

## NIGHTLIFE

Dengue Fever's spin on Khmer rock turns into a political passion. Page 6

## PERFORM

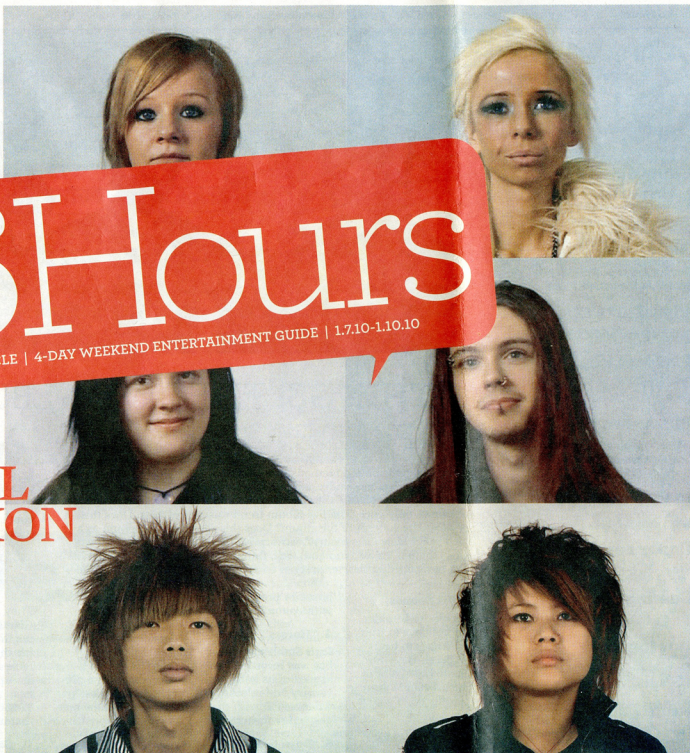
Tim Barsky brings back his beat-boxing hit "The Bright River." Page 15

# 96Hours

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE | 4-DAY WEEKEND ENTERTAINMENT GUIDE | 1.7.10-1.10.10

## VIRTUAL OBSESSION

British artist examines teens' use of online social networks in 'Transitions.'  
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# Visual arts

**'Transitions':** Artist examines use of social-networking sites by teens in U.S., Britain and China for new show

"Unfriend," the process of deleting a person from a social-networking site, was the Oxford dictionary's word of the year for 2009. It describes the blissful disengagement possible online. With just one click, you can virtually erase a person: no more updates, no more photos — and no more quiz results. Oxford's choice shows that Facebook and social-networking sites like it have invaded our non-virtual lives.

British artist Christine Webster is interested in this invasion and how it relates to teenagers' social lives. She's not concerned with the ways teens disconnect over Facebook; she's curious about the myriad ways they engage through it.

For her installation, "Transitions," Webster interviewed teenagers in three countries — Britain, China and the United States — regarding their use of Facebook and similar sites. (Teens use Bebo in England, while QQ is all the rage in China.) Why do they log on? What do they do while they're on? How much do they use the sites?

"In terms of global similarity, they were just as obsessed with online social networking," said Webster, who has been interviewing teens in San Francisco since early December. "They were just as into it in China as they were in the U.K. and in the United States."

Webster filmed the teens sitting silently across from each other, creating a live social interaction to contrast with the mediated ones experienced online. During the weekend exhibition, she will stream these videos while interviews play overhead and a collection of laptops plays slide shows of images that teens have uploaded to the sites.

Webster found a few cultural differences during her research. In



Christine Webster interviewed teenagers about their use of social-networking sites. Their images are part of "Transitions."

Opening reception 6 p.m., Fri.  
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England, teens tend to post photos of themselves and their friends drinking. In China, where studying and schoolwork are emphasized, they favor self-portraits and using avatars as profile pictures. And in San Francisco, teens are more guarded about their use, but those interviewed spoke about tending their crops in Farmville and stalking prospective crushes on Facebook.

"Excessive" is probably the best adjective to describe many teenagers' use of social-networking sites. One teen in China said she used QQ up to seven hours a day, accessing it from her mobile phone while in class, Webster said. Some teens reported not getting enough sleep because of online networking.

With so much time interacting online, the question is inevitable: Are teens forgoing the opportunity to interact in real life?

Webster is quick to answer with a sad reality of teenage life: It is often a very lonely experience, and going online may be the best and only social outlet available. In these cases, such sites can be a lifeline.

"You have to think back to when this wasn't around, and all the screams of teenagers that would've been locked in their bedrooms and isolated," she said. "It's providing this amazing opportunity for them to develop their identities and be quite creative. Think of those teenagers, those ones who are withdrawn or shy and don't have those opportunities, they're getting the opportunity to impress somebody by being funny or witty or being smart."

Although Webster sees the value of social-networking sites, she doesn't use them herself. "I prefer e-mail. Call me old-fashioned," she said. "But we should probably put this event on Facebook, shouldn't we?"

—Victoria Gannon,  
96hours@sfgate.com