“People fearlessly putting their work online and owning it and putting it out there...”

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“Future Ritual II: Alone Together,” Diego Montoya (2015). Multimedia installation. Courtesy of the artist.

Interface: Queer Artists Forming Communities Through Social Media is Visual AIDS Artist Member Walt Cessna’s curatorial debut at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art. Spanning painting, photography, installation and sculpture, the show brings together thirty queer New York artists including Visual AIDS artist members Benjamin Fredrickson and George Towne. Interface developed from Walt’s art publication VacZine, which started to assemble this community of artists through social media. Below, former Visual AIDS intern Kyle Croft interviews Cessna about the Interface.

Could you talk about who is in the show, in larger terms? It is organized through the framework of social media, but you’re also showcasing a scene and an ethos that’s particular to New York City right now.
Walt Cessna: I’m trying to reference the early ’80s period of David Wojnarowicz--it’s a DIY punk ethos of showing art wherever you could, putting things out any way you can. In the ’80s we had people putting their art on piers; we had people like Michael Stewart killed by the police because he was putting things in subways; we had people who were showing things in Gracie Mansion’s bathroom. I myself am somebody who used to show my work through Xerox magazines by leaving them on people’s doorsteps.

And I think that’s why social media has become so important. I think the important aspect of this show is basically that people are just frustrated with having to go through normal channels to get a place to show or even be exposed and that’s why people started turning towards putting their work online. People fearlessly putting their work online and owning it and putting it out there because they want people to see their work.

And even when I started doing it 10 years ago there was a lot of backlash--people thought you're giving your work away for free, you're going to tarnish your brand, and if you put nude pictures of yourself online they're going to come back and haunt you.

So the framework of social media is a foil to get at the tensions between multiple art worlds in New York--namely the commercial, gallery-oriented scene and this emergent, counter-culture queer scene. The internet provides an alternative mode of engaging with and distributing art.
I was trying to make the point that there's a moment happening in art right now where people are creating work that's extremely unique and rare and really heartfelt and very diverse and there's so many different mediums being utilized. I think that's a community, whether the people know each other and hang out or not, there's this scene that hasn't even been acknowledged yet.

And I think that even though this show really hit a lot of good points, the sad part of it is we got no mainstream press attention, or any actual print media attention. I did what I could do, I got them online press, but I still think unless you get that attention from The New York Times, Artforum, blah blah blah, then you're never going to be taken seriously. My opening was wow, crazy wild, tons of people, but that doesn't mean anything at the end of the day if certain people from within the arts industry don't take this to heart and actually pay attention to it.

How did the show come about?
Because I've been posting my work for free for 10 years. I'm not even bragging when I say this, but I like to make this point because I hope that other people might take it as inspiration. I think it's really important to put the work out there, being really conscientious about it, and not filtering it and not hesitating and not regretting anything and owning it completely. Everything that's come to me has been by posting it on social media, putting it out there, and letting it grow organically and letting it come back to me. All of my gallery shows, including the ones I've been in in England with Scooter, the things I've done in LA--all of it has come from my Tumblr blog and my Facebook. I hate giving Facebook credit, because I hate it so much, but at this point it is my business

If social media is providing new platforms for queer artists to engage each other and their audiences, what role do gallery and museums shows play in this scene? How do these online and offline worlds relate to each other?
Well the first thing would be the human connection. Getting to meet the people that know me online or know my work or know VacZine and then getting to have a one-on-one with them.

And I get a lot of clicks of that "like" button. I see a lot of these people do too. But I don't think anyone should use it as a barometer. That's great to get the attention, but if people are going to come and see the work in person, then that's successful. No matter how much we claim we want to live our lives online, or we don't want to be part of the real world, people want to be part of a connection thing here. And I think the frustration over the last ten years watching social media and the internet grow and take over people's lives and attach to them like pods is starting to frustrate people and it's starting to backtrack a little bit.

I want to use the internet to find things or discover things. The only way it helps me conceive or

conceptualize my art is because it's where I find some of the beautiful boys that I photograph. It's a sourcing place, it's not giving me inspiration. I get inspiration when I get on set and I see the light and the light is magic and I have a connection with somebody that is regardless of it being sexual or whatever. It's a connection and there's an energy there and I'm not getting that energy by plugging into the internet.

What is significant about this contemporary queer art scene beyond its relation to social media? Are there any pieces you want to highlight in the show?
I think it is kids like Slava Mogutin who come from a very fucked up place, where he went through a lot of persecution for being gay. I think that plays a lot into it. I think the political side of it is really important because basically we don't have any kind of ACT UP organization any more. We have a lot of people who say they're activists but all they do is post #ferguson. I think the activism or the point of politicism that comes into this is in the actual work. And it's actually not being afraid to show a Muslim man stroking his penis, à la Gio Black Peter's painting, or seeing work from Slava from that early point before VICE magazine made it popular to see boys with their pants pulled down, drinking a beer and passed out in the street. Slava was documenting that and making into art. He was documenting the scene that was around him.

We've had this whole rash of making everything pacified and more palatable for people. So you look at things like what Alesia is doing, where she's documenting the people who are in that scene who are so major, like Macy Rodman and Severely Mame, and really, 20 years from now, she'll be the photographer that people go to--kind of like Nan Goldin--to look at that scene.

I think Dietmar was so impressively strong in the show because he was shooting people from the scene, who a lot of us have also used as muses--Robert Anderson, Dominic Vine, Christopher Stribley, Jorge Clar, Scooter LaForge--and then taking it to another level by painting on the photographs and not making it so precious that it had to be framed, so we could put it up raw like that. They really didn't want to do that at first, they wanted everything to be framed and safe. I've never had a show of my own actually where anything's been framed. I've always tacked it or nailed it to the work to try to make it as least precious as possible. And I think that was actually a good thing with this show because they actually motivated themselves to go out of their norm of making things so historical or archival and letting it be more present.

Todd Yeager is someone who should be shown an enormous amount of respect--he and George Towne are probably the finest illustrators/painters that we have in this scene and have been doing it for so long.

George Towne is a Visual AIDS artist member, and Interface also features the work of artist member Benjamin Fredrickson. What role does HIV/AIDS have in the show?
The only way I can afford to live in New York and have my art career is because I have a plague apartment that the government pays for because I had full-blown AIDS twice. The only reason I've been able to do anything that I've done for the past 10 years is because AIDS gave me a second chance at having a career and a life and having people take me seriously again as an artist. That's why. If I didn't have the plague, I wouldn't have anything of this right now. I probably would have

been dead already from drugs or other risky behavior.

HIV plays into everything in my life in a major way because I wouldn't have anything without it. And until I tested positive in 2000 after being asymptomatic--I tested inconclusive for four years, back before the oral test happened. There was a specific percentage of people who tested inconclusively. They knew the bug was in me, they just couldn't find it yet. So when I did start showing symptoms in early 2000, I was in San Francisco, living in a residential hotel on Market Street. I was a hooker and a drug dealer, I wasn't making art or writing or doing anything and I didn't have insurance, so when I went to the hospital, basically dying, they wouldn't even give me the results of my blood tests because I couldn't pay them for it. So I went a whole three months basically dying and not knowing what was up with me. Rashes all over my body, loosing weight, night sweats, until the oral test came out, and then I tested positive immediately. And was able to go on meds. And the minute I went on meds--I'm like a med sponge--my T-cells went from being like 11 and my viral load being over 1,000 to like 800 T-cells, and a completely undetectable viral load. But then, after taking the drugs for a long time and kind of going through things with my addiction, I really fucked myself up. I gave myself full-blown pneumonia and pleurisy. I had full-blown AIDS again. It's how I ended up getting into the HASA system and getting my apartment and getting my benefits and everything like that.

It's basically made my life completely unmanageable but also kind of manageable. So it's always like a tightrope, about to fall off. It's never steady, never consistent.

Interface: Queer Artists Forming Communities through Social Media is on view at the Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art through August 2, 2015. Join Walt Cessna for a curator-led tour of Interface on Saturday, August 1, at 3 p.m.

Walt Cessna is a writer, photographer and former fashion designer who started his career in fashion as a Vogue-obsessed 13-year old eventually working with knockoff king and dress mogul Jack "Fast Jack" Mulqueen and designer Norma Kamali. He established himself as a fashion designer with his acclaimed Dom Casual label, designing and self-producing a line of men's and women's sportswear. His short stories have appeared in magazines such as Paper as well as numerous blogs. His photography can be found virtually anywhere on the Internet as well as in his published photo collections, Fukt 2 Start Wit and Wolfpack! He lives in New York City.

Kyle Croft is a graduate of the University of Washington and a former intern at Visual AIDS. He has also worked with MIX NYC and Seattle's Reteaching Gender & Sexuality.

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