

Ludd
or Lucifer:
Felicity Fenton
Considers
Whether
to Abandon the
World Wide
Web or Strike
a Deal with
the Devil and
Use the
Internet to
Critique
the Internet

~~~~~ *Richard Speer*



To post or not to post? In light of the “delete-Facebook” and anti-social-media movements, an increasingly vocal contingent of visual artists is wrestling with that very question. Is it worth engaging a digital matrix one finds insidious in order to promote one’s creative output? The question hits close to home for Colorado-born, Portland-based artist Felicity Fenton (b. 1977, fig. 1). Deeply inquisitive, ambitious, and imaginative, Fenton is an interdisciplinary virtuoso who floats freely across drawing, painting, photography, new media, social practice, writing, and conceptual art, juggling her artistic life with hosting a radio show (“Bachelard’s Panty Drawer” on Freeform Radio 90.3 FM), co-parenting a seven-year old daughter, and, significantly, working a full-time job as creative director at a Portland-based tech firm. This day job, more than any other she’s held in the past (sign painter, massage therapist, Arby’s cook, personal assistant to Paul Simon and Lou Reed), informs her art practice today. While she has tackled an array of ideas throughout her artistic life (food and consumption culture, domesticity, ritual, sexual response) and exhibited at a plethora of local venues (among them Milepost 5, p:ear, Anka Gallery, Launch Pad Gallery, the Portland Building, and Performance Works Northwest), it is her current focus on social-media addiction and new-media platforms that most clearly crystallizes her dilemma. Swimming by day in the digital ocean, she returns evenings to her home studio and stares down the impulse to eschew completely the digital realm. Does she engage social media despite its draconian undercurrents in a Faustian bargain to disseminate her ideas; or, in a bid for greater personal authenticity and aesthetic integrity, does she put down the phone, turn off the Wi-Fi, and try to recapture the less contrived, less “connected” ethos of the pre-digital era?

In ironic and double-coded fashion, Fenton’s most recent work employs humor and parody to defang social media’s grip on our psyches, even as she engages the very platforms she is critiquing. Simultaneously she encourages viewers to reenter the worlds of nature, primary experience, and unmediated human interaction. In short, she is inviting us out of the chatroom and back into the agora. The seeds of her current practice took root in her 2013 exhibition “Internal Server Error” at Place White Gallery in Portland. For this show, Fenton kept a meticulous longhand time-log of every Web site she visited over a thirty-day period, no matter how fleetingly or frivolously. The result was a grid of 38 wall-mounted clipboards (some days required multiple clipboards) displaying the logs and the glut of information and ephemera they represented (fig. 2). Paces away from the wall she installed a bank of objects that physically represented the subjects she’d browsed online: dictionaries, cassette tapes, letters from friends, takeout menus, junk mail, and appliance user manuals. This counterpositioning of recorded digital consumption with a much more voluminous assortment of real-world referents set up a spatial dialectic between the frothy, often time-killing habit of Web-browsing (the postmodern equivalent of TV channel-surfing) and the palpability, the literal gravitas, of ancien-régime media that used to be our stock and store, which is to say, physical objects with dimension and heft.

The disparities between cyber and IRL (commonly used acronym for “in real life”) concerns has increasingly become the focus of Fenton’s more recent efforts, among them her Web projects *My Googled Dreams* and *Self-Portrait According to Google* (both 2015–present). In the former, Fenton writes down her dreams, inputs

Figure 1.  
Felicity Fenton,  
*Self-Portrait*,  
November 20,  
2017. Digital  
photograph



keywords from those summaries into Google image search, then displays the returns as scrolling slide shows on her Web site. In the latter project, she inputs written descriptions of her physical appearance into Google image search, then organizes the image returns into grids, creating digital composites of her face and features. In what might seem to be a foregone conclusion, the digital collages do little to capture the nuances of her dreams or physique. The artist's IRL self remains uniquely cyber-resistant even as social-media behemoths buy and sell, gather and dissect, reams of information about our shopping and entertainment preferences, our political affiliations and other private demographics. A few months ago, G-mail began inserting suggested replies at the bottom of each incoming email. It's startling how spot-on these replies can be: "Sure thing — thanks for the heads-up!" "That's great. See you soon!" The algorithm seems to intuit how we would respond even to our dearest relatives. If our correspondence is intelligible to a supercomputer, can our dreams be far behind? If a data aggregator can divine which dating service we might prefer, how long before it can compose a virtual picture of our bodies' every bone and bulge without ever having laid "eyes" upon us? Hearteningly, Fenton's projects demonstrate that at least for now, technology cannot infiltrate and monetize our deepest interior sanctums, nor can it yet perfectly reconstruct our identities from decontextualized data.

Figure 2.  
Installation view,  
Felicity Fenton,  
"Internal Server  
Error," at Place  
White Gallery,  
Portland, OR,  
June 15–August 3,  
2013 (Photo:  
Felicity Fenton)

In *Copy Catz Club* (2018–present), Fenton's photographic collaboration with new-media artist Scott Wayne Indiana (auteur of the well known *Portland Horse Project*), the two artists establish a virtual call-and-response, staging themselves in private and public contexts in activities alternately mundane, absurd,

or ecstatic. One of them will strike a pose, Fenton from Portland and Indiana from New York City, whereupon the other mimics the same pose in his or her own setting, changing details for parodic impact (fig. 3). In recent iterations, Fenton posted a self-portrait playing guitar while standing in the Columbia River, and Indiana responded by playing guitar in his shower. Fenton photographed herself with fortune cookies over her eyes, as if receiving some bizarre facial; Indiana responded with a sugar-cookie eye treatment. All of this may seem in good fun, or perhaps just plain sophomoric, but between the pixels something deeper is at work. A proliferation of so-called “social-media influencers” on Instagram is currently redefining the advertising industry. These mostly fresh-faced pitch-people indirectly advertise goods and services by photographing themselves with various products, calculatedly integrating them into the branded lifestyles they have concocted for their online personae. Their posts aim to inspire admiration, envy, and, most of all, clicks that lure social-media users to pull out their credit cards. In this call-and-response, the call is the influencer’s post; the response is the viewer’s cash. Enter Fenton and Indiana, whose *Copy Catz* shenanigans satirize the influencers. These artists are influencing one another directly; when one initiates a pose, the other must respond with a parroting maneuver. There is no option not to respond. In one another they have found the pluperfect solicitors and consumers. Across the 2,900 miles separating them, they react like entangled quantum particles across space, no matter how ludicrous the action—stuffing Q-tips up their noses, wearing three pairs of sunglasses at once, holding a clothes iron up to an ear as if it were a telephone. It is an unsettlingly undignified exchange, a dark allegory cloaked in whimsy for the manipulations we absorb and fall for without noticing,



Figure 3.  
Felicity Fenton  
and Scott  
Wayne Indiana,  
Copy Catz Club,  
2018–2019.  
Digital photo-  
graphs, images  
archived on  
Instagram:  
@copycatzclub

often without asking or caring what unseen corporate hands are pulling our marionette strings and making us dance.

This profound uneasiness with social media's hidden mediators—and the ways in which they affect our private, public, and economic behavior—is at the heart of Fenton's practice, distilled in her new book, *User Not Found*.<sup>1</sup> As she related during an interview last fall, the book's genesis came in December 2017, when Fenton, feeling increasingly leached of personal authenticity, took a two-month cold-turkey break from all social media. This followed a trip to Indonesia and Mexico during which, she says, "I realized we have this global monoculture with Facebook and Instagram. Wherever you go, you're constantly seeing the blue-and-white screen. I was disturbed by this not only anthropologically, not only with ideas of narcissism and identity, but it also made me question my own attachment to these devices."<sup>2</sup> Leaving the Internet entirely was arguably a disastrous move for an artist who enjoyed a substantial online presence, and indeed, during those two months her Web site traffic declined by fifty percent. Friends cautioned her that she was shooting herself in the foot. As she writes in the book: "If there were ever a time to post something, it would be now, friends say. You have things going on; how will anyone know about them?... Friends and family ask me to come back. They say they like to see what I've been up to."<sup>3</sup>

Conflicted, in March 2018 she began inching back onto the Internet, but with certain rules: no mindless scrolling, just directed searching, and only five minutes a day total. As if to atone for this resumption, she rededicated herself to ongoing and new projects that seek to reconnect people to their pre-digital selves. In her *Sniff* happenings (2007–present) she engages gallery-goers and event attendees in a game of smell-and-tell. She and each participant inhale selected parts of one another's bodies, then record their impressions in a log, which then becomes part of Fenton's Web site. The impressions, she has noticed, read like prose poems. For example: "Jessica on Felicity—Elbows: faint musk laced with candy; a fancy candle with black glass container and pale pink wax.... Felicity on Jessica—Armpits: black pepper, purple, toasted sesame seeds, a Mexican restaurant with a fountain and hydrangeas...." This intimate and often uncomfortable-making project aims to wrest participants out of the hermetic virtual world and back into the mammalian, sensate relations we are increasingly leaving behind. Similar motivations underlie another social-practice project, *The Dreaming Dirt* (2015–present), a series of free-form happenings in which attendees recite poetry, sing, teach, perform healing rituals, and so on. It is the artist's attempt to resuscitate the spirit of the old-school talent show and church social, the barn-raising and hootenanny, the parlor salon and *soirée musicale*. She is on an E. M. Forster-approved mission to encourage us to only connect outside the fiefdom of 1's and 0's. Even her Web site admonishes: "When you are done perusing this site, go outside. Good things happen outside."<sup>4</sup>

The publication in December 2018 of *User Not Found* underlined a dilemma for Fenton: whether to use the Internet to get the word out about an anti-Internet epistle. "I've struggled with how to publicize the essay," she acknowledges, "because it feels wrong posting about a project that's all about trying to remove myself from that world. Kevin [Sampsell], my publisher and friend, is so good at the publicity side of things, I haven't had to do much at all."<sup>5</sup> Lest this seem like passing the buck, she added: "I do get random Twitter texts on my phone, so when someone mentions the book on Twitter, I can be sure to thank them, click

a heart, or retweet.” She has mused over other, non-digital ways of getting attention for the book: “I like the idea of going door to door. Or putting up flyers. Or hiring one of those banner planes. Or sticking status updates in fortune cookies.”

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As cute or glib as that may sound, the conundrum remains. If you shake hands with the devil, will he singe your fingers, or worse? If you advocate for a Net-limited life, do you risk obsolescence and ossification? And is it really that cut and dried—are we either constantly checking status updates or off in the woods as neo-Luddites kindling fires with flint and steel? These are murky-bottomed eddies, and Fenton is to be commended for wading into them. Her work is thoughtful, challenging, sometimes transgressive, yet consistently tempered by humor and a commitment to accessibility. She deserves a wider audience, which fortune cookies will not win her. The modern world stops for no one, and Fenton may soon have to decide on which side of the digital divide she will declare herself. If her aim is to critique the digital kingdom, her best bet may be to do so as a Trojan Horse. To the phrase “If you can’t beat them, join them,” we might tack on the addendum: “then attempt sabotage.” If new media are this talented artist’s chosen tools, she is likely to discover there is no way to sharpen them except by using them.

1 Felicity Fenton, *User Not Found* (Portland, OR: Future Tense Books, 2018).

2 Felicity Fenton, interviewed by the author, September 15, 2018, Portland, OR.

3 Fenton, *User Not Found*, 13, 27.

4 See <https://felicityfenton.com>. For further projects, see also <https://futuretensebooks.com/product/user-not-found-felicity-fenton/>, <https://www.portlandmercury.com/books/2018/12/06/25046842/in-the-new-chapbook-from-future-tense-felicity-fenton-dives-in-to-social-media-addiction>, [https://www.freeformportland.org/program/?show\\_name=bachelards-panty-drawer](https://www.freeformportland.org/program/?show_name=bachelards-panty-drawer), and <https://www.mixcloud.com/felicity-fenton/>, and <https://www.instagram.com/copycatzclub>

5 Fenton, personal email communication, Jan. 8, 2019. Subsequent quotes in this paragraph are from *ibid.*

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