

# Social epitaph



## A Montreal duo harvest Facebook for picture posts to create photo installations that document how we are shaped by social media, even after death. Words by Laurence Butet-Roch

The room, though bewildering at first, commands respect. Under a dim bluish light, nine computer servers stand upright, unmistakably evoking nine tombstones. Above each, screens pointing towards the floor act as windows into the clouds. On them, posts commemorating the dead, culled from thousands of Facebook profiles, appear and disappear to a rhythm that resembles the beating of a heart.

The installation, *After Faceb00k: In Loving Memory* <3, shown at Montreal's Mois de la Photo last year, was curated by Catalan artist Joan Fontcuberta, who chose "the post-photographic condition" as his theme, interrogating an era shaped by the proliferation and ubiquity of images, and our exponential consumption of them in all aspects of our lives.

The Montreal-based duo behind the piece, also called After Faceb00k, make work centring on the visual practices of Facebook users but, unlike many who hope to find fame by going viral online, prefer to remain anonymous. In doing so, they hope viewers will focus on their practice, and on the many authors whose online habits feed into their projects.

"Back when we started in 2011, 250 million images were uploaded onto the social platform daily," they tell me. "That number may seem trivial now, but at the time it heralded a watershed moment. Wondering what these photos revealed, we started going through pages of places where people tag themselves. One of them was a bar with exotic dancers. We were surprised to see that some patrons publicly posted pictures of themselves attending the shows.

"As photographers, we knew we couldn't have taken similar shots without spending countless hours developing a certain intimacy with the regulars. Now we no longer had to."

Intrigued by this unparalleled access, they started to explore how they could harness this information using a documentary approach. In Rouyn-Noranda in Quebec, they found images of the local pit, taken and shared by miners. A small town heavily dependent on the mines, this economic mainstay had gone largely unrecorded, as photographers are not allowed to go underground with the workers. Gathering these posts together, After Faceb00k was able to build a coherent body of work.

Installation at L'Écart Lieu d'Art Actuel in Rouyn-Noranda, Quebec, featuring Facebook posts shared by miners at a local pit, to which access is normally prohibited. All images courtesy After Faceb00k.









“Facebook is not an archive in and of itself, but an aggregator,” say the duo. “It is up to us to collect and classify posts, to create a database that can be analysed and researched.”

They collect images via a Facebook profile that they have set up but left friendless, which means their findings are limited to public posts. “We navigate on the platform much like one would meander through the streets, camera in hand, taking pictures of scenes happening in the public space.”

They deliberately include the full display in these screenshots, including the tabs at the top of the browser that indicate the path they took to each image. They then categorise each grab according to its most prominent aesthetic components and, little by little, find the popular visual types used in social media. The whole process takes two to six months, depending on the scale of the subject.

“People very consciously construct their online identity,” they say. “The images they post represent the choices they’ve made on how they want to be seen publicly. What we’re interested in is unravelling those preferences.”

Initially, they focused on regional matters, but their projects have grown to encompass wider issues, such as the ramifications of our contemporary addiction to social media. In Edmonton, the capital of the state of Alberta, one of the biggest energy reserves in the world, they considered the physical impact of the huge amount of data posted online, and the electricity required to host it. The resulting installation combined images of the tar sands, Facebook’s data centres, and daily life in Edmonton to show how memories stored in the ‘cloud’ leave concrete – and harmful – physical traces.

This led them to consider what happens to these virtual memories when the person who’s uploaded them passes away. “Think about the sheer volume of energy required to preserve our memories online for eternity,” they ask. “Is that sustainable?”

Over the years, Facebook has offered users several ways of dealing with the profiles of deceased loved ones – accounts can now be deleted or memorialised. Social media, it seems, has touched all our social customs, including those surrounding death, and exploring this factor led to the *In Loving Memory <3* project.

Using the now defunct Graph Search, and Google searches, the duo found several visual rituals now performed online after a death, including portraits taken next to the dying, standing at the grave, funeral balloon releases, commemorative collages and so on.

“The first query method catapulted us into funerals and other ceremonies, almost as they happened,” they say. “This created a certain intimacy between them and us. It also often returned more ‘spectacular’ images – coffins being laid to the ground, and even cadavers – as well as portraits of celebrities who’ve just passed. But the second strategy we used reflects how people pay tribute.

“It was the first time we touched on the international nature of the network,” they continue. “Before that, we worked within the confines of communities with whom we share customs. When it comes to death, although it’s a universal human experience, people relate to it differently in various parts of the world. For instance, although most Canadians and North Americans would refrain from showing a corpse, citizens of other countries, for whom



it is not a taboo, might not think twice about it. Some cultures seem to greet death with more serenity than others.”

After Faceb00k say they try to avoid drawing conclusions regarding specific sociocultural traditions or beliefs. Visual practices on social media, they say, amount to a language, one that evolves by taking into account both the affordances of the medium and the culture of the one who uses it. “Affordance refers to the dispositions of the platform, which slowly suggest certain types of behaviour. In the case of Facebook, because we’re never sure who follows us, we’re kept from engaging in serious conversations. Most people prefer to post the anodyne, the trivial, the funny or the positive. Even when it came to death, posts weren’t always solemn.”

Their hope is that when Facebook disappears, replaced by another portal, their archive will shed light on how we used it, and how it has shaped, and was shaped by, our relationship to photography. **BJP**

[afterfaceb00k.com](http://afterfaceb00k.com)

[Previous page] Computer servers stand like tombstones below screens displaying social media memorials to the dead at After Faceb00k’s exhibition at McCord Museum during Montreal’s Mois de la Photo festival. [Top] In Alberta, which has one of the biggest energy reserves in the world, After Faceb00k’s installation at Latitude 53 gallery questioned the physical sustainability of hosting huge amounts of data online.