

*Andrew Kuo's Ironies: The Influence of Social Networking on Contemporary
Identity and Self-Representation*

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Andrew Kuo's chart works in the context of self-representation in the age of social media. The paper positions Kuo's artistic development and critical responses to his art, linking his work to social networking practices of online self-portraiture and identity formation, and to identity construction through archive and memory. Kuo's practice is contextualized in a postmodern theoretical framework, specifically irony, to frame his work as a form of critique. The paper argues that Kuo's chart works are an exemplary case of self-representation unique to the age of contemporary social networking, allowing for new hybrid forms of identity.

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INTRODUCTION

This research will focus on the topic of self-representational art in the age of social media. It will explore how practicing artists deal with contemporary identity formation. By looking at Andrew Kuo's self-representational art and its intersections with social media it becomes possible to address broader understandings of subjectivity and expose underlying cultural ideologies within these contemporary techniques of documentation. I will examine Andrew Kuo's art as a form of self-representation in the age of social media. His work can be contextualized as a new form of self-representation as he merges irony, fluid memory, and impermanent experience, with notions of unity, archival permanency, and dead information. The hybridization of traditionally opposed forms of analog and digital mediums further situate Kuo's work within a time and culture where such binaries can be considered to have a shared history and create new philosophical and practical understandings of the self.

To prove this I have divided the research into three sections. The first section, "Andrew Kuo: artistic development and critical responses," will introduce Kuo's work from a series of perspectives. It will look at his early blog, *New York Times Online* music review charts, personal infographs, style, and briefly outline the critical assessments his work has received. These aspects assist in analyzing Kuo's trademark of ironic personal narrative that is informed by his artistic

approach to digital subject matter. This description of his artistic development and critical assessments will provide the foundation of my argument.

The second section, “Social networking: online self-portraiture and identity,” develops a theoretical framework for identity practices that inform Kuo’s artistic work. These frameworks assist in understanding Kuo’s use of social media as a tool for critiquing online self-representation that shifts between fluid impermanency and permanency. His work will be situated within two opposing theories of identity: self-obsessed and fragile narcissism theorized by Ross and Turkle, and Lifton’s fluid, multiple, and impermanent identities stemming from his understanding of the Greek sea God Proteus. Kuo’s work hybridizes these two forms of identity, using irony as a marker of the fluidity between them. Kuo’s art speaks to experiences of self-representation in online networks as he questions the accepted cultural metaphors social media users practice in their self-portraiture.

Finally, the third section, “Constructing identity through the archive and memory,” locates Kuo’s work in theoretical frameworks of archive and memory, further developing the relation of irony, fluid memory, and impermanent experience to unity, archival permanency and dead information. Traces of Protean identities from the previous section align with properties attributed to impermanent memory, while Narcissus identities are linked to the permanency of archival practice. Wendy Chun’s “The Enduring Ephemeral” will assist in further exposing the ideological purposes of cultural metaphors for archive and memory. This section ends with a comparison of Kawara and Felton to Kuo to differentiate

Kuo's representation of identity through ironic impermanent memories from literal quantifications of identity or conceptualizations of time to create a permanent archive.

ANDREW KUO: ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT AND CRITICAL RESPONSES

In this section I will examine Andrew Kuo's artistic development and the responses of critics to his work as a way to demonstrate how the particularities of his online self-representation are constructed through contemporary social networking practices and irony. I will examine the work from a series of perspectives, beginning with his early blog work, followed by his charts in the *New York Times Online*, his personal infographics, subsequent styles, and resulting critical assessments. These categories will incorporate his use of irony, personal narrative, style of production, and approach to digital social media.

Kuo's life is a catalyst for his artistic practice. He constructs a visual identity by putting his personal life on display, which locates his art process within a range of everyday practices. The multi-disciplinary approach taken by Kuo affords expression and reflection that exceeds traditional restrictive art categories. His ironic reflections on personal experiences, indie-pop culture, and art historical references, are markers of contemporary life.

Kuo's background is crucial to understanding his infograph content. Andrew Kuo was born in 1977, in Queens, NY, and currently resides in New York City where he works as an artist, *New York Times* contributor, DJ, and blogger, among other activities. Formally trained at the Rhode Island School of Design with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, Kuo went on to use his critical art

and design skills in multiple fields.¹ Kuo is perhaps best known for his meticulous charts that graph music reviews seen online as digital graphics, which he began to apply to his personal life. In an interview with Joe Magliaro for *Theme Magazine Online*, Kuo states: “[the charts] started as a joke. I think I sent the first chart to a friend as a thank-you note. Then I kept making them. I feel like if I can make things that tell any kind of story, it’s worth making more of them.”² The charts clearly flow organically from Kuo’s life and experiences.

In order to understand Kuo’s beginnings, I will examine his early charts as the precursor to his later artistic approach to self-representation. Kuo posted several initial charts, like the joke charts given to his friend, on his personal blog <earlboykins.blogspot.com> in 2006.³ These charts featured his personal and emotional experiences involving music. In addition to his blog, Kuo consistently produces writing and image creation in the form of instant messages, post-it notes, emails, and tweets.⁴ Kuo’s blog explores the subjective nature of online self-publishing. This site features musical critiques in the form of unconventional charts, which reveal his humorous and highly unforgiving subjective tastes and emotions based on his personal experience of New York’s music scene. Kuo has said his reason for beginning this blog was:

¹ Andrew Kuo, “Artist C.V.,” 2011, *Taxter and Spengeman*, 24 Jan 2012

<http://www.taxterandspengemann.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Kuo_Bio.pdf>

² Joe Magliaro, “The News: Andrew Kuo,” Sep/ Oct 2008, *Theme Magazine Online*, 24 Jan 2012

<<http://www.thememagazine.com/stories/andrew-kuo/>>

³ Graham Beck, “Andrew Kuo: Taxter and Spengeman, New York, USA,” *Frieze Magazine* (July – August 2012): 200.

⁴ Catherine Kim, “Artist Talk: Andrew Kuo,” 8 Nov, *RxArt*, 24 Jan 2012 <<http://www.rxart.net/blog/artist-talk-andrew-kuo>>

[to take the] alias [of Earl Boykins] because I wanted to psychologically separate this [blogging] world from my artwork. Earl Boykins's exactly my height – five feet five – and he's a great player for what he is. I started talking about basketball a lot, but one day one of my friends took me to a concert and I sent her a thank-you note in the form of a diagram. I had a lot of fun working on it and realized that I wanted to do more of these and publish them on my blog. So from then on my blog focused on charts of shows that I had seen or of albums I listened to.⁵

This alias of Earl Boykins must be understood as a play on identity roles in social media and a way for Kuo to express a personal narrative distinct from himself. *Artforum's* Dawn Chan describes his work as a “newer, gentler incarnation of self-disclosure [compared to other contemporary artists like Sophie Calle and Tracey Emin], one made familiar by blogs and YouTube.”⁶ Despite the artist's view of his blog as an alternative to his artwork, the two are undeniably linked as Kuo carries similar themes into the non-blog aspects of his life.

Kuo's blog not only functioned as a starting point for his trademark approaches to art and design, but led to his employment at *The New York Times Online*, which provided him with a new sense of cultural power unique to user/producers of digital social media. The initial charts that Kuo uploaded to his personal blog gathered such a large audience that it caught the attention of the employers at *The New York Times*, who had accidentally stumbled upon his blog.⁷ Soon after, Kuo was invited to publish his musical review graphs (similar to those seen on his blog) in *ArtsBeat*, the cultural blog section of *The New York Times*

⁵ Andrew Kuo, *In/Visible: Graphic Data Revealed*, mod. John Maeda, ed. Nicola Bednarek (New York: Princeton Architectural Press: American Institute of Graphic Arts New York Chapter, 2009), 48.

⁶ Dawn Chan, “Critic's Picks: New York: Andrew Kuo, 33 Bond,” 21 Dec 2007, *Artforum*, 24 Jan 2012 <<http://artforum.com/archive/id=19115>>

⁷ *Ibid.*

Online.⁸ Kuo's work is unlike any other cultural review featured in *ArtsBeat* since his unforgiving musical critiques are in the form of graphs instead of written newspaper articles. His review charts retain the humorous characteristics created by his first post-show notes for the entertainment of his friends, which often seem unedited in comparison to the purely text-based articles. Kuo's particular subjective stance is productive as it allows him to express critical responses visually that may not have been featured in conventional newspaper articles otherwise. Ironically, this unconventional nature of his reviews and transition from blogger to reviewer have led many *New York Times* readers to believe Kuo's graphical reviews are authentic portrayals of the New York music scene as his articulations of personal sensory experience, from listening to albums to attending musical concerts, give him public appeal as a "music nerd."⁹ Marcela Silvia describes his work:

Kuo's reliance on the casual use of – assumed as assimilated – music references and genre neologisms, make the charts even more appealing for the youth culture, as the readers who catch the 'wink' can also consider themselves insiders, music connoisseurs.¹⁰

This wink speaks as an ironic gesture to those who understand it. Those inside of youth music see through Kuo's entangling of seemingly authentic and sincere opinions to its exclusionary cynicism.

⁸ Marcela Silva, "Don't Miss – New York: Andrew Kuo, 'My List Of Demands' at Taxter & Spengemann," 25 April 2011, *Art Observed*, 24 Jan 2012 <<http://artobserved.com/2011/04/dont-miss-new-york-andrew-kuo-my-list-of-demands-at-taxter-spengemann-through-april-30th-2011/>>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

To ground Kuo's use of irony I will briefly turn to Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon for their critical perspectives on the term. Jameson's use of irony is situated within the era of late capitalist postmodernism. He maintains that self-consciousness and reflexivity are elements of irony that often lead to misunderstanding and misreading.¹¹ Jameson considers irony's literary value as a "vulgar appropriation of Einstein's theory of relativity," which is expressed through ideology.¹² Hutcheon sees irony extending beyond the postmodern era as she studies its discursive practice and strategies. She describes ironic meaning to be complex as it is "[not] simply the unsaid meaning, and the unsaid is not always a simple inversion or opposite of the said: it is always different – other than and more than the said."¹³ Irony relies on interpretive and indirect communication, requiring preexisting "discursive communities"¹⁴ to provide context for its deployment and attribution.¹⁵ As we proceed through an examination of Kuo's work, we will see a range of ironic strategies, from extreme self-reflexivity and intended misreading to direct address to discursive communities that get the insider wink.

Kuo's irony is found in his gallery artworks, where he appropriates the language from his blog and review work to form critical reflections of his personal life instead of music. The irony in Kuo's work allows otherwise

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1991), 258 – 259.

¹² *Ibid.*, 412.

¹³ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, (New York; London: Routledge, 2000), 12 – 13.

¹⁴ These preexisting discursive communities have similar concerns, knowledge, and interests that allow subjects to perform indirect communication.

¹⁵ Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, 18 – 20.

formulaic representations of data to become comical and digestible for public audiences. Irony is exemplified in Kuo's self-critical and anxious reflections on his own life and emotions in the work *Everything Bums Me Out About Everything, People and Sandwiches alike – On January 14, 2009*. In his piece Kuo lists different aspects of his life in rows and then states why each bums him out in corresponding columns that are sometimes labeled with reasons which ultimately provide no answers as to why he feels the way he does. For example, one of the colour-coded columns contains the text: "Here's to the '90s! My one true love!" This text does not explain why Kuo is feeling bummed out (as suggested by the title), yet his over-enthusiasm implies that he is being ironic and sarcastic, suggesting that he hated the '90s.

Irony also stems from Kuo's diary-like writing style found in his infographs.

During a television interview with American interviewer Charlie Rose, Kuo said:

I'm quantifying things that can't be compared to anything. Like how I feel about my day, as opposed to how I feel about this exact piece of work. You know, it's actually in the piece. So I think that, as much as anything, is art.¹⁶

Kuo unquestionably understands that he is quantifying aspects of life that cannot actually be quantified and the practice of creating them is itself an ironic act. This aspect of irony can be seen as a comment on the cultural practice where attempts to neatly quantify life experiences within social media occur in ways that are unable to be represented. Kuo takes social media practices of self-quantification

¹⁶ Charlie Rose, "Charlie Rose Tomorrow – Andrew Kuo," 23 Feb 2008, *Charlie Rose*, 24 Jan 2012 <<http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/89567>>

further by making artwork out of them, in order to critique the normalized practice of attempting to quantify one's life and personality. The ironic state of Kuo's work both critiques and shows how deterministic algorithms could be used as a supplemental space of self-expression. Kuo charts moments in life, often irrational or ephemeral data, which cannot actually be quantified. The primary content of Kuo's artworks is online environments, which shove unquantifiable and highly personal data into prearranged algorithms. His trademark use of irony, evident across his music review charts and gallery works, enables Kuo to construct a critique of logging one's personal life in social networks.

Kuo's artistic strategies rely upon the ironic language and techniques typical of hipsters, one of his most attentive discursive communities. His charts usually respond to the genres of music that appeal to sub-cultural youth groups. He often caters to music considered underground or informed by hipster conventions that have become mainstream.¹⁷ Robert Lanham, who wrote *The Hipster Handbook* out of hipster fatigue, describes "hipsterism" as far too over-exposed to be considered underground or counter to hegemonic cultural tastes.

Lanham offers three main points to define the hipster:

hipsterism is about stuff. It's the natural byproduct of a consumption-obsessed culture with a thriving middle class. The complete works of Johnny Cash on vinyl. An iPhone packed with apps. Thick-framed glasses without the lenses. Throw in an unwavering certainty that your tastes are superior to everyone else's, and you're on your way to establishing a hipster aesthetic.¹⁸

¹⁷ Robert Lanham, "Look at This Fucking Hipster Basher," 29 Jun 2009, *The Morning News Online*, 25 Feb 2012 <<http://www.themorningnews.org/article/look-at-this-fucking-hipster-basher>>

¹⁸ Ibid.

Thus, material possessions are the primary markers for identity and cultural capital among the members of this group. Lanham's second defining point of hipsterism is pastiche, as hipsters blend pop-cultural elements to create new sensibilities.¹⁹ Irony is the final defining quality of hipsters, which Lanham sees as "a knee-jerk way for hipsters to emotionally distance themselves from sincerely appreciating things."²⁰ Lanham further characterizes hipsters as nostalgic and self-loathing. Each of these characteristics are echoed in Kuo's work. Paradoxically, Kuo has become an authentic music nerd for hipster audiences because of his incorporation of pastiche and irony, in addition to a focus on nostalgia and self-loathing critical commentary in both his artworks and music review charts.

Frieze Magazine's Graham Beck argues that Kuo's graphic works have created a cult following amongst New York tastemakers as a variation on hipsterism.²¹ As a graphic designer, Kuo mixes graphically quantified data with musical knowledge to judge – in the manner of a connoisseur – and to display his good taste in contemporary New York music. Although Kuo seems to have become a tastemaker in the New York hipster scene, there is an ironic tension in the way he phrases his opinions to claim superior taste in music. The indistinguishable line between irony and sincerity in his work therefore points to a second level of irony, which transcends the system of taste making. Kuo's ironically referenced notions of connoisseurship in both visual art and musical taste poke fun at these qualities found within the hipster group which considers

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Graham Beck, "Andrew Kuo: Taxter and Spengeman, New York, USA," *Frieze Magazine*, 200.

itself sub-cultural, and outside of traditional notions of taste making. This doubling of ironic cultural meaning is only possible because of the cultural power Kuo holds as a *New York Times Online* reviewer and the authentic resonance of his earlier personal blog.

Regardless of the cultural critiques and the many levels of irony in Kuo's work, he has become a tastemaker for the hipster music scene by transforming his online self-representation into one of cultural distinction and hipster celebrity status. Many of the first music review charts produced by Kuo at *The New York Times* were from *CMJ's Music Marathon*, an annual festival put on by the *College Music Journal (CMJ)*. *CMJ's* target audience is the same hipster group that Kuo ironically references in his music review graphs. *CMJ: 15 – Minute Test* and *CMJ: 'Music You Are Dead to Me'* were both made during the 2008 *CMJ Music Marathon*, and demonstrate Kuo's attempt to document and quantify his ephemeral experiences. Many of his *CMJ* charts describe his anticipation of the event, his mental state while at a music event, and his post-show opinions regarding the performance.²² In these charts Kuo notes occurrences that distracted him from the music, creating a multi-sensory document regarding his ephemeral experience of the event. Joe Magliaro has written about these characteristics found throughout Kuo's charts in *Interview Magazine*: "By combining personal minutiae and the public spectacle of live music in accessible, candy-coloured graphs, Kuo preserves a bit of the ephemeral rush of participating in the event

²² Magliaro, "The News: Andrew Kuo," *Theme Magazine Online*.

itself.”²³ His early *CMJ* charts positioned him both as a tastemaker within hipster youth music and as a member of the group itself by attending nearly every show at the event. Kuo maintains his musical authority through his review charts in *The New York Times* where he expresses his devotion through his constant attendance, familiarity with the music itself, critical approaches, and involvement as a musician.²⁴ Kuo’s celebrity status within hipster culture has been made possible by his ironic use of self-representation on his blog, music reviews, and personal involvement as he critiques the role of tastemaking by documenting his personal musical experiences.

Moving into Kuo’s documentation of his experience, I wish to establish his personal infographics as a practice in dialogue with digital archival techniques used in contemporary social media. Kuo’s chart works are artistic incorporations of the digital archive, as he obsessively transcribes his thoughts, habits, and events into analog prints to be exhibited in galleries. These prints are different from the earlier online music chart reviews. Although his prints appear from afar as if digitally produced, up close it is clear that Kuo created the majority of his charts through labour intensive analog techniques of painting, printing, and in some cases, sculpture. Kuo’s light-hearted and self-critical narratives logging his daily activities and thoughts, as an artist or gallery visitor, his reflections on pop culture (particularly music and art), his mood swings, misunderstandings through Instant Messaging, hangovers, failures, life stages, intervals of wasted time, and

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ At the *CMJ Music Marathon* in October 2011, Andrew Kuo participated in the festival by DJing a set at The Fader Fort venue.

nostalgia, comprise the content of his prints and reflect concerns expressed in contemporary Twitter culture. One example in particular, *Looks like the Mind-Garden Needs a Weeding on June 13, 2009*, uses minimal word count. Minimal word counts are often seen in social media sites like Twitter, which are programmed to limit users textually. By controlling the length of messages there is a shift from conventional text which is lengthy and descriptive to condensed and fractured language. *Looks like the Mind-Garden Needs a Weeding on June 13, 2009* utilizes minimal word count to convey thoughts labeled the “brain zone” and things that “actually happen” in a systematic chart, giving a sense of what he considered important to note. Text in this piece includes: “I wish I was a little bit taller...”; “Lurking on Facebook. ‘861 pictures? Really? That’s it?’”; and “Understanding that there’s always someone worse off than me.” These personal reflections align with the criticality and irony found in his charted music reviews, yet speak to larger cultural assumptions that are ideologically entwined with social media and documentation which will be explored in more detail later in this paper.

I will now consider Kuo’s artworks as a merging of digital and analog aesthetics to create new artistic approaches to self-representation and the multiplicity of identity unique to social media. While the artwork does not consist of data visualizations from actual tweets, or other social media, Kuo’s structuring of content echoes tweets and the fractured storytelling found in his blog. In an interview with Catherine Kim from *RxArt*, Kuo outlines his approach as allowing

him “to talk about more than one thing at once, literally plotting one idea against the other within the same eyeshot.”²⁵ The layout of his infographic charts allow for multiple stories to be shown at the same time, reproducing non-linear forms of online conversation. Kuo’s aesthetic approach evokes online/digital infographic design aesthetics that social media users interact with on a daily basis.²⁶ Kuo’s use of analog processes, such as carbon transfers, lithography, silkscreen, drawing, and painting, are evident in the completed pieces and act as a visual history of his mark making processes.²⁷ The evidence of Kuo’s previous mark making is a uniquely analog property chosen so these elements would not be erased, deleted, or covered as would often occur in digital imaging processes. Kuo purposely allows these elements of mark making to peek through the final layers to demonstrate the unregulated nature of his artistic process which are often interpreted by viewers as “mistakes.”²⁸ His analog practice mirrors computer-aided compartmentalization of personal lives into data figurations, and he often uses digital technologies to fabricate his prints, demonstrating the merging of processes and aesthetic approaches in digital and analog mediums, much as he has ironically merged in his work.

Understandably, Kuo’s approach has provoked a range of critical responses that I will briefly review here. Graham Beck of *Frieze Magazine*

²⁵ Kim, “Artist Talk: Andrew Kuo,” *RxArt*.

²⁶ Rose, “Charlie Rose Tomorrow – Andrew Kuo,” *Charlie Rose*
<<http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/8956>>

²⁷ Ken Miller, “Art: Andrew Kuo’s Chart World,” 1 Dec 2012, *Interview Magazine Online*, 24 Jan 2012
<http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/andrew-kuo-what-me-worry#_>

²⁸ Jason Schwartzman, “Andrew Kuo,” *Bad Day Magazine*, Issue 11 (21 July 2011): 87.

maintains that Kuo's practice is so varied it may require a Venn diagram to understand.²⁹ Venn diagrams are visualizations used to distinguish relations among sets or collections of data. Beck criticizes Kuo's charting of life as confusing, because his art requires another set of charts in order to fully explain it. He also determines Kuo's work to be disjointed, identifying five styles:

[T]he colourful, comedic info-graphics for which Kuo is best known; angsty, brushy portraits in acrylic on linen; iPhone photos of convenience store flowers pimped with pie charts; a palette-knifed self-portrait with comic-strip sensibilities; and Sunday-painter mediations on a down-scale florist's unsold stock.³⁰

Other reviewers like *Artforum Online's* Michael Wilson disagree, describing Kuo's chart works as his strength. Wilson describes the general experience with Kuo's work as easily understood as a graphical representation of the artist's daily life and a reflection of his psyche.³¹ However, the critic is concerned viewers can easily dismiss Kuo's work as a "snarky gimmick" by interpreting only the initial face value indicating artifice.³² Wilson sees Kuo's "forceful design" as a distinguishing touch of sophistication and criticality in the application of his casual and colloquial appeal.³³ This critique clearly notes the ease with which viewers can misinterpret the irony in the pieces for sincerity. Will Henrich from *The New York Observer* found Kuo's abstract works shown in "My List of Demands" at Taxter & Spengemann in 2011 to be a confusing instance where the

²⁹ Graham Beck, "Andrew Kuo: Taxter and Spengeman, New York, USA," *Frieze Magazine*, 200.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Michael Wilson, "Critics Picks: Andrew Kuo," 8 Apr 2011, *Artforum Online*, 24 Jan 2012
<<http://artforum.com/archive/id=27928>>

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

viewer is unsure whether they were supposed to be ironic, artificial, or a critique.³⁴ However, Henrich seemed lost in the “mistakes” he kept finding within the works he viewed. The critic was uncertain if the evidence of pencil lines and lettering mistakes covered with correction tape (alongside untouched spelling errors) were careless mistakes or intended decisions.³⁵

Dawn Chan understands Kuo’s first publication *What me Worry* as a therapy session, because it appears as “blogger chatter” written in a “take-it-or-leave-it-cheer,” regardless of who is listening, reading, or viewing.³⁶ Even more potently Chan claims this publication is “as morosely confessional as a good rock record.”³⁷ It is important to note that his confessional, take-it-or-leave-it-attitude is not necessarily a negative aspect of his work, but perhaps marks the unrecognized visual language unique to hybrid identity experiences specific to social media. The concerns expressed by critics demonstrate the way in which Kuo’s use of hybridity opens up his work to multiple interpretations. The varying levels in which viewers can understand Kuo’s work mirror the multiplicity and fluidity of his self-representation within the art pieces. These critiques inadvertently offer insight into the personal opinions of the viewers regarding self-representational practices online.

In this section I have introduced Kuo’s work from a series of perspectives. I began by discussing his early blog, *New York Times Online* music review charts,

³⁴ Will Heinrich, “From the Abstract to the Human and Back: Leland Bell and Andrew Kuo,” 4 May 2011, *The New York Observer*, 24 Jan 2012 <<http://www.observer.com/2011/culture/abstract-human-and-back>>

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

personal infographs, style, and I briefly outlined critical assessments his work has received. During this process I analyzed his use of irony and personal narrative, and his approach to digital media subject matter. This overview of his artistic development and critical assessments of his work provides the foundation of my argument that Kuo's work is a form of self-representation unique to and critical of the age of social media, which I detail in the following section.

SOCIAL NETWORKING: ONLINE SELF-PORTRAITURE AND IDENTITY

To fully explore Kuo's practice as a new form of self-representation unique to the age of social media I will develop a theoretical frame using social networks and online identity formations to situate Kuo's work. I will first approach colloquial understandings of the online self as self-obsessed and then the fragile self through readings of Narcissus. I will contrast this with the concept of the online fluid self through readings of Proteus. This section will end by comparing Kuo's work with Jens Wunderling's locative media.

To begin to see Kuo's work as more than a narcissistic self-obsessed practice I want to first address the colloquial understanding of narcissism in self-representations online. Social networking sites have increased the ability for large public audiences to create digital and personally directed self-representations of themselves. Many individuals are attracted to these online spaces as they offer new ways of communication, information sharing, and entertainment. Social networking sites are primarily formulated by organizing information around a personal profile, which allows for new types of self-representation to occur as images, conversations, and hyperlinks are embedded into one's profile page. The entangling interests, social connections, and visual appearance impact how individuals are represented and perceived by the networked community. However, the structure of social networking sites constrains self-representation to specific fields. For example, Facebook requires users to fill specific fields of information

in order to categorize their identity: age, sex, relationship status, profile image, and so forth, each of which is incorporated into a formulaic profile page. Any information that does not fit into these categories will not be included in the profile page, unless it is offered in the form of a temporary status, or by writing on someone else's profile wall or in private message. However restrictive these fields of information are, performative aspects of a virtual persona can be formulated through their use, and often bleed back into material reality. Constant interactions with these identity-making and constraining vehicles involve what can be considered narcissistic behaviour. Generally speaking, this form of online narcissism is usually attributed to younger generations sometimes referred to as "digital natives" although the effects of using social networking and Internet structures have altered other generations' outlook on subjective experience as well.³⁸

This generalization of online identity as a self-obsessed practice can be traced through the history of narcissism. Ovid's Narcissus provides an appropriate metaphor that today informs aspects of online identity construction. In *Metamorphoses Book III: The Wrath of Juno*, Narcissus is born with a prophecy foretelling his unfortunate self-obsession and his untimely death.³⁹ Narcissus is described as an attractive youth, full of pride, and unattainable to his numerous love interests. Ovid describes a curse placed upon Narcissus by a past love

³⁸ Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon*, Vol. 9, No. 5, (October 2001): 1. Marc Prensky, 14 Mar 2012 <<http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/prensky%20-%20digital%20natives,%20digital%20immigrants%20-%20part1.pdf>>

³⁹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Charles Martin (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 106.

interest: “ ‘May he himself love as I have loved him,’ he said, ‘without obtaining his beloved.’”⁴⁰ Narcissus becomes forever tormented by his reflection, unable to distinguish himself from his mirror image in a pool of water. Believing that his own reflection is of another, he is incapable of leaving this illusion and is haunted by his self-reflection even in the afterlife. Narcissus personifies self-obsession, and thus the concept of narcissism is an appropriate metaphor for self-obsessed identity constructed in online social networking practices. As Narcissus mistook his own reflection for another, it is possible that an online persona may become a performative obsession in its own right, which can ultimately impact both physical and online interactions.

Christine Rosen has linked narcissism and digital self-portraiture in social networks. In her 2007 article “Virtual Friendship and the New Narcissism,” she traces the historical function of self-portraiture from a marker of status and wealth to a form of immortality, self-expression, and attention seeking. She sees portraits as an important window for understanding culture, as they can offer historical insight into the time they were created. This notion stems from German art historian Hans Belting’s understanding of self-portraiture as both an intentional and unintentional “painted anthropology.”⁴¹ Rosen outlines the carefully crafted and versatile nature of online portraits: “Like painters constantly retouching their work, we alter, update, and tweak our online self-portraits; but as digital objects

⁴⁰ Ibid., 106.

⁴¹ Christine Rosen, “Virtual Friendship and the New Narcissism,” *The Digital Divide: Arguments for and Against Facebook, Google, Texting, and the Age of Social Networking*, ed. Mark Bauerlein (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/ Penguin, 2011), 172 - 173.

they are far more ephemeral than oil on canvas.”⁴² She notes that the enthusiastic uptake of social networks is in part a result of their potential for identity play and constant alteration of oneself, which she does not see as a positive effect.⁴³ However, the archetypes embedded in social networks in fact constrain how people present themselves, and how they interact with others through this standardization. For Rosen, the proliferation of social-networking sites marks the end of Internet anonymity and the beginning of committed self-exposure, forcing users to embrace ideas of compartmentalizing their personalities in a fashion that is nearly impossible to maintain through exhibitionism.⁴⁴ The act of editing one’s online persona exposes the users’ active involvement and acknowledges that they are consciously formulating how others will see them. Users choose what aspects of themselves they want to contribute to their profiles or homepages, believing that they have control over the production and reception of their digital identity. Rosen views this digital narcissism as constraining identity in producing self-portraits in social networks.

In contrast Sherry Turkle’s fragile self acts as an alternative means of understanding Narcissus. In *The Second Self*, she wrote: “[t]his image of that other person fascinated him [Narcissus] because it objectified a sense of beauty of which he had felt only a vague inner sense.”⁴⁵ Turkle’s statement opens up a new way for understanding narcissism, by moving beyond the traditional associations

⁴² Ibid., 173.

⁴³ Ibid., 184.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 146.

with self-obsession. Instead, Turkle focuses on the role of narcissism in the psychoanalytic tradition. As she combines social networks with identity formations, narcissism is used not to describe self-obsession, but a fragile personality requiring constant support.⁴⁶ Her version of the narcissistic personality suggests:

It cannot tolerate the complex demands of other people, but tries to relate to them by distorting who they are and splitting off what it needs, what it can use. So, the narcissistic self gets on with others by dealing only with their made-to-measure representations. These representations (some analytic traditions refer to them as 'part objects,' others as 'self-objects') are all that the fragile self can handle. We can easily imagine the utility of inanimate companions to such a self because a robot or a computational agent can be sculpted to meet one's needs. But a fragile person can also be supported by selected and limited contact with people (say, the people on a cell phone 'favorites' list). In a life of texting and messaging, those on that contact list can be made to appear almost on demand. You can take what you need and move on. And, if not gratified, you can try someone else.⁴⁷

Turkle understands social networking sites as places that can support the fragile self. The restrictive user interactions in online social environments can alleviate the stress of face-to-face conversations. Thus, fragile personalities often thrive in online social environments because they can select or limit interaction as they please. Narcissistic fragile selves often maintain relationships online because they allow them to gain from a relationship without necessarily having to fulfill other people's needs. The fragile self also requires mirrors and support systems in social networking sites to define themselves against in order to retain a sense of self.

⁴⁶ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 177.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Turkle's and Rosen's contrasting interpretations of narcissism both expose the meticulous and constant upkeep required for self-portraiture and identity in social networking environments.

The story of Narcissus and the two interpretations offered by Turkle and Rosen ultimately reveal that Kuo's work seems to exemplify these characteristics of self-obsession or fragile anxiety. Kuo's art is often considered narcissistic, as he is constantly the subject of his own work. He expresses his life experiences in a self-obsessed manner. This narcissism can be read as what Hutcheon refers to as the "said" meaning.

Kuo's charts construct a visual language to expose the tropes of social networks. Kuo acknowledges dominant culture as though to confirm it, in order to bring the unsaid elements in his work into play, to engage the interpretive community of social media users. He is both referencing accepted norms of identity construction in online portraiture and critiquing them, using the said and unsaid to create an interpretative irony that questions the role of quantifying human behaviour and data constraints inherent in social networking sites.

The protean self offers a different theoretical frame for considering online identity construction in general and Kuo's reformations of online identity in particular. In Robery Jay Lifton's book *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*, he describes the self as fluid. Proteus, the Greek sea god is "inconstant" in his physical form.⁴⁸ In Homer's *The Odyssey*, Proteus fools others

⁴⁸ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 51.

by taking the shape of any living creature or element on earth, yet he is tricked into answering questions when constrained and unable to shift from his original form.⁴⁹ For Lifton, Proteus is a “Metaphor for a contemporary phenomenon – a metaphor sufficiently rich to suggest the blending of radical fluidity, functional wisdom, and a quest for a least minimal form.”⁵⁰ Proteus can therefore be seen as an example of multiple personalities that are purposefully accessed within a fluid self instead of a fluid self-created from a fragile or obsessive individual caused by unconscious needs or desire.

Rosen uses Lifton’s protean self to describe how online social networking promotes the concept of the self as multiple, highlighting his concepts of irony and humour: “Mockery and self-mockery, irony, absurdity, and humor enable the protean self to ‘lubricate’ its experiences and to express the absence of ‘fit’ between the same way the world presents itself and the way one actually feels about it.”⁵¹ Rosen examines a survey conducted by the University of Daytona demonstrating a staggering twenty-three percent of students admitted to intentional misrepresentation of self on Facebook for humorous purposes.⁵² For Rosen, this sense of comedy, irony and mockery on social networking sites is entrenched behaviour and evidence of the fluid protean self in online relations. Protean inconsistency and non-permanence is what Rosen sees as the appeal of

⁴⁹ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Walter Shewring (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 44 - 45.

⁵⁰ Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 5.

⁵¹ Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*, 5 – 6.

⁵² Rosen, “Virtual Friendship and the New Narcissism,” *The Digital Divide: Arguments for and Against Facebook, Google, Texting, and the Age of Social Networking*, 187.

online communication.⁵³ Turkle, on the other hand, suggests in her work *Alone Together* that this sense of non-permanency often attributed to digital identities on the web is false. Turkle is concerned with the effects an individual's online identity may have on their future, implying that online identity is in many ways permanent. For Turkle, Lifton's protean self is "capable, like Proteus, of fluid transformations but is grounded in coherence and moral outlook. It is multiple but integrated. You have a sense of self without being one self."⁵⁴ Citing science historian Donna Haraway as another source for theorizing multiple selves, Turkle suggests: "The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly; and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another."⁵⁵ This is increasingly complex as the Protean self emphasizes fluidity, multiplicity, impermanency, and irony, further opposing it to online representations of the narcissistic self which often assumes a unified permanence, characterized by anxiety, fragility, and self-obsession.

It seems that Kuo's work strategically positions narcissistic and protean metaphors of identity as extreme ends of a continuum, allowing a new sense of online identity that reads across and references both. Even Kuo's production process, hybridizing analog and digital, suggests fluidity. Kuo's identity transitions seamlessly between artworks and within them, using irony as Lifton

⁵³ Rosen, "Virtual Friendship and the New Narcissism," *The Digital Divide: Arguments for and Against Facebook, Google, Texting, and the Age of Social Networking*, 187.

⁵⁴ Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1995), 258.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 261.

suggests, experiencing and expressing feelings within a range of multiple identities.

To contextualize Kuo's work as an exemplary form of self-representation in the age of social media, I will apply the theoretical frameworks explored in this section to a comparison of Kuo and Jens Wunderling's work, both of which explore identities in online public and private spaces. Social-networking sites often require repetitive acts of narcissistic self-exposure, which Jens Wunderling's *Tweetleak* project demonstrates as having public/private consequences. This work creates an awareness of the naivety regarding personal information that is shared in the virtual world, and its implications for physical embodiment. *Tweetleak* is comprised of a printer and GPS reading pole that collects and aggregates tweets sent from nearby and then prints them as physical stickers.⁵⁶ Wunderling's work is described on his website as a materialization of virtual communications:

The collected fragments from people's lives on the web leave the digital public space on adhesive paper strips. Being taken away by other individuals, they are distributed in physical space, eventually being placed in another context in another environment.⁵⁷

The creator of this public intervention clearly shows how the virtual and physical spheres are linked, by pointing to the problems that could result from free access to personal information that is offered up by millions of Twitter users around the world as they maintain and extend their online self-portrait.

⁵⁶ Jens Wunderling, "Tweetleak," 2008, *Default to Public*, 15 Apr 2011
<<http://www.defaulttopublic.net/tweetleak/index.html>>

⁵⁷ Ibid.

The project captures information sent out in tweets regardless of the tweeter's awareness of the art project. The artist uses this lack of awareness in physical space as a metaphor for the digital conditions in social networking environments. These conditions are of course often not something users can see online and therefore they are often unaware of what happens to their personal information after updating their online identities. Wunderling publishes the GPS coordinates of each project installation of *Tweetleak* so willing participants can also actively seek out the location by moving nomadically through the city to find a specific place on a specific date. Once a person's tweet has been printed out onto paper and taken away from the temporary project location by another individual, the originating Twitter account is sent a notification.⁵⁸ The act of notification is described by Wunderling as "the loss of control over one's data... after a short period of time, the user won't be able to track his [or her tweet]."⁵⁹ Wunderling literally forces Twitter users into a position where they must acknowledge the loss of control of their identity that their narcissistic practice leads to. Kuo also addresses this issue by displaying his personal private experiences in public online forums and in public gallery spaces. Both artists question issues of access to and control information in private and public contexts produced by social networking structures for quantifying the self.

Interestingly, both artists employ hybrid methods to demonstrate private and public space. The adhesive paper strips that contain tweeted information bring

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

into question perceived notions of the ephemerality of digital media versus the materiality of analog media. Many participants in Wunderling's default to public series documented their shock or confusion to the project by tweeting about it directly after they were notified that their information had been materialized within city spaces.⁶⁰ Yet, they were not worried about publicly accessible digital forms of the same information available through their open Twitter accounts. This continues to occur despite the well-made known fact that the USA Library of Congress collects all Twitter posts, archiving and making digital data accessible and linkable to other personal traces on the Internet, and information on social networking sites is sold to companies for data mining purposes.⁶¹ Even the FBI has discussed their interest in aggregating social media for data mining.⁶² Kuo's work achieves a similar ironic twist on digital ephemerality. By hybridizing his artistic practice and bringing digital subjectivity into his traditional (analog) medium, Kuo materializes his personal information. This materialization is not only bringing Kuo into his work, but also inadvertently commenting upon this practice by other individuals, which in turn creates a cynical sense of irony. Kuo, on the other hand, is playing a part to comment on the unsaid elements and the new message that critiques through his act of exhibitionism. As the subject of his work, Kuo displays his information publicly and neatly categorized into data sets.

⁶⁰ Jens Wunderling, "default to public (2008)," 2012, *Jens Wunderling*, 26 Apr 2012
<<http://www.jenswunderling.com/works/default-to-public/>>

⁶¹ Matt Raymond, "How Tweet It Is!: Library Acquires Entire Twitter Archive," 14 Apr 2010, *Library of Congress*, 15 Apr 2011 <<http://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2010/04/how-tweet-it-is-library-acquires-entire-twitter-archive/>>

⁶² "FBI seeks social media data mining tool," 13 Feb 2012, *CBC News*, 4 Apr 2012
<<http://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/story/2012/02/13/technology-fbi-social-media-app.html>>

His visually appealing charts ironically situate the audience in the role of the data miner as they attempt to aggregate his seemingly narcissistic practices in order to understand his identity or life. Although Kuo's work uses the language of narcissism it is doing so to mirror these characteristics of narcissistic practices and allow viewers to question their involvement with them. Similarly by doing this Kuo's use offers viewers a new way of understanding social networking as a new form of expression that could potentially bypass narcissism by using irony in a similar vein. As each artist works to expose issues of access they are simultaneously commenting on the cataloging of one's social media self over time. The fluid protean self is constrained by its online instantiation, since older aspects of the self will remain in play; they do not yet shift over time with the individual. Each artist's materialization of personal data can similarly be seen as fixing fluid identities in time.

By comparing Wunderling and Kuo's work, issues of public and private online identities become clearer. The different tactics taken by each artist expose the complexity of narcissistic and protean identity types, in turn shedding light on the state of digital self-portraiture. Furthermore, this comparison highlights Kuo's use of fixed narcissistic identity structures as a critique of this form of self-portraiture. With this understanding of Kuo's work in relation to fixed and fluid identity construction types in social media in place, it is now possible to proceed to examine his work from the perspective of the role of memory and archive.

CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY THROUGH THE ARCHIVE AND MEMORY

Building on the examination of the role fluid and fixed identity structures in online social media in general and Kuo's identity charts in particular, this section focuses on two additional and related factors that condition digital identity construction: impermanent memory and permanent archives. I will employ Wendy Chun's concept of the "enduring ephemeral" to unpack the terms archive and memory as cultural metaphors which have ideological purposes. I will then apply this more extended framework for contemporary digital identity construction to a comparison of Kuo's work with On Kawara's and Nicholas Felton's work. I will consider Kawara as a precursor to Kuo and compare each artist's technique for constructing identity using the archive and memory. Kuo's use of ironic impermanent memories will be compared to Nicholas Felton's quantification of identity in an attempt to create an archived permanent self through more overtly narcissistic practices of self-portraiture.

Wendy Chun's concept of the "enduring ephemeral" repositions categorical assumptions regarding ephemerality and permanency. For her, the digital exists as "undead."⁶³ She acknowledges that the digital is not always there. Instead, digital media is constantly degenerating and erasable. Chun considers digital technology as simultaneously and paradoxically enduring and ephemeral unlike the deadly permanent characteristics of analog media. Once analog

⁶³ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 200.

information is created it becomes dead because it is unchanging. In the digital, new information can be instantaneously old, while old news can be considered new (if users find it for the first time).⁶⁴ For Chun, these regenerative aspects of digital media distinguish it from the degenerative aspects of analog media. She also draws a distinction between archive and memory, as they do not share the same qualities of ephemerality. To get to this distinction, Chun deconstructs metaphors and ideologies of the digital condition. Because the digital is “undead” it is often associated with permanent storage leading to cultural practices where it is treated like a permanent archive. As digital metaphors become ideological people often accept and assume that machines are more stable and permanent than humans. Chun says “By storing programs and becoming archives, computers make the future predictable; by enabling a human capital, powers (and ‘disabilities’) that exceed personal experience.”⁶⁵ However for Chun the archive cannot be digital, since the digital is inherently impermanent much like protean identity. Constant degradation and regeneration link the digital to functions of human memory. The cultural metaphor of a permanent digital archive is normalized ideologically as subjects construct their portraits in online social media as a permanent and unified documentation of their lives. Chun believes these metaphors reconceptualize “society, bodies, and memories in ways that both compromise and extend the subject, the user.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ibid., 199.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 176.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 6.

The ideology inherent in these metaphors is one of empowerment for social media users in constructing their self-portrait. However, users produce information about themselves as data miners collect it to inform future product consumption. Existing relations of power are enforced through these processes. The maintenance of docile bodies conforming to online structuring of identity is enforced by users' quantifications of their lives. Overall, Chun offers a complex reading of digital identity, counterposing aspirations to unified permanent archiving of the self by users with command and control structures of social media commercial endeavours. This paradox is underpinned by her notion of enduring ephemerality where supposed digital permanency is reframed as in continual flux, not unlike human memory.

With this expanded field of identity construction theory in social media in place, I will examine Kuo's work from the perspective of memory, archive, and the enduring ephemeral. With his trademark irony, Kuo critiques the assumptions many people make in accepting ideologies of digital permanency. Kuo ironically makes digital memories (the enduring ephemeral) into an archive by transferring memories into analog form. The experiences which Kuo describes in his texts are not objective recordings of his life (as traditional archives were once thought to be); instead he creates a record of his subjective experiences. He moves fluidly between memories as protean impermanent identity and archive as narcissistic permanent identity.

Kuo works across the traditionally opposed categories of analog/digital, unity/multiplicity, permanency/impermanency, to create a hybrid form of identity, not unlike Chun's enduring ephemeral. For Kuo online identity and material identity are related and not opposed. His use of irony points out flaws in digital memory as his archive exposes the power structures embedded in the medium. His self-mockery reflects the self-surveillance inherent in the construction of what is seen as an empowering digital archive of self, the online self-portrait. His charts both embody and ridicule this paradoxical identity structure. Nonetheless, Kuo understands that the enduring ephemeral can cause a fluid identity to be haunted by its own histories. Turkle has also discussed the haunting of personal histories as a psychological impact of social-networking practices. Kuo translates his digitally inspired concepts into analog form where his "undead" information becomes relics or historical traces of his own past. His past histories are archived, as Turkle and Chun suggest occurs in digital social media.

In order to explore Kuo's hybrid enduring ephemeral approach to digital identity, archive and memory, I will compare his work to On Kawara's. Kawara's work can be seen as a precursor for Kuo's artistic practice, however they use archive and memory in different ways. Kawara's work is conceptual, while Kuo's is grounded in actual social practices. While it may seem that Kuo borrows from Kawara, he is interested in the materialistic representations of digital impermanent identity rather than the metaphysics of time which characterize Kawara's work.

Kawara's *Date Painting* is a body of work formed by a series of canvases. Each painting is minimalistic: a flat background with no gradation, with a date in a large font in the center of the canvas. Each painting in this series was created and completed during the date depicted on the canvas.⁶⁷ Any paintings Kawara began but could not fully complete during the time span of one day were disposed of. During the twenty-four hour time frame allocated to each canvas Kawara often collected archival materials that marked events occurring while he created the painting, including newspaper articles that would later be stored with their corresponding date painting.⁶⁸ Archival materials and the paintings were stored in custom designed cardboard boxes with the date marked on the top. The works in this series were initially accompanied by separate diary-like entries of historical events, artist encounters, and personal experiences. However, the artist culled the data to retain only the date and size of each individual piece.⁶⁹

Jonathan Watkins details the transition of Kawara's diary-like entries for the *Date Paintings* series into self-referential notes, a shift which becomes apparent in his painting *29 May 1966* where he writes "I am afraid of my today paintings" and in *18 January 1966* where he writes "I am painting this painting."⁷⁰ Watkins uses these works to demonstrate how Kawara's practice is existential, concentrated on contingent, temporal value judgments instead of absolute truth.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Jonathan Watkins, "Where 'I Don't Know' Is the Right Answer," *On Kawara: tribute*, ed. Denizot, René and Jonathan Watkins (New York: Phaidon Press, 2002), 42.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

Watkins attributes this to Kawara's experience of Japan's atomic bombing as a teen. Kawara calls this period of his life his "awakening of consciousness."⁷² Kawara's existentially inspired painting of self exposes the barriers between reality and remembrance of experience through the use of the archive.

Kawara also deploys the archive as a reference to metaphysical time. According to Charles Wylie, Kawara's work can be seen as extending beyond traditional conceptual art thematics, as it is concerned with the metaphysical aspects of time alongside his sustained "experience, being, and consciousness."⁷³ Kawara's use of diary-like entries and ephemeral material collections create an archive of past time that can be seen as a questioning of life and experience around ideologically accepted concepts of time. Homi K. Bhabha says:

Yet every day, when the computerized clock clicks the changing time of day, the newspaper announces that it's another day, national public radio repeats the day's headlines, I know On [Kawara], not as a person, but as a kind of place that one has to occupy, a movement to follow, a problem with which to be preoccupied: can you ever keep Time? In the midst of that anxiety.⁷⁴

Kawara's use of the archive to question the metaphysical qualities of time recall Chun's consideration of permanency and impermanency of the enduring ephemeral. In the *Date Paintings*, mortality and transient time link Kawara to the

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Charles Wylie, "Of Today," *On Kawara: 10 tableaux and 16,952 pages*, ([Dallas]: Dallas Museum of Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 34.

⁷⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, "24/7," *On Kawara: tribute*, ed. Denizot, René and Jonathan Watkins (New York: Phaidon Press, 2002), 16.

date each painting was made. Watkins describes the works as tombstones of Kawara's presence.⁷⁵

Charles Wylie sees Kawara's *Date Paintings* as embodiments of self in conceptual, non-analytic terms and says this work is:

an autobiography that relies on an objective sensibility, not an analytic one: no attempt is made to register impressions, anecdotes, opinions, or, in the end, any kind of meaning at all. Unlike the writers of the contemporary Web-based daily blog, with their penchant for unprecedented (and often discomfoting) intimacy, Kawara presents only the bare facts of his daily experience in analog form, allowing his audiences free rein in imaginatively recreating what is apparent in the maps, words, and images arranged in meticulously ordered cases, themselves signifying precision and scientific remove.⁷⁶

Kawara's practice contrasts with Kuo's whose work deploys self-portraiture to critique cultural practices and assumed norms, such as identity construction in digital social media. Kuo deploys ephemeral experience and impermanent memory to perform an ironic critique, while Kawara engages in meticulous archival documentation of experience to unfold metaphysical considerations.

Kuo's approach to identity and self-portraiture based on online social media practices of archive and memory can be further contextualized by comparing his work to that of graphic designer Nicholas Felton, who relies on mechanical tools and numerical data to create an anthropological archive using digital media. As a commercial designer Felton creates conventional interfaces for users to enter their own data onto Facebook. He recently launched a chart-based data retrieval site

⁷⁵ Ibid., 87.

⁷⁶ Wylie, "Of Today," *On Kawara: 10 tableaux and 16,952 pages*, 34.

Daytum.com, which enables individuals to actively participate in transcribing their lives into digital data.⁷⁷ The designer views his website Daytum as:

Empowering people to collect [the] information about their lives that tends to go uncollected. Our electronic footprints are everywhere, but I don't believe they're necessarily the most interesting or comprehensive. Once we've made the gathering as easy and detailed as it can be, some interesting things may start to happen.⁷⁸

Felton's creation of Daytum and contribution to the design of Facebook, allow his commercial practice to shape the field of social media as he builds systems to archive the self. Felton has said his personal practice is a way of recording and preserving life activities through tracking.⁷⁹ Felton clearly believes that the archive can construct a unified digital identity by compiling sets of data.

He uses similar techniques of digital tracking and data collection to construct an archived representation of his own life. Nicholas Felton's obsessive personal infographic charts began in 2005 with his first *Feltron Annual Report*.⁸⁰ It is worth noting that Felton uses "Feltron" instead of his own last name to title his annual works. The simple addition of the letter "r" places the word "tron" into his self-representation and evokes cultural knowledge of the "Tron" film series where people actually became apart of a digital computer "grid." Felton's alternative name denotes a digital self created purely out of data sets. For several years he has created summaries of self-tracking data as digital annual reports, with

⁷⁷ Nicholas Felton, *Feltron*, 22 Oct 2011 <<http://www.feltron.com/faq.html>>

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

the exception of his latest print edition, the *2010/2011 Feltron Biennial Report*.⁸¹ Although the final designs are posted online in digital format, Felton creates intricate layouts for the analog infographs which are printed by professionals and sold as limited editions on his personal website. With the exception of his first report there are no photographic images. Felton incorporates Venn-diagrams based on data, graphic representations of maps indicating where his data was taken from, and uses bar graphs, pie charts, and other visuals to represent data configurations. While most reports are given a theme, his 2006 and 2005 reports appear to be less thematic than the rest as they incorporate personal data Felton was able to collect about himself including places of travel, expenses, music listened to, books read, and photos taken. In 2007 it seems that the overarching theme of the data was accounting as he details every place he spent money and what he spent his money on, while the 2008 report has collected data around Felton's travel and activities from the year. His personal website indicates that his 2009 report was created through a survey submitted by each person Felton had a meaningful encounter with that year.⁸² This survey was conducted by distributing a URL and a unique number for each respondent's observations of Felton during their encounters. He used tools such as Processing to manipulate layouts and Amazon's Mechanical Turk to collect survey data. This report differs from his earlier works because the data was aggregated by him, and is about him, but was not created by him alone. This data display included the dates and locations of

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Nicholas Felton, "The 2009 Feltron Annual Report," 2009, *Feltron*, 8 Apr 2012
<http://feltron.com/ar09_01.html>

where the surveys were handed out, relationship reports, activities, moods, discussion topics, food and drinks consumed. His 2010 report quantified the life of his recently passed father using data from calendars, slides, and other traces. Meanwhile, his 2010/2011 data collection is focused on his personal behaviour changes based on his company and location.

Felton's quantification of identity represented in his *Annual Reports* and his commercial data tracking applications point to surveillance systems embedded in social media sites based on the construction of permanent digital archives. Felton's self-tracking has been described by Ben Fino-Radin, the digital conservator for *Rhizome*, as exemplary of the contemporary phenomenon of creating an "anthropology of ourselves."⁸³ This practice replicates contemporary practices of social networking to literally, rather than ironically, define Felton's life through data. Felton does not engage the enduring ephemerality of digital media as Kuo does, rather he uses the digital to simply store dead data instead of using it as a place to explore undead memories. His digital archives conform to the status quo allowing personal data to become documentation waiting to be mined. This archiving can be seen as both an obsessive narcissistic observation of one's self and as a trace left behind for other people, corporations, or government affiliations to aggregate.

It seems evident that Felton and Kuo have different understandings of identity, archive, and memory, in digital media. Kuo uses irony to critique social

⁸³ Ben Fino-Radin, "Storytelling: An Interview with Nicholas Felton," 1 Jun 2011, *Rhizome*, 22 Oct 2011 <<http://rhizome.org/editorial/2011/jun/1/storytelling-interview-nicholas-felton/>>

networking practices while Felton's use of the same social networking practices may also be considered ironic in a different manner because he literally aids in the creation of constructing individuals through their own self-reflexive surveillance process. Even though both of these artists create self-portraits using archive and memory, they exemplify different approaches. Kuo creates impermanent representations of the protean self, using irony as a fluid state similar to memory in order to critique unified representations of identity, while Felton shows how identity can be archived and documented in a permanent form. Felton's construction of digital archives interacts with Chun's considerations on a different register as she considers the digital as an undead state with degenerative and regenerative processes that allow information to not always be there, thus not stored in the way Felton makes information appear. By contrast Kuo places his practice firmly within Chun's conception of the enduring ephemeral as he counters ideological assumptions by using permanency, unity, and narcissistic identity practices ironically to inform his critiques of them.

In extending my analysis of Kuo's ironic deployment of social media identity tropes of fluidity and permanency to critique contemporary digital ideologies and practices into the paradoxical framework of archive, memory and eternal ephemerality, this section of my research and analysis positions Kuo as a force for reconsidering accepted social media practices and ideologies. As well, in comparing his work to Kawara's and Felton's, Kuo has been positioned as a

hybridizing force, reading ironically but insightfully across binary oppositions to engage undead digital human memory.

CONCLUSION

My first encounter with Andrew Kuo's work took place in 2009 at the MASS MoCA group exhibition "This is Killing Me." During this time I was in the process of developing artwork for my undergraduate degree on the subject of social and mobile networking. As I approached Kuo's charted print works I could not help but recognize the uncanny resemblance his subject matter and visual aesthetics had to social media. My initial interest in this research topic therefore sought to tie together my reactions to his work and the common interpretation of assumed narcissism because to his self-reflective practices.

Through the process of developing this paper I have gained new insight into Kuo's practice. As his work represents identity formation in the age of social media, it also signals a time of critical cultural change. The meaning and importance of Kuo's work lays in his use of ironic hybridity to explore traditionally opposed binaries that together open up new forms of identity. Kuo's trademark of irony allows viewers to consider the ideologies of self-representation embedded in cultural metaphors of digital identity construction. His artwork becomes a critical example for examining alternative ways to represent one's self. As social media becomes a normalized practice for communication and documentation, questions of self-representation in digital spaces become integral to understanding contemporary subjectivity.

Throughout this paper I have addressed contemporary identity formation and representation unique to social media, as exemplified through Kuo's interdisciplinary practice of self-representation. Kuo's work is able to illuminate these identity formations in a contemporary context reading across concepts of fluid memory and impermanent experience on the one hand and notions of unity, archival permanency, and dead information on the other. The examples and theoretical frameworks explored in this paper give insight into the hybridization of traditionally opposed forms of analog and digital mediums. Kuo's work becomes situated within a time and culture where such binaries can be conceived as shared histories and create new philosophical and practical understandings of the self.

The three thematic sections of my research assisted in developing my argument. I first explored Kuo's artistic development and critical responses to his work from a series of perspectives, all centered on his paradoxical deployment of irony and authenticity. The second section examined Kuo's works interaction with social networking through online self-portraiture and identity to demonstrate his practice and use of social media as a tool for critiquing prevalent forms of digital self-representation. Here self-obsessed, permanent, and fragile narcissism theorized by Ross and Turkle were opposed to Lifton's fluid, multiple, and impermanent protean identities to highlight Kuo's position between those two fundamental identity structures. Prior to this research Kuo's work has not been considered as the hybridization of two forms of identity using irony as a marker of

the fluidity between them. The third section built upon this research to demonstrate Kuo's construction of identity through theoretical frameworks of archive and memory. Chun's enduring ephemeral further exposed the ideological purposes of cultural metaphors within archive and memory while theorizing the intersection of "dead" and "undead" media. While Kawara's and Felton's works differentiated Kuo's self-representation of ironic impermanent memories from literal quantifications of identity or conceptualizations of time to create a permanent archive.

This research has placed Kuo's practice as a form of self-representation in the age of social media. Kuo's interdisciplinary forms, sense of self, and impermanency, are opposed to his ironic uses of archival permanency and dead information. In turn his work marks, reflects, and critiques cultural shifts of self-representation unique to social media. Furthermore his artwork acts as a stepping-stone for one to begin questioning their own identity formation and understanding of social media practices.

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