Art exhibit pushes boundaries of online privacy

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NEW YORK (AP) -- Image after image splashes on the wall of the art exhibit - a snapshot of young people laughing and drinking, a picture of an elephant, an exposed belly of a woman barely covering her breasts with one arm. The photos were taken from their computers without their knowledge through a technological glitch.

Over in a corner, visitors can sort through Facebook profile photos from unwitting users through a website that organizes them by gender, country and adjectives such as "sly," `'smug" or "easy going." Think online dating site, for people who don't know they are on it.

The works are part of "The Public Private," an art exhibit that explores the gray areas of online privacy, surveillance and data collection in the age of Facebook and Google. The pieces shift across the boundaries between what's public and private, all through the lens of technology. But lines are never clear, if there are any at all, and that can be unsettling.

Its curator, Christiane Paul, says she hopes visitors will walk away with questions. The exhibit's goal, she says, isn't to universally declare Facebook bad or social media evil, but to get people thinking. It's only been nine years, after all, since Facebook's birth and seven since Twitter was created, so art that explores social networking as a subject is just emerging.

"I don't think good art provides easy answers," says Paul, adjunct curator at Whitney Museum of American Art and a media studies professor at The New School, where the exhibit runs through April 17.

Indeed, bringing the concept of online privacy into the physical world can feel both uncomfortable and eye-opening. The Internet may lull us into a false sense of security. Posting something on Facebook, for instance, can feel more private than shouting it on a busy street, even if the opposite is true given that a Facebook post might reach hundreds or thousands of people, perhaps millions.

"We are living, really, in a situation where we don't know what we want to have as public," says Paolo Cirio, one of the artists featured. "We don't know what is public and what is not. It's a moment of confusion for a lot of people. The next generation already has another idea for privacy."

After the exhibit ends, some of the projects will remain available online or offline - at least in some form.

Take Cirio's "Street Ghosts," for example. It's nothing more than life-sized images of people caught in Google's street-level mapping feature, plastered on walls and fences in the same physical place that their digital counterparts occupy on Google Maps. Cirio calls the online versions "digital ghosts." Some of the images are pasted on the outside walls of the building housing the exhibit.

They serve as a reminder of what we leave behind on the Internet.

"We lose control (of our digital information) completely when we die," he says "But it's left in the archives of Google, Facebook."

Some of the works in the show, Paul acknowledges, exist in a legal and ethical gray area.

For "The Others," Eva and Franco Mattes gained access to private computer files through "old software that lets you anonymously share files from your computer," Eva Mattes explains. "But people who are not familiar with it mistakenly share their whole computer without realizing it."

Looking inside a stranger's computer feels a bit like peeking into his or her house, she says.

A previous project by the couple - not part of this exhibit - made all the content of their computer available to the public. For three years, anyone with Internet access could look through their photos, emails, even their bank account.

The artists say they didn't feel conflicted about grabbing the photos from private computers.

"The first thing I noticed is how little difference there is with the ones you see online

all the time," Franco Mattes says. "These are supposedly private photos, but they're no different than public photos. In a sense, I'm doing what all photographers do: I `take' photos."

So has anyone in the photos contacted them?

"The first time we showed the work, in Sheffield, U.K., a person claimed to be portrayed. To be honest it was hard to tell whether or not he really was the guy in the photos," Eva Mattes says in an email interview. "Anyway, the next day he came back to see the exhibition with his whole family, to show them he was famous."

She says the couple felt relieved.

Brooke Singer, a new media studies professor at Purchase College in New York, says the imagery of "The Others" is in itself uninteresting. It looks exactly like photos people post online.

"So the point of the project is not the content per se but to have us consider the ethics and audacity of the act," she says.

The project, she adds, speaks more broadly about the digital age - the way limits to what can and cannot be replicated are constantly built up and torn down "by various interests."

"And this also points toward our false sense of isolation as we are on our `personal' computers always connected to the network," Singer says.

Another gray-area piece, Cirio's "Face-to-Facebook," has been taken offline, after Facebook's lawyers complained. But visitors can use a computer at the exhibit to look through the piece. Cease-and-desist letters from Facebook are posted on an adjacent wall.

The project, created in 2011, consists of data that hundreds of thousands of Facebook users shared on the site publicly - including their name, profile photo, the country they live in and groups they belonged to.

Cirio and co-creator Alessandro Ludovico put all the information in a database and used face-recognition software to put people in personality categories such as "funny," `'climber" and "smug." Then, the artists set up a dating website using the photos and information. It was called Lovely Faces, and it didn't last long.

Facebook sent its first cease-and-desist letter in February 2011, complaining that the artists used an automated program to "scrape" Facebook user data, in violation of the site's policy. The artists eventually took the site offline.

"Although it was online only five days, a lot of people understood that what they publish on Facebook eventually could be used by someone else without their authorization," Cirio says. "And they lose control of their data."

Though many of the pieces poke at Google and Facebook, camera surveillance is also a central theme. Wafaa Bilal's 3rdi project takes a look at what he's left behind - literally. The Iraqi artist had a camera surgically implanted into the back of his head.

It had to be removed because of infection risk and because his body rejected it. Now, he attaches it through less invasive means, using a wraparound headgear.

"During my journey from Iraq to Saudi Arabia, on to Kuwait and then the U.S., I left many people and places behind," Bilal writes on his website describing the project. "The images I have of this journey are inevitably ephemeral, held as they are in my own memory."

The twist is that he doesn't see the memory while it's captured, leaving it behind.

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