

Unlike Us

**SOCIAL MEDIA MONOPOLIES
AND THEIR ALTERNATIVES**

EDITED BY
**GEERT LOVINK AND
MIRIAM RASCH**
INC READER #8

ON PLEASELIKE.COM
AND FACEBOOK BLISS

/

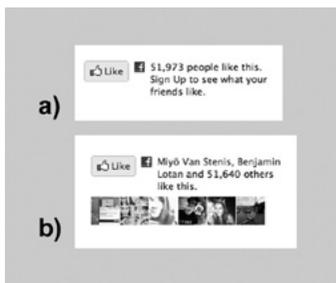
LOUIS DOULAS
AND WYATT NIEHAUS

FACEBOOK ROZENDAAAL VIEWER
CLICK PLEASELIKE BLISS
ANTONELLIS BUTTON WEBSITE
SOCIAL LIKING VIEWERS GESTURE

Pleaselike.com

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’. Now 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. And with nothing apparently at stake in the viewer’s relationship to this request, either X clicks or X doesn’t click. So, 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 maybe continues onto the next website

in their surfing queue. However, the relationship concludes at this point. Suppose, though, that the viewer *doesn’t* click. What happens then? Why would *anybody* refrain from clicking?

1. This description is accurate only if the viewer is a Facebook member and logged in while viewing the website. The artwork can be found at: <http://pleaselike.com/>.

One reason may point to the viewer being of the 'private' type, not wanting the results of their click to show up on their 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:

- They aren't familiar with the *Pleaselike.com* site and never actually cross paths with it.
- They express disinterest, moving on without further dispute.
- They express disdain for the artist by refusing to 'participate'.
- They wonder what it means *not* to click.

Without having access to the statistics of clickers to non-clickers, unique, and returning visitors, etc. the point of extending this thought is to illustrate that maybe the typical viewer doesn't always undergo such hypotheticals 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 mediocre – 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. So, 'liking' here then becomes the content itself, the viewer liking to fulfill the site's only existence, bridging the gap of intention the artist has built. 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 is accounted for by Facebook in terms of information. In the end don't the viewer and the liker become one and 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-

-
2. Arnold Roosendaal, 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; and Riva Richmond, 'As "Like" Buttons Spread, So Do Facebook's Tentacles', *The New York Times*, 27 September 2011, <http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/27/as-like-buttons-spread-so-do-facebooks-tentacles/>.
 3. Of the top 10,000 websites in the world, 24.3% employ some form of Facebook integration. ('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-you-d-be-surprised/>).

by-like construction of a user's identity. However, other than the positive affirmation of the 'like', Facebook offers no other button for alternate expression. And 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' suggests a modest call for action from the viewer, 'It's no problem, *really*, I can click'. However, because Rozendaal's Like button exists only for itself, in that there is no obvious supporting content to which it references⁴, these two titles can also suggest 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 meta-gesture. And thus, *Pleaselike.com* embraces the normativity of Facebook and exploits it to an absurd conclusion.

Facebook Bliss

Utilizing the popular metaphor of the attention economy, the transaction between Rozendaal and his audience is fairly lopsided. For one party, this is simply an empty gesture and for the other, a self-referential form of publicity with high yields of attention. Inversely, this project can be compared to *Facebook Bliss*, a work by American artist Anthony Antonellis.

In *Facebook Bliss*, Antonellis offers his viewers piece of mind by framing three notable Facebook icons (friend requests, private messages, and notifications) in the center of a screen. Nested just below these icons is a simple button prompting a click with the word 'Bliss'. Upon clicking, three new notifications appear – one in each category. With each subsequent click, the number grows.

Antonellis offers his viewers the pinnacle of virtual connectedness – an ever-growing cache of social influence. Where Rozendaal commits to the application of real social currency only for himself, Antonellis wants simply to replicate the comforting gesture of acceptance, internally, for each of his viewers. But perhaps the symmetry of these two works is in the banality of this gesture? *Facebook Bliss* is an idealistic appeal to the socially powerless. Just as Rozendaal leads us to an absurd end in *Pleaselike*, Antonellis leads us to the opposite absurdity – a circumstance where merely the symbolism connected with our networked sociality is enough to provoke a satisfying emotional response. However, Antonellis has not discovered a shameful detail of our unmitigated desire for social validation, but rather a nuanced account of what it means to desire in the late aughts.

Like much of Anthony Antonellis's work, *Facebook Bliss* is not an appeal to the cynical elements of networked culture, but rather an optimistic embrace of new technologies and how they come to affect us personally. His work often makes references to an internalized value of social media and emerging technology in a culture that is so rooted in concepts of social mobility and personal branding.

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

Just as Rozendaal has created an isolated circumstance for his viewers to ruminate on the power of a symbolic action, Antonellis too has removed context. In *Facebook Bliss*, we are never meant to consider questions like ‘who has added me?’, ‘what does this private message say?’ or, ‘to what event have I been invited?’ Addressing these questions might stand only to trivialize the gesture. Removing such details liberates it from the burden of personalization. Antonellis offers us three simple symbols, which mean more and more to our networked society.

Facebook Bliss is a simple synthesis of how we categorize our desires for interaction in the 21st century. By presenting them in this tongue-in-cheek manner, Antonellis has ascribed the necessary brevity to a social circumstance that is exceedingly reflexive and self-aware. The piece takes full account of the breadth of emotional responses triggered by the variables of these simple symbols.

In total, *Pleaselike* and *Facebook Bliss* offer a spectrum of reactions to the symbols and gestures behind our everyday online exchanges. These keen manipulations of now ubiquitous icons are low-stakes invitations to explore and consider the value of our interactions online. Facebook is, for now, the ever-present social mediator of our time. Instead of critiquing this circumstance directly, both Rozendaal and Antonellis accept the framework but offer up a sincere reaction to its boundaries and limitations (on both ends).

Notions of personal and interpersonal are constantly in flux, on the web. *Pleaselike* and *Facebook Bliss* use this fluctuation very differently – and by doing so, offer to their viewers a gamut of interpretations of the Facebook framework that shapes our lives.

References

- ‘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-you-d-be-surprised>.
- Richmond, Riva. ‘As “Like” Buttons Spread, So Do Facebook’s Tentacles’, *The New York Times*, 27 September 2011, <http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/27/as-like-buttons-spread-so-do-face-books-tentacles/>.
- Roosendaal, 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.