INTERFACE:
INTRAPERSONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE FEEDBACK NETWORK

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Introduction

As we familiarize ourselves with our digital devices, our devices familiarize themselves with us. The trail of personal data that gets left behind is enough to piece together a picture of who we are as consumers, thinkers, professionals, and lovers—the bills we pay, the books we order, the friends and acquaintances we're linked to. Interfaces present themselves as virtual windows through which we can connect with the world outside of ourselves, but our personalized engagements with smart devices position them as more of a reflection than a portal. News is catered to our interests, content feeds recognize what we like most, recommended products target us. An experience that was once intended to broaden our horizons and link populations, within a virtuality free of domination and exploitation, is collapsing on itself and we are stuck in the insular space where what we're seeing most of is ourselves.

The course of my work in IP grounds itself at the intersection of our digital engagements and our understanding of self. I worked across media to identify specific inquiries within the nebula of human-computer interaction, and to discover new applications of pertinent concepts. My exhibited work, an interactive diorama titled *Interface*, aims to visualize the digital exchange of personal information that leads to a highly tailored and individualistic experience of the internet. I hope not for my stance to assert that a personalized World Wide Web is entirely detrimental, but rather prompt consideration of how such a customized experience creates isolating barriers that limit exposure to the thoughts and observations of unlike individuals and exploits users' psychodynamic information in the interest of capitalist advancement.

Interface is an interactive diorama that lives inside the gallery wall.
A viewer engages with the work by peering into its small viewing window.
Source: Annie Turpin.

Contextual Discussion

I'd be afraid to find out how many cumulative hours I have spent on my computer and smartphone. I scroll through social media, liking posts and images that I find funny, inspiring, relatable, or politically relevant. Sometimes I post images and thoughts of my own. I scroll through products on Amazon, Etsy, and Ebay, hovering over items I'm interested in. I might add a few to my cart. From these thousands of likes and clicks, the websites I visit have learned a lot about me, and they prove this by showing more content that is similar to what I have already clicked on. Antithetically, these algorithms block out what I don't like, or what they predict I

won't like, which alienates me from real world diversity and limits my ability to understand and empathize with dissimilar individuals.

Looking back through my own engagements with frequented websites—previously liked Tweets and saved Amazon items—I learn about who I am, or who I was 42 weeks ago. However, just like life in the physical realm, my preferences and tastes are conditioned by a set of social structures in which cultural capital and performance anxiety confuse and complicate personal identity. Social websites are public stages to perform identity with tight control, both for your own consumption and for the consumption of others. But if an online audience sways my deliberately crafted online presentation of self, then how sincere is the portrait that my data paints of me? As social media links us together, does it simultaneously distance us from our true self?

I began my conceptualization and ideation with these concerns in mind. My interest in asking such questions comes from a desire to understand how my own identity fits into a greater human network and social structure, and how my own individuality is influenced and guided by that structure.

An interest in contemporary social theory and works of art that relate thematically to my inquiries became the impetus of my IP research. In the following section, I will discuss the impact two books, "Profiling Machines : Mapping the Personal Information Economy" by Greg Elmer and "Window / Interface" by Sabine Eckmann and Lutz Koepnik had on the conceptualization of my work. I will then examine how works by contemporary artists Dan Graham and Lynn Hershman Leeson affected my decision making over the course of the year.

Theory References

The following abbreviated description of Michel Foucault's panopticism is informed by Greg Elmer's book titled, "Profiling Machines : Mapping the Personal Information Economy."[1] Panopticism, a social theory developed by Michel Foucault in 1975, is modeled off a prison design where inmates encircle a central guard. The Panopticon prison design speculates on the functions of power held by an observer over the behavior of those they surveil. Because the central guard is not always visible to the prisoners, the prisoners must assume they are being watched and thus they begin to self-discipline. Two decades later, with the arrival of the World Wide Web and the emergence of social media, Foucault's Panopticon takes on new applications.

Our smart devices create a profile about who we are through the collected data of uploaded images, purchase histories, shared articles, and music taste. While a significant portion of this data is securely encrypted, some of it is stored and shared to public platforms, such as Google, Facebook, and Amazon, for other internet users and corporations to access, evaluate, and consume.

Users who disclose personal information often do so in exchange for new knowledge or services; For example, many account-based services allow website visitors to log in using existing Facebook or Google profiles as a way to make streamline the user experience. However, users who succumb to this option expose the collected data of their Facebook or Google activity, which includes details about their political disposition, socioeconomic status, race, age, and personal interests. This information is monetized in the digital economy because it gives valuable insight into market predictions. This exchange has become commonplace, and is often disguised by endearing graphics and cool colors to frame the trade as seemingly innocent, but the everyday

[1] Elmer, Greg. *Profiling Machines: Mapping the Personal Information Economy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.

implications of this capitalist information economy are steadily revealing themselves in the physical world; Political and cultural dichotomies are growing stronger in opposite directions, and younger generations are feeling more isolated and anxious than their parents or grandparents felt in their teenage years.[2]

The gaze of an internet audience, comprised of other users and corporate data collectors, take the prison guard role in this form of panoptic surveillance. This places individual internet users as prisoners in this scenario, whose smart interfaces reflect back an oversimplified image of themselves in their potential as consumers.

Another influential resource was a book titled "Window / Interface" by Sabine Eckmann and Lutz Koepnik, which discusses the effect of advanced technologies on new media art.[3] This book's most significant contributions to my thought process were in its analysis of the connection between traditional window symbolism and digital interfaces. The writers distinguish the function of a window from an interface, arguing that the infinitely illuminating quality of an interface is just a facade. Screens do not open us up to the outside world in the straightforward way windows naturally do. This book also developed my understanding of new media arts tradition by outlining the themes regarding technology skepticism and artificial intelligence that gained momentum in the 1990's. Eckmann and Koepnik also reiterate the idea that we experience ourselves as performing spectators on screen, and affirmed my belief that an appropriate way to address these topics is through works that are set in time and space opposed to an enclosed system.[4]

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[2] Yang, Chia-Chen. "Instagram Use, Loneliness, and Social Comparison Orientation: Interact and Browse on Social Media, But Don't Compare." *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 19, no. 12 (2016): 703-08. doi:10.1089/cyber.2016.0201.

[3] Eckmann, Sabine, Lutz P. Koepnick, and Anne Fritz. *Window / Interface*. St. Louis, MO: Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, 2007, 60.

[4] Eckmann, 62

Art References

Dan Graham, an American artist, architect, and writer, began making open-air architectural structures, which he refers to as "Pavilions," in the 1980's. Situated in both indoor and outdoor public spaces, the follies are constructed from two-way mirror, reflective glass, and steel. Through investigation of the structure's form, the viewer can notice their own reflection alongside the reflections of other viewers, which becomes a part of their looking experience—within the curved walls of the pavilion, they see an obscured version of themselves. The spectator's engagement with their own reflection can inform an understanding of the materiality and function of the structure—to examine the structure, the viewers must also examine themselves. Dan Graham's pavilions encourage a social and intrapersonal engagement that transcends an explicit object-viewer relationship by activating the viewer's own self-consciousness and awareness of their physical relationship to others. I returned to Graham's work to reference how he invites viewers to engage with their bodies in space as they relate to the form of the work.

These pavilions influenced my decision to create a structure that viewers must approach in order to activate. Similarly to Graham's follies, *Interface* has a clean and simplified aesthetic. I find that there is room for mystery and intrigue when a structure does not scream loudly to make its presence known.

Dan Graham, *Two 2-Way Mirror Ellipses, One Open, One Closed* (2011-2012). *Source: Lisson Gallery.*

Lynn Hershman Leeson is another artist whose work I revisited over the course of the year. She creates multimedia installations using digital technologies to investigate surveillance, identity, and the role of digital media as a tool of empowerment against political repression.[5] Of all Hershman's works, I was particularly drawn to *Room of One's Own,* a small interactive installation in which a video of a female occupant navigates a miniature bedroom as the viewer's eye projects into a small television within the space. This work confronts the viewer with his or her own gaze and injects them into the space of the work.

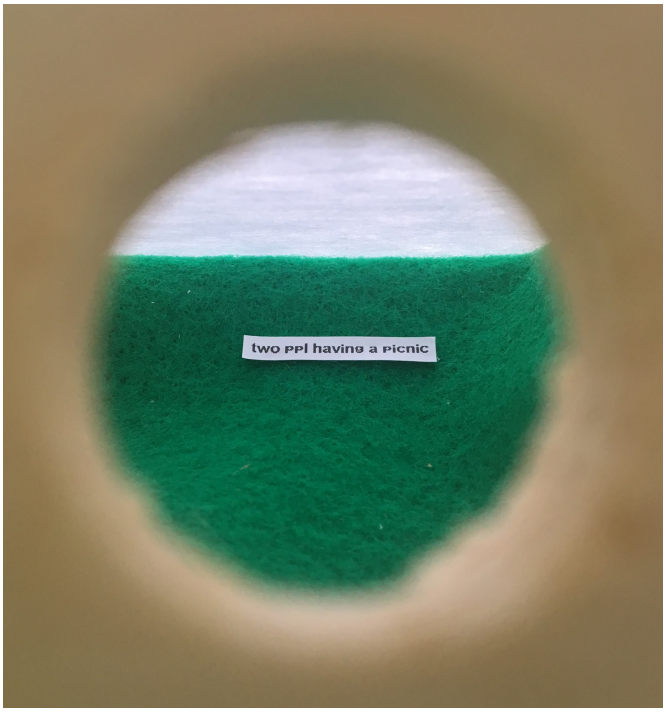
Hershman's work is at once personal and essential; Learning about her projects empowered me to use digital media as a creative tool, especially in within diorama-like spaces.

[5] Lynn Hershman Leeson. Accessed April 12, 2018. http://www.lynnhershman.com/.

Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Room of One's Own,* 1993, interior view, interactive apparatus (computer, laser disk, projection, surveillance system cameras, monitor, miniature furnishing), 38 x 40.5 x 89.5 cm
Source: http://www.lynnhershman.com/project/interactivity/

Methodology

Thinking my way through an early decision to create an object into which a viewer must peer gave structure to the trajectory of my work. This urge to create a space that can only be accessed through a looking hole has recurred over the course of my time at Stamps, taking form as pop-out books and dioramas. I am drawn to the intimacy of the object-viewer relationship that occurs when an observer must look into a peephole, and the immersive experience of discovering what's inside. Viewers must approach these objects in order to fully see them—dioramas with peepholes cannot be consumed from a distance. The viewer must make the decision to engage their body and submit to their curiosity in order to activate the work. In return, the work shapes the viewer's body by manipulating their physical posture.



I quickly iterated a series of small boxes (4”x2”x2”) with peep holes in the first month of IP. These boxes contain both interior and exterior spaces and through making them, I solidified the decision to suggest a presence of people in future dioramas.
Source: Annie Turpin.

In the iterative stages of IP, I noticed myself gravitating toward themes of everyday life and took interest in the visual and emotional quality of mundane activities like sitting on a grassy field, waiting in an office lobby, and taking a shower. I also noticed an impulse to depict solitary figures with their smartphones or laptops, so I focused my work around the role of these devices in everyday American life. Reflecting on my own (often suffocating) relationship with technology inspired *Home Office*, a door-less dollhouse-like diorama with a full-color 3D print of myself on my laptop living inside. *Home Office* marked the beginning of a focused inquiry into our relationship with technology within domestic space. I began to question how the forces of media surveillance affect my private life at home, and concluded that continuous access to the outside world reduces my sense of privacy and heightens a sense of vulnerability and self-

consciousness. Because I have access to the world outside of my bedroom walls, I feel a pressure to constantly check up on what is going on. I carry the weight of world news, social updates, and work-related notifications in my pocket. This pressure impedes on my personal thoughts increases my emotional reliance on my digital devices.

I made *Home Office* using 1:12 scale bricks, mortar, miniature asphalt shingling, wood panelling, and spray paint. On the interior of the space, I installed dollhouse-scale carpeting, wallpaper, and a crown moulding trim. The full color 3D print of myself and my MacBook Pro seated in a desk chair was produced in the Duderstadt Library on the Stratasys J750 machine.
Source: Annie Turpin.

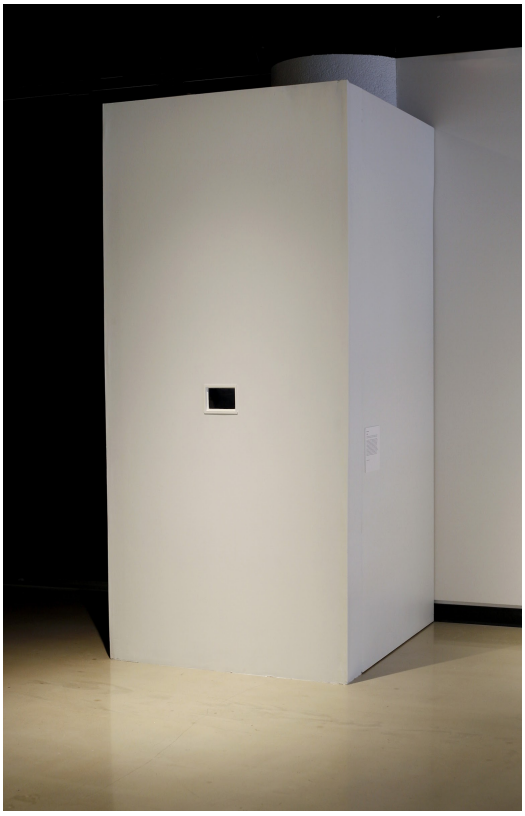
I continued on the theme of virtual connectedness within domestic space in *Bathroom / Dreaming in 140 Characters*, my next diorama. I built the miniature scene using painted acrylic, polymer clay, found objects, and a miniature steel bathtub. I lit the back of the diorama with an LED and used an iPad and piece of plexiglass to create a Pepper's ghost projection. The rotating texts that I projected into the scene are thoughts I have conceived in the shower and later published to my public Twitter account. The goal of this project was to highlight the extent to

which my own thought processes are influenced by the pressure of an online audience. Even in the intimacy of my private shower, my thoughts are organized into 140 characters and take an online audience into account.

This is a still from video documentation of the projected Tweets cycle.
Source: Annie Turpin.

Creative Work

Amidst wall hangings and white pedestals lives a small underlit window, just big enough for a face to comfortably square up to. It is positioned seamlessly in the center of a white gallery wall, low enough that a grown woman may need to slightly bend her knees, yet high enough for a child who is perched on their tiptoes to peer inside of. Once the viewer looks into the window (assuming they respond to the seductive call of a small fenestra opening), they are confronted by a synchronicity of happenings: the reflection of their own eyes, the simulacra of their own image, and a crowd of miniature figures witnessing the synthesis of both. *Interface* aims to visualize the dual embodiment of viewer as both exhibitionist and voyeur to question a mode through which we understand our own selfhood and manage our identities in contemporary screen culture.



In order to create the illusion that the window is embedded in the gallery wall, I built my own wall with the same dimensions as the existing wall and attached it like a cap. I used standard building materials: wooden studs, drywall, corner bead, joint compound, primer, and paint. The periscope within the wall is constructed out of masonite, wood, screws, front-facing mirror, paint, and model figurines. An iPhone 6, iPad Mini, MacBook Pro, and selfie stick are wired together to create a surveillance system that projects the viewers image into the periscope structure.
Source: Annie Turpin.

Behind the window, within the constructed wall, rests a three-foot-tall cylinder box periscope. Not only does the periscope create an illusion of receding space, but it serves as a visual metaphor for seeing that which should be physically impossible to see. Just as collected personal data provides a viewpoint of ourselves and others that is not visible within the physical world, *Interface* provides viewers with an angle of themselves within a feedback loop that is not usually observed in everyday life.

Interior view of *Interface*. The silhouetted model figures represent and the crowd of spectators who observe your online behaviors.
Source: Annie Turpin.

Conclusion

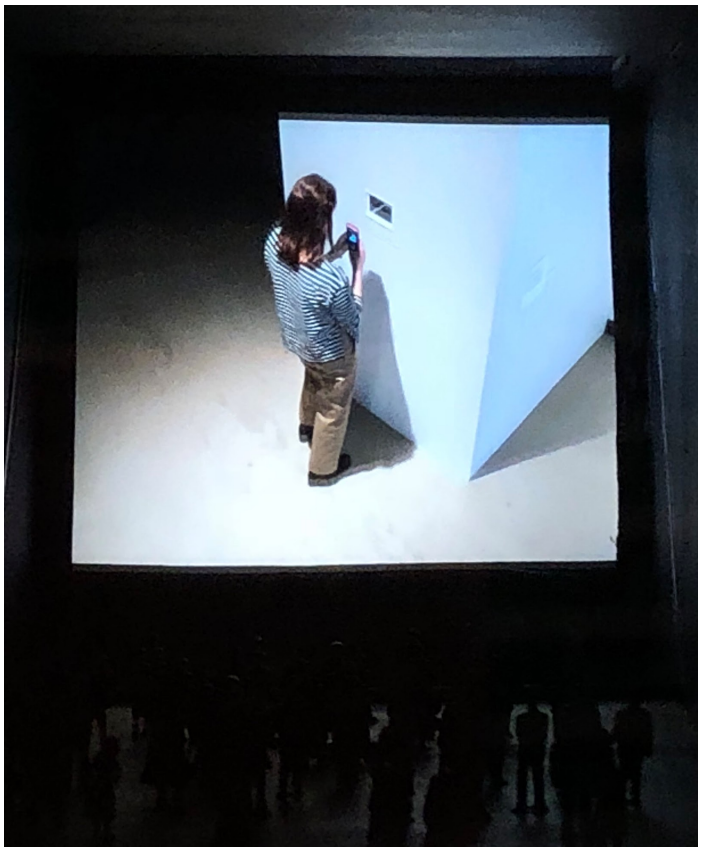
As smart devices integrate themselves more deeply into daily Western life, they develop closer relationships to their human users. The speculation that we manage our identities through performance is not new to the digital age; Social theorists have been studying how face-to-face behaviors in everyday life are governed by a set of unspoken expectations that keep us from embarrassing ourselves since the mid-19th century.[6] However, the insurgence of screen culture and social media has amplified the extent that this identity management manifests itself in our everyday lives, and has been exploited by data collectors for corporate gain.

Smart technologies have proven themselves powerful tools for self-understanding, but our current culture around online engagements places users at the center of their own

[6] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday, 1990.

personalized universe of consumption, where they are monitored by the corporations that benefit from this self-centered position.

My coursework in IP marks only the beginning of a making practice that responds to my personal relationship with integrated smart technologies, and my observations of their intrapersonal and societal implications. In future projects, I will aim to encourage critical thought about our relationships to technology, but will also focus on potential solutions to these issues.



Interior view of what is seen once a viewer looks into the window.
Source: Annie Turpin.

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