On needing deadlines

Artist and technologist Mindy Seu discusses making herself the through-line, ending up somewhere better than she planned, and her mission to produce work for the rest of her life.

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As told to Mercedes Torrendell, 1842 words.

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When I first came across your work, what struck me was the range. Lecture performances, spreadsheets, design commissions, a residency at the Internet Archive… There's a curiosity running through all of it that feels specific and deliberate. Has it always been this wide-ranging?

This question reminds me of something that happened when I was teaching at Rutgers. We had a guest lecture series, and the designer David Reinfurt was one of our speakers. A grad student asked him, "I feel like my work is so disparate. How do you create through-lines between all of these things?" And he said, "Regardless of the output of the work, the through line is you."

I think about this a lot. As someone who's naturally drawn to interdisciplinary forms, whenever I feel anxious about whether things feel disconnected or medium agnostic, I can remind myself that the through line is me, and being attuned to what resonates is the true value—in knowledge production, in artistic production, in all of it.

Thematically, my work has actually been quite consistent. At the core, it comes down to research-based inquiries dealing with internet subcultures, technology histories, citational praxis. Those things are at the root of everything, regardless of whether they come out as a lecture performance or an essay or some sort of software.

You've said that ideas tend to find you through conversations, friends, therapy, lectures, students. How do you stay open to all of those inputs without losing the thread of what's yours?

My friend Nora Khan, who's an incredible writer and curator, describes it like this: these ideas and connections truly don't occur in a bubble. You have to be in the world, and all of these things become inputs for new connections to form. Whether that's in conversation with a close friend or a collaborator, going to a performance, going to a show, watching some random reality TV show—across that whole spectrum, things are converging and creating associations. For me, that friction, those overlaps, are where I'm able to conceive of new ideas, new partnerships. I think it really comes down to a constant intake and curiosity, not even with the expectation that anything might emerge from it. Just being a curious person in the world. Things naturally form and cultivate there.

Your projects all seem to carry the logic in their form. In *A Sexual History of the Internet* you inverted what each container was supposed to do. The Instagram Stories performance became the slow version, almost an endurance test, while the book became the fast one: a flipbook. What was behind that inversion?

I think one of the strategies I seem to employ—very intentionally, but also sometimes just as it happens—is trying to understand the behavior that a tool affords, and then breaking that down. What are the conventions of

books? What are the conventions of other interfaces? How can you turn that on its head? By making something a bit uncomfortable, you reveal the convention, and then you open up strategies for working against it or using it in an unintentional way—whether for a poetic reason, a critical reason, or something more playful.

We are trained to use Instagram in a very fast, consumer-driven way. But when you actually treat it as a publishing device—and they're literally called "Stories"—it sets a very natural pace. Text slides are about five seconds. So if you're reading segments in five-second intervals, it creates a very consistent pace for how you might speak. When I was creating the printed version with Laura Coombs, I gave her all of our Instagram Stories, and she found that the book could move as fast as a flipbook. Whereas the Instagram interface was suddenly very, very slow. It did feel like we had turned the behavioral function of each device by trying to make things fit within the project, rather than trying to conform to the rules of the interfaces.

Can you walk me through the design process with Laura for *A Sexual History of the Internet*?

What I love about working with Laura is that I can give her key ideas and themes, and then she extrapolates and makes them specific to print. For this book, the brief I gave her was that it needs to feel like a phone, the size of a phone extruded to however many pages. It should also feel like a little black book, like a safety vehicle. Ideally, it needed to refer to a digital context. Some people's first instinct would be to use an RGB color scheme. But Laura thought that if it needs to feel like a transmissive display, it's almost more interesting to make the surface as matte as possible and the ink as shiny as possible, so it feels like it's transmitting in a different way. So she presented this palette of matte black paper with sparkly silver foil for the cover, and metallic silver ink for the interior pages. It sparkles in a way that refers more to pixelation… It was not where I thought we'd end up, and it's so much better.

Both books are recovering stories that didn't make it into the canonical version of internet history. And you've framed them deliberately as "a" history: one subjective perspecive. Why is that distinction important to you?

My advisor in grad school, Jeffrey Schnapp, said something that has stayed with me: "Anthologizing is very violent." A curatorial practice is violent. You're pulling things out of context and suggesting that they belong in the same canon. There's a lot of power in that.

Historically, we've accepted these big curatorial projects as singular truths, when in fact they are highly curated, for a lot of different purposes—whether to fortify a social narrative or for a political purpose. So for *The Cyberfeminism Index* and for *A Sexual History of the Internet*, I was doing my best to make sure that while the work is extremely research-driven, the act of pulling things together is inherently biased by my perspective and what I'm naturally drawn to. The idea was to move away from any pretense of objectivity.

I almost see it as a serial publication. It could be *A Sexual History of the Internet: Mindy*. Or *A Sexual History of the Internet: Noelle Perdue*, a porn historian friend of mine. Or *A Sexual History of the Internet: Ani Liu*, an eco-feminist artist. There are so many different ways of telling the story. Thematically it would be very similar, but the specific anecdotes and references would be very distinct depending on what feels resonant for the author. The idea was to show a subjective route and also to show the natural co-authoring process that comes from publishing anything.

Where do you see visual artists in all of this? What do they specifically bring to the space of technology that others can't?

Artists are doing so much inquiry, thematically and conceptually, and it's manifesting in a form that might not be very didactic. It's not a textual explanation of something; it's coming through material research, something more sculptural, something that feels performative and embodied. It's almost the responsibility of the critic, the reviewer, the historian to situate that work within a larger historical, technological, and social context, to make explicit the connections that might have felt very intuitive for the artist. These are all just ways of building out a world and a context to create the backbone of whatever that work initially was.

You've talked about treating a story told in a whisper at a bar at the same level as a scholarly text. How do you

validate something like that? Is validation even the right word?

I'm calling from my office at UCLA, so I'm immersed in a very academic context, and academic writing is important for a lot of reasons. Peer review is the lifeline of academia. But academic articles are also incredibly restrictive; there's a language barrier that prevents access. Because my work is based so much on communal networks, it encourages a gravitation toward things that aren't part of that discourse. Whisper networks, oral histories, random ephemeral artifacts, fragments of political movements—through me, these all create a singular story, even without a clear record. Part of my responsibility is to try to create a record for these very ephemeral sources.

You've described moving away from being a five-year planner toward something more emergent. In a world that moves so fast, what did slowing down unlock for you?

Part of the transition was, on a personal level, more self-assurance. When I had more confidence in myself, I could trust emergence, because I'd shown precedence that something would happen, and it would be fulfilling. So I could think: the world is changing rapidly, I want tools to respond to those things, but I also want a scaffolding for how to move forward that allows for variability and responsiveness. A lot of my work is about responding to current environments. It's just about creating structures that allow you to do that.

What would you tell artists who feel the pressure of constantly needing to produce and expand?

One thing I tell myself that gives me a lot of reassurance is, "God willing, we will be able to make things for the rest of our lives." If we make one thing we're proud of every decade, and we do this until we're 70, what an incredible body of work. We don't need to overproduce. People have to find their own method, and working very, very quickly is just not part of my process. It's about finding what methods feel fulfilling, what feels propelling, and leaning into that.

You're watching students navigate this tension at UCLA. What are you seeing in them, as the gap between idea and execution gets narrower?

Venkatesh Rao describes this as, "Deadlines are lifelines." To have a clear deadline is extremely helpful, especially if you work in an iterative way, which I'd argue most people do. So even when I talk about a five-year runway, I have very clear six-month markers for how I want something to move forward. Within that time frame there's a lot of space for play and improvisation, but the structure is there.

Mindy Seu recommends:

I'm currently reading a book of essays called *Authority* by Andrea Long Chu.

I'm also working on a play and reading a lot of scripts: a standout is *The Wolves* by Sarah DeLappe.

My favorite solo dinner date is at Henry Public in Brooklyn Heights with a steak frites and dirty gin martini with extra olives, a notebook, and a great book.

I am eagerly awaiting a gray wrap mini skirt by Trashy Clothing, an "anti-luxury luxury label" from Palestine.

My favorite sweater is an XL half-zip sweater from the Internet Archive that I've had since my fellowship there in 2017.

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