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The arts at Facebook: An aesthetic infrastructure for surveillance capitalism

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ABSTRACT

For almost a decade, Facebook has maintained two internal organizations to commission and create artworks for Facebook offices around the globe. This paper maps those enterprises, their organizational practices, and the aesthetics they promote. It then builds on recent work in the critical sociology of capitalism to make two cases: one, that the ways Facebook works with the arts marks a radical departure from traditional, industrial-era corporate collecting practices; and two, that Facebook's arts initiatives mirror and help legitimate profit-seeking techniques particular to social media. Together, it concludes, these features give us a glimpse of the ways that surveillance-based for-profit media such as Facebook are creating new relationships between the arts, the corporation, and their respective publics.

1. Introduction

When visitors enter Building 10 on Facebook's Menlo Park, California, campus, they step up to a counter so that a security guard can check their IDs, confirm their appointments, and give them a badge. This is a banal ritual at most corporations and a standard reminder that visitors are entering a privileged and privatized space. Yet, at Facebook, if visitors happen to look up over the shoulders of the guards, they see a riot of hand-silk-screened posters that at first glance, belong to a far more public kind of space. One poster reminds visitors to

“TAKE CARE OF
MUSLIM
BLACK
WOMEN + FEMMES
QUEER LATNX
NATIVE
IMMIGRANT
P.O.C.
TRANS
DISABLED
INCARCERATED
L.G.B.T.Q. +
FRIENDS
FAMILY & COMMUNITY.”

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Another features the motto of Act Up, “Silence = Death,” underneath a large pink triangle. And here and there, prominent among the maybe seventy posters in all, you can see portraits of the Afghan women’s rights activist Mulala, of Holocaust survivor and author Eli Wiesel, and even labor leader and co-founder of the United Farm Workers Dolores Huerta. Perhaps most strangely of all, just above the row of iPads on which visitors must promise not to disclose any proprietary information they may stumble across, a poster announces in red block capital letters: BE OPEN.

Though Facebook has hired unionized contract workers to guard its buildings and staff its kitchens, there are no unions inside the company itself. And as you sign the non-disclosure agreement, it’s hard to forget that while you must open your data to Facebook if you want to use its services, Facebook need not share its data with you. So what are these posters doing here? The mystery deepens as visitors enter the campus’s main buildings. Soon they see that the posters they saw in the lobby are everywhere. So too are enormous murals, such as a hand-painted image of a wolf on the back of a whale, and just down the way, a neo-psychedelic mandala at their twice as tall as a person. Across the wide-open floors of Facebook’s cavernous work spaces, engineers and analysts sit at their computer monitors. There is not a cubicle in sight. If programmers look up from their work, they see each other. But they also see spidery mobiles dangling from the ceiling, or a visiting painter atop a scaffold, filling in a bit of background.

The question is: Why? Why would one of the most technologically sophisticated and highly capitalized firms in the world want to surround its workers with hand-made posters – particularly posters promoting points of view that seem to be at odds with a public company’s mission of maximizing profits? Why would a media company that has claimed to be a politically neutral platform surround its workers with progressive iconography? And why would the company not just use its wealth to purchase paintings off the shelf? Why would they want artists roaming the halls, with cans of paint in their hands?

To try to answer these questions, this essay builds on a series of interviews, extended visits to Facebook’s headquarters, and a comprehensive review of Facebook’s art and design archives to trace the history of Facebook’s two internal arts programs and explore the aesthetics they promote.¹ From the company’s founding, CEO Mark Zuckerberg has hired muralists to decorate its walls. Today the company supports two intertwined arts organizations. One, the Analog Research Laboratory, has grown out of the company’s internal community of designers and produces the posters seen in Building 10. The other, the Artist in Residence Program, invites painters, sculptors, graffiti artists and others to make site-specific pieces in Facebook’s workspaces. Both programs began in Menlo Park and have since spread to Facebook’s offices around the world. Today the company employs five curators on four continents to manage its arts initiatives.

This essay focuses primarily on Facebook’s Menlo Park headquarters. There, it argues, posters and murals do much more than simply brighten the walls. They transform political and aesthetic movements into management tools. The arts at Facebook blur the line between the public, social sphere and private corporate space, and they encourage workers to imagine the company as a community – a community centered on the celebration of individual creativity. Such practices have deep roots in twentieth-century corporate America and especially in the internet-related industries that sprang up across America in the early 1990s. As a number of scholars have shown, technology start-ups have long flourished in the rich soil of bohemian, art-centered social worlds.² Yet, Facebook is no start up. On the contrary, it is a global flagship for an emerging mode of capital accumulation that Shoshanna Zuboff has christened “surveillance capitalism.”³ As Zuboff notes, the industrial firms of the mid-twentieth century made their money providing goods and services. The new media of surveillance capitalism solicit social behaviors, monitor those behaviors, map social interactions, and resell what they learn to advertisers and others.

The art programs inside Facebook provide an aesthetic infrastructure with which to encourage and legitimate that process. That infrastructure works in two ways, one organizational and the other, semiotic. As units within the firm, the Analog Research Laboratory and the Artist-in-Residence program solicit bottom-up collaborations from Facebook’s workers. These solicitations mirror the ways that Facebook’s online interface requests and celebrates contributions from users. The posters and murals these units produce encourage Facebook’s workers to imagine themselves not as architects of a global surveillance apparatus, but as creative technical artists and perhaps even builders of a new, individual-centered expressive democracy. When the Analog Research Lab posts images of activists such as Dolores Huerta, it is hardly urging Facebook’s engineers to unionize. On the contrary, it is asking them to imagine a polity in which individual character and ethnic diversity – as opposed to electoral process and institutional bureaucracy – will be the foundations of a good society. This new society will be one of constant conversation; its highways and towers will be Facebook’s own often invisible algorithms and layers of code; its civic foundations will be laid and maintained by a globe-spanning, for-profit corporation. And in this new society, Facebook’s engineers will use the company’s technologies to become citizens and shapers of a public they see represented on the walls around them.

¹ As any who have tried it will know, conducting research inside a firm that has received the kind of sustained and critical public attention that Facebook has can be quite difficult. In my own case, I have conducted three extensive tours of the art on Facebook’s Menlo Park campus, one under the supervision of a corporate public relations officer. I have interviewed the current directors and one of the two founders of the Analog Research Laboratory and the Artist in Residence Program, as well as half a dozen participating artists. Both the Lab and the Residence program keep substantial archives of their work and I have reviewed those comprehensively. Because I have not been able to interview current employees of Facebook outside the arts programs, I have leaned on published journalistic reports and online materials to flesh out my account. Images of much of the art I discuss and more information on both programs can be found on the programs’ Facebook pages. For the analog Research Laboratory, see <https://www.facebook.com/analoglab/> and for the Artist in Residence Program, see <https://www.facebook.com/artistinresidence/>.

² Neff, Gina. *Venture Labor: Work and the Burden of Risk in Innovative Industries*. Acting with Technology. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012; Ross, Andrew. *No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and Its Hidden Costs*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2003; Lloyd, Richard D. *Neo-Bohemia: Art and Commerce in the Postindustrial City*. New York: Routledge, 2006; Turner, Fred. *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

³ Zuboff, Shoshanna. “Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization.” *Journal of Information Technology* 30 (2015): 75–89.

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