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# #Blessed: User-generated Content and Indexing Spirituality

BY AMIE TULLIUS ON FEBRUARY 11, 2015 • ( LEAVE A COMMENT )



Curator Christin Acunas was surprised at what people put on the internet, but amazed at the openness people displayed in their sharing.

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Beginning this Friday, the Granary Art Center in Ephraim, Utah will be assaulted with a visual overwhelm of printed Instagram images for #Blessed: User-generated Content and Indexing Spirituality.

The hashtag #blessed has been used over 34 million times since Instagram's inception. It was used well over 8,000 times the day that the show's curator, Christin Aucunas, chose to examine it as a filter on the image-based social media site. On Instagram, images are user-tagged, so a sampling of the images reveals content that is subjective and also startling in its scope. Aucunas, a photography historian who recently moved to Utah after graduating from the University of Manchester, chose the project as a way to examine what happens to photography when it ends up online, how the personal becomes public, and how the secular and spiritual mingle on social media.

"I was really fascinated by the hashtag #blessed," Aucunas says. She says among certain users, #blessed is typically used ironically, and frequently as a critique of consumerism. At the other end of the spectrum, though, the hashtag is used as a genuine expression of joy. "When you look at the images, and how they function," Aucunas says, "it's really remarkable." Aucunas says that she was amazed at the openness people displayed in their sharing. As she sifted through the vast amount of visual material, she found that the hashtag was used over and over to sincerely express gratitude that "encompasses so many aspects of life, really, from birth to death. You can find a sonogram image next to someone saying goodbye to their grandparents at a funeral." And everything in between.

"You can find how that hashtag is used through very specific communities, and how memes travel around specific communities, so limiting the search to one day gave this very interesting snapshot into how communities function online." One unexpected trend she saw was young men posting shots of their new haircuts. And then there are people using the hashtag to sell their products—"everything from makeup, to shoes, to whatever," Aucunas says. She also discovered a shocking number of images that featured illegal activities. "You'll be surprised what people put on the internet. A lot of images of people using drugs, like a lot of partying images, and they're all publicly available, so, in my mind, if people made the work public, it's hard for me not to include it." And then there was the irony and social critique she had expected to find. But all that is juxtaposed against hundreds of sunsets, engagements, religious cartoons, and Disney. "Going to Disney World was a very big trend," Aucunas says. "And a very joyful one. And I just imagine, all these people are at Disney World at the same time, taking these photographs and hashtagging them as blessed, and I don't know if they're interacting with each other in real life; they may be standing with each other in line!" While she took note of (and printed) the repetitions and trends she discovered, the point of the project was not to define #blessed, so much as to look, and to—as she writes in the press release—"offer a visual trace of the curator's own adventures in the digital photographic playground."



Aucunas chose the project to show how the personal becomes public, how the secular and spiritual mingle on social media.

The contradictions in how the hashtag is used on Instagram are mirrored in a way by the anxiety of how Instagram itself is used. Instagram (and other social media companies) provide a platform for community even as the company mines the community's information to make a profit. Getting users to upload personal information/images is "a very lucrative pursuit for companies such as Instagram and Facebook," Aucunas says. "We're all sort of aware of this system. But also, what I think is really powerful is that these images mean something to a community of people." In a sense Aucunas mines user-generated data much like the company might mine the data, but with the resulting output being art rather than advertising.

Aucunas expected at some point to experience some exhaustion with the images. "There are 8,000 of them. They all have to be selected, downloaded, processed, [and then] uploaded and printed by a printer," she says, "and I thought I would just get sick of them. But there are certain images that I just love." She explains that she was delighted by the irony and humor she found, moved by the critiques, and totally swept up by the sincerity. "I think people don't often recognize how significant this act of sharing is. That's one of the reasons I wanted to make these digital snaps, these amazing things that happen around us constantly, and bring it into a real-life space."



What Aucunas found really powerful, "is that these images mean something to a community of people."

*See all 8,000 #blessed prints and meet Christin Aucunas at the opening reception Friday, February 13th from 6-8 p.m. It is free and open to the public. Granary Art Center is located at 86 N. Main St. in Ephraim • Hours: Wed. – Fri. 3-6 p.m. and Sat. noon-3 p.m. For more information visit [www.GranaryArtCenter.org](http://www.GranaryArtCenter.org) or [HashtagBlessed.org](http://HashtagBlessed.org)*



**Amie Tullius**

Amie Tullius, moved to Utah after finishing an MFA in Writing at California College of the Arts in San Francisco in 2006. She writes fiction, essays, and is also the director of sales at J GO Gallery in Park City.