Responsive Hyperreality

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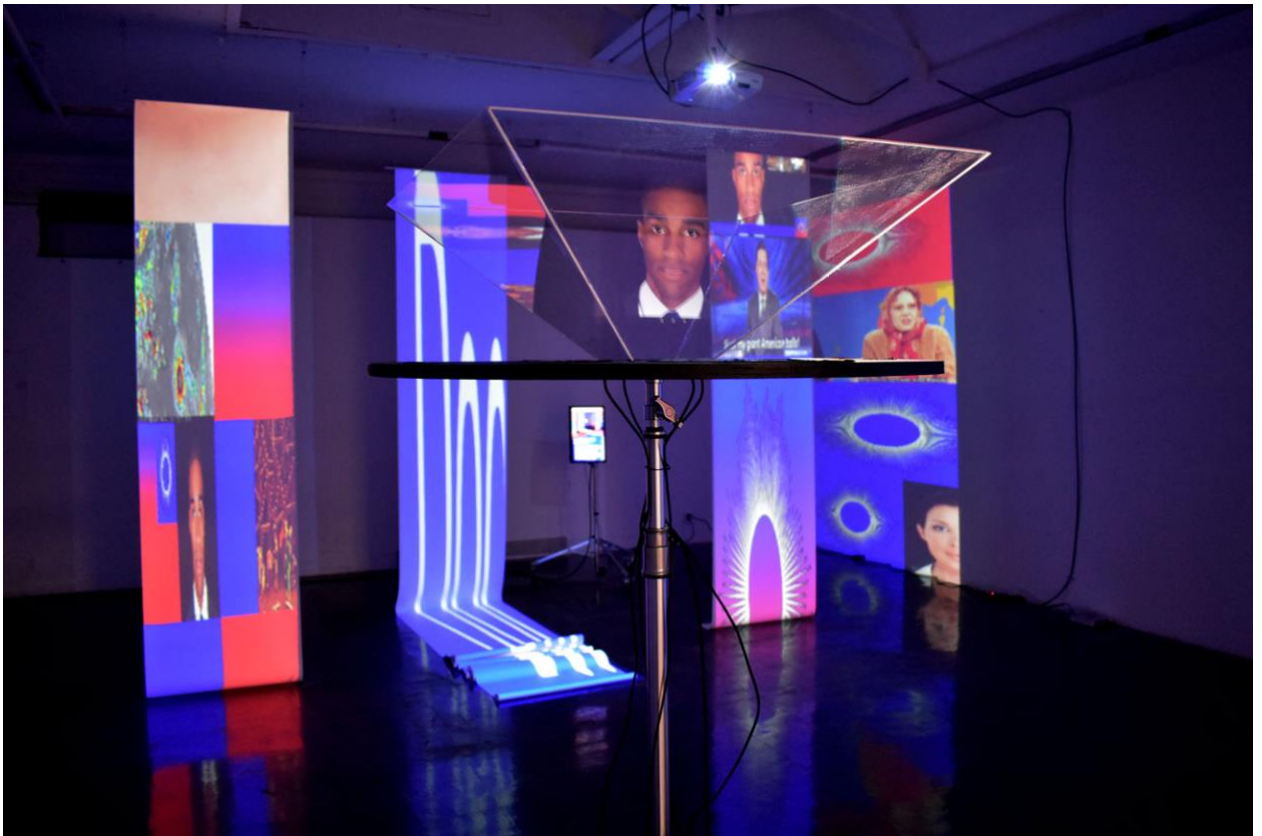
In media res. Twitter bots, live websites projected on vinyl banners, holographic projection device, televisions mounted on rolling stands. The Anderson Gallery, Richmond, Virginia, 2018.

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I open my phone and scroll through my Twitter feed. I see reactions to the latest statements from Donald Trump nestled right above meme videos showing yet another object that turns out to be cake inside. Politics, culture, and personal narratives are

compressed in space and time, mediated by a set of standard devices. *Breaking news*. *Streaming now*. *Trending topics*. The terms we use to discuss live media reveal how we consume it and the effect it has on us. If we break down the grammar, all of these –*ing* terms are in the present participle, meaning the action is in the midst of taking place, with no clearly defined start or end. By the time we enter the feed, we are joining a space *in media res*, in the middle of things, to borrow from the well-used literary device. In cable broadcasts and social media feeds, there are no pauses, no time between events. We see a running feed, an unbroken stream without time to trace back to any single origin point. Everything is important and nothing is important at the same time. Each breaking news story or trending topic comes quickly and replaces what came before it. Time collapses and context spirals into entropy. Reality melts into interface, a clear vision of Baudrillardian hyperreality.

Structure

The social media feed runs on a standard grid that stretches and rearranges seamlessly to fit an expanding multitude of digital devices. The responsive grid of our devices is a rational structure that plays host to an irrational hierarchy, a space of simultaneous distance and proximity to each other's real-time personal and collective narratives, to disaster and violence, and ultimately to political upheaval. The presentation and consumption of media has flattened our concept of reality, with consequences to our individual psyches and collective politics. Beyond the individual pieces of content we read or watch, the structures and mechanisms of the smartphone, social media, and the cloud shape us profoundly. Decades before widespread use of the internet, Marshall McLuhan argued that the mechanized means of communication supersede the power of the contents they hold and that we too often overlook the power of the larger apparatus of media.[i] Posts, tweets, memes, and likes are the content, but psychological and political power lies in the structure itself, the omnipresent black box of the digital screen and the responsive grid holding it all together.

The Responsive Grid

The term "responsive grid" is credited to Ethan Marcotte, whose mobile-first doctrine quickly became dogma for corporate web design soon after the introduction of the first smartphone.[ii] Born as a legacy to modernism's attempt to rationalize and universalize the presentation of static text and images, the responsive grid became the standard framework for organizing an endless stream of constantly changing content, much of it ironically rebelling against the very ideals and notions that gave birth to the grid. Beyond its ubiquity as a way to cleanly serve up the same media on a variety of platforms of different size, shape, and resolution, the responsive grid takes on larger meaning as a manifestation of the hyperreal. The structure of the grid is fluid and adaptable, but its borders are ultimately rigid and impermeable. The apparatus is permanent, but what it holds is ephemeral and immaterial. The concurrent proliferation of smart phones and social media solidified the mobile-first responsive grid as a container for all forms of content. The structure itself—the template, the grid—self-directs and even self-generates its content, creating, to borrow from McLuhan, an automated medium as message.

Sources and Dispositions

What are the larger implications of the flattened, reductive space of the device and its interface? What are the forces at play beneath the constant stream of media and the algorithms serving us all seemingly unique, dynamic content?

Architect and researcher Keller Easterling's work surrounds what she calls "infrastructure space," which provides us a good framework for dissecting the implications of the continuous feed and the responsive grid. Easterling argues that beneath the surface of large-scale infrastructure projects lies a hidden network of power outside the traditional channels of international governance. Easterling unpacks the difference between the forward-facing "object forms" and underlying "active forms" present in contemporary global infrastructure projects. Object forms are the bridges, free trade zones, and street grids that make up the built environment, while "active forms" are the political aspirations and maneuvering veiled beneath the glimmers of

glass, metal, and cast concrete. Easterling argues that all infrastructure projects have a "disposition," which "uncovers accidental, covert, or stubborn forms of power—political chemistries and temperaments of aggression, submission, or violence—hiding in the folds of infrastructure space."[iii]

Applying this to our focus, what are the object forms, active forms, and dispositions of the omnipresent digital screen and responsive grid? Each successive development after the introduction of the smartphone has been a movement toward reduction and ease of use. Posts, tweets, memes, and likes are the object forms. Responsiveness is the active form. The stream and the feed take precedence over the static, and brevity is valued over long form. The result is a constant state of saturation, a state of inundation like Debord's concept of alienation in *The Society of the Spectacle*, where the capitalist spectacle holds individuals captive to "the contemplated object," distanced from their "own existence ... and desires."[iv] In the same way, the grid delivers automated, personalized alienation and inundation by means of algorithmic code.

The responsive grid is self-reflexive. The apparatus is the content, and the medium is the message. The disposition of the responsive grid and the spiral of entropy is an extranational force that contains and generates momentous cultural and political shifts.

Filled Boxes, Flattened Spaces, Infinite Scroll

The boundaries of the responsive grid are impermeable and atemporal, but the content is dynamic, constantly updating and refreshing. Responsiveness is the disposition of contemporary media. Facebook and Instagram notoriously use algorithms that mine data from usage patterns to anticipate preferences and areas of interest in order to dynamically generate appropriate content. The platform buries posts it presumes particular users would not care for, and it elevates posts that align with their interests or relate to larger social, political, or cultural issues at the moment. Linear time collapses from the platform as it chases user interest and engagement. The social media algorithm is the back-end version of the responsive grid, hidden beneath the surface, but directing

the entire system. What I see on my phone is different now from what it was two minutes ago, and it will surely be different from what you see if you look at your screen at the same time. But we both stare at the same grid lighting up the same infinite window.

In the same way that algorithms *serve* content on the responsive grid, they also *generate* content. Hackers and programmers create bots and spam that infiltrate and subvert the structure of online media, manipulating and monetizing search engine optimization and web traffic. In an endless looping cycle, the same code that destabilizes the apparatus is then co-opted and made mainstream. The same mechanism that spews spam into the comments of news articles and trolls people on forums is picked up and repackaged into customer service chat bots for Amazon and Verizon. The responsive grid is simultaneous host to subversion and co-optation.

The smartphone not only allows users to consume content in new ways, but it also allows them to create and disseminate it easily. This has been one of many factors that has disrupted the traditional structures of mainstream media. Stories from traditional media outlets merge with content generated from both real users and algorithms, forming a homogenous stream, all conforming to the parameters of the responsive grid. The screen and the responsive grid gradually morph from a digital supplement to real life into a layer of reality itself. Here the disposition of the grid and the feed is one of Debordian spectacle. The line between digital and physical collapses, the space between algorithm and human blurs, and reality is subsumed as just another interface. Time, space, specific content, and even the rule of law become flattened and governed by a responsive grid that seeps out of the screen into our individual and shared lived experiences.

Responsive Politics

Immense political power sits within the disposition of the responsive grid. A series of large-scale geopolitical shifts have transpired alongside the growth of the smartphone

and social media. The 2016 election cycle gives us a glimpse into the murkier side of the political disposition of the responsive grid. Donald Trump was made for the era of responsive politics. His endless stream of headline-grabbing tweets appealed to a swath of Americans resistant to the change spurred by global connectivity and the rapid pace of social liberalization. Empowered by social media, reactionary nationalist groups across the globe gained more visibility and traction, moving beyond back corners of the internet and into mainstream social media feeds. These forces, housed within the structure of the responsive grid, combined to destabilize traditional media outlets and undermine decades of global political conventions.

During both Brexit and the US presidential election, external players exploited social networks and media outlets to directly influence public opinion. Under the auspices of the Kremlin's Internet Research Agency, Russian hackers exploited Facebook's algorithms, buying advertisements and injecting sensationalized and fake headlines related to the British and American elections.[v] Fake news enterprises launched in Eastern Europe and schools popped up in Macedonia to train unemployed young people in the lucrative art of media deception and subversion.[vi] Both independent and state-sanctioned programmers exploited the echo chambers that social media had become. Algorithms made it possible for users to never see content that challenged their beliefs. Sharability is part of the disposition of the responsive grid—seeing a close friend share a news article can bolster its credibility and viability, whether its content is true or not. By 2017, 67% of Americans said they got news from social media,[vii] and the responsive grid has given every piece of content the veneer of veracity.

The screen and the algorithm render all media equal, regardless of accuracy or relevance. All content is malleable. Stories become detached from their origins, instantly extracted, recontextualized, and re-skinned on the grid. The dissolution of the media landscape has produced an infinite scroll of hyperbole and misconstruction, blurring our notions of truth and reality. The feed is home not to reality, but to simulation and

hyperreality, "the generation of models of a real without origin or reality, " as Jean Baudrillard writes.[viii]
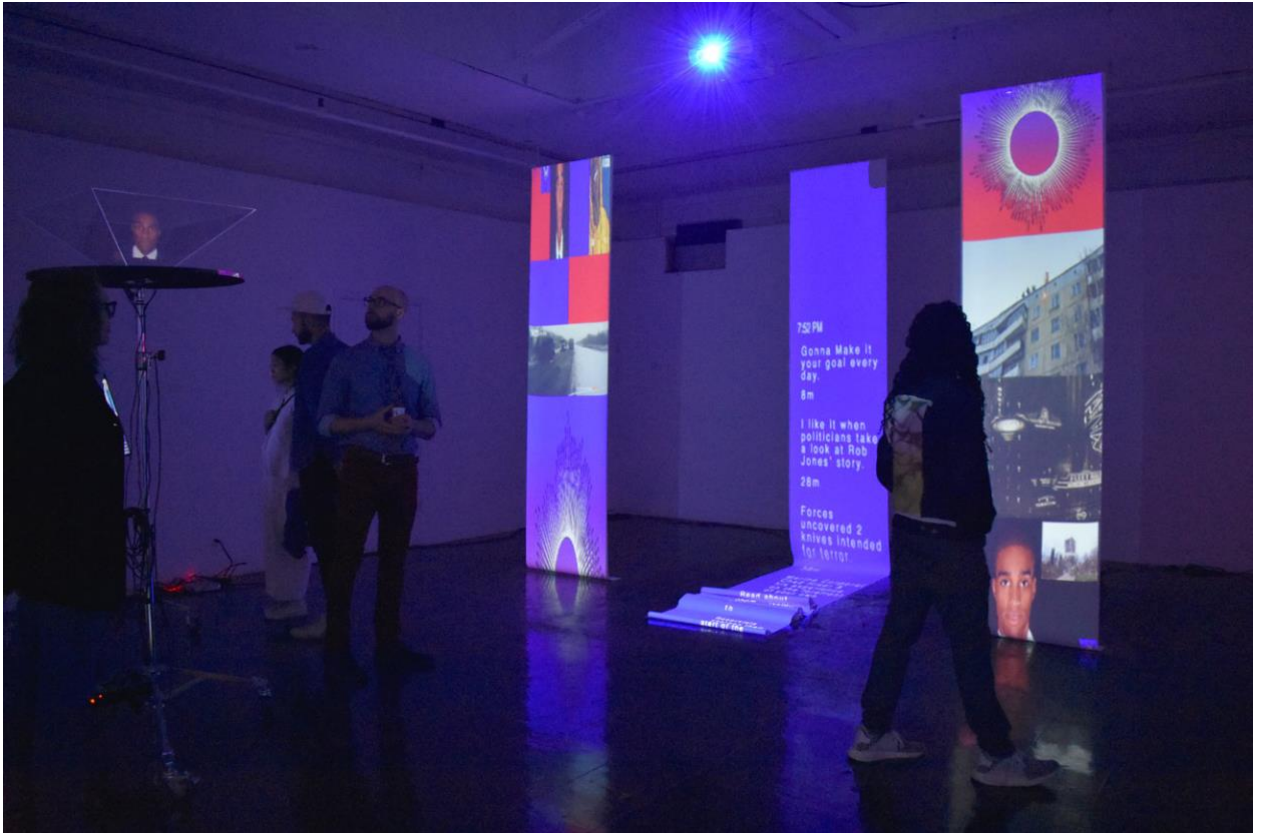
In Media Res

In Media Res is a body of screen-based and installation works that borrow heavily from reality to expose and exaggerate the veneer of the hyperreal. With this work, I am focused on the implications of the omnipresent responsive grid, the continuous feed of information, and content generated by algorithms. I am interested in how the presentation and consumption of media has flattened our concept of reality, with both individual and collective consequences. What are the cracks in the system? Where does it start to unravel? What are its edges and seams?

I created a series of web compositions working with live content and continuously changing imagery. The grid and the feed form an oppressive, omnipresent force, visually alluding to cults of personality, authoritarian regimes, and charismatic religious figures. Content stretches and distorts to accommodate an endless variety of dimensions. I think

of these as a growing lineup of live broadcast channels. Based on early investigation into the teleprompter as a visual form, I developed a four-sided holographic talking head device that gives simulated human form to content generated from continually working bots. The anthropomorphized algorithm makes steps out from the flat screen into three-dimensional space.

A live feed is generated by automated image searches and Twitter bots. Content is continuously changing and no surface is fixed, pointing to a dystopian present-future in which information is hyper-present, generating and even consuming itself. Every surface has the benign veneer of the continuously running feed we're all familiar with, creating a physical space of inundation and confusion.

Bots construct an infinite scroll of new content, and algorithms serve us images and sounds from current events, politics, and the cultural zeitgeist. Responsive websites drive movable tiles that are projected at a large scale and mapped onto surfaces in an infinite number of configurations. Two monitors flank the projected banners, creating an in-between space for viewers to watch and be watched simultaneously. Text-to-speech technology mashes gallery visitors' words together with audio content randomly generated from online searches and played in the space, making gallery visitors an unwitting part of the work.

The mobile hologram apparatus is constantly watching, listening, and recalibrating at the center of the room. The eclipse, a continuing motif, serves as a glorified loading icon, a shorthand, a symbol that gains political and psychological charge through repetition. Ultimately this is a live, automated system that is continuously running—systems within systems that are constantly refreshing and updating in real time. I am simultaneously enamored and unsettled by the idea of a system with such economy. I think about Guy Debord's *Spectacle* and the efficiency and economy of power and control. I think about Keller Easterling's object forms and active forms. I think about Jean Beaudrillard's prophetic notions of the hyperreal.

This is a regime of responsiveness. The all-seeing eye of the algorithm.
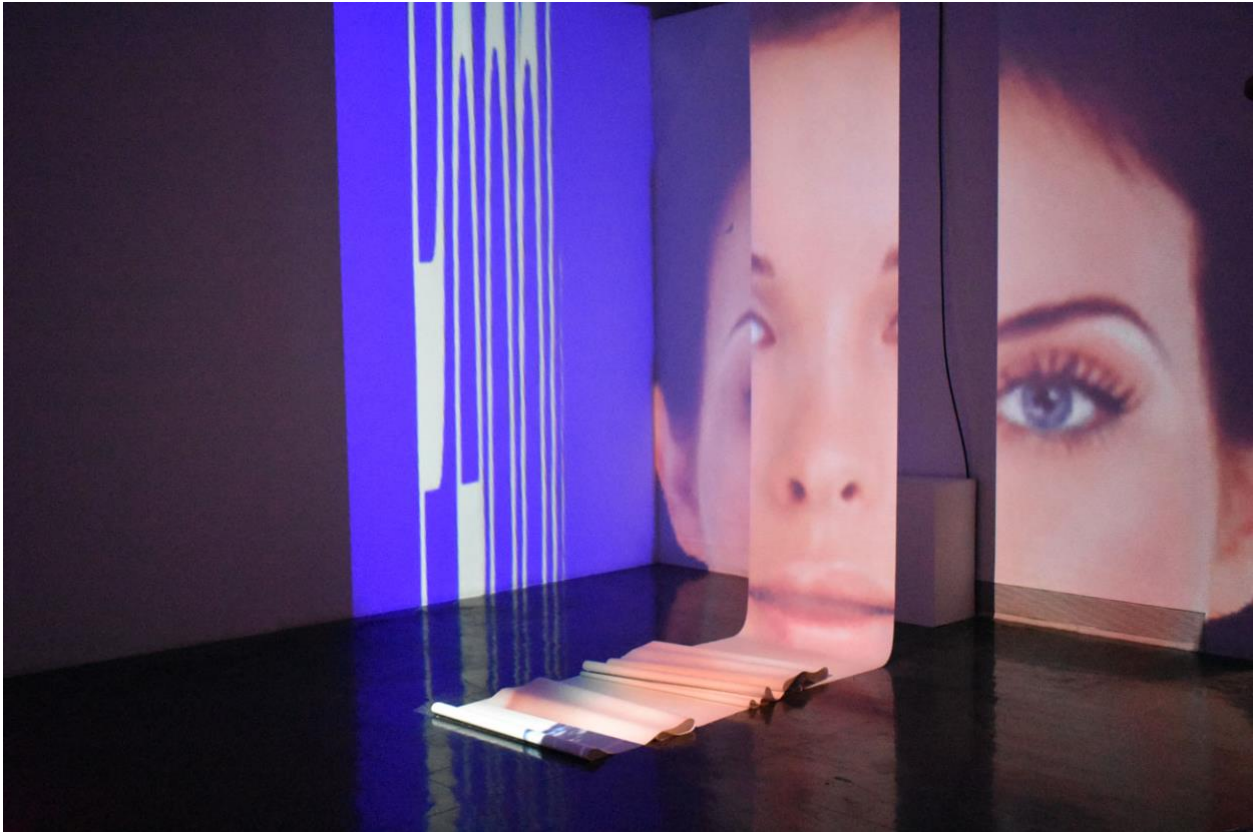
→ See video documentation here: http://drewsisk.com/projects/in-media-res

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Up for 2020," *CNN Money*. 2017. http://money.cnn.com/interactive/media/the-macedonia-story.
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viii Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994. 1.

Drew Sisk is a graphic designer and artist making web-based work, installation, and print media. Blurring the lines between fine art and graphic design, his research explores the conjunction of media, politics, and technology. His client work supports nonprofit organizations, higher education, cultural institutions, and publishing. Drew is Assistant Professor of Design/Digital Media at Tennessee Tech University and is a book designer at Duke University Press. He recently co-founded Utilities Included, a small exhibition space and publishing initiative. His small-run artists' books are included in collections at the Yale University Hass Arts Library Special Collections, Joan Flasch Artists' Book Collection at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), Claire T. Carney Library at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, and James Branch Cabell Library at Virginia Commonwealth University. He earned his MFA in Design/Visual Communication at Virginia Commonwealth University and his BA in Studio Art and Asian Studies at Furman University.