### Sociable Media: Looking in the Gap of Technological Representations
#### Addison Conn

Coming from the visual studies perspective, I sought in my sculpture a representation of my relationship with sight. Much of it is mediated: The things I look at often pass through the screen of technology before it reaches me. Especially due to the pandemic, I feel as though I spend most of my time looking at a screen in some shape or form.

Last year, I injured my right hand severely and spent most of the summer recovering at home during lockdown. I was out of work, and I decided to make art during that time for my own sake. It was a process of recovery both mental and physical. During this time, I made the sculpture depicted below: *Sociable Media – Self Reflexive* (2020)



*The sculpture depicts someone looking at a mess of screens while sitting on a projector. The screens are piled up next to each other and stacked in an arc formation. There are blue and white waves washing over the screens and rocks, like a beach. The projector contains dirt and seeds inside of it.*

Mainstream social media platforms do not account for disability. My example is the platform TikTok, which hosts independ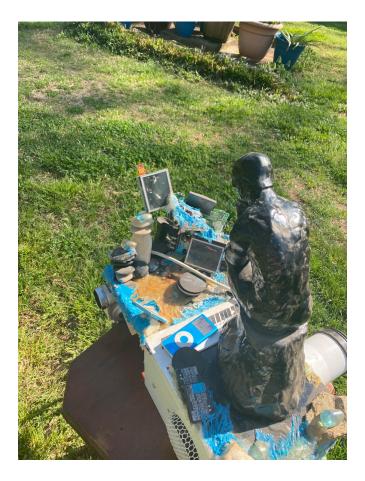ent video content on a singular "For You" feed. Individuals upload content that gets attention via likes, and the algorithm presents it to more people as more people like it. In other words, the continued exposure makes certain videos rise to the top of people's feeds. The reifying effect means that individual feeds look different based on the users

likes and dislikes, or the creation of a custom feed. The sculpture attempts to speak to the effect of these custom feeds.

Disabled people posting content on TikTok and other social media are subject to an often anonymous audience, who make a spectacle out of their daily lives. Videos showing how disabled people live their lives are consumed as entertainment, and I noticed this most on TikTok because of its directness between viewer and content. While most of the creators use their platform to bring disability to the forefront of people's minds, there was an invasive aspect to the medium that I felt needed to be addressed. I'm not an avid user of the app, but I see that many more people are adopting it as a way to connect with each other, so it is important to analyze how the algorithms that undergird the system uphold prejudice. Eli Clare's chapter on 'freakshows' from *Exile and Pride* (2015) comes to mind:



"*In a culture that paired disability and curiosity, voyeurism was morally acceptable. Thus, people flocked without shame or compunction to see the "freaks," primed by cultural beliefs about disability to be duped by the lies and fabrications created at the freak show.*" (95)

The very same mechanisms are at play in TikTok as the ones Clare describes as central to freakshows. TikTok provides a Q&A format in which the audience can ask questions, and
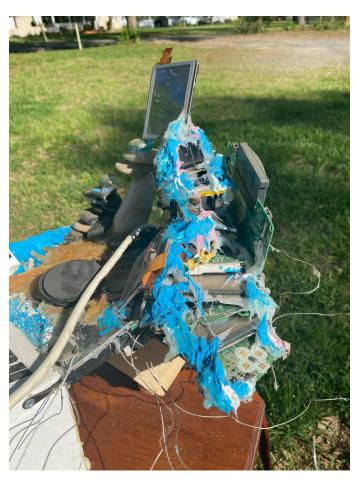
audience members often ask disabled content creators to do a variety of tasks and film them for

the audience to see. These actions range from eating to impersonations; all of which enable an

exploitative performance. The acts themselves are not bad, it is the people in the comments who

treat it as 'inspiration porn' that enable the algorithms to normalize able-bodiedness. The

comment sections are literally just requests for more things to be filmed, and there is no way to

filter these into the proper channels on the app. The content becomes contingent on the

performance of a voyeuristic curiosity.

I don't intervene to say that the app is bad or that people are not making money off of

these performances, but rather to pose that a support structure be in place around these practices.

The algorithm specifically targets disabled people for the spectacle.

The algorithm has also been a site of racism, as it tends to exclude black and brown

voices in favor of white content that contains essentially the same information. These preferences

are built into the algorithm and reinforces itself off of what people like and dislike in their

consumption. There is an unconscious gaze that goes into the hypervisibility on the app: the

content comes at such a quick and direct pace that 'something out of the ordinary' would hold

our attention for longer. This curiosity is preyed upon by those projecting the image (the app and

its coders), not the ones creating them.

As Eli Clare stated, it is the flocks of people in the audience that unconsciously reinforce

the system of spectacle, and disabled people within that system have found certain ways to retain

agency.  The culture of disability will remain regardless of exploitation, and we have seen that in

other performances. Alice Sheppard's performance *Embodied Virtuosity* provides an alternative

perspective to the exploitative algorithms latent in social media. My sculpture is static, and I

think that analyzing it in conjunction with Sheppard's art performance shows the agency

provided in disability culture. While my sculpture provides a meditation, Sheppard's

performance provides a way of being, a movement towards something. Mine the observer, and

Sheppard's the observed, but complicated.



The movement of the water around the sculpture took the most time, and it was the painstaking process of gluing and painting the glue before it dried to get the waves to actually feel like waves. I wanted to evoke the feed as a stream of content that we can't consciously control. It is overwhelming to have such a wide variety of content available at your fingertips, and that feeling overflows into your real life. That is why the statue is ultimately on top of the projector, and the projector is filled with dirt. The focus on content in the

media can provide fertile ground for a representation of cultural beliefs in the real world. By

analyzing the unconscious gaze that is designed in the media, we can begin to enact disability

justice in the world. We have to find the stream at its starting point, and build support structures

from that flow. Support the creators on and off the app.

An Allure article from January of 2021 encompasses this issue very well, and states that

"there is so much power in owning your own narrative, and it is vital for authentic representation

in any community. When you're a member of the disabled community, often people want to

make assumptions about what that means. Being able to control the lens through which we are

looked at, something we can do on TikTok, is not always a luxury we have in real life." The

ending to the article provides a powerful starting point for those who want to resist the gaze by

controlling how they are seen. The algorithm can change if enough people engage, and that too

will spill over into the real-world.

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*Addison Conn*

Works Cited

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