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You Wouldn't Download an Art

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Rice Evans

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

By

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

To: Mom, thank you for giving me life and editing everything I have ever written, including this thesis.

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ABSTRACT

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To quote the late Alaskan Senator Ted Stevens, "The internet is a series of tubes." Like my art practice, these tubes meander through concepts, techniques, and mediums to arrive at a messy, confusing, and overwhelming shared experience of digital life. It is here where we find humor, creativity, and most importantly our own folk culture.

COLLECTIONS AND CRAFTS

I come from a family of both crafts people and collectors.

My great grandmother was a quilter who passed on her craft to my grandmother, and then my mother, and then not to me. Probably because my mom worked full time and probably because I was more interested in Pokémon than sewing.

Aside from crafting, they also had collections. My mother collects hand painted glass Christmas ornaments which are both expensive and extremely breakable. This led to the Christmas tree being more elaborately secured as the collection grew. It started with wires that secured the tree to the wall and ended with the tree stand being cast in concrete. My mother would buy the ornaments when she was manic. They were expensive so I think this was the only time she could justify the purchase. In a way, our Christmas tree became a collection or a documentation of manic episodes that glittered and lit up the living room on winter nights. I was not allowed to put my crafted childhood ornaments on that tree; instead, I had a

smaller cheap plastic tree that displayed my ornaments made from dry macaroni and gingerbread. Baby's

first introduction to the hierarchy within craft.

I had my own more unconventional collection: Objects selected and arranged in a variation of the

Victorian cabinets of curiosity, but less problematic.

Figure 1: Childhood Creation

This is my city of collected objects I built with playing cards as roads, stacked VHS tapes as a sky scraper

and a blue bubble backpack as a lake complete with ducks. My practice in many ways has not strayed from

this path. I am still a collector. I still place handmade and manufactured objects in juxtaposition. I still

reimagine the function and meaning of objects. I still lead with humor. I still question the hierarchy within

craft and believe there is space for all types of ornaments on the Christmas tree.

Figure 2: Great Uncle Pig Meal, Great Aunt Off Course, Great Uncle Melted Sole

Another collection of mine is less physical and is the oral history of my family's folklore. I am interested in how stories, especially when they are incorrect, get passed down from one family member to another. I started writing down all the stories I could get my family to tell me and those that I have a fuzzy memory of from childhood. In my research I was surprised to learn that many people, all over the country, have almost the same stories. I set out to document and imagine my own family's lore.

Folklore is by definition fantastical; it may have some truth to it, but by repeated telling it becomes increasingly embellished. Folklore often recounts a distant family member for believability and undermines reality for entertainment.

Figure 3: Great Uncle Off Course (Detail)

This panel titled Great Uncle Pig Meal was created as a portrait of my fictitious great uncle and his untimely

death. The story goes that one day the mail man notices the mail piling up at my great uncle's house. This

being a small town, the mail man goes to investigate. At the barn he notices the pigs kicking around a ball

in their pen. Upon closer inspection, he discovers the ball is actually the disembodied head of my great

uncle. The police were called and determined my great uncle must have been doing work on the roof and

had fallen into the pen, which (hopefully) killed him instantly. The pigs having not been fed, did what pigs

do, and ate his body right off of his head, leaving only his scull which was too hard for them to break.

None of this really happened, but the story had existed as truth at least in my mind since I first heard it as

a small child. The morbid humor aspect to this story and folklore in general is one of the reasons these

stories permeate our culture. Humor is a powerful and memorable thing. There are many family folklores

of this type. They come from stories of the pioneer days where wild fantastical animals devoured brave

adventurers in shocking and hilarious ways. Great Uncle Pig Meal is just an updated version of a classic story that continues through a process of adornment, mutation, and imitation.

Great Uncle Pig Meal and the other two panels, Great Aunt Off Course and Great Uncle Melted Sole, are inspired by similarly false gruesome family tragedy and were created to function as memorial plaques to my nonexistent family members. The plaques are painted in a high polish gold spray paint to echo the false narratives and placed on similarly fake old looking wallpaper. The plaques are adorned with the story of their death around the frame and filled with images of what I imagined the accident could have looked like.

MEMES AS MODERN-DAY FOLKLORE

Through my time spent investigating my own family's collection of folklore, I began to wonder what my own folklore is. If these stories are from the past, what is the folklore of today?

We always lose context over time, and it happens faster than you would think. Folklore and folk art are not exceptions. By definition, folklore is a system of social beliefs that exist in the current cultural consciousness of a community. It speaks of the immediate culture, but may play on the past and guess about the future. It is an accessible format—one that can be easily repeated, imitated and modified for specific instances. It is created without sponsorship by folks for the amusement of other folks. It can be humorous, poignant, offensive, but always with the goal of entertainment. It is part of everyday life. It is constantly changing. It is memes.

The internet, arguably the largest cultural community in the world, has been creating its own folklore and folk art since the beginning of mass novice usership in 1993. What started with emoticons, e-mail chains and chat rooms has snowballed into Grumpy Cat, YOLO, and Yeet. The internet community is the decisive

creator of the largest archive of folklore and folk art, but is not treated with the cultural importance I feel it deserves.

I want to change people's mind about how they value scrolling through their phone. Memes are not a time waste, but active participation in our culture. Memes have changed public policy, ruined lives, shut down corrupt businesses, and helped those in need. They are the most accessible form of mass-comprehensible creative expression.

I want a space for memes to exist next to traditional folk art like colonial embroidery samplers, Shaker furniture and face jugs.

Memes, like all folk art, are imitations and mutations of something else and have a context that is quickly forgotten, and it is this process that inspired the creation of this work.

Figure 4: Meme Face Jugs

I started out wanting to slow down the process that creates memes by using older traditional techniques of folk art, solidifying the digital folk art into a tactile one. I used face jugs because they are still created today. They come from a white southern tradition of ceramic making passed down through generations. However, what these families leave out is that these techniques were stolen in the early 19th century from enslaved people who first created these jugs to carry water on plantation fields and to protect personal items. The original context of face jugs has been almost lost due to cumulative re-creation and generations of silence. The history of these jugs took time to erase. However, the process of imitation that destroys context is much faster on the internet.

You may recognize some of the memes I used on these face jugs. They were extremely popular in the late 2000's and have, for the most part, exited our fast-paced popular culture. They seem harmless. Simple drawings created to function as unwritten emotion before emojis. However, their origin story has been lost due to mass imitation and mutation. These characters come from an extremely homophobic rage comic that was first published to media platform 4chan in 2008. The language is vulgar, and deeply offensive. Over time, the characters were stripped of their offensive context through this same process of imitation and mutation, so much to the point that major American companies used their likenesses in advertising. The erasing of context that happened to face jugs over eight generations is happening to memes in a matter of days. Memes and internet culture are the most popular representation of current folk art. But like traditional folk art, its fame is built upon an inherent destruction of context. It is this process of imitation, mutation, and appropriation which keeps the memes alive but also removes us further from the origin.

I still want to honor memes with the cultural importance I feel they deserve. But by failing to question the source of popular culture, we run the risk of erasing context and unknowingly perpetuating offensive content.

What is a meme anyway?

To understand how memes are a form of our modern-day folk culture, I feel I must define what memes are and how they function.

The term meme was originally coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976 in his book "The Selfish Gene." Dawkins shorted the term meme from mimeme, which comes from the Ancient Greek word mīmēma, meaning 'imitated thing'. Dawkins applied the term meme to all units of culture that was physically spread from one individual to another, for example: music, phrases, fashion, and religion (Dawkins, 1989). However, this original definition of meme was thrown out in the 2000's.

The modern-day definition of meme is defined by internet historian Limor Shifman. "A group of cultural (most often digitally documented) items sharing common characteristics of content/form/stance created with an awareness of the meme scape (created in an awareness of similar memes)" (Shifman, 2014).

As defined my Shifman, a trademark of a meme is that it creates mimicry of content with awareness of others also creating mimicries. Memes only stay alive by people constantly altering, remixing, and re-imagining them. Without constant adaptations adding to the meme landscape (memescape) they will become unpopular and die. Essentially it is the world's largest crowd-sourced creative process. Memes do not just apply to images, but anything that can be defined as a digital unit of culture. Sometimes things get labeled as trends when they are actually memes. The Ice Bucket Challenge was a meme, the thing where we all used the Google Arts app to see what portrait we most closely resembled would also be a meme, the knock-out game was a meme, and the Tide pod challenge was a meme. All of these cultural performances can be classified as memes because their goal is to document and share the re-creation and remixing of the same cultural phenomenon (Shifman, 2014).

Memetic process

Memetic process is what keeps memes in the current cultural consciousness and classify as representation of current folk culture. Memetic process is the constant re-creating and remixing that allows a meme to remain popular. Without continual re-creation, the meme will disappear from the cultural consciousness and die. The average life of a meme is seven months. As I explained in my section about the meme face jugs, memetic process happens extremely quickly due to the large population and the fast-paced nature of the internet community. However, memetic process is not simply a linear re-creation of a meme but often a combination of several memes (Shifman, 2014).

Figure 5: Memetic Process and Remixing Example

In my opinion the best memes have many layered references. I find that the more references you can decode the more satisfying the meme is. This also leads to memes which over time naturally become more and more niche. This is the ultimate trademark of the memescape. Meme creators do not care if you get the joke or not, it's only for the people who get it and everyone else be damned. Because of the

large population that exists online it is not necessary for the meaning of memes to be particularly accessible; someone will always understand. In fact, it is common cultural practice for users to shame other users for explaining memes in the comment sections.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT MEMES AND DIGITAL FOLK CULTURE?

1. Memes are seemingly trivial and mundane artifacts, but they actually reflect deep social and cultural structures.

2. Memes shape the mindset, form of behaviors and actions of a social group.

3. Sharing/posting memes functions as distribution of culture and an act of compounding social norms.

4. Memes are the first and only time in history that a popular vote determines cultural importance. Memes break down the long-standing practice of the rich, powerful, winners of wars, and art patrons getting to decide what of our folk culture is worth recording and preserving. The powerful no longer have the ability to decide what becomes historical symbols for a time and/or culture. For the first time in history, we get to document and preserve all of our folk culture.

Brad Troemel

The historical avant garde succeeded, just not through art.

	MEMES	ART
Dematerialization of the art object?	YES	NO
Aesthetic forefront of visual culture?	YES	NO
Created and appreciated by anyone?	YES	NO

Figure 6: Brad Troemel, *Imagine an Art World Beyond Count Choculas*

This brings me to a great crusader for the cultural importance of memes: Brad Troemel. In his work, which consists of clipart images combined with text formatted specifically for Instagram, Troemel argues that the art world has become increasingly inaccessible and that memes have filled the cultural void left by art.

To quote Troemel at length:

"One comforting lie artists like to tell themselves is that more people would take an interest in art if only the public was properly art educated. And while it is true public funding for the art education is abysmal there an underlying cope in the idea, to say it's not my work that's the problem, these poor heathens who just don't get it, but alas, who will ever help them? This is a huge underestimation of people's visual literacy especially millennials and younger. Video games prove people's patience to learn complicated participatory rule sets. Social Media personalities prove people's penchant for the most minute narrative lore. Memes prove people's ability to discern layer after layer of obscure references. It's not that people lack the tools

to understand art. It's that they lack a reason to give a shit even if they did manage to get inside. In both medium and message art has made itself irrelevant to anyone whose mustache isn't stained from 4 years of art school Kool-Aid. Memes are what it would look like if you applied the art world's self-congratulatory rhetoric about aesthetic freedom, subject matter inclusivity, and creator diversity to reality instead of retrofitting those ethics to a Ponzi scheme for criminals to buy abstractions." (Troemel, 2020).

Though Troemel is harsh in his discussion of the art world, I tend to agree with how inaccessible the art world can be to non-art folks, especially when it comes to contemporary and performance-based art.

Relax Rick

In this work I wanted to investigate how memes are more accessible than contemporary art and poke fun at the precociousness of performance art.

I wanted to reverse the feeling art outsiders have when viewing performance art and hopefully apply it to performance art insiders. Though I am an artist, I am unfamiliar with the complexities and history of performance art and consider myself an outsider in the performance art world. I can think of many occasions when leaving a performance that I felt like a complete idiot or that the work was idiotic, or possibly both at the same time. Some of these feelings are due to a lack of education, but these feelings also keep me from wanting to understand and educate myself. In this video performance I wanted to lead with my impression of common performance art tropes: dramatic costuming and lighting, soft rhythmic music, and a voiceover asking the audience to breathe and relax. I then transform into a memetic re-creation of arguably the most famous meme: The Rick Roll. This reversal creates a jarring experience that both mimics the intended traditional effect of a Rick Roll while allowing meme culture into a performance art context. Hopefully, confusing performance art insiders into the same feeling I often felt as a viewer of performance art.
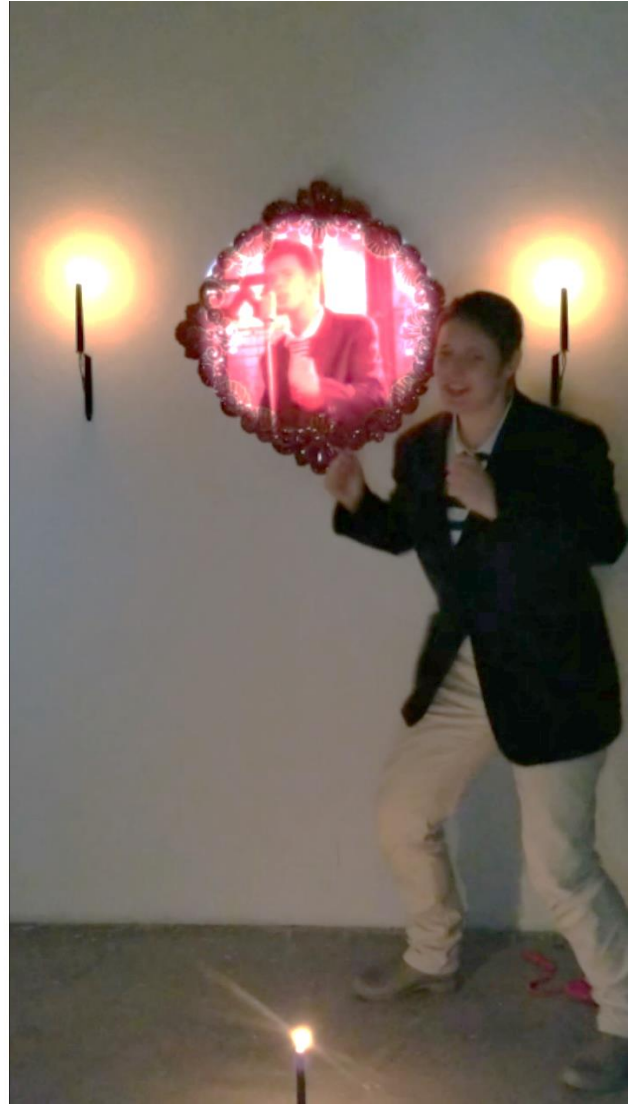
Figure 7: Relax Rick Film Stills 1 & 2

IF MEMES DEFINE OUR CULTURE, WHAT DO MY MEMES SAY ABOUT ME?

Figure 8: Me as a Meme
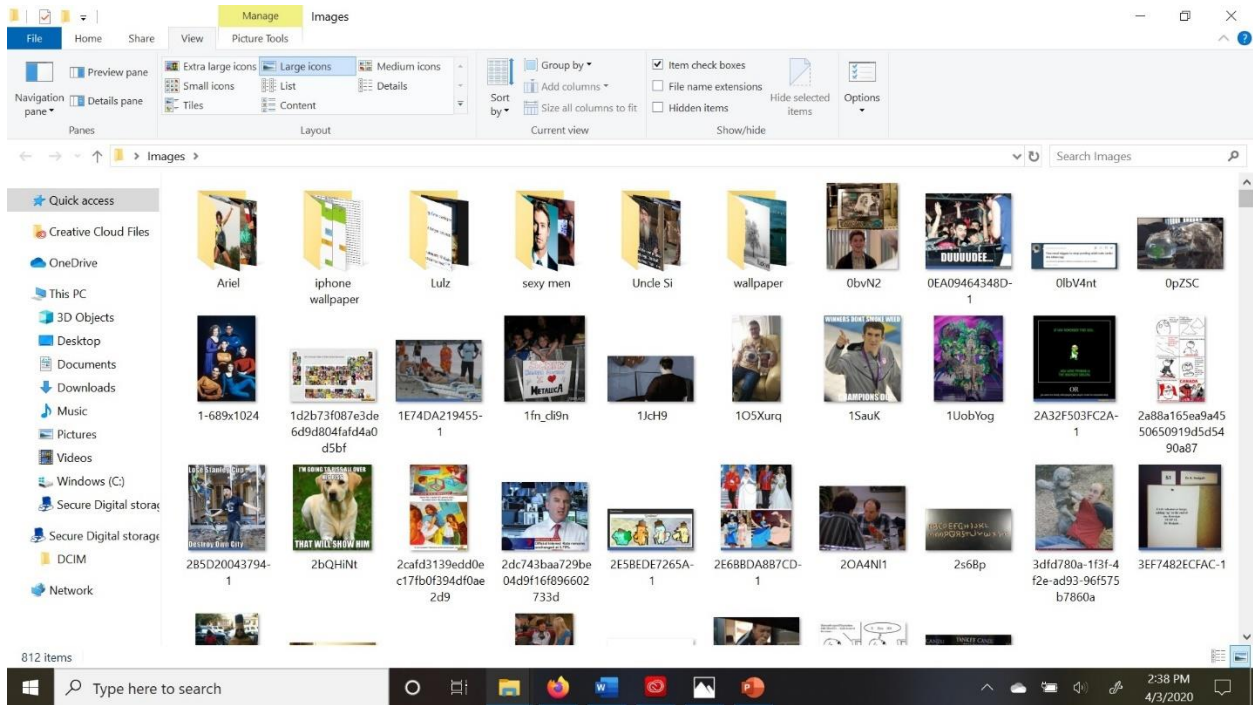
Figure 9: Screen Shot of My Meme Folder

This is a screen shot of my meme folder that I added to almost daily beginning in middle school and ending around the time I went to college. It is by far the largest collection I possess and the only collection I own that is completely intact. In the raging river of constant content which is the internet, the things I decided are important enough to save must be meaningful. These saved memes speak to what I find funny, sad, interesting, and spectacular.

The over 600 images and gifs represent who I was at the beginning of my adolescence through early adulthood. I was raised on the early internet and from these photos you can see what my very sheltered understanding of the world was. It is not a flattering image. I grew up in an all-white town in the rural Midwest and these memes exemplify how I was a product of my physical environment and the digital environment of 4chan. I was a racist, homophobic, sexist kid with a dark sense of humor. Looking back at these images makes me cringe. However, I am proud of how I have changed and the progress I continue

to make. In a way I am lucky to have these memes. They collectively portray a more honest mindset of the person I was than the one I have in my memory.

I do not add to this folder anymore. I am a different person than the one who saved those memes. I am still an avid meme collector, but the collection is the history of links sent between myself and people I care about.

These collections are not a phenomenon unique to memes. Personal collections of images have reflected the taste and ideology of individuals for as long as we have been able to collect images.

COLLECTION AND PRESERVATION: MEMES AND RED-WORKING

Figure 10: Red-Working Example: Unknown (1902). In Honor Shall Wave Spread. Permanent Collection. Folk Art Museum, New York

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, red-working is defined as a simple style of American art needlework that consists of embroidering the outline of designs onto a neutral background using a common stitch called backstitching in a contrasting red thread. Commonly called turkey red thread,

because of its Turkish origins, it was the most used colored thread because it was the first colored thread to not wash out or bleed into the white fabric. Initially, red-working was not done on quilts but tea towels, napkins and pillows and containing stand-alone images. At the turn of the century, sewing magazines began giving away free patterns to promote new subscriptions and with the invention of iron-on transfers, welcomed in a new era of an abundance of imagery for women to work with. Building on the previous Victorian fad of the "crazy quilt" women began to combine all types of scrap images into larger quilts. As patterns came in from magazines or transferred from carbon paper, women would stitch the images important enough to save. Eventually there would be enough of these scrap images to create an entire quilt top. The patterns could consist of anything from historical figures to illustrations from children's books, and were arranged regardless of scale or narrative. These quilts are seemingly random but portray the unique taste, beliefs, and interests of the women who collected the imagery.

I feel that my meme folder was created and maintained in a similar way to the women who pioneered red-working and inspired the creation of this work.

Figure 11: The Workbench of the Meme Red Worker, (Detail)

I began with looking at the images and because I had so many memes to work with, I started organizing them into types or themes. To narrow down my choices, each theme was assigned one meme that I felt spoke for the group.

Those chosen memes were traced, similarly to the process used with carbon paper by the red-working women, and collaged onto the seat of the chair. They were then embroidered into the seat of the chair in turkey red thread using backstitch.

This labor-intensive process gave me time to digest the influence the images had on me as an adolescent and how they reflect our folk culture. I wondered about the reason for saving these particular images. I thought about sitting alone on the computer in my childhood bedroom in a chair just like this one. The chair becoming my work bench as a budding digital folk artist. I embroider the workbench as the memes are stitched into my identity. Just Like the red-working women this is less about an individual image and more about what the collection says together.

THE LINEAR MIND

If I feel that these memes define who I am or at least who I was, is there any scientific proof? Is there documentation of brains being altered by the influence of memes and digital culture?

According to Nicholas Carr, author of *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains,* the internet has physically changed the way the neurons in our brains are created. These new internet-influenced neurons create pathways in the brain that change our thinking from a linear structure into a distracted one. The main cause for the change is due to the format of the internet. We no longer have a need to completely read an entire article, book, or even sentence when searching for information. We simply find what we are looking for and move on to the next thing in a way described by Carr as "hunting and pecking" (Carr, 2010).

The practice of "hunting and pecking" is changing the way we process information, and is subsequentially changing our brains (Carr, 2010). Before the internet we had to hold information in our minds, because we did not have the convenience or ability to look up anything at any moment. Out of necessity, phone numbers, addresses, and facts were stored away in linear sections in our brains. The internet and smart phones in particular have resulted in our brains creating networks that no longer move information from short term to long term memory. Having access to all this information is actually making us retain very little. This is the death of our linear minds (Carr, 2010) .

"It's not that we're not seeing the forest for the trees, it's more that we're spending all our time looking at the twigs and leaves." (Carr, 2010)

If we no longer store our memories or information in our brains, where are they?

Figure 12: The Death of My Linear Mind

In this work, *The Death of My Linear Mind,* I created an urn, grave site, and memorial for my former linear

mind. I imagined my memories swirling around in the cloud connected to my brain by wires rather than

neurons. Though I probably only had a linear mind for a short time, I am lucky to be old enough to have experienced having one at all. I suppose the younger generation will never know it.

The creation of the meme folder marks the death of my linear mind. The start of that collection is when I changed from almost never using the internet to being totally integrated into social media. If the mere format of the internet changes the way we process and store information, is there a way to reverse it?
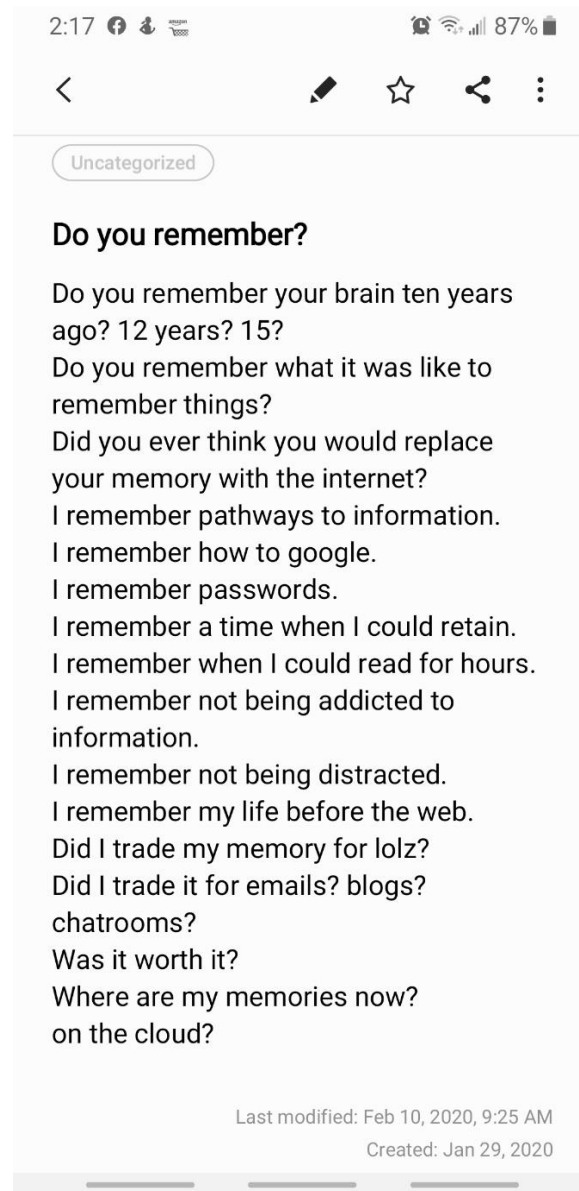

Figure 13: The Death of My Linear Mind Title Card

One week without internet. Can you regain a linear mind?

I spent an entire week without using the internet or my smart phone to try and regain a linear mind. This was before COVID-19 would have made this experiment virtually impossible. This process of internet separation reminded me of when I quit smoking. I had withdrawal from the technology. I later learned that the withdrawal feelings are caused by decreased serotonin levels in the brain. This was caused by the lack of serotonin I would have normally gotten from participating in social media. Instagram and Facebook in particular rewarded me with serotonin by making me feel important and wanted. Every little notification gives me a little hit of serotonin causing dependency. When I was cut off it resulted in moodiness, irritability, and depression.

Another effect was that I burdened people. I asked a librarian where a book was and they told me to look it up on the computer and was bothered when I asked for the number to physically locate it. I made people describe art, podcasts, and articles when they would have preferred to send me a link. I missed emails and direct messages which resulted in annoyed conversations in person.

On the positive side after a couple days, I found it much easier to focus. I could read and create for a much longer time without feeling the need to check my email or social media. Overall, I felt clearer and I believe I started to regain some linear memory. However, it seems a week away from technology was not long enough for a full return to the linear mind. When I finally returned to the digital world, any and all progress I had made was quickly destroyed and internet serotonin dependency returned.

What I learned from this experiment is that protecting and possessing a linear mind is not sustainable. I thought I could live in the world without the internet and I cannot. The system I live in has systematically destroyed the previous structure we relied on before the internet. I cannot send or return letters if I cannot look up addresses. I cannot travel if we no longer sell updated maps. I could not participate in school. I cannot set up doctor's appointments. The list of daily and necessary tasks becomes increasingly

difficult and, in some cases, impossible to complete without the internet. It dawned on me that because of this dependency our system is extremely fragile. That if we lose the internet, we lose the whole system.

To quote Ted Kaczynski, "The system does not and cannot exist to satisfy human needs. Instead, it is human behavior that has to be modified to fit the needs of the system" (Kaczynski, 1995).

The Things We Used to Carry

During my time without the internet, I needed objects that replaced necessary functions of my smart phone. I bought my first clock faced watch. I bought a map of Richmond, though the only travel size one I could find was for tourism. I bought a small planner to keep phone numbers, addresses, and to schedule and remember appointments. My final purchase was a battery radio so I could stay informed and listen to music.

I used to run out the door, now I had to plan my route and hope the weather and traffic reports were accurate. I had to be on time, I could not text and let someone know I was running late. I had to schedule phone calls, to make sure I would be home to answer the landline. There was an adjustment of my time but also an adjustment of weight. What used to fit in my pocket now required a bag. The linear mind holds more information and the linear mind's body carries more weight.

I created a list of every object and approximate weights of the objects my smart phone has replaced. I chose to use the weights of objects from before the first smart phone created by IBM in 1992. The approximate weight is 265.62 lbs. I weighed out this amount in sand and placed it on a cart so I could better visualize and feel the weight. The experiment inspired the creation of this work: The Things We Used to Carry.

Figure 14: The Things We Used to Carry

Like the grave and memorial I made for the linear mind, I created this plaque as a memorial to the body of the linear mind. Within the frame are illustrations of all the objects replaced by my smart phone and fringed with my childhood VHS and cassette tapes. I want to honor the body that carried so many objects now replaced by a small metal and glass rectangle. To function as a memorial to the objects and strength no longer needed.

Figure 15: The Things We Used to Carry (detail)

BIG DATA, BIG TOBACCO, TOMAYTO, TOMAHTO

Figure 16: Addiction Diptych

As I mentioned earlier, the week without internet reminded me a lot of the first week I quit smoking. Most notably, I was surprised by the physical and emotional withdrawal symptoms caused by decreased serotonin. If there are similar effects caused by quitting the internet and quitting tobacco, surely there are similarities in the industries that produce them.

 I researched the rise of social media in the 2010's and compared it to the rise of industrialized tobacco in the early 20th century. Unsurprisingly, both industries adopted the same tactics and reached the same goal of successfully addicting an entire generation. In my research I compiled a set of steps taken by the two industries to both increase and normalize addiction.

The 6 Steps Used by Big Data and Big Tobacco to Increase and Normalize Addiction

Step 1. Create an unnecessary and addicting product.

Step 2. Market the product as a source of pleasure.

Step 3. Pay for scientific research that claims the product to be healthy.

Step 4. Lobby the government to stop any attempt at regulations.

(Examples: Supreme Court rules that the FDA cannot regulate the tobacco Industry: FDA v. Brown &

Williamson Tobacco Corp and the 2017 FCC ruled to repeal net neutrality).

Step 5.   Increase the addictive qualities of product.

(Examples: New additives in tobacco that make the product more addictive. Constant push of notifications

from social media).

Step 6. Create products that claim to cure the established addiction.

(Examples: E- cigarettes and apps that limit time spent on social media).

Goal: If all steps are followed the result is a society that cannot function without the product.

Figure 17: My Dutch Baby (Performance)

My Dutch Baby was a performance I created to test the participant's addiction to their phone. It is directly inspired by my research into the similar tactics used by Big Data and Big Tobacco to normalize dependency. At the beginning of the performance, I asked the viewers for their phones and placed them in plastic bags with a promise not to harm them. I then proceeded to process and "bake" them into what resembles a rectangular Dutch Baby pastry. I used a process that felt like a typical cooking demonstration, but involved incasing the phones in slabs of clay, crimping the edges, dusting with corn starch, and setting the corn starch on fire with a torch. While I was processing the phones, I talked through the life of each phone I have owned starting with when I first received it, its birth, its most significant moments in my life, its pinnacle, and how it stopped working (its death). The goal was for the viewers to feel the stress as they watch me torch their clay covered phones and reflect on their own addiction and dependency.

Figure 18: The Value of One Week of My Facebook Data (Film): Film Stills 1 & 2

Like Big Tobacco, Big Data is addicting us to a product and profiting off of our addiction. I wanted to find

out how much money I took out of the big data economy by not participating in social media for the one

week I spent offline. At the time, my main form of social media was Facebook and Instagram (which is

owned by Facebook). It is hard to find concrete data that shows exactly how much money I specifically

made Facebook, but I was able to generalize and estimate an amount.

Figure 19: The Value of One Week of My Facebook Data (Sculpture)

In 2019 Facebook made 70.7 billion dollars in add sales. Facebook has 2.6 Billion users. Meaning that each

user (bots and Instagram users included) makes Facebook 52 cents per year. There are 52 weeks in a year

meaning I took out around one cent from the data economy during that one week I did not participate in

social media. The math here is purposely not correct and there is a joke within the accompanied video

that references it. The actual amount of money Facebook makes per user per week is little more than half a cent. The fake math about Facebook was employed to do two things. First, it is more or less fake news but delivered in a way to seem accurate. When I come across facts and figures within media, I rarely question the math. I assume many viewers would not question the math until watching the accompanied video. Secondly, I used a penny as a stand in for the actual amount so that the viewer can physically grasp the power the users have. That we, the users, are what drives the data economy and if we banded together one penny per person, we could drive change. I created a classical-inspired alcove complete with silver jewelry stand to elevate the humble penny from being trapped in couch cushions into a symbol of possible future change.

Figure 20: The Value of One Week of My Facebook Data (detail)

Figure 21: All of My Facebook Profile Pictures Combined

Sherry Turkle

If what you save from the internet is a reflection of yourself, surely what you add to the internet is also a reflection of yourself. I came to believe this statement while contemplating my meme collection, and MIT professor Sherry Turkle, author of *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less From Each Othe*r, agrees.

"The internet is the workshop of identity" (Turkle, 2011).

Turkle argues that the digital space is a great way to try on different personas. It gives us the freedom to be someone else without the restrictions of physical requirements (Turkle, 2011). You can be whoever you want, but that does not mean anyone will believe you—nor should they. Everyone curates their digital self online. No profile is an accurate portrayal of any person. Your profile is more of a reflection of what you want to be rather than who you are. Your profile is aspirational and fictional, but it is only one half of the digital self. The other half is the data that is collected about you. Everything you click on and for how long you look at something is collected and compiled to make assumptions about you using algorithms. It is hard to curate one's data because it is looking at your behavior rather than your profile. This is the reason Facebook knew I was queer before I had actually figured that out for myself. Your digital self Is both fake (lies and curation) and true (data collected on behavior) (Turkle, 2011).

CRAFT VS. CRAFTS AND CULTURE VS. FOLK CULTURE

I am continuing a family tradition of both collection and craft. My mother, grandmother, and great grandmother were all active quilters. I grew up surrounded by half-finished sewing projects and stashes of fabric squirreled away in repurposed cookie tins. As a child, my understanding was that this type of labor was not considered art, nor was it considered craft, but crafts with an S. This classification did not take away from the value my family had for handmade objects, but it did establish a hierarchy. Quilts were

appreciated, but never honored with that heavy gold-plated stamp of craft with no S. This always left a sour taste in my mouth that would turn bitter when my grandmother refused to call herself an artist. This led to a permanent question mark in my mind. What is good craft, and does it all hinge on how and when that S is applied?

Craft Vs. Crafts Comparison

Figure 22: Carly Slade, Ming's Kitchen

This is *Ming's Kitchen* by Carly Slade. This work is steeped in craft. It has clearly involved many hours of labor with its precise miniature detail. It is created using clay, fiber, and wood, all practices typically associated with craft. It has a doll house or scale model connotation that creates a dream like nostalgia that is kitschy but not offensively kitschy. It is an excellent mixture of familiar, surreal, and craft. Obviously, craft with no S.

Figure 23: Examples of Laundry Soap Bottle Pinterest Fad

This is from a Pinterest fad that was popular about 10 years ago and is strikingly similar to Slade's work. There is a combination of miniature and actual scale. There is precise attention to detail that clearly took time and labor. Similar, dollhouse nostalgia, and surrealism, but slightly heavier handed with kitsch. It is not made from traditional craft mediums, but it is the same mixture of handmade and found objects that is in Slade's work. The post name from Pinterest is "crafts to do with old laundry bottles" and is classified as #crafts not #craft.

This hierarchy applied to Craft and Crafts is the similar to the hierarchy that is applied to High Culture and Folk Culture. One is regarded as better for arbitrary historical reasons. Folk culture, including digital folk culture, is classified as a lower form of culture because it is for the masses. Memes are for the masses and so is "crafts to do with laundry bottles." To put it simply, high culture and craft are for institutions and folk culture and crafts are for folks.

The more I look to the internet to define what is good craft or bad crafts, the more I want my work to exist somewhere between craft and crafts, and between high and folk culture.

DIGITAL DADA

I am forever inspired by unlikely and creative solutions. One of the reasons I love internet culture is that whenever something is designed with a specific purpose, the users always do something unexpected with it. Vine (the video sharing app popular from 2014 to 2016) is a great example of something that was wildly popular and almost completely unintentional. Vine was created with the intention of documenting mundane life. It was designed to record 6 seconds of everyday life that you could eventually review as a way to document change. What it became was a cultural phenomenon that was hugely fueled my memetic processes, dumb jokes, and creative solutions. Users on Vine took the six second restraints and through creative problem solving created hilarious and absurd content that is the foundation upon which the hugely popular TikTok app is built. Vine marks the beginning of what I classify as digital dada.

Traditional Dada

In order to define digital dada, I want to define what was the original Dada. I am looking specifically at the early 19th century German Dadaist work of Hugo Ball and Hans Richter. Ball and Richter are known as the fathers of Dadaist film and performance art and greatly expanded the scope of Dada as more than two dimensional paintings and collage. Both artists created outrageous works that were built on four main principles: deliberate irrationality, distortion, humorous actions, and the rejection of capitalism and the bourgeois.

Digital Dada

Like Dadaism, digital dadaism is a celebration of unnecessary actions big and small. Sometimes these digital Dadaist videos are classified as "just because" videos. These videos can be anything from filling a

bathtub up with cereal and milk to putting shoes on with feet covered in whipped cream. The medium is different from the original Dadaists, but the meaning is the same: everything is bad, so why not be weird? Instead of grief from WWI the digital Dadaists have Covid-19; instead of paintings, it is short videos, but the response to tragedy with unnecessary, absurd, and often hilarious actions is the same.

Another creative solution that exists within the realm of digital dadaism is "fixed it" photos and videos. This memetic phenomenon stems from a reddit page dedicated to photos of "fixes" which are absurd but technically functional. Examples of this would be using a tennis racket to strain pasta or a tipped over shopping cart as a grill. They are creative solutions that are technically effective but never the easiest solution. In general, "fixed it" content is created in response to abundance of DIY (do it yourself) videos. DIY videos often lead the viewers to believe that anyone can fix anything from pants to plumbing, when in actuality something that is portrayed as easy within a DIY video could be extremely difficult. This difficulty is what leads a user to create a "fixed it" video or the similar failed DIY content "nailed it."

An even more absurd form of DIY videos would be life hack videos. Life hacks are inherently DIY but focus on less practical products and applications. Life hacks are what is left after all the helpful DIY videos have already been made. Life hacks are a perfect example of unintentional digital dadaism; unlike DIY or fixed it videos, they often do not work whatsoever. It is an exercise in the creation of a non-function. They are made purely as clickbait and offer little knowledge beside how best not to make something.

Jan Hakon Erichsen

Figure 24: Jan Hakon Erichsen, Stills from Destruction Diaries #28

One early digital Dadaist is Jan Hakon Erichsen. Erichsen is most known for his destruction videos featuring him destroying balloons in creative and extremely unnecessary ways.

Erichsen is both highlighting creative solutions and glorifying the completely unnecessary. He is simultaneously poking fun at performance art and internet culture by using the hypnotizing format from satisfying videos. This work lives somewhere between crafts and craft, seamlessly shooting the gap of art and memes. Erichsen's work has gone viral several times because of its accessible format and uncomplicated humor. Erichsen is using memetic processes by re-creating and remixing popular digital video tropes, but elevates it with a white gallery backdrop and serious expression. In his work Erichsen has created a space that allows for performance art and memes to coexist and allow for any viewer, no matter their art education, to enjoy and understand the work.

Ethernet Cord Bath Bomb

Figure 25: Ethernet Cord Bath Bomb

While making this work, I was looking at "fixed it" content, Erichsen's work, and my generation's bizarre romantism with old technology. All over social media are accounts dedicated to re-creating and relishing the rituals surrounding old technology. There are hundreds of videos with soft music playing in the background depicting opening a VHS tape, carefully rewinding it by hand and placing it in a VHS player. Often the teenagers creating these videos have no firsthand knowledge of this technology, creating a weird nostalgia for an activity they never participated in. These videos seem to romanticize the activity, but do not consider how inconvenient and subpar the old technology was. It also made me wonder about what use we have for all this old technology. Can it have a future that is helpful to society?

Figure 26: Ethernet Cord Bath Bomb (Film Stills 1&2)

In this work I created a nonlinear world where technology and aesthetics from different time periods are confusingly combined. I wanted to poke fun at influencers and their intense positivity that often accompanies the promotion of unnecessary beauty products. This seemingly silly video leads with humor and will hopefully inspire deeper thought about the state of our absurd digital folk culture.

Floppy Disk DIY

The inspiration for this work began when I came across a TikTok video around 2:30am one night. The minute long video featured a teenage girl pulling a plastic box out of the ground in the woods. When she opened the box, it was filled with 3.5" floppy disks. She had no idea what they were and went on to create several videos on her quest to find out how to use and read them. Spoiler alert, they were destroyed due to moisture and were unreadable. What struck me about this video was the excitement. The excitement of finding not only buried treasure, but treasure that was put on the ancient technology I used in elementary school. She was so excited to hold a physical memory even if it was only one megabyte. I do not yearn for a time when your computer would overheat trying to connect to the web through phone lines, but perhaps for someone who never had a binder full of CD's, using a floppy disk could be a historical reenactment experience like churning butter.

Figure 27: Floppy Disk DIY Film Still 1

Like with the ethernet cords, I wondered if floppy disks could have a place in our modern digital world besides a landfill.

This video uses a format that is familiar to anyone on Instagram. It is directly taken from the numerous DIY craft videos constantly plaguing my feed. The video escalates in absurdity as the viewer is taken through fifteen different uses for floppy disks. Each one becomes increasingly less useful and, in some cases, impossible. This format, in combination with the absurdity of the "Fixed it" videos of the digital Dadaist, creates an uncomfortable union between the hot glue DIY crafts video projected on top of the fine crafted Ceramic "mirror" and "fireplace." The fireplace itself will echo the humor and DIY crafts of the video, with its tiles made of floppy disks.
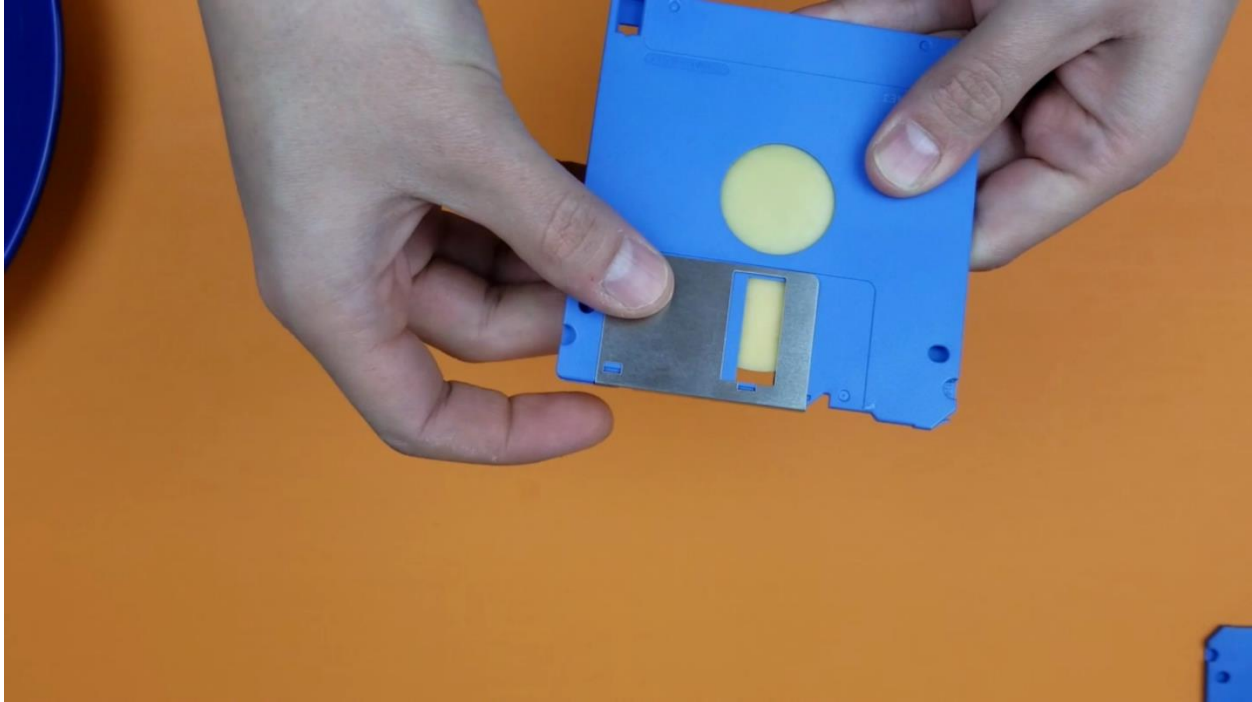
Figure 28: Floppy Disk DIY Film Still 2

I want to create a conversation of Craft and Crafts (inherently high and low culture) and the shortening of

the cycle of nostalgia. When our technological growth is so fast it seems to shorten the time we need to

miss something, or like the TikTok girl, miss an experience she never experienced in the first place.

Marie Antoinette Should Have Been on VHS

This work is a series of lies. The first being that Marie Antoinette, directed by Sophia Coppola in 2004, was

released on VHS (it was a DVD-only home release, as were most films at that point). The second lie is the

color of the VHS tape itself; it was only painted pink and original tapes never had that color, but I would

guess that people younger than me may not know that. The third lie is the mirror used as the projection

surface, which is not glazed as it appears but spray-painted to look like glaze. The final lie is the

romanticized portrayal of the story of Marie Antoinette. In this movie, which I watched for the first time

at a very impressionable twelve, is glorifying a very wasteful and oppressive person and monarch. I find

this similar though less destructive to how we look back at old technology like the VHS. People yearn for

its ritualistic practices of rewinding and accidently taping over your parents wedding video. We look back at the VHS like how we look back at Marie Antoinette. She was kind and misunderstood; the VHS was easy to use and play movies in great quality; both lies framed in rose-colored glasses.
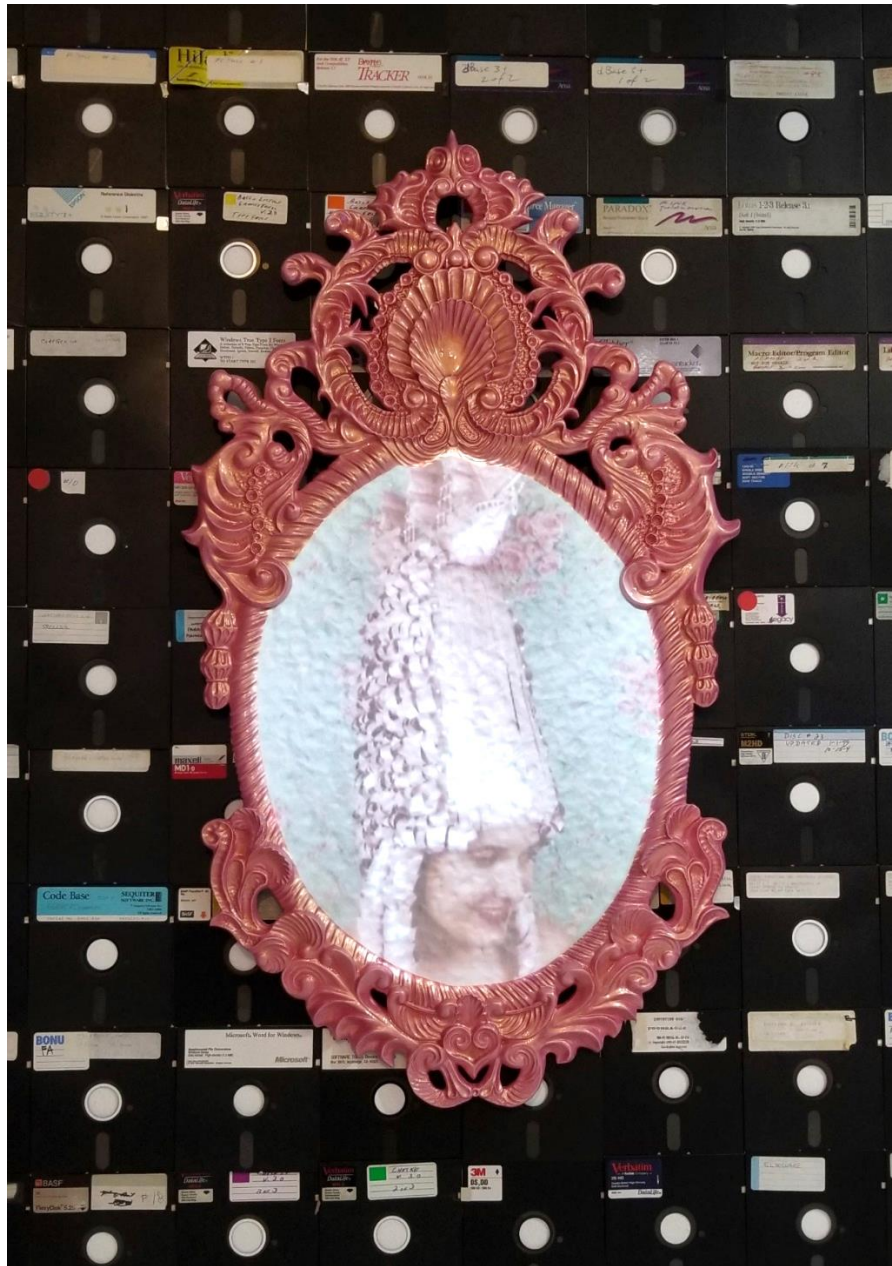

Figure 29: Marie Antoinette Should Have Been on VHS

There are of course layers of craft within the video. The wig is made from painted VHS tape, which like the floppy disk videos is a very unpractical use for outdated technology. This video has a darker tone with

its reference to the story of Marie Antoinette. At the same time, it is as cheeky, pink, and cute as Antoinette is portrayed in the film. It walks the line between adding to the glorification of both Marie Antionette and VHS tapes and making fun of the same nostalgia it is employing.

VICTORIAN/CLASSICAL ORNAMENTATION

I have spoken about my love of unnecessary actions and excess, and who are the champions of excess? The Victorians; all about decorations, all the ornamentation, all of frills, all the ruffles and all the complicated undergarments.

Victorian ornamentation is overtly excessive and in many ways is the backdrop to western art institutions. Our museums are filled with Victorian and classically inspired ornamentations, especially when it comes to frames. Almost all historical art that is acclaimed by the western art canon exists within an ornate gilded frame. These frames are meticulously crafted and gilded just to be ignored by the art within it. I crafted similar frames to go around the screens for my projected digital folk art inspired videos. I hope this juxtaposition between the frames and the work would be jarring for the viewer for two reasons. First is the apparent difference between the labors involved. The frames are obviously handmade and took material knowledge and skill to create. The videos did take a tremendous amount of time and computer knowledge, but the digital labor involved in video is invisible. The viewer may be almost insulted by the juxtaposition joke of putting some seemingly goofy video on top of fine crafted Victorian inspired frames.

The second reason is the apparent difference between high and low culture. Memes and digital culture are classified as a lower form of culture so the juxtaposition between the frames and the videos should invite the viewer to question why we value one type of culture over another. Can digital folk art be held up to the same cultural importance as other work within a similar frame? Is there space for memes to be along-side the impressionists, cubists, and original Dadaists?

Figure 30: Floppy Fireplace (Detail)

BREAK DOWN OF THESIS EXHIBITION COMPONENTS

Clay

The mirrors are apparent in their ornate, detail orientated, and labor-intensive design to exemplify the craft mentality of mastering a material. The intense ornamentation combined with the humorous video that it is projected on it seems to belittle the effort put into the clay carving. This uncomfortable pairing asks the viewer to question why we do not value the time it takes to create digital content. I want to question what can be defined as craft and why if both processes are labor intensive and require mastery, why is only one a craft.

The 3D printed components echo the classic European decorative arts style but are obviously designed and created using a machine. This contrast both the traditional ornamentation (as a product of machine labor) and the outdated technology (as a marker of innovation). The 3D prints mark the work's impermanence on the cutting edge as clay technology continues to innovate.

Figure 31: It's Crafty-er Than It Looks (3D Printed Ceramics)

Video Projections

I have created parody videos of tropes or common formats which exist in digital culture. I use the videos to subvert what we expect from digital culture while also making fun of its problematic fakeness. I start out the videos as familiar, approachable, tried, and true formats that slowly dissolve into surrealism—a subversion, an unexpected left turn into a world where bath bombs can be made of ethernet cords and floppy disks can be pasties. The videos make people laugh at the familiar and create a space to ponder the unfamiliar.

Out-Dated Technology

As addressed in my video work, I am interested in how we as a culture look back at old technology. We look back at "simpler times" or "simpler technology" in a rose-colored nostalgia, but fail to remember how inconvenient things were or what happens to old technology after it is no longer needed. The gadgets for this installation come from the outdated technology of my childhood: floppy disks, ethernet cords, VHS tapes, and cassette tapes. The old technology supports the video work and functions as the wallpaper immersing the viewer. This floppy disk wallpaper not only exemplify how much of this useless technology is around, but with the personalized labels show a uniquely personal relationship with technology.

The Phone (It's Not Over Until You Delete His Mii)

This work consists of a painted antique rotary phone sitting atop a chrome pedestal. When answered, the phone plays the music that would normally accompany the main menu of Nintendo's Wii, first released in 2006. This soundtrack is instantly recognizable to anyone who has played the Wii, which is the most popular game system ever created. To people who do not recognize the music it will be interpreted as elevator music, or hold music. This soundtrack is so infamous that is has been released on vinyl and sells for $300. The phone, like all the work in the exhibition, is an absurd mashup of technology from different time periods. The phone itself also acts as a joke. It does not give the viewer any more

information that goes with the videos projected. It asks the viewer to go to the extent to pick up a phone and gain no additional information about the work. Because the projections have no audio that goes with the video the phone would be assumed to fill in the missing audio. It does but it also adds nothing more than continuing to mix up the timeline of technology.

Figure 32: It's Not Over Until You Delete His Mii

Mirrors

Though these mirrors are not conventionally functional they still reflect, because internet culture is a reflection of our current folk culture. The clay "mirrors" are built in the classic European decorative arts style, referencing the institutional use of classical gilded ornamentation to frame "high art" or "high culture". Before Covid hit, I took a trip to Washington DC to document the frames in the National Portrait

Gallery for reference in the creation of these mirrors. I was interested in discovering what kind of frame goes around our most revered cultural icons. I used the same ornamentation and frames associated with institutionally revered culture to subvert the hierarchy placed on digital culture. I ask the viewer to decide, can what's within your phone screen be as culturally significant as that within gilded frames?

Fireplace

I chose to depict a fireplace because traditionally the fireplace was the cultural center of the home. The family would gather around the fireplace for warmth but also for conversations, songs, and other cultural expressions. The radio replaced the fireplace as the cultural center of the home, and soon after that television replaced the radio. This particular fireplace that I used as a reference is from a prop house in London that specialized in re-creating furniture for period films. I want the work to be created using a series of misleading references, because it more accurately depicts the way content becomes popular on the internet. Things online can look real, but its history is always unknown or under researched. Not only is this not a real fireplace, it is based on a fake fireplace that was designed to look old.

Figure 33: Floppy Fireplace

WHAT IS THE POINT?

I want to give people permission to laugh at art,

like you would finding a fresh meme that makes you laugh alone in a dark bedroom.

A gasping laugh validated by a twinge of brutal honesty.

After all, the internet is a lonely place.

Always surrounded by strangers.

Propelled down a tunnel carved by an algorithm into a brain-dead abyss.

But it's a nice break.

I create art that hurls jokes which land in your belly and not your soul.

I vilify elements of our culture without causing the urge to throw yourself into traffic.

Art that is both funny and subversive.

Light hearted and deeply thoughtful.

I feel like we could all use a joke.

Too much anger around to be forwardly serious.

I need a break.

A break from being miserable.

But maybe I'll just look at my phone some more until it's time to go to bed.

I am not an activist.

But I provide a long drink of humor with a backwash of social commentary.

I construct work that is creating visual and humorous pleasure.

Art that invites approachable decoding,

 a gentle subversion,

some considered craft,

and a boatload of dumb jokes.

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CV

EDUCATION
2021   M.F.A. Virginia Commonwealth University – Richmond, VA
        Masters of Fine Arts
2016   B.F.A. New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University – Alfred, NY
        Bachelor of Fine Arts | Magna Cum Laude

EXPERIENCE
2019 – 2021   Virginia Commonwealth University, *Graduate Teaching Assistant.* Richmond, VA
2020   Anna Hepler, *Artist Assistant.* Richmond, VA
2017 - 2019   DBO Home, *Ceramic Technician, Studio Manager.* Sharon, CT
2018 - 2019   Standard Space Gallery, *Assistant Curator.* Sharon, CT
2017 - 2019   Blue Star Gallery, *Studio Manager, Assistant Curator*. Falls Village, CT
2016 - 2017   John Michael Kohler Arts Center, *Arts/Industry Artist in Residence Intern.* Sheboygan, WI
2015 - 2016   Sharon McConnell, *Artist Assistant*. Alfred, NY
2015 - 2016   Alfred Ceramic Art Museum, *Museum Assistant*. Alfred, NY
2015   Cohen Gallery, *Gallery Assistant*. Alfred, NY
2015   Alfred University, *Ceramics Department intern.* Alfred, NY
2014 - 2015   Division of Sculpture at Alfred University, Alfred, NY
                Teacher Assistant for Liberal Arts Introduction to Sculpture
                Teacher Assistant for Fine Arts Introduction to Glass Blowing and Casting

EXHIBITIONS
2021   National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts Student Juried Art Exhibition. DAAP Reed Gallery, Cincinnati, OH.
2020   Regency Mall: Store Front, *Pentamerous,* a candidacy exhibition of first year VCU Arts graduate students. Richmond, VA. Canceled due to COVID-19.
2020   Main St. Station Gallery, *Insert Self,* an exhibition of current VCU Arts graduate students. Richmond, VA.
2020   The Anderson, *Endless Street,* an exhibition in coordination with National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts. Richmond, VA. Canceled due to COVID-19.

2019   The Anderson, *Lavender Empowerment,* an exhibition of queer artists living in Richmond. Richmond, VA.

2019   Clay Center of New Orleans, *Casting Call,* an exhibition of slip cast ceramic art juried by Peter Pincus. New Orleans, LA.

2018   Flower City Art Center, *Good Things Come in Small Packages,* an exhibition of small ceramic works not exceeding eight inches in any dimension Juried by Lydia Johnson. Rochester, NY.

2018   Limner Gallery, *A Show of Heads,* an exhibition of busts and portraits juried by Tim Slowinski. Hudson, NY.

2018   Lexington Arts and Craft Society, *10th Biennial State of Clay*, an exhibition of ceramic artist previously or currently living in Massachusetts juried by Emily Zilber. Lexington, MA.

2018   Maple Grove Art Center, *Maple Grove Traveling Art Show*, an exhibition of works selected from the North Show's 23rd Annual Arts in Harmony Show. Minneapolis, MN.

2018   Hopkins Center for the Arts, *23rd Arts in Harmony 2018 Annual International Show,* an international juried exhibition of all media. Hopkins, MN.

2018   Clay Center of New Orleans, *Clay as Canvas*, an exhibition of ceramic work with unique surfacing juried by Chandra Debuse. New Orleans, LA.

2017   Work House Art Center, *2017 Workhouse Clay International Exhibition,* an international exhibition of functional and sculptural ceramics juried by Chris Gustin. Lorton, VA.

2016   New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, *The Silk Purse of a Sow's Ear,* BFA Solo exhibition. Alfred, NY.

2015   Robert Turner Gallery, *The Female Gaze*, a group exhibition of female artists. Alfred, NY.

2015   Robert Turner Gallery, *The Ladies Casting Club,* a group exhibition focusing on showcasing women working in casting using a wide variety of media. Alfred, NY.

2015   Robert Turner Gallery, *Unscripted Collections*, a group exhibition of ceramic art made by the 2015 Alfred University Ceramic department summer interns. Alfred, NY.

2014   Flex Space, *Impregnate*, a group exhibition of sculptural ceramic work. Alfred, NY.

2012   Manitou Springs Business of Art Center, *Wunderkind*, a juried exhibition or works by young artists in Colorado. Manitou Springs, CO.

CURATORIAL PROJECTS

2019   Blue Star Gallery, Assistant Curator, *Spring Show.* Falls Village, CT.

2019   Standard Space Gallery, Assistant Curator, Matt Magee *Numerologies*. Sharon, CT.

2015   Robert Turner Gallery, Curator, *The Ladies Casting Club.* Alfred, NY.

AWARDS & RECOGNITION

2021   Virginia Commonwealth University Graduate Research Grant

2019 - 2021   Virginia Commonwealth University Graduate Teaching Assistantship

2012 - 2016   Dean's Merit Scholarship Alfred University

2015   Phi Alpha Theta National History Honor Society

2014   Alfred University Ceramic Grant