

HYPERALLERGIC

A Droning Chant of Our Ceaseless Media Consumption

Mitchell F. Chan's sound piece "Infinite Newsfeed" turns *New York Times* headlines into monotone chants that reverberate through his new exhibition.

By Claire Voon | December 21, 2016



Mitchell Chan, "Something Something National Conversation (In 2 Characters Or Less)" (2016)
(all GIFs and images courtesy the artist)

"SWASTIKA. SWASTIKA. SWASTIKA. TRUMP. SWASTIKA." Those are the lyrics of a song generated from a recent *New York Times* headline — except it's less a song and more so a dreary chant set to emotionless string instrumentation. It played one afternoon in Toronto's [Angell Gallery](#) as part of artist Mitchell F. Chan's solo exhibition *Art & Inactivism*, repeating for half a minute until the verse change — reminding visitors, in that time, of the increasing prevalence of news related to white supremacy since Donald Trump was elected the next US president.

This was one grating stanza spat out by "Infinite Newsfeed," one of Chan's three works on view that reflect on the current nature of public political discourse, where news tends to overwhelm yet remain dissatisfying. Connected to the *Times*'s API, the work's software grabs a recently published headline, fragments it, then has an automated voice read the words, often out of sequence, to a uniform beat set by a mopey cello and violin. (Chan drew inspiration from a [repetitious tune](#) in John Adams's opera *Nixon in China*). The sound also [broadcasts live](#) online, all day, throughout the show's run, staying true to the work's title. Although the headlines are jumbled, you can make out the originals if you listen closely — but the narrator's monotonous voice

is soporific; the back-and-forth, lackluster pull of the same four or so strings mind-numbing. The result is akin to an aural translation of the mechanical act of scrolling through feeds, where you skim headline after headline to sort of know what's happening but ultimately fail to completely grasp any real content.

Chan set “Infinite Newsfeed” as the backdrop to his installation “Something Something National Conversation (In 2 Characters Or Less),” which he describes as “a massive representation of discourse as spectacle without substance.” It consists of an endless cycle of a purposeless but mesmerizing action: two clouds of water vapor emerge from holes in opposite gallery walls and drift to meet each other over a dramatically illuminated ring, where they collide — and dissipate into nothingness.



Mitchell Chan, “Something Something National Conversation (In 2 Characters Or Less)” (2016)

“I wanted [the installation] to be almost pure content, just a constant reading of the news that’s so relentless that it becomes a drone and that content melts away,” Chan told Hyperallergic. “It’s almost as though the audio work represents content that’s trying to insert itself into those clouds, but failing, since that spectacle refuses to allow it.”

In the internet world where we face echo chambers, uncertainty over fake news, and @realDonaldTrump’s tweets (with #MAGA trolls in tow), Chan’s installation seems particularly pertinent, capturing the exhaustion of web navigation. Many of the “Infinite Newsfeed” headlines currently relate to Trump, making the work’s attitude toward consumption habits especially caustic (are we masochists?). Chan, though, actually started working on these installations two years ago.

“Even then it seemed clear that our discursive climate of Twitter flamewars and content-thirsty political blogs wasn’t going to lead to anything positive,” he said. “I mean, it was a ‘post-truth’ world back then and long before that, and that’s what I wanted to talk about. But good god, I never imagined it would lead us to President Trump.”

When his exhibition opened in early December in a context he did not expect, Chan for a moment debated replacing the *Times* with Breitbart as his source. In the end, he decided the switch would feel cheap. So the words still arrive from the Gray Lady — but, as I hear the narrator bleat out, “border, security, security” and “Donald, Donald, access, access,” it’s clear they could really be arriving from anywhere.