Nesting Peeps

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Abstract

_Nesting Peeps_ is a book depicting a peep character residing in nests of recycled mass digital media. The book images contrast a loving bird, or peep, to a mess of mass media, opinions, arguments, and disrespectful redirect. The peeps and nests relationships focus on presenting the impact of mass digital media on how we engage with one another. Extreme amplifications of particular human social behaviors in a digital space reveal the power of visual imaging in America, and globally, to create divisions as well as broaden our perspectives. This essay further examines the contradictory content of the book _Nesting Peeps_, and contextualizes it within the contemporary art world.

(fig.1. _Nesting Peeps, 12”x12”, large format film, printed book format_)
**Nesting Peeps**

*Nesting Peeps*, a book of 23 large format film images, presents the impact of mass digital media on how we engage with one another through words and images. Each image consists of photographing two sculptural components; one the peep, and two, nests made from recycled digital media. Titled, *Nesting Peeps*, the book focuses on presenting underlying discrepancies of human social behaviors that are masked by the white noise of digital media. Through the course of this paper the components of the book will be analyzed, including the peep and the nest, as well as how *Nesting Peeps* is in conversation with the contemporary art world.

**The Peep**

The peeps are 300 endearingly cute soft plaster blobs. Their purpose relies on the concept of a visual metaphor. A metaphor is drawing connections between two unlike things, to better understand them or another concept. Visual metaphors, don’t rely on the language of words, but instead of images, and can be understood globally across cultures. The peep has been commonly misidentified and compared to a jet puff marshmallow, cotton ball, breast, snowman, egg, soup dumpling, and most notoriously marshmallow Easter peep. While these comparisons make the peeps entertaining, they more importantly highlight the peeps global relatability through visual metaphors. The peep is in fact, none of these objects, but an imitation of a bird. Through the symbolism of a bird’s behavior, the peeps express a larger metaphor imitating human social behaviors. This can be seen in the different ways the peeps are arranged to fill a space.
In figure 2, the flocking of these caged birds reflects the human social behavior to cluster in groups with those one feels they share an identity with. In figure three the peeps lazily blob in one place, slightly separated from each other, reflecting the human nature or desire to remain in one’s comfort zone. Alone the peeps pose the question how do we socially engage with each other?

The Nest

The nests look to build off the imitation of a bird started with the peep, and conceptually address the impact of technology on our human social behaviors. The nests (fig. 4.) are a collage of printed, recycled mass digital media. To create the nests, Information and images were collected from Instagram, twitter and digital news platforms.

(fig.2. Peeps, 2”x3”, 300 plaster birds, fig.3. Peeps, 2”x3”, 300 plaster birds)

(fig.4. Nesting Peeps: Instagram Nest, 12”x12”, large format film, printed book format)
The book includes a page sourcing all of the digital media accounts which images were appropriated from within the collaged nests, spanning from political figures, artists, athletes, businesses, and more (fig. 5.). Focusing on the digital space is significant in that we no longer are interacting with one another in person, but also through technology.

Technological innovation has continuously impacted how we communicate with one another; from letters to smart phones, technology has altered how we converse.
Recent progression of technology has been the development of social media, increasing the individuals’ accessibility to media (Li 14). We now live in a world where the progression of digital and social media has led to the consumption and expression of infinite images. Even in the fine arts sphere digital media has had a stronger presence. Many fine art institutions, recognizing the power of digital media to spread visual content, are attempting to embrace social media instead of fight it (Gilbert). This has had an impact reaching far beyond the cultural sphere of the visual arts. In short, open accessibility to images from technology has led to a more globalized world. *Nesting Peeps* presents the exchange of ideas on digital media through worded content and visuals. In no nest does a tweet or article headline stand alone, but instead is surrounded by images.

The circulation of digital media illustrated in the nests shows the power of visual mediums to impact how individuals confine and expand societal ideologies. Access to cultural content through technology provides the opportunity for more people to share their identity and viewpoints (Hancox 280). This is seen not only in sharing personal opinions, but also in liking and retweeting images or other posts. In one digital space, there are now infinite attitudes, perspectives, and opinions. By sifting through this jumble of content and representing it in a new form, *Nesting Peeps* makes clearer how mass digital media amplifies particular human social behaviors. Digital media is the tip of the iceberg to the larger basis of human nature beneath the surface. Through the process of creating the nests, as well as the support of research there are three main social behaviors which digital media masks and intensifies; simplification, polarization, and engagement.
Simplification

When confronted with a massive amount of content in one space, it is natural for humans to react by simplifying the content to tailor it to our own understanding. This simplification can lead to many misunderstandings and alter how we converse with one another. Steve Lohr, a technology, business, and economics specialist for the New York Times, addresses this spread of “ignorance” on social media, stating that the spread of fake news could be due to, “the human nature to not want to digest all this content being thrown at once” (Lohr). Within Nesting Peeps this issue of selective hearing is depicted in two ways.

The first method is through the cropping of headlines to singular distracting titles, and use of graphic eye-catching images. Particular images circulated through digital media do not always represent the entire narrative. Sometimes an image or headline is absorbed by the viewer while the content accompanying it is not fully comprehended. This can be seen in the nest on climate change (fig. 6.) with images of snowmen and the globe on fire, paired with cropping’s of headlines on climate change denial and climate change awareness. When viewing the nest, it becomes unclear what message is being promoted: climate change awareness, or climate change denial?
The second method is through presenting confusion in conversations around a topic. This is done by collecting different subjective opinions on the same topic from different social media conversations, and combining them in the same or adjacent nest revealing ironies and hypocrisies. An example is the nest pairing of the Olympics and Globalization (fig. 7, fig.8.). In the Olympics nest all media corporations, and the President, patriotically support the USA and global sports engagement. However, in the adjoining nest on globalization pertaining to the economy, the opinions towards Olympic sport change. The news corporations also shift in questioning global engagement not supporting it. This is not only ironic, but shows a severe simplification of concepts to serve the purpose of the user’s subjective opinions. With this potentially occurring across social media all the time, many inaccurate conclusions towards another human beings’ view point are formed.
Polarization

The second behavior that is presented through the content of each particular nest is a heightened polarization in attitudes. This is most obviously seen in nests that include narratives wrapped around American politics (fig.9.). However, when one truly reads the content of the conversations within the nests, it becomes clear that the polarization is not from divides in American party politics, but instead from the human nature to respond and act emotionally or politically to other’s opinions. Politicization is a byproduct of hyper consumption of mass content circulating in one digital space. For example, in figure 9, a media corporation adopts the popular culture symbol of captain America to communicate the idea of political party divide or “civil war”. Is this use of imaging about political divide, or about tapping into the human nature to simplify and polarize a narrative to gain viewership? The Harvard Business review recently shared through Instagram, “leaders in all sectors are engaging in controversial political and social debates that they would have shied away from just a few years ago. … Aaron Chatterfji and Michael Toffel argue that this shift is rooted in increased political polarization, aided by the rise of social media and one-sided news diets” (HBR). Like the Harvard Business Review, I also observe that
there is an overload of commentary and content being posted onto media platforms, and that it is human nature to formulate black and white opinions around grey topics. A consequence of this is the further simplification of content, leading to more emotional and subjective attitudes. Within the nests this polarization is not only illustrated through ideologically contradicting tweets and editorials, but also through color.

Within these nests there is a clear choice in red versus blue colors, or Republican versus Democrat colors. Sometimes this is intentional, other times it is not.

Even in an image on twitter describing how many tweets the President has shared about the economy (fig.10), the small twitter blue bird is stacked in sharp contrast to red birds (representing President Trump's tweets). While this color combination may not be intentional as the twitter color is naturally bright blue, the opposed political association is unavoidable to see. This makes it appear as if the post is promoting political polarization. Visual’s on social media have a power to polarize and devalue content consciously and subconsciously. Beneath this black and white dichotomy, or red and blue political polarization, there is also potential for connectivity in the grey areas.

Engagement
The Nesting Peeps also display the potential for more positive engagement. Across the nests, visual imagery is specifically chosen to highlight the power of visual communication to not only divide us, but also connect us. This is most simply seen in following trends and social movements through sharable digital media platforms. More complexly, this is depicted in the use of images across nests, to present an overlap of topics in how we engage across ideas.

While it may seem obvious, visuals have the ability to communicate beyond words. The peep is affectionate, cute, and funny. This is not written out on the peep, it is the visual nature of it. Red and blue colors imply political parties, one does not have to read “republican” or “democrat”. Visuals can translate an entire theory within a second. Through images, connections can be found that are otherwise overlooked. People, technology, digital media, and images have the power to connect ideas across different cultural landscapes (Li 14). Within these nests an overlap of content is seen between categories, fostering connections between concepts normally perceived as separate. For example, in the different nests, there are multiple repeats of the same image combined with different content, like the “standing girl” statue image. This image is in a nest around Women’s rights, and a nest around global consumerism (fig.11, fig.12).

Within each nest these images communicate different messages, revealing the complexity within conversations. Different contexts show one idea or image can have multiple meanings and sources of influence, pushing one to question why do we continuously label and narrow synthesize information? Visuals have the power to open our minds, not just polarize and confine them.

**The Peep & the Contemporary Art World**

The concepts of visual metaphors, mass media, and human interactions are all topics that can be viewed beyond the subtext of American culture, and instead globally. Thus, *Nesting Peeps* are placed in conversation with artists that work around the concept of globalization. Globalization is commonly understood as global consumerism, but what does globalization mean in the fine arts? I believe it is art that communicates through a global aesthetic. This idea of a global aesthetic is most easily depicted in social media in advertisements and branding. Companies and popular culture figures like Nike, Apple, and Beyoncé rely more and more on visuals to communicate their product and identity. Colors, shape and form replace words to communicate the product (as seen in fig.12.). Victor Li, in “Cultural Critique”, introduces a connection between globalization of political economies and aesthetics stating that, “Such a view of the connection between political economy and aesthetic culture is usually ignored in those accounts of globalization that stick solely to the mantra of global economic competition and free-market fundamentals” (Li 1-2). Li points out the under exemplified impact the fine arts have in sharing and depicting aesthetic culture. Globalization is not just the exchange of ideas through the economy, but also through visuals. I will analyze the
peeps in relationship to contemporary artists whose works all share the commonality of communicating an idea through global visual forms. These artists are Ai Weiwei, Andreas Gursky, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Damien Hirst.

**Ai Weiwei**

Ai Weiwei’s work addresses the impact of globalization on Chinese culture. A negative side effect of globalization which Ai Weiwei presents is the homogenization of cultures. In an interview related to his works Ai Weiwei shared his opinion on globalization: “Materially and discursively the world is becoming more integrated. Globalization, facilitated by greater mobility of people, goods, capital and information, is associated with deterritorialization and cultural hybridization” (Steger 2003: 13; Hancox 280). Deterritorialization is the stopping of cultural practices. While Ai Weiwei’s work is about the negative impacts of globalization, he ironically uses a global aesthetic to spread his message. His *Han Jar Overpainted with Coca-Cola Logo*, literally takes Coca-Cola’s logo, a consumer good, and paints it atop an ancient Chinese ready-made vase (Welch 81). Ai Weiwei is appropriating a globally recognizable brand to communicate an idea specific to Chinese culture. Likewise, the Nesting Peeps appropriate global digital media imagery to communicate forms of human discourse.

(fig. 13. Ai Weiwei, *Han Jar Overpainted with Coca-Cola Logo*, 1994, Ceramic urn, 10”x8.5”x8.5”)
Ai Weiwei’s most recent work, *Good Fences Make Good Neighbors*, metaphorically addresses narrowmindedness that has sprouted globally through the construction of large cages and fences around New York City (Farago). Like the peep, Ai Weiwei’s work also utilize a globally recognizable symbol, fences or cages, to communicate a greater metaphor.

**Andreas Gursky**

Andreas Gursky’s images rely on mass repetition in form to create a visual language descriptive of the impacts of globalization. Pertaining to Gursky’s work this has been coined the, “contemporary sublime” (Ohlin). In his ink-jet print, *Amazon*, he captures multiple packages in one image to emulate the larger than life spread of global consumerism. Likewise, *Nesting Peeps*, use one photograph with masses of digital content to communicate the existence of infinite digital content.
Peter Galassi describes how Gursky is able to capture this ever changing world sharing,

our omnivorous image industry—the slick illustrations of corporate advertising, the overabundant photography of magazines and newspapers, the ceaselessly roving eye of television—has processed, packaged, and delivered all of this and more. Gursky's originality lies in the vividness and wit with which he has distilled compelling images from the plenitude of this commercialized image world” (Galassi 8).

Like Gursky, Nesting Peeps sift through the “overabundant” accessible digital content of the world, and display it in a fashion that has not been seen before. Andreas Gursky’s large photographs, and Nesting Peeps photographs both utilize the ideas of multiples to communicate a “sublime” of sorts. However, they differ in the curation of the image. By removing posts from their original context and curating them in new topic based conversations, Nesting Peeps is creating a new nonexistent environment. Instead Gursky is not removing images from their context, but is highlighting an existing environment to promote an idea.

**Felix Gonzalez-Torres**

Felix Gonzalez-Torres also uses the multiples to communicate. His fine art work, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, 1991, is a 175-pound candy pile about the loss of his partner due to AIDS. The mass of candy reference the weight of loss, and are also visually alluring (Lee and Kim 480). Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s candy piles intentionally
or not have grown a second life in the digital media world as “eye-candy”. Viewers have posted his content all over Instagram. When Gonzalez-Torres’ art collides with digital media, it potentially loses some of its original content (Women Magazine). However, is this a bad thing if it is still engaging the viewer and inspiring themselves to take a picture? Nesting Peeps are similar in this respect. The peeps have an akin reaction from the audience, in being distracted from the visual nature of the work. Despite a work of art losing some conceptual content in its material appeal, the spread on social media can lead to the engagement of more people, thus having greater impact (Lee and Kim 485). Nesting Peeps draws from this quality of Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s work, in being visually alluring through bright colors and cute peeps to relatedly engage with a wide audience.

**Damien Hirst**

Damien Hirst also capitalizes on a relatable aesthetic to engage a wide audience. Within his work he has literally defined the impact of a universal symbol in fine art. He calls recognizable symbols “universal triggers”, sharing, “everyone’s frightened of sharks, everyone loves butterflies” (The Psalms - Damien Hirst 1). Regardless whether these symbols represent the content of his work, they are visuals recognizable on a global scale.

Color is also a key component in Damien Hirst’s fine art works to create visual metaphors that would not be seen otherwise. He describes the “Psalms” from his “Kaleidoscope Series” in 2011, stating that, “The perfect symmetry which characterizes the ‘Psalms’ alludes to both the display of light, color and beauty as presented in Gothic
stained-glass windows, and the circular patterns of Buddhist mandalas" (Psalms - Damien Hirst 1). Color is specifically alluded to in creating a visual connection to religious stained-glass windows and mandalas. While Hirst's paintings may not be solving world religious conflicts, the point is they visually present a connection between different cultural aesthetics. The use of color in *Nesting Peeps* operate in a similar way by posing visual connections between concepts and cultures. In contrast, color also serves a dual purpose in *Nesting Peeps* to contribute to make the work visually alluring.

In relationship to these four-contemporary artist, *Nesting Peeps*, likewise operates on an aesthetics of relatability. This aesthetic is using recognizable symbols, visual metaphors, bright colors, and multiples to communicate to a global audience a specific idea. The one quality of *Nesting Peeps*, which remains unique from these four artists' works, is that the peeps also rely on a language of humor in their cute faces and funny round forms.

**Conclusion**

On the surface *Nesting Peeps* is a light-hearted book full of adorably speculative peeps residing in nests of mass media. Yet behind the colorful charade, within the discourse of the nests, is content reflecting the impact of mass digital media on intensifying specific human behaviors. Through the humorous and inquisitively cute
personality of the peep, *Nesting Peeps* reveals how this conflation of opinions, attitudes, and perspectives on digital media are truly built off how we engage and treat one another. In the end *Nesting Peeps* is a cautionary curated narrative which manipulates the powerful impact of digital visual content to question how we process and act on information in an ever more globally connected world.


Bibliography


Image List

**Figure 1.** *Nesting Peeps*, 12”x12”, large format film, printed book format

**Figure 2.** *Peeps*, 2”x3”, 300 plaster birds

**Figure 3.** *Peeps*, 2”x3”, 300 plaster birds
Figure 4. *Nesting Peeps: Instagram Nest*, 12”x12”, large format film, printed book format

Figure 5. *Nesting Peeps: Nest Sources*, 12”x12”, printed book format

**NEST SOURCES**

Instagram, twitter and digital media accounts (as titled by users):

- CNN
- Fox News
- Harvard Business Review
- Time
-realDonaldTrump
- ObamaWhitehouse
- JR (artist)
- NRDC (National Resource Defence Council)
- Sotheby’s
- Christie’s
- Google
- cristiano (Ronaldo)
- marcorubiofla
- UN Geneva (United Nations)
- Fox & Friends
- NRCC
- NYT (New York Times)
- Twitter
- Instagram
- Nike
- Apple
- the Economist
- NBC News
- gopro
- Adidas
- abc News
- Boston Tweet
- The Hill
- John Oliver
- Oprah
- Department of State
- metmuseum (Metropolitan Museum of Art)
- IvankaTrump
- CNNMoney
- SelenaGomez
- beyonce
- The Atlantic News
- kendalljenner
- HillaryClinton
- Elon Musk
- WSJ (The Wall Street Journal)
- whitehouse
- thedailyshow
- Jake Tapper
- POTUS44 (President Obama)
- The Atlantic
- Marvel
- The Players’ Tribune
- aaronrodgers12 (Aaron Rodgers)
- KingJames (LeBron James)
- nbcolympics
- USA Today
- USA Today Sports
- New York Post
- VanityFair
- Sports Illustrated
- Olympics
- CNNPolitics
- museelouvre
- Netfix
- disney
- seanhannity
Figure 6. *Nesting Peeps: Climate Change Nest*, 12”x12”, large format film, printed book format

Figure 7. *Nesting Peeps: Olympics Nest*, 12”x12”, large format film, printed book format
Figure 8. *Nesting Peeps: Globalization Nest*, 12”x12”, large format film, printed book format

Figure 9. *Nesting Peeps: Politics Nest*, 12”x12”, large format film, printed book format
**Figure 10.** *Nesting Peeps: The Economy Politicized, 12”x12”, large format film, printed book format*

**Figure 11.** *Nesting Peeps: Women’s Rights, 12”x12”, large format film, printed book format*
Figure 12. Nesting Peeps: Consumerism, 12”x12”, large format film, printed book format

Figure 13. Ai Weiwei, Han Jar Overpainted with Coca-Cola Logo, 1994, Ceramic urn, 10”x8.5”x8.5”), https://www.artsy.net/artwork/ai-weiwei-han-jar-overpainted-with-coca-cola-logo-1


Figure 17. Damien Hirst, Kaleidoscope Painting: Psalm 6, ne in furore, 2008, 18” diameter, Butterflies and gloss on canvas, http://damienhirst.com/psalm-6-domine-ne-in-furore.