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Spring 2018

# Machines of curation

Riley Todd Vier  
*University of Iowa*

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MACHINES OF CURATION

by

Riley Todd Vier

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts  
degree in Art in the  
Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2018

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Jeremy Swanston

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Riley Todd Vier

has been approved by the Examining Committee for  
the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree  
in Art at the May 2018 graduation.

Thesis Committee:

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Jeremy Swanston, Thesis Supervisor

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Bradley Dicharry

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Jan Albert Gratama

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Terry Conrad

To my wife Kourtney and my family for your continual support and love for me during this,  
a very unconventional graduate career.

“When on the day the great I Am  
The faithful and the true  
The Lamb who was for sinners slain  
Is making all things new

Behold our God shall live with us  
And be our steadfast light  
And we shall e'er his people be  
All glory be to Christ!”

Kings Kaleidoscope  
“All Glory Be To Christ”

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my committee members for being so gracious in their advice and patience over the years. Thank you to my colleagues for always pushing me to make my best work and my family for their undying support of this pursuit.

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Machines of Curation is an attempt to confront the ever-growing landscape of technology I observe and live inside of daily. This work is specifically concerned with my interest in how we interact with and alter our surrounding environments through technology. The constant tether we have to our devices is becoming more reminiscent of a parasite and host, rather than of a device and user. It informs how we are to look at things, speak with those we love, pay for things, and receive news; just to name a few. I seek to co-opt these methods to urge the viewer to ask their own questions and make their own decisions on how they feel technology is shaping them in ways they may be unaware of. Graphic design holds a unique vernacular to our digital universe as one of the primary mediums that helps organize and create it. The overall goal of this work is that a consistent irony can be established through the work that helps the viewer experiencing it question their views of technology.

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## PREFACE

Technological advancements surround us at a more rapid pace than ever. There are 5.3 billion unique mobile subscribers as of August 2017, a growth in data traffic of 67% from a year prior (Ericsson, 2017). The question of if something can be created is considered much more highly than the creation's potential negative implications. For example, content curation is an avenue social media companies created to keep their users logged in and scrolling. By making social applications customizable to their user's social needs and interests, it has become a difficult task to find anything more interesting to someone than their smartphone (The Book of Life, 2012).

These individualized worlds that live inside of our pockets provide a constant distraction from the environments and situations that surround us (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2012). We exchange our present for someone else's past, as more and more content is funneled into our feeds.

We are interfacing with technology more than ever. Our reliance on technology has extended to provide us necessary comfort in many avenues of our life. This body of work highlights those interactions and juxtaposes them with other concurrent interactions we are experiencing in our daily life. I saw that my interaction with technology was affecting how I viewed everything around me. People, nature, social issues, language, technology has the power to collect these areas of our lives into itself. Without a healthy questioning of our relationship with technology, certain social norms and ideals will soon fall by the wayside. If these issues remain unchecked, what's next?

I gained interest in the effects technology has on society during my graduate career. I was seeing the results of the boom of smart phones and became curious as to how life had seemingly changed so quickly for everyone on the planet. I had grown up with technology, this wasn't culture shock to me, but an article in *The Atlantic* questioned the way I was viewing the problem. The article was describing how smartphones were affecting the social lives of teenagers in America. The article stated facts about how iGen-er's, those born between 1995-2012, relationship with technology is toxic. This generation lacks self-confidence, proper rest at night and independence from their parents, just to name a few examples (Twenge, 2017).

The data was jarring to me as someone who had not been out of high school long enough to have a 10-year reunion. Had things really changed that much? The second event to inspire this work was the rise of virtual reality (VR). Virtual reality has existed for years, but mostly as a fake, gimmicky function to a children's toy or an as-seen-on-tv product. In the aughts, we wouldn't have thought it would ever be where it is today. Virtual reality has gone from a cheap trick to an innovator in healthcare, manufacturing and art (Calvo et al., 2017). One of the innovations of this boom is AR (alternate reality). The idea of a virtual interface overlaying our current environment is extremely interesting to me. This concept of altered environments is increasingly worrying to me in conjunction with the information I had learned about smartphone's impact on social interaction. This interest led to work that addresses these problems in various ways.

## CHAPTER I

### VIRTUAL / REALITY

This work explores the evolution of the effect of technology on our view of the world. Technology is faulty, it glitches, sputters, and needs updating to function. Virtual reality is an integral inspiration to this work. Creating false environments as a solution to replace the mundanity of the world surrounding us, or overlaying interfaces that affect the way we function with our environment. There is an incredible amount of promise that virtual reality presents, from the medical field, to the classroom. However, in the vein of technology, the question of if we can do something is often asked far before if we should.

The altering of our world through virtual means will impact how we view the natural world significantly. I sought to create pieces that were significantly marred by technological and digital processing of otherwise natural materials. I called upon said processes to create work that gave me less control artistically and gave technological processes' limitations input into the work.

This commentary is made using technical processing on natural and manufactured materials. These assemblages use found digital materials, that are themselves processed to the point of abstraction. This relationship is meant to integrate the confusing and sporadic messages we receive when the flow of communication is disrupted between us and our machines.

This disruption was first introduced to me in a story I had heard from a friend about children trying to "swipe" pages of physical books. Their frustration seemed similar to how I react to my internet connection slowing to a crawl or a device I want to use having a dead battery. How will we react when these same problems approach a new form of technology, especially one that can teach us new habits?

## CHAPTER II

### GIF OVERLOAD

Internet meme culture is a constantly evolving series of in-the-know jokes and references that seem to build off each other. One joke dovetails into another, and before long you will find yourself laughing at an otherwise arbitrary image. I sought to elevate this culture of inside jokes to convey a bit more depth than memes typically represent. The animated format, when displayed together, overwhelms the viewer. Seeing all these messages, simultaneously flashing, in a gif search application such as Giphy causes an overload of information, similar to what we experience on the web in smaller doses.

Drawing from the wide, yet shallow well of internet culture to create animations, this work's purpose is to question our reliance on our interaction with the internet for comfort. Irony is displayed in an entirely internet-based form of communication and the usage of terminology born online.

The goal of this work is not only to commentate on the social implications of the web, but also to create an overwhelming scene. This display falls in line with interfaces we see daily on the internet trying to bait users into clicking on ads, or external websites. Using the vernacular of the internet to describe problems links these signals to create a cohesive message. Represented are emotions and situations that I feel any viewer who has logged onto a computer can relate with. Some of these examples coming from my own personal online experience, and some coming from the reports of others seen through memes and articles. The work is created using Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator, each in their respective strengths. Sketches are brought into the programs and roughed out. Once the compositions are complete, multiple frames are exported and then transferred to Photoshop's frame animation tool to be exported as a .gif file. The result is a simple frame animation.

## CHAPTER III

### A NEW VIEW OF THE GALLERY SPACE

Knowing that I would be using the avenue of the gallery space to present the points made in this thesis, I sought out ways I could easily alter the gallery space to corroborate the points I was making. During the summer of 2017, I was perusing the internet, I found a very interesting experiment. A web engineer named Chris Bolin had co-opted an afterthought function that made content more easily available if you accidentally went offline as the cornerstone of a web project.

The web app that ensued could only be accessed if your device was completely disconnected from the internet. As soon as I saw it I knew that was the way I could help the audience interact with the gallery space in an innovative, yet disruptive way. I would present all the information on an offline-only website that the viewer had to access to engage with the work.

This achieved two goals, it disrupted the viewing of the gallery and it also ensured that those interested in the gallery would not be distracted from the experience by their cell phones. The only information given with the work itself is a number. This number corresponds to the website that contains any information about the work. The website also presents thoughts about the work, as well as materials and dimensions that would appear on a regular card accompanying a displayed piece of art in a traditional gallery space.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

The overall goal of this work is to present issues and let the viewer decide their own opinion. Levity is used in the work involving digital media to contemporize it to the vernacular of internet culture. The assemblages present a more abstracted view of the natural world and how technology bleeds into and influences the landscape surrounding us.



1. *VIRTUAL / REALITY*. Laser-etched wood, powder-coated steel, mild steel. 2018



2. *AFK*. Digital animation still, 2018



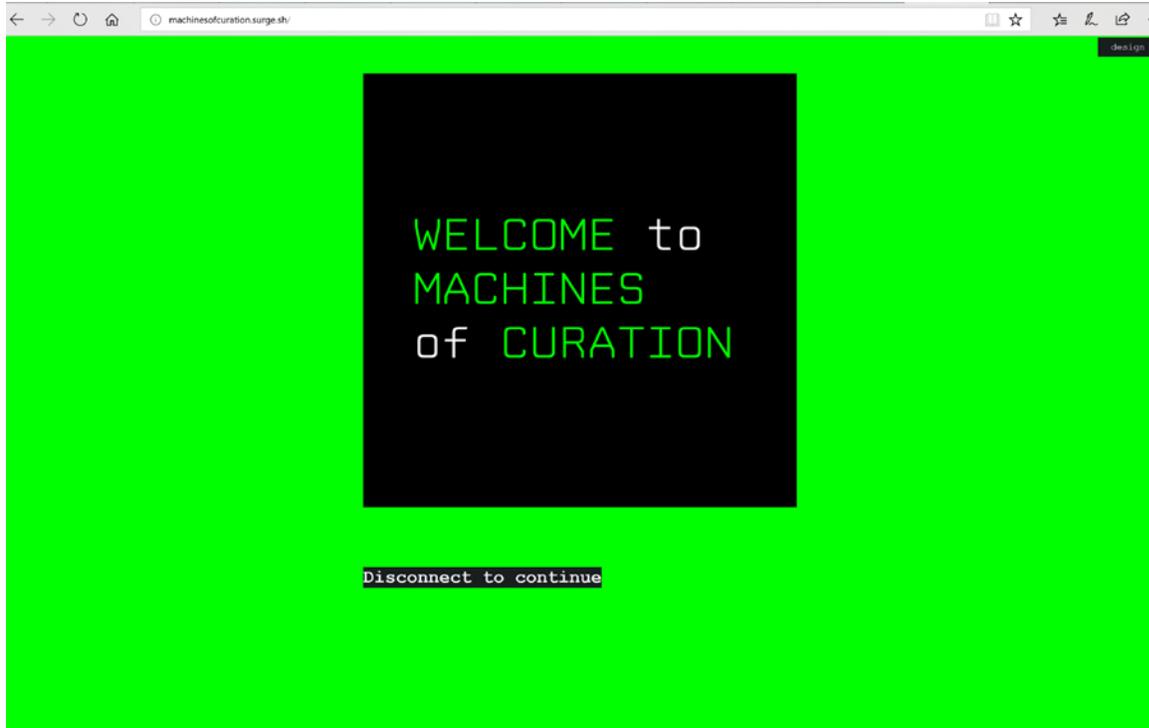
3. *LIKE BUTTON*. Digital animation still, 2018



4. *PRIVACY, PLEASE*. Digital animation still, 2017



5. *DIGITAL DUDE*. Digital animation still, 2016-2017



6. *THE OFFLINE ZONE* (view when offline). HTML, CSS, React. Web app.

# Greetings...

The MFA Exhibition of Riley Vier! I, or rather your own device, will be leading you through this experience, though I might not be in the space with you. Let us begin.

You are probably already thinking, "How ironic, disconnecting from service, only to be left staring at a now mostly useless rectangle." You are right to think that. This space has been hijacked to create a new experience with a fixture of modern life.

7. *THE OFFLINE ZONE (view when offline)*. HTML, CSS, React. Web app.

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