

On Pleaselike.com*

Louis Doulas

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Pleaselike.com is a browser-based artwork by Rafaël Rozendaal made in 2010, consisting of an entirely white web page save for an embedded Facebook classic-blue thumbs up Like button positioned in the center. To the right of the button is a small Facebook icon and next to it, the names of two Facebook friends along with an ongoing number tally of “others [who] like[d] this.” Accompanied below this tally is a display of six randomly generated Facebook friends.¹

On October 27th 2011, the first version of this essay had been written, with the number of likes recorded at 18,085. Since then, the website has gained an additional 60,941 likes, and currently stands, as of this date, November 21st, 2012, at 79,026 likes and counting. In 2011, for Facebook users who had yet to click “Like,” the following statement was generated: “Be the first of your friends.” Today, in 2012, currently no such statement is displayed. Additionally, viewers who aren’t Facebook members, or not logged in, will encounter the following message: “Sign Up to see what your friends like.” It seems likely then that *Pleaselike.com*’s display interface will continue to change as long as Facebook continues to modify itself.

Rozendaal’s website presents the viewer with an encouragement to submit to a seemingly undemanding request. With nothing apparently at stake in the viewer’s relationship to this request, either she clicks or she doesn’t click. Let’s say the viewer clicks and accepts, enlists in Rozendaal’s playful game, chooses to be established as a “liker,” and perhaps proceeds to check their Facebook timeline to witness the immediate result of this action, then continues onto the next website in their surfing queue. The relationship concludes at this point. Suppose, though, that the viewer doesn’t click. What happens then? Why would anybody refrain from clicking? One reason may point to the viewer being of the “private” type, not wanting the results of their click to show up on their

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¹ This description is accurate only if the viewer is a Facebook member and logged in while viewing the website.

Facebook profile. However, anyone can hide stories like this from their timeline by configuring a simple setting in their privacy settings (alternatively via the “Edit” or “Hide all likes activity” tab). *Pleaselike.com* would still receive the user’s “like,” but none of their Facebook friends would see this activity. Another reason may point to the viewer’s unwillingness to forgo privacy, though again this tactic is thwarted: even if the viewer avoids clicking, their information will still be accounted for and collected by Facebook for merely just visiting the page.² Why else, then, wouldn’t someone want to click and make Rozendaal’s work “complete”? Here we can postulate four theories: (1) They aren’t familiar with the *Pleaselike.com* site and never cross paths with it. (2) They express disinterest, moving on without further dispute. (3) They refuse to “participate” out of disdain for the artist. (4) They wonder what it means not to click.

Without having access to the data (e.g., statistics of clickers to non-clickers, unique and returning visitors, etc.) the point of extending this thought is to illustrate that perhaps the typical viewer doesn’t always undergo such counterfactuals when confronted with the website. Or at least that if they do not adhere to any of the above hypothetical situations they most likely have clicked, or will click “Like.” The general lack of threat “liking” poses and the briefly satisfying—if not banal—moment Rozendaal’s button offers (the chance to be part of the “others,” to join one’s peers and not feel left out, to be part of a potential artwork, etc.) only solidifies the motivation to click—at least this is what I’d like to suggest. The action of “liking” becomes the content itself, the viewer liking to fulfill the site’s only existence, bridging the gap of intention the artist has built. I’d also like to entertain the idea that by liking, the liker symbolically affirms the gesture of “liking” itself—a recognition of a recognition, while in the process, whether intentional or not, generates symbolic capital for the artist and data for Facebook. By not clicking, a viewer might refuse to contribute to an accumulation of “likes” but still indirectly contributes to Rozendaal’s website traffic, and furthermore, will still be accounted for by Facebook (in terms of data scraping). Here is one question: In the end, do the viewer and the liker become one in the same?

The Facebook “Like” button is implemented on websites and blogs across the internet³ as an expanded way to maintain and measure the success or impact an entity, or specific piece of content has, or perhaps ultimately doesn’t. Generally speaking, the more “likes” someone or something gets, the more potential viewership, which in turn—depending on interpretation—results in higher appeal, relevancy, and even influence. From the user point of view, “liking” symbolically signifies a preference or taste: a like-by-like construction of a user’s identity. However, other than the positive

²Rosendaal, Arnold. “Facebook Tracks and Traces Everyone: Like This!,” *Tilburg Law School Legal Studies Research Paper Series*, 2010, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1717563 & Richmond, Riva. “As ‘Like’ Buttons Spread, So Do Facebook’s Tentacles,” *New York Times*, 27 September 2011, <http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/27/as-like-buttons-spread-so-do-facebooks-tentacles/>.

³Of the top 10,000 websites in the world, 24.3 employ some form of Facebook integration. See “How many sites have Facebook integration? You’d be surprised,” *Pingdom*, 18 June 2012, <http://royal.pingdom.com/2012/06/18/how-many-sites-have-facebook-integration-youd-be-surprised/>.

affirmation of the “like,” Facebook offers no other button for alternate expression. Rozendaal’s two interchangeable titles—the website url, *Pleaselike* and the title “please like” listed on his website—amplify these positive inflections by conjoining the word “please” with “like,” thusly conveying a charitable tone. “please like,” suggesting perhaps a modest call for action from the viewer, “It’s no problem, *really*, I can click.” However, because Rozendaal’s Like button apparently exists in support of nothing but itself (in that there is no obvious supporting content to which it references),⁴ these two titles can also be understood as a command, implying that the viewer must do something on the page, and what is there to do but to click the only clickable item?

Without supporting content, Rozendaal’s Like button points to itself, leaving one with a composition of numbers. Without disdain or disapproval, in this context “liking” might be seen as an empty gesture. *Pleaselike.com* embraces the normativity of Facebook and exploits it to an absurd conclusion.

⁴You can argue that while there is no visible content the Like button stands to support, it is, technically, supporting Rozendaal himself, however, I would argue that this is still an *indirect* form of support.