



The SPACES World Artists Program (SWAP) offers residencies to international, national, and local artists who explore and experiment. SWAP supports artists in the creation and presentation of new work, while facilitating opportunities for collaboration with artists and audiences in Northeast Ohio. Roopa Vasudevan is SPACES' 55th Artist-in-Residence.

## SPONSORS

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Large print available at the front desk.  SPACES © 2016

# Roopa Vasudevan

(Shanghai, China/Brooklyn, NY)  
#Bellwether

May 20 - July 29, 2016



# #Bellwether

**#Bellwether is a data collection project that examines the language surrounding American electoral politics.**

Over the course of this exhibition, I will be taking a look at social media data and examining whether or not we can extract a more nuanced or accurate read on the political desires of the voting population of Ohio, a state that is regarded as vital to the endgame of both parties, but whose citizens are often treated as faceless, nameless votes.

After performing language analysis on the data, I will use the results to construct physical objects that co-opt the design language of the presidential campaigns, but instead of reflecting the candidates' curated messages, the objects will represent how they are perceived by Ohio residents.

The number of objects in the gallery will grow over the course of my two-month residency, and will be exhibited in a monthly timeline, displaying how perceptions of each presidential candidate shift and change over the course of primary season—just like the content, positions, and tones presented by the campaigns themselves.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the support of so many. In particular, without Flux Factory in Long Island City, NY, and the network of artists associated with the collective, I may have never found my way to SPACES in the first place. I owe a debt of gratitude to Flux for taking a chance on me and my work, and giving me room to grow, experiment, and fail in all the ways I have needed to over the last few years.

The Interactive Telecommunications Program at the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, has been instrumental in providing a source of contact and engagement with other technologically-minded artists, and is also responsible for my developing a love of programming in the first place. I have been honored to learn from and work with so many incredible people through ITP, and am extremely thankful that I have been able to stay an active part of the community.

Huge, huge thanks to Marianne Petit, Matthew Belanger, and the entire faculty and staff of the Interactive Media Arts program at NYU Shanghai for workshopping this idea with me over the course of the last semester, and for listening to me babble on about American politics when we live and work on the other side of the world.

Thank you to Dan Moulthrop from the Cleveland City Club for meeting with me right before the circus of this primary season began, and for showing me the political memorabilia collection—that trip was the spark that enabled this project idea to grow.

Finally, I am so grateful to everyone at SPACES, especially Bruce Edwards; without his guidance and support (and that fortuitous trip to the City Club last summer), this project would never have taken shape in the form that it has today.

# RELATED EVENT

Art and Politics Symposium: July 19, 2016  
Transformer Station All day event.

# PROCESS

I wrote a computer program that has been running almost continuously since August, 2015. This program has one task: to comb through Twitter data and save tweets that mention any of the 2016 presidential candidates by name.

In addition, when the program saves a tweet, it also saves the additional metadata that comes with it—most importantly, in this instance, the geographical location of the user who posted it. Then, I filter down the data collected to focus solely on tweets that are from or are concerned with Ohio specifically.

After the tweets are filtered, I run a variety of algorithmic language analyses on the content of the postings to determine a number of things: sentiment, frequency of similar or identical posts and phrases, grammatical structure, and the like. I most frequently use “regular expressions,” which are text-matching patterns that look for specific words or phrases within the data.

While the objects created are not meant to mirror the data in its physical form (size or design), the number and types of objects I will construct per candidate each month will entirely depend on how much and what content I extract from the total tweets. The design language—color, typography, imagery and logos—will mirror that of the official campaigns as closely as possible.

# INTERPRETATION

Ohioans are uniquely familiar with the laser-like focus projected onto this state every four years. We are assaulted by the presidential campaigns with increasing frequency, as we get closer and closer to November, and with seemingly increased importance placed on Ohio's voters and their crucial role in the election decision. But no one is paying attention to the individuals responsible for this decision-making. The robo-calls come from both parties, the campaign ads appear no matter what channel we watch, and the general methodology practiced by the campaigns seems to involve carpet bombing the population with their messages past the point of mental and emotional saturation.

Traditional polling often serves to emphasize this disconnect between the candidates and the citizens they hope to reach, condensing the thoughts, opinions and preferences of voters into very specific, carefully curated statements, with small sample sizes dependent on a use of antiquated technology (read: landlines). Meanwhile, on the Internet, it's possible to be overwhelmed by millions of different individual voices on social media, and they are often saying the same or similar things.

What if we started gauging the sentiments of Ohio's voting population not through polls, but through social media — where everyone feels like they have an individualized soapbox? Is it possible to get a better sense of what voters actually want just by tapping into what a larger number of them are saying? Is there a trend to what the population actually wants? Do these trends match up with the widely accepted polls? And if not, is it time to investigate a new system of vote forecasting that better harnesses the data trails we are already habitually leaving behind us?

# ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Roopa Vasudevan is an artist, creative coder, and researcher based in Brooklyn, NY and Shanghai, China. She is interested in utilizing technology in order to explore and expose patterns in our culture and behavior, and in examining how computers and algorithms can help us better understand the relationships we have with ourselves and each other. Her work has been exhibited at venues around the United States, and has been featured by Reuters, Slate, the Huffington Post, the New Yorker blog, Jezebel, GOOD Lifestyle, Complex, PSFK, and The FADER, as well as on American, French and German television.

Roopa holds a BA in Film Studies from Columbia University, and an MPS from NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program (ITP), where she also served as a post-graduate research fellow during 2013-2014. She is a member of the Flux Factory artist collective, based in Queens, NY, and is currently an Assistant Arts Professor of Interactive Media Arts at NYU Shanghai.