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PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE ONLINE: THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Phenomenological research into the online experience offers real value to Internet Studies and Digital Humanities scholars for three key reasons. Firstly, as an explicitly qualitative approach, it offers a way to gain insights into the experience of going online that are not identified by those who study behaviour alone. Secondly, as phenomenological studies focus on the individual rather than the collective, the resulting small sample size means that the investment required in terms of time spent with participants is minimised. Finally, the interpretation that emerges through the phenomenological research process produces categorisations that could form the basis on which larger scale, Big Data, quantitative research projects could be built.

This paper will explore the above ideas through the lens of my doctoral research, which uses hermeneutic phenomenology to investigate the experience of persona construction by artists on the fringes of the traditional art world, specifically craftivists, tattoo artists, street artists, and performance poets. By incorporating the interpretive categorisations that have come from my early discussions, I will demonstrate the strength of a phenomenological approach to investigating the experience of using the world and social media to present the self to the world.

KEY WORDS

Phenomenology; methodology; online experience; online persona; artistic persona

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INTRODUCTION

The humanities have a wealth of methodological approaches. It could even be said that there is a bit of a glut of slightly different but eagerly fought over methodologies, especially when it comes to qualitative data collection and analysis. Human behaviour in relation to new media and web based technologies can be studied qualitatively using ethnographic methods by ethnographers, virtual ethnographers, anthropologists, cultural studies theorists and many others. Uses and gratifications theorists, social psychologists, sociologists, and grounded and narrative theorists all have their own approaches to the study of people. Add to this the opportunities offered by computational and other quantitative methods, and the choices increase again. Phenomenology – the approach championed below – as an approach to the study of the human experience when engaging with digitally networked spaces is not unknown, but is certainly underutilised. Phenomenologically driven research “seeks to reveal and richly portray the nature of human phenomena and the experiences of those who live through them, taking into account the contexts in which these experiences occur and the subjective meanings participants give to particular situations” (Grace & Ajjawi 2010, p. 197). Saldana, Leavy and Bertvas (2011) comment similarly that the purpose of phenomenological research is “to come to an intimate awareness and deep understanding” of human experience, and involves revelations between research and participant of “what goes through one’s mind and what one feels as the phenomenon occurs” (p.8). This is distinct from the study of behaviour as seen in projects that utilise an ethnographic or anthropological methodology.

As the founder of modern phenomenology, Husserl sought to develop a “rigorous and scientific study of things as they appear to be, in order to come to an essential understanding of human consciousness and experience” (Pernecky & Jamal 2010, p. 1063). Heidegger was the first scholar to marry phenomenology and hermeneutics, creating a methodology with a linguistic focus (developed further by his student Gadamer). Van Manen (2006, p. 62) states:

The point of phenomenological research is to "borrow" other people's experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper significance of an aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole of human experience.

In my own research, I am borrowing my artist-participants experiences of constructing personas, both in offline setting and in online settings. This will allow me to develop a deeper understanding of how persona construction occurs, and how it is experienced.

Taking a phenomenological approach offers three key benefits to those studying people and digitally networked spaces. Firstly, there is much to learn about the nature of the experience of engaging with digital technology that has yet to be explored. Secondly, the depth of exploration involved in

phenomenological research, and the input of the participants in a hermeneutically focused study, allows for real insight into the human experience without requiring computational research or large numbers of participants. And thirdly, the capacity of phenomenological research to provide categorisations of experience that can be used to frame larger quantitative research has yet to be capitalised on. Each of these benefits is explored below, followed by an example from my own research into the experience of artists constructing persona in digitally networked environments.

STUDYING EXPERIENCE

Studying the nature of an experience requires a different approach to the study of behaviour. We can observe behaviour; we can describe it in other people. Behaviour is visible, explicit, if occasionally inexplicable. What people *do* is accessible to others. However, the experience of a phenomena, in this case the use of online technology to construct identity, can be interrogated not just from the perspective of what people do but also *what it's like*. Although those who study behaviour also incidentally investigate experience, the different focus of the research project means that these researchers "pre-empt a holistic understanding of experience" (Rose 2011, p. 516). A phenomenological approach foregrounds the understanding of experience and being in the world, whether that world is physical, digital, or a blend. Giorgi and Giorgi (2008) describe the aim of phenomenology as "to capture as closely as possible the way in which the phenomenon is experienced within the context in which the experience takes place" (p. 28), an aim which sets the scene for a different level of understanding of phenomena than behavioural research allows.

I believe that there is intrinsic benefit in investigating experience, and understanding how others experience phenomena, especially in terms of relatively new phenomena related to new media, online engagement, and relationship of these phenomena to our understanding of our individual and collective identity. The use of phenomenology as a methodology for studying online experience is growing in popularity, within the home disciplines of both health and cultural studies.

Hermeneutic phenomenological research into the use of online message boards by cancer patients found themes of support, consolation, problem solving, empowerment, and information gathering, helping health care practitioners to understand how the internet can work for patients within the context of treatment and recovery (Dickerson et al. 2005, 2006; Dickerson et al. 2011). Rose (2011) uses phenomenology to investigate the experience of engaging with digital text, while Chappell et al. (2006) use a psychological phenomenological approach to study their understanding of online gaming addiction. Equally, phenomenology has a history of investigating the experience of the screen, most notably through Marks (2000) and Sobchack (1992). There are intrinsic benefits of

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phenomenology that come with simply understanding experience, and extrinsic benefits – by understanding how people experience the online, what it's like, we have the potential to work to improve that experience if it is found to be lacking in some way. Although not the focus of my work, I can see that understanding what it's like to work with this technology in order to construct the persona of the artist might enable software and web platform developers to create more intuitive, engaging interfaces, or for artists to consider and adapt their own online experience in relation to others, just as understanding how cancer patients experience on message boards could help oncology professionals to adapt their approach to patient care to meet hidden needs. I believe that the essence of either phenomenon cannot be reached through the study of behaviour alone.

SAMPLE SIZE

The focus on a small number of participants is the second real benefit I see in a phenomenological approach. By getting deep into the experiences of a small group of people, a depth of description and cooperative interpretation can be obtained that is as valid and interesting as a large scale study. The cooperative nature of hermeneutic phenomenology, which foregrounds the voice of the participants, is a valuable aspect of this small-scale approach. Pollio, Henley and Thompson (1997) state that "Within phenomenological methods, interview participants function as co-researchers and not merely as research subjects...The focus on dialogue arises from the decidedly non-Cartesian orientation of phenomenological research" (p. 30). They go on to say "The description of an experience as it emerges in a particular context *is* the experience. To proceed otherwise, such as by seeking to capture a more "truthful" version, is to look past the concrete phenomenon at hand in search of an abstract ideal" (p. 31). Phenomenological researchers work together with participants/co-researchers in both the descriptive and interpretive process, understanding that what they are aiming for is not some abstracted understanding of *truth*, but an understanding of the experience. This level of cooperation makes a large participant group both unnecessary and unworkable.

The application of a hermeneutic approach to phenomenology provides additional structure to the methodology, whether through hermeneutic phenomenology as set forth by Heidegger (1996) and Gadamer (1975), or through the more recently developed Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009; Smith & Osborn 2008). Hermeneutic phenomenology allows for a range of different 'texts' to feed into the interpretive process so that the participants discussion transcripts can sit alongside (in the case of my own research) art works, online self-presentation

practices, and published work, without privileging the first-person narratives of experience. Van Manen states "Because artists are involved in giving shape to their lived experience, the products of art are, in a sense, lived experiences transformed into transcended configurations" (2006, p. 74), and hermeneutic phenomenology allows for the inclusion of those works of art, along with other transformed experience, as equal to the verbal description obtained during discussions.

The focus on a single person or a small number of individuals mirrors the idiographic approach seen in psychology, where it is used to balance the nomothetic, large scale, long term randomised clinical trial for treatment studies (Barlow & Nock 2009). Ashworth (2008) states "The nomothetic approach assumes that the behaviour of a particular person is the outcome of laws that apply to all, and the aim of science is to reveal these general laws. The idiographic approach would, in contrast, focus on the interplay of factors which may be quite specific to the individual" (p. 14). This focused approach to the study of phenomena offered by phenomenology provides a clear counterpoint to the study of global trends, Big Data and cultural change common within new media, internet and digital humanities disciplines. Additionally, the themes that emerge during the interpretation process could provide a starting point for a larger computational study, by setting up a categorization process on which to base data collection decisions.

APPLICATION OF INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORKS

The third key benefit of using phenomenology to investigate experiences relating to the internet and new media is the use that can be made of phenomenological research by those working in other methodological frameworks, specifically those doing computational work in the digital humanities. In order to run computational (or Big Data) projects, it is helpful to have clear categorisation systems in place. These can be grounded in the data itself, although putting boundaries on the data collected may be difficult without some idea of what is being sought, or at the very least the area in which the seeking occurs. The interpretations of experience that are explicated by a phenomenological process can provide thematic categorisation systems on which to base a larger project, providing phenomenological micro to the computational macro. The qualitative deep description and interpretations of the experiences of a small number of participants, when matched with opportunities offered by computational research from within the digital humanities, can provide new and challenging insights into the way we understand the role and influence of digital technology. This is a way to tap into the strengths of both idiographic and nomothetic approaches to understanding phenomena. I propose that a mixed method study utilizing both phenomenological and a computational data collection will offer real insight into the impact (positive and negative) of new technologies on those engaging with them.

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There are some specific concerns with the turn toward computational research methods that phenomenology can help to address. boyd and Crawford (2011) outline six ‘provocations’ they wish to raise in relation to the computational turn in the humanities: the wide scale automation of research changes the definition of knowledge, misleading claims of computational research objectivity and accuracy, issues of scale and reliability, lack of equivalency in data, ethical concerns with data accessibility, and digital divide issues. Although the development of a mixed method approach incorporating phenomenology will not address all of these issues, the incorporation of some elements of the methodology could well help to balance out the concern raised in the first point, that the automation of research and data analysis will change the way we understand what knowledge is. boyd and Crawford (2011, p. 3) cite Chris Anderson, Editor-in-Chief of *Wired*, stating “Forget taxonomy, ontology, and psychology. Who knows why people do what they do? The point is they do it, and we can track and measure it with unprecedented fidelity. With enough data, the numbers speak for themselves”. For those working within qualitative research methodologies, this lack of interest in the reasons behind behaviour and the importance of experience are frightening, in addition to revealing the “arrogant undercurrent in many Big Data debates where all other forms of analysis can be sidelined by production lines numbers, privileged as having a direct line to raw knowledge” (boyd & Crawford 2011, p. 4). Including a deeply qualitative, interpretive and subjective framework into the research design from the outset helps to ensure that the question of *why* remains important and central to all research into the human experience.

EXAMPLE FROM PRACTICE

To provide a framework in which to understand how phenomenology might operate within the framework of studies of social media use, I will now provide an example from my own research. I am investigating the experience of online persona creation by individuals working within four fringe or counter cultural art forms – street art, tattoo, slam poetry, and craftivism (also known as indie craft or DIY craft). These four creative groups incorporate visual, textual, tangible, ephemeral, political, economic, labouring, performance based, anonymous and nonymous elements of fringe art, with each individual operating as individual creative practitioners. As traditionally marginalised art forms (Becker 1982; Lachmann 1988; Levine & Heimerl 2008; Wicks & Grandy 2007), those who choose to work within these fields often operate outside of the art world’s gallery, critic, publication, production and representation systems, and the support networks available to artists are small, made up of networks of enthusiasts and other practitioners. The formation and use of these networks through web and social networking sites – presentational media – is a key element of this research.

Although still in the early stages of the interpretive process, my work with Rayna Fahey, a craftivist, is described below to allow for insight into how phenomenological research can operate.

Rayna Fahey is a Melbourne based crafter, who works predominantly in cross stitch. Although she creates work that fits within a traditional understanding of needlepoint – samplers and pictorial based work – these types of pieces deviate from the norm by being explicitly. In addition to these works, she also does large scale, public installations, most typically ‘fence-stitching’ in which the chicken wire fences around vacant lots and unoccupied homes replace cross stitching fabrics. Her background includes a number of years working as an information technology advisor for the Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand, and she has a degree in Women’s Studies. Her work draws on this politicised background, encompassing feminist and environmental messages while challenging conservative understandings of what craft is, what it is for, and what it is capable of achieving.



Fig. 1 *Identity Blues* - Rayna Fahey (2012) original quote by Patti Smith. Part of the Tapysteria Hacks series. Repurposed and radicalised tapestries and doilies saved from op shops. Image found at <http://radicalcrossstitch.com/2012/05/10/gender-blues/>

Rayna: I think my work sort of operates in two levels: it's working in traditional craft spheres but bringing different political ideas into it, and then working in non-traditional craft spheres and bringing craft into it, if that makes sense. So I'd do the traditional fabric needle work, point canvas sort of stuff, and then do public installations and fence stitches and that kind of thing, that sort of have those two different purposes, either getting crafters to be more political or getting political people be more crafty or more creative and interesting.



Fig. 2 *Carrots* – Melbourne Revolutionary Craft Circle (2012). Part of the *What else could go here* series, recycled and repurposed fabric scraps on fence. Image found at <http://radicalcrossstitch.com/2012/03/21/what-else-could-go-here/>

In discussion about her creative practice, a number of themes emerged that relate to how Rayna sees herself as a creative person in both online and offline forums: community membership, collaborator, archivist, education, inspiration, marginalisation, feminism, environmentalism. These themes can be roughly grouped into three superordinate themes of the self as crafter that connect to her engagement with the online: as a member of a community, as an activist, and as a mentor. These themes come together to allow an appreciation of how Rayna experiences herself as a crafter and how what it is like for her to engage with new media and internet based technologies.



SELF WITHIN COMMUNITY

Rayna: I think the main difference between art and craft from a professional perspective is collaboration. In art, artists tend to be about one person, and it's sort of there, there's all that competitive stuff, whereas craft is more community based in their work and less competitive, much more collaborative and all that kind of stuff.


By distinguishing herself as a crafter as opposed to an artist, Rayna seeks to emphasise the importance of the wider community in both her practice and in her life. During our discussion, she spoke at length at the importance of acknowledging that craft in general, and cross stitch in particular, has a long history which shouldn't be denied. When she first started cross stitching in early 2007, she found that information on craft history, particularly political craft history, was scarce. In an effort to engage with a community she saw forming around political ideas and traditional women's craft techniques, she started blogging about her own practice.

Rayna: So I started really researching what was out there online in terms of online communities for people who were using craft to communicate subversive and political ideas, and there was very little. Most of the stuff that was there was more of the kitschy

ironic stuff, which didn't really find the protest kind of angle that a lot of people clearly were looking for. It didn't take very long after that and I just turned my blog into a cross stitch blog full time, and then eventually bought the domain radicalcrossstitch.com and then it just took off. Because it's such a niche activity – political craft in general but then specifically cross stitch – the internet was the only way to organise on a community based level.

This engagement with a geographically diverse but ideologically connected community has a direct impact on her practice, and social media use allows for this group to connect and engage with each other's work.

Rayna: So I used Facebook and then Twitter and then things like Etsy and communities and things like that and Flickr to find people mostly, not necessarily to organise them, but certainly finding them and getting people involved and finding their work and finding ways to promote each other, because a lot of those projects, a lot of the sort of craftivism projects are collaborative based, so I will make a quilt to protest about something and I'll get all these people to embroider a patch and send them all to me and then I'll stitch them up. Classic example of a craftivist project. So people use websites and stuff to promote those activities.

This understanding of the self as a member of a community is not just something that Rayna is aware of in the abstract. As a collaborator, a crafter, and a blogger, she is deliberate in her engagement with others, and this is explicit in her work and her online self-presentation. 

Rayna: My practice is about trying to get other people to start doing stuff. It's about engaging and encouraging other people to participate. So, a lot of the work, a lot of the communications that I'll put out online will be about trying to get people involved in projects, trying to get people to start their own projects, and will be, so as a consequence a lot of the language is about us, we, you know all that kind of, it's really community based language, it's sort of speaking from a member of a community, rather than 'hi I'm an expert on this stuff, you should do what I think because I'm cool', you know? ... And also I mean, a lot of that language is... because, I'm a crafter and not an artist, and it's kind of the done thing within that community to sort of speak like that.

Although the World Wide Web, and particularly social media, have created opportunities to connect with others, and Rayna has tried to make the most of these opportunities, she is also aware that this experience is not the same for everyone.

Rayna: One of the things that's easy to do in online communities is to ghetto yourself, and I think depending on what sort of aesthetic you're interested in craft, it's really easy to miss the empowering statements within the craft communities. If you're into making pretty little bows for hairclips for little girls to wear, then you can quite easily miss the awesome. And certainly it's not uncommon that whenever of the major craft blogs write about some kind of controversial craft, there's quite often a big stink, which will come out in the comments from women who see that as a threat to tradition and don't like it.

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In an effort to counteract this perception that craftivism is in some way threatening traditional craft, Rayna uses web spaces to collect information and historical examples of craft being used for political or subversive purposes. Describing herself as a “compulsive archivist” she tries to set up systems where the craftivism community can access and add to the history of political craft.

Rayna: So one of the things that I was doing for a little while but then I just kind of have run out of time and have let it drop a bit but want to get back into, is that I was establishing a wiki of all of that kind of stuff, so that anyone could contribute to it, it was an open democratic information source.

As an active member of the online craftivism community, Rayna also demonstrates her commitment to the community through the support, encouragement and promotion of other crafters. On her Tumblr page, she links and comments to other crafters and makers work far more frequently than she discusses her own. This is also evident on her Facebook Timeline and Twitter feed, where her membership within a number of different collectives is discussed alongside promotions of her gallery show. However, Rayna’s community extends well beyond the craftivism world. Consistent with the content of her craft practice is her engagement and support of a wide range of political and environmental issues. She comments on and reposts articles and issues she supports, and encourages others to get involved where possible.

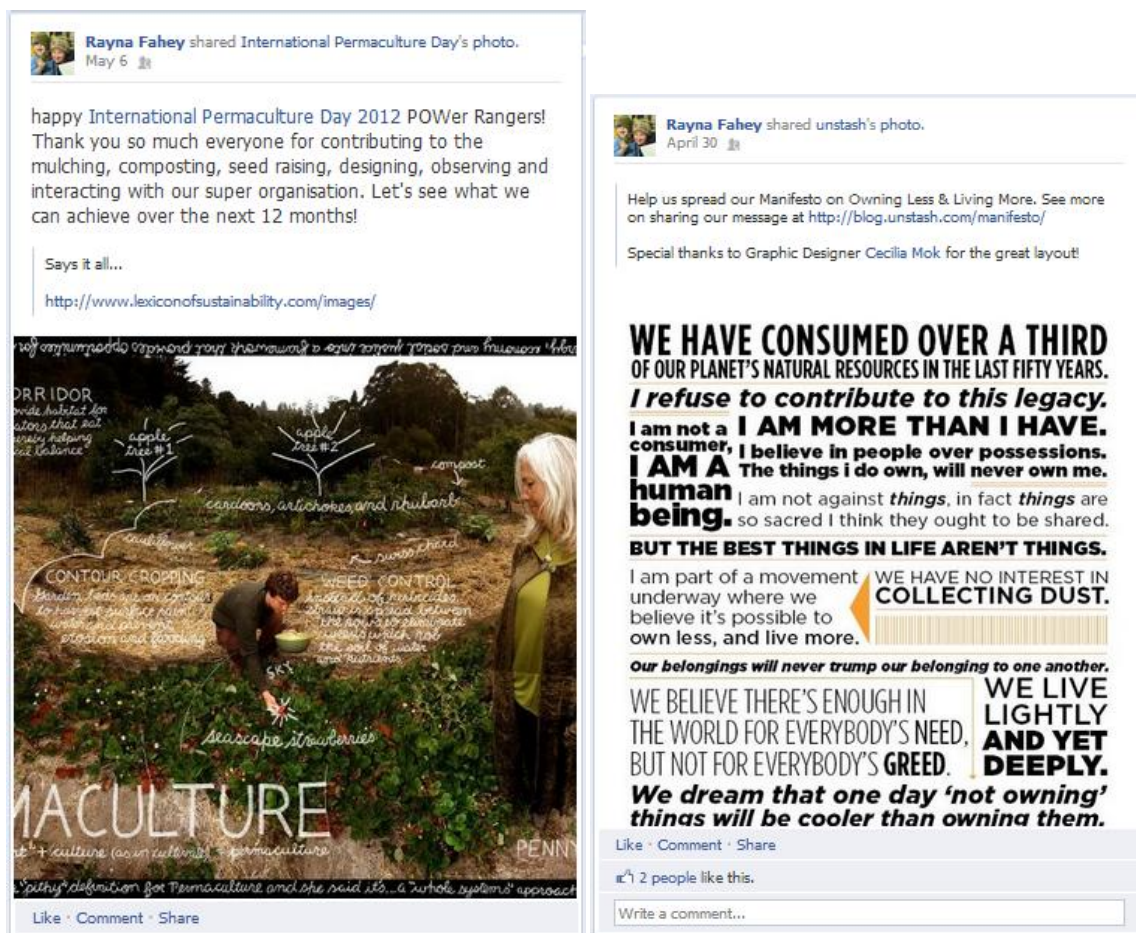


Fig. 3. Facebook Timeline screenshots (2012), Rayna Fahey.

Rayna: it's hard because having to balance the needs of children the needs of me, and the needs of my community, because I'm a really active member of my community. So friends have needs, sometimes friends need some time out, so I'll have their kids for a day or whatever. You know, stuff happens, but also at the same time, my friends are also really good at knowing that I need to practice regularly, and they will come around. I'll get a couple of friends who will come around with their kids and we'll all just communally look after our children together, and because I've got such a big space it's really easy to do that with a lot of kids, and kids tend to look after themselves when there's enough of them, they just wander around playing with each other... Because a lot of my friends are makers as well, I get to engage them in the work that I'm doing, and engage in the work that they're doing. That's fun.

Rayna's community is an active part of her identity as a crafter, and this is visible in both her descriptions of her practice, which is collaborative and operates within a supportive network of likeminded makers and artists, and can be seen through her engagement with online media through her support both of other crafters and her discussion of and support for a wide range of issues from coal mining to women's rights. By better understanding how Rayna experiences herself as a community member, we learn more about how she sees herself as a crafter. The descriptions she provides of connecting with the online community provide insight into what it is like to connect and engage with others in these spaces.

THE SELF AS ACTIVIST

The focus on activism is the aspect of Rayna's practice that distinguishes itself from what is generally understood as craft. She describes herself: "rather than a crafter turned activist, I was an activist turned crafter". This activism stretches across a wide variety of concerns, from political/economic issues, to environmental/animal rights issues, to human rights issues around indigenous peoples, refugees and immigrants, and women's rights. Working within mediums such as cross stitch and embroidery, which are traditionally known almost exclusively as women's creative spaces, it is not surprising that Rayna should locate herself within the history of women's practice and politics around creative practice, particularly considering her university degree in Women's Studies. However, she makes this connection explicit through her own research practices into the history of political craft. Arguing that political craft is in fact nothing new, she grounds her own practice within women's activist movements, whether large or small, seen within modern history.

Rayna: Over the last few years I've done a lot of research into the history of political craft, and people think that it's quite a recent phenomenon but it's totally not. Because I'm trying to encourage crafters to a bit more risky and dangerous, part of that is saying there is a really strong history of this, it's not like we're inventing this whole new idea. A lot of the work that I've done has looked at movement, like the arts and crafts movement, and the luddite movement, and a lot of the stuff from the 60's and 70's

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feminist movements and peace movements, and looking at the ways that people have changed the way activism's done, so that it's more inclusive. And also there have been movements where women have been the only participants, or the major participants, like the suffrage movement, so just by default they needed different ways of doing things.

Engaging with social media and web based platforms has allowed for a much wider audience for craftivists than was previously possible. Along with providing access to political craft history and activist projects, the web also allows for the community building described in the first subordinate theme. Rayna sees relationships between what she does in her practice with the work of activist groups whose campaigns now exist solely in the archives.

Rayna: Things like the Greenham Common Woman's Peace Camp which ran through the 80's and 90's, there is an amazing website which archives all of that stuff, and in a really brilliant interactive way, and because it was a woman's only camp, and because of the timing of it starting in the 80's when there was this major renaissance of woman's spirituality and there was all this amazing culmination between protest, and wiccan stuff, and so there was all the witches and spider webs and all that kind of stuff, all that sort of symbology was used, which was really easy to translate into craft. So there's a lot of work around wall webs and then there was – most importantly for me – the work of that peace camp to engage with the fence that was surrounding the military base that they were protesting outside, and just really challenging the idea of what a fence is, the role of what a fence does.



Fig 4. Fabric mural installation & windbreak, Melbourne (2011), Permaculture Playgroup.

Although the activist works that Rayna creates can be on a public scale, as with her fence stitching, she also does domestic sized pieces, including sampler patterns that she sells to others. One of the most popular patterns she sells is the Anti-Patriarchy Sampler. This heart-shaped sampler pattern is deceptively beautiful, and only on close examination can you read the words 'Fuck Patriarchy Fuck

Patriarchy' running through the centre of the design. This scale of craftivist work is limited in its impact in physical form, but the capacity to sell on both finished versions and the pattern through her blog means that Rayna can reach a much wider potential audience.



Fig 5. *Anti-Patriarchy Sampler* (2012), Rayna Fahey.

In addition to producing craft work with an activist focus, Rayna also sees craft has being an example to explain some of the more abstract concepts that her work engages with.

Rayna: We have to continuously explain our freedoms and what they mean and what they should look like and yeah, absolutely using craft to do that. Because I think it's such a practical example, you know? You can talk really abstractly about rights and freedoms, but being able to do it through a practical example means a lot more to some people. Craft is just as good a one as any. I can create a craft metaphor for just about any moral you can suggest at me. I particularly like to talk about craft and economics, it's really easy to do that. Craft and making and economics. I do constantly.

Rayna's engagement with both online and offline communities, and her focus on using craft as activism, both intersect with the final theme to be explored here, which is the self as a leader.



SELF AS MENTOR

The theme of self as mentor comes from Rayna's discussion of role in inspiring and educating people to become more active, politically aware, and engaged with both craft and their wider communities.

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However, it is important to note that as a member of collectives and other groups of loosely aligned individuals, the forms of leadership Rayna discusses are subtle.

Rayna: Because I was one of the – to use the term ironically – pioneers, in that area within the internet, a lot of people when they came into their ideas they were looking at my work as an example of how to do things, and also I put a lot of tutorials on my website because I'm trying to encourage people to do stuff.

By providing an archive of information about craftivist history, along with resources to assist those just starting out, Rayna is providing leadership from within the community. Because of her place within the online community, she has also been approached directly for advice and mentoring.

Rayna: one example was a woman, Sarah Corbett in the UK, who emailed me and it was quite a forlorn story. She was like 'oh, I really want to do this stuff, but I don't know anyone else who does this, and I want to start a group but I don't really know how', and she just asked me for some advice. Now she's arguably the most well-known political crafter on the planet, she has this most amazing network and it is really grass roots democratic based stuff, and whilst she's the central organiser, she's not the only organiser. I'm in awe of the stuff that. She's part of a crew called the Craftivist Collective in the UK, and they campaign on so much stuff. They campaign on sweat shops. They campaign on child poverty. They campaign on public transport. You name it, they're doing stuff on it. And there's a huge network of them now, and empowered enough that their members go off and speak as experts in their own right all over the place and it's just so awesome to see, and that's only been in the last maybe three years, I think, since she's started that up. And she's just gone from this really sort of, shy, unconfident person who just needed a little bit of advice, and now she does workshops at the Tate!

The mentorship and inspiration that Rayna provides to solely online contacts also extends to her relationships with the friends she maintains in offline spaces. This tendency to support and encourage others provides enough intrinsic reward to make the effort worthwhile.

Rayna: I mean I know that certainly within my close group of female friends, every single one of them has said to me in the last few months that the reason that they're making as much as they are is because they're friends with me. One of my friends, when she was younger all she wanted to do was to be an artist but her mother wouldn't let her because there's no money in art, and used to tell her that she was useless at it. And when she met me, she's like, I can be an artist, there's not this level of proficiency you need to have and she started painting again after she met me. She's not painting for an audience she's just painting for herself, but she hadn't even given herself the permission to do that. So that was really nice when she told me that...

The role of mentor or inspiration for other crafter fits in with Rayna's work as an educator within craft communities. Along with workshops in craft techniques, Rayna speaks on craft history, utilising the research that she has conducted since she began crafting herself.

Rayna: One of the things that I do is give a talk on radical craft history, and every time I do that talk, I have a slideshow that I update with any new things I've learnt and that always goes online and gets shared with people.

She shares this information not just to inform and educate those who are interested, but also to counteract the negativity that occasionally emerges from within the more conservative craft circles.

Rayna: A really good example is a piece of art, a woman who did a pixel by pixel cross stitch of a security camera still from the Columbine shooting. She did this grey scale cross stitch. It took her five years. Phenomenal *phenomenal* piece of work. Certainly as a cross stitcher I understand the meditation you go into on whatever you're stitching about, so spending five years on something that emotionally intense must have been the most amazing process for her. But the vitriol online from some woman who saw that as glorifying those two young boys, and didn't think that her work was at all 'appropriate' was very much based around whether that should be what you should be allowed to do craft about... That's a lot of the reason why I talk about you know, the history of political craft, because when people say to me, 'that's not what craft is' I go 'well a. fuck off you can't tell me what craft is, b. fuck off, that's not even true [laughs]. You know, look at this, look at this, look at this'.

The subtle nature of Rayna's leadership both within the digitally networked craftivism community and within her private spaces means that this element of her understanding of herself is unlikely to be obvious to an observer of behaviour. The value of this phenomenological investigation of Rayna's experience as a craftivist, and how this relates to her engagement with internet and social media technologies is demonstrated through our capacity to understand the phenomenon in a different way.

CONCLUSION

The benefits of a phenomenological approach to studying human engagement with digitally networked media technologies such as social media outlined at the beginning of this paper are demonstrated in the example of Rayna Fahey's experience of creating a persona for herself and her craft practice. By studying experience rather than simply behaviour, we have learned far more about her motivations and the benefits of engaging with digital networks than would have been possible by studying only her behaviour. I would also argue that despite the fact I have used only one person's experience, this idiographic study tells us at least as much about what it's like to create persona online as would a study that utilises computational methods and massive numbers of participants. Finally, the themes of community membership, collaboration, archiving, marginalization, activism, mentoring, and education could guide the development of a computational study that investigates persona creation in networked environments on much larger scale. By returning to the phenomenon of experience, by using hermeneutics to focus our attention



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on the thing itself, we can go some way to addressing the concern of Van Manen (2006, p. 45), that "In our efforts to make sense of our lived experiences with theories and hypothesizing frameworks we are forgetting that it is living human beings who bring schemata and frameworks into being and not the reverse".

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