TOP: JOANIE SAN CHIRICO; BOTTOM: COURTESY THE ARTISTS

The Social Revolution

Today's Facebook comments are tomorrow's artworks as artists harness social technology to comment on how our new connectivity is changing our culture by **barbara pollack**

How many friends does an artist need? Facebook sets a limit of 5,000, but that hasn't stopped many artists from tweeting, blogging, posting to well past that number. Today, there are artists who are fully engaged with the world of Web 2.0, the term for an interconnective Internet with sites that encourage user participation. With more and more people becoming familiar with social-networking sites, artists are tapping into these online communities and making works that harness new capabilities.

"The possibilities are endless," says Louise Shannon, curator of contemporary art at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, who organized "Decode: Digital Design Sensations" at the museum in December 2009. The exhibition featured a number of examples of social-media art. "As networks grow, these opportunities will grow exponentially. We are only at the tip of an iceberg."

"I look at it with a very long term of view," says Barbara London, new-media curator at the Museum of Modern Art. "Artists are harbingers in working with materials and technology that keep updating faster than we can blink."

Social-media art is an umbrella that covers a mind-boggling array of projects: performances accompanied by Twitter feeds, paintings inspired by Facebook profiles, online works that evolve as people participate, videos compiled from postings on YouTube, start-up companies created as art. "Social-media art, for me, is defined as anything that uses social media as either a medium, as source material, or as a starting point for critique," says Hrag Vartanian, editor of Hyperallergic.com, a Brooklyn-based online publication, and the curator of "The Social Graph," an exhibition that examined the impact of social networking on art, held at Outpost, a nonprofit art space in Bushwick, Brooklyn, last year. "The social graph" is a term coined by Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg to describe the way that a network of relationships can be applied to a variety of purposes, such as marketing.

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Creating an exhibition in a physical space from what is basically an online phenomenon presented its own set of challenges. Artist An Xiao spoke to visitors through the online video-chat service Skype from the basement of Outpost, pretending she was in Los Angeles Performance artist Man Bartlett was also present through a live video feed, stationed at Hyperallergic's offices in Williamsburg. He asked visitors to complete the sentence "I am . . ."—"I am hungry," "I am overly sensitive to criticism," "I am thinking about my future"—via Twitter. In a 24-hour period, Bartlett received 1,500 responses, tagged with #24hkith, the title of the piece. The artist read the responses aloud, and for each one he attached a feather to a mannequin, which he sold to a collector for $2,000. "I am interested in looking beneath the technology itself at how we communicate with other human beings, and how that is changing as a result of social networking," says Bartlett.

Keeping with the spirit of the show, "The Social Graph" was sponsored by another media-art project, Social Printshop, developed by Benjamin Lotan. Social Printshop is a service that makes posters out of people's Facebook pictures, each costing $25. Lotan created the company for the M.F.A. program at the University of California, San Diego, where he is still a student. "I would say the company, its organization, and the group of people that I am working with are more the art piece than the posters, though it's blurry," says Lotan, who describes his practice as "durational performances where relationships and networks are formed." He has already attracted two investors, raising over $70,000, but plans to expand social printshop to a much larger scale by this summer. For "The Social Graph," Vartanian struggled to figure out the best way to include the project in the exhibition, and realized that the most natural relationship would be to have Social Printshop as his sponsor, the way that most cultural institutions interact with large corporations.

"The Social Graph" is just one of several recent exhibitions to showcase social-media art. "Free," at the New Museum in New York last year, explored the ways that the Internet has expanded artists' access to information. It included *riverthe.net*, a collaboration between video artist Ryan Trecartin and David Karp, the founder of Tumblr, a social-blogging platform. Like stream-of-consciousness poetry, *riverthe.net* is a constant flow of short videos posted by visitors to the site with additions from Trecartin. A much more ominous work in the show was *Untitled Black Video* (2009), by Dutch artist Martijn Hendriks. For this piece, the artist lifted online comments on an illegal video of the execution of Saddam Hussein and arranged them as subtitles beneath a black screen. Viewers can imagine the gruesome hanging from the posted words.

TOP **Man Bartlett's *#24hkith*, 2010. In this 24-hour performance, Bartlett attached a feather to a mannequin for every person who completed the phrase "I am . . ." via Twitter. CENTER Julius Popp's *bit.code*, 2009. The black and white tiles spin to spell out words commonly used on the Internet. BOTTOM *We Feel Fine*, 2005, by Sep Kamvar and Jonathan Harris, is a web application that collects emotional statements from blogs and links them to graphics.**

# NETWORKED ART

code: Digital Design Sensations" at the V & A. "Networks are saturated with the traces of our lives: messages we send, blog entries we post, borders we cross. Artists and designers are drawing on these traces of human presence, and using the 'memory' as the basis of new works," according to the website for the exhibition. At the entrance of the museum, German artist Julius Popp installed *bit.code* (2009), a wall of black and white moving tiles programmed to spin until they align to form words. Relying on the software SAP BusinessObjects Text Analysis, the piece collects heavily used words from various news feeds, blogs, and websites which are then fed into its database and spelled out on the wall. "At first, visitors couldn't see the words and were kind of confused," says exhibition curator Shannon. "It was really amazing to watch people's faces when a word came up and they had that moment of realization of what was happening. We had a really positive response."

"Tag Ties and Affective Spies," a virtual exhibition curated by Daphne Dragona of the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens, went online in March 2009 and can still be visited. Examining the ways that social networking is changing common notions of identity and privacy, the exhibition featured works such as *The Big Plot* (2008–9), a multilayered spy story told across blogs, Twitter, and video streams, developed by Italian artist Paolo Cirio, and *We Feel Fine* (2005), by Jonathan Harris and Sep Kamvar, a web application that scours the Internet every ten minutes and collects sentences expressing feelings — "I feel bad for her that she is like this," "I hope I will feel like myself again soon" —which it then turns into interactive graphics.

"Artists who have been working with the Internet and with new media since that genre began are interested in participatory systems and social networking," says Lauren Cornell, the curator of "Free." "What is new is more advanced technologies and new applications connecting masses and masses of people. It's really just a progression."

An Xiao, an early adapter to Web 2.0 and the founder of @Platea, a collective of online art makers, would disagree. "I think social-media art is a new genre of art," she says. "It blends many different things. It blends performance art because it is people interacting socially with each other. It blends visual art because Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, and the rest all rely on very visual elements. It blends net art, but it is in more of a public space than traditional net art." Her recent performance *The Artist Is Kinda Present* (2010) took aim at the Marina Abramović retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, itself an example of a show utilizing social networking, since MoMA posted images every day of Abramović's performance on Flickr. Sitting in silence, Xiao tweeted with anyone who sat down for as long as they liked. "One woman told me stories about her first child and I asked her about how that felt and she was very forthcoming," says Xiao. "We never actually spoke but we had a very intimate conversation." Xiao was the first artist selected by the Brooklyn Museum for its social-networking membership program, "1stfans," which for two years commissioned artists, including Joseph Kosuth and Tracey Moffatt, to create works of art in Twitter to coincide with the "First Saturdays" event series.

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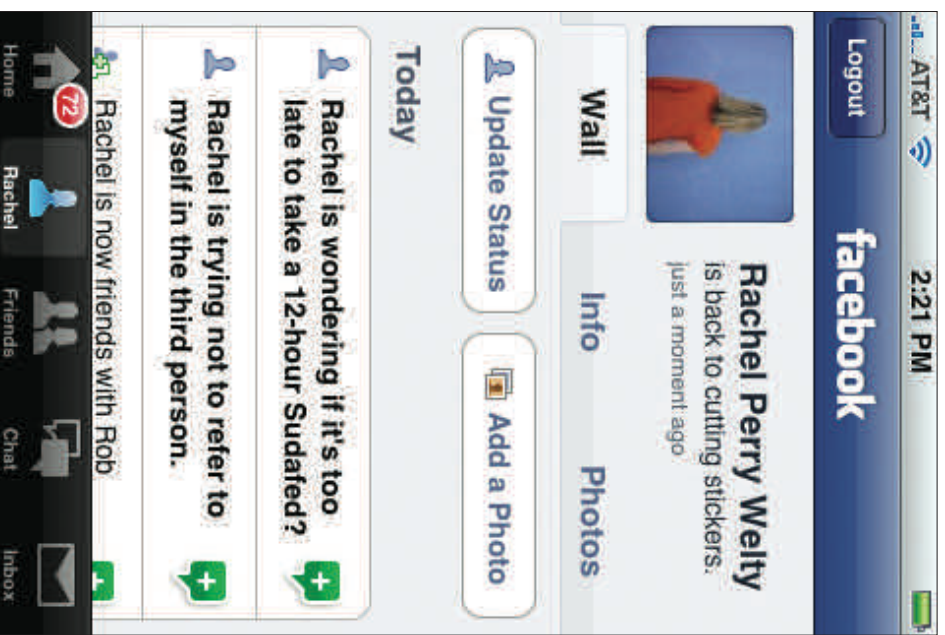
Rachel Perry Welty's *Rachel is*, 2009 (detail above, installation view below). Welty updated her Facebook status every minute for 16 hours on March 11, 2009. The archived texts were displayed on multiple iPhones.

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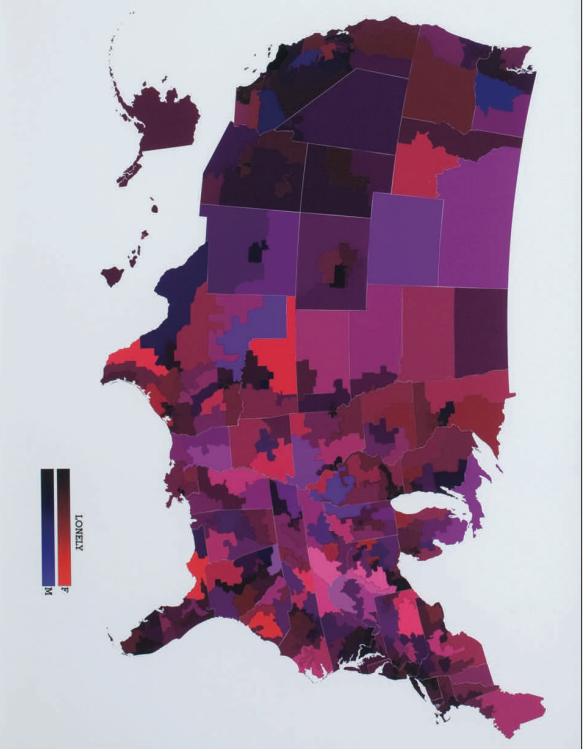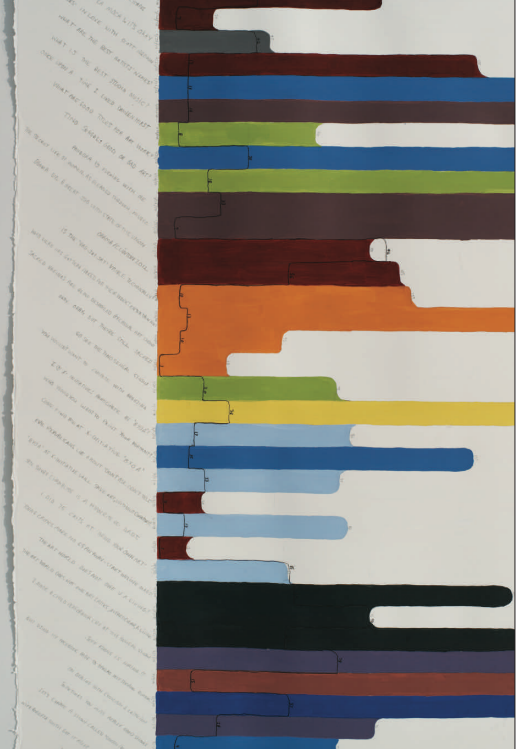
FACEBOOK, WITH

its 600 million users worldwide, has not surprisingly inspired many artists. Appropriating the often funny and sometimes unflattering photos that people post on their profiles, Matt Held painted portraits of 75 individuals, selling them for $1,500 each at his show at Denise Bibro Fine Art in September 2009. Held, who met all his subjects through the site, reached the limit of 5,000 friends, so he developed a separate page. "I'll have my Facebook portrait painted by Matt Held," which brought him 3,000 fans. Artist Debbie Hesse curated the show "Status Update," which invited artists to take a look at Facebook, at Haskins Laboratories, an affiliate of Yale University, in July 2009. For that exhibition, she created a wall installation from embroidery thread and pins, a venn diagram tracing the interconnection of her 500 virtual friends.

Rachel Perry Welty makes social-media art that documents arcane aspects of her daily life. Her work *Rachel is* required her to add to her Facebook status update every minute for 16 hours on March 11, 2009. The history of updates was recently on view, displayed on a bank of iPhones at the artist's retrospective at the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts. Welty has also made a series of wall reliefs from aluminum foil, that spell out the words from spam messages, such as "You are already a winner." *Rachel is . . .* is available for $2,000.

On a more sinister note, Paolo Cirio and media critic Alessandro Ludovico founded Face-to-Facebook.net, appropriating 1 million Facebook profile photos, sorting them with face-recognition software, and creating an online dating site based on facial expressions. They created the data bank from information that was publicly available on Facebook. But many of the individuals on the site still felt that their privacy had been invaded. "We are trying to discuss this blind trust in Facebook, when Facebook is selling private data every day," says Cirio, who posted the project on February 3 and immediately received coverage from a wide variety of news media, including *Wired,* Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, and *Time* magazine. By the end of the day Cirio's and Ludovico's Facebook accounts were disabled and the duo had received a cease-and-desist letter from Perkins Coie LLP, Facebook's lawyers. In response, they have put their dating site "under maintenance," but have not removed it from the web. To Cirio, even with its short duration, the project was a success.

Jennifer Dalton examines a different kind of Facebook phenomenon in her work *What Are We Not Shutting Up About?,* 2009. For this wall installation resembling a bar graph, she copied the words that came up most frequently on *New York* magazine art critic Jerry Saltz's Facebook page, with its 5,000 followers. "It was obvious people were craving some kind of dialogue or community," says Dalton. Saltz was flattered by the work, which is available through Dalton's dealer, Ed Winkle-

TOP AND CENTER Jennifer Dalton's *What Are We Not Shutting Up About?,* 2010 (shown here at The FLAG Art Foundation), diagrams the Facebook activity of art critic Jerry Saltz.

BOTTOM *A More Perfect Union: Lonely,* 2011, by R. Luke DuBois. Dividing the country by congressional district, DuBois mapped the regional use of the word "lonely" on 21 dating sites.

man, for $18,000. "I was honored that someone would take a look at that," says Saltz, who tweets as well. "I am interested in what I call the 5,000 headed beast, not one speaking to the many but the many speaking to one another coherently."

DATING SITES were the inspiration behind R. Luke DuBois's "A More Perfect Union" series, shown at New York's bitforms gallery last January, with works ranging in price from $950 to $28,000. For the series, the artist joined 21 dating sites, gaining access to over 19 million profiles. He developed software that could sort through the profiles by zip code and by heavily used words—"kinky," "lonely," "adventurous"—to create his own idiosyncratic census of the United States, based on emotions rather than living arrangements. Instead of names of cities and congressional districts on the large-scale maps he designed for the exhibition, DuBois inserted the phrase most used in those locales, such as "now" for New York City, "hipster" in Bushwick, Brooklyn, and "conservative" in Birmingham, Alabama. "I do a lot of stuff that veers toward data visualization, but what I am really looking at are the metaphors behind the information," says the artist, who is a professor at the Brooklyn Experimental Media Center at NYU's Polytechnic Institute. The artist sold six of his maps at the exhibition.

Creating community was precisely the goal of @Platea advisory-board member Jonathan Gray's project *Tree-Blogging*, a five-day online event that took place in January 2011. To create this work, Gray "planted" several prompts at the @Platea website—an image of a tree with an anarchy symbol carved into its trunk, sound clips of a buzz saw and a woodpecker, a quote from conservationist John Muir—and invited people to respond. Over the course of the project, the artist traced the development of the ever-broadening responses, which branched out very much like a tree. The result is a mash-up of text, photographs, video, and sound. "New-media communication presents interesting possibilities and challenges," says Gray, who is an associate professor of communications and visual rhetoric at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. "On the one hand, there's the argument that we are amusing ourselves to death with the Internet and it is making us disconnect from nature, from sustainable living and so forth. On the other hand, the networks that are created are important for activism and they mirror the networks we find in the natural world."

"Social media has become so prevalent in our day-to-day lives lately, both for personal and professional reasons, and it is just so integrated into our relationships today. I think people really have an interest in seeing how it is being used creatively by artists," says Julia Kaganskiy, organizer of the "Art, Culture, and Technology" group on Meetup.com, which holds an annual event on social-media art that is open to 100 attendees.

"When artists use social media they are working in a medium of our time. They pose really interesting questions about the nature of communication, how that it evolving, how those interactions are evolving," says Kaganskiy, who works as editor of the Creators Project, a new partnership between Vice Media and Intel dedicated to exploring how technology is enabling creativity in art, music, film, design, and gaming. "Artists are using technology to help realize previously impossible creative visions." ∎

TOP **Matt Held's** *Jillian*, **2009, from a series of portrait paintings based on Facebook photos.** BOTTOM **Jonathan Gray's photograph** *Anarchy Tree*, **2006, was one of the original components of the** *Tree-Blogging* **project, which took place over five days in January 2011.**