Ben Grosser Talks Textbook

For any non-Facebook users, last Tuesday evening, Art Gene's 2017 and 2018 **Digital U** exhibition programme curators Ruth Pringle (Art Gene) and Alejandro Ball (Ali Ball) spoke on **Facebook** with artist Ben Grosser about his current online Art Gene exhibition *Textbook*.

Ben answered a number of questions about his artwork *Textbook* – which, while being simple in concept is in many ways a challenging artwork.
Textbook is a browser plugin which strips Facebook of all images. It is an iconoclastic attack on the social platform Facebook itself, designed to reveal the power, artifice and manipulations behind what most perceive as an innocuous – even personal – space. With its inspiration clearly in activism, *Textbook* is also a very subtle artwork to experience which – as great art does – makes you think, feel and act differently. A *Textbook* user questions what they think they know and trust and how they process different kinds of visual imagery. A textbook user has a sense of themselves, not as a user of Facebook, but as someone being used by Facebook within a network of millions.
Art Gene's **Digital U** exhibition programme was started in late 2016 to showcase innovative and excellent contemporary Digital Art re-visioning the social, natural and built environment. We have recently begun inviting our contributing artists to chat with us live on our Facebook page about their work – choosing this platform both for its visibility and potentially egalitarian debate (we actively encourage anyone to post a comment or question to the artist and/or curator). (The disadvantage is that threads do get a little jumbled from time to time).
 During the interview Ben said,

"... for example, you can screenshot moments you find when the software pushes you to do/think something and then post those back to Facebook for discussion and awareness. or you can treat your feed as a performance space. my point is that these actions first require observation and analysis and don't require code".

Thanks to the tutelage, humour and vision of artist Ben Grosser, we certainly began this last Tuesday night!

> **Art Gene**
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> Join us here to talk to Alejandro (Ali) Ball, the forthcoming Digital U curator and Ben Grosser, our current Digital U exhibitor about his exhibition Textbook.

Our Conversation

Art Gene Hi Ali Ball, thanks for joining us. Can you tell us what *Textbook* is?
Ali Ball Hello Art Gene, Ben and everyone else, its good to be here tonight. I am really looking forward to this informal chat on Ben's artwork *Textbook*.
Ali Ball Well to give a brief overview – *Textbook* is a browser plugin that a person can install and use when specifically using Facebook. It basically removes all the visual content and makes the site really bare. Its an interesting concept – because in

my experience its the images I really look for, and without them it changes the whole experience. Suddenly you have to dedicate a lot of time to processing the information on your feed. Its a bizarre experience.

Matt Sanderson Starting early? It's only 6:38 GMT

[NB: A fair point – I (Ruth) hadn't realised that daylight savings didn't alter GMT]

Art Gene Haha, thanks Matt Sanderson, glad you are going to be joining us this evening! I wonder if our America based artist Ben Grosser can join us anyway?

Art Gene Hi Ali Ball, you selected Ben's artwork *Textbook* as your first exhibition for Art Gene's Digital U online exhibition programme. Can you tell us why you wanted to begin with this artwork?

Ali Ball Yes certainly! Well I think it boils down to the type of artists I am attracted to work with, that tend to have a radical way of thinking about the medium they use. So with Ben – I actually saw his exhibition with **Arebyte** in London where they programmed a plugin that changed your facebook reaction to a random one, and I think it was this playful nature in his work which I wanted others to see.

Art Gene I've been enjoying the simple fact that someone can do this to Facebook. I'm sure it is enormously complicated to achieve, but it seems like a very simple tool to use. It is a bit David and Goliath – someone has silenced the giant!

Ali Ball Art Gene It really is a bit – and in my experience a person doesn't need a large knowledge base of programming and computer science to accomplish some of these alternative tools with the technology around us.

Art Gene Ali Ball For me, there's a new freedom in even the knowledge of *Textbook*. I think (especially recently) Facebook has felt like something being force-fed to us. I know we have the choice to use it or not at all, but our friends (real friends) are the hostages in this choice. I have enjoyed having it subverted.

Ali Ball That is a good point to touch upon, this idea of force or being locking into something by choice. However, I think as time progresses this choice is marginalised. For example – I have one good friend that refuses to use Facebook, but complains that he never gets invited to anywhere.

Ali Ball So the hostage idea is spot on because we all know we don't have to stay plugged in – but then there is this fear of missing out.

Ben Grosser Hi everybody! sorry, I had us down for starting 30m from now. but i'm here, reading the thread.

Art Gene yeah, my fault, sorry. But delighted that you are with us Ben!

Matt Sanderson Hi Ali, have you tried getting people to use the *Textbook* version of FB without telling them that it is any different than "normal" FB? Maybe I'm a bit jaded about the whole social media thing, but I wonder, would people notice?

Ali Ball Hi Matt – thanks for the question. That and interesting thought, and I actually had a conversation with a colleague on a similar topic. I think it boils down to how the individual uses social media. In my case I tend to rely on the visuals to understand what happening and read only when I'm truly interested. However, in my colleagues case she reads everything so for her the experience to my own.

Matt Sanderson Ali I agree that it is different for each user; I guess I was wondering, and I probably didn't articulate it very well, how people would react to Textbook if they didn't know it was meant to be any different…

Ben Grosser Matt Sanderson Interestingly, Facebook started out a lot more text focused. Images were an option, but the balance between text and image was more balanced. Over time, that balance has shifted to be dramatically more image-focused. Even Facebook itself has started trying to turn text into images with the new background options on text-based posts.

Ben Grosser I would love to try a text-only social network. Perhaps the historical versions of this would be Usenet or, going back further, BBS systems.

Ben Grosser It seems practically impossible to present an image-free Facebook to anyone without them knowing something is missing.

Ben Grosser However, a version of Textbook could collapse the blank spaces, which would get closer to that idea. I was interested in not only seeing it without the images but also seeing *how much* of the content is getting removed (spatially), which is why I leave it blank.

Matt Sanderson Hi Ben, I didn't know that about FB. Makes sense; I remember Compuserve and "yahoo groups", which were very much text indeed. I guess the reactions would also vary considerably between generations, and not necessarily in a linear way. My (almost) 70's parents are late to the Internet, and in many ways treat it like my 16 yo son, whereas my wife and I grew up with DOS, Unix and… TEXT!

Matt Sanderson I wonder if it would work the other way? Even Snapchat requires some text, but how would people respond to nothing but images?
Communication through art? It really would be

Ben Grosser Matt Sanderson yes, definitely some generational divisions … I also grew up with DOS and Unix, and recall each OS using ASCII characters to create images, user interfaces, etc. So even those text-based spaces reached for the image at various points.

Ali Ball Thats an interesting thought on a text only social platform Ben – and in fact to add to the Facebook legacy you mentioned, Twitter was of that format also when it began (if I am not mistaken). However, to answer you question Matt I don't know if people would notice – I think social media sites like this one are built a bit on addiction and there is a general strategy to get people hook regardless of the websites format.

Matt Sanderson Ali Ball well, you've got me hooked…. until my battery runs out! (19% and stable).

Ben Grosser Ali Ball yes, thought of twitter too. one thing that happens with the overall monoculture and near-monopoly we have in the social media space is that all of the players recreate each other. so twitter becomes more like FB, while instagram becomes more like snapchat, and snapchat feels compelled to add features from facebook, etc. they lose a lot of their distinction as they compete.

Ali Ball Ben I wonder how much that comes down to there being a growing consensus of how a virtual public space should be. Or would you say its purely market driven when it comes to social media platforms?

Matt Sanderson Ali and Ben, you do wonder if it's a case of the "lowest common denominator"? The "race towards the middle ground"? And, as Ali alludes, the best sales model…?

Ben Grosser Ali Ball I think it's mostly about market share. it's interesting to watch (at least, for me :)). a social network starts with its own niche feature (e.g. twitter at 140 chars or snapchat with ephemeral posts) and that gets them traction at first. but then they start losing users to something else so they add in a new feature to stem the loss (e.g. twitter going to 280 or Facebook adding stories).

Ben Grosser the problem here is often one of a need for growth. nobody feels comfortable with keeping the same 6 million users (or whatever), they always want more. shareholders want more profit. ad buyers want more users. etc…

Ben Grosser I would argue this affects the users too … the interfaces thus encourage more engagement and morph to influence us to stay, to friend, to like. so it's a kind of snowball effect of more more more. images are a big part of this shift. instagram is almost all image. FB is not that extreme but getting closer.

Art Gene I agree with what you just said Ben Grosser. And as we now know, the more you use it, the more you get targeted with images that are almost right for you – but tailor made to change you or make you act, based on what you have expressed a

'like' for before.

Ali Ball Matt – Well it certainly feels like that at the moment. I think Ben touched upon a lot the core issues with trusting private companies with not only our information but also our social lives – it becomes a game and the person (or company) with the most exciting one that attracts the most users always spawns copy cats.

Ben Grosser Art Gene definitely. and this algorithmic curation, showing you just what they think you want, is part of what has been exploited recently in everything from politics to marketing

Matt Sanderson Hey everyone,

I've been dicing with battery death, but whilst I have just a very few % left, I'd just like to say what a great Digital U exhibit this is.

Although I'm one of the trustees of Art Gene, I probably don't follow everything quite as closely as I should… I'll be paying more attention to the online spaces from now on

Thanks guys!

Matt

Art Gene Thanks Matt!

Art Gene Ali Ball and as *Textbook* highlights – there is quality information and communication to be had on Facebook – if it was all shit we would walk away in a second. The quality of the good stuff is our friends and associates – actually from them. They invent it. But it is packaged and traded back to us. The cost is not knowing quite what is real – and I think that is a heavy price to pay. When they move the formatting around to slip new stuff at us we realise it better, but as Ben says, it is constantly changing. Often unnoticed.

Ali Ball Absolutely – there is plenty of quality information moving around Facebook and other social media site. But your point on whats real is the kicker isn't it? Maybe its time for there to be social change in how we engage with these things

Ben Grosser Ali Ball one thing I aim to do with my work is to bring attention to how Facebook constructs us as users, to show us what it expects from us, how it guides the way we think and interact. it's important to keep these in mind when we use these systems (and I agree, there is good here too which is part of why there are 2 BILLION users).

Art Gene What would you suggest? Can the answer be found by digital artists and activists subverting Facebook? I know we are testing it personally. How powerful is it?

Ali Ball Well I think Artists' activities and activism certain helps to change the system. But I think on an more important level education is essential to change. I don't mean re-educating people per se, but expanding curriculums in school and providing people with outlets to learn and understand what they are using. Because the biggest I feel one of the biggest myth about technology is that you have to be super smart, or geeky or techy to understand.

Ali Ball So I think the answer lays somewhere between artists' activities, activism and education.

Ben Grosser Art Gene Artists have a role here for sure. But it's broader than that. I think the answer is to treat Facebook (and other social networks, and software in general) not as fixed sites of consumption and prescribed interaction, but as spaces for experimentation and manipulation. Don't use them as the designers and programmers and owners intend. Analyze it, work against it. The intervention/action can be more complex, such as with some of my code-based works, but it can also be done by anyone without code … for example, you can screenshot moments you find when the software pushes you to do/think something and then post those back to

Facebook for discussion and awareness. or you can treat your feed as a performance space. my point is that these actions first require observation and analysis and don't require code.

Ben Grosser Ali Ball yes yes. general awareness and understanding of tech is essential.

Ben Grosser demystification.

Ali Ball Exactly Ben – And i think this is where people in general get into a lot of conflicts with others when entering into this territory of demystification – because no one likes to be told the contrary to what they believe or think. So I think its the approach we take to convey this awareness, while encouraging everyone to participate (not just artist, activists and other specialists) is key.

Art Gene Do you think that is starting to happen now, with all the widespread analysing of Facebook's marketing strategies? Will the users begin to demand clarity?

Ali Ball I certainly think the recent news about Facebook and their uses of our personal data will open a lot of peoples eyes. As to demanding clarity – strangely I've read through a bit of Facebook's terms and agreements and everything they do is laid out in that tome of a document. So I think on that front we as people have to put pressure on our politicians and MPs to change the political guidelines on clarity for private entities – because I feel only with sustained pressure from individuals, groups, organisations and our government can we achieve this needed type of clarity.

Ben Grosser Ali Ball no question, within current situation, regulation is key. the EU is far ahead of the US on this front.

Ben Grosser Art Gene yes, recent revelations about Facebook has certainly shifted the tone.

Ali Ball Ben Grosser it'll be interesting to see if this will be a permanent shift – because it sometimes feels like in our period things don't stick and people easily move on to the next issue forgetting the last one. I really do hope this shift in attitude remains – because Facebook and all those other companies have to understand they are not untouchable.

Ben Grosser Ali Ball agree, will be interesting to see. Facebook certainly hopes we forget, and/or believe that they have a "fix" for the problem (watch how many times Zuckerberg projects that some new artificial intelligence algorithm will solve problems in the future).

Ben Grosser one thing i wanted to point out is that Facebook changes their code all the time. so today I'm noticing, as shown in the screenshot (which you can see if you *aren't* using Textbook), that while it's removing the banner image for Art Gene, there's a low opacity underimage that is now showing up. I'll make changes asap and issue an update for Textbook. If you see any other examples, let me know!

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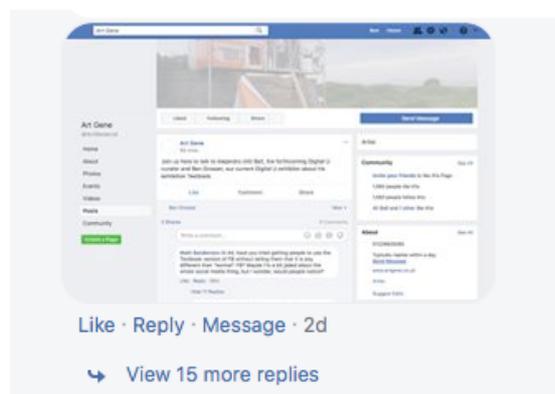
Ali Ball I actually notice just now gifs seem to show up.

Ali Ball Actually Ben maybe you could chat a little on how you preserve your work under these changing conditions you mentioned with Facebook's code (and other platforms you create work for) – because this seems like an on going battle for artists working in a similar nature.

Ben Grosser Ali Ball Yes, it's a real challenge. I don't preserve it as well as I wish I had time for. But I do track major changes I make by keeping the code on github … it's a source code revision system that allows anyone to look back at previous versions and to see what changed over time. Textbook has been pretty static. but my work Facebook Demetricator has had many major changes … and both works are in a state of continuous decay (due to Facebook making changes on their end) and repair (from my code-based reactions to their changes).

Ali Ball Well in that case it seems that documenting your work becomes an integral process to your practice, theoretically. I'm actually really interested in this process of decay and documentation as preservation, especially when it comes to the digital material because of its fragility

Art Gene What is Facebook Demetricator?

Ben Grosser Art Gene http://bengrosser.com/projects/facebook-demetricator/

Ben Grosser Art Gene It's a browser extension that hides all metrics on Facebook. so no longer do you see how many likes you get or how much someone shared your post — instead you can focus on who liked it or what they said about it.

Ben Grosser Ali Ball preservation is especially difficult as not only is Facebook changing its code all the time, but there is no *one* facebook. your code is likely different from mine, different from someone elses. so I'm often trying to adapt to multiple facebook codes at the same time.

Ben Grosser Ali Ball on the GIFs, … ah, that broke then. I used to hide them all. will fix it up as soon as I can.

Ali Ball Ben would you say then there is a time to live on all your artworks, and if so, when this point is reach what is your strategy for preserving and presenting whats left?

Ben Grosser Ali Ball yes, great question! it varies by the work. I've kept Facebook Demetricator going for 6 years! I never expected to do that, and have sometimes wanted to drop it. but people keep wanting it and I also want it myself, so I keep going. Textbook should be maintainable. My work Go Rando (another Facebook work) is in a bug workaround state right now due to a Facebook bug in their accessibility interface which I hook onto. I've tried to get them to fix it but they haven't (and of course, they don't want to fix anything for me as everything I do is unsanctioned and challenging them).

Ben Grosser At some point with each work I have to decide when to call it quits … and that decision point often comes with a major platform change. However, I will say that my intention is to maintain them indefinitely (even though that won't be possible).

Ali Ball Ben That would be great if you could all those going – especially because work that challenge these platform's authority is definitely needed.

Ali Ball But I also really liked your description of this back and forth between you and the said company – it really speaks to me of the age old struggle of the artist and the institution.

Art Gene Ben Grosser Do you know if Facebook the company is aware of your work? Do you have to deal with any legal issues?

Art Gene It is also very interesting what you have both said about having to keep the work alive and up to date in the face of Facebook being revised. It does highlight to myself the sheer passivity of myself as a user. I don't peer behind the scenes at all. It

is encouraging to think that we can all become wiser in this respect. It also makes me think about other art forms. I can't think of another one that has to be perpetually maintained to keep it static and (apparently) unchanging. It is an interesting position to be in as I presume you must divide your time between making new work and keeping previous work alive.

Art Gene Thanks Ali Ball and Ben Grosser for all your contributions tonight. This thread will stay open incase people in other time zones want to add further comments to the discussion so far. Please do! We would love to hear your thoughts. Ben Grosser, thank you once again for exhibiting with us. Textbook is a fabulous, thought provoking artwork and we are proud to host it. Thank you also to Ali Ball for selecting it for Art Gene's Digital U exhibition programme.