



Window Space

Xpace Cultural Centre
2-303 Lansdowne Ave
Toronto ON M6K 2W5
416 849 2864
Tuesday-Saturday 12-6
www.xpace.info

**Stacie Ant, *The Internet and how I Googled myself into inner heaven*
September 9 – October 21, 2016**

long ambients1: calm. sleep.: Moby and the Virtually Sacred

Multi-media artist Stacie Ant's window installation *The Internet and how I Googled myself into inner heaven* references both homemade website aesthetics and commercial window displays. For passersby unaware of Xpace's exhibition structure, the window display might allude to a gimmicky pop-up shop or better yet, an "as-seen-on-TV" store, moving "life hack" products from screen to IRL to nullify online buyers' apprehensions.

The exhibition features a hand-painted backdrop of small, puffy clouds against aqua blue skies—a typical web layout option, I'm told. The pattern moves into the foreground, repeating on the front faces of three plinths. Their remaining sides, covered with a vector-printed wallpaper, explode the sky into geometric pieces—perhaps a reference to the backend of a website. Several portable DVD players, a picture frame, propped book, and various votive candles fill the floor space. Two hologram posters of Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ hang from the ceiling like discount sales signs. Together, the imagery appears to market a religious enterprise that follows some elements of Christianity. However, the face behind the business is not Jesus but Moby, the American singer-

songwriter, musician, and DJ known for his trance-inducing electronic music. Moby's floating face fills the picture frame and book cover, both framed by the title *The Internet and how I Googled myself to inner heaven*. Here's the lynchpin of the work: the amalgamation of Google and Heaven as places of, or means to, transcendence, with Richard Melville Hall as our guide.¹

Ant's installation converges the spiritual realms of digital and material space through aesthetic play and social critique. Fusing online celebrity worship with cyber religious practices, the installation plays with image consumption and idolization, turning celebrity following into its own branch of religion. The artists' conceptual intentions to merge screen space and the physical environment are strengthened by the architecture of the window installation, which performs its own qualities of virtuality vis-à-vis the window (reflection, approximation of the real, and transparency being material properties related to virtual effects). The mix of objects and digital references incorporate various religious icons that reflect a culture of user-generated and user-curated content.

Applying digital tactics, the artist explores faith-building in the twenty-first century not just as a personal path along a given belief system but as a grassroots initiative which enables users to create their own "cyber church" by incorporating elements of various religions into the web's infrastructure. Using the dispersed nature of the web as both content and architecture for spiritual design better reflects the ways we receive and gather information today. *The Internet and how I Googled myself into inner heaven*

¹ Moby's given name

playfully and satirically references the possibilities of the web as both a site for religious bricolage and as a spiritual media itself.

Has Google replaced god? A report in MIT Technology Review suggests a correlation between increased Internet use and a decline in religious affiliation.² The study's results, and Stacie Ant's installation, raise questions not just about the cost of digital life on religion but the shared expectations associated with online activity and religious engagements. Although "ask and you shall receive" –a colloquial adaptation from Book of Matthew (7:7 KJV)—describes communication with god for Christian-believers, it is also an apt description of our relationship with the Google search engine, exchanging the virtues of patience and slow listening for online immediacy and directness. A sense of community and belonging may be better delivered through an online setting with the convenience of at home immediacy and 24-hour presence, participation, and the promise to connect to someone at any given time. The Internet offers the opportunity for information sharing, community building, as well as knowledge exchange and production, eliminating the barriers of physically dependent communities. Thus, online engagement enables agency to self-produce what a physical space such as a Church does not allow.

² Christine Rosen, "Is Google Replacing God?" *The Wall Street Journal*, June 12, 2016, accessed August 28, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/christine-rosen-is-google-replacing-god-1402614743>.

As religious affiliations promise the opportunity to transcend the material world, digital platforms provide this heavenly sphere by enabling user-generated frameworks to operate outside of, or against, normative and privileged structures. The ability to act beyond the limits of the flesh (in the digital world) does not mean transcending our earthly setting but existing without imposed external limitations fixed by ideas of normativity, perpetuated in the physical environment.³ To (digitally) explore other ways of being is indeed a spiritual quest. In this sense, Googling oneself to Heaven is not far off. Is Moby the spokesperson for such ventures? Celebrity status certainly hinges on the supernatural but his most recent album, which explores meditation and altered states may make him a better candidate. *long ambients1: calm. sleep.* uses the virtues of the digital to create and disseminate a fully accessible, free, and unprotected track list of ambient music inspired by his own personal listening interests: music for yoga, sleep, meditation, or panicking (as stated by the artist). Drawing parallels between celebrity worship and spiritual worship, Moby serves as the spokesperson, product, and spiritual guide in Ant's installation.

While the Internet performs and enables spiritual qualities like transcendence, knowledge-seeking, and even a sort of online afterlife (posthumous online activity, such

³ For more on power dynamics and social exclusion at work in face-to-face interaction see Jenny Davis, "Face to Interface," *Real Life Mag*, August 10, 2016, accessed on August 28, 2016, <http://reallifemag.com/face-to-interface/>. Davis provides many examples of users that socially benefit from digital communication such as Alzheimer patients, writing that a greater sense of self and increased social connections are gained online. More examples to add to Davis' overview include the production safe spaces for LGBTQ+ and the development and strengthening of Crip communities through online networks, to name only a few.

as the Facebook profile of a deceased friend or loved one), religious communities are too taking to the Internet to establish new points of connection and even user-generated religions, referred to as “cyber cathedrals” by the artist. Cyber churches and virtual temples extend the physical architecture of worship spaces to an online setting as a means of creating an increased sense of collectivity and connectivity. *The Internet and how I Googled myself to inner heaven* pays homage to these translations between physical and online infrastructures and not unlike the impetus for *ambients1: calm*. *Sleep*, aims to create a spiritual space accessible for all.

-Sara Nicole England

This exhibition and essay were created during Xspace’s 2016 residency for OCAD U graduates.