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POKE!

Artists and Social Media

September 10 - October 24, 2009

Houston, Texas

A FOTOFEST EXHIBITION

FotoFest

1113 Vine Street, Houston, Texas, USA

HOUSTON, TEXAS - AUGUST 5, 2009 - The increasingly pervasive, user-created content of online social media – tweets, confessional video, status updates, online gaming - are these subjects for art? In online parlance a *poke* is a virtual gesture intended as interaction without any specific purpose, usually interpreted as “hello.” **POKE!** is also a new FotoFest exhibition featuring technologically savvy artists who explore online social media and its evolving relationship with the public, the media, and art.

On view **September 10 – October 24, 2009**, *POKE!* explores the inter-personal intentions of social media technology and the nature of modern internet-mediated relationships with work that references and uses source material from popular online social media websites such as Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, Craigslist, and YouTube.

Curator, and FotoFest Exhibitions Coordinator, Jennifer Ward says, “It’s hard not to acknowledge the impact of web-based social media technology on contemporary life. Video and photos from demonstrations following this summer’s Iranian elections shaped global perception of the event. Cellphone video of Oakland, California police shooting a handcuffed man on a train platform was broadcast on television stations that downloaded it from the internet. An online campaign brought to light and eventually freed a young Chinese woman jailed after killing her rapist in self defense. These are three extraordinary examples plucked from a vast sea of content, most of which is far less spectacular.”

The cultural impact of unfiltered online content, created, accessed, and obsolete within the same moment, is not likely to be understood in the near future. What is clear is that social media, and the buzzwords and jargon surrounding it, have captured the imaginations of individuals and institutions alike. Political candidates update supporters from their *Blackberries* aboard campaign buses. News reporters cite online sources and *micro-blog* from warzones. Adolescents secure recording contracts based on the popularity of their *viral videos*.

“Contemporary artists are also turning to the online world for source material or inspiration,” says Ms. Ward. “Reaching into the stream of online information, artists are pulling out a great variety of content, from the profound to the mundane. The artists in this exhibition do not merely consume media. They take the disposable bits of electronic information – tourist photos, personal documents, status updates, instant messages, random confessions, viral videos, etc. – and process, rework, and re-contextualize it before throwing it back into the stream for others.”

The artists exhibited in *POKE!* work in both digital and analogue media, and the exhibition features two-dimensional framed works, video pieces, online projects, and installation works.



Curtis Mann, *Thought, Collective (Somewhere, Israel)*, 2007

Christopher Baker (Minneapolis, MN) compiles a wall full of personal, diarist messages by teenage users of YouTube and Facebook. The wall-sized video installation is a cacophonous monument to the individual's voice and the confessional nature of self-made video.

Curtis Mann (Chicago, IL) uses images from Palestine and other regions of conflict, gathered from image-hosting websites including Flickr. Mr. Mann uses these images, mostly tourist photos, as source material for his re-contextualized and heavily reworked prints.

David Oresick (Chicago, IL) uses video posted to YouTube by American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan to tell a tale, by turns contemplative and manic, where life alternates between roughhousing on base and exploding I.E.D.s on maneuvers.

Marivi Ortiz (Chicago, IL) stages re-enacted video documentation of her months-long, remote, intimate exchange with an older man via instant message video chat. Her paean to the voyeuristic impulse explores the nature of online relationships and the emotional risks involved.

Brian Piana (Houston, TX) has developed a web-project, *Journal of the Collective Me*, which singles-out tweets and status updates from the internet containing the word "me," and presents them, devoid of any identifying information, in an endless journal of self-obsession.

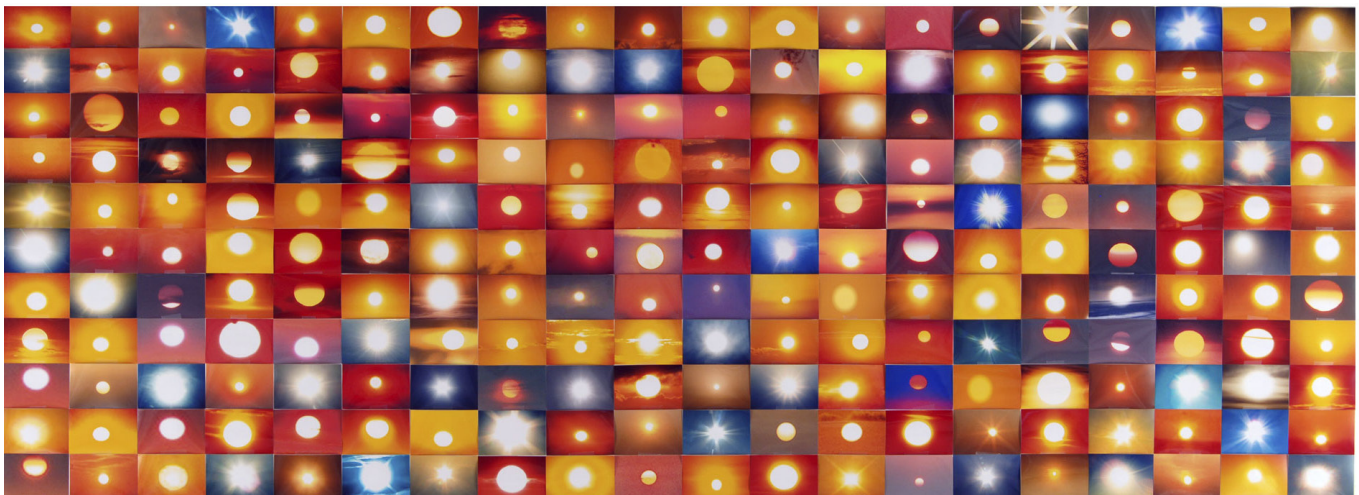
Jon Rafman (Montreal, Quebec) has recreated himself as the perpetually smiling "Kool Aid Man" in the online world of "Second Life." As the Kool Aid Man, Rafman explores as a tourist of sorts, climbing virtual peaks, exploring virtual canyons and visiting the seedy back alleys and sex dens of the user-created, immersive virtual world of the game.

Mr. Rafman also shows another body of work in the exhibition, exploring Google Maps' "Street View" option looking for extraordinary images – houses on fire, birds in mid flight, etc. - captured by chance.

Penelope Umbrico (New York, NY) obsessively appropriates images from Craigslist, where merchants selling second-hand televisions make unwitting self portraits of themselves. These images of TVs, branded with their owners faces, are reproduced life-sized and sold for the same price as their real-life counterparts, questioning the worth of the consumable (the TV) and the original (the photograph).

Lee Walton (Greensboro, NC) is a self described "experientialist" and uses the short, textual Facebook status updates of his friends and family as scripts for his video shorts depicting scenarios that are taken to absurdly literal extremes.

POKE! is an original exhibition conceived and organized by FotoFest.



Penelope Umbrico, *Suns from Flickr*, 2006-2007

“Has Humanity ever been more connected, documented or archived?” asks Ms. Ward. “Anthropologists and sociologists in generations to come will have more information on who we are today, what we do and how we interact than in any other time in history. The repository of all of this information – the great vault of our time – is the internet and the technologies we have developed for it.”

FotoFest is planning a number of peripheral programs connected to the POKE! exhibition including: **virtual artist talks conducted via video chat, a tour of the Second Life universe and a MySpace Karaoke event.** Dates and time are to be announced on the FotoFest website and the POKE! facebook page at <http://tinyurl.com/FotoFestPoke>.

POKE! is on view at FotoFest, 1113 Vine Street, Houston, Texas 77002, Monday - Friday 10am - 5pm, Saturday noon-5pm. Admission to FotoFest exhibitions is free.

For more information on FotoFest Exhibitions and other programs, please visit www.fotofest.org.

For further information, interviews and visuals, please contact:
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FOTOFEST 2008-2009 SPONSORS

The Brown Foundation, The Houston Endowment Inc., The City of Houston through the Houston Arts Alliance, The Wortham Foundation, Vine Street Studios, FotoFest Board of Directors, iLand Internet Solutions, Houston Press, KUHF 88.7 FM

Special support for *POKE!* comes from Robert Abbinanti, Spacetaker, Domy Bookstore, and Art League Houston

ABOUT FOTOFEST

Founded in 1983, FotoFest is an international non-profit organization promoting photographic arts and education in Houston, Texas. FotoFest is recognized for its discovery and presentation of important talent, contemporary and historical, from around the world, its commitment to presenting important social ideas through the photographic arts, its groundbreaking exhibitions and its portfolio review program, The International Meeting Place. FotoFest has curated and commissioned exhibitions of photo-based art from Latin America, Asia, Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. In addition to year-round art exhibitions and programming, FotoFest's school-based education program, Literacy Through Photography, uses photography to stimulate visual literacy, writing, and analytical thinking.

The FotoFest Biennial is the first International Biennial of Photography and Photo-related Art in the United States. Through the FotoFest Biennial and its year-round art programs, FotoFest is known as a Platform for Art and Ideas, combining museum-quality art with important social and aesthetic issues. FotoFest curated exhibitions give priority to the works of important but little-known photographic artists from the U.S. and around the world.



Marivi Ortiz,
from *A Matter of Two Months and Three Spaces*, 2007