



9 MAY –
11 AUGUST 2024
Online


CURATED BY
REA MCNAMARA

ORGANIZED BY
THE MACKENZIE ART GALLERY

EXHIBITION DEVELOPMENT
CAT BLUEMKE AND JONATHAN CARROLL

WAKE WINDOWS: THE WITCHING HOUR

Anon Mom subreddit moderator with curator Rea McNamara

 (henceforth referred to as “Anon Mom subreddit”) is a 115K+ “moms only” support group. Founded in 2013, the subreddit was established when a group of mom users, frustrated with the judgement and criticism they faced in general parenting subreddits, decided to form a mom version of a *Breaking Bad*-inspired “dad confessions” subreddit.

The group is explicitly a “no judgment” space. While it’s publicly accessible on Reddit, another rule is that members cannot publicly discuss the group since it has been the frequent target of trolls and “non-mom assholes.”

Below is an edited and abridged interview I conducted in May 2023 via private message on Reddit with one of the founders/mods, a self-described “elder millennial” based in Texas who is the mother of two school-aged children.

Rea McNamara (RM): What role do you play on the 9-person moderation team, and what are your daily/weekly/monthly responsibilities?

u/superfucky (SF): The team dynamic is very egalitarian — everyone has full permission to do whatever they deem necessary to keep the sub running and protect our users. I’m technically the head mod, but I don’t make any unilateral decisions; there’s always a conversation in mod mail where we get everyone’s perspective and feedback and decide on changes together. Daily, I’m clearing out the mod queue, unbanning moms who get nabbed by Saferbot, and handling reports. I am the sole moderator responsible for all the graphic design and styling of the subreddit on various platforms (primarily the CSS on old Reddit), so once a month, I rotate the theme and update the mom featured in the sidebar. This scrolling header includes every

sidebar mom we’ve ever had, the link flair thumbnails (largely emoji-based), colouring, etc. May’s theme is Mother’s Day, so all the Flair thumbnails include women. Next month’s theme will be Pride Month, so rainbows and lesbians abound!

RM: Why do you feel so many larger parenting-related subs are toxic? Do they reflect too much on the greater social dynamics of Reddit and the internet in general, or do you feel they reflect more on how those spaces are moderated?

SF: Any space with a significant male presence seems guaranteed to be hostile to women’s issues and struggles, and in my own experience, the only way to offer a true space of support for women is to bar male participants entirely. At one point, one of our related subreddits allowed guys to participate.

Still, it almost immediately devolved into childish insults and mudslinging, and when confronted about their behaviour, the men defended themselves, saying, “This is how we treat our buddies! Y’all just need thicker skins!” So we kicked them out. nobody should “need a thicker skin” when struggling and looking for empathy.

RM: Do you find that Reddit provides valuable tools to protect your community from trolls and bots?

SF: Reddit is TERRIBLE about giving communities the tools to protect themselves. One of the biggest issues is that a banned user can still browse the subreddit and crosspost content to other subs, even when crossposting is turned off in our subreddit settings. Other things like disabling downvotes are only possible with CSS, which only applies on desktop Reddit, specifically the old-style desktop Reddit. New Reddit — the mobile browser and app versions — don’t allow for CSS customization or granular tooling like a downvote toggle in the subreddit settings. Reddit also rarely actions brigades,¹ even with blatant evidence like people commenting, “I went there and downvoted 100 things.” Hence, the mod team is stuck playing whack-a-troll and hoping nobody’s in such a precarious place that the one who gets through tips them over the edge.

RM: Why haven’t you ventured onto another

platform, like Discord?

SF: I don’t think Discord serves the same function as Reddit. It’s a chat room, and you can’t keep long conversation threads going, especially not on multiple topics at once. I’ve tried asking questions on Discord, and if the first two or three people to say anything after me ignore me/change the subject, I’m not getting an answer, period. On the other hand, with Reddit, I can leave that thread up for hours or days, however long it takes someone to see it and decide to answer it. If I get a couple of answers right away, a few more later in the day, and a few more the next day, that works too.

I think accessibility also plays a part in that all somebody has to do is have a Reddit account, and they can find us and jump right in. You can’t just wander into a random Discord server; you have to be invited. I don’t think nearly as many moms would be able to find a specific Discord server in the middle of the night as quickly as they can find a subreddit.

RM: Why do you think web 2.0 social platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have sometimes failed in providing a non-judgemental space for mothers, often even exacerbating their challenges (mental health, access to credible information, etc.)?

SF: I think much of it comes down to the dissolution of “the village.” Extended family,

¹ “Brigading” is a term that originated on Reddit for a coordinated attack by a group of users of an antagonistic subreddit (forum dedicated to a particular topic). The brigade would privately agree to “downvote” comments, either on a random or targeted basis, to deprioritise them in users’ feeds and effectively censor them. The meaning of the term expanded to cover all coordinated voting behaviour to make something or someone seem more or less popular than they actually are, and now it means all coordinated abusive engagement behaviour online. This engagement can come in the form of retweets, comments, quote retweets, email campaigns and more.

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friends, and neighbours don't participate in the nuclear family unit and child-rearing anymore, so we are primed to think of ourselves as "every mom for herself," and because no one is offering that support natively, moms have to find validation in tearing other moms down. Like "No one's telling me whether I'm doing a good job or not, and no one's helping me do a good job, so if I find someone who's doing a worse job or having a harder time, I can tell myself I'm a good mom because I'm better than that one."

RM: How have your experiences on social media informed the digital literacy skills you pass along to your kids?

SF: I'm not making those decisions based on my own experiences since I didn't really "come of age" with social media like Gen Z. Being a teenager on the internet was a vastly different experience to what it is now, so while I would have allowed or even encouraged my kids to be online as it was in the late 90s, I am not allowing them any social media access until... well, as long as I can hold it off. They don't have their own YouTube accounts, they don't have Facebook accounts, they don't know about Instagram or Snapchat, and they're not allowed on TikTok or Twitter. I'm looking into getting my oldest her first phone as she's starting middle school next year, but I want it to be a talk & text flip phone, no internet. I don't know of any other way to protect them from cyberbullying, especially in the forms it takes now.

RM: In a perfect world, what would a "village" look like to you? Living within an intergenerational family home where there is more "in-kind" support? A workplace that covers childcare and aftercare expenses?

SF: I mean, it would take a LOT. In a perfect world, there would be no generational trauma or political oppression so that people would live next door, across the street, or down the block from their parents. And if only one parent wanted to work while the other stayed home with the kids, jobs would pay enough to support that. The grandparents, aunts/uncles, or neighbours would watch the kids if both parents wanted to work. Society would have a more kid-friendly outlook; people wouldn't go speeding down residential streets so kids could ride their bikes in front of their houses (instead of having to pack up and drive to a park with a bike trail). Everyone would be keeping one eye out so kids could wander the neighbourhood, play with neighbour kids, go swimming in a neighbour's pool, walk the dog, and not have to have a parent right next to them the whole time. Having a village would mean everyone is invested in the safety & well-being of every child.

ABOUT THE CURATOR

Rea McNamara is a writer and curator based in Tkaronto/Toronto. Her curatorial work has long been shaped by networked counterpublics' participatory cultures, particularly the collaborative processes of transformative fandom, alongside a social practice shaped by organizing community-based art initiatives. In her research, she often focuses on the emergence of otherness and hybridity within digital identity formations, informing an on/offline curatorial approach that connects and capacity-builds.

McNamara has previously held curatorial and public programming positions with the Gardiner Museum and Drake Hotel, and been awarded grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. She has curated and organized a range of exhibitions and public projects, including *dis-ease* (Vector Festival, 2021), *Obsessive Pop Tendencies* (Pleasure Dome, 2019), *Community Arts Space* (Gardiner Museum, 2016-2019), and *Safe Space* (Scotiabank Nuit Blanche 2024). In 2011, she founded the art party series *Sheroes*, which engaged with female celebrity fandom through music, performance, installation, and internet-based art. Her work has been presented at The Art Gallery of Ontario and is in the Whitney Museum of American Art collection.

Additionally, McNamara has written about art, culture and the internet for *frieze*, *Art in America*, *The Globe and Mail*, and been commissioned to write exhibition texts for Trinity Square Video, the Remai Modern, and Daniel Faria Gallery. From 2020-2021, she was the Emily H. Tremaine Journalism Fellow for Curators with *Hyperallergic*. She also gives talks, moderates panels, and lead workshops on fandom, curatorial practice, and the labour of mothering for The Toronto Public Library, Toronto Metropolitan University, NYU Tisch School of the Arts, and more.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Wake Windows: The Witching Hour

Led by a rebellious AI Chatbot, this interactive online exhibition guides viewers through interactive and time-based art by artists who are parents, caregivers, or educators who engage with public databases and “living archives.” In touching on maternal world building and our ever-evolving relationship with AI, *Wake Windows: The Witching Hour* intends to make visible the missing datasets in our collective understanding of the often invisible labour that is mothering. From animations to machinimas or virtual reality (VR) to interactive narratives, the digital exhibition traces how the artists' creative outputs have shifted since taking on this care work. Curated by Rea McNamara, participating artists and collaborators include Claudia Cornwall, Alejandra Higuera with Magnolia Higuera, Faith Holland with Ben Bogart and Hildegard Holland Watter, Wednesday Kim, Lauren Lee McCarthy, Rory Scott, Skawennati, and Rodell Warner. *Wake Windows* is part of a series of digital exhibitions created through the MacKenzie Art Gallery's Digital Exhibitions Toolkit and Art Installation Launcher (DETAIL)—a newly developed resource championing the development of art exhibitions for digital platforms.

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ARTISTS

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Alejandra Higuera with Magnolia Higuera
Faith Holland with Ben Bogart and Hildegard Holland Watter
Wednesday Kim
Lauren Lee McCarthy
Rory Scott
Skawennati
Rodell Warner

SPECIAL THANKS

Cat Bluemke
Jonathan Carroll
Iain Soder
Claudia Cornwall
Rodney LaTourelle and Louise Witthöft
Geoff Yuen and Lee Froese of The Hatcher
Crystal Mowry
Nicolle Nugent
Jayne Wilkinson
Lisa Karen Cox
Onika Powell
Sharn Peters
Natalie Haddad
Rosemary Heather
Linda Wilson
Tony Halmos and Quincy Lou McNamara-Halmos.

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