

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

The Social Ties That Unbind

by [An Xiao](#) on February 25, 2013



Editor's note: This is the second in a series of commissioned essays for [The World's First Tumblr Art Symposium](#) on Saturday, March 9, 2013.

When I sent my first email in the 1990s, the internet was just beginning to hit the mainstream. The idea that we would use the internet to talk to friends we knew offline had yet to take off. Most of the nascent social web culture, from usenet to telnet to AOL chat rooms, consisted of socializing largely with strangers. These strangers might eventually become friends, of course, but they'd start out as strangers in the purest sense of that word. At the outset, you didn't even know their name, age, location, perhaps not even their gender.



Peter Steiner's famous "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog" cartoon, as published in The New Yorker (via [Wikipedia](#))

The now famous [New Yorker cartoon of a dog at a computer](#) sums up this internet reality well. "On the internet," the dog says, "nobody knows you're a dog." Far from the real name requirements of today's predominant social network, the early days of the social web were largely anonymous. One could adopt a screen name, then cast it off days later for an entirely new one.

This turns out to be an ideal situation for adolescence. Teens are known for their need to try on new hats and new selves. It's a vital aspect of our development into adults, as we discover who we are and take more agency in our identities. Being tied to an identity and a social network is the worst thing you can ask of a teen, especially if that same social network contains all your childhood friends and — worse still — your parents.

Which is why it's not a surprise that a site like [Tumblr has become more popular amongst teens](#) than either Twitter or Facebook. Unlike Facebook, one's Tumblr identity can simply be a screen name. And one can create a seemingly infinite variety of tumblelogs, none of which are necessarily tied to the original screen name. They exist separately and develop independently, and the ties that develop tend to be with strangers rather than old friends. Tumblr handles are the equivalent to having multiple screen names in the 1990s, given life with the cool design and massive scale of the 2010s internet.

Like rubber bands, when we step into Tumblr we can stretch and reshape ourselves into different configurations. Each new hat we try on stretches the rubber band just a little bit further, and over time it might evolve into a new configuration.

Tumblr is what one might call an "unbounded" social network. In her theory of the "elastic self,"

presented recently at the [Microsoft Social Computing Symposium](#), sociologist Tricia Wang argues that not all social media are the same. It's something we intuitively know — most people keep separate personas on Twitter vs. Facebook, for instance — but why we tend to be more freewheeling on one versus the other has largely not been articulated.

In Wang's theory, a network like Facebook, which enforces real name registration and consists of a person's friends and family from time immemorial, encourages bounded use. It's like the small town you never left, the grammar school class you couldn't pass out of, the first dead-end job. It's a network mired in past and present, and by its nature it enforces a limited sense of identity and expression.

By contrast, something like Tumblr encourages unbounded use. It allows you to experiment and play. It's the big city, and each new tumblelog you create is like a new bar or neighborhood where you can try on a new self and see how it fits. In one instant you can be a pug lover, reblogging the best animated GIFs of the flat-faced dogs. In the next, you can dive deep into the Go Pro snowboarding community and post snaps from your latest run.

Hence Wang's notion of the [elastic self](#). Like rubber bands, when we step into Tumblr we can stretch and reshape ourselves into different configurations. Each new hat we try on stretches the rubber band just a little bit further, and over time it might evolve into a new configuration. This allows for remarkable opportunities to explore different potentials of self and self-expression.

Wang would know. Though a sociologist by training, she has a long history with the arts, doing hip-hop education and documentary film. This expressiveness leaks through in the wide variety of tumblelogs she keeps, listed at the bottom of [her website](#). There's a tumblelog for her elastic self theory, one for digital urbanisms, one for her ethnographic notes on China tech usage. But she also tumbles on pussy power, fuck yeah pho, her "Crasian" mother, and dancing. Each tumblelog represents an element of herself, and though she links to them from her central web site, she doesn't have to, nor are most of her researcher friends aware of them.

Breaking the Mold



Artists like Nikki Lee have long played with the idea of shifting identities, like in this work “The Ohio Project (7)” (1999) (via indyweek.com)

All of this got me thinking: isn't this notion of an elastic self the exact reason Tumblr is also ideal for artists and makers? It's always been pitched as a site for creators, but its multimedia features alone can't really account for its popularity among artists, especially given the wide variety of media publishing opportunities artists have access to.

Ever since the art world started trickling onto Facebook and other social media, it's been clear that, as in other fields, social media have been disrupting the usual power systems. But it was never clear exactly how, or if social media provide affordances particular to artists that actually change the game, rather than just being a way to promote the work. Could the internet also be changing the work itself?

Since the introduction of the commercial gallery system, the path to success for most artists has mapped in a linear direction. Get a degree, move to New York or another urban area with enough of an art scene, get a few shows, get a few reviews, get representation, start making a living. Few could break from this well-trodden path.

... the internet has given artists access to multiple audiences ...

Due to the immense investment of time and money on the part of both the artist and any gallerists or supporters behind them, it's understandable that an artist wouldn't or couldn't change the fundamental nature of their work. They would have to stick to their brand, and only artists who opted out of the gallery system or those firmly established in their career could afford to change tactics every now and then, finding a new way to realize their craft. It's a model designed to please one audience — an elite circle of tastemakers. And one general audience, by and large, has a perspective and vision of the world that any given artist either does or does not slip into.

By contrast, as we well know by now, the internet has given artists access to multiple audiences. Sites like Etsy and even eBay have provided a new model for promoting and selling work, while services like PayPal have simplified payment systems and structures. Open source and/or free publishing tools like WordPress and Blogspot have made it easier for artists to establish their presence online, not to mention for new critics to develop platforms to express their opinions. Facebook helps us follow art openings and events and stay in touch with people we meet.

But if many social media tools are beginning to reveal an alternative model for newspapers and galleries, others, especially Tumblr, seem to be providing an alternative model to the studio. (Other unbounded social media systems include Twitter, Snapchat, and Douban, which is popular among youth in China. Like all Chinese social media, it is censored, but censorship usually occurs for social and political issues deemed sensitive. Like MySpace, youth can rate movies, music, and books, and they often avoid tying their real name to the service, thus allowing more unbounded use.) Once the hallowed workspace of the solitary artist, who could use it to welcome potential clients and collaborators to review their work, the studio can now exist online, allowing the artist to work through new ideas and projects in public, informally and with multiple audiences.

Artists Unbounded



Who Shall I Be Today? (via keboch.wordpress.com)

Using social media in an unbounded way has served many artists well. Take, for instance, the story of Ma Yongfeng. A Beijing-based artist known for his conceptual works, he maintains a variety of online personas depending on the type of piece he is producing. His most well known is [Forget Art](#), a collective of artists playing with redefining public art and public space. But he's also adopted the persona of the [Youth Apartment Exchange Program](#), a Weibo-based social media art practice, not to mention

his own online persona as Ma Yongfeng, the artist. Each identity reveals a facet of him without tying him down to a specific practice.

Closer to home are examples like [Jayson Musson](#), who uses the online persona [Hennessy Youngman](#) to full effect. While Musson is relatively quiet and unassuming, his brash, online alter ego allows him to mock the art world in his popular Art Thoughtz series. Everyone is in on the ruse, but if YouTube required that even online personas be tied to one's real name, it's hard to imagine Musson achieving the same kind of effect. Much as artists have used pseudonyms to enable a wider variety of creative expression, Musson has embraced a more unbounded use of artist names online.

... artists have used pseudonyms to enable a wider variety of creative expression ...

Of course, most social media, including Facebook, can be used in an unbounded way, but Tumblr is one of the few that encourage and facilitate this. When making a new blog is as easy as a few keystrokes, and when none of these blogs have to be tied closely to one's identity, it's easier to experiment publicly and test new ideas. Artists and their practice, in other words, can achieve just as much elasticity as a teenager changing outfits in the mirror. This enables artists to resist a wholesale branding and packaging of their work into a single, easily identifiable practice, and it gives them the flexibility to develop new practices parallel to each other. Ma Yongfeng, Forget Art, and Youth Apartment Exchange can all continue their projects, and if the man behind them wanted to, he could create more selves and more practices, each reflecting different areas of his art and interests in self-expression.

Wang might agree. Speaking with me about her theory, she noted, "I think Tumblr is ideal for youth and artists because both are much more experimental with their identities — and already see them as elastic." The old joke that the art world is high school redux might have some teeth; the teen world's leading social network is a welcome home for artists' flexible sense of self and self-expression.

Bounded and Unbounded

All around the world, countries are marching toward a future where real name registration is the rule, not the exception. In places as far afield as the US (think Facebook and Google+), [China](#), and [Uganda](#), our names and identities are being tied to our personas online. This has positive benefits — it's easier to trust an online vendor or professional contact if you know exactly who they are. Accountability will probably keep more people honest and perhaps less prone to trolling and bullying (though the truly committed ones will always find a workaround). But as Facebook continues to envelop the world with its real name values, Tumblr's [95+ million blogs](#) show that a sizeable portion of the population seeks an additional path. If LinkedIn is becoming the world's office and Facebook the world's town hall, Tumblr is where we party.

... sites without real name registration have real value — both for users and for business, and that the shifting screen names and anonymous online identities of yesteryear continue to appeal ...

Tumblr is well on its way to a [solid business model, supported in part by advertising](#). The danger — if the brief history of social media is any indication — is that it will soon need to collect broad data on its clientele for advertising and greater sustainability. The new age of Big Data is anathema to unbounded expression: sophisticated algorithms not only know that you're a dog secretly tapping away at the

keyboard but can also get a photo of your doghouse and advertise your favorite doggy biscuits after analyzing your emails. And it's not just Big Data: as more teens migrate to Tumblr, [cyberbullying is cropping up](#) in harsh, memetic ways, and [teen insecurities](#) could even be magnified on the site. The original freedom of expression allowed by unbounded use could eventually give way to more rules and regulations, either enforced from above or developed informally by the netizenry.

But as it stands today, Tumblr, with all its flexibility, has proven that sites without real name registration have real value — both for users and for business, and that the shifting screen names and anonymous online identities of yesteryear continue to appeal. Artists will always need a haven for their practice and a way to reinvent themselves if they want their work to remain truly fresh and inspiring. Tumblr, for now, is one of those outlets. You can reveal and explore bits and pieces of yourself and your art to different audiences in different ways. The platform retains the freewheeling nature of the 1990s internet, a lively and chaotic space brought to life by people typing away in relative anonymity.

I remember when I first started Tumblr. I used the same screen name for my Twitter handle and website, and I would post more or less the same things I do on Twitter. But that got old fast, and I discovered how easy it was to create a new blog. These days, I have almost a dozen tumblelogs: one for bots, one for my photos, one for poetry, one for translation, one for memes in civic life, one just for pictures of empty plates. Some are shared, some are just mine. Some are clearly tied to me, some float freely on the web. They are all part of my creative practice, but they exist separately, like separate studios in separate cities, allowing me to dip in and explore when I wish. Unlike my Twitter and Facebook accounts, I don't have to worry about posting too much about any one topic at the expense of others; I can simply post as I'd like and draw the audience I'm looking for. Some of these blogs have sparked new projects and trajectories; others have faded away. Tumblr's flexibility enabled me to test them all out in an open, public studio.

For teenagers, creatives, and dogs that secretly roam the internet, Tumblr (for now) provides a place to shed the leash and collar for a little while and run around freely. Internet users treasure internet freedom so much not just because it allows us unrestricted access to information but because it has historically also allowed us to openly express ourselves. As Wang noted recently about unbounded spaces, social media users need identities that they can put on, take off, and abandon or keep as they wish. They need sites that are, in her words, "impermanent, informal, flexible and anonymous." It's this stew of factors that drives identity exploration and creativity and innovation. And as the world comes online and competing values for internet freedom emerge, I hope we remember this, for the sake of teens and artists — and everyone else.

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