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COVER SHEET

Your Digital Graveyard Sound, Toilets and Participatory Post- Internet Practice in *Scrape Elegy*

Gabby Bush and Monica Lim

Abstract:

Scrape Elegy is a participatory multimedia art installation designed as a critical exploration of our presence on and engagement with social media. The work uses sound, a physical installation in the form of a pink public toilet, and participatory practice through visitors' Instagram accounts. It joins the postmodern art procession of toilet-based installations and plays on the aesthetics of the banal (Maffesoli 1999) as a critique of society, much like such works as Maurizio Cattelan's *America* (2016) and Gelitin's *Locus Focus* (2004). It calls attention to the ethical issues surrounding data scraping technology by using the very same technology to read visitors' Instagram captions from their accounts back to themselves. Sound becomes the medium for self-representation, subverting the text- and photo-based platform of Instagram. The work is personal and user-specific, using parasitic platform practices to create a critique of modern internet capitalism and tech oligarchies (Sætra et al. 2021). *Scrape Elegy* is a comedic mourning poem, a monologue, and a private show for the individual in a commercialized, globalized, corporate, pink Instagram world.

Keywords:

digital ethics, social media, artistic research, participatory installation, post-internet, scraping

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Audio description when the original page is opened: An ascending arpeggio in B flat major in a generic electronic keyboard tone, reminiscent of a public service announcement.

Your Digital Graveyard

Sound, Toilets and Participatory Post-Internet Practice in *Scrape Elegy*

Gabby Bush and Monica Lim

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This accessible page is a derivative of <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1743858> which it is meant to support and not replace.

Audio description when the original page is opened: A human voice lets out a sigh and then says 'um'.

Scrape Elegy: Introduction to the Work

A lament for what we give over to the bots. A mourning poem for the late capitalist hell that makes even the worst of us valuable. A cringe tour of the digital graveyard we make day by day. A sweet little drown in the doom scroll. A comedic monologue starring you and only you. All you need to hand over is your handle. All you will leave with is the OMG echo.

(Weiland, Bush, Lim and Mikho. *Scrape Elegy*. 2022. Science Gallery, Melbourne.)

Image description: The visitor is sitting on the toilet (lid closed), smiling and looking upwards to the ceiling where a speaker is installed. The photograph is atmospheric, dominated by soft, warm lighting. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1743858#tool-1743864> to see a photograph of a visitor inside the work.

Scrape Elegy is a mourning poem for the facets of ourselves that we share on social media. The work is a large physical installation with an algorithm that consensually scrapes visitors' Instagram captions and synthesizes the text into audio. The installation is a large, circular, non-functioning pink public toilet — a small escape from the gallery, where visitors have a private experience. While sitting on the toilet, a speaker plays a six-minute audio journey, with human and artificial intelligence (AI)-generated voices reading predetermined captions interspersed with the visitor's own Instagram captions. The toilet, with its multiplicity, becomes cognitive. It is intimate; the toilet reads back your own online life, but this is created specifically for the visitor to experience their own data in a familiar, private setting. Yet the work is a performance, and the visitor is the main character and core contributor. As Michel Maffesoli wrote in *The Ethics of Aesthetics*, in 1991, the world of postmodern art is built on the banal, in which all experiences can be considered art (Maffesoli 1991: 8).

Scrape Elegy was shown as part of the Science Gallery's 2022 exhibition 'SWARM' in Melbourne, Australia. The collaborative team comprises Willoh Weiland, Gabby Bush, Misha Mikho, and Monica Lim, with Lauren Steller (design), Sullivan Patten (voice), and Will Loft (fabrication). The work was run out of the Centre for AI and Digital Ethics (CAIDE), in collaboration with the Science Gallery at the University of Melbourne.

In its call for submissions, the Science Gallery posed the question 'What does it mean to belong to a swarm?' For the proposal, the team focused on the idea of a digital swarm — the

data we create ourselves, looking specifically at social media. We posed the research question:

'How can we use art to reframe social media as a lens through which to experience our own digital swarm?'

To explore the research question, we played with the aesthetics of banality and everyday participation and performance, using visitors as key players in the research enquiry. The creative-led research resulted in the creation of a work that not only focused on our own experience of social media, but also used an installation to demonstrate our research and the collective experience of a swarm.

In this article, we will discuss the exploration of this question within an arts-based practice methodology, using the creation of *Scrape Elegy* as our fieldwork. The research draws on the cross-disciplinary study of art, sound, and the field of AI ethics. *Scrape Elegy* is a subversive commentary on one's social media presence; it invokes the aesthetics of the everyday by blurring the line between life and art (Yuriko 2021). What we post on social media can be many things — daily updates, life events, pictures of food, documentation of travels, jobs, and ways to connect with our communities. With the many lenses and experiences we can have on social media, it has become, for many, part of the banal and everyday, but it can be reframed by or transformed into artistic experience. *Scrape Elegy* aims to conduct a reimagining of our social media presence, a new look at our swarm and its role in our lives.

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This accessible page is a derivative of <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1748044> which it is meant to support and not replace.

Audio description when the original page is opened: A human voice saying 'like' ten times with the same intonation each time.

Methodology and Methods

Image description: A photograph of two people inside the work as it is being installed. They are looking at a circular screen with a keypad interface. They both have their arms crossed. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1748044#tool-1748142> to see the image.

This research was conducted through arts-based practice, where the creative work itself acts as a form of research (Candy 2006). This methodology allowed for the interdisciplinary exploration of digital swarms through art, sound, algorithmic practice, performance art, design, and user experience in the making of *Scrape Elegy*. The collaboration of researchers and practitioners from more than five disciplines, through a process of shaping, theorizing, contextualizing, documenting, and making, allowed us to create a work that reframes our social media presence through a kind of uncanny self-awareness, rather than traditional methods of knowledge transmission. We take inspiration from Gerber (2022) and McNiff (1998) in using arts-based practice as critical exploration, in which the subject of scientific enquiry is explored through art as a medium, influence, and practice.

Using Sullivan's framework of practices (2009), our methodology involved various domains of enquiry, including:

- 'conceptual practice', where we used interactions and designs within the medium of social media, technology, sound, and physical materials to give form to our ideas;
- 'dialectical practice', where we explored the making of meaning through an installation experience that is felt and lived, using socially mediated data that are reconstructed, reinterpreted, and re-experienced; and
- 'contextual practice', reflecting on the role of our work as a critical form of enquiry that can bring about social change or at the very least a shift in the perception of social media use at the individual level.

The methodology includes influences from post-internet art (Smith 2020) and art through delegated performance (Bishop 2012).

Image description: Two people in the gallery during the installation of the work. They are

surrounded by various equipment and each is holding part of a pink toilet seat and smiling at the camera. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1748044#tool-1748150> to see the image.

The stages of creating this work were:

1. The exploration of digital platforms and technical possibilities;
2. The creation of the algorithm;
3. The design of the audio journey and integration with the algorithm;
4. The design and fabrication of the structure; and
5. The integration of all components and streamlining of the visitor journey.

Although these stages represent the broad trajectory of our process, in practice our process was iterative and collaborative. Ideas were tried out and discarded or changed, resulting in changes to other parts of the work. At times, the design of the audio journey required changes to the algorithm; at other times, the technical latency with digital scraping required adjustments to the audio journey. We used ourselves as research subjects, evaluating individually and collectively how the algorithm and audio design reframed our own experiences of social media, how it affected us emotionally, or how it changed our perspective. As we reached the final stages of our process, we asked friends to act as research subjects and qualitatively evaluate the audio design, receiving feedback from them about durations and emotional impacts.

This article presents each facet of the research in the order of exploration of the work. While a visitor will approach the work through the physical installation, the interaction with the algorithm via the iPad, and finally the experience of the work, the purpose of this article is to present our findings relating to the various lines of enquiry and disciplinarity within our arts-based research.

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This accessible page is a derivative of <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1743786> which it is meant to support and not replace.

Audio description when the original page is opened: The ‘neural’ voice saying ‘two hearts’ six times in rapid succession.

Social Media: The Basis for Exploration

Image description: A visitor in the work. The visitor is inputting information into a circular, screen-based keypad. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1743786#tool-1743805> to see the image.

The many interpretations of social media and its role differ: it is a place designed primarily for the sharing of one’s own identity in exchange for likes (Bibhu et al. 2021), a quick fix of instant entertainment (Volcic and Andrejevic 2022), and a place where the user bears witness to the content creation of others (Schmuck et al. 2019). Other scholars, when speaking about social media, see it as a platform where more democratic relationships can be enacted, being a place for the creation and ‘existence of multiply constructed selves’ (Akman and Huq 2016: 232). Part of the ‘construction of self’ has also allowed for more important relationships, communities, and actions to play out on social media. Platforms such as Twitter (now X) and Facebook have been credited as integral communication and engagement mechanisms for organizing social movements such as Occupy, Slutwalk, and Uncut (Hill 2013). More recent research has found influencers on TikTok and Instagram to be powerful voices in social movements; Goodwin et al. (2023) have described these influencers as ‘Political Relational Influencers’. Other work has found that social media provides an important avenue for vulnerable LGBTQI youth to find support and networks within their communities (Hiller et al. 2012).

In the art world, Instagram has changed the way in which we consume art and even the type of art that is curated and presented (Pardes 2017). Whereas most museums used to prohibit photography, many of them now plan for Insta-friendly installations and displays, giving rise to the new term ‘Instagrammable Art’ (Budge and Suess 2018). Many of us experience more art through our social media feeds than we do first-hand, mediated through someone else’s experience and lens. However, as Mihaela Mihalova (2021) notes in their work ‘To Dally with Dalí: Deepfake (Inter)faces in the Art Museum’, an increasing number of galleries and museums are using new technologies such as deepfakes to create this Instagrammable art as an experience within the museums themselves.

Instagram was developed as a photo and editing ‘app’ in 2010 and now hosts more than a billion users (Diefenbach and Anders 2022; Rejeb et al. 2022). In 2012, Instagram was bought

by Facebook (now Meta) for approximately \$1 billion, but it remained an independent brand following the acquisition (Kumar 2019). In his chapter 'Wealth Creation in the World's Largest Mergers and Acquisitions', Kumar (2019) credits Instagram as being ahead of the curve in terms of its use of a mobile application rather than a web-based platform. He writes that 'Instagram is a community for sharing visual stories through photos, videos, and direct messages' (2019: 321).

Image description: A screenshot of an Instagram account with the account name @pink_elegy_. The screenshot shows an Instagram grid of eight images of the work and one image of an article about the work. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1743786#tool-1744636> to see the screenshot.

Instagram in *Scrape Elegy*

Social media was central to the creation of *Scrape Elegy* — through the research, the exploration, and the creation, and in the final work. Our own Instagram accounts were served up for experimentation and dissection. Each Instagram account was scraped and synthesized, then rescraped and played to various collaborators, while we continued to use our personal accounts for everyday use. During the work, as each member of the team added to their Instagram account, the audio journey would update itself, selecting new posts as part of the journey, thereby giving the team a new understanding of the experience that was being created.

While Instagram was chosen owing to its user base among the target audience of the Science Gallery (16 to 25-year-olds), we were cognizant that not all visitors would have an Instagram account, so decided to create a dummy audio journey for those visitors who might not be able to access the work otherwise. This dummy account also serves as a backup should the servers go down or Instagram remove our accounts for suspicious, unhuman-like activity. In creating this dummy account, we took to our own accounts and shared a story with a question box, asking our Instagram followers to share their most 'cringe internet speak' language.

[1] From these terms, we created a dummy Instagram account, serving up the generic content that many would find reflected in their own accounts.

How do you see your current self online?

How do you see your past self online?

What does the internet hold in your digital graveyard?

Image description: A screenshot of an Instagram post by Gabby Bush. The post features a photograph of Willoh Weiland kneeling on the floor in front of the toilet. She is smiling at the camera while holding a cleaning spray bottle and a cleaning rag. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1743786#tool-1743811> to see the screenshot.

In creating *Scrape Elegy*, we spent much time considering what people wrote and shared via their posts and the selves they constructed over the course of their (Instagram) lifetime — how they created and curated their personal swarm. We looked to works such as Amalia Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections* (Kerr 2017), a six-month Instagram performance of self-discovery exposing the gap between online self-representation and reality. By asking our audience to review their own social media posts through another voice, we hoped to similarly unveil the fractures between these multiple constructed selves.

While acknowledging the importance of social media, and the role it can play in our lives, once we began to experience our own Instagram captions, it was not the meaningful interactions with our communities that became the most apparent — rather, it was the lack of depth the captions held when stripped bare of their surrounding importance. The research team felt that while the intention was important, the outcome felt hollow, creating among the team a sense that what makes us who we are, and how we belong to our communities, is so much more than what we post on Instagram. The caption accompanying a picture of a beloved relative or friend, for instance, does not capture the multitudes of feelings we may have about them — it does not display our fears, nor the lengths and depths of these relationships. This led us to exploring the idea of the banal.

Social media's role in shaping the 'new aesthetics of the banal' became of central importance to our enquiry, with its 'transcoding of evil and grey media that become sensible to us as banal effects of the everyday; effects that may even possess some kind of inner beauty' (Anderson 2015: 276). In this view, the algorithmic revolution, rather than being heralded with sound and fury, has occurred without anybody noticing, precisely because of its ordinariness. Millions of pet videos and dinner photos attest to the permeation and creation of the banal through users' free production, obscuring the hidden agendas of big tech in monitoring our consumption and behaviour. Banality becomes a Trojan horse, beguiling us into accepting and even welcoming the intrusion of large, profit-making corporations into our lives, relationships, and innermost thoughts. The role of the artist, then, becomes one of rupturing the process of banalization and exposing its processes. By presenting the banal as an artwork that can be digitally scraped, archived, and reflected upon, we begin to question the automatic ways in which we post.

The use of the banal to reframe the ways in which we view social media has been explored in works such as Petra Cortright's *VVEBCAM* (Kerr 2017), where the artist gazes blankly into a webcam that is then uploaded on YouTube, while clipart flickers across the screen. The work is notable for its use of the comments section, which is updated with more and more keywords to attract viewers searching for erotic or offensive content. *Scrape Elegy* extends this self-objectification from the artist to the participant, making them both the subject and object of their own banality.

Endnotes

[1] A question box is a feature on the Instagram 'stories' function that allows users to ask a question to receive prompts from their followers. The 'story' remains on their account for twenty-four hours and in that time all followers (and, for public accounts, all users) are able to submit short responses via the question box, which can be read and reshared by the original

account holder. ↩

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This accessible page is a derivative of <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1743778> which it is meant to support and not replace.

Audio description when the original page is opened: A solo digital stringed instrument plays two short phrases with a downward glissando.

The Technical: Finding Your Footprint

Image description: A screenshot of part of the code used in the work. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1743778#tool-1744713> to see the screenshot.

After the development phase, our own Instagram accounts became essential to the functioning of *Scrape Elegy*. The algorithm runs off nine verified Instagram accounts. Each collaborator and the curatorial team at the Science Gallery have become the hosts of the Instagram accounts that the API (application programming interface) of *Scrape Elegy* runs off. These accounts exist like normal accounts and are rotated via each request from a visitor. As such, *Scrape Elegy* has become not just a physical installation, but also an artwork with its own online presence. Our team have posted photos and stories from the accounts sharing the experiences of *Scrape Elegy* to a separate Instagram account.

The work makes use of two iPads, the first with a 'Vacant'/'Occupied' sign on the exterior wall of the work, the second attached to its inner circle — the first port of call for visitor participation. The iPad has a series of prompts that ask for consent and explain what the process will entail.

The visitor is asked to input their Instagram handle. While the work contains a [dummy scrape](#) that allows for visitors without Instagram accounts to listen to a sample of the audio journey, the proper depth and participatory nature of the work comes from the input of a visitor's handle. The algorithm is built so that visitors with private accounts receive friend requests from our *Scrape Elegy* Instagram accounts. The participant is prompted on the iPad to accept the follow request. The visitor is then invited into the work through prompts on the screen.

Image description: A gallery showing six different stages of the circular keypad user interface design for the work. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1743778#tool-1749009> to see the image.

The work has multiple accounts owing to Instagram's anti-bot software, which detects algorithms running on the platform. The work adheres to the Instagram community guidelines

and does not keep or retain visitors' data.

The following is a technical description of the back end by the *Scrape Elegy* developer, Misha Mikho.

Scrape Elegy has five containers:

1. **The front end** (which builds static files during 'docker-compose build' using webpack and shoots them off into a volume, to be picked up by Nginx, immediately exiting during 'docker-compose up');
2. **The back end** (which runs Daphne, an ASGI (Asynchronous Server Gateway Interface) Django server with support for channels to facilitate the use of websockets);
3. **The task queue** (Huey);
4. **Redis** (an in-memory database used both by Django Channels to facilitate websocket connections and by the task queue Huey); and
5. **The web server** (Nginx), which serves all the static files, which are:
 - a. the optimized front-end (React) production build;
 - b. our back-end static files, e.g., for the Django admin site; and
 - c. the audio clips, which are generated by the Huey task queue and passed onto Nginx).

[\[2\]](#)

Endnotes

[2] Note the omission of a dedicated database. We are instead using sqlite, which is only read to/written from 2 and 3 above. ↩

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Audio description when the original page is opened: A human voice giggles weirdly.

The Elegy: Creating the Lament

Reading and listening/hearing are functions that demand a measure of patience, presence of mind and cognitive attention, whereas the ocular/visible is capable of drawing attention by affect, thriving on the non-linear and non-teleological gradient of desire.

(Shang, 2016: 244)

Audio description: An example of a default audio journey where the user has no Instagram account. Captions by Willoh Weiland and Gabby Bush. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1743774#tool-1744577> to hear the example.

As a medium that demands a measure of patience, presence of mind, and cognitive attention, our audio journey for *Scrape Elegy* had to grapple with a number of key issues. First, it is a representation of a visitor's sense of self (Choi et al. 2020), a sonic narration or staging of their life, yet we do not know at the design process *who* their social media self is, let alone their content, style, or the length of their captions, which would affect the duration of audio samples generated. Second, regardless of the individual profile of each visitor, we wanted to use the sound design to reinforce the affect of the physical toilet, with its sense of absurdity and exaggerated banality, with the banality questioning and ultimately fracturing itself. And, finally, we wanted to create a dramaturgical and emotional narrative, bringing in the techniques of film scoring to create an intimate emotional journey for the visitor that would support the sense of nostalgia or 'cringe' when hearing their own captions.

A critical part of the sound design was the neural voice used for reading out visitors' captions. Wanting a gender-neutral voice with a certain deadpan ennui, we explored the possibility of training our own custom neural voice, using providers such as Resemble.ai, Overdub by Descript or Amazon's Polly. However, owing to cost considerations (custom AIs are expensive), as well as being denied access owing to our inability to detail what the voice would be saying [3], while also remaining mindful of contributing to the coffers of Big Tech, we settled on using a free pre-trained voice by Microsoft Azure Cognitive Services in two different emotional modes – 'whispering' and 'unfriendly'.

The pre-trained female voice was pitched down 20%. We adjusted the rate of speaking, the volume, the emotional mode, and the gaps between sentences to achieve variation in the

vocal journey, which were pre-programmed to occur at certain points in time. Different durations for each section and various parameters were trialled during the design process to tweak the emotional narrative.

Image description: A screenshot of part of the code used in the work to set the 'neural voice' parameters. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1743774#tool-1744612> to see the screenshot.

Rather than bringing in visitors' captions from the start, with our inability to know their content in advance, we decided to use pre-rendered captions by the artist Sullivan Patten to help visitors settle into the intimate mental space (the cognitive toilet). These pre-rendered captions were used to supplement the visitors' vocal captions throughout the audio journey.

They consisted of the sounds we make in everyday conversation that usually disappear in our written texts (e.g., 'hmmm', sighs, and uses of the word 'like'), as well as phrases describing emojis, which usually exist only in the textual domain and sound unfamiliar when read out (e.g., 'two hearts, two hearts'). We also introduced whole phrases to provide bookmarks at certain narrative points, such as 'Do not stand in my grave and weep, I am not there', marking the dramatic midpoint, and the song 'bye ... bye ... sorry', at the end. These provide a consistent narrative structure for the different visitors, with their individual Instagram handles, and also provide anchor points for the caption selection algorithm even when a visitor has very few social media posts.

Interestingly, a number of visitors did not realize that some captions were pre-rendered, instead absorbing them into their own social media self-image, perhaps attesting to the homogenization of language caused by 'like' culture, search optimization engines, and character limits (Anderson 2015: 281).

How Do You Create Banality in Sound?

Just like the non-functioning, excessively pink toilet, we sought to create a type of shiny, otherworldly, *something-is-wrong* banality. To do this, we designed an underscore of sounds to accompany the vocal captions. These start with a simple ascending arpeggio reminiscent of a Public Service Announcement, calling the visitor into the inner sanctum of the cubicle. The first part of the journey builds on the familiar, kitsch sound of a Wurlitzer electric piano, with a pastiche Alberti bass pattern [4]. These familiar sounds and patterns are, however, made uneasy by the use of pitch slides at the ends of phrases.

The subtle pitch slides become large string glissandi by the middle of the audio journey, marking a dramatic point where the underscore nearly overwhelms the vocal captions. The voice becomes faster, with smaller gaps between captions, creating a sort of mental crescendo, irrespective of the actual content of the captions (which in many cases are just banal descriptions of food and the humdrum of everyday life).

The final section of the audio journey takes us quite literally into the world of laments and elegies, using the sound of a funereal pipe organ as the final accompaniment to the digital

graveyard. Rather than recording 'real' instruments, we use sampled digital instruments as a parallel to the transcoding of our real lives into a digitized, compressed-bit version.

In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.

(Kant 1790 [1911]: First Part, sec. 54)

Visitors' captions are not filtered or ordered based on any content or emotional valence, to allow for the absurd juxtaposition of captions with the melodramatic and over-the-top underscore. As that builds to its dramatic peaks or fizzles to its melancholic ending, the nothingness of endless hashtags, text-to-speech emojis, and netspeak acronyms highlight the tragicomedy of our social media selves.

Endnotes

[3] Microsoft Azure offers the option of training an artificial voice through an application process, and our application was returned with a request for more details of the words to be spoken by the voice. As the intention was to use the Instagram captions of visitors, we were unable to provide a script or word list to Microsoft and therefore were denied access. ↩

[4] Alberti bass patterns are a kind of broken chord accompaniment commonly used in Classical or Romantic music. ↩

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This accessible page is a derivative of <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1743629> which it is meant to support and not replace.

Audio description when the original page is opened: A simple melody and accompaniment in a Wurlitzer-type tone.

The Toilet: Constructing the Physical

Scrape Elegy is a circular structure, built with acoustic panelling on a steel frame. [5] In the centre of the structure is a half-circle with a toilet in the centre, hidden from view. The structure has a partial roof. In a collaborative compromise, to ensure privacy while adhering to fire safety and Occupational Health and Safety standards, the roof has circular holes in the ceiling, reminiscent of old-fashioned telephone dials — a nod to the history of phones before Instagram. The central feature of the work is the pink toilet in the middle of the cubicle. *Scrape Elegy* joins a long line of absurd toilets in postmodern art. Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* was the first toilet of sorts to be put in a gallery, in 1917, and is credited in *Artsy* as 'changing art forever' (Mann 2017).

Image description: A rendered architectural images of the physical design of the toilet by Lauren Steller, showing front and top views. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1743629#tool-1744591> to see the image.

Matthew Bown (2019), in 'Toilets of Our Time: Where Art Meets Defecation' credits Sarah Lucas for creating the next seminal work, this time a functioning toilet in an empty room, titled *The Great Flood*, in 1996. This was followed by Gelitin's *Locus Focus* in 2004, which Bown describes as 'a frank exhalation of the act of defecation: as you sit on your throne, a system of mirrors enables you to watch your own live action' (Bown 2019: 2). Like *Locus Focus*, *Scrape Elegy* uses a toilet as a setting, with incorporated technology to create self-reflection as part of its experience. Much like *Fountain*, which was not connected to plumbing or intended for actual use, *Scrape Elegy* is a non-functioning toilet. As the toilet concept was introduced very late in the creative process, when Lauren Steller was brought in to do the design, plumbing was not considered and the toilet was simply symbolic, à la *Fountain*. In fabrication, the toilet bowl holds the wire that connects the iPads and lights to power cables through the floor of the gallery, and it must be stuck shut at all times to prevent damage to the electrical wiring as well as defecation.

Within the sound art world, real public toilets have been used for site-specific works, such as *The Gordon Assumption* by Sonia Leber and David Chesworth, in 2004. A chorus of female voices rise infinitely in pitch from subterranean toilets situated at a train station, making passers-by concerned for the 'trapped women' (Kouvaras 2009: 101). The absence of a toilet,

conversely, becomes a moment of terror in Martin Kersel's 1994 installation work *Brown Sound Kit*, where a piece of sound equipment that emits low-frequency infrasound waves threatens to cause mass involuntary loss of bowel control (M HKA 2024).

Image description: A photograph of the exterior of the work situated in the gallery. The pink circular walls of the work are visible, together with an iPad stand. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1743629#tool-1743728> to see the image.

Image description: A photograph of the interior of the work, ceiling view. The dark pink roof is punctuated by multiple, cut out, circular holes. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1743629#tool-1743752> to see the image.

In 2016, Maurizio Cattelan unveiled another functioning toilet, this time in 18-karat gold, titled *America*, in the Guggenheim. *Scrape Elegy* mirrors *America* in its exceptional colour and placement, as well as the mutual criticism of corporate America and the absurdity of the modern capitalist hellscape we find ourselves in. Both toilets, like the public toilets of reality, often result in queues of people in the gallery waiting to use them. In *Scrape Elegy*, this works as a subversion of Instagram and social media in general, where access and gratification are instant.

In this way, *Scrape Elegy* is also a subversion of the performative platform of Instagram, a reminder that it is nothing more than an accompaniment to our daily use of the bathroom. As Abigail Cain (2016) found through interviews with viewers, the golden toilet *America* was, in the end, not much more than a working toilet.

Endnotes

[5] The design of the toilet was by Lauren Steller and the structure was created by Will Loft and his team at Loftetcetera Studios. The acoustic panelling was generously sponsored by Autex Acoustic Australia. ↩

Next section: [Subverting Big Tech](#)

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This accessible page is a derivative of <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1743629> which it is meant to support and not replace.

Audio description when the original page is opened: A simple melody and accompaniment in a Wurlitzer-type tone.

The Toilet: Constructing the Physical

Scrape Elegy is a circular structure, built with acoustic panelling on a steel frame. [5] In the centre of the structure is a half-circle with a toilet in the centre, hidden from view. The structure has a partial roof. In a collaborative compromise, to ensure privacy while adhering to fire safety and Occupational Health and Safety standards, the roof has circular holes in the ceiling, reminiscent of old-fashioned telephone dials — a nod to the history of phones before Instagram. The central feature of the work is the pink toilet in the middle of the cubicle. *Scrape Elegy* joins a long line of absurd toilets in postmodern art. Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* was the first toilet of sorts to be put in a gallery, in 1917, and is credited in *Artsy* as 'changing art forever' (Mann 2017).

Image description: A rendered architectural images of the physical design of the toilet by Lauren Steller, showing front and top views. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1743629#tool-1744591> to see the image.

Matthew Bown (2019), in 'Toilets of Our Time: Where Art Meets Defecation' credits Sarah Lucas for creating the next seminal work, this time a functioning toilet in an empty room, titled *The Great Flood*, in 1996. This was followed by Gelitin's *Locus Focus* in 2004, which Bown describes as 'a frank exhalation of the act of defecation: as you sit on your throne, a system of mirrors enables you to watch your own live action' (Bown 2019: 2). Like *Locus Focus*, *Scrape Elegy* uses a toilet as a setting, with incorporated technology to create self-reflection as part of its experience. Much like *Fountain*, which was not connected to plumbing or intended for actual use, *Scrape Elegy* is a non-functioning toilet. As the toilet concept was introduced very late in the creative process, when Lauren Steller was brought in to do the design, plumbing was not considered and the toilet was simply symbolic, à la *Fountain*. In fabrication, the toilet bowl holds the wire that connects the iPads and lights to power cables through the floor of the gallery, and it must be stuck shut at all times to prevent damage to the electrical wiring as well as defecation.

Within the sound art world, real public toilets have been used for site-specific works, such as *The Gordon Assumption* by Sonia Leber and David Chesworth, in 2004. A chorus of female voices rise infinitely in pitch from subterranean toilets situated at a train station, making passers-by concerned for the 'trapped women' (Kouvaras 2009: 101). The absence of a toilet,

conversely, becomes a moment of terror in Martin Kersel's 1994 installation work *Brown Sound Kit*, where a piece of sound equipment that emits low-frequency infrasound waves threatens to cause mass involuntary loss of bowel control (M HKA 2024).

Image description: A photograph of the exterior of the work situated in the gallery. The pink circular walls of the work are visible, together with an iPad stand. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1743629#tool-1743728> to see the image.

Image description: A photograph of the interior of the work, ceiling view. The dark pink roof is punctuated by multiple, cut out, circular holes. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1743629#tool-1743752> to see the image.

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This accessible page is a derivative of <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1748970> which it is meant to support and not replace.

Audio description when the original page is opened: A pipe-organ plays a grand, dramatic phrase.

Subverting Big Tech

Video description: A video of the circular keypad user interface in the work. The video shows a series of words flashing across the screen after the visitor inputs their Instagram handle. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1748970#tool-1748995> to watch the video.

Duchamp's *Fountain*, as previously noted, has been credited as creating the new artform of 'readymades' and constituting a critique of the abandonment of functional ceramics. But in writing about Duchamp's *Fountain*, John Roberts noted that the work served as more than these initial meanings, stating:

If Duchamp's urinal stands for the work of art itself, and in turn for the productive labour that underwrites the vanguard of modernity of American monopoly capitalism it is also an image of premodern cultural continuity in which craft, creativity and being are united. (Roberts 2013: 257)

The use of the toilet in *Scrape Elegy* mirrors this critique of American monopoly capitalism, employing the toilet as the primary medium for users in the experience of their own historical data, outside the constraints of the capitalist monolith that is Instagram. The work plays on the anthropomorphism of machines in modern life. Like *Fountain*, as well as *America*, the medium of the toilet hails back to the concept of a swarm — every person will use a toilet in some form. But does every person use Instagram? Do we identify more with a toilet or with social media platforms? *Scrape Elegy* plays the two off against each other, uniting the experience of being, both on the internet and on the toilet, with the creativity of the work, as Roberts describes.

This toilet knows you.

Does Instagram know you?

Does the internet know you?

What part do I play in the swarm?

In *The AI Ethicist's Dilemma: Fighting Big Tech by Supporting Big Tech* (2021), a disruptive piece in the field of AI ethics by Henrik Skaug Sætra, Mark Coeckelbergh, and John Danaher,

the researchers present multiple possibilities for critiquing an industry that ‘has both resources *and* control of the tools and digital infrastructure required for communicating and raising awareness about the problems’ (Sætra et al. 2021: 3). One possibility presented is that an AI ethicist might use social media in a parasitic manner, feeding from it, but not contributing to the platform (Sætra et al. 2021: 3). The automated system of *Scrape Elegy* is designed to pull the captions from a consenting user, convert the word files into audio, and feed the audio back for the user to hear on the toilet. In this sense, *Scrape Elegy* is enacting a parasitic practice — pulling from Instagram, then changing the medium, while giving the platform nothing in return. Indeed, Instagram’s own software has at times logged out or demanded verification from the *Scrape Elegy* accounts, owing to their unusual or unhuman-like behaviour on the platform.

In presenting their possibilities for the subversion of big tech, Sætra and colleagues write:

Surveillance Capitalism is a prime example of such a system, based on collected and monetizing/actioning personal data. It is enabled not just by individual companies but by the economic, regulatory, political and social system, and we argue that you cannot correct surveillance capitalism simply by eliminating, for example, Facebook (Sætra et. al. 2021: 3).

Scrape Elegy, as a work aiming to present new experiences of our own social media data, engages directly with the platform, and the experience is deeply grounded in the social media platform itself. Without the platform, the work would be missing a crucial element in the experience it offers. Instead, the work aims to challenge our own interactions with ourselves on the platform. In presenting users with a different experience, the aim is to make clear the banality and everyday nature of the swarm that occurs on Instagram — to remind users that their lives are more than what is presented to the world on Instagram and to give power to the human experience of being, rather than existing through the validation chasing of big tech and its algorithms.

Next section: [Curtain Call: Delegated Performance](#)

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This accessible page is a derivative of <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1743835> which it is meant to support and not replace.

Audio description when the original page is opened: A human voice speaking the phrase “Angel, angel, I see what you did there...bye...bye...sorry.”

Curtain Call: Delegated Performance

At this point, we have presented our research through the weaving of multiple media; the exploration of social media, the technical creation of the work, the composition of an integrated sound journey, and the construction of a large, circular, and pink public toilet. The enquiry has explored these media through many interwoven and occasionally conflicting ideas and experiences. This leaves us at the final stage of the work: the performance.

Come through by yourself. Take a seat alone.

Scrape Elegy entrance screen

Image description: A photo of a visitor exiting the work. She is smiling slightly. The photograph is atmospheric dominated by soft, warm lighting. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742136/1743835#tool-1743844> to see the image.

In her work *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Claire Bishop (2012) coins the term ‘delegated performance’ (219). This type of work is where the art is made by spectators of or participants in the work, who are ‘keen to perform aspects of their identity’, but are not as directed as they would be in a traditional performance (Bishop 2012: 220). Maurizio Cattelan, the creator of the aforementioned toilet, *America*, was a proponent of this art form: those visiting the toilet *used* the toilet. Their defecation was a performance; they were creating art.

Delegated performance is centred on the participation of the non-professional, but in practice, it is primarily achieved through the hiring of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Bishop 2012). While we have no indication of the socio-economic status of the visitors to *Scrape Elegy*, in comparison to big tech and its oligarchs, the performers are the everyperson. In each six-minute performance, they hear their own work and connect with it, despite the platform having ownership over their life’s work.

This art form ties the strands of participatory multimedia art together. The visitors to *Scrape Elegy* are performers in their own show, their input (via their Instagram captions) forming an essential component of the sound journey and thus of the work itself. Indeed, without

delegated performance, *Scrape Elegy* would not be the work it becomes for the visitors.

Scrape Elegy: A Comedic Mourning Poem for Your Social Media

Our work is many things:

- an algorithm
- a toilet
- a soundscape
- an exploration of personal data
- a comedy
- a tragedy
- a criticism of Big Tech
- a performance
- a ridiculous pink toilet in the middle of a green and black gallery

Our research enquiry was actualized in the launching of *Scrape Elegy* in August of 2022. The work, as it stood, was a culmination of our artistic reframing of social media. The line for the toilet on opening night was long - many waited for their own experience: the swarm outside; as well as the digital swarm waiting inside.

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