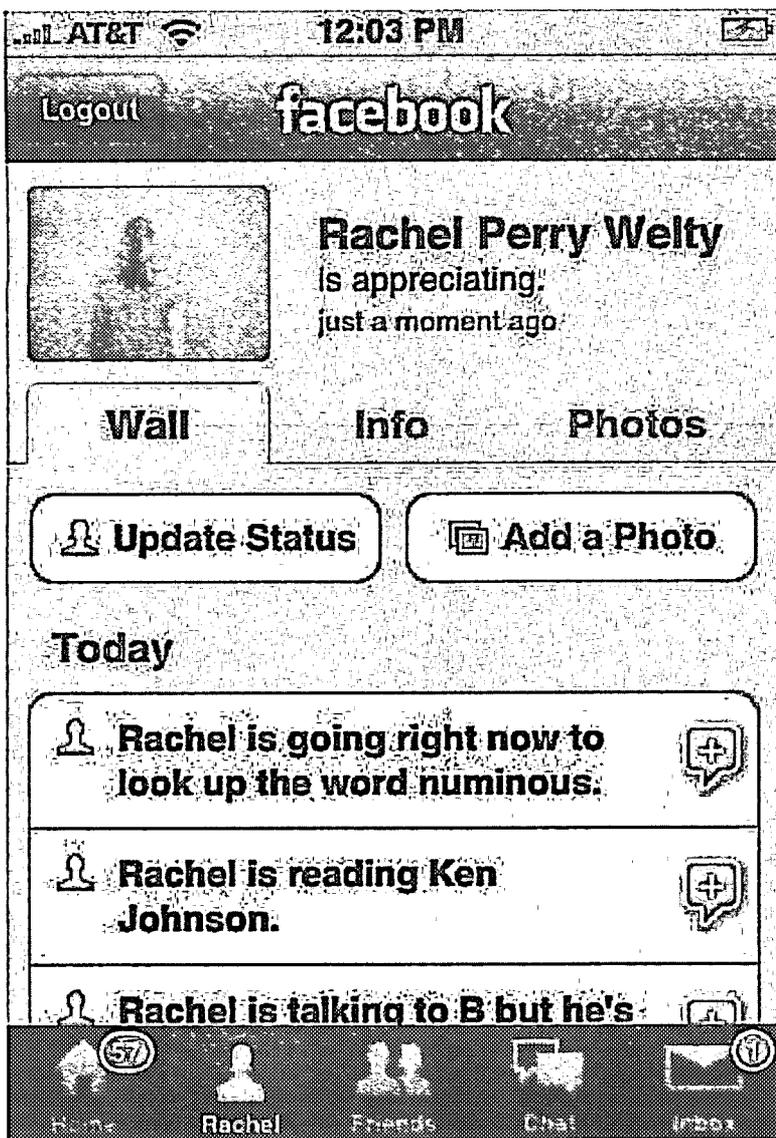
photography. Ultimately he moved on to uploading short performance videos done by either him or his wife.

However, once the artist began to feel the limits of Facebook constricting the diverse nature of his projects, due to its lack of physical space, and insistence that each user's identity be connected to a single person, rather than collaborative groups, Carey announced he was no longer going to speak English on his page: "I don't speak Spanish or write very well, but my wife is from Spain. When I started writing in Spanish, people wrote back to me. Then I began thinking that there is a language within Facebook, something that is built into the structure since it is trying to build a community without the rules being too exposed."⁸ Carey recently started a project titled *Darkness* (2009) in which he combines his Facebook status updates with his Twitter feed, leading interested viewers to fragments of a larger idea. Intended as a science fiction/horror story the narrative keeps readers hanging on at the rate of one hundred and fifty words per update that the artist changes either a couple of times a day or every few days.

Carey is also at work on a project titled *Have You Ever Been Deleted?* that documents the Facebook tenure of Whitney curator Francesco Bonami. Last year Bonami opened a Facebook membership, which attracted an array of aspiring artists. Carey befriended Bonami with digital chivalry, but soon realized that the Whitney curator would repeatedly delete all of his friends and start all over again: "I, of course, took it personally, but then I started taking snapshots of his screen that showed the gradual decrease of his network. He deleted me about twenty times, but now his Facebook page is largely inactive. He currently has only a handful of friends."⁹ Could this be the next Whitney Biennial? The only drawback Carey finds with Facebook is its insistence on individual authorship since it does not allow PRAXIS, as a collaborative, to fully participate.

DIGITAL URBANISM

Although Facebook neither appears nor operates like a city, it does function as an alternative to the physical, built, urban environment. In a critique of systems theory, Jürgen Habermas has suggested that a system imitates its subject much like a prosthesis: "The system-environment takes the place of the inside-outside relationship, between the knowing subject and the world as the totality of knowable objects."¹⁰ On one hand, the system itself lacks consciousness, but Facebook succeeds through all users' intentional decisions. Each decision, made by a single mechanical click, feeds into an aggregate that determines who hears more from each other: "Social systems process meaning in the form of communication. For this, language is used. But it . . . only permits signs to be substituted for meaning."¹¹ This automated version of human consciousness echoes Mark Kingwell's notion of "the Playful City." Based upon desires, "play itself has no end or purpose. There is no point to the game beyond its continuance."¹² The Imaginary City consists of desires alone, a series of uninhibited feelings centered upon those objects that one cannot have. Kingwell states, "Desire therefore does not signal as we often imagine, a lack of object; it signals a lack of obstacle."¹³ Facebook initially marketed itself exclusively to college campuses, micro-societies that function as a thumbnail blueprint for society at large.



The continual exchange of images throughout Facebook appears to reduce the significance of the photograph as a singular visual object. In 1988, Andy Grundberg published "Photography in the Age of Electronic Simulation" in Polaroid's *Close-Up* magazine—his essay decried the vast technological change of photographic practice into a far more simplified method that worked in tandem with computers. News organizations, for instance, relied less on the number of photographers who traveled to specific locations as opposed to the fast transmission of digital images by those who were already on location.¹⁴ Grundberg associated the technical nature of photography with an art that had lost its aura due to the countless number of "reproductions, impressed on notecards, posters, silk scarves, and jigsaw puzzles, all available at your local museum shop."¹⁵ Much of his essay confuses the idea of the *image* with the *photograph*, using both words interchangeably thus suggesting the imminent disappearance of photography.

Above

Rachel is (Facebook status via iPhone), March 11, 2009

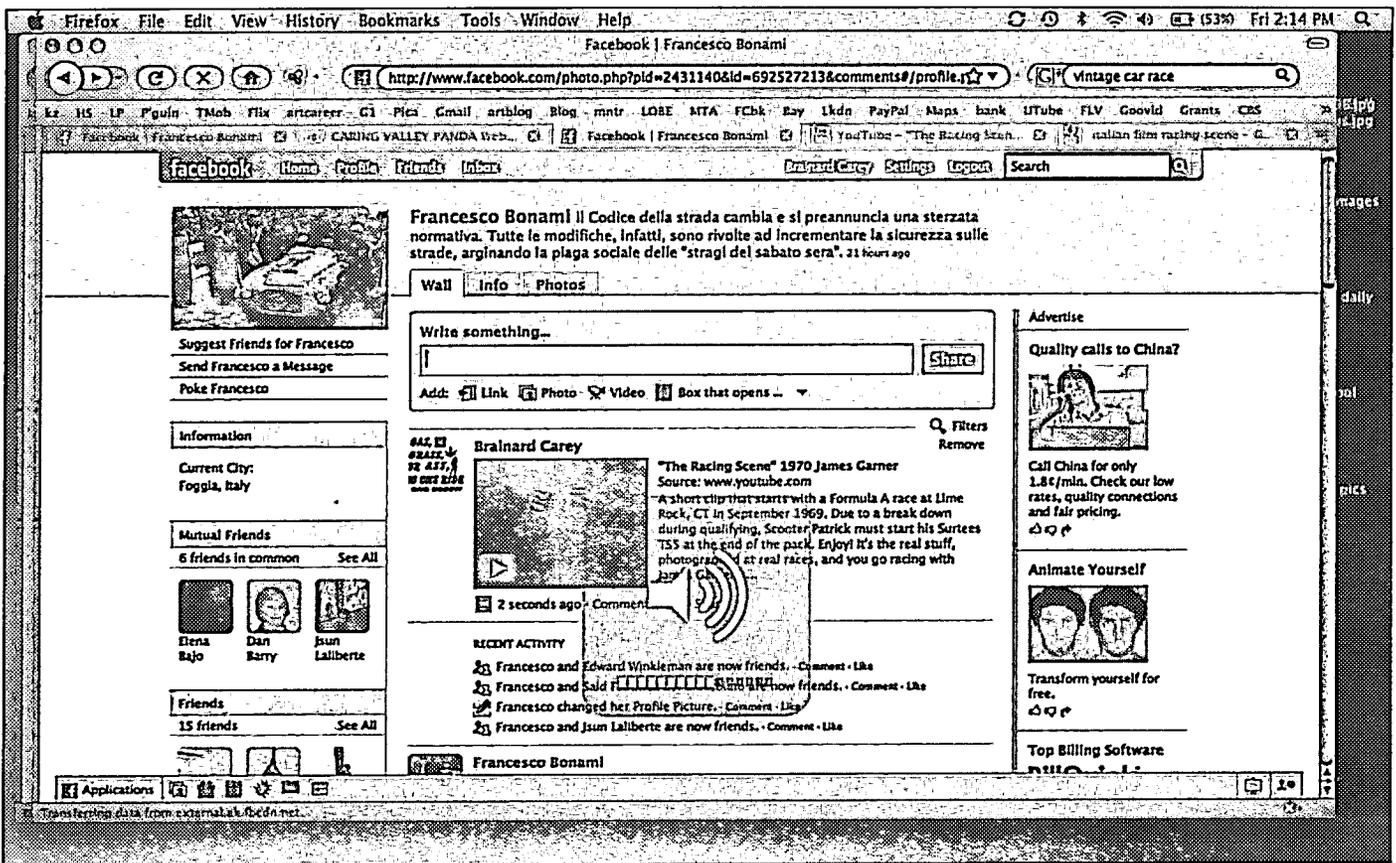
But when asked if this form of technology could successfully subvert the notion of photography, Stephen Shore responded, "No. There are many uses of photography, and Facebook only addresses and facilitates a few of them."¹⁶ On a similar note, Will Van Overbeek insists, "A photograph is a photograph regardless of the medium."¹⁷ When the Farm Security Administration dispatched photographers across the United States to gauge the economic fallout of the Great Depression during the 1930s, the photograph became a site of social truth. During the Vietnam War, all published images of the war required military approval before they could be released to the public, revealing the government's choice to disconnect the tragedies of war from truth and thereby strongly endorsing conspicuous consumption as the new lived reality that was shaped by advertisements masquerading as universal truth since the goal was to make everyone happy. Conversely, the connection of the photograph to "truth" also contributed to the success of Irving Penn's work for *Vogue* magazine, and the magazine's ability to suggest a connection between an individual's identity and various types of fashion commodities.

ONE IMAGE, ONE TRUTH

Scott Walden's 2008 essay "Truth in Photography" breaks down the interpretive process of a photograph into two cognitive spheres: the phenomenal and the intentional. The phenomenal consists of feeling gained from experience "and the images that form in our minds as we experience the world in the course of day-to-day perception."¹⁸ In other words, one's personal view of the world shapes his or her interpretation of photographic content, and since truth is relative to each individual, it is not possible to fully grasp what exactly truth is.¹⁹

When one physically experiences a vista in a reproduced image, as opposed to experiencing it while on a walk through a park, the associations could be either true or false due to the fact that the representation is not a substitute for the actual experience. Walden refers to photographs as "a species of images," that elicit a paradox: "On the one hand, photographs have always been used—and will continue to be used—to help us form true beliefs about the world. On the other, experience teaches us that beliefs so formed are frequently not true, and that our trust in them has not often been misplaced."²⁰ Walden contends that photographic objectivity will remain in place due to a collective interest in preserving the primary avenue used to reference truth.

Through sheer irony Facebook's use of the thumbnail portrait, along with its archival function of users' personal photographs, has raised the significance of the image in ways that other social networking sites have not. Unlike much of the Postmodern era, when photography and imagery were seen as one and the same thing in magazines such as *Vogue*, *Life*, and *Aperture*, Facebook contends that the image is a direct signifier of who one is. Not only that, but any additional images continue to build on that process of signification. Additionally, the vast use of thumbnail



graphics to render the virtual gesture of giving and receiving appeals to the individual's id-based pleasure principle and the need for immediate gratification.²¹ The aggregate used to track how many visits one makes to other friend's pages, in order to filter out who might appear to be more significant in the moment, bears an odd resemblance to a diagram by Sigmund Freud that visually explained how a sound could lead to an association of one idea and simultaneously the abandonment of another.²² Facebook's two-color layout echoes the company's insistence on the linear progress of socialization, which has proved a subtle guide for users to be ethical with one another.

In our current era of mass-production, the value of an original image over its copy has been lost. Moreover a sense of originality had been missing from most of the Postmodern era. As recently seen in the exhibition "The Pictures Generation" featured at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, photo-based artists of the 1980s explored the photograph as a multi-media construct in an attempt to bridge the divide that had long existed between photography and fine art. Although the "Pictures" artists exploited various image-enhancing technologies such as 35mm film, video, and sound, Grundberg was overwhelmed by the similar advances of his day and claimed, "As the function of traditional silver-based photographs [that serve] as carriers and conveyers of cultural messages decreases, their value increases. Stripped of their use value, they become commodities instead."²³ The photograph was displaced

by a new debate centered on the virtue of traditional photographic practice versus new and emerging digital methodologies. But, in an odd stroke of luck, the image, through Facebook, has regained its authenticity, not through the multiple, but in the way that it is used as a single signifier to always represent the portrait of one person, a friend.

JILL CONNER is an art critic based in New York City.

NOTES 1. Peggy Orenstein, "Growing Up on Facebook," *The New York Times Magazine* (March 15, 2009), 11. 2. *Ibid.* 3. Susan Dominus, "Can Facebook Be Your Friend?" *Real Simple Magazine* (April 2009): 159. 4. Interview with author, May 26, 2009. 5. Interview with author, May 24, 2009. 6. *Ibid.* 7. Interview with author, May 28, 2009. 8. *Ibid.* 9. *Ibid.* 10. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 369. 11. *Ibid.*, 381. 12. Mark Kingwell, *Concrete Reveries: Consciousness and the City* (New York, NY: Viking, 2008), 230. 13. *Ibid.*, 228. 14. Andy Grundberg, *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography Since 1974* (New York, NY: Aperture, 1999), 225. 15. *Ibid.*, 224. 16. Interview with author, May 13, 2009. 17. Interview with author, May 14, 2009. 18. Scott Wallen, ed., *Photography and Philosophy: Essays on the Pencil of Nature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 92-3. 19. *Ibid.*, 94. 20. *Ibid.*, 101-7. 21. Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (New York, NY: Norton, 1985), 62: "The id, to which we finally come back, has no means of showing the ego either love or hate. It cannot say what it wants; it has achieved no unified will." 22. Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2003), 8. 23. Grundberg, 226. (C)



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