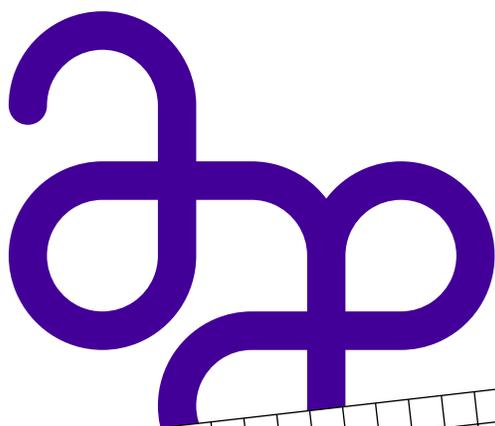


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Screenshot from Meta's video "The Metaverse and How We'll Build It Together -- Connect 2021."

# META MORPHING

On November 2, Sydney-based artist Thea-Mai Baumann found herself blocked from the Instagram account she had used for nine years, @metaverse. Instagram's parent company, Facebook, had renamed itself Meta just five days prior as part of its plan to expand into the "metaverse" and had deemed hers an imposter account. Following a *New York Times* investigation, Instagram gave Baumann back her handle, but her temporary ejection raised concerns about the unchecked power of social-media companies given free reign over content on their platforms thanks to Section 230 of the United States' Communications Decency Act. One has to wonder how the metaverse is actually conditioned for the diversity its proponents purport to value.

Equity likewise surfaced as an issue plaguing the NFT marketplace, where, despite theories that all creators have a fair shot, artists from the Global North still dominate, making 73 percent of all primary and secondary sales since February 2020, while men accounted for 77 percent of sales, according to ArtTactic's examination of Nifty Gateway. One possible explanation for this disparity was offered by Clare Untalan, founder of the online community web3 baddies, who, in an article published by The Org, commented: "Not only do marginalized people oftentimes lack the financial means to invest, but they also oftentimes lack the financial means to build and create." So far, the metaverse is indeed shaping up to be a seamless extension of the real world, with all its deeply entrenched power imbalances.

Offline, throughout 2021, hegemonic forces violently imposed themselves. On February 1, the Burmese junta ousted Myanmar's democratically elected government. In May, protests against the eviction of six Palestinian families in Israeli-occupied East Jerusalem led to an 11-day military attack on the Gaza Strip. Three months later, the Taliban re-took Kabul, cementing its hold over Afghanistan. In the US, violence against the Asian American and Pacific Islander community has surged by 150 percent since early 2020.

Many followed these events through social media like Facebook, which was mired again in controversy in October when it came to light that the company's algorithm was designed to favor posts that spark anger. Facebook's own data scientists observed that such posts are disproportionately more likely to contain misinformation and harmful content—and yet, anger was assigned the same algorithmic value for three years. Until we learn to listen to the voices that have been muted, inequities will only perpetuate.

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