THE NEW SCHOOL

VERA LIST CENTER
FOR ART AND POLITICS

Freedom of Speech: A Curriculum for Studies into Darkness
Seminar 3: Pervasive and Personal: Observations on Free Speech Online

Monday, February 11, 2019

SUMMARY

Participants
Deborah Brown, Global Policy Advocacy Lead, Association for Progressive Communications
Molly Crabapple, artist and writer
Julia Farrington, Associate Arts Producer, Index on Censorship; member, International Arts Rights Advisors
Shawné Michaelain Holloway, artist
Nancy Schwartzman, documentary filmmaker, Roll Red Roll

Judy Taing, Head of Gender and Sexuality, ARTICLE19; moderator

Following a summary of the series of seminars, Carin Kuoni introduced each of the panelists and the moderator. Judy Taing began urging everyone to put forward questions throughout the panelists' remarks, and then posed a series of framing questions: Does technology advance expression for women, LGBT+ persons? Is the internet is an equal space? What are the "new" risks that come with expression online? She stressed that freedom of expression online for women is a societal issue that produces complex challenges due to the specificities of culture, geography, legal frameworks, and language, among many other factors that impact the field globally. She signaled that nonetheless preserving freedom of expression for women online is crucial given the power and amplification that the internet enables. She then pointed to questions of enforcement and authority: should attacks on individuals should be handled legally, by the state, or by the companies that run the technology (like Twitter and Facebook)? Would we trust either to be the gatekeepers? What should be done in relationship to anonymity and encryption, so necessary for some and abused by others? Is it possible to grow an inclusive space online as the technology grows and changes?

Molly Crabapple read a deeply compelling and terrible story she reported on for the New York Times about Tara Fares, a young woman who became an Instagram celebrity based in Iraq, who was subsequently murdered for being a highly visible, outspoken woman. The full text of the article can be found here. Judy followed up the reading by asking if the visibility provided by the internet could make us safe. Shawné suggested an important distinction that would remain central to the seminar when she questioned whether the discussion should be centered on visibility or rather, legibility? Perhaps, she

offered, if legibility were the goal then users would be truly 'seen' rather than assumptions made about their presence.

Julia Farrington recounted the story of a young, female photographer working in the Middle East named Yumna Al-Arashi, whose photography was posted on social media platforms and made her a target of threats and hate. Julia described the very real need to provide artists with protocols for interacting more safely online. She made the important point that for many, withdrawal from online platforms is a luxury and a privilege. She noted that not only was there a sense of shame amongst artists that were targeted by hate campaigns but that it often also led to self-censorship. Julia further suggested that guidelines like those created for journalists and documentary filmmakers needed to be repurposed for artists' specific needs to provide artists much-needed protocols to follow in moments of crisis, and connecting them to others and avoid the isolation these situations often promote.

Molly drew an important distinction between direct threats of violence, and coordinated smear campaigns. She noted that while certainly egregious, the former threats were often empty and that the latter could result in unemployment, isolation, and removal from the public sphere. A robust discussion ensued.

Nancy Schwartzman spoke next, introducing her documentary Roll Red Roll, and showed this trailer. The film is about the sexual assault of a young woman in Steubenville, Ohio, and attempts to cover up the crime(s) given the perpetrators' status on the local football team. The way the perpetrators were discovered was via their online footprint; they had talked about the assault on Twitter and via text message. A discussion followed about the ways in which bystanders and witnesses were complicit in this scenario and how this is amplified online. There were further discussions of how to maintain credibility when under attack, as both Nancy and the lead investigator became targets once their work was made public.

Deborah Brown offered examples of creating a coordinated, international, co-created methodology to combat the attacks that while contextually specific, had the pervasiveness of misogyny in common. She suggested that imagining how to "take back the tech" could create a feminist space on the internet. She described this feminist internet as being a platform for freedom of expression that should be intersectional and accessible, be supportive of movements, provide alternative economic models, and promote a vast array of principles around consent, privacy, anonymity, and other crucial issues. She suggested feminist internet and feminist IT for further details. She and the panel also discussed alternative ways to confront attacks collectively, rather than individually, a strategy that is used by APC which provides flexibility and de-personalization.

Shawné presented several of her media-based work that are largely created explicitly for the internet. She discussed UI (user interface) as a mode of manipulation, and how her works produce a perceived 'realness' or intimacy that is both real and veiled through her costumes and efforts to otherwise disguise herself. She presented a work that is not publicly accessible other than for a fee behind a paywall. The work repurposed footage she had created for paying clients and overlaid words and images, both legible and pixelated, confounding and revealing the positionality of the artist to her audience. Shawné then read Poetry is not a Luxury by Audre Lorde. She emphasized the online experience as being one of transformation, as a place to make dreams, to escape judgement, to submit, concluding the conversation by pointing to the convergence of light, as in the light that comprises the internet, and also is emitted from the screen, as well as in the sense that "being in the light" relays being seen and public.

These final comments of Shawné's brought the group, in some ways, back to Molly's first presentation, to addressing the incredible power of the online world to connect and free us, while simultaneously being a location of potential patriarchal violence. Fortunately this group of powerful women, among a significant network of others, are working to create a feminist internet, as Deborah termed it, to make the publicness of our intimacies heard and safe.

The seminar series **Freedom of Speech. A Curriculum for Studies into Darkness** *is organized by the Vera List Center for Art and Politics as part of the center's 2018–2020 curatorial focus If Art Is Politics. It is directed by Carin Kuoni, Director/Chief Curator, Vera List Center, and Laura Raicovich with assistance by Gabriela López Dena. Partner organizations for the seminars are ARTICLE 19, the National Coalition Against Censorship, New York Peace Institute, and Weeksville Heritage Center. This seminar is co-presented in partnership with the National Coalition Against Censorship. Feminist Manifestos is curated by Gabriela López Dena, Vera List Center Graduate Student Fellow, Art and Social Justice.*

Further information on each seminar, including SUGGESTED READINGS, PROGRAM, SUMMARY, and VIDEO DOCUMENTATION, at www.veralistcenter.org.