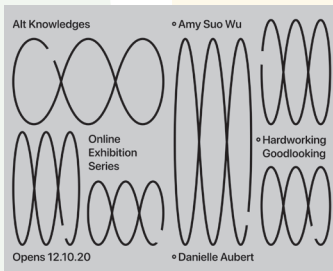


Dismantling Capitalism and Colonialism Beyond the White Cube: Alt Knowledges Exhibition Debuts Online

by Rachel Poonsiriwong



Alt Knowledges Exhibition Series

Twitch streamed gallery hours in February 2021

Alt Knowledges explores alternative values through the work of Amy Suo Wu, Danielle Aubert, and Hardworking Goodlooking. This student-led series of solo-exhibitions presents models for challenging entrenched colonial and capitalist systems through privacy tactics, worker-run presses, and a rethinking of modernist design values. For the opening event, Danielle Aubert shares about her practice, and her research on The Detroit Printing Co-op. *Alt Knowledges* was initiated by the Graphic Design Program with support from IF/THEN.

Since the implementation of COVID-19 safety guidelines in March 2020, art galleries saw an exodus of artwork and visitors alike. Conversely, online spaces such as video streaming platforms and websites have been remodeled into virtual art galleries. *Alt Knowledges* was an online exhibition series initiated by the CCA Graphic Design Program as part of the Creative Citizens in Action initiative at CCA (CCA@CCA). Curated and designed by chris hamamoto's Fall 2020 Exhibition Design students, *Alt Knowledges* explored anti-capitalism and anti-colonialism through the creative work of Amy Suo Wu, Danielle Aubert, and Hardworking Goodlooking.

According to [Alt Knowledges' webpage](#), its series of solo exhibitions challenged "entrenched colonial and capitalist systems" in society through worker-run presses, modernist design values, and privacy tactics. *Alt Knowledges* piqued my joint interests in Interaction Design and Art History, which led me to ask: How are virtual exhibitions designed differently from physical ones? How is interactivity redefined when viewers peer into hermetic cyberspace instead of immersing themselves in the white cube?

Despite having these questions in mind, I was caught off guard by my first experience viewing *Alt Knowledges* when I encountered difficulties with Twitch, a live streaming platform on which viewers could view the physical installation at IF/THEN studio in Berkeley. I had spent the first thirty minutes unable to access *Unfaithful Kami*, the first virtual exhibition in the *Alt Knowledges* series which featured publishing "hauz" Hardworking Goodlooking. This technical hiccup added an unpredictable edge to my viewing experience because I was worried I would not be able to view the exhibition. My status as a virtual viewer was now dependent on large technology companies like Twitch instead of on art institutions that used to host exhibitions in their spaces. I noticed that *Alt Knowledges'* reliance on Twitch, a profit-making entity, directly contradicted Hardworking Goodlooking's anti-capitalist production techniques of cottage-industry press-printing. It seemed that Hardworking Goodlooking's subversive and alt-capitalist themes were ultimately reliant on a capitalist product like the Twitch platform to disseminate its ideas. This dissonance between anti-capitalist artwork and capitalist structures felt jarring because I had not previously experienced technical issues while attending a physical exhibition. However, these contradictions have always been present in physical exhibitions, but manifested as art dealers and wealthy individuals that fund and orchestrate our viewing

experiences. After thirty minutes of refreshing my page, I was finally able to view *Unfaithful Kami*, curated by Kaja Berry, Ji Yun Kim, Yixun Li, Ruiyi Liu, and Janel Mitchell. While I tried to focus on the art, the technical issues I experienced highlighted the inherent conflict between *Alt Knowledges'* themes and the capitalist structures that govern our information-sharing channels.

Unfaithful Kami's virtuality led to a robust temporal quality in its exhibition design. Given its format as a two-hour-long video, *Unfaithful Kami* gradually revealed events within the audience's frame of vision on the live stream. For example, an idyllic backdrop of a gazebo was increasingly covered in multi-colored posters, adhered by an anonymous hand. A poster that illustrated natural dyeing practices was applied onto the gazebo, which made me think that Hardworking



Goodlooking worked with themes of Indigeneity. As each poster was placed one-by-one onto the gazebo print, I focused my gaze on each new poster to read its contents. The anonymous hand anticipated their viewer would try to read the posters, leading to a long lag between the application of one poster to the next. Nearing the end of the exhibition, I spotted posters with phrases like "Ghetto Book Printing!!" and "New Strategies in Post-Truth Times," both advocating for alternative viewpoints to mass publication and dissemination. This practice of adhering posters on top of another reminded me of wheatpasting, a longstanding cheap way of making liquid adhesive using flour and water. Alluding to this technique that was ubiquitously used in anarchist ventures to apply unauthorized signages or posters, *Unfaithful Kami* presented a subversive perspective in which the posters appeared to disobey social norms and structures. Throughout my viewing experience, I refined my understanding of Hardworking Goodlooking's ideas/concepts by constantly questioning my inferences about their work and shifting my perspectives to accommodate their broader thinking on anti-colonialist themes. I realized that *Unfaithful Kami's*

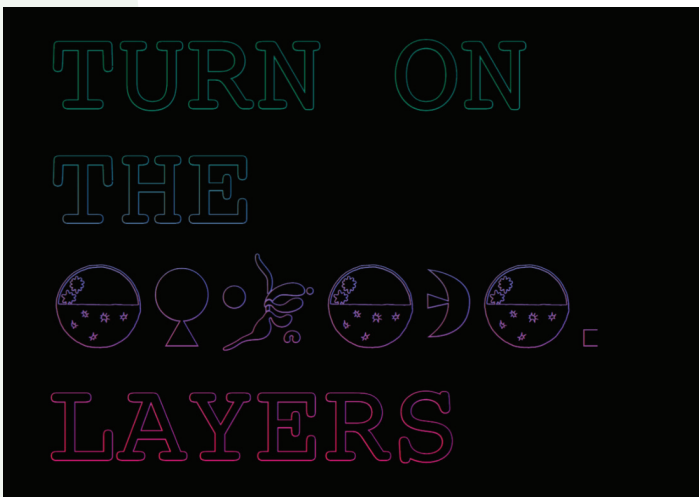
temporality regulated how much information was being shared at any one point in time, instead having opted for a slow reveal that allowed space for viewer interpretation. My first experience with a live-streamed exhibition like *Unfaithful Kami* led me to infer that virtual exhibitions are more likely to be temporal and performative instead of static like a physical art exhibition.

Throughout the *Alt Knowledges* live streams, I also felt achingly passive in how I absorbed artistic content. The exhibitions were entirely self-contained in pre-recorded videos from an unknown source, and any action I took as an audience member would not alter them. On the other hand, I could significantly change a physical art exhibition if I were to destroy the pieces on view or create a disruption of some kind in the gallery space. In viewing a virtual exhibition series like *Alt Knowledges*, I could have thrown my laptop out of the window and it would not have affected the artistic content one bit. This one-way-ness was highlighted

during a particular scene in *No. 7* curated by Jennifer Jang, Karina Kristensen, Alia Moussa, and Darian Newman in collaboration with graphic designer Danielle Aubert. During the first hour, a masked attendant waved amiably to the camera, but they would not see me wave back. I was



then brought on a tour to view what I thought was Aubert's body of work, but I couldn't ask the tour guide to slow down or speed up. I contemplated whether the *Alt Knowledges* team was intentional in maintaining this passivity in its interactions with the audience or whether this was a consequence of using the live stream platform. As the solo-exhibitions were engaging egalitarian themes of anti-capitalism and anti-colonialism, could my inability to interact with the work be a conscious removal of power on my end?



I thoroughly enjoyed *Invisible.Show*, an interactive web experience and documentation page designed by Menaja Ganesh, Chiao Huang, Howsem Huang, Aashi Jhaveri, and Xiaoyi Yang in collaboration with designer Amy Suo Wu. As I ran my cursor over different words and phrases on the website, they converted into Dingbats, rendering them impossible to read. This action was a homage to Amy Suo Wu's steganographic practice of hiding and concealing information using low-tech methods like crypticism as an act of rebellion towards high-tech surveillance systems. I found it more enjoyable to interact with the documentation of this virtual exhibition than the passive viewing experience of the virtual exhibition itself. Playing with *Invisible.Show's* steganography led me to conclude that an effective feedback system

between the audience and artwork—where the audience feels they can make something happen with their actions—is the foundation of a memorable virtual art experience.

Attending the *Alt Knowledges* virtual exhibitions was an eye-opening experience. While I expected to learn about anti-colonialism and privacy tactics, I also left with a better understanding of how virtual exhibitions are designed. As an interaction designer and emerging art curator, I hope to learn how to leverage technology to craft artistic experiences that are interactive and memorable.

The *Alt Knowledges* exhibition series was organized **christopher hamamoto**, Assistant Professor, Graphic Design Program.

Rachel Poonsiriwong (she/her) is an interaction designer and art curator passionate about social impact. She recently interned at Microsoft, is currently curating an art exhibition at Root Division, and is also volunteering with the Asian American Women Artists Association.



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