

# Engaged Media – Building Ethical Awareness from Art Spaces to Art sites to Public Spaces

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**ABSTRACT:** Responding to the focus areas of multi-perspective narration, sharing and participatory work I want to give an artist's rather than a curator's perspective on "the parallel representation of real world culture in the virtual (online) world experience" by mainly presenting a project that takes both the participant and the art work through a cycle of real world and online media. This and other projects presented are part of my "Engaged Media" series as an artist and educator.

This practice combines media art with socially relevant advocacy. I see art as a powerful tool to reach different audiences, to invite participation, and to reflect on my responsibility as a creator and user of the powerful amplification tools of digital media.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Responding to the focus areas of multi-perspective narration, sharing and participatory work I want to give an artist's rather than a curator's perspective on "*the parallel representation of real world culture in the virtual (online) world experience*" by mainly presenting a project that takes both the participant and the art work through a cycle of real world and online media.

Among the other projects mentioned, two use the early virtual world of *Second Life* as an interactive and participatory platform. All projects are part of my "Engaged Media" series as an artist and educator.

This practice combines media art with socially relevant advocacy. I see art as a powerful tool to reach different audiences, to invite participation, and to reflect on my responsibility as a creator and user of the powerful amplification

tools of digital media. As a citizen, professor and artist I point to ethical choices in general and specifically work towards local environmental awareness and solutions.

I try to involve a public beyond traditional art spaces and encourage participation in a variety of media from gallery to public space to online platform. This advocacy has taken different forms for different occasions: from poetic, artistic installations to direct political messaging. It is my challenge to find the right balance between accessible and artistic subliminal visuals. To reach my audience, I may use public space with a bicycle or video projection, online space on social media or virtual platforms or also traditional gallery spaces.

From that spectrum above I am presenting several of my artworks and NYU student projects.

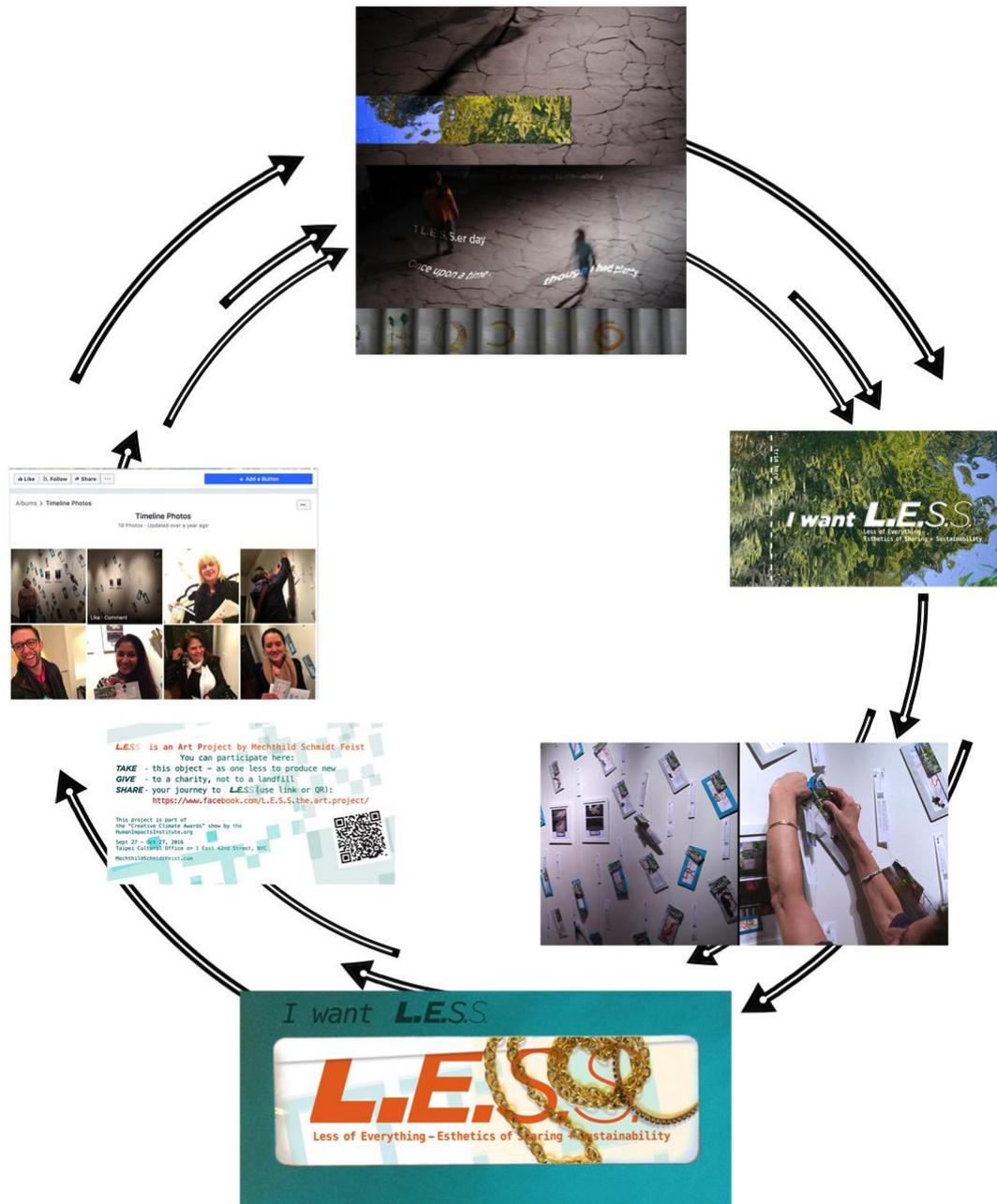


Figure 1: Media Cycle of L.E.S.S.

## 2. ART PROJECTS

### 2.1 L.E.S.S.

*L.E.S.S.* / *Less of Everything – Esthetics of Sharing and Sustainability* is my artistic comment on excessive consumption in western societies. L.E.S.S. starts with me and with my own reduction of material possessions.

My project makes conceptual and esthetic use of LESS by a symbolic weaning to a more sustainable existence. The project extends over several media (see Fig. 1):

- Introductory animation and projection: a crowded screen of objects and typographic

representation of material objects gives way to a calmer, emptier, pensive environment.

- A pledge wall installation aimed at reducing my belongings. By giving away envelopes with my small items I ask that participants pledge to purchase at least one item less. Each envelope has an oversized business card that needs to be trimmed for fit – mirroring the project concept.
- An attached QR code leads to a [Facebook page](#) for participants to post their items.
- A link cycles back to the video, which is also saved on [mechthildschmidtfeist.com](#). [1]
- I am left with the digital reproduction and separate from the physical item. The aesthetic

of LESS aims to want LESS, to waste LESS, to share more.

This personal ‘sharing economy’ is a symbolic contribution to reduce our consumption, a builder of awareness that each purchase uses finite energy and resources, to become mindful of a fairer global distribution of these resources.

The project grew out of a series of photographs documenting small acts of leaving behind personal items that could be of use for someone else and replacing my physical ownership with a digital collage. *L.E.S.S. Cities* occurred in some 20 places, among them Prague, Berlin, Hue (Vietnam), Zagreb.



Figure 2: *L.E.S.S. Cities-Hué*

## 2.2 COP-CYCLE

*COP-cycle pedal power* is a bicycle projection performed in New York as part of the *ARTCOP 21* global climate art festival in December 2015 during the 21<sup>st</sup> Climate conference in Paris. Advocating a simpler life, I pay homage to basic geometric structures of Oskar Schlemmer's Bauhaus dances. I see the relevance of his work today in addressing the expression of simplicity and sustainability of

means. By design choice and financial necessity Schlemmer conceived of dances making sustainable use of very limited resources for both conceptual and artistic strength. I built on his principles, expanded them to the digital realm to advocate a life based on sustainability and restrained consumption.



Figure 3: *COP-cycle*

Using a CO<sub>2</sub>-free transportation, I projected the [animation](#) [2] while biking between Madison Square and Union Square in Manhattan to attract attention to the ongoing conference. The black-and-white typography and design are projected down and easy to read on the asphalt. It was important to me to invite conversation and participation, so I stopped in Madison Square Park for an hour to talk to passersby – and give them a chance to try a ride or take a photo. A [Facebook event page](#) and emails announced the event and gave directions.



Figure 4: *Projection in Madison Square Park*

### 2.3. FOSSIL FREE



Figure 5: FossilFree, projection map

*FossilFree*, a video projection, mapped and adjusted to the architecture of three NYC locations sends a direct political message against plans for a pipeline for extremely polluting tar sands. The [1-minute loop](#) [3] uses the building windows for footage of protests

and renewable solutions while type crawls over the wall area through the ‘pipeline’. The projection was part of a citywide art initiative *10 Days of Climate Action* by the *Human Impacts Institute*.

### 2.4 MIRROR GARDEN3

Other than cause-specific art in public places, my *Mirror Garden series* is a personal reflection on humanity’s relationship to nature. I used *Second Life*, an early virtual reality platform. The open source architecture allows building and owning assets. While public, *Second Life* is no longer in the academic or artistic limelight of a decade ago but a quiet place to create, for open-ended real-time interaction or building. I used it for many years for classes (see below) and my own installations that mix painted and mapped imagery with fantastical 3D fauna leading the visitor through the interactive work. *Mirror Garden3* continues my visual reflections on interactions between humans and nature. The first 2 ‘Mirror Gardens’ explore expectations of perception and laws of physics – like gravity. In this third *Mirror Garden* I revisit the Icarus theme from earlier videos (*Stochastic Dance*). The Icarus saga is iconic for the many myths of desire to overcome obstacles and human limitations. I relate Icarus’ fate to humanity’s struggle to balance exploration and destruction of nature. As a warning of our impatient waste



Figure 6: Mirror Garden3. Glücksspringer

at the expense of the under-privileged and our own future a spiraled band quotes Nietzsche's *Spirit of Heaviness* from *Thus spoke Zarathustra*: "Das ist aber meine Lehre: wer einst fliegen lernen will, der muß erst stehn und gehn und laufen und klettern und tanzen lernen - man erfliegt das fliegen nicht!" (This however is my teaching: he who wants to fly one day, must first learn standing and walking and running and climbing and dancing - one does not fly into flying! ")(4]

### 3. TEACHING

While unethical behavior is not a byproduct of media technology, our new tools have enabled instant and global amplification with much room for intentional or accidental consequences. Without a newly attuned ethical awareness guiding our work and legal agencies, these tools have already proven their lethal and manipulative potential. Thus I made media literacy and responsible citizenship of media professionals a part of my teaching at New York University. My goal is to build a design and art practice on knowledge of both esthetics and political consequence.



Figure 7: Plastic Bottle study – in progress

My course 'Engaged and Participatory Media' focuses on the use of media for non-profit, or social purposes. Our discussion of Howard Gardner's seminal book *Five Minds for the Future* [5] emphasizes what he calls the 'respectful and ethical minds' necessary in our global work environments. In preparation for their own media projects students seek out more information through films and readings such as *This changes Everything* by Naomi Klein [6] who analyses current economic systems and ecological restraint. Now small student teams develop their own local project based on their interest and skills. These are two examples:

- In a Second Life class project students researched water bottle use in the NYU cafeterias and made a visual, interactive case study of a 1-semester usage. Based on the numbers they build a scale model, a 'bottle maze' and an 'info tower' with the . The final project aligned visual design, interactive and ecological criteria.



Figure 8: Plastic Bottle study – info tower

A team of 3 students conceived of an elevator installation, 'Think before you drink' that confronted riders in an aquarium-like environment of what at first sight seemed like a beautiful ocean. Then we see the plastic contamination.

Both exhibits were scheduled to coincide with the annual NYU Earth Week and helped a speedy move to discontinue giving out water bottles in the dining halls and installing more refill stations. The successes of these local projects showed students that they could make a difference. Now they were encouraged to take on other, or even larger environmental issues with local governments or corporations.



Figure 9: Installation, 'Think before you drink'

### 4. CONCLUSION

My practice and teaching investigate the role of media in communicating social and envi-

ronmental awareness. As an educator, I teach creative and ethical use of our powerful media tools.

I coined the term *Engaged Media* seeking to combine media art with environmental advocacy. Visuals are a powerful tool to reach different audiences, to invite participation, and to open minds – so I responded to the motto of the ‘DIGITAL TWIN’ by outlining my artistic advocacy for local responses to Climate Change both in public and online spaces.

## 5. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to thank my department, the SPS Division of Undergraduate Applied Studies (DAUS) for the encouragement and support to experiment with new forms of courses at the BS in Digital Communications + Media at New York University.

I like to thank Tara Deporte, the tireless social entrepreneur and founder of the *Human Impacts Institute* [7], a New York cultural environmental organization for her support of my artwork and encouragement to join the board.

## 5. REFERENCES

(Links may need ‘copy paste’ or go directly to:

<https://mechthildschmidtfeist.com/artwork/portfolio-video/> )

[1] Schmidt Feist, Mechthild (2016): L.E.S.S. , video 2:30 min, Available from: <https://mechthildschmidtfeist.com/2018/01/26/l-e-s-s-of-everything/> (Oct 2018).

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## About the Author

Mechthild Schmidt Feist is a media artist and Professor for Digital Communications + Media at New York University. Building on a fine arts and history background (Universität der Künste, Freie Universität, Berlin), Mechthild has worked in digital media since her DAAD study grant and Whitney Museum Fellowship. Her interdisciplinary works occupy real or virtual spaces between painting, stage, and media. She designed and animated for studios like ARRI Munich, Alexander Kluge, Editel New York. Among her awards is the design of the ‘Deutscher Filmpreis’ statue ‘Lola’. She has exhibited and lectured widely on topics reflecting digital esthetics and *Engaged Media* (selection): Siggraph, BDA, MIT/Center for Advanced Visual Studies, NMC at Princeton, KHM Cologne, SID conference NYU, Bauhaus Dessau, NTU Singapore, SànArt HCMC (Saigon).

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