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# The arts at Facebook: An aesthetic infrastructure for surveillance capitalism

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## ABSTRACT

For almost a decade, Facebook has maintained two internal organizations to commission and create artworks for Facebook offices around the globe. This paper maps those enterprises, their organizational practices, and the aesthetics they promote. It then builds on recent work in the critical sociology of capitalism to make two cases: one, that the ways Facebook works with the arts marks a radical departure from traditional, industrial-era corporate collecting practices; and two, that Facebook's arts initiatives mirror and help legitimate profit-seeking techniques particular to social media. Together, it concludes, these features give us a glimpse of the ways that surveillance-based for-profit media such as Facebook are creating new relationships between the arts, the corporation, and their respective publics.

## 1. Introduction

When visitors enter Building 10 on Facebook's Menlo Park, California, campus, they step up to a counter so that a security guard can check their IDs, confirm their appointments, and give them a badge. This is a banal ritual at most corporations and a standard reminder that visitors are entering a privileged and privatized space. Yet, at Facebook, if visitors happen to look up over the shoulders of the guards, they see a riot of hand-silk-screened posters that at first glance, belong to a far more public kind of space. One poster reminds visitors to

“TAKE CARE OF  
MUSLIM  
BLACK  
WOMEN + FEMMES  
QUEER LATNX  
NATIVE  
IMMIGRANT  
P.O.C.  
TRANS  
DISABLED  
INCARCERATED  
L.G.B.T.Q. +  
FRIENDS  
FAMILY & COMMUNITY.”

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Another features the motto of Act Up, “Silence = Death,” underneath a large pink triangle. And here and there, prominent among the maybe seventy posters in all, you can see portraits of the Afghan women’s rights activist Mulala, of Holocaust survivor and author Eli Wiesel, and even labor leader and co-founder of the United Farm Workers Dolores Huerta. Perhaps most strangely of all, just above the row of iPads on which visitors must promise not to disclose any proprietary information they may stumble across, a poster announces in red block capital letters: BE OPEN.

Though Facebook has hired unionized contract workers to guard its buildings and staff its kitchens, there are no unions inside the company itself. And as you sign the non-disclosure agreement, it’s hard to forget that while you must open your data to Facebook if you want to use its services, Facebook need not share its data with you. So what are these posters doing here? The mystery deepens as visitors enter the campus’s main buildings. Soon they see that the posters they saw in the lobby are everywhere. So too are enormous murals, such as a hand-painted image of a wolf on the back of a whale, and just down the way, a neo-psychedelic mandala at their twice as tall as a person. Across the wide-open floors of Facebook’s cavernous work spaces, engineers and analysts sit at their computer monitors. There is not a cubicle in sight. If programmers look up from their work, they see each other. But they also see spidery mobiles dangling from the ceiling, or a visiting painter atop a scaffold, filling in a bit of background.

The question is: Why? Why would one of the most technologically sophisticated and highly capitalized firms in the world want to surround its workers with hand-made posters – particularly posters promoting points of view that seem to be at odds with a public company’s mission of maximizing profits? Why would a media company that has claimed to be a politically neutral platform surround its workers with progressive iconography? And why would the company not just use its wealth to purchase paintings off the shelf? Why would they want artists roaming the halls, with cans of paint in their hands?

To try to answer these questions, this essay builds on a series of interviews, extended visits to Facebook’s headquarters, and a comprehensive review of Facebook’s art and design archives to trace the history of Facebook’s two internal arts programs and explore the aesthetics they promote.<sup>1</sup> From the company’s founding, CEO Mark Zuckerberg has hired muralists to decorate its walls. Today the company supports two intertwined arts organizations. One, the Analog Research Laboratory, has grown out of the company’s internal community of designers and produces the posters seen in Building 10. The other, the Artist in Residence Program, invites painters, sculptors, graffiti artists and others to make site-specific pieces in Facebook’s workspaces. Both programs began in Menlo Park and have since spread to Facebook’s offices around the world. Today the company employs five curators on four continents to manage its arts initiatives.

This essay focuses primarily on Facebook’s Menlo Park headquarters. There, it argues, posters and murals do much more than simply brighten the walls. They transform political and aesthetic movements into management tools. The arts at Facebook blur the line between the public, social sphere and private corporate space, and they encourage workers to imagine the company as a community – a community centered on the celebration of individual creativity. Such practices have deep roots in twentieth-century corporate America and especially in the internet-related industries that sprang up across America in the early 1990s. As a number of scholars have shown, technology start-ups have long flourished in the rich soil of bohemian, art-centered social worlds.<sup>2</sup> Yet, Facebook is no start up. On the contrary, it is a global flagship for an emerging mode of capital accumulation that Shoshanna Zuboff has christened “surveillance capitalism.”<sup>3</sup> As Zuboff notes, the industrial firms of the mid-twentieth century made their money providing goods and services. The new media of surveillance capitalism solicit social behaviors, monitor those behaviors, map social interactions, and resell what they learn to advertisers and others.

The art programs inside Facebook provide an aesthetic infrastructure with which to encourage and legitimate that process. That infrastructure works in two ways, one organizational and the other, semiotic. As units within the firm, the Analog Research Laboratory and the Artist-in-Residence program solicit bottom-up collaborations from Facebook’s workers. These solicitations mirror the ways that Facebook’s online interface requests and celebrates contributions from users. The posters and murals these units produce encourage Facebook’s workers to imagine themselves not as architects of a global surveillance apparatus, but as creative technical artists and perhaps even builders of a new, individual-centered expressive democracy. When the Analog Research Lab posts images of activists such as Dolores Huerta, it is hardly urging Facebook’s engineers to unionize. On the contrary, it is asking them to imagine a polity in which individual character and ethnic diversity – as opposed to electoral process and institutional bureaucracy – will be the foundations of a good society. This new society will be one of constant conversation; its highways and towers will be Facebook’s own often invisible algorithms and layers of code; its civic foundations will be laid and maintained by a globe-spanning, for-profit corporation. And in this new society, Facebook’s engineers will use the company’s technologies to become citizens and shapers of a public they see represented on the walls around them.

<sup>1</sup> As any who have tried it will know, conducting research inside a firm that has received the kind of sustained and critical public attention that Facebook has can be quite difficult. In my own case, I have conducted three extensive tours of the art on Facebook’s Menlo Park campus, one under the supervision of a corporate public relations officer. I have interviewed the current directors and one of the two founders of the Analog Research Laboratory and the Artist in Residence Program, as well as half a dozen participating artists. Both the Lab and the Residence program keep substantial archives of their work and I have reviewed those comprehensively. Because I have not been able to interview current employees of Facebook outside the arts programs, I have leaned on published journalistic reports and online materials to flesh out my account. Images of much of the art I discuss and more information on both programs can be found on the programs’ Facebook pages. For the analog Research Laboratory, see <https://www.facebook.com/analoglab/> and for the Artist in Residence Program, see <https://www.facebook.com/artistinresidence/>.

<sup>2</sup> Neff, Gina. *Venture Labor: Work and the Burden of Risk in Innovative Industries*. Acting with Technology. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012; Ross, Andrew. *No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and Its Hidden Costs*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2003; Lloyd, Richard D. *Neo-Bohemia: Art and Commerce in the Postindustrial City*. New York: Routledge, 2006; Turner, Fred. *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Zuboff, Shoshanna. “Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization.” *Journal of Information Technology* 30 (2015): 75–89.

## 2. The corporate arts, then and now

The arts at Facebook model a radical transformation in the ways corporate leaders think about the publics they serve and the roles that art can play in that process. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, American corporations largely used the arts to speak to a social world that they thought of as flourishing beyond the factory walls. Until the middle of the twentieth century, corporations employed artists primarily to design products and create advertising.<sup>4</sup> That began to change in the late 1930s, when IBM and the Container Corporation of America began to buy art and sponsor exhibitions.<sup>5</sup> In the 1960s, large American firms, and especially New York financial firms, began to buy art in earnest. In 1959, the Chase Manhattan Bank moved its headquarters to Wall Street and began to construct a collection that now includes more than 30,000 works. A wide array of companies followed suit. By the late 1960s, corporations in many American cities could be seen creating public squares outside their office towers and populating them with museum-quality statues, or hanging Abstract Expressionist paintings in their lobbies.<sup>6</sup>

They did so for many reasons.<sup>7</sup> Often a CEO saw the company collection as a personal status symbol. Many hoped that art would promote an image of their companies as forward-looking, and encourage their employees to think of themselves as creative. Some also knew that paintings and sculptures appreciated with time and that what they purchased could likely be resold later for a profit. But particularly in the 1960s, the leaders of large corporations saw buying and displaying art as a way to support public culture in a newly powerful America. David Rockefeller, head of the Chase Manhattan Bank, spoke for many at the time when he wrote,

the public has come to expect corporations to live up to certain standards of good citizenship. One of these is to help shape our environment in a constructive way....In our increasingly mechanized and computerized world, the arts illumine and reinforce our individuality through beauty and form and human emotion that can reach and move most men. They are indispensable to the achievement of our great and underlying concern for the individual: the fullest development of the potential hidden in every human being.<sup>8</sup>

For Rockefeller and his colleagues in finance and heavy industry, to support the arts was much more than to promote their companies to potential customers. To the extent that the arts helped citizens develop their individuality, many corporate leaders believed they could be psychological tools with which to mold a more diverse and creative polity. That is, the arts could not only help companies speak to a liberal public; they could help them *create* one. These ideals permeated contemporaneous collaborations between artists and engineers as well. In the early 1960s, after C.P. Snow published his widely read critique of the divide between the worlds of the arts and the sciences, *The Two Cultures*, leading citizens of both communities began to try to work together. Engineers from Bell Labs collaborated with artists such as John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg.<sup>9</sup> NASA employed visiting artists in order to stimulate the creativity of their rocket scientists.<sup>10</sup> And by the early 1970s, leading museums in the United States and Europe were holding large and popular exhibitions of technology-centered art.<sup>11</sup>

## 3. The arts meet liberation management theory in the 1990s

Such collaborations between artists and engineers have persisted, especially in computer-related industries, but within a new economic and cultural context.<sup>12</sup> The turn toward the arts that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s was followed by an explosion of interest in corporate culture more generally in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>13</sup> In the two decades after World War II, American business enjoyed a period of relative stability as large, hierarchical corporations dominated the industrial landscape. By the early 1980s, many such multi-industry conglomerates had begun to break apart.<sup>14</sup> Firms moved their manufacturing operations overseas or otherwise

<sup>4</sup> Martorella, Rosanne. *Corporate Art*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Martorella, *Corporate Art*, 21; see also Allen, James Sloan. *The Romance of Commerce and Culture: Capitalism, Modernism, and the Chicago-Aspen Crusade for Cultural Reform*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

<sup>6</sup> For a fascinating discussion of “lobby art” in this period, see Simon, Sydney Skelton. “Harry Bertoia and Postwar American Design Culture.” Ph.D. Dissertation. Stanford University, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Martorella, *Corporate Art*, 104; Appleyard, Charlotte, James Salzmann, and Sotheby’s (Firm). Institute of Art. *Corporate Art Collections: A Handbook to Corporate Buying*. Handbooks in International Art Business. Farnham, UK; Burlington, VT: Lund Humphries in association with Sotheby’s Institute of Art, 2012, 25; Wu, Chin-Tao. *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention since the 1980*. London; New York: Verso, 2002, 242–247.

<sup>8</sup> Rockefeller, David. “Foreword,” in Gingrich, Arnold, and Business Committee for the Arts. *Business & the Arts; an Answer to Tomorrow*. New York: P. S. Eriksson, 1969, XI–XII; XI–XII.

<sup>9</sup> Goodyear, Anne Collins. “Gyorgy Kepes, Billy Klüver, and American Art of the 1960: Defining Attitudes toward Science and Technology.” *Science in Context* 17.4 (2004): 611–35; Goodyear, Ann Collins. “The Relationship of Art to Science and Technology in the United States 1957–1971: Five Case Studies.” Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Texas, 2002; Turner, Fred. “Romantic Automatism: Art, Technology, and Collaborative Labor in Cold War America.” *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 7 (1) (2008), 5–26.

<sup>10</sup> Goodyear, “The Relationship of Art to Science and Technology,” 176.

<sup>11</sup> Reichardt, Jasja, and Institute of Contemporary Arts (London England). *Cybernetic Serendipity; the Computer and the Arts*. New York: Praeger, 1969; Burnham, Jack. “Art and Technology: The Panacea That Failed.” *The Myths of Information: Technology and Postindustrial Culture*. Ed. Woodward, Kathleen. Madison, WI: Coda Press, 1980. 200–15; Lee, Pamela M. *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960’s*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Beck, J., and R. Bishop. “The Return of the Art and Technology Lab.” *Cultural Politics* 14.2 (2018), online preprint [Accessed 29 January 2018]; Harris, Craig. *Art and Innovation: The Xerox PARC Artist-in-Residence Program*. Leonardo. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999; Bennett, Drew, and Chelsea Randall. *Facebook Artist in Residence Program Fall 2012*. Facebook, Inc., 2013.

<sup>13</sup> For an account of this shift and its place in the larger history of management discourse, see Barley, Stephen R., and Gideon Kunda, “Design and Devotion: Surges of Rational and Normative Ideologies of Control in Management Discourse.” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 37 (1992): 363–399.

<sup>14</sup> Davis, Gerald F. *The Vanishing American Corporation: Navigating the Hazards of a New Economy*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2016, 47–56.

outsourced production, causing massive deindustrialization across states like Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania.<sup>15</sup> Companies of many kinds began to rely on temporary workers, project-based labor forms, and slowly but surely, the levelled hierarchies and networked management forms that now characterize the firms of Silicon Valley. In this context, management theorists began to encourage workers to blur the lines between their lives inside their firms and their lives elsewhere. Whereas the corporations of the 1950s and 1960s had imagined themselves serving a public beyond their own walls, the management theory of the 1990s envisioned transforming the workplace into a realm in which personal growth and political activism belonged alongside the profit motive – that is, they imagined turning corporate space into a new version of the public arena. Writing in 1995, at the height of this encouragement, sociologist Avery Gordon summed its promises thus:

Reinventing the corporation and corporate life qua social life promises to deliver us into a sweet, technologically sophisticated but humanistically grounded future, where decentralization replaces hierarchy; where diversity replaces homogeneity and legalistic affirmative action; where trust, freedom, and respect for the individual replace fixed work rules and a culture of managerial suspicion; where creativity, knowledge, and fun link human values to economic necessity in an economically and personally therapeutic fashion; and where activism and a commitment to shaping the corporate/social environment replace the postwar emphasis on white-collar obedience and conformity.<sup>16</sup>

As Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello and others have shown, these promises borrowed heavily from Romantic and 1960s countercultural critiques of bureaucracy and industry.<sup>17</sup> Boltanski and Chiapello surveyed two eras in American and European management theory, one from 1959 to 1969 and the other, from 1989 to 1994. In the second group they saw that management theorists had absorbed the ideals of what they called the “artistic” and “social” critiques of the 1960s.<sup>18</sup> The artistic critique was “rooted in the invention of a bohemian lifestyle” and focused on the search for individual “authenticity and freedom” long associated with artists.<sup>19</sup> The social critique challenged the individualism of the artists and sought to confront economic inequality, moral laxity, and the social consequences of political centralization. Both critiques flourished in Facebook’s northern California neighborhood. As a series of scholars have noted, the Romantic impulses of the counterculture suffused Silicon Valley at precisely the moment its engineers were developing the personal computer and shaping the Internet.<sup>20</sup> These impulses in turn shaped the digital utopianism of the late 1990s, as well as the collaborative ethos behind the development of open source computing, peer-to-peer technologies, and social media as we know them today.<sup>21</sup>

As Boltanski and Chiapello have demonstrated, management theorists in the 1990s sought to implement the attack on hierarchy associated with both critiques. They began to present the firm as the site at which the “authenticity and freedom” once promised by a Bohemian embrace of the arts might finally be achieved.<sup>22</sup> The manager was to cease to be a bureaucrat and to become instead “the neo-manager, like the artist, a creative figure, a person of intuition, invention, contacts, chance encounters, someone who is always on the move, passing from one project to the next, one world to another.”<sup>23</sup> Workers too, were to become itinerants. Yet they were to imagine their forced migrations from project to project as opportunities for personal growth, as stages on a personal journey.<sup>24</sup> Within the inherited logic of countercultural critique, social and economic precariousness was to become a psychological opportunity. And the firm was to become a mirror of the social world, a liberal community devoted not only to profit, but to enhancing the individuality of its citizens.

#### 4. Bohemia for profit at Facebook

Facebook continues to deploy this logic today. On its Facebook Careers website, for instance, the company tells potential employees to “BE YOURSELF”: “Be *unique*. Be authentic. However you prefer to say it, we really mean it. Our culture embraces people’s diverse perspectives and creates a positive environment where everyone belongs.”<sup>25</sup> Such rhetoric is par for the course in much of corporate America today, yet under the pressures of surveillance capitalism that drive the company, they have taken on a new meaning. “We always talk about bringing your ‘full self’ to work,” explains Lori Goler, Vice President of Human Relations and Recruiting. “You’re not a different person when you leave here and go home in the evening than you are during the day.”<sup>26</sup> The

<sup>15</sup> For a history of this process, see Bluestone, Barry, and Bennett Harrison. *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry*. New York: Basic Books, 1982.

<sup>16</sup> Gordon, Avery. “The Work of Corporate Culture: Diversity Management.” *Social Text* 44. Autumn-Winter (1995): 3–30; 6.

<sup>17</sup> Boltanski, Luc, and Eve Chiapello. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London; New York: Verso, 2005; Frank, Thomas. *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997; Lloyd, *Neo-Bohemia*; Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*.

<sup>18</sup> Boltanski and Chiapello, *New Spirit*, 38.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 38 and 97.

<sup>20</sup> Barbrook, Richard, and Andy Cameron. “The Californian Ideology (Full-Length Mix).” September 18, 1998. Web. October 10, 2001; Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*; Streeter, Thomas. *The Net Effect: Romanticism, Capitalism, and the Internet*. New York: New York University Press, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Dijck, José van. *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. For portraits of these impulses at work in early web era media firms, see Ross, *No-Collar* and Neff, *Venture Labor*.

<sup>22</sup> Boltanski and Chiapello, *New Spirit*, 97.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

<sup>24</sup> For a fascinating demonstration of where this process has taken Americans to today, see Gershon, Ilana. *Down and Out in the New Economy: How People Find (or Don’t Find) Work Today*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Facebook Careers website: <https://www.facebook.com/careers/> [Accessed 17 February 2017].

<sup>26</sup> Lori Goler, quoted D’Onfro, Jillian. “How one Facebook employee’s health crisis led to a new internal slogan,” *Business Insider Australia*, April 29, 2016. Available <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/how-the-facebook-family-slogan-started-2016-4> [Accessed 7 August 2017].

managers of Facebook aim to do more than make the office a fun place to hang out. They strive to make every aspect of their employee's lives – like their users' – objects and sites of labor.<sup>27</sup>

Online, Facebook mediates the relationship between its users social lives and its own profit-seeking through the Facebook interface. Many of us are in the habit of describing Facebook and other companies like it in terms of the interpersonal relationships on which they draw – that is, as *social media*. Yet Facebook has always been at least as much an advertising-driven for-profit media company as its mass media predecessors ever were.<sup>28</sup> And its interface is designed to maximize social interaction in a way that also maximizes profits for the firm. The hinge with which the company's oft-proclaimed mission of interpersonal connection opens onto the landscape of capitalist expansion is what Facebook calls its “social graph.”<sup>29</sup> In essence, Facebook sells advertisers on the idea that their ads will reach potential customers with a high likelihood of buying their products. To ascertain that likelihood, Facebook asks advertisers to define potential customer segmentation metrics. At the same time, Facebook surveils its users, abstracting patterns of interaction among them, and developing them into what sociologist Adam Arvidsson calls a rich “topological space where relations between derived qualities can be created and calculated in ways that pay no attention to other aspects of the life of the underlying users.”<sup>30</sup> That is, Facebook's engineers map and quantify patterns of interaction and explore their association with particular behavioral outcomes. By recognizing patterns and calculating relationships in real time, Facebook is able to infer the probability that a certain segment of their user population will be drawn to a particular community, action or product. It is essentially this inference that they sell to advertisers.

Facebook's interface also carefully downplays and often renders invisible the processes by which the company profits from users' interactions. Like firms such as Google, Facebook invites its users to exchange their personal information for the value they gain from using the service. In the era of industrial capitalism, Shoshanna Zuboff has claimed that such exchanges would likely have been managed by contract. And one could argue that the massive and rarely read user agreements that users must sign to use Facebook and other services constitute such contracts. Even so, Zuboff points out that in the era of surveillance capitalism, companies like Facebook manage the exchange of social information primarily by designing semiotic environments – that is, interfaces. These environments carefully and deliberately shape the behavioral options of those who enter them. They have become what other scholars have called “choice architectures” – conglomerations of algorithm, text and image designed not to tell a user what to do, but to subtly solicit a desired behavior.<sup>31</sup>

Inside Facebook, the arts provide a similar kind of architecture for employees. Like Facebook's public interface, posters and paintings on the wall work to mask the contractual nature of employment at the firm. In keeping with the liberation management theories of the 1990s, they urge employees to see their work for the company as a species of personal development. They speak in ostentatiously hand-made idioms of paper and ink, paint and glue. Yet, their aesthetics model and legitimate the digital monitoring and mapping of our most intimate experiences. As unframed posters or graffiti-style murals, the works on the walls of Facebook turn away from projecting the kind of wealth formerly displayed in the framed Abstract Expressionist paintings hung on the walls of twentieth-century banks. They project a new kind of wealth instead – a kind of wealth built on capturing the ever changing, highly personalized riches of individual feeling and social interaction. And they invite Facebook's employees to imagine themselves as artists, working to paint that wealth into being through code.

## 5. The Analog Research Laboratory

The arts have been a part of Facebook since the company's 2004 move to California. Almost as soon as they took up their downtown Palo Alto offices, Mark Zuckerberg and his co-founders commissioned graffiti artist David Choe to paint murals on the office walls. Today, art reaches Facebook's employees through two parts of the firm, the Analog Research Laboratory and the Artist in Residence Program. The Laboratory was created first. In 2008, Facebook hired two designers for what it would soon call its Communication Design Team, Ben Barry and Everett Katigbak. In 2010, as Facebook was expanding its Palo Alto offices, Barry and Katigbak quietly seized an unused warehouse space in one of the firm's new buildings. Facebook bought them printing gear and within a month, working evenings and weekends, they began putting out posters. They named their operation the Analog Research Laboratory, said Barry, “to create a brand for the lab, so it wasn't just me. Then I started putting posters up all around the company.”<sup>32</sup>

The first posters featured bold, bright red letters, always in caps, to contrast with the light blue that anchored Facebook's corporate palette. Barry and Katigbak chose their slogans from one of two pools: quotations they happened to like and had collected over the years and more commonly, from phrases they heard around the office. These included straight-ahead motivational slogans like ‘STAY FOCUSED AND KEEP SHIPPING.’ They also included phrases designed to highlight one or another core belief about the ideal qualities of a Facebook engineer: “MOVE FAST AND BREAK THINGS;” “BE OPEN;” and “WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU WEREN'T

<sup>27</sup> For a rich fictional account of this process – an account likely based on research at Facebook – see Eggers, Dave. *The Circle: A Novel*. New York and San Francisco: Alfred A. Knopf; McSweeney's Books, 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Brügger, Niels. “A Brief History of Facebook as a Media Text: The Development of an Empty Structure.” *First Monday* 20, no. 5 (May 4, 2015).

<sup>29</sup> Arvidsson, Adam. “Facebook and Finance: On the Social Logic of the Derivative.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 33.6 (2016): 3–23. See also Shepherd, Tamara. “Mapped, Measured, and Mined: The Social Graph and Colonial Visuality.” *Social Media + Society* 1–2 (2015): 1–2.

<sup>30</sup> Arvidsson, “Facebook and Finance,” 11.

<sup>31</sup> Thaler, Richard H., and Cass R. Sunstein. *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008; Sunstein, Cass R. *Why Nudge?: The Politics of Libertarian Paternalism*. Storrs Lectures on Jurisprudence. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Marks, Ben. “Does Facebook Have a Secret Paper Fetish?” In *Collectors Weekly*, 2012. <http://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/facebook-secret-paper-fetish/> [Accessed 14 July 2016].

AFRAID?” Mark Zuckerberg approved of their work from the beginning. As their postering began to eat into their other work, Facebook allowed Barry and Katigbak to develop the Lab as part of their employment. On February 1, 2012, the day that Facebook went public, Zuckerberg granted the Lab the ultimate in legitimacy when he posted a photograph of his desk. Next to his MacBook air, readers could see a copy of Barry and Katigbak’s poster, “STAY FOCUSED AND KEEP SHIPPING.”

The Analog Research Lab has since become an emblem of the anti-hierarchical, organic mode of organization called for by 1960s activists and 1990s management theorists. The Lab now inhabits a large, garage-like workspace in the center of Facebook’s Menlo Park, California, campus. The story of its founding, repeated to reporters and employees alike, emphasizes the fact that the Lab sprung up not from a bureaucratic command, but from individual initiative. “The executives aren’t setting these messages” Barry explained in 2012. “People email them to me, or whatever, and I make the posters and we put them up. We’re not asking for permission or anything like that.”<sup>33</sup> Yet even as its leaders deny involvement in processes of top-down control, the Lab has played an important role in turning the aesthetics of earlier artistic and social critiques into management tools. First, the Lab’s posters have linked calls for labor to calls for self-transformation. In the industrial era, a motto like “STAY FOCUSED AND KEEP SHIPPING” would represent a straightforward professional exhortation: DO YOUR JOB. But set in the same type as a poster reading “WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU WEREN’T AFRAID?” and placed in the same sorts of locations, the corporate slogan can become an answer to a request for self-discovery. If you weren’t afraid, you might express yourself; and if you were a fully committed member of Facebook’s imagined internal community, you would express yourself by staying focused and shipping code. Second, much like Facebook’s online interface, the Analog Research Lab presents itself as giving voice to a community of expressive individuals – the employees who suggest the slogans. In this way the Lab has helped shift the *locus* of organizational control from the company’s formal hierarchy to its culture. The Lab’s posters never speak to questions of contract or rule. Instead, they urge employees to turn inward, to focus on their individual development, and to align that process with their professional obligation to help develop the firm.

In the fall of 2012, Facebook held a company-wide party to celebrate the arrival of their one-billionth user. When employees returned to their desks, they each found a copy of a small red paperback, created by the Lab with help from a designer at Weiden-Kennedy, an advertising firm.<sup>34</sup> “Facebook was not originally created to be a company,” the front cover announced. “It was built to accomplish a social mission – to make the world more open and connected,” said the first page. The pages that followed drove home the point: “WE DON’T BUILD SERVICES TO MAKE MONEY; WE MAKE MONEY TO BUILD BETTER SERVICES” said a two-page spread. The book featured motivational slogans such as “CHANGING HOW PEOPLE COMMUNICATE WILL ALWAYS CHANGE THE WORLD” and “THE QUICK SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH” arrayed across a loose collage of typefaces, photographs and drawings. It also featured photographs of punks at the Berlin Wall and a graffiti fist raised in protest. Employees immediately began to call it “The Little Red Book.”

Few of Facebook’s engineers are old enough to remember the seas of hands waving Mao’s original Little Red Book during China’s Cultural Revolution. And the Lab’s design for the book leaned heavily on Quentin Fiore’s famed multi-media layouts for Marshall McLuhan’s 1967 volume *The Medium is the Massage*. The Little Red Book’s visual vernacular, its bold colors, varied fonts, diverse imagery – all made it look like an act of countercultural rebellion. Yet inside, it too celebrated a charismatic leader. Toward the end of the book, two-page spreads appeared. The first depicted Mark Zuckerberg speaking to a group of young men and featured the slogan “BE OPEN.” The second showed a teenaged Zuckerberg sitting around a table with five young male friends, all at their laptops. “When you don’t realize what you can do, you can do some pretty cool stuff,” read the caption.

The book depicted only a handful of women and people of color. For all its particolored style and emphasis on community, the Little Red Book did little to make visible the range of human diversity or human intimacy the rhetoric of community might seem to embrace. On the contrary, it reminded workers that they were part of a tight-knit group whose success depended on mutual surveillance and collective commitment to the road mapped out by their CEO. On a two-page spread entitled “A word from our founder,” the book reprinted an email from Zuckerberg headed “Please resign” and addressed to an anonymous Facebook employee who had spoken to a *TechCrunch* reporter. The employee appeared to have suggested that Facebook was building a cell phone, which was untrue. But what really angered Zuckerberg was the fact of the leak at all:

It is frustrating and destructive that anyone here thought it was okay to say this to anyone outside the company. This was an act of betrayal....So I’m asking whoever leaked this to resign immediately. If you believe that it’s ever appropriate to leak internal information, you should leave. If you don’t resign, we will almost certainly find out who you are anyway.

Here the Little Red Book effectively fused the countercultural critiques of bureaucracy that drove the liberation management theories of the 1990s with the non-contractual modes of influence that characterize surveillance capitalism. On the one hand, the book worked to create a vision of Facebook as a community of consciousness, not unlike a 1960s commune. It too would be a world-saving enterprise. Its citizens would be a far-seeing avant-garde who would work to connect the minds of millions around the globe. Like the communes, and like the idealized, flexible firms of the 1990s, it would be governed less by rules than by a shared set of values, expressed in culture. And like Facebook’s own online interface, it would offer itself as an ostensibly non-commercial, mission-driven, and in that sense, public infrastructure, to be used by individually empowered, expressive citizens. On the other hand however, Zuckerberg’s email revealed the dark side of that mode of organization. In the American communes of the 1960s, the desire

<sup>33</sup> Ben Barry, quoted Marks, “Does Facebook Have a Secret Paper Fetish?”

<sup>34</sup> Bosker, Bianca. “Facebook’s Analog Research Lab: The Slogan Factory Where Techies Get Tactile,” October 19, 2012. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/19/facebook-analog-research-lab\\_n\\_1987421.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/19/facebook-analog-research-lab_n_1987421.html) [Accessed 9 September 2016].

to be rid of bureaucracy frequently led to the rise of charismatic and even authoritarian leaders.<sup>35</sup> To the extent that such communities were to be built around the consciousness of their members rather than formal rules, disagreements with leaders could be easily characterized as failures of character on the part of followers. To break with the leader could all too quickly become to break with the community as a whole. In his email, Zuckerberg threatened more than a simple firing; he threatened a *shunning*.

The Analog Research Lab's posters have recently embraced the more explicitly political critiques associated with the New Left. Since 2012, Ben Barry and Everett Katigbak have both departed from the company. Under the Lab's current director, Scott Boms, the Lab has created a new series of what Boms calls "unsung heroes."<sup>36</sup> These include portraits of figures such as Dolores Huerta, a famed organizer of unions for American farm workers, and Shirley Chisholm, the first African American woman elected to Congress, and they hang throughout the company's global offices. "It's all about trying to make an environment that's welcoming and inclusive for everybody," explains Boms. He and his colleagues hope that these racially and politically diverse portraits might serve as mirrors for an ever-more diverse set of workers and so assure them that they belonged at the firm. Boms points out that he and the Lab sought out diverse employees to suggest poster subjects. "What do I know?" says Boms. "I'm a white male."

It's hard not to admire the Lab's efforts to help grow and sustain a diverse workforce at Facebook. At the same time, it's hard not to notice that the posters do little to make visible the political organizing that made Huerta and Chisholm heroes in the first place. Boms and his colleagues want diversity and difference to be "part of people's natural conversation here," he explains. "It's the world," he says, and the Lab is trying to "encourage people to be more mindful and generous in how they treat people who are not themselves." Yet, the fact that the posters depict only the faces of their subjects and say nothing about their lives renders the institutional politics of elections and unions and racial and economic inequality with which they struggled invisible. The posters aim to help employees build a world that includes all comers; they do not aim to help workers launch political campaigns or start unions of their own. On the contrary, they aim simply to help Facebook's workers become more *conscious* and more *expressive*. Inside Facebook, as within the online system it has built, a successful polity depends on the foregrounding of conversation and awareness, and the tucking away of contractual relationships.

The fact that Dolores Huerta can appear on a wall at Facebook as an emblem of racial difference alone marks the degree to which the Bohemian, communalist ethos of building community by turning away from party politics and toward a shared consciousness reigns inside the firm. It also celebrates Facebook's particular mode of making money. When the Chase Manhattan Bank acquired Abstract Expressionist paintings and hung them on the wall, it demonstrated its control of financial capital. The bank showed all comers that it could muster the money needed to acquire even the most rarified of commodities, and it implied that it could help its clients do the same. When the Analog Research Lab posts a picture of Dolores Huerta on the walls of a company whose engineers have no unions, it demonstrates its own power to transform the most embodied and institutionalized political movements into acts of decontextualized expression. On a poster, Dolores Huerta's image becomes a sign, emptied of its history, and repurposed. A picture that might once have inspired marches in the street by impoverished farm workers now offers wealthy engineers an opportunity to celebrate the variety of identities their company embraces. In the workplace, that embrace may mean a more diverse set of employees. Online, it means a larger, more varied set of communities and social experiences to mine.

## 6. The Artist in Residence Program

"The Analog Research Lab is the voice of the company inside the company," explains Drew Bennett, Director of the Artist in Residence Program. "The artists in residence are coming from outside...and flow through."<sup>37</sup> Like the Lab however, the Artist in Residence Program models a post-countercultural way of working that synchs well with the charismatic leadership exercised by Mark Zuckerberg. And it too embraces expression and identity as the foundations of social organization. The artists it selects and the work they do celebrate a vision in which the natural and social worlds can be turned into patterns and analyzed as such. By inviting artists to paint directly on Facebook's walls, even as programmers code all around them, the Artist in Residence Program asks engineers to imagine themselves as artists likewise making beauty by turning the world into patterned code. As Bennett puts it, "The engineering mindset is one of hacking. The engineer is taking what's available to them and improvising and realizing what you can do with it. The artist is the same."<sup>38</sup>

The program grew up alongside the Analog Research Lab. In 2011 and 2012, as Facebook was moving into its current Menlo Park headquarters, Ben Barry and Everett Katigbak began to talk about setting up a corporate art program. "At Facebook, hacking and building are highly valued, so we didn't want to just purchase artwork to display; we wanted to invite artists in to work alongside us," Barry later explained.<sup>39</sup> Barry and Katigbak lobbied Facebook's executives and soon brought in several visiting artists. One was Bennett, then a local painter and woodworker who had painted murals in Facebook's first Palo Alto offices. In 2012, he came back to Facebook as a visiting artist; today, he runs the company's global Artists in Residence program.

The program's curatorial process marks the ways that Facebook's relationship to the arts and the public at large differs from that of the dominant industrial-era corporate art collectors. Fifty years ago, corporations tended to either purchase paintings and

<sup>35</sup> Kanter, Rosabeth Moss. *Commitment and Community*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972. The tendency toward charismatic leadership plagued many countercultural organizations devoted to challenging existing modes of hierarchical control. See, for instance, Swidler, Ann. *Organization without Authority: Dilemmas of Social Control in Free Schools*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979.

<sup>36</sup> Boms, Scott. Interview with the author, January 16, 2017. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of Scott Boms come from this interview.

<sup>37</sup> Bennett, Drew. Interview with the author, April 17, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Barry, Ben. "Office of Ben Barry." Available <http://benbarry.com/project/facebook-artist-in-residence-program> [Accessed 28 December 2016].

sculptures for ostentatious display or to pair individual artists with employees to spark collaboration on specific projects. Facebook generally does neither. Rather than purchase work already made, the Artist in Residence program commissions new works to be created on the walls of the company's offices. This method of commissioning blurs the lines between wall and image, between the material and the semiotic, much the way Facebook's online infrastructure blurs the lines between image, text and digital architecture. If industrial corporate collecting made visible the corporate power over commodities, Facebook's surveillance-capitalism-era commissioning makes visible the company's power to transform the material, social world into a digital architecture for the support of individual expression. If and when Facebook changes buildings, the art works will disappear. The Artist in Residence Program surrounds engineers with a world that is always ready to change, always ready to be hacked – a world that in that sense, mirrors the company's online interface as Facebook's programmers confront it daily.

Facebook's artist selection process employs flexible, non-bureaucratic mechanisms that in some ways, mirror the organizational principles of the firm as a whole. Artists cannot apply for a residency. Instead, they must be chosen by Bennett and his colleagues. In its first year, 2012, the program selected just a handful of artists on the basis of "their hacker spirit and [the] social networking qualities in their practices."<sup>40</sup> Today, the program has gone global. The Artist in Residence program now has a regional program manager on each of four continents, in addition to Bennett and his colleagues at Facebook's California headquarters. Bennett continues to oversee the program as a whole and to see out work that is "authentic," "personal," "emotional" – work in which "there is vulnerability."<sup>41</sup> As he puts it, "We don't use art to project opulence."<sup>42</sup>

In fact, the art Bennett commissions works hard to avoid presenting itself as in any way connected to practices of conspicuous consumption or even the industrial world. Over two hundred artists have worked with the Artist in Residence Program, and their creations line office walls from Seattle to Sao Paolo.<sup>43</sup> In the summer of 2017, the Program published a 460-page catalog presenting much of their work. Surveying that catalog, as well as walking the halls of Facebook's Menlo Park headquarters, reveals that Facebook has commissioned works that celebrate and model the pattern-seeking sensibility of its algorithms, that transform natural objects into signs and figures, in a handmade, DIY idiom. Alongside those works, they have presented versions of street murals and political graffiti. Together these multiple visual genres model a world in which the social, the political and the natural can all be absorbed into a system of patterned signs and so made beautiful.

Consider two installations created by San Francisco artist Barbara Holmes for Facebook's Menlo Park headquarters. One is mounted along a workspace wall; the other, on a café wall. Both consist of hundreds of inch-wide wooden laths tacked together into a swirling DNA-like ribbon that spins along the wall's surface, up and over partitions, and around corners. The work is relentlessly material, all wood and motion. Yet it is also a visible case of the way in which the material can be transformed into pattern. Spinning across the wall it reminds engineers of what can be made of otherwise inert scraps of nature – patterns, codes, and through them, knowledge and pleasure. The installations provide visual analogs to the work of Facebook's engineers. After all, they too gather up small bits of the world's data and recombine it in ways that reveal systemic patterns. In that sense, Holmes' work implies that hackers may in fact be artists too.

It would be very difficult to box up this sculpture and sell it off the way an executive might have sold an abstract expressionist painting decades back. And the plain wood of which it is made denies any connection between Holmes' installation and the industrialized commodity form. Yet, the work's celebration of pattern clearly helps legitimate the work of patterning the social and natural worlds from which Facebook derives its profits. It is not opulent, and yet, it remains an image of the processes by which wealth is created at Facebook, and under surveillance capitalism more generally.

Holmes' installations are just a single example of a fascination with pattern that animates artworks throughout Facebook. Some images are neo-psychedelic, with exploding daisy patterns and colors straight off Carnaby Street circa 1968. Others depict plants and animals in a hyper-realistic style, yet radically decontextualize them. One dining hall at the Menlo Park headquarters features a work by Sarah Biscarra Dilley and the Black Salt Collective that takes images of clouds as they might appear in the sky and integrates them into a brutal geometric network of triangles and squares. Nature has been captured, rendered abstract, and made available to topological graphing. It can now be seen not just with the ordinary eyes, as clouds in the sky would be, but with eyes accustomed to the mathematical, pattern-seeking work of computer-aided surveillance.

It can also be seen to be ephemeral. At Facebook's Menlo Park headquarters lovely, delicate paper clouds flutter in an atrium. Pink and white diagrams for unknown dance steps run across a concrete floor. An abstract blue hand the size of a person draws a pencil down a wall. None of this work can be easily detached from its context at Facebook or even pulled cleanly off the wall. And that's part of its point. The art on the wall, like the posts of users or the code made by Facebook's engineers, can only last for a limited time. As a company, Facebook thrives through a process of constant updates; by definition, its products must always keep changing. The aesthetics of the art in its headquarters reflect that fact. When the building goes, or the company moves, the art will largely disappear. The ancient corporate effort to assert permanence and stability through aesthetics, the mounting of pillars at the entrance to banks, for example, or the constructing of skyscrapers, has no place at Facebook.

What does have a place is the tactile and the personal. Even as it celebrates the network sensibility in the art it commissions, the Artist in Residence program aims to ease the pressures of non-stop coding and corporate growth. As Bennett puts it, "we exist as a digital detox entity in the company."<sup>44</sup> That is, the Artist in Residence program, like the Analog Research Lab, reminds Facebook

<sup>40</sup> Bennett, Drew, and Chelsea Randall. *Facebook Artist in Residence Program Fall 2012*. Facebook, Inc., 2013, 15.

<sup>41</sup> Drew Bennett, interview with the author, April 17, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Bennett, Drew. "A Note from the Program Director," in Facebook Artist in Residence Program, *Open Form* (Facebook, Inc., Menlo Park, CA), 2017, 2-3; 3.

<sup>44</sup> Bennett, Interview with the author, April 17, 2017.

workers that there is a world beyond their screens. Unframed, painted directly onto the walls, murals allow workers to see every brushstroke the artist made. While the artists are painting, Facebook workers are encouraged to walk up and talk to them. Some artists make nothing for the wall at all. In the summer of 2016, for instance, weaver Travis Meinolf planted himself in the center of Facebook's Menlo Park campus and wove for days on a back-strap loom. Engineers wandered up and talked with him about his work and in the process, encountered the feel of yarn, the quiet sounds of combing wool, and the calm, entirely material presence of Meinolf himself.<sup>45</sup>

That encounter however, took place in the corporate version of a public square. Facebook's Menlo Park campus is large and on the inside, resembles a colorful city, with restaurants, streets, and squares. The restaurants are subsidized by the firm, its citizens have been carefully selected, and the boundaries of the pseudo-city are carefully patrolled by security guards. Yet the center of the Facebook campus looks very much like a public plaza. Some of the art the company has commissioned explicitly promotes the illusion that Facebook's campus is in fact a miniature public sphere. Alongside pattern-oriented abstractions, the Artist in Residence Program has commissioned work anchored in social movements to end racism and other modes of oppression. In the winter of 2017, for instance, Facebook's Seattle office commissioned a street graffiti artist named No Touching Ground to create a mural for them. Until then, No Touching Ground had done virtually all of his work in the streets, without permission, in support of movements such as Black Lives Matter, the Standing Rock protests, and the National Women's March. At Facebook, he created a wall that reads "SOLIDARITY" in huge red letters and in front of the wall, images of real-world activists, looking out toward the word, with protest signs in their hands. In a video about his project created by Facebook, he explained that "For this piece specifically, I wanted to incorporate the general public who's going to be viewing it. So it's actually a feeling that you're a part of this thing instead of looking at this spectacle. You're actually engaging in the act."<sup>46</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

No Touching Ground made this piece not for the general public of course, but for display inside Facebook's Seattle offices. His account reminds us of how much work Facebook's art programs do to recreate the private, carefully guarded interiors of the firm as seemingly public landscapes. In the industrial era, corporations of Facebook's size used their art programs to draw clear lines between the public sphere and the corporation. Chase Manhattan bought paintings created outside the firm, in a public art world. By framing them and hanging them on its walls, the bank reminded everyone who saw them that these objects came from another place. They could be bought and sold and so made visible the bank's accumulation of capital, but they were not part of the walls and their creators were not part of the bank's everyday social milieu. When the bank acquired a massive abstract sculpture by Jean Dubuffet and placed it in front of their offices in Manhattan, they showed that they could use their wealth to create a new, more playful landscape for all the city's citizens.

In other words, fifty years ago at Chase Manhattan, art travelled back and forth across a line between the public sphere and the firm. Today at Facebook it works to create the illusion that the public sphere and the firm are one and the same. It is precisely this illusion on which surveillance capitalism depends. Inside companies like Facebook and Google, programmers must build architectures that solicit massive quantities of individualized expressions and transform those expressions into digital patterns from which money value can be extracted. Office murals that marry images of clouds to geometric graphs or turn wood into ribbons of pseudo-digital-DNA mirror and legitimize that process. At the same time, posters asking "WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU WEREN'T AFRAID?" encourage workers to bring their most interior selves into the workplace, to make their most private emotional parts available to the company. Like Facebook's online users, they are urged to turn inward, to cultivate their self-awareness and their gifts of self-expression. They are to imagine themselves as artists of their own lives, and of course, of code. They are to express themselves, not unionize.

This blurring of self and community, this concentration on the individual and self-expression, is a legacy of the 1960s counter-culture. The communards of that time dreamed of a world in which contracts would no longer be necessary since the lines between work and play, public need and private desire, would have dissolved. At Facebook that dream has swallowed up the political hopes of the New Left. Images of Dolores Huerta and Black Lives Matter marchers have been hollowed of the hard work of movement organizing. On Facebook's walls they suggest that the company is so powerful that it can render political dissent into just another mode of self-expression. They make it harder to see the ways in which Facebook's power continues to depend on the same kinds of contracts and secrecy that characterized the corporate giants of the industrial era. At the same time, they remind us that Facebook's success depends on a steady campaign to characterize the needs of the firm and the needs of the public as one in the same.

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<sup>45</sup> Meinolf, Travis. Interview with the author, August 29, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> June Zandona, Director; Facebook Artist in Residence program, Producer, "No Touching Ground." Available: <https://vimeo.com/217589111> [Accessed 24 July 2017k].

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