

Make America Great Again and Again: Voices from a Virtual World

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Abstract

Make America Great Again and Again (MAGAA) appropriates the exclusive political slogan “Make America Great Again” to create an inclusive phenomenon through participatory/interactive storytelling art. *MAGAA* invites visitors beyond the U.S. border to an exhibition space, transforming it into a public sphere where they can manipulate or maintain a large American flag displayed on a white wall, accompanied by the *Star-Spangled Banner* song. Following the exhibition outside of the United States, the project will return to the United States to showcase external voices and then travel to other countries. Upon its return to the United States, the project will incorporate a broader range of voices from its previous journeys. *MAGAA* is an ever-evolving open work, as it circulates at different exhibition events. Rather than providing a definitive answer to the questionable slogan “Make American Great Again,” this project provides a public platform for participants to discuss diverse perspectives on the concept of “make America great again.” This process naturally visualizes a temporal collage, transitioning from the American flag image to a multi-screen representation created by participants via YouTube.

Keywords

Interactive art, Sustainability, Interactive storytelling, Participatory art, Max MSP, Max8, Collage

Introduction

According to media archaeologist Erkki Huhtamo, the concept within media undergoes a process of (re)cycling, a phenomenon he refers to as ‘topos (plural: topoi)’—a recurrent and enduring theme. [1] Utilizing the American flag as a collage-based image in art is a prime example of such a topos. Renowned artist Jasper Johns, for instance, employed his iconic American flag image as newsprint collage on canvases, while Nam June Paik incorporated symbolized media images on television sets. Likewise, ‘Make America Great Again’ is a topos—a recurring phrase, predominantly associated with conservative politicians, including figures like Alexander Wiley, Barry Goldwater, and Ronald Reagan. More notably, former President Donald Trump adopted this slogan for his last presidential campaign. This political phrase became a subject of controversy, entangling themes of racism, patriotism, and (ultra)nationalism. In between these topoi context, *Make America Great Again and Again (MAGAA)*, visualizes collage-based YouTube images through the internet, reflecting not only the evolution of

technology in art but also the enduring fascination with the American flag as a compelling/controversial subject for both artists and audiences. As open work of participatory interactive art, *MAGAA* does not simply criticize the conservative slogan but delves into the appropriation of this exclusive idea as an inclusive one, facilitating visitor participation and fostering conversations about the complex web of meanings intertwined with this recurring and politically charged topos.



Figure 1. The projected image of *MAGAA*. Photograph by Byeongwon Ha. ©Respect Copyright

The Concept of MAGAA

The style of *MAGAA* draws parallels to Nam June Paik's video sculpture, *Video Flag* (1996), which features a massive American flag comprised of algorithmically mesmerizing moving images displayed across 70 television sets. [2] By reinterpreting Paik's approach with emerging technology, the Internet, *MAGAA* collects separate 60 parts of an American flag from live YouTube, one by one, as a spatial montage to compose a grand fluttering American flag image. To bring this flag image to life, *MAGAA* accesses video clips from the top YouTube search results for titles ranging from 'MAGAA_Project01' to 'MAGAA_Project60,' all of which were previously posted by the creator using these titles. The titles were never used for other projects before. So each title search result will show a part of the American flag image on the top. The 60 small screens of *MAGAA* align with the duration of one hour. Each minute corresponds to the top YouTube clip for that specific minute—'MAGAA_Project01' during the first minute, 'MAGAA_Project02' during the second minute,

in the last frame. The selection of video clips is executed according to their rank, utilizing the titles 'MAGAA_Project01' to 'MAGAA_Project60.' Put differently, every hour, each small screen located in the same position will present the top-ranked link in order. If a visitor uploads a video clip using the title 'MAGAA_Project10,' their video clip will ascend to the top rank and replace a portion of the American flag at the top of the right corner display with their own content since the YouTube in *MAGAA* was set up to find the latest video with the title. The collective involvement of multiple visitors in the same participatory process results in the transformation of the American flag into a composite, collage-based image, featuring a diverse array of video clips. To materialize the dynamic process of showcasing each YouTube video clip, several elements come into play, including the use of `jweb`, `jit.str.reexp`, `jit.desktop`, and `l1strokes&l1clicks` objects in `Max8`. [3] The `jweb` object empowers creators to incorporate the YouTube website within a `Max` patcher, while the `jit.str.reexp` object identifies the top-ranked YouTube link. Sometimes, YouTube suggests a commercial video clip at the top instead of a video clip with the exact title. To address this issue, the project utilized the "watch?v=" filter keyword, enabling it to avoid the commercial video links. To prevent short commercials before playing each image, a YouTube Premium subscription was required. Subsequently, `jit.desktop` crops the YouTube video image and transmits it to each small screen. Finally, the `l1strokes&clicks` objects govern keyboard and mouse activities respectively, simulating the act of surfing the YouTube website. These sequential actions replicate a user's real-time interaction with YouTube, fostering a genuine connection between the project and the platform. This revelation can encourage visitors to take part in adding their video clips to the whole screen. As visitors await the updates, they engage with each small screen and may listen to the voices of others, extending the interactive experience beyond the confines of the screen-based project itself. In essence, this project serves as participatory art in the expanded field.

MAGAA as Open Work

MAGAA serves as a platform, offering the audience a public sphere where they can engage in dialogues about 'Make America Great Again.' Visitors are encouraged to either uphold the default image of the American flag or deconstruct it according to their own perspectives by posting their own video clips. As implied by 'Again and Again,' this project thrives on the repetitive participation of visitors within a sustainable interactive environment. In addition, while

References

[1] Erkki Huhtamo. "Dismantling the Fairy Engine: Media Archaeology as Topos Study." In *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, edited by Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi

checking the titles, visitors also find diverse postings by other participants. This will be a significant opportunity to listen to other voices from different perspectives. It is intentionally designed to be asynchronously exhibited in diverse countries, shedding light on the internal and external perceptions of the American image. While traveling around the world, sometimes, *MAGAA* returns to the United States and shows a collage-based American flag image, facilitating a transatlantic, transpacific, trans-cultural, even virtual dialogue beyond the physical boundaries. This serves as a significant public sphere for the exchange of diverse perspectives on opinions, responsibilities, and criticism related to the concept of 'Make America Great Again.'

Floor Plan

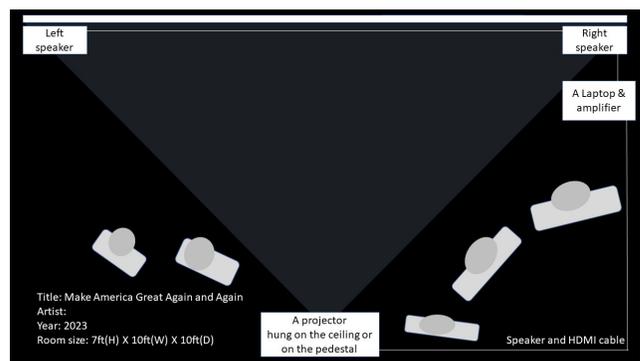


Figure 5. The floor plan of *MAGAA*. Image by Byeongwon Ha. ©Respect Copyright.

Conclusion

MAGAA transcends the aim of solely amassing opinions regarding the meaning of 'Make America Great Again' within the United States. Instead, this project serves as a global public sphere, inviting audiences from beyond U.S. borders to engage with the discourse. Diverse versions of *MAGAA* in various countries will gather a spectrum of voices from around the world, subsequently stimulating a reevaluation of its meaning among visitors in the United States from fresh and diverse perspectives. *MAGAA*'s international re-enactments will persist as an ongoing endeavor, aimed at broadening the horizon of American understanding, fostering a greater appreciation for multifaceted opinions and perspectives from across the globe.

Parikka, 27-47. (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011).

[2] Nam June Paik, "Video Flag (1996)", Smithsonian American Art Museum website, accessed October 20, 2023, <https://www.si.edu/tbma/work/video-flag>
Thomas H. Corman, *Algorithms Unlocked* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2013), 40.

[3] 11OLSEN.DE, “11strokes” and “11clicks”, 11OLSEN.DE website, accessed June 1, 2023, <https://www.11olsen.de/>

Author Biography

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