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***Social Media* Opens at The Pace Gallery, With Works by David Byrne, Miranda July**

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Word had gotten out about the opening of *Social Media* at [The Pace Gallery](#) in Chelsea -- not surprising, given the show's title.

The large, factory-like space thronged with people interested in the art, and those attracted by the hubbub and bevy of food trucks parked out front. A man dressed in either a sailor or ice cream man's white suit stood out from the crowd, as did a pair of scruffy teenagers wearing shorts and tee shirts and carrying acoustic guitars.

[David Byrne](#) also drew attention. The former Talking Heads frontman looked svelte in a blue suit jacket, his white hair contrasting nicely with his dark tan -- he's just back from judging the Venice Film Festival, and a trip to South America to discuss bicycle-friendly city planning. Byrne made a quick circuit of the gallery, stopping to let fans take a few pictures, then moved on, I heard him say, to the Agnes Martin opening down the street.

Byrne's name had surely attracted many. *Social Media* contains two of his pieces: a series of faux iPhone apps that provoked more smiles than thought, and shots of parliamentary scuffles displayed in digital photo-frames called *Democracy in Action*. The besuited politicians belting one another in chamber echo lines from Byrne's song "The Civil Wars," from his 1997 album *Feelings*: "We are fighting with knives and forks / demonstrating how Democracy works." A dim view of the grand Democratic experiment -- a "Road to Nowhere," indeed.

That pessimistic tone persists in "Tight Space," Byrne's far more interesting public artwork on display in an abandoned lot next door. "Tight Space" is a giant globe squeezed between the walls of two buildings, hemmed in by rafters, and pressed upon from above by the High Line -- the former railroad artery into New York City's Meatpacking district now turned public green space -- that emanates a low, ominous rumble made by Byrne's voice, digitally manipulated past recognition, a sound that occasionally vibrated beneath the crowd's buzz in The Pace Gallery. Is Byrne imagining a globe squeezed by economic worries, or perhaps made smaller by digital media and world trade? Is it a statement on ecology -- the world literally pressed upon by humanity's constructions? Are the sounds the Earth's mournful groans, or its angry growls? "Tight Space" evokes without preaching.

Social Media also contains work conceived by writer, filmmaker, and performance artist [Miranda July](#) and [Harrell Fletcher](#). *Learning to Love You More* literally came about via social media -- participants were given an assignment that they then executed and uploaded to a website. Many of the shots in *Social Media* depict famous figures doing some pedestrian, humanizing activity. In one picture, Mitt Romney takes a nap on his futon after winning a primary. In another, Ben Bernanke decides to wear a blue shirt to a press conference. The piece challenges how we think of these political power-holders, as it does the concept of the artist itself. July and Fletcher act more as directors and curators, with many unseen amateurs creating the works. (Talk about outsourcing!)

The most interesting pieces went beyond the clever and funny, making the mundane uncanny. [Aram Bartholl's](#) *Are You Human?* transformed digital CAPTCHA codes -- those gibberish phrases we enter on sites to distinguish us from spambots -- into metal sculptures. With the letters blurred and scored in strange ways, these codes annoy me onscreen, struggling as I do to decipher them and move forward in whatever task they're guarding. Yet taken out of context and made concrete, each distortion took on the beauty of a graffiti tag, a sculpture built of font and form.

[Penelope Umbrico's](#) *Personal Subjects* presented photographs of television screens from Craigslist ads, blown-up and enhanced so that the person taking the picture and their surroundings come into view. They make the point of the shot -- the television for sale -- secondary to the snooping glance into the other person's life. What isn't an inherently social media artifact becomes one, reminding us that much of what we put online reveals things about ourselves that we are not always aware of. It's an almost insidious definition of social media, endowing even the most insignificant of acts, or the most transactional ones, with a hidden, personal meaning.

Adam Bell, a photographer and instructor at the School of Visual Arts who helped to organize the show, said they tried hard to avoid gimmicky work. "We didn't simply want to take art that exists online and put it in a gallery," he told me. Instead, they tried to challenge how we think of the term "Social Media," showing viewers that it goes far beyond simple Twitter timelines or Facebook updates. Indeed, the show contains work by Robert Heneicken that predate the Internet -- copies of *Time* magazine that he transformed and then returned to the news rack, a literal form of social media before the online concept existed.

With boldness, intelligence, and wry humor, *Social Media* leaves one aware that everything we do online puts us in touch with and contributes to a conversation that is much greater than the sum of its parts.

Social Media is on display at The Pace Gallery, at 510 West 25th Street in New York City, through October 15th.

David Byrne's installation *Tight Space* appears at 508 25th Street in New York City, through October 1st.