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Brian Mackey: Exhibit explores codes of life, society

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It's a universal modern experience: you post something to Facebook or Twitter and wait for your friends to respond.

Perhaps it's a witty remark, or an insightful comment about the election, or news of The Boy's first goal in soccer.

A few hours later, you check back and are dismayed to find that your cleverness has been greeted by ... silence. In fact, you can't believe how far down you have to scroll to find your pearl of wisdom, past your friends' boring photos, bizarre political views and banal dinner descriptions (yum!).

It turns out you are not a beautiful and unique snowflake.

And at a deeper level, in the code of these websites, you're reduced to an indecipherable jumble of characters that tell the machines what to do.

That intersection — where man meets machine — is the subject of "Object Code," a new exhibit opening today in the Visual Arts Gallery at the University of Illinois Springfield.

Artist Mike Miller takes the title literally, turning ephemeral fragments of computer language into physical artifacts of paper, plastic and wood.

One piece, "Palimpsest," is a mess of computer code printed again and again on the same piece of paper. Staring at it, the sheer mass of content overwhelms any attempts to find meaning. (At times, I've felt the same way about Twitter and Facebook.)

When viewed from the human scale, the Internet is an impossibly vast void, with a gaping maw demanding constant feeding. As the title of Miller's piece says, it's a palimpsest. (The term refers to an ancient precursor to the hard drive: a piece of parchment that could be erased and reused again and again.)

The exhibit space is dominated by "Documents," which covers the floor in the center of the room.

An old classroom map of the world rests on a copy of Walter Benjamin's landmark 1935 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." The article is printed in the font and format of a New York Times article, but on an old piece of wood laminate. It's a way of giving one of the older forms of ephemeral media — the daily newspaper — a somewhat more permanent treatment.

Below that is a huge copy of the Facebook page of Courtney Neunaber, 17, a relative of Miller's who agreed to let him use her page for his art installation.

In an interview in the gallery this week, Miller said Courtney was enthusiastic about the project — "in the spirit of Facebook," he said.

And it's all out there: Courtney's 1,541 friends, the name of her boyfriend, her membership in the Colleyville Heritage High School network.

The final piece of "Documents" is a huge mat containing a fragment of genetic code — the repeating combinations of the letters G, C, A and T, which together represent the chemical composition of life.

Whether online or off, we can't escape our code.

Miller said he's not passing judgment on digital culture. Rather he hopes his exhibit will prompt conversations about the way we're increasingly living online.

Code, he said, "is foreign to a culture that's completely dependent on it."

Looking at the exhibit, I kept thinking of the book "You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto." Published this year, it's computer scientist Jaron Lanier's argument against the dehumanizing aspects of "Web 2.0," a term used to describe the type of social websites (Facebook, Twitter) that have come to dominate the Internet.

The book is about more than that, but no brief description could do it justice and, frankly, I'm still coming to grips with everything Lanier had to say.

But on one point he was clear: "One must remember that the customers of social networks are not the members of those networks. The real customer is the advertiser of the future. ... The only hope for social networking sites from a business point of view is for a magic formula to appear in which some method of violating privacy and dignity becomes acceptable."

As Miller's exhibit seems to suggest, we can believe in the promise of social networks all we want. But our online profiles are just code in the machines on which these "communities" are built, and technology is agnostic about us.

Reception

A reception marking the opening of "Object Code" is scheduled for 5:30 to 8 p.m. today in the Visual Arts Gallery, in Room 201 of the UIS Health and Sciences Building.

Miller will also deliver a lecture on his research at noon Wednesday in Rooms C/D of the UIS Public Affairs Center.

Regular gallery hours are 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Thursday. "Object Code" closes Dec. 1.

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