

10 QUESTIONS

with privacy artist
Julia Burns

A BLEAK future has been predicted for human existence if we continue to follow the path of making our every thought, feeling, sensation and action accessible to the world.

In an effort to make the public aware of what a potentially devastating tool sites like Facebook and Twitter could be to our privacy, conceptual and privacy artist Julia Burns has developed a series of art works to drive the message home.

Ms Burns' installation art work, which will open tomorrow at 7pm at the Griffith Regional Art Gallery, will take the private and make it public – an analogy of what society is already doing to themselves on social networking sites.

For the second part of her work, Ms Burns will sit on a couch in the middle of Banna Avenue updating her Twitter and Facebook accounts with her private thoughts. Ahead of her visit to Griffith, Ms Burns tweeted *The Area News* journalist Emily Tinker, discussing the consequences of social networking and the way the world will go with Facebook at the helm.

1. What do you do?

I'm a privacy artist and I'm interested in issues of public access and privacy online. I try to encourage internet users to become proactive about protecting their personal data online. People don't seem to understand what social media can really do, it feels like we're always finding out about it a bit too late and then developing a really patched-together solution to defend ourselves. In my work, I'm trying to show people a tangible reality of the results of loss of privacy and what it really means in the real world when you have your public data exposed for everyone to see.

2. What inspired you to do it?

I like to discuss ideas that impact everybody and we can't get away from these social media sites and that requires a bit more criticism. At the moment in Australia we're really good at taking up new technology but I don't think we're critical enough of the directions we take. I feel as an artist it is my responsibility to inspire people to be introspective about the direction we're taking, so as we are running forward we don't do damage to ourselves and we're not exploited in the long term by our enthusiastic use of social media.

3. What do you hope to achieve?

Griffith is one part of the process. I'm trying to build a community of people through my website where there is a bit more of a communal understanding of what is going on. To somehow work forward with policy makers and privacy organisations so everyone knows what is actually involved with these social media sites. At the moment no one is talking to each other and there is a lack of knowledge, and how can we possibly defend ourselves if we don't even know the facts. I'm trying to get people to know the facts so they can do something about it.



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4. How do people respond to your work?

They usually become part of it. The work I make isn't just one where you contemplate and look at it. I love to involve people. I recently did a work where I sat on Bondi Beach with a sign asking people to be my Facebook friend and I had a big wall next to me. All the teenagers that passed by immediately clicked with it and they wanted to be my Facebook friend and gave over their private profile details which I put up on the wall with their photo. They were very, very happy to put that out in public because they didn't care that everyone might know. There were also some people who said they wouldn't do it because everyone could see it. But they still had a Facebook account with all that information on there, but they thought because it was online it was different and no one could see it even though it is on a public social media site.

5. What do you think of groups like Griffith's Gossip Girl site and the Brad George support page that has people in our community at each other's throats?

I think it's a reflection of human nature; that's why Facebook is so popular. Gossip has been around since the beginning of time and word of mouth is a very powerful thing that we've always had in society so this is just an exponential form of that. We're just in the infant stages of what can happen to social networking and groups that occur on Facebook. I think the bullying that's going on and these pages that come up are just the tip of the iceberg. The problem is that they take it home with them. If you think about how much time kids spend on computers they're always with them; they can never get away from it. It's a constant eating away of your sense-of-self and

confidence. But there's a lot of stuff underneath that's not been brought attention to. Parents are blaming Facebook but Facebook's just a platform – the people who drive it often have something bad going on in their lives or they're bored and that needs to be brought attention to. But the worst thing about these conversations is that they're being cached and are very hard to delete. Long-term, it's a big problem, it will be very hard for the people named to get that information or conversation deleted and their reputation is harmed. It's running so fast at the moment that policy makers don't realise how damaging it can actually be.

6. What do you think social networking sites do to people and their personal relationships?

Everyone uses them differently. I don't and wouldn't ever use Facebook to connect my mother and father and boyfriend and uncle and friends together to keep track of them because I'm not the only one who would keep track of them and I don't have any idea who the others might be. We don't know enough to be so trusting of it. But in the end, it's another form of communication, I don't think it's replacing older, more traditional or personal forms.

7. Do you think restrictions should be placed on these sites?

I think Facebook should start restricting itself first before it starts restricting users. We don't know enough about it, the terms and conditions are so blurry and always changing I think they should start looking at themselves first. But Facebook would never restrict age groups like 16-year-olds because they are so valuable commercially and that's the whole point of Facebook and how it makes money. I don't see restrictions

as a realistic thing for Facebook.

8. Do you think technology like this is developing too rapidly?

We're in a renaissance of technology. It is a great natural, fast progression and it makes perfect sense to me. What is not moving fast enough is the understanding of what we're doing and I don't think experts in the field are taking it seriously.

9. Why are social networking sites so popular?

It's human nature, it's what we're all about; we're social animals. It's a perfect tool for what we do best, which is work together and develop content and share it. That's why it's such a significant tool to have, the same as the telephone, the same as the radio. Social media is one of those milestones.

10. Where do you think Facebook and other social networking sites will be at in 20 years and beyond?

I can't even imagine five years from now. But basically, I think we should be reading *Brave New World*. All the things that are most important to us; our relationships, our careers and our identity are all trackable, traceable and possible to manipulate online. I feel like we're in the first phase of a much larger thing that will be potentially a very frightening situation of thought-control, control of action and speech. We're coming towards the end of the first stage, which is an acceptance of being surveyed. In America from the Patriot Act in 2004, the government can now see and read everyone's email and everyone accepts it as something they can't stop. It could be a terrible thing in wars – imagine if there was a genocide of a particular group – all they would need would be a key word. No one can hide anymore.



BLAST FROM THE PAST

If you have any photos you would like featured in Blast From The Past, let us know by emailing editor@areanews.com.au or by dropping into our Ulong Street office.

THE year was 1893, Australia was but a colonial outpost and Griffith was still a howling wilderness.

But Rankins Springs was a thriving country town, as evidenced by this photo taken at the Rankins Springs Hotel at the time (later named the Conapaira Hotel).

This photo of the original store building belongs to local man Greg McCarten,

whose great-grandfather John Hannan owned the hotel for about 30 years.

The grand old hotel has since been rebuilt, most recently in the last few years, after burning down.

If you have an old photo you would like featured, let us know by emailing editor@areanews.com.au or simply drop into our Ulong Street office.